

Reimagining a Lace Town

PART I

A novel: 'The Queen of the Midlands'

PART II

**A critical thesis: what creative processes can a writer use to transform
archived oral testimonies into fictional worlds?**

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Abstract

'Reimagining a Lace Town' explores the potential of extant oral histories as an inspiration for fiction. It falls into two parts: a novel 'The Queen of the Midlands'; and a critical thesis which explores how a writer can draw on an archive of oral testimonies to create a fictional world.

'The Queen of the Midlands' is set against the historical backdrop of the East Midlands machine-made lace industry. It reimagines a lace town inhabited by two fictitious female lace workers and tells their overlapping stories at three separate and distinct points in their lives: as children and sworn enemies; as young women who forge a truce; and as elderly women who have become firm friends. The novel explores their relationship and shines a light on the machine-made lace industry that shaped their lives. It employs historical, regional and industrial detail gleaned from an archive of oral histories. It draws on the nature of the oral history interview to inform its three-part structure. It uses anecdotes, descriptive language and storytelling techniques found in the archive to inspire the reimagining of a lace town.

The critical component considers the heritage of East Midlands machine-made lace. It discusses how my own personal connections with this heritage and geography seep into the novel's creation. It goes on to consider my practice-based research as an interdisciplinary practice, embracing oral history theory and the work of other East Midlands novelists. It examines the

listening process and the transformation of spoken text into prose fiction. It considers the ethical implications of this work and the potential of oral history as an interdisciplinary field for creative practitioners to engage with.

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The Queen of the Midlands

Part One

‘Lace, the queen of textiles, still has a magical allure. Long may she reign.’¹

¹ Lowe, David and Jack Richards. *The City of Lace*. Nottingham Lace Centre Limited, 1982. 85.

1911, Spring

Arthur Foster is in the scullery at the back of the house, shirtless, his braces hanging limply around his hips. He is rinsing his face with ice-cold water from the tap, shocking himself awake and into the day. He seems to take the very air out of his lungs as he gasps, eyes closed, grabbing for a towel to dab at his face. His daughter Winnie is there by his side in the damp and the gloom, ready to hand him the towel, waiting for the tea to mash on the hob in the kitchen next door. He blinks and leans forward, squinting into the cracked mirror above the stone sink, running his hands over his face, smoothing down his silver-tipped moustache. He slips a vest over his head, pulls a shirt over the top, fastens up the buttons rhythmically and reaches for his blackened apron and bowler hat.

Winnie shivers as she goes back upstairs to her bedroom. She slides her dress over the top of the slip she's been sleeping in, pulls on socks and boots. Her light brown hair hangs down her back in two thick plaits. She picks up her doll from her pillow. Her father had made it for her. Two wooden balls for a head and a body, stuffed pieces of sacking for its arms and legs. Black wool glued on to its head for hair.

Yesterday, Bell had taken a pair of scissors from the kitchen and cropped off the doll's long locks. Short woolly tufts now stick out from its head. Winnie had slapped Bell for that, told her that she was a horrible little sister, the worst little sister that anyone could ever have. Bell had hidden herself away for hours, only coming out for her tea. The doll's painted face stares back at Winnie now, with crooked

cupid-bow lips and black dot eyes and nose. It wears a dress made from a bit of lace that Father had fished out of a basket of off-cuts at the factory.

Bell is still fast asleep. She's turned away, facing the wall, her dark hair splayed across her pillow, bony shoulders under a thin cotton slip. Dirty little feet sticking out of the end of the bed.

'Lazy boggar,' says Winnie bouncing on the thin mattress and making the bedsprings creak, but Bell doesn't stir.

The back door yelps like an old dog in pain and Winnie crosses to the window, pulls back the curtain and the nets and looks out of an inky square to see a blur of her father moving away up the dark street. She pushes her face up against the glass and the coldness of it burns into her skin. The sun is beginning to rise up behind a grey veil of cloud and soot. A clopping of boots on cobbles as twisthands and lace-hands from their street make their way to the town's factories.

Winnie heads back down the steep stairs to the kitchen. She's carrying her doll. There's water splashing in the scullery and her mother's voice shouts over the top, 'Pram's out in the passage.'

Winnie jumps and swigs from a half-empty cup of cold tea and pulls a face at the fishy tang of the milk on the turn.

She was born right here in this little red brick house on Embankment Street that smells of tobacco and toast. Like all the other houses in this row, the kitchen has a range for cooking and heating; a puttering gas jet on the wall throws out light and shadows across the room. A small windowless scullery at the back has a sink and a copper and a single cold tap. Outside there's a yard and at the end of the yard there's a privy that always smells of piss, despite daily scrubblings; it catches in your throat.

There's a front parlour, a best room for Sundays and holidays. It was Gran'ma's bedroom when Winnie was younger. But then Gran'ma took a seizure and then another and never left the front parlour again. She withered to bones and papery skin and died in there almost one whole year ago to this very day. There are two bedrooms upstairs: one at the back for Mother and Father and one at the front for Winnie and Bell. And for Ada, once. But Ada left years ago.

Winnie takes her heavy grey coat from a peg on the wall, picks up her doll and heads out of the back door and into the side passage. It's as black as hell and when she stretches out both her arms, she feels the walls rising up sharply on either side of her. It's like being in a chimney.

She sets off down the street pushing a big perambulator of finished lace with her doll tucked in the top. She knows the names of all the families in this street and counts them off as she passes their front doors: the Barkers are all lace workers and so are the Tappers and the Hoopers next to them. A few doors further down lives Mrs Brown and her two daughters, who are brass bobbin winders. Then there's Mr Nobbs; he works on the railways and his daughter, Jessie, who is close to Winnie in age, has just started as a hand at Henson's lace factory.

Embankment Street could be any street in any town. It doesn't go anywhere; it ends at the wall of a railway viaduct that rises up and blocks out the light. It's just one of many that make up a maze of straight streets that intersect at sharp angles and all eventually lead back on to Main Road, a wide road connecting two cities and a busy thoroughfare through this town of Longwash.

Longwash. A landlocked town in the Midlands. It grew up around the canal and the railways. And then the lace-makers came from the overcrowded city, finding

ideal conditions for their craft here in the valley. Others drifted in from the villages, leaving their hand-loom and stocking-frames behind. They left their cottages and set-up standings in workshops and steam-powered manufactories. And up went the terraces of red brick and grey slate, row after row, two-rooms-up-two-rooms-down and a small yard out the back.

There are plenty of shops in Longwash and two busy railway stations. And on every corner a public house: The Victoria, The Railway, The Prince of Wales, The Turk's Head, The Tiger and The Angel. And, of course, the Working Men's Club. And then there are all the churches for all the drunks to redeem themselves. As well as the sturdy Church of England one that the Fosters attend, on occasion, there are the two mission churches, churches for the Roman Catholics, the Baptists, the Congregationals, the Primitive Methodists, the United Methodists and the Wesleyan Methodists. And a Salvation Army. But of all the holy buildings in this drab lace town, the Free Public Library is the most beautiful and reverent building that Winnie has ever seen, a place where a golden angel in mosaic form welcomes you in with a book in one hand and a torch in the other.



Cissie Higgins wakes in a black mood with a sour taste in her mouth as she remembers the events of the night before. Standing in the doorway of The Angel. A sticky tiled floor, small rooms, low ceilings. Her dad slumped in the corner of the tap room, unable to stand, unable to speak. Fit for nothing. Poisoned with drink again.

Get him home, duck and the big red face of Mr Finch, the publican, had loomed in close to hers. We couldn't find your Billy, he'd gone on, but a couple of these chaps'll help you if you can't manage.

And Cissie's reply had been curt, I can manage, thank you, and her eyes had prickled with tears.

She has the cramps today. It's that time of the month she hates so much. She hears bare feet padding down the stairs; the familiar rhythm of Mam's gait, the creak of the first stair, the crack of the second, the squeak of the one on the turn shaped like a wedge of cheese. Cissie rolls over in the bed and the sheets shift and, for a moment, a patch of cold cloth touches her legs. She opens her eyes and thinks about the pile of laundry downstairs; bed sheets and soiled trousers that can't wait till next Monday. She pulls on her underskirt. Her two little sisters left in the bed wriggle and moan and tug the sheets over their heads.

He'd pissed himself on the way home as she struggled with him along the back jitty, his drooping head bouncing off the brick walls. He'd passed-out, fully clothed, on the bed that her two little brothers share in the front room. She'd pulled at his unlaced boots. A smell of vinegar from his feet. She tried to get his soaked-through trousers off. And then her older brother Billy came in and calmly pushed her aside. He grasped at their dad's trousers by the ankles, pulled them hard until they began to slide down his legs. A ripping sound as one of the seams gave way.

Billy was inches from his dad's face and then, you're nowt but a filthy cunt John Higgins, and he'd spat out a glob of saliva and their dad's eyelids flickered as it landed on his face. And Billy had said, I'm sorry you have to see this, duck, and he'd taken a long-limbed step over to Cissie and kissed her on the top of the head.

And now she's got bed sheets and piss-soaked trousers to wash and seams to mend. And she'll need to wash her handkerchief too. She'd used it last night, licked at the corner of it and gently dabbed at the foam of spittle on her dad's temple. Wiped it away. You are a bastard, John Higgins, she'd said gently as she'd tucked the handkerchief back up her sleeve.

Cissie's mood is still black as she rouses John Higgins from the darkness of his drunken sleep and leads him to the scullery where she's a bowl of cold water waiting for him.

'Leave me be,' he mumbles and hangs his head over the sink.

Cissie waits until his retching stops and then wipes his face with a ragged piece of flannel. Pushes him towards the kitchen table. 'Sit down and eat,' she says and puts a basin of stale bread and tea in front of him.

John Higgins eats each spoonful slowly and mechanically, staring absently at the wall.

Billy Higgins has found his father a few days' labouring alongside him at Henson's, starting this very morning. Cissie makes sure to send John Higgins off with a clean face and a full snap tin. Billy leaves a few minutes later, straggling along behind his father, hanging his head like a kicked dog.

And then Cissie has the nippers to deal with. She fills a tin-bath with cold water from a jug and puts it on the floor in front of the fire and then makes each child in turn, first Ted, then Harry, then Florrie, then Elsie, kneel down in front of the bath, and as they do so, she pushes their faces down into the icy water, splashes it around their necks and then rubs her soaped-up hands behind their ears and rinses them off with the flannel. They squeal, as they do every time she does this, and she

makes sure that she does this every other day, because she doesn't want them going to school dirty. She wishes her mam had done the same with her. She was always one of the dirty kids at school.

Cissie's thirteen now, has left school and helps out at home, what with her mam being in the family-way again. But she's got her Labour Certificate and once this child's out in the world, they're going to send her into the mending sheds to fix the lace as it comes off the machines. She'll get more money doing that than what she does doing outwork at home with her mam. No doubt she'll still be expected to help out with the littl'uns and she imagines that soon she'll be bobbing five little heads into the tin-bath instead of four.

Her cramps are worsening and her drawers are heavy with blood-soaked rags. She feels wretched. She'd started her monthlies when she was still at school. Her mam, Nellie, had said, you're a little advanced for your age, when she'd found Cissie, clutching hold of her belly and wailing that very first time she started bleeding, and Nellie Higgins had gone on, I was nearer sixteen years myself. It hurts, Cissie'd wailed, and Nellie Higgins had taken hold of her eldest daughter and hugged her close and Cissie had felt so warm and comforted in her mam's arms. But then Nellie Higgins had taken Cissie by the shoulders and spoken to her sternly. You be careful now, duck, she'd said, because this family doesn't need any more babies.

Mam is sitting up against the window. She's been there for hours, catching the light from as early in the day as possible, finishing off the lace work. When she's done, she'll head down to Henson's to put in a Saturday morning shift in the mending shed. Cissie looks at her mam's tired face, her screwed-up eyes straining to

see patterns in the lace, and she sees herself in ten, twenty, thirty years' time. Sitting to catch the light. Straining to find the flaws in the pattern.

From the age of five, Cissie would toddle along behind her mam as she made her way to the middle woman's house. Word would reach them that there was lace work available and they'd leave Trafalgar Street by the back door and head up the jitty, through the Market Place, across the Canal Bridge on to Main Road and then wend this way and that through the terraces until they reached Embankment Street.

The scrubbed kitchen table would be pushed up against the wall. Webs of brown lace, of cotton and of silk, would be piled up on blue and white cloths on the floor waiting to be collected. Once, when Nellie Higgins wasn't looking, Cissie began to jump about in these piles of lace, to have a grand old time in all these swirls and frills. But she got caught out when the middle woman's daughter, Winnie Foster, who was just a nipper herself, shouted out that Cissie Higgins was being naughty, and this caught the attention of Nellie Higgins who gave her eldest daughter a sharp slap on the back of the legs that sounded like dry sticks being snapped in two. And Cissie had cried and cried, quiet sobs into her balled up fists so she'd not be told off for making a noise. Gertrude Foster, the middle woman, hated noise in her house.

Soon the Fosters' kitchen would fill up with women from the surrounding streets. Women nearing their middle years, like Nellie Higgins, with wiry arms and sagging bellies from years of childbirth. Women with hard, lined, ruddy faces, older than their years. Women with calloused hands. Young women came too, and wide-eyed children, like Cissie, tagging along, boys and girls, tots clutching at their mothers' skirts, older brothers and sisters carrying tin-baths and baskets between them to fetch their pieces back home. And old women, toothless with hard stares and

downturned mouths, some of them chewing and sucking on clay pipes. And Gertrude Foster, as agent of the factory, would dish out all the lace to these outworkers – her outworkers – all the lace to be mended. Unbleached brown lace that had already passed through so many hands, from the factory looms to the dyeworks, to be shared between these women. Her neighbours. She'd keep order, with her stern looks, and make sure that everyone got what they should. She handed these women their pieces of lace and, like hungry dogs, they'd take them and go, and the floor would be bare within an hour.



At the end of Embankment Street Winnie turns right and takes the well-worn route along Main Road. She gets a waft of the stinking water as she pushes the pram over the humped back of the canal bridge. From the highest point, she sees the walls of the great factories rising up. The great factories built tightly against the canal bank just a few years earlier, their enormous chimneys towering over the terraces.

The clip-clop-rattle of a horse and cart fades into the distance. Winnie stops and leans over the pram; her doll has slipped down underneath the webs of stiffened lace. She pulls it out by its woolly hair before tucking it back in, neatly. She tells herself to make sure to hide the doll back down underneath all the lace before she reaches the factory because she feels slightly embarrassed that someone might see her with it. She has always taken her doll with her whenever she's been sent fetching and carrying lace from Henson's. She used to go with Ada, but Ada left home when Winnie was four years old. She just went. And from that day on Winnie was sent off

to do this work all on her own. She'd struggled with the heavy perambulator at first, but she's eleven years old now and manages just fine.

She carries on towards the Market Place. It's still early and many of the shops clustered around the cobbled square are all shuttered up. There's very little light this March morning, just a dull haze from the gas streetlamps. There's a half moon visible in the sky. The day is raw. The cold wind cuts into her face. She wishes she'd worn a scarf and pulls up the collar of her coat against her cheeks. A few carts are parked up, horses blowing steam out of their nostrils into the biting air. Winnie parades along with the pram. There are no shutters on the windows of Fisher and Radford's Bazaar and she's able to peruse a row of china dolls in fine dresses and bonnets in all shades of yellow and blue. She daydreams about working in the Bazaar, about laying out all the fancy goods in the windows, not just toys, but fine ornaments made of glass and china. And bonnets and pens and umbrellas and hat-pins and brooches. She's heard about the big stores up in the city and longs to visit them. Sometimes, when she plays down by the river, she sets up a little shop pretending to sell pieces of pottery she salvages from the muddy banks, using stones as coins and counting them in and counting them out for her make-believe customers.

There's a shortcut to the factory from the Market Place. It takes her down a jitty, a little lane, that runs downhill behind The Angel and opens out on to Canal Street. It's hemmed-in by high walls on both sides. Drunks and dossers piss up these walls and let their empty beer bottles drop and smash on to the cobbles. Winnie braces herself and quickens her step. Her stomach rumbles and she thinks about butter melting onto hot toast. She takes a deep breath and tenses her arms and strides

on down the jitty towards the factory. Her skirts catch on the nettles that have forced their way up through the broken cobbles under her feet. The cobbles are greasy from a light drizzle of rain that fell in the early hours and Winnie feels the heels of her boots slipping. As the pram picks up speed on the downward slope, she struggles to keep herself upright and her hands clutch the pram handle tightly.

She passes gates that lead into people's back yards, and as she approaches one, broken and hanging off its hinges, a tall girl steps out and blocks her path. It's Cissie Higgins. She's a couple of years older than Winnie. And she is spiteful and wicked. She used to sit behind Winnie at school and pull her hair and spit on the back of her dress. And now she's standing, just yards away, staring malevolently, and as the pram gathers pace on the sloping cobbles, Winnie fears that she'll lose control of it and so she turns it at an angle to stop it.

Cissie's dark greasy hair hangs loose around her shoulders, her face is blotchy, her eyes puffy. She's hunched over, pulling her skirts up between her legs, knotting them up into her fists. A dark crimson stain is spreading across the front of the fabric.

Winnie's eyes widen. 'You're bleeding.'

Cissie lets her skirts fall from her fists. 'You'll bleed too, you know. You just wait,' she squeals. 'You'll have to wear rags in your drawers an' all.'

And then Winnie sees Cissie's eyes rest on the doll sticking out of the pram. The doll she meant to hide away.

'Playing with your doll an' carriage. You're nowt but a big kid. A big baby.' Cissie makes a grab for the doll but misses as Winnie jerks the pram away from her and tries to reverse it back up the hill, and it bucks and bobs on its big springy

wheels as she tries to turn it in the narrow jitty. At last it turns and she puts her weight against the handle and runs.

At the end of the jitty, outside The Angel, Winnie stops and looks over her shoulder. Cissie has gone. She rests her head on the pram handle, drawing in breath, her arms aching, her heart beating away like the Silver Band's drum. With her eyes cast down at the ground she spots something and freezes. Somehow, in her efforts to get away, some of the lace has spilled out of the pram and fallen onto the cobbles. It's soaking up muck around the edges, turning from off-white to a dirty brown. Winnie's stomach jumps into her mouth and she mutters, no, no, no, as she rushes back and picks up the soiled lace and rubs at it frantically. But the muck won't come off. She rearranges the precious cargo in her pram, trying so carefully to hide the soiled pieces underneath the clean ones, all the time muttering, no, no, no.

Winnie rests her head on the pram handle again and she can't stop herself thinking about the big pot of bloody rags that every so often she sees soaking and boiling on the hob at home. And she remembers how, when she'd asked her mother about it, just that one time, she'd snapped back at her, you don't need to know about that yet.



Winnie keeps to the streets and avoids the shortcuts and finally arrives at Henson's with her pram full of lace. As she passes the factory, the thud and clatter of the looms on the other side of the wall is palpable. It pounds in her ears, in her throat, in her stomach. She's sure that if she reaches out her hand and touches the bricks,

touches the very skin of the factory, she will feel it moving in time with the beating heart of the lace-machines inside.

Father is in there. She marvels at his skill. She hears people talk about him. About how he's such a good twisthand, a man who makes fine lace on a steam-powered machine. About how he knows his lace-machine intimately, its curves and peculiarities, better than any person he's ever known. Its finely engineered cranks and cams, the delicate bobbins in their shining brass carriages. He can tell when a machine is running well and when it needs calibrating. He can tell when the temperature drops too low and a shout will go up for more heat, for more coal to be shovelled into the great factory boilers. He tends his temperamental lace-machine as if it's his only child. It's dirty work though, making such beautiful stuff, greasing the machine with black graphite stuffed into socks. And the days are long when it's piecework you're on. Sometimes he'll go to work and spend all night, taking naps when he can on the floor by his machine, until a single piece of lace is produced. He's doing well though. Twisthands do. And Winnie's heard Mother and Father talking about moving on to a better house, a bigger house even, next year maybe.

Winnie pushes the pram into a pen by the mending shed next-door and rings a bell. She expects Billy Higgins to answer. Billy's a good few years older than his sister Cissie. And a completely different character altogether. He's a lanky lad with a handsome face and his trousers will be dirty, as they always are, and too short for him. He'll be wearing a flat cap on his head that is much too big for him. And he'll be holding the nub end of a cigarette between his yellow fingers and thumb, which he isn't supposed to do at all, not working so close to the lace. Eh up, he'll say to Winnie, you got summat for me? And he'll wink and call her princess and blow

smoke-rings above her head and Winnie will smile and she'll feel a rush of excitement at seeing him, but a sense of dread as she feels herself blushing.

It's Nellie Higgins, though, who opens the pend door to Winnie this morning. The Higgins family live in a constant state of struggle. John Higgins can't seem to hold down work. Winnie has heard some people say that his littl'uns will end up in the workhouse if he's not careful. Some, that he'll drink himself into oblivion with his taste for ale. Some say his moods are so black that he may well throw himself into the canal one day.

Nellie Higgins looks like she's had the life shaken out of her. She's beginning to bulge with her pregnancy. There are dark circles under her eyes and her arms are whippet thin. She looks like her bones will snap if she tries to lift the lace out of the pram and so Winnie grabs a pile of the stuff herself wrapped up in a large cloth. She's carrying it across the pend when Nellie Higgins says, 'What's all this, duck?'

Winnie turns to see her holding up a piece of lace against a shaft of light coming in through a window opening high up in the wall. There are dirty splashes across it. She can see the blue veins of Nellie Higgins's hands through her pale skin. Winnie is terrified, unable to speak.

Nellie Higgins says, 'Leave this with me, duck,' and there's a crooked smile on her face, and a whisper in her voice.

And Winnie feels a sense of utter relief. Then, as Nellie Higgins heaves out another bundle of lace from the pram, the doll tucked away at the bottom flies up into the air and lands and rolls across the floor. Nellie Higgins picks it up and strokes its cropped woollen hair. Winnie can feel her cheeks burning.

Nellie Higgins is staring into the doll's painted face. 'My Cissie had one like this,' she says. Winnie flinches at the mention of Cissie and Nellie Higgins goes on. 'We all forget you're just littl'uns.'



As Winnie crosses the back yard, home in Embankment Street at last, she can hear an unfamiliar voice coming from inside the house. It's lighter than her mother's, thin and reedy. The back door is slightly ajar. The house beyond still smells of tobacco. The smell of toast has been replaced with something meaty and sour. Through the crack of the open door, she can just see a sliver of Mother's face. Her lips are a straight line. The skin between her half-shut eyes is squeezed into a spiteful crease. Her mouth opens and closes, as if she is empty of words.

The thin voice says, 'She's to come with me.'

'And how long is this one going to last?' Her mother sounds angry.

'I've settled down for good this time,' the unfamiliar voice says. 'And you know it's for the best. I s'll take her today. She can stop with me for a bit. See how she gets on.'

Winnie pushes the door open with the flat of her hand. In the middle of the room, there's Mother and next to her is a younger woman. She's slim and her finely boned face is lightly powdered and her pale brown hair is piled up elegantly on her head.

Ada.

Ada had left home when Winnie was just a nipper. She was there one day. Gone the next. Winnie missed her at first, her strong arms to help with the pram, the warmth of her body in the bed they shared. For weeks after she left, Winnie'd wake in the night and stretch out an arm or a leg across the cold sheets, searching for her. She'd lie still, holding her own breath, listening for Ada's. But there was no warmth in the coldness, no breath in the quiet. Just an empty space.

Ada usually only visits at Christmas time, Christmas Eve or the day before that, and sits at the kitchen table and drinks a small glass of sherry and eats one of Mother's mince pies and there's that kind of uncomfortable chit-chat that happens between adults who are embarrassed by being in the company of someone they don't really get on with and so they try and fill that empty space with words, meaningless words. Closed questions. Curt answers. The conversation runs dry. There are uncomfortable silences. Father is always at work when Ada visits. Winnie always sits at the table, next to Bell. They're both always tight-lipped. They speak only when they are spoken to.

It's from these short annual visits that Winnie finds out about Ada, her older sister. That she lives up in the city now. That she was working in service at a big house but now she works in the lace, in the packing department of one of the big warehouses in the Lace Market, but that she aspires to move into the offices and she is saving up to go to evening school to learn how to use a typewriter. Ada lives with Mr and Mrs Hodge. She says they are a nice old couple. She smiles when she talks about them.

But there was that one time, after Ada had left, as Mother cleared away her empty glass and brushed mince pie crumbs off the table into the palm of her left

hand with the fingers of her right, as Mother cleared away all traces of Ada from the house, she told Winnie and Bell that Ada told lies and that she really lived in a boarding house and Mother sneered when she said this and a red flush spread across her throat and her cheeks, up to her ears.

But this isn't Christmas and so Winnie stares at Ada and wonders why she is here, right now, standing next to Mother in the kitchen, when Mother suddenly snaps at Winnie, 'Go through to the front room and help our Bell to clean that fire out.'

The silence in the front room buzzes in Winnie's head when she shuts the door behind her. Dust motes float in the air, dance in the feeble daylight that squeezes in around the edges of the ill-fitting curtains and pools onto the floor. She can taste the mustiness. She thinks about Gran'ma who died in this room almost a year ago to the day. She died and went to heaven. That's what Mother said. That's when the last fire burnt itself out in this room. The day that Gran'ma died. And the room hasn't been used since. No fires have been lit in here. But now Mother thinks that a year is quite long enough to grieve and that the room should be used again and so she wants the fire cleaned out properly and the room turned back into the best room, as it used to be. But all Winnie can think about is the dirty lace lying in the jitty and how kind Nellie Higgins is and how wicked Cissie Higgins is.

Bell is kneeling down on the hearth with a dust-pan and brush in her hands, staring at a small pile of ashes in the fire grate.

Mother's voice can be heard clearly from the kitchen. 'You're not taking her and there's no more to be said on the matter.' And then, 'You'll never change, my girl, you'll never mend your ways. You'll just keep on making the same mistakes. Over and over and over again.'

The back door slams. Winnie has her doll in her hand. She hands it to Bell. 'Go on,' she says, 'you play wi' it. I can do this.' And she takes the dust-pan and brush from Bell and begins to sweep up the ashes.



Gran'ma once told Winnie that Arthur Foster was originally destined for the pit; the pit in the village he'd been born in the north of the county and that had provided work for his own father and for his three older brothers, John, Charlie and Eric. That would have been it for Arthur Foster too had it not been for the events of one ordinary spring morning when he was eleven years old.

He was at school, sitting on a hard wooden bench, fidgeting and kicking his feet in time with the metre of the poem that the class was reciting as one. A poem that had been drilled into them and that they all knew off by heart. As the schoolboys paused and gulped in air between the rhythmic lines, birds could be heard trilling outside, filling the silence. And then suddenly the ground began to shake. The classroom window-panes rattled in their frames. The pit bell began to clang. And it clanged on and on. And one by one the boys scraped back their chairs across the flagged floor and got to their feet and the teacher got to his feet and his voice rumbled, hold it, lads.

Ernie Clifford ran first. He was the youngest of a large family of pit workers and destined for the colliery himself a few weeks later. As the other boys began to follow, the teacher dropped his chalk on the floor and it exploded in a puff of white dust and he just said, off you go then, lads, and the classroom emptied.

There had been a cave-in at the pit. Arthur's father had been carried out, his face covered with bandages. Charlie and Eric Foster were dead. It took hours to find their bodies and bring them up out of the blackness that had swallowed them. Young John Foster clung to life in the cottage hospital for three more days, long enough to see his little brother Arthur turn twelve. This meant that their mother had just one son left and she swore that day, when John Foster died, that her only living son would never, never go anywhere near a pit head, ever.

Arthur was packed off to his mother's brother, Jack, who ran a lace-standing in Longwash, and by the age of fourteen he was apprenticed to learn a trade as a twisthand, a man who makes fine lace on a steam-powered machine. He would return home on his day off each Sunday and press a generous portion of his weekly wage into his mother's hand and he remembered fondly how his mother would grab at him and smooth his hair and marvel at how he'd grown so tall and handsome during his week away. He'd have travelled straight from a shift sometimes, arriving with his face and overalls smeared with black graphite.

His mother would mutter, you're as black as your brothers were down the pit, and her eyes would tear up.

And old Mr Foster's retort had been that there's proper work and then there's that lace work. He'd not taken lightly to his only surviving son going and working in a trade that made fancy trimmings for ladies, when he continued to mourn his dead sons by going back down and grafting in the guts of the earth.



When Cissie Higgins went to school one morning at the age of eight with her hair shorn close to her head like a boy's, the other kids kept clear of her. Some of them called out clouty and fleabag as they passed by. But Winnie Foster didn't. She seemed to be fascinated by Cissie Higgins. She seemed not to care about the infestation of nits afflicting the Higgins family and one day, while the other kids threw sticks and stones at Cissie when she tried to join in their games of tickie in the playground, Winnie Foster hovered next to her. She stared at Cissie's cropped head, at the dark down sprouting from it, at the soft pink scalp beneath and then gently reached out to touch it.

Cissie shook her off. Leave me be, she said.

Winnie took her hand away, but still stood at Cissie's side.

And for just a few short weeks, Winnie Foster was the only child in the class who would stand with Cissie Higgins in the playground, who would talk to her and play with her. And perhaps, because of this, Cissie relented and one day she let Winnie stroke her stubbly scalp with her little fingers. But it soon came to an end. Cissie's hair grew back thicker than before. Other kids from other Longwash families became lice-ridden and new targets for the taunters and the bullies. And Winnie's curiosity in her new friend vanished as quickly as it had begun.



Bell had come along not long after Ada had left. At first, Winnie'd thought her an ugly little duckling. A dead skinned rabbit. She had pink wrinkled skin. Pale glass eyes. Wisps of black hair curled against a pink scalp. Mother's face was white and

expressionless as she held the tiny bundle against her breast. Father looked awkward as he jiggled the thing up and down and then handed it back over to Mother. The baby slept in a drawer taken from a chest in the front room. Its screams in the middle of the night woke Winnie and she'd creep to the top of the stairs and look down at her mother sitting a few stairs down from her with the thing on her lap, humming and rocking. And Winnie has a memory of seeing tears glinting on her mother's cheek, just as she turns her head to the side for one moment, little flecks of silver salt water. Gran'ma appears in one of these early memories too. She's heating sour smelling milk in a pan on the hob in the kitchen while Mother sits at the table with a cigarette in her hand. There are tears on Mother's cheeks again and sobs that make her entire body quake.

There had been other babies that had cried in the night and that Mother had sat up with. There had been a baby that lived for only four months. That was before Winnie was born. And then another born dead when Winnie was about two years old.

When Ada left home and Winnie was left to sleep alone in the bed for the first time ever, she was scared then, that she would die too. That it would all go black and she would go to heaven and live with the angels. She wet the bed that first night alone after Ada had left. She didn't tell a soul and it was only the smell that drew Mother to it. And Mother was cross. She slapped Winnie's backside and sent her down to sleep in the front parlour with Gran'ma. In time, Winnie was allowed back upstairs. And then, of course, Bell came along.

The duckling was finally given a name, Isabella, after Gran'ma. She grew into a quiet toddling child. Painfully shy, she hid behind Mother or behind Winnie

whenever strangers came into the house. If there was no one to hide behind, she hid behind chairs or curtains or under the table. Scared of her shadow, that one, Gran'ma had said.

She came to be known as Bell and her hair grew long and hung in dark curls. Her eyes had a haunting look to them. And her skin was so pale that Winnie thought you could almost see through it.



Winnie has finished the cleaning that her mother wants her to do and so she heads to the factory gates to meet her father like she does every Saturday dinner time. Her father will appear at the end of his shift, about a quarter past one, with a blackened face, dishevelled hair and tired eyes and they will walk home together hand-in-hand.

But Winnie's late today. Only by about ten minutes. But late nonetheless. And so, when she gets to the gates today, her father isn't there. The factory yard is deserted. She walks across to the building that houses her father's standing. The door is locked. She climbs up on a low wall so that she can peer in through a window. The machinery is still. Closed down until Monday morning. The place is empty.

Upset at missing him, she heads home, up Trafalgar Street, avoiding the jitty of course, and she walks past The Angel, and as she does so, she peeps in through the one pane of window-glass that is plain and not frosted, into the tap room where only twisthands are served, and she sees him, Arthur Foster, her father, sitting at a table by himself, a near empty half-pint pot of beer in front of him. His bowler hat on the seat next to him. The tap room is full of men, black-handed twisthands, fresh

from their work, some of them still wearing their aprons. A rotund man with a full moustache and a bowler hat on his head is holding court, up on his feet, leaning on the bar, telling an anecdote in a rumbling voice that Winnie can't hear clearly and there are sudden bursts of loud and rough laughter from the other men. Arthur's face wears its usual serious expression and Winnie sees him finish his drink in one clean swig before he gets up and heads to the bar for another.

And so she leaves him there and continues her journey home. And as she gets to the end of Embankment Street, she sees Mother rushing home ahead of her, one hand holding a piece of bloodied meat wrapped in paper and tied up with string, the other one clutching Bell's hand, her little feet pattering quickly to keep up with Mother's vigorous strides. And then Winnie sees Bell turn her head and she grins as she sees Winnie and pulls away from Mother and comes running towards her. Her dark hair is tied back in plaits. She's wearing a dark brown coat that used to be Winnie's. The sleeves have been shortened and the hem taken up. And Mother turns at this point. She sees Bell rushing towards Winnie. And with a shrug of her shoulders she turns back again and continues her journey homewards alone. And instead of following Mother and heading home down Embankment Street behind her, Winnie takes Bell's hand and they turn back to Main Road, head down to the tow-path and follow the canal out to where Longwash ends. To where high-bricked buildings give way to flat fields broken up by hedgerows and the odd scrawny tree. Where the canal meets a river with ragged edges. Raw smells of mud and cow muck mix with coal smoke. And they head to the spot where it's shallow enough to ford the river, where the banks are steep and worn down to slippery clay. The sun has broken through the grim sky and despite the chill of this spring day, Winnie and Bell

take off their boots and their socks and hitch up their skirts and cautiously enter the water, dodging the foamy effluent washing downstream from the bleaching works. They hunt for bits of broken pottery and gather it up like treasure. Winnie washes her treasure in the river and folds it up in a handkerchief. And then she takes it home and hides it in a box under the bed.



1911, Summer

Cissie is in the scullery scrubbing at a blood stain on a nightdress when she hears his footsteps crossing the back yard. She goes through into the living room drying her hands on her apron. It's late afternoon on a bright summer's day but the room in this hemmed-in house is in semi-darkness. A flickering candle casts a halo around the head of Nellie Higgins. Her frail neck is bent over and her face in silhouette as her fingers work away industriously at the lace in her lap.

When John Higgins bursts in he's wild with excitement. His mood jars with the stillness, sends ripples across the room. Cissie stands in the corner, invisible in the gloom. She's watching her father in the doorway, beads of sweat on his brow, a big silly smile on his face. She watches him as he walks unsteadily across and kisses her mam clumsily on the top of her head, patting and smoothing her chestnut hair. Mam flinches slightly, keeps on with her mending and says, 'I can smell the ale on you, John'.

'There's good reason to be supping,' he answers and his mouth cracks open into a wide grin.

Nellie Higgins looks up at him. Her eyes are wide and her face is creased into worry lines.

'I've good news, duck, I tell thee,' says John Higgins.

Nellie Higgins puts her lace work down on the table and stands up, stooping a little as one hand cups her swollen belly and the other pushes at the small of her back. She goes through into the scullery. Cissie can hear her busying herself at the sink.

‘We’re going to the coast, duck,’ John Higgins announces in a shout and he reaches into his trouser pocket and pulls out a wad of papers. ‘And ‘ere’s the train tickets. For all on us. Just for the day, mind, but we’re going.’

‘When?’ asks Cissie.

‘Tomorrow.’

Cissie’s heart jumps and there’s a clatter of metal against stone as Nellie Higgins drops something in the scullery. And then she’s shouting, ‘Cissie, get your father some bread and butter to soak up that ale’.

Cissie goes to the table. There’s a loaf on it covered with a cloth. Nellie Higgins comes back into the room.

‘Are you not pleased, Nellie?’ John Higgins’s voice sounds flat. There’s no longer any laughter around the edges of it.

‘I’m tired, John.’ Nellie Higgins picks up one of the lighted candles and it wobbles in its holder and shadows dart around the walls. ‘Too tired to go off gallivanting to the seaside when we’ve barely two ha’pennies to rub together.’ She pulls open the stair door and begins to climb the rickety steps to the bedroom.

They say that this terrace was built on old mine workings, that the houses are slowly sinking into the earth and that’s why they’re so crooked. Eight of the Higgins family squeeze into the four dark rooms of this plain little house. Cissie has a distant memory of her mam decorating it with flowers; she’d go with her to pick them down by the canal in the summer months, greenery and herbs in the winter months. Her mam would set aside a little money in an old biscuit tin, saving up to buy cheap ornaments for the mantelpiece and postcards of coastal scenes to cheer up the walls. But her mam’s enthusiasm for such things diminished over the years as the place

became filled with children and John Higgins flitted in and out of work. His hands were too big and clumsy to work the lace, he'd say, and various portering, packing and labouring jobs came and went. The postcards of the seaside are still pinned on the walls, but they're faded and curled at the edges now. And there's never enough money coming in to set aside anymore. The window in the living room at the back of the house looks out onto a tiny yard. Nellie Higgins used to keep the glass in this window as clean as she could to let in as much light as possible. She made pretty curtains for it once. But the window is dirty now and a pane is cracked where something, thrown in anger, has smashed against it.

John Higgins is slumped in a chair at the table. Mam's footsteps creak overhead. Cissie looks across at her dad. For just a moment, her imagination transforms him: he's taller, his hair parted neatly and groomed till it shines. She dresses him up in fine trousers and a jacket, like she's seen some of the gentlemen who work in the factory offices wearing. And on his head, she places a great big hat. A big proud top hat. And sticking out from the hatband, a sheaf of five-pound notes – even though she has no idea what a five-pound note looks like. But that moment pops like a bubble. That isn't John Higgins, her short and stocky father, who's sitting there looking pathetic in his dirty, patched trousers, stained shirt and waistcoat, straggling moustache and unruly sideburns. A five-pound note wouldn't last in John Higgins's hand, it would be in the bookmaker's hand or the pub landlord's hand before the day was out. No doubt it's winnings from a horse that are funding this extravagant day trip to the seaside.

Cissie hacks a slice of bread from the loaf with a blunt breadknife and puts it on a plate in front of her father. She goes back into the scullery and picks up the blood-stained nightdress and begins to scrub away at it again.



Despite the previous night's misgivings, there's a rare buzz of excitement in the Higgins household this morning. Cissie dresses up her little sisters, Florrie and Elsie, in their Sunday bonnets. They wear striped frocks made out of some old curtains that were taken from a neighbour's house as payment in kind for Mam laying out the old woman who lived there when she died. Cissie wears a navy blue frock that she's fancied up with flounces of lace around the cuffs and the collar. She dresses up a straw boater with a piece of ivory ribbon and secures it on her head with two large hat-pins. Her little twin brothers, Ted and Harry, wear matching knee-length shorts, coats and caps. Billy has on the nearest thing he owns to a suit, in a dark brown tweed, with a clean shirt and a flat cap on the top. John Higgins wears charcoal grey. He's trimmed his beard, his moustache and sideburns.

In the end, Cissie and Mam stayed up late into the night pressing the family's outfits, hanging them up to air them out. Today Nellie Higgins wears a green frock, her best frock, a little frayed and patched in places; she was married in this dress, has buried three dead infants in it and wears it to church on the very rare occasions that she attends. And on her head, a spectacular hat, a hand-me-down from a cousin, with a drooping brim bent back from her face and pinned in place, adorned with feathers and velvet roses. A little warm for a July day, but it's the best she has.

All assembled they set off to walk to the railway station. John Higgins gives the train tickets to Cissie for safe-keeping. Cissie has only been on a train once before when she went with Mam to take their Elsie up to the Eye Infirmary in the city. John Higgins walks along at the head of the group with his hands in his pockets jangling loose change.

‘We’ve enough for chips and ice-creams,’ he shouts out.

Billy walks by his father’s side. He’s making an effort to be civil with his father today, for Mam’s sake mostly, to give them all a good day out. ‘And a ride or two, I should hope,’ he says. He’s swinging a cricket bat in one hand and carries a ball in the other.

The platform at the station is busy with Longwash folk all heading for the coast. Ted and Harry lark around, sticking out their chests and their stomachs, pulling their caps on at jaunty angles, impersonating the jolly red-faced fisherman on the poster pinned up advertising train rides to the seaside.

‘Bracing?’ says Cissie, reading the poster. ‘Hope that means it’s not cold.’

Mam leans in close to her, ‘It means it’s good for you, I should think. A good dose of fresh sea air.’

They almost fill a whole carriage on the train. Elsie squeals when she hears the train whistle. They pull down the windows to let the air blast in and Cissie takes in great bellyfulls of it, anticipating that first taste of salt. The train sets off at a galloping pace, picking up and dropping off passengers at the stations and halts along the way and the sun shines brightly and hotly all the way to Skegness.

When they get there, they leave the station and follow clusters and straggles of people who all seem to know where they’re going. And it’s not long before they

catch a glimpse of it, a shimmer of grey-blue at the end of the street. Underfoot, firm pavements give way to shifting sands and then it opens out and there it is. A wide expanse of yellow-brown beach and away in the distance a neat white line where the land joins the sea. And jutting out into the water, a criss-cross of wooden struts and beams. The pier.

Cissie's stomach is all a-jitter and her pace picks up. She walks ahead now, stumbling on the sand in her boots. She chooses a spot on the beach and lays out the two blankets they've brought with them. Ted and Harry run straight off to the water's edge with Billy hot on their heels. Florrie and Elsie hang back. Mam settles herself down onto a blanket and the girls start to dig in the sand. Dad stands facing away from them, lighting a cigarette behind a cupped hand. Billy's a few feet away chatting to a group of lads. And then the group breaks and Cissie sees that he's getting a cricket match going. She goes over to watch. She's good at hitting the ball and at running, but she's also self-conscious of her height and her athletic build. Other children join in. And a few men start to hang around on the edges watching and then begin to help with the fielding. Billy whacks the ball effortlessly and a shout goes up as it spins and flies beyond the boundaries of the makeshift sandy pitch. He's enjoying himself. Enjoying the ripple of applause as he hits another four. He sticks his chest out and grins broadly, pulls his cap firmly onto his head. He could have played for the county, thinks Cissie.

She gives up on the game as the heat of the day builds and she feels herself sweating beneath her layers of clothing. Dampness prickles in her armpits and between her legs. Florrie and Elsie are still playing in the sand. Mam is sitting bolt upright, shading her eyes from the sun with her hand.

‘Where’s our Dad gone?’ asks Cissie.

‘To find his-sen a drink,’ says Nellie Higgins flatly. ‘He said he’d find me a chair to sit on too.’

Cissie tuts. ‘Here,’ she says. She rolls up the boys’ coats to make two cushions. ‘Lay down and have a rest.’

Nellie Higgins eases herself back stiffly and shuts her eyes.

Cissie looks out to sea. Two young women dressed in swimming costumes paddle in the shallows, their wet knitted suits hugging every curve of their figures. Cissie begins to unbutton her boots.

‘Florrie,’ she calls and when the little girl comes over, ‘‘Ere stand in front of me,’ and Cissie reaches up under her frock, unhooks her stockings and rolls them down in one fluid movement. She lifts her hem and waggles her bare feet and ankles. Florrie giggles and Nellie Higgins, who has seen this show through half-closed eyes, sits up and glares at Cissie, telling her not to be so brazen. But Cissie is up on her feet now, with Florrie clutching at one hand and Elsie at the other, and they run down to the water’s edge.



The cricket game fizzles out. The adult spectators wander off.

‘Come on sis,’ says Billy. And he leads her off across the sand towards the pier thrusting itself out into the sea. Cissie is nervous; it looks so flimsy, high up above the water. They stand at the edge of it, Cissie gripping the handrail tightly. Beneath her feet, through the gaps in the wooden planks, she can see the sea, dark blue,

frothing and her insides lurch at the sensation of walking on the water. She wishes she had something to drink to take the nasty taste out of her mouth from where she'd sucked on her wet fingers whilst paddling to prove to her sisters that the sea really did taste of salt.

'What's on the other side?' she says, looking dead ahead and out to sea, trying to keep her unease hidden from her brother.

'Of the sea? Holland or France or somewhere like that,' says Billy.

'I wonder if I should ever go and see places like that?' says Cissie.

They fall silent. All around them the hollow clattering of feet on the wooden planks.

And then, 'I could join the Navy,' says Billy.

'You could what?' Cissie is sharp with her brother. 'Why would you want to do that?'

'To see the world.'

'But you can't,' says Cissie. 'What would we do if you weren't here?'

'I could get money and send it home,' says Billy.

'And I'm sure we'd be most grateful,' says Cissie and she still stares out to sea, won't turn and look at her brother and take in how serious he really is.

After a silence, 'But there's more than the factories,' says Billy.

'I know that,' snaps Cissie turning to look at her brother at last, 'I'm not daft.'

Somewhere nearby, a fairground organ bursts into life. Its shrill tones catch Cissie unawares and she jumps. It's a jolly upbeat tune. She looks out at the sea again, rolling on without an end. Billy's humming along with the organ, his fingers drumming on the handrail and Cissie wants to say, the grass isn't always greener,

Billy Higgins, but somehow she thinks that it might be. And her stomach hurts. The cramps again and then she remembers that she's bleeding and she's not checked herself for hours, but then Billy suddenly catches hold of her and his handsome face is creased into a smile and Cissie begins to laugh as he spins her around in time to the jangling organ music.



The sun wavers in the sky. A few puffy clouds have appeared. Florrie and Harry are digging in the sand with their hands. Elsie and Ted are asleep at Mam's feet. Cissie is lying on the blanket. Her cramps have worn off. She managed to slip away and find a dark little yard at the back of a shop that was all locked up and check her drawers. The blood is coming less now. The sun has warmed her right through and it feels wonderful. Mam is sleeping and Cissie notices how she's caught the sun. Her skin is glowing. Her hair, ruffled by the warm breeze, shines like copper. The edges of her lips are so very nearly curled into a smile. A smattering of freckles on her face, around her fine cheekbones and her nose. She looks like a painting. Like a young woman in a painting. Cissie's eyes prickle as they take her in.

It should have been a perfect day. But there is something hanging over them, something unspoken, and then Billy comes over swinging his cricket bat and says to Cissie in a low voice, 'Where's the bastard then?'

John Higgins still hasn't come back. He'd just gone off this morning jingling all those coins in his pockets and has not come back. Cissie had enough money in her purse to buy the kiddies chips at dinner time. Billy magicked up ice-creams from

somewhere. And sweets.

Mam has woken and is sitting up now, scanning the horizon and then looking back at the promenade. Cissie sees her check all her children one by one and then, 'Is 'e not back yet?' And shadows fall across her face. The worn-in lines, hollow cheeks, tightness around the mouth.

'Come on Billy,' says Cissie and walks across and takes her brother's arm. 'Mam, you stay here and we'll go and have a look for him. And then we s'll need to be getting our train home.' And Cissie's stomach and her throat feel as if she's swallowed a whole beach full of pebbles.



They travel home without him. Before they go they check in all the pubs they can find, along the sea front and little ones tucked away in yards and jitties off the main thoroughfares. But there's no sign of John Higgins anywhere.

'We could ask people,' says Cissie.

'It'll be a waste of time,' says Billy.

They approach the clock tower. It's a quarter to five.

'Our train's at quarter past,' says Cissie. Time is racing against them. 'How will Dad get back? We have his ticket.'

'He can work that out for his-sen,' spits Billy. His earlier ease has gone. His smile has vanished. There are frown lines etched into his forehead. He suddenly kicks out at a wall. 'Bastard,' he bellows. 'Come on. Let's get home and leave that cunt here.'

They journey home in uncomfortable silence. No one squeals at the train whistle this time. The younger ones nod in and out of sleep. Mam sits, stone-faced. Billy fidgets in his seat. Chews at the skin around his nails. Kicks at the seat opposite him, bang, bang, bang, until finally Mam says in a tearful voice, ‘Oh for goodness sake, Billy.’ He continues to chew at his fingers. Cissie stares out of the window, close to tears herself. Not because her father isn’t there, but because of the worry his absence seems to bring out in Mam, the anger it seems to drip into Billy’s blood.

And so, it’s reheated broth and a slice of stale bread and bed by nine. There’s still a graze of light in the sky.

When she wakes the next day, Cissie stretches and her sunburnt skin feels tight and hot and for a moment, just before she opens her eyes, she remembers how warm the sun had felt on her feet and on her legs as she’d shamelessly lifted up her skirts and paddled into the frilly edges of the waves, and the squeals from Florrie and Elsie as they felt the cold water splash on their unblemished skins. And then she hears the stairs creak and she knows that Mam is heading downstairs and she remembers her absent father and she throws back the sheet and blanket and jumps out and runs to the door at the top of the stairs and opens it and ‘Is he back?’ she calls down after Mam whose hair hangs down her back in one long plait.

‘No, duck,’ and Mam tries to smile as she looks up at Cissie, her voice hoarse, worn away. ‘He s’ll not be coming back, duck.’



On Saturday morning Winnie rings the bell at the factory door as she does on every

visit and waits, nervously picking at her fingers. Waiting for Billy Higgins to open the door with a cheeky smile or Nellie Higgins with a tired but friendly nod. But no one comes. She musters the courage to ring the bell again and the door is jerked open and in front of her stands a woman with skin like a tanned hide pulled tightly across her face. Sharp Bones, thinks Winnie. They could cut your eyes out. Sharp Bones sees the pram and gestures for them to come in with a nod of her head.

Bell is with her today, her first time ever taking lace to the factory. It's Bell's birthday tomorrow and this is a great treat for her. An adventure. Winnie whispers down to her to go on and follow the woman inside. Sharp Bones leads them right through the pend, past the spot where Winnie normally waits, and right on into the mending shed.

Winnie has peered around this door many times before but has never actually been inside. It's a vast cavernous space. A group of women in starched white aprons sit on stools with large baskets at their feet. They're mending lace fresh from the machines next door. Their heads are bowed over their work. Sharp Bones tells Winnie and Bell that they're to wait over in a corner until the person they need to see is ready to see them. They're to shush. Don't you dare disturb the workers. Just you keep out of their road. They're on an important job. Time is tight. Winnie stands up against the wall as straight as a poker. She's not even sure who she's supposed to be seeing and she's too scared to ask. Best just to wait, she thinks. Bell is at her side clutching at Winnie's frock with one hand. Such a tiny hand, like a doll. The dirty thumb of her other hand is stuck in her mouth.

Mother shook a stern finger at Bell that morning before they left, telling her to be quiet in the factory. To be good. To not speak unless spoken to. The same stiff

instructions that had been drilled into Winnie the very first time she went to the factory with Ada. Do not disturb the workers. Do not talk to them. Do not fidget if you're told to wait. The Devil makes work for idle hands. Winnie and Bell left home with plenty of time on their hands and they had dawdled around the Market Place, gawping in the shop windows at all the fancy goods, before heading down Trafalgar Street to the factory.

Winnie looks up, up at a great clock on the wall. A great clock ticking by. Ticking away the seconds until Bell's birthday. Turning the seconds into minutes, into hours. Winnie shuffles from foot to foot. She can feel her socks slipping down inside her boots. But they'll be standing here until the person they need to see is ready to see them. And there will be no fidgeting. There will be no sitting down. They must wait. The seconds still twitching by on the great clock above their heads. Its delicate roman numerals picked out in gilt against a cream face. Tick. Tick. Tick. And then a clink as one of the menders drops something on the floor, then a scrape of a stool leg as she bends to pick it up.

And then Winnie catches sight of something on the floor rolling past her, a flash of something metal, a bobbin of some kind perhaps, and she feels Bell's grip on her frock relax and she's off and running towards the rolling thing and Winnie lunges after her and puts out her hands to grab at her little sister, but Bell is running away from her, chasing the bobbin, heading towards the menders all working away, the women without names all set out in rows with their fingers all busy and their heads bowed low and Bell is chasing the bobbin as it rolls within inches of their skirts and spins round and round in ever decreasing circles until it stops and falls flat on the floor.

Sharp Bones swoops in and grabs Bell by the arm and swings her back round to face Winnie. She roars at her to get back to where she had been told to stand and wait, and she holds her arm up high above her head before bending to slap the back of Bell's legs. Winnie winces and her throat constricts to hold in the no, no, no that she wants to shout out. She glowers at Sharp Bones as Bell stumbles awkwardly back towards her and Winnie pulls her into her side, smoothing her hair, at the same time hissing, now just you behave. Just you shush and stand still.

Winnie dreamed that she grew wings last night. And these wings were the colour of pure snow and made from a substance she'd never seen nor felt before; not flesh, not bone, not lace. They sprouted from her shoulder blades and she had an urge to fly but when she tried, when she tried to push herself up into the air, she felt something dig deep into her back, at the very base of her spine, and she'd jumped right out of her dream and had woken up with the sensation still in her back and her shoulders prickling as if they been stuck with the barbs of goose feathers and she feels that sensation again now, right here, standing in the mending shed, waiting.

More empty seconds pass. She can almost hear the menders breathing as they work, air going in, air coming out. The creak of their stays over their rib cages as their lungs fill and empty. Rows of angels mending their broken wings.

Bell is tugging at Winnie's frock and Winnie shakes her off. She's irritated now and just wants to be free of this place. She wants to be off to meet Father when he finishes his Saturday morning shift or back dawdling and looking in shop windows or paddling down by the river. She hates herself for bringing Bell here now. Shush, she tells herself. The Devil makes work for idle hands.

And then Bell begins to sob. Quietly at first and Winnie shushes her again,

thinking that she is just crying because she was slapped, but then she glances down at Bell and sees her squatting, her skirt spread out across a puddle of liquid. And the smell hits her. And Bell is sobbing harder and saying that she'd tried to hold it in and Winnie is shushing her again and has taken her arm firmly and is steering her away from the puddle, trying to keep it from the beady eyes of Sharp Bones who, to her utter relief, has left the mending shed and is nowhere to be seen.

Winnie catches the eye of a young mender at her work looking over at them. It's Jessie Nobbs from her street. The corners of the girl's lips flicker up into a smile. But then her expression changes and she puts her hand up to her mouth and buries her mouth into her sleeve and coughs. A flash of lurid red against the paleness of flesh and lace. Winnie looks away. And the clock ticks by. It keeps ticking by. Winnie's legs ache and she has a dull pain in the small of her back. The stench of piss from the puddle on the floor is unbearable. She can hear the bones in the menders' fingers clicking in the silence. She thinks of the wings she grew in her dream. The desire to fly. That involuntary lurch, as if she were pushed.

And then someone is tapping her lightly on the shoulder. It's another woman who Winnie doesn't know but who smiles kindly at her and thanks her for bringing along the lace. She's ready to unpack it now. Winnie's free to go. The hands on the great big clock are creeping into the afternoon. Sharp Bones is nowhere to be seen. The menders still work away at their stools, their baskets filling up. There's an empty stool where Jessie Nobbs had been sitting. And when Winnie looks down at her side she sees that Bell has gone and that there is just a trail of little wet footprints leading to the door.



The next day and they've eaten a breakfast of eggs and toast and hot sweet tea and made a rare visit to church. Mother insisted that they show their gratitude; Arthur Foster has put in a long week at the factory and he's brought home a very satisfactory wage for it. And it shall also be a celebration for Bell's birthday. Father still wears his Sunday trousers and is sitting in the chair by the range reading the newspaper while Mother puts together a picnic of pork pie and cheese and apples and fruit cake. Winnie and Bell have been allowed to keep their best dresses on.

They take the tow path down by the canal and head away from Longwash. The long grasses shine green and yellow and flowers on the bushes are breaking out in pinks and creams. They reach the point where the canal meets the river and take a path following the water and heading out into the open fields. Church bells from the next village clang in the distance. A bright red barge chugs by belching smoke from its black chimney. At the place where the river curves and a grass verge banks away into pasture, Mother spreads out a blanket and sets out the picnic. Father takes the two girls down to the edge of the river, where it's slippery and muddy and tall reeds grow. He's got a net on the end of a long cane. He takes off his boots and rolls up his trousers and crouches down at the water's edge dipping his net into the water. Bell watches him transfixed while Winnie picks at the muddy banks, pulling out interesting looking stones.

They eat their picnic in contented silence. Mother has taken her hat off and stretches her legs out in front of her for a moment before self-consciously turning and tucking them under herself, hiding them away.

Winnie is biting into a chunk of cheddar cheese when she spots a figure in the distance coming along the path towards them. It's a woman, she thinks as she comes closer. She has a hat on her head. A floppy hat with a bobbing feather. And she's quite young. The woman is moving briskly and getting closer all the time and then her hand goes up and she's waving. She's waving at them and then, 'Yoo hoo,' she's calling out. And that's when Winnie happens to glance at Mother and catches a look of recognition in her face. Mother's eyes darken.

'What is she doing here?' Mother looks across to Father who looks down and stares intensely at the wedge of pork pie he's holding in his hand. Bell sucks at an apple, looking around with wide-eyes. And right then, a cloud swallows up the sun.

Winnie had wanted to stay here all day, enjoying the peace and quiet and the stillness. Away from Longwash, where a Sunday afternoon is never quiet, what with the judder of passing trains and their piercing whistles and the squeals from the neighbours' children that jar the nerves. The blanket feels warm against her skin. She's enjoying the firmness of the pork pie, looking forward to singing happy birthday to Bell as they cut the fruit-cake.

Winnie had promised Bell that today would be the best day ever. She had told Bell off at first, when she'd found her hiding under the bed yesterday afternoon. But then she'd cried with relief that she'd found her safe and had promised that she'd not tell Mother that Bell had run away from the factory. She knew that it was only an accident and that Bell had been scared of Sharp Bones. She'd told her that this picnic would be the most wonderful picnic ever. But now, Mother is beginning to pack the picnic things away, grabbing at the remains of the food and wrapping it haphazardly

back into its greaseproof paper, shoving it into the basket. In goes the cake. And the apples. A bottle of lemonade is tipped up and poured away into the grass.

‘Arthur,’ says Mother. She’s getting to her feet just as the figure gets close enough to see clearly. And there she is. Ada.

‘Have I missed the picnic?’ Ada’s face is beaming. Her eyes are shining. She reaches across to Winnie, who is also on her feet now, and hugs her. Winnie feels a little shy, but she hugs her back.

Mother hands the folded blanket to Winnie. ‘It’s time we went,’ and she brushes roughly past Ada and marches away with the basket of food.

‘Bell?’ Ada looks across at Bell who goes and hides behind Father. ‘I’ve a present for her.’ Ada holds out a parcel wrapped in brown paper and string.

‘She doesn’t need for anything, thank you,’ says Father in a quiet voice, getting to his feet, his head hanging low as if he can’t look Ada in the face. He turns and takes Bell’s hand and they follow Mother back along the path.

Ada hands the parcel to Winnie. ‘Please tek it for her,’ she says. ‘It’s a dress I picked out. I hope it fits, but you can always alter it if need be.’

And Winnie takes it and says, ‘Why do they hate you so much?’

And Ada says, ‘Oh, it’s very complicated. You wouldn’t understand.’



1911, Autumn

Cissie can't sleep and is sitting at the kitchen table rolling a marble back and forth between her hands. There's a small puddle of light from a candle on the mantelpiece. It's quiet at last. Mam and the kids are all in bed. Billy is out on a night shift at the factory.

She's still thinking about the Goose Fair. The sheer thrill of it like a physical sensation inside. Billy had taken her there last week and it really was something. It was like looking into a mirror and seeing the world turned inside out. It'd taken her breath away.

They'd gone in the middle of the afternoon so they'd see it in the daytime and there'd been treats and tuffees of all kinds, hot peas and cocks-on-sticks and candy floss. They'd braved the thick swell of people all dressed up in their frills and fancies and gone on the swing-boats and Billy had swung them faster and higher than Cissie'd ever been before and she'd screamed herself hoarse. He took her into the hall of mirrors with its endless reflections of distorted faces and she'd not known whether to laugh or squeal at the spectacle of it. And above it all the barkers and the goaders on their platforms egged on the baying crowds. There was a moment, just as the sun began to set, as families with children headed for their homes, that the place settled down and there was a pause for breath. But as darkness took hold the crowds swelled again, this time they were young, brash, brazen. Cissie wondered how so many people could fit into such a small space bound only by the city's market square. Billy steered her away from the main drag and they passed tents where she caught sight of tattooed men with bloodied noses boxing each other with their bare

fists and she didn't like that at all. Signs blazing in gold paint proclaimed all kinds of freaks on show for the curious to view, 'The Fattest Woman Ever' and 'The Invisible & Disappearing Man with the Paper-Thin Skin'. the crowds pushed against each other, the steam and the noise and the stink thickening, all eager for the spectacles on offer, the theatrical shows with lights and special effects. And Billy had warned her about those dirty beggars who couldn't keep their hands to their-sens, the ones that'd take an opportunity to grope and fondle a young woman in the dark and the crush and those thieving bastards that'd grab at yer money, see what they could get. Keep close and keep yer eyes open, Billy had said.

When she'd felt a hand in the small of her back, at first she'd thought it was Billy just guiding her through the crowds, but then she smelt the beery breath over her shoulder and felt the tug on her bag. She'd only a few pennies in it but she needed those pennies and so she'd turned as best she could, as people pressed up to the right of her, in front of her, behind her, she turned and she saw a face, an arm outstretched, clutching at her bag and so she stamped, she stamped so hard on the man's foot that he yelped and turned away and was soon swallowed up by the mass of people. And then she felt a hand again, in the small of the back, but she knew it was Billy this time and he was saying, well ain't you the little fighter then my girl, and she looks up and sees her brother's face and his grin and his eyes sparkling and, the coconut shy next I think, he says and he takes her hand and finds a gap and leads her gently and safely through the crowds.

Billy's come home from work for the past few nights in a good humour. The work's been treating him well. The other men have been treating him well. He seems to do nothing but talk about Arthur Foster these days and how he's been helping him

and his assistant out. Arthur Foster seems to have taken Billy under his wing. He's been giving him work to do. Good work at that. Keeping an eye on him and steering him towards new things. Moving him on from just sweeping the floors and lifting heavy boxes. Billy came home two nights ago babbling excitedly that he might even get trained up properly. Not quite an apprentice. But proper training. There's been a shine in his eyes for days. There's no more talk about John Higgins in the house. About where he might be or when he might be back. Billy's stepped into his shoes now. Keeping order and bossing everyone about. Everybody's got to do something, Billy says. His mucking around days are behind him, he says. When he'd left home that morning and Cissie'd run after him to hand him a brown paper bag with some bread and cheese in it, and she'd caught up with him in the side passage, tall and upright, and she'd felt so proud of him. His eyes had shone as he looked back over his shoulder at her and taken one last puff on his cigarette and then flicked it against the wall. A shower of tiny sparks fizzed in the darkness.

A loud crack. That's what she hears first. A loud crack and then shouting. She can't say where the crack comes from but the shouting sounds like it's just out on the street, outside the house. She's up and out the back door and along the pitch-dark passage. Shapes are picked out by the gas lamps, shapes moving around on the street beyond. Men and women. She heads towards them and sees her neighbours milling around. There's a stench of burning in the air. She can taste it.

Out on the street it's Dotty Grudgin who tells Cissie that one of the factories is on fire. Another woman she doesn't recognise shouts across that it's Henson's. Cissie's house and all the others in her row have their backs to the factory and so she

turns and looks up and there's a red glow above the rooftops. She runs, full pelt, back down the passage and into the house.

Mam takes some rousing. Cissie smells stale beer on her breath as she shakes her awake. 'I need you to stay here wi' the nippers and I'll go and check on our Billy at the factory.'

But Mam's flailing her arms and getting herself upright and out of bed. 'You'll do nothing of the sort,' she says. 'I'll get down to the factory.'

Cissie thinks about the red flames searing the blackness of the sky. Panic rising up inside her. 'Well, hurry up then,' her voice close to a scream.

'I'm going as fast as I can,' says Mam pulling on a shabby dress. She sits on the edge of the bed tying up a boot. Cissie drops to her knees to tie the other one up for her, but Mam's flailing her arms again and pushes her away and Cissie falls backwards onto the floor as Mam scrambles up and is away down the stairs.

The slam of the back door is enough to wake up the kids. Bleary eyed they drift into the kitchen one by one. Cissie sits at the table, her head down and begins rolling a marble back and forth again. She wants the quiet back.

There had been fires at the factory before. And there would be again. And it might not even be Billy's part of the factory. It could be one of the warehouses or something. But then Billy often worked in the warehouses as well. Despite everything he's been saying over the last few weeks, he's still basically a dogsbody at the factory. He should have been home by now, Cissie knows that, but she also knows that Billy would stay and help. Of course he would.

Cissie is jolted from her thoughts by the hollow clatter of a pan hitting the tiled floor. Harry has been pulling at its handle and it has slid off the stove and he has

toppled over onto his backside. He begins to wail. A painful sound that rises in pitch higher and higher. A wave of anger washes over Cissie; her blood feels hot under her skin as she bellows, 'Back to bed all of you.' The words come out hard. They have jagged edges that hurt her throat.

The room clears in seconds. The padding of small bare feet scampering up the wooden treads of the stairs. A creak of bedsprings. The quiet returns, the candle on the mantelpiece gutters and Cissie continues to roll the marble slowly across the table from one hand to the other.



The hammering on the front door of the Foster's house wakes Winnie. This is no polite tapping or the gentle peter of pebbles being thrown at the window, which happened once when Father came home from a late shift and found the back door locked. Winnie sits bolt upright in bed, her heart thudding. Bell stirs next to her but doesn't wake.

Then her mother's voice, 'What on earth?' and feet pounding down the stairs. Winnie gets out of bed and goes to find out what the commotion is all about. She can make out the silhouette of her mother in the front doorway; she's barefoot, a shawl thrown over her nightdress, her hair hanging in clumps around her shoulders. And then a man's voice and there's a sharpness to it, a warble as if he is nervous or upset. She picks out the odd word here and there, 'sorry', 'late', 'quickly' and then 'fire'. And then she can smell it. The sharp tang of something burning. And through the

open door out on Embankment Street she sees figures, wrapped up in shawls against the cold, running towards Main Road.

‘Arthur?’ It’s Mother’s voice.

‘Still in there.’ The man’s voice.

And then Mother turns and her words are filled with fury and fear as she shouts to Winnie, ‘Get my shoes.’ And Winnie does just as she is told and Mother pushes her feet into them without tying-up the laces and calls out, ‘Look after our Bell’ and then she’s gone.

Winnie scurries back upstairs. Bell is wide awake now, sitting up in bed, a blanket around her shoulders. Winnie goes to the window. She can see the hulk of Henson’s factory and its tall chimneys rising up over the rows of rooftops that stretch away into blackness. It’s a moonless night, the sky lit by the deep red glow from the factory fire. Winnie peers through the glass and can make out small tongues of flame at the large factory windows. Sparks flying up in the darkness. She leans her weight against the window and turns the rusted catch and slides up the sash. It moves, stiffly at first, opens an inch or two from the bottom and the room becomes tainted with the bitter taste of fire.

‘What’s burning?’ Bell shuffles to the end of the bed.

A loud crack. And then a muffled boom. And then another. And voices raised in the distance, cries and shouting. Winnie pushes the window shut and turns to Bell.

‘It’s nothing to worry about, ducky,’ she says trying to sound like her mother. ‘One of the factories has gone on fire, but it’s only little and they’ll put it out soon.’

‘It smells horrid.’ Bell pokes her tongue out and pulls a face and then lifts the blanket right over her head. The pungent odour is thick in the room.

‘Go back to sleep,’ says Winnie. She settles Bell back under the sheets, plumps her pillow, kisses her on the top of the head. Her hair smells stale. She feels the grease of it against her lips. She reaches into the bed and pulls out her doll and tucks it down under the covers next to Bell.

Winnie is unable to settle. She wonders if she should get a kettle on. Mother and Father will be parched when they get back. She wonders what’s happening down at Henson’s. Despite what she said to Bell, the fire, she knows, is a big one. Even from the limited view she has from her bedroom window it’s quite clear that there’s a lot of damage being done. Father must have got out. But then why wasn’t he home yet? He’ll have been reluctant to leave his machine, she knows that. The fire brigade will be there by now with their pump and engine and they will have things under control, she’s sure.

She peers out the front room window and in the gloom of the street lamp she can make out a ragged figure standing by the front door. It’s Mrs Porter from next door. Her face is dirty with soot. Winnie opens the front door and goes out onto the street in her bare feet and Mrs Porter sees her and walks towards her, her arms out. She takes Winnie’s hands in hers.

‘Oh, you poor dear,’ she says.

‘Have you been at the factory? Have you seen my father?’ Winnie asks, unsettled by Mrs Porter’s show of tenderness.

Mrs Porter stares in silence at Winnie. There are streaks where tears have cut through the black of her face.

‘They got him out,’ she says at last.

‘Is he all right?’

‘Your mam’s with him, duck.’

Something compels Winnie to run at that moment. She can hear Mrs Porter shouting after her, but she keeps going, reaches the end of the street and turns onto Main Road, running along in her bare feet, dressed only in her nightdress. A soft breeze blows and her loose hair billows out behind her. She sees the factory ablaze clearly from here, lighting up Longwash like a great beacon. She runs on towards it, her feet slapping against the cobbled roadway, not caring about the dirt and the horse dung and the dog shit or feeling the stones cutting into the soles of her feet. She runs across the Market Place and as she turns the corner and onto Trafalgar Street she runs into a solid body and two hands grasp at her arms and scoop her up and out of the way.

‘Eh up, careful now.’ And then, ‘Well if it isn’t my little princess. This is no place for you, duck.’

‘Have you seen my father?’ Winnie says through tears.

‘He got out, duck.’

Billy Higgins carries Winnie back across the canal before she insists that she can walk perfectly well and doesn’t need to be carried home. He sets her down gently and she lets him hold her hand and guide her to the front door.

‘You’ll be all right now, won’t you,’ he says. ‘Your mam should be back soon, I’m sure. Do you want me to get my mam to come and see that you’re all right?’

‘I s’ll be fine,’ says Winnie and she looks up at Billy Higgins and the gas streetlamps sketch him in shades of grey and brown. He puts a hand into his pocket and pulls out a packet of cigarettes and pops one in the side of his mouth, his hands trembling.

‘Do you have a light, duck?’

‘I’ll get you one,’ and Winnie heads down the side passage, putting out her hands and touching the walls on either side of her in the narrow space. She shuts her eyes and all she can see are factory walls and hot red bricks and trembling hands and her dad’s bottom lip, red and shiny, and the glow of a sky on fire. And Bell poking her tongue out and pulling a face. She opens her eyes and heads for the kitchen and picks up a box of matches from the sideboard.

When she gets back out onto the street, Billy is walking away.

‘Do you want a light?’ she calls after him. He turns and gives her a half-smile and comes and takes the matches from her and lights his cigarette. The backs of his hands are red and sore.

As he sucks on his cigarette, Winnie asks, ‘What happened?’

After a pause, Billy says, ‘One minute we’re all working and the next minute there’s smoke and then there’s flames and then we’re all trying to put it out.’ He takes the cigarette out of his mouth and coughs hoarsely. His last few words come out of him as a breathless whine, ‘And then we’re all trying to get out and then the whole place is just falling in on itself.’



Cissie bathes Billy’s hands with warm water from the kettle. She thinks about putting some butter on them but they’ve none left.

‘You need to see a doctor.’ Her face is pale and tired. ‘And you can get back to bed,’ she snaps as she sees Ted’s face peer around the front room door.

Billy seems agitated. Cissie peels the shirt from him and throws it onto the floor for laundering and he winces and she notices marks on his shoulders.

‘Banged me-sen when I were getting out,’ he tells her. He’d helped to carry Arthur Foster from the factory, before the ambulance arrived and stretchered him away. ‘The poor chap looked in a bad way,’ he says. Billy’s got away with a few bruises and some superficial burns on his hands and arms.

‘Is he bad then?’ Cissie asks.

Billy says nothing. He slumps forward over the table. ‘Is there any ale?’

She carries on dabbing at his burns with the flannel. ‘You know Mam won’t have drink in the house.’

Billy begins to kick at the table leg with his foot. A light and regular tap, tap, tap.

‘Do they know what caused it?’ Cissie asks.

Tap, tap, tap.

‘Well you should get a medal for saving Arthur Foster. That miserable Gertrude owes you his life. Face like a slapped backside, she’s got.’ Cissie snorts, something between a sneer and a laugh.

Bang! And Billy kicks the table leg, so hard this time that the whole table moves a few inches across the kitchen floor and he shakes his hands free from Cissie, pushes himself back in his chair and stands up. He’s shouting now. ‘Just leave them alone. You and your nasty words. Leave them alone will you.’

And Cissie drops the flannel and takes a step back.

Billy’s voice drops to a soft whisper. ‘Please, Cissie. Just leave it, will you. Just let it be.’



‘Shouldn’t have been smoking in there in the first place.’

Cissie Higgins shuffles from one foot to the next with the cold. Her words are puffs of steam. The woman in front of her in the queue, the woman she’s chatting to, is a short dumpy soul with dirty yellow hair coiled up under a wilting hat.

‘Couple of chops, Goosey,’ calls Dirty Hair over the counter to Mr Gander, the butcher, who stands expectantly with a dull metal meat cleaver in his hand. His hair is oiled and combed to a shine. ‘Who was it?’ Dirty Hair continues, ‘They’ll be fer it.’

‘There’s some names as being banded about,’ says Cissie, her voice rising with intrigue. ‘It were bad you know. The fire caught fast. Burnt through all the floors. They all collapsed. One machine on top o’ the next on top o’ the next. You could feel them great heavy things dropping, you could, you could feel it right in the pit o’ yer stomach.’

‘Ooh, yer beggar!’ Dirty Hair looks Cissie up and down through squinting eyes. ‘You were there then? Saw it did yer?’

‘Well, when I heard it, course I had ter go out and see what were going on.’

Winnie has been listening to this exchange from the back of the queue on the doorstep of the butcher’s shop and as the queue edges forward she steps in onto scrubbed orange tiles. She’s clutching some coins in her hand, clutching them so tightly that later she’ll see how they’ve made deep red imprints, the shape of half-moons in her palm. Dirty Hair is counting some coins out onto the counter. She slides a package wrapped in paper into her basket. ‘Thanks, Goosey. Ta-ra, duck,’

and she taps Cissie on the shoulder. As she reaches the door she gives a sideways glance at Winnie who steps out of the way to let her pass.

Cissie is talking at Mr Gander now in a low voice. He punctuates her chatter with thwacks from his cleaver, cutting through the flesh and bone lying on the marble slab. Another woman standing between Winnie and Cissie suddenly ups and leaves, shouting something that Winnie doesn't quite catch at the young butcher's lad, Albert Grubb, who has just brought through some grey bits of meat from the back of the shop. Mr Gander looks strained as Cissie witters on. Winnie is standing right behind her now.

'They're saying that that Arthur Foster might have summat to do wi'y'it,' Cissie says. 'He was working there that night.'

Mr Gander stops dead, his cleaver raised in the air. He looks up and straight at Cissie. His mouth falls open and he barks, 'Now mind yer-sen, Cissie. You can't go round saying stuff. Just have a bit of a thought for others now,' and he nods across, over Cissie's head, towards Winnie.

Cissie turns. And when she sees Winnie her mouth snaps shut. She turns back to Mr Gander and in a loud gruff whisper, 'E's had 'is 'ands burnt off, yer know, Goosey. Both on 'em. So he'll be no good fer nowt now anyway.' She coughs to clear her throat and in a louder voice, 'Oh, and me mam says 'ave yer got a sheep's 'ead we could 'ave?'

Mr Gander tuts. And Winnie turns, away from Cissie, away from the blooded meat on the counter, the pimply skinned birds and dog-eared rabbits hanging on hooks in the window, that smell of disinfectant and rotting flesh and she's calling Cissie, under her breath, she's calling her a bitch, a hard-hearted bitch, an evil bitch.

The fire at Henson's consumed what it could and eventually burnt itself out. It's still smouldering three days later. Already this morning Winnie has overheard a woman in the pharmacy saying that some lads had got trapped on the top floor and burned to death. A stallholder on the market rubbed his hands as he told a spellbound customer how some people who couldn't get out had jumped to their deaths from the roof. But despite the pitying looks of the listeners, the tuts and shakes of their heads, nobody died in the fire at Henson's. The factory interior is gutted. The floors have collapsed in on themselves. The machines will be ruined. The flames spread to the mending shed next door and not a piece of lace has survived. It will take months of clearing and rebuilding before the place will be up and running again. They reckon a carelessly discarded cigarette started it. Three men were injured in the blaze. The worst affected is Arthur Foster who suffered severe burns to his hands trying to smother out flames. Another chap, whose name Winnie doesn't know, suffered smoke inhalation, aggravating his already weak lungs, and he will be unable to work for some time, but his eldest son has taken him in. Billy Higgins escaped fairly unscathed.

Winnie doesn't feel the coins drop from her hand as she flexes her fists, she doesn't hear them drop onto the tiled floor of the butcher's shop as she curses and swears to herself calling Cissie Higgins a bitch. When Winnie suddenly leaves the butcher's shop, heading off at a fast walking pace, she knows where she's going, and she breaks into a run out on the street, and reaches the canal bridge and jumps over a low wall and down onto the tow path, and she knows where she's headed, out of this place, away from evil people and their poisonous tongues and their vile minds. And she'll find her spot by the river and she'll pull off her boots and her socks and she'll

wade in and she'll splash and she'll shout and she'll dig her fingers into the clay of the riverbed and she'll smear that mud on her arms and her legs and her face and she'll wish she could turn into mud and melt into the very river itself.



Gertrude Foster is not happy with Winnie. She'd come home filthy. Her basket empty. Winnie had said that the butcher didn't have any faggots left. So her mother had asked her where the money was. Winnie said that she must have dropped it. And Gertrude Foster had said that dropping money when they needed it for food was downright sinful. Especially with her father off work and all the doctor's bills they'll have to pay. And then her mother had slapped her. Hard on the back of the legs. And Winnie flinched and bit her lip to try and stop herself from crying. And then Bell saw Winnie close to tears and began to cry herself which made Gertrude Foster even crosser. And why are you so filthy my girl, her mother had said. Have you been messing about again when I'm working my fingers to the bone to get a meal on the table for us. And then her mother had slapped her again. But this time Winnie had made herself numb, like a lump of dead meat. So numb that she didn't feel anything.

Winnie retraces her steps back to the butcher's shop. She stands outside looking in through the bare window. The shop is shut. The marble counters are bare. Albert Grubb is on his knees on the floor scrubbing the tiles. He looks up and sees Winnie and then he stands up and comes over and opens the door.

He holds out his hand. 'This is yours.'

Winnie gasps and takes a pile of dirty coins from him.

‘I found them when I were cleaning up.’

‘Thank you,’ says Winnie. She says this in a whisper and looks down at the floor.

‘There’s some bits left if you want them,’ says Albert Grubb.

Winnie hands the coins back to him. ‘Whatever this’ll get me please.’

Albert Grubb comes back five minutes later with some small paper-wrapped parcels and hands them to Winnie. She thanks him and he says, ‘There’s a couple of sausages in there for you, too, and you’ll not be charged for those.’ And then he goes on, ‘I know they’re saying that people got trapped in that fire and that people were jumping from the windows and that. But they weren’t, you know. I know it were a mess and that, but no one was killed. And Goosey, I mean Mr Gander, he hates gossip and just after you’d gone today he did remind Cissie Higgins that it weren’t just your dad that were there when that fire started. Billy Higgins were there too remember.’



Cissie hears Billy coming down the jitty and pokes her head out of the gate and sees him stumbling, knocking against the walls and grazing his arms. His shirt sleeves are rolled up; he’s left his jacket somewhere. And then as he comes into the backyard his head suddenly ducks to one side and he bends himself double and makes a retching noise as he vomits across the flagstones. Cissie throws her dirty washing water over it. Billy straightens himself up and stares through her as she scolds him, get inside, Billy, angry with him for being in such a state when he is supposed to be the strong

one now that their father has gone. And Billy wobbles up the path and in the back door. She hears the scrape of chair legs as he sits down and a thud as he falls forward onto the table. She puts a mug of strong tea in front of him, some bread and butter, and demands that he drink it up and eat it up. He chews the bread with a sulky impudent expression on his face, his lips hanging heavily, his eyes glazed and far away.

And Cissie sits down next to him. ‘Why did you let yourself get into this state?’ She tries to soften her voice as she puts her hands out to take hold of his, but he pulls away and the next thing she knows his head is in his hands and he’s sobbing. Great big sobs that send spasms through his chest and his shoulders. She’s never seen him like this before. She thinks she knows him so well and yet she’s never seen him like this and she feels at a loss.

And that’s when Nellie Higgins comes in carrying a bundle of lace for finishing and a small basket with packages in it.

‘That young Grubb lad at the butcher’s gave me a little extra.’ Nellie smiles as she takes out a greasy looking package from her basket, ‘So we can have a nice stew for our tea.’ She sees Billy slumped at the table and the smell of drink catches in her nostrils.

‘If he turns out like his father I shall never forgive myself,’ she says.

Billy pushes himself to his feet. ‘Just leave me be.’ He slams the door behind him and Nellie goes to follow him.

Cissie catches hold of her arm. ‘Just leave him,’ she says.



Arthur Foster takes to sleeping in the front parlour, spending his days in the gloom of it. Gertrude puts up thick drapes at the window to try to keep the cold out. She tries to lift the mustiness that has taken hold of the room. She instructs Winnie to open the window and air the room for thirty minutes every day, to mop the floor with disinfectant every day, to take the rug out into the back yard and beat the dust out of it every day and to keep Bell well away from the front parlour in case the sight of Arthur should scare her. As Winnie sashes her mop across the floor she can see Bell in the doorway and she sends her off on a made-up errand, all the time thinking how her father isn't some kind of side-show to be kept out of sight and she can hear his heavy and pained breathing as he sleeps fitfully over on Gran'ma's old lumpy mattress.

As the days darken, the life seems to seep right out of Arthur Foster. He's not returned to work since the fire. His hands are too badly damaged to work the lace anymore. His wounds aren't healing properly. He can't hold a teacup or a knife or a fork. He can't dress himself. He barely speaks and when he does his voice has become a whisper.

Arthur Foster dies at six o'clock in the morning – the very same time he would normally be leaving home for his first shift of the day at the factory. It's a Monday and Gertrude Foster sends her daughters off to school at eight-thirty as normal. The doctor visits and certifies the death. Blood poisoning is recorded on the death certificate.

Gertrude Foster sits up all through the night writing letters to distant family members informing them of her husband's death. On Tuesday morning she sends her

children off to school again. She visits each of her outworkers. She calls at the undertaker to make arrangements for a simple service and burial. They will bury him on the Friday – the day he'd normally be queuing up with all the other twisthands outside the clerk's office at Henson's to collect his wages. They can't afford a headstone. But there'll be flowers.

Late on Tuesday afternoon, the vicar calls at Embankment Street and Gertrude Foster makes him tea and sits with him in the front parlour for over an hour. Winnie walks in on them and finds them both on their knees praying. She's sent packing. As soon as the vicar leaves, Gertrude Foster lights the copper and boils up the water and washes all her husband's shirts and mangles them and hangs them on a line over the kitchen range to dry. She serves up four plates of food for their tea and the one she sets out for Arthur Foster lies on the table untouched and Winnie thinks it an awful waste and worries about what will happen next week once her father is finally in the ground.

On Wednesday morning, Mr Finch knocks at the door and asks if there is to be a wake of any kind. The Angel would be very honoured to host it.

'We'll not be having anything formal,' Gertrude Foster says.

'I'd like to put something behind the bar for the lads to pay their respects, Ma'm,' says Mr Finch.

'That's very thoughtful of you,' says Gertrude.

'He was a very kind and humble man, Ma'm.'

'He was that.'

'Never the loudest voice in the room. But we shall miss him.'

'And so shall we.'

Mr Gander calls by with a few rashers of bacon and some mutton. 'Please accept them with our condolences,' he says, and Gertrude does. She cooks up bacon and eggs for tea, laying a place at the table for her husband as usual. She sends off her best dress and Winnie's Sunday frock to be dyed black and they will be returned within days. She finds a black lace collar amongst the things that had belonged to Gran'ma and had been put aside in a drawer, and she takes to wearing that too. Mr Nobbs from two-doors-down loans the family a black dress for Bell, one that his Jessie had worn when she was five years old and tuberculosis had killed her mother. Bell is small for her age so it fits just fine. She wears a pinafore over the top to keep it clean. Winnie hates seeing Bell dressed all in black.

Gertrude seldomly speaks to either Winnie or Bell and both girls don't know what to say to their mother. There is a big hole in the place, one which none of them can mend. But life goes on in its usual pattern. Winnie wakes as early as ever and listens out for the sound of boots on the cobbles outside knowing that her father's footsteps are missing and she cries quietly into her pillow. She washes and dresses herself and her sister as she does every day before they walk to school, hand-in-hand.

On Thursday morning Winnie finds Gertrude Foster asleep in the front parlour, slumped across her lace work. Her mother looks pale and weak and Winnie tells her she should go to her bed. Gertrude does so without argument. Winnie stays off school and keeps Bell at home with her.

That evening Aunt Hilda arrives. She's a relation of sorts on Father's side, a distant cousin from the north of the county. She has a fat face and big red cheeks and a neck that wobbles when she talks and when she walks. The hair piled high on her

head is white with yellow streaks from the cigarettes that she constantly puffs on. And she has the biggest bosom that Winnie thinks she's ever seen and she looks so top-heavy that Winnie wonders how she manages to stay upright. Aunt Hilda tries to let herself in through the front door but finds it locked and Winnie, who is beating a rug in the back yard, shows her through the back door. Aunt Hilda makes her way around the downstairs rooms, putting everything into a state of appropriate mourning. She pulls shut all the curtains, plunging each room from gloom into near-darkness. She pokes a fat finger into the workings of the mantel clock, stopping the swinging pendulum and halting the hands at seven o'clock. She turns the few family photographs that sit on the mantel away to face the wall. She takes a piece of black net from her coat pocket and drapes it in front of the mirror above the fireplace to prevent the dead spirit from getting trapped in the looking glass. She does the same to the cracked mirror in the scullery above the stone sink.

And then suddenly Aunt Hilda grasps Winnie between her fat arms and pulls her to her large bosom in an embrace and kisses her on the head. Winnie feels the big fat body moving up and down as Aunt Hilda pulls breath in and out of it like a great engine.

'Now where's your mam?' she says.

'She's upstairs,' says Winnie.

'You've grown up lovely, haven't you, duck,' says Aunt Hilda. She lets go of Winnie, pats her hair down with the heels of her hands and takes a deep breath.

'Well, I'm going up to find your mother and you can get some tea mashed for us all.' She hands Winnie a heavy leather bag she's carrying. 'They're my things and I'll be sleeping in with you tonight. And there's a slice or two of cake in there too.'

Bell is standing at the foot of the stairs. She's come down on her tiptoes, still being as quiet as she can when she's anywhere near the front room. She peers up curiously at Aunt Hilda as she comes towards her.

'Well, now,' says Aunt Hilda, peering back. 'Don't you look the very image of your mother. Out of the road, duck, let Auntie get past,' and she begins to haul her heavy body up the stairs and they crack and creak under the weight of her and she's muttering to herself, 'It's the eyes, it's the eyes as always give you away.'

That night Winnie can't sleep. Aunt Hilda takes up most of the bed. Winnie lies awake, wondering how anyone can dig a hole in the ground to bury her father in with it being so cold and the earth so hard. In the end, restless, she slips out of bed and tucks Bell in, well away from Aunt Hilda, and heads downstairs to take up the mending work her mother hasn't finished. She works away in the darkness of the small hours struggling against sleep. The fire is out. The oil lamplight shines through the pattern of the lace and casts cobwebs on the walls. But it's a weak light and although Winnie can feel the twisted threads of cotton between her fingers, she still feels like she is working in the dark, catching at shadows.

And then on Friday morning, Ada arrives. She arrives early as the sun is just rising into a cold November sky. She's dressed soberly and her hair is pulled tightly against her head. She stands in the kitchen as Gertrude Foster and Aunt Hilda come downstairs. She hugs each of them in turn, gently, not saying a word and not a word is said back to her. They all leave by the front door. Gertrude first, with Aunt Hilda on one side and Mr Nobbs walking alongside her on the other. Gertrude has draped her whole head with black net and Winnie thinks that it looks as if she wants to disappear into the darkness and become invisible. Ada, Winnie and Bell follow, all

holding hands. Neighbours from Embankment Street and surrounding streets gather behind them and begin to process towards the church on Main Road. And right at the back, Nellie Higgins.

In the church Winnie doesn't understand what the vicar is saying as he reads loudly from a thick bible. The parchment creaks as he turns the pages. She recognises some of the words from the times that she was sent to Sunday School, but she doesn't really know what they mean. Then they're singing a hymn and Winnie has never heard it before; the vicar had chosen it. A slow dirge, it ambles along mournfully, the organ rising and falling. Ada sings in a sweet high-pitch, like a songbird. Winnie looks down and sings at the floor in a whisper. Bell doesn't sing at all. Aunt Hilda stands with a handkerchief pressed to her nose. Gertrude Foster stands with her head held high and is singing too loudly. She's off-key and her voice warbles as if it will crack into a hysterical wail at any moment.

There's quite a crowd gathered. The rows of pews are filled with men who have worked with Arthur Foster over the years and have been able to get away from work for an hour or so. Mr Henson from the factory and his overseer, are both here with their wives. Winnie picks off the names of some of the familiar faces as she looks around her. But she can't bear her eyes to settle on the coffin at the front of the church with its dark wood and polished brass handles. She's grateful that Mr Henson was able to make a contribution to her father's funeral costs on behalf of the firm.

He was a highly regarded twisthand, your husband was, ma'm, the overseer had said to Gertrude Foster when he'd come to the house, and we'd like to show our appreciation for all his service to the firm.

But Winnie knows that her mother fears for whatever will come next. And a

fine dark wood coffin with shiny brass handles isn't going to put food on the table and coal on the fire. There's a big hole now. A great big hole and she can't see how she can mend this. It will just fray around the edges and get bigger and bigger.

When the service is over Arthur Foster's coffin is put onto the back of a trap, led by a single pony. People gather outside the church and begin to make their way to the cemetery across the road. Clouds have gathered overhead and look ready to burst.

Ada is talking to Winnie and it's about Bell. Ada doesn't think that it's right for Bell to be at a funeral. Not at her age. She shouldn't have to see Arthur Foster get put into a hole in the ground. It's not right. Aunt Hilda comes over just then, looking flushed. She's been chatting with some of the neighbours and she's not one to gossip, but did they know what people were saying. About the fire at the factory. That it was started by a cigarette most likely and that they reckon it could well have been that Higgins boy, whoever he is. Do they know who he is? And that's when Ada begins to shout.

'Now stop all this tittle-tattle, Aunt Hilda, because that's all it is.' Heads turn and Ada looks embarrassed and drops her voice. 'Father is lying over there in that box and you've nothing better than to stain this day with cheap and idle gossip.'

Aunt Hilda looks taken aback and dabs her face with her handkerchief and Ada apologises for her outburst and gives Aunt Hilda a peck on the cheek to make amends.

'I think it's best if I take Bell back to Embankment Street now,' says Ada. 'I'll stay with her till you get back. You'll be all right, won't you Winnie?' And Ada takes Bell's hand and walks off with a hurried step. Winnie decides not to tell her

mother about Ada taking Bell home. Winnie wonders if she'll even notice that she's gone what with everything else going on. She takes Aunt Hilda's arm and they make the slow walk to the cemetery.

The cemetery is shaded grey by the sunless day. It was established sixty years ago; the parish churchyard was full and a group of local businessmen urged the town corporation to set aside a fresh piece of land in which to lay the dead to rest. It lies on the outskirts of the town, past the school, heading southwards, towards the River Soar. It can be reached by walking the length of the Main Road and that is the route that most of the mourners will have taken today when they came to bury Arthur Foster in the cold hard ground. There are some, like Nellie Higgins, who will take other routes, along the jitties that run between factories and old rights of way that run along the backs of the terraces, the dotted lines on the map. They have their reasons for staying in the shadows. The burial plot is in a shady corner of the cemetery. There's a vista of the town from here if you look north, the outlines of a few fine villas with large gardens and above it all, the factory chimney.

They gather at the graveside. A few short words. And then silence as Arthur Foster is lowered into the ground. The rattle of cold clods of earth falling onto the coffin lid. A few muffled sobs into lace-edged handkerchiefs. And if you listen carefully you can just hear the sound of the lace machines clattering away in the distance.



1911, Winter

Winter bites. Its breath wet and fetid. It frosts the windows. Turns trees into skeletons. Strips the world of colour. It creeps up on them with stealth this year, throws a net of fog over the world, keeps out the light, traps in the gloom. Winnie's coat comes out of its mothballs, the elbows worn thin, cuffs and hem fraying. And Bell needs new boots again.

Winnie had hated the golden colours of autumn that year, those fiery colours reminded her of the blaze in the factory and she felt no sense of regret as the golds and reds turned to crispy browns. There had been no conkering this year. Her favourite horse chestnut tree grew in a paddock near the big house by the weir. But this year neither she nor Bell had gone anywhere near it.

The air grows crisper and clouds billow from people's mouths as they pause to chat to each other in the streets.

Winnie unpicks a bobbling jumper that had belonged to Arthur Foster and reknits it into a scarf and mittens. She wraps them up and puts them in a stocking for Bell for Christmas. But Christmas comes and goes with little celebration. Winnie makes mince pies and waits for Ada to visit. But she never comes.

Gertrude has taken to the front parlour since her husband's death. Sitting in there for days at a time, neglecting her lace work. She never lights a fire. She just sits in the room with a shawl round her shoulders, shivering as it grows colder and colder.



Winnie walks home from school with Bell for the very last time. It's Friday and she's to start work at Henson's new mending shed on Monday. They need the money at home now. Nellie Higgins has put in a good word for her with the factory overseer and he is willing to give her a chance to show herself as a mender.

Nellie Higgins had called round last night and Winnie had mashed some tea and sat with her while she told her a little bit more about what she would be expected to do in her new job. What time she should arrive for work. To watch out for the timekeeper because lates weren't tolerated, wages were docked and three lates and that was it; there was always someone ready to step into your shoes if you didn't do the job properly. And then Nellie Higgins had seen Winnie looking scared and had patted her shoulders and told her that she would be just fine and to wear clean clothes and to bring an apron with her and to make sure that she had clean hands and to get the dirt out from under her fingernails and to use a knife to scrape them underneath if she had to, to make sure that they were spotless. Nellie Higgins was a grubby woman, wore shabby clothes, but Winnie knew that her red raw hands were always spotlessly clean.

And then Nellie Higgins had said to Winnie, where's your mam, ducky? Is she out? And Winnie had said, she's poorly. Nothing serious I hope, said Nellie Higgins and, she's hurt her back, that's all, said Winnie and there was a second or two of silence, a silence that must have roused Nellie Higgins's curiosity. And how did she go and do that, duck? And Winnie said, she just, and silence again, and then, she says she just hurt it when she lifted the sheets out of the copper. And Nellie Higgins had sighed and wished Gertrude Foster a speedy recovery and had glanced around

the room as she said this and Winnie could see that she was taking in the cloths full of lace piled up on the floor waiting to be sent out for finishing. And then Nellie Higgins said, and how is she going about getting this work done, duck? And Winnie didn't know what to say. And that was when Nellie Higgins stood up and said, now you tell me not to poke my nose in where it's not wanted, but you ask your mam if she'd like me to oversee getting this batch of lace sent out and finished for her while she's poorly. And Winnie had said, thank you, thank you Mrs Higgins, I'm sure she'll be very grateful.



Cissie can't understand what's up with Billy.

He's drunk again and jabbering on about it all being his fault.

And Cissie is telling him to stop feeling so sorry for his-sen.

And Billy looks at her with incredulity.

'It was an accident,' says Cissie.

'But there's more to it than that,' Billy says.

And that's when he tells her. All the stuff about Ada. But Cissie already knows that too. Well, she's had her suspicions for years. Billy doesn't want to go into all the grubby details, he says. But Cissie already knows. She can't tell him that she does though. And so, she pretends, at first, to look shocked when he tells her about their thing – he calls it a thing – his thing with Ada Foster. He was just a lad of fifteen and she had been about a year older, if that. And Cissie sees it all again, clear as day, as she had seen it that first time through her childish eyes.

She wasn't supposed to have been there. She was supposed to have been at school. But she'd bunked off. She wasn't supposed to have been hiding, in the darkness, looking through the crack where the lace curtains didn't quite meet. It was like looking through a spider's web. And that woman lying on the bed. Her hair coming loose from its pins. Her skirts turned inside out like the trumpet of a flower. A flash of blue-pink skin at the top of her legs.

Billy's nakedness had shocked her the most. His shirt pushed up revealing the small of his back. Trousers pulled right down, gathering in rolls around his ankles, tangled up with the grey fabric of his long-johns. She'd seen it before, of course. Those times that he reared up out of the tin bath by the fire and Mam would fuss round him eager to cover him up with a towel. It was the whiteness of his buttocks in the grainy half-light of the room. His breath coming in rasps, heavy like sobs.

He seemed to fall and then to melt into her breast. Lay on her like a new-born child on its mother. Just for a brief moment. And then he rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. He stood up, pulled up his trousers, she saw him struggle with the buttons. His braces dangled at his sides.

The yellowing curtains had flickered in the breeze. He was standing in front of a small mirror, flattening his hair with one hand, wiping his face with the other. Staring into the mirror. And then, and perhaps this last bit was just Cissie's imagination gone away with her, because Cissie could swear that she caught a flash of blue as his eyes caught hers in the reflection.

'But that was years ago,' says Cissie.

'Yes,' says Billy.

'And nothing ever came of it,' says Cissie.

‘But that’s the thing,’ says Billy. ‘That’s where you’re wrong.’



They’ve barely a farthing left in the house. Arthur Foster has been dead and buried for weeks. Gertrude Foster can’t face the world. They need to eat. Winnie brings in what she can. Nellie Higgins is middle woman for the factory now. It should have been Ada that took it on really, but they’ve heard nothing from her since Arthur Foster’s funeral. Winnie is doing what she can with her mending work. It’s dull and monotonous work and everything aches, her fingers and her hands and her eyes and her back.

Most of the days this year have been frosted over. They need to heat the place. Bell still needs new shoes: she’s newspaper in the bottoms to keep out the wet. There’s her mother’s best dress, still stained with sweat from being worn at Arthur Foster’s funeral. And there’s Winnie’s own Sunday dress. And then there’s Bell’s favourite dress. It’s brown, dark brown velvet. It has motifs down the front. Ada had bought for her.

The pawn shop is on Main Road. Winnie can be there and back in fifteen minutes. Bell is in the front room playing. Mother is in the back bedroom staring into the space dead ahead of her. They’ll never know she’s even been out. She’ll be there and back in fifteen minutes. The brown velvet dress is upstairs, dangling in the wardrobe. It looks clean enough. Bell loves that dress, not that she’s had many opportunities to wear it. Winnie takes it from its hanger, lays it on the bed, gently folds it, bundles it up in her arms. And Arthur Foster’s overcoat. That can go. She

takes it from the hook by the back door as she passes. She takes her father's coat and she takes her sister's favourite dress. She'll only be fifteen minutes. They'll never notice she's been gone.



Snow is falling. Something so pure and white falling from the sky onto dirty pavements and shit-stained cobbled. The virgin snow is settling, coating back yards, the tops of fences and walls. It'll be grey with soot from the chimneys and churned up underfoot into brown mush on the streets of this factory town within hours.

Winnie finishes her shift at midday and makes her way home to collect Bell. She'll take Bell sledging, she thinks. They'll go to Heggy Hill. Despite everything that has happened, they'll have some fun.

Gertrude Foster is upstairs. Winnie peeks around her bedroom door and sees her mother as she has seen her so often for these last weeks, lying lifeless, on her side facing the wall, shutting the world out. Winnie leaves a cup of tea by her bed.

Winnie and Bell wrap up well and take a tin tray from the kitchen as their make-shift sledge and head for Heggy Hill, a steep street running down from Main Road. It's a favourite with all the kiddies when it snows. The road ends where it meets the wall of a factory. It can be treacherous in winter. Many a horse has fallen whilst pulling loads up and down here and a farmer and a gun will be called for to put the poor beast out of its misery.

The snow is drifted up against the factory walls. They stand at the top of the hill looking down on a crowd gathering at the bottom of the slope. And Winnie

realises that no one is sledging. They are all just standing still. Like statues in the snow. Snowmen, she thinks and she wants to laugh, but then she sees trays and bags and sacks and other make-shift sledges cast around on the ground and it feels strange and it's so eerily quiet. All sound is muffled. It's like standing with your hands over your ears.

'Stop here a minute,' says Winnie to Bell and she begins to make her way to the bottom of the hill. As she approaches the crowd, she sees two men in heavy overcoats and caps. One of them is gesturing, pointing over at the factory wall. The other one is approaching all the snowmen, who Winnie sees now are children, and she can see him telling each one, head off home now, get your-sen off home. And she realises that man, the one doing all the talking, is the local constable. And all the snowmen beginning to move, to head off home, walking stiffly, they all have blank expressions on their faces. There's no sense of excitement here.

It's Jessie Nobbs from Embankment street who comes over to Winnie as the other kids head back up the hill. It's Jessie Nobbs who tells her about the accident. How he'd come straight down on a sledge and into the wall of the factory. And Winnie asks her who, who has been in the accident, but Jessie runs off, sobbing, struggling to keep herself upright in the snow. Winnie asks another child and then another before finally a young lad with ripped trousers and a dirty face tells her that it was Billy Higgins who came careering down Heggy Hill on a tin tray and went straight into the factory wall. Bashed his head in. Killed his-sen outright. I saw him, said the lad, his mouth was hanging open and his eyes were bulging out and there was blood coming out his nose and his ears. He'd been playing like a big kid and it did for him.

And forever afterwards, Winnie remembered the bloody spots on the pavement just below the place where he hit the wall and the rusty brown colour that they made as they mixed into the snow.



Cissie approaches her house on Trafalgar Street. Dotty Grudgins and Ettie Rudd are scrubbing their doorsteps as she passes them. Both women are sat back on their haunches with buckets of water on the slushy pavement. Dotty stops talking as Cissie gets level with her and then both women fall forward onto all fours and continue their scrubbing in silence. Bastard old gossips, thinks Cissie. She wants to call out scrubbers as she passes but can't muster the nerve to do so. She dislikes these women who both look much older than their twenty or so years. They were the ones that had told on Billy that time he'd smashed a window at The Angel when he was drunk. He was drunk because he was upset because their dad had turned on him and anyway, it was none of those women's bloody business. But they told the landlord, Mr Finch, and then he came knocking on the Higgins's front door demanding that Billy Higgins paid up, at a rate considerably more than the glass in the window should have cost, or he'd go to the constable and have Billy charged with criminal damage and underage drinking. Which was the last thing Billy needed. But the worst of it had been that when the landlord hammered on the door that day it had been John Higgins that had answered it and he'd offered to get the window mended his-sen, but Mr Finch was having none of it. He wanted the money. And their mam had pleaded with John Higgins to pay up to save Billy from trouble and so

he had put his hand in his pocket and paid up, but only on the understanding that Billy owed him, and Billy did, but not just the money. From that point on Billy seemed to owe him his blood and his sweat and his tears.

And so, John Higgins took to using Billy as a skivvy and a butt of all his jokes and a punch bag. Sometimes he would take him out with him to the pub and make him sit with him and he'd humiliate him in front of everyone, telling stories about how he wet the bed as a young lad. About the time he'd caught him with a girl who'd laughed at him when he kissed her. He'd tell the punters that when Billy lost his nerve he'd stutter and blush and John Higgins would roar with laughter. And when he was so drunk that he could barely stand, John Higgins would tell folk that Billy Higgins had a small cock and no spine and that was the reason why he was so bloody sure that he wasn't his father and that his missus was a whore.

There's an uneasy silence as Cissie walks past Dottie and Ettie today, the scrape of her shoes against the pavement, the scrubbing of stiff bristles against stone, the splash of water in the metal pails. Ettie looks up at Cissie and forces a smile, a strange smile, but Cissie just scowls and pushes open her front door and she's greeted with a sound that she's never heard before in her life.

It sounds like a dog, a dog that has been whipped and is howling in pain, in fear. But it's a human sound. Cissie rushes through into the back where the noise is coming from and sees her mother leaning over the sink in the scullery, her sleeves rolled up, her hair hanging down in fronds around her shoulders, her face contorted. Her mouth opens and out comes that sound again. At her side is her Aunty Ida. She isn't a real aunty, she's a distant cousin of John Higgins's and she lives across the street, and she's pulling at Nellie Higgins's arm and saying, now then dear, come on,

now then dear. Aunty Ida sees Cissie coming in and pushes the door of the scullery shut in her face.

Cissie hammers on the door furiously. Her mother is in pain. She can hear it. She can almost feel it. The door opens and Aunty Ida takes Cissie firmly by the arm and leads her into the front room.

‘Sit down, duck,’ she says in a very matter of fact way. ‘There’s been some bad news. It’s your Billy.’

It had been quick, they were all so certain it had been quick, he’d probably not have felt a thing, larking about with all the young kids, big daft kid himself, never grew up properly that one, always one for showing off, you know what he was like, better than anyone, you know, he should have been at work but ducked out, off on an errand, he told them, found himself a tin tray, nicked from a pub no doubt, was going too fast down that hill, bleeding dangerous, that hill, he could have got out of the road, just rolled off the tray before it hit, but silly beggar, he didn’t, full on, face first, right into the wall, cracked his head open, mashed his nose up, you shouldn’t see him, duck, not as he is, he fell dead there and then, never took another breath, he made no noise, it was sheer stupidity, he never tried to save himself, he could have rolled out of the way, terrible thing for all those young kiddies to see, what a waste, he’s in the mortuary, they’ll be bringing him home soon, best you not see him, remember him how he was, full of life, he’ll be buried next week.



One week later and Ada arrives at Embankment Street early one morning in a froth

of excitement about all the good things that are beginning to happen to her – she speaks more freely with just Winnie there and Mother out of earshot – and she talks about all the fine things she could give Bell if she came to stay with her for a while in her new house. There'd be toys and new clothes and ribbons for her hair. And a man about the house. A father figure.

‘It must be difficult for you here now that Father’s gone,’ says Ada.

She and Winnie are in the back yard.

‘Mam’s back is still bad. She’s still in her bed.’ That’s what Winnie tells Ada; that’s what Winnie has told Bell as well. ‘But she’ll be better soon and be back at her work and then we’s’ll have money coming in again and it’ll all be just fine.’ But Winnie knows that it won’t be fine. Winnie knows that bad back or no bad back, Gertrude Foster is trapped. Trapped in a cold bedroom, with her memories, raking over the cold ashes. Winnie lights a fire for Mother upstairs in her bedroom every morning, but Mother lets it burn out and won’t let Winnie make a fresh one. And so there’s nothing to keep her warm except hot broth and tea and small bites of toast. The bedroom curtains are never open.

The neighbours are told it’s a bad back. And there’s plenty of sympathy and some practical solutions are proffered. Mrs Tapper calls by with some lotion for aches and pains, something home-made that her own mother had sworn by. Mrs Porter, she brings them a pot of stew and some dumplings once a week, which Winnie is very grateful for. Mrs Brown says that Bell should call round to her and have her tea with them if they’re stuck. She’s only a little mite so she won’t eat much. Mr Nobbs says to knock if they need anything doing and he presses his thick hard-skinned hands into the small of his back and says that he knows back trouble

well himself and that there's nothing worse. But Winnie knows the truth. Their mother has no bad back. She has just fallen into darkness. And she can't find a way out of it.

Ada helps Winnie fold a sheet from the washing line. And Ada's skin looks clear and creamy and freshly powdered and her eyes shine and her hair shines and there's not a bit of it out of place and she smells of roses. They go inside. And it's then that Winnie says to Ada that Bell should go with her. It's Winnie who lets her go.

Bell returns from wherever she has been with a pocket full of stones. She scoops them out onto the table and lifts each one in turn and holds it up, in the dimming light of the room. A collection of thick grey lumps of gravel. Ada asks her if she would like to go on an adventure. And Bell looks up. She's still for a moment, stares at her stone, and then she says, 'Can Winnie come?'

And Ada says, 'Winnie has to stay and look after Mother, don't you Winnie?' and Winnie thinks of the bare food cupboard, of Mother in her dark place, of Bell's shoes worn through, of Bell's dress hanging in the window of the pawn shop. She feels the ache of no breakfast in her own stomach and she nods.

'It's for the best,' Ada says.

And Winnie nods again and then pours out the tea in a heavy silence and slides a cup and saucer across to Ada and takes another one and heads for the stairs to take it up to Mother.

She can't tell Mother. Not now. Not while she is in such a state. And anyway, she can't think how to tell her, how to turn what is happening into words that won't hurt her, words that won't punch her in the guts. Bell is going away. Words that

won't bruise her. She's going away with Ada. Words that won't smother the life right out of her. She may as well put a pillow over her mother's face than tell her that Bell is going away.



Cissie dreams of better things. Better than her mother had. And it's not so much the things. Cissie accepts that her family doesn't have much and that those that can must work themselves ragged to bring home money to feed and clothe them all. And now that Billy is dead, now that it's clear John Higgins isn't coming home, she needs to be bringing in as much as she can. She's never been one for looking in shop windows, looking at stuff she can never have, what's the use in that. What she dreams of is a home where they all eat well, a winter where they can have a coal fire burning through the day and she doesn't have to go out foraging for old boots and rubbish to burn to keep them all warm. She dreams of a new winter coat.

Nellie Higgins has gone into labour and Mrs Smedley from across the street has come across to help. Nellie is writhing in agony, her face flushed and sweating as Cissie leaves her upstairs in Mrs Smedley's capable hands and goes to appease the littl'uns who are all upset at the state they've just seen their mam in.

'Shush now,' Cissie coos and ruffles little Harry's hair. Florrie climbs up onto Cissie's knee and clings to her. 'Mam's going to be just fine and then we'll have another little brother or sister.' And at the same time she thinks, oh God, another mouth to feed, and she thinks of John Higgins getting his wife pregnant again and then running off and she calls him a cunt under her breath.

The noise from upstairs subsides and there's a creaking from the staircase and Mrs Smedley is coming down the stairs. Her face is pale and she is wiping her hands on her apron as she looks Cissie in the eyes and says, 'Your mam will be fine, duck. She just needs to rest.'

Cissie pushes Florrie from her lap and stands up, 'And the child?'

And Mrs Smedley puts her finger on her lips and beckons Cissie through into the front room. 'I don't want to upset the nippers, but I'm sorry Cissie, it weren't born alive.'

Nellie Higgins's last two babies had been born dead. Cissie feels her eyes well up with tears as Mrs Smedley says, 'Leave the arrangements to me, duck. I can take the kiddies across the road with me for a bit. I think your mam needs some rest.'

'Thank you,' whispers Cissie and makes her way upstairs to the back bedroom, the room where the Higgins women traditionally give birth. Mam's face is ashen, her eyes shut. On the floor by the bed, a drawer, and in the drawer a bundle wrapped up in a grey blanket, its face covered.

Cissie dreams of a day when Nellie Higgins can be free from worries and she thinks of her mother and her slight frame, her lank hair. She looks much older than she should for her forty years of life. And Cissie looks down at herself, at her drab frock that smells of sweat and mothballs and her worn-out boots and greasy hair, her dull skin. She's grown a lot over the past year. Her slip feels tight around her and her breasts are swelling. Downy hair is growing in places she's embarrassed to think about, but she knows it's normal because she's walked in on Nellie Higgins so many times naked to the waist in the scullery, washing herself under the cold water tap. She's seen her pale bony back, her prominent shoulder blades and once when she

was much younger she'd exclaimed to her, Mam are you growing wings like an angel? and Nellie Higgins had chuckled to herself. She'd scrub her mam's back when she took a soak in the tin bath once a week in front of the fire, Nellie's small pointed breasts hanging limply by her arms bobbing slightly in the grey scum of the water. And when Nellie got out the bath, Cissie would take her in, her whole figure, the skin and the bone, a small curved stomach and the hair sprouting in tufts from the strangest of places.



Ada comes to take Bell with her a few days later. Winnie has packed up her things into a carpet bag that belonged to Gran'ma and still smells of Gran'ma. A few clothes, a comb and a mirror. And she's put in a bag of her favourite tuffees. And then Ada hugs Winnie and kisses her on the cheek. She gives her a slip of paper with her new address written on it.

'You're to come anytime,' she tells her.

Winnie picks up her doll that Bell has been playing with on the rug in front of the fire and she kneels down at Bell's side and hands it to her. 'You're to look after her now.'

And Bell hugs the doll to her small chest. And then Winnie tells her that she's going on a great adventure, but that she is not to forget about her or about Mother and that she must come home soon. Ada takes Bell's hand and Winnie turns and heads up the stairs with her throat choked and tears streaming down her cheeks.

As she hears the back door shut she hears the back bedroom door open and her

mother shuffles out. She's bent over, almost doubled up, like a woman much older than her forty-five-years. Her hair hangs in greasy hanks around her shoulders and she wears a drab tunic. Winnie coughs loudly to clear her choked-up throat and her voice comes out in a rasp. She asks her mother, 'Are you all right? Where are you going?'

'To the privy,' comes the gruff reply.

Winnie turns sideways on the stair to let her mother shuffle past. And as she does this, her mother asks, 'Where's our Bell?'

And Winnie says, 'She's gone with Ada.' Just those four words. She's gone. With Ada. And her mother stops dead for a second or two. And then she carries on, shuffling down the stairs, her bare feet rubbing against the wooden treads.

Winnie comes back down the stairs and finds her mother in the front room on her hands and knees. She's bent over the fire holding a match to a slip of paper and Winnie sees it spark alight and flame for a few seconds before her mother drops it into the ashes. And Winnie screams, no, realising that scrap of paper is the one that Ada had written her address on and now it's been burnt and she has no idea whereabouts she is taking Bell.

And then Mother mutters, 'Well she's back where she belongs,' and her eyes burn as she turns to Winnie and says, 'But you knew that of course, didn't you? That Bell was Ada's child? Ada's bastard?' And then Mother heads back up the stairs, soundless, without looking back.



Cissie's walking across the Market Place when she sees Ada Foster.

She'd had to get out of the house for some air. She's left Mrs Smedley fussing over the littl'uns. She spoils them like anything. And she's left Mam, exhausted and tucked up in bed.

Ada Foster's on the other side of the road walking along with Bell. She's walking quickly, as if she's in a hurry to get to wherever she's going. She holds her head high and Cissie thinks that she has a haughty look about her. But she's ever so striking. There's no doubting that. And that's the bit that Cissie struggles with. She dislikes Ada Foster because of who she is, but she also admires her, for walking along with her nose in the air, hand in hand with her bastard child, not giving a stuff about this place or the people in it. And she's all dressed up and Cissie admires her clear powdered skin and her hair that's swept upwards from her face into a Pompadour, so fashionable, and tucked under her hat. She hates to think it, but she does think it. I can see why she turned our Billy's head.

And Ada Foster is looking down at the little girl whose hand she's holding onto and she's smiling at her and the little girl is smiling back and jumping from one foot to the other in a little excited dance. Cissie steps back and huddles herself up against the wall of Fisher and Radford's Bazaar, trying to make herself invisible. And then there are chimes from a church clock marking the hour and the next thing Cissie knows, she's crossing over the road, taking long and confident strides over onto the other side, and she's walking towards Ada and she sees Ada glancing down and chatting to Bell and she's close enough to hear her voice now and it's soft, animated and there's a delighted look on Ada's face and Cissie hears the little girl, who looks like a little china doll, and she's saying, 'I've never been on a train

before,’ and then Ada’s laughing and she’s saying, ‘You will absolutely adore it, you will.’

Cissie steps onto the pavement right in front of them. She’s the same height as Ada and she looks her straight in the eye and says, ‘I need to tell you about Billy.’

Ada is taken aback. She looks awkward and then says, ‘And you are Cissie? Am I right?’

And Cissie’s words come out carelessly, cruelly, like a stab from a sharp knife. ‘Billy’s dead,’ she says.

And she sees Ada stumble slightly, as if someone has pushed her in the guts, and then she gathers herself and brings herself upright again. Cissie can hear a shakiness in Ada’s voice as she says, ‘Oh I am sorry to hear that.’ But she says it quickly. Too quickly. And then she adds, ‘Do give my regards to your mother, won’t you.’

Cissie knows that she should go home now. That she’s said enough. But she wants Ada to say something else. She wants her to say something, anything. Just so that she can be sure. But Ada says nothing, just looks down at the ground. Cissie goes to step aside, to let them pass, to let them continue their journey to wherever they’re going in such a hurry.

And Ada finally speaks. ‘How did it happen?’

‘A stupid accident. In the snow. It should never have happened.’

Ada’s eyes fill with tears, her chin quivers.

And Cissie says, ‘I’d best let you get on. I just thought that. That Billy would want you to know. That’s all.’

And as Cissie turns to pass them Ada says, ‘That’s very kind of you, Cissie. I know that your brother thought the absolute world of you.’

Tears are streaming down Cissie’s cheeks now. She walks away, wiping her face with her dirty hands.

And then she hears Ada calling after her, ‘I will miss him, you know. And I think that you’re the only one that knows that. You do know, don’t you? He told you, didn’t he? I’ll miss him more than anyone will ever know.’

And Cissie breaks into a run and her sobs come thick and fast because she knows that Ada means what she says.



Winnie grabs her coat and she’s running down the street, heading for Longwash Station. Puffs of smoke from the quarter-to-four train still hang in the air. There’s still a hustle and bustle on the platform from people who have recently alighted at Longwash. But the train has gone. Winnie has missed it by seconds. By the time it takes to strike a match. By the time it takes for a small piece of paper, barely the size of a train ticket, to catch hold from a match and burst into flame and disintegrate into ashes.

Winnie walks home numb. She has no idea where Bell is now. She tries to replay her conversations with Ada in her head, desperately trying to recall mention of a place, a street, a landmark, but other than her living up in the city she knows nothing. As far as Winnie is concerned, Ada lives in the shadows. She’s never talked about her life beyond those few words each Christmas that Mother rubbishes as soon

as she's gone. A few words. A cup of tea. A piece of cake. A mince pie. And then she replays the words that came from her mother's mouth, that sounded so cruel, so incomprehensible. That Bell is Ada's child.

She feels empty as she sits at the kitchen table. There's some bread and potatoes and carrots and gravy that have been set aside for Bell, so she heats them through and eats them. She'll need to keep her strength up. But then she wonders what for. She wonders how she could have so easily let Bell go away.

It's only as she takes her plate and knife and fork through to the scullery to wash them that she notices something on the sideboard. Her doll, with its cropped dark locks, that Bell lopped off that time, that would never grow back, and its sackcloth arms and legs and its sweet cupid lips and black dot eyes. It's lying on the sideboard by the back door. It's been placed there carefully. Not thrown carelessly or disregarded. But it's still been left behind.



Cissie loiters on the corner where The Angel meets the jitty. It's cold. The jitty has been in shadow all day. Someone's singing in the pub. It sounds like a woman, but then Cissie realises that it's a man warbling in a falsetto and then there's a belly laugh from another man and a round of applause breaks out. She's tall enough to look through the clear glass pane above the frosted ones. If Billy were still here she'd rap on the glass and catch his eye and he'd sneak her out something to drink, even just let her get a swig of his own ale. But not anymore.

Cissie knows there are jobs waiting to be done at home. She knows she's

abandoned them. That Mam is lying weak and ill in her bed. But she just wants to escape. Just a few hours to herself, away from playing mam to her little brothers and sisters and wiping their snotty noses and getting them to wash their lousy heads and picking the dirt out from under their fingernails. Mrs Smedley's had to go home, but she's made them up some soaky to eat and their Ted is old enough now, old enough to keep an eye out. Cissie had said she'd not be long. She'd said she was going out to find some wood for the fire down by the river. She'd put an old pair of John Higgins's boots on the fire last night when they ran out of coal and wood. She aches for Billy and she can hear people inside that pub laughing and having fun and she wants some of it for herself.

She's about to give up and go home. The sun's starting to slip down in the sky and she knows that she should be making the tea for the littl'uns, but she's waiting for something. She doesn't know what. Just something. And she's about to turn and head back down the sloping jitty home when she sees him coming along the street.

Albert Grubb has never really taken her fancy before. He's a stocky young lad, round-faced, red-cheeked with a roll of fat for a neck. He used to be quite a slight lad but since he's been working as the butcher's boy, most days he takes home, at worst, scraps of meat, at best, some good cuts. His mother is a very smug woman because she's able to feed her family well on what her son brings home with him. Cissie sees Albert Grubb. She sees his rosy face and his bright eyes and his strong arms and she wants a drink and she knows he will get one for her. And so, she takes a deep breath and marches out of the jitty, timing it perfectly so that she walks right into Albert Grubb, with her hands clenched into fists she punches him in the side of his stomach as she collides with him. He swings round, catches sight of her, stops dead.

‘Hello Albert,’ Cissie catches hold of his arm. ‘Now aren’t you a sight for sore eyes.’

Any warmth that there was has been sucked out of the day. The sun is falling from the sky. Cissie leans back against the wall. A sour taste in her mouth and a light feeling in her head from the beer. Albert Grubb lunges towards her. Goes to kiss her full on the mouth. She turns her head to the side. The rough brick of the wall tugs at the fabric of her sleeves. She feels her skirts being peeled back. She shuts her eyes.

‘Let me,’ says Albert Grubb. His words are thick in her ear as he buries his face into her hair that’s falling out of its pins at the side of her head. His fat hand is under her skirts. His fingers jabbing. His face still in her neck. Warm wet breath against her skin. Her stockings are coming loose.

‘Let me,’ Albert Grubb says again. He’s pressing against her now, grinding his trouser crotch between her legs. Grunting. He begins to fumble with his trouser buttons but then she feels the strength go out of him. Albert Grubb has stopped moving. His head is still buried into her neck. Wet saliva from his lips is sticky against her skin.

Albert Grubb steps back. His face is flushed. He pulls his coat around him. Cissie catches sight of his bloodied apron. She pulls her skirts back down, adjusts her stockings. She feels bruised.

‘Can I tek you out?’ says Albert Grubb awkwardly.

‘What?’ says Cissie. And then, she can’t help it, she laughs.

Albert Grubb stares at her. His eyes shine for a minute and then his face falls. ‘Well, if it’s like that,’ he says and he turns to walk away but then stops and fishes

inside his trouser pocket.

‘There’s a word for women like you,’ says Albert Grubb. He takes out some dull copper coins and throws them down on the ground. He turns and walks to the end of the jitty. Cissie watches him go, her mouth open, her eyes unblinking. She’s standing almost in darkness now. Someone in a room at the back of The Angel turns on a lamp and a little square of light shines out. The lace curtains twitch slightly. There’s enough light to make out a couple of ha’pennies lying on the ground. Cissie looks at them for a moment and then bends down and picks them up. She’s home in seconds. She goes into the kitchen and reaches up to the old biscuit tin Mam keeps on the top shelf. She’ll start saving for a rainy day. She lifts the lid and drops the coins inside.



Part Two

‘[M]ending, an operation requiring a practised eye and a quick hand. The menders fill up any accidental holes in the lace with such neatness that the injured part can hardly, if at all, be recognised.’²

² Ginswick, Jules. Ed. *Labour and the Poor in England and Wales, 1849-1851: Volume II:*

Northumberland and Durham, Staffordshire and the Midlands. Frank Cass and Company Limited, 1983. 156.

1918, Spring

Cissie has to stoop to look in the mirror. She sees herself looking back. She's grown into a long-necked creature, with strong blue eyes and freckled skin. She tries to blot the freckles out with her powder, pinches her cheeks, longing for rouge and lipstick. She rifles around in the top drawer of the chest in Mam's bedroom and her fingers come to rest on something cold, metallic, bullet-shaped. Lipstick. She stoops again to glance at the mirror as she applies a thick gloop of the stuff and it sits clotted in the bow of her lips. Like face-paint on a clown. She smears it into shape with a finger, smooths her hair, pats down a wild curl or two, then lifts her skirt hem and wipes the lipstick residue from her finger on its underside. She'll do. She'll have to do. She's meeting Albert in ten minutes.

But Cissie isn't doing this for Albert. She isn't dressing up for him. Even after all these years of stepping out together, she'd never call it courting, Albert is simply a free ticket to a drink out. A good time. As brazen as she can be, drinking is still something she can't do alone. And since Billy's death, Mam won't allow any kind of liquor in the house.

Albert is wearing a sombre dark suit and a flat cap. He slips the cap off when he sees Cissie coming up the street, pushes his oiled hair from his forehead and it falls back in clumps. His fat lips break into a smile.

'Where you teking us then?' asks Cissie as she comes to stand beside him at the tram halt. Albert's mouth hangs open. Like a dead fish, thinks Cissie. He goes to take her hand but she pulls away.

'Don't ger mauling me, you soppy devil,' she says. 'It's too hot for that.' It is

unusually warm for an evening so early in spring. Cissie's palm feels sweaty where Albert's touched it. She wipes it on her skirt.

'You look nice,' says Albert. And his fat lips break into a smile again, a smile that creases up his chubby face.

'Where you tekking me?' asks Cissie again and before Albert can answer, 'Let's go up into town, to that pub where all the soldiers go.'

She sees his shoulders drop and he looks to the ground, crushed. That was cruel, she thinks. She knows that Albert feels bad for not being in uniform like most other young men of his age. But he'd failed the medical. Heart murmur. That was it. He's spending his war in the butcher's shop, getting whatever meat he can off the bones of the carcasses and sharing it between hungry customers on their rations, sorting out their quarrels as they bicker over who gets the best bits. He pretty much runs the place now, ever since Mr Gander took ill last year and went to recuperate at his daughter's near Mablethorpe. He hasn't been back since.

The tram arrives and Cissie jumps on board, her skirts swishing round her heels. It clatters into the city. They barely speak a word to each other all the way there. Cissie sits by the window, studying the view: factories and tattered shop fronts give way to open fields and for a while, they ride level with a barge on the canal, steam puffing from its tin chimney, and then smart Victorian villas appear with front gardens, but they soon run out and the hard lines of brick terraces and more tattered shop fronts take their place. Finally, larger, grander stone-fronted buildings begin to appear, municipal buildings, theatres and music halls filling the wide streets and they clank to a halt in the city's market square. The market has shut down for the day leaving skeletons of stalls and rotting fruit and vegetables in the gutters. Bloodied

water runs down the gullies from the shambles. It's been dry for days and the air feels brittle and charged, ready for rain to break it.

Albert insists on taking Cissie's arm as they walk towards The Feathers. Its large windows overlook the market square. The door is open and drinkers spill out onto the pavement. Many of them are soldiers, hatless and stumbling drunk. Albert and Cissie sit at a table by a window. She drinks port and lemon thirstily. Albert frowns at her as she finishes her second and asks for another; he's barely made a dent in his first pint. There's little conversation between them.

Suddenly a whoop goes up from over by the bar. And then excited cheering and clapping, the screech of tables being moved across the flagged floor, the crowd shushing each other.

And then a quiet and sharply pitched voice:

Oh, I do like to be beside the seaside.

Over the top of it, a loud voice shouts for a beer.

Another shush.

Oh -

A pause.

A loud whisper – go on!

I do like to be beside the sea.

There's more confidence in the voice now. It gets louder.

Oh, I do love to stroll along the prom prom prom.

It's strong now. It doesn't waver at all. Just a clear, sweet voice. A young voice.

Where the brass bands play diddly om –

And the crowds join in – *pom pom* – and there's cheering.

It's a child. The sweet singing is coming from a young girl. Far too young to be in here, thinks Cissie. Her song comes to an end and there's boisterous clapping. Cissie joins in. Albert sits with his elbows on the table and his hands still, looking glum. Her heart sinks when she looks at him. She's nothing more to say to him. She's away from Longwash for the evening. That's something. She's in the pub. She has a drink in her hand and the desire for more in her belly. But she doesn't want to be here with Albert. He's nice enough, good prospects and all that, but not for her. She realises now as she looks at him again that it isn't just emptiness that she feels, but the slightest hint of revulsion. Revulsion at his stout frame, his podgy stomach beginning to hang over the top of his trousers, his red pimply skin, always cold to the touch, the moustache that never grows in, those fat earlobes.

'I want another drink,' she says and she's aware of her voice slurring, a sense of being behind a translucent curtain, numbness at the ends of her fingers. She's on her way to being three sheets to the wind, as Billy used to say, and she knows that one more will make her even more miserable, but she wants it anyway.

And then she's on her feet, pushing her way through the crowd that has thickened up around the bar ever since that young girl's singing turn. She stumbles, bounces off people and turns herself sideways to squeeze in between soldiers with beery breath and the backs of fat old men who stink of rolling tobacco and then she pushes a hand through between a soldier and a young lad who isn't in uniform and she feels the hard wooden bar and pulls herself through, and as she does so, her hips bang sharply against the soldier, and, watchit, he turns and spits, but then catching her face, he pulls his head back and, oh excuse me, duck, and over his shoulder to

the man on the other side of him next to the bar, you, move along there and let this lady through. He's still staring at her and Cissie stares back deeply into a pair of the brownest eyes she's ever seen. She stares and she stares.

This will be her last port and lemon she tells the soldier as he pays for it for her and she nods at him and feels herself blush as she heads back to Albert. But he's not there. There's just an empty pint pot on the table. She looks around and sees the back of him; he's heading for the door. She hurries after him, her drink still in her hand.

'Albert,' she calls out, but he doesn't turn and he's just gone through the door and she follows him, thinking that he must have heard her and that he will stop and hold the door open for her, but he doesn't, and as she reaches it, it slams shut against her arm.

'Albert,' she cries out, in pain and angry this time, rubbing the arm of her coat where the door has caught it. There'll be a big bruise there in the morning.

He's just outside. His hands thrust deeply into his pockets.

'You bogger,' Cissie shouts into his face, 'Letting the door go on me like that.'

And Albert replies calmly, 'You treat me like dirt.'

Cissie can't think of a thing to say back to him.

'I can see right through you, Cissie Higgins, and I'll never be good enough for you. No one will, 'cause you're nothing but a tease.'

And Cissie – and in years to come when she thinks back on this moment her stomach will cave in on itself in shame – she lifts the glass she's holding in her hand and throws it at him and it falls short and smashes at his feet, shards of glass flying

up. He stares at her, his mouth open and she sees a red scratch on one side of his face where a fragment of glass must have cut him. When he walks away she runs after him, but he turns and pushes her with such force that she skitters backwards and into the wall of the pub.

She begins to cry, but Albert keeps walking away. She cries because she's hurt herself and she cries because she's ashamed of what she's done. Albert won't be coming back. She knows that and that makes her cry even more. And she cries with relief. And she cries with fear. And she cries because she doesn't really know what else to do.

The market square is quiet. There's still a racket of laughter and heckles coming from inside the pub. Cissie shivers and rummages around in her bag for her handkerchief. And then she hears heavy footsteps passing close by. They stop. Move towards her. Stop again, just a few yards away and then, 'Oh, deary me. What's all this then? We can't have this.' She looks up and her gaze falls on the brown-eyed soldier from the bar, a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth. She turns her head away quickly and looks back down into her handbag and continues rooting around, her shoulders hunched up around her ears. Footsteps again, soft taps this time, coming closer. It's getting dark and she hears the noise of the blackout curtains being drawn closed at the windows behind her. She knows he's standing right in front of her now and she's fumbling desperately in the darkness for a handkerchief, her nose full of snot. If he'd not been standing there, she'd have just sniffed and been done with it.

'Everything all right, duck?'

Cissie keeps her head down, her fingers in her bag touch the rounded edges

of coins, the bullet of Mam's lipstick, a door key, a pencil, something sticky, probably an old tuffee.

'Have mine,' he says.

With her head still lowered, Cissie looks up from under the brim of her floppy hat and sees a spotless white handkerchief dangling in front of her. She snatches it and puts it to her nose.

'Thank you.' She looks up at the soldier with the brown eyes. He's very handsome. And she realises as she pulls herself up to her full and proper height, that she's just ever so slightly taller than him. She blushes again as she hears herself saying, 'Well, now, kind sir, I shall have to get this washed and pressed and return it to you some day, won't I.'



This will be his first leave home from the front and he'll be full of tales and Winnie'll feel so proud walking along with her soldier on her arm. They'll go up into town, she thinks, to the pictures, for a fish and chip supper. And she'll throw a little do for him, perhaps at Mrs Goddard's, if she's agreeable. And if the weather stays dry they'll go to Clifton Grove and wander down the avenue of trees, take the ferry across the Trent. She'll make them a picnic. She'll buy him a couple of bottles of his favourite mild. Or they'll stop off at one of the tearooms in the village on the way home.

The telegram says he's back in Blighty already. He's been in Portsmouth. And London. And today he'll be coming home.

She travels up into the city and arrives at the Midland Station and the guard lets her onto platform four, into a fug of smoke and steam, dimly lit by gas lamps hanging from a glazed canopy. She dodges a porter carting trunks on trolleys with squeaking wheels; a soldier sucking on a tab steps aside to let her pass, his sweetheart smiles tightly at her; a man sweeping up fag ends and tuffee wrappers catches the backs of her boots with his bushy broom and she stumbles. And then she sees him.

He's already here. She cocks her head up to look at the station clock from under the brim of her hat; he must have caught an earlier train.

It's a terrible sight, in the gloom, a pin-prick of light from the end of a burning cigarette. A figure leaning up against a wall, next to a Waiting Room sign; a terrible sight. He's clad in dirty green-brown, like stagnant puddles, thinks Winnie, like the slimy mould that grows in the crevices of the outside privy. It's a terrible sight to see him. He's got all his pack, full to bursting, on the floor at his side, his grey great coat flung over the top of it, his rifle propped against it. He picks up his coat and puts it on. The greyness of it is like Father's dirty pewter tankard that still sits on the mantelpiece at home, like the corners of the front room that the sun never gets to. And the bottom of it, the bottom of his great coat is all chopped off. All ragged. It looks so strange. Hanks of frayed woollen material hang just above his knees.

In a few days' time, George will tell Winnie, with dry eyes and a cracked voice, he will tell her how he hacked away at his great coat, how he cut it off himself with his bayonet. He'd got to cut himself out of the mud, you see, the mud which sucked at him, tugged at him with its wet hands, the mud that dried into hard, heavy

clay, weighed him down, pulled him down, into the depths of the earth, down to his very grave.

When Winnie calls his name, George looks up. She's pleased to see his face is clean. His hair neatly combed. He's lost weight though. She sees hollows in his cheeks she's not seen before. His moustache is fuller. It makes him look older. It covers more of his mouth. She can just make out his bottom lip. He's got a graze across his right cheek. It looks like a fresh wound. It looks sore. Winnie steps towards him, puts out her hand to his face to touch it. He jerks his head away, out of her reach.

Winnie and George get a tram back to his mother's house. George refuses to pay. The conductress, a woman of a similar age to Winnie, looks him up and down and Winnie sees her flinch at the state of him. At the terrible sight of him.

'I've been fighting,' says George, his eyes wide. 'I ain't paying no fare on anyone.'

His voice is flat. It doesn't have the gentleness, the soft ring that it used to have. It's like someone or something has blunted the edges of it.

And a man sitting on a seat behind them calls out, 'My lad, don't you pay. You've earned your ride,' and he reaches into his pocket and pulls out a few coins and hands them to the conductress who takes them without a word. Another man, dressed in overalls, with blackened hands and his hair greased and parted in the straightest line, wrinkles his brow and he mumbles, 'You have, lad, you have,' and he looks down at his hands and picks at his nails.

Winnie blushes at the fuss of it all. And she looks at George who is staring out of the window at the grey streets, into the steely blueness of the end of the day.

She tries to put her arm through his, he pushes her away – gently – but he pushes her away and Winnie feels the lump she already has in her throat get sharper and her eyes prickle and she looks down at her hands encased in white kid gloves, knowing that underneath, the skin is red and dry and brittle from all the washdays, the floor scrubbing, the mending work.

The tramcar comes to a stop by the factory where George used to work. A large white moon illuminates the façade of the building, picks out the neatness of the brickwork, draws in the outline of two tall chimneys.

‘They’re making netting instead of lace there now,’ Winnie says, ‘The place is half empty. Most of the men are away.’

And George just stares out of the window and in the gathering darkness his reflection stares back at him with black eyes. Just before he goes back to the front, George will tell Winnie how scared he is of the darkness of the trenches at night. That same day, she will overhear a woman in front of her in the queue at the baker’s shop telling all and sundry about how her son had said that once they get sent to the trenches they never get let out. They have to stop in there for weeks at a time, in mud and filth and all sorts. And there’s rats and that. And when the rations are brought round, if you don’t get hold of them quick, the rats get ‘em, see.

They get to George’s mother’s house in Cromwell Road.

‘I don’t know what’s the matter wi’ y’im, Mrs Goddard,’ says Winnie.

George is through in the scullery at the back of the house. His mother stands in the narrow front hallway, her wide hips nearly touching the walls on either side of her. She’s looking flustered, her white hair hanging loose from a bun on the back of

her head, strands of it sticking to her fierce looking cheeks. She wipes her hands down the front of her apron. There's a strong smell of soap and bleach.

'He's 'alf starved,' says Mrs Goddard.

Winnie is twisting her tram ticket in her hands, folding it and rolling it and staring down at the floor.

Mrs Goddard says, 'I'm just getting the copper going.' She mops her wide brow with a big handkerchief.

'Can I help?' asks Winnie.

Mrs Goddard's voice rises in pitch, gets louder as she says, 'He's lousy, duck. Do you see? He's lousy. Absolutely lousy.'

Winnie shivers as she remembers the kids on the back-bench at school, the ones with the close-cropped hair, the ones like Cissie Higgins that time, that all the other kids pointed at, called names, kept well clear of.

'And he'll not let you near him, duck. He'll not let anyone near him. Not while he's in this state. Do you see?' The rising whine of her voice cuts the air.

Mrs Goddard heads back through to the scullery and Winnie sits on the stairs. George's great coat is hanging from the bannister and she sees the torn fabric, its rough raw edges where it has been cut away, hanging like a great fringe, like a horse's mane with small clods of French clay still stuck to it.



Cissie stands outside The Feathers. I'll be here tomorrow at about the same time, he'd whispered to her last night as he'd taken her handkerchief and walked back inside. She's been waiting for him for some time. The evening light is holding out.

He casts a shadow as he approaches. They go to sit inside, at a table by the window, and he drinks a pint of bitter and she a half of stout. He says that his name is Tommy. He's dressed in uniform again.

'Have you been to the front?' asks Cissie.

'Desk job,' he says. 'Bad feet.' And Cissie thinks, oh no, not another one. And then he tells her that he works at the shell filling factory and Cissie thinks that is ever such a brave thing to do.

'It must be dangerous,' she says, her eyes shining.

'Might not be the theatre of war,' says Tommy and swigs from his pint pot, 'But you still have to be careful,' and Cissie's not quite sure what he means about the theatre, but she smiles at him and tell him that she lives in Longwash with her mam and her brothers and sisters, that she's a mender at the moment. They're working on hair-nets and mosquito nets. For the war effort and that. And Tommy listens intently as Cissie tells him all about Ted and Harry and Elsie and Florrie.

'You're like a mam to them, aren't you?' he says.

'I suppose I am,' says Cissie. She doesn't mention Billy. It doesn't feel right to mention Billy.

'All sounds very cosy,' says Tommy and Cissie's sees his nose wrinkle slightly.

She feels embarrassed and says, 'But there's so many other things I'd like to do, you know. I'd like to travel a bit. See places.'

Tommy laughs. 'Where would you go then?'

And Cissie thinks for a moment, she thinks of the sea stretching away into nowhere and she says, 'Holland.'

But Tommy isn't listening now, he's looking around the pub, she can see his eyes darting about and so she asks, 'So where do you live?'

'Why do you need to know that?' says Tommy.

'I'm interested,' says Cissie.

Tommy puts his pint down on the table and leans forward till he's only inches from her face, his voice low. 'Well it sounds to me like you want to come home with me.'

Cissie shudders as she's hit first by a feeling of dread, then a feeling of excitement right in her guts. 'Well that depends whether I'm invited or not,' she says, batting her eyelashes.

'Look, duck,' and Tommy's voice seems to soften as he says, 'Not tonight 'cause I've got to look in on me old mam. Poor old dear.'

'Is she poorly?' asks Cissie.

'Summat like that,' says Tommy. He swills the dregs of his pint and chucks them down his throat. 'But how about I meet you here tomorrow.' He lands his pint pot on the bar with a thud.

Three nights in a row, thinks Cissie. 'That would be very nice,' she says.

'Well, had you not best be getting home now, what with all those little mouths to feed and that?' Tommy asks.

'I suppose I had,' says Cissie and she stands up and Tommy helps her into her coat and she sighs heavily as she pulls it around her shoulders.

He leans forward and kisses her on the cheek. 'Night, night, ducky,' he says. 'Get 'ome safe,' and he sits back down in his seat and winks at Cissie and Cissie gives a little wave and a little wiggle as she heads for the door.



There wasn't terribly much to pack away when Gertrude Foster died. The day after the funeral, Winnie scrubbed the house thoroughly. She did consider moving in to her mother's old bedroom. It'd be a bit quieter at the back of the house. But she decided to stay where she was in her room at the front. She liked the familiarity of it.

It's been three weeks now since she died.

Most of her clothes were well-worn, some were worn right through, so Winnie's got rid of those, taken them to the rag-and-bone-woman on Main Road. But there were some clothes hanging in the wardrobe that hadn't been touched for years, were as good as new. She can alter some of these for herself. Cut down a few of the old-fashioned dresses into skirts and blouses. But some of them just won't do, and she can pawn these maybe, get a little bit more money in.

Her mother had left no instructions. When Winnie tidied up her things she found a tin with some coins in it at the back of some drawers. What she was saving up for she never knew. Gertrude Foster was a thrifty woman. There were some old cosmetics in the drawer, pressed powder and lipstick, barely used; Gertrude Foster rarely made her face up. A small blue notebook filled with addresses written in tiny handwriting. Two days after Gertrude Foster died, Winnie sat and wrote to distant aunts and uncles and cousins, sent out letters to the north of the county and as far afield as Manchester and Kent, telling them all that Gertrude Foster was dead. People she'd never met before and doubted she ever would; blood relations and friends made by Gertrude decades ago and abandoned in recent years. She also found combs, a hair-pin, a shoe-lace, stockings and lace collars in her mother's

drawers. A box of letters that she put away to read another day. A few photographs. One she was sure was of Ada as a young child. One of herself as a baby. A couple of others, unnamed infants and old people dressed in high Victorian style. Gran'ma perhaps. Or maybe people on her father's side. She had no idea.

She didn't mourn as such.

She took down all the curtains and washed them and opened up all the windows. Every mirror was polished and she didn't even wear black except to the funeral itself. Aunt Hilda came for the funeral, but just for the day this time. Nobody needed to come back to the house afterwards. There was catering laid on at a small tea room on Main Road, organised very kindly by Zillah Goddard, and some of the neighbours had clubbed together as well. Mrs Goddard came to help wash and prepare the body. She was a very thoughtful lady, if a little fierce.

Winnie cried twice following the death of her mother. Once when she'd finished cleaning the house and tidying all the things up, and those tears were fuelled mostly by exhaustion rather than anything else. The second time she had been in the mending shed when she'd been sent home by the overseer. She should go home and be at home, not at work on the morning of her mother's funeral, the overseer had said, and as Winnie had made her way home she'd passed Nellie Higgins and Nellie had stopped to talk to her, had patted her on the shoulders and smiled kindly at her and Winnie had felt that same kindness she'd felt all those years ago in the pen of the factory when she'd brought dirty lace in her pram. And that was when Winnie started to cry and Mrs Higgins took her back to her house on Trafalgar Street and into her kitchen and made her tea and sat with her at the table and listened. Listened as Winnie told her how much she missed her father. That she knew she was very

lucky to have her George now but that she wished she'd known Ada more and how she wondered where she was now. How she missed her Bell and how cold it was in bed at night on her own. And Mrs Higgins had said that she'd overheard someone talking about Ada only the other day. Probably down to the fact that Gertrude Foster had just passed away. She couldn't make any guarantees but she'd try to find out a bit more if she could. And Winnie had invited her to the funeral and Mrs Higgins had said that she'd always had a lot of respect for Gertrude Foster, but that it wouldn't be quite right for her to intrude on the family's grief.

There were a couple of pieces of jewellery: a cameo choker, quite old-fashioned now, and a sapphire ring. Winnie put these away in her treasure box, alongside the pieces of broken glass and coloured stones she'd collected from the river banks all those years ago; alongside a photograph of Bell and a gold ribbon that she'd had for years and her old doll with its cropped woollen hair, dots for eyes and blood-red mouth.

Gertrude had died on a Saturday. She'd not left her bed for months and that last morning was just like all the other ones that had gone before. Winnie bent over her mother's bed, rolling the old lady over onto her side and grunting with the sheer effort of it, pulling a wet sheet out from underneath her with a great wrench and letting it fall with a slap to the floor, gathering it up into a ball. We's'll make you up a fresh one, Mother, and rolling Gertrude Foster back down. Her mother lying motionless on the rubber sheet laid on the bare bed, looking even paler than the day before, wrapped in a long white nightgown with brown stains down the bib at the front. We's'll need to get you washed, Mother. And Gertrude mouthing something soundless and Winnie unable to make out the words and having to look away from

her. She couldn't bear to look her mother in the eyes. Pushing the skinny old lady over again and roughly spreading a clean sheet underneath her bony body, pulling it taut and tucking it in, plumping up the pillows and pulling up the eiderdown. Lifting a comb from the side table and running it through her mother's thin hair, greasy white strings stretched across a pink scalp. Gertrude's face. Her eyes closed now. Her body barely seeming able to acknowledge the breath going in and out of it. Pulling back the heavy green drapes covering the window, letting more light in, shaking the nets underneath gently, wafting dust up into the air and it whirling like fine face powder. Each speck suspended for just a few seconds in the weak daylight. Bundling the wet sheet up under her arm and carrying the stench of urine with her into the kitchen and through into the scullery. Throwing it into the empty copper and it landing with a soft thud. Sobbing gently as she set to boiling up the water.

Gertrude was dead by midday, just as Winnie was mangling a sheet. She had thought that she might hear her mother finally give up, that she might call out, that she might hear her cracked voice for one last time. That there may be a cough or a gasp or a rattle. In the end, she heard nothing but the slap of wet washing as she pummelled it in the copper, the crackling of the fire, the bubbling of the water.

Winnie kissed her mother on her cold cheek and pulled the sheet up over her face and sat down on the edge of the bed. She'd been waiting for this day for months and she could feel herself trembling. She set off to call on the doctor. He'd said to do so once she'd gone, whatever time of day it happened. He'd need to issue a death certificate. She looked back into the room and imagined her mother lying in the bed and the last thing she would have seen. She hoped that it was the specks of dust

dancing in the light coming in through the nets and not her daughter's face, with its weeping eyes and gritted teeth, turned away from her.



It was going to be a grand night.

Cissie has been to a picture house once before with Billy. He'd taken her to the Scala in Longwash and she'd been utterly thrilled by the whole experience: rubbing shoulders with all kinds of people as the crowd was ushered into the auditorium by the ticket girls, with their daintily made-up faces and neatly set hair; fingering the plush of the seat arms; smells of cigarettes and coffee mixed with sour alcohol, sweet chocolate and eau de cologne; the whiteness of the light from the screen as the images started to flicker in the darkness. And the faces on the screen, they were so enormous that Cissie felt you could see right through their eyes and into their souls. And the girls on the screen were so pretty, like painted dolls, and the men, so dashing, even the villainous ones. And a man at the front jangling the piano and a woman next to him on the violin marking time and making the whole thing even more magical.

Cissie was never able to relate the story of the film she went to see with Billy, she'd not taken that in at all. She couldn't even remember the name of the film, but it was a most memorable night for her, those faces, the flickering lights.

Tommy is taking her up into the city to the Electric Palace. They meet at the Victoria Station. Tommy is all suited up, his hair slickly oiled back. He's growing a moustache, thinks Cissie, and it makes him look suddenly like someone's father,

someone dependable, reliable, serious. A smile flashes across his face when he sees her. She's wearing a new hat – well it's actually an old hat, a hand-me-down from one of Nellie Higgins's cousins, tarted up with some lace and some silk bluebells. The purple-blue of the flowers make Cissie's forget-me-not eyes sing out, her cheeks are flushed, her hair is pinned up perfectly and shining.

Tommy takes her through the foyer with its red and pink tiled walls and black and white floor and into the smoking room. They both have a cigarette as they sit in a booth, looking across a burnished mahogany table into each other's faces. Tommy puts his large hands across the table towards her and Cissie takes them in hers.

'Well, I've only gone and got my best girl the best seats in the house,' says Tommy, his teeth biting down on his cigarette. He exhales a long stream of smoke into the room, his head cocked up, chin in the air.

'Really?' says Cissie, fluttering her eyes at him.

'It's not one of them boxes or anything,' says Tommy, 'But nice, comfortable seats. Right on the back row.'

The girl in the film, her name is Fanny and she has a haughty look about her, a strong nose and shapely brows and dark hair and Cissie likes her very much. She has a bit of spirit about her. There's none of this sobbing into hankies that she remembers from that last picture that Billy had taken her to see. Cissie thinks that the young chap in this film is a bit soft, a bit wet, but she likes the girl. She likes her a lot. And there's an orchestra playing at the Electric Palace, not just a piano or a violin, but a whole orchestra and it's filling this whole dark space with sounds that

twist around in the air and get under Cissie's skin and into her ears and her eyes and make her insides prickle with absolute pleasure.

They leave the picture house without speaking. They're just another couple in amongst a crowd of strangers: they don't know it but they rub shoulders with a soldier due to report back to his battalion tomorrow; a munitions girl on her night off, who'd fallen asleep in the film and is due back on shift in a few hours; a woman and her sister trying to fill the cracks and hollows left by their sons away fighting overseas; a middle-aged man too sick to fight, who feels foolish and futile and tries to find purpose in his work, selling bicycles; a group of young lads shambling along in their big brothers' suits, borrowed or stolen for the night, trouser legs trailing on the floor and hints of fluffy moustaches on their top lips.

Tommy takes Cissie's hand and pulls her from the crowd and they head away, down through the market square, towards The Feathers public house.

'You look like that girl in the film,' says Tommy.

And Cissie feels a ripple of excitement inside. 'You mean she looks like me,' she says pouting and she thinks of Fanny's strong brows and fine nose and high cheekbones. Her aloofness, her polished manner. And Cissie pulls herself up to her full height, shoulders back, and she's walking through the darkening city and she's flickering with light.

'You know I want to be with you, don't you, duck,' says Tommy.

And Cissie says, 'Well don't be daft, you are with me.'

'You know you're my queen, don't you,' says Tommy, and then he says, 'I'm going to leave her, you know.'

‘I know you are,’ says Cissie and she’s high as a kite now. Of course, Tommy Bolt is going to leave that woman he’s shackled up with, the one he’s told her all about, the one he’s desperate to leave, he just feels a bit sorry for her, and he’s going to be with Cissie because tonight she’s like a film star, walking tall across a large screen, illuminated by light that casts her in silver.

‘You do trust me, don’t you, duck?’ says Tommy.

And Cissie says, ‘Of course I do,’ because she knows that Tommy wants her more than anything else in the world right now.

They reach The Feathers and Cissie heads for the door, but Tommy pulls her away and walks towards the jitty that runs along the side of the building, dank, littered with broken bottles and stinking of filth, and Cissie stops for a second, a look of disgust crosses her face, but Tommy pulls at her hand, winks at her.

‘Come on, duck,’ he says.

Cissie sighs and follows him.



George and Winnie go up into town. George has two days left of his seven days leave. He’s in his civvies while his uniform is being fumigated in his mother’s bread oven. As they cross the market square, Winnie sees red flushing across his cheeks. It may well be from the beer he had in the last pub, but it’s good to see him looking alive again.

Inside The Feathers, Winnie stands beside George as he orders the drinks at the bar. She feels drawn to a table by the window. But it’s already taken by a young

couple. Well, she's young; he's got a more lived in face, looks a bit older. Less pimpled youth and more mature man in his thirties, she thinks. A man with thick, dark hair and dark eyes. Rather handsome in a savage kind of way. He's not in uniform, but then neither is George, so that says nothing.

George is signalling to Winnie to go and find a seat. The pub's filling up, with people, with noise. She heads away from the window and the failing evening light and into a dark corner by a staircase. There's a candle flickering on the table. She looks back over to the window and her eyes rest on the dark-haired man. He is handsome in a way that Winnie can't quite put her finger on. The woman sits with her back to the pub. Even sitting down, Winnie can see that she's tall. She has dark hair piled high on her head and smoke rises up from a cigarette in her mouth. There's something about her too. That silhouette. And then she realises. It's Cissie Higgins sitting there with that chap, who actually looks like he could have stepped right out from the pages of some fancy novel.

Winnie feels herself blushing. She wants to melt into the walls. The last thing she wants is for Cissie Higgins to see her and start. George comes back from the bar. He puts a glass of ruby port on the table in front of her and she takes a deep sip of it, but too quickly. It hits the back of her throat and she gags, gasps for air, at the same time trying to keep the liquid inside her mouth, she coughs into her hand and feels the warm red port seep through her fingers and trickle down her sleeve. She's coughing loudly now and she sees heads turning from other tables, a gruff voice saying someone can't tek their drink. She dives into her handbag, mortified at the scene she's creating, and pulls out a handkerchief and tries to cover up the mess she's made.

‘Went down the wrong way, that’s all,’ she says weakly, composing herself.

‘You’re all right, duck,’ soothes George, putting his hand over hers. He sups deeply from his beer. The pub windows are open and Winnie hears the rhythmic clip-clop of dray-horse hooves outside.

‘That Higgins girl’s in ‘ere,’ says George. ‘Dressed up like a floozie.’

‘She’s always been a bit of a bully,’ says Winnie.

‘Rum family. The lot on ‘em,’ says George.

‘Nellie Higgins is a good woman,’ Winnie says quickly, and she thinks fondly of Nellie’s worn out smile, handing her back her doll.

George grunts disapprovingly and shuffles in his seat and takes another firm slurp of beer leaving a foaming layer on his moustache. ‘Steer well clear if you ask me.’

And Winnie sees the brood of brothers and sisters that grew up around Cissie and looked to her for everything that their mother couldn’t give them. The father who drank away every penny they had before he ran off. And, of course, there was Billy.

‘She’s had a rough time of it,’ says Winnie.

George tuts. Takes another sip of beer.

Even now, years later, working alongside her in the mending shed, Winnie still fears Cissie’s tongue, her temper, her spite. And then George is calling Winnie soft, or something like that, never be soft on bullies, he goes on and then he’s quiet as he sips at his drink and there’s the clip-clop of the dray-horse again, and thuds as casks hit the paving stones outside and the growl as they roll towards the cellar hatch. She hears the drayman barking orders. A woman shouting out a name, Lizzie

or Daisy, and the squeal of a child. A jolt of laughter from another woman. A tram bell clanging. And then chimes from St Peter's or St Mary's, she's not sure which.

George has put his pint pot down on the table and he's looking earnestly at Winnie. 'I'm worried about you all by your-sen now that your mam's gone,' he says gently as she tunes back in. 'I've asked my mam and she's very happy if you'd like to tek up in one of her rooms. Keep each other company and that.'

Winnie feels panic rising in her stomach and says, 'That's very kind of you, George.' She grabs at his hand, 'And very kind of Mrs Goddard too. But I'll be quite all right where I am. I'm close to my work and I could even tek in a lodger myself if I chose to. Make a bit of housekeeping out of it.'

George takes a breath and then, 'Now we've talked about it before, but I think so even more now, we should get married. Next leave I get. What do you say?'

And Winnie looks at George Goddard and she sees his clear blue eyes and friendly, plain face and his constantly furrowed brow as if he is worried about everything in the world and she feels his cold rough hands in hers and his fingers, just like her father's, made for tending his lace machine. She glances across at the window; the couple have gone. And she knows that the most satisfactory outcome of this whole thing would be to say yes and so she does. And she does love him in so many ways.

'As it's your last day tomorrow, shall we go to Clifton Grove,' says Winnie.

And George smiles and the furrows in his brow soften and his lips feel soft as he kisses her on the cheek gently, calls her his queen and heads to the bar to buy celebratory drinks, a half of mild for himself and a port and lemon for his wife-to-be.



Cissie had been sent into the mending shed as soon as the littl'uns were able to look after themselves. Their Elsie is now quite capable of running the house while Mam carries on as middlewoman. Florrie is bobbin winding at a lace factory on the other side of town. Ted is apprenticed to a lace machine maker up in the city. And Harry has been doing labouring work. That was before both the boys had lied about their ages and joined up. They were in Belgium now as far as Cissie knew.

So Cissie is freed up to go out to work and work she does, bent double over her lace mending. Her eyes ache and her fingers ache at the end of every day. And she hates it. But there's a good amount of money coming into the Higgins household these days. Nellie though, still greets each day as if she is stepping out onto thin ice. A thread pulled taut, ready to snap. Cissie watches her struggle with her eyes and her nerves. The worsening tremor in her hand as she counts out chits of paper to pay her workers, squinting at the figures to tally them all up, all the while fretting about her two boys away fighting.

Nellie Higgins had been so proud to take it on, the middlewoman role, when Gertrude Foster was forced to give it up. And Cissie knows Nellie will most likely want to hand it on to her before too long. But she doesn't want it. She doesn't want any of it. She doesn't really want to be here at all. Not in Longwash. Ever since the day Billy died she has wanted to be far away. She doesn't know where. Anywhere but here though. But there's a war waging out there. And the only people heading away from this town are the men, the young men, dressed up in their smart uniforms. And secretly she envies them and she remembers Billy and all his grand plans to join

the navy. And when she remembers Billy, she feels angry. When she remembers Billy, she cries.

And so, she sits, day after day at her mending. There is less of it coming through now that the war is on. It's mostly just plain stuff, mosquito nets for the armies in warmer climes and hair-nets for the munition workers. But she's doing her bit, she supposes.

She knows that the other girls look up to her in the factory. But she also knows it isn't their respect that she commands. In truth they are all slightly intimidated by her confidence and her swagger, by her forthright nature, her coarseness that really doesn't belong amongst a group of women working on fine lace trimmings. She gets herself into trouble for talking when she should be working and has got into the habit of having money docked for being late. When this got back to Nellie Higgins she had stern words for her eldest daughter, for letting down the reputation of the family and Cissie reminded her mother about her own drunken husband who had run away and at this Nellie Higgins swung out and slapped her daughter across the face for her insolence and disrespect and Cissie felt the effort that came in that slap and her stomach lurched as she felt revulsion at her own words and thoughts and ran to the scullery where she was physically sick.

Not a word passed between mother and daughter for the next three days. They moved effortlessly around each other in the same space without touching or talking. And then one Friday evening, Cissie came home from the mending shed and laid out her wages on the table for her mother and her mother lifted the coins, one by one, her lips moving silently as she counted them. Nellie Higgins thanked Cissie, and as she thanked her she looked at her and saw tiredness etched into her daughter's

pale face. Cissie looked back and said that was quite all right. And then, right from that very moment, things just slipped back into their normal pattern.



Winnie wears the ring that George gave her, the ring that belonged to Zillah Goddard's mother, on a chain around her neck. It keeps slipping off her finger; it needs taking to the jewellers to be altered, but it's not something she can afford to do. George had said she'd dainty little fingers like an angel and he'd kissed them when it'd become quite clear that the ring wasn't going to fit. But it's important, particularly while George is away, that she keeps the ring close to her, even if it is on a chain around her neck, hidden under a high-necked blouse. They'll marry when George is next home on leave. They'll get a special licence if they have to. But Winnie doesn't know when that will be.

Zillah Goddard has taken a shine to Winnie. She talks of them moving in with her when they marry. It'll still be Longwash. But Winnie knows she'll miss the little house she grew up in. And what if Bell comes home one day and she's not living there anymore. She and George haven't really talked about living arrangements yet. But Winnie is determined that they'll stay on at Embankment Street. Just for now. They can fix it up. Paint it up. George is very handy like that. She'll tidy out her dad's old tool shed for him for when he gets home. They can get an inside toilet put in, perhaps, if they save up. Zillah Goddard still has an outside privy. And the rent is cheaper at Embankment Street, she's sure of that.

Winnie arrives early for work. She puts on her pinafore and goes to her stool in the shed as the other women begin to arrive. Tilly Thirkettle, one of the older workers in the shed, nods at her with a big wide smile. Tilly's a very old friend of Zillah's and Winnie is sure that she reports back to her, but Winnie knows that she's a good worker. She keeps her head down. Gets on with her work. Doesn't cause any trouble.

Machinery clatters away in the factory next door. There's a low hum of conversation between the women at their mending. And then she hears Cissie Higgins, her voice rising up above everyone else's.

Cissie is telling the women about a man called Tommy. And Cissie is telling everyone that Tommy is handsome all right. And he's doing important war work. Munitions and that.

And then Tilly Thirkettle says, 'And is it true what they say, that he's a married man?'

'People may say that but let them think what they like. It's not a proper marriage anyway,' says Cissie. She's not ashamed, she says, why should she be? It's no secret. And Tommy has said that he's leaving this other woman.

The other menders in the shed are spellbound by Cissie's revelation and she knows it.

'Well, if he is or if he isn't, you be careful my girl,' says Tilly Thirkettle.

'Well he's tekking me out again tomorrow night. He always teks me somewhere nice does my Tommy. Usually up in town.' Cissie carries on, shamelessly.

Winnie really can't be doing with Cissie and her idle chatter; instead she tunes in to the clatter-clatter-clatter from the machines next door and tries to drown her out.



Cissie hates running errands for her mam. But Nellie still sends her off, this time to return a frock to a cousin who lives up in the city. She needs it back to make it good for her daughter to get married in. So, Mam has wrapped the frock up like it's a piece of priceless porcelain, in tissue and brown paper, and tied it up with string and popped it into a basket along with a few potatoes and a couple of bottles of ale for her cousin's husband.

'He's always had a thirst,' says Nellie as Cissie stands before her in her coat ready to go, and Cissie thinks this most strange, that she'll buy ale as a gift for a cousin and yet she'll not let a drop of the stuff be drunk in the house. Not since John Higgins. Not since Billy. And then Nellie presses some coins into Cissie's hands, something to cover the fare and a little bit left over to treat herself. All those shop windows, Nellie goes on, I know what you girls are like. And Cissie, who has never really been drawn to the shop windows that much, just thinks of her Tommy up there in the big city where she's heading. But Tommy has told her that he's working today, all day, and then a late shift and so Cissie sets off with a dull knot of disappointment in her stomach.

Cousin Mabel tuts over the dress, at the state of it, it'll need a wash, she sniffs at it and turns her head away in disgust. 'Couldn't your mam have at least

rinsed out the armpits. It smells like it's been worn by a navvy for a full week's work,' she says. Cousin Mabel doesn't have much time for Nellie Higgins. They'd grown up together, very close, but then something had happened and they'd had a falling out. The rift has healed, slowly, over the years, but there's still a scar there, an irritation that sometimes gets picked at a little too much. But Mabel is fond of Cissie and fills her up with tea and corned beef sandwiches and fruit cake. And they chat away. And Cissie feels herself blushing when Mabel asks if she's laddin' and she says no, there's no chap on the scene at the moment and Mabel tuts again and says that Cissie would make a wonderful wife and she'd have imagined that the lads would be queueing up around the town to take her out. And Cissie thinks of Tommy again and that last time he said he was going away on war work – he goes away on war work an awful lot – and she thought, take me with you, and then she'd said it out loud, take me with you, Tommy, next time you go away, take me too. But Tommy had said nothing back. He'd just walked away as if he'd not even heard her. Tommy and his dark eyes and that sense of gloom that forever hangs over him. She's claimed him as 'hers', said so to his face, but he hasn't really said it back. Not properly. Not yet.

When Cissie leaves Cousin Mabel's, it takes her a good fifteen minutes and some distance out of her way, but she deliberately heads for the tram stop on the market square so that she can walk past The Feathers. She'll not go in. Not on her own. She doesn't have the nerve. Not in a pub up in the city. She's not enough brass neck for that. But she'll walk past and listen to the chatter and the shouting and the singing, and take in the smells and think of Tommy and her and their spot at the

table by the window, and he'll feel a bit more hers, just for that short time, before she jumps on the tram back home.

He's supposed to be on late shift, so when she sees him her heart lurches and it takes all her strength and self-control to stop herself calling out to him as he strides purposefully across the street and heads for The Feathers, the woman on his arm trotting along, taking two steps to keep up with each one of his. And Cissie knows that this is the woman that he's told her about. The one he's shackled up with. And Cissie can't help but stare and steps back into the shadows so she'll not be seen. And it's just as the woman turns her head that Cissie catches the profile, the sharp cheeks, the button nose, the large eyes, that clear skin and it hits her like a punch in the stomach, that Tommy Bolt is walking out with Ada Foster. She's not seen her for years. But she'll never forget that face.



The pram has been standing in the backyard for months. And it's rusting away. It's not been used since Gertrude Foster gave up the will to work and took to her bed and Winnie went to work full time as a lace mender. That's when Gertrude began to retreat from the world. She barely spoke to her daughter beyond making requests for food, for warmth, for clothes to be washed, sheets to be changed, aches to be soothed, pains to be tended to. Before long Gertrude was spending all her days at home, only ever leaving the house first thing on a Sunday morning to attend church, dressed head to foot in black and covered with a mourning veil. And it was on one of those Sundays, not long before she died and following a sermon from the vicar about

forgiveness, that Gertrude passed through the back yard and caught sight of the pram. Its brown oxidised wheels. Its hood starting to crack. And she began to shriek, get rid of that thing, get it out of my sight. And Winnie had hidden the pram in a gap behind the shed, out of view of her mother.

It's been years since she's last wheeled that pram to the factory. Full of lace all wrapped up in cloths. Her doll's head poking up inside. Bell trotting along beside her. You still play wi' dolls, Winnie Foster. Well she doesn't any more. Winnie Foster has become worker, breadwinner, housekeeper.

She doesn't need that pram any more, but there's life in it yet, and so she wheels the thing along to Nellie Higgins at the factory and asks her if she can make use of it and Nellie's face breaks into a smile and creases into a thousand lines and she thanks Winnie kindly and says that summat like that can always be made use of. She'll get her Harry to have a look at it, when he comes home from the war of course, he can fix it up. It'll be as good as new.



1918, Summer

Cissie has been running and sweat is prickling underneath her arms, trickling down the ridge of her spine. It's so hot, there's no whisper of a breeze to stir up the air. The city is brooding in the July heat. The pavements are dusty. Smoke rises up in straight lines from factory chimneys. Cissie breathes in hot tar and horse manure. She coughs. Grit crunches underfoot, grazes her feet through the worn soles of her shoes. She holds her straw boater on her head with one hand, puts the other one up to shade her face from the sun hanging in the parched sky and careers, half-blinded, round onto Milton Street. Victoria Station is right ahead of her, its grand edifice rising up in crisply embroidered brick.

From the top of the stairs, she sees Tommy Bolt on the platform below. He strikes a match, lights a cigarette and cups it inside his hand. He's standing next to a group of soldiers, all swaggering, laughing loudly. At his feet, other men are shambling on the fringes, drawn to the places where shadows are thrown across the platform. They crouch in their tatty uniforms, resting their heads in their hands or staring into empty spaces. And then Tommy disappears into a cloud of steam, into the push and shove of men and women meeting again after so long apart. Seconds later, she sees his face in the crowd, can make out its square jaw, its pockmarks. He's heading up the stairs, walking right towards her.

'Tommy,' she shouts and jumps out in front of him.

He stutters to a standstill, does a double-take and the corners of his mouth turn down as he looks at her. 'Oh, eh up, kid,' he says.

'You said to meet you here.'

Tommy sighs. 'I don't need meetin'. I just need a pint of beer in me hand and a hard seat under me arse in The Feathers, if you don't mind.'

'Don't be like that, Tommy,' says Cissie. 'I've not seen you in weeks.'

Tommy sets off at a stiff pace. Cissie's almost running to keep up with him. He's heading for the market square with a bag over his shoulder, his mouth a hard, straight line.

Cigarettes and stale ale greet them at the door of The Feathers. Tommy elbows his way through huddles of old men. Cissie follows him, a shadow. She stands next to him at the bar as he orders their drinks and he takes half of his down in one slug. Then he turns to her and there's a smile on his face.

'That's more like it, duck,' he says.

'And that's more like it back,' says Cissie. The dread inside her guts eases as she sips at her stout and feels Tommy's eyes surveying her face and body.

'You're a sight for sore eyes,' he says.

'Well you didn't seem to think that when I met you just now,' says Cissie.

'You want me to say sorry, don't you?'

After a pause, Cissie cocks her head and pouts, 'Yes.'

'Tommy Bolt never says sorry,' and he pours the rest of his drink down his throat, leans across the bar, 'Shippos when you're ready,' he shouts at the landlady and turns and catches the stares of three other men lined up along the bar next to him, all waiting to be served before him. One of them scowls.

'Going to have a go then, are you?' Tommy growls, sneering and showing his yellow teeth. The scowling man turns away and looks down at a newspaper open on the bar.

‘Here you go.’ The landlady swoops in with a foaming pint of bitter.

‘So where have you been? What have you been doing?’ asks Cissie.

‘What do you mean?’ Tommy seems distracted.

‘I mean you’ve been away for weeks,’ says Cissie.

‘War work. I told you. Gotta keep mum,’ says Tommy, tapping his nose with his index finger.

And then Cissie notices a girl pushing her way through the crowds towards them. By her reckoning, she’s older than ten, but not yet fourteen, dressed in a checked frock, dressed like a child. Too young to be in here. And she comes right up to Tommy at the bar and tugs at his jacket. A voice from somewhere calls out, ‘You can’t bring that nipper in ‘ere,’ and Tommy turns and glares at an old man whose mouth gapes open, beer foam hanging in beads from his moustache.

‘He’s right, you know. She can’t be in here. I’ve told you before.’ It’s the landlady and she’s pointing at the girl who is huddled at Tommy’s side like a dog at heel.

‘She’ll be no trouble,’ says Tommy. He lights up another cigarette and it smokes up in his face. He takes a long swig of beer and leans back against the bar, surveying the room. The landlady puts down a bottle, ‘Lemonade for the littl’un.’ She wipes a glass with a dirty cloth and sets it down.

Tommy nods a thank you. He looks down at the girl, ‘And you can tek it outside and drink it. And then you can go home and say that you couldn’t find me. All right? I’m not here. All right, duck?’

The girl nods, pours her lemonade into the glass and disappears back into the crowds.

The landlady looks nervous as she says, 'Anyone at home waiting for you?'

Tommy slides his empty glass across the bar. 'She can wait,' he says.

A few moments pass before Cissie says, 'And what on earth was all that about?' and she's pushing at Tommy's chest, and then she's pounding it with her fist. Her cheeks are burning. She can't help herself. 'What the – what the bloody 'ell was that all about, Tommy Bolt?'

'Steady there now with the effing and blinding, girl.' Tommy is laughing at her.

'I mean it Tommy. You won't make a fool out of me. I won't let you.'

'She's not mine,' says Tommy and he's fumbling in his pockets for another cigarette. 'She's just some little bastard that belongs to that woman I told you about.'

'The one you live with?' Cissie says indignantly. 'The one you're not married to so it doesn't matter?'

Tommy turns and takes Cissie's hands in his and looks at her. 'That's right,' he says, 'The one I'm not married to. So, yes, it doesn't matter.'



When it happens, Winnie is thinking about Bell. About her tiny little hands, her pale skin, her dark hair and how greasy it used to get. Her dirty little feet sticking out of the end of the bed. How quiet she was. When the ground trembles she's thinking that she was so quiet sometimes that it was almost as if she was somewhere else. She was like a ghost. That little hand that clutched at hers that first time she took her to the factory. That cold little hand.

When it happens, at that very moment, Winnie's fingers stop their mending work for just a second or two. There's a shudder, they all feel it, as if a black cloud has been blown in front of the sun. A row of bobbins on the edge of a shelf suddenly topples over. But no one hears the boom over the endless clattering of the looms next door and the moment passes. And Winnie's fingers are moving again as she works at her lace and she's thinking about home and how Bell isn't there and how empty it is.

Ever since she put Gertrude Foster into a hole in the ground she's been thinking about Bell. Even though she's now engaged to be married to George Goddard, she thinks of Bell. She'd be thirteen now. Slender and tall perhaps. She had it in her to be very pretty. She'd perhaps be out at work, maybe even working alongside Ada. And Winnie feels empty because she feels guilty. She feels guilty because she let Ada take Bell and then she never brought her back. And it's the same kind of guilt that Gertrude Foster felt, she knows that now, the kind of guilt wound up so tightly and buried so deeply inside her that it eventually twisted her out of shape.



It's late in the afternoon, and when she's pegged-up the last of the washing, Cissie makes her way through the kitchen, dim with smoke and smelling of burnt fat, and up the stairs to her bedroom tucked under the roof at the front of the house. She's on a late shift at the mending shed today and in her head she's working out how much money she can save over the next week. She's saving up to treat Tommy. She wants to buy him something. To thank him for being so good to her. Even though she's not

heard from him again for days now. But that's nothing unusual with Tommy. He loves her now. He said so the other night. And he'd taken her to Jessop's the next day and bought her a lovely new hat and some gloves.

She's looking out at the view from her bedroom window, out across the street, and suddenly the window frames rattle and the floor beneath her shudders and her eyes widen as she sees a great black cloud billow up, beyond the rows of roofs and factory chimneys, way beyond, beyond the edges of the fields and the winding river.

They heard it twenty miles away, they say in the mending shed the next day. They're all talking about it. They heard it far beyond the factories and the houses, far beyond, beyond the edges of the fields and the winding river. In the mining villages to the north of the city. In the vales and the wolds out to the east. The ground shakes when Number Six Filling Factory, just a few miles from Longwash, goes up on that Monday evening in July and they feel it in the Lace Market and in the lace towns dotted along the river. All it took was one spark. It could have been anything. A hair-pin, a shoe-lace, a ring.



The policeman who turns up at Winnie's front door the next morning, asking for next of kin, is quite old. Older than her father would have been, probably. Certainly older than Mr Nobbs from a few doors down. But then all the young lads are away fighting.

Winnie is never quite sure how it came about, but Nellie Higgins goes with her to identify the body. Maybe she was passing at the time or perhaps word had got to her somehow and she'd been concerned. Anyway, the next thing Winnie knows, Mrs Higgins is at her side and she takes her arm and they follow the policeman who has arranged for a cab to take them to the makeshift mortuary. Winnie overhears someone say that you can't expect a young lass like that to go looking at the dead all on her own now, and Winnie, who has just turned eighteen, wonders when they'll stop calling her a young lass.

She comes home from the mortuary shaken. As does Nellie Higgins. The gossips are saying that the only way Winnie could tell that it was Ada was by the two plaits hanging down her back. There were no identifying marks left. Nothing to tell who that lump of flesh, made sexless by its baggy khaki overalls, had once been. It was just like all the rest.

And all this time, all these seven years, Ada had been just a few miles away. And she never said. No one ever said.

That night Winnie dreams about Ada standing in the scullery at Embankment Street. She can't see her face, she's turned away from her, her back to the door, and she's naked to the waist, washing herself over a sink of cold water, her plaits all combed out and her hair falling across the white skin stretched across her shoulder blades.

There'll be a grave for Ada in a churchyard near the munitions factory along with all the others killed in the explosion. And they'll be carrying bodies out of the cornfields around the factory for weeks to come yet.



On the kitchen table there's a cheap gold ring, a pair of shoelaces and a door key. There's a small cracked mirror glass in dulled silver and a tortoiseshell comb with some teeth missing. A lace-edged handkerchief wrapped around something that turns out to be a photograph of a young child.

It's a younger policeman who calls the second time. He has grey skin and red-rimmed eyes and Winnie feels sorry for him. For the job that he has to do. His hair is untidy and he looks nervous. She invites him in, shows him through to the kitchen, offers him tea. He's very sorry about Ada.

'It would have been very quick,' he says. 'She'd not have known a thing about it.' And after a pause, 'We found these personal effects in Mrs Bolt's locker at the factory.'

And Winnie says, 'Mrs Bolt?' A clock somewhere in the house chimes the hour as Winnie goes on, 'But she was Foster. Ada Foster.'

And the policeman says that Bolt was her married name, and he checks his notebook and looks uncomfortable, shuffles from one foot to the other and fiddles with the stiff buckle on his satchel and Winnie snaps, 'She must have married, so where's her husband then?'

'Well, Miss, it seems that Mrs Bolt was the name that she gave when she worked at the factory,' says the policeman. And Winnie's head is in her hands now as the policeman continues, 'And there were one or two people as worked alongside Ada and knew her as one of yours and that's how we was able to let you know. And there was also talk,' and the policeman blushes and clears his throat, 'I'm sorry to

say, gossip, Miss, you know, that she'd taken the name of the – gentleman – that she was – cohabiting with. We've tried to find him, the gentleman. We've gone to the address that the factory had for her. But there was nobody there.'

Winnie goes to pour the tea, her hands shaking, and the policeman says that it's very kind of her, but that she's only his second call that morning and he's quite a few more calls to make yet, and then Winnie thanks the policeman and says that she must be getting on herself and pulls her shawl around her shoulders as the policeman offers to see himself out. He's very sorry for her loss.

Winnie lifts the photograph of the child from the table. A sepia print of a young girl, a studio portrait, standing at the side of a chair, one arm delicately resting on it, long hair loose down her back, a ribbon tied in it, a lock falling across her forehead, dark eyes. Bell.

And then Winnie is up on her feet, rushing after the policeman as he heads for the front door. 'Where did she live?' she shouts after him. 'Where did Ada live? You must have an address for her. Please. She had a little girl, you see. And I don't know where she is.'

The policeman turns. A puzzled look crosses his face and then he reaches into a pocket and brings out his notepad, flicks through some pages and says to Winnie, 'I've got it here, duck.'

Winnie stares blankly at the objects on the table. A cracked mirror, a broken comb, a door key, a cheap gold ring, shoelaces.

A spark. That was all it needed, the policeman had said, one single spark for the whole thing to go up.



Winnie sleeps with the slip of paper under her pillow. Number nineteen Clappers Yard written out on it in blunt pencil. She'd woken in the small hours and written the address out again on the back of an old envelope and put it on the mantelpiece in the kitchen, held fast under a large white pebble she'd once pulled from the river. She remembered her mother throwing that slip of paper in the fire that time, the burnt black petals flying up in the heat from the flames.

She doesn't expect Bell to be there, at the address that the policeman has given her, but the neighbours might remember her, they might know something. It might lead somewhere. She'd gone to the library and found a map of the city, worked out a route there and back, drawn out a rough version for herself. Clappers Yard is in a part of the city she's never been to before. She knows a few of the city's landmarks, the Midland Station, the market square, Jessop's department store, the castle, and these mark out the four corners of a place that feels familiar to her. But Clappers Yard is beyond that square; it's somewhere dark and unexplored.

She travels up to the city on a hot Saturday afternoon, catching the train rather than the tram from Longwash and getting off close to the Midland Station. She heads out onto Station Street and makes her way through crowds of Saturday shoppers and men and young lads leaving their morning's work, wearing the uniform of flat cap and black and white County scarf, making their way to the afternoon match at Meadow Lane. Her father was a County man. And so is George. She wishes he were here with her now, holding her hand, seeing her right.

She heads down Carrington Street, crossing the canal, the one that flows all the way here from Longwash. Down Canal Street and on to Leen Side, where the crowds thin out. A man rides by on a bicycle; children play barefoot in the dust and gravel of the road. As she passes them she feels a rain of tiny pellets hit the back of her dress, the brim of her hat. They're throwing stones at her! The buggers. She wants to turn around. To shout at them, but instead keeps walking, feeling the heat building in her face. At the next junction she turns on to a long narrow street and lingers in a pool of shade thrown onto the ground by a cluster of trees. Looking up, she sees the hulk of a brick-built church rearing up from its churchyard. Its door is open. She longs to step inside and feel the cool of its thick walls, gaze up at its beautiful stained glass, but she's here for a reason. She has a mission of her own. Checking her map, she realises she's made a wrong turning. She's reluctant to double-back, but this church will be here forever, she thinks. She'll come back and visit again another day. And so, she turns back.

Her pace picks up as she finds herself back on Leen Side. She looks down at her hand-drawn map and takes a sharp turn left again and finds herself in a maze of back streets, stacked up densely in the space between the canal and the railway and the Lace Market that sits delicately high up on the sandstone cliff of a hill, beetling over the terraces and factories and warehouses below. This part of town is thick with lace outworkers, women working in their homes every single day of the week. She keeps her head down as she passes them on their doorsteps. Nameless women with bent backs and bent fingers and hard faces. Harder, she thinks, than those in her own town. Hardened, she thinks, by the city, the density of the people. The houses feel crammed together more tightly here. The walls higher. The sky further away. The

weave of humanity denser. The pattern of the weave tighter. There's a tension in the air and on people's faces. Smiles that could turn into screams with a wrong word or a misjudged look.

Clappers Yard is packed with three-storey dark-bricked houses stained black with soot. Winnie hangs back and picks out number nineteen. Cracked black-eyed windows with torn lace coverings. A paint-blistered door. She's scared to approach at first, but then with one deep breath and five confident strides, she's there, hammering on the door. Flakes of paint crust on to her fist and fall onto the pavement below. The house is set above large cellars with a steep step up to the front door. She hammers again. Rattles a black door-knocker and then a letterbox. Minutes pass and still she hammers and rattles, with less urgency now. There's not a flicker of life from the place. She steps back and looks up at the windows and they look blankly back down at her.

And then there's a woman at her side. She could be the same age as Winnie or even younger, but life has worn away at her, and this woman is saying to Winnie that they've all flitted and Winnie begins to throw questions at her. Who was here? Was there a little girl? Well, she'll not be so little now, probably about thirteen or so. And Winnie is fumbling in her handbag as she's saying this, fumbling for the photograph that she found wrapped in a handkerchief in Ada's things, she's pulled it out of her bag and is waving it at the woman.

The woman steps back, arms crossed over her bosoms, mouth clamped shut. She's looking suspiciously at Winnie and then at the photograph and then, 'Well there were a woman and a man and a girl and yes, I suppose you could say that the littl'un looked a bit like this one in the picture. The same eyes. Pretty little wisp of a

thing. I never knew their names. Never spoke except to pass the time of day. The woman was a bit of a beauty and her chap, he was a bit of a shady-looking character you could say, and they was always shouting at each other, and that poor lass, the little girl, she was a tiny little scrap of a thing, well her and the chap and the little girl they haven't been seen for a good while now.'

Winnie asks, 'How long?'

'A week at least. And no, you can't go in there 'cause it's locked up and due to be let out to someone else soon. It's empty though. They left nothing behind. My mam collects the rent for the landlady and she got me to go in and tidy round after they'd gone. Just a few sticks of furniture they'd left. Ashes in the fire. A bottle of sour milk on the windowsill. Dirty boppers. No forwarding address. Nothing. And they owe money.'

Winnie hurries away from the woman, leaving her shouting about her bad tenants, and retraces her steps back onto Leen Side. Most of the doorsteps are empty this time and a smell of meat and boiling vegetables comes from some of the houses that she passes. On Canal Street, she decides to head up Sussex Street towards the market square.

There's a lightness in her chest. It's been years since she's seen Bell and to be honest, she'd not know what to say to her if she saw her again. But she feels ashamed as this feeling of relief rubs against a familiar sense of guilt; the guilt of letting Bell go with Ada all those years ago. Bell's all grown up now. Thirteen. She'll be out at work before she knows it and she'll not want some interfering aunty turning up and Ada will have made a good job of it, she was sure of that, Ada would have looked after Bell and brought her up well.

Winnie's tired now. It's an uphill walk and her legs jerk as she steadies herself on the steep cobbles. She passes tightly-packed shop fronts. Some are closing up for the day. Harrington Street bears off to the left, dark and foreboding. She'd written to an address on Harrington Street when her mother died, she remembers. To a cousin of sorts; a blood relation her father had known well as a child. And their family name was Foster, she was sure of it, and they ran a greengrocer's shop. She pauses and looks down Harrington Street, a deserted terrace. She picks out shop fronts, a public house sign. Crates and sheets of newspaper litter the roadway, empty barrows, horse dung. No one from here came to the funeral as far as she knew. Best to leave it alone.

She comes to a stop at the end of the road that turns out onto the market square, shuts her eyes and holds her breath and wishes in her head that George were here with her right now. He'd take her hand and he'd lead her into The Feathers and he'd sit her at the table in the shadows by the stairs and put his arm around her shoulders and tell her that everything was going to be just fine and then he'd buy her a port and lemon and he'd have an ale and his eyes would shine and he'd get froth from the head of his ale on his moustache and wipe it off with the back of his hand. It's going to be just fine, duck. That's what he'd say.

Winnie doesn't want to go home yet. She stops off at a small tea shop on Bridlesmith Gate, a dark place with low ceilings, where the tables are nicely laid with crisp white cloths and a young girl with a pleasant smile brings her a cup of tea and a scone with cream and jam.



When Tommy asks Cissie to move in with him – he’s got a new place now, he says, a cracker of a place up in the city – he assures her that whatever has happened, he had planned to leave Ada anyway. Her death, well, it’s just a sad coincidence. Cissie tells him how she’d felt sick to her stomach when she’d heard that it was the shell filling factory that had gone up that day. That she thought she’d lost him and what a relief it was that he hadn’t been there at the time. She said that it was unfortunate about Ada. Tragic really. That she’d never wish that on anyone. He tells her that the house, well, it’s a grand house. It’s one of Mrs Gregory’s, and him and Mrs Gregory, well, they’re thick as thieves. Mrs Gregory doesn’t own the house as such, but she’s taken it on and furnished it and they’ll have to pay her the rent when she comes round to the house every Friday night. She’s the public house woman. Cissie will know her. She runs The Feathers. That’s how Tommy knows her so well. And the house is just a hop and a skip from The Feathers.

Cissie first sees it in the gloomy half-light of the end of the day, feeling her way in through the door and into the hallway. In the main living room there are still the remains of the last fire that burnt itself out there. Scorched newspaper is scattered across the hearth. No one’s been in to clean up. One of the bottom panes in the front window is cracked. Cissie looks around for lighting and sees a gas jet on the wall of the fireplace.

The place is lightly furnished. There’s a heavy oak sideboard with a scuffed top. Tommy goes over and rubs his hands across it. Worth nowt, he says. And there are two chairs, rickety looking things that look like they will break with the slightest touch. A table. Scrubbed. There’s a low flea-bitten couch huddled in shadows in the corner. The floorboards are bare. And there’s broken glass over there on the floor by

the back window. Both windows are unclothed. We's'll get some nets up, says Cissie. She dreams of thick drapes, swags falling down in cascades to the floor and a beautifully patterned carpet beneath her feet. The walls are covered with a faded paper pattern of twisting stems and leaves crawling upwards and outwards. There are brown-edged rectangles where pictures once hung.

'Do you like it?' asks Tommy and Cissie says nothing.

And as he turns away she says, 'We's'll make the best of it. Just needs a few things, that's all.'

It's so empty, she thinks, and she thinks of home with its cluttered mantelpiece with all her brothers and sisters, with the constant pounding up and down the stairs and the creaking of boards overhead and voices at all hours of the day. And yet in here. Silence. Emptiness. And it's very chilly despite the time of year.

'I'll get a fire going,' she says, 'Mash us some tea.'

'Let's look upstairs first, duck,' says Tommy and he pushes her up ahead of him and as she climbs the stairs which rise up steeply with a sharp turn and lead to two tiny rooms, she feels his hands on her, fondling her and she knows why he wants to come up here, and as she goes into the front bedroom, she takes in the bed with its tarnished brass frame and its filthy brown mattress and she starts to take off her coat and turns to Tommy and he's a look on his face she's never seen before, it's sullen and fixed and cold, and he fumbles with his trouser buttons with one hand and pushes her back onto the bed with the other.

She's woken by a banging on the door and the first thing she feels is the cold. Such a bloody cold house in the middle of the summer. The buttons on her blouse are half undone; her skirts caught up uncomfortably around her hips. She straightens herself up, pulls a shawl around her and makes her way down the stairs. It's the front door they're hammering on, whoever it is, and they're still hammering.

There's a woman standing there when she opens it. She says she's a neighbour and she's not too happy to have been tekken advantage of she says and she pushes forward a girl. A thin, pale girl, with long dark unkempt hair and wearing a coat that's far too big for her. Cissie recognises her at once. It's the girl from the pub that time, the girl who was given the lemonade and sent outside to drink it. And the neighbour's going on that the girl's dad had said he'd be back to collect her hours since. Her hands on her hips and her neck thrust forward, the neighbour's beginning to shout now, some people shouldn't be allowed t'ave kiddies. Poor mite. Look at her. She's starving. And before Cissie can say anything, the young girl says, is Tommy here or not?

Tommy's coming down the stairs and he's tucking his shirt into his trousers as he comes into the front hall and then he sees the neighbour and the young girl and he barks at Cissie to let the girl in and he slams shut the front door in the neighbour's face.

'What d'ya let her know we were here for, you daft bitch,' he shouts at Cissie. 'She could have kept her a bit longer and we could have gone down The Feathers.'

The girl stands silently in the hallway, staring at the floor.

‘And who is this then?’ says Cissie and even as she’s saying this, she knows who the girl really is and her voice softens.

‘For God’s sake,’ Tommy pushes the girl through into the living room. ‘It’s Ada’s girl.’

And Cissie catches her breath.

Tommy’s pulling on his overcoat. ‘I’ve got business to attend to,’ he says and Cissie can see that he’s in a foul mood. She lets him go without any protest.

The girl is perched on a chair, a sullen expression on her face. Her features are tiny. She’s like a little imp, thinks Cissie, and she feels her mood lift. ‘And what do we call you then?’ she asks in a cheery voice, knowing very well what her name is.

The girl stares at her. The look is hollow. ‘Bell.’

Cissie stares at Bell. Bell stares back at Cissie and neither of them know quite what to do until Bell shivers and Cissie takes off her shawl and wraps it around Bell’s shoulders and says that she’ll sort out the fire and get them both warm and get them some tea. And then she’ll go up and sort a bed out.

Cissie wants to make the house nice. Breathe some life into it. There’s curtains to wash and floors to scrub. Antimacassars to bleach out. Sheets and pillowcases to launder. Rugs to beat. The lino in the little kitchen, it’s cracked and missing in places, but it’ll clean up all right. She’s heard about some people having gas ovens these days. Maybe Tommy can get them one. But not just yet. There’s a war on and things are tight.

Mam will do just fine without her. There's Elsie to help at home now and Florrie bringing in money and Mam's doing so much better than she ever was with the work she does now. But she still frets about her boys away at the war. And she frets about her daughters too. What on earth must she think about her eldest daughter living with a chap? Now that's just not acceptable.

But they'll get married. She told Mam this and Mam had pursed her lips and never in her life had anyone disappointed her so much as her own eldest daughter and Cissie thought, well what about your drunken, gambling, work-shy, bully of a husband. The man who gave them hope one minute and then set all their dreams alight the next and just let them burn, burn, burn until they'd all burnt out and turned to ashes. She thought it, but never said it. And she thought of Billy. Wondered what he'd say.

And then she flitted. She waited until everyone was out, packed up her dad's old bag, wrote a note, left it on the mantelpiece. Sorry. But please wish me well.

And now, she's in her own house, with her own chap, up in the city. She'd got herself a job at first. An errand girl at the Lace Market. She thought she was a bit too old to be doing that, but she'd set off early every day with a freshly pressed pinafore over her dress and head up into the city, to the Lace Market itself, with its grand facades in terracotta brick and sweeping steps leading up to grand entrances. But no grand entrances for her. She'd disappear down into the gloom of a narrow jitty and in through a small door at the back where she'd line up with the other errand boys and girls, many of them years younger than her, and sign herself in in a leather-bound book and then go and wait outside an office door with a shiny brass door handle. She'd wait. And wait. Wait to be sent off to do all sorts of chores,

fetching and carrying mainly, pushing a big wicker basket on wheels, taking boxes and bobbins and samples of lace all packed up in brown paper between offices and sometimes to different firms of lace makers in the area. At dinnertime she'd be handed a list from the girls in the lace dressing room and she'd head off to Denholm's the Bakers for slices of jam roll and custard or fish-paste sandwiches. It was hard work, never time to sit and catch your breath, but she grew to love the busyness of it, the chatter of the folk she passed on her journeys through the Lace Market, the cheeky whistles from the porters and the banter with the women over their jam roll and custard. She didn't even mind emptying the slop bucket left over after all the lace girls had had their tea.

She'd only been there for a few weeks though, when Tommy told her he didn't want her going out to work no more. He'd provide. Tommy would give her everything she needed. And he did, for the first few weeks. Not regular amounts. But dribs and drabs. Sometimes just a few shillings, and they'd get by, and then he'd disappear, just for a night or two, working shifts at some military establishment he'd say, all hush hush, and then there'd be a big pay day and he'd give her a great big bundle of money, money for the house and money for herself and money for Bell. And she'd take Bell out and treat her. Cissie was reluctant to spend money on herself, though, what with there being a war on, and so she began to save again, in that tin that she kept for a rainy day, the empty tin she'd taken from her mam's kitchen without telling her on the day that she flitted from Longwash.



Cissie has just woken up and is easing herself out of bed when it hits her full in the guts, and she struggles out from under the bedsheets, finding herself on the floor, on all fours, heaving and retching and throwing up last night's dinner all over the bare wooden boards.

Cleaning it up is the worst part. She's on her hands and knees again, scrubbing at it, her loose cotton nightdress flapping around her thighs. The vomit has seeped into the cracks between the boards. It gives off a bitter odour, mixes with the sweeter smell of her own sweat. A wave of nausea sweeps over her again.

Later, she sits at the kitchen table, her head resting on her folded arms and there's a gentle tap on her shoulder.

'You all right?' It's Bell.

'I'm fine, duck.' Cissie's voice is muffled as she cradles her head. 'Just a bit of an upset belly, that's all.'

'Cup of tea will sort you out,' says Bell and Cissie feels her eyelids droop and hears Bell's feet pad across the kitchen floor, the clang of the kettle against the metal tap and the rush of water as she fills it.

'That will be lovely, duck,' says Cissie, head still down, eyes still closed. She hears a gentle thud, inches from her face, sees the milk bottle through half-opened eyes and that's when a wave of nausea hits her again, for the third time that morning.



The summer is nearly over. Cissie's missed her monthlies twice now. Her breasts are sore and she can't bear Tommy touching them. But Tommy is rarely at home these

days anyway. He headed off again last night on another one of his supposed war work jaunts. Cissie feels sick inside wondering where he is, what he's up to, but she's shoved that feeling of dread down inside her as far she can. He's doing his bit, she thinks. The money still comes and goes in fits and starts. And these are uncertain times for everyone.

She spends more and more time with Bell. Bell who says so very little. At first the silences made Cissie feel awkward and so she'd natter on, nonsense mostly, just to fill the gaps, but over time, she's learnt to accept that the silences don't have to be filled. Bell is a closed book. Cissie has been looking for signs, for something to tell her for sure that this pale, lanky young girl is the child of Billy Higgins of Longwash. She thinks of her Billy's wild red hair that would stick up all over the place, however much it was greased or combed; his long fingers that Nellie Higgins always said should have belonged to a pianist; the temper that was soft as putty one minute, then snapped in two and crackled with fury the next. Bell seems to spend her days dreaming. Tommy says that she's away with the fairies. And she isn't the brightest spark at school, but she's a real talent with a needle and a piece of cloth. And she's got a lovely little singing voice. She's been passed from pillar to post for most of her short life, a Foster one minute, a Bolt the next, one supposed mam one day and a different one the next. But she seems happy enough, in her own little world.

So Cissie thinks it best just to let her be.

Cissie wants to take Bell to the seaside. Before the summer comes to a proper end. She knows it's a frivolous thing to want to do. An extravagance when there's all those boys away fighting and all those at home going short and struggling to make

ends meet. But she still wants to take Bell to the seaside. She's heard about the beaches along the east coast being fenced off with wire because of the war. That people've not the heart for seaside novelties and fun these days. But nevertheless, she wants to take Bell to the sea because Bell says she's never been and Cissie wants her to see how marvellous it is. She wants her to dig in the sand, to walk along the pier and look down through the cracks in the walkway and squeal at the water foaming below. She wants her to look out over the sea, to the very edges of it, beyond the horizon and they can talk about going all the way there, to whatever there is. Just like she did with Billy that time.

She's been putting a bit by. Saving up a few coppers in her rainy day tin. And the sun is shining today and she decides that a sunny day is better than a rainy day for a trip to the seaside.

'Tomorrow,' she says to Bell. 'Tomorrow we're going to go to the seaside. You and me. On the train. We'll take a blanket for the beach and to dry our feet if we have a paddle. We'll get fish and chips and ice creams.'

And that afternoon Cissie, goes to get her tin from the spot where she keeps it, on the very highest shelf in the kitchen, but something isn't right here, the tin doesn't rattle. There's no weight to it. She opens it and it's empty. And she throws the tin lid on the floor and she shouts, Tommy Bolt, you bastard. You thief. And she throws the rest of the tin on the floor and it clatters and she kicks at it and it hits against the stove and she'd probably dented it but she really doesn't care. She's so angry. And then the tears come and she's gasping for breath between the sobs.

Cissie cries for over an hour. Then cleans up her face and is ready to serve up fried eggs and chips when Bell gets home from school. Cissie knows that Bell can see that she's been crying.

'I'm sorry, duck, but we can't go to the seaside tomorrow,' she tells Bell. And Cissie thinks about the tales she's been making up all afternoon, as she'd sat sobbing at the kitchen table, tales about why they can't go to the seaside. There's the tale about how they need the money for Tommy to send to his mother because she is unwell. Or the tale about Cissie losing the money on her way to the station to book their tickets, the same tale that turned into the one about how someone had stolen the money from her handbag as she was queuing up at the ticket office. She could just say that they'd been told not to go, what with the war on and all the seaside towns being closed down. But Cissie chooses to say nothing. She tells no tales. She just says sorry, duck, and that is that and Bell eats her egg and her chips and says nothing either, but her face clearly shows her disappointment and as she leaves the table, Cissie says, 'We will go, duck, I promise you, we will go to the seaside, just not tomorrow.'

And Bell nods and goes up the stairs to her bedroom.

And Cissie curses herself for making a promise because promises are never kept.



Winnie is fluttering with nerves. Zillah Goddard had been quite firm with her when the subject had first reared its head, but Winnie had said no, that she and George

would be living in the house on Embankment Street once they were married. It was perfectly serviceable for the both of them. And Zillah had looked most put out and pointed out that it was the custom that Winnie should move in with her husband and his family. And Winnie had told a white lie and said that George was quite happy to move in to Embankment Street, they'd discussed it already, and of course, Winnie had added, as an afterthought, there was room for Zillah too.

Zillah Goddard is coming for tea. Winnie has scrubbed the house from top to bottom. She's tried her best to brighten up the front parlour: she's bleached and blued the lace curtains and beaten the dust out from the heavy drapes and drawn them back as far as they'll go to let in as much daylight as possible. The walls need re-papering. Rose patterns that were once rich reds, oranges and pinks have dulled and mottled to shades of brown. The kitchen needs a fresh coat of paint too. And the scullery and the outside toilet all need a whitewash. Her father had always kept on top of these things; she's a vivid memory of him in overalls, a bucket of whitewash and a thick brush, specks of white in his hair and moustache, a strong chemical smell in the privy for days. But George has said that one of the first things he'll do when he gets home from the war will be to freshen up the place. We'll make it feel lived in again, he'd said.

It's Saturday afternoon and Zillah is due to arrive for tea at three. Winnie clocks off from the mending shed at one and heads home for a quick change of clothes before heading to the Market Place. She buys milk and a small fruit cake as she's not the time to make a cake herself, and a tin of salmon from the grocers. And then she heads for Fisher and Radford's Bazaar. She stands in front of one of the large windows taking in the display of fancy goods. There's some tat in that window,

thinks Winnie to herself, regarding with disdain the cheap looking ceramic flower girls with blurred facial features, wide brimmed hats and gaudy blooms in baskets. But she's quite taken by a glass vase in exquisite reds and purples that catches the light and sparkles like rubies and amethysts. A silver-plated tea service glints proudly at the front of the window, the whole thing, teapot, cream jug, sugar bowl, tongs and silver spoons all laid out carefully and symmetrically. An array of lace tablecloths make a backdrop for the window and Winnie admires the workmanship that's gone into them, leans in and squints as she takes in the patterns. They would most certainly have been made not far from here and she wonders if she herself may have had a part in creating such beautiful things.

She's just finishing cutting the last of the crusts off the sandwiches when there's a knock at the front door. Zillah. She puts the crusts in a bowl and hides the bowl away under a tea towel. She never wastes good food. She looks at her offerings laid out on the table in the front parlour as she passes to answer the door. A plate of salmon sandwiches cut into little triangles and the small fruit cake sliced into dainty fingers. The tea things are laid out on a silver-plated tray. She's using the best china that her mother and father had as a wedding present. She's laid the cream jug and sugar bowl out carefully and arranged the teaspoons in straight lines, trying to emulate Fisher and Radford's shop window display. She's got no sugar tongs, but then they've never had a sugar cube in the house. An unnecessary extravagance. She wishes now that she'd bought a cucumber to slice thinly and add in to the salmon sandwiches. But never mind. Two white napkins trimmed with lace and folded neatly. A crisp white tablecloth.

Zillah is wearing a big grey coat with a fur collar, quite heavy for a late August day. Winnie takes her coat and goes to hang it on the back of the door where Arthur Foster's coat once hung. Zillah takes a seat at the table in the front parlour and Winnie goes to make the tea. From the kitchen, she hears Zillah moving around and when she goes back in with the teapot, she's walking from one piece of furniture to the next, taking in the ornaments, lifting photographs and looking at them. The room is dark and its drabness makes it look neglected, despite the hours spent dusting it only the day before.

'Can I pour you some tea?' asks Winnie.

'Thank you,' says Zillah. And as Winnie is pouring the tea into her best china cups, Zillah goes on, 'Well, let's not mess about. We'll dispense with the niceties, if that's all right with you, duck. We both know why I'm here and it's not to talk about the weather and the state of the war. Do you see?'

Taken aback, Winnie places the teapot back onto the tray, a little too hastily, and hot liquid sloshes from its spout, splashes onto the white tablecloth. Winnie quickly throws a napkin over the stain and passes a cup and saucer over to Zillah, takes one for herself and goes to sit down. Unsure what to say, she waits for Zillah to talk. And she does.

'You're marrying my son and you don't think my house fit enough for you to begin your married life in and so you want to bring him here instead.' Zillah tuts and she looks around the room and up at the ceiling. Winnie follows her with her eyes and as she looks up she sees dirty stains on the ceiling that have been there for years and to her horror there are cobwebs hanging from the cornice in the corner over by the window. How could she have missed those?

‘You’re probably aware, duck, that this part of town isn’t quite as, how shall I say it, as nice as the part that George and myself live in. Do you see?’

Winnie fights her embarrassment and responds, in a nervous warble, ‘This really isn’t such a bad part of town, Mrs Goddard. My neighbours are very decent folk.’ And then, Winnie can’t help herself as she plants a ‘Do you see?’ at the end of her sentence.

‘I’m sure they are,’ says Zillah, not seeming to notice Winnie mocking her. ‘But, without meaning to sound rude, duck, this place has seen better days,’ and Zillah turns her head and casts her eyes up at the walls and the ceiling. She’s clearly noticed the cobwebs.

Winnie bristles. ‘It’s been quite difficult on my own,’ she says firmly. ‘And before, looking after my mother after my father died.’ Winnie pauses and her voice cracks. ‘It was a very different place when he was alive. It was always as shiny as a pin. Full of life.’

‘I’m sure it was, duck.’

Winnie feels on the verge of tears. She gets up, puts her cup on the table, takes the plate of sandwiches and offers it to Zillah.

‘And I’m sure it can be again,’ Winnie continues. ‘George has said that he’ll be decorating as soon as he’s back.’

‘I suppose so,’ says Zillah. She bites into a sandwich and chews. ‘So, which room will I be having then,’ she says, crumbs spraying from her mouth. ‘If I’m to move in here, that is.’ And Winnie feels the tension lift as Zillah says, ‘This is a very good piece of salmon this is, duck. I do like a bit of salmon.’

‘I can show you around the rest of the house later if you like,’ says Winnie.

And later, when the sandwiches and the fruit cake are eaten and Zillah has dismissed the idea of sleeping in the front parlour – she doesn't want to be sleeping at the same level as people passing in the street – and insists on inspecting the rooms upstairs, Winnie leads her up the stairs. They stand at the window of the front bedroom. It's started raining. The window covering is pulled back and the glass freshly cleaned and still smelling of vinegar. They look out at the view through the drizzle; identical houses looking straight back at them. Row after row. Over the top, the roof of the factories and above it all, the great towering chimney of Henson's.

‘Just like the view from my window really,’ says Zillah. ‘I suppose you can see the factory chimneys in this town, whatever part you live in.’



1918, Autumn

Cissie feels her hand tremble as she puts a plate of pie and potatoes in front of Tommy. Bell sets down a jug of watery gravy next to it.

Tommy pushes a finger into the crust of the pie. 'Bit bleddy dry, i'n't it?'

Bell stirs the thin gravy.

Cissie says, 'Have you had a drink, Tommy?'

Tommy says, 'So what if I have?'

Cissie tuts. She can't help herself.

Bell's shoulders stiffen.

After a pause Tommy puts down his knife and fork and leans back in his chair. He looks around the walls of the room and says, 'This place is still a shit'ole then.'

Cissie looks flustered and she thinks, I've worked my fingers to the bone to clean it up for you, Tommy Bolt and she says, 'I'll give it a good going over tomorrow.'

'Shit'ole,' says Tommy again, shovelling potato into his mouth.

Cissie says, 'If I went out to work we could get more money. Move somewhere better. Bell could get work now, too.'

'Can't you go to your mam for money?' Tommy's picking at the pie crust with his fork. There are flecks of mashed potato on his lips.

Bell is stirring the gravy, clanging the spoon against the jug noisily.

'Bell,' says Cissie curtly.

Bell still stirs the gravy.

Tommy slams his bottle of ale down. 'Stop stirring that bleddy gravy, kid.'

Bell jumps and drops the spoon and it rattles onto the floor in a brown puddle.

Tommy looks up and stares at Cissie with glazed eyes. 'I've been thinking about you all day,' he slurs. He takes her hands in his and kisses them. And then he asks, 'Where's your ring?'

Last time Tommy was home he'd gone down on one knee and slid a ring onto Cissie's finger and he'd said that Cissie was his now and his eyes had twinkled.

Cissie says quickly, 'I took it off when I was washing up.'

'You promised me you'd never tek it off,' says Tommy.

But Cissie only wore the ring when Tommy was about because it turned her skin green.

Tommy sits quietly resting his chin on his fists.

Cissie turns to Bell. 'Can you go upstairs for a bit, duck.'

Tommy takes a cigarette from a packet on the table and slips it between his lips and throws a matchbox at Bell, hitting her on the side of the head.

'Light me up, duck,' he says.

Bell blinks and rubs her cheek where the matchbox has struck it. She lights a match and holds it up to Tommy's cigarette. As the match burns down its stem, Tommy stares at her, without moving, the flame burning closer to Bell's fingers and then, 'boom!' he shouts, spitting the cigarette out from his mouth, blowing out the match and roaring with laughter. And Bell runs away up the stairs.

Cissie's telling Tommy not to be so cruel, but Tommy is still laughing, a cracked broken glass laugh.

And then he says, 'I've been thinking about your lovely milky body all day, duck.'

And Cissie says, 'No, Tommy.' And she thinks of Billy, his wild hair and his kind smile and his gentle hands. And what he'd do to Tommy if he were here right now. And that's when Cissie tells him. 'There's going to be another child.'

And then something, a plate or a jug, clatters onto the floor. Metal, a knife or a spoon, hits the floorboards and jangles out of tune.



Winnie knows that Nellie Higgins is worried about her Cissie. She'd been tight-lipped at first. Everyone knew that Cissie had gone. Some had said that Nellie had finally come to her senses and chucked her out. Some said that she'd run off with a married chap. Nellie Higgins wasn't herself, whatever anyone was saying. She'd been standing at the front of the queue at the greengrocers and the shopkeeper had only asked after her girls – you didn't ask after the boys, just in case, what with the war being on – and poor Nellie had bolted, dropping a cabbage as she fled. It rolled across the terracotta floor and stopped at the feet of Winnie who picked it up and paid for it when it was her turn.

Winnie knocks at Nellie's door and one of the girls answers it. Winnie was never sure which one was which, they looked so alike, both thin scraps of lasses with dark auburn hair that blew loose in curls around their faces. Winnie steps into a gloomy back kitchen and Nellie comes out from the scullery, wiping her red hands on a rag and Winnie gives Nellie her cabbage and Nellie thanks her and goes to get

her purse and asks Winnie to stay for a cup of tea. Winnie takes the coins from Nellie's bony fingers, for fear of offending if she doesn't. She says to Nellie, my father had always wanted to grow vegetables and he always said he'd start off with cabbages. But Nellie seems miles away and busies herself making the tea.

'I can't imagine she's missed at the mending shed, is she?' Nellie's voice cuts into the silence. She means Cissie of course and Winnie says nothing, takes her tea from Nellie, her cup rattling on its mismatched saucer.

'You're a good girl,' Nellie says and she sits in a chair, her head bowed as if she's the weight of everything on her shoulders. She looks up at Winnie, her eyes brimming with tears. 'Why did she turn out like she did?' She pleads as if Winnie has the answer.

Winnie notices for the first time how Nellie Higgins's hair has become one great shock of white. She says, 'There's those that disappoint in all families, Nellie. Look at our Ada.'

And Nellie looks at her feet and slowly nods her head. She's heard what they're saying about her daughter, that Cissie Higgins has run off with a married chap and they're living over the brush, as brazen as you like. And Nellie has heard this and she's tried to hide in the shadows and she's shivered with the cold that runs down her spine when she hears who they're talking about.

Nellie has tears trickling down her grey cheeks.

'Don't cry, Mrs Higgins,' says Winnie with a lump in her throat. 'I'm sure Cissie will come back when she's ready to. You've not lost her forever. I'm sure of that. She's a Longwash girl, through and through.'

'But the shame of it,' says Nellie.

Winnie has run out of words and as she puts her teacup down on the table, her chair hits against the table leg causing the cup to fall sideways into the saucer and spilling hot liquid across the newspaper laid out as a table covering. She jumps to her feet. 'I'm so sorry, Mrs Higgins,' and she looks around for a cloth to clean up the mess.

'Sit down, duck,' says Nellie, 'Let me do that.'

Winnie looks down at her hands and wishes she'd not mentioned Ada, not brought her into the room, because now she's thinking of Bell and that familiar ache begins to rise inside her, hollowing her out.



The back gate has been left open. It bangs in the wind until Cissie gets up out of bed and goes downstairs to shut it. She notices the door to Bell's bedroom is open as she comes back up the stairs. Bell's form, shrouded in a blanket, is curled up on one side, her dirty little feet sticking out of the end of the bed. The flimsy window covering can't hold back the moonlight that drenches the room. Cissie goes in and tucks the blanket over Bell's feet and kisses her on the head. 'Sweet dreams, duck,' she whispers and shuts the door behind her.

Cissie doesn't mean to kick Tommy as she climbs back into their bed, it's an accident, but it wakes him with a start and he sits upright and calls her a stupid bitch for waking him up when he's got an early start in the morning. He grunts and turns over and pulls the blanket with him, leaving Cissie barely covered up and shivering.

The banging gate wakes her again a few hours later. It's morning now. She can hear people moving about in the street outside. Wheels and clip-clopping hooves on cobbles. Tommy lies sleeping next to her, his face turned towards her. His heavy-lidded eyes closed. His breath smells sour. His cheeks are black with stubble.

A gust catches the back gate and it bangs again. Blast it, Cissie mutters under her breath as she climbs out of bed and pulls her shawl around her shoulders and heads down the stairs. She pads out into the back yard. There's a fresh nip in the morning air. Dry. Windy. Brittle leaves, blown into the yard from a nearby tree, gather in piles. She latches the gate shut. Goes back inside to make up the fire. Puts the kettle on. Slices some bread for toast. Lays out butter and jam on the table. Dregs of milk in a stained bottle. Three teacups. Three plates and a knife. A box of cigarettes and a box of matches at the side of one plate for Tommy. A clean, pressed handkerchief by another for Bell. And then she runs to the privy out in the yard and is sick.

Twenty minutes later and no one has stirred

'Come on and get your breakfast,' she bellows up the stairs. Nothing. She gallops up the stairs now, feeling a sense of rising panic. Bell is due at school in fifteen minutes. And she's no idea when Tommy is due to leave, but she worries he'll be late and take his temper out on her. When she looks in on him, he's still snoring. She shakes him awake and he opens his eyes and lets out a deep sigh.

In Bell's room, the bedclothes have been pulled back. The bed is empty. Bell's little satchel, the one that usually sits on the floor by her boots, has gone. So have the clothes that Cissie had laid out for her the night before.

Feeling uneasy, Cissie takes one of Tommy's cigarettes and lights it and sits on the back doorstep and puffs on it. She remembers her mam doing this. On those dark days when John Higgins didn't come home. Sitting on the back doorstep. Smoking. Trying to work it all out.

Tommy leaves half an hour later. Cissie can see he's on the edge of a rage and she keeps out of sight in the scullery until she hears the front door shut firmly behind him. She doesn't ask where he's going. Or when he'll be back. She couldn't care less. If anything, she's glad that he's out of the house. She's fretting about Bell.

She washes herself in cold water. Under the arms, the neck and the face. Dabs some toilet water on her wrists and behind her ears. A smudge of lipstick across her mouth. Pulls on her smartest skirt and smartest blouse. Pins a cameo brooch at her neck. Fixes her hair into place and positions a hat on the top. Grabs her small crocodile handbag, climbs into her coat and heads for the school.

The playground is empty. Classes have started. A multitude of young voices reciting the Lord's Prayer. The booming echo of a master's voice. She enters by a side door and in a high-ceilinged corridor, she finds herself face-to-face with a stout woman in spectacles wearing an old-fashioned dress. The woman takes her to an office and asks her to wait. Cissie is told by the headmaster that Bell Bolt isn't at school today. She had been absent at registration. Cissie says that she has come in person to report that Bell Bolt has a fever today and will be kept at home.

Cissie pounds up and down Dark Street and all the other roads that lead to it and off it, looking. She returns to the school twice and hangs around in the shadows outside, peering through the railings hoping to catch sight of Bell. But she doesn't. She goes home and stands in the front room, the curtains pulled wide, looking up and

down the street frantically. She stands there for hours. But Bell doesn't come home at the end of the school day. As the light of the day fades, she takes to an armchair by the fire. She wraps herself in a blanket as the fire burns out; she has no more coal to build it up again. There's no sign of Tommy either. But Cissie doesn't care right now. It's better he isn't here, she thinks. In fact, Tommy Bolt can go and crawl right back under the stone that he came out from in the first place. That's what Cissie thinks as she sits wrapped in a blanket in a cold house all alone. And she thinks about Tommy Bolt and how little she knows of him. She's asked him before and he's told her stories, usually buoyed up on ale, stories of growing up as one of so many littl'uns, all buttoned-up in boiled clothes, five warm bodies in one bed. They were all miners, Tommy has said, brothers and uncles, spent their lives blinking in the daylight one day and were buried alive the next. Tommy has told stories of guilt numbed by flat ale, of fist fights on Friday nights, sounds of sex through paper-thin walls, babies born dead in cold empty rooms. That's where Tommy Bolt says he comes from and, at first, it broke Cissie's heart to hear those things. But Cissie wonders at the truth of it, wonders if all the time he's sat like a spider spinning dark fairy tales and she has just got caught up in them. And right now, she'd like nothing better than for him to go right back to those dark places. And never come back here. And just as she thinks this, she feels a strange sensation as the life inside her kicks and she realises that she isn't alone.

She heads out again later that evening. The door to the grocers on the corner is still open; the man inside, wearing a mustard overall, is weighing out flour into bags and a woman is sweeping the floor. Cissie asks if they've seen a girl – she wants to say a little girl, but Bell is thirteen years old now and at thirteen years old

Cissie had been bringing up her own family in the stead of her mother for some years.

Anyway, they've not seen hide nor hair.

And so home past the pub, The Feathers; she waits until a man goes in and then she follows him and peers around the door. She half expects to see Tommy hunched over the bar, laughing loudly, a laugh he has that contorts his face into something ugly. She remembers Bell cowering at his side like a whipped dog that time. But there's no sign of Tommy. No sign of Bell. Another man leaves the pub and Cissie recognises him from somewhere – she can't quite think where – and she shouts after him as he turns away from her to head for home.

'I'm looking for a girl, a little girl, well she's thirteen.'

The man is in his fifties, dressed quite smartly in a suit and a waistcoat, dressed for work, she thinks. He's sucking on a pipe.

'Have you lost her then, duck?'

'Well,' Cissie falters. 'I think she might've run away.' She tails off.

'I can't say I have, duck.'

Cissie describes a pale, thin girl, a girl with long dark hair tied into plaits, large dark eyes. Quite tall for her age. She was wearing a grey skirt and a white blouse and Cissie doesn't know if she was wearing a coat. She hasn't checked to see if she was wearing her coat.

'I'm sorry, duck. I'm sure she'll come home.'

The man turns and walks away into the darkness of the blackout and Cissie feels her face crumple.

She's already knocked at all the neighbours' doors, but she knocks again. She feels herself becoming frantic and angry, angry that Tommy is God knows where doing God knows what while she's out here hunting for Bell. Where on earth is Bell? Cissie heads back to the house on Dark Street. She hears a single chime from St Mary's. It's black as pitch and she finds herself in unfamiliar streets and jitties, retracing her footsteps on a couple of occasions, keeping the street names in her head. It begins to rain and the newspaper plugging up the holes in the bottom of her shoes is soon sodden through.

When she wakes the next morning, she's sitting in an armchair still wearing her coat. The cold reaches out and touches her. Winter is on its way. But there's still no coal left in the bucket.

Tommy will be in bed for sure, she thinks, and her heart flutters for a second, but then she looks across to the back of the door where he usually hangs his overcoat and there's no overcoat there, and so she pads up the stairs, her shoes still wet through to her stockings. He'd have slept in his coat no doubt. Too drunk and too cold to take it off. But their bed is empty. And Bell's bed is still empty.



Cissie is taking the tram back to Longwash. There's always a chance that Bell's there. There's not been a sniff of a sighting of Bell or Tommy. She's beginning to make up stories in her mind about what has happened to them both. And they're not nice stories. Part of her hopes they're together, but part of her doesn't. Bell has been gone for a whole day and a whole night and it's just not right.

As she'd scuttled down the street to the off-sales last night to buy herself a bottle or two of stout to help her sleep, she'd looked up at the moon. A crack of light in the sky as the clouds gathered overhead. And she'd whispered up to the moon, eh you up there, you can see everything up there, the whole world, so you must be able to see my Bell. And she remembered how the moon's brilliant light had flooded Bell's bedroom floor that night she vanished. And Cissie whispered, where is she? Tell me? And she felt so close to Bell and yet Bell was such a quiet girl; she smiled and she giggled, but she spoke so rarely. And Cissie wanted to hear her voice, but for the life of her, she just couldn't summon the sound of it.

The tram trundles into Longwash, along the straight sides of the canal and into the Market Place where life seems to be carrying on as it always has. And Cissie feels like a prodigal returning after a great journey away, but she knows that she's only been away for a couple of months and she'll not have been missed by many folk.

She can't go home. Her belly is beginning to swell, but she manages to keep it hidden well enough beneath her skirts. She can't face Nellie Higgins though. She knows that her mam will see straightaway that there is something amiss with her eldest daughter. And she can't face that. And anyway, why would Bell be there? And that's why she's here. To find Bell. She's been working her way through every place she can think of that Bell might go to, every place she's ever been to.

Cissie feels lightheaded as she crosses the canal bridge and heads towards Winnie Foster's house. She's not eaten all day. A cup of tea for breakfast. She'd managed to keep that down even though the milk was nearly off. The sickness seems to have gone now. When Cissie thinks about the child that she's carrying, it seems

simple. Tommy is the father and he will come home eventually and everything will be all right and he will provide. He'll take to the baby for sure, once it's born, Cissie is convinced.

The buildings here seem smaller than she remembers them being and perhaps that's because the buildings in the city seem bigger and the streets seem to stretch on for miles. She remembers that short spell that she spent working in the Lace Market and its grand streets and facades that reached up and up and blocked out the skies. You'd have thought that they were palaces fit for kings and queens, not warehouses and offices filled with lace girls. It's early Saturday afternoon and people have finished their work and are drinking in the pubs or busying in their houses. Before she knows it, Cissie finds herself standing at the door of number seven Embankment Street.

She knocks quietly. She doesn't want to draw attention to herself. She pulls her shawl around her shoulders as if it will make her invisible.



When Winnie opens the door the last person she expects to see standing there is Cissie Higgins. Cissie Higgins with her piggy eyes. Her spiteful face. Her twisted mouth that spouts such nastiness.

And when Cissie asks, 'Is Bell here? Is she with you?' Winnie thinks that even she couldn't stoop that low, be that cruel. With Ada only dead a few months, and she would have known, word would have spread, that Bell had been with Ada

but that she'd gone off somewhere, probably with Ada's chap. Whoever he was. He was as near to a father as Bell had at that time.

'Why have you come stirring up trouble on my doorstep, Cissie?' Winnie asks and crosses her arms defensively. As much as she doesn't want this woman inside her house, she's no stomach to have this out on the pavement where all the neighbours can see.

But there's something about Cissie. There's worry etched into her face. Genuine worry. She seems breathless. As if she's in a hurry. Or scared of something.

'If this is some kind of joke,' says Winnie. 'It's cruel. Cruel and nasty.' Winnie's fired up now, her voice is louder and she's ready to vent her fury, but Cissie's face, usually so strong and hard, it crumples, her head drops and she's staring at the ground and Winnie can see drops falling from her eyes. She's crying.

'You'd better come inside,' says Winnie, her voice softening, and she stands aside and lets Cissie into the front room.

Zillah Goddard has not long left visiting and there's still a strong smell of her musky perfume inside the small house. But Zillah's visit means that the place is spotless, with clean cloths laid over the tables and shining window glass.

'Sit down,' says Winnie, pointing to an armchair by the well stoked fire that's crackling away. They'll sit in the front parlour. She'll treat Cissie as a guest. Keep it formal. 'Would you like a cup of tea?'

'Thank you,' says Cissie weakly, rummaging in her handbag for a handkerchief.

There's a stiff silence between them, just an occasional sniff from Cissie, who sits very upright in the armchair. Winnie sits at the table, laid with tea things, the rattling of crockery and teaspoons, like delicate musical notes.

Cissie breaks the silence. 'Bell was living with me and my Tommy.'

Winnie stops dead. Puts the teapot back down. 'What?'

And Cissie carries on, 'Cause my Tommy, well he was with someone when I met him and, well that other woman, that was Ada. Your Ada.'

Winnie furrows her brow taking in this news.

'So, he took on your Bell when he was with Ada. And then when Ada –.'

Cissie sounds breathless again. 'When she got killed, well he came to me and Bell came with him.'

So that married chap that she bragged about at the mending shed, thought Winnie, all this time. He'd been Ada's chap. Bell's father, as good as and Winnie feels her heart breaking as she thinks of Bell being passed from pillar to post.

'Ada was always supposed to bring her back,' says Winnie and she can't help herself, she begins to cry and her blood prickles with guilt.

'Look,' says Cissie, 'I feel as bad as you do, as responsible as you do and I want to find Bell as much as you, you can be sure of that.'

And then Winnie, as much as she tries to keep calm, to think clearly, she quite simply loses her temper and she's shouting, 'And why would you care so much, eh, you, just some floozie who got 'erself involved where she shouldn't have. Why would you care about some bastard child that has nothing to do with you?' And Winnie's is red faced, her eyes staring.

And then Cissie comes out with it. 'You know that Bell was Billy's, don't you? Our Billy's. So that means she's as much my niece as she is your niece.'

And Winnie feels her blood slowing in her veins and it begins to run cold, turn to ice.

And Cissie sounds exasperated as she says, 'Bell was Ada and Billy's little girl. You do know that? Please tell me after all these years that you've worked that out.'



Before she leaves Embankment Street Cissie tells Winnie more about the circumstances surrounding Bell's disappearance. She tells her calmly that she thinks she may well be with Tommy. That Tommy, for all his faults, has been as much of a father figure to Bell as anyone else has. Cissie says that Bell could well be hiding away somewhere trying to give her a fright, and she laughs nervously as she adds that it's working and no mistake.

Winnie promises to search for Bell. To scour Longwash. To try the shops and the river and the school and the church and the railway station and the fields and farms scattered around the tattered edges of the town; the factories and the workshops and the park and the library and the cemetery where Arthur and Gertrude Foster are buried together and where there are plenty of trees to climb. And Cissie promises to let Winnie know as soon as she's any word of Bell. Winnie wants to go to the police and report it, but Cissie says they should give it time. And then, close to tears, Winnie says, why didn't you bring her back to us, if you knew she was our

Ada's girl, and Cissie says that Bell has been with Tommy for so long, as good as looks on him as a father, that she doesn't think it her place. And she is our Billy's girl too, Cissie adds and Winnie nods, yes, and that she's still not taken it all in and that there is such a lot to think about and Cissie says that there is indeed, but the main thing is they both love Bell and want her safe. Winnie tells Cissie to take care as she leaves and Cissie asks Winnie not to mention to Nellie Higgins that she's been back to Longwash. That she'll only get upset and she doesn't want that. And just before Cissie steps away up Embankment Street and back to the city, Winnie holds out her hand and Cissie takes it and shakes it stiffly.



When the Armistice is declared, Winnie sobs her heart out. To all intents and purposes, the war is over. The fighting will stop. George will come home. But they're saying in the shops, as they queue for their rations, that the soldiers won't be home straightaway. Not all of them. Winnie waits patiently to hear from George. She writes to him every single week without fail. Sometimes twice.



Cissie has gone back to being an errand girl in the Lace Market. She knew they'd have her back. The general overseer, Mrs Grimes, had taken a bit of a shine to her.

But she's beginning to show now. The tiredness is overwhelming some days after she's been on her feet for hours. It's one of the warehouse girls who notices

first. She makes some cheap remark about Cissie eating too much jam roll and Cissie bursts into a furious rage. She almost strikes out at her with her fists. The girl backs off and falls silent. Perhaps she senses that there's more to Cissie's plumpness than too much pudding. More to her tantrums and her exhaustion than just a short fuse. The next day, the girl leaves a meat pie and a bottle of stout in Cissie's wicker trolley. Cissie passes her as she heads for the gates that evening and stops and stands square with her as the girl says, 'You're in the family way, aren't you?'

Cissie gives it away with her silence.

'You're from Longwash aren't you?' the girl carries on. 'My mam knows of your mam. Speaks well of her.'

There's silence and Cissie can't look the girl in the face.

'Well you need to be tekking care of yoursen,' the girl goes on, 'And mi mam made a batch of pies.'

'Thank you,' Cissie mumbles and walks away, her eyes looking down at her dirty shoes as they scuff the dust of the factory yard.

Cissie is dismissed at the end of the week. Mrs Grimes tells her that they have to let her go and Cissie looks her in the face defiantly as she eyes her up and down. There's not enough work coming in just at the moment, she says. What with the war over now and everything. We can't keep you on, duck. But Cissie knows that there's more to it. Her secret is out. She's not the guts to pull her corset strings any tighter than she can right now and she's waddling with the child she's carrying inside her. She can't pass it off as just being fat. Not anymore when it's so obvious. And Tommy, despite everything he said, he'd never marry her. Never make it look right and proper. So, it was always going to be wrong to some people. And Mrs

Grimes is the kind of person who won't put up with that kind of wrong amongst her staff.

On that last day, Cissie makes sure she gets her pay packet before she wheels the wicker trolley to the gates of the factory and parks it up for the last time. As she picks out her shawl something cold and heavy rolls out of its folds. Another bottle of stout. There's a note with it, written in tiny neat handwriting. You should go home to your mam.

Tommy has flitted for good this time. Back at the house, Cissie packs up her things. There are a few clothes left after she's pawned the best of them. Some stockings and a winter coat. She's still only the one pair of shoes, full of holes. Bell left nothing behind. There's an ornament she'd bought up in town when she moved in with Tommy. She'd like to keep that.

There had been the thinnest strand of hope, when the Armistice came, that Tommy would come home. That he'd just turn up at the door with a smile and a pocket full of money, like he'd never been away, like he'd done time and time before, over and over, the same old pattern. But she knew deep down that this time he was gone for good. And Bell was gone too.

Cissie would never admit it, but she saw it now for what it was, in the bright daylight. Her and Tommy. She lifted it and turned it slowly in her hands, examining every angle of it. Every stitch of Tommy Bolt and Cissie Higgins. She saw the flaws with the keen eye of the mender. It was as if she'd only ever seen it before in the fading light of the day and had simply been blind to the fault-lines running through it and had instead seen something exquisite. But now, in the cold light of this new day, she saw how cheaply it had been made, Tommy Bolt and Cissie Higgins, a mass-

produced design, one that snagged easily, a pattern riven through with a fault from edge to edge, impossible to repair for even the most experienced hands.

She takes down the curtains, the bits of lace and fabric that she's used to brighten up the house. A rag-rug from the kitchen. The empty rainy day savings tin. A photograph of Billy, faded, creased and worn at the corners. She fits most of this back into the old scuffed bag that belonged to her dad. Then she sits down on a chair and opens the stout and drinks it straight from the bottle.

When Mrs Gregory calls an hour later, Cissie hands her most of her last pay packet. She's in arrears on the rent so there's just enough left over for some chips and hot peas and her train fare back to Longwash.



1918, Winter

These days, Cissie sees Billy in her younger brother Harry. Harry's safely back from war and Ted is on his way. Cissie sees Billy in Harry's lanky frame, his loose limbs, the flop of his unruly hair, that double crown that won't flatten; in his infectious laughter as he mucks about with the kids out on the street kicking a ball about; in that devilish look he gets on his face when he's had one too many at The Angel and he comes home wobbling all over the road and giggling about some mischief or other he's been up to with the lads. She sometimes sees Billy in the flash of her own blue eyes in the mirror and she hopes that the child she's carrying will be a boy.

They'll let her work up till she drops at the mending shed. Nellie got her work there when she came back to Longwash.

Tilly Thirkettle looks very pleased with herself these days. 'Think you're too good for us, Your Majesty,' she says to Cissie and fakes a curtsy.

But Cissie takes it in her stride and says, 'It's all right for you, Tilly Thirkettle, bending over and sticking that great big arse of yours up in the air with your curtseying, but you're blocking out all the daylight and I'm trying to work here.'

And Tilly Thirkettle, her hands on her hips, pouting, says 'That Cissie Higgins should have more respect for her elders.'

To which Cissie replies, 'Well I do because if you weren't such a helpless old bag, I'd come right over there and batter you one and that's for sure.'



At her stool in the mending shed, Winnie twists the thin band of silver on her finger. The fleck of diamond catches the light for a second. George is on his way home from France. He's sent money on ahead; Winnie's bought herself a new frock and got the ring altered to fit properly. He's set his sights on a new house for them. It won't be for a while yet, he says, they'll have to save up, but he'd like for them to find somewhere that they can fill up with their new life. That old place that Winnie lives in is like cracked china that had been glued back together so many times, George says. They're building new houses on the other side of town, on the outskirts, to the north, towards the city. They're all crescents and avenues and drives there, says George, houses with their own gardens, front and back.



It happens one morning when Cissie is pausing to get her breath at the mending shed door. She's just pushed a great heap of her mam's finished lace here. Despite the cold winter day she's worked up a sweat. She mops her brow with a handkerchief and then a gust of wind catches it and it's tugged from her fingers and falls into a mucky puddle at her feet.



Winnie sees the pram first. She recognises it at once. And then she sees Cissie standing by the mending shed door with the thing full of cloths of lace. Her full face and strong jaw. A shawl around her shoulders. As Winnie gets closer she can see a

twinkle in Cissie's eyes. A light, sparkling and dancing in the deep blue. Just like the sea. And her belly bulging right out. She's not the shame to try and hide it anymore. And Nellie is right. There is life left in that old pram yet.



They've barely exchanged glances let alone words these past few weeks since Cissie's been back and they've been working alongside each other in the mending shed.

After thanking Winnie for picking up her hanky, Cissie says, 'I've tried my best to find her,' and a stone of guilt settles in her stomach. Locking up that house she shared with Tommy for the last time, knowing that Bell might always come back.

And Winnie says, 'I know you did, and I did too,' and there's that hard knot inside Winnie that's never left her, that began to coil itself up when she first let Bell go off with Ada. That tied itself even tighter after that time when she went to find Bell up in the city and never found her and then went and had tea and scones. How could she have done that, she thinks to herself now.

And Cissie says, 'She was such a wisp of a thing.'

And Winnie says, 'I don't even remember her voice.'

Winnie has been to the police station a few times. Explained about Bell to the constable. That she was missing. It was the young one, the one who'd come round to tell her about Ada that time. He'd been kind, concerned, said they'd look into it, do what they could. And the young constable had been to see Cissie and she'd told him

all that she knew about Tommy and about Bell, but all that did was confirm that she never really knew either of them.

‘I bet Nellie’s pleased you’re home,’ says Winnie.

Winnie has heard Nellie going round telling folk that the father of Cissie’s child has been killed at the front, and the way that folk snigger behind their hands at her, look at Nellie with scorn, Winnie hates them for that.

‘She might be pleased I’m back,’ says Cissie, ‘But they all think I’m nothing but a whore,’ and she nods her head towards the women who are now coming in through the mending shed door thick and fast, ready for a hard day’s graft. And Winnie winces at the words that come out of Cissie’s mouth. ‘None o’them bitches’d poke me with a shitty stick.’

And Winnie thinks to herself, how did Bell come into their lives for such as short time and then leave without leaving any footprints behind. A speck of dust suspended for a few seconds in the weak daylight. Did she ever really exist? And she wants to say to Cissie, it’s as if only you and I ever knew her. But instead, she says to her, ‘Come and sit beside me then. We can sit together.’

Cissie looks like she might burst out laughing, but her face breaks into a huge smile. ‘Come on then,’ she says and takes Winnie’s arm and they head into the mending shed together, their warm voices condensing into clouds on the cold winter air.



Part Three

‘Nottingham is well known all over the world as the ‘Queen of the Midlands’ not only on account of its pleasant situation but because its lace girls ‘rule the waves’ of fashion and are looked up to by the best sons of the Empire. [...] But the brightest years for the girls and the lace trade generally were fast fading. Displays of fine lace were still seen at Ascot. But women, especially the younger generation, no longer desired yard upon yard of lace frills. They had come to accept simpler styles.’³

‘I am still master of my needle, and I shall be sad, very sad, when the time comes to lay it aside.’ (Account of a female lace mender from the early twentieth century)⁴

³ Lowe, David and Jack Richards. *The City of Lace*. Nottingham Lace Centre Limited, 1982. 51.

⁴ Ibid. 49

1976, Summer

They've hired a bus from Barton's for the day. Winnie insists on calling it a coach rather than a bus. It smells of stale cigarettes, vomit and disinfectant. The high-backed seats crack when you sit on them. Red and orange moquette faded and worn smooth by years of sweaty backs and fat arses. They've put antimacassars on the headrests.

Winnie spent some time deciding what to wear this morning and ended up in a floral frock with a tasteful print in pale blues and browns. She'd made it herself from a remnant a few years earlier and it still fits her nicely. The skirt is slightly A-lined and it falls below the knee. She's paired it with a double string of pearls that George had bought her for her fiftieth birthday. And as she'd stood in front of the full-length mirror in her bedroom this morning she'd thought, very Chanel. She's had her hair set and put her best patterned headscarf over the top of it, knotting it under the chin. Sheer nylons and cream patent sandals. And she has sunglasses too, just in case. Dark frames with a white band across the brows. She feels a little dressed-up, but why not. Some of the women will be wearing slacks she thinks. Very casual. Winnie only has the one pair; George had talked her into buying them years ago. She's only worn them the once.

She carries a cream handbag in one hand, a canvas shopping bag in the other. Inside the shopping bag is a hand-towel, just in case she takes a paddle in the sea. She'll have to slip her nylons off if she does go in for a dip. A bit daring and not very likely, she thinks, but then.

George had taken her to Bournemouth once and they'd been to Morecambe Bay and Cleveleys and Llandudno several times. And back in '71 they had booked to go on a coach trip to Holland, travelling over on the ferry to see all the tulips. There'd been weeks of excitement and a few nerves. Winnie had to get herself a passport. She'd never been abroad. But then a few days before they were due to leave, George had taken a bad turn and they'd had to cancel. She'd been so disappointed. Tried to hide it for his sake. He'd spent a week in the hospital. After a month or so of recuperation, George's nephew Barry and his wife Rita had driven them out to the flat fields of Lincolnshire to see all the flowers blooming and that had been a lovely day. They'd stopped off for lunch at a Berni Inn. And then on the way home George had chatted away about moving out there to a bungalow somewhere near the sea and, well, it had been a lovely dream. That bad turn was the first of many that George had over the next few years. When he died last year, it was after a long spell in the hospital. Winnie had never asked him whether he wanted to come home to die.

Winnie also has a quarter of sherbet lemons in her shopping bag for the journey. A handkerchief. A Woman's Realm. And an umbrella. And despite Cissie's assurances that there will be plenty of opportunities to stop for refreshments, she's also packed a flask of tea. It's quite a heavy bag.

Barry and Rita drop her outside Henson's lace factory that morning. They've taken a detour from their Clifton flat, en route to their weekly Saturday shopping trip in the city. It is very good of them. They've gone miles out of their way really. Barry and Rita moved out from Longwash to the new estate at Clifton about five years ago, leaving their old crumbling terraced house with its tiny back yard, for a comfortable

modern one with a large garden and a garage. Rita is chuffed to bits with it. Barry misses Longwash. It's where he was born and brought up. And he misses his allotment.

'Have you got your bikini in your bag, Aunty Winnie?' Rita teases as Winnie gets out of the car.

Barry looks embarrassed.

Winnie hisses, 'Ooh stop it now, cheeky.'

Barry revs his engine. 'Have a lovely trip, duck,' he calls through his open window and Rita waves excitedly as they drive off.

There's a small crowd of women gathering already. Winnie recognises their faces, doesn't know all their names. A short dump of a woman waves over at her. 'Hiya Winnie,' she lisps. She's got very few teeth in her mouth and has a fat neck that wobbles when she talks. Her white hair is piled high on her head. She's wearing cat's-eye spectacles.

'Eh up, Bette,' says Winnie. Bette is dressed in a gold shift with pink roses printed on it. It falls well below the knee and looks very warm for a July day like this one. She wears thick tights and court shoes and a cream jacket over the top. She's two big shopping bags with her.

'Eh up, ducks.' It's Cissie. She's wearing a summery frock that she's had for years with large flowers printed on it in navy and white. It's pulled in at the waist and she's a white cardigan on over the top. Sensible white sandals and tights. Her handbag bulges open with paper packages. 'Just a few tuffees for the journey.' She smirks as she sees Winnie staring at the bag.

‘Is it just us girls then?’ Bette is bending over one of her own bags rummaging through packets of sandwiches wrapped in paper.

‘You brought your dinner with you then, Bette, I see,’ says Cissie. ‘Me and Winnie are gonna treat ourselves to fish and chips.’

‘Ooh, pushing the boat out,’ says Bette. ‘My Charlie says that the prices in Skegness are super-over-inflated for the tourists and so I’m best bringing my own food.’

‘You don’t want to listen to your Charlie,’ says Cissie. ‘When was the last time the inside of his wallet saw the light of day?’

More women begin gathering on the pavement, their voices raising a din that bounces off the high factory walls. Winnie looks around at them. There are people here she’s known her whole life, since they were young girls with shiny faces and all the hope in the world. So many of them, like her, had started off as kiddies helping their mams and their dads with the lace work at home, and then they’d left school and followed them straight into the factory. There are dozens of skilled hands here, thinks Winnie, as could pick apart the most delicate piece of lace and put it all back together as good as new, if not better. Of course, Henson’s is a better place than it used to be. They get a little bit more holiday now and days like this one, work trips out to the seaside. And they even invite all the retired folks along, like her and Cissie and Bette. And their pay packets are probably a little fatter than they were back then. And there aren’t kids out on the streets without shoes anymore. And there are only one or two of the older folks now who still insist on using their tin baths. And outside toilets, they’re long gone. Winnie thinks about her pink bathroom suite at

home and the matching mauve carpet that she sinks into every time she walks across it.

Bert Cresswell, a twisthand in his fifties, arrives arm in arm with his wife. She does jennying at the factory. Behind him is Dickie Stallard, another twisthand, just a few years younger than Bert. His wife's here too. She works in the offices. Winnie notices a crate of beer bottles on the pavement next to Bert, waiting to be loaded onto the bus. And there are a few younger faces coming along the street towards them now. Some of the girls from packing are here, dressed in flimsy sandals, with long hair hanging loose and uncombed around their faces. One or two have very short frocks on. And you can see the straps of their bikinis poking out the top of them.

Cissie is on board the bus first and grabs the front seat behind the driver. Winnie gets on a few people behind and sits with Cissie. Bert and Dickie seat themselves right in the middle of the bus where they can make the most noise and be heard by the most people. The younger girls head for the back seat. Soon there's a fug of cigarette smoke shrouding the rear of the bus. And there's Mr Spencer, the overlooker who has organised the trip, at the front of the coach with a clipboard. He's got a bulky camera hanging around his neck. It takes a while for everyone to settle; Mr Spencer tries to call out a register and is interrupted at every other name by someone calling out something inappropriate. It's largely Bert and Dickie. They're always playing the fools in the factory. Winnie used to find them a little bit intimidating. And some of their jokes were just a little bit too blue for her.

She's getting used to being without George. He'd have laughed at their jokes, but then he'd have also turned his head away from her so she wouldn't see him blushing.



The bus motors along narrow roads that crumble at the edges into ditches, through flat open fields stretching out to the horizon. There's a smell of manure wafting through the air and some of the women are cackling and holding their noses. One of the young girls is pretending to be sick and making loud gagging noises. And then Mr Spencer stands up and bellows, 'Come along now, ladies and gents, a lot of fuss about a bit of a smell. It's the smell of the countryside,' and he inhales deeply and breathes out as if savouring something delicious.

'Ooh, 'ow vulgar,' says Winnie to Cissie.

Cissie is chuckling. 'First time I ever went to Skegness we went on the train.' She stretches her legs out and her knee knocks against Winnie's.

'Bit more leg room on the train,' says Winnie.

'It were a steam train,' says Cissie. 'I can remember the smell of it.' She lays her head back against the headrest and shuts her eyes. There's her mam clambering on board holding on to her hat and the littl'uns pushing and shoving behind her all scrabbling to get a place. Little Florrie and little Elsie. Florrie's been dead a long time now. And Elsie moved away years ago. And the boys, little Harry and Tom, both long gone now, they had caps on that day, she remembers that, like proper little boys all smartened up for a trip out. She can smell the coal burning away in the

engine at the front, a great beast with steam billowing from its nostrils. And she feels herself being swept up off her feet and lifted onto the train and she squeals and it's Billy acting daft and he plants her down inside the carriage shouting, move along please, everyone move along, make room, make room, and then he's jabbing at the back of her with that blessed cricket bat that he brought with him and she's inside the carriage now and the windows are down and there's dad still out on the platform. He seems to be standing in the shadows cast by the carriages. She can see his profile. His suit, too big for him. And then the train whistle is shrieking and the girls are squealing, but dad's still on the platform, still standing in the shadows, trying to light up a cigarette, and then Billy's back out on the platform and he's grabbing the old man by his arm and, come along father, come along, the train won't wait, not even for you.

‘George was the first to tek me to the coast,’ says Winnie and Cissie opens her eyes, but she can still smell the coal smoke in her nose. She remembers how it clung to her clothes that day, that smell, and she lifts up her arm to her face and sniffs her sleeve and Winnie turns and catches her doing this and, ‘Do you want a handkerchief, duck? You don't want to be wiping your nose on your best cardy now, do you.’

Cissie looks up.

Winnie says, ‘What was it we used to call – ’

And Cissie says, ‘I'm fine Winnie, I was just – ’

But Winnie cuts in, ‘Silver sleeves! That were it. Kiddies as wiped their noses on their sleeves. Silver sleeves. Ooh, that's not very nice is it.’ And she chuckles to herself.

In the dark spaces behind Cissie's closed eyes, Mam is wiping trickles of snot from Harry's face with the dampened corner of a hanky and Florrie is chanting silver sleeves, silver sleeves at him, and Cissie is making a grab for her little sister and sits her up on her knee. And slowly, as the train begins to move, the noise inside the carriage subsides, the shouting, the squeals, the jibes, they all stop and there's just the gentle clacking rhythm of the train and Cissie looks around at her family, at their faces, all their happy excited faces, all looking out at the fields and trees and ditches and houses flashing by as the train picks up speed. But she can't see her father's face. She looks across at her mam and Elsie and then along the row of the seats next to her at her little brothers and Billy, but right at the end, John Higgins's face is obscured. She can just make out the brim of a cap, the tip of a boot, a thin wisp of cigarette smoke.



Thirty minutes later and there are shouts that people want to stop for the toilets. They're stuck in a queue of slow-moving traffic. A tractor trundles along at the head of it. And then suddenly, the bus driver, a fat man, wearing a shirt with rolled up sleeves, swerves violently to the left and they leave the road and park up on a grass verge next to a small cafeteria.

'You can all get yer-sens a cup of tea here,' says the driver and the engine judders and falls silent and he lights up a cigarette.

Everyone stands up to get off the bus. Winnie feels her dress sticking to the back of her legs. There's a bit of a queue along the aisle and a commotion at the

front as a couple of the women are struggling to get down the bus steps and have turned around and are going backwards, as if climbing down a ladder. Mr Spencer is trying to help them. Both women look hot and flustered: one of them huffs and puffs through a sour face; the other is whooping with delight.

Winnie can't be doing with all the fuss, so she decides to stay on the bus and have a cup of tea from her flask. She's never really liked a lot of noise and bother, that's why she and George got along so well.

Winnie didn't cope very well at first when George died. The doctor gave her some tablets and they dulled the pain, made everything flat, made her sleep a lot. They made her lose track of time, get a bit jumbled.

I caught her washing up in bleach again, she'd overheard Rita saying to Barry. But Winnie knew that it had been a mistake, plain and simple. She'd got the bottles muddled up. They were the same colour, for heaven's sake. It was those tablets. They played tricks on her and so she stopped taking them.

That was the very same day that Rita had asked Winnie if she'd thought about moving to somewhere smaller now that it was just her. And Barry had said that it would be a good idea and that they could help her find something a bit more manageable. She didn't want to rattle round in that big old place all on her own now did she.

George has been dead for a year now.

Rita had gone on and on at the funeral about how they kept asking George back to that factory and he kept going back. And he was well into his seventies, as she flitted from person to person.

He liked to feel useful, said Winnie.

He was bleddy good at his job, said Barry.

There were so many people at the funeral, some that Winnie had never met before. She felt bewildered by the whole experience. She'd an ache in her stomach all day. They all went to a hotel after the service and there were sandwiches and cakes, but she couldn't eat anything. She heard a woman she didn't know say to Rita, it's all a bit confusing for her. And then a man she didn't know with wiry white hair came round with a bottle of sherry. He'd been an apprentice of George's, apparently, years and years ago. Bleddy good twisthand. George was one of the best, he kept saying and then he started telling a story about how George had broken something at the factory once and he kept laughing and then everyone else started roaring and wiping their eyes. It was all too loud and Winnie didn't like the noise. She wanted to go home. And then she couldn't help herself, she started to cry. Don't keep topping her glass up, Barry, she heard Rita say, you know she can't tek her drink. And Barry had said to Rita to leave Winnie alone.



They arrive at Skegness and the bus drops them off on a narrow street away from the sea front. The group huddle together waiting for someone to suggest what to do, where to go. Bert and Dickie and their wives announce that they're off to a pub on the front. Mr Spencer is shouting something about a group photograph. Cissie grabs Winnie's arm and says, 'Come on, duck, let's head off for some food. I'm starving.'

Cissie knows where she's going. She's been to Skegness quite a few times and she leads Winnie along the prom to a fish and chip shop with an upstairs sit-in

restaurant and views of the sea. It's a tall, thin, rickety building, a few hundred years old. They head up its winding steps to the first floor, a whitewashed room with scrubbed floorboards and bare tables. Cissie stops at the top of the stairs and hangs on to the banister, her mouth open, gulping in air. And for a moment a dark shadow crosses in front of her eyes and she shuts them.

‘You all right, ducky?’ asks Winnie.

‘It's a long way up, that's all,’ says Cissie.

They get a window seat and Winnie tugs at the over-painted window until it slides opens and a lets a breeze in. Gulls, huddled on nearby rooftops and window ledges, whine and screech. People amble along below. There are bursts of laughter. A car horn, loud and persistent. Pumping and jangling music from the amusement arcades.

A woman comes to take their order. She's buttoned up inside a tight blouse and a short skirt and wears a flowery housecoat over the top. Her bouffant hair is bleached blonde over grey roots. They order cod and chips and mushy peas, bread and butter and tea for two.

‘I did love coming to the seaside that time when I was a kiddie,’ says Cissie. ‘We were all so excited.’

‘I never came here till I was grown-up,’ says Winnie. ‘My George brought me for a weekend on one of our anniversaries.’

‘You sent me a postcard,’ says Cissie.

‘You can remember that?’ says Winnie.

‘Well, not that one in particular, but you've always sent me postcards whenever you've been away. You're very good at things like that.’

Winnie takes a sip of her tea. 'It's funny to think how we didn't get on as kiddies, isn't it?' she says.

And Cissie looks thoughtfully down into her teacup, chuckles and then puts the cup back in its saucer. 'We really didn't like each other, did we?' she says.

And Winnie says, 'Well, to be fair, you were nowt but a bully, Cissie Higgins. You didn't deserve to be liked.'

Winnie's words touch a nerve.

Cissie looks out at the sea and her eyes water. She can see a ship far out on the horizon. 'I was rotten, wasn't I?' she says.

'Now, don't you go getting all upset on me.' Winnie puts a hand on Cissie's arm. 'It were all such a long time ago. And it's all been long mended since.'

And Cissie looks out at the sea stretching on for miles. She remembers that time she tried so hard, that time she planned to bring Bell here, to the seaside. She wanted her to see all this so badly. And she realised years later that she wanted to do it for Billy's sake more than anything else. To let Bell see the sea stretching on forever. But Tommy Bolt put paid to that. Tommy Bolt, he was the rotten one that time. And then there's that other thing that's been playing on her mind for a while now and she's never been one for secrets. She has to tell Winnie and she must tell her today.

A long silence settles between them. It's not an awkward silence, just a pause for breath, accompanied by the noise of the gulls and the gulping of tea.



Winnie regrets her harsh words. She's felt a little irritable of late and she thinks it's because of this house move. As eager as Barry and Rita seem to be for her to go, it's not like she's being forced into anything and she can see the sense in it. She'll miss Imperial Place, she's certain of that. She and George had rented that house for most of their married lives. Winnie thinks about the new flat she's going to. She's been to see it twice now. The first time, Barry had gone on about how the rent was very reasonable with it being council-run. How well-kept the grounds were. And Rita had oohed and aahed over the carpets and the wallpaper. It was all very clean and freshly papered and painted. Not really Winnie's colours, lots of peach and that nobbly plaster all over the ceiling, but she hadn't the stomach to have it all done again. She'd make do with it as it was. She'd need her own things around her, of course.

On the second visit, it was just her and Rita, to measure up for curtains and to check what furniture would fit in and what wouldn't. They passed a couple of women in the corridor outside the flat, about the same age as Winnie, and Rita had stopped to chat, but Winnie scuttled on ahead, pretending that she hadn't seen the women, because in truth she didn't want to talk, she didn't want to have to tell people she didn't know all about herself.

When Rita caught up with her she said, they were nice, you should've stopped, it looked quite rude that you walked off. And Winnie had snapped back, I'll talk to who I want to, when I want to, and Rita had taken herself into the flat's tiny bathroom and shut the door rather loudly behind her and Winnie had gone through to the empty bedroom and stood staring out of the window at the immaculately mown lawn and pruned bushes that were attended to once a month by a man from the council.

And it was as she'd stood looking out from the bedroom window at the landscaped gardens, still feeling perturbed about the cross words she'd just had with Rita, it was when she'd lifted her gaze from the patch of grass outside the window and had looked beyond the patch of ground where these flats sat, out across the car park and over the hedge, it was then that she saw the open fields and her eyes followed them as they were interrupted here and there by hedges and trees, it was then that she saw that these open fields had ragged edges and these ragged edges marked the point where the fields fell away and met the river.



‘That were lovely.’

They were climbing down the steep twisting stair from the first-floor restaurant. Out of the door, yelling a cheery bye-bye to the man frying fish behind the counter.

‘It were grand, weren’t it,’ says Cissie. ‘I did enjoy that bit of fish.’ She clicks open her handbag and pulls out a lace trimmed handkerchief and wipes her face. She looks warm. ‘I should like to take this cardy off, but I don’t like showing the tops of my arms when I’m out.’

Winnie looks at her friend and sees how she’s filled out over the years. She’s always been the lanky one has Cissie. But she’s quite plump these days. Winnie’s still petite, quite tiny in fact; she’s a little bit of a tyre around her tummy and she’s always been a bit big on the thigh – George had called her an hourglass – but she’s still reasonably trim for her seventy-six years. She creaks a bit now when she tries to

do things around the house and she calls on Barry to mow the lawn for her. She's finding bending down to weed a bit of a struggle. George had always done the garden, that was the thing. But to let it go, to let the garden go to seed, she can't bear that thought. All that work he put in over all those years. She sometimes imagines George coming back, as if in a pantomime, appearing in a cloud of smoke, dressed all in a long white gown, shackled by chains, with his bald pate, waxy and blue, and wisps of hair around his ears and staring eyes and he's there, standing on the lawn, bouncing up and down on his heels, moaning about how he can feel the moss in the lawn and wanting to know how on earth she has let it get so bad.

And now there's this move on the cards. A move to somewhere smaller. And maybe this is why she's starting to give things up. Get rid of things. All the stuff she's accumulated over the years. All the furniture and the nick-nacks and the dinner sets that never get used. Who would want it all after she's gone? She's never wanted lots of things. But she does like nice things.

And there's no children to leave it to. She and George never had any. There were several visits made to the doctors when she didn't 'fall' in the first few years after they were married and a lot of poking and prodding from men in white coats, but they couldn't find anything wrong. Winnie found the whole experience very embarrassing. They were told to just carry on as they were and if it was going to happen then it would. But it never did. And by the time they were in their thirties they'd given up on the idea altogether and the few things that George had inherited from Zillah Goddard – a cot that his father had made, a lace christening robe that had been in the family for generations – he handed on to his brother, who by then was the proud father of two boys with another one on the way. The eldest of these boys,

Barry, had always been fond of his Uncle George and was a regular visitor to their house in Imperial Place as he was growing up. George found Barry an apprenticeship straight from school with a lace machine manufacturer and Barry thrived. Winnie really doesn't know what she'd do without Barry, since George died. But Barry doesn't want all her tat. And Rita is very house proud. She likes to buy everything new.

There had been that ornament. The one that Zillah Goddard had bought them as a gift that first Christmas they were married. A woman with a basket of flowers. It had never been to Winnie's taste and she'd always kept it on a sideboard in the spare bedroom. But she'd not have a spare bedroom in her new place and so she'd need to get rid. But she didn't have the heart to give it away. To let someone else have it. And so, one day, she dropped it. Quite deliberately. She dropped it and it broke into three pieces. Barry glued it back together. And so, she dropped it again. And this time she dropped a milk saucepan on top of it and that did for it. Broke it into tiny little shards. Barry tutted and looked concerned. He'd not get that back together. We'll look out for another one for you, Rita had said. No don't do that, said Winnie, I've not the room.

It wasn't so much the getting rid of things that she couldn't bear. It was the thought of her things ending up on a mantelpiece in a stranger's house. She'd rather they go in the dustbin.



'Now, I should like to get our Barry and Rita a little gift,' says Winnie.

And Cissie thinks, surely there's better things to do, but she knows how Winnie likes to look around the shops and so she says, 'Yes and I think I should like to take our Kev something back too,' and then with a knowing look, 'Shall we do the shops first then?'

The prom is lined with amusement arcades and cafes selling sweet smelling foods and kiosks bursting with racks of postcards and sticks of rock and lollipops the size of children's faces. They choose the first souvenir shop that they come to. It's crammed inside with novelties and nick-nacks. Cissie stands at the door and watches Winnie peruse a shelf of ornamental animals. Some are moulded out of a plastic made to look like glass and others sculpted out of shells, crudely glued together and painted with a clear, thick varnish that looked sticky to the touch. Winnie picks one up. A mouse, with a wobbling head attached to its body by a spring, its eyes and ears completely out of proportion to its head. She puts it back and moves on to a shelf of snow globes. And Cissie wonders about the appeal of fake snow suspended in water and wonders what on earth snow has got to do with a day at the seaside anyway. Winnie's at the back of the shop now where the more expensive items are on display. She points to a plate on a stand up on a high shelf and an assistant gets it down for her. As Winnie pays at the counter, Cissie comes to stand beside her. The plate is decorated with a hand-painted scene of the beach, captured on a sunny day with empty golden sands and the bluest sea, flags flying from the pier jutting out in the background and – S K E G N E S S – in spidery black lettering along the bottom edge. Two empty deckchairs in pastel stripes in the foreground.

'That's a very pretty blue, that sea,' says Cissie.

‘They can hang it on the wall,’ says Winnie. The plate is wrapped in a layer of tissue paper and then a layer of yesterday’s newspaper and the assistant comes around the other side of the counter to put it in Winnie’s shopping bag for her and chirps, ‘Take care with that now’.

Cissie says, ‘I’ll get our Kev summat from the shop next door.’ It’s a joke shop. ‘Right up his street,’ she chuckles.

A few years ago, now, Cissie’s grandson, Kev, had a big falling out with his mam. He left with a suitcase and slept in his car for a few nights before Cissie took him in. She loved having him around, but then he found himself a place of his own, a little flat just along the road, over the top of the fish and chip shop. He tells Cissie that it does him fine for now, but he’s saving up to get something nicer. He stinks of chip fat all the time, he reckons.

Cissie buzzes around the joke shop excitedly. Winnie hangs back at the door, her lips pursed in disapproval. Cissie picks up a pair of chattering teeth and winds them up and they clack away and, ‘We should tek a pair of these for our Bette,’ hoots Cissie and Winnie goes, ‘That’s wicked, Cissie Higgins,’ but Cissie can clearly see the colour rising in Winnie’s cheeks as she tries to hide a smirk.

Cissie’s in her element: she tries on a sombrero hat, a fake moustache, a novelty ‘arrow through the head’ and a ‘nail through the finger’. Winnie draws the line when Cissie reaches for fake dog excrement. ‘Come on now, have some decorum,’ says Winnie.

Cissie’s at the counter paying for a whoopi cushion and a novelty pen with a cartoon picture of a lady in a bathing suit on it.

‘Ooh, decorum, get you,’ mocks Cissie and Winnie tuts as Cissie tips the pen and the woman’s bathing suit falls off to reveal a caricature of her naked body. Cissie cackles with laughter again.

‘You are coarse, Cissie Higgins,’ says Winnie. ‘And anyway, what would your Kev want with a mucky pen like that now that he’s courting.’

Kev has been walking out with Pamela Smith for a while now and sometimes Cissie does wonders whether it won’t be long before he’ll want to be settling down. But at other times she’s not so sure. She sees the sparkle in his eyes and although he’s a good, reliable sort, she does see her brother Billy’s spirit in him sometimes. That urge to go and find a better place. He’s nothing of his father in him though and that’s a blessing. Cissie always wondered where she went wrong with her only son.

William Thomas Higgins was born in the back bedroom at number eleven Trafalgar Street in Longwash in the year 1919. It was Tilly Reeves that had stepped in to help Winnie take Cissie home when she went into labour in the mending shed at Henson’s on that keen January morning. Cissie remembers Tilly bleating on about how she should have been confined before now, how her waters breaking on the mending shed floor so close to all that lace work could have caused some real damage. And Cissie wanted to thump her, but all she could think about was the pain, the biting pain that came in waves and gnawed away at her from the inside out.

Nellie Higgins was present at the birth and acted as midwife. She thanked Tilly Reeves kindly when she arrived at her door with Cissie screaming and howling, and she had sent her off again with a couple of buttered cobs made up with potted beef for her trouble. Nellie asked Winnie to stay, to keep an eye on things downstairs

while she was upstairs looking after Cissie. Boil us up some water, get some clean towels ready and find some sheets of newspaper to lay across the bed.

The first person to ever lay their hands on William Thomas Higgins was his grandmother Nellie as she picked him up seconds after he'd been born and passed him over to his mother. And when Winnie was called to come up the stairs and have a look at the little fella, she became the third person to ever hold him, a tiny, red-haired little boy with the palest skin and the bluest eyes. Cissie named him Thomas William and thought that she would love him forever.

Cissie was back at work within weeks, often with milk oozing from her breasts, staining her apron dark. The Higgins women, Nellie and Florrie and Elsie, took it in turns to be at home in Trafalgar Street to look after the baby, while Cissie did her shifts. They'd often take him along to the mending shed, bundled up in the big perambulator, a piece of lace tucked over the top to hide him, and Cissie would steal away from her mending work to feed him. She'd smuggle him into a cupboard full of buckets and brooms, out of the way of the prying eyes of the officious overlooker who would always knock money off folk's wages for being away from their work for whatever reason.

It was when Thomas Willian Higgins was just a few months old that Winnie said to Cissie one day, just dropped it into conversation, casual as you like, I know that Thomas is a very nice name, she'd said, but you do realise that as he gets older it'll get shortened and he'll be Tommy before you know it, and from all accounts, that Tommy Bolt, he was a good for nothing, wasn't he? Do you really want him to carry that man's name?

And Cissie stared at Winnie, her mouth open, she didn't know what to say.

And Winnie had gone on, I mean, she'd said, I know that Tommy Bolt's the father and that, but even so, would you not rather he be known as William after your Billy? And then Winnie had blushed and said that she was sorry and it wasn't her place to say such things.

Cissie said nothing back to her and Winnie never said anymore on the subject either. But within a week of this remark, Thomas William Higgins was renamed William Thomas Higgins, and within months he was simply known as Billy and no one ever used his middle name at all.



At George's funeral, after a sherry or two, Winnie had said to Cissie, you know I talk to him sometimes, and when Cissie had asked who, Winnie had said, George of course. Cissie had looked away, but Winnie knew that she was rolling her eyes at her. I do, said Winnie, I see him in the mirror sometimes. Or I catch his shadow in the garden. And Cissie said, well the mind can play tricks.

Winnie knew that Cissie didn't believe in ghosts. She wasn't the religious type. She only believed in the living. In my book, she said, I'll only believe in you if I can see you. If I can't see you, then you don't exist.

One Christmas Eve, a few years ago, Winnie had asked Cissie to go with her to midnight mass, and Cissie had scoffed at her, saying that it was all a bunch of fairy tales. She only went along in the end because Winnie promised to buy her a port and lemon in the pub on the way there. Winnie herself wasn't particularly religious, but she liked the spectacle of midnight mass. It made her feel Christmassy.

Winnie was slurring, someone had just topped up her sherry, and she'd said, at least I know now that there's a space for me next to George on Main Road when my time comes.

And Cissie had said, knocking back the sherry herself, that she'd given her Kev strict instructions that she was to be cremated. I can't bear the thought of being buried underground, she'd said, ooh, the very thought of it, makes me shiver.

And Winnie had said that surely, being turned to ashes and dust and nothing, it'd be as if you've never existed in the first place.

But I shall feel free, Cissie'd said and she'd flung her arms in the air and laughed. Scatter me somewhere nice and I'll be able to float off to all those places I've always wanted to visit.

And Winnie had almost chuckled as she pointed out that Cissie had always stuck to the fact that when it ends, it ends. That as far as she was concerned, this was it. There was nothing else.

At which point Cissie had folded her arms across her chest and with a straight face said, well, there is that, I suppose.



Cissie and Winnie are lounging in deck chairs on the beach. They can't see the sea, but they know it's there. The tide's out and beyond the warm yellow sand, brown mud stretches away into the distance.

'Couldn't paddle if we wanted to,' says Cissie. 'We'd have to get a bus to get to the sea.' Her sandals are off, her nylons draped on top of them. She's wriggling

her toes in the fresh air. Her feet are bumpy with bunions and corns. Her nails yellowed and misshapen. With one final crunch, she finishes off an oblong block of ice cream sandwiched between two wafers.

Winnie keeps her sandals and tights on. She's taken off her cardigan and is enjoying the warmth of the sun on her bare arms. She sucks at a cornet; the ice cream has melted and run down her wrists. Some of it has splattered onto her cardigan. Bogger the mess, she thinks. She'll find a toilet and get tidied up when they head back to the prom, before they get back on the bus.

'That sea's bleddy miles away.' Cissie crooks a hand over her eyes trying to see the edges of the sea, where the waves are nibbling at the shore. She can see dots in the distance, paddling, and out further, heads bobbing, people swimming where their feet can't touch the ground. She shivers. She's never swum out of her depth before.



George had said it very quietly at first. Very casually as he sat eating his toast one morning. I think you should give up work.

And Winnie who was standing through in the kitchen frying up some eggs thought that perhaps she'd not heard him right, so she came through, fish-slice in her hand and, what was that, George?

And George had said it again. I think you should give up work, and he'd bitten into a second slice of toast.

Winnie's lips had knotted themselves up in a puzzled expression and she'd said, why would I want to do that?

And George had put his toast down, finished his chewing. It's not that I don't want you to go out to work, duck, it's just you don't need to. I'm doing well since I've had that promotion. And what with the money that my mam left us.

But I want to work, George. I've always worked.

Well it's not for me to tell you what to do, duck. But do have a think about it.

And Winnie had asked, what else would I do, George? It's not as if there's kiddies to run around after. And the devil makes work and all that. I couldn't just sit around all day.

You wouldn't just sit around all day, George had said, you'd busy yourself.

And Winnie had thought about all those years of early starts in the dark, of pushing that big pram to the factory and fetching and carrying and all those years of mending in that shed and the aches and pains in her fingers and the strain in her eyes and yes, it was all changed since back then. The factories were cleaner now and the hours not as long and the lighting was better and the wages were better and the holidays were better. And she liked the company she kept at the factory. Most of all, she'd miss sitting beside Cissie after all these years.



Cissie's that proud of her Kev. Her grandson. He's got himself a stall on the indoor market in that new shopping centre up in the city. Selling all kinds of fabrics and bits

of lace. Some of the last bits of lace that they're making in the area now. The industry's not what it used to be.

Kev doesn't look a bit like his dad or any of Cissie's brothers or Cissie's dad for that matter. His looks must have come from his mother's side of the family. He's short and stocky with coarse brown hair that waves around his face and drapes over his shoulders. His moustache – they seem to be fashionable again these days – covers his top lip and his eyes are large and liquid brown and his cheeks are ruddy and a bit pimply; Cissie thinks he's still growing into his skin, even though he's in his early twenties now.

As for his father, William Thomas Higgins, he left his little lad behind when he took off all those years ago. Kev's mother does her best, but keeps a distance. Cissie's proud of Kev and he seems to dote on his grandmother. His Nanar. And as for William Thomas Higgins, if Cissie could, she'd revert his name back to Thomas William. As far as she's concerned he's gone rotten just like his father, Tommy Bolt, before him. But it doesn't matter either way, because they never talk about him. Not ever.

Cissie likes to pop along to Kev's stall most Saturdays to help out. She misses the routine of Henson's. She'd been there all her working life and seen it at its best and at its worst. She'd seen the bottom fall out of lace and vast numbers of staff being laid off, but Henson's had kept on going. When old Mr Henson died, his son took over and brought in a new partner and then the second war came along, but Henson & Powell adapted and survived. There was a prickle of excitement in the place when the new man-made fibres came in. Cissie embraced it all and found there was still work for her. They moved her around a lot. At one point, she was offered a

job in the offices. They'd train her up, she was told, to do some of the clerical work. They could send her to night school to learn how to type. This was all Mr Dunkley's idea. He was the main overlooker at the place at that time and he took a shine to Cissie. Despite her reservations, Cissie gave the office job a go. She lasted for three days before she went and asked Mr Dunkley if she could please go back to the mending. It's what suits me best, she said.

Cissie had to retire eventually. She knew that too. It's time to start drawing a pension and sit down, everyone kept telling her. Her send-off was the biggest party that Henson's had seen for years. Everyone ended up in The Angel and Bette's husband, Charlie, an excellent pianist, provided the entertainment and the last thing Cissie remembered about that evening was having a slow dance with Mr Dunkley.

Now, every Saturday morning, Kev picks her up in his purple Ford Escort and drives her to work with him up in the city. It's a different journey these days. All the spaces between Longwash and the city have been eaten up by crescents and cul-de-sacs and blocks of flats and parades of shops and garages and those new big supermarkets, they pass one or two of them along the route. Kev always parks up on a piece of rough ground, a former lace factory site now being used as a make-shift car park. A single piece of the old factory still stands, its brick walls ravaged, holes where its glorious arched windows, that once flooded the factory floor with light, have been gouged out. Ivy clings to it. There's a broken sign hanging off the wall. A long-forgotten name. And rising up next to this shell, a big new shopping centre, a hulk of grey windowless concrete. Cissie was scared to go in at first, but she's got used to it. She follows Kev across the pot-holed gravel and he takes her arm as she wobbles on the uneven ground.

Steady, Nanar, Kev always says.

And Cissie's retort back, oh, you are a good boy taking care of your old Nanar.

Well, you're valuable you are, Kev will smirk, a proper antique!

And Cissie hoots when she calls him a cheeky young bogger.

And Kev says that she's a proper Victorian.

And Cissie says that, yes, she is and they used to send her up chimneys when she was a nipper to sweep 'em out, and she whacks him gently with her handbag.

They walk through a door marked Emergency Exit Only and into a cavernous space, lit starkly from overhead. Kev weaves his way around trolleys and pallets and cardboard boxes. They take a lift, a cage with metal doors, and it creaks and squeals up a level and then judders to a halt and Kev pulls the door open and says, welcome to the indoor market, Nanar.

The green and grey metal shutters on most of the stalls are usually still closed up when they arrive. Kev's an early bird. The walls of the market are painted a bright white that glows in the fluorescent light. The place smells of mouldering vegetables, the sharpness of citrus fruits, the sickliness of ripe bananas. And Kev walks ahead with a swagger, hair waving around his neck, flared trouser bottoms flapping. He likes to wear tight-fitting shirts and tends to have the top buttons undone and Cissie's not keen that she can see his angry black chest hair poking out, but she puts it down to him being a youngster and things not being as they used to be in her day. The floor's tiled in white and grey checks and the stalls form a grid of walkways. It's not like the old shambles and the old market square that's for sure. Music blares from a radio behind one of the stalls and somewhere, someone is

hammering away at a cash-register and it rattles as it tallies up numbers. They pass women in tabards with buckets and mops and men dressed in white coats and white hats and white rubber boots and the stench of fish hits as they pass two younger lads dressed the same with blood on their aprons. And Kev will make some coarse remark about the smell.

And then they'll stop at one of the stalls and Kev will reach in behind the counter and flick some switches and on come the lights, more bright, white overhead lights. He'll fumble in his trouser pockets for coins and hand them to Cissie with a right then, Saturday Girl, he always calls her his Saturday Girl, now go and get us both a nice cup of tea.

Cissie's a whirlwind once she gets going. In her blue apron with lemon piping she sorts out the fabrics on display. She knows them all by heart: laces in a rainbow of colours, thin strips for fringing and trimming and larger pieces for dresses and curtains and tablecloths. She feels each fabric to get a sense of its texture and its weight: the brocades and the calico and the cambric, the madras and the muslin and the sheer chiffon and the crinkled crepe and crepon; the lustrous damask and the coarse dupion and the thin georgette silks, organza and poplin, metallic lame for the more outrageous, glossy sateen and taffeta, delicate tulle and the finest voile. She handles each bolt of cloth with deft hands and a knowing eye; she'll lift one with ease and toss it so that it twists and unwinds itself on the counter. She measures each length by eye and makes cutting look effortless, pushing the open blades of the scissors through the fabric, slicing it like warm butter. She knows that Kev's mates think she's a marvel at her age. And she'll not say so – she'll never say so – but even with her spectacles on these days, she struggles to see the fine detail like she used to;

lifting the bolts of cloth tires her arms and her fingers feel fat and useless working the scissors, and flipping the lengths of fabric onto the cutting table can knock the breath right out of her.

It'd been one of the young lads with the blood on their aprons – they had that smell about them that took her right back to those days of fumbling down the jitty with Albert Grubb – a nice young lad with dark curls and piercing blue eyes and he was the one staring down at her as she lay sprawled on the floor looking up at him. It was a few weeks back and she'd been walking along minding her own business, on a break from the stall, just popped to get some bits of fruit and veg and a nice piece of fish and she remembered the bright lights overhead, she could hear them buzzing as she put things into her shopping bag and then blackness. And then she was down on the floor and looking up at those piercing blue eyes. There was a strong smell of rubber coming off the floor tiles. A taste of metal in her mouth. Her ankle throbbed.

You all right, duck? And then an arm reached down and she felt herself being hoisted up and then she was face to face with an older chap, fat and red faced, she recognised him as the chap off the flower stall just across from theirs.

And Cissie had said that she'd just slipped, that was all, and she looked down at her feet and saw that her big toe was sticking out through a hole in the leather of her shoe. And she'd tutted to herself about the bleddy slippery floor. The young lad was shouting across about getting the old lady a seat and Cissie mustered a loud voice from somewhere inside and called him a cheeky bogger, old lady indeed, she'd exclaimed, there's nothing wrong with me. And despite her light-headedness and the cold sweat that was drenching her, she'd gone looking for someone to blame, anyone but herself, and so she'd shouted at the flower stall chap that, I'll bet it's your lot

spilling all sorts on the floor and not cleaning it up properly. And she'd thanked the young chap with the blue eyes for his kindness and, with a sniff, she also thanked the flower stall chap for hoisting her up and the others in the small crowd that had gathered around her for their concern, picked up her shopping bag and headed back to Kev's stall. She found herself limping. Felt quite sick. She'd tell Kev she'd twisted her ankle on the steps. That was all. There was no need to tell him that her ribs felt bruised and her heart felt like a great big hand had got hold of it and squeezed the life out of it and that her blood felt like it was running thick and sluggish through her veins.



Winnie had said to Rita, I do hope they look after it.

And Rita had asked who and what?

And Winnie had said, this place, Imperial Place, when I go, I hope whoever comes in here next keeps the garden up nice like George did. And I hope they wash the nets regularly. And look after the carpets cos there's plenty of life left in them yet. And the place'll be needing a fresh lick of paint next year. George did it every three years, so it'll be time soon.

And Rita had looked concerned and that little vertical line between her eyes had deepened as she'd taken Winnie's hands in hers and said to her, but it'll not be your house anymore, duck, so you'll not need to worry about any of that, not anymore.

And Winnie remembered how, for those first few months when she'd moved to Imperial Place with George, all those years ago, just after old Mrs Goddard had died, she'd sometimes woken in the early hours of the morning, in those darkest hours, in a panic, her body rigid with fretting about her old house on Embankment Street. She kept wondering, were the new folk keeping it as it should be kept. Were the chimneys getting swept regularly? They were prone to catching fire in that street. Were they keeping the windows clean? And then one morning, after she'd been lying awake worrying for hours, after George had got up and gone off on an early shift, she'd set off to her own work, but she left a good hour or more earlier than she needed to and when she got to the Market Place, instead of heading down to Henson's she'd taken that familiar old route back over the canal bridge and turned off into the maze of streets that led her back to Embankment Street. She knew those roads so well. They felt part of her very being. She could close her eyes and find her way home. Except that it wasn't home anymore.

Embankment Street, when she got to it, was darker than she remembered. The railway running high overhead threw grey shadows across the street. And the street itself felt narrower than she thought it used to be. And as she reached number five, she slowed and turned to survey the façade of her old house. The very first place she'd ever known, where so much had happened. And she felt her heart crack with disappointment at the scruffy curtains hanging at the windows, the newspaper pasted over a broken pane of glass in the front room window, the peeling paintwork on the front door, the woodwork and the pipework, the moss creeping into the brickwork and the cracks in the front door step. There appeared to be no signs of life inside the building. It felt all hollowed out. Maybe it had been like this for years,

thought Winnie. Maybe after all those years of scrubbing and bleaching, I just stopped seeing how this place really was.



Cissie had stayed on at Trafalgar Street for most of her life, took over the running of it all once Nellie died, and then her sisters got married and moved away and the brothers, they went too, and soon it was just her and young Billy. She doted on that kiddie. And Cissie always had an eye for the chaps, she was always being taken out, courted seriously on more than one occasion, but she never let a man over the threshold, never gave up her independence. And when young Billy went, when he just took off like he did and left them all in the lurch, it broke her heart and she hadn't the stomach to stay there anymore. The council offered her a flat and that was it.

It's on the ground floor of a small block that was built to fill a gap left by Mr Gander's old butcher's shop that had been bombed out in the second war. People were desperate for houses back then. Cissie's flat is the third window along and has a grass verge at the front and a little bit of patio out the back, which is fine for her, she's never been one for gardening. It has one bedroom and Cissie's never needed more than that. And she's as happy as anything in that flat. Kev has done it all up for her, made a smart job of it, and they've put in one of those gas fires that looks like a real fire but isn't really. The place is flooded with light for most of the day and the very day that she moved in Cissie declared that it felt like she'd been living under a stone for all those years at Trafalgar Street.



It comes out of nowhere and Cissie knows that it will knock the wind out of Winnie's sails. But it's been playing on her mind for so long now, for months. And everything's so nice here by the seaside that she thinks that if she brings it out of the shadows here and now, just pulls it gently into the daylight and dusts it off and lets the sun shine on it, it'll all be all right. There'll be no upset. Winnie'll see it for what it is, that it's well meant.

And so, as Winnie shifts in her deckchair, reaches down for the flask of tea in her bag, Cissie wants to ask, do you ever think about our Bell? And she feels her breath stutter in her throat and her body stiffen as she wonders how Winnie would answer. Why bring all that up now? After all these years? That's what she'd say. Or she'd change the subject, she's one for doing that if she doesn't like talking about something, she'll just start talking about something else. Or else, she might just get her bags together and walk off. She's done that before now, mardy boggar.

Cissie is mustering something inside of herself. She's always, ever since she was a little girl, just come out with things, never been one for secrets. Never really been one for tact. But her insides ache right now. And she realises it's her heart. Her heart is aching. She's going to burst if she doesn't let it all out and so she takes a breath in and out and in and 'I have to tell you something, Winnie, and I don't want you to get upset.'

Winnie's taken off guard. She's leaning forward in her chair. 'Why would I get upset?'

‘Because I’ve not told you before now, that’s why,’ says Cissie. ‘But I’ve had my reasons for that. And I’m telling you now because you need to know.’

And Winnie says, ‘Well I’m listening,’ and she’s sitting bolt upright in her deckchair, her brow furrowed.

‘Give us a cup of that tea first,’ says Cissie, her mouth dry and she points across at the flask lying in the sand at Winnie’s feet. Winnie pours for them both. Cissie takes a slurp of tea and begins. ‘It were back last year sometime. Summer, it were definitely summer, because I remember I was wearing these very same sandals and I had a blister. They were new then. It was August. Late August. I was out one Thursday morning and I’d just been to the market for a bit of fruit, popped into Fords for a couple of new tea towels, my old ones were turning to rags and you know how Fords does such good quality seconds.’

Winnie nods. ‘I always get my bedding there.’

‘And I bumped into Bette,’ Cissie goes on.

‘Our Bette?’

‘Yes, our Bette, and she was in a right tizzy, and so I says to her, come on, let’s go and have a cup of tea and a sit down and a natter and so we went to the café in the Co-op.’

‘They do a nice pot of tea there and a lovely scone,’ says Winnie.

‘Well, that’s exactly what we had,’ says Cissie. ‘A pot of tea and scones and jam and Bette was still in a state, you see, you know how she’s been going on and on for years about moving to a bigger ‘ouse, although why at her time of life she should want a bigger ‘ouse, I don’t know. Anyway, there’s a bungalow had come up for sale on her street, a few doors down from her and Charlie, and it’d got one of those

rooms in the roof, you know, and a bigger garden, bigger everything, and so Bette had set her heart on it. And she says to me, Cissie, it's got a conservatory and I've always wanted a conservatory. And so her Charlie, tight-fisted as he is, but he reckoned it as a good investment, that's what Bette said. And Bette, she's all set to move, had a good clear out. And then it all falls through. That's why she was in such a state in the café. It'd just happened the day before, you see, the day before I bumped into her last August.'

'Oh, I say,' says Winnie. 'She never said owt to me.'

'I think she was a little bit embarrassed to be honest with you,' Cissie goes on. 'Wanted to keep it a bit quiet. Apparently, they was all ready to exchange contracts and that and their 'ouse were up for sale too, and they'd people interested in buying it and that. But then someone else comes along and offers more money.'

'That doesn't sound very fair,' says Winnie.

'There's no fair about it. That's what happened,' says Cissie. 'So, they stayed put. And all this had just happened and Bette was in such a state about it. She'd been picking out curtain fabric only the day before. She was so angry, ready to snap she was.'

Cissie falls silent. There's a murmur of distant voices from other groups of day-trippers and holidaymakers, all set out with deckchairs and windbreaks and umbrellas at intervals across the wide expanse of sand. The breeze gains strength. Cissie's cheeks get pinker. The frothy edges of the sea move a little bit closer.

'So, what's this big thing you have to tell me then?' asks Winnie.

And Cissie wants to snap back at her, I'm getting to that, but she doesn't because it's this next bit that will hurt the most. Her insides still ache and she feels

light-headed now. A bit like that feeling she had at the indoor market a few weeks back when she had that funny turn. She sips the dregs of the tea from her small plastic cup and continues in a quiet, gentle voice. 'A few weeks later I met Bette in town again and we chatted about the 'ouse and I asked her, who's these people then that have moved in to that bungalow that was s'posed to be yours? Have you met them? What are they like? And she told me that when they moved in she'd decided to put her grievances to one side and be neighbourly and go and say hello, welcome them to the street. Bette and Charlie, they've been there at Grove Avenue almost since those 'ouses have been built.'

'Back between the wars weren't it?' says Winnie.

'That's right,' says Cissie. 'So, Bette went and knocked at the door and it's a woman as opens it. In her late sixties or early seventies. Quite glamorous by all accounts. Hair all done up on her head. Face full of make-up. Quite serious looking. She didn't invite Bette in or anything, just a polite hello on the doorstep and a nice-to-meet-you kind of thing. And that was that.'

'Oh,' says Winnie looking and sounding disinterested. She begins to gather up the flask and the plastic cups and pack them back into her shopping bag.

'But,' says Cissie, and Winnie stops her sorting out and sits back and listens as Cissie carries on, 'I didn't see Bette for a good few weeks, months really. Anyway, it wasn't long before the Christmas just gone that I bumped into her and we went for a cuppa and she was full of the joys of the season and it was Dolly this and Dolly that.'

'Dolly?'

‘Well, that’s the name of the woman that’s moved in to the bungalow, you see, and Bette was talking about her as if she was the best of friends with her. She went on about how her and Charlie had been invited round for dinner, and Dolly being ever so well to do, and so I asked Bette, well who is she? Where does she come from? And Bette tells me that she says that she’s worked all over, never been in one spot for very long. She says she were a singer, apparently. Cabarets and summer seasons and cruise ships all over the world. But she’s retired from the business now and has come back to this part of the world. She reckons it’s because she was born round here. She says she’s got no husband, far as she knows. No kids.’

‘So, she’s local then?’ says Winnie.

‘It would seem so.’ Cissie falls silent and Winnie goes back to packing up her bag. And it’s then that Cissie asks, ‘Do you ever think about our Bella?’

And just as she thought she would, Winnie says abruptly, ‘Why do you bring that up? Why now?’

And Cissie inhales sharply and says, ‘Because Bette says that in that Dolly’s hallway there’s all these posters in frames of her shows at Blackpool and the Isle of Wight and Butlin’s, all over, and places in Spain that she’s never heard of. And she’s top of the bill on a lot of them. She’s there, in big red letters, under her stage name.’ Cissie pauses. ‘Her stage name is Bella Bolt.’

And Winnie doesn’t even look up. She just looks at the dregs of the tea in the flask and screws the lid back on. ‘We shan’t want any more of that,’ she says, ‘It’s gone cold,’ and she carries on packing away her things.



Winnie's glad that she's got her sunglasses on so that Cissie won't see the tears that are welling up in her eyes. She feels the corners of her mouth twitching and so she busies herself sorting out her bag.

She doesn't think about Bell as much as she used to. She'd packed up all those memories and put them away in a box years ago. She'd hoped and hoped, for years, even after the police had said that they'd done what they could, but that they were best to accept that Bell was probably with Tommy Bolt. Somewhere. They didn't know where. There was nothing legal signed, but they should consider that he was, more or less, her guardian. They'd found no bodies. Nothing suspicious had been reported. They'd done what they could. But now Cissie has just pulled that box out and taken the lid off it and, whatever happens now, Winnie's not going to be able to put that lid back on it.

She settles back in her deckchair, shuts her eyes and begins to drift off to sleep. She can feel the memories escaping from that box already. Bell. For so many years now, as far as Winnie was concerned, life had started with George, with the day that Winnie Foster became Winnie Goddard. And now, when she does let herself think about Bell, all she can see is that dark head of hair turned away from her. Bell. Skinny bones under a thin sheet. Bell. Dirty little feet sticking out of the end of the bed.



Cissie reckons that she can get to the toilets, the ones in the Ballroom and back again, before Winnie wakes up. After Cissie's revelation, Winnie had gone very

quiet. She'd not changed the subject or packed up her things and gone off in a mardy mood, she'd just shut her eyes and fallen asleep.

But Cissie can't hold it any longer, she has to go. It's all that tea. She rolls up her tights into a ball and shoves them into her handbag and walks barefoot across the sand. It's hot, too hot, in some places. The breeze is whipping up the sand and she thinks of it getting in all these people's sandwiches and the grittiness of it in their mouths.

And now, all those words she said, they feel like grit in her mouth. All that stuff that came tumbling out about that woman. Bella Bolt. Her big mouth and all those gritty words.

Afterwards, Cissie had studied Winnie's face, looking for something, she didn't know what, a glimmer of some kind maybe. And then she'd said, I thought we could take a walk out there sometime soon, to Grove Avenue. Go and visit Bella Bolt. Find out for ourselves. Winnie had reacted very calmly to this suggestion. Cissie knew that she was upset. Well, yes, Winnie'd said, sounds around the same age as our Bell would be now I suppose. If she's still alive that is. And the name, a coincidence maybe. It happens. I don't think we should get too excited.

And Cissie had gone on about her being a singer, saying that she certainly remembers Bell not being much of a talker, but a singer?

And Winnie had said that maybe they'd just never taken the time to listen to her. And that had hurt.

And that's where Cissie had left it and Winnie had fallen asleep.



When Winnie wakes up and she sees Cissie's deck chair empty, her tights and sandals and handbag gone, she knows that she must have gone to find a toilet. She enjoys the sense of being on her own right now. It's so peaceful here, she thinks. Even the crying of the gulls sounds soothing. She looks around her. There's not a soul within a good few yards. And at last she can see the sea. The tide's come in a bit and the waves are dancing not too far away. She takes another look around her. She can see people in the distance. Some sprawled out, sunbathing on towels. But there's still no one close enough to worry about. She takes her towel out of her bag, stands up and discreetly pushes her hands up on the inside of her skirt till she finds the waistband of her tights and then pulls them down, wriggling, like she's doing the twist, that dance that Rita was so in to all those years ago. Her tights are around her ankles and there's warm air against her bare legs which is something she's not felt for years. She uses her left foot to pull down the back of her sandal and slip it off. Her right foot slips the left sandal off. With one final tug the tights come off over her feet and she pads forward towards the sea.

There's a little girl in the water. Winnie doesn't see where she comes from. She just seems to have appeared. She's dressed in a blue and white striped top and shorts, dressed up like a little sailor. She's squatting down at the water's edge and as Winnie gets closer she sees that the girl is picking at the pebbles and shells that have gathered in the crease where sea ends and land begins. There's not many pebbles on this sandy beach. The girl stands up and turns. Dark wet hair hangs around her face. She's running out of the sea now, heading away up the beach. Her hand is curled around her collection of pebbles and shells. She rushes past Winnie, who steps to one side and calls out, 'Steady there, ducky.' But the girl has gone.

There had been that time when Bell had followed her down to the river and Winnie didn't want to play with her. Winnie was collecting stones and cleaning the mud off them and sorting them and arranging them neatly on the grassy bank, deciding which ones she'd take home and which ones she'd throw back into the river for other people to find. And it had been Mother that had sent Bell with her, for Winnie to keep an eye on her. Keep her out of trouble. Mother had something important to do. Somewhere important to go. And Bell had taken off her socks and her boots and was running to and fro, from the water's edge to Winnie, taking her all varieties of treasures she could find in the river: bits of brick and clay pipe, a sodden sheet of newspaper, a half-eaten buttered cob, and Winnie kept telling her to stop, that the stuff she was finding was rubbish, it wasn't treasure, she was looking for beautiful pebbles, soft water-worn stones, with stripes and spots and unusual patterns and colours that changed when you covered them with water or held them up to the light. And then Bell brought her an old milk bottle and Winnie lost her temper and hurled it back into the river where it landed with a splash and a passing duck quacked and ruffled its feathers as it swam away. And as she'd thrown the bottle she'd shouted, just go away and leave me alone. You're always there. There. There. And Bell had run back to the water's edge and Winnie saw her slip and fall onto the squelching mud, her pinafore and her dress getting stained with dark brown. Bell had carried on finding her own treasures in the water and she made a pile of them some distance away from Winnie. When they got home, Bell was sent to the scullery to scrub herself clean, given bread and jam for tea and then sent to bed; Winnie was scolded for letting her little sister get into such a mess when she was older and

should know better and she was given bread and jam and sent to bed. The two sisters lay in their bed wide awake, unable to sleep. And not a word passed between them.

Winnie steps into the sea, the cold salt water stings her toes as they sink into the mud. She can just hear its ebb and flow at the edge of the sand, the crackling noise as it draws itself back over shingle and crushed shells. The next wave brings in a small green net on a long cane. Winnie goes to pick it up and turns to call after the little girl in case it's hers, but she seems to have gone a very long way in a very short time and she's clearly out of earshot now. Just a figure casting a long shadow on the brown sand. A pebble catches Winnie's eye and she bends down to pick it up. It's pretty, she thinks. The water makes it shiny, jet black, and there's a speckle of white crystals and a hole through it. All the way through. She could thread it on a piece of string, she thinks. And wrap it in a hanky for safekeeping and put it in her treasure box.



The Ballroom seems to be further away than she remembers and so Cissie decides to head for the parade of shops on the high street instead. There'll be a pub toilet there she can sneak into, she's sure. The pier runs alongside her to the right. On her first visit to Skegness there'd been that great archway leading from the prom onto the pier. It was so grand, but that had been flattened a few years back. In its place, a great hulk of a building that seems to Cissie to have no windows in it at all.

Amusements and the like, she's been told. Cissie likes a little flutter on the bingo

more than anyone, but nothing can tempt her into that great big monstrosity. Even the factories had windows in 'em she thinks to herself as she passes by.

She wishes now she'd told Winnie the rest of the story. That she hadn't stopped where she did. She wishes she'd told her about Boxing Day when she'd been over at Bette and Charlie's for the afternoon and although Charlie had insisted on driving her home, she'd said she'd prefer to walk. Bette and Charlie told her how they'd been invited round to Dolly's in the afternoon on Christmas Eve. Dolly had got sherry in and sausage rolls and what Charlie called 'plates of them little nick-nacks on sticks'. There were a few other neighbours had gone along. Bette had said that Dolly was very pleasant, but that she didn't give much away. Bette had wanted to know all about her, but she seemed a bit buttoned up. She'd asked her where she'd been born and Dolly had said around here somewhere, although she wasn't too sure exactly where. It's changed so much since my day, she'd said to Bette. And Bette had heard someone refer to Dolly at one point as Mrs Stenton. So, she had been married. But she didn't seem too interested in talking about her family or anything. She changed the subject. Talked a lot about Spain and the Winter Gardens in Weston-super-Mare, which she said had been a favourite venue of hers for her shows.

Cissie had left Bette and Charlie's just as dusk was falling on Boxing Day. She'd bundled herself into her coat and hugged them both and all her goodbyes and merry christmasses had turned to steam in the cold air. She got to their gate and she should have turned right, onto Main Road and back into town. But instead she felt an urge to turn left. She walked along the street, past two bungalows with generous gardens, and there it was. Number seven. It was detached. A bungalow, a very grand

affair. By this time, Cissie was buoyed up by the three glasses of sherry she'd had at Bette and Charlie's, and all that on top of a port and lemon she'd had in the pub earlier that lunchtime with her Kev. She wanted to talk to this woman, this Dolly. She wanted to know who she really was.

The house at number seven had a door in the middle and a bay window on either side, that Cissie thought made it look like it had a wide-open smile. A smart plastic front door and double-glazed windows and a conservatory wrapping itself around one side. And there were no nets at the windows. The whole world could see in. Window boxes filled with green shrubs and tubs of conifers lined the gravel path. There was a driveway to the side with space for a car and a garage with an up-and-over door. Cissie decided that she'd knock on the front door and if she lost her nerve she'd pretend that she'd called at the wrong house by mistake. So, she walked down the path.

She rang the doorbell and electrical chimes played somewhere at the back of the house. And nothing happened. She rang the bell again. Still nothing. There was nobody at home. She peered through a window into a dining room. A large table covered with a decorative lace cloth, six chairs, a bowl of oranges, two candelabras, silver ones, each one holding three unused red candles. There were pictures on the walls. Artistic looking prints with gilt frames. And posters, clearly from her singing days, in slender black frames. Cissie could just make out the print on one of them, a venue somewhere in Torquay, and then it jumped out at her in thick red block print, top of the bill, 'Bella Bolt, the Queen of the Midlands' and it made Cissie exclaim, well I never. She went back to the front door but couldn't see through its frosted glass panel, so she peered through the window to the other side, into the sitting

room. A neat three-piece suite in green draylon that looked like it'd never been sat on. Cushions plumped to perfection. A glass-topped coffee table with magazines neatly stacked on it. A bowl of nuts and a pair of nutcrackers. There was no Christmas tree. No decorations of any sort. Cissie thought of her own flat festooned with paper chains and tinsel this time of year. The only nod to the season here appeared to be five Christmas cards on a wooden mantelpiece over the gas fire. There were also two photographs on the mantelpiece. Cissie moved closer to the window and peered in to get a clearer view. One of the photographs, in a silver frame, was of a man in uniform. It looked like someone on service in the second war. A husband perhaps? Mr Stenton? And the other photograph, in a dark wood frame, was an old sepia shot of a young woman, a very pretty young woman, dressed-up like they used to back when she was a girl, in a frock with large puffed up sleeves, her hair plaited and coiled up decoratively on her head. Much of the delicate detail had faded, but Cissie could see that the young woman wore a contented smile on her face. She could see her smooth and unblemished complexion. Her large and appealing eyes. Her soft snub of a nose.

Ada. It was Ada. And that was the part of the story that Cissie should have told Winnie.



Winnie needs to find a toilet. And quickly. Cissie's still not back. She wipes the sand off her feet with her towel and puts her sandals on. Slips her nylons into her handbag. Grabbing both her bags she heads off to the pier. There'll be a café with

facilities somewhere or there's probably public toilets on the prom. She thinks she saw some near the crazy golf. George liked the crazy golf. And those miniature model villages that you sometimes get at the seaside. He'd talked about making one himself in their garden if they ever got to their bungalow in Lincolnshire.

The toilets are very dirty considering that they are attended and Winnie can't help but tut as she leaves the block. She looks at her watch and realises that she has to be back at the bus in half an hour. And then she realises she doesn't know where the bus is parked. She has a hazy memory of where they got off, but she's no idea how to find her way back there. She doesn't know the name of the street. She'd been relying on Cissie. She decides to head back to their deckchairs and hopefully to find Cissie there. She walks to the railings on the prom and looks out over the beach. It stretches from the pier in the north and goes on forever. A huge sweep of sand and Winnie realises she has absolutely no idea whereabouts she and Cissie had been sitting. The beach, everywhere, seems busier than it had been earlier. The tide's come in a bit and the sea is full of people now. She feels her heart beating a little faster, she can physically feel it, and it makes her shudder. She remembers when George used to cuddle her and she'd rest her head on his chest and then have to move it away if she heard his heart beating. There was something about it, that noise, that dull thud, hollow echo, that she just couldn't bear. It was like there was some kind of machine inside him made of gristle and flesh and blood and muscle pounding away, ready to stop at any moment.

Winnie feels herself trembling slightly, her stomach churning. She feels herself beginning to panic. She heads for the pier and looks around her at all the people milling about, all these people escaped for the day, lumbering along at a

relaxed pace and she wills for a familiar face to suddenly loom out of the crowd of strangers. Cissie must be back at the bus by now. She must have given up on Winnie. And here's Winnie stuck on the pier, not knowing where she's supposed to be going. All alone. She's lost. She feels overwhelmed and dizzy and knows that she needs to sit down. The late afternoon heat is too much for her. She's not had a drink for some time. She sees a café with a flashing neon sign sandwiched between a couple of arcades and heads for it.

There had been that time. There had been that time when she'd found Bell playing with a little kitten. A wild little thing with thick orange striped fur that stuck out all over the place and it went up on its back legs, its front legs clawing in the air as it played with the string that Bell dangled in front of it, and its belly was the purest white she'd ever seen. And she stood and watched for a full five minutes without making a sound and she saw Bell wiggle the string this way and that and she caught the delight on her face as the kitten swung this way and that with a playful spirit and Winnie heard Bell's gentle giggle as she waggled a finger at the kitten, provocatively, and the kitten swung again, its eyes, barely weeks old, flickering with a mixture of goodness and evil and then it swung a paw and this time it caught Bell on the finger and she jerked backwards and ow, she shoved the finger in her mouth, and then, naughty Kitty, you got me that time, she'd said and her whole hand went towards the kitten, but so gently, and she patted it and then picked it up, like it was made of glass, and she cuddled it to herself. And even from the distance away that she was, Winnie could hear the delighted purrs coming from the tiny creature. Bell caught sight of Winnie and Winnie had asked her, do you like cats then? And Bell

had nodded and Winnie had said, would you like us to have one as a pet? And Bell had nodded again and smiled and her face had shone with delight. Winnie took a few days to build up the courage but then she asked Mother when she'd just finished up in the scullery one evening. You know it's Bell's birthday next week, she'd said and Mother had said of course she did, but there were to be no extravagances and then Winnie had gone on, well, I should like to get her a kitten. I've seen her playing with one and she seems to really love the little thing. And I know that Jessie Nobbs's cat has just had some kittens not long since. And Mother had turned and sighed and looked at Winnie and said, I'm sorry Winnie, but I shan't have one of those creatures in this house. They're dirty things and they bite and they scratch. And Winnie had thought to herself, it's not them that's dirty, it's us, it's people, and she'd looked at Mother as she'd rubbed her hands on her mucky apron.

Winnie sits down on an orange plastic chair. There are tears on her cheeks. She's taken off her sunglasses and is wiping her eyes. She must have walked for miles. She can hear the bingo in the arcade next door, a loud roll-up-roll-up-eyes-down-ladies jarring against the electronic fanfare of a horse racing game. Sitting here now in the shade, out of the bright glare of sunlight, she shivers and pulls her cardigan around her shoulders. The ice cream she splashed down the front of it earlier has dried into stiff little patches of dirty white. Winnie fumbles for a handkerchief, licks the corner of it and starts to rub away at one of the patches. She's self-conscious that she might look like she's been crying.

She remembers that time with George, huddled around a table in a public house, it might have been Yates's or The Feather, and George's jacket was slung

across the back of his chair and he was supping at the foamy head of his pint of mild and Winnie had been upset by something and had sat staring into her own glass. And then she'd begun to cry. And George had said, not in 'ere, duck, and he'd put his hand out under the table and patted her leg.

'So, what's happened here then?' A big bosomed waitress with a booming voice is towering over Winnie now. She's very small eyes, thinks Winnie, narrow eyes. Winnie feels that she is looking at her suspiciously, eyeing her up.

'I've lost my friend.' It comes out in a rather pathetic way, Winnie thinks afterwards. She sounds like a silly little girl. 'What I mean is,' she carries on, 'I'm on a trip with my work colleagues,' she exaggerates these last two words, tries to make herself sound a bit well-to-do.

'Oh?' says the big bosomed lady, 'And where do you work then, dear?'

Winnie bristles at the dear. But then I suppose, she thinks, at my age and still working. She decides to clarify the situation, takes a breath and 'Well, I'm retired, obviously, but I'm here along with other retirees, some former work colleagues and friends. We're all from a lace factory – or were. In Longwash.'

'And you've got yourself lost,' says the woman. Her face breaks into a broad smile. 'Don't you worry. Happens all the time. Can't remember where the bus parked up? Is that it?'

'Something like that,' says Winnie, a little relieved.

'Well, let me get you a cup of tea. There's every likelihood your bus will be parked up in one of three spots in town. Bus drivers are very predictable.'

'A cup of tea would be very nice,' says Winnie.

The woman continues, 'What bus company are you with, duck?'

‘Barton’s.’

‘Right, you leave this with me. I’ll put out some feelers.’

Minutes later a very strong looking cup of tea is placed in front of Winnie. She sighs and says thank you and drinks it gratefully. She’s warmed to the big bosomed lady. Her nerves are subsiding. She just feels a bit silly really. She looks at her watch. Oh heck, it’s now ten minutes past the time she’s supposed to be back on the bus. What’s the worst that can happen she thinks. So, I miss the bus. I have to get a train.



Once away from the beach, the wind seems to have stilled itself and Cissie feels the heat building up again. She feels daring with her tights off, her bare legs out in public. Sweat is gathering in all the crooks and the crannies of her body. She passes bare-chested young lads in nothing but shorts and she thinks of her brother Billy in his smart suit and tie that time they were here. She thinks of her own long skirts and blouses all buttoned up and those stays they wore! Blimmin’ ‘eck, she thinks, how did we do it? The heat feels intense now as she pounds the pavement, the crowds are thickening and small children are scuttering around her feet, clutching candy floss and windmills, with sticks of rock stuck in their gobs and she fears she’ll kick one of them by accident. She puts her hands up to shield her eyes from the glare of the sun as it bounces off the tarmac and the gaudy coloured awnings on the shop fronts. Music blares from arcades and she keeps on, heading for the high street. Oh, bother this, she says, as someone else bumps against her and she turns and, oh, bother this,

oh, boggler this, and she heads back towards the Ballroom. She knows where the Ballroom is. She'll spend a penny and buy herself a lemonade. She'll feel safe there.

She finds it on a corner by the sea front. The Ballroom is a shadow of its former self. Her heart sinks when she sees the chipped tiles and worn carpets and dirty windows. She takes in the colours that once sparkled luxuriously and are now faded and drab. But once inside, the large high-ceilings make the place feel airy and although it's busy, there seems to be some respite from the rush and din of outside. She follows a sign for the ladies' toilets.

She gives a little groan as she sits down to wee. Her knees ache. Her head aches. She's conscious that she's caught the sun on the back of her neck and it feels stiff and sore. And she feels sick. She runs her hands under the cold water tap. Her skin looks red and blotchy in the cracked bathroom mirror, her face powder has broken into clumps. She takes her compact from her handbag and dabs at her cheeks and her forehead, fumbles for a bullet of lipstick and paints dusky rose onto her lips. She looks quite pale and sickly underneath it all, just like your mam, she thinks to herself. She should have worn a sun hat. She could always go back and buy one of them big sombreros to wear. That would embarrass Winnie. Wouldn't it just.

Oh, Winnie. Why hadn't she just told her the whole story and they could have planned to go and visit Bella Bolt together? Cissie wouldn't believe that this woman, this Bella Bolt, was their Bell Bolt, unless she saw her with her own eyes. Cissie didn't chase ghosts. But that photograph in that frame on that mantelpiece in that grand bungalow – that was Ada Foster for sure. Strange she'd kept the name Bolt, whilst Cissie did all she could to scrub that man's name from her life. Did Tommy Bolt come good in the end? She always had an inkling that Bell had gone

with him. But again, she could never have been completely certain. It wasn't something she'd ever wanted to speculate about. And neither, so it seemed had Winnie. And maybe that's why they'd barely spoken that little girl's name to each other for years. Years and years. And really, at the end of it all, the only thing that Cissie knew for certain was that Bell was Ada's and Billy's little girl.

As she stands in front of the sinks looking at her mam looking back at her from the mirror, she feels the nausea rise in her stomach, up into her chest and she leans forward as if she's about to heave into the sink, but then it subsides and she decides that a cold glass of lemonade will be the best course of action and then she'd best get herself back to Winnie who'll be fretting no doubt.

The lemonade is sickly and sweet, but ice cold and Cissie stands and drinks it at the bar. When she leaves and hits the hot air, she begins to feel lightheaded again. It's not an unpleasant feeling, she feels more like she's had a port and lemon than a lemonade, but that's fine she thinks and she knows that she needs to turn right here and then head down past that big monstrosity with no windows and onto the beach and back to the deckchairs.

But it's when she's just about to cross the road that she hears it. Music. A familiar song. An organ has struck up from somewhere, an old-fashioned funfair organ. Cissie doesn't know where it's coming from, it must be some kind of music hall entertainment they're having, maybe on the pier. But it doesn't seem to be coming from the pier, it's coming from the other direction and it's drowning out the bumping and the pounding of the rock music from the shops and the arcades and so she follows it. She follows the music and she's humming along with it – *oh I do like to be beside the seaside* – then she turns off the main drag and Cissie knows where

she's going now – *oh I do like to stroll along* – she's taking the same route that she took with Billy that time when they were looking for her father – *prom, prom, prom* – and Cissie's thinking, but this can't be right because me and Billy looked down here – *where the brass bands play* – and then she's heading for that pub, the one that Billy was sure that her dad would be in – *diddly om pom pom* – a pub, tucked away down a side street, he could be in there, Billy reckoned he could be in there – *oh I do like to be beside the seaside* – and there's it is, the pub, rearing up in front of her, a building half slumped to the ground, its windows boarded up, marked due for demolition, a bracket sticking out above the door and the ghost of a sign hanging from it. And the chorus is starting up again – *oh I do like to be beside the sea* – but their dad, he wasn't in there, it was called the King's Head, and they looked in there and in The Anchor and Chain, they looked in them both and he wasn't there – *oh I do like to be beside the sea* – and she's winding left and right through the alleyways and the jitties and out onto a street of hotels and boarding houses and she thinks, but we didn't look down this street, I don't remember this street – *oh there's lots of things to do* – he might be down here, and she's hurrying now and as she swings her arms briskly by her sides she realises that her handbag has gone, she must have left it in the Ballroom, she'll have to go back and get it because she has to get back to Winnie soon, but the music's still playing and she wants to know where it's coming from, and so she's walking faster than she's walked for years, trotting alongside a row of parked up coaches now, and as she turns, she feels her sandal hit something and her ankle twists, she catches her breath and then she's falling.



The bus is still there. As Winnie approaches it from behind she can see that it looks half empty. People must be waiting about on the pavement still. Smoking. Gossiping. Perhaps she isn't the only one late back. She feels nervous, expecting that when they catch sight of her, Bert and Dickie will start heckling her for being late. They'll no doubt start singing some rude song or other, why are we waiting, and then those young girls will join in and they'll change all the words, no doubt, and make them all mucky. But then again, it may well be those young girls as gets back to the bus late or Bert and Dickie for that matter, probably been holed up in some boozier all afternoon. And then she stops herself for being so judgemental and thinks about the nice lady in the café and how relieved she is to see the bus after all.

But as she gets nearer, she sees the group all gathered up in a huddle. Not straggling along the pavement in twos and threes as you would if you were waiting for a bus, but all tightly bound up, like a ball. It's as if they're all focusing their attention on one thing and that's when Winnie sees the ambulance. At first when she sees its high roof and the big window she thinks it's an ice cream van. Then she sees the bright orange stripe along the side and it reminds her of when they came to get George that time he collapsed in the garden and she stops, dead still, feels herself gasp. The handle of her shopping bag is sliding down her arm and she raises it and slides it back up and keeps walking forwards.

'Winnie.' It's Bette. 'It's Cissie. She's not well.'

The shopping bag slides down Winnie's arm again and she lets it this time, she lets it slide right off and fall on the ground and she knows that the glass inside the flask will shatter as soon as it hits the pavement, she thinks she hears it, like a thousand tiny mirrors smashing, shattering into a million pieces, and those million

pieces all swimming around in the stale luke warm tea left in the bottom of the flask. But she leaves it – her shopping bag, her broken flask, her half-read magazine, her umbrella that she never needed to use, half a bag of sherbet lemons, the hand-painted plate – she leaves it all on the pavement. And she's running now in a slow and deliberate way, as best a way as her old legs will let her, through the crowd and towards the ambulance doors. Obscured by the familiar faces of former workmates, she sees Cissie lying awkwardly on a stretcher, like she's fallen and twisted herself. The hem of her dress is pulled up, the lace edge of her petticoat just showing. Her head hangs back and her eyes are closed. And there's a man on one side in a black uniform and he's holding a rubber mask over Cissie's mouth and nose and then there's another man in the same smart black uniform and they are lifting the stretcher into the ambulance now and asking these people, all these people, to step back please and Winnie feels herself push into the people in front of her and she's calling out in a wisp of a high voice, let me through, let me through, and they do. They step back and let Winnie through.



The weather's still not broken and a drought has been declared. Winnie is hiding from the heat, from the eleven o'clock sun burning fiercely in the sky. Its blistering light seeps into the carpet's heavy autumnal swirls.

Winnie's house in Imperial Place always smells of paint. The sitting room is bleached of colour. Knobbly off-white woodchip wallpaper. A bright white net curtain hanging from the window, casting spidery shadows across the floor. There's

a faded aroma of sweet pipe-smoke in the house. George's jacket still hangs on a peg on the back of a door.

Rita and Barry arrive mid-morning for Sunday lunch. Rita's wearing a shirt-dress in crackling polyester mix, splashed with daisies and roses in orange and yellow and brown. She wears matching tan sling-backs with wedge-heels and a tan belt pulls her in tight at the middle. Barry's in slacks and an open-necked short-sleeved shirt.

Winnie's sitting in the armchair that used to be George's favourite. She puts down a framed photograph on the table beside her, of her and George on their wedding day. George in uniform. She's wearing a pale dress that falls to her ankles. A hat decorated with flowers. A small bouquet of carnations. Rita goes over and kisses Winnie on the cheek. Barry stands by the fireplace.

'You've had one of them big perms,' Winnie says to Rita. 'It does suit you.'

'Oh, thank you,' says Rita and she flicks her head to one side and her big bouncy curls bob up and down. 'Still so flamin' hot. Not really the weather for a Sunday dinner.'

'It's tradition though, in't it?' says Barry.

The heat of the day is building. Heavy and dry. The windows in Winnie's house are pushed open as far as they will go. It's been sweltering hot now for fifteen days solid. They've recorded temperatures in the nineties in these landlocked Midlands. There's not been a drop of rain for weeks. The air is prickly today, full of electricity. Everyone seems to be waiting for a storm to break.



Cissie's been dead for two weeks now. They told Winnie afterwards that she had a cardiac arrest in the back of the ambulance. They did what they could but she couldn't be saved. She'd a bad heart, you see, and was more poorly than she was letting on to people. Winnie overheard someone say that Cissie was a ticking timebomb and she thought that a horrible thing to say. She'd asked to see her old friend laid out at the chapel of rest. Cissie's Kev took her. The coffin was set up on a high table and Winnie struggled to see Cissie's face at first. Kev found a stool for her to stand on. Winnie peered over into the coffin. Oh, duck, she murmured. And then she kissed the tips of her fingers and pressed them onto Cissie's cold lips. She took in what they'd dressed her up in. A dark green dress. Very old-fashioned. Winnie didn't recognise it. It looked a little worn in places. A little creased. A little tight around the armholes. And she wished they'd asked her to pick something out, something smart maybe, something freshly laundered and aired and pressed and not just taken out of the back of the wardrobe smelling of mothballs. But she knows that Cissie wouldn't really have cared. She'd dress herself up to get attention, particularly attention from men, but Cissie was never one for looking well turned out. And she seemed to care less and less as she got older. Her hair had been curled and combed away from her face and Winnie remembered it before it went so white, the dark reddish shine that it used to have when the sunlight caught it. She studied Cissie's face, which had been heavily made-up, and noticed how face powder had caught in the lines worn into her cheeks.

They held a simple service at the crematorium. It was well attended. Cissie had a few family members there: Kev and Kev's mother, a great-niece and nephew and she'd many friends and acquaintances. Winnie wasn't sure that Cissie would

have liked the service to have been led by a vicar, but Kev said that it didn't seem proper unless there was someone with a dog collar on doing the talking so he engaged the services of the local Church of England reverend. The vicar gave a summary of Cissie's life. Talked about her growing up in a large family. How she'd been a wonderful grandmother to Kevin and how he was a credit to her. Kev turned puce with embarrassment at being singled out. The vicar led everyone in a rousing rendition of All Things Bright and Beautiful and Winnie watched tears rolling down Kev's cheeks as he stood there with his mouth clamped shut, looking at the floor. And then another chap got up and, after a minute or two, Winnie recognised him as Mr Dunkley, the old overlooker from Henson's. He was well into his seventies and stooped. He mumbled, reading monotonously from a script that he held just inches from his face, but Winnie was moved to tears by what he said about Cissie. She could be as coarse as a navvy, he said, but there was no one as much fun as her; she may have lacked tact and diplomacy at times, but she always told the truth; grace and manners weren't attributes you'd have associated with her, but she'd give you her last penny.

Kev had organised a do after the funeral, sandwiches and a free bar at one of the nicer pubs in town, not a pub that Cissie would probably have ever taken a drink in herself. There were plenty of folk there, more than had come along to the service at the crematorium and Winnie wondered if this had anything to do with the free drinks that were being served. She heard afterwards that it went on into the small hours. Cissie would have liked that though.



Winnie is at the kitchen sink, running the cold tap, filling the kettle. Rita hovers in the doorway. Winnie knows that she's watching her, studying her hands and feet in case something slips out of her grasp or makes her stumble.

The radio is reporting that more scrub fires have broken out in north Wales. One, believed to have been started deliberately, is still burning in the New Forest. Rita is tutting.

'All those poor people having their 'olidays ruined,' she says, rifling through a drawer in the dark wood sideboard. She counts out knives, forks and spoons. Barry helps her as they gently lift the dining table away from the wall and out into the room. The rickety gate-leg is unfolded, a lace cloth shaken out over sun-scorched patches of table-top, catching dark-eyed knots and scratches in its dappled nets.

Dinner's ready. Barry brings a chair and a stool from the hardly-ever-used front room and they take their places. No one complains about having to straddle the leg or the slope of the unsteady leaf. Winnie has bought a steak and kidney pie with a delicate rope twist crust, perfectly pleated with a golden crown. She serves up blackened spuds and Yorkshire puddings, gravy with a thick skin on it. Sherry to wash it down. They sit, huddled, knives and forks clacking like pistons on a train.

Barry finishes first, leaving a clean plate. Rita is next. She's scraped half of her pie to the side and discarded it in a puddle of brown. They all help to clear the table. Winnie is at the kitchen sink again, washing-up tea-cups under a running tap.

'Watch that water, Winnie,' Rita is tutting again. 'We're using standpipes on our street.'

Barry decides he'll mow the lawn. It's gone all weedy since George died and the sun has parched it yellow. He heads outside. Rita sits down next to Winnie on

her hard, yellow sofa and says, 'So, are you looking forward to the big move then?' And Winnie says nothing back. Rita goes on, 'It's a great little place, i'nt'it? The flat. All mod cons. And aren't the fitted carpets beautiful. Good quality. And that lounge for socialising in, that'll be grand, won't it.'

'Depends what the other people are like,' Winnie sniffs. 'I might not want to socialise.' And she misses Cissie so much and her insides ache for her. 'Anyway, I've put by a few things you might like.' She's been having another clear out again. Every time Barry and Rita visit there's another bag of things she thinks they might like. 'There's that gravy boat I was telling you about. You said you'd broken yours.'

When Barry's pulled all the weeds he can find, he comes back inside and settles himself in George's armchair. Winnie's taking up a hem on one of Rita's summer frocks. Rita often brings her bits and pieces of sewing to be done. She's useless herself. Can't even sew on a button. Winnie's needle flashes in and out of the fabric, neat little movements, tiny little stitches. A spider weaving a delicate thread. Her spectacles are perched on the end of her nose, her eyes fixed on the task in hand.

'We should be meking tracks soon,' says Barry.

And Winnie holds up Rita's frock to the light and says, 'Let me get these threads tidied up. You don't want to leave any snaggy bits. If you catch 'em they'll run and run.' She finishes, pulls out the pins and winds and snaps the thread with a flourish and mutters, 'All done,' through a mouthful of pins. She flips the inside-out frock back the right way and then shakes it out with a crack and holds it up to the window. Then she folds it and lays it over the arm of the settee. 'It'll need a press,' she says.

Barry announces that it's definitely time to be pushing off. Winnie gives

them both a kiss on the cheek, Rita, who smells of sherry, and Barry, who smells of cigarettes, and they head back to their modern house on the Clifton estate. She can hear them clearly as they walk off down the path. They must think she's deaf.

Rita says, 'She's just a frail little bird, poor thing.'

And Barry says, 'We're doing the best for her.'



Winnie will miss the roomy house at Imperial Place. When Zillah Goddard died, just a couple of years after they'd been married, George put his foot down and said that it was time to move and so Winnie finally said goodbye to Embankment Street, with its dark, tiny bedrooms and damp back kitchen and scullery, its dirty back yard and outside privy, and they moved to new rented accommodation on the other side of town. A grand Victorian villa. George decorated it from top to bottom. It was a little palace with its high ceilings, indoor bathroom, hot and cold water taps, a long thin garden with immaculate lawns and fruit trees and a shed that smelt of grass clippings and grease.

On the 9th May 1941, bombs fell on Embankment Street, narrowly missing the factories a few streets away that were still making nets for the war effort. Number seven was smashed to pieces. When Winnie heard about it, all those years ago, she'd been so upset. She'd been caught up in the city that night. George was out on his shift as fire warden. And it had been the next day that they'd met and gone for a drink, that was it, they'd gone for a drink at Yates's, and she remembered George's jacket slung over the back of his chair. And that's when she heard the news,

someone she knew, a man she recognised from the factory, had just come over to tell them about it. It's all gone, he'd said, Embankment Street, it's been hit. Pulverised. That was the word that the man used. And Winnie had started to cry and George had said, not in 'ere, duck, and he'd put his hand out under the table and patted her leg.



Winnie had meant to give them that plate from Skegness. She'd bought it for them after all. But then, when Rita had said, 'Now, Auntie Winnie, you've got to stop giving away all your stuff,' when she'd tried to give her a gravy boat, and then she'd left behind the bag of bits Winnie'd put aside for her, well, suddenly Winnie changed her mind.

When Barry and Rita have gone, Winnie reaches into the top drawer of the sideboard and brings it out. It's still in its tissue paper and newspaper as it was wrapped up for her the day that she bought it. The girl in the shop must have done a good job for it to have survived being dropped. Winnie peels back the layers of paper and sets it down on top of the sideboard. Yellow sand, blue sea. She'll hang it on the wall. Flags flying from the pier. There's a space just above George's armchair. – S K E G N E S S – . It'll look grand there. Just for now, till she moves. Two empty deckchairs.



It's very quiet now that Rita and Barry have left. The sun is still high in the sky; it's

only mid-afternoon. She'll take that walk now.

She gets as far as the Market Place. It's going to be much further than she had thought. So, she decides to take a bus. There's a shelter and a seat at the bus stop that will be most welcome in this heat. She's no idea how long she'll have to wait for a bus to come. It'll be a Sunday service, of course. But there's no hurry. She's nothing else to do now. As she reaches the bus stop she realises that she's standing outside the library. It's still a grand old building. The golden angel over the door is a little duller than she remembers. All those books she'd borrowed from this place when she was younger. She'd read them voraciously. But that all stopped when she'd been taken out of school and sent off to work. The reading stopped. In the evenings, she'd be too tired, her eyes feeling the strain of a day's mending work, and the weekends, well, they were for doing all those other jobs that she couldn't do in the week. And then George, he wasn't much of a reader either. Their Barry has a shelf of books in his house, a row of Shakespeares all bound in fake red leather and a set of encyclopedia with gold lettering on the spine. She doubts they've ever been opened. She'll dip into some of the shorter stories that she finds in the magazines in the doctor's waiting room, the Reader's Digest and the People's Friend, but she rarely finishes one.

There's a bus coming along the road and it's heading out of town, the way Winnie needs to go. She's not familiar with the street that she's heading for, so she asks the driver to let her know when she should get off. He's a straight-faced chap with beads of sweat on his upper lip. Winnie feels sorry for him having to wear such a heavy looking uniform in this weather. She sits up at the front, shifting her gaze between the view from the window and the driver's rear-view mirror, looking out for

his signal for her to get off. She watches the streets pass, knows most of their names. They drive through the empty Market Place, just a few young lads sitting in a bus shelter, smoking. Most people are probably inside, out of the heat, even at this time of day, it's roasting. Fisher and Radford's is still there, looking ever so down at heel these days. The bus pulls up at the stop outside The Angel. Cissie's pub. George went in there with his workmates sometimes too. And she remembers her father drinking in there. And there's Trafalgar Street, a gentle slope, a terrace of tiny houses, leading down to the factories on the canal side. The factories have been gradually closing down now for years. You no longer hear the clickety-clack of the lace looms as you walk around the town. Machinery and men and women lie idle. Some of the factory buildings have fallen into disrepair, their carcasses neglected as people turn away from brick and cotton and iron and all things industrial and look for a bright shiny future moulded out of concrete and plastic and chrome. Winnie wonders why it couldn't hang on. The industry had taken up nylon after the war, moved with the times, so why couldn't it still hang on. People still hung nets at their windows. People would always need nets at their windows.

The row of houses where the Higgins family lived is still there. It looks even more crooked than it ever did. There's less uniformity now though; Winnie notices how some have changed their windows and their front doors, a mouth with odd teeth in it.

As the bus pulls off they pass the jitty at the back of The Angel and it looks even narrower, even darker, even dirtier, than it ever did. They pass the old cinema; it's a bingo hall now. Cissie was a regular visitor in her last few years. And then they turn off down Main Road and the bus trundles over the canal bridge. Winnie gets the

smell from the canal through the open bus windows. Fresh as ever, she thinks to herself. She looks at the canal stretching away till it meets the river. Oh, the river. How lovely would it be to head off down the tow path, along the canal and then branch off at that point where canal meets river and find that sweet shallow spot and slip off your shoes and your stockings and go and paddle in the cool water. It would be heavenly. They'll reach the outskirts of Longwash soon: past the fish and chip shop with its new brightly coloured façade and the old pawn shop, it's a record shop now, the church that her mother went to that only has services every other week now and the cemetery that still gets its grass cut regularly and looks as neat as it can. It must have doubled in size over the years. Now that George is buried there Winnie visits every week. Sometimes she'll stop at her parents' grave. The headstone is worn and discoloured by moss and she's asked Barry if he can have a look at getting it cleaned. I should like to be able to read their names again, she'd said.

The journey goes on, past the cemetery, towards the point where the town once ended, where its ragged edges once blended into fields and scattered farms. This is where the houses start now. A grand estate of smart bungalows and detached houses with gardens and garages, built around curving crescents and tree-lined avenues between the wars and developed further a decade ago.

'Next stop, duck,' the driver calls.

When the bus has rumbled away out of sight and out of earshot, Winnie is left alone on the quiet road. She crosses and turns down Foxglove Avenue, takes the first left onto Grove Avenue. She's standing under the shade of trees. There's the slightest hint of a breeze stirring. She could do with a sit down. She can see number one, Bette and Charlie's house, a nice bungalow on the corner. The curtains are all

shut to keep out the sun. She walks past it, her sandals softly padding on the ground. She feels like a shadow.

She remembers walking through the tree-lined grove at Clifton, before they built the estate, with George when he came home on leave that time. And they did have their picnic. In the shade of those trees. She did buy him a couple of bottles of mild. They did stop off at that tea shop on the way home.

This is the house. Number seven Grove Avenue. It's terribly smart. Whoever lives here has done alright for themselves. It has a wide-eyed look about it, this house, and then Winnie realises it's because its curtains are wide open and it has no nets up. Nothing to stop people from looking in. She steps away from the ornate iron gate leading into the garden and stands behind the hedge so she'll not be seen and rehearses what she'll say. But an old nagging anxiety comes back. If George were here with her now, he'd take charge of the situation and he'd ask her why she's losing her nerve. And Winnie would say to George, 'cos I'm a coward George Goddard. I used to run away and hide from that Cissie Higgins when I were a girl. And I told you about that time I ran out of the butcher's shop and dropped all our money for the week on the floor. And George would say, there's no need to run from idle gossip because that's all it is, idle folks with idle hands using their idle gobs to stir things up. And then he'd remind her how she made it up with that Cissie Higgins in the end anyway. I'd never get a look in when you pair were together, he'd say, and Winnie chuckles as she imagines George heading off to the shed again with his paper and his pipe leaving her and Cissie to put the world to rights over a well mashed cup of tea.

Winnie will gather all her courage up and she'll walk through that ornate iron gate, up the sweeping gravel path, admiring the geraniums in their tubs, the immaculately trimmed lawns on either side and she'll tut as she thinks, someone's been watering this grass and there's supposed to be a hosepipe ban round here, and she'll approach the front door, slick and plastic and inset with thick, rippled panes of glass and she'll glance down as she feels something rubbing at her ankles and she'll see a small ginger cat wrapping itself around her legs and she'll call down to it, puss, puss, and it'll slope off, purring loudly and she'll pause by the front door and her finger will hover just next to the doorbell. She will press it. And then, well, she doesn't know the next bit. But whatever does come next, she won't go straight home when she leaves here. There's still plenty of warmth and daylight left in the day. So, if she can manage the walk, she'll get herself back onto the main road and head back towards Longwash. She'll pass the cemetery again and she'll walk back over the canal bridge and she'll look up at the great chimney of the old factory that still casts a shadow over this town, and just at this point, she'll turn off down the tow path and follow the canal along, right along, to the place where it meets the river and along a bit further to the spot where it's shallow enough to paddle.

PART II

Reimagining a Lace Town: what creative processes can a writer use to transform archived oral testimonies into fictional worlds?

With the aid of living memory [...] the historian can draw up fresh maps, in which people are as prominent as places, and the two are more closely intertwined. He or she can then explore the moral topography of a village or town with the same precision which predecessors have given to the Ordnance Survey, following the ridge and furrow of the social environment as well as the parish boundaries, travelling the dark corridors and half-hidden passageways as well as the bye-law street. Reconstructing a child's itinerary seven years ago the historian will stumble on the invisible boundaries which separated the rough end of a street from the respectable, the front houses from the back, the boys' space from the girls'. Following the grid of the pavement you will come upon one stretch that was used for 'tramcars', another for hopscotch, [...] the High Street, where young people went courting on their Sunday promenades, while the cul de sac becomes a place where woodchoppers had their sheds and costers dressed their barrows. The physical environment will come alive too, if seen as an arena of activity rather than as an impersonal ecological force or a repository of archaeological remains. Particular fields or woods or commons are remembered by their use, by the work done in them, or the provisions foraged: here mushrooms and firewood could be found or rabbits trapped; there potatoes were dug or horses illegally grazed or long summer days were spent at haymaking or harvest. Oral evidence makes it possible to escape from some of the deficiencies of the documentary record, at least so far as recent times are concerned (i.e. those which fall within living memory),

and the testimony which it brings is at least as important as that of the hedges and fields, though one should not exclude the other. There are matters of fact which are recorded in the memories of older people and nowhere else, events of the past which they alone can elucidate for us, vanished sights which they alone can recall. Documents can't answer back, nor, beyond a point, can they be asked to explain in greater detail what they mean, to give more examples, to account for negative instances, or to explain apparent discrepancies in the record which survives. Oral evidence, on the other hand, is open ended, and limited only by the number of survivors [...]’ (Samuel, “Local History and Oral History” 199).

1. Introduction

‘The Queen of the Midlands’ is a novel set against the historical backdrop of the East Midlands machine-made lace industry in the twentieth century. In writing it, I have drawn upon an archive of oral histories of workers from this industry to inform and inspire my creative process. In using oral history archives I have, as Samuels describes above, found myself ‘following the ridge and furrow of the social environment as well as the parish boundaries, travelling the dark corridors and half-hidden passageways as well as the bye-law street’ (“Local History and Oral History” 199). This thesis reflects on my practice-based interdisciplinary research in engaging with this archive and the creative process(es) that have led me, through my writing, to reimagine a real-life lace town and create a fictional one as the backdrop to my novel.

The thesis explores the historical context of my research, the disciplines of oral history and creative writing in the academy and the use of oral history archives in my creative practice as a writer. ‘The historical context’ examines my decision to set my novel in a lace making community in the early-twentieth century. It examines the heritage of machine-made lace and my own personal connections with it.

‘Disciplines collide’ sets out the interdisciplinary context of the thesis by contextualising oral history and creative writing as both fields of practice and academic disciplines. ‘Spoken text’ introduces the oral history archive that I worked with and discusses how I gained access to the archive material and my engagement with it. Drawing on oral history theory, it goes on to consider the act of listening to oral history archives in order to harvest material for creative inspiration. The

transformation of spoken text into ‘Written text’ is considered by an exploration of the range of forms that I experimented with as part of the creative process.

‘Reimagining’ examines the geographical context of the East Midlands machine-lace heritage discovered in the oral history archives and the notion of place in my novel. It considers the story-making process itself; how I drew on oral history archives to create a fictional world, populated it with characters and breathed life into them through dialogue and literary detail.

Finally, I touch on ethical considerations when creatively repurposing personal testimonies. I draw conclusions about this way of working with oral history archives and consider how future creative writing practitioners might work in an interdisciplinary way with oral history.

2. The historical context

It passed through calloused hands, delicacy free-
falling. Embroidered wool, mosaic in imitation lily,
wide-mouthed peony, moss, beaded-vermicelli’s
lugworm casts.

Sometimes, its handling a kind of love,
knowing shining-girls never saw the graphite,
pre-bleached state an intimacy between lace
and handler.

extract from “Homage to Walker’s Workers 1932”, (Tyler-Bennett 12, lines 1-8).

I grew up in a village that once boasted its own lace factory, although by the time I was born in the late 1960s it had become an engineering works. The nearest city, Nottingham, was known as the home of lace making. In the nineteenth century, manufacturing spread out from the city and lace making towns sprung up along the Erewash Valley, cutting across the three counties of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire and Derbyshire. Although the industry had diminished considerably by the 1970s, it was still a vivid part of the physical and mental landscape. My childhood memories are set against rich industrial architecture, brick factories and tall blackened chimneys; they are peopled by strong female characters who worked in local textile manufacture; they are brought to life by anecdotes of these industrial times passed down to me by my Nottingham-born paternal grandparents. Decades later, as a writer and following a career in the heritage sector working at sites of historic interest and with archives and oral histories, I have been drawn to reimagine, through fiction, these physical and mental landscapes that I grew up with.

Lace, the textile at the heart of all this labour, shines out as a mesmerising symbol: a beautifully delicate textile produced in a dirty factory environment; with connotations of sexuality and frivolity; the net curtain hanging at the window to signal privacy and respectability; its place in the many rites of passage, from christening robes to wedding gowns to the black nets adorning the hats of mourners

at funerals and as heirlooms passed down through generations. Briggs-Goode and Dean suggest that these associations with lace connote:

‘a myriad of meanings and values – from the ‘prim and proper’ to its diametric polar opposite – [lace] can be white and concealing or red and revealing as well as cover all manner of meanings inbetween’ (9).

The machine-lace industry once dominated the English East Midlands, with 60 percent of Britain’s lace makers based in the region (Hayes 151), mass-producing fashionable lace for dresses and trimmings and net curtains to afford some privacy to the homes of the booming urban population (Quarini 29). At the turn of the nineteenth century, 40,000 people, a third of the working population of Nottingham, were employed in the industry (Matthews).

Oral histories held in local archives attest to how the industry permeated entire communities and was an integral part of identity:

all lace work in those days

you know

aye

all lace work (Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection, A98a)

I didn’t know nothing else

but lace

same now

I couldn't do nothing

but lace (A85a)

Only decades later and this crucial part of the region's identity has all but gone.

Pattern books and lace samples have been removed to archives; a few are housed in the odd glass case in a local museum. The lace machines have fallen silent. The factories emptied. The workforce dispersed.

The decline in machine-made lace began in the first-half of the twentieth century.

The industry survived two world wars by adapting to produce vital materials for the war effort, such as mosquito netting and hair-nets for munitions workers. Changing fashions and developments in textile production later in the century took their toll (Mason). The final death knell came in the 1970s and 1980s as the lace industry in the East Midlands, along with so much of Britain's once great manufacturing base, collapsed and manufacturing moved overseas. Since the 1970s, machine-made lace has been made in Europe and the Far East (Bryson 115).

What remains of the industry in the East Midlands today is in a precarious state as both a viable twenty-first century industry and as a heritage. It could be argued that as an industrial heritage, machine-made lace lacks popular appeal and therefore does not form part of the Authorised Heritage Discourse (AHD), a term coined by Laurajane Smith. The AHD is concerned with 'aesthetically pleasing material objects, sites, places and/or landscapes', assets often presided over by

‘archaeologists, architects and historians’ (2). Past outputs of the industry are now valued cultural assets, with lace artefacts held by national repositories such as the Victoria and Albert Museum. Nottingham opened its first publicly owned museum and art gallery at Nottingham Castle in 1878 to ‘establish a permanent collection of Ancient and Modern Laces’ (Edgar 36-37). However, other utilitarian elements of the industry, such as lace making machinery, are under-represented in collections today. The legacy of lace is still evident within the built environment of Nottingham’s Lace Market area (Briggs-Goode & Dean 7), although, following the industry’s decline, many former factory sites across the East Midlands have been demolished or left derelict. A few have been re-purposed for alternative uses: the Adams Building, built as an extensive lace warehouse in Nottingham’s Lace Market, has been refurbished to become a campus of Nottingham College and other former lace buildings in the area have been turned into apartments (Oldfield 40).

Research trips to former lace making and marketing areas of the region highlight that ‘[i]ts legacy continues, but in a fragmented form, largely through academic interest and community-based, time-limited project work. There is no dedicated lace museum in the region’ (Foster 112).

Beyond the tangible heritage assets of the machine-made lace industry, its intangible heritage is even more under-represented. Oral history, as a form of intangible heritage, makes a valuable contribution to the industry’s social and historical legacy. With this in mind, I turned to oral history archives as a writer wanting to reimagine an East Midlands lace town in order to create a fictional one for my novel. Alongside

archived oral sources, I have also consulted regional photographic archives, such as Picture the Past, a collaboration between Derby City Council and Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire County Councils, online newspaper archives and local studies materials held by Nottingham City Libraries. I have made a number of field visits to the Lace Market area of Nottingham and to the region's former lace towns of Ilkeston, Beeston and Long Eaton.

I begin my novel in 1911, a period when machine-made lace was still flourishing in the region. I sketch in the fictional lace making town of Longwash, give it a potted history, contextualising real historical developments in the industry and inviting the reader to step in to the setting:

Longwash. A landlocked town in the Midlands. It grew up around the canal and the railways. And then the lace-makers came from the overcrowded city, finding ideal conditions for their craft here in the valley. Others drifted in from the villages, leaving their hand-looms and stocking-frames behind. They left their cottages and set-up standings in workshops and steam-powered manufactories. (10)

Oral history archives bridge what Blatti calls 'the gulf between historians' history and citizens' history' (623). In my novel, the accounts of the two female protagonists, Winnie and Cissie, personalise and humanise this heritage. At the beginning, the reader is privy to Winnie's childhood experiences of the factory

where her father works. I anthropomorphise the factory building situated at the heart of the community; it becomes a living, breathing entity:

[...] the thud and clatter of the looms on the other side of the wall is palpable.

It pounds in her ears, in her throat, in her stomach. She's sure that if she reaches out her hand and touches the bricks, touches the very skin of the factory, she will feel it moving in time with the beating heart of the lace-machines inside. (18)

My personal connections with the East Midlands lace industry seep into the novel. As Atwood asserts '[w]e have to write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may' (1504). I have a strong bond with its geography: I was born in the region and grew up there. I have ancestors who worked in the industry. When I listen to oral histories about this heritage and its landscapes I experience a sense of connectedness; I feel a closeness to them despite my direct links with the industry being more than a generation removed. The voices I hear on tapes in oral history archives resonate with the remembered voices of my own paternal grandparents, identifying with Rothenberg's experience of, 'testing my own otherness, my closeness to or distance from the place from which my parents came' (770). This 'testing' forms an integral part of the exploration of my own role in the creative transformation of oral histories into fiction. I realised during the writing process that fictional place-making was coming not just from the oral history archive itself, but from beyond it, from my own personal experiences, from the voices I carry in my head as memories, transmitted inter-generationally throughout

my childhood from older family members. The remembered voice of my paternal grandmother Bertha Foster, who was born in 1905, influences characterisations in the novel, not just her accent and use of dialect but her sense of reserve and respectability.

The writer Dorothy Alexander also draws on family voices, in *The Mauricewood Devils*, a novel set against mining communities in Lowland Scotland. She reflects on oral testimonies generated informally by older members of her own family and finds significance in her ‘own experience of hearing their voices and their day-to-day conversations over the years. [...] the oral histories painted such a vivid picture of the community at that time that made imagining it so much easier’ (Alexander).

According to Abrams, familial stories are fundamental to the way in which humans interpret the world: they ‘circulate in families acting as the glue that maintains relationships’ (106). In my own family stories there are gaps, particularly in the time before I was born, and I insert my own imagined past into these gaps. Richard Benson, author of the *The Valley*, a historical narrative about previous generations of his family living in mining communities in Derbyshire and South Yorkshire, points out, ‘we live with highly-edited, if not outright fictional, versions of our own pasts.’ He sees the family itself as ‘the basic unit of that editing process’ (Benson).

Atwood also suggests that beyond simply creating a past for ourselves, we sometimes insert ourselves as a character into a past that we were never a part of. She cites an interview with a man in the United States in which he talks about a

rebellion that took place many years before he was born, ‘recalling [it] as a personal experience’ even though it was ‘an event at which he had not been present in the flesh’. Atwood calls this an intersection of memory, history and story, suggesting ‘it would take only one step more to bring all of them into the realm of fiction’ (1505). This ‘one step more’ for me involved bringing voices from oral history archives into the creative process alongside remembered family voices and other imagined voices.

3. Disciplines collide

A rounded definition of oral history can be garnered from current practitioners, such as Abrams who defines it as ‘a practice, a method of research. It is the act of recording the speech of people with something interesting to say and then analysing their memories of the past’ (1).

Oral history has been viewed with suspicion by many historians since its inception. Writing back in 1976, labour and oral historian Raphael Samuel, recognised that the practice had become branded as ‘dubious’ and was accused of ‘a naïve empiricism in which the facts are supposed to speak for themselves’. In its defence, he went on to highlight a political basis to the maligning of this essentially grass-roots practice, claiming that: ‘[b]ehind such negatives lies the unspoken assumption that knowledge filters downwards’ (“Theatres of Memory” 4).

The practice of oral history amongst professional historians developed during the second half of the twentieth century. It emerged from the practices of local history,

folk history and labour history (Smith) and has evolved within universities largely under the umbrella of the academic disciplines of history and sociology.

In my practice as a writer, I approach oral history as an interdisciplinary field of study. Grele asserts that:

[W]e cannot fully understand or exploit the materials we are dealing with if we remain within the narrow conventions and methods of our fields of specialisation, we reach out with much uncertainty for some more or less sophisticated cooperation with other fieldworkers. We become interdisciplinary in spite of ourselves ("A Surmisable Variety" 276).

Portelli remarks on the intersection between writing and oral history calling the latter a 'genre of discourse which orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past' ("Oral History as Genre" 25).

The positioning of oral history as an ally of the creative arts has long been recognised by arts practitioners. The practices of Documentary Theatre and Verbatim Theatre have dedicated themselves to working directly with the interviews of 'ordinary people' for many years by undertaking oral history interviews which are then transformed into script and often developed into theatre with the interviewees taking on the roles of actors (Paget 317).

Despite recognising that some historians regard the fictionalisation of history as ‘deeply offensive’, Samuel also identifies the potential of past events as a stimulus for the creative practitioner:

The idea that the past is a plaything of the present, or, as postmodernist theory would have it, a ‘metafiction’, is only now beginning to impinge on the consciousness and disturb the tranquillity of professional historians. But it has been for some twenty years or more a commonplace of epistemological criticism, and a very mainspring of experimental work in literature and arts.’ (“Theatres of Memory” 429-30).

Creative writing in the academy is one way of encouraging experimentation with oral history material through interdisciplinary relationships. It can be suggested, for example, that the spoken nature of oral history resonates with poetry. York identifies ‘those special moments in an oral history recording when the voice seems to reach its maximum potential and vivacity; a phonetic pattern emerges, and the spoken sounds become poetic’. He describes the results of his own experiments transforming oral transcription into free verse as ‘oral poetic-prose’ (13).

Studies have only recently focused on oral history as research material for fiction. A key Australian study by Van Luyn identifies ‘a deep theoretical discussion around the task of transforming oral histories into fiction’ (“Artful Life Stories” 1). She acknowledges a ‘shift away from traditional uses of oral history interviews in Australian oral history scholarship’. She sees a place here for the fiction writer,

valuing oral sources as ‘dynamic, evolving, emotionally and culturally authentic, and ambiguous’ (“Jogging Alongside” 63). She engages with oral sources to ‘build up an understanding of how [...] [to] construct voice in the fictive work’ (“Jogging Alongside” 67).

Van Luyn’s creative practice differs from my own in that she engages directly with the oral history gathering process. The research process undertaken in writing her novel ‘Hidden Objects’, involved identifying interviewees and conducting interviews with them for the purpose of generating source material for fiction writing. She acknowledges ‘Hidden Objects’ as a novel ‘solidly based’ on oral history interviews and relying ‘on oral history methodology to conduct the interviews’ (“The Artful Life Story: the oral history interview as fiction 5). She follows up interviews with a detailed analysis of the outputs in both audio and transcript form. She is therefore positioned, in the role of interviewer, to illicit responses from her interviewees that may be relevant to her proposed creative output. In my creative practice, working only with extant material, I am entirely removed from the interview process. Rather than creating my own raw material, I listen in to archive sources, recorded many years previously.

4. Spoken text

4.1 The archive

I have chosen to use extant oral histories as an inspiration for my fiction. For the writer, oral history archives are potent with possibilities: they represent the voices of

individuals who are often under-represented or lost altogether in institutionalised histories and Authorised Heritage Discourses and crucially these voices accommodate a plurality of viewpoints (Blatti 615).

The oral history recordings that form the basis of my research are part of the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection held by Nottingham Local Studies Library. (Extracts cited in this thesis are referenced by archive number and fuller interview extracts are made available in the appendices.) Relevant interviews associated with the machine-made lace industry come from a project called 'Making Ends Meet, one of many Manpower Services Commission oral history projects which were funded across the country in the 1980s by central government as a response to escalating unemployment (Bornat 17). The interviews were recorded between 1982 and 1984. The interviewees are predominantly lace workers. They range in age at interview from 64 to 93 years; the oldest interviewee was born in 1892. Their testimonies reflect changes in the machine-made lace industry from the closing years of the nineteenth century up until the 1970s. No information is available about the interviewers.

Archives such as this are a rich and often under-used resource. High, Mills and Zembrzycki suggest that 'there are tens of thousands of oral history interviews sitting in archival drawers, computer hard-drives or on library book shelves that have never been listened to' (1). Accessing original oral history recordings can prove challenging: when I first approached the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection the recordings were only available on cassette-tape, a near-obsolete analogue format,

although Demers points to a current ‘revival of sorts’ with regard to the music cassette-tape (109). Difficulties inherent in the preservation and accessibility of original non-digital recordings can result in these important primary sources being side-lined. Once I gained access to the collection, and with the permission of Nottingham Libraries, I digitised recordings as I listened to them in real time, making them easier to playback for my own research purposes as well as more accessible for future researchers.

4.2 Bypassing the transcript

The Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection offers typewritten transcripts alongside audio recordings, however it was important to my creative practice that I bypass existing transcripts and engage directly with the spoken text. The transcript, defined by MacKay as ‘a verbatim version of the spoken word’ (49), provides the traditional route in to interrogation of the oral history interview. It can become the main source if original recordings are held in unstable or obsolete formats. Portelli points out that ‘[s]cholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published’ (“The Peculiarities of Oral History” 97). However, a printed textual representation of an interview can be problematic. MacKay considers that ‘[m]uch is lost in transferring a unique voice and speaking style to the flatness of print on a page’ (49). One such loss could be the seams of vernacular that run through locally recorded oral histories in the form of accent and dialect words. The transcripts provided alongside the recordings of the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection offer up some attempts to convey the phonetic of the Nottingham accent: ‘me’

recorded to indicate 'my' and inclusion of dialect terms is certainly apparent.

Transcription styles in oral history practice can also differ greatly, both between and within collections, meaning a lack of consistency in this medium. The Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection transcripts record paralinguistic features, such as '(laughs)' and 'er', whereas others finesse these out of the printed representation of the interview. Good suggests that 'we must learn to live with the fact that transcription of the spoken word is more of an art than an exact science', acknowledging that 'techniques attempting to convey its orality in print vary widely' (365).

The form of the transcript as a representation of an oral history interview means that layers of interpretation are already in place and unknown to the end-user wishing to work anew with that oral history material. This too can be problematic. Good suggests that there is 'a real concern and a sad pretence if the secondary element of text [the transcript] is misrepresented by default as the mirror of the original speech' (369). MacKay also challenges the authenticity of a transcript in representing a speech act, arguing that if the different stages of the oral history process – from interview to edit to transcription – pass from practitioner to practitioner then 'each one adds the thumbprint of an editor' (49). The lack of documentation accompanying the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection means that there is the possibility that more than one person was involved in the transcription process. Abrams agrees that layers of interpretation applied to an oral source create a greater distance between the subject and the reader-listener: 'the narrator's voice fades and the researcher's gains prominence as we move further away from the direct relationship with the subject'

(165). This is in line with the recent trend in oral history practice which has been towards the production of time-coded summaries of interviews rather than full transcriptions. This is recognised as best practice by national repositories, such as the British Library Sound Archive and the State Library of Queensland in Australia, who assert that '[t]he creation of summaries rather than full transcripts presumes that the primary source or the original record is the audio file' (Klaebe & Burgess 43). In each oral history interview that I listened to, it was important for me to feel as close as possible to the interviewee, to remove any existing interpretations of the interview before making my own first-hand re-presentation or interpretations of the speech act.

The transcript does have a place as a navigational tool for oral history. Some writers are advocates of its use in being able to focus in on the content of interviews and shutdown background noise and distraction. In her research for *The Mauricewood Devils*, Dorothy Alexander drew on a collection of oral histories of paper mill workers in Penicuik in Scotland and worked largely from existing printed transcripts. Having previously undertaken research in which she engaged directly with audio recordings she reports that: 'while I loved hearing the voices, [working from transcripts] made me appreciate not having the voice of an interviewer present in the transcript'.

Van Luyn's creative process involved her conducting and then transcribing her own interviews. She explains her reasons for this:

I fully transcribed the interviews because I was interested in the specific voice of the interviewee, which I would need to replicate in written rather than audio form. I wanted to be able to unpack the way in which interviewees structured sentences and phrases, their vocabulary, their rhythms of speech and their values and attitudes was revealed in their interpretation of life events. I found that transcribing the interview made me consider the interview in a different way. Instead of listening to the story for an overarching narrative and for missing details or incomplete stories [...], I was paying attention to each sentence, to the words used and the way they were arranged. This close level engagement with the audio and transcript allowed me to build up an understanding of how I should construct voice in the fictive work (Jogging... 67).

My approach is in line with that of Alessandro Portelli, who asserts that '[o]ral sources are *oral* sources' ("The Peculiarities of Oral History" 97). Any form of textual representation at the initial stages of this research project was very much set aside and listening was primary. I listened to each recording a number of times, each time making notes and recording timecodes at the points where certain words, phrases, fragments and longer extracts of interview struck me in some way. Only at this stage did it become necessary for me to begin to pin down the spoken word as physical printed text, not as a way of representing the interview but as the first stages of the creative writing process, and I turned to the transcript at this point as a tool of navigation.

4.3 Creative Eavesdropping

Before examining the transformation of interview fragments into creative works on the page, I will reflect on the listening process itself.

Norkunas considers listening to be ‘critical to the oral history process’ and ‘a very active process that deeply impacts the content, performance, and emotional tone of the narration’ (1). She finds it an interactive process, suggesting that active listening is indeed vital to the interview where an interviewer interacts with interviewee.

However, listening to oral history archives lacks the interactivity that exists in the interview situation. It is a passive activity.

The desire to listen engages with recent shifts in oral history practice, as practitioners, such as Frisch (102), have more recently chosen to reconnect with the aurality of oral history rather than simply engage with printed versions of the spoken voice. These shifts can also be seen in work taking place as part of the ‘Spoken Web’ initiative, a Canadian oral literacy project in which:

new digital technologies and techniques allow scholars to revisit old assumptions and practices. Traditionally focused on the transcript oral history and literature [scholars] have (re)discovered the aural qualities of the spoken word as well as the embodiment of the storyteller, poetry reader, and listener (Clarkson & High).

In the early stages of my creative practice, when engaging with oral texts, I found myself filtering out and focusing on material that specifically referenced the historical context of machine-made lace, social historical details about the industry and its impacts on lives. However, this approach seemed too narrow and so I developed a process of open listening or ‘creative eavesdropping’; rather than approaching a spoken text with expectations, I allowed a space to develop between my expectations and the listening, ready to embrace any fragment or trigger that sparked potential for experimentation in writing.

Alan Dundes identifies three elements that come together in oral narratives: text, texture and context. For Dundes, text indicates a version or telling of the story and texture, the language used to tell the story including literary devices such as rhyme, alliteration and tone. For McCarthy, the texture is an abstract concept (80) and Dundes finds texture ‘on the whole untranslatable’ (23). Context ‘refers to the situation out of which the story grows’ (McCarthy 80). These three elements mirror how I have shaped my listening process into one in which: text refers to the storytelling and how the story is told; texture is the literary detail that emerges through language, imagery and linguistic nuances, accent and dialect; and context is the story itself whether that be in the form of an anecdote or a described event.

5. Written text

5.1 Poetic transcription and found poetry

Van Luyn's creative process considers both the spoken interview and the transcript as comparable primary sources: 'before writing, I listen to the audios and read the transcripts many times' ("Jogging Alongside" 62). My own practice differs in that it considers the act of transcribing the spoken text as part of the creative writing process itself. I now turn my attention to how I began to fix words to the page and consider my experimentation in this area.

My early work was influenced by ethnopoetics, a practice that regards prose as an inadequate representation of the spoken word and transcribes spoken text on the page in a form similar to poetry or script. According to Ryan, '[a]n ethnopoetic performance takes into account not only words but silences, volume and tone of voice, sound effects, and the use of gestures and props' (729). Dennis Tedlock believes this method of transcription more closely represents the active and performative nature of the oral history interview:

Conversational narratives THEMSELVES

Traditionally classified as PROSE

Turn out, when listened to CLOSELY

To have poetical qualities of their OWN (109)

Tedlock places words in a poetic form with line lengths indicating the natural rhythms of the voice, line breaks indicating pauses and silences. I have adopted this method of transcription and simplified it, developing my own transcribing techniques for the purposes of creative writing and to present oral history extracts within the body of this thesis. Hymes suggests that how we position oral texts on the page and use conventions such as punctuation can ‘divide the narrative’ (475) and indeed within this thesis I aim to re-present extracts from oral history archives as living and breathing voices, not pinned down on the page with punctuation or fractured and re-purposed into standard prose. Good suggests that punctuation ‘is purely an indication of the editor’s idea of correct grammar’ rather than an accurate interpretation of a speech act (364). Tedlock also asserts that:

[...] in oral discourse a person may go right on from one sentence to another without pausing, or else he may pause in a place where there would ordinarily be no punctuation in writing. (115)

There is opposition to this form of stylistic representation. Oral historians, such as Jones, consider that ‘[v]erbatim is interesting and challenging to the reader but may, in fact, be self-defeating as the reader may lose the content at the expense of the style’ (32), suggesting that an editor’s hand is vital to interpret the spoken text in a form that is accessible for the reader.

With Tedlock's approach in mind, as I recorded extracts from the oral history archives on the page, I developed my own form of transcription practice. In essence, I was:

using the natural rhythms of the voices

as I heard them

and not imposing a rhythm

on their words although

sometimes

voices found a natural rhythm

of their own

and I helped refine this

by leaving out punctuation

and breaking a line or

leaving a line

to indicate a pause or

a change of tone and

I began to find that the spoken voice

delivers the spoken word

in natural units

and that sometimes

there is rhyme

or alliteration
occurring ‘naturally’
or unconsciously
and I found delight in these moments
before
moulding and shaping
this
raw
material

and pouring new ideas into it

In recording fragments of spoken text on the page, I was creating a form of poetic transcription. Poetic transcription is a cross-disciplinary method used by researchers to present qualitative data in an innovative format. Defined by Glesne as ‘the creation of poemlike compositions from the words of interviewees’ (1), the method was pioneered by Laurel Richardson who uses it to communicate social science research findings. Richardson engaged with an interview from a project on unmarried mothers. In “The Consequences of Poetic Representation” she describes her process:

I transcribed the tape into 36 pages of text and then fashioned that text into a three-page poem, using *only* her words, her tone, and her diction but relying on

poetic devices such as repetition, off-rhyme, meter, and pauses to convey her narrative. (125)

Butler-Kisber describes her practice of poetic transcription in which she will ‘nugget words and phrases from the chained prose, a practice [...] used extensively by poets’ (233). Lahman and Richard find the use of the word ‘nugget’ as significant: ‘[it] has value in underscoring the identification of the most salient, valuable words and phrases and setting these nuggets aside as though one were in the act of mining, panning and sifting through words for small pieces of gold’ (345). I draw on a mining analogy in my own engagement with spoken texts as I seek out fragments within large and dense oral history interviews. For me, poetic transcription offers a way of lifting an extract from an interview and fixing it to the page whilst still retaining the fluidity of the spoken word. It acknowledges the performative moment of the interview that generates raw material for re-shaping into fiction.

In the following interview extract from the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection, a female interviewee recalls how clothes were handed down through families and frequently pawned to bring in money:

I’d got an aunt
and she’d got three daughters
four daughters and
they were well off
so I used to have all their clothes

you see so
I wa'n't bad
I wa'n't dressed bad
was only more or less
your shoes that
your mum used to have to
tek em to the pawn shop
and your vest
so she used to
look after them
and if you scraped them
a little bit you'd

I can always remember this
velvet frock she bought me
and I'd be about seven
brown dark brown velvet
frock with
motifs
on the front
and that went to the pawn shop
never saw it again
that really broke my heart then
you know cause

all my life I've
thought of this frock
you know
it's funny how little things

but always well cared for and
people used to wash and starch and
the kids was clean you know
all of them (A85a)

I have drawn out words and phrases, or 'nuggets', from this extract to develop a scene in my novel. The 'velvet frock' lies at the heart of this piece. Unlike the 'shoes' and the 'vest', the 'velvet dress' is foregrounded by the interviewee as she embellishes it, remembering it being made from 'brown dark brown velvet' with 'motifs / on the front'. There is an emotional punch to this extract as she recalls how it 'broke her heart' when it was pawned and it is a memory that hasn't faded for her: 'all my life / I've thought of this frock'. I re-shaped this 'nugget' into an episode in the novel:

Years later Winnie still remembered that dress. It was brown, dark brown velvet. They'd barely a farthing left in the house. [...] There was her mother's best dress, still stained with sweat from being worn at Arthur Foster's funeral. And there was her own Sunday dress.

And there was the brown velvet dress of Bell's. The one with the motifs down the front. The one that Ada had bought her. The pawn shop was on Main Road. Winnie could be there and back in fifteen minutes. [...] The brown velvet dress was upstairs, dangling in the wardrobe. [...] Bell loved that dress. [...] Winnie took it from its hanger, lay it on the bed, gently folded it, bundled it up in her arms. And Arthur Foster's overcoat. That could go. [...] She'd only be fifteen minutes. They'd never notice she'd been gone. (71)

This scene in the novel echoes the sense of attachment that the interviewee in the oral history extract had for the dress. The interviewee personalises the dress vividly through description. In the novel, Winnie treats 'the brown velvet dress' as something animate and vulnerable, she gently folds it and carries it in her arms.

As my writing process developed I began to consider my poetic transcription as a form of found poetry. For Lawrence, found poetry is 'a way to analyse data through distillation and compression. The researcher evokes resonance and sensory responses by illuminating essences and exposing nuances thus bringing new insights into everyday experiences' (148).

I worked with an oral history extract found online recalling an explosion at a munitions factory in the East Midlands during the First World War. This early experiment, carried out before I began to work with the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection, demonstrates the process of approaching oral history archives as a repository for found poetry. It resulted in a scene that forms part of my novel. For

the purposes of this thesis, I have anonymised the interviewer and interviewee. In order to fully document the process, I represent the spoken text on the page initially in a standard transcription format.

Stage 1: Listening to the oral text – represented here as transcript

INTERVIEWER: When this explosion happened, I mean how far away were you from where people were killed?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, no distance. They were all – they were great big places, you know. Oh, no distance at all. Some of your friends, your real pals, had gone.

INTERVIEWER: Can you remember what happened – I mean obviously they'd have been fire engines and nurses and – like there'd be today?

INTERVIEWEE: There were some down there but – oh dear. [...] One case I saw, I mean this girl that I worked with, this one girl, her father was an invalid and she used to keep house as well as go to work and she always had two plaits [...] and the old boy they brought him down there to see if he could recognise her you see, and that's all he could recognise, you see, two plaits of hair and – oh, terrible.

INTERVIEWER: So you didn't go back to work in the morning?

INTERVIEWEE: Yes we did right after [...] went back a fortnight after as if nothing had happened. Nothing at all. I suppose you don't mind when you're young, do you. You sing away. I'd have been about 17 I suppose. What you had to do in those days was, you had to do something in the war [...] well you

had to, you was called on to do something [...] so of course you go on munitions, don't you [...]

INTERVIEWER: So did you get good money?

INTERVIEWEE: Oh, about £1 and 16 [shillings]. You'd work 12 hours a day and seven and six for a room out of that [...] travel up and down to work, nine miles a day [...]

INTERVIEWER: Did they ever find out what caused the explosion?

INTERVIEWEE: No, like everything else nowadays they reckoned there was someone, you know, that's drove away after and all the rest of it, but [...] anything could have happened. You weren't allowed a shoe-lace, a ring, you weren't allowed anything.

INTERVIEWER: Yes I suppose it would cause a spark or something.

INTERVIEWEE: No nothing, nothing at all. That's all.

(Source: <http://www.thebrecklandview.com/audio-memories-of-a-ww1-munitions-factory-explosion/>)

Stage 2: Poetic transcription

When this explosion happened

I mean

how far away were you

from where people were killed?

Oh no distance
They were all
they were great big places you know
Oh no distance at all
Some of your friends
your real pals
had gone

can you remember what
happened
I mean
obviously
they'd have been fire engines
and nurses and
like there'd be today

there were some down there but
oh dear [...]

one case I saw
I mean this girl that I worked with
this one girl
her father was an invalid
and she used to keep house
as well as go to work

and she always had two plaits [...]

and the old boy

they brought him down there

to see if he could recognise her you see

and that's all he could recognise

you see

two plaits of hair and

oh

terrible

so you didn't go back to work

in the morning

yes we did

right after [...]

went back a fortnight after

as if nothing had happened

nothing at all

I suppose you don't mind when you're young

do you

you sing away

I'd have been about seventeen I suppose

what you had to do in those days was
you had to do something in the war [...]
well you had to
you was called on to do something [...]
so of course you go on munitions
don't you [...]

did they ever find out what
caused the explosion

no
like everything else nowadays
they reckoned there was someone
you know
that's drove away after
and all the rest of it but [...]
anything could have happened

you weren't allowed a shoe-lace
a ring
you weren't allowed anything

yes
I suppose it would cause
a spark or something

no nothing
nothing at all
that's all

Stage 3: Distilled into a found poem

It went up one day, gunpowder.
Condemned the cornfields round about.
A shoe-lace, a ring, a spark.
One girl, two plaits of hair
her invalid father, they brought the old boy down.
two plaits of hair, that's all he could recognise.
Still bringing bodies out after a fortnight -
you don't mind when you're young -
you sing away as if nothing had happened.

Stage 4: Transformed into fiction – passages that became part of the novel

All it took was one spark. It could have been anything. A hair-pin, a shoe-lace,
a ring. [...]

The gossips are saying that the only way Winnie could tell that it was Ada was
by the two plaits hanging down her back. There were no identifying marks left.

Nothing to tell who that lump of flesh, made sexless by its baggy khaki overalls, had once been. It was just like all the rest.

On the kitchen table there's a cheap gold ring, a pair of shoelaces and a door key. There's a small cracked mirror glass in dulled silver and a tortoiseshell comb with some teeth missing. A lace-edged handkerchief wrapped around something that turns out to be a photograph of a young child.' (120-122)

As the piece evolves from spoken text to poetic transcript to found poem to prose, some striking imagery emerges: 'singing away' resonates with the fact that female munition workers were nicknamed 'canary girls' due to their skin turning yellow from contact with picric acid as part of the production process (Brobst 39); the motif of personal possessions in place of the absent person developed as a theme in the novel.

Unlike Battacharya, who uses found poetry as a way of representing her research and to forge a more collaborative process between researcher and participant (2), in my own work, the element of collaboration is removed. I work in isolation as a writer, engaging with my own heritage, imagination and memory and it is my 'own affective response to the process [that] informs it' (Prendergast 370). In line with Battacharya, I found the process of transforming spoken text, merged with fragments of my own imagination, into poetry, to be 'evocative'. For Battacharya, the resulting poetry:

‘cannot be assessed on merits of truth, accuracy, or holistic understanding of the participants’ [in my case the interviewees’] lives. It can only be re-presented as fragmented, contradictory testimonials of participants merging with my own, without any clear indication where the researcher’s perspective begins and the perspective of the researched ends.’ (2)

Poet Allan Sutherland creates what he calls ‘transcription poetry’ from oral sources, believing that the characteristics of speech should be fully embraced on the page for creative purposes. His poetry, developed as an art form for its own sake rather than as a method of communicating research, draws on verbal idiosyncrasies, such as repetition, that he finds in oral history interviews. As part of a writing residency at Brunel University in 2011, Sutherland created a poem using an interview he conducted with a car crash victim. In this extract:

where’s Jennifer? Jennifer’s dead.
Jennifer’s dead. I wasn’t dead,
Just laying there, laying there.

Sutherland suggests that ‘[an] extraordinary change has taken place. A hesitant or tentative form of speech has been transmuted into a very potent form of poetry’. In my own creative transcription practice I use repetition taken from an extract of a woman recalling a visit to a lace factory as a young child:

ooh and it was terrible in them factories

you know
ooh
you
you could not speak
and they dare not talk to you
[...]
ooh strict
if they spoke they'd
be losing a clip
or a draw
ooh it was ever so
used to go
and I used to come
waltzing in
from being about
since I can remember
being about nine
tekking the work down
they'd be all doing their work there
and there was a clock
there
and the clock used to be ticking by
and I used to come in
you know

with the work
bring the work in
you know
and go like that
sshhh
[...]
you must wait
until someone came to you
and you'd perhaps be
an hour
and you'd be fidgeting
you know how you are
a girl
and they daren't
they all used to just look up
you know
go down
never talked to you (A85a)

This extract inspired a scene in my novel in which Winnie takes Bell to the factory for the first time. The scene is tense: 'They're to shush. Don't you dare disturb the workers' and repetition emphasises this: 'Do not disturb the workers. Do not talk to them. Do not fidget'. (39).

5.2 Prose poetry and fragments

In my creative practice, found poetry as poetic transcription began to develop as a form of prose poetry. According to David Young, the prose poem grew out of the work of Aloysius Bertrand in mid-nineteenth-century Europe, and was taken up by the poet Baudelaire (17). The form is defined by Martin Gray as a ‘short work of poetic prose, resembling a poem because of its ornate language and imagery, and because it stands on its own, lacks narrative, like a lyric poem, but is not subjected to the patterning of metre’ (234). For Anne Caldwell, prose poetry can ‘inhabit the space between fiction and poetry (1-2). Young’s definition of prose poetry emphasises a mixing of forms where:

the poet seems to put aside the discreet or flamboyant costume of poetic identity and, in a swift and unpredictable gesture, raid the other world, the world of prose, subverting categories and definitions, defying the drag of the prosaic, turning everything inside out for a moment (Friebert and Young 17).

This form then opens up possibilities found in the ‘poetry’ of spoken texts and extends these ideas into a prose form. Young calls the prose poem ‘a little world made out of everyday materials, unpredictable in its contours and wonderfully satisfying in its paradoxical way of combining suggestiveness and completeness’. It acts almost as a unit of prose with ‘life histories reduced to paragraphs, essays the size of postcards, novels in nutshells, maps on postage stamps’ (Friebert and Young 17-18).

In my creative practice, prose poems become fragments of fiction. This sense of building a larger work of fiction from smaller units chimes with John Yorke's deconstruction of story in which he identifies units of story as 'fractals'. He describes how: '[s]tories are built from acts, acts are built from scenes and scenes are built from even smaller units called beats. All these units are constructed in three parts: fractal versions of the three-act whole' (78).

Writer Rebecca Luce-Kapler documents her experiments in working with fragments to create a piece of fiction. She uses digital software to synthesise 'short narratives, both imagined and quoted from other places such as newspapers, history books, and archives' (although she doesn't indicate whether these include oral sources). In documenting the process, she finds 'the very act of trying to map out the narrative structure in a fragmented space interrupted the smooth process [...] what emerges is more interesting and exciting than the novel, it is also slippery and more elusive. I cannot say with any certainty what shape is emerging.' (258)

For Luce-Kapler, making connections between fragments and finding patterns across them is vital to her writing process which involves:

reading and rereading the fragments, sorting, noting connections, and keeping a list of things that I might still write about since there is not a singular plot line to follow. [...] there must be the potential for relationships among the fragments that link in meaningful pathways. (260)

The emergence of themes and images from the corpus of oral history interviews that I worked with helped me to develop my own ‘meaningful pathways’ through my novel. Early forms I experimented with, including adaptation of transcription into script and the concept of a short story cycle were set aside in favour of the novel form. As I listened, I reimagined and re-shaped archive material into fragments of prose that became the building blocks for my fictional world. I developed a plot line against which I anchored these fragments, working in a collage or mosaic fashion to create the novel, rather than writing a linear chronological narrative.

6. Reimagining

6.1 Place-making

A sense of place lies at the heart of the novel which is set against a partly-fictionalised geographical backdrop of the East Midlands machine-made lace industry. In her studies of local dialect, Braber finds the East Midlands a difficult region to pinpoint. She notes that although it ‘may be the geographical centre of England, it is not in any sense the perceived centre of England.’ She finds examples of the region being referred to as ‘neither here nor there’ and as a ‘no-man’s land’ (“The Concept of Identity in the East Midlands” 3). However, in their work on place in the Nottingham novel, Daniels and Rycroft find literature from the region to have a strong sense of its own place, to be ‘inherently geographical. [...] made up of locations and settings, arenas and boundaries, perspectives and horizons’ (460).

With oral histories from the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection anchored in many cases by references to real places associated with the machine-lace industry, I decided to disregard the notion of my fictional world relating itself to a wider real world. Instead I reimagined a lace town as an insular entity. The characters that inhabit the fictional lace town make journeys through it, occasionally leave the town and return to it, and these journeys form an important part of the narrative. They make infrequent trips to ‘the city’, a semi-fictionalised version of the city of Nottingham, the real-life iconic capital of the machine-made lace industry; they take annual day trips to Skegness, a real-life seaside resort and traditional holiday destination for workers from the East Midlands.

To intensify the sense of an insular world in the novel, I signal to the reader that action continues beyond the page but that this action sometimes remains a mystery to the characters who inhabit the fictional world. I do this through unexplained absences: Tommy’s disappearance; Bell’s disappearance; John Higgins’s disappearance; Ada’s absence throughout Winnie’s childhood. There are hints about what might be happening beyond the page – Cissie sees clues about the life of Bella Bolt when she peers through the window of her bungalow: ‘posters, clearly from her singing days, in slender black frames’ (202) and a photograph of ‘a man in uniform’ (203). But nothing is made explicit. The novel frames a section of fictional life in the same way that an oral history interview captures just a snapshot of real life.

The novel begins and ends in the fictional lace town of Longwash, based on the real East Midlands lace town of Long Eaton. Longwash is defined by its institutions of home, workplace, church and public house:

And up went the terraces of red brick and grey slate, row after row, two rooms-up-two-rooms-down and a small yard out the back.

[...] And on every corner a public house: The Victoria, The Railway, The Prince of Wales, The Turk's Head, The Tiger and The Angel. And of course, the Working Men's Club. And then there are all the churches for all the drunks to redeem themselves. (10-11)

The domestic setting of home provides a foundation stone to the novel. The oral history archives are rich with descriptions of home. Some interviewees describe poverty and deprivation. Others suggest more comfortable living conditions. Improvements in housing are documented as some interviewees recall growing up in slums before moving to modern housing estates as adults. This change in living conditions is reflected in the lives of the two female protagonists: both are born into workers' terraces; one marries and moves into a larger and more respectable house; the other retires into a comfortable modern flat.

There are features of domesticity that remain constant despite these changes. The symbol of the net curtain is one and it appears throughout the novel. It signals privacy and respectability on the surface, but also offers a veneer of secrecy, 'hanging in the liminal space between the public and the private' (Quarini 2015).

The novel opens with young Winnie pulling back the net curtains in her bedroom to watch her father leaving for work; it ends with older Winnie approaching Bella Bolt's house and thinking that: 'It has a wide-eyed look about it, this house, and then Winnie realises it's because its curtains are wide open and it has no nets up. Nothing to stop people from looking in.' (221).

Beyond home, the workplaces of lace factory, workshop and mending shed, form part of the geographical skeleton of the novel's narrative. These industrial sites are important markers of place and found in the oral history archives:

in Long Eaton

I would say that the first factory

that was built there

is standing today

and it's a four-storey building

and it's the name of it is

the

Harrington Mills

which is in Leopold Street

just

beyond

the Canal Bridge

at Long Eaton Nottingham Road

from Nottingham Road from the market to Nottingham Road

and that
was one of the first (A59c)

Many interviewees root themselves geographically in their narratives. They verbally sketch out a map for the listener. According to Abrams the purpose of memory is that it functions as ‘a roadmap: it tells us where we have been and aids us finding where we want to go’ (82). Oral testimonies draw on what she calls ‘semantic’ memories where interviewees vocalise ‘a kind of reference book for names, places and facts rather than emotions’ (83). This kind of listing is found frequently in the archives:

and I can
almost remember all the names
who I played with
there was
the first house was name of Bothams
which was later in our town
was a butchers
as I got older
and next door
was a family named Roses
their name was Roses
[...]
and the boy Harry

the boys we used to play with as we grew up
[...]
and then there was a
a somebody named Charles
which I played with
played with them
oh they'd a very big family
and the top was
was named Burns (A4c)

As a writer, I use a semantic memory list at the beginning of the novel to define characters and orientate the reader within the 'small space' of the fictional lace making community of Longwash. Winnie maps out her own world as she travels between home and workplace:

She knows the names of all the families in this street and counts them off as she passes their front doors: the Barkers are all lace workers and so are the Tappers and the Hoopers next to them. A few doors further down lives Mrs Brown and her two daughters, who are brass bobbin winders (10).

Longwash lies in the shadow of the city. The city is a place for socialising, for entertainment; oral testimonies evidence the delights of theatres such as The Hippodrome and The Empire which existed in real-life Nottingham and drew in big

stars and large crowds during the early years of the twentieth century. One interviewee recalls:

I've seen Vesta Tilley
and I've seen Harry Lloyd and
Houdini what they
call him you know what used to be
all strapped in chains
and get out tanks and that
I've seen
I've seen all them (A58a)

My second protagonist, Cissie, is mesmerised by the cinema: her brother Billy had taken her to the Scala in Longwash and 'she'd been utterly thrilled by the whole experience' (103); Tommy takes her to the Electric Palace in the city and 'her insides prickle with absolute pleasure' (104).

Oral history archives give an insight into the darker side of urban and industrial life and inspire representations of social deprivation in the novel. Squalid living conditions are documented frequently: 'all the houses were horrible / [...] they was always full of beetles / they were terrible places' (A56a). One interviewee paints a particularly vivid picture:

the area

well I wouldn't say it was rough but it was

got a feeling of Dickens like

hanging over it you know

there was gas lamps

and entries in them little houses

they'd all got entries you know

two or three to an entry and

cobblestones and

heavy fogs

you know and

air of poverty is how I can remember it (A85a)

These atmospheric depictions of place found in the archives led me to the fringes of psychogeography, a field of study defined by the Situationist, Guy Debord, as 'the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organised or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals' (24). Coverley highlights a literary tradition of gothic representations of the city, found in novels such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, that offer 'a sense of urban life as essentially mysterious and unknowable' and depict 'a uniformly dark picture of the city as a site of crime, poverty and death [...] a place of dark imaginings' (13). I create a foreboding air in the fictionalisation of the Narrow Marsh, a real-life former slum area of Nottingham. One interviewee remembers growing up in Narrow Marsh:

I didn't know it was on the map
mind you it brings you out
to live in a neighbourhood like that (A81a)

There is a sense of discomfort about these places that comes through in the archives and I want to induce this feeling in the reader. I develop this in the journey that Winnie makes through a series of run-down city streets in her efforts to find Bell: '[t]he houses feel crammed together more tightly here. The walls higher. The sky further away'. Physical descriptions of the place and the imagery of lace making spill over into the physical descriptions of the people who populate this area: '[t]he weave of humanity [is] denser. The pattern of the weave tighter. There's a tension in the air and on people's faces' (125).

Winnie travels through the city alone with a hand-drawn map copied from the library. Her map defines her limited experience of the place: 'she knows a few of the city's landmarks, the Midland Station, the market square, Jessop's department store, the castle, and these mark out the four corners of a place that feels familiar to her' (124). She is fearful of venturing beyond this area. This sense of marking out the boundaries of a known place with landmarks is found in the oral history archives as interviewees define themselves by the limits of their worlds:

the village in those days
was divided into two parts

and if you lived over
Dutton's Hill
you was a Downtowner
and if you lived this end of the village
you was an Uptowner (A13a)

For Richard Benson, 'the intensely localised nature of people's lives' is a feature found in the oral histories that he conducted to inform *The Valley*. He suggests that societal changes from the 1990s meant that until then people 'were able to live and work in what now seems a small space'. He found 'recurring references – not just the frequency, but also through colloquial/slang names. All the pits and pubs had local names (the Sludge, the Klondike, the Jungle, the Drum) that are incomprehensible to outsiders' (Benson).

As Winnie maps her home surroundings as a child in part one of the novel, she foreshadows the final journey that she makes in part three when, as an old woman, she travels through Longwash on her way to find Bella Bolt. She passes places which feature as prominent anchor points earlier in the novel: Fisher and Radford's Bazaar, The Angel pub, the canal bridge and the cemetery. This notion of re-experiencing a journey was inspired by oral histories in which interviewees retell stories within a single interview, commenting on landmarks that have changed or disappeared altogether over time:

all fields

where
where I
down there
all fields they were
and on this side

corn
cornfields
and that ain't been long
been built on
that hadn't
1929 those houses were built
d'you see (A1a)

Returning to a once familiar landscape that has changed can prove devastating for some interviewees:

I had to go to Shire hall last week
[...]
didn't know where I was

I didn't know where I was
I couldn't tell 'em where

changed

it has changed

I was lost (A81b)

In his novel, *Birthday*, Alan Sillitoe's protagonist, Brian Seaton, reflects on geographical changes in his home town of Nottingham. By inserting historical characters and action into the narrative, he reanimates an otherwise static setting: '[he] passed the White Hart where his grandfather had taken his beer as a farrier, over Abbey Bridge and onto the boulevard by the Grove Hotel at whose bar his mother and her second husband used to drink' (161). Inspired by this and the shadows left by what Coverley calls 'the histories of previous inhabitants' (33), I created opportunities for Winnie, as she makes her final journey in the novel through the streets of Longwash, to reanimate characters from her past as she reminisces about past places. She recalls 'The Angel. Cissie's pub. George went in there sometimes with his workmates too. And she remembers her father drinking in there' (219).

Skegness is another key setting in the novel: the Higgins family take a daytrip to this seaside resort in part one; Winnie and Cissie visit in part three. This setting is significant within the historical context of the East Midlands with people from the region having long holidayed on the Lincolnshire coast. A daytrip to the seaside would have been an annual excursion for many lace making families and workplace outings to the coast were commonplace. Former lace worker, Mark Ashfield,

suggests that an annual summer outing was ‘the custom [...] obviously done to a pattern, following a routine that had been tried and tested’ (40). Oral history archives also acknowledge this annual pilgrimage:

when we was
young
you used to be able to
go down to Skeggy for a day
on train for

to go to Skeggy
or Cleethorpes and that
for the day (A58a)

Skegness is mapped in the novel as a place with boundaries. It is bounded by time; visits made by Cissie and Winnie only last for one single day. The sea provides a physical boundary; Cissie looks out at the sea from the pier and wonders “‘What’s on the other side?’” and whether she “‘should ever go and see places like that’” (35).

Places where urban space meets rural space feature in the novel: ‘where Longwash ends [...] where high-bricked buildings give way to flat fields’ (28). These liminal zones can be found in the archives as places to break free from the constraints of the industrial environment; one interviewee recounts how it felt like ‘an escape for us’

(A17a). Memories of these places often come in accounts of childhood as these spaces become playgrounds:

there's a field
as they used to call Milling
well we used to live again the Milling
we used to get through the boards
fencing like
and we used to go and play (A80a)

For Richard Benson, his interviewees' 'recollections of walking through the landscape, with its strange mix of industrial and rural elements' deepen a sense of place in their narratives. He finds testimonies expounding '[t]he importance of pathways, short walks around ponds linked to industrial sites, the cut-throughs across fields, the difference in behaviours in the back alleys and front streets' (Benson).

Responses to these urban-meets-rural liminal spaces in the archives are notably sensual; one interviewee recalls how on visits to the countryside 'as children you know / we always used to be eating the currants' (A17a). This is reflected in the novel where Winnie's experiences of playing at the river become heightened and in one episode she longs to become one with the landscape: 'she'll wish she could turn into mud and melt into the very river itself' (56).

For Winnie, as a child, the river represents a sanctuary, a respite from the intensity of home and outwork. Richard Benson finds that ‘those memories of escaping into freer space – mostly fields and paths in this case – were particularly important to a lot of women, because it was an escape from oppressive domestic interiors’. For Winnie, the river is a place where her imagination runs free: ‘she sets up a little shop pretending to sell pieces of pottery she salvages from the muddy banks’ (16). The river continues to be important for Winnie throughout her life. At the very end of the novel she longs to return and the familiar journey is described for the reader: ‘she’ll turn off down the tow path and follow the canal along, right along, to the place where it meets the river and along a bit further to the spot where it’s shallow enough to paddle’ (222).

Journeys feature strongly in the oral history archives. According to Benson ‘when we think about people in landscapes we tend to think of them as stationary and even fixed – whereas it’s the traversing of, or working in, the landscape that will often be the dominant memory’ (Benson). When characters in the novel make journeys through fictional places, or between them, the places themselves become three-dimensional. Journeys add movement and tension to the narrative. Characters making these journeys provide a unique point of view of the fictional world that they alone witness. This is particularly pertinent, according to Coverley, when journeys are made on foot. He describes how in urban environments ‘the street-level gaze that walking requires allows one to challenge the official representation of the city by cutting across established routes and exploring those marginal and forgotten areas often overlooked by the city’s inhabitants’ (12). In the oral history archives,

interviewees recall walking as a main means of navigating their communities: '[we] used to walk from Milton Street / always used to walk' (A56a); 'we used to walk everywhere in them days' (A80a).

As Winnie navigates the city streets on foot, searching for Bell, there is a hint of what Coverley calls 'the imaginary voyage, a journey that reworks and re-imagines the layout of the urban labyrinth' (15). One account from the archives of the real-life city depicts its streets as labyrinthine, an effect emphasised by the naming of places and repetition of words and phrases:

ooh it was a long long
long long street
it started from
facing Drury Hill
facing Drury Hill
and you'd cross the road and then you'd go
straight down Red Lion Street
right along right
till you come to Saint
right till you come to the church
is it Saint Patrick's
what's that church at the bottom of
Red Lion Street off London Road
[...]

you'd come right to this church
and then it used to go like
round and round by Leenside
and come back to Red Lion Street
[...]
Red Lion Street was the street
and Leenside was at the back of it (A81a)

The church mentioned in the narrative above forms the basis of the fictional church that Winnie encounters as she looks for Bell. The reader is taken away from Winnie's thoughts and an omniscient voice briefly takes over the narrative:

'Checking her map, she realises she's made a wrong turning. She's reluctant to double-back, but this church will be here forever, she thinks. And so, she does turn. She will come back here one day. It's years off yet, but one day, she'll find herself walking along here in the cold light of the morning after the night time blitz of another war and she'll see the smouldering shell of this church, its broken pillars and arches. Its empty window frames' (125).

This church captivates Winnie. It has the effect in the novel of 'transforming the most mundane surroundings into something strange or sinister' (Coverley 16) which is emphasised as the omniscient voice offers us a brief flash forward. A similar effect is produced by the factory clock that hangs over the workers in the mending shed when young Winnie takes Bell to work with her for the first time. The clock is a

symbol drawn from an oral testimony about a lace worker sent to the factory as a child:

and there was a clock there
and the clock used to be
ticking by (A85a)

The symbol of the clock, in both the oral history narrative, and as it appears in the novel, is omnipresent in both the physical space of the factory and the metaphysical space of Winnie's thoughts. It introduces a pulse to the action and transforms the factory space into something 'other'; time slows and Winnie daydreams that the lace menders have become '[r]ows of angels mending their broken wings' (41). Towards the end of the novel, Cissie also experiences a sense of disorientation in familiar circumstances. Time shifts as she loses her bearings in Skegness and she sees and hears sights and sounds from the past 'and she thinks, but we didn't look down this street, I don't remember this street' (210).

6.2 Story-finding

In listening to the archives and identifying fragments of narrative to inspire my fiction, I have experienced similar issues to those of Allen who finds that:

[s]tories are not always easy to locate, for oral history collections are most often indexed only by subject. Searching for narratives can mean prospecting through whole transcripts looking for story nuggets.' (607)

Abrams finds narratives within oral history texts, unlike narratives in literature ‘do not always have a beginning, a middle and an end though they do usually have a storyline’ (110). In my own experience of listening to the archives I have come across narratives which Riessman calls ‘long stories that appear, on the surface, to have little to do with the question’ and are often discarded as ‘digressions’; I realise the value in these ‘digressions’, in their ability to personalise and humanise their narratives (“Analysis of Personal Narratives” 2) and they provide the starting point for much of my story-making.

For me, beyond historical accuracy, authenticity lies in the lived personal experience that the listener encounters or ‘eavesdrops’ when they listen to a recorded oral history. Eye-witness accounts, embodied in these spoken histories, offer us a plurality of viewpoints. They emphasise the fact that we all experience history differently, remember it differently, retell it differently and that’s what makes us all different and human. In striving for authenticity in my writing, my research seeks out the individual human experiences in the archives. Oral histories are often catalogued as part of larger national histories, found under the umbrella headings of World Wars, Industrial Unrest, Political Upheavals, but within these larger stories, the interviewee often anchors their own personal life-story in their family and their community.

In the following extract an interviewee recalls her fiancé returning home from the First World War on leave for seven days; she presents an authentic *personal* story set against the historical backdrop of a *national* story:

and they used to be in the trenches
till they was
never come out they wasn't like
nowhere to go
they'd got to stop there in mud and
filth and allsorts
rats and
rats used to eat their rations and all that
I've heard him say
he wouldn't like to talk about it much about it
when the rations were brought round
if you didn't get hode of 'em quick
rats'd got 'em you see
and
they used to
live on dead and allsorts
these rats did in them you know
but he told me all about it
[...]
he got this seven days' leave

and this brother of his
he used to think he could tek me out you see
when his Jack
our Jack were away so
me and him went to meet him at the station
Midland Station
this telegram
oh we had this telegram
Mother had a telegram
and Jack's mother had a telegram
[...]
and it was saying he was coming home
on seven days' leave you see
and he was on his way
and he was in London when he sent this
so his brother and I
it was tram cars in them day
we get on a tram
and we went to Midland Station to meet him
and
oh it was a terrible sight to see him
you know
he'd got all his pack
and his rifle and

his bottom of his great coat
were all chopped off
and hanging
and he said to me
he'd chopped this mud off
with his bayonet you see
because they was
so neglected
and anyway
we get on a tram car
this it were only about a penny
and he's and he refused to pay
[...]
he says I'm paying no fare on anyone
it was talk about being embarrassed
he wouldn't let his brother pay
nor me pay so he says
and all the people on the bus
on the trams as was
they said
oh that's right my lad
don't you pay
you've earned your ride
and all this so

everybody was you know
talking about him
when they seen him
so anyway
when we got to his home
in Roseheads Road at Basford
where he lived
he said
he never wouldn't let me go near him
wouldn't let anybody go near him
and I wondered what were the matter wi'y'im
I thought he'd gone funny or something
and he took his mother into the back kitchen
you see
well next thing we knew
was his mother going upstairs
fetching civilian clothes down
and the copper were going
he was that lousy
he was lousy
absolutely
he did tell me this after
and
his mother was cleaning

his clothes up
his uniform and
his things
he was in such a state
and bathing
course in them days
you didn't have baths in them houses
and his mother had got the copper on
for his baths
and one thing and another
[...]
so anyway
I stays I stayed the night at their house
he had three sisters
and I slept with them
[...]
so anyway
his mother cleaned him up
and I he he was too
was too embarrassed
to tell me about
what was the matter (A4c)

This narrative relates a deeply emotional experience, communicated in the spoken text through the interviewee's storytelling. Her exclamation of 'ooh it was a terrible sight' and the repetition of the word 'terrible' itself is delivered in a register that suggests she is vividly remembering the scene, almost reliving the experience, as she relates it in the interview situation. There is drama in her voice as she re-presents this for the listener, shock and disbelief at what she witnessed. She may not be presenting an exact re-enactment of this scene, the dialogue she recalls between characters in the narrative may not be verbatim, but what she does present fits with Riessman's assertion that '[n]arratives do not mirror, they refract the past'. The interviewee is making deliberate choices about what she re-presents and how she re-presents this through her storytelling in order to make it meaningful for the listener. ("Narrative Analysis" 6). Not only is she setting the scene visually for the listener, but she is vocally re-enacting her shock and bringing the past into the present day. The listener gets a sense of her embarrassment on the tram ride home and her confusion at Jack's detached behaviour; these feelings are transferred to Winnie in the novel as she experiences a shell-shocked George come home on leave from the Front.

The emotional depth in this oral history interview illustrates what Franks calls 'the truth of the telling versus the telling of the truth' (145) and this 'telling' informs my listening process. It illustrates that inspiration lies not just in the stories, but beyond them, in the way that the interviewees present them. When I listen, I am listening out for individuals' characteristics. These might be turns of phrase and colloquialisms, regional dialect and accent, natural rhythms in the voice, even the pauses and the silences.

6.3 Story-making

Themes running through narratives in the oral history archives have influenced the writing of the novel. Portelli's work on the notion of modes of narrative in oral history ("History-Telling and Time: an example from Kentucky") can be used to explore narratives and their institutional, communal and personal natures and how these layers of narrative are mirrored in the novel. The subjective nature of personal narratives found in the archives became important during the creative process.

The first key theme that I encountered concerns the gender hierarchies evident in the machine-made lace industry. Narratives about this topic align with Portelli's first mode of narrative, the institutional ("History-Telling and Time" 54). They concern the strict divisions of labour within the machine-made lace industry and I would suggest that these gender divisions are political. In line with institutional narratives, these accounts are often impersonal and told in the third person.

The machine-made lace industry was built on a hierarchy of skilled and unskilled and male and female labour. The *twisthand* was a male reserve, the term *twisthand* being specific to the East Midlands and the West Country (Mason, "Nottingham Lace" 160) and described in oral testimony as: 'the man that works the machine / makes the lace [...] / the common name for a lace maker' (A59a). *Twisthands* were known to be highly skilled, having learned their craft as apprentices, and 'the act of mastering complex machinery undoubtedly brought authority, privilege and exclusion' (Hayes 148). They enjoyed full employment: 'continuity of work / plenty of it to do' (A17a); and were well paid: 'ooh ah they got good money / [...] it was

good money' (A34a); 'if you were a twisthand / you couldn't be too badly off' (A17a).

It is opinions such as these garnered from the archives that help to define the role of the twisthand in the novel: Arthur Foster is 'such a good twisthand' (18) and George Goddard 'was bleddy good at his job' (171). At the beginning of the novel, Winnie knows that her father is 'doing well' and she's overheard 'Mother and Father talking about moving on to a better house, a bigger house even' (19). This marking out of Arthur Foster as steady and successful is further emphasised when we meet his antithesis, John Higgins, a man who 'can't seem to hold down work' (19). Arthur Foster's status and regard within the industry makes his untimely death, and the Foster family's decline into poverty, all the more impactful.

Women's roles in the machine-made lace industry are depicted differently in oral testimony. A mythology grew up around female lace workers, as this testimony from the 1970s illustrates:

the famous lace girls [...]
they were a very attractive lot of people
actually
[...] they were known as
looked upon
as the beauties of Nottingham (C2a)

Daniels and Rycroft assert that '[t]he prevailing mythology of modern Nottingham is feminine' (467). They point to the increase of the female workforce during the industrialisation of the city from the nineteenth century, as the numbers of women working not just in lace, but also in hosiery and clothing industries increased rapidly. They also identify a 'a new urban folklore of formidable, independent women' (467) developing through the twentieth-century such as the fictional lace worker and suffragist Clara Dawes from D H Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers* and the figure of the 'Queen of the Midlands' a character based on Britannia and used to adorn the 1927 Nottingham Guide, an official publication about the city. It is also the name which became the title of my novel.

Women in the machine-made lace industry were largely employed in the finishing processes, working on the lace once it had been removed from the machines. Many of these tasks, such as mending, scalloping and dressing, were carried out away from the factories by outworkers who took work into their homes. This side of the industry was therefore hidden. Outworking within lace making communities is a second key theme found in the archives. The mode of narrative that many of these testimonies use fits with Portelli's 'communal' narratives (54). Testimonies reference the community and collective participation in working lives and are delivered in the first-person plural. Many of these oral histories are from women who tell their own personal narratives and experiences of being engaged in outworking:

but if someone had a mistake then

they all used to whip round
and help one another
they all had to
put about thre'pence in
you see theirselves
you know all the
work hands'd help one another if
one had a bit of a mishap (A85a)

With outwork taking place beyond the factory in domestic settings, the industry permeated entire communities and seems to have become an integral part of women's identities: 'I was born on the lace work' (A85a). This is reflected in the fictional lives of Cissie and Winnie who both follow their mothers and fathers into the lace industry. An extract from part three of the novel, reflects on Winnie's place in the lace making community:

There are people here she's known her whole life, since they were young girls with shiny faces and all the hope in the world. So many of them, like her, had started off as kiddies helping their mams and their dads with the lace work at home, and then they'd left school and followed them straight into the factory' (166-167).

Outworking took place within geographically defined communities and cemented relationships between neighbours. At the heart of the outworkers was the middle woman:

a lady [who] used to go and fetch
so much lace out
and she used to give it out
to people who wanted to do it (A58a)

In the novel, the sense of a community of female workers is introduced in a scene set in the house of the middle woman as local women and children come together to collect lace work:

Women with hard, lined, ruddy faces, older than their years. Women with calloused hands. Young women came too, and wide-eyed children, like Cissie, tagging along, boys and girls, tots clutching at their mother's skirts, older brothers and sisters carrying tin-baths and baskets between them (15).

In order to balance the legitimised and visible respect that the twisthands had, I wanted to acknowledge that the work undertaken by women was also highly-skilled and I do this through Winnie's later life reflection on her occupation:

There are dozens of skilled hands here, thinks Winnie, as could pick apart the most delicate piece of lace and put it all back together as good as new, if not better (167).

Relationships that existed between lace making families comes through in the archives; family and friends provide an important support network in hard times:

1914 the trade began to slacken off
and there was no money coming in
therefore
we used to have to depend
on friends and relations for their help (A59c)

The building of relationships between characters in the fictional community of Longwash was an important element in the process of making the fictional world authentic. It inspired the relationship between the Foster and Higgins families: there is conflict between Winnie and Cissie, developed largely to bring drama to the novel, but there is also evidence of a support network beneath the surface. Nellie Higgins demonstrates this in her fondness for Winnie. This is seen early in the novel in her sympathetic response to Winnie taking soiled lace to the factory; later, Nellie shows Winnie kindness following the death of Gertrude Foster. This is reciprocated by Winnie when she hears that people are mocking Nellie about Cissie's pregnancy: 'the way that folk snigger behind their hands at her, look at Nellie with scorn, Winnie hates them for that' (161).

A third theme evident in the archives is the inter-generational nature of lace making. This mode of narrative aligns itself with Portelli's 'personal' narratives (54); told in the first-person singular many of these narratives are located in the home and reference private lives, family relationships and life events. This example explains how it was the norm for entire families to work in the industry together:

my brothers became twisthands
same as my father
and my sisters worked
[...] in the factory
doing various jobs
such as winding (A59a)

Lace outwork was brought into the home and shared between grandparents, parents and children. The hours were long and irregular and one interviewee recalls how she 'used to sit up and help me mother do it' (A58a). One male interviewee's account of lace work being brought into the house when he was a child inspires a strong image in the novel:

I can see the big heap [of lace]
because I used to jump on it
and play on it you see
in front of the fire (George Reynolds, Salter Archive)

This developed into a scene depicting Cissie as a child helping her mother collect lace from the middle woman's house. It becomes an early source of tension between the two protagonists:

Webs of brown lace, of cotton and of silk, would be piled up on blue and white cloths on the floor waiting to be collected. Once, when Nellie Higgins wasn't looking, Cissie began to jump about in these piles of lace, to have a grand old time in all these swirls and frills. But she got caught out when the middle woman's daughter, Winnie Foster, who was just a nipper herself, shouted out that Cissie Higgins was being naughty' (14).

I show my protagonists involved with lace making at different stages in their lives, to mirror how working in the industry ran inter-generationally in families. This idea helped to structure the novel into three parts, showing the relationship between the protagonists as children, young women and old women.

The interviews contained in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection follow the Western Life Story model of oral history interviewing, described by Abrams as: 'a narrative device used by an individual to make sense of a life or experiences in the past. A life story is not a telling of a life as it was but a creative version of a life which has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time' (176). In this approach, framed by the interviewer's questions, the interviewee situates their narrative in time and uses 'staging posts' to highlight life events. The interviewee populates their

narrative with characters whom Finnegan suggests are mainly family members (100). My novel echoes this with its split into three parts to represent childhood (Part One), young adulthood (Part Two) and old age (Part Three). Rites of passage, such as deaths and births, and events, including the First World War, a factory fire, and characters' birthdays feature prominently and form pivotal points in the narrative arc. In "Bad Teeth: British Social Realism in Fiction", Mengham highlights the significance of events in Alan Sillitoe's Nottingham novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning*, which presents Christmas as 'an obvious occasion on which to foreground social and familial dysfunction' (99). Winnie's childhood Christmasses create tensions within the family unit:

Ada usually only visits at Christmas time, Christmas Eve or the day before that, and sits at the kitchen table and drinks a small glass of sherry and eats one of Mother's mince pies and there's that kind of uncomfortable chit-chat that happens between adults who are embarrassed by being in the company of someone they dislike and so they try and fill that empty space with words, meaningless words [...] The conversation runs dry. There are uncomfortable silences. Father is always at work when Ada visits. Winnie always sits at the table, next to Bell. They're both always tight-lipped. They speak only when they are spoken to. (21)

With a few exceptions, such as the previous account about lace making in the home, many domestic narratives about lace making communities come from women: 11 of the 19 machine-made lace interviews in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection

are with female interviewees. It could be suggested that within lace making families and their wider communities, women become the storytellers. They engage in what Langellier and Peterson describe as ‘narrative labour’ (“Storytelling in Daily Life” 84), shouldering the responsibility of transmitting stories through family networks. They also facilitate the ‘telling of stories’, often returning to what Abrams calls the ‘kernel story’, a recurring narrative, retold as a way of reinforcing family ties (119).

Abrams’s work identifies stark differences between the oral history narratives of men and women. Her findings show that men typically discuss ‘masculine’ topics, such as sport, whereas women tend towards the ‘cooperative and collaborative’ (119). In the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection, narratives relating the technical details of the industry tend to come from men; women who talk about their roles in the industry often set their narratives in domestic locations. In a comparison of time-coded summaries of the first seven minutes of two interviews, one with a male, one with a female, subject headings for the male interviewee include ‘place of birth’, ‘twisthands’, ‘lace industry’, ‘lace factory’, ‘World War One’ (A59a). The female interviewee discusses ‘place of birth’, ‘friendships’, ‘neighbours’, ‘games and toys’ and ‘food’ (A4a). Langellier and Peterson suggest that there are underlying political reasons for women to choose these types of narratives, perhaps associated with the marginalised nature of outwork. They suggest that:

‘[women] cannot draw upon a shared history at a social level when their history is particularized, deprecated, regulated and silenced. Their focus on mundane, everyday events and the use of supportive strategies does not occur

out of politeness alone, but from a realistic assessment of ‘transmission possibilities’: if care is not taken to discover, share and connect these stories with other experiences, then they cease to exist.’ (“Spinstorying” 174)

6.4 Story-telling

Beyond the subject matter of narratives in the archives, it is also interesting to consider how the process of storytelling in oral histories inspired my creative writing process. Abrams finds that women use different storytelling devices to men including: reported speech, non-linear plot-lines, playing around with chronology, adding in circumstantial detail and repetition (119). Bennett suggests that such devices are deliberately employed by women as storytelling strategies to engage the listener (168). A range of narratives in the archives demonstrate similar devices that female interviewees use to enhance their storytelling. One female interviewee relates her experiences of growing up with a travelling fair by giving a rendition of various stallholders’ calls and singing a popular ditty from her childhood (A1a). There are examples of women ‘performing’ their memories. Here, an interviewee introduces a secondary character and acts out a scene:

- ‘ave you got any cracked eggs mester
- he’d say ‘ave you got your basin
- I’d say yes
- give me your basin I’ll go crack you a few (A81b)

It could be suggested that oral history constitutes a genre in its own right. Portelli points to the lack of a narrative genre to convey oral historical information (“What Makes Oral History Different” 35). Abrams suggests that interviewees create their own personal genre dependent on what is most appropriate for their narrative: they synthesise different styles; they may use a generic framework such as epic or tragedy; they may insert themselves into the story as a heroic character or a victim (108). Interviewees will also draw on intertextual formats found in popular media and use these as models that will appeal not only to themselves but to their potential listeners (114). Narratives in oral history are constructed at the interview stage. Whether these come directly from the interviewee or are shaped in some way by the interviewer, what I find in narratives from the oral history archives is that the interviewees take their narratives beyond the bounds of conventional history. They are, as Grele observes, ‘their own historians, capable of elaborate and sometimes confusing methods of constructing and narrating their own histories’ (“Oral History as Evidence” 59).

For me as a listener, and as a writer, picking out fragments of stories to reimagine through creative writing, I am looking for the personal and experiential. Each narrative differs depending on the interview situation and its specific set of circumstances. Each narrative varies in its topic and style of telling every time it is told. I am not looking for a fixed unit of historical truth, but for subjective moments that are open to creative reinterpretation.

The recognition of the subjective in oral history evolves from its practice in the late 1970s. Thomson identifies this transformational period as one in which practitioners recognised the subjectivity of memory as a strength of oral history rather than a fundamental flaw (61). For Thomson, subjectivity in oral testimonies offers ‘clues about the meanings of historical experience’ (54). Robertson concurs that ‘many researchers have come to appreciate that truth in oral history is not always found in factual accuracy’ (3). Richard Benson agrees; for him ‘authenticity lies in portraying a mixture of responses in a community, rather than writing as if everyone felt the same’ (Benson).

The recurrent themes that emerge from the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection become personalised through the subjective narratives of the interviewees. Allen suggests that interviewees’ subjective and emotional responses in oral history accounts can recur within a single thematic oral history collection because they ‘individually and collectively consider [these narratives] to be key aspects of their historical experience’ (607). I draw on this notion of collective memory when presenting Cissie and Winnie at the end of the novel as two elderly women with a shared history. They have become a vital part of each other’s lives. At one point Cissie says to Winnie, ‘you’ve always sent me postcards whenever you’ve been away’ (173); in a flashback, the reader learns that Winnie is present when Cissie gives birth to her son Thomas William and becomes ‘the third person to ever hold him’ (180); after Cissie’s death, Winnie decides to keep the souvenir plate she had bought as a gift from Skegness for her niece and nephew for herself, a memento of her last trip away with Cissie (218).

I was drawn to personalised narratives in the archives that were particularly emotive and rich in imagery and symbolism. The following extract demonstrates some of the potency found in these narratives. One interviewee talks about having had an illegitimate child at the age of seventeen:

course our mother brought her up

my mother brought her up

with the others

[...]

and then when I left

went to come and

live up Radford

our mother had out Rose

and wouldn't part wi'y'er

and I used to give her

the five shillings

every week

[...]

to bring Rose up

[...]

and you still kept in contact

with your baby then did you

I never used to bother about her
cos
my mother never bothered about us
she always thought
me sisters and brothers
was her sisters and brothers
and just loved her
as much as they did
one another (A81b)

There are clearly gaps in the interviewee's narrative about Rose and she refers to the father of her child as 'a soldier'; he is an unformed character. This informed my treatment of Bell's illegitimacy in the novel and I deliberately left gaps here too, such as Ada's absence after Bell is born and uncertainty regarding Bell's father. Bell is a shadowy character, always on the fringes of the narrative and we see her only through other characters' interactions with her.

Such gaps in the novel mirror the silences found in the oral history archives. Van Luyn suggests that spaces in oral history narratives offer the writer 'a space to explore subjective experience' ("Jogging Alongside" 65). They shift the focus away from historical fact towards 'the experiential aspects of the interview, in order to imbue [...] works with a deeper emotional and thematic authenticity' ("Jogging Alongside" 63).

In 'Coming Home', poet Andrew Motion visited British Army soldiers stationed in Afghanistan in 2014 and used transcripts from the 'conversations' that he had with them for what he describes as 'the starting point for a series of new poems, [...] a form of collaboration between me and their subjects'. Motion's engagement with oral sources and my own differ in that I lack direct engagement with interviewees and I do not consider my practice as one that is necessarily collaborative. However, his practice resonates with mine in its approach to the silences encountered in spoken text. He remarks:

The expressions that most interested me were in-between the sentences I had heard spoken. They were implications, not bold utterances. The pity was in the pauses, the silences, the suppressions; the poetry, if there was to be any, had to catch these things, and not hunt for eloquence (Motion).

It could be argued that Rose's mother's forthrightness masks an emotional response; it offers possibilities for the writer to anonymise this narrative, think about the fictional possibilities that lie behind the forthrightness and reimagine the narrative.

6.5 Populating the fictional lace town

What could be overlooked as the mundane details of everyday lives found in the oral history archives, offer the writer raw material from which to make a fictional world more vivid for the reader. Each character becomes more convincing as the writer sketches in finer details about domestic routines, physical characteristics and character traits. Atwood talks about the importance of 'individual particulars' as the building blocks of fiction: '[h]istory may intend to provide us with grand patterns

and overall schemes, but without its brick-by-brick, life-by-life, day-by-day foundations, it would collapse' (1505). Domestic details found in the oral history archives inspire the foundations of the reimagined lace town of Longwash and the people who inhabit it.

The home provides a frequent setting for dramatic vignettes in the archives and these find their way into the novel as visually rich scenes. An early scene in the novel, written to give the reader an insight into the homes of lace workers in Longwash, evolved from an interviewee recalling chaotic scenes in her cramped childhood home as lace was distributed to outworkers:

they'd be an old oil lamp
on the table
and they're all moving their hands
you know
where
you'd move your table
to that wall
then you'd have this
little bit of room
there wa'n't much room at all
all you'd got in your house
was an old dresser
and as you're undoing it

you know
Mum'd be shouting
mind me ornaments
you know
for fear they'd knock it
with their hands
you know
and
they'd part it off
and all on the floor (A85a)

This extract conjures up a stage-set: a space, a room with its furniture pushed back, props in the form of an old dresser, ornaments and an oil lamp, and movement as all the outworkers vie for a share of the lace. In cherry-picking fragments like this from oral history archives, I am not necessarily seeking perfectly formed extracts; as Riessman notes '[d]eciding the beginnings and endings of narratives is often a complex interpretive task' ("Analysis of Personal Narratives" 9). I am seeking the essence of each snippet that I pick out, in the case of the extract above, using the interior setting of the kitchen and objects found within it to build a fictional living space for my characters. In the novel, the fictional middle woman's house contains a 'scrubbed kitchen table' (14); action unfolds as the room begins to 'fill up with women from the surrounding streets' (15); and the middle woman would 'makes sure that everyone got what they should' (15).

To populate my fictional lace town, I needed characters. Van Luyn identifies oral histories as a rich source of inspiration for character development in fiction (“Jogging Alongside or Bumping Off?” 66). Knight agrees that oral histories ‘provide the basis for fiction writers to create ‘fuller’ fictional characters’ (4). Both of these studies concur with Thompson’s ideas on the deeply human nature of oral history. He asserts that:

Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history and widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people [...] it makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations [...]. In short, it makes for fuller human beings (23-24).

In her approach to character development, Van Luyn asserts that ‘in the same way that oral historians achieve anonymity by removing identifiers and using pseudonyms, fiction’s anonymity is achieved through creating composite characters’ (“Jogging Alongside” 64).

In my novel, the characters are composites. They derive aspects of different characters that interviewees talk about as well as aspects of some interviewees themselves. I mimic turns of phrase that I hear; embellish life story summaries to develop back stories for characters; use aspects of older interviewees relating tales of childhood or young womanhood to inform a child or younger female character within the novel.

Anecdotally, interviewees recall local characters in their testimonies. ‘Scatty’, a rag-and-bone man who ‘used to go around playing his tin whistle’ (A98a) and ‘a character [...] named Billy Pom-Pom / we used to / used to mock him / you know / poor lad’ (A4b), influenced the development of Billy Higgins. Originally Billy was to be a secondary comic character, but as the novel evolved, he became a fuller character with more emotional depth, a character that I want readers to warm to. I drew on a description of a woman from the Lace Market known as ‘Rosie’, who wore ‘a big black hat [...] / and a big black cloak / and all crosses / down here’ (A1a) to create both Zillah Goddard and Aunt Hilda, large and lively Victorian ladies with a hint of the bohemian about them.

Other characters in the novel were influenced by testimonies recounting the actions of people rather than simply their physical descriptions. The following oral history extract inspired my development of the Higgins family in part one of the novel. The interviewee relates a scene in which she and her brother, Bill, fought with their stepfather:

when he’d get a drink of ale
he was a bloomin’ nuisance
he was a nuisance
and I said to our Bill
I’m fed up wi’y’im
he was always

putting his hand across your face
when he'd had
and he said to me
I help to keep you
so I said to our Bill
you know if he does it tonight
I says if I hit him
will you help me
so our Bill says
aye I'll help you
I said don't say you'll help me
and you'll not
he said I'll help you Alice
so this 'ere night
I'd got some fish and chips
cause they was ever so cheap then
and
he done it
and I hit him straight in the eye
with these fish and chips
and he gets hode of me
tried to get hode of me
and our Bill go'rr'im
and I

I pulled his hair
and scratched his face
Bill run
and he was running after Bill
but we had to go and live
we had to go out
had to leave home
both on us
[...]
be about seventeen
oh
oh it was awful (A81a)

This account plays out in a domestic setting, with ‘fish and chips’ – signalling the everyday – becoming the weapon in the piece. There’s a veneer of comedy over the violence. The relationships in the scene and the siblings’ alliance inspire the close relationship between Cissie and Billy. The violent stepfather is not described, simply sketched in: we learn that he is a drinker and this makes him a ‘nuisance’. It’s a visceral scene full of physical action, hitting and scratching and running.

In the novel John Higgins, the head of the household, is presented as a troubled alcoholic. We hear accounts through Billy of his violence and bullying. The novel presents a pathetic character, buying train tickets to take the family to the seaside

when they can't afford it, passing drunk out in the pub, wetting himself and being put to bed by his children.

In this oral history extract, the interviewee leads the narrative away from the lace industry and work life and ventures instead into life beyond work, the personal, private and emotive. Rather than leave this alone, I draw on the potency of this extract to develop a tense and dysfunctional relationship between Cissie and Tommy. However, rather than expose the violent aspects of their relationship to the reader, I decided to suggest conflict, to keep things 'behind the net curtain'. When Tommy and Cissie move in together and Tommy arrives at the house drunk and ill-humoured, he takes her upstairs:

She goes into the front bedroom, she takes in the bed with its tarnished brass frame and its filthy brown mattress and she starts to take off her coat and turns to Tommy and he's a look on his face she's never seen before, it's sullen and fixed and cold, and he fumbles with his trouser buttons with one hand and pushes her back onto the bed with the other. (129-130)

The action beyond this is unwritten, a silence in the narrative to be filled by the imagination of the reader or left in the shadows. The next time we meet Cissie she is 'woken by a banging on the door and the first thing she feels is the cold' (130).

When giving voice to my characters, I tread a fine line between authenticity and saturating the novel with phonetic representations of accent and dialect words,

possibly making it inaccessible for the reader. The East Midlands has its own vernacular, evident in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection. A survey of students across the three counties of Leicester, Nottingham and Derby found that there was: '[...] a perceived ugliness of the dialect. Students mentioned that it was lazy, slurred [...], boring, rough, not proper, nothing unique' (Braber, "Language perception" 23).

I use dialect words and representations of accent as markers to suggest regionality and enhance the sense of place that the characters inhabit. Braber identifies a number of typical features of the East Midlands vernacular that are still easily recognisable and used widely in the region today and I found a number of these in the oral history archives and use them in my novel mostly in dialogue spoken by characters: 'cob' for bread roll, 'mardy' for grumpy, 'mi duck' as a term of endearment, [...] 'sen' for self ("Language Perception" 23). To these I added other words from the archives and from my own local knowledge, such as 'allus', always, 'mashing the tea', brewing a pot of tea, 'ey up', a general greeting and 'tuffies', sweets. There are linguistic features such as the running together of words, 'wi'y'im' meaning with him. The word 'soaky' is referred to in the archives, and subsequently gets a reference in the novel. This now archaic food staple is described for the record by an interviewee as 'a basin full of tea / with sugar and milk and bread soaked in it / and you used to have that / and that was your breakfast' (A13a).

There are slight language differences between former lace towns within the East Midlands region itself. In the period during which the novel is set it is likely that

there would have been considerable variations between the speech of inhabitants in different lace towns. Scollins and Titford suggest that ‘the speech of an average Ilkestonian [Ilkeston is a lace town in Derbyshire] would have been unintelligible to an outsider, but it would have differed considerably from that of an inhabitant of, say, Heanor [another Derbyshire town] or Eastwood [a town in Nottinghamshire]’ (10). Braber finds that ‘anecdotally [...] locals insist there is considerable difference, for instance, between speech in the major urban centres of Nottingham, Derby and Leicester’ (“Language perception” 17).

Whilst there may be some opposition to the use of accent and dialect in writing for public consumption restricting it to a narrow readership (Edney 76), I hope that representing the vernacular in the novel adds colour and texture to the writing and that the use of unusual words makes the reimagined lace town feel authentic for the reader.

7. Ethical considerations

The creative re-use of oral history archives raises ethical considerations. It remains a grey area. Rose discusses ‘the need to be aware, always of our responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction’ (1). Again, considering the creative use of oral history archives as a process of transformation, she suggests that creative work operates in a context other than that in which it was written or in which it is read (3). In the absence of clear guidelines for writers working in this area, she suggests that writers themselves need to demonstrate an awareness of the sensitive nature of oral testimony: ‘each one of us must judge if we have done enough to bridge the divide

between what is and what ought to be' (7). The notion of the writer's self-awareness when handling oral history is echoed by Dorothy Alexander who feels that using oral history archives to cherry-pick elements of character, phrases, anecdotes and images and to reimagine them, 'inhabits the realms of inspiration and intertextuality as opposed to plagiarism or any other nefarious purpose'. Richard Benson refers to his work in journalism 'where you see how malleable the notion of real life is [...] but then the moment anyone writes about anyone else, the ethics are open to question aren't they?' (Benson).

8. Conclusions

As a novelist, I have reimaged a fictional lace town in the shape of Longwash. Testimonies held in the oral history archives demonstrate that people rebuild and re-present places from their pasts through their memories. In my novel, I have not aimed for historical accuracy in my own fictional re-presentation of real places. My work has been a process of embellishment of place; what Van Luyn describes as 'blurring the features of places' ("Jogging Alongside" 64). I exaggerate characters' experiences, both within the fictional landscapes of the novel and on their journeys through it. My work is influenced by Nottingham writers such as D H Lawrence and the concerns with regional landscapes where rurality meets the industrial and Alan Sillitoe and the representation of people's working lives in the industrial East Midlands. At the heart of the reimaged fictional lace town, though, lie the ghosts of real-life lace making communities, mapped out from personal testimonies overheard in the archives. Although a work of fiction, I aim to create a credible world in my novel. For Leech and Short, such credibility is:

‘the likelihood, and hence believability, of the fiction as a ‘potential reality’, given that we apply our expectations and inferences about the real world to fictional happenings. A fiction tends to be credible to the extent that it overlaps with, or is a plausible extension of, our ‘real’ model of reality.’ (157)

For me, the oral history archives bring authenticity to my novel: through the observed details of everyday life in a reimagined past; through the actions and reactions of people, their emotions and their motivations.

Van Luyn uses the term ‘re-presentation’ to describe, as I do myself, the process undertaken by the writer in altering oral history interviews for creative purposes, ‘editing, altering or transposing the interview into a different symbolic language’ (“Jogging Alongside” 63). My own creative practice consists of a number of experimental processes: consideration of the spoken text as a found form; pinning spoken text to the page as poetic transcript; the evolution of poetic transcript into prose poetry; the transformation of prose poetry into fictional prose. Engaging in the creative process of transformation of words through these various forms was a delight, the breaking down of music into its component notes and then putting it back together and in the process creating something new and more than a sum of its original parts.

However experimental the process, the resulting creative work comes together in the conventional form of a novel. Its three-part structure follows the ‘beginning-middle-

end sequence of a narrative' and there is 'progression towards an end'. The narrative moves 'from a state of equilibrium or stasis through a disturbance of this stability; and back to a state of equilibrium at the end' (Bennett & Royle 56-57). The silences that fall between each chosen time period of the three-part novel structure mirror the silences found in the oral history archives. There are missing years and missing accounts in the novel, as there are in many oral testimonies. A listener in the oral history archives cannot intervene and prompt the interviewee to reveal more. For the writer, these silences offer spaces to be filled creatively.

Drawing on oral history archives is a valid methodology by which the novelist gains an insight into the human condition. Collected voices provide creative possibilities. Van Luyn acknowledges the experimental nature of her writing practice using oral history. She identifies benefits for the fiction writer as well as opportunities for 'researchers interested in exploring subjectivity in oral history interviews' ("Artful Life Stories" 14). She notes that 'Oral history's acceptance of interdisciplinary approaches has opened up a space for writers of fiction to engage in discussion with oral history theory. The exploration is, however, [still] in its infancy' ("Jogging Alongside" 65).

As discussed earlier, a number of creative writing practitioners work with oral history although much of this is concentrated in poetry and theatre. The study of oral history and fiction is less well covered. Writers, such as Van Luyn and Benson, create their own interviews from which they craft fiction or historical narrative. For those drawing on archive sources there is little analysis of the process by which they

engage with these recordings or how this material ends up in their work. Knight believes that oral history will become a key methodology for fiction writing as creative writing develops further as an academic discipline (1). Creative writing in the academy provides a platform for further experimentation for writers using oral history archives through the possibilities inherent in interdisciplinary relationships that break down barriers and encourage collaboration between disciplines.

Working with oral history archives as a found source offers scope for future creative research: not just of subject matter but concerning regionality and time period. As oral history collecting projects continue apace, such as the British Library's Sound Collection and Radio Four's Listening Project, the spoken voice continues to record everyday life as today slips into the past. These recent voices in the archive offers scope for contemporary fiction not just historical fiction. Using material gleaned from across collections creates an eclectic mix of raw material for the writer to work with.

These ethical considerations of working with archive material should not overshadow its creative possibilities. The continuing challenges encountered with access to oral history archives mean that much of it still remains 'hidden' and it could be suggested that the 'hard-to-reach' nature of the material is what makes it so attractive as a resource for the writer seeking out unusual or inspirational experiences.

In my work, delving into these archives brought to life a time that I could only experience visually through black and white photographs, archive film footage and the remaining urban and industrial archaeology of former lace towns. The voices that I listened to in the archives – the real Victorians and Edwardians – provide the lifeblood that courses through the veins of the novel and brings it to life. My own heritage has become part of the novel with voices in the archives triggering personal memories and reminiscences about my own connections with the heritage and landscapes of the East Midlands and its machine-made lace industry. Through my writing, I found myself at times, in the words of Atwood, at the intersection of ‘memory, history and story’, particularly in the final section of my novel, set in the 1970s, the decade of my own childhood.

‘The Queen of the Midlands’ began as a heritage project and came to fruition as a creative writing project which sits within the genre of historical fiction. As my writing progressed the machine-made lace industry slowly fell away from the foreground and became instead a vital backdrop for the characters and their lives both in and out of ‘the Lace’. I aim to have drawn on this rich historical context as a way to re-present a vanished world; to celebrate the textile at the heart of the industry and once so deeply embedded in people’s lives; to create my own piece of lace from the threads that I teased out of the archives; to put the language I heard in the archives back into the context out of which it grew. Lace seeps into everything about this project; it seeps into the accounts in the archives and interviewees’ lives; it ties the fictional characters to the fictional lace town of Longwash as much as it once

tied the real-life lace workers to the real-life lace towns of the English East Midlands.

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10. Appendices

10.1 Interview with Dorothy Alexander. Conducted by email, 2 July 2018.

The critical component of my PhD explores my own experiences of using an archive of oral history testimonies to inspire and inform my creative work. I have written a novel, set against the backdrop of the East Midlands lace industry. I have family connections with this region and its industrial heritage and have drawn on these alongside oral history archives to develop my work. I'd be interested to find out more about how you as a writer used oral history archives in creating 'The Mauricewood Devils'. I would value your responses to the following questions.

This interview falls into three parts. Firstly, I'd like to find out more about the oral history archive material that you used and your experiences – the challenges and the pleasures – of working with it. Secondly, I'd be interested to hear about your creative process, what you took from these archive sources and how you were able to use this in your writing. Finally, I'll touch on the ethics of (re-)using oral history archives for creative purposes.

1. The oral history archive

1.1 Why did you decide to draw on oral history archives as a source?

I had used oral history archives in a previous project to very positive effect.

1.2 What archive(s) or collection(s) did you use: can you give an overview of the material and the holding repository? How did you find out about it?

For the novel, I used SWPHT's [Scottish Working People's History Trust] *Through the Mill: personal recollections by veteran men and women Penicuik paper mill workers*, edited by Ian MacDougall. This is a collection of transcripts that tell of what it was like to work in the paper mills in Penicuik for those being recorded and from memories of stories told by previous generations. I also used Midlothian Council's archive of local newspapers in which the voices of those present were recorded as incidents unfolded, in which speeches were recorded verbatim as were, for instance, the funeral orations for the victims of the disaster. I found out about the whereabouts of these resources in Penicuik library – by amazing coincidence, the secretary of Penicuik Local History Society was behind me in the queue!

1.3 Navigating the spoken text: did you face any challenges accessing the material? What format was the material available in, was it analogue or digital?

No challenges accessing the materials. Much of it was anglicised to an extent but I am totally familiar with the way of speaking used. *Through the Mill* was a book. The contemporary newspapers were on microfiche.

1.4 Were you able to listen to the oral source, either the original recordings or digitised recordings, or did you have to rely on paper-based transcripts?

Not in this instance – all resources were on paper-based transcripts. In the previous project I did have access to original recordings and while I loved hearing the voices, it made me appreciate not having the voice of an interviewer present in the transcripts.

2. The creative process. In my own writing I draw on oral histories to inform and inspire: for historical detail to build authenticity and as a creative stimulus, with new ideas growing out of anecdotes, images and turns of phrase all found in oral testimonies.

2.1 Personal connections: could you explain your own family history connections with the novel? Did drawing on oral histories add to these personal connections in any way? Did you use oral testimonies from within your own family, from stories handed down intergenerationally?

See <http://www.dorothyalexander.co.uk/how-i-came-to-write-the-mauricewood-devils.html> for my personal connection and how much oral testimony came from within my own family. As you will see, it wasn't much. What was much more significant was my own experience of hearing their voices and their day-to-day conversations over the years. I think that the oral histories painted such a vivid picture of the community at that time that made imagining it so much easier.

2.2 Place is clearly important in 'The Mauricewood Devils': did oral history archive material help to develop a sense of place in your work? Can you explain how?

Yes. I am familiar with Penicuik but only in the sense of it being a neighbouring town to the one I was brought up in. The oral histories gave me a much clearer sense of the kind of community it would have been at that time. They also gave me such valuable details as all the young folk meeting at the Roslin road end on a Sunday evening. I was familiar with Innerleithen anyway as my grandparents lived there.

2.3 Historical detail: did you find oral history archives useful to inform the historical authenticity of your novel?

Absolutely – see above. Details that I would never have had access to from more conventional resources. Details that gave texture to the narrative. The novel would have been much less if I had not had these details.

2.4 Did listening to voices from the archives inspire any other writing that eventually became part of the novel in some way?

Yes – some of the stories became incorporated into dreams, and the archive newspaper material was hugely useful in terms of the fact-containing fifty-word paragraphs.

2.5 Themes: when I listened to the archives I identified a number of issues that interviewees returned to again and again and these became keystones in my novel, for example, the hidden stories of women outworkers who did lace work at home and how this work tended to be intergenerational. Did you identify any themes in the

material that you consulted and do you feel that any of this became a part of the novel?

Not specifically, but they very much contributed to the fleshing out of the themes that I had for the novel such as how to live a something vulnerable in the world. The importance of having enough money to survive came across very strongly in the testimonials from the paper mill workers, for example. I'm also just remembering that another source of testimony that I found very moving and useful for the theme of how religion had played its part within the society around that time was the report of the Frank Commission on the working conditions of women and children working down the mines in the 1840s. Oral testimony had been recorded verbatim and was heartbreakingly sad and yet most of the comments on the various individuals related to how much religious education they had had.

2.6 Characters: are any of your characters influenced by anything that you found in the oral history archives?

I think that rather than any of the characters being influenced by things I found, they were useful for providing a certain tone of voice, giving me an insight into the way people might have behaved and their day-to-day activities.

2.7 Dialogue: I'm interested in your use of reported speech in the novel. Is there a connection between this way of presenting the spoken word in the novel and your use of oral history archives?

I suspect that this has more to do with being an only child and listening, in the background, to a lot of conversations when I was young.

2.8 Structure and form: as you explain in your notes at the end of the novel, the book references the oral narrative tradition in its presentation as a monologue and the structuring of factual material into fifty-word paragraphs to represent the assertion that this is 'the maximum number of words that we as humans can memorise verbatim without recourse to the written word'. Were these decisions made in the early stages of writing or did they evolve over time? Did oral history archives influence your decisions?

Yes, oral history definitely influenced my decisions although the idea for the novel and initial writing began before the oral history project which eventually fed into the novel's structure and has subsequently influenced much of my creative work since. Working with oral history has also refocused my earlier work.

3. The ethics of (re-)using oral history for creative purposes

3.1 In my work, I cherry pick elements of character, phrases, snippets of anecdote, images and reimagine them, fictionalise them. I'd be interested to find out what your approach is to the ethics of re-using oral history interviews for creative purposes?

I do much the same as yourself and feel that if resources are used in the way you describe their use inhabits the realms of inspiration and intertextuality as opposed to those of plagiarism or any other nefarious purpose.

10.2 Interview with Richard Benson. Conducted by email, 8 June 2018.

Although my writing is fiction, I'd be interested to find out more about how you as a writer used oral histories in creating 'The Valley' as a social historical work. I would value your responses to the following questions.

This interview falls into three parts. Firstly, I'd like to find out whether you worked with any existing oral history archive material or created new oral history interviews and what your experiences – the challenges and the pleasures – of working with this material were. Secondly, I'd be interested to hear about your creative process, what you took from these archive sources and how you were able to use this in your writing. Finally, I'll touch on the ethics of (re-)using oral history archives for creative purposes.

1. The oral history archive

1.1 If you used oral histories from an existing oral history archive, can you tell me a little more about the archive(s) or collection(s) you used, an overview of the material and the holding repository and how you found out about it?

I didn't use any existing oral history archives. However, I did work with two local history groups in Shirebrook, Derbyshire, and Bolton-Upon-Deane in South Yorkshire. Both of these groups had compiled written and transcribed histories of their localities – the latter in a printed and bound series that runs to ten volumes. I also used some published oral histories, notably Tony Parker's Redhill, Brian Lewis' excellent Up Sticks And A Job For Life record of the Selby coalfield, and Elizabeth Roberts' books.

1.2 Did you face any challenges accessing this archive material and navigating the spoken text? What format was the material available in, was it analogue or digital?

No, but it might be worth adding that when I was interviewing the local history groups, I found that the meaningful information I could obtain depended very much on the make-up of the group. The main problem, particularly in the south Yorkshire group, was that some people forcefully and consistently talked over others. This would have been frustrating in any circumstances (not least for the people being talked over) but all the more so because in this case because it was always men talking over women, and while much of the male discourse was egocentric, opinionated and focused in the public sphere, while the women had more to say about private, family and domestic arrangements.

1.3 Were you able to listen to the oral source, either the original recordings or digitised recordings, or did you have to rely on paper-based transcripts?

See above!

1.4 If you created your own oral history interviews can you give me an overview of the work that you carried out?

This was the bulk of the oral history work. I targeted three main groups:

1) People whose jobs/experience had involved responsibility to/representation of the Dearne community; for example, councillors, education/health/social care managers, people with experience of running regeneration projects, union representatives and historians, local historians/writers/artists.

2) People whose work had given them insight into the community: for example publicans, librarians, teachers, police officers and clergy. I attempted some interviews with groups – for example schoolchildren and drinkers in working men's clubs – but these were not among the most successful experiments, for obvious reasons.

3) Family members. I set out to interview all the living descendents of my great-grandparents, but of course this was unwieldy and impractical. In the end I limited it to those family members who had had relationships with the central couple in the book, i.e. my grandparents. I interviewed all the people, with background interviews usually taking a couple of hours, and those with family members anything from 3-4 hours to several days' worth over the course of several years. With key family

members in the narrative, I drafted versions of events according to initial interviews, and then went back over them – I found this an interesting because often they would mention new memories even on the third or fourth version. There were several occasions when we'd spend hours doing an interview, then go out to get lunch or something, and they'd casually mention a new narrative-changing incident.

One thing I'm interested in is how any kind of recording or creative engagement with a community or place changes both that community/place and the person recording or creating. At the outset I wanted to use this idea positively, and I was able to pay a just-graduated Human Geography from Barnsley to do research for me. He did some of the background interviews, flagging up anyone he felt would be useful for me to speak to personally. We developed a close relationship, and he subsequently worked researching another book, and then studied journalism, and is now a BBC news reporter who has brought his own experience to bear on several stories he has covered. He would have done this with or without my help, but I feel pleased to have worked with him.

There was also a more challenging aspect of this idea of the engagement changing the story, i.e. interviewees revealing facts hitherto unknown to the rest of the family. In particular, one woman, an aunt, told me the details of her physical abuse by her husband (my mother's brother, who was by then dead). When I asked her if she was comfortable talking about it, she said yes, she really wanted to, because she had never told *anyone* before. She was 70 at the time. As you might imagine this caused some distress and consternation among other family members. Of course, I couldn't

verify everything she said, but felt that the incidents that others did verify, and the details of her account, lent weight to what she said.

The details of my grandmother's affair were also almost entirely new to me and the rest of the family.

The obvious point here is that we live with highly-edited, if not outright fictional, versions of our own pasts. The family itself seems the basic unit of that editing process.

1.5 Did you make paper-based transcripts and work from these? How did you find this experience?

I did, and I find transcribing laborious, soul-destroying work. I did pay someone to do some of the transcribing, though it's expensive, and the Barnsley accents caused some issues!

I have to be honest and say I didn't transcribe every interview, because so often would we going over stories we had discussed before. In these cases, where I was checking details and/or trying to find new ones, I would add the new material into new edits of original documents.

3. The creative process. In my own writing, I draw on oral histories to inform and inspire: for historical detail to build authenticity and as a creative stimulus, with

new ideas growing out of anecdotes, images and turns of phrase all found in oral testimonies.

3.1 Personal connections: could you explain your own family history connections with 'The Valley'? Did drawing on oral histories add to these personal connections in any way? Did you use oral testimonies from within your own family, from stories handed down intergenerationally?

Yes, it's about my family, and I was specifically interested in the way the family relationships were channels for creating and passing on history. I feel it's become almost hokey and over-familiar to talk about mining families passing on stories about strikes, Churchill and Lady Astor and so on at the grandmother's knee, but it's true and I did have personal experience of it. For me it went together with the entertaining storytelling by tap room raconteurs, popular spiritualism, and the constant discussion of family influences and similarities.

To me as someone looking in as a writer or historian, this desire to orient oneself with story, family and wider social context seems to me part of the refusal to become passive beings in the service of industry, or to be laid down like another layer of geology.

That was why I wanted to write a non-fiction account. I wanted to record that these specific, actual people existed in that specific, actual place. As soon as it became fiction I felt I lost them. In order to do this, I had to add a lot of guesstimating (you

could say making it up, though it didn't feel quite like that), but there was no perfect way to do what I wanted to do.

I think the first time I thought of doing the book was at my grandmother's funeral – at the wake we talked a lot about the 84-5 miners' strike, and the arc from the First World War to that point seemed closely bound up with the arc of her life, so the social history and her personal story always felt like two sides of the same thing to me.

Listening to oral testimonies from the family absolutely added to all this, mainly in that they made me understand that many of the experiences I associated with my own family had been shared by the whole community. So for example one person mentioned briefly his stepfather weeping when the Saltley Gates were closed in 1972, because it vindicated that stepfather's own father, who was in strike in 1926. This is how my grandmother and grandfather saw it too. It was very moving to realise that that arc, which I had thought might be partly in my imagination, was felt viscerally by the community and place.

3.2 Place is clearly important in the book: did oral history archive material help to develop a sense of place in your work? Can you explain how?

Ah well, see immediately above! The most straightforward way in which that worked was the intensely localized nature of people's lives – until the 1990s they were able to live and work in what now seems a small space. That came through the

oral history/interviews simply through the recurring references – not just the frequency, but also through the colloquial/slang names. All the pits and pubs had local names (the sludge, the Klondike, the Jungle, the drum) that are incomprehensible to outsiders.

But what really deepened my sense of the place were the recollections of walking through the landscape, with its strange mix of industrial and rural elements. The importance of pathways, short walks around ponds linked to industrial sites, the cut-throughs across fields, the difference in behaviours in the back alleys and front streets made me think about how, when we think about people in landscapes we tend to think of them as stationery and even fixed – whereas it's the traversing of, or working in, the landscape/place that will often be the dominant memory.

I think those memories of escaping into freer space – mostly fields and paths in this case – was particularly important to a lot of the women, because it was an escape from oppressive domestic interiors.

I was also really struck by the ways in which “ugly” industrial structures were transformed by imagination into elements which were intriguing and even beautiful; spoil heaps as mountains, train lines as symbols of escape, coke works as factories for pure white clouds or Mordor.

Finally, I was genuinely surprised at the antipathy towards to area expressed by some of the people from groups 1 and 2 above, who saw it the valley as a down at

heel home to ne'er do wells. I mean, I knew it wasn't Windsor or Oxford, but having lived in other rural areas, I don't think the people there were any worse than anywhere else!

3.3 Historical detail: did you find oral history material useful to inform the historical authenticity of your novel? Can you give some examples of this?

Yes. The example that immediately comes to mind is from when I was trying to write the account of my great uncle's injury and subsequent death in a pit accident. His son in law, who had worked with him on the same coal face, had a very clear account which involved managers (and indeed union officials) repeatedly ignoring warnings from the men about gas leaks. These warnings had been made in official channels. However, the official, Government-sanctioned report, and other materials, made no mention of any of this. When in exasperation I mentioned this to an ex-miner who had worked through the ranks from worker to manager, he laughed and told me it as a standing joke that the reports were always used to exonerate the management. I used the son in law's version!

Another example. At the time when my aunt (who suffered the abused) left her husband and was looking for housing and social work support to regain custody of her children, she was able to obtain help from the welfare state. This reflects well on the period and the state, but what history does not record is the sexism and condescension directed at her as a shy, working class woman in the process. It was her son, aged around 10 at the time, who remembered this keenly. Of course, it's

possible that it seemed worse to him than an objective adult might have thought, but again parts of her own testimony backed this up.

And some of the account of the 84-5 miners strike sits slightly at odds with the now-mythologised version (most miners didn't picket; Orgreave wasn't the only pitched battle; some people hated the soup kitchens because they were humiliating) – that's not to say that the myths aren't valid, but the authenticity lies in portraying a mixture of responses in a community, rather than writing as if everyone felt the same.

3.4 Did listening to oral testimonies inspire any other writing that eventually became part of the book in some way?

Not any long sections, but yes in that several of the people were spiritualists, and there was a theme running through some of the interviews of a universe parallel to ours but freed from time. To reflect this I did add in a couple of references to people re-entering the story after their deaths.

Also, the descriptions of the landscapes were based on oral testimonies, ie interviewees' impressions rather than mine.

3.4 Themes: when I listened to the archives I identified a number of issues that interviewees returned to again and again and these became keystones in my novel, for example, the hidden stories of women outworkers who did lace work at home and how this work tended to be intergenerational. Did you identify any recurring themes

in the oral testimonies that you listened to and do you feel that any of this became a part of the book?

The 1984-5 miners' strike was certainly a constant reference point, so much so that I often had to try to steer people away from it.

As for themes, the two that I consciously tried to incorporate were technology (radio, cars, vacuum cleaners, computers and so on) and entertainment/leisure. Having in mind the Humphrey Jennings film *Spare Time*, I felt these were important means by which successive generations had defined themselves and created self-images.

3.5 Characters: did anything you drew from oral testimonies help you to develop your characters in any way?

Not sure this quite applies as *The Valley* is narrative nonfiction. One interesting challenge here was to combine the individual's own oral testimony with other people's recollections of them.

3.6 Dialogue: I'd be interested to find out more about how you developed dialogue in the book – what characters say as well as how they say it. Did oral history or family stories influence any of the dialogue that you constructed? I'd also be interested in your approach to accent and dialogue when representing the spoken word on the page.

When I wrote my first book, *The Farm*, a more personal memoir, I found the dialogue hard because so many of the people in the book were silent, or at least disinclined to speak more than was necessary. They also had strong Yorkshire accents, and I find accents phonetically transcribed read unconvincingly. The only author I'd read whose characters sounded like the people I wanted to write about was Magnus Mills, so I read every interview with I could find to see if he mentioned influences – finally I found where he talked about basing his approach on Harold Pinter. So I read a lot of Pinter, and found an answer in writing the dialogue to suggest the accent and feel, and letting the audience do the rest.

With some of the dialogue I tried to get something of the feel of the he-said she-said stories people tell in pubs or sitting rooms, as these tended to come up a lot in family history stories and interviews – in my mind this is bound up with a) the binary capital-labour social conflicts in pit villages and b) the chalk-and-cheese nature of my grandparents!

The pre-war dialogue, which I had to construct based on secondhand stories, is the part of the book that troubled me most in terms of authenticity, because it's clearly reconstructed with a degree of fiction that could be found in novels. I did try the tactic of saying "I imagine them saying...", but this was problematic because the "I" is also a character in the book.

So I just explained it in the introduction and hoped for the best. I'm not sure I'd do it again in all truth, I do feel it's not quite right in a work of non-fiction.

4. The ethics of (re-)using oral history for creative purposes.

4.1 In my work, I cherry pick elements of character, phrases, snippets of anecdote, images and reimagine them, fictionalise them. I'd be interested to find out what your approach is to the ethics of re-using oral history interviews for creative purposes, in your own work and in the work of other writers?

I think I covered some of this above. I'm interested in the points where oral history meets narrative non-fiction, or the non-fiction novel, or more to the point that area where fiction and "real life" are mingled. History, pub anecdotes, secrets, lies, political narratives, family legends, corporate deceit and so on – I think that might be partly because of working in journalism, where you see up how malleable the notion of real life is. I have to say that I realised I was interested in all that as a result of writing *The Valley*, rather than vice-versa.

I think that all this can lead into very ethically-dubious areas, but then the moment anyone writes about anyone else, the ethics are open to question aren't they? I don't see using oral history as a resource for fiction as being particularly problematic, as there does seem to be an implicit selflessness in the act of compiling oral history, but perhaps I'm being idealistic.

The work that most interests in me in this whole field is Ronald Blythe's *Akenfield*, which I feel it is somewhat misunderstood. When I first read it, I like many other people took it to be a work of more or less straight oral history. Having revisited it

many times over the years, I now see it as more a personal memoir, but more importantly as something we don't have a term for (Blythe himself said after being accused of being a poor oral historian in 1969 that he didn't even know what oral history was). Clearly he did the interviews, but equally clearly they're shaped into his personal vision of that place and time. Whether it's history, fact or fiction I dunno, but that's why I like it so much.

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I dedicate this thesis to Bill and Bertha Foster, my grandparents who were there with me all the way along the journey.