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That Dark Remembered Day - a novel, and critical self-reflection on composition and the editorial process

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**RESEARCH
DEGREES
WITH
PLYMOUTH
UNIVERSITY**

THAT DARK REMEMBERED DAY

a novel

&

critical self-reflection on composition and the editorial process

by Tom Vowler

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

English and Creative Writing, School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts

October 2015

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That Dark Remembered Day, a novel, and critical self-reflection on
composition and the editorial process

by Tom Vowler

A thesis submitted to the University of Plymouth in partial fulfilment for the degree

of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

English and Creative Writing, School of Humanities, Faculty of Arts

October 2015

Abstract

Name of candidate: Tom Vowler

Title of thesis: *That Dark Remembered Day*, a novel, and critical self-reflection on composition and the editorial process

My aim for *That Dark Remembered Day* was to create a work of fiction with a strong sense of the literary, one whose themes of violence, landscape and survivor guilt shone a light on the human condition, specifically the effects of post-war trauma on one family. The novel's structure would be crucial in achieving its emotional heft, as each of the central characters is allocated at least one section, the reader experiencing events from disparate and increasingly illuminating perspectives. Fragmenting the book's chronology (both throughout, but particularly in Part 3) by employing a technique of temporal blurring, helped to recreate a sense of disorientation in the reader, a key symptom of post-traumatic stress disorder. And despite an at times lyrical style, readability was important to me, in that I wanted the novel to retain its pace as a psychological thriller, albeit one where the reader is told what happens at the outset, the remainder of the book tasked with explaining how and why.

Crucial to this thesis is the relationship I developed with my appointed editor, specifically how conflict emerged and was for the most part resolved during revision of the work. Significantly, I argue that these negotiations, together with my exploration of the author/editor relationship, contributed to my development as an author, and to the realisation of the novel.

Research was conducted into the Falklands conflict by studying first-hand accounts of those who served, allowing me to blur fact with fiction, a process that delivered its own ethical challenges.

Author's declaration

At no time during the registration for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy has the author been registered for any other University award. The work is entirely the author's.

Word count of main body of thesis: 88,000

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Date: 15th October 2015

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I am also indebted to two texts in particular, J.A. Baker's inimitable book, *The Peregrine* (Collins), and Tony McNally's account of the Falklands War, *Watching Men Burn* (Monday Books). Adriana Groisman's hybrid project, 'Voices of the South Atlantic', also provided much inspiration.

The words 'nothing but the wild rain' on page 192 were taken with permission from Edward Thomas's poem 'Rain'. Permission was also granted for use of the epigraph on page 2.

I dedicate this thesis to victims of violence, be it from spree shootings or the conflicts our craven politicians deem necessary.

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That Dark Remembered Day

'The past beats inside me like a second heart.'

JOHN BANVILLE, *The Sea*

Spring, 1983

In those last moments of childhood, before everything splintered forever, he watched her disappear along the lane. They'd got off the school bus together, made plans to meet later in the woods behind his house, nervous and exhilarated at what might occur. Their fumbling of the last few weeks, gloriously ardent explorations of one another that had so far been contained, now longed for a crescendo, a progression to unknown, untasted delights. He assumed it would be her first time too, although when he'd asked, she just smiled and pulled him closer. It irritated him that his own bedroom was ruled out for such a momentous occasion, his father, with the exception of walking the dog, home all day since his return from the war, ghosting between rooms, ever present, albeit in a vacant approximation of himself. There was enough to contend with – performance, the mechanics of the thing – without the fear of someone walking in, though the woods hardly guaranteed privacy. He'd wanted so badly to ask his friend for advice, a sense of what to expect, but of course the one person he could ask about such matters was now the one person he couldn't.

Once she was out of sight he caught up with his friend – a friend he'd replaced in the girl's affections – hoping the awkwardness between them, the sense of betrayal, would recede a little in the days ahead. More than anything he wanted his friend to punch him, to lash out in a rage that would see them sprawling on the ground, bloodied but with the tension broken. Anything but this silence. He wanted to say sorry, how neither of them had meant it to happen, that you couldn't help your feelings, that he hoped the three of them could still hang around together.

Instead he kicked a stone along the road, watching it skim and buck, hoping his friend might join in, before the hedge claimed it. Passing the gate they sometimes climbed over for a smoke, he suggested a fishing trip at the weekend, if the weather held, how he'd found a new spot, miles upriver from the old iron bridge. There would be chub and roach, even a barbel if they got lucky. They could get up first light Saturday, pack some food, make a flask of tea, then meet by the oak tree in the top field and walk down to the river with their rods. 'How about it?' he said, looking at his friend's back. Still the silence, the unspoken allegation of theft, his friend striding on in anger.

Reaching the houses on the outskirts of town, he saw a car on the brow of the hill, sideways on so that it blocked the road, and they stood staring at it for a moment. One of its doors was open, the engine ticking away. Beyond the car, the town's lone traffic lights passed through their silent cycle, the roads leading off them empty as a Sunday morning. Someone was shouting, perhaps half a mile away, the words' pitch rising, the sound just carrying to them on the breeze.

They walked on, around the car and up to the crossroads, where several dogs barked in a discordant choir. A hundred yards or so along Cross Street they could see a bicycle abandoned on the pavement, the groceries from its basket spilt onto the side of the road, a trail of fruit strewn along the gutter. Opposite the bike, outside the newsagent's, a pushchair was upended as if it had fallen from the sky, its contents long gone, and he realised that's what was missing: people. To the north, beyond the town, they could hear a siren now, distant like white noise.

At the fork in the road, the two of them separated without speaking and a few seconds later he found himself running past the churchyard and out of town,

over the humpbacked bridge, where finally he stopped to catch his breath. Hands on knees, puffing, he looked ahead, seeing by the side of road a mound that looked both ridiculous and commonplace. Still as a rock, it had been covered almost entirely by an old grey blanket and as he passed it, as his mind processed what it was, he felt his heart quicken, da-dum da-dum, as if it were dancing.

PART ONE

Autumn, 2012

1

Grateful to emerge from the violence of his dreams, he prepared for the hangover awaiting him. Somewhere in the fog of his sentience Zoe left for work, the front door, if not slammed, then closed with scant consideration. She'd have made their daughter's breakfast, got her ready for school, but with nothing of significance to fill his days now, the school run had become his alone. Reaching for some painkillers in the bedside drawer, Stephen knocked over the glass of water, the last of which trickled in a rivulet into the paperback he'd yet to start. A pallid light bled through the curtains and he winced at the emptiness the day promised, as if all its moments had already been glued together with inertia. The steady build-up of traffic on the road into town could be heard, an insidious taunt from those with routine in life, whose days were a series of edifying events.

Downstairs Amy was finishing her cereal, her lunchbox standing proud in the middle of the table. She looked at him, standing there in his underwear, unshaven, her face full of concern they'd be late again.

'Hey, you,' he said, offering a reassuring smile as he made himself a strong coffee. There was a note from Zoe, some groceries to get if he went into town, a suggestion of what to cook tonight, that she would be home late again. She'd signed off with, *This can't go on.*

He too wondered how long this could be endured. Initially, for the first couple of weeks, he'd savoured the days' leisurely rhythms, filling the mornings with long-put-off jobs around the house, the afternoons fishing for pollock or bass off the

harbour wall, perhaps a few quid on one of the afternoon races before congregating by the school gates. But the absence of structure gave his mind space to lurch into darker realms, turning in on itself and sabotaging the quiet progress, bringing into relief the 'episode', as Zoe now referred to it.

She had tried to draw him into an exchange about his recent transgression – the hows and whats, if not the why – something he'd resisted for now. And whereas her instinct was to show support, to be, as they say, there for him, her face could barely hide the incredulity at the situation he'd brought upon them.

'What made you do such a thing?'

'I've tried to tell you, I don't know.'

They had made love last night, a frantic scramble he initiated once she had stopped reading. There was something about his enforced idleness that leant the passion, on his part at least, additional vigour, perhaps desperation, as if impotence, real or symbolic, could take root in such times. Once he'd finished she rolled over, patting his thigh with her trailing hand in felicitation, sleep coming for her in seconds.

After walking Amy to school he took the binoculars and trekked out of town, along the coast path, hoping the brackish air would calm him as he stopped to watch cormorants skim over the water, tight to the surf, their elongated necks cleaving the air like arrow shafts. If he was lucky a kestrel would hover at eyelevel, out over the cliff edge, scanning for small mammals or nesting birds. At this time of year the sea could be black as ink as it roiled beneath a flinty, turbulent sky. He looked out beyond the headland, picturing the rusting hulks of wrecked ships that ghosted the sea floor, forests of kelp slowly claiming them. In the distance, out in the Channel,

sheets of rain slanted downwards as if smudged from the cloud, while on the horizon a vein of sunlight divided land from sky. If he made good time he could be near Helford by lunchtime, where he'd stop for a pint, warming himself by the fire. The beer would be honeyed, a pint would become two, his hangover almost forgotten. Later he would time the walk back to pick Amy up from school.

The terms of his suspension, although anticipated, felt ridiculous. None more so than the mile radius of campus he was to remain beyond until the hearing. He'd held onto the vague hope a resolution could be reached informally, his apology, if sincere enough, accepted. But the lecturer had lodged his complaint with unambiguous expectation: he would settle for nothing less than the full disciplinary procedure. HR had written to him, stressing he should seek representation – a friend, someone from the union – that he would remain on full pay but a return to work was out of the question. A link to the University's constitution was provided, should he wish to read it.

The day in question had unfurled in benign fashion for the most part. As a senior technician in the Marine Biology department his job was a varied one. One day he could be collecting plankton for student research, the next mapping seagrass meadows on the ocean floor, or, more prosaically, feeding and monitoring fish stocks. Colleagues came to him with all manner of requests, whether practical or scholastic, his knowledge respected throughout the faculty and beyond – an encyclopaedic familiarity with his subject that had emerged from a private passion rather than formal schooling. If this led to accusations of arrogance, he was unaware of them, though some probably regarded him brusque, even rude on occasion, his

emails lacking the deferential etiquette required. But nothing had ever spiralled beyond the occasional tetchy or sarcastic exchange.

However, in recent months small pressures had built up following a departmental shake-up. As their workload increased, resentment was cultivated. Talk of cutbacks laced conversations, rumours they'd have to reapply for their jobs. Tensions between teaching staff and technicians could flare with minimal provocation as goodwill was slowly withdrawn. Lecturers, though, while often ignorant of how much work their requests involved, were generally courteous, his relationship with all but one productive and, at least superficially, egalitarian.

But David Ferguson had never warmed to him. Not since they clashed several years ago over conditions of an experiment into the immune systems of trout. Not since Stephen confronted him with suspicions a mass mortality among the fish was his fault. And not since Ferguson's fellow lecturer, Zoe Wheeler, moved in with Stephen. This last piece was conjecture, but Ferguson was certainly fond of his wife and had barely hidden his surprise when she got together with a technician and not a member of the academic staff. Stephen had once suspected the man of being one of her former lovers, but this seemed unlikely on a campus where extra-curricular pursuits between members of staff rarely went unnoticed.

And so for years the two men had allowed a tacit feud to steadily gather, its impetus bolstered with each barbed email, every point of conflict exploited or stored for future vitriol. That Stephen suspected he knew more about his subject than Ferguson only served to intensify the ill-feeling. And perhaps on some level Ferguson sensed this too, his behaviour a defence against a perceived inadequacy, that for all

his academic prowess and stature in the field, when it was stripped down he knew less than the technicians he regarded as serving him.

The escalation had occurred in the weeks before, midway through a six-month feeding trial. Part of Stephen's role was to look after the automatic feeders, check the power to the pumps, change the filters when necessary.

In a hurry to get away one evening Stephen had inexplicably forgotten to set one of the internal alarms. Overnight, oxygen levels had depleted, and with no intervention most of a tank of fish lay floating on the surface by morning, meaning the whole trial would have to start again. It was his first significant error in the job, the blame his alone. Ferguson, perhaps mindful of Stephen's past criticism of him, didn't hold back, despite the presence of two technicians and several research students.

Stephen took the rebuke without reply, his own sense of guilt fuelling the admonishment, as Ferguson left with a disdainful shake of his head. But in the hour that followed, a sensation made itself known in his chest, a tightness of breath as if his own ribs were compressing him. As the agitation grew, nausea rose from his stomach, his head pulsing with a quiet rage. Even now he couldn't remember the walk to Ferguson's office, who he might have passed and ignored on campus. What he could recall was the man's expression of astonishment as Stephen pushed open the door, walked steadily across to the desk and brought a fist down hard into the side of his face.

After the incident he was told to go home, a phone call from the senior technical manager later that day telling him suspension was inevitable. The offence was a serious one, of course: the physical assault of a colleague, a facial injury that,

although not requiring stitches, bled significantly. There would be bruising, a black eye that passed through the spectrum of hues in the days that followed, whispered outrage from all who saw it. The police had not been called, though this remained an option for the complainant, Stephen was advised.

There were three disciplinary levels he could be subject to. An oral warning would be normal for a first offence, but unlikely given the severity of the incident. Even a written warning would be lenient, the woman from the union had advised him in their brief telephone conversation last week. Either of these would stay on his record for a year before, in the event no repetition occurred, being wiped clear. Or, quite reasonably, the committee could decide the offence warranted dismissal, which he could appeal against if he produced some mitigating circumstances.

And what form might these take, beyond the vague sense of his unravelling? Of the appalling crisis building inside him, the likely cause of which he'd managed to keep from colleagues, from his wife, all these years? No, better to not resist whatever punitive squall they unleashed his way. Better to ride it out, hunker down, try for once not to pick a fight with life.

The hearing itself was in three weeks, enough time for witnesses to be called, written submissions to be made. A supreme arbiter would be appointed, likely the Vice Chancellor, a brute of a woman whose sermoniac emails displayed a level of corporate jargon he could rarely fathom. He could expect little sympathy from her.

He'd waited until after dinner that evening to tell Zoe, who'd been off campus and hadn't heard. She spoke of the embarrassment, of colleagues' reactions, of what would happen if he lost his job, checking every few minutes that it had actually happened, that some mistake hadn't been made, or that she wasn't the

victim of some ill-judged practical joke. And later when her inquisition petered out, she looked hard at him, scrutinising his face as someone might a stranger, disquieted and appalled, perhaps a little frightened even.

The wind was gusting now, a fine rain blinding him if he looked into it. Herring gulls and fulmars rode the thermals in long, graceful arcs, the easy rhythm of their flight soothing him some. The gulls on the beach below issued proud, barbarous cries as they delved into the seaweed or jabbed at stranded cuttlefish. Beyond them, groups of sanderlings gathered on the tideline in search of sand shrimps, their forms scuttling comically back and forth with each breaking wave, froths of foam eddying around them. As he rounded the headland a couple of walkers passed him on the path, a genial nod or half-smile exchanged, their dog scampering back and forth, nose to the ground. Inhaling deeply he felt the briny air had imbued him sufficiently now, dulling his headache to a faint pulse.

Did it mean anything? Beyond that his temper could flare these days with such small provocation? A fuse that, while never being interminable, had now barely any length at all. When, a couple of months ago, the technical manager had called him in, asking if there were problems he should be aware of, that Stephen seemed uptight, often curt, he tucked it away in the part of his mind that resisted inquiry. Last week Zoe had even suggested he sought help.

‘The union know,’ he said. ‘They’ll help me prepare for the hearing.’

‘I didn’t mean that sort of help.’

He took a few seconds to catch up. ‘That’s a bit overboard, isn’t it?’

‘If you won’t talk to me...’

'We do talk.'

'Apparently not about this, though. Not about your childhood.'

'What do you want to know?'

'I don't understand what's happening to you, why you did it.'

'I've told you why.'

'You don't hit someone because they're an arsehole.'

'It was a one-off, an aberration. I don't know, stress of work.'

'I'm scared.'

'Of me?'

'Of it all.'

This they shared, for the manifestation of violence had left him shaken at this new capability. Beyond childhood scrapes and a scuffle in a pub a few years ago, he'd avoided any physical run-ins, despite a contrary personality, one that shifted easily to aggravation after a few drinks. He'd always known both when to stifle the antagonising of others and how to stop his own temper rising. The incident with Ferguson was inexplicable. It belonged to the realms of fantasy, one you let play out in glorious retrospect in your mind, while acknowledging gratitude for decades of social mores and evolving civility that prevented you from punching colleagues you loathed.

Again he tried to recall details of the seconds leading up to it. There was a hangover, as was increasingly the case these days. There was general resentment towards aspects of work. He'd argued with Zoe the night before. Amy had been difficult over breakfast. Yet none of this excused what he'd done, the terrible person he was apparently becoming, the origin of which didn't bear thinking about.

He looked out to the open water, its irregular surface specked with half a dozen fishing boats. A tanker sat sombrely on the horizon. For a moment he thought he saw the dorsal fin of a basking shark cutting through the swell a few hundred yards out, but by the time he found the spot with the binoculars, it had gone. Most, if not all of them, would have left for the warmer waters of the south by now. On the tip of the promontory ahead, sea heaved at the rock, slamming into its coves, the water forced up a blowhole with each wave, spuming into the wind.

Inland the cloud had opened, just a crack, allowing the sun to wash briefly over the fields, chased by a surging line of shadow. A pair of choughs squabbled in the gorse that flanked the path. Ahead, through the drizzle, he could just make out the bone-white walls of the pub a couple of miles along the coast, and he pictured himself seated by its fire indefinitely.

2

Clouds scudded in from the south, low and sepulchral, winter held among them. As his car left the main road the fringes of the town could be seen, its lights pulsing like sodium lamps a mile or so away. How long had it been since he was last here? A couple of decades, perhaps a little longer. Enough time to allow a fantasy in which the place ceased existing to flourish.

The phone had rung as Stephen served dinner last night. He told Zoe to ignore it, that they were about to eat, but she was never able to, her curiosity or assumption that it wouldn't be some trivial matter triumphing.

'It's for you,' she said. 'Someone called Peter. Says he's a friend of your mother's.'

The man's voice was gentle, old fashioned, with traces of a stammer riding the occasional word. 'I'm sorry to bother you,' he said.

'It's fine. You know...'

'Mary, yes.'

'Is she OK?'

'Yes, I think so. I don't want to worry anyone. It's hard to put into words. I suppose you'd say she's not really herself at the moment.'

In his mind he'd held on to the idea of never returning, of keeping the distance between him and the town considerable; coming back here was probably as unpalatable for those who lived here as it was horrifying for him. His mother had

stayed with them in Cornwall a couple of times, awkward visits, Zoe trying hard but failing to make a connection. In the coming years there would, he supposed, be issues of care, decisions on location to be made. But this was some way off: for all her eccentricity and diminishing lucidity, his mother was a hardy woman, capable of enduring the physical and mental challenges living alone bestowed. And yet the man on the phone, a friend his mother had never mentioned by name, hinted at something being wrong.

‘I don’t know what. Just that, even for her, she’s behaving oddly – forgetting things, clumsy even.’

Keen to say their friendship was no more than that – something Stephen would have assumed anyway – the man explained that he helped her around the house and garden, fixing things, bringing her firewood at this time of year.

‘We play canasta once a week, share the spoils from my allotment. I feel disloyal calling, but thought a family member would want to know. I saw your number on the notice board in the kitchen.’

After a series of bends the town’s sign welcomed him. Years of dirt from passing traffic had encrusted around the letters so that they bled into one another, while the hedge, listing and neglected, had entwined itself between the sign’s posts, reaching up to the words. As children they had sat on the wall across the road, hurling stones at a nominated letter between passing cars. Or a bottle would be balanced on top of it and, once smashed, they’d amble home through the field of rapeseed and along the river. Back then the place’s name had been insignificant, denoting nothing more than the arrival at an unremarkable market town in middle England.

Time unspooled in slow motion then, skewed as it was by childhood, days without end, lives barely begun. Their world, a few square miles fringing the town, was small yet felt gargantuan. He tried to picture the faces of friends, half feral boys, bound by some inexplicable force, but the years had dulled them to amorphous forms, the detail diminished, pushed beyond memory's grasp. Even Brendan's face could barely be recalled now and the more he tried, the less he trusted the image. Returning here as an adult gave the illusion none of it was real, that perhaps it had been read about or imagined, all aspects blurred by the years, like a fading photograph or childhood nightmare.

Lost in thought he had to swerve to avoid a badger's half eaten, half run-over carcass. He imagined carrion crows pecking at its eyes and guts, a bird of prey swooping down, picking clean the bones between traffic.

Despite keeping to modest speeds, the drive here had taken less time than he remembered. He would have preferred the cover of darkness, the anonymity it brought, but any thoughts of interrupting the journey in one of the pubs he passed had been undone by a compulsive dread to witness the town again after so long.

The cloud now yielded some drizzle, the car's wipers issuing a rhythmic mewl. On the outskirts, where the old petrol station had once been, there was some new housing, twelve or so homogenous units packed together, incongruous against the town's more traditional buildings that rose beyond them, their diminutive gardens manicured and featureless. Perhaps they were termed affordable, built to accommodate those who didn't move away when adulthood arrived. And there would be new residents, eager to take advantage of the slump in prices such an

event affords. Add to this the second-home owners picking up a bargain, impervious to the town's legacy, their contact with the community perfunctory, pragmatic.

The newspapers, mistaking aloofness for camaraderie, always termed it a close-knit community, as if this had somehow insulated the people who lived here, left them better prepared for that day. But there were factions here like any small town, schisms that divide one street from the next, regardless of their shared history. Neighbours who pass one another in decades-long silence.

He eased the car around the last bend before the road straightened, the town square now visible up ahead. A few people, the first he'd seen, went about their business, their pace skittish as the rain, harder now, slanted down. In the distance, towards the hills, the sky was still open a crack, a shaft of silvered light falling onto the valley's slopes as if beaming someone up. He strained to catch a glimpse of the house on the hill, the place it had all begun, unable to resist in spite of himself, but the clouds soon fused, the higher ground lost to the rain.

Of the cigarettes he'd rolled before leaving, one remained and he lit it, opening the window an inch. Beyond the mini-roundabout the traffic had slowed to a chunter and he joined the end of the procession as it edged forwards. To his left the low stone wall of the cemetery flanked the road before cutting in towards the town's Methodist church. Rows of gravestones lay along the mildly undulating ground, stopping abruptly in fallow space, assigned, he assumed, to those the town had yet to give up. Some of the older slabs were listing badly, the granite weathered, garbed in patchworks of lichen. Further along, by contrast, the more modern headstones gleamed despite the murk, the rain glistening on the burnished marble. Without the rain it might have been possible to read the inscriptions from the car,

surnames that resonated, their echo catching in the throat like an acrid vapour. Epitaphs began to form, unbidden, at the edge of his mind and he pictured a stonemason at work, carefully carving words that families had agonised over, attempts to capture a life in a sentence or two.

Up ahead a car sounded its horn, the driver remonstrating with an arm from his half-open window. Stephen watched, waiting for a retaliatory burst, but nothing came. He pictured the other motorists hunkering down, a generation wary of confrontation, happy not to give conflict its fuel. As his car inched past the gates of the cemetery, a coldness passed through him, a convulsion that was gone in an instant, someone treading on his grave, he might once have termed it.

Apart from half a flavourless sandwich on the motorway, he hadn't eaten today. Zoe would be making Amy's dinner about now, his absence perhaps enquired about for the first time today. He imagined the awkwardness in his wife's face as their daughter asked whether Daddy would be home tomorrow. In truth no timescale had been discussed, just a vague acknowledgement that he would come home when he could, that he'd use the time to reflect on his suspension, consider what he'd do if dismissed.

He thought about what his wife knew of the town he'd kept her – and now his daughter – away from, the place he grew up, his family home, it amounting to an airbrushed version of the truth. A version in which key players had been appropriated, names changed, his family's part in it all downgraded, but not so as he'd lose all sympathy. Just enough ambiguity to his backstory so as to resist scrutiny. What had he feared would be Zoe's reaction? Disgust? Fear? Or perhaps her judgement would have been more considered, benevolent even. But why risk it?

Why parade your shame to those you meet? Better to allow them time to know you in isolation. And after the initial months, it had seemed easier to go along with this version, to continue its propagation, tweak it on occasion, apologise to his wife for the estrangement of his family.

As he neared the town centre he was reminded of a game played with his sister. As children, returning from seaside holidays, almost drunk with torpor, they'd summon the last vestige of energy to peer out the back of the car, the winner the first of them to spot someone they knew. Their mother would tell them not to stare, his sister asking how they were supposed to see people if they didn't. Sometimes Jenny would announce a teacher's name, or a friend's parent, claiming to have seen them up a side road, insistent it still counted.

'It's not proof,' he'd say as she grinned knowingly. 'I have to see them as well.'

The game was different now, played from the front seat, where, despite the drizzle distorting everything, he was as much on show as the people who passed by. Occasionally a face would spark some small beat of recognition, before morphing into something unfamiliar. And while he expected someone to fix on him, to cease their business and stare with quiet recognition, nobody did.

He turned into a side road, a shortcut that bypassed the heart of the town, where a cat darted out from beneath a parked van, causing him to brake hard, the car skidding to a halt. Houses rose up like battlements on either side of him, their walls oppressive, darkened windows eyeing the car as he sat there, inert, listening to the idling of the engine. He realised this street was where Brendan had lived. During the final year of school they would syphon off alcohol from their parents' stocks and

meet in the park on Friday nights. Stephen, looking marginally older, would sometimes get served for cigarettes and they'd sit in the old fort, smoking ostentatiously, swigging vodka or gin or whatever from a plastic bottle, faking bravado as they talked about girls in their year that they'd one day ask out. In truth the two of them shared an abundant diffidence when faced with a girl up close, though neither liked to admit it. So when Suzanne entered their lives – pretty, a little awkward herself – they could scarcely account for it, the two of them falling for her in the same moment at the party, Brendan's charm opening that particular door ahead of Stephen. He tried to grasp more of the memory but it retreated.

The last time he saw Brendan was shortly after the inquest. Stephen had been given permission by the board to take his exams separately, so it'd been months since they'd spoken. He passed him down by the river, at one of the spots they liked to fish together. Stephen had stopped and stood behind him, Brendan continuing to focus on the float that bobbed on the water. He said his friend's name, asked how his exams had gone, whether he'd caught anything, but the silence only deepened.

Scanning the line of houses now he looked up at what had been Brendan's bedroom window, remembering staying at the house once, passing Brendan's mother on the landing in the middle of the night, entertaining his adolescent fantasy that she might come into his room, his virginity taken by a woman almost three times his age.

The cottage was a mile or so beyond the town. Built in the mid-nineteenth century to house local miners, there were four or five rows of them running at right angles to the road, the end ones with gardens backing onto the river.

He parked a few hundred yards along the road and walked back to the gate in the incipient darkness, the scent of wood smoke lingering in the drizzle. He rehearsed a greeting – a courteous half-smile, cordial but scant – should any of the neighbours emerge from the doors as he passed. Outside the end-but-one cottage a faint orange glow issued through the curtains of the living room and he paused, thinking that he might turn around, drive straight home. His first knock was tentative, almost apologetic, so he followed it with something more purposeful. There were two hanging baskets he didn't remember, the cottage perhaps painted recently. Ten seconds or so later he knocked again. Eventually a light came on at the back of the hall. She opened the door slowly, wearily, as if expecting some cold-caller or the cackle of children as they ran away. Seeing him, there was little flicker of emotion on her face, as if his arrival was both expected and cause for indifference. Her face had aged, the skin around her eyes puffy, her forehead appreciably furrowed. Standing in the doorway she appeared smaller, not merely thinner but as if some height had been lost to a stoop as the heft of life here accumulated. Apart from a glance along the path, her gaze was floor-bound after making initial eye contact. Behind her he could hear the utterances of a radio play.

'Hello,' he said.

Perhaps forgetting herself, the beginnings of a smile formed at her mouth and for a moment he thought she might hug him. As he stood there in the drizzle

one of the cats appeared between his mother's feet, coiling itself around her legs in a figure of eight.

'You must be cold out there,' she said.

Leaving the door open she picked up the cat and returned in silence to the lounge.

3

The fire was little more than a tendril of smoke rising from damp wood. His mother tended to it with patience, adding more kindling, blowing from the side until it caught a little. She muttered something about the logs being wet, how Peter was supposed to be bringing round some drier ones. That they didn't hug or kiss by way of greeting had always felt unremarkable until Zoe commented on it the first time she'd met his mother.

'It's not something we do,' he'd said, though he supposed they once had. He'd wondered whether the birth of his daughter might not give their bond a prevailing warmth, ushered in beneath their defences, but if anything it rendered the prospect more absurd. Zoe, with little tolerance for such awkwardness, had wrapped her arms around his mother within seconds of meeting.

He put his bag down and looked around the room. The other cat was coiled asleep on the armchair. Above the fire sat his grandfather's mantel clock, the hands unmoving. To the left of it there was a framed photograph of him and Zoe, one he'd sent several years ago, and next to that one of Amy in the garden, her smile slightly forced for the camera. To the right of the clock, his sister looked out at them.

Little had changed by way of furnishings, second-hand pieces hastily bought to fill a home in that other time, the mahogany's lustre dulled, the chairs' fabric cloyed with the scent of wood smoke, damp and cats. The only picture to survive Highfield – an oil painting of hills to the north – retained its brooding quality, the distinction between colours in the gloom of the lounge barely perceptible. There

seemed more paperbacks in the bookcase, some they'd sent as presents over the years, and he was curious to see if they'd been read. His mother had tried, with little success in his case, to get Stephen and his sister to read more as children. After school one day, she announced there was an account for them in the town's bookshop. They were allowed, the owner had been told, up to two new books a month – anything they liked – and their mother would settle up on payday. Perhaps it was hoped they'd return with some classics of children's literature, that the lure of choosing whatever they desired, rather than being told to read something, would set them on some gloriously edifying literary journey. Jenny, more than he, took the gesture seriously, spending hours in the shop, planning meticulously which books to acquire, which to save for future months. Often she would just buy a notebook to draw or press flowers in, but her most prized purchase was an audio book of *Peter and the Wolf*, which came with two accompanying records that narrated the story. She listened to it again and again, thrilled as each character's instrument in the orchestra was played. Within weeks the vinyl had several scratches across it, meaning someone had to lift the needle and gently lower it into a subsequent groove. She never tired of the French horns that signalled the wolf's entrance, her face rich with fear and excitement as if hearing it for the first time. Stephen would tease her, saying that Sonia the duck didn't really survive in the wolf's stomach, his sister welling up until he was proven wrong, whereupon she'd scowl at him, her face somehow both angry and forgiving.

The owner of the bookshop, a chubby, florid-cheeked man for whom even the slightest movement induced a diabolical wheeze, would always forget their mother's arrangement as he awaited payment from them. Each time they reminded

him he'd affect weary resignation, as if regretting the understanding that had been reached, or somehow doubting their mother's ability to pay. In the end, when their financial difficulties worsened, their mother approached the owner, explaining the problem, how it was temporary, and could he see his way to continuing the provision made until such time as their situation improved. Perhaps he'd heard how bad things were for them, or just saw the chance to rescind his earlier generosity, for they were never allowed books on credit again. A few weeks later, as if to prove a point, Stephen and his sister were taken to the shop one Saturday morning, their mother, once inside, announcing proudly they were to choose anything they liked (she'd told them before going in they could only have one book each). The whole shop seemed suspended in time as they gingerly browsed the shelves, their mother standing proud, daring the owner or any of the few customers to meet her eye. Stephen tried to remember what he'd bought that day, but couldn't. Likely some fantasy adventure book he didn't ever read. After that they never went back to the shop.

His mother, content the fire had caught sufficiently, replaced the guard and returned the poker to its hook. Her hands still had the strength of someone who'd used them throughout life, although the skin had parched considerably. Her hair, previously flecked with grey, was now silvered throughout, its lustre gone, making it impossible to picture the once glossy strands that had spooled down. Years ago he'd discovered she still cut it herself – a hangover from their money problems or just another aspect of her seclusion, he wasn't sure. The result was an irregular profile with one or two mutinous clumps flaring outwards like peaks on a chart. Kneeling there by the fire,

she looked tiny, the line of her spine visible beneath her jumper like an abandoned dog's.

She eased herself up from the grate and went into the kitchen. It was to be expected, the sudden ageing of a friend or relative you saw only occasionally, rather than the trickling, imperceptible plunder of their vigour in your ever-presence. Perhaps she regarded him similarly, her once-little boy, awkward and sickly, now approaching middle age, a family of his own, a steady if unremarkable career, though this last part likely needed qualification now.

'Did you manage to get a space?' she called through.

Originally the cottages were assigned parking spaces, but over the years the lines had faded, the system abused, becoming first-come, first-served. His mother had sold the car long before moving in and, as far as he knew, had not driven since.

'Got lucky,' he said. 'There was one at the end.'

The tea was insipid, his mother using one bag for both cups, he assumed. He'd thought to ask if she had anything to drink in the house, but suspected she remained faithful to her temperance. That this extended to denying her occasional visitors anything seemed churlish. If he was here more than a day or so, a pub would have to be chosen, perhaps the one on the edge of town, where he'd played pool with Brendan as kids. He would wear the cap that made him look a little ridiculous, find a spot in the corner, keep himself to himself.

'I didn't think you'd come back here again,' his mother said as she sat down on the settee.

'It's not by choice. Peter contacted me.'

'He needn't have bothered you.'

'It's hardly bother. It was good of him to call. He said you'd had some tests.'

Before speaking she dismissed his words with a sweep of her arm, a petulant tut. 'Tell me, how's Amy? She must have started school now.'

He thought to press for more but decided against it, see what was offered in the coming days.

'She's good. Has her mother's brains.'

'She got lucky, then.'

'I thought I might stay for bit, if that's OK. A day or two, perhaps a little longer.'

'There's really no need,' she said, before softening a little. 'But, yes, stay as long as you like. Will Zoe manage without you?'

'Amy's at school most of the day now. And Zoe can work a little from home.'

'Won't work miss you?'

He wondered whether there was sense in mentioning his suspension, deciding not to for now, fearing the connection she'd make. 'They'll manage.'

'What will you do? There's nothing to do here.'

He'd considered this, the danger in being idle, here of all places, the emptiness of afternoons without the promise of seeing his wife and daughter later. Of clipped exchanges with his mother as they steered clear of the past's contrails.

'I thought I could help out around the house, do any odd jobs need doing.'

A flicker of annoyance passed across his mother's face, as if his offer was absurd, insulting even. She'd managed well enough for the past twenty-six years on her own; what jobs did he think beyond her?

How old was she now? Sixty-four, sixty-five? He felt some small guilt at not knowing which. On the cusp of becoming old, then. And was she resigned now to a life on her own? Of her twilight years unfurling in a withering loneliness, broken only by fleeting family visits and a sympathetic friend? Her penance, she no doubt believed. Repaying the gods, or whoever, with monastic sobriety.

When she moved into the cottage he was starting his A-levels at the other end of the country. The preceding year had seen his mother endure several spells in a psychiatric ward, between which she would catch the train down to her brother's to see Stephen. They thought she would return indefinitely on her final discharge, but a phone call to his uncle revealed she was looking at houses to rent in the town. They presumed it a phase, some aspect of the grief that needed to play out, hoping she would move down in time. But the months became years, a sanctuary of sorts created in the heart of purgatory. Stephen came to stay soon after she moved in, the only time he had been back, a difficult few days for them both, the awkwardness following them to the cemetery, where his mother placed fresh flowers on the grave, as she still did every week as far as he knew. There was still some stone-throwing in those days, a group of kids from the other side of town, Stephen's mother shrinking into her chair a little more as each one struck the cottage, both of them waiting for a window to go. On the second evening, on hearing the sporadic patter against the door and roof, he went out, half scared, half seething with anger, to confront them, the dog following him out, sitting by his side.

'Leave us alone,' he'd said and they'd laughed.

What did he think he could do, other than goad them further, give them the confrontation they craved? The few he recognised had the decency to look vaguely

embarrassed, but it was the tall, skinny one at the front whose defiance showed Stephen what his mother would endure when she made the decision to stay. The boy launched the stone he held low and flat into Stephen's cheek, the blood taking several seconds to appear. Despite the injury being worse than it looked, his mother and uncle agreed he shouldn't visit again, not while feelings were so strong. It would be more than two decades before he returned.

He rolled a cigarette and went out to the garden. It was almost dark now and the rain had thinned to nothing. Where the cloud had broken, the first stars shimmered. He could hear the river babbling by beyond the end cottage, little more than a whisper. The garden was faintly lit by neighbours' windows, so he stood close to the back door, tucked into the storm porch, watching his smoke billow into the night. He wondered how much contact his mother had with those around her, whether Peter lived nearby, how much he knew. Initially, according to his uncle, those in the other cottages hardly acknowledged her. Doors would close as she walked by, conversations cease. But when a stone came through her kitchen window, one neighbour, a young woman from the adjacent row, helped her clear up the glass, the others regarding her more sympathetically thereafter. Her landlord, too, seemed beyond such judgements, assuring Stephen's uncle he would let him know if any repeat of the broken window occurred.

Once able his mother had returned to work at the nursing home for a few months, the manager sympathetic and supportive to a degree, allowing her to come back on reduced hours. Stephen wondered how colleagues treated her, whether she was shunned. By this time the papers had shifted the tone of their coverage from guarded sympathy to thinly veiled condemnation of her. Either way, she left the

nursing home by mutual agreement before the end of the year, some small payoff allowing her employer to deflect further attention. His mother hadn't worked again, not in any sustained sense. The convenience store in the centre of town took her on when they first stayed open late, but it hadn't worked out. And she'd helped out at the bakery for several months, coming and going before most of the town had risen. Again, for reasons Stephen was unaware of, she left after the trial period ended.

He wasn't entirely sure how she managed financially then, assuming that there was some sort of pension, that perhaps her brother helped out initially. There certainly weren't any savings left, living as they had in the end with menacing debt. Perhaps the bailiffs had been stood down after the inquest, what was owed written off or recovered from some lump sum. He knew his parents had put everything into Highfield, that it came with great risk, this seismic new venture, that the stakes for the family were significant. If he could find the words, he would offer his mother something during his stay, though the gesture would almost certainly be declined. He imagined leaving some cash in the room, only for it to be left unspent, or, worse, posted back to him.

He looked around the garden, which was bedding down for winter. In the far corner, by the small pond, the cherry tree rose from the spot they'd lain Shane's ashes. It surprised him how long the animal had lived, and he suspected his mother resented its presence on some level. When Stephen came to stay that time he expected her to have given the dog away, but perhaps it remained an unlikely source of company for her.

The bird table, Stephen saw, was cloyed with food: seed mixes, peanuts, fatballs. It had always been his father, when he was home, who'd fed the birds, but

since living here his mother topped up the feeders daily and could spend half the morning watching coal tits and house sparrows plunder the offerings. A lone robin remained faithful over the years, she said, allowing her to stand just a few feet away as it ate, brazen and unhurried. It was what they spoke of on the phone, the difficult silences filled with an enumeration of species to visit the garden that month. She'd become quite expert, able to distinguish a mistle thrush from a song thrush, a dunnock from a tree sparrow, species he often confused. (Like his father, it was the raptors, the falcons and hawks, that roused him most.) His mother knew their songs as well, her ears attuned to individual notes within the chorus. She seemed to cherish their apparent loyalty, how the simple act of placing food out ensured their daily return. Initially she'd worried the cats might target them, but it seemed both had been adopted beyond their hunting prime, preferring instead to watch the steady convergence from a window, as if it were for their amusement.

After the birth of Amy, Stephen's mother had come to visit them in Cornwall. They'd sat in the garden at dusk one summer's evening, the four of them, watching pipistrelle bats circle and flit, feeding on throngs of midges, the air heady with pollen. It was then he'd held real hope his mother could be convinced to move down, to finally leave the town and settle near them.

Inside, she was tending the fire once more. Again he decided against asking about the tests, what they were for. He would talk to Peter if possible, find out more. Find out more about this man in his mother's life. Tomorrow he would get up early, make them some breakfast. He would call Zoe, talk to Amy before she went to school, and then head out across town, up to the house on the hill they had once all lived in.

4

The road out of town was quiet. Once over the humpbacked bridge he parked in a gateway that looked unused. Setting off up the hill he wished he had a dog or a briefcase, something that gave the impression of purpose. The lane up to the house was narrower than he remembered, little more than a car's width, with one or two passing places cut into the hedge. Passing the gate to the only other house up there he kept his head down, putting in some big strides, his heart lurching in his chest, but there seemed no one about.

The air was still beneath its slate-grey canopy, the dense corrugations of cloud low and cloying. To his right, in the tall beeches, the serrated cry of a rook punctured the silence. Nearing the top of the hill his thighs burned and a cough reminded him of his promise to Zoe, to Amy, to quit smoking this year.

He'd woken late, almost nine – too late to phone home – the absence of work rendering him more inert each morning, the parallels with his father not lost on him, splintering the sense of himself. Once downstairs he'd realised the cottage was empty, a cup with a teabag in it left for him. After making some toast he'd sat by the window, watching birds bicker as they fed, while a neighbour attended to a raised bed. An hour later his mother returned carrying a handled stick with some sort of grappling implement at its end. In her other hand was a small bin sack, which he saw was full of litter as she transferred it to the main bin out the back. He asked her about it but she had avoided his question, instead inquiring what he wanted for dinner tonight.

The roof of the house could be seen up ahead now. He had no idea what to expect, who would be living there, what sort of reception he'd get. He'd rehearsed possible reasons for calling, none of which sounded plausible this morning: selling something (what?), asking for directions (to where?), or just that he was lost. Anything that would afford him a glimpse of the place. In the end he opted for honesty, how he'd say he used to live here and was just passing. There'd be an awkward pause, his presence not unreasonable but still unsettling. He would see straight away in their faces whether they knew the house's history, as they stiffened slightly, filling the doorway like unfriendly bouncers. He'd feel their stares on his back as he walked away, sensing their fear that he was some doom-laden harbinger. Or perhaps they'd invite him in, wary but not unfriendly as they chaperoned him from room to room as small children looked on bemused.

He had come back here once previously, before being sent away for good, to collect some clothes and schoolwork a week or so after that day, when there was still the sense none of it had happened. That it was some crazy dream he was still caught in, one that fooled you with its clarity and continuity. He remembered thinking any minute the dream's colour and sound would fade, images blending into each other, characters switching, absurd and surreal, reality finally resuming. Like his mother he'd been given something to take at night, just for the first few days, to help him sleep, and was told to expect some drowsiness the next day. And this had contributed to the hazing of the actual world, its edges softened and blurred, his actions and thoughts seemingly happening independently of him, as if he was being directed. His uncle had driven him up here, the man trying but failing to fill the silence in the car. There was a woman waiting for them, he remembered now, who

had a kind voice. Once they'd parked she came across the yard and opened his door, asking if he was sure about the visit, that he could come back another time or to tell her what he needed from the house. He recalled how she smelt of summer, of the flowers up in the woods, her smile heartfelt yet tinged with pity. Stephen kept expecting Shane to come bounding out, barking at first, then jumping up and slobbering all over his face, his tail submissive, but the dog, he learned later, had been removed by then.

There were a couple of people that day, a man and woman, walking around inside the house, examining and removing things, placing them in bags. Each time he passed one of them they smiled as if they knew him, the man even saying Stephen's name.

Inside he'd expected everything to have changed, some vast shift from the familiar and comforting to a place of terror. But in a sense it was like coming home any other time: their coats lined up in the hall above the rack of shoes and boots; in the kitchen food lay on the surfaces awaiting preparation, dishes from breakfast piled to be washed up, and, beneath the table, his sister's school shoes, foolishly left where she'd kicked them off. There was a smell he couldn't place, acrid and smarting, that had laid claim to the house. He went from room to room, the woman behind him, her hand on his shoulder, gently squeezing it every now and then. When he went to go in the front room, the woman ushered him towards the stairs.

'Come on,' she said, 'let's get your stuff.'

His uncle chose to wait outside but the woman hardly left his side. Despite the time of year, upstairs had been cooler, a breeze from an open window blowing across the landing. The woman seemed to know which was Stephen's room and they

went in together. Again everything was as he'd left it on that morning: bed unmade, a few clothes splayed on the floor, a cassette tape of songs that Suzanne had made him on his desk. The woman asked if he had a bag that he used to go away with and he pointed to the wardrobe. As she looked for it he stood there in the middle of the room, unable to move, thinking that he might be sick, or that his legs would buckle beneath him. In the end the woman suggested he sit on the bed while she opened each drawer, held up an item of clothing and he would nod or shake his head. The entire time they were there he didn't utter a word.

He packed some school work and books, stuff he'd need for revision, plus the cassette tape. When they'd finished he went over to the window. His uncle was sitting against the Cortina's bonnet, looking out towards the town, smoking hard and fast, running a hand through his thinning hair. The man and woman continued to make trips back and forth from their van in silence. He looked at the garden his mother had cleared and created when they first moved in, the vegetable plot glistening in the morning dew, the tree swing Jenny loved to sit on swaying slightly in the breeze. An old football, unkicked for months and near-deflated, sat in front of the barn, a few of Shane's chewed up toys dotted around it. The same question kept repeating in his head: What would happen now?

His uncle dropped the cigarette to the ground and swivelled his shoe on it before lighting another. Exhaling he turned and looked up at the window, an expression Stephen couldn't fathom on his face.

The woman asked if he was OK in the bedroom for a moment, while she got some clothes for his mother. Back on the landing she offered to carry his holdall downstairs, but he put it on his shoulder, for some reason keen to show he was

coping. The carrier bag of school work was heavy, the handles threatening to break, so he held it from beneath. Pausing at the top of the stairs, he looked along to Jenny's door, the draught coming from it carrying the garden's scent. Again the hand on his shoulder, the woman's soft voice, urging him to come on, that they had what they came for. And yet he just stood there, unable to move, to speak. He thought of his mother, her pills apparently stronger than his, rendering her a zombie for most of the day, able only to lie or sit, staring numbly ahead. She wasn't to be left alone, he'd overheard someone say, not even for a few minutes. She didn't eat for the first few days, and only did later when his uncle or aunt took the spoon or fork of food to her mouth, where mechanically she'd slowly chew, her eyes glazed, unmoving. He didn't feel much like eating either but managed a little of every meal made. The nights were worst, the unfamiliar house dark and deathly quiet, until, without warning, a low wail would start up, building for several minutes until it drew out, crescendoing into a vast howl and he would hear someone go into his mother's room, perhaps giving her another pill, the noise slowly dying to nothing. With first light he'd lie there and listen to a blackbird's dawn chorus, feeling some slight relief, sensing that his mother was asleep, the house free of grief for a couple of hours.

Looking hard at Jenny's door that day, some force pulled him towards her room, daring him to enter.

'Come on,' the woman had said, 'let's get you back.'

At the bottom of the stairs the phone rang and they'd both jumped a little. He half expected his mother or father to emerge from a room to answer it. Instead Stephen and the woman looked hard at it until it stopped.

Outside the man and woman were drinking from a flask by the van. They issued weak smiles as they passed them. As they reached him, his uncle took a last gulp of his cigarette before taking Stephen's bags and placing them in the boot. He asked if they had everything they needed. As the woman put his mother's things in her own car she said she would return if anything had been forgotten, that things could be sent on. Then she asked them to wait in the car while she spoke to the others.

They sat in silence, the sun warming the car, his uncle's fingers tapping the top of the steering wheel. Stephen could hear the others talking but could make out none of the words. Finally the woman came to say goodbye and they drove slowly away.

Rounding the last bend now, he could see the house. Up here the sides of the lane were strewn with dead leaves and he remembered how Jenny would trudge through them, kicking them up into fleeting eddies, squealing at the easy pleasure of it all. As he neared the gate, a gustless breeze threaded through the gap between the buildings as if the house were breathing, whispering to him.

Any thoughts of running into the new owners soon vanished as he realised it was unoccupied. The entrance was largely overgrown, trails of ivy gripping the old gate so that he had to force it open, remembering it needed lifting to clear the ground. Fixed to one of its cross beams a rusted notice warned of danger, to keep out. Above, the carved lettering on the wooden sign could still be read: *Highfield*.

The house itself rose from a mass of latticed brambles, the grey pebbledash stained green with trails of mildew. He saw that the front door and ground floor

windows had been crudely boarded up, some of the boards splintered where they'd been hacked at, others adorned with fading graffiti. On the first floor his parents' and Jenny's windows had almost no glass left in the panels and he pictured stone-throwing kids cheering each other as another pane was breached. Paint from the rotten window frames had blistered and flaked. Beyond his sister's window he could make out a curtain, faded, weatherworn, barely clinging on as it rippled in the breeze. Above, clumps of grass grew out of the guttering, as if the house had a neglected roof garden. Whether from decay or sabotage, a significant part of the roof had collapsed next to the chimney, the rafters exposed like ribs, several slates hanging precariously over the edge. The chimney itself, listing close to tipping point, had a few token strands of fluorescent tape attached to it, beyond which the television aerial hung down from its remaining bracket.

In the yard he turned full circle, taking in the ruined barns, the garden that had grown back to the wilderness of when they moved in, the greenhouse skeletal. The swing still hung from the old maple, its rope perhaps a large child's weight away from failing. A further danger sign had been fixed to one of the barn doors, this one's message more compassionate than prohibitive, appealing to trespassers' sense of preservation. He looked inside the barn his father was going to turn into a workshop, where he was going to strip the Morris' engine, teach Stephen its mechanics as they restored it.

He and Brendan almost set fire to themselves in there, playing when everyone was out. They were trying to heat a metal rod, to fashion a tripod for fishing, but the small fire they lit kept going out. Brendan found a petrol can, pouring a little on the flame, which shot back up, setting the top of the can alight. His friend

threw it across the floor, leaving patches of burning stonework. Without thought Stephen ran to it, cupped the opening with the palm of his hand, denying it oxygen, until it went out. He almost hid the burn mark successfully, until his mother saw it one evening. The collusion, the conspiracy that separated them from his father, was already well established, so he never found out they'd nearly blown up the barn and them with it.

All that was left in there now were some upturned crates, arranged as seating, and the brackets from shelves his father put up. Remnants of a camp fire lay in the middle of the floor, empty beer cans and cigarette butts strewn around it. More graffiti adorned the walls, some relatively fresh-looking.

He headed round the side of the house, where the oil tank was shrouded by head-high nettles. Behind it was the old Morris, one of so many abandoned projects. They were supposed to witness its rebirth, taking it to the coast for family picnics, feel the wind in their hair as the roof was furled back. Its shell was badly rusted, the seats inside blackened from attempts to burn it, and yet he still recognised it, pictured himself manoeuvring the gearstick, mimicking the engine's sound in adolescent thrill.

Around the back of the house the basketball hoop hung on the wall, its net absent. Below it was the spot his sister had played endless games of hopscotch, bounding between boxes drawn in chalk, singing a rhyme that kept pace with her movement.

Pushing through the brambles he tried to peer behind one of the kitchen's boarded windows but it was too secure. Beside the potting shed the back door was also boarded up, but was loose where it had been forced before. He fetched an iron

pole he'd seen behind the oil tank and levered the door open enough to squeeze through.

The first thing to hit him was the smell. Nothing overpowering, more a general dankness that was at odds with his teenage years here. In the hall wallpaper hung from the walls as if someone had begun to decorate before giving up. Mould spread along the ceiling throughout. Little remained of the kitchen except a few of the fixed cupboards, their doors clinging on or removed entirely, and a gaping wound sat where the old stove once was. He pictured his mother baking in here on Sundays, Jenny helping to roll pastry, getting it in her hair, flour on her nose. Other memories gathered. A radio playing. Laughter. His father sick but not yet fully descended into the darkness.

In the lounge the fireplace had been removed, crudely chiselled out, rubble spewing out from behind it. Again the smell, this time rancid. Moving further into the room he saw a constellation of small holes that adorned the back wall in irregular clusters. What little remained of the carpet was stained and sodden.

Something moved in the corner of his eye, startling him a little, and he watched as a rat scuttled along the skirting in the far corner, unperturbed by his presence, pausing sporadically, nose twitching, sniffing the air. Above him the ceiling had bowed and a steady drip of water fell from its peak into the saturated floor below. More graffiti rose on the walls.

Back in the hall he pictured the day they moved in. Bursting through the front door, exploring the rooms, racing Jenny to be the first upstairs. Choosing their bedrooms. Letting her have the larger one at the front – another source of regret – because the other was L-shaped, which he liked. Their parents unpacking the van

with a friend, while they ran up into the woods behind the house, Jenny falling and cutting her knee, returning in tears while he explored his new playground.

He climbed the stairs now, treading carefully where the wood was rotten. Occasionally one creaked, a sound he remembered, echoing through the decades. The noises and smells of Christmases, the couple they had here, returned. Of family visiting, the house warm and contented with its abundance of guests. It snowed heavily one winter and the lane was impenetrable: no one could get up or down by vehicle, and so he'd walked with his father through a blizzard to fetch food, cut off as they were for a while. The problems with money had begun then but they lived like kings and queens for those few days, sealed in their wintry palace.

On the landing he paused, half-expecting someone to emerge from one of the rooms, telling him he shouldn't be there. A series of lines, barely visible, marked the wall beside the bathroom door, and he remembered their mother pencilling their heights one weekend, their ages in years and months, the writing now illegible. Evidence of a fire – a week ago, a year ago, he couldn't tell – scarred some of the walls.

Great whorls of mildew crept down the bathroom walls, the silicone between bath and tiles like an elongated slug. He turned on one of the sink's taps, perhaps expecting a dry splutter, but it produced nothing.

The door to his old room was stuck, the frame warped, and he had to shove hard with his shoulder to shift it. Memories returned now like a series of images projected across his mind, disjointed, unbidden, and doubts at his ability to cope with it all rose. The room was largely empty, unrecognisable from the two years he spent in it. The window had most of its panes intact, probably due to its proximity to

the hillside, allowing little room to get a good throw in. His Led Zeppelin poster, yellowed and faded, still hung from the cupboard door. The only other piece of furniture in the room was his old iron bed frame, the metal discoloured. He pictured again packing clothes in the numbness of that day, the kind woman by his side that he never saw again. In the far corner he noticed the loose board he would prize up to hide the secret paraphernalia of adolescence: tobacco, a dirty magazine Brendan had given him. Placing his car key between the wood he managed to lift the half-plank enough to get his fingers beneath it. For a moment he was a teenager again, some synaptic impulse firing a memory, a taste in the back of his throat that was somehow then. The hollow was empty save a lattice of cobwebs and he replaced the board. Closing his eyes, he strained to hear the voices of his parents, of Jenny. Instead it was someone else who spoke, though not words but laughter. Suzanne had sat on his bed, playing with her hair, their shyness diminishing. She wasn't supposed to be there, he remembered, their initial liaisons furtive, treacherous. They kissed on the bed and she told him it was over with Brendan, a month-long relationship she regretted. It was him she wanted to be with, him she thought about all the time.

Once he realised nobody lived here, that the house's legacy was too much to bear, he thought more signs of their life here would be apparent, some pristine detail preserved. But together the elements and successive generations of the town's teenagers had reduced it to a husk. A slowly perishing relic that bore down on the town in judgement.

His parents' room was the same as the others, though the graffiti was more profuse. This time he brought himself to enter his sister's room. The remaining

curtain fluttered in the wind, the room colder and damper than the others. Shards of glass lay scattered beneath the window. Every wall was blackened by mould to some extent. He'd forgotten about her wallpaper, an elaborate jungle scene that rose up into a background of sky. Their father had spent an entire weekend putting it up, carefully cutting around the animals and plants so that, half way up the wall, they seemed to come alive in relief. Above, in one of the corners, was the mulch of an abandoned swallows' nest, while below it, perhaps two or three feet, there was a mark on the wall, circular, unremarkable and he walked over, seeing that it was a hole, the same as those downstairs. Standing on tiptoe he could just reach it, its circumference big enough to accommodate his index finger.

He walked over to the window, the glass crunching underfoot, and looked out. The town could be seen over the roof of the barn, the sky above it leaden, shafts of an unseen sun attending to the hills beyond. Below, the yard looked desolate. Rain had begun to spatter, darkening the ground. He listened hard, for the sound of them playing, or of Shane barking. And then he imagined the noise of that day. Of Jenny standing here, behind a curtain, his beautiful sister, still grateful she wasn't at school. Watching the madness develop.

5

He cut down to the river and headed out of town. The copper-coloured sky of an hour ago had darkened so that the water resembled tar slipping by, although there was still enough light to walk by, dusk not yet fully deepened. From the tall trees across the water he heard an exodus of rooks, their wings clattering upwards in applause. So many hours of adolescence had been spent along this path, watching floats in case they bobbed, or moving upriver, hoping for a change in fortune. He wondered if there was any other pursuit with quite such a poor ratio of return for the time invested. Yet Brendan never wavered in his garrulous optimism of what would be caught on the next trip – always the next trip – his enthusiasm infectious enough to drag Stephen from a warm bed at all hours. And in time Stephen learnt that his friend's passion came, not from the success or otherwise of their trips, but in the small rituals they performed, the days of planning and preparing and gathering, the anticipation, which was somehow as important.

It felt strange to feel some small nostalgia for this place, recalling the innocence that had up to now remained inaccessible, sheathed as it was by circumstance or his reluctance to look at it. He'd forgotten how, before the horror of that day, there existed a joyful, ordinary childhood in which for the most part he delighted. Pausing he strained to hear the sounds of this particular aspect of his youth: the purr of their reels once cast, the sonorous slop of weights striking water, and then the metrical click click as they wound in the slack. Comfortable in the

silence, they only spoke to suggest some tea or a cigarette, or a change of position, the hours sliding by in heightened meditation.

The air was sharp now, the trees thinning as the path banked north. Another half a mile and he would emerge onto the road where the pub was. Returning from Highfield he'd spent the rest of the day in quiet reflection, broken only by brief exchanges with his mother.

'Where did you go?' she had asked.

'For a walk, up in the hills, not far. Places we used to hang out after school.'

He felt she could sense the absence of something in his answer, but they'd prepared dinner together without further reference to it. And although she hadn't expressed any surprise when he spoke of walking to the Woodman's Arms, he saw the idea unnerved her.

Wandering through the decaying rooms of Highfield, scenes from their time there had played out with such clarity, parts of his life he'd worked so hard to banish, to eradicate not just from his own mind but somehow from history itself. It amazed him how much this could be done, the pious occupation of the present, a refusal to acknowledge what had passed, to allow it oxygen, for in what real sense did it actually exist? And yet its influence still held dominion over him, whether in a darkened corner of his mind or some impervious chamber of his heart, he wasn't sure. Like the faint cosmic static still heard from the Big Bang, the noise never entirely dulled.

What he hadn't expected from visiting the house was the profusion of memories of the days following his father's return from war. They knew to give him space each time he came home, a day or two to adjust back into family life.

Whenever Stephen and his sister fought or were making excessive noise their mother would intervene, pack them off to another part of the house or the garden, reminding them their father needed some quiet time. There was also the adjustment in hierarchy. Whereas for weeks or even months their mother had been solely responsible for parenting duties and discipline, suddenly there was a new adult telling them what they could or could not do. A familiar but part-time parent, whose presence was resented, like that of a strict teacher returning after illness, relieving their more lenient replacement. The smells and sounds of the house changed too in these times: their father's scent, his heavier tread on the stairs, Shane's animation – all ushering in the transition. Friends weren't allowed to visit for the first few days, and only then on the promise they played outside.

But this time, when his father had been away for real, to the other side of the world, it was as if he didn't emerge from those soundless few days of convalescence.

Usually, on his father's return, Stephen would hear familiar and frantic noises from his parents' room for the first few nights, a sound he'd come to understand in adolescence. But even that ceased this time, the house silent save for wind booming in the rafters.

The only one whose attention remained undiminished was Shane, his father rarely seen without him. Two long walks each day – they were never told they couldn't go too, as they often would with their mother at weekends, but their father would just leave without a word and they'd not see him for two or three hours.

So it was a surprise when his father woke him that morning. It was still dark in his room, the merest blush of daybreak behind the curtains. He could just make out someone's silhouette above him as his dream faded to nothing and his father

told him to wake up. He told him to get dressed quietly, not to wake his mother or Jenny, and as Stephen wiped the sleep from his eyes he finally remembered what they were doing.

Downstairs his father stood in the gloom of the kitchen, swigging tea, a set of binoculars around his neck, Shane at his feet, alert and loyal.

‘Want some breakfast?’ his father asked.

Stephen shook his head, the excitement and fear, the early hour, suppressing any appetite he might have had.

‘You can eat when we get back,’ he said. ‘Get some layers on.’

When they first moved in, before his father went away, he began taking Shane for walks at first light, sometimes taking one of the guns from the cabinet. He checked with the farmer, who’d said he could shoot as many rabbits as he liked, as long as he took a few up to the farmhouse every now and then. Stephen knew his mother didn’t like it, but it was free food, and so it fitted in with the plan to be more self-sufficient, even before things began getting tight with money. His father showed her how to gut and skin them, and they were soon having them in stews once a week, although Jenny cried when they told her what it was, refusing to eat it initially.

A few days after he got back from the Falklands, he asked if Stephen wanted to go with him next time. They’d done nothing, just the two of them, since he’d returned, his father’s presence spectral. His mother looked troubled at the prospect but in the end Stephen said yes, mostly so his father wasn’t disappointed. Later that evening, when he turned his music off, he heard his parents arguing about it.

A few nights afterwards, over dinner, his father mentioned it again.

‘So, you coming hunting tomorrow?’

His mother glared across the table, while Jenny asked if they would catch any wolves, like the hunters in her book.

Stephen had put on his warm coat that morning, the one with the hood he wore fishing, despite it being summer. His father told him to get his fingerless gloves and went into the back room, where Stephen heard him unlock the gun cabinet. As they left the house dawn bled over the hills across the valley, the garden glistening with dew, the world somehow both still and aquiver.

They took the path at the top of the garden that wound up into the woods, his father leading the way, their pace neither fast nor slow. When they hit the tree-line Shane was let off the lead, his father keeping the dog close with a series of whistles. Every now and then Stephen stumbled on a root, losing his footing, and his father would turn and glare at him, the need for silence blazed across his face.

It was then Stephen got the first sense of what would become an obsession for his father, how rabbits were incidental to their pursuit. Whenever the trees thinned into pasture, they would stop and his father would scan the hills through binoculars, looking hard into the sky above their steep slopes. Stephen followed his glare but could see nothing. A few days later his father told him about the pair of peregrines that wintered in the valley. He spoke of them with reverence and exhilaration, glimpses of his former self returning momentarily. Stephen had never known him to be interested in birds; through childhood it had always been his mother who pointed out and identified wildlife for them, though rarely birds. But when his father talked about the falcons, how privileged they were to have them nearby, his face was luminous with an intensity none of them had seen before. He would even walk a third time some days, without Shane, saying it improved his

chances of sighting one of the peregrines. At dinner, when he still ate with them, they could tell if he'd been successful in his quest, his mood lifting a little. And when the mobile library next came through the town, he asked Stephen's mother to find him a book on them.

Deeper into the woods that day they paused, sitting down on a fallen tree, and his father began, in a whisper, to tell him about the gun. It was one of three he kept in the locked cabinet in the utility room off the kitchen. Stephen had looked at them in fascination when they were first brought home, showing them off to Brendan, pretending he was allowed to take them out. It was only this one – the gun that had always been around, the one that hadn't required a cabinet – that Stephen was ever allowed to handle, and then only at times like these, when supervised.

His father held the weapon out for him to take. 'Go on.'

It was smaller than the others, but still heavier than he'd have thought. He held it awkwardly, as if having no contemplation of what it was. As he swung round, his father snatched it from him.

'Never point it towards someone. Even when you're sure it's not loaded.'

'Is it loaded?'

'You tell me.'

'I don't know.'

'You need to always know.' He handed it back to him. 'It's an air rifle. Do you know what that is?'

Stephen nodded his head. His father took the gun from him again.

'You break the barrel here,' he said, snapping the gun almost in half. 'Then you pull it down and towards you, to give it its power. Go on, try.'

He handed it back to him. Stephen tried but it was too stiff, the tips of his fingers too cold. Teeth gritted, he tried again. His father gave out a little laugh. 'Put the butt into your stomach and use two hands.'

Still he couldn't do it.

'Here.' His father took the rifle and bent the barrel back on itself until a loud click was heard. 'That's the spring-piston compressing down and locking.'

After passing the gun back to him his father took a round tin from his jacket pocket and opened it. 'Do you know what these are?'

'Bullets?'

'Pellets.'

He gave him one, showed him where to put it.

'Other way round,' his father said. 'Now close it up.'

This was easier, the mechanism offering little resistance.

'Good,' he said. 'Come on.'

His father called Shane to heel with a click of his fingers and put his lead back on. Stephen went to hand back the gun but his father had already walked on.

They walked more slowly now, half crouching, every small noise their feet made amplified, echoing off the trees. Finally they broke the cover of the woods and his father squatted low, motioning him to do the same, the dog alert, primed next to them. Gradually they edged around the field, stalking nothing in particular, the silence occasionally broken by the unearthly cry of a crow. At one point Stephen stumbled in a furrow made by a tractor, falling in a heap, something between a scowl and a smile conveyed in his father's face. It was light now and they could see across to the far side of the field where a low mist sat, furring the edge of the

coppice. They crept along like this for a while, every now and then stopping still when his father raised a hand. He would then take the rifle from Stephen and bring it up to his shoulder, peering through the sight, scanning the far hedgerow. Sensing the theatre of the moment, the dog could barely contain itself, a thin whine emanating from its throat, its eyes large and animated.

As they rounded a bend his father put his hand up again and they crouched down low. Ahead, about thirty yards away and a few paces from the tree-line, a rabbit munched on the grass, its breath misting upwards in bursts. Alert, it paused every now and then, but didn't notice them. His father beckoned him to his side, gesturing to take aim. Stephen moved forward but was reluctant to raise the gun.

'Go on,' he whispered. 'Find your shot.'

Slowly he lifted the weapon up and pointed it in the direction of the rabbit. His father eased the butt back into Stephen's shoulder, its hard surface pressing into the bone, despite the layers he wore.

'Now, close one eye and try to find it in the sight.'

He could see the trees and the far hedge but nothing else. His father put his head next to Stephen's, looking along the gun, adjusting it downwards and to the left.

'You got it?'

Stephen nodded. His father loosened Stephen's bottom hand, which had been squeezing the barrel tightly, so that the gun just rested on his palm.

'Now, breathe in and out slowly.'

He could see the rabbit's glassy eyes, its nose twitching as if it were about to sneeze.

‘Next time you breathe out,’ his father said, ‘hold it half way and squeeze the trigger gently.’

His left hand shook – the fear, the weight of the gun, he wasn’t sure – the tremor making it hard to keep the animal in sight for more than a couple of seconds at a time. He soon forgot about the breathing, whether he was supposed to pull the trigger when breathing in or out.

‘When you’ve got it,’ his father said, barely audibly, ‘take your shot.’

Again the rabbit stopped eating, its eye fixed on them, sensing their presence. He could feel his father’s impatience, the dog’s whimpering threatening to give them away. A tear pooled in his open eye, blurring his vision. He thought about fishing, tried to tell himself it was the same thing, that Brendan would have fired by now.

Finally he lowered the gun and wiped his face on his sleeve. His father gave out a huff, took the weapon from him and slowly, deliberately took aim, the action smooth, natural, his body entirely still.

A moment later there was a pop, the sound softer than Stephen expected, and the rabbit leapt an inch or two in the air, flipping onto its side. Shane gave out a yelp and, as they stood, his father let him off the lead. The dog tore on ahead of them and was by the rabbit in seconds. After sniffing it for a moment or two he ran between them and the creature until they caught up.

The entry wound was barely visible, just a small mark on its side, the fur around it damp and ruffled. Its eyes, black and dead, were still open and Stephen wondered if the animal might suddenly get to its feet and scurry into the undergrowth, but when his father nudged it with his boot he could see it was lifeless.

The bleeding over, they headed home, his father taking the rabbit into the barn, to hang it up, while Stephen went up to his room.

He could see the pub now, set back from the road into town, wood smoke from its chimney stack swooping down to him on the wind. Several cars were parked along the stone wall and for a moment he considered turning back, fearing his appearance perhaps hadn't changed sufficiently from adolescence. His boots were heavy with clods of mud from the path, which he started to remove on the tussocky bank until the road behind him was lit with headlights. Ignoring the anxiety that grew, he opened the door of the Woodman's.

He thought that his father had used this pub often, while on leave, at least before they'd moved to Highfield. There had been a welcome home reception held for him here, a banner over the door, bunting festooned throughout, free drinks for the returning soldier. They'd been allowed – he and Jenny – to go for the first couple of hours, a stack of coins, a coke and some crisps each to keep them quiet. He remembered the cigarette smoke hanging thickly in the rooms, the jukebox up loud, the same songs over and over. His father sat at a table in the corner, pint after pint placed in front of him, their mother sipping halves of cider, forcing awkward smiles at all the attention. There was a reporter from the local paper, a weaselly-looking man who seemed everywhere at once, lingering on the edge of people's conversations, asking them about his father. A picture was taken, to accompany the piece, he and Jenny allowed in the other bar for it. The man taking it kept repeating the same thing, telling their father he was a hero and to smile, before finally accepting he wasn't going to.

Looking around it now, he could see the lounge was still divided into two sections. Several people stood against the bar, chatting amiably, the occasional laugh issued. The log fire burned steadily on the far wall, a few drinkers looking up to see who'd come in, soon returning to their exchanges. A couple of older men stared longer, scrutinising a face they perhaps thought familiar, not *the* face, but one with enough similarity to propel them to that other time. While they informed the others Stephen entered the quieter room, where a young couple sat deep in conversation. Without the fire it was cooler this side, a little darker. The pool table had been replaced by more seating, the games machine also gone. As he sat at the bar, the couple eyed him in turn, but again with indifference. Removing his jacket he heard a woman call through, saying she would be with him in a moment. It was only once she appeared that something registered in him, a flicker of recall, the slow calibration of the face in front of him with a bank of submerged memories. Her own reaction was slower still, as she asked routinely what he'd like, before stiffening, staring indiscreetly as the men next door had. He remembered how she didn't give up her smile easily, even as a girl, and if it had started to form now she quickly discouraged it.

He pointed to one of the pumps. 'A pint of that, please, Suzanne.' Hearing himself say her name had a hint of comfort to it. After a few seconds in which she hadn't moved, he spoke again: 'Or something else, if that's not on?'

Composing herself she reached slowly for a handled glass, filling it with a few pulls on the pump handle, then placing it on the bar. He held a note out and for moment he thought she was just going to stand there, silent and inert, until finally

she turned to the till. Placing his change in front of him, she spoke, her voice uneven and fragile, as if it was about to break.

‘Hello Stephen,’ she said.

6

The man unloaded the logs he'd brought from a wheelbarrow into the shed, pausing every now and then, the palm of his hand easing the small of this back. He was older than Stephen expected, his voice on the phone belying the decade or so he had on Stephen's mother. Introducing himself with that same voice – soft and fluid, like water – he shook Stephen's hand, smiling warmly, his eyes almost hiding the flicker of awkward condolence. Mary was upstairs, silently attending to something, so Stephen put the kettle on while Peter made several trips back and forth to his car, politely spurning the offer of help.

'Should do her till spring, this lot,' Peter said.

Stephen put the man's tea down and helped to stack the last load. 'It's very kind of you.'

'She should probably get the chimney swept again soon, especially burning wood. Creosote builds up, before you know it you've got a fire where you don't want one.'

The two of them stood back to admire the pile before sitting on the bench beneath the kitchen window, the morning sun for once barely dimmed by flecks of cirrus. What little traffic the road accommodated had diminished, the only sound above the noise of the river an occasional throaty *airk* from the rookery beyond it.

Stephen had stumbled back from the pub last night, shortly before closing time, the path along the river dark but for the gloam of the moon. There had been a missed call from Zoe, a message that she was off to bed and not to ring now. The air

of admonishment in her voice was tempered with concern, that she hoped he was OK, that Amy missed him. They both missed him. He would phone before dinner tonight.

He thought there'd been the beginnings of a tear in Suzanne's eye last night, as she recognised him, though she recovered quickly. Their conversation, broken every few minutes by demand from the bar behind her, began tentatively.

'How are you?' he said, before thinking he had no right to ask this. Still too taken aback to speak, he filled the silence for her. 'How long...'

'Twenty-five years.' There was perhaps nothing barbed in the speed of her reply, it being a simple calculation.

'You look well.'

'You think? Must be the gloom.'

'It's so good to see you.'

She offered a half-nod at this, nothing more, her hands attending to some unnecessary cleaning of the bar. Was it outlandish, naïve, to term her his first love, curtailed as it was in its infancy? They'd walked in the woods a lot, held hands, kissed languorously, his world shifting into some glorious new realm he didn't fully understand. He strained to evoke the sensation, recall how it felt to be a teenager lost to life's first raptures, but it ebbed from his grasp. Not love as he knew it now, but something approaching it. Something fierce.

Pretty in a homely way, she was in several of his classes through the final two years of school, her plainness – though he didn't regard her so – keeping her below the radar of other boys. But both he and Brendan had been drawn to her, their own

shyness with girls mirrored in her demure manner, a factor that should have prevented either of them progressing beyond watching her from afar.

He remembered first learning that Brendan was seeing her, if that was the term then. There'd been a party, someone's parents out of town. Such gatherings grew in frequency during their final year of school, a typical night yielding little more than loud music, some stolen alcohol and an argument that culminated in a fight of sorts, the police often called. They were invited, he and Brendan, to these spontaneous congregations through a mutual friend who somehow bridged the gap between the studious and the unruly among them. They would sit in the corner, drinking cheap lager, envious of those who were lost in the music or who disappeared in pairs upstairs, not to be seen again that evening. But it was enough just to attend, the promise, as with the fishing, of some spectacular and triumphant outcome next time sustaining their enthusiasm.

It was the first time they'd seen Suzanne at a party. Like them she occupied its fringes, observing the more raucous behaviour of her friends with weary tolerance, embarrassed but aware of the dangers in spurning such occasions. Whether Brendan had drunk more than him, or whether he was just done with the fruitless surveillance of others' fun, Stephen never knew. But some epiphany or new-found courage drove his friend to approach the girl sat alone in the far corner. And from this came something akin to a date, and then another, which in turn led to Stephen meeting her.

In the Woodman's last night, several drinks in, Suzanne and he had reminisced a little – about school, certain teachers – careful to keep the conversation away from that last summer here. When the tense silences rose, she would go to the

other bar, where news of his arrival was no doubt proliferating, perhaps making it harder still for her to talk to him. Watching her serve others, he thought how she'd aged well, blossoming into an exacting beauty, one that likely stood out in a small town.

Pointing at his ring she'd asked about his wife, Stephen keeping the answers brief, playing down what would look an idyllic life.

'How about you?' he said.

'I married a guy in the year above us, only found out he was an idiot after the birth of our daughter. We're divorced now.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Why? It's not your fault.'

She spoke of wanting to go to university but had put it off until it was too late. The bar work was temporary, she said a little defensively, the result of a recent redundancy. As she served someone Stephen tried to recall the precise sequence of events that led to her affections shifting from Brendan to himself, the sneaking around for a week or so, then their confession to him. Stephen managed to avoid him for a few days, skipping the one class they shared. When they eventually passed each other in a corridor, he thought Brendan might be about to cry.

'Give him time,' Suzanne had said. 'He'll come round.'

Whatever his friend thought of him, whatever showdown they were building towards, it was so engulfed by what came next, it hardly mattered.

He hadn't even said goodbye to Suzanne back then; there had been no real chance to before moving to his uncle's. And the subsequent visit to his mother had

been as clandestine as possible, the thought of seeing people from the town, especially those he'd known, overwhelming.

Peter was asking him about work, again that soothing voice suggesting all was right with the world. Or that what was not could be forgotten amid the splendour of the morning. Stephen's mother was in the kitchen now, a pipe clanking as she turned a tap on. He wanted to ask Peter about the litter picking, about the tests, but the single-glazed windows suggested the exchange would not be private. Instead he spoke of his career, sensing for the first time since the suspension how much he cherished it. How important it was, this vocational domain he'd fashioned, providing ballast to a life that might have been overrun by circumstance. It wasn't merely a job that allowed little time or scope for his mind to wander, to sabotage itself, but so often it saw him surrounded by marvels of nature, oceanic worlds that rendered this one inconsequential. Perhaps that was its appeal, the escape to an underwater realm where who he was, who his family were, meant nothing at all. He appeared to need the proximity of moving water, where waves – relentless, reliable – surged inwards in an endless cycle. If possible he would always live by the coast now, in sight of the sea, near the currents and tides that bestowed him with a sense of freedom, the far-away horizon the converse of this cloying, landlocked town.

His mother opened the window above them, asking if more tea was needed.

Peter stood to go inside, waiting for Stephen to follow.

'Tell her I'm heading along the river,' Stephen said. 'I'll be back for lunch.'

The climb out of the valley took more time than he remembered, its steep pastures finally levelling out into the larch grove. Looking down on the town the sun glistened off its windows, trails of smoke rising from a few of the houses. Beyond it, on the other side of the valley, he could just make out the roof of Highfield, its listing chimney appearing perpendicular from this vantage point. Following the curve of the hillside with the binoculars he saw the farm that his father had once taken rabbits to, its buildings also abandoned, derelict.

High above him a bird drifted idly on the thermals. He trained the binoculars upwards but it was only a gull, buoyant in its long arcs, slowly heading out to the coast. His father's obsession with the pair of peregrines was at its most pronounced leading up to that summer. Whole days would pass where he was either out looking for them or shut in his room reading about their world. In his occasional lucid periods he would share with Stephen his new-found knowledge, explaining their habitats, how they hunted. How some of the eyries were hundreds of years old, with subsequent generations returning to their ancestors' nests again and again. And whereas the summer months saw the birds remain in the uplands of the north and west, autumn provoked a relocation to the lowland marshes and grasslands to the east, where prey was plentiful. Kills were invariably made from above, often with the sun behind them, the falcon stooping from anything up to a thousand feet, at more than a hundred and fifty miles an hour, its wings tucked in, corkscrewing into its airborne target with a sickening blow. (Whether his father witnessed such kills or merely read about them, Stephen was unsure.) This impact was often enough to render the woodpigeon or gull or partridge dead before it fell to earth. Otherwise the job would be finished on the ground with talons and beak, swift and efficient.

The prey's feathers were then plucked, its bones picked clean with expert butchery, or the carcass returned to in the days that followed. Peregrines like to bathe daily, his father told him, preferably in running water, ridding themselves of lice acquired from kills. As the falcon scanned its hunting territory, crows would rise to mob it, unleashing their fury amid the safety of numbers. Unperturbed the peregrine would perform mock attacks, practising as if honing its skills, before climbing steeply, preparing for another kill. First to die were generally those birds out of place: the sick, the old, the lost – the unlucky. Often a woodpigeon would divert from the panic the peregrine had caused, inadvertently flying towards danger instead of away from it.

He made a long sweep with the binoculars, taking in the copse to the north, the hazel coppice on the hills behind Highfield. He'd not knowingly seen a peregrine in the wild; several times he'd been unable to identify a distant raptor, the distinctive crossbow silhouette of its body and wings just as likely to be a hobby. A pair nested on a church tower twenty miles or so from home, but he'd wanted the sighting to be a solitary affair, away from any urban drone. The peregrines here in the valley took on mythical status for his father, each pursuit of them a pilgrimage, their sighting causing in him a jubilation that briefly lit up the darkness of his mind. Often it was just the search itself, the stalking of these glorious birds, that saw him come briefly to life again, as if some spiritual bond formed, hardening every time, regardless of whether he glimpsed them or not. Out walking one weekend, perhaps shortly after the shooting of the rabbit, he told Stephen how the hunter must become the thing it hunts.

Stephen headed into the wood, the trees filtering some of the sun's glare. His mother had chosen his father's resting place here, far enough out of town for her own peace of mind.

It had been late spring the last time Stephen had been up here, the trees' canopies dense, brimming with life, with birdsong; finding the spot had been easy then, but the trunks now around him had little to distinguish them from each other in the barrenness of early winter. His mother had been advised not to mark the place in any way, that to do so would draw attention, invite those for whom the anger still seethed to converge here, to decimate what they found. And a permanent grave in the town would have been subject to habitual desecration, so she'd walked up here, Shane skulking behind her, and chosen a tree, dusting its base with the remnants of her husband.

After a few minutes Stephen, too, chose a tree at random – for what did it matter now, when countless winds had long since dispersed the vestiges of his father? – and issued a silent acknowledgement to the man who'd known death long before it visited him. Once he'd decided to come here, to the town, to this spot, Stephen had expected a surge of emotion to overcome him, perhaps even to weep. Instead a wordless anger rose, churning away at all that had been lost. At the havoc still wreaked.

Despite the shame that followed his rage and suspension from work, he'd felt, for the rest of that day, exultant after hitting Ferguson. Looking back there had been other moments of fury, moments he'd managed to control. Last month he'd driven Amy to school on his way to a meeting. Late and flustered, he'd taken a series of shortcuts through the town's backstreets, only to be held up several times. Finally

reaching the road the school was on, a man in an Audi lurched in front of him, causing him to brake hard. A simple apology would have sufficed to placate him, but the driver didn't even acknowledge his mistake, and instead sped onwards. When Stephen caught up with him at the next traffic lights he flashed his main beam a few times only to be given the finger. Again nothing registered consciously and a few seconds later he found himself standing by the driver's door, blood pulsing hard in his neck and chest, his eyes – he could see in the window – wild and intense. It was only the sound of a car horn somewhere that made him glance back to see his daughter's frightened face, defusing the situation.

Walking back to the cottage Stephen checked the skies each time something flitted at the edge of his vision. The winter sun was as high as it would get for the day, the sides of the valley burnished in its watery glow. A distant crack sent up a dozen fieldfares from a pasture beyond the gully he was tracking. He hoped Peter would be gone, not because the man's company left him feeling uncomfortable, or that he desired time alone with his mother, but the weight of all that was unsaid, all that was unacknowledged, could choke you at times.

Back on the river path he found himself heading instead to the Woodman's.

7

Her house was an end-of-terrace new-build, similar to the ones he'd passed driving into town a couple of days ago. She'd made the most of the limited space, kept it simple and uncluttered, the furniture often serving more than one purpose. A Picasso print dominated the far wall of the lounge, while a large mirror over the gas fire gave the illusion of depth. Wiping his feet he offered to remove his shoes.

'If you like.'

The laminate wood flooring caused their voices to echo around one another, the room magnifying their now-timorous exchange. She apologised for the slight mess – clothes he assumed were her daughter's strewn on the sofa – before heading to the kitchen. He shouldn't drink any more; there had been a couple at lunchtime, several tonight. It was his rule, increasingly spurned of late: to stop before he passed beyond the happy numbness of a few drinks. Life lived through a three-pint haze: why was there no way of sustaining it instead of sliding on into inebriation or falling back to a cold soberness?

His father liked to drink when home – presumably it came with the territory when he was away too, the drug of choice to unwind after a hard day's soldiering. The weak lager when he was on leave, though, progressed to whisky when the leave became permanent, his breath forever acrid and loamy. Initially the man had been a loud drunk – boisterous almost, ebullient right up to the second he fell asleep in the armchair and their mother had to haul him upstairs with Stephen's help. If he was too drunk, too heavy, she'd leave him there with a blanket placed over him, Shane

furled at his feet. Then, everything he did while drunk was done noisily, as if the drink amplified him. But later his intoxication became a private, soundless affair, the consumption itself a furtive act, occurring steadily throughout the day until by teatime his eyes had narrowed, the pupils glazed, his movements deliberate and stealthy, always without noise. Once he stopped frequenting the town's pubs, he made sure there was a ready supply, though nobody was witness to its procurement. Stephen assumed his parents argued about this, especially when money became an issue, though he couldn't remember such clashes. What tension there was between them seemed to linger wordlessly for days and weeks, the pressure building as if the whole house might detonate at any moment, triggered by some small noise or remark. But then suddenly the gloom would recede and they'd have him back briefly.

Suzanne returned with a half-drunk bottle of red and two glasses as he was looking at the framed photographs on the bookcase.

'She'll break some hearts one day,' she said.

'Does she see her father?'

'She's with him now. He shares the nights I work late with my parents.'

'It must be tough.'

She looked at him, perhaps irritated at what could be taken as condescension, and he tried to think of some swift repair but it all sounded trite in his head.

'We all have our cross,' she said.

As he rolled a cigarette, Suzanne opened the lounge window for him before pouring the wine. She placed his glass near him and sat down.

‘I remember you smoked at school,’ she said.

‘Everyone did, didn’t they? I gave up for a while.’

‘You should again. For your daughter.’

The drizzle they’d walked back in fell lightly on his face as he exhaled smoke up into the night. A pool of orange light from a street lamp stained the pavement below, the rain threading through its beam in a thousand prisms. The road was empty in both directions, the town inert, slumberous. The people in the other bar had recognised him almost immediately – he had his father’s aquiline nose, his sunken eyes – but hadn’t approached him, though he assumed his presence would be ubiquitously known by morning.

‘Does it always rain so much here?’ Stephen said.

‘Pretty much. Something to do with the hills.’

‘It didn’t when we were growing up.’

‘We probably just remember it differently.’

In the field across the road an outline of something, perhaps a barn owl, ghosted low across the furrows of ploughed land, silencing its prey.

‘You never wanted to move away?’ he said, turning round.

‘No, I love it here.’

There was more than just sarcasm in her tone. A trace of bitterness, perhaps. He offered an empathetic half-smile but she was looking away, and so he let the silence gather as he tried to think of something benign to say, the act of small talk intangible now. Their exchanges in the pub had flowed more towards the end and

he'd relaxed a little for the first time in weeks. But the mood had shifted on their return here, as if the bar had served as a barrier, preventing their proximity becoming awkward.

She'd been the one to suggest coffee. He'd joked about sneaking into his mother's house quietly, as they'd done at Highfield all that time ago, tiptoeing up to his room, stifling giggles when a stair creaked, but she hadn't indulged his nostalgia, regarding it either inappropriate or irrelevant, he couldn't tell. The landlord had encouraged her to go after time was called and so they'd left together, Stephen sensing her unease at being seen with him. It was just coffee, he told himself. A chance to prolong what had become a distraction from recent events, to have a friend in what felt like hostile territory.

She emptied the bottle into their glasses, the wine overly fruity, a harsh aftertaste encouraging small and infrequent sips. He closed the window and moved to the sofa. Suzanne was looking through her CDs now, annoyed at not being able to find something. He would stay to finish his drink and then go.

'So you couldn't stay away any longer?' she said.

'My mother's not well. I want to get her to move nearer us.'

Some music started up – bluesy, inoffensive – and she joined him on the sofa.

'She won't leave, not now.'

'Why do you say that?'

'No reason. When I see her walking about – stooped, picking up litter like some crazy person – I feel sorry for her, how she's on her own, with no friends or family—'

'She has family.'

'I meant around her, popping in every day.'

'It's difficult to get up here. It makes sense she comes to live where we are.'

'It wasn't meant as criticism. I just think she's part of the town these days, like the rest of us. If she was going to leave, she'd have gone by now.'

'She's not crazy.'

He knew nothing of the line concerning such matters and where it was drawn. Perhaps quiet eccentricity and withdrawal was as indicative of madness as gibbering mania, the line crossed once aspects of reality were denied, regardless of the manifestation. He saw his mother so infrequently, their contact by phone rigidly formulaic, a checklist of small talk, conversations that resembled a couple of monologues. How *would* he know? It was feasible grief could mutate over the years, slowly eroding the layers of the mind that calibrated reality. A defence, perhaps, the mind protecting itself through distortion and misrepresentation once it sensed no more could be borne. This would tie in with Peter's remarks on her cognitive deterioration, of his hunch something was amiss.

'What do people think of her?' Stephen said.

'Same as me, I guess. They see a woman older than her time, gripped by anguish and guilt. Some of them would like to help, perhaps, but can't bring themselves to.'

'Even now?'

'She reminds them. I mean not like at the start. Everyone just wished she'd leave then – I mean, why would you stay? But there's an acceptance now, a tolerance. They're not rude or anything. They just choose to have nothing to do with her.'

'What about people who've moved here since?'

'They just see an eccentric old woman who keeps herself to herself. And once they've heard, well, you'd be inclined to leave her alone, wouldn't you? I always think I'll ask how she is, whether she remembers me, but I only ever see her in the distance.'

'It wasn't her fault. They must see that.'

'It's been carried down to the next generation, forgiven but not forgotten, I guess. I don't think it'll ever go away, but nobody talks about it.'

'How about you?'

'How about me what?'

'Forgiveness.'

He'd not known her uncle, a twice married painter and decorator who lived across town, only realising the connection at the inquest. Suzanne exhaled in exaggerated fashion. 'Is that what you're here for, to ask on behalf of others?'

'Would it help?'

'Probably not. Look, everyone's moved on as best they could.'

'Is that your way of telling me I shouldn't be here?'

'I don't have a problem with it.'

He ran a finger around the rim of his glass, wishing he was either less or more drunk. The music was louder now and Suzanne crossed the room, turning it down. As she bent down he studied the contours of her neck, tangles of hair tucked behind an ear as if to invite this. What would have been their fate had their lives not been ruptured so emphatically? There was a young affection, one unconsummated by anything more than the first fumbblings of desire. But it was an age when you were

susceptible to intense feelings and gestures, and he remembered thinking it was the start of something vast and glorious, the world opening up to a litany of romantic experiences. He had kissed one or two girls before her, enjoying the mechanics of the sensation without any yearning to prolong the interaction. But with Suzanne, between the intimacy, they'd talked about music and films, about escaping the town's clutches, exploring the world after college. Within weeks she became his first female friend, their conversations somehow richer than any he'd had with Brendan.

On that final day, Stephen had thought they might make love. For weeks they'd kissed heavily, frustration emerging at the limitations of a fully clothed lust, their hands hungry for the pursuit of unexplored regions. It was unspoken, but the intensity was mutually felt, the appreciation something would soon give. He'd not wanted it to happen at Highfield for some reason, perhaps the fear of his sister walking in, or the presence of his father in the next room rendering it more awkward than it would already be. Suzanne's parents maintained an almost pious vigilance over their daughter's chastity, not least because both Stephen and Suzanne were still several months from their sixteenth birthdays. And so he reasoned, given the mild spring they were having, that the act would occur up in the woods somewhere. They'd already spent hours after school walking deep into its heart, Stephen rolling cigarettes, Suzanne hiding behind trees, jumping out on him, their laughter echoing around them, oblivious to the rest of the world. He planned to syphon off some of the vodka at home, pack a blanket and suggest they head to the clearing they'd found a week or so ago. In the glorious image his mind had drawn it was dusk, the gloam of the moon burnishing them as they undressed each other. Recalling it now, he couldn't remember if he'd considered contraception, or whether Suzanne would

regard the woods a suitable place for virginities to be lost. In those last moments of innocence that day, their eyes had met on the bus, a sparkle at the promise of what might occur later, hopeful Brendan sensed none of it.

‘Tell me about your wife,’ Suzanne said as she sat next to him.

Her words brought the situation back into relief, as if he’d been walking blindly into some small betrayal, and again he vowed to leave shortly.

‘She’s a lecturer where I work, marine biology. We met on a field trip to Sweden.’

‘An academic. Is she beautiful as well? I’m sorry. It sounds like you got yourself a nice life down there. I’m happy for you.’

This was said without resentment and for a moment he thought he might talk about the trouble at work, as if his connection to Suzanne – and theirs to that day – would elicit empathy. Her life appeared blemished by misfortune but perhaps it was simplistic to attribute it all to the turbulence of that time.

‘It’s a nice corner of the world,’ he said. ‘I like it there.’

‘And far enough from here.’

He nodded, though suspected no distance was great enough.

They spoke about their daughters, swapping anecdotes with barely-veiled boasts, revelling in the unceasing delight children had brought them.

‘She deserves a better father than me,’ he said.

‘Will you have more?’

‘Possibly. You?’

'I hope to. I don't want her to be an only child. Just need to find someone who'll put up with all the, you know. It must be worse for you. How does Zoe...sorry, it's none of my business.'

She went to the kitchen, brought back another bottle and opened it, ignoring him when he declined another glass. After listening with closed eyes to the music for several minutes, Suzanne spoke again.

'Do you remember that tape I did you?'

He pretended not to, happy to risk causing offence, while hearing the songs in his head, remembering playing it endlessly in his room, attempting to discern any meaning she'd intended in the choice of music. She dismissed his poor memory, pursuing her train of thought anyway.

'Funny to think of cassettes now, songs after songs layered over each other, trying to unravel the ribbon when the stereo chewed it. You must remember it.'

'Sorry.'

'How about Brendan?'

'What do you mean?'

'You remember him?'

'Of course I do.'

'Have you seen him since you've been back?'

'No. Does he still—'

'Live here? Yeah. He's a landscape gardener. I see him about; he comes in the pub sometimes. His mother moved away, met someone, but he came back – see, it's impossible to stay away. I think he's married. Has a son, a daughter too.'

It was strange to think of Brendan as a father, Stephen's image of him as a teenage boy frozen in time. He'd prefer they didn't talk about his friend, yet beside the trauma of remembering, there was something pleasing in the shard of nostalgia he felt, as if Suzanne had given him some small but precious permission to contemplate the adult Brendan. How had he fared in the aftermath? Did he ever think about Stephen?

'It would be good to see him.'

'Don't bank on him feeling the same.'

The album played out to a finish, Stephen emptying his glass and standing. 'I should probably get going.'

'If you want.'

She followed him to the door.

'Do you know if peregrines still nest here in winter?' he said.

'What?'

'In the valley or up in the woods. It doesn't matter.'

He opened the door but she placed her hand across it, keeping it ajar.

'Will I see you again before you go?' she said.

He shrugged his shoulders. 'I don't know. Maybe I'll come by the pub.'

She leant forward and kissed his cheek, a lingering kiss that would have been easy to lose himself in, to pursue. She seemed to smell of that other time, some combination of skin and hair and clothes that evoked it. As teenagers they'd kissed so greedily, as if each one might be the last, though at the time it felt they had an eternity to explore each other. It was an exceptional termination, he supposed. No

one lost interest or went off with someone else. They hadn't grown weary with familiarity over the years.

He pulled away, hugged her instead. 'Of course I remember the tape.'

'Say hello to your mum for me,' Suzanne said as he set off in the rain.

The night moonless, he headed back through the town instead of along the river. There was something surreal in walking home to his mother's house in the early hours, as if he were a teenager again, discovering the hedonistic pleasures of the world, the future vast and unknown. Just as then he would let himself in with the spare key, stumble about, yet knowing she was awake this time.

Had he forgotten Suzanne had also lost someone that day? Not forgotten, but not remembered either, it being entombed in the hinterland of his memory. If she was right, if it was forgiveness he sought, had her kiss held any?

He could hear a group of young men now, a hundred yards or so behind him, probably beneficiaries of a lock-in at the Woodman's, their voices boisterous but absent of malevolence. He imagined turning the corner to find Brendan there, the convergence of two drunks, once rivals in love. They used to ride this way on their bikes, Stephen's an old Chopper, his friend's one of the early BMXs, playing cards fixed to the forks so they clattered in the circling spokes. Stephen would sometimes give his sister a ride on the back, tearing down the slopes next to Highfield, hearing her scream as he pretended the brakes had failed, the cards clacking furiously. Skidding to a halt at the bottom she'd be close to tears, yet still wanting to go again.

'Once more, Even, please' she'd say, the nickname coming from a time his sister couldn't pronounce the start of his name. He said it now, out loud, enjoying

the shape it made with his mouth. Even. Not odd. Even, like level. And then at home their mother would come in the lounge, asking crossly who'd drunk straight from the milk bottle, and with a white crescent over her grinning top lip, his sister would say, 'Even did, Mum. It was Even.'

The streets were empty now, slick with rain. Few shops were the same, yet it all resonated, as if the buildings themselves had waited for his return. The bookshop they'd had an account with was now an Oxfam and he stood staring at the mannequin posing in its window, imagining it bursting into a rakish dance for his pleasure alone. The barbershop his father took him to when he was on leave still stood there and for a second the heady concoction of cologne, talc and sandalwood was remembered by some corner of his mind, receding the moment he tried to indulge it.

He listened to a message Zoe had left on his phone, her voice soothing, the urge to be held by her overwhelming. In the background Amy asked her mother something. As the message ended he said his name into the phone, his real one, the one before he started using his uncle's. The one Zoe knew nothing of, taking as she did one that carried no shame. Briggs. Stephen Briggs.

Walking on he could see the church on the corner, the graveyard he and Brendan had once sat smoking in before being chased away by the warden. He stopped and looked up at the spire, rain threading down into the amber street light. He spoke a few words, too drunk to tell if he had said them aloud. He remembered someone else uttering them once, originality beyond him, and when he repeated them, he was uncaring whether or not he was heard.

'Where was god that day?' he said, before walking on.

PART TWO

Summer, 1982

8

She checked her hair a last time in the mirror by the front door, thought about changing her top again, or putting on some make-up. In the end she did neither. It was strange to feel nervous at his return, as if an important and infrequent guest were coming to stay, the anticipation a source of contrary emotions. She gave the downstairs rooms a last inspection – tidy but homely the desired effect – before putting Shane in the back of the car. The dog had seemed more subdued than ever in recent days, as if resigned to the shorter walks and minimal fuss she and the children gave him. It was touching, she supposed, this blind loyalty that manifested as something resembling grief. She regarded pets, dogs especially, as opportunists, shifting their affections to whoever controlled feeding, their devotion emanating from their stomachs alone. But Shane's allegiance to her husband appeared to go beyond the conditioning of simple behaviour and reward mechanisms. They'd formed a bond, Richard and the dog, in the short time the family had had him, so that whenever her husband was away, the animal would skulk by the front door, its ears down, waiting for signs that signalled Richard's return. And so for almost four months now, with the exception of being fed or walked, the dog had affected a sullen disposition at the back of the hall, its jowls low-slung, big liquid eyes drawn down in melancholy.

They'd got him shortly after moving in, as if the extra space of Highfield demanded another presence. The children had long been promised a pet, though

Mary had something less onerous in mind. Jenny had wanted a kitten or a rabbit, but Stephen, spurred on by his father, made the persistent case for a dog.

‘All that garden, the fields and woods behind,’ Richard had said. ‘We should get something that would appreciate it. This is the sort of house that has a dog.’

Mary wouldn’t allow talk of a puppy; there were enough strays at the rescue shelter in need of a home, and she suspected the children’s fascination with a young dog would soon wane, leaving her with the bulk of the duties. And so the next time Richard was on leave they drove to the shelter a few miles out of town on a wet Sunday afternoon in November to choose one.

They’d stood in front of the caged sections, the four of them, sometimes greeted with an exuberant or fierce bark. Other dogs, morose and wretched, remained impassive. Along the last row a scruffy Border collie shuffled to the front of its space as they approached, tail arched between its back legs, gently wagging in submission. Jenny put her fingers through the bars for the dog to lick, her father shouting a rebuke, snatching her hand back.

It was clear, though, that the animal was nothing but friendly and five minutes later they were walking it around a field behind the shelter, the children squabbling over who held the lead. A single visit to their house from staff, to check its suitability, and the dog was allowed home with them a few days later. The children wanted to name him something else but the woman from the shelter said this would be unfair; he’d been Shane for nine years and was used to it.

Within hours of getting back the dog latched onto Richard, the children too animated for him, Mary largely indifferent. Her husband had grown up with dogs

around the house, his parents never having fewer than two at any one time, and perhaps animals sensed this, judging their most likely source of companionship.

A week later the novelty of feeding and walking the dog on their own had worn off for the children. That the latter had to happen whatever the weather hadn't occurred to them and talk soon returned to other pets. Richard, though, when home, would never fail to rise first thing and could be gone half the morning up in the woods and fields behind the house, the dog, more used to the sedentary regime of the shelter, returning exhausted but content.

The car started eventually and she eased in the choke. At breakfast Jenny had asked to stay off school in order to come to the station.

'No one will care, Mum.'

'It's been four months,' Mary told her. 'A few more hours won't make any difference. He'll be here when you get home.'

Their daughter was due to begin secondary school later this year, where her appearance would once again become an issue. The birthmark that covered most of her left cheek and half her forehead was, despite best intentions, the first thing you saw, drawing your eye like a flare in the night sky or a blood stain in snow. Walking Jenny into primary school for the first time, Mary noticed that even the teacher failed to hide her stare, the florid discolouration of skin, resembling a wine stain, a pulsing beacon. There from birth, they were told it wasn't hereditary, but caused by a faulty nerve supply to the blood vessels, which remained dilated, as if in a permanent blush. Other than her appearance, it would cause no medical problems, and in time classmates and friends became used to it, as they had as parents. But with the prospect of a new, bigger school, Mary had spoken to the woman in the

town's chemist, enquiring about possible make-up or creams to camouflage it, but the options were scant. What little they had relied on such a precise match in colour, the effect was often equally flagrant. And if they did achieve a good match, it diminished a few hours later, the attention merely postponed.

Mary eased the car around the lanes out of town until she joined the main road. She checked her watch: Richard's train arrived in forty minutes, enough time to park and meet him on the platform.

Stephen had seemed cooler on the matter of his father's return, though he'd clearly missed him on some level. Something of the war had permeated his resistance to matters outside the cocooned territory of adolescence and several times Mary had found him watching the coverage with concern etched across his face. If ever she remarked upon his disquiet, asked whether he wanted to talk about any aspect of it, he quickly retreated to the safety of apparent indifference.

Richard had been away for almost as long previously – spells in Ireland and Germany, training in the jungles of Central America – but she'd learned to settle into a routine, to keep busy. It had been difficult once the children started school, the loneliness intolerable at first, and she would countdown the hours until their return home. Her husband would write occasionally, though she knew he struggled to express emotion this way, his letters a litany of the physical hardships the men endured, or merely the prosaic cataloguing of the duller aspects of army life. In the early years a careful reading of his words might have revealed something of his own experience of bullying, a time Mary had hoped would prompt his departure from the forces. Once this ceased with promotion, there was just a general sense of his unhappiness, again hardly articulated, just felt, a lowering of mood in the days

before his return to base, of a career hastily chosen in the confusion of youth. And now that he was finally getting out, world events had conspired to ensure they got just a little more of him.

The date they'd set for their new life to begin had been snatched away by the invasion of some small island group in the South Atlantic. Richard had bought himself out, given his year's notice, and had only a few days left to serve before his premature voluntary release, as it was termed. They'd purchased the house, put everything they owned plus a lot they didn't into it. As his release date approached he applied for several engineering jobs, the only one to yield an interview missed with the outbreak of war. Last week, anticipating the need for recuperation on his part, Mary had spoken to the manager at the nursing home, requesting more hours until her husband found some work.

And now he was home. Unscathed as far as she could tell from his phone call yesterday. She'd followed the war on television initially, incredulous it was happening for the first few days, seeing hordes of well-wishers at the docks, the long journey south at sea and their eventual arrival. It was like watching a documentary at first, none of it quite real. She knew Richard was there in a literal sense, but the physical distance between the two realities acted as mist, blurring the coverage of its sharpness. But then the first casualties were announced and the television became a source of ambivalence as she was both drawn and repelled by it each day. In the end she opted for the radio.

As she pulled into the station car park, the dog sat up on the back seat to inspect their whereabouts. How would her husband react to the gathering that had been planned for this evening, a homecoming party at the Woodman's? She'd had

no part in it, other than being told to keep it a secret, to just get Richard there under the pretence of a quiet drink. If he wouldn't come she was to tell him something small had been arranged.

In recent days she'd watched the first servicemen return on television, stepping off the plane to a military band and a small crowd of families and journalists, the SS Canberra docking in Southampton amid a flotilla of boats, the sky filled with balloons and bursts of Land of Hope and Glory as the country basked in its victory.

In his phone call Richard had told her not to travel to the barracks to collect him, that he would get the train down today. He sounded calm, as if he'd merely been on a week-long exercise, his voice somehow compressed as if the call was across continents. She'd felt some small guilt at the relief he had come home, wondering how others explained to children that the absence would be permanent. Stephen and Jenny were used to his being away, their resilience born from knowing no different, but they too must have sensed her near-permanent dread in recent months. At ten their daughter was too young to understand the true implications of war, that until now their father had merely gone away to practise. The few years her brother had on her, though, meant he was appreciative, if not of the politics, then at least of the fact that his father might not return.

Thinking back to that day in spring, her husband on the phone confirming what the news people were saying, she recalled there was a real sense it would be called off before it began: how important could this colonial outpost nobody had heard of be? That beneath the jingoism were level-headed diplomats charged with

resolving the dispute. After all, wars were something that occurred in the past or between other countries.

She put Shane on the lead and walked through the small station building and on to the platform, where a few people stood in glum anticipation. After tidying the house this morning she'd gone into town and bought some steaks for tonight, the occasion justifying the extra cost. And there was some expensive-looking wine they'd been given several years ago.

She wouldn't mention the bills, not for a few days. Or how the roof leaked in several more places in the spare room, that empty ice cream containers were needed to catch the rain in there. The urgent tasks aside, the disrepair at Highfield would have to wait, the large projects that would see the old barns converted into accommodation put off at least until next year. It was never going to be easy, she reminded herself, this self-sufficient life, one they controlled, where they didn't work tirelessly for others. It would take time: the steady transformation of the house and its outbuildings into holiday lets; the garden rescued from its tangle of scrub and bramble, cultivated for the production of food. They'd talked about buying some goats this year, perhaps a couple of pigs and some hens. An apiary the year after. In time the car would go, replaced by bikes and public transport. If Richard ever got round to making the Morris roadworthy, they'd tax it for the summer months alone, using it for trips to the coast, to visit parents. They'd hunker down in the winter, cooking whatever summer and autumn had yielded, enjoy having the place to themselves. If the business took off she could reduce her hours at the nursing home, perhaps not working at all for part of the year, other than attending to guests'

needs. They could run courses on self-sufficiency – Richard had teased her that it would become a commune, with throngs of hippies ensconcing themselves everywhere, a lure for anyone with a guitar and a beard. The image had some small appeal, she had to admit, were it possible without the petty politics and inevitable infighting. A community of shared values, who rejected the more obscene excesses people were filling their lives with these days. A return to the sort of life her parents had lived, where you accepted what you had, lived within your means, consumed only what was necessary. Perhaps being at war would remind people of such times, despite its spectacle occurring so far away.

She walked along the platform to its end, allowing the dog to relieve itself on the grass. On the opposite side, across the track, swallows flitted low under the eaves of the old station house, their cream bellies swooping close to the ground, the birds' presence summer's true harbinger. Beyond the hills the sky brimmed with high cloud. Behind her Mary noticed a Union Jack had been draped over one of the notice boards, its hem crimping the puddle below in the breeze. Presumably other soldiers had alighted here in recent days, tearful reunions before departing to provincial towns and villages, returning to lives that had been on hold.

She wondered whether they would make love tonight or in the coming days, as they generally did on Richard's return. She'd missed their intimacy a little this time, the circumstances of her husband's absence perhaps intensifying it. Waking in the night, often emerging from appalling dreams, she would forget he was away, reaching across the bed to find a vacant expanse, cold and hollow. It was his physical presence she missed most, a warmth and permanence next to her; the frenetic passion that marked his return was, these days, something she could take or leave. If

she were lucky alcohol would render her husband's efforts scant and he'd fall asleep, whereupon she'd cuddle into his side, content at not being alone. And yet there existed a selfish streak in her now, a part that relished the time he was away, the house, with the children at school, hers alone. In the evenings she would come in from work, light some candles, listen to music her husband loathed. At weekends long, languorous baths were taken following an afternoon's gardening, then helping the children with homework before settling in front of the fire with some wine and a book. Sometimes, weeks into her husband's return home, she'd find herself guiltily reflecting on the date he was to leave again, as if the loneliness in the long hours of the night had been sated enough for it to be tolerated again. She wondered if this desire for solitude would pass once he'd left the army, whether the intensity of his coming and going would play out another way.

For a moment she forgot he'd not merely been away this time. She could hardly guess at the horrors he might have witnessed, friends who'd fallen, action he'd been compelled to take. That he was not really built for army life would presumably have loomed large when all the rehearsal was exchanged for the real thing. When he was home he often spoke of men who blazed with the desire to fight, to test their skills in the arena of battle, their lives ultimately devoid of meaning until this time. She tried to understand it, evoking analogous pursuits you trained all your life to perform, yet never did.

She could hear the train now, a thin chatter from the next valley. An announcement was made on the tannoy, to stand back from the track, causing Shane's ears to twitch in anticipation of some new episode in the day. The front few carriages were now visible beyond the hedgerow, the train making its long banking

curve towards them. She tightened the dog's lead and strained to see the faces of those aboard.

9

She watched as he cut the last bit of his steak in two and fed them one at a time to a salivating Shane. The dog, as if knowing there would be no more, lay down in the corner of the room, eyes lovingly fixed on Richard. She told the children they were allowed to come for an hour or so, a little longer if it wasn't too smoky, suspecting nobody would object to them being there tonight.

'Can I have some beer?' Stephen asked.

'We'll see,' Mary said. 'Perhaps a shandy.'

Her son gave a little cheer as he went upstairs to change out of his school clothes.

'Can I have a shandy?' Jenny asked.

'Of course not, darling. Go and get changed too.'

She had told her husband about this evening in the car on the way home as the dog nuzzled him from the back seat, the conversation predominantly one-way.

'A few people from the pub, that's all. I don't even know who organised it. I said you'd want some time at home first, a few days, but they wouldn't hear of it. I think it's more an excuse to stay open late.'

It wasn't as if they'd kept up any social links with the town since moving to Highfield and she regretted mentioning at work her husband's imminent return. For most of the journey home from the station he had stared out of the window, into the passing fields or swivelling his head to look up into the sky. She'd hardly recognised him when he stepped off the train, his face significantly thinner, gaunt

almost, despite being hidden beneath a copious beard. It had taken all her strength to keep Shane from tearing across the platform, the animal beside itself on seeing him. Richard met them both simultaneously, a three-way embrace of sorts as people shuffled around them, one or two offering her husband a congratulatory word or two.

In the car he asked if the children were at home.

‘I thought you’d like the house quiet for a while.’

They walked across the field, the four of them, down into the town, Jenny skipping on ahead, stopping to pick buttercups, which she held one at a time beneath her chin before placing in the pocket of her dress to press later. The late-afternoon drizzle had thinned, the evening sun edging beneath low cloud, casting a mellow light across the line of elms up ahead. Shane flanked them in wide arcs, returning every now and then to the path to round them up with exultant barks, delirious to have them all together again. As the slope levelled out Richard paused to observe a bird in the distance as it soared high on the breeze, his face for a moment like a child’s.

‘Come on,’ Mary said, smiling. ‘You’ll be late for your party.’

As they reached the stile at the edge of the field, Richard whistled, a single, strident note that saw Shane bolt towards them. The evening sun had emerged fully now, warming their faces a little before they entered the copse. Inside the wood the rain had fashioned an earthy smell that fused with the honeysuckle to produce a sweet, loamy scent. She felt good in her cotton dress, the sense of making an effort

to go somewhere almost forgotten. She'd put on some make-up for the first time in months, finishing with a mist of the perfume Richard had bought her years ago.

Emerging from the wood they could see the pub up ahead. Some token bunting had been strewn above the windows and a Union Jack hung limply below the sign. Several people idled outside, men Mary recognised from the town, men whose stares would linger longer were she alone. One of them had come up to the house a week or so after her husband had left. The children were at school and she hadn't heard the knock, Shane's bark finally alerting her. Opening the front door, the man had his back to her, as if he was taking in the view of the town, curious at the novel vantage point. Turning round, his eyes scanned her up and down, a careless grin breaking out on his face.

She greeted him, holding the door ajar to stop Shane from emerging.

'Looks good,' he said.

'I'm sorry?'

'What you've done to the place.'

'Oh, thank you. It's just a start. There's so much to do.' After a moment's silence she spoke again. 'Can I—?'

'I was just passing. Wondered if you wanted any help, what with your old man being on the other side of the world.' She felt flustered, knowing he wasn't a neighbour, the offer inappropriate. As she fumbled for words, he looked beyond her, into the house, and she wished Shane's growl sounded more menacing. Again he grinned, conveying someone who wasn't embarrassed to try his luck, to see where it led.

Declining his offer politely, she thanked him, suggesting they were managing fine. After a final scan of the house the man turned and headed back towards the gate.

As they neared the pub a couple of cheers went up, though nobody approached them. The men greeted Richard in turn, the man who'd come to the house nodding at Mary. She ushered Jenny along, her daughter stopping to stroke a small dog lying beneath one of the tables.

Inside the low murmur of conversation fringed the noise from the jukebox. Someone recognised them and called out and within seconds people were lining up to shake Richard's hand, while others patted his back, her husband unresponsive to the gestures. After telling the children to go into the lounge bar, Mary ordered some drinks, the landlord ignoring her when she went to pay.

Following the initial exuberance, people filtered away, back to their game of darts or to attend the fruit machine, the far side of the room almost lost to the fog of cigarette smoke. When they lived in the town itself, they'd come in here a few times, it being the better of the two on offer, but it wasn't somewhere she liked to be. A woman was expected to conform more than usual in here, her presence an adornment of the men whose conversation often revolted her. She had smiled, laughed in the right places, but the move to Highfield, in her mind, signalled an end to putting up with such unpleasant occasions. After tonight Richard would have to come here on his own.

They sat in a corner, by the door to the kitchen, Shane settling down at her husband's feet. Every now and then she checked on the children through the gap of

the bar, seeing Jenny watching Stephen and a friend play pool, her daughter looking increasingly bored, the promised party not as she'd imagined.

'You should pretend to be a little grateful,' Mary whispered to her husband.

'We have no ties to these people. It's just a charade.'

As others arrived, they would approach their table, offer some clumsy acknowledgement of Richard's return, insist he was bought a drink, or that one was put in for him. Occasionally someone sat with them until the awkwardness of small talk became burdensome, her husband's monosyllabic answers condemning the exchange to a premature end. In truth she hardly knew anyone there, a few faces that were familiar, perhaps termed acquaintances, characters glimpsed in the fabric of small town life. It saddened her, this absence of friends, and she vowed to correct it, to extend their lives beyond the concerns of Highfield. To become part of a community, despite living in a large house that overlooked the town. It felt important not to isolate themselves in their search for a more sustainable life.

The evening trudged on, becoming a little more raucous. The group of men they'd passed coming in were now assembled at the bar near them, Mary sensing the man who'd come to the house, his stares less and less subtle. Perhaps they could leave soon without it seeming rude, an exhausted soldier, grateful for the gesture but in need of his bed. He'd hardly be missed. She looked at her husband but he was lost to thought or fatigue. A moment later one of the men, perhaps the youngest, approached them, placing more drinks on the table before Mary could decline. Buoyed by his advance he began asking Richard questions about his time away, what part he might have played, her husband refusing to be drawn, dismissing them with an almost shy modesty.

Finally one of the others called over. 'Did you kill anyone?' The words cut the air, the chatter around them fading for a moment. Still the men received nothing in return and she sensed resentment rising among them, that Richard was neglecting his role of the soldier returning to regale glorious accounts of victory, denying them their vicarious warfare. As the chat became more jingoistic, she went to check on the children. The pool table had been covered up now and a man was setting up to play music in the far corner. Stephen and his friend were playing on the games machine, tapping its buttons furiously, while Jenny asked the man about his guitar. She observed her daughter for a moment, the ease with which she spoke to newly-met adults contrasting with her self-consciousness around children she didn't know, most adults being able to disguise their reaction to her face. Mary sat down, telling her the man was busy, to stop bothering him.

'It's fine,' he said. 'She's no bother.'

The man's Irish accent had a soothing lilt to it, distinct from the barbed voices next door, and she found herself hoping he'd speak again.

'What does that do?' her daughter asked, pointing to the amplifier at the man's feet.

'It's so they can hear me through there,' he said.

'I'm not sure that'll be big enough tonight,' said Mary.

Stephen's friend came over, asked the man for some coins, and she realised he was Brendan's father. The boys had known each other for a year or so now, fishing together down at the river, staying at each other's houses on occasion. She remembered the boy mentioning his father was a musician, how he was away from home a lot, going to festivals or performing gigs. Perhaps they would become friends

with Brendan's parents now, invite them around, though Richard would probably regard their lifestyle too alternative.

She watched the man tuning his guitar, concentrating hard on a small device that informed him of each string's pitch as he adjusted it. Seeing Mary's interest he explained to her how it worked, how it could only be done by ear until recently. Satisfied it was in key, he played a few riffs, his fingers dancing expertly across the instrument's neck, while those on his other hand gently plucked its strings. They watched him perform a few more sound checks, before moving to a table near the far wall. As they were the only ones in there, Mary decided to stay for a while, the thought of the man having only children for an audience causing a heaviness in her heart. She got Jenny another drink, checking on Richard through the bar, who was now being asked by some sinewy man to pose for a photograph. Her husband looked over and she smiled, but his eyes remained glazed, empty.

As the music started up, she supposed it was somewhere between folk and blues, the man's voice higher than she'd have thought, the song alternating between melancholic and sanguine. It didn't sound like a cover and she wondered if he wrote his own stuff. It had been years since she'd listened to live music, perhaps before the children were born, and she'd forgotten its unique spectacle, how it could lift you above petty concern as you lost yourself in the theatre of it. A few people, on hearing the music, had come in, the room rivalling the other for headcount now. The second song she recognised as a Dylan cover, the man giving its chorus a witty twist that went over the heads of the others, Mary giving the faintest smile to let him know his repartee wasn't entirely wasted. Several verses into the cover, Mary noticed a couple of the men who'd been around Richard remonstrating from the

other bar, their tone indignant, angry even. When the song finished she realised it was Brendan's father they were unhappy with. As more voices of dissent joined in, someone shouted across a request, that he play something more patriotic, something that fitted better the occasion. A man behind them shouted his disapproval that *some Irish fucker had been booked at a time like this*. The landlord, after making the case that the man played there regularly, looked across, hopeful the song request might be met, but Brendan's father ignored them, continuing his set with one of the few Donovan songs she knew. As the tension between bars rose, Mary told the children to go home, that it would be dark soon, Jenny protesting that there was no school tomorrow. Through a gap in the crowd of men, she could see her husband, staring absently at nothing, somehow both drunk and sober. Again the landlord attempted to placate the men, but they had spurred each other on, wound themselves up, perhaps to impress Richard, perhaps just to have a fight of their own. As she took the children back through, an ashtray was thrown across the bar, hitting the wall to the left of Brendan's father, but still he played on. Reaching her husband's table, she saw he had three full pints lined up in front of him, the man with the camera, a reporter from the local paper, sat opposite. Despite the agitation at the bar the man corralled them all together, a family shot essential apparently, after which Mary told Stephen to walk his sister home, that they'd follow them in an hour or so.

The standoff concluded with the landlord pulling the plug on the music, a boisterous cheer coming from the men as they congratulated each other. He then took some money from the till, gave it to Brendan's father, who looked defiant but resigned as he packed up his stuff. More nationalistic slurs followed him as he left.

The anger churned in her as she watched the men revel in self-satisfaction, as if their victory were a continuation of what had occurred on the other side of the Atlantic. For years she'd vowed to take a stance in the face of such bigotry, perhaps spurred on by treatment her husband had succumbed to over the years, her daughter's bullying. Fantasies had formed where she intervened, challenging prejudice regardless of the hazard to herself. All her life she had let the fury broil and fester, before retreating into silent self-loathing. The next time she would find the courage to speak out. Always the next time.

With Brendan's father gone the atmosphere returned to its earlier ebullience. A burst of 'Rule, Britannia' filled the room, the men at the bar encouraging but failing to get Richard to join in. One of them stood on Shane's tail, laughing as the dog snarled, her husband, pulling the lead tight, as animated as he'd been all night. She thought of her son and daughter at home, wishing she was with them. Or still in the next room listening to the man's songs.

The house was quiet when they returned. She'd expected the walk home through the field to be a struggle, given how much Richard had drunk, but he seemed unaffected, throwing a stick for Shane in the vestige of moonlight. They'd left a little after midnight, slipping out unnoticed, the bustle of the pub continuing behind them. The air had been heavy with the scent of summer, a hint of warmth still radiating up from the ground. She talked most of the way home, to fill the silence, telling her husband about Jenny's friend who'd stayed but hadn't slept for fear she had heard a ghost. Of how Stephen rarely did as he was told, his petulance wearing

her down at times. How they'd all missed him. He'd responded with quiet efficiency, as if the effort of speaking burdened him.

She offered to make some tea, but he poured himself a large whisky and sat at the kitchen table smoking hard. More than earlier she saw how thin his face had become. Beneath his eyes semi-circles the colour of plums emanated a rich lustre. She wanted to talk about the men in the pub, their treatment of Brendan's father, but judged it a potential source of conflict. Instead she spoke about the plans for the house she'd made in his absence, how this was the start of their new life. As she looked at her husband, this battle-weary, taciturn man, she tried to work out what the overwhelming emotion in her was – be it joy, relief or something else.

She took her tea upstairs, touching Richard's shoulder as she passed, telling him to come up soon.

10

Seated in the kitchen window looking out across the garden, it felt to her that the house had renewed itself in his presence. Already its disposition had shifted, as if her husband had laid claim to the fabric of the place, the rooms themselves thick with the suggestion of him.

A parchment of cloud had yet to burn away beneath the morning sun, the sky inert and colourless. Beyond the town a pall of mist lay low in the valley, its vaporous mass migrating imperceptibly. She remembered summer mornings as a child, her mother also sat in the window seat of their home, watching the day unfurl, as if each new one was to be marvelled at.

She thought for the first time of the man who'd lived here before them. They knew little about him, except that he'd lost his wife some years ago, Highfield's upkeep beyond the means of one person. His children had visited frequently to begin with, but when this tapered off, his health declining, the man had been forced to sell up. Given the house's condition there had been little interest and the estate agent encouraged them to put in a low offer. They did so, Mary embarrassed at its brazenness, and the man accepted it later that day. She pictured him sitting here in the window, straining to hear the sounds of a house that had once brimmed with life, mourning his inability to maintain the garden without help.

It would feel too vast, this house, with only memories to follow you from room to room, the ambient murmur of others receded forever. And yet there was something to cherish in these moments before her family were awake, the

experience of each new season here hers first. She loved how dawn graced the tips of the distant hills before it swept through the valley. How, in their first winter here, the elements had pummelled the house as they sat around the fire, windows rattling in their frames, beams and joists groaning above them. Snow had drifted hard one January night, a three-feet high perfect white curtain greeting her when she opened the door. One morning, sitting here a few weeks before Richard returned, a vixen had cautiously traversed the garden, sniffing the air before slinking through the far hedge, and Mary had pictured its cubs, hopeful of observing them later in the year as they tumbled and cartwheeled over each other on the lawn. There was a badger run nearby, too, a trail established through the hedgerow, its sett up in the woods.

She looked at the small section of ground she'd planted in since moving here. What could loosely be termed a garden had been choked with weeds and brambles, decades-old debris strewn within it. It had taken her several days last autumn to clear an area big enough to grow a reasonable crop this first year. At the start of spring she'd broken up the soil, drawing out four sections of furrowed rows with an old hoe she'd found in one of the barns. She would assess what worked well this year and develop more beds the following spring, rotating crops over the years to add nutrients to the soil. Once established they would be able to grow all their own vegetables, selling any excess produce to local shops. The work was tough on top of her job and without help from Richard, and as their income dwindled there would be real pressure to make a success of it.

In March she cleared out the lean-to at the back of the house to use as a potting shed, the hours spent in there deeply pleasurable, almost meditative. Beyond the stone wall there was a dilapidated greenhouse she'd repaired enough so

it retained most of its heat, and already the sweet earthy fragrance of tomato vines cloyed the air inside, while peppers and aubergines glistened from their watering.

It was a start. In time she would learn to make use of the profusion of food nature offered, foraging in the hedgerows and woods this autumn. There were blackberries, sloe, rosehip and bilberries nearby, two types of mushroom up in the top field she suspected were edible. For soups there was watercress growing down by the river, as well as sprigs of wild thyme snaking through the grass that fringed it. Salads from the produce of the greenhouse could be enhanced with yarrow and wood sorrel, and there had been redcurrants in spring, wild strawberries early in summer.

She'd found an orchard a mile or so along the valley and would approach the owner to ask what fruit might be surplus or whether she could exchange something for it. Eventually she would get to know every wild plant that could be harvested, herbs and shrubs that were both food and medicine, taking care not to uproot any, keeping the supply abundant. And while Mary doubted Richard would ever be sympathetic to this extent of alternative living, it felt an important part of what they were trying to achieve at Highfield. To use less. To be responsible for what they did utilise. For their relationship with nature not to be an occasional pilgrimage, something you acknowledged from time to time, but one where they became part of its great, unswerving cycles, where they gave as much as they took, immersed in the seasons' rhythms and order.

She'd surprised herself with how much she'd achieved in Richard's absence. In addition to the garden she'd cleared out the smaller of the two barns, junk and rubble the previous owner was unable to tackle. This, too, had left him impotent

during the sale, their offer allowing for the fact they would take care of it. After moving in Mary asked Stephen to help her one weekend, but despite a reluctant commitment to do so, he made plans with Brendan, apologising as he hurried out before she could protest.

The small barn, despite being damp, was the safer of the two, its roof almost intact, the stone walls largely unblemished. They would convert this one first, the project, if her husband was to be believed, conceivable without too much outside help. Once the building work was underway, Richard could connect a water supply from the mains. They'd need help with electricity, but the plan was to do the rest themselves, have it habitable for the start of the holiday season next year. More than this, though, she wanted the restoration to be sympathetic, for them to be curators of the house and its land, responsible for its rescue, its evolution. It mattered to her the materials they used, that the spirit and character of the place wasn't lost, its history preserved, the memories held in its centuries-old beams regarded. Highfield would be a place people loved again, where they felt welcome and safe, a home the children returned to with relish once they'd moved out.

Sorting through the old man's rubbish in the barn, seeing if anything could be salvaged, she'd found an old oil painting, a bucolic scene, perhaps local, its tones sombre and brooding yet not without appeal. She rang the estate agent but they reiterated the man hadn't wanted anything that had been left, so she'd found a place for it in the lounge.

Jenny's floorboards groaned above her now and Mary smiled at the prospect of company. Their daughter was waking earlier these days, perhaps anxious at what September would bring.

'Stephen will be there if you need him,' Mary had said, to little effect.

She decided to let Richard sleep his hangover off, before taking him up some breakfast. Shane, usually wanting to be let out once someone was up, remained curled on the floor by her husband's side of the bed.

Mary had woken around six, confused by the sense of another presence, the bed for so long hers alone. A trapezoid of light slanted through the window, illuminating her husband's back, and she watched the gentle rises and falls of his torso. He'd lost a couple of stone, she estimated, his spine trailing down his back in painful relief. She realised, as the evening had passed, that they wouldn't make love, that there was something different in the nature of this homecoming. Undressing she'd been nervous, the evening's tension at the pub heightening the awkwardness of bodies that had forgotten each other. They kissed goodnight once the light was out, a perfunctory gesture as Richard turned over. She'd reached out to touch him, to curl into this stranger, but pulled back at the last minute, sensing her touch would be unwelcome. The snoring she was used to starting up almost immediately didn't come and they'd lain there listening to the silence.

The first time she woke, Mary thought the noise had been a dream, an animal-like cry emanating from her husband as he tossed about in a fitful sleep. This time she did put an arm around him, realising his body was slick with sweat, the sheet sodden around him. She held him until the cry became a whimper, finally fading to nothing. Waking an hour or so later she felt a dull pain, its source initially

unfathomable in her half-sleep. Pursuing the sensation she realised Richard was gripping her arm, firmly enough that she was unable to release it, his fingers deep into her muscles. She said his name, wriggled a little, but this merely caused him to tighten his grasp. Finally she used her other hand to peel back his fingers one at a time, before shimmying to the far side of the bed.

She heard her daughter's footfall on the stairs. Nothing had been planned for the weekend; she would wait and see how her husband felt, a quiet couple of days together as a family, shut away from the world, his preference, she suspected.

Their first summer here was already waning, autumn's golden membrane would soon appear as the yard became burnished with leaves from the copper beech and sycamore. A surge of russet and ochre would furnish the slopes of the valley, the woods behind them. She thought how such edifying beauty was quickly acknowledged in the natural world, yet the gratuitous colour in her daughter's face was cause only for bemusement or discomfort in others, the stain a thing to mistrust, as if indicative of some malevolent force. Despite the medical wisdom Mary had blamed herself for years, recalling times of upheaval during the pregnancy, arguments with Richard, as if her anger and frustration had manifested as a birthmark. A book on folklore she'd found in the town revealed more elaborate precursors, such as the wound from a battle in a previous life, or of the pregnant woman touching her belly while looking at a solar eclipse. More prosaically, she'd read port-wine stains were caused by the mother's insatiable craving for strawberries or jam. But whereas in other cultures such marks were regarded as

blessed, lucky if touched, here Jenny was an aberration, a freak. That she was a girl, for whom beauty would be measured all the more against, felt crueller still.

She looked at her arm, the beginnings of a bruise rising, the skin an iridescent violet where each of Richard's fingers had held her. Jenny stumbled in, wiping the sleep from her eyes and Mary smiled at her as together they set the table for breakfast.

11

From the garden she watched the man struggle with the gate, finally calling out to him to lift it before he pushed. She hadn't heard a car but people often parked at the bottom of the lane, unsure that it led anywhere or that they'd be able to turn around. The noise brought Shane into the yard, the dog settling into a low growl as it held its ground a few feet from the front door. Something in her husband's return had brought out an excessively protective streak in the animal, to the point where she felt unsafe herself at times she had to discipline it. A line would be crossed if it bit either of the children, she'd told Richard, whereupon it would be returned to the shelter. For now she ushered the dog into the utility room and headed back outside, where the man stood in the middle of the yard.

'Mrs Briggs?' he asked.

Mary nodded, thinking perhaps she recognised him, though not from the town.

'I'm Philip Taylor. Richard's sergeant.'

She could see now that he was one of the men in a photograph her husband had once shown her, a group of six or seven soldiers stood for the camera in front of an army vehicle, some bare-chested, some with rifles, one or two smoking. He'd named them, the men in his unit, and had spoken kindly of Sergeant Taylor, a man, she felt, her husband looked up to, who'd helped him through a difficult time. Younger than she would have imagined – younger perhaps even than Richard by a few years – there was an air of self-assurance about him, of someone who coped

with anything thrown his way. Well groomed, his features had a leanness to them, his face a series of sharp angles, as if sculpted, and she supposed some would regard him as dashing. By contrast her husband had not shaved since coming home, the beard he returned with seemingly a thing of permanence.

The man stood and offered her his hand to shake, dismissing her apologies at having soil on her own. His grip was neither firm nor limp, though she could sense the power of the man. Looking beyond her, he asked if Richard was home, saying that he'd tried to call first but, unlike their address, their telephone number hadn't been updated on the records. When she said that her husband wasn't up yet, the man looked bemused, before giving a half-laugh.

'Life good to him now, is it? Don't let him get too used to it.'

She could think of nothing to say, her smile an effort to summon.

Sergeant Taylor explained that he had family down this way and apologised for not visiting sooner, saying that he was keen to see how Richard was doing on civvy street. Mary looked at him for a moment, desperate for some small and immediate insight, a sign that this man was here to deliver hope, perhaps the announcement of some support or an explanation, but she realised he would know nothing of what was playing out here.

'Do you want to come in?' she said.

She washed her hands in the sink while the kettle boiled. With the children back at school she'd settled into a routine of clearing up indoors, before spending a few hours in the garden and potting shed. Her current shift at the nursing home began after lunch, meaning she had to prepare dinner for them all, something simple that

could be reheated or that required minimal cooking. Stephen seemed to like the extra responsibility, the sense he was still in charge until his mother returned later in the evening. In almost every sense it was the same as when her husband was away, the order and rhythms of the day unchanged, his presence more felt than observed, as if the pipes and wires of the house carried some essence of him. Their behaviour became increasingly modified so as not to disturb or annoy him, his need for solitude and silence heightened a little more each day. She tried to reassure the children it was a phase, that he just needed more time than usual adapting to being home again.

The staying in bed until she'd gone to work began a month or so ago, a couple of weeks after he'd returned. At first it seemed reasonable for him to ease back into things, a week or so, she'd presumed, to acclimatise, to adjust to the absence of a life he'd lived since leaving school. He had, after all, returned from a war, albeit one that lasted barely a couple of months. But as the days passed, instead of emerging from this doleful stasis, he slid deeper into its grip, withdrawing from them a little more each day.

That his daughter had started secondary school this week, his son beginning his final year, did nothing to rouse him. Mary encouraged the children to seek their father out each day when they got home, to try to engage him, but by this time, according to Stephen, he would be out walking the dog.

As she placed the teapot on the table Sergeant Taylor asked what her husband was doing with himself now, joking that there was always room for him to return, in case he missed it all. He gave his words more emphasis now, as if once his voice carried upstairs, Richard would join them.

'He's not found work yet,' she said.

She'd pointed out jobs in the local paper, but he'd got no further than tearing them out, staring at the words as if they'd been written in another language. Initially, she thought his prolonged presence at home at least meant some of the larger projects would be tackled, yet on the rare occasion he did start something, she'd get up the following morning to find a semblance of work undertaken, perhaps an hour or so, the job then abandoned, seemingly forgotten. When she tried to discuss it, he claimed the absence of some tool or material, saying he'd acquire them when next in town, despite the fact he now only left the house to walk Shane. After almost a month of his being home, Highfield looked the same, only with another half a dozen more tasks in need of completing.

According to her son, his father often missed dinner, instead coming home as the light faded, a look of confusion or just emptiness on his face, taking the plate of food Stephen had left him upstairs, where Mary would find it later, half-eaten by the bed. By the time she arrived home from work, he'd be back in bed or in the spare room, sketching in a notebook, or just sitting there, the dog at his feet.

Last week, when for once he'd come to bed after her, she'd smelt whisky on his breath, though checking the bottle the next day, its level appeared undiminished. Searching the house and barns she'd found nothing.

For now all she could do was try to maintain some degree of normality, to ride it out. Their debt was becoming more of an issue, the extra hours she was doing helpful but ultimately insufficient, and Richard's army pay had ceased now. His pension would be moderate due to the early release and the last of their savings had gone. As each day passed her vision for Highfield seemed to retreat further. She

tackled the jobs her strength and knowledge allowed, finally getting Stephen to help her shift some of the heavier debris in the larger barn, but she knew nothing of masonry, of how a roof was made waterproof. She had spoken to her mother a few days ago, concealing her concern, hoping her father's arthritis had improved enough to help. She found herself lying, describing a leg injury Richard had picked up when away, how everything would be fine soon. Her parents had always been unenthusiastic about the move, seeing the risk as unnecessary: *What was wrong with the life they had? Why take on such a dilapidated house?* Despite the opportunity to feel vindicated, her mother managed to hide any self-righteousness from her voice, but, no, her father's health meant he couldn't really help. They could visit next month, if Mary wanted, although the journey was difficult.

For the first time in her adult life she found herself missing her parents. An ache had formed, born of the realisation they wouldn't always be there, that time now spent with them was the creation of memories to have once they had gone.

She poured the tea, offered Sergeant Taylor a biscuit. He was perhaps a little self-conscious with the situation now, a series of glances towards the stairs suggesting a desire to climb them and find Richard for himself.

'I can tell him you're here,' Mary said. 'But he probably won't come down.'

'He's not well?'

'It's been tough for him.'

'Has he any plans? He spoke of engineering or something.'

She looked at Taylor, scrutinising his face for some recognition that he understood, that his visit would cast light on the gathering gloom. But if something

terrible had happened to her husband down there, this man knew nothing of it, or at least nothing of its legacy. He was merely visiting an old friend, someone he'd served with. Or perhaps his kind chose not to acknowledge weakness, in case it proved contagious.

She ignored his question, instead asking him about his family, his children, how they coped with him being away. As he spoke she saw a man at ease with himself, someone who'd found his calling in life, who could no doubt both lead men and be respected by them. She imagined his war as a glorious affair involving decoration, imminent promotion. As if sensing her thoughts, he spoke of a victory parade next month, in London, to salute the task force.

'Richard should be there,' he said. 'See all the lads again.'

Mary pictured her husband, how last week she'd asked him whether he was getting up that day, and his response had been, 'What for?' It was already difficult to imagine him in uniform again, clean shaven, a soldier's demeanour about him. For most of the night now he curled up tightly in a ball, holding himself as a frightened child might, or as if gripped by cold. She'd observed as their bodies drifted further apart in the ocean of their bed, as if they were land masses on different tectonic plates, the contours of where they'd once fitted together still visible. His sleep was fractured, easily disturbed by whatever nightmare had caused him to cry out, names and words that became familiar to her. She hoped the children slept through it, or were able to dismiss it as a dream of their own and not their father's torment. Some nights she would wake to find Richard scrambling about the room, crying out that his arms were on fire, beating them furiously with his palms until she turned the lamp

on, the realisation of where he was dawning on his face. Or he'd just be stood naked at the window in silence, staring out at the night.

'Come back to bed,' she would say, tenderly at first, becoming more weary with each occasion.

There had been a few repeats of waking to a dull pain, her arm or waist clutched firmly, Richard's hand or arm in need of prising open. She hid the bruising as best she could, grateful the arms of her uniform came down far enough.

Last weekend she'd come in from the garden to hear a curious whimpering, thinking initially the dog had injured itself. Following the sound upstairs, into the spare room, she found her husband huddled in a corner, sobbing uncontrollably, and for once he allowed her to comfort him.

'You need some help,' she said. 'We need some help.'

He'd agreed to see a doctor, next week in the town. She made a morning appointment, so she could drive him there, ensure he went in.

'They'll be able to give you something to help you sleep,' she said, hopeful the intervention would not stop at this.

Selfless devotion to the care of others, to those incapable of looking after themselves, had been part of her life for as long as she could remember, both in a vocational and domestic sense. A virtuous calling, to subvert one's wilder impulses and desires for the good of others, be they strangers or kin.

She'd entered nursing at a time it was becoming more academic, the top teaching hospitals requiring A-levels, which she'd taken, her grades competent if not spectacular. She lost her nerve for university life, so the mix of vocational and academic pursuits was an appealing blend. They learnt on the job, completing

twelve-week ward assignments, which were assessed and graded at the end by the ward sister, something she found terrifying. Further courses followed, in children's and adult nursing, before more general training, after which she became a staff nurse.

And the role of dutiful carer continued into parenthood, the maternal instinct flourishing bright from the moment of Stephen's birth. But recently, as mid-life approached, she'd found this altruistic proclivity waning, replaced by an examination of her own life, or of the life she hadn't led. She dwelt on missed opportunities, on frustrations that had been suppressed. Nurse, wife, mother: all of these things she cherished, yet they were no longer in themselves enough, defined as they were by their connection to others. It was as if a dilution had occurred somewhere along the way, a watering down of the woman who'd hoped to go to university, to travel, to make a small impact on the world. She thought of the Lennon quote, of life being what happens to you while you were busy making other plans, and it made her cross, this acceptance that despite your best intentions, the world buffeted you according to its own arbitrary blueprint, one that was generally more prosaic. Or perhaps this interpretation was a cynical one, that it instead alluded to the infinite potential of life, its chaotic splendour that refused to be dictated to. Either way, she'd given her time to motherhood, to supporting her husband's career at the expense of her own aspirations. The pull of a new life – since Richard had given the army notice, the children growing up fast – had felt irresistible. The chance to escape the dreary formula their lives had succumbed to, a sequence of unvarying chapters, safe and unremarkable.

And yet here she was, burdened with a new, unfathomable strain, her husband returning from the far side of the world, a debilitating affliction visited upon him like some exotic disease, her place as full-time carer more entrenched than ever.

She wanted to ask the man at her kitchen table how the army allowed someone who so obviously wasn't suited to such a regime to serve for so long. How there wasn't a filter to catch him. And then, finally, when he did get out, how he was just left to get on with it, no after-care.

'What happened to him?' she said finally.

'What do you mean?'

'Down there. On those islands.'

Taylor again looked at the stairs, perhaps concerned a trust might be breached, his composure momentarily slipping.

'He won't hear you, don't worry,' she continued. 'Nothing gets through. We tiptoed around when he first got back, but nothing stirs him now.'

'Look, I...It was tougher for some than others. You know, some of the things people had to see. Stuff they can't train you for. He probably just needs some more time. Get it out his system. Perhaps a holiday would help.'

They drank their tea in silence. When Mary spoke again, she fought the tremor that was forming in her voice.

'Do you know what he does, when he finally gets out of bed? He goes for a walk, up in the woods somewhere, I don't know. Takes the dog, gone until dusk, sometimes later, looking for birds in the sky, he says. And at night, when he's not thrashing about or crying out in his sleep, he sits in the spare room, in his pants,

drawing these birds from pictures in a book. What little he eats, he does alone. That's his life now.'

A look of bemusement passed across Sergeant Taylor's face, whether from surprise at this artistic inclination or with her frank account of Richard's behaviour in general, she was unsure.

'I can't remember the last time he touched me.' She hadn't wanted to say this, the words articulated before she could restrain them.

As the silence deepened again, they heard an upstairs door close. A few moments later the toilet flushed, followed by the sound of another door. When they resumed their conversation it was in a conspiratorial hush.

'I should at least say hello,' Taylor said. 'Perhaps it will help, seeing me.'

Mary shook her head. 'It might make him worse. Remind him.'

'I could tell him about the parade.'

'I'd rather you didn't.'

She thought to ask him what he'd meant by the things people had seen, both wanting and not wanting elaboration. Richard had still not uttered a word of his time there and she'd known not to ask; it had been enough to have him home when others had not returned. She knew enough of his role to understand what he'd have been doing, the nature of his combat, but something in Sergeant Taylor's face had hinted at the unspeakable, of something he himself had managed to seal away in a box deep in his mind.

Finally, he stood, thanking her for the tea.

'If you give me the number,' he said, 'I'll phone him next week, talk about plans for the parade.'

Mary did as he asked, then saw him to the door, where, turning to say goodbye, he stood still, looking over her shoulder.

‘Briggs,’ he said.

She followed the sergeant’s gaze up to the landing where, in just his socks and pants, her husband sat on the top stair, the dog now by his side.

‘Hey, buddy, you coming down?’ Richard looked through them, impassive, as if they weren’t there. ‘What’s up?’ Taylor continued. ‘You getting too used to the cosy life? Come and say hello. Your missus tells me you’re being a right pain in the arse. I offered to come up and sort you out but she wouldn’t have it. How about that pint some time?’

Without responding her husband turned his attention to door frame opposite the banister, where, reaching his arm out, he started picking furiously at the paint, flaking it off with his nail, the white flecks falling down into his hair like dandruff. Taylor gestured to her whether he should go up, though it was clear now he too doubted the wisdom in this course of action, bewilderment playing out on his face at Richard’s appearance, his weight loss, his beard and hair.

‘No, I think just go.’

After a further plea, Taylor allowed himself to be ushered into the yard, where he placed his hand on the side of her arm. ‘I’m sure he’ll be fine,’ he said, before heading to the gate.

As she got ready for work Mary listened for signs of life above her. She’d sensed her husband listening at the top of the stairs, at least for some of the time Sergeant Taylor was here. Perhaps she’d been wrong not to allow the man upstairs, his

confronting Richard the prelude to some small recovery, a familiar and friendly face to snap him out of it, someone who'd shared whatever abomination occurred. But it had felt incendiary, like sending up an embodiment of all her husband's terror. Better to seek some professional help, a psychiatrist or someone; she'd ask for advice at work.

After putting some food in the dog bowl she left a note for the children. She called up that she was leaving, listened to the silence for a moment, before setting off across the field.

12

The surgery's waiting room was sparsely furnished, its few rows of seating assembled as an L-shape in front of a rectangular hatch in the wall. Without lifting her gaze the receptionist marked a sheet in front of her and told them to take a seat, that they were running twenty minutes or so late. Mary led them to some chairs in the far corner, Richard shuffling behind her. She'd thought they might walk here, to save petrol, but despite giving her husband an hour's notice, he was still undressed when it was time to leave and had to be corralled to the car, his movements often sluggish now, as if part of him was shutting down. In between this inertia were now woven periods of agitation that verged on paranoia, bouts of which left him exhausted to the point of collapse. Sudden noise – a door slamming, the first ring of the telephone – caused him to flinch, though it was becoming rarer for him to be downstairs for any length of time. Still he disappeared into the woods each day, binoculars slung round his neck, Shane at his heel, the pilgrimage bestowing him with a routine of sorts. Other, more visible changes had emerged in the past couple of weeks. Where once his eyes had brimmed with mischievous intensity or a vulnerable lustre, they were now increasingly devoid of animation, as if the organs were mere orbs of pith in their hollows – functional and expressionless. Despite the endless hours spent outdoors, his complexion had become sallow, his skin bloodless. Sergeant Taylor had told her it was to be expected that they lost weight, given the size of their combat rations, the calories expended each day. But whereas the man who visited their home had blazed with renewed vitality and a fullness of physique,

her husband's indifference towards food had kept his build as frail as that day at the station. His voice, too, had thinned from even-toned and resonant to a sound that was frail, almost muted, the words perishing immediately upon utterance.

Mary had spoken to her husband's mother last week, a dutiful woman who lived in the shadow of Richard's father, but it was clear his parents regarded such difficulties as private matters, to be resolved from within, discretely, without fuss. That nobody was prepared to discuss what *such difficulties* even were, only furthered the sense of isolation. She knew his father held bitter disappointment at Richard's premature departure from the forces, that he regarded his son a failure even before this, his relatively lowly rank a source of embarrassment. She felt angry that they'd not even visited him since his return. And now they had cause not to, suggesting it would be better to wait until their 'domestic troubles' had returned to normal. Had the conversation gone well, she might have broached the subject of money, especially as their son was the one with a reduced income, the one not pulling his weight at Highfield. In the end she'd terminated the call with a brusque retreat, ignoring enquiries about the children.

She browsed the pile of magazines to the side of them, settling on the least tatty of the gardening ones. Every now and then she looked up, sensing a few stares, issuing a defiant look to those who made eye contact. They would be curious at this stranger among them, bedraggled and bearded, accompanied by the woman from the house on the hill.

He's the one who went to war.

He's in the army?

No, he left.

What's he doing now?

Nobody knows.

What about her?

A nurse, over at Parkwood. They used to live in the town. Bought the Russell house.

What, the old ruin up there?

She tried to dismiss it, the border where a sense of community and concern crossed into whispers and suspicion. It was the sort of place, in the absence of a rooted generation or two, you never quite belonged. Perhaps this was a feature of all small towns: you were an outsider, on probation until further notice. But the alternative was to live in the sprawl and tumult of a city or to isolate themselves further.

She offered the magazine to Richard before returning it to the table. To their right a small boy was building something with toy bricks, the tower toppling over around her husband's feet. The boy looked sheepishly to his mother, wondering if it was OK to retrieve them. Mary was about to intervene when Richard slowly gathered them up, handing them in almost fascination one at a time to the boy.

Finally, her husband was called through, Mary looking hard at him, as if to say, Remember why we're here, that you need some help. This cannot go on. Those seated around them looked on as he walked through to the doctors' rooms and for a moment she considered accompanying him, to ensure the case was well made, its severity emphasized. Instead she thought to walk along the road, perhaps settle up the account at the bookshop, but the idea receded with the prospect of Richard

emerging before she returned, perhaps wandering off somewhere. She would wait for him here.

Mary recognised the man as he scanned the room for somewhere to sit and she nodded at the chair next to her. He smiled, picking his way around the labyrinth of seats and outstretched legs, stepping carefully over the boy's latest construction. Bohemian was how she supposed he'd be regarded, someone who stood out, especially here, the tight jeans and cowboy boots, the same colourful waistcoat from the pub. A tattoo, ornate and detailed, a shamrock at its centre, adorned most of his right forearm. He apologised for not remembering her name, though she didn't recall saying it that night, and he told her his – Aiden. He'd had his hair cut since she last saw him, though it still sat just above his shoulders in auburn whorls. As he sat down, she noticed his left ear was pierced, a thick silver ring tight to the lobe.

He made a joke about the place being full of sick people and how those who weren't would be by the time they left. His clothes smelled faintly of something musty, though not unpleasant, perhaps stale wood smoke.

'So, our boys play together?' he said, which made them sound younger than they were.

'I think they go fishing a lot.'

'Perhaps one day they'll even catch a fish.'

They both laughed a little and when those around them stared, Aiden gave a mock shush, which made her laugh some more.

'So you've got old man Russell's house, up on the hill?'

'You know it?'

'I did some work for him once, a bit of rewiring. Not that he paid me for it all.'

'So, you don't...the music?'

'It brings in a few quid, nothing more.'

She wanted to make some compliment about his voice but the words sounded mawkish in her head. In the end she asked how long he'd been playing to audiences.

'I started in Dublin, in the late sixties. Small clubs and pubs, traditional stuff mostly. I was never going to be any good, not so I'd make a living of it.'

'How did you end up here?'

'Just sort of happened, I guess. Drifting around, found some work. And then I met my wife. It's not a bad town for kids to grow up. I'm still a foreigner here, mind.'

'I've always wanted to go. To Ireland.'

He gave a little laugh.

'What?' she said.

'Everyone says that. It's only a few hours on the boat.'

She wanted to say that she knew this, that it wasn't the distance, or lack of, that had prevented her. That she'd been to other places, the Channel Islands, Germany when Richard was stationed there at the start of their marriage.

'My husband's been there,' she said, a little defensively. 'To the north, that is.'

'I've family thereabouts.'

In the pause that followed she recalled the scene in the pub, the mindless discrimination, and was keen to point out she was no part of it.

'That night, at the Woodman's,' she said. 'Does that happen often?'

‘What, getting hassled? A bit. More since the Falklands. They think we’re all in the IRA. Mostly it stops when I start playing.’

‘I’m sorry Brendan had to see it.’

‘You know what they’re like; he probably didn’t even notice. It’ll all be forgotten the time I next play there.’

‘You’ll go back?’

‘It’s hard to get gigs these days; you can’t be choosy.’

‘I knew some of the songs, but not all of them.’

‘I try to write my own, slip a couple in when no one’s listening.’

He told her about musicians who’d inspired him, some of whom she’d heard of, and how he was happiest immersed in a song, seeing the joy on others’ faces as they sang along or were touched by the words. His voice was starting to go now, he explained, the higher notes beyond reach. Modern music appalled him for the most part, the sixties and seventies seemingly being replaced by a decade that looked set to value synthesised noise and sentimental pap, the acoustic guitar an endangered species.

‘Where are all the songwriters?’ he said. ‘What are they singing about?’

Mary shook her head, unsure how to respond but feeling engrossed all the same.

One of the doors opened at the far end of the corridor, an elderly woman emerging, examining her prescription. Richard had been in a while now, which was a good thing, she told herself. It was hard to imagine him articulating this thing, capturing in words the wretchedness he’d succumbed to. But perhaps it would be easier to talk to a stranger, one whose judgement manifested as clinical rather than

emotional. Since Sergeant Taylor's visit she'd thought more about how inadequate Richard's post-war treatment was. That he'd left the army hardly seemed relevant given how much of his life he'd given them. Weren't there specialists for such situations, for the ones whose anguish didn't subside? He'd done what was asked of him – served his country, risked being killed, perhaps killed others – only to be abandoned. If Sergeant Taylor did ring, she'd make her case more forcefully, demand some assistance.

Aiden was talking again now and she welcomed the distraction.

'You doing up the house, then?' he said.

'Highfield? It's a work-in-progress.'

'A lot of damp, I remember.'

'We didn't realise how bad the roof was.'

'Russell let it go, I think. Once his wife died. Didn't you have a survey?'

'We only got a valuation, to save money.'

'Not so clever.' He said this with sympathy, she felt, rather than rebuke.

'We want to convert the barns, into accommodation, and to run courses. By next summer the plan was.'

'But not now?'

She lowered her gaze, surprised at her urge to tell this man everything.

'It's been tough, since my husband got back. He was going to do most of the work himself. I've made a start but...'

'Well, I know a good electrician. He talks a lot but I can vouch for him. He can turn his hand to most things, actually.'

She smiled, hopeful her face didn't imply disinterest at the offer. In truth there were no funds for such work, nor were there likely to be.

'I'll keep it in mind,' she said with a smile. 'Thank you.'

Again they lapsed into silence. She thought to ask him about her old violin. A reward from her father following A-levels, it had languished in the corner of rooms in various homes, untouched, barely removed from its case. She'd got as far as tuning the instrument once, filling the bow hair with rosin, but when her efforts to produce a sound of any kind – let alone something vaguely tuneful – failed, her enthusiasm waned. And in the absence of a tutor it became something else she would get to one day, once the clouds of life's tumult parted for a moment.

She watched Aiden's fingers tap out a rhythm on the side of his thigh, imagining some composition occurring, an artistic breakthrough to be stored in his head until he was home. Was this how the part-time artist worked? Moments snatched from the daily grind, mined for their lyrical potential? She wondered whether the music was always playing within him, his songs an undercurrent to all else, eddying in the background as they formed. Again it encouraged analysis of her own life and the absence of any artistic pursuit. She supposed the vegetable plot showed an element of creativity, as did the plans for Highfield itself, though focus on these were now a source of disquiet. There was pleasure to be found in gardening, in the aesthetic betterment of the space around them. And yet none of this quite nourished the creative part of her, which had remained fallow for as long as she could remember.

The boy to the side of them had given up on the bricks now and was smashing a plastic fire engine into his mother's chair leg.

‘So, do you always come to the doctor’s with your husband?’ Aiden said, leaning towards her.

His over-familiarity, the attempt at humour, could easily have been offensive or irritating, yet it was delivered with enough charm to be neither.

‘I was coming to town anyway.’

‘It’s OK, I’m just kidding.’

She went to speak again but the receptionist called out his name. He wished her well with the house, said goodbye. The other women in the waiting room looked across as he stood, their gawking barely hidden.

Something in their haughtiness, perhaps together with the scene at the pub, gave her parting words an emphasis. ‘Will you be playing again soon, somewhere nearby?’

13

She took his tea out to the barn. The balminess of autumn gone now, winter's hand held the town, dusk arriving a little earlier each day. She was more prepared this year, knowing how best to heat the house, which rooms retained the day's heat. They had enough wood to last into January, the farmer giving her a good deal again. It was best left for the following winter, he'd said, to dry out some, but nothing remained of last year's supply. Being damp it would at least burn more slowly. She'd taken delivery of a half tank of oil last week, hoping the invoice would arrive after her next payday. This too would see them into the start of the following year but not much further.

She had collected her husband's prescription on the way home from the surgery, somehow both relieved and disappointed to learn he'd been given tranquilisers. Her probing into the nature of the consultation was largely resisted.

'At least tell me it was useful,' she'd said parking the car, taking Richard's hand in hers. His gaze turned outwards, scanning the banking cloud above the valley, looking for a distant fleck that soared beneath the expanse of sky.

Later, she'd made a list of what else could be cut back on. Non-essentials had all but gone now. She'd cancelled the paper, plus the cream and orange juice that were delivered once a week with the milk. She would cut her own and her daughter's hair from now on – Stephen said he'd just grow his rather than risk enduring some terrible spectacle on his head. (Her son's appearance had become of increasing importance to him in recent weeks, since mentioning a girl he liked at

school.) Where possible clothes could be repaired rather than replaced, again Stephen the only one to protest. When they required new garments, the town's jumble sale was a good source, especially if she arrived early. She would use her mother's old sewing machine to make curtains and cushion covers, buying the fabric from the remnant factory shop out on the estate. When there was more time, in the depths of winter, she would learn to knit.

She had already begun using the children's bathwater after them, stopping short at asking them to share their own. Richard maintained the barest personal hygiene. Recently his flannel and toothbrush remained dry for days at a time, his clothes, unless she removed them from the bedroom and washed them, worn day after day. Dirt had begun to encrust under his fingernails in swarthy crescents and his untended toenails often scratched her during the night. One morning his sweating had been so pronounced it had soaked across to her side of the bed, though on changing the sheets after work she realised he'd wet himself.

It became increasingly tempting to sleep in the spare room, despite the leaking roof, but for now she was keen to maintain as much normality for the children as possible.

The vegetable garden had continued to provide into autumn and beyond, and she'd learned how to store food for longer, even pickling produce from the greenhouse. But soon all their food would have to be bought again. (She remembered Aiden's joke about the boys one day actually catching a fish, half-hoping a meal or two might emerge from this unlikely source.)

In many ways she relished the challenge of fashioning free entertainment for them as a family, pastimes harnessed from what was around them, from their

imaginations rather than the electronic games that some of the children's friends were rumoured to have. At weekends Jenny helped her bake, her daughter's face a picture of concentration as she measured out flour and butter and sugar with unnecessary precision, the pastry clagging in her fingers and hair. They made sweets and toffee, jams and jellies. On Saturday afternoons in autumn the two of them had embarked on epic foraging trips, gathering berries and fungi, collecting feathers and fir cones, exploring deeper and deeper the woods and hinterland around them. And Stephen, although increasingly reluctant to spent time together as a family, seemed to sense its worth as his father's remoteness intensified, her son accompanying them more and more. They would even run into Richard on occasion, or at least Shane, on such walks, the dog confused as to which way to go as it ran between them, attempting to corral them together. In one of the top fields there was a horse they'd got to know. Past its prime, underfed, it had a sullen air as it stood solemn and unmoving in the centre of the field. Seeing them the animal would sometimes make its way over, allowing them to pat it as it scoured its neck against the gatepost. Jenny asked if they could take it home and they'd hatched mock plans to sneak up in the night, rescuing the wretched creature. Instead they took it apples, feeding it at the start of their circuitous walks, until one day it was no longer there.

On a walk back in March they'd penetrated an overgrown forest of laurel, emerging from its clutches into a snowdrop wood that bordered the river. It had been like stepping into some enchanted, ancient place, with fronds of fern specked among the thousands of pendulous white flowers and she watched the wonder on her daughter's face.

These were the times Mary treasured most, immersed with her daughter, sometimes Stephen too, in their modest wilderness, embarking on great outings, before returning to Highfield to light the fire, gathering around the flagstone hearth, its glow mollifying. Yet all the while great forces seemed at work, prizing the family apart, isolating them not only from the town but from each other.

Glancing back at the house she entered the barn, handing him the mug. He cupped his fingers around it and surveyed the stonework around him. She'd got his number from Stephen, who'd asked Brendan for it at school. Once he'd agreed to come and have a look, Mary had made two requests, hiding her embarrassment while telling him it would be understandable for him to change his mind. Firstly, she wondered if he might work on the promise of payment being made the following summer, when some National Savings matured. They could discuss this, he said, but it was possible; the work would go well into next year anyway and as long as there was money for materials. She didn't tell him the savings were her daughter's, an investment both children had been given from Richard's father almost five years ago. Her husband away, Mary had opened the accounts, which Stephen and Jenny were allowed to withdraw from when they reached sixteen. For Stephen this was just a matter of months now, but she would have years to replace her daughter's lump sum. Nothing about it felt good, and yet it was absurd that the money would just sit there in meagre accumulation while their problems worsened. She would repay it all once the business was up and running, nobody any the wiser.

Secondly, she'd whispered into the phone to Aiden, her husband was unwell but that didn't mean he'd lost all sense of pride. She feared he might be against asking someone to carry out tasks he'd planned to do himself, that it might affect

any recovery, his impotence brought into relief. Again she expected the man to decline, but after a pause he'd agreed to at least come along and have a look. They'd settled on a time, Mary asking him to park in the gateway halfway up the lane and walk the last bit. She would make sure Shane was shut in the house.

He sipped his tea, circling the barn, inspecting its walls, tutting each time something displeased him.

'There's a lot to do. Not just the walls, but the roof and the floor. And you say you want electricity in here? And water?'

She nodded.

'We'll need to dig down, put some drainage in. And the lintels need replacing – I'm surprised that wall's still there. Have you a room plan?'

'I thought I'd wait until you saw it, ask your advice.'

He smiled. If her lack of foresight frustrated him, he managed to hide it. Again he surveyed the barn's interior.

'He'll hear me working. I'd rather he knew what was happening.'

'His pills knock him out at night. He never wakes before midday. You could start early, finish before then.' She saw now this was the wrong strategy, that she was losing him. 'No, you're right. I'll tell him before you start. He'll be fine, I'm sure.'

Another walk around the barn, more scrutiny. She could see the doubt continue to leaven in him. Trying to keep the desperation from her voice, she said, 'Please, Mr Doherty, I don't know any other way.'

Finally, he spoke. 'I wouldn't be able to come often.'

'I was thinking one morning a week. Perhaps you could show me things I could get on with when you're not here.'

His smile was sympathetic rather than patronising. They agreed on an hourly rate, Aiden promising to let her know where this stood every few weeks. She would pay him for materials at the end of each month. Mary held out her hand to shake, which, after a final glance around the barn, he took.

She pulled her daughter closer, looking around the kitchen, thinking that it had been months since the four of them had been in the same room together.

‘It’ll be OK, I promise,’ Mary said.

By now Jenny’s sobbing had shifted into tremulous wheezes, Mary’s jumper soaked with snot and tears.

‘How will it be OK?’ said Stephen.

She had no idea, beyond hoping it was a phase to be passed through, that the dynamics of the thing would right themselves. What else could she do other than speak to the school, demand action was taken? She parted her daughter’s matting curls, kissed her forehead, kissed the source of her tormentors’ attentions.

‘Do you want to tell us what happened?’ Jenny shook her head. ‘Perhaps later, then.’

Mary continued to dab her daughter’s bloodied elbow with cotton wool, her uniform, if not ruined, then in need of much repair. It would be easy to keep her at home a few days, something she suspected would only amplify the situation. As would driving her daughter to school, although according to Stephen, whatever had occurred didn’t take place on the bus.

The graze clean, Mary fixed a plaster to Jenny’s arm, promising her she could choose what they ate for dinner tonight. Richard watched from the far side of the

room, if not fully engaged with them, then still affected by the scene playing out before him, his daughter's trauma keenly felt on some level.

14

Winter slipped slowly by, the town sepulchral in its wake. Lives were lived quietly at this time of year, as if in torpor, people's energy conserved where possible. For once the Woodman's had some appeal and she imagined regulars converging around its fire, sharing tales of the hardship and inconvenience the snow had brought.

Much of the valley lay untouched by the sun in the shortened days, its slopes casting shadows that bled over the land. As with last year they burned more wood than anticipated, the temptation for one last log each evening always too great, as outside wind breathed frost onto Highfield. Despite the harshness of the landscape, its palette deficient at this time of year, there was still beauty to be found: crisp, glassy afternoons walking out of the valley, to the fields that steamed in the low sun, the air knife-sharp; or seeing a lone oak, serene and skeletal mid-field, its branch tips like spiny fingers reaching into the dusk sky; or listening to carrion crows squabble among themselves, their voices reverberating across the pastures as if it was the only sound in the world.

To her surprise the occasional wild food had still offered itself into December: velvet shank and oyster mushrooms, honey fungus and chickweed. She'd finally succumbed to shopping at the large store once a week now, telling herself she'd support the smaller shops in the town when they could afford to again, although it had angered her none of them was prepared to give her credit on account.

They would grow more of their own food this year. She would learn about cultivation and storage, the combinations that worked best. The vegetable garden

would be expanded in spring, new crops trialled. Meanwhile, the wind that barely ceased up here had given her the idea of somehow producing energy from its squalls, a miniature windmill perhaps, connected to some sort of battery. She would ask Aiden about how this might work.

Their arrangement had worked well so far, with only the coldest weeks proving impossible to work in the barn. The thaw had come as a relief, as much for having his company once a week, as seeing progress resume.

‘You’re husband’s OK with this?’ he’d said that first morning and she’d hoped the lie didn’t show on her face.

Having dwelt for months on all that bore down on her, she tried now to focus on what had been achieved, what had not yet been lost. Simple delights that endured. The crunch of her boots in the snow as the sound echoed from tree to tree. Or sitting around the fire with her daughter.

But it was as if the stasis of the season had permeated Richard too, his condition neither improving nor worsening, the pills sustaining a steady lethargy in him as he existed among them like an elderly relative might. There’d been a return to the doctor, an increase of his medication, but nothing else as far as she could tell. Still there had been no contact from the army enquiring as to his welfare. Sergeant Taylor had phoned before the parade, hopeful Richard would be attending. Thinking the event might prove a catalyst to recovery, she had pleaded with her husband to go.

‘Don’t you want to see everyone again?’

‘Why would I?’

In the end she’d raised her voice. ‘You have to try something, for god’s sake.’

But she had given up any form of confrontation now, as if part of him, the man she'd known before the war, had receded beyond reach. Attempts to argue, to provoke a reaction, got no further than a monologue; she was unsure he even heard her words at times. The nightmares, at least, seemed to have tapered off, the chemical dulling of his emotions allowing her some sleep too.

Several times in January the water pipes had frozen overnight and she'd spent an hour with Stephen in biting wind, armed with jugs of boiling water, trying to locate the blockage, hopeful nothing had burst. Where the pipes were most exposed they'd insulated them with old towels and a plastic sheet she cut up. Realising some of their heat was escaping up the unused fireplace in the back room, she wedged several pillows up the chimney. In the bedrooms ice had formed on the inside of the windows, breath from their dreams appearing on the glass in the morning as filigree whorls. Stephen and Jenny rarely complained, the struggle against the cold regarded in terms of its challenge, defeated by cunning and the judicious placement of hot water bottles and extra blankets. Yet watching them contend with the adversity of the last six months, their father unravelling before them, made her heart ache.

She grew stronger as a result of the work, the chopping of logs, helping Aiden in the barn on Wednesday mornings. To her relief he parked the other side of the barn for convenience.

Progress had been slow in the early stages – the accommodation unlikely to be ready this summer – but she'd begun to enjoy his company as they worked together, chatting about music they liked, the vast changes that were occurring in the world. She caught herself laughing at his often cruel humour, jokes at the expense of the town's characters or just anecdotes from his time growing up in

Dublin. Later she found some batteries for her old radio and took it out to him, but he preferred to hum his own tunes.

Once the children left for school she would take him his tea, watching as he prepared the lime mortar, making good where the stonework was weak. The roof secured, he'd excavated the floor before filling it with hardcore, followed by some insulation and a layer of concrete. When she helped he never patronised her, regardless of what she could or couldn't do, often taking time to explain the detail behind his work, tricks of the trade his father had taught him as an apprentice in the business back home.

He spoke of his family, how he'd worried about bringing Brendan up over here, but the boy soon settled in, endearing himself with some of his father's charm perhaps. She thought about this as a tactic, how Aiden had tried to deflect the anger at the Woodman's by playing on, entertaining the hostile crowd, as if his kind could be only terrorist or jester, tolerated as long as he assimilated. She wondered what his views were on nationalism, whether his devotion to music was the whole story, or if the indifference to the politics of his land merely made for an easier life here. She tried to ignore her fear that Richard and Aiden might meet, her gambling on her husband's inertia preventing this more than foolish, born of desperation. Not that Richard had ever expressed the same mindless prejudice as those in the pub. But he was, had been, a soldier in the British Army, one who'd fought in a war, perhaps witnessed friends die, friends who'd lost fellow soldiers across the Irish Sea, albeit in the north.

She thought of other shifts occurring within her, as their new life took shape beneath the constant threat of failure. Half a lifetime of conformity, of supporting

someone who defended the status quo, who was part of the establishment, had now lost its cogency. And not merely in how they themselves lived, but a sense had grown in her of all the violence in the world, how it repeated, went barely challenged. For as long as she could remember they'd lived with the insidious threat of nuclear war, this quiet menace that, although not dwelt upon unduly, lurked at the edges of her generation's mind. Should tensions between superpowers escalate, they were reliant on a mutual fear of annihilation preventing someone from initiating the sequence to destruction. All of history, all of what was to come, removed in a moment's insanity by men whose own ego and pride ensnared them. Perhaps there was false security in being so far from the major cities, with proximity preferable, your demise instant rather than protracted.

She'd read about a group of women who'd set up a peace camp at an RAF base in the south of England, in protest at the American cruise missiles sited there. Forming a human chain around its perimeter fence, there were thousands of them, their number growing by the day, returning each time they were evicted. Mary was surprised how much the report had affected her, for the first time in her life feeling the sense of collective outrage and triumph despite not being any part of it. She'd told no one – for who was there to share it with beyond her children? Or perhaps Aiden? It was her secret, a rebellious part that allowed her to remain sane, the wife of a soldier who wanted to protest for peace. She imagined the disgust of those in the town, of Richard's parents. Yet wasn't her case a more poignant one given what her husband had become? War had an even greater absurdity to it now that it wasn't some abstract concept, now that it had touched her own life. Of men

(although it had been a woman this time) sending other men to die, for land, for empire. Why shouldn't she join the women at the camp if they remained there?

But also it was her job that had prompted a yearning for something else. Caring for those who couldn't look after themselves – who navigated their final years with dignity and often grace but also with an acceptance that their time here was nearing an end – had finally stirred into life some unrealised part of her.

15

Wiping away the condensation from the bathroom mirror she studied the detail of her face, wondering if beyond its lassitude others saw a residual beauty. It had been a lifetime since she'd last dwelt in any sustained way on her appearance, given care to the adornment this precisely. She had shown Jenny how to apply foundation when they were looking at concealers last term, but otherwise, perhaps with the exception of her husband returning for leave, she hardly looked at herself from one day to the next. Faint lines ran like tributaries out from the corners of her eyes, her cheeks now defined by creases rather than the smooth curvature of the face's structure. Her lips, once full and pliant, had become thinner, taut as if pursed, and depending on the light, the semblance of a moustache could sometimes be seen, a dozen or so tiny hairs that had turned sable over the years. She wondered whether people noticed them, whether, unlike her mother, she might finally do something to remove them. Certainly the past year or two, since they'd lived here, since Richard had returned, had plundered any last youth from her, and yet today her eyes gave off a forgotten vitality.

She tied her hair back, leaving a few strands to fall across her cheeks, before allowing a hint of perfume to settle on her neck. In the bedroom she put on the old clothes that had become her uniform on such mornings, the milder days with the onset of spring allowing for fewer layers. She wondered whether he was here yet, picturing him high on the ladder or attending to the door frame they'd started last week. It was a curious contrast, the force his hands applied to the more arduous

aspects of the work, and the delicacy with which his fingers had traversed the neck of the guitar that evening. At no time did he seem concerned an injury might be sustained, one that would curtail his playing. Or perhaps there was little choice, his living earned in this way. She thought she might ask today if he knew anyone who could give her lessons for the violin, indicating that she might take it up at last. It felt like a risk, that it might be seen through, but the momentum of the thing seemed beyond her now, her behaviour no longer compelled by something she recognised. They'd touched a few times, the skin of his hand brushing hers as she passed him some tool or material. And when he took his tea, their fingers sometimes made contact, though she conceded this was likely accidental, that she was overplaying it. Last week she'd caught herself staring at the back of him as he fitted a support bracket under one of the beams. At any moment he could have turned round, asked for something, seen her stood there entranced, lost to ridiculous thoughts. She never asked about his marriage, though he would often speak of it, especially on his return from the Christmas break, during which they'd apparently rowed the whole time and he'd slept several nights in the spare room.

Christmas at Highfield had been less difficult than Mary had imagined, Richard joining them for the opening of a few small presents before lingering silently on the fringes of the day. He'd even helped prepare some of the dinner, the kitchen filled with the sound of an old cassette of carols she'd found, glimpses of Christmases gone by playing out. In the week before, she and Jenny had made decorations, to go with the few they had – painting fir cones silver, assembling paper chains – while Stephen helped her put up the huge tree the farmer had given them. They collected holly from the woods, tied ribbon around clusters of cinnamon sticks.

For a few days it seemed she might be witnessing the healing of her husband's ailment, a gradual exorcism of whatever gripped him. But by the second week of January he'd slunk further into the gloaming of his mind, so that even the sight of him became a rarity. Often the only way they were aware of his presence was the creak of a floorboard above them as he scuttled between rooms, or the back door closing in his wake. The medication, while still rendering him soporific in the mornings, was failing to curb the more eccentric performances that had become commonplace. Although he never answered the phone, she could sense him at the top of the stairs listening to the conversations she or the children had. His mother rang once a week, happy to exchange small talk with Mary, any reference to her son's disintegration resisted like a child with fingers in their ears, refusing to acknowledge the words, replying with a banal non sequitur. Meanwhile her own parents simply failed to appreciate the severity of the situation, managing only unconvincing reassurances that things always improved given enough time.

Richard was spending more and more time in the spare room now, taking what meals he ate in there, reading the same bird book over and over. She sometimes stood by the door, listening hard, the only sound the rhythmic dripping of rain into containers. If she knocked, asked him whether the dog needed letting out, the silence remained unbroken, or, on occasion, the door would open enough for Shane to be shoved out and then closed again, the animal snarling at her when she tried to walk it.

Parting the curtains a little Mary looked out across the yard, trying to see if there were any signs of life in the barn yet. She checked her hair again, hoping the few filaments of grey were indiscernible. Beside her the covers of the bed rippled as

her husband turned over, Shane's head lifting at the prospect of activity, before lowering again.

Outside the day shimmered with the manifestation of spring, with Highfield blushed in the morning sun, the swelling chorus of a blackbird announcing the shift in season. In the coming days blackthorn would begin to blossom, stitchwort and red campion colouring the hedgerows. Celandine would burst through in the meadow down by the river, the first cuckoo heard on a walk if she was lucky. The garden demanded more of her now and she was happy to spend long hours in the vegetable plots and potting shed before getting ready for work.

Last night she had cleaned the violin. She told herself it should be sold, that it served no purpose to keep things with little sentimental or practical value in such times. There was a shop in town Aiden had told her about, who would give her a fair price, especially if she mentioned his name. It had been a way to raise the subject with him, that she possessed such a thing and had once harboured musical ambition. She had hoped he might ask her to elaborate, perhaps even encourage the instrument's resurrection, but he'd merely gone along with her strategy for its disposal. Removing the violin from its leather case she had placed it beneath her chin, drawing the bow slowly across its strings in a discordant gesture. More than ever, even than when she'd been given it as a teenager, she longed to produce a series of notes, rich and soothing, a melody that filled the space around her with an edifying flourish. She thought about tuning it, though even how to do this much had been forgotten. Wiping the instrument down with a cloth, she had replaced it in the case, returning it to the cupboard beneath the stairs.

The children's breakfast things cleared, she thought about her daughter, hoping Jenny was thwarting the worst of the bullying. Friends from primary school had apparently rallied around her, but the transition to the comprehensive several miles away had gone badly. Mary could still recall the cruelty of children from her own school days, how momentum could build against the weak, those who differed, until the bullying became ingrained, part of each day. Jenny had been stoical in the first few weeks, the name-calling attributed to one or two unpleasant children, Mary assuring her they would soon tire of it. Teachers acknowledged she had come in for a fair share of teasing, but assumed it would settle down as new friendships formed, her appearance eventually regarded as unexceptional. It was also clear, in the absence of specific complaints against another pupil, they were powerless to tackle it, fearful vague intervention would only make things worse for Jenny. Although there'd been no repeat of coming home bleeding, Mary had noticed small shifts in her daughter's behaviour and mood. Her posture was of some crestfallen creature, her shoulders slumped, her head bowed much of the time. Her voice had thinned to an apologetic whisper and she'd taken to following Mary around in the evenings, wrapping herself around her mother as she had as a toddler. Nothing of substance could be extracted from her, other than a gang who'd honed in on her, who'd decided to make her life miserable for now. Mary spoke with little optimism to Richard about it and, despite his silence on the matter, some aspect of their daughter's turmoil permeated him, his eyes emerging briefly from indifference into quiet rage. Next week she would make another appointment, this time with the headmaster, insisting more was done.

As she made some tea to take out to the barn, Mary noticed her daughter's school shoes beneath the kitchen table, likely kicked off at dinner last night, and she wondered what Jenny had worn instead, whether she'd get in trouble.

Sunlight slanted across the interior of the barn in vaporous shafts, dust eddying through them. In the corner he was planing one of the uprights for the door frame, whistling a familiar tune as he scrutinised the wood. She put their tea down, watched as peels of pine spiralled to the floor around him, his forearms shifting back and forth like calibrated pistons. Hair curled out from under his woollen hat, the golden tones muted until sunlight picked them out, bringing them to life. There was a simplicity found here, a realm untouched by the onerous reality beyond these walls. The day would begin with a plan of what he hoped to achieve, what she could do around him. Sometimes she'd head into town to pick up materials he'd forgotten or had not anticipated needing, resentful of the time away. In recent weeks she'd taken to baking a cake on Tuesday mornings, slices of which accompanied their second cup of tea. They'd work side by side, sometimes chatting, other times in a comfortable silence. Around midday they'd survey the progress or lack of it, before he'd pack up the tools and she'd get ready for work, counting down the days until the following week.

He took some sandpaper and began to smooth the timber. Blowing away the sawdust, he felt along the edge of the wood with his fingers, satisfied with its shape and texture. She gave a little cough to announce herself and he looked at his watch before giving a mock tut.

'I was going to dock your wages if you were any later,' he said.

She smiled and walked over to inspect the frame. She wanted to make a joke in return, something about him cutting the wood the wrong size or how there had been a change in the room plan, that he would have to start all over again, but the words wouldn't form in time.

Again the smell of him found her, some combination of sweat, wood smoke and aftershave, subtle yet intoxicating. Last night she'd imagined being in here, laying her face in his chest and breathing in this scent, getting lost in its glorious bouquet. In this scene his fingers, the ones she'd watched dancing on the guitar, had combed her hair, before navigating to the small of her back where he'd lifted her dress, placing his palm against her skin, pulling her in. Moving her head back he'd kissed her greedily, sunlight warming their bodies as they undressed.

It both shocked and thrilled her, this newfound capacity for fantasy that had waited until her late thirties to emerge. When she'd met her husband at the end of her teens, there was as much fear as anything else when they first made love, a panic that she would do the wrong thing or not be good enough. Pleasure was found, not in her own bodily delight, but in the performance she'd given, knowing that were she desirable he would likely remain keen. In that time a crush manifested entirely in her head, still as obsessive thoughts, but ones with little corporeal relevance. Now her body pulsed with a new longing, and at night, when she was certain her husband's pills were deep in his veins, she would touch herself to some version of the scene in the barn.

There had been guilt initially, the thoughts unsolicited, but this faded with each day her husband looked at her with empty or contemptible eyes, his inertia mitigation for an imagined infidelity, if nothing else. Resentment, too, played a part.

She was now not only the main bread winner, but responsible for all the family's needs, be they physical or emotional. Stephen had his O-levels fast approaching, a career to think about. Her daughter's problems at school were hers alone to tackle. And hanging above all this, the threatening debt, the life she'd imagined for them more preposterous by the day.

All this burden needed an outlet, the playing out of a fantastical encounter at least enough for now. There was no serious consideration of a life apart from her husband, not in any real sense, for how would such a thing occur, the man as good as an invalid in her care.

They worked side by side for the next couple of hours, Aiden making small adjustments to the door frame, while she passed him tools, held the wood in place as he fixed it to the stone. There was no sense he harboured similar thoughts, the jocular behaviour she'd seen as flirtatious, probably reserved for everyone. And yet what could you really know of the thoughts that passed behind a person's eyes?

He was talking about Dublin again. Of its medieval streets, narrow and cobbled, of writing songs as a teenager on the banks of the Liffey, lights shimmering beneath the arches. Of the smoky bars he'd sat in with friends. She wondered how else this could be prolonged, once the work was finished, whether the larger barn might be tackled if their finances improved. She had considered going to see him play once he'd spoken of an upcoming venue, but she would look ridiculous, sitting there on her own like some ageing groupie. And if she sought him out afterwards, hung around as he packed up his gear, gossip would rise like sap until it reached the whole town.

Mary thought about his wife, wondering what she looked like, how old she was. She pictured a plain woman, a little frumpy perhaps, her once desirable figure plundered. She'd asked Stephen about her once, careful to sound indifferent, but her son was an age where all adults blended into one, their appearance of little consequence to him. It pleased her he'd started a romantic involvement of his own, a girl at school he'd brought to Highfield a couple of times, Stephen briefly introducing her as they scuttled up to his room.

A little after noon they finished for the day. She helped him clear his tools away, hopeful some small sign of reciprocation would occur if their eyes met. Again the banter, the teasing her, and she laughed more than she meant to, as a girl nervous on a first date night. She picked up the spirit level and performed a few mock stabs into his belly, insisting he surrender.

For a moment she thought the smile falling from his face was emblematic of a gathering feeling on his behalf, the intensity a culmination of the months spent in here together, his own feelings finally beyond denial. She looked hard at him, eventually following his stare to the door in the far wall, where Richard stood watching them, the dog by his side.

PART THREE

Summer, 1982

16

He could see the dog now, sitting obediently by her side on the platform. Something in the animal's ignorance – both of his return and of all he'd seen – lifted his spirits for the first time in ages and he longed for its undemanding company. He had phoned Mary from the barracks last night, their exchange, to his relief, absent of emotion. Did he want her to drive up and collect him? There was no need, he'd said, the station was fine. It was agreed Jenny and Stephen should go to school, leaving Highfield quiet for a few hours on his return. They would break up for the summer holidays soon, she reminded him, a chance to spend some time together as a family, perhaps a trip to the coast.

'Are you alright?' she'd said finally.

There would be much for him to do to the house over the summer. He tried to picture its rooms, this place that became their home last year, the images grainy, as if he'd been away longer than a few months. There was the main gate that had to be lifted to open, the front door that became stuck in winter, the large hallway that had smelled so richly of shoe polish and pipe tobacco when they moved in. But beyond this, much of the detail inside took effort to recall, his mind somehow confusing it with their old home in the town. He remembered the steep path that led up into the woods behind the house, how last winter they'd negotiated it in the snow, laughing as each of them slid into one another, their arms linked like tethered mountaineers. And, at the top, how his daughter had thrown snowballs at Shane, the animal confused as they powdered to nothing in its mouth. It felt important to

heighten these scenes, to etch them deeply enough into the strata of his memory so that time could not overlay them. And yet already the mechanism allowing this seemed defective, the procedure beyond him.

The train eased to a standstill, the squeal of its brakes seeming more strident each time since leaving the barracks. He let the family opposite get up first, the boy who'd stared at him for much of the journey unable to resist a final gawp and, on reaching the doors, a quick protrusion of his tongue. The carriage empty he realised Mary was standing beyond the window, her face fixed between curiosity and apprehension as she peered in, perhaps thinking he wasn't on board. Leaning forward to reveal himself, he caught his reflection in the dirt-encrusted glass, his beard more profuse than he'd thought, and for a moment his face appeared as if it resided on his wife's head, the image both faintly comic and grotesque. Adjusting slightly, so that they could see each other clearly, he looked at her as someone might a stranger, observing a smile of sorts forming on her face. Reaching for his luggage he made his way along the aisle, civvy street a few steps away.

They should only have had him for another few days. The end of an unremarkable career, his heart never really in the job, built as he probably was for something else. And yet this new life that beckoned, that he could almost touch, had been postponed – by a few days, a few months, no one knew. As they loaded up buses for the long journey to the ports of the south, he'd consoled himself with the knowledge that giving his notice in a week earlier would have made no difference. They'd have still called him back, as they had those on leave, the rules changing in such times. It was in the small print: they owned you.

Amassing their equipment, much of it proved to be faulty and had to be replaced, but still it had taken less than two days to prepare the entire Battery, something they'd trained for without ever thinking it would be necessary. There had been time for a quick call home, a queue of men delivering unwelcome news to loved ones, the mood with a volition of its own. Answering the phone, his wife's voice had been distant, quietly anxious, the radio already carrying the events that were unfolding. He thought she might make some plea for him to refuse to go – to take whatever punishment this resulted in, that he'd done his final year – but she'd sounded resigned to the matter. He told her it would likely come to nothing, that some small posturing would see it called off, a climbdown, diplomacy triumphant.

She had called the children down. Stephen was rushing out, to meet a friend down by the river, his frustration at being held up barely hidden. It was always hard to know what to say to his son these days, the passage through adolescence making their conversations tentative. There'd been a time when the two of them spent whole days together, before the move to Highfield, assembling models of the great ships at weekends, building a miniature steam engine in the garage, his return on leave still a source of jubilation. In those days Stephen tried his best to remain aloof with him for an hour or two, both at the start and end of Richard's time at home, as if withholding some aspect of himself, perhaps a mixture of distress and resentment that he was unable to express another way. It was as if his son had to forgive him each time for the betrayal of leaving them all. But it quickly dispersed, a contrived sulk breaking into reluctant laughter as they play fought, Richard tickling the boy until his resolve fell away. In a couple of years he hoped to teach his son to drive in the Morris.

By contrast his daughter still erupted with joy when he arrived home, her tearful episodes as he packed to leave upsetting. For all the attachments he and his wife had with their children based on shared gender, a deep bond had emerged between himself and Jenny. Away on exercise, he'd missed Stephen's birth, and so his daughter's arrival had drawn from him an emotional intensity the like of which he'd not known. From the moment the midwife handed Jenny to him, her bloodied head resting on his chest, to those first few days with her at home, he would watch for hours this miraculous and delicate thing Mary had given them, terrified her breathing might cease, her heart would stop. As if to confirm her exception, the side of his daughter's face was adorned with a brilliant maroon smudge.

Jenny had snivelled on the phone as he told her he wasn't going to be home this weekend after all, that work, the people who told him what to do, meant he had to stay away for longer.

'When will you be home?' she'd asked, her voice fracturing.

'I don't know, darling. Soon.'

Mary had then told him not to take any risks, that she loved him.

'Look after Shane,' he'd said.

As the bus had pulled out of the barracks, heading for the docks in Plymouth, the thing that struck him most was how nobody had heard of the place. A group of islands on the other side of the world that apparently were British – some far-flung colonial outpost, he assumed – had been invaded and it was their task to take them back. All the training, the preparation: few had believed it would be needed beyond the streets of Belfast.

Their role was one of air defence, his unit of the Royal Artillery charged with protecting the task force from enemy attacks from the sky. Rapier missiles were fired from a static surface-to-air launcher that they took turns manning. Once there the unit would be airlifted to land, where they'd dig in and set up, camouflaging themselves as best they could. Potential targets were picked up on the system's radar, the tracker head and missiles swivelling automatically. He would then locate the enemy aircraft in the optical sights once it was close enough, keeping it in the crosshairs. When the target was in range and had been confirmed by the system as belonging to the enemy, the order to fire would come. The missile, once in the air, could then be steered towards the plane using a joystick, although the absence of a proximity fuse meant the missile had to hit its target in order to destroy it. It was a complex, temperamental piece of equipment, prone to developing faults, but its manoeuvrability and fast reaction time gave it a formidable reputation.

Known as long-range snipers, there were seven of them to a system, each unit containing a sergeant, a bombardier, a lance-bombardier such as himself, and four gunners. In theory they would see little in the way of hand-to-hand combat, though were trained for this if attacked.

Their sergeant, Taylor, was a fair man, a soldier's soldier, who earned most people's respect. He knew of Richard's difficulties, his reasons for transferring to the RA, and had taken him to one side during his first week with the unit. Assurances were given, that he didn't tolerate bullying, that Richard would be starting again afresh. The others in the unit were cooler with him at first, keeping their distance, getting on with the job, but despite the fact he was due to leave that week, he felt they regarded him with some fondness.

None of them had had much practice at live firing the Rapier, the cost of missiles meaning it occurred annually, usually in the Outer Hebrides. A couple of the gunners in his unit were still youngsters, a year or two out of basic training, keen to get stuck in, their enthusiasm thus far undiminished by active service, a stint in Dortmund their only taste of army life. He tried to recall the early part of his own career. Of leaving school without the first clue as to who he was, what he might do, despite his father's own military service. Friends had moved on to apprenticeships, one or two to college, or into the family business. But despite loathing his father's insistence that the forces would be the making of him, he found himself enlisting after a visit to the army careers office.

That he'd always had high levels of fitness served him well, as he kept his head down, did as he was told. He enjoyed the physical challenge, exercises that pushed you to your limit, showed you could do more than you thought. But the endless drills and inspections, the inane, menial tasks, the punishment beatings and blind obedience wore him down in those first years. Twice he had to be persuaded not to leave by a sympathetic major, who, on each occasion, suggested he give it another twelve months, that everyone found it difficult initially.

Then came a marriage, fatherhood early in his twenties. Army life got a little easier, though by then he'd achieved a reputation as something of a loner, a man who did his job but who was unlike the others. He accepted this was deserved: a preference for his own company in the evenings, the books he read, the interest he took in wildlife and birds on exercises, understandably alienating him.

But whereas in those early days most around him grew to accept his strangeness, perhaps referencing it only in banter, one private took exception to it,

never failing to express his antipathy of Richard. Initially this took the form of a general coldness towards him, an exclusion during conversations, a contemptuous glare that lingered a second or two. Later, though, while others joked about his unsuitability as a soldier, this man would go beyond the wearisome teasing, always having a final sentence that was both condemning and vitriolic. For him perceived weakness in any of them reflected badly on the unit, tarnishing it in the eyes of others. There was no place in the army for difference: you pulled in the same direction, held the same beliefs. Assimilation and homogeneity. Mavericks, eccentrics, individuals harmed the cause, which was to think and act as one. They were a mechanism that operated through its harmony, its cogs in perfect synchronicity. It was true what they said about the army: how you were stripped down, broken almost, then rebuilt in their mould. It was the only way such institutions could function successfully. All of this he understood. And he had conformed where possible, trying to fit in, laughing at the same things; there was nothing to be gained from life on the periphery. But the best he could manage was to perform his duties, with neither excellence nor incompetence, and withdraw into himself when their time was their own. And it was this disinclination to give every part of himself, the social as well as the professional, that particularly affronted some. Diversity was a source of suspicion, the rationale being you were training to reach a point where you trusted those around you with your life. The decisions you took – if one day they were made in the theatre of war and not on some Welsh hillside – could determine the fate of others. And so men needed to know how you worked, the machinations of your mind and whether it would be both consistent and reliable. Doubt was the enemy. When a soldier behaved not from instinct and

instruction, but began harbouring misgivings, thoughts that could lead to hesitation, they became a liability, a threat to the mission. More so than those you were fighting. This, too, he accepted. At least in theory, because he could do the job, he could execute the skills taught him. But somehow he remained an outsider, access to the fraternal realms of army life beyond him. And this made him, to one soldier in particular, a source of revulsion.

Alone with this man on exercise, Richard had tried to make conversation, hopeful the hostility would expend itself eventually, an acceptance making both their lives more tolerable. But it proved to be another misjudgement, the clash that followed seeing Richard's head forced back against the trunk of a tree, the man's face pushed into his own, telling him to fuck off, that this life wasn't for him.

Following the incident his thoughts had turned again to his daughter and the birthmark that would ensure her own feeling of otherness. With her for life, this purple stain splayed across one quarter of her face would darken with age, finally resembling more the colour of port wine, as the mark was often termed. There was nothing hereditary to it, no rogue gene that had skipped a few generations; she was just unlucky. Friends became used to it, but each time life ushered in a new era for her – starting school, joining a club – they worried how she'd cope with the reactions. He knew it was impossible for people not to stare initially, and over the years Jenny had become used to this, often putting them at ease with some witty acknowledgement, or even getting her retort in first, before any scrutiny occurred. She deflected people's own embarrassment by immediately drawing attention to her face, allowing them to move on. But starting secondary school later this year would

probably yield fresh challenges for her, new audiences to overcome, some whose resistance would endure regardless.

As the bus travelled south at the start of April there had been Union Jacks everywhere, unfurled from windows, draped across road signs. Motorists sounded their horns as they passed. People stopped what they were doing and waved excitedly. A woman lifted her sweater and pressed her breasts against the passenger window, the men in the car cheering. It had felt strange to be regarded heroic without having done anything. Still the consensus had been they would be heading back north in a day or two, his new life only briefly stalled.

They spent that night in a couple of the city's pubs, where locals queued up to buy them drinks, to slap their backs. A young woman staggered from her group of friends and kissed everyone in Richard's unit, a suggestive wink perhaps intended to sustain them. Songs were bellowed out, then chants for the local football team that they were encouraged to join in with. Armchair warriors tagged along, the rhetoric now bellicose, of how they'd love to come too and help annihilate the enemy if only circumstance allowed. There seemed a general confusion as to who this enemy might be, the abuse aimed at South Americans in general.

Later, when he could bear it no longer, he had told Taylor he was heading back to the barracks, but instead walked up to the Hoe, where he sat and smoked, watching the lights shimmer in the Sound, the occasional gull gliding by.

Seeing him on the platform the dog was unsure at first, sensing that the man approaching them was of significance, yet unable to recognise Richard. Finally something shifted in the animal's brain and it lunged forward, Mary barely able to

keep hold of the lead, and the three of them met as the train began to pull away. Once Shane had calmed a little his wife held him properly, the sensation not unwelcome, yet not as he'd imagined it either. He offered to drive back but she ignored him, instead conveying how much they'd all missed him.

As the road narrowed into country lanes he relaxed a little, Mary's voice soothing him as he focused on its timbre if not her words. He watched a distant bird drift high above them, before losing it to the glare of the midday sun. Finally, as they settled into silence, the perfumes of an English summer filled the car and for a moment he thought he might fall asleep for the first time in days.

17

Something about the noise made him want to join the dog beneath the table. It was inconsequential in comparison to the thunder of war, yet the music from the juke box, laced with the chatter around him, thrummed inside his head like a series of explosions. It had been harder to get drunk lately; the steady line of pints now accumulating in front of him barely registered as he quaffed them in good time, each one sobering him further. Whenever there were more empty glasses than full, another drink was placed down, as if he was the final component in a production line.

He supposed the children were next door, Mary flitting between the rooms, ignoring requests from the men at the bar to dance. Earlier they'd come home from school, Stephen a little wary on seeing him, his sister alternating between elation and tears as she flung her arms around him, telling him he mustn't go away again. After holding back for a moment or two, his son joined them, their three-way embrace ungainly but intense.

He didn't have to attend tonight, his wife had told him, that it was nothing to do with her, the gathering organised by some well-meaning busybodies, Richard being the only soldier to honour the town in the recent conflict. She could phone the pub, tell them he wasn't up to it, feign injury or illness. In the end it had seemed less fuss to walk down there for an hour or two, and so after some steak for dinner they had set off across the field.

Standing to go to the toilet he saw Mary and the children in the other bar, his wife talking to someone tuning a guitar. It upset him how she couldn't see men flirting with her, or if she did, how she was able to dismiss it as harmless fun, ignorant of their true agenda. How had she repelled it in the months of his absence, when the temptation to reciprocate was at its greatest?

Watching his piss flow slowly along the base of the urinal, he fought hard to dull the clarity of the images gathering in his mind.

The ship loaded, they had slipped away at dusk, a low-key departure with a handful of dock workers looking on in the murk. There were accounts of other boats leaving with grandiose send-offs, thousands of locals lining the quayside, waving and shouting. The Paras left on the luxury liner, the *Canberra*; others, such as the Scots Guards, sailed on the *QE2*. In contrast, his unit were heading to the other side of the world on the civilian-manned *Sir Geraint*, a rusting hulk that re-supplied warships at sea or transported army units and their equipment. Conditions were cramped, with more than five hundred men plus all their stores on-board and little space for personal items beyond the essentials. What little privacy there was could only be achieved when you hung a towel from the top of your bunk, cocooning yourself in a coffin-sized recess. But morale seemed high for the most part, many of the men excited by the prospect of something other than endless drills and exercises, as if they were fire fighters on route to their first real blaze.

The tedium of life at sea soon made itself known, a routine that varied little. You queued to wash and shave. You cleaned the mess deck before the Captain's inspection. There was some Commando-led training on how to cope with the cold,

what to do in the event of hypothermia. Briefings were given on the kind of terrain they would have to negotiate. Someone taught Morse code; in return he went through the basics of aircraft recognition. The Rapier system should have made this superfluous, designed as it was to identify potential targets as friendly or otherwise using coded radio signals. But the potential for mistakes still existed, so visual recognition was a necessary back-up.

Within a couple of days he began to feel an intense loneliness, more than the normal feelings of being away from home, the injustice of his presence keenly felt. Others seemed to find a sense of freedom seeing water for mile upon mile in all directions, but he found the vastness, the absence of anything save an occasional seabird in the distance, disorientating. Even then many thought it only a matter of time before the whole thing was called off, the ship turned around. But the further they sailed, the more unlikely this seemed.

He thought of home a lot in those early days, their new life on hold. Picturing Highfield the day they'd first looked at the house, he remembered wandering around it, the four of them, realising the work that was needed, his wife's vision at odds with what stood before them. They'd gone away and worked out the finances, which didn't add up, even if the bank lent them a large amount.

He'd have been happy to stay where they were, their life uncomplicated, without risk. But Mary pushed and pushed, tweaking the numbers until the shortfall appeared manageable, her enthusiasm gaining an air of obsession. She used the children's excitement to win him around, a three-way campaign launched each time he returned home, until finally he yielded. It was easy to feel overwhelmed by it all, the scale of things clearly beyond two people. He hoped Stephen could help out in

the school holidays, Jenny too in a few years if necessary. For now, though, according to his wife, they would concentrate on producing as much of their own food as possible. They would throw away less, recycle what could be used again. An adventure, Mary kept calling it.

He wondered what work he might do. There'd been an interview lined up, with an engineering firm based out of town; perhaps they'd keep the job open until he returned. There were other skills, gleaned from almost two decades' service, knowledge gained that somehow didn't lend itself to an obvious career but which surely had its demand. He just knew he could no longer do this, the aggression, the deference. And yet here he was, on a boat, heading to the South Atlantic, to fight for somewhere nobody knew about.

He'd heard of those who left the military, who couldn't cope on the outside, much like prisoners, he supposed, who needed the routine of an institution, their choices made for them. To them the real world loomed like some vast realm with endless possibilities, where rules were complex and ambiguous. Where life had once been predictable, it suddenly brimmed with doubt and uncertainty. Men often signed back up within months of leaving, this world the only one they could endure. Perhaps the order and discipline ensnared you so that deviation eventually became impossible.

Once they hit the Bay of Biscay the weather worsened. Waves rose in giant swells now, the ship rising and falling in a slow and endless bucking motion, its decks heaving with each lurch. He pictured his father, a proud and obdurate Royal Navy man, laughing at his landlubber son, green with nausea, already homesick. There were injections given, for the vomiting, but they had little effect and it felt as if he

would turn himself inside out. Given the choice, he'd have curled up in his bunk, closed his eyes, but they just had to get on with it.

The first real inkling many of them had of it being more than just an extended exercise was when Taylor handed out wills to those who hadn't made them. You could see it in men's eyes, a focusing of the mind, a small sense of what was now happening.

As they neared the equator and the weather turned warmer, the ship had succumbed to the permanent stench of sweat, what fresh water they could carry rationed to allow minimal washing but little else. A few lads were badly sunburnt, their punishment the docking of several days' pay. Those who'd burned their backs were made to leap-frog each other again and again, the spectacle both comic and pitiable.

Evenings were spent mostly in the canteen, drinking their ration of beer, playing cards, smoking. A few of them had radios and kept in touch with news back home, though this was discouraged for fear of homesickness. Others watched the porn that was shown, something he was neither drawn to nor repulsed by, his indifference further evidence to them of his estrangement.

'Hey, Briggs, come and watch this. Make you a real man.'

Occasional fights broke out between units, the boredom, the claustrophobia causing tempers to flare from nothing, as they might among dogs cooped up in a kennel. They were told a couple of drunken Commandos, arguing with a sergeant major, had thrown him overboard. Arrested and charged with mutiny, they were flown home to a military jail.

As they headed ever southward the atmosphere on board shifted. Their training was upped, with endless exercises, running around on deck in the blistering sun, mile after mile, the perpetual stamping of boots an ambient pulse as if the ship itself were alive. Everywhere he looked, there was nothing but horizon, the sea spilling away over the earth's edge, and he thought how they could be the last people on the planet. At night he would gaze upwards, trying to discern some of the great constellations strewn across the sky, the stars' ancient light seeming to possess some great sorrow.

Weapons skills and first aid were practised, more sessions given on aircraft recognition. They were reminded of the rules of the Geneva Convention, how they should treat prisoners, how they in turn should behave upon capture. Personal items – letters, photos of loved ones, anything that could be used against them – were to be left behind, though most, he included, would ignore this. The realization that war now loomed, that this wasn't some elaborate exercise, could be seen on the faces of the younger ones. Those who'd barely had time for a stint across the Irish Sea. Hints of what lay in their minds, the first signs of doubt some had felt, was betrayed by their eyes. Others, the more seasoned or just unhinged, gave nothing away; they were ready for whatever was to come. His own apprehension, now that he too felt this to be real, manifested in its own quiet way, withdrawing as he did even further from those around him. Again he felt resentment that he was here, of what he would be asked to do. And what would his reaction be during that first contact, when the posturing and politics came down to men killing each other? Would his training carry him through it or would he wither and freeze, his true nature emerging?

Taylor told them they should write letters home if they wanted to, that the words should be chosen carefully, in case they were their last. He tried writing to Mary and the children but couldn't find the sentences to match his thoughts. The distance seemed unfathomable, as if they existed in another time. In the end he wrote only to his wife, dryly cataloguing the aspects of his days that they were allowed to discuss. He asked her about the garden, what else she'd planted in his absence, whether Shane was alright. He spoke of going away when he returned, of a weekend somewhere, asking her parents to come and stay with the children. He said that he loved them all.

In the days to come they received two pieces of news, one that bolstered morale, one that saw it ebb. One of their submarines had torpedoed the Argentine flagship, *General Belgrano*. Cheers went up, soon muted by the act's confirmation that attempts at diplomacy were now redundant. And then the news that their own ship, *HMS Sheffield*, had been destroyed by an Exocet missile, killing twenty two sailors.

After weeks at sea, they were finally nearing the Islands. Occasionally, an iceberg slid by them now, sombre and imperious. Flotillas of penguins bobbed comically in the swell. An albatross flanked the ship for a few miles, perhaps in hope of something edible being jettisoned, and he recalled the curse of a poem his father used to read to him as a boy.

Later Taylor called them together below deck to announce the call sign and go through the landing plan. When the ground had been cleared, they were to be taken by helicopter to San Carlos, on the west side of East Falkland. Once ashore

they'd dig in and provide air cover for the ships in the bay, which would be the target of the Argentine Mirages and Skyhawks.

That evening there was a church service held, its attendance a matter of personal choice. A few of the men headed to the temporary chapel, a mess room on the far side of the ship, while he stayed on his bunk polishing his boots.

They checked their equipment in near silence as the ship was prepared for battle, its hatches sealed, the red emergency lighting faintly luminous. He lay awake on his bunk the entire night, listening to the sounds of the *Geraint* as it idled into position, waiting for the air attack that would surely come.

At home the dog followed him upstairs, waiting outside the bathroom. The whisky had been a bad idea on top of so much beer, but at least he might sleep some. Back on the landing light bled from under Stephen's door and Richard stood there for a moment, wondering how his son had grown up so quickly, how Jenny too had been an infant barely any time ago. The photographs he had of them, that he looked at whenever there'd been a lull in fighting and he was alone, were several years old now, yet it was these images he saw whenever he thought of his children since returning home, his mind choosing to suspend their development.

It was a relief to be back at Highfield, away from the clamour of the Woodman's, where every noise, every fragment of conversation had amplified in his head like some speeded up sequence in a nightmare. Why had they wanted him there? To celebrate his return, his glorious war? To feel righteous?

Mary was undressing in the quarter-light, the room still heady with the scent of a summer's evening. His eyes followed her silhouette as it shifted towards the bed

and he wondered whether she too felt this awkwardness. He'd thought of this moment for so long, craving it so intensely on those desperate, lonely nights that it had become almost sacred, the memory of it wielding more power than the reality now he was home. Even in the pub earlier, when they were surrounded by idiots staring at Mary's legs and the urge had risen to push his glass into one of their faces, he knew he wouldn't be able to hold his wife tonight, let alone make love to her.

18

He gave his son the gun to hold. Already the trees were shedding their leaves, the early-autumn sun weaker as it edged over distant fields. He let the dog run free for now, calling him in every few minutes with a single whistle. Despite Stephen filling out a little in the last year, he was unable to break the air rifle's barrel and so they settled for him loading and closing it. It felt good to be up here, especially at this hour when the chances of running into anyone were almost nil. Within a minute's walk from the house everything became still, the only sounds those secreted by the woods themselves. Last year, negotiating a price for logs, the farmer had told him about a pair of peregrine falcons that wintered here, how you could catch a glimpse of them if you were patient and fortune was with you.

They walked on in silence, passing through wedges of mellow sunlight, the ground mulching underfoot. Breaking cover from the trees he called Shane to heel and they crouched low in one of the furrows, watching the rabbit up ahead as it grazed. He could sense his son's unease, that the boy had no instinct for it. Perhaps the familial custom of entering the forces would end with him. In the meantime it was important for Stephen to see the damage even a pellet could do, and so with orders whispered into his son's ear, he told him to take aim.

He was woken by the shouting. An NCO barked orders to collect their ammunition, to do it quickly. For a moment he forgot where he was, the half-light offering few clues. He had dreamt of Salisbury Plain, of an exercise going wrong, of soldiers being

gassed by their own side, turning their guns on each other as he ran away, hiding from Taylor who was ordering Richard to shoot himself. Finally, he'd fallen into some quicksand, his submergence slow but inexorable.

As he made his way along the passage, someone remarked that it was a beautiful day for a war and for a moment he thought he might be sick. They gathered their ammunition and helmets, together with some field dressings and morphine. Again they were told about removing all personal items.

And then there was a lull. More waiting, listening to the sounds around them, the moan of the ship's bowels. Outside it was still dark, a slither of moon hanging above them in a tilted smile as the ship edged into position, cutting through the gentle swell at a steady eleven knots. Nobody knew what would be waiting for them, though they'd been told things looked quiet.

Up on deck he got his first view of East Falkland, its silhouetted hills rising from the calm waters of the sound as dawn broke behind him. Ahead, over the island, the last stars shimmered, the pale sky crystalline.

The order came to get to the galley for breakfast, their last fresh meal for a while, they knew. He forced it down, the nausea rising all the time, before heading back to his bunk. He cleaned his rifle again, stripping it down, reassembling it while trying to ignore the tremor in his hand. An hour later someone came in and told them one of their Sea Kings had ditched on a flight between ships, its crew of eighteen dead.

Returning to the deck to witness the dawn, he saw dozens of their vessels had gathered around them. Helicopters flew overhead, Harriers screeched by,

searching for enemy positions. Gunfire could be heard in the distance, the occasional explosion reaching them as an innocuous, faint rumble.

He watched the youngsters taking it all in, this convergence of an armada, gathered so far from home. This spectacle of war amassing around them. He felt it too: that nothing here could stand up to this. That perhaps their encroachment had been witnessed, from hilltops, from a reconnaissance plane high above them, whoever was here now long fled.

When the clatter of machine-gun fire came, it was still barely a surprise. A Pucara fighter appeared from behind them, its fuselage lit magnesium white by the morning sun. Coming in low, it fired several rockets at the *Argonaut*, before banking hard to attack the *Canberra*, missing on both occasions. Fire was returned from a frigate to the west of them, the shells streaking through the air until the lone pilot was shot down, water erupting as the plane crashed into the sound and, after some cheers, the near-calmness returned.

Their lift-off times were chalked on a board and finally they were taken to shore, the Sea King skimming just a few metres above the water towards the island, the cold, brackish air now replaced by the heat of the helicopter's engines and the fug of aviation fuel. The rhythmic *wap-wap* of the rotor blades was hypnotic and he wished he could just sit there forever, despite the prospect of a missile scything into them at any time. Beside him the door gunner scanned the horizon for enemy aircraft. When their eyes met briefly, Richard half-smiled, trying to convey a sense of shared incredulity to the madness they found themselves amid, but the man's face remained impassive.

The Sea King then banked hard to the right, the g-force pressing him down as if some great weight had been thrust on him, his body no longer his own. Although they had been told there would be no resistance on this side of the island, it still seemed ridiculous to be landing in daylight.

A minute later they touched down on a flat piece of ground that overlooked the bay. Climbing out he expected a volley of gunfire, an attack of some sort despite what had been said, but nothing came. They set about forming a defensive position until the Sea King was airborne, returning to the ship for their equipment.

As they waited in the freezing air for the launcher and missiles to be brought over, they began digging into the peaty earth, the ground black and sodden, their holes filling in as quickly as they made them. Again it struck him how exposed they were, perched on the side of a bluff in sharp relief. In training there had always been an abundance of vegetation to use as cover, to hide themselves and the system. But looking around they saw there wasn't a single tree, the barren, featureless ground leaving them reliant on their netting to blend in. In reality, he knew they wouldn't be targeted particularly, the enemy planes, having flown so far from the mainland, seeking more substantial quarry.

As they worked, his thoughts turned once more to home, of the woods above Highfield, rich with elm and ash, marking the seasons absolutely, the trees softening the wind to a whisper, filtering the sun's blaze so that it mottled the earth. And in winter, when the cold clung to everything and ice tapered like bones from the branches, there was still comfort to be found there. The woods cocooned you in their own rhythm, embracing you, your senses mollified by their ancient splendour. But there was something ghostly about this landscape he now looked out on, with its

frail sun offering little warmth, the light a sickly grey as it bled onto mile after mile of colourless scrub.

Pausing he looked out beyond the tumult in the sound, searching the sky for life, but could see nothing other than a gull a mile or so out to sea, the inception of war perhaps displacing the natural order. What resources could such a land yield, he wondered. What exactly was it they were fighting for so far from home?

Taylor, perhaps sensing his reverie, snapped at them to work faster. Over the next hour the Sea King returned several times, their supply vehicle and missiles slung beneath it in cargo nets like a stork carrying a baby. They were given their food supplies plus extra small arms ammunition. Finally, with the trench for the Rapier's cables dug, they worked quickly to make the system operational.

He heard the plane before he saw it, its jet engine screaming along the valley behind them like a banshee, the roar serrated and sickening. Fear pulsed through him as it approached and he froze momentarily, forgetting drills as if they'd never been learned. A couple of the others ran into one another, slipping in the mud, their shouts lost to the incoming thunder. Anti-aircraft fire went up in staccato bursts from the hill next to them, from those who'd managed to set up. Then the ships in the sound opened up their guns, filling the sky with ordnance.

He saw it then, hugging the contours of the land, scything through the air with unimaginable velocity, before it shot over them, its downdraft an intense sirocco, the guttural roar following behind.

And then it was over, the plane, with perhaps only enough fuel for one pass, disappearing around the headland, returning to the South American mainland. A silence of sorts returned and they finished setting up in a wordless efficiency.

They settled into a routine, each gunner taking turns with four-hour shifts in the operating seat of the Rapiere, while the others watched for enemy ground forces, unloaded missiles or prepared meals from their ration packs. Between this they would take turns to grab some rest, perhaps even a moment's sleep before the cold prodded them awake. He would do an occasional shift in the seat, but for now he manned the radio, checked the generator had enough petrol.

The cloud was low, his body becoming numb as wind blew the rain in horizontally up from the Antarctic Circle. His fears of damage to the system during transportation were born out, as the radar began developing faults, often failing to distinguish between enemy aircraft and their own helicopters. After speaking with Taylor the decision was made to turn it off, relying instead on visual recognition. This reduced the likelihood of mistakes being made but also dramatically lessened their reaction time, now down to just a few seconds.

As night crept in over the horizon, they would sit there, the seven of them, boots deep in freezing water, shivering, clutching their rifles, waiting for the alarm to sound, or for the enemy's special forces to sneak up on them, death perhaps a silent, barely acknowledged affair. These periods were the worst, thinking that the darkness would last forever, until, finally, a hem of light would appear along the horizon and he felt his breathing ease a little. On exercise in Northern Ireland, someone had once told him first light wasn't when you could make out the shape of things around you, it was when the brain could first determine something's colour.

Days blurred into one another now, time only meaningfully marked by finishing a shift on the Rapiere or lighting a hexi block to make a brew. The enemy air raids continued, their frequency increasing, the noise of one attack barely dying

down before the next began, so that it became the norm. They'd not shot anything down yet, the pilots' deft manoeuvres almost balletic as they sliced the air in glorious, streamlined arcs.

All the time the wind chill pushed the temperature below zero, sleet and rain hammering into them in relentless squalls. In the distance lines of their infantry could be seen trekking across the slopes like veins, and he felt some envy that at least they were moving.

Later, news came that some of their ships had been hit, increasing the pressure on the Rapier crews to protect them. Often, though, the enemy's bombs would fail to detonate, the terrain requiring their pilots to come in low and fast, the fuses denied enough time in the air to arm themselves. *HMS Ardent* had no such fortune, though, struck several times as she limped for cover, finally sinking the next day.

By this time the Argentines were also using retarded bombs, silent killers that parachuted slowly down around them, so that you saw death approaching, announcing itself in blithe descent. These, as well as the occasional stray shell from their own side, were never far away. It was mostly down to luck in the end.

During lulls, if he was sat in the Rapier, he would practise by tracking their own helicopters as they brought ammunition and stores ashore. Some days intelligence would filter through of a planned enemy attack, an audacious ground assault via a beach landing, and they'd steel themselves for hours, but it never came. He wondered how he would fare in any hand-to-hand fighting, when who you killed wasn't flying away from you at mach 2, unseen and faceless. When you could look into their eyes as you ran your bayonet through them. Or as they ran theirs into you.

Eventually, their air superiority showing, the attacks began to diminish, with enemy plane losses mounting. His unit still hadn't hit anything themselves but had perhaps done enough to spoil the planes' accuracy.

After a quiet few days the next attack came from the west, the guns from their ships below opening up before their unit could get anything away from the hillside. Skyhawks and Mirages screamed in, fast and low, some banking hard, using the hills as camouflage. By this point he had gained an admiration for their pilots, their outrageous flair and courage as they flew into great clouds of ordnance, pass after pass, gambling on having enough fuel to return home.

Two of his gunners had been flown out for supplies, the bad weather keeping them away for now, and so he was doing an extra shift in the seat to give the others a break. He tried to locate the planes in the tracker, his thumb steady on the joystick as they targeted the *Antelope*, sitting in the entrance to San Carlos Water. One plane was shot down by a Rapier missile launched further along the coast, its burning fuselage hitting the water after an arcing tumble. Another fell to a hail of cannon shells fired from the ship's deck, the plane crashing into its mast, before exploding. Although it had managed to get its bombs off first, neither had exploded.

Still he couldn't fix on anything, his own frustration mirrored in Taylor's face to the side of him.

Scores of enemy planes came in now, some below their position, unloading their bombs in breathtaking passes. Remarkably none of them exploded and although several small fires broke out on board the ships, they were quickly under

control. When finally the skies were quiet again, he slumped forward in the operating seat, incredulous that they'd taken no major loss.

They had settled down for the night when the noise tore up the hill like a train in a tunnel, a great wave of heat following it. More explosions came, immense bellows that resounded through him. Climbing from their trench they watched the sky turn red, realizing one of the unexploded bombs onboard the *Antelope* had gone off, starting a chain reaction with the ship's magazines. They stood there, staring in silence at the firework display before them, wondering how many men were on board. Throughout the night the ship glowed like a blacksmith's forge, the hills around them shimmering.

At first light they saw the extent of the damage, the frigate's shell peeled open like a tin can, its back broken. Word got through that the ship had been evacuated in time, the only casualty the poor bastard trying to defuse the bomb. Later that day the *Antelope* slipped below the water's surface as they looked on from the hillside.

The problems with the radar still vexed him. To add to this, the tracker head was now faulty, meaning that they had to physically turn it towards attacking aircraft.

The weather continued to pummel them, the bottom of their ditch permanently underwater. To compound this, their boots were horribly ineffective, water seeping into them, the risk of trench foot ever present. They heard of a soldier further along the coast deliberately soaking his foot until he had to be airlifted away, to have his sock surgically removed.

Generally, though, they felt things were tipping their way, that combat in the skies was nearing its end, the ground war looming. As he heated some water to rehydrate a vacuum-packed shepherd's pie, he thought of the meals Mary cooked when he was home, trying hard to evoke their flavour and smell. Of Jenny helping her bake on Sunday mornings, the house filled with the scent of pastry and cinnamon. The closest thing they'd come up with by way of a treat out here was to crumble an oatmeal block into some drinking chocolate, achieving a few seconds' decadence.

A day later the order came to move. They joined the Welsh Guards of 5 Brigade, who were being taken by boat round to Bluff Cove, closer to the capital, Stanley, to avoid the long march. They were to travel with them on the *Sir Galahad*, go ashore ahead of the Guardsmen, where, from their new position, they would provide them with cover as they waited to land.

It felt good to be moving, albeit closer to the main fighting. They boarded the ship, the Guardsmen eyeing them with suspicion at first, perhaps, in the absence of any head-dress, suspecting them of being special forces. They must have looked peculiar – dishevelled wretches, bearded and filthy, stinking of sweat. The warmth of the ship was welcome and he found a corner beneath some pipes before falling into an exhausted sleep.

19

Rationally, he knew the silvered thread splayed across the path to be gossamer, the dew-glistened filament of a spider, assembled since he was up here yesterday. And yet it was equally compelling to regard it as a trip wire, the enemy's cunningness disguising it so. Either way he walked carefully around it and continued on, vowing to stay off the paths from now on.

From its bark he could tell the dog was deep in the woods, ensuring any wildlife would be hunkered down, and he realised if he was to see either of the peregrines he'd have to leave the animal at home. The farmer had told him it was cold enough in the uplands to the north, that the birds could arrive any day now, returning to one of the ancient eyries. He had asked Mary to get him a book on falcons, and although he found its style overly-academic, a strong desire to catch a glimpse of them emerged.

For now he reasoned on spending at least half his waking hours up here, some of which without Shane. He would divide the wood's boundary into rough quadrants, working his way into the centre and then out again ninety degrees round, scanning each tall tree for movement before moving onto the next section. But his most likely sighting, according to the book, would be when the birds hunted, observing the fluster of their prey as it attempted to escape. If luck was with him he'd witness a kill, a wood pigeon or magpie plucked straight from the sky as the falcon scythed into it from above. For now he would scan the ground for half-eaten carcasses, signs the birds had returned. This surveillance would also allow him to

watch for anyone approaching the house through the woods, using the trees as cover.

Within an hour or so he reached the tree with the small hollow eight feet or so up its trunk, the bottle of whisky he kept there cool, still half-full. After taking a swig, feeling the burn deep in his throat, he scanned the foliage around him, listening hard for the clumsy footfall of a human, before returning the bottle to its hole. Sitting on a fallen bough he looked up to the sky, the tree-sifted wind heaving gently above him, the mid-afternoon light clean, glasslike. Despite his best efforts, raising the binoculars to his face still took him back to that other time.

There was a delay in the ship setting off, Port Pleasant their new destination, an inlet a few miles short of Bluff Cove, where the Welsh Guards would march the final hours to the capital.

Once they'd dropped anchor in one of the narrow channels, he went on deck. The damp squalls of recent days had passed, the sky for once perfectly clear and blue, the sea as calm as a boating lake. On the hills across the water, sheep grazed in the heather, gulls drifting on the breeze above them. Where the terrain sloped down to the water in crags, a pair of seals had broken the surface, their heads bobbing gently like silvered buoys. He thought how far away the conflict seemed for now, the only sound the lapping of the swell against the side of the boat.

Perhaps his war was almost over, an Argentine surrender ushering in a premature end. His contact with the enemy had been meagre, the true maelstrom of battle playing out elsewhere, his contribution sporadic, insignificant. That others, on both sides, had given their lives in the last few weeks felt beyond comprehension. It

was what you signed up for, the prospect of this eventuality – and for many this bestowed the profession with nobility, their being no higher honour than to breathe your last defending your country. But what did you know of such matters in your late teens, when deep down you believed you'd live forever? What did you know of the politics at play, the bureaucrats who sent people to die? Because that was it: you couldn't pick your battles, regarding some more worthy than others. Your life was worth as little or as much regardless of where or how you fell, whatever the cause.

Looking around now, the arena of combat tranquil, there was something absurd to it all, the idiocy of war, where monstrous acts were sanitised by lies, the old lie, of it being sweet and right to die this way.

Taylor wrenched him from his thoughts. 'Wake up, Briggs, we're out of here.'

He was keen to get off the ship, concerned at how vulnerable they were, sitting there on a boat in perfect visibility with no escort or anti-aircraft capability set up. There was some debate about whether they could just sail the extra distance, taking the Guardsmen on to Bluff Cove after all, that the march was unnecessary, but the decision was made to stay put. An hour later a Sea King took his unit the half-mile or so ashore, where they watched 2 Para preparing for the final push on Stanley.

As they dug in and set up, the problems with the Rapier persisted. He continued testing the system, making small adjustments, but he could now hear the fault tone in his headset, an intermittent knocking that meant nothing would launch immediately. Again he voiced his concerns to Taylor but was told to get on with it. They had what they had. An electrical engineer had been requested but none was nearby.

He looked through the optics at the *Galahad*, waiting in the still waters of the cove for hours now. Silence gathered around him, broken only by his smock whipping in the wind. Out at sea a gull arced beneath the weak sun and he tracked it in the sights, while the others made some food behind him. The mood among them had lifted now with the small change in scenery, sporadic bursts of laughter rising as if they were on exercise. There was an easiness among them, he realised, a connection that such living afforded. You ate and cooked together, slept and shat next to each other. You fought and died together. Even he felt less alienated for once, as if part of something beyond himself. You did this, the killing the being killed, not because you were ordered to, not for your country or those you loved at home. You did it for the people around you, your surrogate family, men you might avoid or even despise in other times. Your proximity to each other, that the person next to you might share your final minutes, meant a bond was hewn, one you succumbed to so that you didn't die alone.

He had barely shouted the alarm when the sickening roar of jet engines blasted by just thirty feet above them, the smell of kerosene thick and acrid in its downdraft. He could see the helmet of the lead pilot as the jet banked, the stencilled letters on its bombs' underbellies visible. Some of the Paras fired off rounds from rifles and machine guns in a futile gesture.

He focused on the lead jet, trying to keep it in the crosshairs as it streaked away.

'In cover,' he called out, his heart beating wildly.

'Engage,' came Taylor's response.

He pressed the fire button. Nothing. Just the *tap tap* in his ear of the system failing. He pressed it several times but still nothing. A few seconds later the lead jet dropped its 250kg bombs onto the *Galahad*, which exploded instantly. The second plane missed its target, but the third hit, before all three thundered away in steady climbs until they were just specks in the distance. The attack had lasted just seconds.

Roars from the explosions reached them with an appalling bellow. The *Galahad* was carrying large amounts of petrol, mostly for the Rapier generators, and once this caught, the fireball was devastating. Men on board ran in all directions, beating at the flames as their clothes caught fire, many jumping into the water. Some were able to climb into life-rafts that had been launched. Screams, small and distant, carried across to him, their pitch rising each time, but he could only sit and watch, subjected to anger from the Paras at his inability to prevent the attack, while Taylor cast him a sympathetic look.

He wanted to go down to the shore, to help with the rescue, but their orders were to stay with the Rapier, in case more planes came. By now smoke from the *Galahad* was rising, thick and black, in great plumes. He trained his binoculars across the water. A helicopter had arrived and was winching survivors up away from the flames and exploding ammunition. Another, seeing the life-rafts drifting back towards the burning ship, hovered dangerously low, using the wash from its rotor blades to steer them to safety. Beyond this he could see a soldier running along the *Galahad's* deck in terror, his hair smoking, his arms on fire, skin from his hands flapping loose like latex gloves. Further along blackened faces appeared one at a time from the smoke, men staggering, falling to their knees. Others scanned the ship for shelter from the fires, stumbling back and forth in half-blindness. Below him, on

the beach, men were helped out of the water, some collapsing to the ground before being placed on stretchers. Finally he looked away.

Later, when the silence returned, it began to snow.

They kept their heads down. There was no talk of blame among their own unit, he'd done all he could. The equipment failed him. Failed those on board. It could have been anyone in the seat, though he could see the relief in others' faces that it hadn't been them.

He overheard accounts from men who had gone down to the shore to assist the wounded. Of faces beyond recognition, skin pustulous and broiling from the heat. Of soldiers who'd crawled along in the ship's blackness, clambering over the remains of others, unable to breath as they searched for exits below deck. As he tried to find out how many had been lost, he heard reports of limbs being blasted away, leaving smoking blackened stumps. And of the smell of burning flesh.

The next day, trekking across sun-bleached plains, they came across a dead horse. Felled by artillery, its wounds had begun to yield a plentiful source of food for the carrion birds and insects, perhaps some small mammals. They gathered around it, the sheer size of the animal commanding their attention, though no one spoke and they walked on in silence. He remembered as a child seeing a dead blackbird, the shock in observing this creature so removed from its own sphere, so inert and fragile. He'd prodded it with his shoe, hoping to see it resume flight. Finally, he found enough courage to pick it up, his sadness replaced more and more by a fascination with its structure, its sculpted brilliance. Gently he fanned open one of its lustrous

wings, marvelling at the arrangement of feathers, how perfectly engineered and intricate they were. Burying it in a shallow grave, he'd vowed to return, to observe its degradation, perhaps taking the skeleton home, but he hadn't.

He thought about their reaction to the horse, how it had drawn a moment's quiet sorrow from them, as if the carcass was emblematic of all that had occurred here. As they headed into the biting wind a longing to see his dog rose, to lose his hands in its fur as it tried to lick his face. Or to hear the animal's bark echo through the woods, knowing it would soon return to his side.

20

He could hear Sergeant Taylor's voice in his sleep. Not the authoritative and precise tolling that issued orders, but a softer, less certain inflection, as if the man had forgotten who he was. A silence followed, in which one of the nightmares feigned to resume, before Taylor spoke again, awkward laughter following his words. Remembering he was at Highfield, Richard rolled over and tried to place the time and day, the light in the bedroom suggesting he'd slept through much of the morning. He'd come to bed around four, he thought, having sat in the spare room for hours sketching badly the basic form of a peregrine from a picture in the book. If he had any talent for such matters it remained untapped, yet he found the activity meditative, especially when he drank less. The trick, he was learning, was not to think about it too much, to let the pencil glide with the same effortless efficiency a falcon accomplished in flight. Away from the woods, he found the spare room the only other place the agitation eased, his mind largely his own again. Initially he'd found the steady dripping of rain into bowls infuriating, destroying what little concentration he could muster. But in time, and especially after a downpour, there seemed a rhythm playing out around him, the rhapsody completed by his scratching of pencil on paper.

He could hear his wife's voice now, which meant it was still before lunchtime. Why was Taylor here, invading his home, bothering him? What unfinished business had he been sent to oversee? If his sergeant came upstairs, Richard vowed to climb

out the window, shimmy down the wall and wait in the woods until he'd gone. If the man couldn't issue an order, then Richard was not obliged to follow any.

But then after a few minutes something incensed him about the man's presence and he walked out to the landing, went to the loo and then sat on the top stair.

They spent the next few nights of the war hunkered down in a sodden trench as battles played out, exchanges of tracer rounds arcing up and down the hillside like dashes on the night's black page. The sky was star-filled, its grandeur for once making little impression on him. Flares went up from both sides, burnishing the terrain with a pallid blue patina, the dead and injured who littered the land briefly illuminated like waxworks or extras in a film. The *pop pop* of distant fire-fights reached them on the breeze, as if occurring in the past or the future. Occasionally a scream would carry thinly across the slopes, followed by a sickening wail that spoke of pain he couldn't imagine. Finally, hours later, it would fade to nothing and he thought he might fall asleep, only for it to start up again. They listened one night to a wounded Argentine, pinned down where he'd fallen in open ground, beyond rescue. Between the whimpering he would cry out for his mother – *Mamá, Mamá* – his voice threading through the valley like a ghostly wind. Can't you just die in silence, someone in their trench finally shouted.

He thought for the first time about running away, detaching himself from the others, sitting out the war in one of the corrugated outbuildings they'd passed, eking out his rations. Soon the fantasy began to sustain him and he hatched elaborate scenarios in which he scavenged for food at night, hid during the day. In time the

others would stop looking for him, presuming him lost to battle. When the guns fell silent and he was found, he would claim to have lost his mind or his memory, the result of an exploding shell. Wandering, confused and weak, the night air thick with smoke, he had taken shelter where he could. He'd searched for them without success. Few would believe him, the act of desertion as loathsome now as in the days they shot you for it. It was still the ultimate display of cowardice, the worst thing you could do to those around you: abandon them in combat. You might as well put a gun to your head.

In the pre-dawn half-light one of their younger gunners complained that he could no longer feel his feet. Convinced he would lose them to frostbite, he began to panic, wandering up and down the line, crying out for help. Taylor told him to shut up, to remove his boots and rub them. Finally, Richard got him to sit down, telling him to slow his breathing. The boy's boots off, Richard zipped open his own clothing and placed the gunner's feet in his armpits until they were warm again.

As a pale sun rose they were shelled from the enemy's position on high ground, the gorse around them igniting, giving off a rich, sweet scent that tempered the stench of sheep shit. Thanks to the peat, the earth around them burned for longer, emitting a warm glow that they huddled round when it was safe. With two months of preparation Argentine machine-gun posts were well dug in, keeping them pinned down in daylight. Artillery and mortar were also fired from Stanley, the ground shaking, clods of earth raining down like some plague. Sporadic rounds from snipers would rip into the terrain, or ricochet off the rock and scree, until they became used to it: if you heard it, you probably hadn't been hit. The main targets of these hidden

gunmen were the officers, singled out by their behaviour, their manner – one bullet one kill, the ideal ratio. A well-camouflaged sniper could instil fear and disorder out of all proportion to their number, their impact often psychological more than lethal. He thought how their taking of lives differed from his own (or at least from how it was supposed to), their telescopic sight giving them an intimate connection with the target, the face studied, the target's eyes as if just feet away. If the hide site had been chosen well, a single sniper could hold up an entire company for hours, even days, masking their shots in the ambient artillery fire so as to remain undetected.

Later he found himself alone with Taylor, the two of them sharing a brew during a lull in fighting. Despite the few years Richard had on his sergeant, the man possessed a maturity that gave him a paternal edge during their exchanges. It came with rank, he supposed, but more than that, his nature lent itself to all this; he was, as others probably said, born for it, destined to lead, to triumph. Not in a mindless, gung-ho sense like some here, men who craved the savagery of conflict. But one who was calmly focused on the order (if such a thing existed) of war, who conducted himself as a foreman on a building site might, or a film director, aware of but untouched by the maelstrom around him. Both part of it, yet separate from it.

Richard handed him his tea.

'Still in one piece?' Taylor asked.

It was said without irony. The man wasn't without a sense of humour, but left the repartee, the bravado, to others.

'I think so.'

'They say with luck it'll not be long now.'

Did Richard believe this? There had been little talk of victory, of significant gains, no sign things were going their way on the ground. Not that they'd be told anything this far down the food chain; perhaps Taylor had heard something.

They swigged tea in silence for a while until Taylor spoke again.

'Wasn't your fault, you know. I'll make sure they're told about the Rapier.'

In those words he could already sense the doubt of others, the need for his sergeant to make strong the case about the equipment. And despite this assurance, he detected Taylor's own misgiving, that the man felt a need to protect him whatever the truth of the situation. For the first time Richard, too, began to question what had happened. How the Rapier failing seemed to occur most when he was in the seat, as if some frailty in his technique, an absence of conviction in his hand on the joystick, his thumb on the button, was sensed deep in its mechanics. This is what they would say, that he didn't want to be here, that they shouldn't have brought him. He wanted to leave, so let him.

As another night drew in, they were joined by a private, about Richard's age, mid- to late-thirties, who they all regarded as unhinged, as someone you didn't want to be around anywhere, let alone in battle. During a lull in the fighting, the man pulled out a piece of cloth from his Bergen, in which was wrapped a pair of pliers. They looked at him nonplussed, listening with disgust as he spoke of the gold fillings one could find in the mouths of enemy corpses.

In the twilight plumes of smoke rose along the ridges above them, their own trenches thick with the smell of cordite. There was concern the enemy would outflank them, concern they were too well dug in. Still the cold seethed into him,

rain needling his face, becoming a blizzard by day's end. He coiled his body into itself, curling up as tightly as he could, until he sensed a numbness spreading to all parts. It felt as good a place as any to die, he thought, with nothing but the wild rain for company.

But then, the following dawn, just as he believed no more could be taken, a ceasefire was rumoured. A surrender. The news of a white flag over Stanley. Taylor told them to keep their heads down for another hour or so, to wait for confirmation. There was always one unit who weren't told, a peripheral sniper out of the loop. Someone with the fight left in them.

Slowly, in the hours that followed, the Argentine trenches were cleared, their passage to the capital opened up. Enemy soldiers trudged down off the hills, giving themselves up, their faces dejected.

A while later he stood and took in the terrain around him. The battle site was ravaged and scarred, pocked with scorching craters as if an asteroid belt had rained down. Slowly men returned from advanced positions, from the final assaults he'd listened to in the night, exhausted, some in shock. The walking wounded were helped back, many with bullet wounds, and it surprised him what it took to put someone down; people generally didn't die from a single bullet, as they might in a film. All around him medics treated the injured, drawing an M on the forehead of those given morphine.

As the symphony of war faded, a silence gathered for the first time in days. He slumped against the wall of peaty earth, lighting a cigarette and exhaling heavily. The sleet had eased now, a wedge of light lancing down to them between the

clouds. Sitting there, his body trembling, he became aware of the unbroken trilling of a skylark as it hovered vigorously above them and he thought he might weep.

He watched his daughter idle back and forth on the garden swing, the rope mewling against the branch at the end of each parabola. Earlier she'd drawn a near-perfect hopscotch court by the side of the house, the game, in the absence of a fellow player, boring her after a few minutes. He thought about the changes he'd witnessed in her, remembering an unselfconscious girl, headstrong and joyful. How he returned to find a sadness about her, one that grew when she began attending Stephen's school and her face had drawn the tyranny of strangers. How he'd love to confront her persecutors, or at least their parents, supposedly upstanding members of the town who did nothing but breed cruelty, who knew nothing of war and its sacrifice.

Seeing him at the window, she smiled and waved, almost losing her balance, giggling at her near miss, before returning to the tune she was singing. Listening to her he recalled the marching songs that had seared themselves so indelibly into his memory during training, call and response cadences that helped the passing of long miles.

A little bit of rhythm and soul,

Early in the morning,

The bullets they are flying high,

You see your buddies fall and lie,

Such an awful way to die,

Early in the morning.

Turning away from the window he supposed it must be the weekend, or perhaps school had broken up for the holidays. Back in the spare room he remembered how he used to read to Jenny at bedtime and wondered why he no longer did. Perhaps she was too old for that now, or perhaps Mary did it. And with this other memories announced themselves as a series of images, rippling by like a flip book: washing his daughter's hair in the bath; the day of his wedding; his mother's face rich with pride at the passing out parade. He felt no particular attachment to these events beyond a suspicion they could not be recaptured, that they had played out in another lifetime and to someone else.

Lifting a section of the carpet in the corner of the room, he eased a pill from the foil strip and posted it in the gap between two floorboards. It felt good to stop taking them, as if they had stolen something from him, and he realised now it had been an attempt by his doctor and Mary to control him. Perhaps Taylor even had a hand in it, though as far as Richard knew his sergeant had not visited Highfield again. Certainly it felt important not to trust anyone, not to let his guard down. He would be sharp again, able to deal with the danger his family faced from the town. Able to protect his daughter again.

In the absence of the pills he'd begun to feel strong once more, as if all the physical training had fashioned some permanent fortitude deep within him, his walking pace in the last week leaving the dog lagging behind. His heart raced often these days though, regardless of how much exertion he placed on it, a rapid tolling against his ribcage that left him faint, the sensation, to his relief, lasting only a few moments. After the most recent episode he was moved to consider the darkness

within the body, how the organs, the muscles and tendons, all functioned in total blackness, light only penetrating them in the event of a rupturing wound.

Still he was drawn to the woods each day, relishing how nothing of human extraction occurred there, how his senses relinquished themselves to the sound and colour, to the birdsong that flowed like liquid down from the canopy. He liked to walk for hours at a time, deep into the conifers, the air among the pines heavy and spiced as he neared the wood's core, a spot where light and sound barely breached, where night drew in earlier, departed later. Where he could no longer smell the stench of war. The woods were his alone. Sometimes he would break cover and observe the town from above as dusk extinguished it, the copses behind him trembling with life, winged predators negotiating the trees in near-silence, the treeline a threshold between the world he could bear and the one he could not. Watching the town's lights pulse on one by one below, it was odd to think he was the only one of its denizens to have fought, at least in this war. Why had no one else from this provincial hovel signed up? Why hadn't this town spilt its share of blood?

He listened to the sounds of the old house, the movements of others who lived there. Now that winter was done with them, it had become feasible for him to spend entire nights among the trees, knowing the falcons were roosting nearby, sharing their nocturnal dominion if they allowed him. He'd already identified several large hollows that would make ideal camps; later today he would take some tools up and fashion a rudimentary dwelling in one of them, careful to camouflage it well on his retreat. His son's fishing line would make adequate trip wires, the camp unapproachable without his knowledge. The dog would come with him, the two of them returning to Highfield only to replenish food supplies. In time perhaps he could

even fend for himself, trapping small mammals, foraging as his wife liked to, he and the dog becoming truly wild things, feral and free. He suspected there were deer nearby too, though he'd not seen or heard any.

And from this base in the woods he would be better positioned to assess whatever threat was taking shape in the barn. For weeks now he had felt the enemy's presence, his senses sharpening as the medication receded from his system. He had been careless to let them get so close, to outflank him. As with the hapless wood pigeon, oblivious to its blind spot as the peregrine lanced into it from above like a sniper's bullet, he had left himself vulnerable.

21

The house was quiet when he woke, the dog furred asleep on the floor. He'd come to bed late, watching from the spare room as dawn bled into the valley, the first birdsong of the day cascading down from the tall trees that fringed the garden. His aim had been to stay awake until there was enough natural light to walk by, then head up into the woods to begin work on the camp. But despite feeling more alert since ceasing his medication, exhausting bouts of fatigue still overwhelmed him when he deprived his body of all sleep, and instead he'd collapsed onto the bed beside Mary without bothering to undress.

He stood and walked to the window, the dog stirring into a long stretch. Judging by the position of the sun it was around midday, a drowsy scent rising from the garden's flora. Irritated at wasting an entire morning, he called the dog and headed downstairs. The kitchen was empty, signs of hastily prepared breakfasts strewn along the surfaces, the sweet smell nauseating. He made some coffee, rolled a cigarette.

Sitting at the kitchen table he tried to recall what day it was – the start of the week, perhaps, though what did it matter nowadays? He felt sure it wasn't the weekend, although his daughter's school shoes lay by his feet. He had some affinity with seasonal fluxes, how the tones and light in the woods shifted, the days drawing out still. But the tyranny of time he'd once melded his life to, the precision with which every task, every movement was invested with, had relinquished its hold on him. Days, weeks now blurred into one another, an afternoon sometimes passing in

an instant, as if his attendance within it were incidental; other times the day felt suspended, its progress barely perceptible, his thoughts playing out the only sense one moment was moving to the next. He'd prefer not to have thoughts either, lining up as they did in attack formation, preludes to the awful images that appeared, scenes that were as vivid and compelling as reality. Perhaps they were real, for who was he to promote one version of the day above another? Maybe he was still in the Falklands and the scenes at Highfield – here now in the kitchen, up in the woods – were the illusion.

It was strange to have some awareness of the changes taking place within him, but to have no opinion on them. The other day, sat upstairs looking at a sketch he'd made of a diving peregrine, he realised he was crying, the tears that fell onto the paper his, yet somehow disconnected from him, the sadness, if that's what it was, observed rather than felt.

There was a tree half an hour's walk from Highfield that he regarded his own, that he pictured one day securing a rope to. A mature beech, its smooth boughs radiated formidably, the lowest of which he'd marked as his personal gallows should the need arise. And yet there was work to be done before then. A camp to build, where he could be alone. The enemy who encroached a little nearer each day to deal with.

The end of the war seemed only to bring chaos. Walking into the capital for the first time, the ground burnished with a light frost, he was shocked at how unremarkable and desolate Stanley was. This was what they had been fighting for, the symbol of the war: a ramshackle town, its streets a sea of rubbish, smoke rising from its

buildings. Clothes were splayed everywhere as if a tornado had whipped them from the bodies of those who lived here. There was a forsaken air to the town as fires burned and vehicles lay abandoned. Weapons lay strewn about, faeces littered the streets. As they headed further in, handfuls of civilians appeared, offering them warm applause, some explaining they'd been held in the community hall for more than a month. A line of dead Argentine soldiers had been laid out along a wall like exhibits, his exhaustion somehow numbing him to it. A tractor towed a trailer brimming with more bodies, while some of the enemy injured lay on sheets of corrugated iron.

Later, when they were certain it was over, soldiers headed to the beach, firing what enemy weapons had yet been gathered up, playing with them like toys, their laughter at times demented. Others merely sat around and got drunk. On the outskirts of the town, more of the Argentine dead lay lined up along a hedge.

Back in Stanley choppers droned overhead. A Chinook landed nearby, its twin rotor blades pulsing through him. Many of the buildings had been adorned with red crosses, the vapour of death seeping from beneath their doors. On one of the larger sheep sheds, the letters POWs had been painted in white, and he headed over to it. Inside there were prisoners, many that looked barely out of adolescence, huddled together, crestfallen, avoiding eye contact with their captors. He handed out cigarettes to those who wanted them, while others were selected for interrogation.

Later someone hoisted the Union Flag over the governor's house and it billowed in the breeze. Further out of town, little white gates and pretty fences gave the illusion that nothing much of significance had occurred there.

As men gathered and shared cigarettes, they heard details of the land battles, close up fighting where bayonets were thrust into the enemy, like something from another time. Men spoke of the young Argentine conscripts, hopelessly inexperienced, having their throats slit or holding their stomachs in as they fell to their knees. Others were dismembered by artillery, the detail of what a shell can do to human flesh and bone remarked on matter-of-factly. A church service was held on the outskirts of Stanley for their own fallen.

They spent a week shackled up in the islanders' homes, warming themselves by peat-fuelled stoves, feeling returning to their feet and toes for the first time in weeks. The conversation was short-lived, unremarkable. Some units got to head home early, while those left behind set about clearing up the post-war squalor. He queued for some of the mutton stew on offer, but within hours his stomach cramped at the food's richness and he spent the rest of the day curled in a retching ball.

A day or so later he slipped out of town before dusk, keen to escape the wretchedness of the place. He walked along the road, then cut west across open ground towards the series of hills that had been taken on their approach to Stanley. The landscape here was scarred with gullies where shells had landed, turbid water pooling in them. They'd been warned of the landmines and with each firm step he dared one to find him. He imagined hearing its soft click, solitary and unexceptional, before shrapnel lanced up into him, saving some poor bastard from the same fate.

He walked and walked, trying to escape the sound in his head. Not the sound of men screaming as their faces burned, or the screech of jets, but the *tap tap* of the Rapier failing. *Tap tap*. As the ground rose wind gusted by, the whispered voices of the dead riding it.

He'd been walking for an hour, perhaps longer. Looking around there were no buildings now, no signs of life. A track of sorts unspooled like ribbon into the distance and he followed it, uncaring of where it took him.

Out here, alone, he saw for the first time another aspect of the island, one he'd been blind to since they arrived. The grass around him, canted by the wind, had a timeless beauty to it, as if not even war could tame the great prairies. Granite stacks rose like ancient monoliths, their lichen-covered surfaces evoking the uplands of home. The air, now absent of the fog of war, felt purer and he inhaled deeply. And when the clouds did finally part, the sky was somehow bluer here than at home, despite the weakness of the sun.

The hole was barely four feet deep, hidden from view by the prostrate grass. He stumbled, one foot then the other, falling awkwardly, his whole body except his trailing right hand now below ground. Gathering himself, he stood and looked at what had broken his fall. The man – an Argentine, although it was hard to tell – couldn't have been a day over nineteen, a boy really, the agony on his face frozen in death, terror held in his hollow blackened cheeks, in his bulbous eyes. Where his lips had burned away, teeth protruded like dentures in a permanent grin. As he pushed himself off of the body he could see that both the boy's legs and one of his arms were missing, apparently vaporised by whatever had struck him. The dog-tag around the boy's neck trailed across his chest, its end disappearing down between the exposed ribs, into the heart of him. And off to the side, extending up the wall of the crater, the fingers of the boy's remaining hand still gripped tightly a string of rosary beads.

The noise coming from the barn was intolerable now. It wasn't particularly loud, more an incessant irritation that disrupted his thoughts, an irregular knocking. *Tap tap*. Taylor's voice – although distant, as if it had been thinned by the wind – still startled him, and he leapt from the chair, darted across the kitchen floor, pushing his back into the wall by the window. Why hadn't the dog heard the gate, alerting him?

He held his breath, listening hard in order to pinpoint the voice's location, but when Taylor spoke again it just sounded as if he was everywhere, his words encroaching in irregular fashion, overlapping one another, his orders confused, chaotic. He inched his head out, scanned the yard, but there was no movement. The noise from the barn had stopped now, Highfield silent enough that he could hear his heartbeat.

Climbing out of the hole that day, he had vomited until dry, before running several metres and collapsing in a sobbing heap. He lay there, curled into himself, for an hour, perhaps longer, until the sky had darkened, the distant lights of Stanley glinting on the coast. Walking back to the hole he had gathered as much tussocky grass as he could carry, dropping it gently into the hollow before edging back a few paces. He'd wanted to say something, a few words to acknowledge the moment, but nothing came. Eventually he walked on a little further before looping back to camp.

Before falling into the hole, he'd seen something at the edge of his vision. High above him a bird of prey, a falcon of some sort, soared majestically below the deepening layers of cloud, its hunting territory quiet once again. Richard stood and watched it, this thing of beauty, relishing the trance it induced in him, mesmerised by the easy cadence of its flight. Marvelling at its grace, its otherworldliness, he felt

envy at such realms that men could not occupy. He wondered if somehow the bird could comprehend what had taken place here, of what men could do to each other, the things they were capable of. Several times it rose high, almost beyond sight, before swooping in a fast dive, falling as if it were some great weight, and he realised it was attacking the gulls beneath. He considered where it nested in such barren terrain – perhaps on the cliff-faces he'd seen to the west.

At one point the bird flew directly overhead, little more than a hundred feet above him, the silhouette resembling an anchor, its pale underside flecked with tawny notches, its body taut and muscular. He imagined it eyeing him, curious at this figure below, perhaps fearful, perhaps not. Perhaps knowing that humans were something to avoid.

He'd watched it drift in the currents until, finally, it disappeared beyond the hills to the west.

Taylor had not spoken for several minutes now. Perhaps he had left, or was securing the barn himself. It made sense to go out the back door, unseen, head up into the woods, where he could better assess the situation. But this thought led only to more chatter – not Taylor's voice, but some version of his own, telling him how he always ran away, always took the easy option, and so he headed out to the barn.

Back in the house now he tried to rationalise what he'd seen. Mary was speaking next to him, her words a series of sounds, familiar yet beyond his comprehension. At one point she touched his arm and he thought he might break it. Finally she left and he was alone with the dog again.

Taylor had been right about the threat. The enemy, using the barn as a base, had become well established, moving in not only to his territory but infiltrating his family too. On some level this hardly mattered, given his own plans to move up to the camp he was building. But what would stop the invasion spreading there? The man, once in the house, would seek him out however well he was hidden.

In the utility room he changed into his fatigues and put his beanie on, before pulling the stick of camo paint across each cheek and down the bridge of his nose. Opening the drawer of the old dresser he took out two boxes of ammunition and the key to the cabinet and, after shutting the dog in the kitchen, headed out to the barn.

In the yard air shimmered in the summer heat, the warmth on his face reminding him of some forgotten time and for a second he allowed the seething white sun to enter his eyes. When his vision returned he saw swallows scything in and out of the far barn, their rapid swoops and turns a silent mimicry of the Skyhawks and Mirages. Again the voice, bringing him back, urging him to remain focused, not to be distracted this time.

Entering the barn he allowed the man to turn, his face full of bewilderment as he let his toolbox drop to the floor. He was talking now, something about the changes to the barn, Richard scanning the interior for signs others were in there. It was so hot now; the barns had always been cool, even in summer, but he could feel a rivulet of sweat tracking down the side of his face into the hairs of his beard. Fumes caught in the back of his throat like the kerosene from a jet and he thought he might throw up if he stayed in here much longer. Still the man spoke, his accent familiar now, the inflexion like something Richard had heard on the streets of

Belfast, and as he reached towards his toolbox a single shot to the forehead was all it took, the noise echoing briefly off the walls.

Something unfathomable had occurred, a thing beyond description, a thing he suspected was to be feared, and yet a great calmness swept through him. He could hear Taylor's voice again now, urging him on, insisting that the threat remained. Are you going to let everyone down again, he said.

Richard pushed his boot into the side of the man on the ground, ensuring no more shots were needed, before crossing the yard into the field and heading down into the town, every now and then checking the skies for movement, thinking that perhaps the milder weather had seen the birds return to the north. Next year he would redouble his efforts to find them.

The breeze of earlier had blown itself out now and the sun fell heavily on his uniform. Looking at the rifle as he walked, he berated himself for not cleaning it more often, promising to do so when he got back to Highfield.

Emerging from the alleyway he noticed people stopped what they were doing and stared, while a few scurried into shops or turned on their heels. He kept to the centre of the road, exposed but with a better view of the terrain, and after a hundred yards a car appeared over the brow of the hill, moving towards him, slowing but not stopping. In the second before he put the windscreen in, he thought the driver had mouthed something.

He watched as the car veered into the wall, before continuing on, heading into Market Lane, leaving the screams behind him, his pace in keeping with the song he muttered.

A little bit of rhythm and soul,

Early in the morning,

The bullets they are flying high,

You see your buddies fall and lie,

Such an awful way to die,

Early in the morning.

PART FOUR

Autumn, 2012

22

Stephen stood before his sister's grave. They had walked – he and his mother – to the cemetery in silence. Every now and then she'd paused as if the route had changed and she was looking for clues in the landscape. The people who passed them gave polite nods, one or two looking a little longer than they might have, their minds processing who was before them.

Last night, knowing they were coming here today, Stephen hadn't slept much, watching instead the shadows that shifted imperceptibly across the walls, his room silvered by the light of a hunter's moon. Through the ill-fitting window came the murmur of the river, its whisper soothing if not soporific. When sleep had finally come, he'd dreamt of Suzanne, a frenzy of flesh and lust, and then, on waking, lingering guilt at how good it had felt.

His mother had announced her intention after dinner last night, more a statement than an invitation, uttered with a casual air that remained unconvincing.

'I'll come,' he'd said.

'If you like.'

They had cut through a part of the town he'd forgotten was there, an entire neighbourhood his mind had filtered out, Stephen carrying the fresh chrysanthemums, his mother holding a bag that contained a small gardening fork and some gloves. Above them the sky had yet to decide on its course for the day, the expanse of blue converging with a rain front to the west. Beyond the houses the path was jaundiced with fallen sycamore leaves, as if their route to the cemetery had

been illuminated, marked with a golden wash. Occasionally his mother stopped, plucking a crisp packet or some other litter from the hedge, placing it in the bag with a disapproving sigh.

Walking like this, with his mother, he'd remembered doing so as a teenager when they lived at Highfield, accompanying her and Jenny on Saturday afternoons when Suzanne was busy and he had nothing better to do. By then he knew something was profoundly wrong at home, an awfulness their mother tried to play down, attempts to keep her own panic from them, the walks some crucial vestige of family life.

It was where his fondness for nature, for places still regarded as wild, came from: those days outdoors, the three of them escaping, as their father also had, into the woods and valleys around them. Before then, fishing with Brendan has been something he enjoyed, but without an appreciation of why, of how the landscape had begun to nourish him, of the part it would play in all that followed. How he would return to it again and again for solace, walking the coast path at home as a form of meditation, its dramatic beauty, features hewn from ancient ice and fire, granting him the insignificance he sought. One such summer evening, shortly after learning Zoe was pregnant, he'd climbed a steep section of the path and sat on the tip of a headland looking out to sea. The sky was star-clad, a hazed band of the Milky Way visible to the west. He'd watched a fishing boat flank the coast, its silhouette crimping the water's surface, the chunter of its engine pulsing faintly up to him. Behind, in the vessel's wake, the sea gleamed a luminous azure, as phosphorescent algae were ignited by the turbulence, giving the boat a shimmering tail as if a million fireflies were following it.

An urge to see his wife and daughter rose in him, the anticipation of talking to them at teatime lifting his spirits despite the proximity of the cemetery. There was comfort in knowing he could be home in five hours, and he resolved to leave here tomorrow. He would spend today urging his mother to move away, before heading back to focus on the hearing and the rest of his life. And on his return he would find a quiet moment, sit Zoe down and tell her about a boy named Stephen Briggs and what had really happened here.

In the years that followed his departure from the town, as new episodes were laid down like strata over the old, life couldn't pass by quickly enough. Anything that replaced the images he was left with of that day was welcomed, as if the new experiences would eventually seal his time here in some impervious chamber, like a condemned nuclear reactor, entombed in concrete. That had always been his aim: the construction of an existence so removed from his past that the connection was one day severed. A new family, a home on the other side of the country. If he ran far enough, closed enough doors behind him, it could never catch up, never find him. But in recent years, perhaps after Amy was born, it had become impossible not to recall time spent with his father, days that remained unsullied by the man's last hours. Because up until then they had been a family like any other – navigating life as best they could, flawed and fragile, bound by the shared chronicle of all they'd been through. And yet before returning here it had become almost impossible to evoke the man his father had been, the person left behind on an island in the South Atlantic. The father who had returned was another version of himself – spectral, his presence merely implied, as if his time there had consumed him.

Zoe had once told him about the strangler tree, how it comes to exist when a bird carries a fig to its nest, where the seed then sprouts, sending its roots inexorably outwards. One set reaches the ground, providing itself with nutrients, while the other slowly throttles the host tree, often killing it, so that only a hollow central core remains. You could see where the original tree had been, but only by virtue of what had replaced it.

The cemetery was quiet. An elderly woman stood several rows away, her back to them, while a man Stephen's age idled along the far wall, scrutinising the gravestones. Dominating the section they were in, a ten-foot statue of an angel rose from its plinth, a crow perched on the apex of one of the stone wings, observing them with indifference. Driving past here a few days ago, he'd almost turned the car round, headed home, the pilgrimage aborted before it began. His mother had been unwell in the past without him feeling the need to visit each time. A phone call would have sufficed, betraying Peter's trust if necessary, the offer to drive up made knowing it would be declined. He could still have broached the subject of her friend's concern, though she'd likely still have dismissed it, as she had so far during his stay. Zoe's mother had developed a form of dementia a few years ago, though he'd been too selfish to properly listen to how it manifested. In his ignorance he'd bracketed it with the general decline in mental health that comes with old age, there being no need to know any more. Presumably, his mother's eccentricity would make it harder still to determine where one ended and the other began.

They stood by the grave. His mother knelt down and removed the lifeless flowers of a previous visit, before sweeping away the dead leaves that had gathered.

After smoothing out the decorative gravel, she laid the chrysanthemums gently down, adjusting them a couple of times until she was satisfied with their position. She then began removing the weeds that had encroached onto the stonework, quietly admonishing herself when the root remained in the ground.

He bent down to help.

'It's OK,' she said. 'I've got it.'

Standing he watched her inspect the grass, her head a few inches above it, the search intense and methodical, as if something minute and precious had been lost there. Reading the inscription to the side of her, he pictured himself here as a boy, shaking despite it being a warm day in spring, his legs feeling as if they were about to give way. There had only been about ten people standing around the hole that day, most he knew, a few he hadn't. Men and women from the newspapers aimed cameras at them from afar, which was somehow both respectful and not. It was thought people from the town might attend, but it came at the end of a week full of such visits, when enough grief had been expended. Or perhaps they'd have stayed away anyway, the ostracism amassing already.

The day, the service itself, passed in a blur of surreal anguish, his legs tremulous throughout, his heart performing little lurches, nausea rising all the time. No one made eye contact, their faces blanched of colour, stares fixed to the ground as occasional wisps of blossom drifted past them on the breeze. There was a sense the earth had tilted on its axis that morning and once or twice he closed his eyes hard, hoping to awake from a terrible dream. He felt the need to keep it together, not merely in himself, but in the others, that if one of them fell apart, they all would, the emotion held in check by the frailest of barriers. He remembered none of what

was said in the tribute to his sister, a eulogy uttered by a reverend who himself wore the strain of all that had happened that week, his face as beleaguered as their own. Near the end of the service Stephen had reached out, taking his mother's hand, its touch cold and lifeless, his grip unreciprocated.

And then before he knew it he was in his uncle's car, heading back to a new life, waving anxiously from the back window to his mother as she was led away by his grandparents, his uncle smoking heavily in the silence.

He looked at his sister's grave. She would have been in her mid-thirties now, a wife perhaps, a mother. He tried to imagine what she might have done with her life, who she would have become. At times in his childhood he'd suspected his parents of loving her more, that the mark on her face meant she needed a surplus, the distribution an attempt to balance matters. He'd even come to resent the birthmark at times, as if it were a favoured sibling itself, an emblem of his parents' bond with her. Whenever his father returned on leave, Jenny would race through the house to him, flinging herself into his arms, delirious with joy. Stephen and his mother would stand back and wait their turn, or as adolescence arrived he would have to be called down from whatever he was doing.

Picturing his sister now, it was her hair that dominated the image, great tumbles of blonde that never fell the same way twice, a gamut of tones that still burnished in even the dullest light. Their mother would brush it, tie it back each morning, but almost immediately the first few strands worked free, coiling down to her shoulders and beyond. Before he was ill, Jenny would sit on their father's lap at bedtime and he'd gently draw a hairbrush through her curls until she fell into a trance, Shane looking on with envy. Other images formed, of her trying to teach

Stephen to play cat's cradle, how he'd get it wrong each time, the string ravelling around his fingers until he couldn't move them, and she'd laugh at his incompetence. His sister rarely seemed bored and was always busy making something from papier mache or plasticine, or focused intensely on her collage kit at the kitchen table. She played for hours in the garden without ever going far from the house on her own, sometimes helping their mother in the potting shed or greenhouse, her fingers caked in soil, hair wilder than ever. She was a great collector, too, of stickers and badges, the subject matter scarcely relevant, with half her room given to this pursuit, its mirrors and wardrobe, her chest of drawers, emblazoned with years of careful accumulation.

The memories rushed him now, an assault on his senses. The smell of shoe polish on Sunday nights when their mother encouraged them to shine their shoes before the school week. His sister coming into his room shortly after their father had gone to war, looking for the Falklands on Stephen's globe, thinking how impossibly far away they were, her face brimming firstly with incomprehension and then a kind of wonder.

Perhaps if his sister had reached her teenage years, she would have endeared herself less, the lustre of her charm fading a little until they were equal in their parents' eyes. But at that time he had to work harder for their love, or so it seemed.

Once, on a family holiday in some seaside town, they were having dinner in a gaudy pub on the seafront when a table near them erupted with shouts and panic. A boy of six or seven had bitten the glass he was drinking from, breaking it in his mouth. As the mother screamed at the blood pouring down her son's chin, the father lifted him, turning the boy upside down, patting his back hard. The spectacle

lasted no more than a minute, the family leaving soon after, the side of the boy's mouth stuffed with tissues staff had brought over. At the end of the week, sitting again in the same pub, Stephen had inexplicably done the same. Curious at how it was possible, by how much pressure could be exerted before it broke, he'd bitten a section clean from the top of the glass, which he held between his teeth as coke slopped from the fissure onto his lap. There was no blood, no repeat of the display earlier in the week, and his mother calmly removed the piece of glass from his mouth, his father looking on. No one spoke of it on the way home, the silent accusation being that he'd been seeking attention, and although it hadn't felt that way at the time, perhaps he had.

By contrast his sister flourished in social situations, despite her visible blemish, enthraling those present with an endearing wit or ingratiating manner. This made it all the harder when, at secondary school, she encountered a different kind of reaction. Instead of her precocity ingratiating her, it acted as an additional beacon for those seeking a victim. It was a terrible thing to observe: an ebullient extrovert reduced in weeks to a timid version of herself.

By this time their father was lost to his sickness, their mother too distracted by everything else to realise the extent of the bullying. Highfield soon became his sister's sanctuary: a bastion, safe on its hillside, impregnable. At weekends glimpses of her old self appeared – buoyant and enchanting – only for it to ebb away as Monday neared.

He tried hard to help his sister, arranging to meet her between lessons, sitting with her on the bus when he could, but this probably fuelled the tyranny, and after a while she asked him not to hang around with her.

It was years later that he began to see what his parents had attempted, how it was less an inequitable dissemination of love and more about building her up to resist any persecution she might endure. And it had worked on a small scale, when her classmates all came from the same provincial town, had all known her from the age of four. Or perhaps it was just that children's cruelty didn't fully emerge this early.

Spots of rain fell now, an irregular spatter on the path behind them, the stretch of blue overhead all but dwindled.

He'd found Brendan's number in the local paper, under the garden services section. Several times he'd dialled it, only to abort the call before it began to ring. Finally, two pints into the evening, he'd rolled a cigarette and gone outside the Woodman's, waiting until he was alone. His voice was nothing like Stephen remembered, and yet there was an essence of his friend heard in the terse greeting. After a pause Stephen spoke, announcing his first name, and a few seconds later his surname – the old one – in case it wasn't enough. Stood there in the night air he could hear Brendan's breath on the line, sense his mind whirring away.

Finally his friend spoke. 'What are you doing here?'

'Just up to see my mother. I thought we could meet.'

Again just silence, until, 'Alright. I should be done by five tomorrow.'

Stephen's mother finished tidying the grave and placed the small pile of weeds in the bag. He noticed she bowed her head a little, and he did the same, both wanting and not wanting to feel something more than he did.

'There,' she said, standing back to take in the result of her labour. They looked at it together in silence, before starting the walk home.

23

The Woodman's was quieter than it might have been. Several young men were assembled around the fruit machine in the corner, so he headed into the main bar, the landlord serving him with quiet efficiency. Sitting down, he looked back across the room. If the man knew who Stephen was, he kept it to himself, his manner neither rude nor friendly, just a look that lingered a fraction longer than it might have. Presumably the whole town knew of his presence now, the news shifting like a pyroclastic flow until it reached everyone.

Embers from an earlier fire smouldered and he thought to place some of the stacked logs onto them. In the end he moved his chair towards the residual heat, trying to disregard the doubt that had crept up on him since arranging to meet Brendan. Suzanne had mentioned it was her night off, though some incendiary side to him wondered what bizarre dynamic the three of them in the same room might yield. He could picture the party where he and Brendan first saw her, Stephen thinking how composed she was sat there alone, untroubled by the two boys leering clumsily at her. Earlier today he recalled sitting with her in his bedroom at Highfield, scarcely able to believe his luck as she told him she no longer wanted to go out with his friend, that the more the three of them had hung out together, the greater her attraction to Stephen had become, the momentum irresistible. Knowing his father was in the next room, he'd put on some music, wondering if anything would happen between them, telling himself it was over between her and Brendan, even if his

friend didn't yet know it. Nothing happened, though, Stephen walking her home, their guilt laying claim to any intimacy that might have gathered.

Two years he'd known Brendan at that point, the Irish kid who'd shown him how to fish, how to roll cigarettes, how not to talk to girls. Hardly an enduring friendship, yet it was one he valued, having lost touch with other friends since moving to Highfield.

'You're bad luck, you are,' Brendan used to say to him at the river. 'Never catch a thing when you come.' Despite this assertion, Stephen was never discouraged, never told he wasn't welcome. Perhaps the claim was spurious, Brendan's trips by himself equally unproductive.

It was a little over twenty minutes across the fields between their houses, the tree they often met by roughly halfway. A tall beech with flaring branches, it could be seen from miles away, its presence dominating the skyline as you approached. The first of them to arrive would climb it, ten or twenty feet, squatting on one of its sturdy boughs, observing cars in the distance or an impromptu game of football between kids in the year below them. Sometimes, waiting for each other, they'd score their initials in the bark with penknives, the challenge being to find the other's letters the next time you were there alone. Stephen had found the tree this afternoon, its canopy bejewelled with thousands of copper-coloured leaves. Looking around he'd been tempted to clamber up it, thinking he could just reach the lowest branch and heft himself up. It struck him as immensely liberating, climbing a tree in your forties, losing for a moment the inhibitions of adulthood. He imagined being perched up there, silent and unseen, listening to the wind breathe as it stirred the leaves. Once there he would look for their initials, perhaps find fresh sets made by

their equivalents, kids who knew little of what had occurred here, or who knew a version, one that lingered like a legend. Instead he'd just placed a palm against its colossal trunk, feeling content that the tree would outlive them all, its endurance of another order entirely. His mother had once told him about the grand oaks in the top field behind Highfield, how they took three hundred years to grow, three hundred years to live, another three hundred to die. That they were the custodians of history, witnessing and recording all that passed. If one of their number was sick, its neighbours, if clonal, would share nutrients with it via the root stool, a communal nurturance that appeared altruistic. And even in death, their importance to the woodland remained, with fallen, decaying boughs providing home to insects and small mammals.

Stephen heard the door to the pub open. Brendan wore the look of a man there under duress, his body in recoil, as if gripping itself from within. He glanced over while ordering a drink, Stephen nodding, giving a smile of sorts, Brendan eyeing him as one would a complex and frustrating puzzle. His friend had filled out, a physique of someone who worked hard on their body, more than merely the result of a laborious job. Stephen had been the stronger of the two at school, though neither would have fared well in a fight then.

The last time they saw each other, down by the river when Stephen had returned briefly from his uncle's, Brendan hadn't spoken. Sitting there on the bank, his rod trembling, tightly gripped, he refused to look up. Before then it had seemed their friendship might survive the business with Suzanne, the damage significant, brutal but perhaps impermanent. She had broken up with Brendan the day after being at Highfield and a week later Stephen asked his friend if he minded him seeing

her, the euphemism gloriously banal, misrepresenting the betrayal that was playing out. In truth he and Suzanne were already together, basking in a surreptitious courtship. But even after going public, they vowed to keep it low key, to not rub Brendan's face in it or, where possible, let him see them together, at least to begin with. How seismic the fallout had seemed to them, this treachery between friends, love's battle bloody and merciless. And how inconsequential it soon became.

Watching his friend at the bar now, Stephen remembered staying at his house once, before they had met Suzanne. It had got late, the two of them listening to music, smoking out the bedroom window. Earlier, Brendan's parents had argued, and perhaps in an attempt to show Stephen this was exceptional, or at least innocuous, Brendan's mother suggested he stay for dinner. The earlier tension fallen away, it was an engaging hour, Brendan's father dominating the chat, teasing them about their inability to catch any fish, Brendan giving as good as he got, telling his father to stick to music. Stephen realised then how bad things had become at home, how estranged his own father was, how even at weekends when his mother wasn't at work, they no longer shared mealtimes, Stephen and Jenny taking turns to carry a tray of food upstairs, leaving it outside their father's door, announcing its arrival with a knock. In contrast meals at Brendan's appeared a time of truce, a symbolic gathering where all that had gone before was forgiven or forgotten, wiped clean with banter and laughter, the regaling of each other's day. Later, Brendan's father had played his guitar in the lounge, working on new songs, Brendan's mother seeing her way through a bottle of wine, the house, much smaller than Highfield, mellowed and warm.

Placing a pint on the table, Brendan undid his jacket and sat down. Stephen held his glass up, by way of invitation, but his friend chose to ignore it, instead scanning the room as if their meeting were a liaison of furtive lovers.

‘Thanks for coming,’ Stephen said. ‘I wasn’t sure you would.’

‘You and me both.’

‘They got rid of the pool table.’

‘All about food these days. Not that you’d chose to eat here.’

‘Beer’s good, though.’

‘It’s OK.’

‘You come in here much?’

Brendan shrugged, his gaze still averted, fingers tapping out a febrile rhythm on his glass. ‘You back for long, then?’

‘Few days. To see my mother.’

‘She still in one of those old cottages by the river?’

‘Yeah. It’s dark and damp, but she likes it down there.’

Brendan played with a beer mat, turning it over and over between thumb and finger, before leaning it against his glass. A cheer carried through from the other bar, followed by a procession of coins clinking into a tray. One of the men began stacking them on the bar, catching Stephen’s eye as the landlord exchanged the coins for notes and a row of celebratory shots.

To the likes of Stephen the smoking ban had left pubs drearier places, stark and vast, the eye, in the absence of a permanent and faint fog, carrying to every corner, each blemish and gaudy aspect of décor enhanced. Healthier dwellings, certainly, but generally devoid of character.

In the silence Brendan leant over, tossed a couple of logs on the fire, watching to see if they caught. The two of them sipped their drinks in unison, Stephen tracing a finger down the glass, following the frothy trails. He thought that Brendan had aged more than himself, his hair thinning, silvered a little at the sides, his eyes heavy with fatigue. They used to tease each other about who was the better looking, idle boasts that were both harmless and untested until Suzanne came along. Yet it was his friend's character rather than his looks she alluded to in those first few days, as they tried to anticipate Brendan's reaction.

'I can't talk to him like I can talk to you,' she'd said, and he'd leaned in to kiss her.

'He'll forgive us.'

Looking down at Brendan's hand Stephen spoke again.

'You're married, then?'

'With children. Boy and a girl.'

'I've a daughter,' Stephen said. He thought to get his wallet out, prompt a sharing of photos, but decided against it.

'Mine finish school in a couple of years. Makes me feel old.'

This time their eyes did meet, just a glance, the moment charging the air between them.

'Amy's still at primary school. Not that you'd think it, the stuff she's into.'

'The technology generation. I can't keep up with it.'

'They know so much.'

'The phones mine have.'

'We got excited over CB radios, remember?' Brendan looked up, perhaps unhappy with Stephen's choice of pronoun. 'Your business going well?'

'People always need their grass cutting.'

'I'm a technician, at a university. At least I think I still am.'

'How come?'

'Doesn't matter. Bit of job insecurity at the moment. So how long has it been, do you think?'

'Since?'

'Since we last saw each other. Twenty. Twenty-five years?'

'Pretty simple to work out. Summer of eighty-three.'

'Have you lived here ever since?'

Brendan sighed, as if his sternness required great effort to maintain. 'We moved away for a few years, me and mum. North. Where she grew up. We lived with my grandparents until mum found somewhere.'

'But you came back?'

'Just me. Fuck knows why. I met my wife, got some work here. Ended up staying. I don't know, something about the place. My boy goes to the same school we did. You remember that hut we used to smoke behind? It's still there. Kids in the year above him use it. Told him he'll be for it if I catch him smoking.'

'Remember old Kelly?'

'Sadistic fuck, yeah. Long dead, I think. Just as well; you can't touch the kids these days. He wouldn't have known what to do.'

'Didn't you get a beating off him once?'

‘Let off a firework in class. Got the cane for my troubles. Hurt like fuck, but I didn’t let him know it.’

‘What about Riley’s, on the corner there?’

‘The tuck shop? Gone now. Probably cos no one ever paid for anything.’

Stephen laughed a little, Brendan finishing his pint in a long quaff.

‘Another?’ Stephen said.

Standing at the bar Stephen looked through to the other side, picturing Brendan’s father in there, almost hearing one of his songs from that night they’d all been in here, when his own father was on parade.

The men had abandoned the fruit machine now and were sitting in the far corner. Stephen placed the drinks down as Brendan took off his jacket. He rolled a cigarette, offered the pouch across the table, Brendan shaking his head.

‘Didn’t think you of all people would give up,’ Stephen said.

‘My wife hates it. I suppose I do now.’

The wood had caught behind them, hissing and flaring in orange shards. Stephen placed the cigarette on top of his pouch, nostalgic for the days it could be lit inside. With nothing else to do with his hands, he was drinking faster than he wanted. The laughter from the other bar was more raucous now and again he thought back to the abuse Brendan’s father had received that night, of his own father sat in a stupor just feet from where they were now.

When Brendan next spoke, the words sounded barbed, accusatory. ‘So, were they fucking each other?’ For a moment Stephen thought it was some reference to him and Suzanne.

‘Who?’

'Your mum, my old man.'

It had been implied at the inquest, though not confirmed; the papers too had hinted at a relationship. His mother never spoke of it and he hadn't ever asked her. He knew they had become friends in those last months, working together in the barn, Brendan's father arriving before they went to school, one morning a week through the winter and into spring. Stephen would help out too, though not as much as his mother asked. She was different around Aiden, though, in the mornings before he arrived, her mood shifting, shrugging off the stresses of their situation for a few hours, preening herself in a mirror.

'I don't know,' Stephen said.

'I think they were.' Brendan's voice had shifted a little now, from his initial barbed tone to something more resigned, the anger barely able to sustain itself.

'Does it matter?'

'No, I don't suppose it does now.'

'I think my mother was lonely.'

After a minute's silence Brendan spoke again. 'My mum remarried, a couple of years later. Bloke's an idiot but she's happy.'

'Did you stay on at school?'

'I went to college after the summer. It was good to get away, even if only in the daytime. There were reporters everywhere.'

'I saw the stuff in the nationals, but my uncle kept most of it from me.'

'They wanted a piece of everyone, even those without any connection. Not just the witnesses or victims' families, but their friends, people who'd slept with them in the past. People who'd fixed their plumbing or delivered newspapers.'

Anyone who had a view on it. To start with they trod carefully, kept a bit of distance. But as more of them came, they all wanted to outdo each other, get that one quote or detail the others had missed. So much of the reporting was inaccurate, the worst kind of sensationalism. More than anything they wanted photographs, of your family, of mine, of the aftermath. Money changed hands, deals were done. People regretted being so cosy with them at the start. They were here for weeks, months in a couple of cases. I heard that some of them returned on the anniversary for the first few years, composing features on how the town was coping. The focus shifted from what happened itself to how it impacted on everyone. The broadsheets tried to dress it up in fancy terms, but they were as bad as the tabloids. And although they went home sooner, the TV people were the worst.'

'I didn't know. My uncle took us on holiday the first week. And then we didn't have the TV on for a month. I came back for the funerals, but only for a couple of days.'

'Didn't the papers hassle you?'

'There were phone calls, a few turned up at the house.'

'That's what I mean. We were their focus. The survivors. "What was it like to live here?' they'd ask. "How will the town cope?" The *town*. Not us as people. The place itself became a celebrity.'

There was not so much anger in Brendan's voice, but a quiet intensity, as if telling this to someone who didn't live here was a release for him, even if it was Stephen.

'We just wanted to grieve in peace,' he continued. 'Everyone knew someone who'd been affected.' Stephen hadn't thought of it like this, the ripples stretching

outwards until they reached everyone: mothers who lost sons, who lost lovers, who lost friends. A town that lost its innocence. 'People closed ranks, but not in a we're-all-in-this-together way, more an unsaid refusal to speak to anyone from outside. And then of course the psychologists arrived. I mean I think they helped some people, those who would talk. But most preferred the stiff upper lip approach, especially after the initial horror faded. If you didn't talk about it, it went away. Only for most people it didn't go away. You can still see it now in some of their faces, the older ones especially.'

'Did you get help?'

'It was offered and I had a couple of sessions, but didn't see the point then. My wife made me speak to someone years later, after losing it a few times. Having children helped.' Stephen was keen to light his cigarette now, to feel the smoke deep in his lungs. 'And then the tourists started coming.'

'Who?'

'We noticed it a month or so after. More cars in town than normal, people parking and walking around as if they were lost, pointing this way and that, taking pictures.'

'They came just to see—.'

'They came to see the town, your old house up there. Even now you get one or two a year. You can spot them a mile off, the fascination in their faces.'

'So why did you come back?'

'I don't know. Why is anyone drawn to the town they grew up? Why does your mother stay?'

'Because she blames herself. So she can be near Jenny.'

Stephen played with his cigarette, rolling it between finger and thumb, wanting to get another drink. It was quieter in the other bar now but he could feel the men's eyes on him, their voices hushed, one of them asking the landlord something.

'Are you going to smoke that?' Brendan said.

Outside the air had sharpened. Light from the moon bled through a layer of cloud, their faces just visible in the beer garden. If the men did come out, inquisitive or seeking confrontation, they might not look round here. On some level Stephen hoped they would, a quiet eruption of violence, people eager to make a name for themselves, his own anger given an outlet. Once it was over he would walk back to the cottage, show his mother the wounds of a debt they could never pay.

Brendan was talking about his work, some big job he'd landed with the council, how he was taking someone on next month. His son was good at rugby, apparently, trials for a big local club soon; his daughter was musical, something Stephen could see meant much to him.

'Guitar?'

'I wish. Piano. They cost a fortune. Then there's the retuning.'

Brendan mentioned his wife briefly, a local woman, in the year below them, a note of warmth in his voice.

'Did she...'

'Lose anyone? No. You ever go up to the house?'

'Day before yesterday, for first time.'

'Bet it's a state.'

'Why hasn't anyone bought it, done something with it?'

'Would you want to?'

Stephen shook his head. 'But to just leave it...'

'They want to bulldoze it, but it's listed apparently.'

'Who wants to?'

'The town. Everyone. Sat up there, peering down on them. You can't blame them. There were several campaigns, then rumours it would be turned into a youth hostel. Some kids tried to set fire to it a few years ago.'

Stephen pictured Highfield, the one of two days ago. He tried to edit in features of how it had once been, his sister on the garden swing, swaying back and forth, Shane barking at her feet, their mother smiling at the kitchen window. The excitement the day they moved in. Suzanne up in his room. But all he could see was the small holes in the lounge wall, and the one upstairs.

Brendan finished his pint, tapped his glass against Stephen's. 'Come on, keep up.'

Stephen got his wallet out, tossed it across the table. 'Perhaps you better get them.'

His friend gone to the bar, Stephen rolled another cigarette. An opening in the cloud allowed the moon to briefly blaze through, its corona like burning magnesium. He was glad they could refer to it without the need to discuss or compare what had been lost. For now they were just two men, old friends from school, having a pint, catching up on each other's lives, on the children they'd had. Perhaps they would walk home together, along the river if Brendan's house was that side of town, remembering the fish they never caught.

24

The air in the attic was cool and damp. Looking back down the ladder, Stephen could see one of the cats eyeing him curiously. He stood and ran a hand along one of the rafters, searching for a light switch, a splinter of wood piercing his finger, making him flinch and cry out. Sitting back down over the hatchway, he watched as the prick of blood pooled slowly outwards and trickled down to his palm. Wiping it on his trousers, he took in the dimly-lit area around him, its far corners still lost to the darkness. Switching on the torch his mother had given him, the light spilled onto the felt above. A water tank took up much of the space to his left, the chimney's stonework rising behind it. Turning he saw that strips of rudimentary insulation had been hastily laid, perhaps a decade or more ago, its coverage irregular, broken by pipework and wiring. Parts of the far wall had crumbled and water looked to be coming in from next door's chimney. According to Peter, his mother's landlord was a reasonable man who could be relied upon to make good repairs to the cottage, even if not always promptly. But, as far as he knew, his mother had never been in the attic. He would suggest she call the man, get someone round to have a look.

They had discussed coming up here at breakfast.

'Did you not keep any of his stuff?' Stephen said.

'Like what?'

'I don't know, books, photos.'

'He wasn't one for books.'

'Other things, then. There must be something left.'

‘There are some boxes in the attic. I can’t remember what’s in them. Your uncle put them up there when I moved in. It’s just junk, stuff I didn’t need.’

He let his eyes adjust to the gloom some more, before shuffling along the joists to where several boards formed a floor. Wedging the torch behind one of the rafters, he aimed it back at himself, motes of fibreglass eddying slowly around him, as if he was in a toxic snow globe.

His uncle had created a single row, a line of three cardboard boxes stacked on top of four larger wooden ones. The damp had caused the cardboard to soften so that the heavier boxes tore as he lifted them. Stephen placed the top ones on the floor, leaving a gap he could kneel in.

A large pad lined the wall of the first box he opened, its cover and pages wilting as he lifted it out. The sketches had been made in pencil, their definition diminished but still visible. The first third was given almost entirely to anatomical structures, presumably copied from pictures: wings, beaks, the peregrine’s distinctive feet and talons, sometimes an entire skeleton. Further on his father had become more ambitious, sketching the whole bird, the drawings crude but not without merit. Some were perched on the husks of dead trees, others swooped in streamlined splendour. What was lacking in depth and proportional accuracy was compensated for by the pieces’ energy, the majesty and essence of each falcon captured.

Further down there were some of Stephen’s school reports, endless references to a boy who, despite having ability, didn’t put the effort in to achieve anything beyond mediocrity. Between these was a photo of his father, standing in a

line of mostly moustached soldiers, looking his awkward self, ill at ease, uncomfortable with the bravado on display.

Stephen recognised the final object he pulled from the box. The size of a place mat, its cover featured a young boy aiming his toy gun at a fleeing wolf, as snow weighed down the surrounding conifer branches. Inside the book, its pages had yellowed and stiffened, the corners curling with age. He pulled out one of the 45s from its sleeve, the vinyl still glossy after all this time, a couple of scratches written like gossamer across its surface.

Downstairs his mother had lit the fire. Both cats were assembled on the corner of the sofa nearest the hearth, their bodies coiled tightly in luxurious homage to the warmth. He drew the curtains, put the tall lamp on and sat next to them. His mother called through that she would make some tea once she'd brought some more logs in. He offered to do this, but the back door closed on his words. Above the fire Jenny smiled out into the room, her curls backlit by the sun, unfurling to the edges of the photograph.

Looking at his sister's audio-book, he longed to hear the crackle of needle on vinyl as it traversed the circular groove, the narrator interrupted firstly by each character's instrument, then by one of the scratches that cut the story short. He would take it home with him, see if it could be restored, before giving it to his daughter. In the attic he thought he would ask his mother's permission to have it, but, deciding against this, he climbed the stairs and packed it in his bag, together with his father's sketchbook.

Walking along the river path with Brendan, the moon had silvered everything around them – the trees, the river itself, devoid of colour beyond a metallic sheen, the world burnished in greyscale. They said nothing for the most part, comfortable in the silence that began back at the Woodman's, the ambient noise of the passing water accompanying them. Occasionally they acknowledged a favoured spot on the bank from that other time, Brendan remembering more detail of the trips than Stephen, of lines that snagged, one of them wading in to salvage their weights, of arguments over what bait to use. They'd fantasized about taking on the men in the pub, a glorious stand where, despite being outnumbered, they triumphed. Every now and then one of them stumbled on a tree root, the other poking fun at an inability to hold their beer now that middle age stalked them.

At one point Stephen had felt the urge to leap into the water, to splash about in its icy turbulence, his breath ripped from him, the act a gesture of something he didn't fully understand. Would his friend have followed, flailing and laughing, the two of them shivering violently until their bodies numbed?

It was strange to think they were both fathers, as if the word should be something out of their reach, its membership beyond them. It occurred to him to ask to meet Brendan's children, though in what circumstance, he didn't know. *This is Stephen. His father killed your grandfather.*

And there was Suzanne, too. A mother. All three of them parents, life blazing on regardless. If it was true none of them were unscathed, then it was also the case that their lives had value.

They'd parted last night where the river curved north, Brendan's house half a mile further on.

'I'm sorry,' Stephen said as they stood by the stile.

'It's OK, she liked you more.'

'Who?'

'Suzanne.'

'No, I mean...'

'I know.'

Mention was made of meeting up again, though Stephen suspected they wouldn't. There was no handshake, no hug, just quiet nods in the half-light, Stephen watching the outline of his friend vanish along the path.

25

It was never known where his father got the weapon he used that day, Stephen's mother unable to shed light on the matter at the inquest, recalling only when the guns first appeared. Acquiring such firearms at that time wasn't difficult, legislation dictating how they were to be stored but little else. The airgun had always been around, the more powerful guns turning up without ceremony one day, housed in a cabinet his father had built for them. The weapons were all legally held, a licence issued long before they moved to Highfield. The doctor who'd supported the application gave evidence at the hearing, citing there had been no concern with Stephen's father's mental state. He was a serving soldier: what more fit and responsible person could there be? There was nothing remotely unusual about such a man having a private collection, a cache even. Compared to some, the inquest heard, it was modest.

The day itself began in drizzle, low cloud furring the slopes of the valley. By lunchtime the sun had burned through, the sky glassy blue, muted only at its edges. People in the town set up their stalls for the market, hints of the coming summer on the breeze. Above them stood the redbrick clock tower, its dullish notes ushering in the afternoon of another unremarkable day in an ordinary market town in middle England. At Highfield, Stephen's mother had left for work, Brendan's father finishing off in the barn.

The gun his father removed from the cabinet, the inquest was told, was an M1 carbine semi-automatic assault rifle, its ammunition kept in a drawer in the

utility room off the kitchen. Stephen remembered focusing hard on the weapon's specifications as the man read them aloud, losing himself in the detail by way of distraction. Designed in the US during the Second World War, the expert said, more than six million were built, the aim to replace its less wieldy predecessors. Relatively lightweight, weighing just 5.7lbs when loaded, the gun was 90cm long and could fire 900 rounds a minute, its bullets travelling at 600 meters per second. Accurate up to 200 yards, rounds could nevertheless travel two miles or so, stopping only once they struck something. It was said they could easily penetrate the steel helmets and body armour worn by Japanese soldiers of the era, and while lacking the firepower of subsequent assault rifles such as the AK-47, the M1 carbine's size and weight made it ideal for sustained close combat. Ideal for his father.

There had been no requirement for Stephen to attend the inquest, his uncle suggesting he didn't. They'd driven up, the two of them, just three weeks after burying his sister. Stephen sat with his mother throughout as they listened to hour after hour of background testimony and witness statements, the day still recent enough for it to sound like a piece of fiction.

The first phone call to the police station that day came just after lunchtime when a man in combat fatigues and a woollen beanie, his face smeared with camouflage paint, was seen walking through the town with a rifle. This prompted an initial though routine response, the assumption being it was a prank or an exaggerated account. When, ten minutes later, a woman ran screaming through the streets, more calls were made, the desk sergeant under the impression an accident had occurred.

Despite the nature of the descriptions, it was still some time before the tactical firearms team was notified. Based forty miles away, almost ninety minutes passed from that first shot until the team arrived in the town. By the time they assembled outside Highfield with the knowledge it was no false alarm, the local telephone exchange had recorded almost two thousand calls, a fact the coroner said hampered both the police and ambulance personnel as the system laboured under the deluge.

After leaving Highfield, Stephen's father made his way down the field into town, emerging from the alleyway on Cross Street in full view of afternoon shoppers and passing traffic. It was said he wore a blank look, one of cold indifference, his movement measured, unhurried. A woman in a car described seeing him walking towards her down the middle of the road, his eyes vacant as he raised and fired the gun. The first shot shattered the windscreen, missing her and coming to rest in the boot, the second – though she swore to not feeling anything initially – shattered her left clavicle, the car turning sharply into a wall. Pretending to be dead she laid slumped forward until she sensed the danger had passed, the radio playing all the while.

Turning right onto Market Lane Stephen's father came across the second person he would kill that day, Suzanne's uncle. Ron Jenkins, a painter and decorator, was working on the exterior of the town's bakery when he heard the two shots and screams that accompanied them, the thud of the car hitting the wall. Walking hurriedly towards Cross Street, a small tin of paint in one hand, brush in the other, he was shot twice, once in the neck, the second bullet penetrating his chest, causing

bleeding into one of his lungs. Ultimately, it was the bullet to the neck that would kill him.

Stewart Dawson's mistake was to leave his young assistant in charge at the garage, something he did on occasion if work was slow. A mechanic in the town since finishing school thirty years earlier, he'd built up his business steadily, gaining a reputation for the quality of his work, even if some in the town grumbled at his prices. Divorced and single, his weakness, besides visiting the Woodman's every day after work, was for horses, and once his trainee was up to speed, it was a mere five minutes across town to place a few bets, checking the results later on Ceefax between working on the cars. Scrutinising his betting slip as he left the bookmakers, he was oblivious to the unfolding carnage, rounding the corner of Chapel Street into Stephen's father's path.

Derek Stapleton could have banked the bookshop's takings at any time that day, his wife suggesting he went in the early afternoon lull. The soon-to-be grandfather, who had once let Stephen's mother have an account in the shop, was known to stop in the Bell – the town's other pub, two streets over from the bank – for a quick brandy, sometimes two. If he was planning to have a drink that day, it was to be on the return journey, Stephen's father bringing him down with three shots to the chest outside the bank, the cloth money bag still gripped tightly in his hand as he lay at the side of the road.

Alan Caruth was probably the best known of those to die. A councillor of twelve years, he was hopeful of becoming mayor one day. A former town planner, Caruth was instrumental in keeping new housing developments on the outskirts to a minimum, his passion for retaining the town's charm well known. Returning from a

meeting with prospective developers, he parked in the street behind Market Lane, walking to the office rather than taking the one-way system around town. The second of the two bullets to enter him severed his aorta, causing fatal bleeding between the lungs and chest wall.

By now the police were getting a sense of the thing's severity, though none of them had reached the centre of town. Witnesses a few streets away, on the fringes, spoke of hearing a car backfire, or thinking truanting kids were letting off fireworks.

The youngest person to die was Peter Barnes, a twenty-three year old estate agent who'd moved to the town a month earlier to begin a new job. He'd rented a flat over the bookshop and had popped home between viewings, as he sometimes did, to let his young Jack Russell out, walking it on the green by the town hall. It was said he tried to hide behind a bin, its wooden exterior impotent against the shots, the dog licking his face as he lay on the grass.

It was in these morbid narratives that Stephen got a sense of the randomness of death that day. How mundane decisions, a last-minute alteration in plans, determined who lived, who died. Accounts emerged of lucky escapes, near misses. A woman walking into Cross Street before those first shots, on realising she'd forgotten a friend's birthday, stopping at the newsagents on the corner. In the days after, people began examining their movements in detail: the traffic that delayed them, the phone call as they were leaving the house, the virus that had kept them off work. Perhaps for these few it became life-changing, this glimpse at death that had been a single street or a few seconds away. And of course there were the others, whose phone didn't ring as they left home, whose route to their final spot was unencumbered or insufficiently delayed. Suzanne had spoken of the guilt many

felt at surviving, their good fortune at first inexplicable, then a source of reproach. Why had they lived that day when others hadn't?

The inquest heard how screams were spreading along the town's streets now, emanating outwards like concentric ripples from Stephen's father. A picture was established, not of entirely random firing, but one where those who appeared suddenly in his vision, or moved directly in front of him as he walked back to Highfield, were targeted. The exception to this was a young boy, a six-year-old off school, out with his mother despite having a chest infection. Bored in the chemist, he'd wandered out alone, the bell on the door alerting his mother, who called to him to wait there. Standing on the pavement a few metres in front of Stephen's father, the boy had looked at him, curious rather than scared, it was said, as the gun was raised and aimed at him for a few seconds before being lowered.

By this time the first sirens could be heard as local police sped through the town. As the hour unfurled they were always a step or two behind, responding to each incident, arriving a few minutes after Stephen's father had left. As the sergeant told the inquest, though, they were not armed and could have done little to stop him.

Three more people would die before his father reached Highfield.

Gary Draper was a courier for a mail order company, the only victim who didn't live in or have connections with the town. A father of three, the inquest heard how he was a man of simple tastes, devoted to his family and the local football club. Traffic had held him up in the morning, his arrival in the town an hour later than scheduled. The only witness, an elderly woman walking her dog along the path that flanked the main road, spoke of the van braking hard, skidding behind her, causing

her to turn around. A man with what she first thought was a large umbrella was standing still in the road, the van's bonnet a few feet from him. She described the next few seconds as lasting forever, the only noise the steady ticking of the van's diesel engine as the two men stared at each other.

William Burke's car came around the bend seconds after the shots into the van. It stopped a few hundred yards short of the scene, perhaps seeing the danger ahead. Watching in disbelief, the woman saw Stephen's father approach the car, its driver panicking, unable to find reverse until it was too late.

The only woman to die in the town that day was Sheila Hannigan. A mature student, home visiting parents, she was the last person his father shot in the town. Recently engaged, she had returned to share the good news, staying a day longer than planned at her mother's asking. She'd caught the bus into town, to withdraw some money from the bank, when she walked down to the humpbacked bridge, passing some time until her return journey. There were no witnesses, her body discovered as police followed the direction of carnage out of town.

Where there were witnesses, accounts differed on Stephen's father's precise movements, the number of shots fired, the exact order of events lost in the madness. But as their statements were read out it was clear his father had uttered something each time he raised the gun. Three words: 'In cover' followed by 'engage'.

Initially ambulances were not allowed to attend to the injured for fear of coming under attack themselves. They were held back behind a cordon until Stephen's father's whereabouts were established. The dead were also untouched until later that afternoon, blankets and coats placed over them by those brave or foolish enough to break cover, one woman in particular, Jeanie Harris, comforting

several victims in the moments before they died. (In the days that followed, the places where people fell would be marked in chalk, the spectral outlines of bodies adorning the streets until, finally, they washed away in the rain.) Details of the injuries inflicted were catalogued, entry and exit wounds, the latter often doing more harm. The hospital, some twelve miles away, that treated the injured had little experience of wounds of this kind, its staff having seen shotgun injuries but nothing from a high-velocity rifle.

By this point Stephen's father's name was being widely used, the police's focus turning to the house on the hill. When the firearms team finally arrived, the lane was quiet, the road off of it closed from both sides by local officers. Making their way cautiously up to the top the team dispersed around Highfield, taking up positions with good views of the house, some of them in the barns, others behind the oil tank, Shane barking all the while. It was at this point they found Aiden lying dead in the smaller barn, a single bullet wound to the head.

Listening to all this then, Stephen imagined himself in class, the bell going on what would be his last ever day there. He'd got on the bus, sat next to Brendan, who still wouldn't speak to him.

He'd thought of his mother, a couple of hours into her shift at the nursing home, the phone call asking if she knew where her husband was. Stephen remembered the policewoman who stopped him at the bottom of the lane, the body by the humpbacked bridge, covered with a blanket. How long had it taken for death to come to the dying? Seconds, minutes? Hours?

Attempts were made to initiate dialogue with Stephen's father, to negotiate his surrender. The police were aware they faced a former soldier, armed and

murderous, but had no real idea what weapons they were up against, Stephen unable to help them out beyond the number of guns. Procedures and protocol – the rules of engagement – were discussed in length at the inquest, the precise circumstances officers were permitted to open fire, precedents that had been set in previous shootings.

When the bullet broke the glass of the lounge window, heading towards police, it had already passed through his father's brain. It then ricocheted off the room's stone wall before exiting the house, the officers returning with a burst of fire. They had no way of knowing the gunman was dead, the sergeant still attempting to communicate with him through a megaphone once the shooting had stopped.

It was several minutes before anything else happened, the air around Highfield smelling faintly of cordite, washing Stephen's mother had put out fluttering in the breeze, the silence broken only by the keening of a dog's bark.

They would finally enter Highfield an hour later, after a mirror attached to a pole had shown Stephen's father slumped against the far wall of the lounge, the rifle leant against him, as if propping him up, the wall behind brindled red. At his side lay Shane, issuing a snarl between whimpers.

But it was in that near-still air, before they knew he was dead, when one of the curtains in Jenny's open window twitched, just a few inches or so, enough movement behind it to draw a single shot from one of the barns.

26

They washed up together, his mother drying what he stacked. The kitchen was cold, warmth from the fire not reaching it, the cats only venturing in to eat. There were a few storage heaters positioned about the cottage, heat trickling from them, most of it lost to the drafts of ill-fitting doors and windows. Stephen imagined the landlord offering to install radiators, perhaps even double glazing, his mother declining, not wanting the fuss, or preferring the cold's penance. He'd watched her fall asleep in the chair last night, her posture barely shifting beyond the loosening of her jaw, head canted a few degrees to the side. When the cat left her lap he placed the old tartan blanket on her, pulling it up over her arms, then sat and watched her sleep for a while.

Winter would arrive in a few weeks. Stephen pictured the breath misting from his mother's mouth as she busied herself around the cottage, fingerless gloves and scarf a permanent feature indoors in these months, she'd said. On bright days she would move washing around, turning it on the window sills, eking out every drop of sunlight. He thought of her breaking the ice on the bird bath each morning, topping up the feeders, sparrows and tits watching keenly from a distance, flitting in once she'd left. He hoped Peter called, if not daily then frequently enough to be counted upon, though Stephen hadn't seen him since the log delivery, suspecting he was being given time alone with his mother. They ate together, his mother and her friend, he'd come to realise, at least once a week, the arrangement informal, occurring when meals leant themselves to sharing, or perhaps when sufficient time

had lapsed. A companion, he supposed the old fashioned term would be. A friendship that didn't need to delve too deeply, to look ahead or to the past, its strength in the silences they were comfortable in.

Peter had lost his wife a decade ago, his children the best part of a day's drive away. They'd moved here in the nineties, to retire, having holidayed nearby when they first met. The town's legacy was known to them but hadn't diminished their affection for the area.

'It must be nice,' Stephen had said, 'to have some company,' his mother changing the subject, ill at ease with the inquisitive tone.

After washing up they went through to the lounge. One of the cats had unfurled itself along the sofa, so he took a cushion and sat on the floor while his mother manoeuvred a log to a more central position in the fire. The TV was showing coverage of an explosion in Baghdad, its aftermath, the camera jerking frenetically, attempting to capture all the horror in one sweep, as if a child were operating it.

'We always seem to start the wars these days,' his mother said.

There was no sense she felt lonely, yet a surge of guilt swept through him at all the long evenings alone she had endured, would endure.

'I was thinking, you could get the train down to stay with us. Or perhaps the bus.'

'Did you find anything?' she said, easing into the armchair.

'Where?'

'In the attic.'

'Not really. Blankets and stuff, that old sowing machine.'

A flicker of annoyance passed across her face, whether realising there were useful things to be had up there, or at him rummaging through them, he couldn't tell.

'It should all come down, go to a car boot sale.'

'There's stuff I remember from the house. Ornaments, pictures.'

'Don't know why I kept it. I'll ask Peter to get rid of it.'

'Is that everything? From then?' His mother didn't answer, seemingly lost to thoughts of the boxes' disposal. 'There must be something more, of Jenny's. What happened to all her toys, her clothes? Did you not keep anything?'

With an exaggerated sigh, his mother stood and went into the hall, where Stephen heard her going through the old chest below the coats. Returning she held a pink knitted hat and a small notebook, which she handed to him.

'Only these.'

The wool was a little grubby and had unravelled in places. He wanted to remember it, to picture his sister wearing it on snow-clad days, sculling back and forth on the swing, but he couldn't.

'Did you make it?' Stephen said.

His mother nodded. Bringing it to his face, he inhaled deeply.

'It just smells of the cottage now,' she said.

His mother held out a hand but he placed the hat on his lap and opened the notebook. The colour had faded from most of the petals, though he recognised speedwell and dandelion, perhaps cow parsley, their stems arcing down crimped pages, some of them identified by his sister's precise handwriting. Again he tried to

recall Jenny collecting the flowers, pressing and gluing them into the book, but if such a memory had existed it was lost now.

‘What did you do with the rest of her things?’

‘I think they went to a jumble sale.’

‘You think?’

‘I don’t remember.’

He looked at the mantel piece. ‘Are there any more photographs? I have a couple, from Uncle Michael, but there must be more.’

‘The drawer at the top of the bureau. In an envelope.’

He found it among some paperwork and sat back down to look at them, frustrated at his mother’s discomfort. There were more than a few, perhaps twenty or so, the early ones black and white. He featured in several, scenes from their old house, Jenny in a paddling pool in the garden, transfixed by something she was holding, another where an eight- or nine-year-old Stephen held his sister in ungainly fashion, eager to show his strength. Despite having no recollection of the images themselves, they triggered a wave of deep-seated memories, hazed and incomplete, but tangible nonetheless. As the photographs moved into colour, it felt even more real, an actual piece of his life, albeit one consigned to the furthestmost archives of his mind. In one picture – perhaps taken by a grandparent or friend – the four of them sat proudly on a beach next to an elaborate sandcastle, its four crests bejewelled with pebbles and razor shells, glinting in the sun. Each of them wore smiles, the kind that weren’t forced, and Stephen strained to hear the gulls above them, smell the brackish air breezing on their faces. Later his father had buried him in sand up to his chest, Jenny crying as she realised the tide was coming in.

'Where was this?' he said, showing it to his mother.

'Wales, I think.'

'Can I take it? I'll get it copied.'

She nodded. As he returned the others to the bureau, she took back the hat and flower book, placing them next to her on the arm of the chair.

'Would you like some tea or something?' she asked.

'It's funny how you can't say it. Even now.'

Shaking her head, she returned to the fire, scrutinising its structure, as if calculating where best to place the next log. 'Well, I'm going to make some anyway.'

'You still blame me, don't you? For her being home.'

She seemed to tremble slightly, her back still to him, but said nothing.

'It was years before I understood it,' he continued. 'How despite everything, to you her death was somehow my fault.'

His mother sighed, her words finally wrenched from some weary place within her, their utterance almost but not entirely without accusation. 'She should have been at school.'

Jenny had come into his room the evening before that day. There was a trip organised for her class, to a museum or somewhere, which meant an entire day in the company of her tormentors. Unless she could sit at the front, the bus journey alone would have her endure prolonged harassment. The two of them spent ages composing the note, careful to mimic precisely their mother's looping handwriting, composing words that alluded to a high temperature, how it was hoped Jenny would be back the day after. They gathered some bread and cheese for her lunch, to hide in her room, and, at breakfast the next day, carried on as normal. Their mother was

distracted anyway, Brendan's father due anytime to start work in the barn. Waiting until she was in the bathroom, his sister snuck upstairs and hid in her wardrobe, Stephen calling up that the two of them were off to get the bus, feigning a conversation as he walked across the yard.

Once at school he'd taken the note to Jenny's form tutor, the man eyeing him with suspicion as he read it. Walking back along the corridor, Stephen wanted to find his sister's class, to confront the girls making her life miserable, to see fear in their own faces as he stood over them. For what could avoiding them for a single day do, other than postpone their treatment of her? She had to either win them around, he'd told her in his bedroom on that last night, or stand up to them, show she wasn't afraid.

It would be a one-off, the note, he said: he wouldn't do it again, his sister hugging him with relief once he'd agreed. He knew by the afternoon, with their mother at work, their father indifferent to anything they did, no one would be any wiser.

As Stephen got on the bus that morning, the others charging down the aisle, fighting for the back seat, the driver had asked after his sister, a warmth in his voice.

'She's poorly,' Stephen said.

There was a separate inquest into the police's tactics, a month or so after the initial hearing, Stephen's uncle attending. While critical of the officer who'd killed Jenny, it was acknowledged they found themselves in an impossible situation that day. Nine people lay dead or dying in the town below them, scores more injured. The gunman, a former soldier, they knew at that stage, was hidden from view in his own home,

armed with at least one powerful weapon. As the siege unfolded, a neighbour told them that Stephen's mother would likely be at work, the children at school. Calls were made to confirm nobody else lived there.

The bullet Stephen's father fired into the roof of his mouth passed through part of his brain before penetrating the top of his skull – the police, as it passed over them, taking greater cover before returning fire. If a clear sight of the target now presented itself, the order was given that they should take the shot. For hours the inquest debated the semantics of the protocol, what constituted a clear sight, what alternatives they had, deciding in the end that the officer believed their lives were endangered by the movement in Jenny's window. In his statement, the officer said something resembling the barrel of a gun had been extended beyond the curtain, a claim none of the others in the team could verify one way or the other. Nothing was found near her body, save the book she was reading.

The bullet entered the left side of her chest at an angle of around thirty degrees, lacerating the right cardiac ventricle, before exiting at the base of her shoulder blade and coming to rest in the far wall. As blood pooled into her thorax, the pathologist said, she would have lost consciousness in seconds, death following a few minutes later. One of the police statements made reference to Shane stopping his barking for a few seconds at this point, Highfield still and silent, the only movement a gentle swaying of the curtain.

No charges were brought against the officer, although he was suspended from the firearms team pending further training.

Stephen stared at the back of his mother, anger at what she'd said rising in him. *She should have been at school.*

'If anyone's to blame...' he started, his mother turning round, her eyes eager for him to let it go.

'Why? Because I was a nurse? Because I should have looked after him better?'

Despite the tone, her words had an air of self-rebuke to them, as if years had been spent in consideration of this. In truth he hadn't meant that, his criticism of her focused more on what had happened between her and Brendan's father that acted as a tipping point.

'Were you having an affair with Aiden?'

His mother issued a laugh of sorts, a scoff. 'You think that was it, the reason?'

'Perhaps.'

'Well, I wasn't. It wasn't. Why would that be enough?'

Her denial, despite the emotion in the words, sounded genuine. Did he believe her? There seemed no reason to avoid the truth after so long.

She was shaking her head now. 'He came in the barn, when I was in there with Aiden.'

'Dad?'

'Yes.'

'What happened?'

'Nothing. He looked confused, seeing all the changes, the two of us working in there, but no one spoke and he went back indoors. I followed him inside, told him

we were lucky to have Aiden helping us, given all the problems, that he should be grateful, but he ignored me.'

He thought about her words for a minute, how she'd seen his father shortly before it began, something he'd not considered.

'What was he like? Couldn't you have...?' He could see she'd long carried this thought too.

'What should I have done? He was doing strange stuff all the time. I had to go to work. I left Aiden packing away his tools. I told him not to come back the following week unless I called, that it would be alright once things had settled. I could see he felt let down that I hadn't told Richard about him.'

His mother's naivety seemed extraordinary. Surely she should have better appreciated the situation, how emasculating this would have been for his father. But then he too knew Aiden was working for them, that it was something to be kept from his father if possible. What gave him particular exoneration? In the end he settled for a more collective criticism. 'Why didn't anyone see it coming?'

'How do you see something like that?'

'We should have done more to help him.'

'You mean I should have.'

'Why didn't the doctors?'

'It was different then, these things weren't understood. There were no treatment programs like today, no courses. They gave him some pills, but I think he stopped taking them.'

'Do you wish it had been me?' As soon as the words were uttered he wanted to take them back.

‘What do you mean?’

‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘No, go on.’

He’d meant his question to be neutral, philosophical perhaps. ‘Instead of Jen.’

Neither of them spoke for a while, each crackle of the fire amplifying the silence.

‘Why now?’ his mother said finally. ‘Why have you come here, bringing it all up now?’

‘It needs to be said. Nothing was ever said.’

‘Perhaps it’s only you who needs it.’

She went into the kitchen, one of the cats following her. He looked hard at the photo of his sister above the fireplace, wanting to shout or smash something, or even to cry, something he’d not done for years now. He wanted to summon his father, to hold him or to shake him, he wasn’t sure. Perhaps to speak to him would be enough, to reach out to the man in those last days, show him all the beautiful things he still had.

Despite half anticipating her refusal to serve him, it was hard to reconcile the act with the girl he’d known, with the woman he’d almost risked his marriage for a few days ago. She had shaken her head as he approached the bar, a barely-seen gesture announcing the revised state of things, while the handful of regulars watched with interest. He thought how pained her face seemed, richly ambivalent with the array of emotions his return had stirred. How simple it would have been to use all that had

happened to justify – to himself at first, to others if necessary – a more serious transgression the other night, as if the world owed them a night together, the moment postponed for more than twenty years. Who would deny them that, an infernal passion, fuelled by anger and wine and two decades of reflection? What glorious exorcisms might have occurred? What awfulness?

‘I’m sorry,’ Suzanne said, looking along the bar to the landlord, indicating the source of the instruction, as well as her frustration at complying with it.

‘It’s OK. I wanted to say goodbye, that’s all.’

‘Homeward bound?’

‘In the morning.’

If sadness or relief were felt at this, she remained impassive.

‘They said you were in here last night, with Brendan.’

‘It was good to see him.’

‘No blood shed, then?’

‘It’s been good to see both of you again.’

His words, as so often they did, felt trite once they’d left him. Judging any parting display of intimacy to be a potential source of jeopardy for Suzanne, he instead offered her a warm smile.

‘Take care,’ she said.

Outside the air brimmed with wood smoke and the bite of winter. He thought he might try the other pub in town, before deciding against it; his mother, he realised, had begun to appreciate having him around, though she’d never acknowledge it. More and more she would follow him around the cottage, fussing over him, possibly bemoaning his imminent departure. Perhaps she lost the most of

all of them that day. A husband and daughter, a friend in Brendan's father. And in choosing to stay here she lost a son.

He'd barely left the car park when he heard someone approach from behind.

'I thought you should know,' Suzanne said. 'They're at the house, some of the men from here. One of them had a can of petrol.'

By the time he climbed the hill to Highfield, he felt sure exhaustion would do for him, his lungs worked to the limit of capacity. Having initially thought Suzanne meant the cottage, he'd run the whole way back there, only to witness through the kitchen window his mother quietly attending to something. It had taken another fifteen minutes to get here, the shortcut up through the field burnished with enough moonlight to show the way. This time the gate was ajar, though there was no sign of anyone. Perhaps they'd lost their nerve, the drunken bravado in the pub receding as the night sky bore down on them, exposing the pointlessness of their plan. Yet what did it matter, the final destruction of an already derelict building whose presence served only to remind a community of all they'd lost? That it had taken his return to the town to garner enough rage for such an act seemed the only incongruous aspect. Crossing the yard he recalled again the kind woman who helped him collect his schoolwork that day, his mother's clothes, how some aspect of his own unfathomable grief played out in her eyes and at one point he was sure she was going to embrace him. At the time, watching her pack the old suitcase, he'd felt guilty indulging the fantasy that she could be his mother now, there to take him away to some innocent new life, a new family adopting the poor child tragedy had left behind. There would be a new brother or sister to get to know, the events of the

past few days soon forgotten. And instead when his uncle told him he would be living with them, he still felt relief, firstly at not having to remain in the town, but mostly at not having to live alone with his mother, whom he saw as a living symbol of the horror. Perhaps she too regarded their parting in favourable terms, preferring the severance from all reminders, to grieve alone and completely. Once he'd left she never missed a birthday, a card with a cheque or book token tucked inside arriving in plenty of time. And for the first few years she would phone as well, spending a few minutes in conversation with her brother before their own awkward exchange. At no time did Stephen's aunt presume to replace his mother in the few years he lived with them, her approach one of considered nurturance, there if he needed someone, while preparing him as best they could for adulthood, for independence. His cousins, who'd long since left home to take up dazzling careers, returned to stay periodically, initially eyeing Stephen with a wary curiosity that eventually turned to pity. The day he moved out, renting a bedsit after taking a job in the nearby fish market, there was a hint of relief in all their faces, that despite a fondness for him their own vague connection to that day had been removed a little more.

He recognised the first of them to emerge from behind Highfield, one of the lithe young men across the bar in the Woodman's when he'd met Brendan. Early twenties, perhaps younger – certainly with no direct memory for that day. His anger would be a vicarious one, handed down like a folk tale, a collective narrative he could now weave a final chapter into. Or maybe he was affected directly, Stephen's father taking from him a parent or grandparent, this deed a personal revenge long regarded. As two other men emerged from the house's shadow, he could see the soft flicker of light now in the upstairs windows, its silent expansion hypnotic, as if

the glow rendered Highfield a winter snug. He tried to recall the presence of any containers from his last visit, something that held rainwater in abundance that he could disperse. And yet to tackle the fire he would have to pass the men, the delight at this fact clear on their faces as they held their ground like sentinels. As the standoff prevailed, the one carrying the petrol can, a man nearer Stephen's age, issued a crude and unoriginal threat along the lines of his not being welcome, that he should go home tonight, take his mother with him.

'This is my home.'

He could hear the fire now as it moved hungrily from room to room in search of combustible matter. Smoke surged from the hole in the roof into the darkness, the fluorescent tape around the chimney stack excited by the heat.

It was his sister's room he wanted to preserve, the rest could burn, but already the flames had claimed her remaining curtain, which disintegrated in seconds, the window frame itself now charring. He pictured her jungle wallpaper blistering into itself, the floor itself ablaze, flames licking up to the lone bullet hole in the far wall.

The men seemed in no hurry to depart, likely calculating that whatever crime was being committed, its sanction carried little if any heft. And it was doubtful those witnessing the fire from the town would report it with any urgency. When the boys had gathered outside his mother's cottage that day, throwing stones, firstly onto the roof and then into Stephen's face, his fear had been complete, the temptation to run away only overcome when on seeing his bloodied cheek the gang scuttled away. But now it was with calm resignation he ran, not across the yard and down through the

field, not up into the woods behind Highfield, but into the wall of fists and boots that relished his arrival.

The cottage felt stiller than normal this morning, as if it too was bedding down for winter. He helped his mother put away the breakfast things, then went upstairs to pack, his head still thrumming to some callous tune of last night's violence, his body replete with pain. She had remarked matter-of-factly on the state of his face, offering without sympathy or surprise to find something for the swelling. As she stood over him, gently pressing a tea towel laden with ice cubes into his head, he was reminded of a fall from his bike as a boy, a nasty landing that took several layers of skin from both knees. She'd cleaned the wounds of grit, a pragmatic rather than soothing giver of treatment, and applied a sparing layer of antiseptic cream before dressing them. And all the while, as she attended to his adult injuries, he'd wanted to cry at the injustice of it all, of the care his mother would now need.

He'd finally drawn her on the subject last night, once the tension had fallen away, before he'd gone to the Woodman's.

'I thought you could come for Christmas,' he'd said.

'I don't know, what with the cats.'

'Peter will feed them. Or bring them with you.'

'They don't travel well. It upsets them.'

'A cattery, then.'

'I'll be OK here.'

‘But you’re not, are you?’ He could see her turning his words over in her mind, still wary of their earlier clash. ‘Are you going to tell me what the tests were for?’

She sighed. ‘It’s not what you think.’

‘So tell me.’

‘They found a small tumour, in my brain. It’s probably benign, but the more it grows, the more it’ll make itself known.’

He felt instantly sick, the word appalling, part of a monstrous lexicon that had the power to take your legs from under you. And of all the parts of the body, surely this was the worst, the hub of who you were, the attack all the more personal. But she’d announced it with such stoicism, as if it were an annoyance, a disruption.

‘When were you going to tell me?’ He heard the hint of bitterness in his voice, like a child being told his parents were going somewhere without him.

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I wouldn’t have had to. I’ve got to have another scan next week. They’ll know more after that.’

‘And then what?’

‘They don’t know. Surgery, perhaps. Radiotherapy if they can’t remove it all. The specialist says the odds are good.’

He crossed the room, tried to hold her, the arms of the chair, his mother’s posture, making it awkward. Finally she moved across a little, put a hand on his shoulder and they stayed there for several minutes in silent embrace. When his arm became numb, he pulled away and stood.

‘You need to move near us more than ever now,’ he said. ‘So we can look after you.’

She looked bemused by this, as if his suggestion was ridiculous or impossible.

‘Look after me?’

‘Yes, now you’re unwell.’

‘Peter will cook me some meals if needed.’

‘You need your family at times like this. You don’t owe this town anything.’

At this she turned to the window and looked out. ‘It’s terrible about the trees, isn’t it?’

‘The trees?’

‘The man on the news said they’re all dying.’

From the bedroom window Stephen watched as half a dozen long-tailed tits flitted around the bird table, their feeding finally interrupted by a jackdaw careening in, banishing them to the next garden. Further along Peter was planting some bulbs in one of the beds behind Shane’s grave, standing upright every now and then, easing his back. The dog hadn’t been the same afterwards, living out its final days in a sullen lament. Unsure if it was dangerous or not, the police almost shot it that day, a sympathetic officer finally cornering the animal, cajoling it into one of the vans. It surprised them all when his mother agreed to have it back, a colleague from the nursing home looking after the dog during her bouts in the psychiatric hospital. Once home she walked it in the early morning and at dusk, slipping in and out of the cottage largely unnoticed, the animal living another year or so. Stephen liked to think she went along the valley and up in the woods to where his father had been laid to rest, Shane perhaps bolting when he got the chance, running back to an empty Highfield, his allegiance Pavlovian.

A neighbour chatted idly with Peter over the line of wilting buddleia, perhaps exchanging strategies for their flora, of what would survive the frost when it came. Beyond them the sky was rinsed of colour, the morning sun made frail by banking stratus. He finished packing, left an envelope of money on the bedside table and went downstairs.

His mother was cleaning the old Belfast sink, working a brush hard into its corners, a bottle of bleach nearby, the smell smarting. He observed her for a moment, imagining the thing that grew inside her, realising she saw this too as reparation, as a reasonable sentence. With a complete absence of self-pity she'd remarked last night that there would be some small comfort in knowing the thing that would ultimately kill her.

Sensing he was there, she spoke. 'Would you like a cup of something before you go?'

'I told Zoe I'd be home to collect Amy from school.'

At the front door she seemed surprised when again he held her, embarrassed almost, as a teenager might with an older relative, their embrace the evening before seemingly a one-off. Her body felt delicate between his arms, as if an ounce more force would see it break and crumble before him. She patted his back before pulling away.

'They set fire to the house last night,' he said, his tone apologetic.

She seemed to consider his words briefly before dismissing them. 'Perhaps you could bring Amy up soon.'

He thought to repeat the invite for Christmas, but instead merely asked her to say goodbye to Peter for him. Just as when he'd arrived, one of the cats wove

itself between her feet, a simple devotion he'd begun to appreciate. At the end of the row of cottages, he turned to wave but his mother had gone inside.

On the outskirts he parked where the school bus used to drop them off, just yards from the granite memorial listing those from the town to fall in the Great War. The track was rudimentary but passable, his boots clogged heavy with mud before long. Cocooning him were hedgerows still rich with fruit – rowan and haws, blackberries and sloes – gangs of sparrows chattering deep within them. As he followed the path out of the valley, the cloud began to retreat, autumn's mellow tones diffusing around him.

In the garden of the Woodman's, Brendan had told him about one of the injured, a man now in his fifties, who still had a bullet from that day lodged in his head. Entering through his ear, it came to rest millimetres from his brain. After a scan doctors deemed an attempted removal too risky, and so, almost thirty years on, he lived with the residue of that day in every sense, knowing the bullet could shift and kill him at any time. And as well as the holes in the walls at Highfield, Brendan had spoken of several in the town, if you knew where to look, small hollows that bore witness to an insane hour.

As the trail levelled out, arcing limbs from a line of elders had formed a short tunnel, the river below quietened for a moment as he walked through it. Broken sunlight slanted to the ground around him, the landscape he'd always regarded as restless, now becalmed. Finally the path opened out to a grassed clearing that overlooked much of the valley. Through his binoculars he could see Highfield opposite, the early sun caught in the shells of its remaining pebbledash walls, a

thread of smoke from last night's fire furling upwards. He could see movement around the grounds, likely the same fire fighters he'd heard approaching as he scrambled home like some wounded wretch. Perhaps it would be demolished now, rendered too unsafe to be left to the elements. Around the house a patchwork of trees radiated, their canopies bronzed, the evergreen conifers crowding the few oaks. Below, the road home followed the river west until, a mile or so out of town, they parted at a row of houses, one of which he supposed was Brendan's.

Beyond the houses the last curtain of mist was receding, above it, in the woods, the spot his father's ashes had been strewn to the wind. An image of the man came to him now, a young version, perhaps before Jenny was born, a smiling, contented version, home on leave. They had been in the driveway of their old house, his father washing the car, Stephen doing the same to his sit-in toy version that had been a birthday present that year. Neighbours walked by, smiling at the spectacle, the cul-de-sac a docile, innocent place, the sun blazing as it always seemed to then. They shared the bucket of soapy water, Stephen mimicking his father's rhythmic motion around the wheel arches, the confluence of grimy water spooling over the kerb, down into a drain.

He would see Amy later, her face a beacon across the playground, as if all the day's light was refracted from it. Was this the same for every parent at the school gates, the instant recognition of your child in a sea of faces? He could hear Zoe telling him of its evolutionary origin, its prevalence in the animal kingdom, the benefit such an attribute elicited to survival. Sometimes his daughter would run the last bit to him, breaking free from the others, giddy, barely able to get the words out quickly enough as she regaled some event that was both commonplace and

extraordinary. Driving home, he'd watch her in the rear view mirror, some days seeing a vestige of his sister, half expecting his daughter's face to be blushed on one side.

Was he a good father? It seemed unfair that such things could be measured only by others, and with hindsight, the legacy of fatherhood determined when it was too late to affect. No one really told you what you were doing right, or wrong.

For much of childhood his own father had been an apparition, even before he was ill, the long absences, the need for solitude when he returned each time, veiling the man. Did that make him a bad father? Certainly Stephen, as he got older, had relished his being away, the freedom it offered, his mother's reins long and loose. The prospect of his father being at home more once he'd left the army had been unsettling, perhaps for all of them.

Stephen often wondered if he had only intended to kill Brendan's father that day, but that once he had, he became someone else. That some terrible flashback took hold of him, the forces in operation, as his mother said, little understood or given much credence in those days. Again and again he remembered the witnesses who spoke of how empty his father's eyes were, glazed and dead like the rabbit they'd shot up in the field, as if the human in him had flown, leaving an abomination, a monster, or as Stephen preferred to think, nothing at all, only the husk of the strangler tree remaining. Yet even now he still thought of his father as a gentle man, a good person whose hardwiring was corrupted by the things he had seen or done. When Stephen was still at primary school, they'd played their own game of 'war' when his father was home. On the front room floor two lines of defences were established from tin cans and pebbles, whatever was to hand, behind which were

positioned Stephen's plastic soldiers, some of which were embedded more than others. Armed with a small fir cone each, they would take turns launching assaults across the carpet, the victor the one to knock over all of the enemy.

Returning here had made the victims of that day vivid again, as he pictured them again and again approaching the last few minutes of their lives. They still appeared in his dreams at times, their faces gleaned from his imagination and snippets from the inquest, as they shifted silently towards him, the walking dead. He rarely dreamt of his sister any more, and when he did she appeared more as an archetype these days, a representation of the girl he remembered, her face unblemished, its features sometimes merged with or replaced by his daughter's. Standing in her room at Highfield the other day, he wondered what her final thought had been, whether she heard that final shot a fraction of a second before the bullet entered her. Had she watched their father coming and going that day, his leaving the house, gun over a shoulder, returning an hour later, the vanguard of all the mayhem to follow? And then as the police arrived, did she think to break cover, suspecting on some gloriously naïve level their presence was a result of her missing school?

Going through it all he rehearsed in his head telling Zoe, trying to anticipate her reaction. It had been easy to let her think his father was instead a victim of a mass shooting she'd vaguely heard of. It explained his reluctance to ever discuss it, to ever return to the town. It explained his mother's estrangement. It was unlikely she'd check the details, look up any of the original coverage. But why had he been so afraid of telling her? In case she thought his father's actions were hardwired somewhere deep in his own DNA? Or just that the association was too much of a burden to place on anyone?

He thought he might disclose his past at the upcoming hearing, as mitigation of sorts, though it was difficult to see it being given weight after so much time. And what guarantees could he provide that a repetition would not occur, especially if his face still bore the marks of last night?

More than ever he needed the distraction of work, his life thrown out of all kilter in its absence, it being the one thing that allowed the past's vividness to dim. He'd already missed a research trip to the Azores with the oceanography students, and next month he'd been due to visit the marine science centre in Gothenburg, collecting samples on their research vessel. And yet it was the less glamorous manifestations of the job he most mourned the loss of, the comfort of routine, banter with colleagues, a sense that he belonged to something. The longer he was away from it all, the more likely they'd regard him as superfluous.

He regretted hitting Ferguson. With luck they would send him on some course, issue a written warning, if he showed sufficient contrition. Whatever anger had festered in him, something in his visit here had seen it dissipate. He would become a better father, a better husband, give up smoking at New Year. He would like for Amy to have a brother or sister, so that she wasn't an only child.

Perhaps they would all come up here for Christmas, the three of them, not exactly a surprise visit, but one with insufficient announcement, his mother given little time to find a reason to cancel. He would show Amy the woods around Highfield, see if there was a horse in the top field, tell her about the aunt she never had who liked to dance barefoot in her bedroom until she was giddy, who took an age to tie her shoelaces, refusing all instruction on how it was best done. Of how her laughter began as a stifled giggle before erupting into an uncontrollable and

infectious guffaw. He would ring his mother more, perhaps Peter too, to learn the things she wouldn't tell him, the prognosis. There was a friend of Zoe's he could ask about the disease, what was to come, what the odds she spoke of were. And he would come up when he could, once the hearing was out the way, just to be around, company of sorts.

The wind was gusting a little now. He scanned the valley, searching for movement, his eyes tracking back and forth in restless repetition. Eventually something slipped from the mosaic of trees opposite, sculling upwards before settling into a steady glide. He found the bird in the binoculars, its form shifting silently across the wooded background like a satellite traversing the night sky. Every now and then it would disappear, reappearing where the canopy became more vivid. It was undoubtedly a raptor, probably a juvenile buzzard, perhaps a sparrowhawk, though the distance between them allowed him to imagine it was a peregrine. He hoped it would soar above the crest of the hill, up into the first thermals of the day, so that he might witness its awesome stoop, its body emblazoned with sunlight. Instead the shape was again lost to the trees and didn't return.

Critical Commentary

Introduction

Nothing sustains us when we fall – J.A. Baker, *The Peregrine*

This thesis offers a critical self-reflection on the composition and editing of *That Dark Remembered Day (TDRD)*, specifically how a number of distinct factors informed these processes and contributed to my development as an author. Firstly I will explore how my own (at times) complicated relationship with my assigned editor, Claire Baldwin at Headline Publishing, yielded both insight and respect for the editor's position, as well as comprehensive negotiation. In addition I will argue that the conflict this negotiation produced – in regards our disparate visions for the novel – allowed a more sophisticated (in terms of its ambition) work to emerge: that is, one able to occupy middle-brow territory, a novel where both narrative drive is achieved alongside reflection on matters philosophical, existential and literary. As well as considering my own relationship with my editor, primary research into the contemporary author-editor relationship was conducted during the writing of *TDRD*. My interviews with several editors (and at times the authors they were working with) allowed me to extrapolate mutually-experienced elements of this complex relationship and examine how it sculpts the fiction in question. Editors were selected from a range of publishers, from small independents (Salt Publishing) to large commercial houses (such as my own, Headline).

Secondly I will discuss the structure of *TDRD*, in particular how the use of analepsis and temporal blurring allowed me to amplify characters' trauma, but also to mimic in the reader the disorientation trauma causes, giving them, I hope, greater

affinity with my protagonists. This non-linear arrangement – particularly in Part 3, where the narrative flits with negligible signposting between Highfield and the Falkland Islands of a year earlier – acts as an allusion to my characters’ unhinging, in particular Richard’s. Such temporal hybridity, I will argue, functions for the reader on a subliminal level, and is more visceral than known. Ellipses (or lacunae) were fundamental to *TDRD*’s impact, and with each subsequent draft (and successful negotiation with my editor), I augmented the space for the reader to occupy within the text, activating their role to *complete* the narrative rather than merely passively experiencing it. In terms of structural exposition, probably the greatest risk I took was to reveal (or at least refer to) the nature of the horrific event – namely a spree shooting perpetrated by Stephen’s father – at the outset, the remainder of the novel employed to demonstrate the ‘why’ and ‘how’ of the atrocity, but only once its full impact has been exposed. But I will argue the work maintains its narrative drive despite this, as the reader is drip-fed details of what led to *That Dark Remembered Day*.

Thirdly I will examine the role landscape and setting play in forming much of the novel’s textural underbelly, influenced as I was by J.A. Baker’s iconic piece of nature writing, *The Peregrine*, but more importantly how place in *TDRD* illuminates a character’s psyche, acting as both cause of and remedy for psychological trauma. Landscapes were created/chosen with great care, functioning both as allegory and, in the case of Highfield itself, as objective correlative. I will explore how conflict with my editor concerning the role place plays in the book was resolved to avoid aestheticizing or sentimentalising the novel’s settings, while retaining the affective impact landscape has. Violence, too, lies at the heart of *TDRD* – from the epic events

in the Falklands and the diabolical shooting spree, to Jenny's bullying at school and Stephen's assault on a colleague. I will argue for the cyclical and inextricable nature of this violence, but crucially how it is so often determined and shaped by the place in which it occurs, the Falklands War itself, for example, a conflict over territory, and of course one defined by the landscape to host it. The violence of the natural world is used allegorically in the novel – Richard finally becomes the hunter, the bird of prey – but also to distinguish it from that of humans. Crucially, places in *TDRD* are never mere adornment or scaffolding, never simply lyrical evocations, but serve very specific purposes as either metaphor or objective correlative, or in many cases, as characters in their own right.

Lastly I will explore – and discuss the slippery nature of this term – the 'literary' value of *TDRD*, arguing that this has been achieved with no detriment to the novel's emotional impact or its sense of profluence and readability. This aspect of *TDRD* was a significant and at times contentious topic during editorial negotiations, with my publisher pushing for less emphasis on and exploration of such matters, preferring a greater freighting given to the book's plot. Although such conflict was for the most part resolved, I will show how aspects of my own anti-war sentiment and other existential concerns inevitably took root within my characters, arguing that the novelist can only remove themselves so far from the text. Part of this section also offers a brief discussion on the ethics of both portraying violence in the novel, as well as fictionalising real-life grief, how an author must not only accord an apposite prose style to represent this, but also examine their motivation for and the consequences of depicting such subject matter.

Conflict and the Author / Editor Relationship

1) According to Betsy Lerner, the editor of fiction is 'like a good dance partner who neither leads nor follows but anticipates and trusts, [who] can help the writer find her way back into the work, can cajole another revision, contemplate the deeper themes, or supply the seamless transition, the telling detail'¹. During the writing of *That Dark Remembered Day*, this dance became more one of negotiation, where the vision my editor and I held for the book was often divergent, in particular when it came to the novel's language and its aspirant literariness.

The primary source of conflict concerning *TDRD* was one of literary worth versus commercialism, specifically between my own desire, to use Dominic Head's words, to 'reflect in complex ways upon experience . . . to build a bridge back to reality through the very artfulness that announces the division between World and Book',² and my editor's desire to produce a novel with strong commercial appeal. Of course the two are not mutually exclusive, and I am not implying that thrillers by definition are necessarily absent of literary merit or must shun stylish prose – John Banville's alter ego Benjamin Black's Dublin-based thrillers are a good example of the latter, although as Alan Taylor points out when interviewing Banville:

[The books] stand out from others in the genre by being stylishly written. In terms of popularity, suggests their author, this is not necessarily a good thing, given how well many writers – no names, no pack-drill – do who write really badly.³

But usually a trade-off is evident, whereby one of the two styles (literary or commercial/popular) is predominant. Certainly literary fiction can also achieve great commercial success – Ian McEwan's or Hilary Mantel's oeuvres, for example – but

¹ Lerner, B. (2000) *The Forest for the Trees*, New York: Riverhead Books. p.6.

² Head, D. (2008) *The State of the Novel, Britain and Beyond*. Singapore: Wiley-Blackwell. p.14.

³ Taylor, A. (29 August 2015) 'An appointment with John Banville', Herald Scotland.

this is more the exception, and the reverse (genre fiction achieving great critical success) is unlikely given such work's intentions.

I propose that *TDRD* possesses such literary qualities (a definition of which I will provide later, but in short where ideas and character are given greater freighting than plot), despite pressures from my publisher to dilute this aspect with more formulaic tropes, but also that the book functions within the genre of psychological thriller, a story where emphasis is placed on the psychology and (usually unstable) emotional states of its characters. Danger in such fiction occurs on a mental level as much, or more than, a physical one, often 'having a "dissolving sense of reality", moral ambiguity, and complex and tortured relationships between obsessive and pathological characters'.⁴

Such editorial conflict emerged with *TDRD* once I'd committed to a two book deal based solely on my publisher's appraisal of my first novel, *What Lies Within*. An implicit agreement was reached whereby, when composing the next work, I would mimic aspects of tone, structure and style apparent in this first book, despite *TDRD* not being a sequel. Emphasis and value were placed by my editor on building a readership through an oeuvre that maintained a consistent aesthetic and tonal course. This was complicated by aspects of genre and categorisation in which publishers (at the behest of booksellers and the desires of readers) feel obliged to position a novel within a pre-existing specific market. In the case of *TDRD* it was decided that although the book lacked aspects of pace and formula found in its predecessor, it would still be promoted as a psychological thriller, a sub-genre of crime fiction. However, my intention for *TDRD* from the outset was for an

⁴ Munt, S. (1994) *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel*. London: Routledge. p.20.

examination of fatherhood, violence and landscape, employing a distinct literary style, as discussed below. Indeed it was this issue of place/setting, and the role it plays, that, for me, distinguishes *TDRD* from the kind of thriller my editor aspired to, an example of which was S. J. Watson's *Before I Go To Sleep*, a novel almost entirely devoid of a felt physical world, one in which setting is incidental. As discussed in depth later, my contention is that people, and therefore characters, cannot be separated from their environment, which both defines and, to an extent, is defined by them. Landscape in *TDRD* becomes a character in itself. Or to cite D.H. Lawrence on Thomas Hardy's *The Return of the Native*: 'What is the real stuff of tragedy in the book? It is the Heath. It is the primitive, primal earth, where the instinctive life heaves up.'⁵

Not that I sought to write Banville-like sentences, conceived 'individually as works of art'⁶; more that *TDRD* would possess a self-consciousness and philosophical enquiry not commonly found in crime fiction, addressing themes of morality, personal responsibility and mental health, specifically post-traumatic stress disorder. Stylistically, I sought sentences that were 'troubled into their making'⁷, that were hewn to delight in their own right, rather than serving purely an expository or narrative function. Or to paraphrase Beckett on Joyce, writing that 'is not [only] about something; it is that something itself'⁸. Such delight would emerge, not from any exhibitionism or verbosity, but from a precision and efficiency of language,

⁵ Lawrence, D. H. (2002). 'Study of Thomas Hardy'. *The Return of the Native*. (James G. ed.). New York: W. W. Norton & Company. p.418.

⁶ Macfarlane, R. (3 June 2005) 'The World at Arm's Length', *Times Literary Supplement*, 5331.

⁷ Brock-Broido, L. (1995) Interviewed by Carole Maso for 'Artists in Conversation', *Bomb Magazine* 53, Fall. <http://bombmagazine.org/article/1906/lucie-brock-broido>.

⁸ Beckett, S. & Cohn, R (Ed) (1995) *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. New York: Grove Press. p.27.

something felt yet not necessarily noticed. From this, I hope, emerged a linguistic richness that amplified my characters' emotional connection to the landscape they were immersed in and wedded to. Indeed, I found a sophistication of style and enquiry – this literariness – necessary in order to convincingly portray the complex nature of trauma that each character experiences. This said, I still sought a balance, one that remained faithful to storytelling that illuminated in 'units of character rather than in wattage of style'⁹. In other words, a novel that was still narrative-driven and profluent, but that crucially went beyond entertainment.

2) The editor's mark on fiction is nothing new. Lewis Theobald made his name in the early eighteenth century with his work on Shakespeare's texts, correcting rival Alexander Pope's errors from the latter's edition of the playwright's work. Charles Dickens and his friend Edward Bulwer-Lytton (who was nearly as popular in the early 1800s) often discussed their work. Although Dickens served as more of an editor to Bulwer-Lytton than the other way around, the latter did make one suggestion that still rankles some critics today. Feeling that the original ending of *Great Expectations* was much too sad, he suggested that Dickens let Pip and Estella get together — and so they do to this day.

Percy Shelley was known to have made significant changes to his wife Mary's novel *Frankenstein*. Indeed, John Lauritsen argued that Shelley's contributions to the novel were much more extensive than had previously been suspected. It was thought that he (although uncredited) wrote the book's preface and that he contributed at least 4,000 – 5,000 words to the novel. Further, Lauritsen believed

⁹ Wood, J. (2009) *How Fiction Works*. New York: Vintage. p.233.

that Shelley was the primary author of the novel. In 2008, Percy Bysshe Shelley was credited as the co-author of *Frankenstein* by Charles E. Robinson in a new edition entitled *The Original Frankenstein*.

Henry James regarded editing as 'the butcher's trade', while Byron considered it emasculation. D.H. Lawrence compared it to trying 'to clip my own nose into shape with scissors'¹⁰. Literary editor Max Perkins, who worked with Fitzgerald and Hemingway, was most identified for his collaboration with Thomas Wolfe. Wolfe was renowned for being difficult to handle, resistant to suggested edits, becoming resentful of the opinion that the brilliance in his fiction was as much his editor's as his own. His first novel was more than 300,000 words, but Perkins agreed to publish it if Wolfe cut 90,000 of these, which he did. But at 3,000 pages for the first part alone, the second novel was more problematic.

They began working together, two hours a day, six days a week - then nights, from 8.30 onwards; then Sunday nights as well. It was like painting the Forth Bridge. Wolfe would be asked for a short linking paragraph - and return a few days later with 10,000 words. There was a sad end to the Wolfe story. First rumours circulated about all the help he'd received, then a damaging piece appeared in the *Saturday Review* alleging that any organisational skills and critical intelligence in his work were down to Perkins. Wolfe grew resentful and paranoid, and in a letter accused Perkins of wanting to destroy him (the letter, characteristically, ran to 28 pages). "Restrain my adjectives, by all means," he wrote, "moderate ... my incondite exuberance, but don't derail the train, don't take the Pacific Limited and switch it down the siding towards Hogwart Junction". Shortly afterwards Wolfe ditched Perkins and went round telling people: "I'm going to show them I can write my books without Max." It didn't happen. There wasn't the time for it to happen. Wolfe died of TB and pneumonia, at 37.¹¹

The rights to some of Edgar Allan Poe's work were obtained by his nemesis Rufus Wilmot Griswold, who edited and published a collection, 'including a highly

¹⁰ Morrison, B. (6 August 2005) 'Black day for the blue pencil'. *The Guardian*.

¹¹ Morrison, B. *Ibid*.

inaccurate “Memoir of the Author,” the profits from which he did not share with Poe’s relatives’¹².

Franz Kafka instructed his friend Max Brod to burn all his work upon his death, the latter famously ignoring this, choosing instead to edit and publish it as he saw fit. Indeed, Kafka was still working on *The Trial*, its chapters remaining unnumbered, left to Brod’s interpretation.

Historically, the editorial dance has produced varying degrees of resistance and gratitude. However, an editor’s and author’s vision for the work will on occasion be so at odds with each other that an impasse is reached. In the well-documented relationship between Raymond Carver and his editor Gordon Lish, the two had worked together successfully for years, developing Carver’s original voice. But reflecting on his forthcoming collection, *Beginners*, Carver could not reconcile Lish’s voluminous revisions and attempted to regain authorial control. In a 1980 letter to his editor, Carver pleaded:

I’ve got to pull out of this one. Please hear me. I’ve been up all night thinking on this, and nothing but this, so help me. I’ve looked at it from every side, I’ve compared both versions of the edited mss—the first one is better, I truly believe, if some things are carried over from the second to the first—until my eyes are nearly to fall out of my head.¹³

Despite this, the book was published, with Lish’s edits, under the title *What We Talk About When We Talk About Love*, to great critical acclaim, going on to make Carver’s name. More than two decades after Carver’s death, his lover, Tess Gallagher, published the original, unedited (at least by Lish) version, under the title *Beginners*.

¹² Temple, E. (4 November 2012). ‘The Artist and the Critic: 8 Famous Author/Editor Relationships’. www.flavorwire.com

¹³ *New Yorker* (2007) Letters to an Editor, December 24th.

Fundamental to this account is the question: If Carver's work was so heavily edited by Lish, how much of it – in terms of style, tone, structure – can be regarded entirely the author's? One of the contentions is that the relationship between writer and editor changed over time so that Lish forced Carver to be more Carver-esque than he wanted to be. In one letter to Lish, Carver suggests as much, writing:

I know there are going to be stories . . . that aren't going to fit anyone's notion of what a Carver short story ought to be . . . But Gordon, God's truth . . . I can't undergo the kind of surgical amputation and transplant that might make them somehow fit into the carton so the lid will close. There may have to be limbs and heads of hair sticking out.¹⁴

Less controversial is Michael Pietsch's posthumous editing of David Foster Wallace's *The Pale King*, after the author's suicide in 2008:

Without David there to respond, my goal was to include everything that made sense. And to change as little as possible. I didn't feel like I had the liberty to edit his words without him there to respond to them. So I restricted myself, and restricted my editing, to making names consistent, and places consistent, and ranks—achieving a kind of consistency so the story made sense.¹⁵

Pietsch summed up the process thus: 'It is one of the great miracles of life, our ability to apprehend a human spirit through the sequences of words they leave behind.'¹⁶

During editing Pietsch often took the starting point: Can the book possibly live without it? Discussing work on Wallace's previous novel, *Infinite Jest*, (when the author was alive), he is keen to point out the collaborative nature of the process: 'It is a common misconception that the writer turns the manuscript over to the editor,

¹⁴ Wood, G. (2009) 'Raymond Carver: the kindest cut', *The Observer*, September 27th.

¹⁵ Pietsch, M. (11 April 2011) 'The Pale King: David Foster Wallace's Editor on the Book's Path to Print'. *The Atlantic*.

¹⁶ Pietsch, M. (May 2009) 'Editing Wallace,' a Q&A with Rick Moody, *Sonora Review* 55.

who then revises, shapes, and cuts at will. In fact the editor's job is to earn the writer's agreement that changes he or she suggests are worth making.¹⁷

And from Wallace's responses, we get a glimpse of the often-playful negotiations involved:

p. 52—This is one of my personal favorite Swiftian lines in the whole manuscript, which I will cut, you rotter.

Ppp. 739-748. I've rewritten it—for about the 11th time—for clarity, but I bare teeth all the way back to the 2nd molar on cutting it.

Lerner, too, touches on this complex relationship in her book *The Forest for the Trees*:

Editors, like shrinks, have a privileged and exclusive view into a writer's psyche, from the ecstasy of acquisition to the agony of the remainder table. Some editors limit their concern to the challenges on the page, but in my experience the challenges on the page and the challenges in the person go hand in hand. While editors are most certainly concerned with matters of style, structure, voice, and flow, they are often faced with extra-textual problems – keeping the writer motivated, seeing the bigger picture, finding the patterns and rhythms, subtexts and operating metaphors that may elude an author drowning in research or blocked midstream.¹⁸

Whilst I concur with Lerner's sentiment, I would argue that financial and time constraints on the modern-day editor make their ability to deal with these extra-textual problems nominal, it being a role increasingly played today by literary agents.

3) Modern publishing trends mean more than ever the novel is regarded as a commodity, competing for a small market share of the entertainment industry. The birth of digital publishing has led to uncertainty in sales, which were already falling amid the emergence of video games and rising television channels, and more

¹⁷ Pietsch, M. *Ibid.*

¹⁸ Lerner, B. *Ibid.*, p.6.

recently the economic downturn. Retailer W.H. Smiths reported an 8% fall in book sales during the Christmas 2013 period, compared to the previous year¹⁹, a trend matched by other sellers, although Waterstones have recently shown signs of a resurgence, helped in no small part by large sales of Harper Lee's *Go Set A Watchman*²⁰. As publishing houses look to reduce costs where possible, increasingly there is a conflict between editing departments and sales/marketing, especially once an author achieves some success and the desire to rush the next book out intensifies. As budgets are shaved, publishers look to sell fewer books in greater quantity; sales are still king, but at the cost of variety, of the mid-list. Often a publisher has fewer staff in editorial these days, while those that exist find themselves lower in the pecking order. It's increasingly the editor's role to acquire books, which more and more come highly polished via the literary agent. Jeanette Winterson believes so:

Editors have become linear and timid. I find, too, that many younger editors simply don't have the cultural resources to recognise a reference or playfulness therein. Copy-editing is not the skill it once was. There are computer programs to do that for you because we no longer believe we need human beings.²¹

In his 2005 essay, Blake Morrison warned that the editor is an endangered species, with few having the time these days for an interventionist, collaborative approach during the book's early drafts. Morrison cites an initiative by publisher Macmillan to uncover new talent, 'where authors would receive royalties but no

¹⁹ Campbell, L. 'WHS Christmas book sales down 8%', *The Bookseller*, January 22, 2014.

²⁰ Wood, F. 'Waterstones sells 50k copies of *Watchman*', *The Bookseller*, July 23, 2015.

²¹ Winterson, J. (11 February 2011) Comment in Alex Clark's 'The lost art of editing'. *The Guardian*.

advances; however, if their books needed significant editing, they would have to pay for the services of a freelance editor, since no one can do it in-house²².

Certainly the perception exists that books are not edited as well or thoroughly as they once were – at the level of plot, structure and language, grammar, facts. Perhaps a change in production is to blame, with the rise of user-generated content, where speed is prioritised over quality, the reader – eager for instant gratification, happy to tolerate the occasional error in order to receive the next instalment of a series with alacrity – ultimately to blame. As Alex Clark puts it:

In more broad-brush terms, the question is whether the image of the word-obsessed editor poring over a manuscript, red pen in hand, has given way to that of the whizz-bang entrepreneur attuned to the market's latest caprice, more at home with a tweet than a metaphor.²³

Kirsty Gunn, a novelist and professor of creative writing at the University of Dundee, is concerned that the business of publishing is becoming more collaborative in the wrong way:

To my mind, there's a wicked expectation that literary work can be created by some kind of committee. I've always been horrified by the notion of sending in a draft that isn't finished. I think there's a real difference between sitting down and creating a piece of work and then having a conversation with someone you respect, and sending in a piece of work and thinking, we'll work on this together.²⁴

It's an interesting discussion, where the line between editorial support and Gunn's committee falls, though I'm not convinced many agents or editors would tolerate for long having to invest such comprehensive input, unless perhaps the model yielded significant sales. Certainly debut novelists, whose work shows great promise but requires inordinate revision, are, without the weight of sales behind them, rarely

²² Morrison, B. (6 August 2005) 'Black day for the blue pencil'. *The Guardian*.

²³ Clark, A. (11 February 2011) 'The lost art of editing'. *The Guardian*.

²⁴ Gunn, K. (11 February 2011) Comment in Alex Clark's 'The lost art of editing'. *The Guardian*.

indulged. Gunn goes on to suggest the ubiquitous creative writing workshop is partly to blame for the writer giving up some responsibility to self-edit. However, as a former pupil and current lecturer of such courses this is not my experience. Further, my own practice of preparing a work for submission is contrary to this view, where I am under no illusion how polished the book must be before my editor or agent sees it. Gunn continues:

[T]he business of being a serious writer, of creating a piece of work that is your own, is about being your own editor . . . If you're creating something that's ultimately there as a product of the economy, then it is going to be made in a different way. That's very different than if you have the sense of a project in your mind that you want to develop and see to completion. I think this is why there's a lot of talk about books not being edited properly any more.²⁵

Where I do agree with Gunn is that editors are increasingly pressurised into second-guessing readerships, positioning a book in a well-established market. I was frequently told *TDRD* would appeal to readers of a particular author, that this was who they would aim the book at. Such pressure ultimately comes from retailers, who insist books should not be divergent from established success stories, although this is obviously governed by what sells.

Another threat to editors is the proliferation of digital media, meaning emerging authors see the value in going direct to readers, bypassing the gatekeepers (agents and publishers), the only goal being to see their work in print. Invariably this also means neglecting a rigorous and professional editorial process. Even paying for such is no guarantee of an improved quality, and such arrangements tend only to focus on grammatical and typographical corrections. I spoke to one self-published author, who requested anonymity, who paid several hundred pounds to have her

²⁵ Gunn, K. *Ibid.*

novel 'edited', the resulting text, after publication, still littered with errors. In such cases as these, it seems the invisibility of the editor works against its calling, with new writers having little appreciation of its worth.

T.S. Eliot, when asked if editors were no more than failed writers, replied: 'Perhaps - but so are most writers'²⁶. One might also counter that many editors are successful authors themselves, and perhaps the most insightful enquiry of this thesis was in speaking to those who have excelled in both. Certainly in my own editorial role I've found editors more receptive to having their own work edited – more sympathetic to and appreciative of the process.

Renowned editor, Diana Athill, reminds us, though, that editors should not expect gratitude from their authors. Working on a book she wished to publish, she found the content unreadable but, financially strapped in the early days of the business, pushed on nonetheless, re-writing every page, every line herself, returning each chapter to the author for approval.

I enjoyed the work. It was like removing layers of crumpled brown paper from an awkwardly shaped parcel, and revealing the attractive present which it contained. Soon after the book's publication it was reviewed in *The Times Literary Supplement*: an excellent book, said the reviewer, scholarly and full of fascinating detail, and beautifully written. The author sent me a clipping of this review. 'How nice of him,' I thought, 'he's going to say thank you!' What he said in fact was: 'You will observe the comment about the writing which confirms what I have thought all along, that none of that fuss about it was necessary.'²⁷

I asked editor Nicholas Royle, who worked with Alison Moore on her Man Booker shortlisted novel, *The Lighthouse*, for his thoughts on the current state of

²⁶ Allen, T. (1967) *T. S. Eliot: The Man and his Work*, London: Chatto and Windus, pp.338-339.

²⁷ Athill, D. (2000) *Stet*, London: Granta. p.37.

editing in the UK, whether it was as rigorous as previous eras, whether standards had diminished at all in tougher financial times.

The prevailing wisdom is that no one edits any more. I heard the other day that editors these days are no longer called editors but are increasingly known as acquisitions editors, because that's all they do – acquire – and they do that only once they've had approval from sales and marketing. There will be some truth in this, but I remain stubbornly – perhaps foolishly – positive in my outlook. I think it's a matter of individuals. Individual editors and individual lists and individual imprints, all within larger operations. I can't believe that if there's an editor at an imprint who has always edited, he or she will stop doing so.²⁸

Where I disagree with Royle is the assumption individual editors will be granted the autonomy to edit a work as they see fit, that because they've 'always edited' extensively or in a certain way, that they can continue to. My appointed editor with *Headline* certainly worked to a proscribed model, one that placed great emphasis on steering fiction towards best-selling exemplars within the genre. This meant she stood at the interface between business and aesthetic / literary demands, a liminal ground where conflict and compromise preside.

Penguin Ireland and *Dublin Review* editor Brendan Barrington echoed some of Royle's thoughts when I interviewed him.

It is a truism that editors don't edit as much as they used to, or as well; some agents say they have to do a lot of editing themselves because they can't count on editors to be willing or able to deal with a strong but imperfect text. This has been a truism for as long as I've been an editor -- seventeen years -- and it's very hard to judge whether or not it's actually true. Certainly, editors are less powerful within publishing houses than they used to be -- and sales and marketing and publicity people more powerful. If you walk in to the office of a large publishing house, and visit the desks of a dozen editors, you might not find any of them editing -- not because they don't edit, but because they don't edit during office hours.²⁹

²⁸ Royle, N. (2013) Interview conducted by email.

²⁹ Barrington, B. (2013) Interview conducted by email.

Certainly regard for the editorial process is often noted in authors' acknowledgements, a subtle citing of the transformational input from an editor. Authors I spoke to were effusive with praise for structural amendments, for continuity errors found, or the anachronisms and tired prose highlighted. Others were told a character's backstory was thinly drawn, or that the voice was inconsistent. Characters were even culled, as were whole chapters. Point of view was switched, tense changed. The scalpel hurt but was almost always appreciated post-procedure. But as I will demonstrate, it was my responsibility to at times resist the surgery.

Structure, trauma and analepsis

Fundamental to *That Dark Remembered Day's* structure was my intention to coerce the reader emotionally, to determine their distance from the narrative and characters, to create suspense, dictate rises and falls in tempo, to affect rhythm and levels of immersion. The novel's structure became a contentious editorial issue early on, in that my non-linear vision for the book's disrupted temporal narration was felt initially by my editor to be too risky, too difficult for the reader.

One point I had to concede was the profusion of retrospective narration in my earlier drafts, which distanced the reader too much from the unfolding story, as argued by my editor:

Rather than being told through Stephen, Mary and Richard events that happened through second hand memories, some scenes/dialogues could be made more immediate for the reader. Let us experience it with them and therefore feel more engaged in their development and the progression of the story. Be careful that it is not slipping into a wistful tone of memories and descriptions of events rather than a living narrative that the reader is locked into from the beginning.³⁰

Subsequently, a number of scenes were changed to the present tense, narrated in real time to reduce what Gardner terms the reader's 'psychic distance'³¹. A further and significant point of conflict was with Part Three of the novel, which is largely set in the Falklands. I had decided early on that I wanted to narrate Richard's war experience later in the book, though of course this risked being too expository, too 'keen to make the link between the cause of his PTSD and his later actions'³². Better to bring about this connection obliquely, to allow the reader to conclude this subtly, the power of Richard's character and behaviour coming from his narrative

³⁰ Baldwin, C. (2013) Email exchange.

³¹ Gardner, J. (1991) *The Art of Fiction*. New York: Vintage. p.111.

³² Caleshu, A. (2013) Email exchange.

silence, from the family's accounts of him. Lionel Shriver demonstrates how effective such lacunae can be in *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, none of her prize-winning novel being narrated by its eponymous protagonist. Certainly I considered removing Richard's section, his story told vicariously, the reader left to occupy this space. My agent, too, anticipated difficulties here:

I can see the issue with Richard in the Falklands. Perhaps there is too much time spent setting up Part 3 as the key to revealing his inner psyche. It would be interesting to see whether small flashbacks could work . . . blending and blurring his domestic life with what happened in the Falklands, to the point where they are inseparable in his mind.³³

And whereas I'd already begun doing this to some extent, it was at this point I decided upon a further fracturing of chronology, the section revealing an increasingly unhinged Richard, life at Highfield and in the Falklands ever indistinguishable. Richard, returning to a world he no longer understands, one he is unable to function in, retreats both inwards and to the landscape and natural world around him. The events he was witness to in the Falklands have taken some element of him, as reflected later by Stephen:

And yet before returning here it had become almost impossible to evoke the man his father had been, the person left behind on an island in the South Atlantic. The father who had returned was another version of himself – spectral, his presence merely implied, as if his time there had consumed him.³⁴

My aim with *TDRD*, then, was to recreate in the reader elements of the central character's difficulties – namely his post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) following his return from war – achieving this by manipulating the structure. With PTSD, hallucinations, nightmares and flashbacks all cause the sufferer to experience a temporal blurring, where past traumas revisit the present with such clarity and

³³ Brotherstone, C. (2011) Email exchange.

³⁴ Vowler, T. In *Ibid*, p.194.

precision that it's hard to distinguish them from reality. And so not only did I resist a linear narrative throughout, but the section told by my former soldier jumps between his current life and his time on the battlefield with little or no signposting of this shift (beyond a jolting realisation something has changed). By fragmenting the story chronologically, and particularly in using analepsis, the reader is witness to both a closer examination of this unhinging, but also to feeling a sense of disorientation themselves, prompted to subtly mimic some of the core symptoms of PTSD. For instance, here the narration switches from the Falklands to a first floor window at Highfield with no apparent segue:

As the symphony of war faded, a silence gathered for the first time in days. He slumped against the wall of peaty earth, lighting a cigarette and exhaling heavily. The sleet had eased now, a wedge of light lancing down to them between the clouds. Sitting there, his body trembling, he became aware of the unbroken trilling of a skylark as it hovered vigorously above them, and he thought he might weep.

He watched his daughter idle back and forth on the garden swing, the rope mewling against the branch at the end of each parabola.³⁵

This disorientation is amplified by the space left for the reader in the absence of a seamless and chronological progression, while also introducing an element of possible unreliable narration throughout the novel, as the same events are told by multiple (albeit implied first-person) narrators, a trope highlighted by Rimmon-Kenan.

An analepsis . . . often fills in an anterior gap, but it may also create a new gap by giving a different slant to an already-narrated event, thus making it difficult to reconcile fresh impressions with 'old' ones.³⁶

In Outka's paper on Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* she states that trauma theory reveals aspects of Roy's novel missed by stylistic and political

³⁵ Vowler, T. (2014) *That Dark Remembered Day*. London: Headline. p.178.

³⁶ Rimmon-Kenan, S. (1983) *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics*. London: Routledge. p.129.

readings, claiming that the temporal hybridity created through its complex narrative structure is redolent not merely of postmodernism or magical realist techniques, but is designed to simulate the symptoms of trauma for the reader. Outka points out that trauma reorders time itself, going on to demonstrate how Roy's temporal mixture can be read as the sign of traumatic experience.

For Roy's characters, time is not a binary meeting but a hybrid where different times become simultaneous, multiple, ambiguous. The present moment is at once a dangerous blending of many times, but also, paradoxically, a refusal of those moments to blend, signaling the past traumatic event's refusal to be integrated into an unfolding narrative.³⁷

Cathy Caruth, meanwhile, argues that because traumatic events are unbearable in their horror and intensity, they often exist as memories that are not immediately recognizable as truth and so an immediate understanding is impossible. She goes on to say that literature 'opens a window on traumatic experience because it teaches readers to listen to what can be told only in indirect and surprising ways'³⁸. The novel, then, with its use of allegory, motif and metaphor, is an ideal form to delineate a traumatic happening and its subsequent fallout. In *TDRD* I had to hope my editor agreed with this oblique approach, this non-linear structure giving the reader a glimpse of some dramatic, devastating event, before rewinding to slowly peel back the layers, giving them the 'why' and 'how' of the thing. The challenge was to do this while maintaining a compelling and immersive story, the structure achieving its aim on a subliminal level, one that didn't detract from the felt world it created. If for a second the illusion of reality, the fictive dream, was broken, my

³⁷ Outka, E. (2011) 'Trauma and Temporal Hybridity in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*.' *Contemporary Literature* 52.1: p.21-53.

³⁸ Caruth, C. (1996) *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: JHU Press. p.180.

technique visible, all would be lost, the reader, as if learning how a card trick is done, ultimately dissatisfied.

As the restructuring of *TDRD* progressed, I became increasingly convinced of the importance of lacunae in the text, of creating what Susan Sontag termed of photographs being 'inexhaustible invitations to deduction, speculation, and fantasy'³⁹. The author Graham Mort refers to lacunae's role in his discussion of a reader 'rescuing the text', of them not merely experiencing it but activating it.

As well as language operating at the level of signification, the setting of a story and its sensory detail also signify in an affective way. The story is formulated as an aspect of the writer's consciousness and activated or catalysed by the reader's consciousness. It follows that the story only really exists when this activation takes place. [...] We can't express the actual dimensions of time and space, because the task of writing could never keep up with the density and pace of actuality, so lacunae are inevitable.⁴⁰

Reminiscent of Kipling's 'fire that has been poked . . . [its] pieces raked out'⁴¹, Mort goes on to liken fiction's structure to the game Jenga, where bricks are removed from the whole, their presence implied by the space left. The resulting narrative is a lighter yet more immersive one, with the reader challenged to invest more, to be active rather than passive. And so I attempted to evoke the reader's activation through what literary scholar Wolfgang Iser termed 'indeterminacies':

Gaps are elements of indeterminacy where we can use our imagination and points at which the reader can enter the text to create the configurative meaning of what he is reading.⁴²

³⁹ Sontag, S. (2001) *On Photography*, Picador. p.23.

⁴⁰ Mort, G. (2011) Interview for *Short Fiction*, http://www.shortfictionjournal.co.uk/?page_id=515

⁴¹ Kipling, R. (1991) *Rudyard Kipling: Something of Myself and Other Autobiographical Writings*. Cambridge University Press. p.121.

⁴² Iser, W. (1974) *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*, John Hopkins University Press. p.283.

I began to rely more on mood and atmosphere than on a linear narrative, shrouding detail where I could, inferring its presence at other times, leaving hermeneutic (in terms of information) gaps where necessary. These ellipses within *TDRD* force the reader to catalyse the narrative, not merely witness it, particularly as they did not know whether such gaps would be temporary or permanent, as Rimmon-Kenan articulates.

The hermeneutic aspect of reading consists in detecting an enigma (gap), searching for clues, forming hypotheses, trying to choose among them and (more often than not) constructing one final hypothesis.⁴³

The lacunae and implied time in *TDRD* also serve to mimic its characters' trauma, where reality, particularly for Richard, is experienced in partial, fragmentary bursts. The trauma of guilt, however, is not Richard's alone. Stephen must live with his assisting Jenny to stay at home that day; Mary with her affection for Aiden, which led to his demise. The town itself suffers a collective culpability and grief, as if somehow responsible for 'producing' its murderous son. Blame is insidious and abidingly corrosive, both from within and beyond the community. Research on spree shootings is not widespread, but what investigation there has been reveals trauma is not limited to survivors, eye witnesses, first responders and victims' families. Merely being resident in the location of such an event is often sufficient.

[T]he impacts of mass shootings extend far beyond the primary victims to encompass the community, whether that is a workplace, neighborhood, school, or campus. Community members resent the media intrusion, the sense that they are being blamed for the violence, and the convergence of outsiders. The reluctance of some members to focus on the event, while others need to, is consistent with community dynamics observed after other types of disasters.⁴⁴

⁴³ Rimmon-Kenan, S. In *Ibid*, p.128.

⁴⁴ Norris, F. (2007) 'Impact of mass shootings on survivors, families and communities', *PTSD Research Quarterly*, Vol 18, No 3.

It therefore became necessary in the story for Stephen, even thirty years on, to encounter a communal malaise on his return to the town, one that leads to a revenge attack on him and the symbolic torching of Highfield, so long an imperious and salutary reminder to the townspeople below it. But it is Richard's trauma acquired on the battlefield that is the precursor to that endured by the others. He is both perpetrator of violence and victim of it, a mechanism for its perpetual cycle, a cycle that begins in the Falklands and (ostensibly) continues through to Stephen's assault on his colleague Ferguson. Violence begets violence.

Landscape and violence: the role of place in *TDRD*

Violence, and the places it occurs, is at the heart of *That Dark Remembered Day*. From Stephen's suspension for assaulting a colleague, to war in the South Atlantic and the spree shooting that defines much of the work's essence, man's brutality against man is ubiquitous. Often this violence is depicted by the location in which it materialises: Stephen's punching of Ferguson in the cloistered, currently febrile atmosphere of a university campus; combat that is wrought by the untamed landscape of the Falklands; a town whose labyrinthine streets dictate who lives, who dies. But violence in the book is not limited to or between its characters: Richard initiates a teenage Stephen into hunting for rabbits as his PTSD takes hold; the natural world, too, is abundant with brutality, which serves both an allegorical purpose (wood pigeons inadvertently flying towards a bird of prey, mirroring victims of the shooting happening upon Richard), but also distinguishes the nature of this (necessary) violence from the (arguably) futile barbarism of war.

A fundamental aim of *TDRD* was to reflect upon violence's self-perpetuating cycle, its contrails long and irrefutable, but often subtle. Jenny's treatment at the hand of bullies (which sees her remain at home on the fateful day) becomes inextricably bound with events in the South Atlantic a year earlier. Even the attack on Ferguson has, in some small part, its roots in the hole where the limbless Argentine conscript is found by Richard, as do the bruises Mary discovers on her arms each day that summer. And so violence connects not only the novel's characters, but also its locations.

Central to the novel's violence is the gun, be it an air rifle in the woods, an M1 carbine semi-automatic in a quiet market town, or the weapon Richard strips and reassembles aboard the *Sir Geraint*. Here Stephen reflects on the inquest's narrative of his father's gun: 'Accurate up to 200 yards, rounds could nevertheless travel two miles or so, stopping only once they struck something.'⁴⁵ Nothing typifies the gun's real and symbolic power in *TDRD* (or perhaps in general) more than the sniper's use of it, where death becomes coldly precise, distant yet intimate, as the shooter blends into the landscape, becomes part of it.

A well-camouflaged sniper could instil fear and disorder out of all proportion to their number, their impact often psychological more than lethal. He thought how their taking of lives differed from his own (or at least from how it was supposed to), their telescopic sight giving them an intimate connection with the target, the face studied, the target's eyes as if just feet away.⁴⁶

Human violence, then, is unique, distinguishable from that of animals owing to the technology of modern weaponry (specifically the semi-automatic rifle), making spree shootings, whether in Columbine, Hungerford or *TDRD*, eminently possible.

During the novel's initial stages of composition I became increasingly influenced by J.A. Baker's iconic non-fiction work *The Peregrine*, a book of vast linguistic ambition, a paeon to the natural world, in particular the eponymous bird of prey. What seduced me, aside from the extraordinary linguistic prowess, was Baker's often elegiac tone and how this alluded to the narrator's own (often mournful) state of mind, despite his feelings being almost entirely absent from the text beyond a rich

⁴⁵ Vowler, T. (2014) p.237.

⁴⁶ Vowler, *Ibid.* p.190.

cataloguing of the observed day. As Robert MacFarland says in its foreword, '*The Peregrine* is a book where nothing happens, again and again', yet somehow Baker is able to maintain a sense of drama and intensity all the same. Indeed, the book achieves, if not a narrative arc, then a melancholic fabled quality, an immersive, chimeric value as the reader follows Baker's pursuit of two wintering peregrines one year. Key to this effect is the tension yielded by the uncertainty of contact with the birds, something that sustains both Richard and the reader in *TDRD*. And, for Baker, witnessing the birds is felt almost as a religious quality. Here *The Peregrine's* author reveals the emergence of his obsession:

She drifted idly; remote, inimical. She balanced in the wind, two thousand feet above, while the white cloud passed beyond her and went across the estuary to the south. Slowly her wings curved back. She slipped smoothly through the wind, as though she were moving forward on a wire. This mastery of the roaring wind, this majesty and noble power of flight, made me shout aloud and dance up and down with excitement. Now, I thought, I have seen the best of the peregrine; there will be no need to pursue it further; I shall never want to search for it again. I was wrong of course. One can never have enough.⁴⁷

Peregrine kills are abundantly catalogued, their violence imagined by Baker as he examines predated carcasses. And so I set out to mimic Baker's intensity and pathos (the author is troubled both by a recently-diagnosed illness and the decline of falcons from pesticide use) in aspects of narration and character in *TDRD*, giving Richard this obsession with the bird of prey to the extent an intertextuality with *The Peregrine* formed. Baker is absorbed by the birds' behaviour in part to escape his encroaching poor health, Richard because he is unable to face or understand his illness. Within Baker's sublime prose is also a hint of misanthrope, primarily at human impact on peregrine numbers, an aspect that served well Richard's revulsion

⁴⁷ Baker, J. A. (2010) *The Peregrine*, London: Collins. p.125.

with the townspeople, for (what he perceives as) their bullying of his daughter, for their not having spilt their share of blood in the recent conflict.

Further, I became interested in how landscape and narrative could be linked to characters' trauma, how they could inform each other. And whereas war literature is abundant, the Falklands conflict seems to be, at least by novelists, a forgotten war, the few exceptions⁴⁸ to exist either satirising it or providing scant treatment.

After returning damaged by the battlefields of the Great War, Henry Williamson immersed himself in the wilds of Devon, becoming (as Richard does in *TDRD*) almost feral in his writing of *Tarka the Otter*, sleeping out overnight during long months of fieldwork, seeking, like Baker, to avoid human contact.

He crawled on hands and knees, squinting out sightlines, peering at close-up textures, working out what an otter's-eye view of Weest [sic] Gully or Dark Hams Wood or Horsey Marsh would be. So it is that the landscape in *Tarka* is always seen from a few inches' height: water bubbles "as large as apples", the spines of "blackened thistles", reeds in ice like wire in clear flex. The prose of the book has little interest in panoramas – in the sweeps and long horizons which are given to eyes carried at five feet.⁴⁹

I sought that my various landscapes, rather than merely adorning the characters (and the narrative), bring them into relief, reflecting their internal states, often saying what they could (or should) not, while also taking care not to make excessive use of this pathetic fallacy. The two aspects became inextricably bound, each a part of the other, the characters never simply inhabitants of the Falklands or the Cornish coast or the woods behind Highfield, but products of them. The two affect each other in constantly renewable ways: one amplifies/animates the other.

⁴⁸ For example, David Mitchell's *Black Swan Green*.

⁴⁹ Macfarlane, R. (26 March 2005) 'Only Connect', *The Guardian*.

And whereas topography is objective, landscape is something more subjective, so how a character regards a given place (someone's dreary, sombre plains are another's endlessly beautiful terrain) tells us about them without need for the author to clumsily spell it out. This is typified in Gerard Donovan's novel *Julius Winsome*, where the cruel, wintry landscape reflects (and appears to shape) the protagonist's (increasingly) cold and unemotional behaviour/narration:

Except for my dog I lived on my own, for I had never married, though I think I came near once, and even the silences were mine. It was a place built around silences.⁵⁰

Likewise in Tricia Wastvedt's *The River*, where the whole town, across a number of generations, is shaped by the river's presence following a tragic event on its water, something mimicked in *TDRD* as a decaying Highfield 'flows' through the text. Landscape, too, can act as objective correlative, where a well or quarry or river, something with no intrinsic value, is used to evoke an emotion in, firstly, the character, then the reader every time they're presented with it. The landscape takes on meaning beyond its physicality, as demonstrated with Richard's meditations on the woods behind Highfield. Here the temporal dissonance of *TDRD* is at its most heightened, the reader temporarily disorientated as to which landscape or mental state the protagonist occupies.

Marcel Proust regarded landscape as having four dimensions, the fourth being time, as evidenced greatly in *Swann's Way*.

Proust not only describes the church and its surroundings, but he also opens up the dimension of time. He combines all manner of meanings, stories, and peoples visiting the church and talking about it. The church is a part of the world and life he is trying to dramatize. It is not a prop. It is not a museum with artefacts even though it stands in for the past

⁵⁰ Donovan, G. (2008) *Julius Winsome*. London: Faber and Faber. p.16.

that is gone. When one person steps into the church, he is using it as a part of his world, and not a thing merely to be consumed. The visitor enters with a sense of history and a knowledge of the way the church is an indispensable part of his world.⁵¹

It's this temporal quality of the natural world that my characters ponder again and again, for example when Mary tells Stephen how oak trees can live for a thousand years – 300 to grow, 300 to live, 300 to die. And how, if clonal, their root systems can link up, so that if one is sick, the others provide it with nutrients. I wanted my landscapes, instead of serving purely as lyrical evocation of beautiful (or ugly) places in *TDRD*, to themselves become characters, imbued with a history, with a capriciousness and complexity (and therefore a stake) to rival those living within it. It became necessary for a symbiosis to occur, with landscape and character laying claim to one another, influencing each other until they became mutually dependent.

Here Stephen has foolishly returned to his childhood girlfriend Suzanne's house after several drinks: 'In the field across the road an outline of something, perhaps a barn owl, ghosted low across the furrows of ploughed land, silencing its prey.'⁵² Danger is everywhere, not merely in the malevolence of the town, but Stephen is prey too to Suzanne's potential seduction and the ruination this would bring. Indeed the hunting motif plays throughout, from Stephen's father showing him how to shoot the rabbit, to his search for the peregrines, the scenes in the Falklands, and, of course, the shooting in the town itself.

Often it was just the search itself, the stalking of these glorious birds, that saw him come to life again, as if some spiritual bond formed, hardening every time, regardless of whether he glimpsed them or now. Out walking one weekend, perhaps shortly after the shooting of

⁵¹ Mahmutovic, A. (2015) *The Sense of Place in Proust and McCarthy*.
<http://adnanmahmutovic.com/the-sense-of-place-in-proust-and-mccarthy/>

⁵² Vowler, T. *Ibid*, p.69.

the rabbit, he told Stephen how the hunter must become the thing it hunts.⁵³

And as Richard's unit prepare themselves for battle amid the bleak terrain of the Falklands, he reflects on the sanctuary offered in the woods behind Highfield:

As they worked, his thoughts turned once more to home, of the woods above Highfield, rich with elm and ash, marking the seasons absolutely, the trees softening the wind to a whisper, filtering the sun's blaze so that it mottled the earth. And in winter, when the cold clung to everything and ice tapered like bones from the branches, there was still comfort to be found there. The woods cocooned you in their own rhythm, embracing you, your senses mollified by their ancient splendour. But there was something ghostly about this landscape he now looked out on, with its frail sun offering little warmth, the light a sickly grey as it bled onto mile after mile of colourless scrub.⁵⁴

Later, as Richard descends into madness, pausing a moment before entering the barn to shoot Aiden, the natural world takes him back to the battlefield:

In the yard, the air shimmered in the summer heat, the warmth on his face reminding him of some forgotten time, and for a second he allowed the seething white sun to enter his eyes. When his vision returned, he saw swallows scything in and out of the far barn, their rapid swoops and turns a silent mimicry of the Skyhawks and Mirages.⁵⁵

Crucially, though, I was keen to guard against a romantic pastoralism or mere aestheticizing of the natural world, to avoid the novel becoming a eulogy to landscape, a nostalgic and hyperbolic evocation of place, or what Kathleen Jamie terms 'lovely honeyed prose'⁵⁶ in her at times scathing review of Macfarlane's *The Wild Places*. (I did, however, weave an aspect of ecofascism, namely misanthropy, into Richard's unhinging, which aligned well with his ultimate behaviour, albeit complicated by his PTSD.) The landscape in *TDRD* is both beautiful and harsh, its

⁵³ Vowler. *Ibid*, p.64.

⁵⁴ Vowler. *Ibid*, p.173.

⁵⁵ Vowler. *Ibid*, p.204.

⁵⁶ Jamie, K. (6 March 2008) 'A Lone Enraptured Male.' *London Review of Books*. Vol. 30.

violence no more or less brutal than that which humans are capable of. And yet I wanted to make the distinction between the two, to defend – almost celebrate – the violence of the natural world, much as Ted Hughes said of his poem 'Thrushes', arguing that when a thrush kills a worm it acts with an 'agile velocity [that is] a kind of stillness. At peace with essential being.'⁵⁷ By contrast, the man-made violence of the Falklands, and latterly the shooting spree, is of a different order entirely, one devoid of grace and logic.

Cynan Jones, in his short novel, *The Dig*, grafts his characters onto the rugged west Walian landscape where cruelty and violence remain ever present. By turns harrowing and beautiful, the visceral evocation of place is vital to the book's unsettling impact. Here a sheep farmer struggles to come to terms with his wife's violent death:

He watched the motes of mist snaking. Since her death he had asked them to stop work. There was an aftermath. The field looked battle-shocked, the ground stark, an altered sense of light. He couldn't see the fields from the house and he was glad of that. The stumps left in the hedgerows and the sharply angled butts of hazel were bleached and obvious still. It was accusatory, something about it.⁵⁸

In many of the texts cited above, the natural world and mental anguish are woven together as the narrator retreats to the land, attempting to graft themselves upon it, or, in Baker's and Williamson's case, to metamorphose with a wild creature as they come to terms with physical or psychological unease. Richard's only way of coping with his PTSD manifests in his pursuit of the peregrines.

⁵⁷ Hughes, T. (2014) 'Thrushes' in *A Ted Hughes Bestiary: Selected Poems*, Faber & Faber.

⁵⁸ Jones, C. (2014) *The Dig*. Granta Books. p.38.

Again, though, there proved to be conflict with my editor as to how much evocation and mining of the natural world could occur, her concern being that it interrupted narrative flow rather than contributing to it:

Your evocation of the landscape and the backstory of the family's life in the house is beautifully atmospheric and builds a vivid image of their world. It could be pared down at points, where it perhaps drifts and isn't adding enough to the story, slowing the pace, to the detriment of the characterisation and narrative drive.⁵⁹

Indeed, this became something of a moot point: the more affected by Baker's *The Peregrine* I became, the more my belief hardened that emotion and narrative drive could be either wrought by or framed within a stronger elicitation of landscape and its observation. It proved to be a source of continued debate between my editor and myself, right up until publication, a dance of negotiation, ground sometimes ceded, sometimes held, for example in the following passage:

In one of the top fields there was a horse they'd got to know. Past its prime, underfed, it had a sullen air as it stood solemn and unmoving in the centre of the field. Seeing them the animal would sometimes make its way over, allowing them to pat it as it scoured its neck against the gatepost. Jenny asked if they could take it home and they'd hatched mock plans to sneak up in the night, rescuing the wretched creature. Instead they took it apples, feeding it at the start of their circuitous walks, until one day it was no longer there.

On a walk back in March they'd penetrated an overgrown forest of laurel, emerging from its clutches into a snowdrop wood that bordered the river. It had been like stepping into some enchanted, ancient place, with fronds of fern specked among the thousands of pendulous white flowers and she watched the wonder on her daughter's face.⁶⁰

My editor requested on two occasions that this section be removed, suggesting that it diffused tension. Insisting on its inclusion, I felt the family's encounter was a crucial juxtaposing of Richard's own encounter with a dead horse in

⁵⁹ Baldwin, C. (2013) Email exchange.

⁶⁰ Vowler, T. In *Ibid*, p.130.

the Falklands, while the scene in the laurel forest contrasted greatly with the ravaged landscape of the war, setting it up as a sanctuary for him to return to. Increasingly the events in *TDRD* became rooted in and defined by the locations in which they occur.

In his 1996 essay, novelist Scott Russell Sanders claimed: 'that a deep awareness of nature has been largely excluded from mainstream fiction is a measure of the narrowing and trivialisation of that fashionable current.'⁶¹ Sanders goes on to evoke D.H. Lawrence, who in his essay on Thomas Hardy's work, wrote: '[T]here exists a great background, vivid and vital, which matters more than the people who move upon it [...] the vast, unexplored morality of life itself, what we call the immorality of nature, surrounds us in its eternal incomprehensibility, and in its midst goes on the little human morality play.'⁶² But if Sanders' charge is correct, and the trappings of modernity and consumerism led to nature's neglect in the modernist novel, there's evidence to suggest climate change, species loss and environmentalism has led to a revival, certainly in creative non-fiction and nature writing, but also, for example, in novels by Melissa Harrison⁶³ and Sarah Hall⁶⁴.

Annie Proulx, too, relies heavily on place to inform her fiction:

It's place that interests me, and the social and economic situation in a place—how people live, how they make their living, the culture—but the story comes from place. For other writers that's not the case [...] You could say that the place provides the architecture and the content is provided by the characters and the events that happen to them. For instance, could "Brokeback" have been set in a different place? Absolutely. It could have been Saskatchewan or Kentucky, or it could

⁶¹ Sanders, S.R. (1996) 'Speaking a word for nature' in *The Ecocriticism Reader*. University of Georgia Press. p.192.

⁶² Lawrence, D.H. (1985) *The Study of Thomas Hardy and Other Essays*, ed. Bruce Steel. Cambridge University Press. p.28.

⁶³ *Clay* (2013) and *At Hawthorn Time* (2015) London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

⁶⁴ *The Wolf Border* (2015) London: Faber & Faber.

have been a lot of places that it wasn't. As long as it was a rural place it would have worked because homophobia is a very strong rural characteristic.⁶⁵

Certainly *TDRD* could have worked in another provincial town (especially as the location is fictional), but other elements – the Cornish coast, the Falklands – are integral to the story's *donnée*. Further I was interested in how the essence of place shifts following a tragic event, specifically how it becomes inextricably synonymous with an episode in its history: Salem with witchcraft; Aberfan with the entombment of children; Hungerford, Dunblane and Columbine, as with the unnamed town in *TDRD*, with their arbitrary massacres. The collective trauma present in such places appears to exist independently of those living there, blurring with a mythology until the name becomes irrevocably pejorative. There is Richard's very distinctive battle with PTSD, but the unnamed town, too, suffers from a version of post-traumatic stress, its residents unable to come to terms with what possible role they might have played. 'Survivor guilt' inflicts many of the townspeople, a phenomenon where a person questions their right to have lived when others didn't. This is exacerbated in such indiscriminate shootings, where chance plays such a significant role:

It was in these morbid narratives that Stephen got a sense of the randomness of death that day. How mundane decisions, a last-minute alteration in plans, determined who lived, who died. Accounts emerged of lucky escapes, near misses. In the following days, people began examining their movements in detail: the traffic that had delayed them, the phone call as they were leaving the house, the virus that had kept them off work. Perhaps for those few it became life changing, this glimpse of death that had been a single street or a few seconds away.⁶⁶

Highfield, too, serves the narrative both in terms of objective correlative and character in its own right, particularly as Stephen returns there and we experience

⁶⁵ Proulx, A. (2009) 'The Art of Fiction' No. 199. Interview in *The Paris Review*, Spring, No. 188.

⁶⁶ Vowler, T. In *Ibid*, p.240.

the juxtaposing of the house in its contrasting states thirty years apart. Highfield's past is vividly evoked for him, from the lines his mother scored into the door jamb to measure the children's height, to the wallpaper his father cut out, or the cavity beneath the loose floorboard. The house is an archive of the remembered day in the novel's title, testament to the legacy of Richard's actions, even down to the bullet holes cited (though not explained at this point).

Throughout *TDRD* Stephen's anxiety that his father's legacy lives on through him, that the cycle of violence is inescapable, is palpable, amplified as it is following his assault on Ferguson. In a bid to escape his past, he has found a sanctuary of sorts on the Cornish coast, the assault and subsequent return to Highfield threatening to overwhelm him. It is only when finally the house is destroyed by arson, and he is able to find some redemption watching what he thinks is a peregrine in the closing pages, that the inevitability of further violence recedes a little.

Literary value of *TDRD*

Whilst emphasis has been placed throughout this thesis on the distinction between literary and commercial fiction, and how *That Dark Remembered Day* occupies crossover ground between the two, it's important to note such terms are mutable and exist on a broad spectrum, one where the either-or argument is often redundant. It is also worth reflecting briefly on what literary fiction might be and what it does. For many, particularly those in the book trade, it is simply a genre in itself. Often the label is associated with 'literature', muddying the water further, for example as to whether Dickens would be regarded a commercial or literary writer in today's terms. Definitions of literary fiction are, perhaps necessarily, slippery creatures. Emma Darwin, among other descriptions, makes the case for the reader having 'to read between the lines for the truth which may not be the truth actually, or not all of it; to appreciate an inadequate narrator and assemble the truth from what they transmit but can't understand.'⁶⁷ There's a sense of the reader having to work harder, or to return to Graham Mort, for them to occupy greater space, to perhaps be content with a sense of moral ambiguity, to tolerate obliquity. Ideas may be explored and given a greater freight than plot-driven storytelling. The prose may be playful, more original and sophisticated than that of a commercial novel. But of course examples of genre fiction doing this, and literary fiction not, are legion. Likewise I make no claim for the role landscape/setting can play in fiction being exclusive to literary fiction – Ian Rankin's Edinburgh-based crime novels draw heavily on the city's dark underbelly, its history and 'brooding presence providing a subtext

⁶⁷ Darwin, E. (2010) <http://emmadarwin.typepad.com/thisitchofwriting/2010/11/okay-so-what-do-i-think-literary-fiction-is.html>

to the stories'⁶⁸ – only that in *That Dark Remembered Day* place facilitates the book's literariness.

I sought, then, for *TDRD* to occupy and contribute to what Dominic Head terms 'an aesthetic means of investigating lived experience through imagined models, and addressing these grand themes – mortality, the ethical life – previously meditated through religion'⁶⁹. Despite literary fiction possessing no overt deductive proofs of matters philosophical, the form remains rich in argument, as maintained by Lamarque and Olsen:

[T]he truth-defender (i.e. the cognitivist) might reasonably insist (that literature) simply has different rhetorical strategies and different means of support from other truth-promoting modes of discourse; that's what's special about it.⁷⁰

If, then, in a search for a greater literariness for *TDRD* I was successful in resisting much of my publisher's suggested edits, how might this have manifested in terms of style and substance? And is the novel stronger for my unwillingness to privilege potential commercial appeal over my desire for a more reflective, enquiring text? Certainly I sought meaning and illumination of the human condition, with the book possessing a self-consciousness that would invite readers to peer into the abyss of human depravity and contemplate what it might take for them jump in (as indeed composition forced me to, especially in my attempts to understand Richard's character). The task was to achieve this without denying the reader the potential to delight in a compellingly told story populated by vividly drawn characters. For example, if in search of some illuminating truth about the state of the world the author weaves their own views of injustice or political sensibilities into the narrative,

⁶⁸ <http://www.ianrankin.net/crime-scene-edinburgh/>

⁶⁹ Head, D. (2008) *The State of the Novel, Britain and Beyond*. Singapore: Blackwell. p.15.

⁷⁰ Lamarque, P. & Olsen, S. (1994) *Truth, Fiction and Literature*. Oxford: OUP. p.235.

it is likely to the novel's detriment. Indeed I had to rein in (or at least be aware of) my own anti-war sentiments when exploring such matters within my characters' beliefs, although a certain amount of unconscious transference seems inevitable; and, of course, it is the writer's prerogative/necessity to at times mine their own emotional experience – particularly of trauma, for how else are they to achieve any sense of authenticity? And for all my attempts to distance myself emotionally from the novel's themes, to transcend the brutality of my subject matter, I suspect on some level the novel is in part a response (or even resistance) to my own sense of powerlessness at the seemingly ubiquitous violence of the world.

John Gardner puts it thusly:

[B]ecause the fictional process selects those fit for it, and because a requirement of that process is strong empathetic emotion, it turns out that the true writer's fundamental concern – his reason for finding a subject interesting in the first place – is likely to be humane.⁷¹

And whilst I was able to mine my own anti-war sentiments to furnish the characters' pacifism (particularly Mary's), I was, of course, unable to bear witness to either the actual atrocities of the Falklands or the imagined carnage of a spree shooting. The more I blurred fact with fiction (for example, the character boasting of removing gold fillings from the mouths of dead Argentine soldiers is from an actual account, as is the description of the soldier's scorched hands on board the *Galahad*), the more ethical discomfort I felt in what could be perceived as exploiting the horrors of war. The author is driven by a need to understand violence in order to portray it as narrative, and in the process uses brutality as a commodity for their art. Or as Alex Preston puts it:

⁷¹ Gardner, J. In *Ibid*, p.80.

[This] opens up for us a way of thinking about literature's role in responding to the evil of the world, of how to write violence without becoming complicit in it. For this is one of the driving ethical concerns [...]: can novelists write about the violently degraded modern world in a way that doesn't in some way taint them by association?⁷²

J.M. Coetzee voices these concerns via his character Elizabeth Costello in the work of the same name: 'Death is a private matter; the artist should not invade the deaths of others.'⁷³ And yet there appears little chance of avoiding such ethical concerns in representing real-life violence in literature. At best, in their balancing of aesthetic and ethical demands, the author can hope to avoid complicity (in their selecting one version of an historical event over another, depicting this as some kind of objective truth), but also to surface from the research and compositional process psychologically intact.

The journey of reading *TDRD*, then, was to be both an emotional and intellectual one, demanding much of the reader, forcing them into the unsettling territory of feeling compassion for a character they know will later commit an appalling atrocity. Such empathy could only be rendered by enabling readers to experience, albeit vicariously, my protagonist's world as he sees and feels it. Crucial to this was writing in, what Gardner terms,

a style that falls somewhere on the continuum running from objective to subjective; in other words, from the discursive, essayist's style, in which everything is spelled out as scientifically as possible, to the poetic style, in which nothing (or practically nothing) is explained, everything is evoked.⁷⁴

Further, *TDRD* would be idea- and theme-driven yet resist didacticism, its language prompting inquiry and profundity rather than providing decoration or

⁷² Preston, A. (2014) *Violence and the Modern Novel: Coetzee and Sebald*. PhD: English Language and Literature. University College of London. p.21.

⁷³ Coetzee, J.M. (2003) *Elizabeth Costello*, London: Secker. p.174.

⁷⁴ Gardner, J. In *Ibid*, p.44.

aesthetic exhibitionism. Much of the narrative in Richard's section is mimetic of J.A. Baker's in its intensely lyrical observation of the woods, none more so than immediately prior to his shooting spree. As Nabokov's Humbert Humbert remarks: 'You can always count on a murderer for a fancy prose style'⁷⁵. The son in *TDRD*, too, indulges at times a deeply self-reflective disposition, with much of the free indirect narration involving a sort of pleading, a confessional for Stephen's atavistic guilt:

Returning here had made the victims of that day vivid again, as he pictured them again and again approaching the last few minutes of their lives. They still appeared in his dreams at times, their faces gleaned from his imagination and snippets from the inquest, as they shifted silently towards him, the walking dead.⁷⁶

In his review of James Wood's *How Fiction Works*, Peter Conrad argues that a novel's 'characters want to be known, which means to be forgiven; in God's absence, the reader's conscience has to scrutinise their confessions and arrive at a proper judgment'⁷⁷. Later, in *TDRD*, Stephen reflects on his having kept Richard's crimes secret from his wife:

But why had he been so afraid of telling her? In case she thought his father's actions were hard-wired somewhere deep in his own DNA? Or just because the association was too much of a burden to ask of anyone?⁷⁸

A primary method in realising literary merit in *TDRD* was to engender psychological acuity by giving intimate access to all three narrators' minds, despite their third-person narration, thus illuminating aspects of self-consciousness. Where possible I abandoned authorial signposting, employing a free indirect style, allowing the narrative to 'float away from the novelist and take on the properties of the

⁷⁵ Nabokov, V. (1995) *Lolita*. London: Penguin Books. p.9.

⁷⁶ Vowler, T. *Ibid*, p.248.

⁷⁷ Conrad, P. (17th February 2008) 'Celebrate the force of fiction'. *The Observer*.

⁷⁸ Vowler, T. *Ibid*, p.249.

character, who now seems to “own” the words⁷⁹. This close narration allowed the fictive dream to greater sustain itself, and for a psychological realism to flourish, one that was better positioned to explore ideas and themes of a literary nature. This is apparent in Richard’s unravelling and estrangement from himself:

Watching the town’s lights pulse on one by one below, it was odd to think he was the only one of its denizens to have fought, at least in this war. Why had no one else from this provincial hovel signed up? Why hadn’t this town spilt its share of blood?⁸⁰

The second and third sentences in particular allow the reader closer to the character. Further, I wanted the book to transcend its structural elements and explore themes of a metaphysical order. Language and tone became particularly important when documenting Richard’s shooting spree (the fulcrum the novel turns on), which is told towards the book’s end. As Max Sebald points out, ‘[h]orror must be absolved by the quality of the prose’⁸¹, and my aim here was to underplay the drama and spectacle of the event, partly to reflect Richard’s coldly delusional state of mind, but also to allow the reader sufficient emotional space within the narration to experience its full impact. Much as Shriver does⁸², I wanted to deal with the cataloguing of the victims in a dispassionate, almost detached way, the narrative foreshadowing sufficient to give the scene its power by the time the reader arrives there. Crucial to this was the number of victims I would have Richard kill: too few would diminish the event’s impact, too many would risk a loss of verisimilitude and subtlety. This narrative compression (Richard’s rampage through the town occurs across just a few pages, emphasising his regard for the victims as non-people)

⁷⁹ Wood, J. (2009) *How Fiction Works*. New York: Vintage. p.9.

⁸⁰ Vowler, T. *Ibid*, p.195.

⁸¹ Sebald, M. (2009) *Five Dials*. Number 5, March. Hamish Hamilton.

⁸² Shriver, L. 2006. *We Need To Talk About Kevin*. London: Serpent’s Tail.

amplifies the shock for the reader, the events accelerated owing to this manipulation of the temporal/spatial relationship, where text (spatial) duration was significantly less than story (temporal) duration. Chekhov employs such a strategy in his story 'Sleepy', the babysitter's terrible act relayed with distinct brevity.

Laughing and winking and shaking her fingers at the green patch, Varka steals up to the cradle and bends over the baby. When she has strangled him, she quickly lies down on the floor, laughs with delight that she can sleep, and in a minute is sleeping as sound as the dead.⁸³

As does Virginia Woolf, who condenses the revelation of a character's death in *To the Lighthouse*, using prolepsis to allow the future to invade the present, even assigning it parenthesis.

[A shell exploded. Twenty or thirty young men were blown up in France, among them Andrew Ramsay, whose death, mercifully, was instantaneous.]⁸⁴

In its exploration and treatment of serious subject matter – war, violence, trauma, guilt – *TDRD* required a linguistic style capable of cultivating such insight, so as not to undermine itself. Head goes on to point out how Nick Hornby, in grafting the sober topic of suicide onto his typically flippant style in *A Long Way Down*, destabilises the novel. Comparing it for literariness to John Banville's *The Sea*, Head argues that the latter's author possesses 'a greater precision with words,

as well as his ability to make his ambivalent treatment of narrative and memory simultaneously dubious and enriching, lends *The Sea* the kind of unsettling resonance – about *literary form* as a mode of meditation on the topic of mortality – that is absent from Hornby's more formulaic novel.⁸⁵

⁸³ Chekhov, A. (1927) 'Sleepy', in *Selected Tales of Tchekhov*. London: Chatto & Windus. Original published in Russian 1899. p.147.

⁸⁴ Woolf, V. (2000) *To the Lighthouse*. London: Penguin Classics. p.145.

⁸⁵ Head, D. In *Ibid*, p.18.

In fairness to Hornby, his is an attempt to blur the boundary between serious and popular fiction – to both entertain and create something with gravitas: a middlebrow novel that appeals to a range of readers. The problem here is Hornby’s assertion towards a spectrum of literariness, where philosophical treatment of cerebral matters can be watered down with no loss to its capacity for intellectual sustenance. Paul Auster’s novel *Invisible* also suffers from a confusion between style and substance, although unlike Hornby’s it is Auster’s absurdist, postmodern deviations and artificial narrative that undermine the at times literary tone. The result is a plot and its characters which remain unpersuasive, and a linguistic framework that feels artificial and incongruous, as Wood points out.

What is problematic about these books is not their postmodern skepticism about the stability of the narrative, which is standard-issue fare, but the gravity and the emotional logic that Auster tries to extract from the “realist” side of his stories. Auster is always at his most solemn at those moments in his books which are least plausible and most ragingly unaffecting.⁸⁶

Stylistically, *TDRD* embraces an introspective narration, regardless of whichever character presides over the page, one that attempts to elicit the kind of unsettling resonance Head speaks of. This is not necessarily to claim a significant elevation of status for *TDRD*, a heightened importance or artistic superiority over genre/commercial fiction; more that the novel is distinct from such fiction, and that its solemn tone and linguistic richness allow a convincing aestheticizing of its subject matter, thus enabling effective psychological and existential verisimilitude. Or as Iris Murdoch termed it:

⁸⁶ Wood, J. (2009) *Shallow Graves. The Novels of Paul Auster*. New Yorker, November 30th.

The author's moral judgment is the air the reader breathes . . . The bad writer . . . exalts some and demeans others without any concern for truth or justice, that is, without any suitable aesthetic 'explanation'⁸⁷.

My aim with *TDRD* was to invest the text with sufficient credibility so as to create a bond between author and reader, one that allowed not only a mutual conviction between the two as to the kind of truth the novel yields, but also to argue for this truth, a phenomenon Edward Harcourt makes the case for:

Moreover, the shared conviction in question does not in this case rest — though in a different case it might do — on convictions the reader brings to the text already fully formed: one ground for the author's confidence that we *will* see things her way is surely that they are convictions brought about in us at least in part by the text.⁸⁸

If fiction is to possess value, insofar as it represents some human truth as the author perceives it, it must necessarily function — and therefore resonate — on a complex and abstract level, not merely a literal one. Metaphors, allegories, motifs may go largely unnoticed by the reader, yet taken as a whole and in retrospect lead to the work ringing true, of it having an enduring impact at a level not entirely understood, despite the text and its characters being entirely a work of imagination, or as Lynne Schwarz puts it: 'You just try and set up certain reverberations in a text and the whole acquires significance that it might not otherwise have.'⁸⁹ Such aftershocks are testament to a novel's worth.

⁸⁷ Magee, B. (1982) *Men of Ideas: Some Creators of Contemporary Philosophy*. Oxford: Open University Press. Chapter 14, 'Philosophy and Literature: Dialogue with Iris Murdoch'. p.249.

⁸⁸ Harcourt, E. (2010) *Truth and the work of literary fiction*. The British Journal of Aesthetics. Vol.50(1). Oxford University Press. p.96.

⁸⁹ Schwarz, L. S. ed., (2007) *The Emergence of Memory: Conversations with W.G. Sebald*, (New York: Seven Stories Press), p.54.

In Conclusion

My journey with *That Dark Remembered Day*, and examination of editorial practice, yielded both insight of and respect for the collaborative process, enriching my experience as both author and self-editor. The two components became mutually dependent, informing and shaping each other as I explored how landscape and characters' trauma could be woven together by lyrical prose, giving the novel an enhanced literariness. Crucial to the author-editor relationship is the sense of trust established between the two, a belief from the editor in the potential of the work, and a belief from the author that editorial intervention will make the work stronger, that they are a facilitator rather than a threat. Conflict is inevitable, with resistance emerging from both quarters, but it is this divergence and its subsequent resolution that, I believe, make *TDRD* an accomplished work of fiction, occupying as it does ground between the literary and the commercial. All writers face the challenge of determining which counsel to observe and which to resist, a fact made more complex when aspirations for the novel aren't entirely aligned. The process, this editorial dance, is a dynamic and fluid one, with neither party knowing the precise nature of the work that will emerge, least of all whether such negotiations will elicit either commercial or literary success. Or both.

Violence lies at the core of *TDRD*, and impacts on everyone's lives to some extent in the book. But as with Baker and Williamson, the natural world offers my characters a remedy for violence's contrails, a restorative hinterland with the prospect of breaking its cycle. Richard, especially, finds solace of a kind in the woods behind Highfield, much as nature writer Richard Mabey does in his memoir that charts his recovery from mental illness:

I've spent most of my life under the cover of trees, and the rhythms of the woodland year have been a kind of metronome: that burst of brilliance and energy in the spring, the long, dense trance of summer, the sumptuous fading-away of autumn, the clean, bare months of winter, the season of working and cutting back. They are places of long memory, and resilience.⁹⁰

Part of seeing *TDRD* realise its full potential, as well as my 'professionalisation' as a novelist, was in learning how to conduct myself and participate in the editorial dance I have referred to throughout this thesis. Likewise how much of a response *TDRD* could be to my own anxieties about war and violence, before this undermined the work.

Ethical issues, too, rose from my research for the novel, particularly when interviewing victims' families from the 2010 shootings in Cumbria, and the question of using people's grief as material for fiction became a salient and moot point, while also raising questions of the novelist's (and indeed the novel's) role in representing violence. Such moral implications can perhaps only be assuaged by the individual author as they wrestle with, what Alex Preston terms 'the trapped nature of the author, at once on the side of the victims and yet inescapably linked to the structures of hegemonic power'⁹¹.

The novelist must also contend with accusations of their exploiting grief in the pursuit of art by fictionalising real-life atrocities, and although the shooting spree in *TDRD* is entirely fictional, it was informed by research into actual shootings – particularly those in Cumbria (2010) and Hungerford (1987) – including the interviewing of victims' families. And as discussed, scenes in the Falklands are based on actual events, from references to ARA Belgrano's demise, to individual soldier's

⁹⁰ Mabey, R. (2008) *Nature Cure*. London: Vintage. p.11.

⁹¹ Preston, A. (2014) *Violence and the Modern Novel: Coetzee and Sebald*. PhD: English Language and Literature. University College of London. p.22.

accounts. But as historical novelist Emma Darwin points out, such appropriation must go beyond mere cataloguing:

To what extent may the novelist appropriate other lives, living or dead, and configure them to his or her own aesthetic purpose? Running counter to this respect for the actual boundaries of a real person's experience, and the readers' preconceptions of the historical world, is the need for a novel to be a novel: to be about the possibilities not merely the record, to be verisimilar not simply documentary, to use the storied nature of human consciousness and memory to refigure experience not merely reproduce it.⁹²

Whether this quest for verisimilitude exonerates an author from such exploitation charges is debatable, and I would suggest it is determined by the time elapsed between the two. So called 9/11 fiction began to emerge just three years after the attacks in New York City, and dozens more have followed since, categorised by some as a 'literature of crisis'⁹³. German sociologist Theodor Adorno initially claimed (though subsequently shifted position) that 'to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric'⁹⁴, as if such unimaginable horrors render art both redundant and offensive. But art's response is inevitable and often immediate, and I would argue more an attempt to understand than to exploit. Certainly much of my intention with *TDRD* (and indeed the novel's initial kernel) was to give a (albeit fictional) voice to the marginalised victims of such spree shootings, namely family members of the perpetrator, whose plight (in similar real-life events) seems largely ignored. And yet I am aware such beginnings also arose from a personal fascination with how these people coped with a loved one's crimes. Dilemmas and moral choices must still be faced by the artist in their pursuit of understanding.

⁹² Darwin, E. (2010) *A Secret Alchemy: Commentary and Context*. PhD Creative Writing, University of London. p.331.

⁹³ Tseti, A. (2012) 'Book review: After the Fall'. *European Journal of American Studies* 7 (2).

⁹⁴ Adorno, T W. (1981) *Prisms*, tr. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge: MIT Press, p. 34.

As I mentioned in the Introduction, this thesis is a self-reflection, a critical commentary on the process of writing *That Dark Remembered Day*, and the elements that led to editorial conflict. As authors we have to take risks, to where possible shun formula and create original, and if possible, provocative work, fiction that shines some new light on humanity, that challenges or resists its most egregious qualities, and in this sense I believe *TDRD* has accomplished its aim.

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