



Nicci

FRENCH



THE
RED ROOM

'GRIPPING, CHILLING, MOVING' OBSERVER

Red Room
by
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Beware of beautiful days. Bad things happen on beautiful days. It may be that when you get happy, you get careless. Beware of having a plan. Your gaze is focused on the plan and that's the moment when things start happening just outside your range of vision.

I once helped out my professor with some research on accidents. A team of us talked to people who had been run over, pulled into machinery, dragged out from under cars. They had been in fires and tumbled down stairs and fallen off ladders. Ropes had frayed, cables had snapped, people had dropped through floors, walls had tipped, ceilings had collapsed on to their heads. There is no object in the world that can't turn against you. If it can't fall on your head, it can become slippery, or it can cut you, or you can swallow it, or try to grab hold of it. And when the objects get into the hands of human beings, well, that's a whole other thing.

Obviously there were certain problems with the research. There was a core of accident victims who were inaccessible to our inquiries because they were dead. Would they have had a different tale to tell? That moment when the basket slipped and the window-cleaners fell from twenty floors up, their sponges still in their hands, did they think anything apart from, Oh, fuck? As for the others, there were people who, at the time of their mishap, had been tired, happy, clinically depressed, drunk, stoned, incompetent, untrained, distracted or just the victims of faulty equipment or what

we could only and reluctantly characterize as bad luck, but all of them had one thing in common. Their minds had been on something else at the time. But, then, that's the definition of an accident. It's something that breaks its way into what your mind is on, like a mugger on a quiet street.

When it came to summing up the findings, it was both easy and hard. Easy because most of the conclusions were obvious. Like it says on the bottle, don't operate heavy machinery when intoxicated. Don't remove the safety guard from the machine press, even if it seems to be getting in the way, and don't ask the fifteen-year-old doing a week's work experience to use it. Look both ways before crossing the road.

But there were problems, even with that last one. We were trying to take things that had been on the edge of people's minds and move them to the front. The obvious problem with that is that no one can move everything to the front of their mind. If we turn to face a source of danger, something else has an opportunity to sneak up behind us. When you look left, something on your right has the chance to get you.

Maybe that's what the dead people would have told us. And maybe we don't want to lose all of those accidents. Whenever I've fallen in love, it's never been with the person I was meant to like, the nice guy with whom my friends set me up. It hasn't necessarily been the wrong man, but it's generally been the person who wasn't meant to be in my life. I spent a lovely summer once with someone I met because he was a friend of a friend who came along to help my best friend move into her new flat; the other friend who was meant to come and help had to play in a football match because someone else had broken his leg.

I know all that. But knowing it isn't any help. It only helps you understand it after it's happened. Sometimes not even then. But it's happened. There's no doubt about that. And I suppose it started with me looking the other way.

It was towards the end of a May afternoon and it was a beautiful day. There was a knock at the door of my room and before I could say anything it opened and Francis's smiling face appeared. 'Your session has been cancelled,' he said.

'I know,' I said.

'So you're free . . .'

'Well . . .' I began. At the Welbeck Clinic, it was dangerous ever to admit you were free. Things were found for you to do, which were generally the things that people more senior than you didn't want to bother with.

'Can you do an assessment for me?' Francis asked quickly.

'Well . . .'

His smile widened. 'Of course, what I'm actually saying is, "Do an assessment for me", but I'm putting it in a conventionally oblique way as a form of politeness.'

One of the disadvantages of working in a therapeutic environment was having to answer to people like Francis Hersh who, first, couldn't say good morning without putting it in quotation marks and providing an instant analysis of it, and, second . . . Don't get me started. With Francis, I could work my way through second, third and all the way up to tenth, with plenty to spare.

'What is it?'

'Police thing. They found someone shouting in the street, or something like that. Were you about to go home?'

‘Yes.’

‘Then that’s fine. You can just pop into the Stretton Green station on your way home, give him the once-over and they can send him on his merry way.’

‘All right.’

‘Ask for DI Furth. He’s expecting you.’

‘When?’

‘About five minutes ago.’

I rang Poppy, caught her just in time and told her I’d be a few minutes late meeting her for a drink. Just a work thing.

When someone is doing the sorts of things that are likely to cause a breach of the peace, it can be surprisingly difficult to assess whether they are bloody-minded, drunk, mentally ill, physically ill, confused, misunderstood, generally obnoxious but harmless, or, just occasionally, a real threat. Normally the police handle it in a fairly random fashion, only calling us in when there are extreme and obvious reasons. But a year earlier, a man who had been picked up and let go turned up a couple of hours later in the nearby high street with an axe. Ten people were injured and one of them, a woman in her eighties, died a couple of weeks later. There had been a public inquiry, which had delivered its report the previous month, so for the time being the police were calling us in on a regular basis.

I’d been to the station several times, with Francis or on my own. What was funny about it, in a very unfunny way, was that in providing our best guesses about these mostly sad, confused, smelly people sitting in a room in Stretton Green, we were mainly providing the police with an alibi. The next time something went wrong, they could blame us.

Detective Inspector Furth was a good-looking man,

not much older than I was. As he greeted me, he had an amused, almost impudent, expression that made me glance nervously at my clothes to make sure nothing was out of place. After a few moments I saw that this was just his permanent expression, his visor against the world. His hair was blond, combed back over his head, and he had a jaw that looked as if it had been designed all in straight lines with a ruler. His skin was slightly pitted. He might have had acne as a child.

‘Dr Quinn,’ he said with a smile, holding out his hand. ‘Call me Guy. I’m new here.’

‘Pleased to meet you,’ I said, and winced in the vice of his handshake.

‘I didn’t know you’d be so . . . er . . . young.’

‘Sorry,’ I began, then stopped myself. ‘How old do I need to be?’

‘Got me,’ he said, with the same smile. ‘And you’re Katherine – Kit for short. Dr Hersh told me.’

Kit used to be the special name my friends called me. I’d lost control of that years ago, but it still made me flinch a bit when a stranger used it, as if they’d come into the room while my clothes were off.

‘So where is he?’

‘This way. You want some tea or coffee?’

‘Thanks, but I’m in a bit of a hurry.’

He led me across the open-plan office, stopping at a desk to pick up a mug in the shape of a rugby ball, with the top lopped off like a breakfast egg.

‘My lucky mug,’ he said, as I followed him through a door on the far side. He stopped outside the interview room.

‘So who am I meeting?’ I asked.

‘Creep called Michael Doll.’

‘And?’

‘He was hanging around a primary school.’

‘He was approaching children?’

‘Not directly.’

‘Then what’s he doing here?’

‘The local parents have started an action group. They give out leaflets. They spotted him and things got a bit nasty.’

‘To put it another way, what am I doing here?’

Furth looked evasive. ‘You know about these things, don’t you? They said you work at Market Hill.’

‘Some of the time I do, yes.’ In fact, I divide my time between Market Hill, which is a hospital for the criminally insane, and the Welbeck Clinic, which provides assistance for the middle classes in distress.

‘Well, he’s weird. He’s been talking funny, muttering to himself. We were wondering if he was a schizophrenic, something like that.’

‘What do you know about him?’

Furth gave a sniff, as if he could detect the man’s stench on the other side of the door. ‘Twenty-nine years old. Doesn’t do much of anything. Bit of minicabbing.’

‘Has he got a record of sexual offences?’

‘Bit of this, bit of that. Bit of exposure.’

I shook my head. ‘Do you ever think this is all a bit pointless?’

‘What if he’s really dangerous?’

‘Do you mean, what if he’s the sort of person who might do something violent in the future? That’s the sort of thing I asked my supervisor when I started at the clinic. She answered that we probably won’t spot it now and we’ll all feel terrible afterwards.’

Furth’s expression furrowed. ‘I’ve met bastards like Doll, *after* they’ve done their crime. Then the defence

can always find someone who'll come in and talk about their difficult childhood.'

Michael Doll had a full head of shoulder-length hair, brown and curly, and his face was gaunt with prominent cheekbones. He had strangely delicate features. His lips in particular looked like a young woman's, with a pronounced Cupid's bow. But he had a wall-eye and it was difficult to tell if he was staring at me or just slightly past me. He had the tan of a man who spent much of his life outside. He looked as if the walls were pressing in on him. His large callused hands were tightly clutched as if each was trying to prevent the other trembling.

He wore jeans and a grey windcheater that wouldn't have looked especially strange if it weren't for the bulky orange sweater underneath, which it failed to cover. I could see how, in an another life, another world, he might have been attractive, but weirdness hung about him like a bad odour.

As we came in he had been talking quickly and almost unintelligibly to a bored-looking female police officer. She moved aside with obvious relief as I sat down at the table opposite Michael Doll and introduced myself. I didn't get out a notebook. There probably wouldn't be any need.

'I'm going to ask you some simple questions,' I said.

'They're after me,' Doll muttered. 'They're trying to get me to say things.'

'I'm not here to talk about what you've done. I just want to find out how you are. Is that all right?'

He looked around suspiciously. 'I don't know. You a policewoman?'

'No. I'm a doctor.'

His eyes widened. 'You think I'm ill? Or mad?'

'What do *you* think?'

‘I’m all right.’

‘Good,’ I said, hating the patronizing reassurance in my voice. ‘Are you on any medication?’ He looked puzzled. ‘Pills? Medicines?’

‘I take stuff for my indigestion. I get these pains. After I’ve eaten.’ He rapped his chest.

‘Where do you live?’

‘I’ve got a room. Over in Hackney.’

‘You live alone?’

‘Yeah. Anything wrong with that?’

‘Nothing. I live on my own.’

Doll grinned a small grin. It didn’t look nice. ‘You got a boyfriend?’

‘What about you?’

‘I’m not a poof, you know.’

‘I meant have you got a girlfriend.’

‘You first,’ he said sharply.

He was quick-witted enough. Manipulative, even. But not all that much more crazy than anybody else in the room.

‘I’m here to find out about *you*,’ I said.

‘You’re just like them,’ he said, a tremble of rage in his voice. ‘You want to trap me into saying something.’

‘What could I trap you into saying?’

‘I dunno, I . . . I . . .’ He started to stammer and the words wouldn’t come. He gripped the table hard. A vein on the side of his forehead was throbbing.

‘I don’t want to trap you, Michael,’ I said, standing up. I looked over at Furth.

‘I’m done.’

‘And?’

‘He seems all right to me.’

To my side I could hear Doll, like a radio that had been left on.

‘Aren’t you going to ask him what he was doing outside the school?’

‘What for?’

‘Because he’s a pervert, that’s why,’ said Furth, finally not smiling. ‘He’s a danger to others, and he shouldn’t be allowed to hang round kids.’ That was for me. Now he started talking past me at Doll. ‘Don’t think this is doing you any good, Mickey. We know you.’

I glanced round. Doll’s mouth was frozen open, like a frog or a fish. I turned to go and from that point on I had only flashes of awareness. A smashing sound. A scream. A push from one side. A tearing sensation down the side of my face. I could almost hear it. Quickly followed by a warm splashing over my face and neck. The floor rising to meet me. Lino hitting me hard. A weight on me. Shouting. Other people around. Trying to push myself but slipping. My hand was wet. I looked at it. Blood. Blood everywhere. Everything was red. Unbelievable amounts everywhere. I was being dragged, lifted.

It was an accident. I was the accident.

I

‘And I said, “Yes, yes, I do believe in God,” but God can be the wind in the tree and the lightning in the sky.’ He leant forward and pointed at me with his fork, this man who I wasn’t going to be going home with at the end of the evening, and whose phone number I would lose. ‘God can be your conscience. God can be a name for love. God can be the Big Bang. “Yes,” I said, “I believe that even the Big Bang may be the name for your faith.” Can I top you up?’

That was the stage of the evening that we’d arrived at. Six bottles of wine between eight of us, and we were only on the main course. Sloppy fish pie with peas. Poppy is one of the worst cooks I know. She makes industrial quantities of unsuccessful nursery food. I looked across at her. Her face was flushed. She was arguing about something with Cathy, waving her arms around over-emphatically, leaning forward. One of her sleeves trailed in the plate. She was bossy, anxious, unconfident, perhaps unhappy, always generous – she was throwing this small dinner party in honour of my recovery and my imminent return to work. She felt my eyes on her and looked my way. She smiled and looked suddenly young, like the student she’d been when I met her ten years ago.

Candlelight makes everybody look beautiful. Faces around the table were luminous, mysterious. I looked at Seb, Poppy’s husband, a doctor, a psychiatrist. Our territories bordered. That’s what he had once said. I’d

never thought of myself as having a territory, but he sometimes seemed like a dog patrolling his yard, barking at anyone who came too close. His sharp, inquisitive features were smoothed by the kind, guttering light. Cathy was no longer brown and heavy but golden and soft. Her husband at the other end was cast into secret shadows. The man on my left was all planes of light and darkness.

‘I said to her, “We all need to believe in something. God can be our dreams. We all need to have our dreams.”’

‘That’s true.’ I slid a forkful of cod into my mouth.

‘Love. “What is life without love?” I said, I said’ – he raised his voice and addressed the table at large – “What’s life without love?”’

‘To love,’ said Olive, opposite me, lifting her empty glass and laughing like the peal of a cracked bell. A tall, dark, aquiline woman with her blue-black hair piled dramatically on top of her head. I’ve always thought she looks like a model rather than a geriatric nurse. She leaned across and planted a smacking kiss on the mouth of her new boyfriend, who sat back in his chair looking dazed.

‘More fish pie, anyone?’

‘Is there someone in your life?’ murmured my neighbour. He really was quite tipsy. ‘Someone to love?’

I blinked and tried not to remember. Another party, another life away, before I’d nearly died and come back to life as a woman with a scar bisecting her face: Albie in a spare bedroom in a stranger’s house, with someone else. His hands on her strawberry-pink dress, pushing its straps off her shoulders; her creamy breasts swelling under his hands. Her eyes closed, her head tipped back, the bright lipstick smudged. He said, ‘No, no, we

mustn't,' in a drunken slur, but let her anyway, slack and passive while her fingers unpeeled him. I had stood there on the landing, gazing in, not able to move or speak. There are only so many things one can do in sex, I thought then, watching this tableau; all the gestures we think are our own belong to other people too. The way she rubbed her thumb across his lower lip. I do that. Then Albie saw me and I thought, There are only so many ways you can catch your lover with somebody else. It seemed unoriginal. His lovely shirt hung loose. We had stared at each other, the woman lolling between us. We stared and I could hear my heart beat. What's life without love?

'No,' I said. 'Nobody now.'

Poppy rapped her knife against her glass. Upstairs I heard a child shriek. There was a loud thump on the ceiling above us. Seb frowned.

'I want to make a toast,' she said. She cleared her throat.

'Hang on, let me fill the glasses.'

'Three months ago, Kit had her terrible . . . thing . . .'

My neighbour turned and looked at my face. I put up my hand to cover the scar, as if his gaze was burning it.

'She was attacked by a madman.'

'Well . . .' I began to protest.

'Anybody who saw her in that hospital bed, like I did, what he'd done to her . . . We were desperate.' Drink and emotion made Poppy's voice wobble. I looked down at my plate, hot with embarrassment. 'But nobody should judge her by appearances.' She blushed with alarm and looked at me. 'I don't mean the . . . you know.' I raised my hand to my face again. I was always doing that now, the gesture of self-protection I hadn't managed at the time. 'She may look gentle, but she's a tough,

brave woman, she's always been a fighter, and here she is, and on Monday she returns to work, and this evening is for her, and I wanted everyone to raise their glasses to celebrate her recovery and . . . well, that's it, really. I never was good at making speeches at the best of times. But anyway, here's to darling Kit.'

'To Kit,' everyone chorused. Glasses, raised high, chinked across the debris of the meal. Faces glowing, smiling at me, breaking up and re-forming in the candlelight. 'Kit.'

I managed a smile. I didn't really want all this, and I felt bad about that.

'Come on, Kit, give us a speech.' This from Seb, grinning at me. You probably know his face or his voice. You've heard him giving opinions on everything from serial killers' motivations to toddlers' nightmares to the madness of crowds. He compliments and smiles and does his very best to make me feel good about myself, but really, I suppose, sees me as a hopeless beginner in his own profession. 'You can't just sit there looking sweet and shy, Kit. Say something.'

'All right, then.' I thought about Michael Doll, lunging across the room, hand upraised. I saw his face, the glint of his eyes. 'I'm not really a fighter. In fact I'm the opposite, I –' There was a loud howl from upstairs, then another.

'Oh, for God's sake,' said Poppy, rising in her chair. 'Other children are in bed asleep at ten thirty, not beating each other up. Hang on, everybody.'

'No, I'll go,' I said, pushing back my chair.

'Don't be daft.'

'Really, I want to. I haven't seen the children all evening. I want to say good-night to them.'

I practically ran from the room. As I climbed the stairs,

I heard footsteps pounding along the corridor, and little whimpers. By the time I reached their bedroom, Amy and Megan were in bed with the covers pulled up. Megan, who is seven, was pretending to be asleep, though her eyelids quivered with the effort of keeping them shut. Amy, aged five, lay on her pillow with her eyes wide open. A velvet rabbit with shabby ears and beady eyes lay beside her.

‘Hello, you two,’ I said, sitting on the end of Amy’s bed. In the glow from the night-light, I could see that there was a red mark on her cheek.

‘Kitty,’ she said. Apart from Albie, they were the only people I knew who called me Kitty. ‘Megan hit me.’

Megan sat up indignantly. ‘Liar! Anyway, she scratched me, look. Look at the mark.’ She held out her hand.

‘She said I was a bird-brain.’

‘I did not!’

‘I’ve come to say good-night.’

I looked at them as they sat up in their beds with their tousled heads, bright eyes and flushed cheeks. I put a hand on Amy’s forehead. It was hot and damp. A clean smell of soap and child’s sweat rose off her. She had freckles across the bridge of her nose and a pointed chin.

‘It’s late,’ I said.

‘Amy woke me,’ said Megan.

‘Oh!’ Amy’s mouth opened in a perfect circle of outrage.

Downstairs I could hear the hum of voices, the scrape of cutlery on china, someone laughing.

‘How shall I get you to go to sleep?’

‘Does it hurt?’ Amy put out one finger and poked my cheek, making me flinch.

‘Not now.’

‘Mummy says it’s a shame,’ said Megan.

‘Does she?’

‘And she said Albie’s gone.’ Albie had tickled them, given them lollipops, blown through his cupped hands to make owl noises.

‘That’s right.’

‘Won’t you have babies, then?’

‘Ssh, Amy, that’s rude.’

‘Maybe one day,’ I said. I felt a little throb of longing in my belly. ‘Not yet, though. Shall I tell you a story?’

‘Yeah,’ they said together, in triumph. They’d got me.

‘A short one.’ I searched around in my mind for something usable. ‘Once upon a time there was a girl who lived with her two ugly sisters and . . .’

A joint groan came from the beds. ‘Not that one.’

‘Sleeping Beauty, then? Three Little Pigs? Goldilocks?’

‘Bo-o-ring. Tell us one you made up yourself,’ said Megan. ‘Out of your own head.’

‘About two girls . . .’ prompted Amy.

‘. . . called Amy and Megan . . .’

‘. . . and they have an adventure in a castle.’

‘OK, OK. Let’s see.’ I began to talk without any idea of how I was going to continue. ‘Once there were two little girls called Megan and Amy. Megan was seven and Amy was five. One day they got lost.’

‘How?’

‘They were going for a walk with their parents, and it was early evening, and a great storm blew up, with thunder and lightning and winds howling round them. They hid in a hollow tree, but when the rain stopped they realized they were all alone in a dark forest, with no idea of where they were.’

‘Good,’ said Megan.

‘So Megan said they should walk until they came to a house.’

‘And what did I say?’

‘Amy said they should eat the blackberries on the bushes around them to stop themselves from starving. They walked and walked. They fell over and scraped their knees. It got darker and darker and lightning flashed and big black birds kept flapping past them, making horrible screeching sounds. They could see eyes peering at them from the bushes . . . animal eyes.’

‘Panthers.’

‘I don’t think there were panthers in that –’

‘Panthers,’ said Megan firmly.

‘All right, panthers. Suddenly, Megan saw a light shining through the trees.’

‘What about –’

‘Amy saw it at the same time. They walked towards it. When they reached it, they found it came from an oil lamp hanging above an arched wooden door. It was the door to a great ruined house. It looked scary, a spooky place, but by now they were so tired and cold and frightened that they decided to take a chance. They rapped on the door, and they could hear the sound echoing inside, like the beat of a drum.’ I paused. They were silent now, their mouths open. ‘But nobody came, and more and more big black birds screeched around them, until there was a dark cloud of birds in the sky. Black birds and flashes of lightning, and rumbles of thunder, and the branches of trees swaying in the wind. So Megan pushed hard on the door and it swung open, with a squeaky creak. Amy took the oil lamp from the entrance, and together the two little girls went into the ruined house. They held hands and stared around.

‘There was a passageway, with water running down

the walls. They followed it until they came to a room. It was painted all blue, with a cold blue fountain bubbling in the middle and a high blue ceiling, and they could hear the sound of waves crashing on the shore. It was a room of water, of oceans and faraway places, and it made them feel that they were further from home than they had ever been before. So they walked a bit further and came to another room. It was a green room, with ferns and trees in pots, and it reminded them of the parks they liked playing in and made them feel more homesick than they had ever felt before. So they walked a bit further and came to a third room. The door was shut. It was painted red. For some reason they felt very scared of this room, before they even opened the door.'

'Why?' asked Megan. She reached out a hand and I clasped it in my own.

'Behind the red door lay the red room. They knew that inside this room was everything they were most afraid of. Different things for Megan than for Amy. What are you most scared of, Megan?'

'Dunno.'

'What about being high up?'

'Yeah. And falling off a boat and dying. And being dark. And tigers. And crocodiles.'

'That's what was inside the red room for Megan. And Amy?'

'Amy hates spiders,' said Megan gleefully. 'She screams.'

'Yeah, and poison snakes. Fireworks exploding in my hair.'

'OK. So what did Megan and Amy do now?'

'Run away.'

'No, they didn't. They wanted to see inside. They wanted to see those tigers and boats and crocodiles -'

'And poison snakes -'

‘And poison snakes. So they pushed open the door and they went into the red room, and they looked around and it was red everywhere. It was red on the ceiling and red on the walls and red on the floor.’

‘But what was in it?’ asked Megan. ‘Where was the crocodiles?’

I paused, nonplussed. What actually was in the room? I hadn’t thought of this bit of the story. I toyed with the idea of a real live tiger that would eat them both.

‘There was a little stuffed tiger,’ I said. ‘And a stuffed crocodile.’

‘And a stuffed snake.’

‘Yes, and a little toy boat and there was lovely food to eat and a big lovely soft bed. And Megan and Amy’s parents. And they tucked them up in the bed and gave them a big kiss and they fell asleep.’

‘With a night-light.’

‘With a night-light.’

‘I want another story,’ Megan said.

I leaned down and kissed two grumpy foreheads. ‘Next time,’ I said, backing out of the room.

‘Tailed off a bit at the end, I thought.’ I started and looked round. Seb was smiling at me. ‘Where did you get it from? The Bruno Bettelheim collection of bedtime stories?’

He said it with a grin, but I answered him seriously. ‘It was a dream I had in hospital.’

‘But I don’t suppose there were toys and a warm bed in your red room.’

‘No.’

‘What was there?’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. I was lying. I felt my stomach lurch at the memory of it.

★

Later, I refused the offer of a lift home from my drunken friend who believed God was the Big Bang, and walked the mile from Poppy and Seb's to my flat in Clerkenwell. The cool, damp wind blew in my face, and my scar tingled faintly. The half-moon floated between thin clouds, above the orange street-lamps. I felt happy and sad and a little bit drunk. I'd made my speech – about friendship helping me through, all of the trite, true phrases about valuing life more now – and eaten apple crumble. Made my excuses and left. Now I was alone. My footsteps echoed in the empty streets, where puddles glistened and cans rattled in gateways. A cat wrapped itself around my legs then disappeared into the shadows of an alleyway.

At home, there was a message on the answering-machine from my father. 'Hello,' he said, in a plaintive voice. He paused and waited, then: 'Hello? Kit? It's your father.' That was it.

It was two in the morning and I was wide awake, my brain buzzing. I made myself a cup of tea – so easy when it's just for one. A bag and boiling water over it; then a dribble of milk. Sometimes I eat standing at the fridge, or prowling around the kitchen. A slice of cheese, an apple, a bread roll past its sell-by date, a biscuit munched absent-mindedly. Orange juice drunk out of its carton. Albie used to cook huge and elaborate meals – lots of meat and herbs and spices; pans boiling over; strange misshapen cheeses on the window-sill; bottles of wine uncorked at the ready; laughter rolling and swilling through the rooms. I sat on my sofa and sipped the tea. And because I was alone, and in a maudlin kind of mood, I took out her photograph.

She was my age then, I knew that, but she looked ludicrously young and long ago. Like a faraway child;

someone glimpsed through a gate at the end of the garden. She was sitting on a patch of grass with a tree behind her, wearing frayed denim shorts and a red T-shirt. The gleam of sunshine was on her, dappling her bare, rounded knees. Her pale brown hair was long and tucked behind her ears, except for a strand that fell forward over one eye. A moment later, and she would have pushed it back again. She had a soft, round face, sprinkled with tiny summer freckles, and grey eyes. She looked like me, everybody who had ever known her always said that: 'Don't you look like the image of your mother? Poor dear,' they would add, meaning me, her, both of us, I suppose.

She died before I was old enough to keep her as a memory, though I used to try to edge myself back through the foggy early years of life, to see if I could find her there, on the bleached-out edge of recollection. All I had were photographs like this, and stories told to me about her. Everyone had their own versions. I had only other people's word for her. So it wasn't really my mother I was missing now, but the impossibly tender idea of her.

I knew, because of the date my father had written punctiliously on the back, that she was already pregnant, though you couldn't tell. Her stomach was flat, but I was there, invisible, rippling inside her like a secret. That's why I loved the photograph: because although nobody else knew it, it was of both of us together. Me and her, and love ahead. I touched her with my finger. Her face shone up at me. I still cry when I see her.

I have always been nervous of New Year's Eve. I can't make myself wholly believe in a fresh start. A friend once told me this meant I was really a Protestant rather than a Catholic. I think she meant that I trail my life behind me: my dirty linen and my unwanted baggage. Nevertheless, I wanted my return to work to be a new beginning. The flat was cluttered with all the things that Albie had left behind. It had been six months, yet I still had a couple of his shirts in the cupboard, an old pair of shoes under my bed. I hadn't properly thrown him out. Bits of him kept turning up, like pieces of wreckage washed up on a beach after a storm.

That Sunday evening, I put on a pair of white cotton trousers and an orange top with three-quarter-length sleeves and lace around the neck, like a vest. I put mascara on my lashes, gloss on my lips, the smallest dab of perfume behind my ears. I brushed my hair and piled it, still damp, on top of my head. It didn't matter. He would come, and then a bit later he would go away again, and I would be in my flat on my own once more, with the windows open and the curtains closed and a glass of cold wine and music playing. Something calm. I stood in front of the long mirror in my bedroom. I looked quite steady. I smiled and the woman smiled back, raising her eyebrows, ironical.

He was late, of course. He is always just a bit late. Usually he arrives panting and out of breath and smiling and talking before the door is even half open, sweeping

in on a gust of conversation, on the crest of some idea or other, on a boom of laughter. I heard him laugh before I ever saw him. I turned round, and there he was, delighted with himself, enviable in that, I thought at the time.

He was quieter today; his smile was wary.

‘Hello, Albie.’

‘You’re looking very fine,’ he said, contemplating me as if I were an artwork on a wall that he hadn’t quite made up his mind about. He leaned forward and kissed me on both cheeks. His stubble scratched my skin, my scar, his arms held my shoulders firmly. There was black ink on his fingers.

I allowed myself to look at him, then stepped back, out of his embrace. ‘Come on in, then.’

He seemed to fill my spacious living room.

‘How have you been, Kitty?’

‘Fine,’ I said firmly.

‘I came and saw you in hospital, you know. When I heard. You probably don’t remember. Of course you don’t. You were quite a sight.’ He smiled, and put up a finger to trace my injury. People seemed to like doing that. ‘It’s healing well. I think scars can be beautiful.’

I turned away. ‘Shall we get going?’

We started in the kitchen. He took his special mushroom knife, with a brush on the end to flake away dirt, his fondue set with its six long forks, his ludicrous striped apron and chef’s hat that he insisted on wearing when he was cooking, three cookbooks. Eel stew, I remembered. Passion-fruit soufflé that had risen too much and blistered on the roof of the oven. Mexican tacos filled with mince and sour cream and onions. He ate with gusto too, waving his fork around and stuffing food into his mouth and arguing and leaning across the candles on

the table to kiss me. Last Christmas he'd eaten so much goose and swigged it back with so much hearty red wine that he'd gone to the casualty ward thinking he was having a heart-attack.

'What about this?' I held up a copper pan we'd bought together.

'Keep it.'

'Sure?'

'Sure.'

'And all those Spanish plates that we –'

'They're yours.'

But he took his dressing-gown, his South American guitar music, his poetry and physics books, his aubergine-coloured tie. 'I think that's everything.'

'Do you want a glass of wine?'

He hesitated, then shook his head. 'I'd better be getting back.' He picked up his bag. 'Funny old world, isn't it?'

'That's it, then?'

'What?'

'Your epitaph on our relationship. Funny old world.'

He frowned at me. There were two vertical creases above his nose. I smiled to reassure him that it didn't really matter. Smiled when he got up to leave with his boxes, smiled when he kissed me goodbye, smiled as he walked down the steps to his car, smiled as he drove away. Now I was going to look ahead, not behind.

The Welbeck Clinic stands in a quiet residential street in King's Cross. When it was built in the late fifties, the whole point was that it shouldn't look like an oppressive institution. After all, it was going to be a building in which psychiatrists solved people's problems and made them happy and sent them back into the world. What

was meant by not looking institutional was that it didn't look Victorian, with Gothic towers and small angled windows.

Unfortunately the design was so successful and highly praised and prize-winning that it influenced the construction of urban primary schools, medical centres and old people's homes, and the Welbeck Clinic now looked very institutional indeed. Normally I didn't really see the building, just as I wasn't conscious of my own breathing. I went to it every day, worked and talked and studied and drank coffee there. But now, walking up the steps after weeks away, I saw that the building was middle-aged, the concrete stained and cracked. The door dragged on the stone step, scraping like fingernails as I pulled it open.

I arrived at Rosa's office and she immediately came out and gave me a long hug. Then she held me back to contemplate me with a semi-humorous expression of inquiry. She was dressed simply in charcoal slacks and a navy blue sweater. Her hair was quite grey now and when she smiled her face almost shimmered in all its fine wrinkles. What was she thinking? When I had first met her, almost seven years earlier, I had already known her extraordinary work on child development. I'd occasionally been puzzled by this great expert on children who had never had children herself, and I sometimes wondered if the rest of us at the clinic were competing to be her cleverest son or daughter. There may have been something maternal about the way she presided over the Welbeck, but it wasn't necessarily wise to rely on a mother's softness and forgiveness. She had a steely objectivity as well.

'We've missed you, Kit,' she said. 'Welcome back.' I didn't speak. I just pulled a face that was meant to look

affectionate. There were butterflies in my stomach; it felt like my first day at secondary school. 'Let's go outside and talk,' she added briskly. 'I think it's cleared up. Isn't the weather funny at the moment?'

We walked towards the garden at the back and Francis met us on the way. He was also dressed casually, in jeans and a dark blue shirt. As usual he was unshaven, his hair ruffled. He was a man who wanted to look like an artist rather than a scientist. When he saw me, he held out his arms and we had rather an awkward few seconds of walking towards each other, before I could step into his embrace.

'So good to have you here again, Kit. You're sure you're ready?'

I nodded. 'I need to work. It's just . . . this bit is rather like getting back on a horse again after a fall.'

Francis pulled a face. 'I'm glad to say I've never been anywhere near a horse. Best idea is not to get on one in the first place.'

It had rained earlier but now the sun was out and the wet flagstones glittered and steamed. The benches were sodden so we stood in a group self-consciously, like people who had just been introduced at a drinks party.

'Remind me of today's schedule,' said Rosa, for something to say.

'This morning I'm going to see Sue.' Sue was an anorexic twenty-three-year-old, so thin she looked as if the light could shine through her. Her beautiful eyes were like brimming pools in her shrivelled little face. She looked like a child, or an old woman.

'Good,' she said crisply. 'Take it at your own pace. Let us know if there's any help you need.'

'Thanks.'

'There's one more thing.'

‘Yes?’

‘Compensation.’

‘Oh.’

‘Yes. Francis is certainly of the view that you should consider legal action.’

‘Open and shut case,’ said Francis. ‘It was even done with the policeman’s own bloody mug, wasn’t it? What on earth did he think he was up to?’

I looked over at Rosa. ‘What do you think?’

‘I would rather hear what you think.’

‘I don’t know what I think. It was all so confused. You know that the Crown Prosecution Service has . . .’ I tried to recall the wording of the letter I’d received ‘. . . declined to proceed against Mr Doll. Maybe it was their mistake. Maybe it was my mistake. Maybe it was just an accident. I’m not sure what I’d be after.’

‘About a couple of hundred grand, some of us reckon,’ said Francis, with a smile.

‘I’m not sure that Doll really meant to hurt anybody. He was just flailing around, panicking. He picked up the mug and smashed it against the wall, and cut himself, and then he cut me. He was a mess even before the police had finished with him. You know what happens to people in police cells. They go crazy. They kill themselves or fly at other people. I should have been prepared for that.’ I looked at Rosa and Francis. ‘Are you shocked? Do you want me to be angrier? Out for Doll’s blood?’ I shuddered. ‘The police beat him up pretty badly before throwing him into a cell. By the sound of it, they thought they were doing me a favour. They must be furious that he got off.’

‘They are,’ said Rosa drily.

‘And it was Furth’s mistake, though he will never admit to that, of course. And mine, too. Perhaps I wasn’t

concentrating hard enough. Anyway, I just don't see the point of suing them. Who would it help?

'People should be held responsible for their mistakes,' Francis said. 'You could have died.'

'But I didn't. I'm fine.'

'Think about it, at least.'

'I think about it all the time,' I said. 'I dream about it at night. Somehow the idea of getting someone to compensate me by giving me money doesn't really seem relevant just now.'

'I hear what you're saying,' said Francis, in a tone that made me want to tweak his nose.

It was raining steadily as I drove back; warm summer rain that splashed on my windscreen, and sprayed up in iridescent arcs from the wheels of the lorries that thundered past. The rush-hour traffic was building, and my eyes felt gritty, my throat a bit sore.

As I pulled up outside my flat, I saw that a man was standing at the front door. He had on a raincoat, his hands in the pockets, and he was looking up at the house. He heard my car door slam, and turned to me. His blond helmet of hair gleamed in the rain. His thin lips stretched into a smile. I looked at him for a long time and he just looked back at me.

'Detective Inspector Guy Furth,' I said.

I felt myself surveyed and evaluated under his gaze and I tried not to flinch.

'You look good, Kit,' he said, and smiled, as if we were old mates.

'What's this about?'

'Can I come in for a moment?'

I gave a shrug. It seemed easier just to agree.

'I've never been here before,' he said, looking around.

I couldn't help laughing at that. 'Why on earth should you have been? We've only met the once. Remember?'

'Feels like more,' he said, walking around as if he were thinking of buying it. He went across to the back window, which looked out over the expanse of grass. 'Nice view,' he said. 'You don't see that from the front. Nice bit of green.'

I didn't reply, and he turned round with a smile that was betrayed by his eyes. They flickered warily around the room as if he were an animal that feared being caught from behind. I always felt that my flat changed with each person who entered it. I would see it through their eyes. Or, rather, I would see it the way I imagined the person would see it. This flat would look too bare to Furth, lacking in comfort and decoration. There was a sofa and a rug on a varnished wooden floor. There was an old stereo in the corner and a pile of CDs stacked next to it. There were bookshelves full of books, and books on the floor. The walls were whitewashed and almost bare. Most pictures irritated me or, worse still, they stopped irritating me. I found it painful the way, after weeks or months, a picture that had unsettled me would become unnoticed, just another part of the decoration. When I stopped noticing a picture, I put it away or got rid of it until I had only two. There was a painting of two bottles on a table that my father had given me when I was twenty-one. It was by a hopeless old friend of his, a

distant cousin. I could never walk past it without it stopping me. And there was a photograph of my father's father and his brother and sister in front of a studio backcloth somewhere in what must have been the mid-1920s. My grandfather was wearing a sailor suit. All three of them had a strange suppressed smile on their faces, as if they were holding back a giggle at a joke out of our view, out of our hearing. It was a lovely photograph. One day, maybe in a hundred years' time, someone would have that picture on the wall and they would be amused by it and they would wonder: Who were those children?

I looked at Furth and saw that for him, of course, it meant nothing. Maybe there was just a touch of bafflement and scorn. Is this *all*? This is what Kit Quinn comes back to every night?

He stood too close to me and looked into my eyes with an expression of concern that turned my stomach. 'How are you now?' he said. 'Everything all right with the face?'

I stepped back before he could stroke my scar. 'I didn't think we'd ever meet again,' I said.

'We felt bad about you, Kit,' Furth said, before adding hurriedly: 'Not that it was anybody's fault. He was like a mad animal. It took four of us to lay him out. You should have paid more attention when I told you he was a pervert.'

'Is that what you've come round to say?'

'No.'

'Then why are you here?'

'Chat.'

'What about?'

He looked shifty. 'We wanted some advice.'

'What?' I was so startled by the wild unexpectedness

of this that I had to make some effort not to giggle. 'You're here about a case?'

'That's right. We wanted a chat. Have you got anything to drink?' he asked.

'Like what?'

'A beer or something.'

I went and found a bottle of something Bavarian-looking in the back of the fridge and brought it to him.

'Do you mind if I smoke?'

I fetched him a saucer from the kitchen. He pushed the glass I had given him to one side and took a swig from the bottle. Then he lit the cigarette and drew on it several times. 'I'm working on the Regent's Canal murder,' he said finally. 'You've heard about it?'

I thought for a moment. 'I saw something in the paper a few days ago. Body found by the canal?'

'That's the one. What did you think?'

'Sounded sad.' I grimaced at him. 'A little story at the bottom of a page. A young drifter. The only reason there was any story at all was that there were some nasty injuries. They didn't even know her name, did they?'

'Still don't. But we've got a suspect.'

I shook my head. 'Well done. Now -'

He held up his hand. 'Ask me the name of the suspect.'

'What?'

'Go on.' He grinned widely and settled back in the chair with his arms folded, waiting.

'OK,' I said obediently. 'What is the name of the suspect?'

'His name is Anthony Michael Doll.'

I stared at him, taking it in. He looked back, cheerily triumphant. 'There now, see why you were just the person for the job? Perfect, eh?'

'Chance to get my own back,' I said. 'I missed out on

my chance to give him a kicking in the cell, so perhaps I can help to send him down for murder. Is that the idea?’

‘No, no,’ he said, in a soothing tone. ‘My boss was interested in you doing some work for us. Don’t worry, you get your fee. And it might be fun. Ask your friend Seb Weller.’

‘Fun,’ I said. ‘How could I resist? And we had such a good time before.’

I went over to the fridge and pulled out an open bottle of white wine. I poured myself a full glass and held it up to the fading light. Then I took a mouthful and felt the icy cold liquid trickle down my throat. I stared out of the window, at the red sun low in the turquoise sky. The rain had stopped and it was going to be a beautiful evening. I turned back to Furth.

‘Why do you think it’s Doll?’

He looked surprised, and then pleased. ‘You see? You’re interested. He spends his days fishing on the canal. He’s there every bloody day. He came forward when we had our appeal for anybody who’d been in the area.’ Furth looked sharply round at me. ‘Does it surprise you?’

‘How?’

‘A man like that, coming forward.’

‘Not necessarily,’ I said. ‘If he’s innocent, he’s better off identifying himself. And if he’s guilty . . .’ I stopped. I didn’t want to be sucked into a consultation based on Furth’s thumbnail sketch of a suspect.

He winked at me anyway, as if he’d caught me. ‘If he’s guilty,’ he said, ‘he might like to get involved in the inquiry, even in a small way. What do you think?’

‘It’s been known,’ I said.

‘Of course it’s been known. People like that love it.’

They want to be close to it, to feel how clever they are. A little extra kick. The sick bastards.'

'So what did he say?'

'We haven't interviewed him.'

'Why not?'

'We'll let him stew a bit. But we haven't been lying down. We've got this young officer called Colette Dawes. Nice lady. Clever. She's got to know him. In plain clothes, of course. Got him talking. You know the sort of thing. Bit of a drink, bit of flattery, bit of crossed legs when he's looking, steer the conversation. In the meantime, she's wearing a wire and we've got the tapes. Hours of them.'

'That's your investigation?' I said, baffled. 'Getting a female officer to flirt with him?'

Furth leaned forward with an urgent expression on his face. 'I'm not going to say anything,' he said in a conspiratorial whisper. 'We just want your professional opinion of him. Off the record. It wouldn't take long. Just look at his file and then have a brief talk with him. You know the kind of thing – a preliminary assessment of him.'

'Talk to him?'

'Sure. Have you got a problem with that?'

Of course I had a problem with that and now I knew that I couldn't say no. 'No problem,' I said. 'This woman, Colette Dawes, does she know what she's doing?'

Furth pulled a face. 'She can look after herself. We're always around, anyway. Look, Kit, I can understand you feeling nervous. We thought it might be a way of making you feel better.' He took a sip from his beer. And you wanted to make sure I wouldn't sue for compensation, I thought to myself.

'Thank you, Doctor,' I said. 'Maybe it would.'

‘So, what do you say?’

I stood up and walked to the window, looking out over that hidden lawn trapped between the backs of office buildings. It was early evening now but it wasn't dark or even twilight. The light was softening from harsh yellow into gold.

‘It's a plague pit, you know,’ I said.

‘What?’

‘Bodies were tossed in a pit there during the plague. Covered with quicklime. Buried. Forgotten about.’

‘Bit creepy.’

‘No, it isn't,’ I said, turning back to him. ‘I'll just say one thing now. I don't know anything about your case. I think this woman playing Mata Hari is a crackpot idea. I don't know what authority you're doing this on and I don't want to know. To me it seems irresponsible, it may even be illegal, but then I'm a doctor, not a lawyer.’

‘Will you let me know, though?’

‘Yes.’

‘When?’

‘How about a couple of days? There's someone I need to talk to first.’

‘You'll ring?’

‘Yes.’

He went and I stayed for many minutes looking out of the window. Not at Furth, not out of that window. I looked out at the grass, watching the green change and fade in the glorious evening. Dead people. Dead people everywhere.

I phoned Rosa at once, at home. I couldn't wait.

'Furth came to see me,' I said.

'Who?'

'The detective. The one who was there when it happened, when I was attacked.'

I told her the whole story and as I told it the more bizarre and unprofessional it sounded.

'And what did you say?' she said finally.

'I was taken aback.'

'But curious.'

'Curious? I felt pulled.'

'What does that mean, Kit?'

'I wake in the night. Or sometimes I don't wake in the night. It hardly seems to make a difference. And I go over and over it, as if it is still happening to me. Or as if it is about to happen and I can do something to stop it, wind back the clock. It's like I am back in that room again, and there's red blood everywhere. Mine. His.'

'So you want to meet Doll again and reduce him to his human size?'

'You're a clever woman, aren't you?'

'You know, I've never thought being clever was very important. Look, Kit, I'm just going to say two things to you and they're the two things you must have had in mind when you decided to ring me. The first is whether you'll do yourself any good by seeing this man. The second is that it doesn't really matter what good it does

you. You're being brought in to do a job. Can you do that?'

'Yes. I think so.'

There was a pause.

'It's dangerous to ask for advice, Kit. You might not get the advice you wanted.' She gave a sigh. 'I'm sorry. In my opinion you shouldn't do this. Now why do I think you're not going to pay any attention to what I say?'

'It must be a bad line.'

'Yes, it must be that.'

I put down the phone. It was twilight outside. Once more the rain splashed down the window-panes and rattled and slapped in the wet trees outside. Wild July, bashed and drenched by warm gales. I went and stood by the window and looked out at the garden below, the waterlogged lawn.

A couple, holding hands, sloshed together across the grass, through the piles of sodden blossom and the shallow puddles. She turned her face towards his, laughing in the half-darkness. I moved away from the window. Love and work, that's what gets you through the days.

The phone rang, startling me out of my reverie. 'Is that Kit?'

The voice sounded very far away. Crackly. Was it abroad? Maybe not. New York can sound closer than South London. It is, in a way.

'Yes?'

'It's Julie.' Dull silence. Julie. Julie. Julie. Couldn't think of anybody. 'Julie Wiseman.'

'Oh, *Julie*. But I thought you were . . .' She'd gone away. Dropped off the face of my earth.

'I'm back in London.'

Back from *where*? Should I know? I tried to picture her

as I'd last seen her. Dark curly hair – pinned up, wasn't it? There was a rush of memory, like a breath of warm air, that made me smile. Cigarettes late at night in cheap restaurants. One night we were all there so late that the cooks came out of the kitchen with a bottle of wine and sat with us. Above all, Julie had done the thing we all said we wanted to do and secretly knew we would never dare to. She had been a maths teacher in a secondary school and she handed in her notice and set off around the world or around South America or wherever it was. I felt myself soften. I said that we'd missed her and that it would be great to see her. And she said it would be great to come and see me, and then it quickly emerged that it would be great if she could do even more than that. I remembered now. She'd given up her flat when she left. What had she done with her stuff? Given it all away, knowing her. That was Julie, generous with her own possessions, generous with your possessions. Could she stay for a day or two? I paused for a moment. I couldn't think of a single reason why it wouldn't be better to have somebody else here with me for a bit.

She came through the door with a waft of elsewhere about her. A vast rucksack and a brown canvas bag hit the floor so that dust rose off them. She wore brown leather shoes, rough khaki trousers, a blue padded jacket that had a sort of Tibetan look to it. Her face didn't just look tanned. It was beyond tanned. It looked sanded, seasoned, weather-blown, polished. Her hands and wrists were brown as well, and her eyes, bright as semi-precious stones, were grinning at a joke you hadn't seen yet.

'Blimey, Kit, what on earth happened to your face?'

'Oh, well, as a matter of fact . . .'

But she was head down, rummaging in a plastic bag.

‘I’ve got something for you,’ she said. I expected her to produce some hand-carved antique Buddha but it was a bottle of duty-free gin. ‘I thought you might have some tonic to go with this,’ she said. ‘I could pop out and get some.’

Clearly there was no doubt that this was to be opened and poured straight away.

‘It’s all right,’ I said. ‘I’ve got some.’

‘And could I make myself something? I slept for about thirteen hours on the plane.’

‘Where have you come from?’

‘I stopped over for a couple of weeks in Hong Kong,’ she said. ‘Amazing. Some fried eggs maybe.’

‘And bacon?’

‘That would be great. And fried bread if you’ve got some. For the last couple of months I’ve been having a dream about coming back to England and having a real old fry-up – eggs and bacon and tomatoes and bread all fried up together.’

‘I’ll get some tomatoes while I’m at it. There’s a twenty-four-hour shop on the corner.’

‘I’ve got something else for you too.’ She got out a huge duty-free carton of Marlboro cigarettes.

‘Actually I don’t smoke.’

‘I sort of knew that,’ Julie said with a smile. ‘Do you mind if I light up?’

‘Not at all.’

Fifteen minutes later, I was sitting opposite Julie at the kitchen table. I was sipping at my gin and tonic. She was alternating sips from her gin with gulps of tree-trunk-brown tea and assaults on the great platter of her very, very late breakfast. As she ate she told me bits of stories: treks at altitude, canoes, hitchhikers, campfires, strange foods, a flood, war zones, brief sexual encoun-

ters, a full-blown affair in a harbour-front apartment in Sydney, crewing on a yacht between Pacific Islands, waitressing jobs in San Francisco and Hawaii and Singapore, or was it São Paulo and Santo Domingo? And all this – it was understood – was like a film trailer advertising coming attractions. The full stories, in all their texture, would be told to me in due course.

‘I love this flat,’ she said. ‘I always did.’

I was puzzled for a moment.

‘Was I living here before you left?’

‘Of course,’ she said, mopping up a thick pool of yolk with a corner of greasy bread. ‘I’ve been here several times. I’ve been to dinner here.’

That was right. I remembered now. It felt like a rebuke. She had done so much, seen so many strange sunsets, had so many ‘experiences’, all those sights, and all the time I’d been here in Clerkenwell, going out to work, having a room painted. My work had seemed so important, I hadn’t even taken a holiday in the time Julie had been broadening her mind. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror. I looked so pale. As if Julie had come back from being in the sun and lifted a stone and found me stuck to the underside, damp and sickly.

‘But in a way I really envy you,’ she said, not meaning it at all. ‘I stepped off the ladder. I mean the career ladder. Now I’m back and I’ve got to find a way back on. Here I am. Back and totally unemployable.’ She gave a laugh. She was clearly, and rightly I had to admit, very proud of herself. ‘And you,’ she said, in the moment I’d been dreading. ‘What have you been up to? How did you get that amazingly sexy scar?’

‘Someone attacked me in a police cell.’

‘God!’ She looked suitably impressed. ‘Why?’

‘I don’t know. Because he was panicking, I suppose.’

‘How awful.’ She chomped loudly for a few seconds. ‘Was it really bad?’

‘Pretty bad. It happened three months ago and I only went back to work today.’

‘Today? You don’t mind me coming, do you?’ Her face creased in an anxious frown. ‘Landing on you like this.’

‘No, it’s fine. As long as it isn’t for too –’

‘What else is happening? Apart from being attacked by a madman and nearly dying, I mean.’

I searched for a significant event. ‘Albie and I split up,’ I said. ‘Finally.’

‘Yes,’ Julie said sympathetically. ‘I remember you talking about having problems.’ Oh, fuck, I thought to myself. Really? Three years ago? I seemed to be living a life like one of those old-fashioned deep-sea divers, walking along the bottom very, very slowly in heavy lead boots. ‘So is there anybody new?’

‘No,’ I said. ‘It only happened recently.’

‘Oh,’ she said. ‘What about work?’

‘I’m still at the clinic.’

‘Oh,’ she said.

I had to think of something. I just had to. Or else I might as well leave the room and phone the Samaritans.

‘I’ve been asked to do some work for the police. Maybe it might even turn into a kind of consultancy.’ Saying it out loud to an outsider made it seem real.

She took a giant slug of gin, swallowed it, then yawned. I could see her white teeth, pink tongue, a glistening tunnel of throat.

‘Amazing,’ she said. ‘Did I tell you about this man who picked me and a friend up when we were going up to the Drakensburg mountains?’

She hadn’t but we moved over to the sofa and she did

now. The full version, this time. It felt soothing, Julie stretched out like a cat talking with fond pleasure about these faraway dangers while I took a sip of my drink every few minutes, and outside the night came on very slowly, like a game of Grandmother's Footsteps that I could never win. And finally I looked up and Julie was asleep, her drink still in her hand, her brain having told her strong brown body that it was in Thailand or Hong Kong, and that it was actually three in the morning. I slid the glass from her fingers and she murmured something unintelligible. Then I fetched a duvet from the cupboard in my bedroom and covered her with it, right up to her chin. She gave a sigh and wrapped herself up in it like a hamster in its nest. I couldn't help smiling at the sight. This wanderer was already more comfortable in my flat than I was.

I went into my bedroom and took off my clothes. It had been the strangest day – frantic with activity after so many weeks of convalescence. My head buzzed with thoughts. My skin felt cold and exposed, like a twig peeled of its bark. I climbed into bed and pulled my own duvet around me. I couldn't seem to get it comfortably over me. I knew that it was square but it felt as if it were lozenge-shaped and there always seemed to be a bit of my body exposed. At last I allowed myself to think of the girl found dead by the canal. Lianne, that was her name, or the name she called herself. Just Lianne. A lost girl with no real name. I would find out more about her soon; tomorrow, perhaps. I had to sleep, so that my brain would be clear for tomorrow. Tomorrow I had to see Doll. I touched my scar. Closed my eyes.

She wasn't by the canal any more, obviously. Lianne with no last name. She would be in a cold metal cabinet, filed away. I felt, almost physically, the size of London

stretching around me in all directions. There were bad things going on in some of those houses. But I tried to convince myself that it didn't matter statistically. Think of all the millions and millions of houses in which good things were happening, or nothing much at all beyond loneliness or neglect. That was the really amazing statistic. All those houses in which no serious harm was being done. It didn't cheer me up but I fell asleep anyway.