

Writing Unity

A Practice-led Exploration of Female Embodiment in Historical Fiction set in Early Twentieth-Century Britain

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ABSTRACT

This doctoral thesis examines how historical fiction can creatively explore female embodiment in early twentieth-century Britain.

The creative component is a historical novel titled *Unity*, which is set in the spring of 1948, against the backdrop of the birth of the National Health Service and the death of Unity Mitford. It utilises female protagonists and medical contexts to explore attitudes towards female bodies, bodily knowledge, and contraception, using focalised narratives to represent the experience of female embodiment itself. The critical component sets out the rationale behind this agenda, demonstrating the complexity of how the female body has come to be shaped in western philosophy, before presenting and analysing the female body within the socio-historic and literary contexts of the early twentieth century. By analysing the work of historical novelists Pat Barker and Sarah Waters alongside *Unity*, drawing on feminist criticism and women's history, this thesis highlights how women's bodies and body images have been socially-constructed by the body politic and the medical gaze.

Whilst women writers of the early twentieth century were limited in terms of how they could articulate embodied experience – through the twin forces of obscenity laws and the self-policing fostered by gendered sexual codes – historical novelists such as Barker, Waters, and myself, have a broader range of organs, sensations, and bodily fluids that we are able to present on the page. These representations can in turn be read for contemporaneous gender dynamics, producing bodies that are both viscerally engaging and socio-historically specific. This thesis also investigates how embodied narratives function, and the multi-disciplinary research methods employed to create them. Trapped within our own bodies it is our creative and empathic abilities that allow us to reach outside ourselves, and even back in time. Connecting to the past thus becomes part of the path towards positive embodiment.

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CREATIVE COMPONENT

UNITY

PART ONE: YES AND NO

SATURDAY MAY 1 1948

YES AND NO

The result of the fourth plebiscite to be held by the British Medical Association will be known soon after this issue of the *Journal* is published. If the majority of consultants and specialists, general practitioners, and those working whole-time in voluntary hospitals vote against accepting service, and if this majority includes approximately 13,000 general practitioners, the B.M.A. will continue to advise the medical profession not to enter the National Health Service on July 5.

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A knife wound, they said. They weren't entirely clear on that, but he would soon make it one anyway. Liz leaned across the table and handed him the blade. Sometimes you had to cut deeper before you could begin to repair. She knew that. She knew there were any number of reasons for slicing into a person's abdomen: excision, exploration, to stop flows of fugitive blood from pooling and gurgling between vital organs; and for others – violence, hate. Love? Ramsay tilted his head so the harsh lamplight fell across his face. The space between his eyebrows glistened and she could see where the edge of his cap was beginning to stick. Warming to his task, though most of his movements were small, and from time to time he stopped entirely. He was standing quite still now, holding his head to one side, and she found herself leaning closer. As if she might just catch the mechanics of his thoughts whirring away like some codebreaking contraption, more intricate than the industrial looking anaesthetic equipment, which hissed and gasped vulgarly behind her back. He lowered his head again – satisfied. And she was ready. She knew all his moves and was used to reading

that wiry frame and three inches of exposed brow. It was nice watching him from this angle, with his head down, so he couldn't see her doing it. His dark eyelashes stood out against the white of his mask: a thin layer of crisp fabric pulled up past the nose. It made her think of her bedsheets that would have turned cold again by now. Then she realised she was going to yawn and felt the resistance of the mask as her jaw moved. The burst of hot air, trapped and turned damp. He looked up at her just then and a smile flashed into his eyes.

“Keeping you up am I?”

She held his gaze for a moment. “Yes, seen as you ask.” She tried to keep her own face straight, looking instead towards the tray of instruments. Neat rows of knife handles and brutish retractors, just waiting. Glinting. Her left hand hovered, flexed over a gaping Payr's clamp, and she found herself yawning again. That bloody body of hers was forever showing her up. As if she wasn't wide awake and ready for anything. It was just that it would take more than a stabbing to faze her. And the muggy atmosphere in the theatre at night seemed to stretch itself out across all but the direst emergencies. It had a surreal quality to it, all those glistening white and silver surfaces, with just a few subdued figures buzzing softly around the too bright artificial light. There was a sudden shift to slow and precise movements after hurried preparations and the dash over from the nurses' home. Though that was an awkward transition too, because before that there was bed. She had lain there, with closed eyes and the usual struggle with closing ears – trying not to listen out for any action; the hurried tread in the hall that meant more work to be done. But as she lay awake there was only the creaking step of old Sister Munn. She knew it was Sister Munn because of the pause to break wind, followed by her usual report, without missing a beat – good arse, I thought you were deid. So Liz had just wrinkled her nose and lowered her head back onto the pillow, feeling that she'd somehow been duped into paying Sister Munn's gas particular attention. Then not knowing she was asleep until they were waking her up again; a distinct knocking coming at her

through the dark. She couldn't even have been asleep an hour, so was amazed at the heaviness of her own frame as she pulled herself up from the bed, and up from the brink of deep sleep, thinking – so...it was going to be one of those nights was it. It required enormous effort to force her aching feet back into her shoes and to not take the face off the probationer sent to summon her. The girl flinched when the door flew open, but was soon peering over Liz's shoulder – so this is what a sister's room looks like... All books and no cushions. How dreadfully disappointing.

“Well?”

“I'm afraid it's an acute case Sister. They've called for Mr Kincaid.”

Liz turned then, and went to check herself in the mirror more carefully, amused that she wasn't yet beyond that. Had the girl noticed? Liz's fingers moved quickly, re-pinning bright blonde waves, and she was soon on her way, dashing down the corridor with the probationer flapping behind her. Running was of course strictly forbidden in all parts of the hospital, even though they were expected to carry out their duties with an efficiency verging on superhuman. It resulted in the nurses adopting an odd and deeply undignified canter. She found herself doing it as she hurried towards the theatre, even though it was the middle of the night when Matron would be in bed, and Liz didn't much care what anyone else thought. Even so, she mustn't run. She was already in enough of a bourach having been hauled out her bed; she wasn't about to turn up all red and unpinned – like the probationer. What was her name again now? She was still trailing behind, and insisting on breathing loudly through the mouth. Liz pressed her lips together and tried not to frown – well a girl has to breathe!

They reached the conservatory, where the air changed. Thick and stifling, though all the strange plants were reaching towards glass panes flecked with rain. How much nicer it would be to get a burst of that, rather than the sweet stench of over ripeness that hung on the threshold of the nurses' home. The others could wax lyrical for hours over their little slice of

paradise, but Liz could never shake the feeling of damp, and of being observed like an object in a display cabinet. It was a relief to pass through into the hospital proper, its stone-walled corridors cool as cold water to the face. She picked up her pace again, hurrying on, like a ghost – floating white and silent, in rubber soles. But she could hear again the lumbering gait of the probationer behind her, the occasional wheeze. The poor girl might even be asthmatic. Liz slowed down slightly. The probationer careered into the back of her. Liz turned around, tutting, but then noticed, even in the dull half-light, the colour bursting across the girl's huge face. On the plus side she suddenly remembered which name she should attach to it.

"Never mind McKinley," she tried to wipe the furrows from her own brow. "We're almost there." She was aware it wasn't quite the same as a smile, like her neutral tone wasn't quite the same as actual warmth. Still, it was a damn site better than the dog's abuse they got from everyone else. It was ridiculous the way folk wound the probationers up to a pitch of petrified frenzy. No wonder it took them so long to be of any use; like that girl the other week who didn't want to breathe on the consultant when she was helping him tie his gown. She'd ended up swooning onto the floor and causing everyone a huge amount of inconvenience. The training appeared to be designed that way though; Year One Objectives: destroy complexion, break spirit, frighten half to death. At least this girl had made it to fetch Liz, all by herself, through the shadowy unconscious hospital, without getting hysterical.

"Been on nights long McKinley? It is McKinley isn't it?"

"No Sister...I mean, yes Sister. That's my right name but this is only my first week."

"Well," Liz glanced at the girl again. Bright cheeks, soft round eyes, almost absurdly puppyish. "I'm sure you'll be fine." It didn't come out particularly convincing. "Just avoid the Wild Rover if you can."

"Is that the ghost up by men's surgical?"

Christ. “No,” Liz made an effort to keep her voice even. “Never mind nonsense about ghosts, The Wild Rover’s what they call the Night Super.” She had a habit of materialising out of the darkness – snarl first. “She’s real enough I can assure you. But her bark’s definitely worse than her bite.” Though that was poor consolation really; who needed to bite when you had a bark like that.

She noticed the girl staring at her oddly before she remembered that Sisters weren’t supposed to know these things, the nicknames and the stories, and certainly weren’t supposed to tell them to probationers. Yet here she was, muddying the waters. Again.

Oh well. It was too late now. She turned away from McKinley’s gaping face to push the door open and propel them into the resuscitation room. The light was much brighter in there so you were practically stepping onstage at the Pavilion. A feeling that was only reinforced by the sight that greeted them.

“Evening ladies, glad you could join us.” Ramsay had turned towards them as they entered.

It was Liz’s turn to gape now. She glanced at McKinley to see what she was noticing, but McKinley had her head down, ducking away from Ramsay’s address, and crimsoning to the point that Liz wondered if anyone had ever blushed to death.

“What have you come as then?” she asked, nodding back towards him before closing her mouth and forcing a small smile into the corners of it.

He held his arms out for her to take in the full monochrome length of him. “A portrait of the surgeon as a young gentleman.”

Young was pushing it. Most of his contemporaries had homes of their own by now, some smart city terrace or other, with a brass plaque and a sign showing clinic hours. Yet he was clinging on to the hospital as best he could, from the registrars’ flat round the corner. When McKinley had mentioned his name earlier, Liz had pictured it all; the ring of the telephone,

his silhouette stumbling into the hall, a raised hand rubbing at his eyes as he announced down the line – Kincaid speaking. She had witnessed it several times herself; a fact that would get them both sacked quicker than the flow of blood to McKinley’s facial capillaries. But on this occasion she’d been imagining it all wrong. Because here he was turning up to the hospital in a full dinner suit – borrowed, no doubt; or perhaps communally owned amongst a few of his friends, like that ridiculous bloody hat.

“But what happens when you all need to go to some important event together?” she’d asked when she heard about that little scheme.

“Ah, then that will be the day the revolution has triumphed, and we can wear any old cap we please.”

She’d certainly been struck, walking into the resuscitation room and seeing him leaning over the bed in that get up, looking, to all intents and purposes, like one of the consultants who might have darted in fresh from the opera. Which perhaps was the whole idea. She wanted to walk up to him and touch the sleeve of his jacket, to see if he was real or some vision that might waltz off down the wing. She’d felt suddenly embarrassed though and couldn’t quite put her finger on why. It was as if she’d somehow caught him out – or been left out. But then she noticed the spray of blood on the floor and the grey pained face on the bed, which was more their sort of scene anyway.

“All right,” Ramsay was saying, “we’d better get him to theatre straight away.”

So she’d had to wait until they were scrubbing up to find out where exactly he’d been. They stood next to each other at the sink, their heads still, shoulders relaxed – hands scrubbing furiously. Like a pair of swans on a pond.

“How’s this for a bit of serendipity?” he asked, over the noise of the gushing water. “It’s been ages since we spent the night together.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “This wasn’t quite what I had in mind.”

“What? You and me underneath the sheets – what more could you ask for?”

Well, it was true that sheets were a good start considering some of their previous operations together. Still, she might wish for a tablecloth instead. Dinner out. The pictures. To be alone together, because as she had pointed out before, unconscious people did still count, not to mention the anaesthetist. The probationer running in and out...

“You might have warned me,” she said, eyeing the straight line of his starched back from the side. “I’m feeling very underdressed.”

He smiled. “Did you like it?”

“Am I going to be the only one at this operation not in some degree of dinner suit?” The patient had been wearing one too – just to rub it in.

“It was a Faculty dinner. That counts as work, listening to that lot give themselves indigestion over the new service and the latest BMA plebiscite.”

“Of course.” There was still some of them opposed. “I imagine things got rather heated.” She paused and drew her head back to look at him. “You didn’t stab anyone though did you?”

He laughed.

“Matching suits,” she went on, “first on the scene – all very suspicious really.”

“Not guilty. I was with Mac so I had to play nice...well...nicer.”

She knew he was trying to make himself indispensable to Mac, his chief – which made it sound like some sort of clan gathering. But Ramsay was currently in the second year of a two year specialism, and only nationalisation would allow him to carry on. A wage to keep him

going up the ladder. While she stayed exactly where she was. But she didn't really want to think about that; she took it out rather viciously on the cuticles of her left hand.

"Look how nicely the evening has turned out," he was saying. He seemed genuinely pleased, frothing at the wrists, but she took that to say more about the Faculty dinner than it did about her.

"I'm sure the patient would beg to disagree. His shirt's ruined."

Ramsay laughed.

"Think of the coupons."

"Darling," he lowered his voice, "I don't think men like him restrict themselves to the coupons."

"What?" She looked at him. "Are you suggesting we have a spiv on our hands? I thought they only had those in the papers."

"Is that more sensationalist coverage from *The Oban Times*?"

She smiled. "How dare you." Not that she was in a position to say what did, or didn't go on in her hometown these days, even if she did get the paper posted to her every week. It was safe enough to do that now; she didn't have to worry so much about who would confront her from the back pages.

"They picked this chap up during a shebeen raid," Ramsay said, "some sort of gambling bust." He was surprisingly well informed.

"Oh here, who's the sensationalist now?" She stood back, finished with her hands, holding them out in front of her – like a ghost again, ready to be covered by her sheet. "I thought he must have been at the dancing because he's got a wife with him in a fur coat."

Ramsay looked over at her as he rinsed.

She sighed. "I suppose you're going to tell me that's not his wife."

"Not at all, she may well be." It was like him to shy away from those sorts of judgements.

How was anyone to know these days. Just look at the two of them – her and Ramsay; what exactly would they be classed as? Boyfriend and girlfriend? They weren't nearly bold enough, and too old by half. She still wasn't sure what exactly she'd been hoping for, but she'd wound up somewhere between lover and liability.

So she had envied this woman her fur coat and her night out, tart or no tart; though obviously things hadn't quite panned out for her either.

Here was her man, all laid out. Cut up. But satisfactory in all his vital signs – considering. And the woman had looked quite calm, considering, though it maybe wasn't the first night she'd spent in a hospital waiting room in a fur, what was it – fox? Liz didn't know about coats but she knew those animals that scurried about the hospital grounds at night. Indecent wails permeating the practised silence of the nurses' home.

She looked at the outline of the man's body beneath the sheets, a long indefinite lump. Had he wailed when they stuck it in him? Had it hurt him much, that gash that she'd painted around, cleaning and staining the skin at the same time. It always reminded her of doing the back of Annag's legs in gravy browning; catching the scent of it and teasing her friend – well don't be surprised if he takes a sudden notion for a roast dinner. How long ago had that been? A world away from the collar and cuffs stuffiness she'd had to contend with since being made sister. It was odd. All through her training she had never really pictured beyond the war, never connected her fate with these strange older women who inhabited the senior's wing. They were a different species, that was all. They barked and frowned, and, it was widely agreed, had probably stopped menstruating. But what could she do, Liz was good at her work and duly promoted. She was twenty-six now. She was no doubt frowning more, but she never raised her voice – what was the point – and she still got her periods each month; a quick burst of relief followed by a simmering sense of inconvenience.

Ramsay stretched two reddened fingers out to her and she felt herself blush as she placed a pair of curved scissors in them. The gloves made his hands round and shiny, and the blood seemed to hang and slide in blobs over the dark rubber. The wound had been a fairly neat oblong shape when they'd cleaned it up, but he needed a whole trench. Now he poked his fingers underneath the last taut pink layer, getting a feel for the hole before working it wider. One long line that revealed as he went, more and more of the pulsating mass below. She held a dish out and the scissors rattled into it. He had both hands inside the patient now, inspecting the jumble of organs. It wasn't half as orderly in there as the anatomy textbooks had once led her to believe. All those diagrams that they'd copied out in coloured pencil. Colour coding was all very well in theory, but the internal organs of the human body had clearly been designed with a more limited palette. Like the one Sister Smith had got from the drapers on Dumbarton Road when she wanted her new curtains. It was a little book with patches of colour in it, with names like: magenta, wine, ruby...cerise...flamingo.

"What do you think?" she had asked Liz, seen as nobody else happened to be in the sitting room at that moment.

Liz looked up from the newspaper, which was locked in a wooden stock lest anyone try and make off with it to read in peace.

"They're quite fleshy tones, are they not." Trying to picture it hanging in folds. "I might feel like I was parting the small bowel each morning."

But Sister Smith hadn't appreciated that comment at all. Though Liz might have likened it to something worse. Sister Smith ran the gynaecological service.

The theatre was Liz's domain, though she was in it far less since she'd been promoted. It added a sense of the illicit to these night surgeries; that, and having come straight from her bed. And then to find Ramsay here, like a dream – because she often dreamt of him. She

wondered sometimes whether it might leave a visible trace on her, something that he would see, and was glad that she was required on these occasions to dress herself up like negative space: gown, mask, cap. Of course, it would be even worse if someone else were to see.

Cribbens, for example; the houseman doing the anaesthetic, who she had once heard refer to her as vinegar tits. Well, anything to throw him off the scent. And he was currently preoccupied with his own instruments by the shadowy head of the bed.

“A bit low for your usual chibbing wouldn’t you say,” Ramsay reached out without looking up and took the retractor she was offering. “Unless, that is, they were aiming for total disembowelment.”

“Oh,” Liz screwed up her face. “That’s a bit on the medieval side.”

“Well, you know, since the dawn of time Man has enjoyed knocking lumps out each other.”

“And putting each other together again?”

“That too.”

“The oldest profession?”

He looked up, catching her smile. “I think you’ll find that’s something else.”

“That’s not what you were saying the other night,” she whispered, and he laughed, loud enough to attract the attention of Cribbens, who jumped slightly and started reciting the readings at them.

It was a standard line of Ramsay’s whenever he was bemoaning the horrors of private practice. He wasn’t going to whore himself out to a bunch of pampered neurotics, and to be fair she couldn’t exactly picture that working out very well for anyone. If he could just hold on a little bit longer...

“Here we are.” He eased his hand out of the abdominal opening, bringing with it a section of the small intestine. The fat pink string of it always looked like a length of sausages to her. Ramsay too apparently: “Did you say half a pound or a pound madam?”

She tutted. “Must you say that every time?”

“I save it for my best customers.”

She wondered if he remembered the very slight young fella near Bayeux whose swollen intestines they’d held between them, alarmingly like at least two pounds worth.

“Our old friend the small bowel,” he said, as he kept it coming.

She moved quickly to pack the area as he ran his fingers over the glistening flesh.

“You seem almost pleased to see it,” she said. “And there was you thinking you’d gone up in the world.”

He laughed.

“At least as far as the diaphragm.”

He laughed again, and this time the houseman turned from his instruments to give a titter too. She looked over at him, after almost forgetting he was there.

“Are you hearing this Cribbens?” Ramsay asked without looking up.

“Yes sir,” he was smiling. Did he think it was odd, her cheeking a senior registrar like that?

“Well Sister, mind and make sure the chap knows he had one of your most promising chest men rooting around in his bowels.”

“Hmm.” She whipped a towel away and into the waiting drum. “Really it’s a shame his ticker appears to be fine – we might have learned something, eh Cribbens.”

The creases at the corners of Ramsay’s eyes deepened. “Oh one of these days Lizzie, I’ll get you in my theatre yet.”

Cribbens gave a loud guffaw at that. At him calling her Lizzie. Bloody Cribbens, the wee shite that he was. She gave the pair of them a look which immediately subdued the situation, and thrust a pair of forceps at Ramsay.

“Yes, thank you Sister. See how she keeps me right Cribbens; it’s almost as if she’s done this before.”

She shook her head. No doubt Cribbens would be replaying the whole scene in the residents' canteen come breakfast. She wondered, not for the first time, just how many people suspected her and Ramsay. They were mainly on different wards, in different theatres, so it wasn't as if they were together much inside the hospital – and really that was what the rulebook objected to. Strictly no relationships between resident staff. Those were the rules. The rules, the rules! Like a red rag to a bull, because she'd never been good with them, and he was all for the red rag. But she wasn't sure what they were doing could even be classed as stepping out; they went to meetings and clinics, perhaps the occasional cafe, sneaked a night at his whenever her off-duty allowed it – of course she knew the only reason they didn't legislate against that was because it was too scandalous for them to even imagine.

Yet here they were, flung together again – in the middle of the night too. When it felt more intimate, as if the space had shrunk, instead of expanding around the reduced staff.

Concentrated; a circle of faces all pointing the same way – towards the patient prone on the table, carefully covered, and just as carefully exposed again. The edges of the room grew blurred, and shadowy, like the point where the floor curved up to meet the walls. That had struck her as odd at first, this rounding off of the room. But corners were something to be avoided, as were shelves, cupboards, protrusions of any sort. The theatre was somewhere dust was never allowed to settle.

Unlike her room in the nurses' home, in which she waged constant battle with the stuff. It was a mystery where it came from. In the end she could only suppose that was what happened when you put so many dried up old women together in the one place. A theory she felt was supported somehow by the amount of her own hair she found everywhere. She'd be bald by thirty at this rate – which was a hell of a thought. She knew her hair was her best feature, and had had vague insinuations from the likes of her mother that it was in fact her

only redeeming one. She wondered how the waves were holding up under her cap. It was getting awful warm and the ties rubbed against her temples.

“Well,” Ramsay was moving a curved suture needle through the wall of the slick tube, “you know what day it is today?”

“The end of potato rationing.” She kept her eyes on the needle holder, but couldn’t quite stop herself from smiling.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, I heard it on the wireless earlier.”

“Listening to the wireless were you?”

“Oh yes, we have all sorts of modern conveniences in the nurses’ home.”

“How nice.”

“Mmm.”

She complained to him regularly about the nurses’ home, especially the sitting room which she tended to avoid. But she had wanted to hear the news, because she was following the plebiscite too, and she knew fine well what day it was going to be – what day it was, in fact, already.

He raised an eyebrow then produced a bloody towel from inside the patient, with a magician’s flourish. Holding it with the forceps so it waved slightly, like a grotesque flag.

“May day Lizzie, May day.”

She darted a look back at Cribbens, but he was no longer listening to them.

“Although I grant you,” he continued, “it’s not as exciting as the prospect of chips, breakfast, lunch, and dinner.”

“That should keep you going if you’re marching today.”

“Of course I’m marching today.”

“Well, I suggest you go home and get changed out of that dinner suit first. You might give your comrades the wrong idea.”

He had finished checking the pile of pulled out organs, and had a thorough feel about the liver. Almost ready to close up? In France, she had done that for him. She wasn't allowed to do that here, even though she was good at it. Better than she was at darning her stockings, because her stockings didn't really interest her. He'd told her though that in the past ancient cultures had used ants to make sutures. They bit down on both sides of the skin and stayed there. Jaws locked, even when their bodies were ripped off. He'd told her that in bed one night, pressing his teeth round the curve of her bare shoulder. And she'd said she didn't think that was a very nice way to treat the ants – what with them being so helpful and all. Maybe there was more about it in that book he'd given her. She'd barely had time to open it yet. It was sitting on the desk in her room though and she liked having things of his there, where he himself was never allowed. There was a quote on the first page from the *Chirurgia Magna* – she knew what that was; she wanted to tell him that she knew what that was. And she read the lines over, trying to imagine herself, but thinking all the time of him:

A surgeon should have well-formed hands.

Ramsay's hands tracing the length of her spine.

Long slender fingers.

Curving around the dip between her thighs.

A strong body, not inclined to tremble...

The perforations had been sutured and he was having a final rummage before putting everything back where it came from; a process that involved shoving his hand down the abdominal cavity in a very inelegant manner. It had all been surprisingly easy. The patient had behaved beautifully and would apparently live to gamble another day. Or would this be

enough to put him off it? She tried to picture what the rest of him looked like, remembering the grey face. He wasn't a particularly young man – 42 the chart had said if she remembered correctly. A history of violence? Possibly a history of abdominal trauma. The woman in the fur coat had been unfazed. Liz wondered whether she'd have batted an eyelid even if she'd seen the trail of blood on the floor. Where had that all come from exactly? The towels packed over the wound had been fairly clean.

"Did they change the dressing before they brought him up?" she pressed the pedal of her towel drum, throwing her bloodied collection in.

"I couldn't say," he pulled his hand out. "Why do you ask?"

Before she had a chance to answer a thin jet of blood shot up at him, gaining a height so farcical she couldn't help being reminded of a postcard she'd once received from Geneva. He turned his face to one side and leaned back. She sprang forward, holding her hand out and thrusting it into the cavity. As she homed in on its source the deflected blood sprayed out at an angle. She heard the spatter of it – spring shower on umbrella – as it swept across the front of her gown, warm flecks even reaching her face as she leaned closer. She couldn't really see much, but she knew where she was going. Her fingers found the thickness of the artery and she closed them around it, feeling the pulse grow stronger under the pressure of her pinch. She realised that the spraying had stopped, and that Ramsay was ready with a clamp. They needed a towel though, they could barely see a thing down there.

"Towel please." She wasn't sure who exactly she was talking to, seen as towels were her responsibility tonight. She glanced behind her for the probationer, who had already disappeared into the steam of the sterilising room. Typical. "Cribbens, get us a towel would you?"

"Me?" His eyes were wide above his mask.

"Yes you. Just use the forceps and don't touch anything else."

“Quick as you like,” Ramsay added, though in a softer tone.

It was only then that they looked at each other, just for a second, breathing heavily and blood-spattered – and smiling. She couldn’t help smiling. And maybe it was because she was still holding the patient’s pulse, holding a life between her thumb and middle finger, that it all felt just right. Even if it was only the work of a moment. And her hands would be back where they belonged soon enough. She shouldn’t get too far ahead of herself really.

There was still every chance of him dying yet.

Despite the hubbub of movement, and chatter, and the clattering of teaspoons, Liz's chair sounded inordinately loud scraping its legs across the floor as she pushed herself away from the table. She rose to meet the cold stare of Sister Roberts, who they always referred to as Chops, though Liz couldn't recall exactly why. Chops: recently appointed Assistant Matron. Long-time sadist.

Liz could see, out the corner of her eye, the row of heads on either side of the table gradually aligning in her direction. She sighed, genuinely annoyed. Breakfast was by far her favourite meal of the day. Tea and porridge, and only the mildest hint of the mutton or horse, or whatever poor beast they were boiling to death back there and would fill the whole place with its reek come lunchtime. But Matron wanted to see her immediately – immediately! Chops had said it twice. Just to be perfectly clear. Liz followed her out of the dining hall and back through the conservatory, where a light rain was still falling against the glass ceiling. The plants seemed to be pointing their bright spiky fingers at her. But they were idiots who couldn't even survive outside on their own; she batted a thick dark leaf out of her way. Chops turned and glared.

Liz had refused to meet any of the eyes that watched her go – mouths frozen mid-chew; she didn't need a gloating gallery on top of Chops' obvious delight at being able to march her off in such a fashion. The only hint of concern she'd seen came from Tina's furrowed brow, though Tina might just have been frowning. She had, after all, been having words with Liz herself.

"Where did you get to on Thursday afternoon? I was verging on apoplectic wracking my brains for what I would say."

Liz had sipped slowly at her tea. "I had an appointment. I thought I'd be back in time."

"You just about gave me a bad turn."

“Well you needn’t have bothered yourself on my account.”

Tina had made a face at that and turned back to her toast. Liz knew she could have immediately mollified her colleague with even the smallest snippet of information, but she wasn’t about to tell Tina she’d been up at the university – again. And still none the wiser.

So that could be the reason she was being marched up the stairs now, towards the large, airy room where Matron carried out such tellings off. Though Matron never actually raised her voice; a woman after Liz’s own heart – should that worry her? It did worry her. Yes, she was late back from lunch on Thursday. Nobody had died. But it probably wasn’t that at all. She wasn’t that lucky.

Chops slowed right down on the stairs. Good to note for the next time Liz was trying to dodge her, but surprising considering the size of the calves on her. They were a highland dancer’s legs; god what a thought – as if Chops’ everyday movements weren’t aggressive enough. Liz had seen her once split an apple with her bare hands.

As they progressed towards the seats of power the corridors became brighter. They passed a set of glass panelled doors and she saw, waiting outside the Superintendent’s office – Ramsay. So that was it then. They had been rumbled once and for all. She tried not to groan out loud. He looked up through the window. Their eyes met for a moment and he lifted his arm up, touching his fingers to his forehead in a loose salute. Two captives, behind enemy lines. She turned her head, to keep looking over her shoulder, and almost tripped up on her own feet; thinking of him in his old uniform, the puckered uneven ground, and having to pick her way through the patients piling up, further and further...

“You look as if you’re about to be sick.” Chops turned on her.

Liz jumped, then shook her head as they came to a stop.

“You’ve every reason to feel ill, if you ask me. But if you dare make a mess in this corridor you’ll be scrubbing it into the middle of next week.” And with that she disappeared into Matron’s office, leaving Liz alone – thank god. She stood up straight, reached out her hand, and touched it against the cold surface of the wall.

When they’d finished last night’s surgery, and the patient was taken away again by the pale night porter, she and Ramsay had found themselves alone for a period that couldn’t have been much more than five minutes. He’d come through to the scrubbing room, pulling his mask and cap off so she could see his thick dark hair. Dishevelled again. It had been curiously neat earlier, atop his suit, though he always had a curl falling down in the middle where he tried to brush it over. He was such a hairy thing, and his hair was so dark, that she could already see a shadow forming along his jaw. His 2am shadow; how he longed to be allowed a beard. Not very aseptic – she had said to him before. Have you seen the sideburns Lister had? – was what he said to her. With that sly smile, which he wore as he walked up to her and turned himself slowly around. She looked at the ties all down his narrow back, two white flaps pulled and pursed together – not unlike a suture. Or a Victorian lady’s underclothes. She smiled to herself as she began undoing his gown.

They weren’t supposed to undress like that, in front of each other. There were separate rooms for that sort of thing, so that surgeons and sisters didn’t converse with their backs flapping indecently open. Considering how many layers of clothing still lay beneath – a bloody dinner suit for crying out loud – it was ridiculous in a way, but also not. Because she liked undoing things in front of him in a way that Matron certainly wouldn’t approve of. His eyes followed her hands as she lifted the stiff white cap from her head. She touched one side of her hair, then the other – a quick account of each blonde wave. It didn’t feel too bad on top but the whole of the frontline had collapsed a little under the strain of it all. Inevitable

really. But he was still looking. She fought the urge to cut through the moment by asking – do I still have blood on my face? Because they’d grown suddenly serious and she could feel her own blood throbbing appallingly in her veins.

There were low grunts and automatic sighs from the steam machines running in the sterilising room. She should really be there. But he put his hand on the side of her arm, fixing her, quite decidedly, to the spot.

“I’ll be getting off then,” he said.

She could feel the heat from his palm through the thin sleeve of her tunic. Her eyes flicking towards the door beyond his shoulder.

“Back to the Faculty dinner?” She wondered what she felt like to him. Cold and brittle – thin limbs in starched fabric.

“I imagine it’ll have broken up by now. Shame I can’t go back and regale them with it all. It’s got the makings of a good yarn; crime, violence...a villain. A hero.”

“Oh yes?” She felt her arm stiffen. And then her shoulder. Her spine.

“And a heroine of course.” He moved his hand up to press against the back of her bare neck, making her shiver despite all the warmth; his fingers spilling around her top vertebrae – like getting into a hot bath. Flushing skin, warming bones. He leaned his head to one side.

“I wish you could come to the flat with me.”

She let her eyes soften and look straight at his – black treacle – moving her mouth to speak – clumsy – wanting to agree. Wanting it too, but still closing her lips over the premature thought. There was no point in wishing. And she’d instead spent the next hour in the sterilising room clearing up after his so-called heroics.

But that was it, somebody must have seen them, and somebody must have told. Not that there had been much to it, not compared to what she had wanted to do, standing next to him,

with the pulse still going through her like electric wire. So what exactly was she guilty of now? Letting him touch her arm, her neck? Unsterilized areas. It was all a bit bloody ridiculous. She tutted out loud and clasped her hands behind her back. No need to completely lose her head. It wasn't as if they could take her out and shoot her.

The door opened again and Chops appeared, eyeing Liz with suspicion even after she'd taken an exaggerated look around the corridor. No, she hadn't been sick. It would take a damn site more than that, and she'd only had half a bowl of porridge at breakfast, so she would bloody well be hanging on to it thank you very much.

"Go in," she hissed at Liz. "And shut the door behind you."

Good. Liz was beginning to worry that the woman would never leave. Matron on her own was at least a touch more susceptible to reason.

"Ah Sister Black, do sit down."

For a second Liz was struck, as she always was, by the orderliness of the room. There was a very tall thin window that let in a lot of light, but there was never a speck of dust to be seen. And although Liz knew there were papers and logs everywhere – you wouldn't guess it from the concealed drawers and polished wooden surfaces. Even Matron's desk only had a small banker's lamp, her pen, and what Liz now regarded as a suspicious looking file.

She sat down and cleared her throat.

"I'm afraid a very serious incident has been brought to my attention Sister Black."

Matron was quite a small delicate featured lady, so it was always a rude awakening when she began speaking in that quick commanding way of hers.

"I know it may not strike you as a particularly serious incident, but believe me there is nothing more important in a hospital than order. Everything in its place; and everyone knowing their place is part of that."

The best thing would probably be to just sit there.

“In certain circumstances I might be tempted to put such a thing down to a misunderstanding between you and the surgeon in question – but I’m afraid Sister Black, that knowing you as I do, I am sure there is no possibility of that being the case.”

Liz felt her face growing warmer and was finding it increasingly difficult to sit still.

“And, though it might not seem like it now, there is a compliment in there somewhere.”

A compliment? What on earth did she mean by that? Liz looked up, but Matron was now consulting her file.

“Nonetheless it is totally against hospital policy and entirely unacceptable. Now,” she raised her eyes again, “did you, or did you not...”

Christ. Here it was. With all the courtroom trimmings.

“...order Dr Cribbens to provide towels during a surgery?”

Liz felt her eyes widening but was momentarily unable to open her mouth.

“It’s a simple enough question Sister—”

“Yes Matron.”

“Yes you gave orders to Dr Cribbens?” Matron pressed her head forward on its neck, unable to hide her annoyance at having to repeat herself. It gave Liz the feeling of being pecked at.

“I did ask him – it was an emergency.” Matron was still staring at her but Liz suddenly felt the urgent need to yawn. “I said please. I said ‘towel, please.’” She lifted her hand to her mouth and pressed her fingertips against her lips, hoping to somehow lock the yawn in.

“And since when do nursing staff give doctors orders?”

Liz clenched her jaw and felt the inside of her mouth move, her nostrils flare, eyes water – and then the yawn was gone. She hoped it passed for a moment of serious contemplation.

“It isn’t done,” she eventually said.

“My point exactly Sister.”

“Yes I see that.”

Matron pursed her lips and raised an eyebrow, but what exactly did she want Liz to say. She exhaled loudly and Liz caught a distinct whiff of peppermint.

“I’m afraid it won’t do Sister, it is overstepping the mark and Dr Cribbens has every right to be concerned.”

Liz pressed her lips together. What the hell had she ever done to Cribbens that was so bad? And what was this about concern? Annoyed – okay. Offended – yes, apparently so. But concerned?

“And I might add, though I would rather not have to,” Matron fixed her with a stony look, “if I get even the slightest suggestion that there is anything untoward between yourself and Mr Kincaid then the matter will be out of my hands.” She paused for a moment, as if seeing how Liz would take this.

Liz for her part was wondering how she would take it too. She could feel herself growing warmer still but said nothing.

Matron suddenly clapped her hands down on the table, but her face had softened – either in sympathy or plain old exhaustion. “Look,” she leaned back, “You wouldn’t be the first, but it does make the position untenable when lines become blurred, as I believe this incident illustrates. I suggest you go away and think about it. Well, actually Black it’s an order, with immediate effect; you have altogether too much annual leave owing.”

And whose fault was that? She’d had it pushed back on three separate occasions – though now probably wasn’t the time to go bringing it up again.

“Then,” Matron waved a hand, “if you decide to leave us that is your decision. These things do happen. No nurse is irreplaceable.”

Well, at least she knew where she stood. So nice to feel wanted. Valued. She was squeezing her hands together.

“Now go away.”

It was still raining when she went outside. She didn't have an umbrella but that didn't particularly bother her. The only reason she rushed along the path and out across Byres road was that she was desperate to put some distance between herself and the infirmary. Even if it was just the one road, and not very busy this morning either. There were cars parked on the far side, some slow-moving umbrellas on legs, and a few passers-by, who like her, clutched trench coats closed and dashed on, hoping for the best. Her shoes sounded loud against the cobbles compared to the ones she usually scurried around the hospital in. It was so difficult to find a deadly silent pair. Even if you thought so in the shop, or in your room, you'd often get on to a ward at night and wonder at the intolerable squeak that must have been lurking there all along. Oh well, she may be out on her ear for now, but at least she could stomp as she pleased.

She had briefly considered seeking refuge in St Simon's at the bottom of the road, but that seemed a bit too melodramatic. Ramsay might accuse her of going to confession or something and she didn't particularly feel like arguing the point. She had tried loitering around near the Superintendent's office, hoping to catch Ramsay on his way out, trying not to imagine how livid he would be about the whole debacle. There were no signs of movement though, and when she crept as close as she dared to, all she could hear through the door was laughter. Then she'd thought that maybe he'd gone already and this was somebody else – cracking the Super up. But no, she recognised the low murmurs as his. And the laugh – there it was again – a big breathy back of the throat number.

Maybe the Super didn't give a fig and was talking to him about something else entirely. It was difficult to imagine a man telling another man how to conduct his personal life. To be fair though, Matron could have come down a lot harder on her. At least she hadn't acted the

wounded virgin and lectured Liz on her moral duty. It did stick in the craw though, having it brought up like that, when really it was difficult conducting any form of untoward affair from the confines of the nurses' home. And even at his registrar's flat, although he had his own room and kitchen, the landlady was on the hospital payroll too. They had rules and eyes everywhere.

If it was his own flat she could go there now, march right in and wait for him, without any skulking around and assessing of coasts. It was only round the corner, and she liked sitting amongst his things even when he wasn't there; the dull cup-marked desk, with his books all piled up on either side, flanking it, like guards. Green carpets, faded wallpaper. A grey peeling ceiling. The whole place was dark and damp and she suspected the landlady of frying eggs in the same fat she'd been using since before the war. The close itself was rancid with it. Liz pictured the woman as wearing a discoloured apron permeated with the stench. Ramsay denied this however, and called Liz a snob – the landlady happened to be a friend of his if she must know. Although the woman's estimates of him had gone down considerably since she'd come across one of Liz's novels.

"You almost landed me right in it leaving that beside the bed," he'd said. "She gave me a very odd look and said it wasn't at all what she had me down for."

As he told her this, she was lying against him, holding up one end of the *Daily Worker* – though it happened to be her day off.

"What book was it?"

"One of those bloody Mitford ones." He moved to turn the page and she felt the muscles all along his torso contracting.

"Oh, *Highland Fling*, I was wondering where I'd left that." She spoke through the tail end of a yawn. "Not Nancy's finest. So what did you tell the woman?"

"Well," he shrugged, "I just said I was researching the enemy."

“And which is that, Mitfords or Highlanders?”

He laughed. “Well those Mitford sisters are all floozies for fascists.”

“Not all of them to be fair, mind the one that ran away with the international brigades.”

“To play at soldiers, maybe rough it for a bit – very good.”

As he spoke she could feel the words forming in his chest, her ear pressed to the heat and distinct beat. An awkward sort of auscultation, with her left arm already going dead; she listened, but said nothing.

“Highland bloody fling...” he flicked his wilting paper to attention. Clearly she wasn’t keeping her end up. “From the landed bloody gentry...” he tutted, “I’d have thought the whole thing was highly offensive.” He turned his face down on her now so she could feel the warmth of his breath on the top of her head. “So what’s your excuse then?”

“Oh, you know...researching the enemy.”

Ramsay had clearer ideas about who was who. Whereas she wasn’t so sure. If she had to pick an enemy right now she’d be hard pushed to put her finger on it. She couldn’t exactly say Matron – Matron was only following orders. Cribbens – the grass? Bastard. But it was bigger than him even. The hospital board? The medical profession? Society? What exactly was her problem.

She sat in the University Café with a cup of tea and waited. Surely he would get her message. And what on earth would she say to him when he got there. He would be furious if he had been suspended too. And all because of her. At least it might make things simpler; she wouldn’t need to choose between Ramsay and her job if Ramsay didn’t want her anymore. She crouched over her cup, resting her elbows on the narrow formica table, like her mother always told her not to. There was a group of young men in the booth on the far side. She assumed they were students; well dressed and bright eyed and dining out at this

time of day. They were laughing over cups of coffee and fried bread, notebooks piled on the empty seat at the end – the absent guest that tied them all together. As they bent their heads in close she thought they looked for a moment like a posed painting, because she could also see them in the mirror on the other side of them, surrounded by the carved wood panels of the wall. It was just like a picture – of youth. Promise. Everything ahead. Then she noticed the flash of blonde hair in the background, and that they would be able to see her too. It was embarrassing. It was embarrassing to envy them that way.

She had been to a talk on Thursday especially for women interested in the study of medicine. And to be fair she hadn't felt overly old then, compared to the others, with their long skirts, and their gold spectacles. They had been marched through the turreted east quadrangle and into the strange smelling anatomy department. She was used to all sorts of unpleasantness at the hospital, but this smell was different. The chemicals used for the dead were apparently not the same as those for the living. She'd tried not to breathe too deeply, but at the same time to concentrate on what the Professor was saying. He had wasted a considerable amount of time trying to scare them off.

"Do I know you?" he suddenly turned to her. Then everyone else turned to her.

She was horrified, far more horrified than when he'd shown them the severed hand. He was a small man with white close-clipped hair and a delicate looking nose – which must have been quite the handicap given the reek of the place. She'd certainly seen him around the hospital but hadn't even considered it possible he'd recognise her, particularly without her uniform; though it was there, carefully hidden under her coat.

"I don't believe I've had the pleasure." She gave him a beaming smile. He certainly wouldn't recognise that.

But she'd had to leave then before she had a chance to ask any questions. Running back down the hill to the hospital, and remembering Ramsay's stories:

"As soon as you had your pass you raced down to the hospital to try and get the placement you wanted."

Not exactly fair, but she supposed sheer athleticism made a change from the usual sorts of advantages. You could get up a fair speed running past the park, the trees, from one grand building to another. And she hadn't been that late back really. Running downhill was fine. It was the uphill part that presented a struggle.

Ramsay walked into the cafe, spotted her, and seated himself on the other side of the liver coloured booth. He smiled and held his hands out across the table for hers. She was glad to just touch him for a moment, not quite knowing what to say. She again noted their difference in temperature, as he stroked warm thumbs across the scars she had on the palm of each hand.

"Well, what did Matron say to you then?"

"I've been suspended."

"Really?" His whole body gave a start. "I could kill Cribbens. Fancy kicking up such a stink all because of his wounded pride. That public school lot – bunch of treacherous bastards."

Looking up she couldn't help catching herself in the mirror behind him.

"The man's all ego."

She looked pinker than she'd expected. Or was it just the café's colour scheme, seeping into her. They'd perhaps been to the same draper as Sister Smith.

"Suspended then?"

She nodded. "What about you?"

"Oh, old Charlie agreed with me – Cribbens is an ass. A lot of fuss about nothing."

“I see.” She gave his hands a squeeze because she was glad for him, then lifted her own away. She had been relying on their unfairness and had not been disappointed. “And did he ask you about me?” She paused as the pretty dark-haired waitress brought him his coffee.

“About ...anything untoward?”

Ramsay shook his head. “Not directly, though he seemed to take it as a given.”

“Really?” She almost smiled but could hear the chill in her voice. It seemed to cut through the warmth of the café air. “Is that what you were laughing about then?”

He looked at her and pulled his cup closer towards him. “No, nothing like that. You were barely mentioned, honestly darling.”

“Well that’s hardly a comfort. My job’s hanging by a thread and it barely gets a mention.”

“Was it really that bad?”

“Matron says I’ve to go and consider my position.” She was embarrassed even having to say that, and she hadn’t implied half of what Matron had.

He took a mouthful of coffee. “Don’t worry, I’m sure it’ll all calm down in a week or two. Or whenever the next drama comes along.”

“Well she can be certain I’ll be considering my position anyway.”

“What do you mean?” He looked at her with furrowed brow.

“Things were bad enough as it was.”

“You love the theatre.” He made it sound like a hobby. Something to pass the time, get dressed up for.

“But since I’ve been Sister I don’t scrub in half as much as I used to.”

She saw his eyes flit to the side for a second and wondered if he too could see his own reflection in the mirror behind her.

He smiled – at her? And shrugged. “It’s tough at the top.”

“The top? That’ll be right. I can’t even stop an arterial bleed without getting a telling off.”

“You’ve got hands Liz, they all know that.”

That was what they said when you were good with them – as if everyone didn’t have a pair. But hers were quick, precise. It had meant something to have them say so.

“But now all the consultants talk to me about is who’s getting top billing and when will they be getting their tea.”

He started to laugh.

“Well you know what they can be like.” She looked at him, because he did know. Because he was well on his way to being one of them. How?

“Yes, I know what they’re like, but everything’s changing.” He was tilting his head towards her now because that was usually her line, when he complained and raged about the doctors dishing out useless potions and sending the collectors round; there were medical men in the city who crossed the street when they saw him. And everything was changing – a national service, free at the point of use – so why couldn’t she change too.

“I’m just not sure if I want to be a nurse.”

“And it’s taken you almost ten years to come to that conclusion?”

She frowned, almost winced. Ten years? That was exaggeration verging on insult. How old did he think she was anyway? And war years didn’t really count because people just had to do whatever they had to do. It was out of your hands. She clasped them together on her lap. Just the sound of it – ten years – filled her with a sort of panic. Surely she should be what she wanted to be by now.

“Not ten years actually. And it was different during the war— “

“Ah but the battles aren’t over. Just look at the bloody BMA and all their carry on opposing nationalisation.” His expression darkened at the very mention. He had battles going on several fronts.

“But what can I do about that, I’m not allowed to join.”

“Well there’s the Nurse’s Council – think of all the work to be done there.” He stretched his arms out. “The hours, the pay, the conditions.” He needed bigger arms.

“Actually I’m thinking of going to medical school.” She pressed her lips together – too late – and felt her neck stiffen.

He sat back in his seat, and then forward again. “Really?”

“Yes.” She picked up her cup and brought it to her lips. “I went to a talk about it on Thursday.”

“But would they even have you?”

Her tea had turned cold already, but she swallowed it anyway. “I don’t know, that’s what I was hoping to find out, only I had to dash back for rounds.”

“But why, when you’re already such a good nurse?”

“Because it’s not enough now.”

“But what’s wrong with being a nurse?”

She sighed. “Did you ever want to be a nurse?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“I think it’s a reasonable question.”

“I think you’re letting your snobbery get the better of you.”

She looked at him but said nothing.

He held a hand up. “Nursing’s a perfectly respectable profession.”

“Of course it is. But since when was respectability the be-all and end-all?”

He shifted in his seat. She wasn’t sure why she’d said that. That was Matron’s fault, insisting on connecting the two things, then separating them again. It was either or. Consider your position Sister Black.

“I should have said ‘vital’ I suppose.” He paused. “I’m well aware of your views regarding... respectability.” Keeping his dark eyes on her. “I believe I’ve always respected them.”

“Yes.” She couldn’t argue with that, though she could just say what they really meant: marriage. I’ve always respected your views on marriage. “Anyway,” she looked into the grit at the bottom of her cup, “as you say, they probably won’t have me so it’s a moot point.”

They sat in silence for a moment. From the corner of her eye she could see their profiles in the side mirror. Two heads, bowed together, but not looking at each other. His as dark as hers was fair. And the wood panelling framing it all, like a picture. Of what?

The students across the aisle were laughing again. Now they were eating hot peas with vinegar. She could see the steam rising from the plates, carrying the scent across to her. She wanted to say to them – potato rationing is over!

“I can’t stay here,” he said.

“*I* can’t stay here.” The harsh realisation of the fact made her feel suddenly exhausted.

“No,” he gave a slight smile. “Well that too.” He ran his hand over his jaw. She could almost feel the rough skin on her own fingertips. It was red in patches. She suddenly wanted to cry. Maybe the National Health Service would allow him a beard.

He looked up at her. “Where will you go?”

“I don’t exactly have much choice,” she sighed, thinking now of what she had been avoiding all morning. What she had been avoiding for years now.

“I’ll have to go home.”

PART TWO: AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

PASSENGERS TO OBAN: The Hon. Unity Mitford accompanies her mother, Lady Redesdale, this week to the family home on Inch Kenneth, west of Mull. The travellers always receive a warm welcome at The Station Hotel, Oban, though they at one time aroused a great deal of public animosity...

Sunday 2nd May 1948

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Liz wasn't sure how long she had been standing in the middle of the room, in just her nightdress. Long enough for her toes to have grown cold but not numb; she could still feel, if she scrunched them together, the stiffened fibres of the rug below. How had it grown hard like that with no one to trample it? The sun perhaps had turned it crisp – it fell across the far wall in waves. Rippling through the curtains and the trees outside, moving in the breeze. She noted the faded floral curtains and the cream wallpaper with its pattern of spindly parched plant life, and thought how unlike a young girl it all felt, though she remembered the feelings of the young girl even less than the feel of her room. The bed itself had been surprisingly comfortable. The mattress wasn't as hard as her one at the nurses' home, or as soft as Ramsay's. Which should have made it just right – except once she'd thought of those other two places she felt her chest growing tighter and had promptly got up. Standing instead in the midst of the cool morning. The indecency of her nipples at last made her reach for a cardigan. It didn't seem right having them there, pointing accusingly into the mirror above her grandmother's old dressing table. She folded her arms over the thick knit and tried to listen above the thud of her own pulse for any signs of movement in the house. She'd told her mother not to get up until she was there to help her, but her mother was unlikely to have paid the slightest attention to that.

Liz moved to open the bedroom door. Still not a peep; that didn't mean anything though. She might walk into the living room and find her mother sitting there fully dressed, looking up innocently from her knitting, like she had done yesterday – as if there was nothing out of the ordinary. Although when she'd first turned round and seen Liz coming through the door there had been more than a hint of confusion about her, and Liz had thought for an appalling moment that she was going to have to introduce herself – surely it hadn't quite come to that! But she'd been in the process of untying her headscarf, and as she pulled the soft fabric from her hair her mother seemed, if anything, more surprised.

“Oh, it's you!” But it was her mum's hair that had changed colour; dark brown to something more chestnut, though she still wore it the way she always did, piled on top of her head like an Edwardian. “What are you doing here? And why are you in disguise?”

Liz hadn't immediately answered, instead she had stared at her mother, who made an effort then to sit more erectly, shifting her long frame around the leg which was propped up on a stool, and plastered as far as the knee.

“What on earth have you done to yourself?”

Of course she hadn't been in disguise at all. A headscarf was a perfectly reasonable part of any travel outfit. It was true that she never usually wore one but trains were draughty and smoky things and then when she got to Oban there would be the sea breeze to contend with. She'd found her hands rising to tighten the knot, more and more as they neared the town, and was at risk of cutting off key circulatory systems by the time she descended on to the platform. And if it had been a disguise it was a pretty poor one, because she'd barely stepped off the train when she'd heard someone shout her name. She'd been counting on at least a few minutes grace, by way of the steam, so she might slink off without being spotted by anyone in particular. But here already was a figure lumbering towards her. Booming.

“Hu-hoh! Well hello there stranger. It’s yourself is it.”

“Hello Jimmy.” She’d forgotten her friend’s husband worked at the station now. She tried to smile and held out what she felt to be very limp and tired arms, compared to his. He gave her a couple of firm whacks on the back.

“Did Annag know you were coming?”

“No, I...it was a bit last minute.”

“Ach she’ll be delighted. You’re looking well anyway.” He said the words first before peering at her as if to see whether they were actually true. “Aye,” unconvinced, “they must be keeping you busy at that infirmary right enough, I can’t think when we last saw you.”

“Yes...it’s...it’s difficult, aye.”

“Well herself’ll be home by tea time, don’t stand on ceremony mind.” There was a shout from the far end of the platform which he glanced towards. “Here I better get on but I’ll see you after.” He started to back away. “You’ll be up for a while now, eh? And how’s the mother?” Continuing, as he went, to fire questions he wouldn’t hear the answers to, even if she’d had any. He was moving at pace now, despite his bad leg. Energetic as ever – she didn’t know how they did it, him and Annag. They always seemed so cheery, whereas she would have lost the will to live by now. Five bloody children. It didn’t really bear thinking about.

After Jimmy she kept her head down. She would be fine if she kept her gaze fixed to the platform, dull grey and trodden over by shoes and legs that might belong to anyone. A few sets of dark trousers and buffed toes. A swinging dog-eared suitcase. As she came out of the station her eyes stayed low. But even without looking up she could feel the space opening out on one side of her – sea, islands, sky – and closing in on the other – the tall points of the Station Hotel, the curve of the town folding round. Villas creeping up the hillside and the stone ring of McCaigs tower perched like a halo, a granite crown, above everything. All

staring in the same direction. She caught the salt tang of the fresh air, faltered, then scurried on through the square. She was racking her brain for a palatable piece of news to present her mother with. Something to make conversation about. Something innocuous. Nothing to do with the hospital, or her surprise arrival; of course in the end her mother had had enough surprises of her own for them to be getting on with.

Liz crept now, still in her bare feet, along the hall, sticking her head into the living room, the kitchen. No signs of life. It was a small sort of victory. It wasn't until she was getting dressed that she had the sudden thought her mum might have gone out, just to spite her. That would have been madness, especially with their path – which had been her downfall in the first place – but of course it was entirely possible. Her mother's will knew no bounds.

Liz hurried to get the rest of her clothes on. Fortunately dressing off-duty was a quicker business with not half as many components. And it was nice to think that there was nobody policing every inch of her, ready to report on the slightest imperfection. She pulled on a pair of camel coloured slacks, a white blouse and a short bottle green cardigan, then went to her mother's bedroom and knocked softly on the door.

"Come in." The call came quickly and with a regal intonation that made Liz take a deep breath.

She pressed down on the handle. "Good morning— oh, it's very dark in here."

"Yes, I decided to keep my blackouts up." Liz could barely make out the shape of her mother under the covers of the bed.

"That's a bit grim is it not?" She pushed the door open wider.

"Not at all, I'd barely catch a wink all summer otherwise."

“Right.” She could see her mother now, rigid even in her reclined pose, propped up by pillows and reaching her arms out in front of her to flatten the blankets. “Fair enough. Well, can I get you anything? Some tea?”

“No, no. I’m getting up, and before you say anything else, no, I do not need any help. I’m perfectly capable.”

“It’s not a question of capability; you’ve got a broken leg.”

“Yes I had noticed.” She clasped her hands together and looked up at Liz. “I’ve managed fine these past weeks...”

“Well,” Liz raised an eyebrow, “we’ve been over that.” They had argued the point the previous night. “I can’t help it if you didn’t see fit to tell me.”

“It’s my leg,” her mother said, “I didn’t want to go bothering you with it.”

“I could have come and looked after you.” She said this with considerable conviction, but suddenly felt the need to turn and examine the wardrobe. It was so much smaller than she remembered it.

“Oh you’re no use for that sort of thing.” Her mother waved her hand dismissively.

“I am a trained nurse you know.” She couldn’t help frowning.

“Yes, yes, but there’s nurses and there’s *nurses*.”

Liz pressed her lips together and turned back to the wardrobe. Dark oak with drawers along the bottom; she wondered if they still stuck. Probably. And the harder you pulled...

“Well.” She tried to think of the least inflammatory response, it being too early for another argument just yet. She might admit that her mother did indeed have some sort of point.

Hadn’t Liz thought it herself often enough? She cleared her throat. “If you don’t want any help then I suppose that’s your business.” She was about to close the bedroom door again and leave her mother to it when she asked for the time. Liz leaned back so she was face to face with the clock in the hall – new since last time?

“Almost seven.” Saying the words made her think how awful early it was to be up and about considering it was her first morning off in a fortnight. So something of a hollow victory in the end then, all things considered.

“Good, that gives us plenty of time before John brings the chair round.”

“John?” Liz folded her arms and leaned against the doorframe. “What chair?”

“You know John.”

“Could you narrow it down?”

“He’s bringing a chair from the cottage hospital.”

“A wheelchair?” That sounded unlikely. She would have thought that would be the last thing her mum would want.

“Yes, well seen as you’re here now,” her mother gave her a pointed look, “you may as well make yourself useful.”

Well that was fine with Liz if her mother wanted to be pushed around in a wheelchair so be it. It did somewhat scupper her plans to avoid leaving the house unless absolutely necessary. But if she did have to go out and expose herself to the eyes and ears of the town, then having an injured mother in a wheelchair between herself and them probably wasn’t a bad idea.

“I haven’t been to Mass for weeks,” her mother was saying.

“Oh here – Mass? This morning?”

“No next Tuesday; of course this morning. It is Sunday you know.”

This was a bit much given that she’d only just arrived. Her second day back in town and already she was being thrust into the thick of it – Mass, for god’s sake. Well yes, for god’s sake was precisely the point but still...she and him weren’t exactly on the best of terms these days. But she supposed that put him on par with the rest of the town.

“Don’t you think we should take it for some sort of test run first?” She was struggling to picture herself wheeling her mother down the aisle without doing injury to some holy relic or small child.

Her mother pulled a face. “What?” She didn’t even need to say the words – I thought you were a trained nurse.

Liz sighed. “I really hadn’t been planning on going to Mass this morning.”

“Oh so that’s it, you’re the one laying off to me about not getting you up here, then when you do come, the only thing I ask you to do –“

“I didn’t say I wouldn’t...if that’s what you want.”

“Yes, it is, and I’m sure it’ll do you good. God knows the last time you set foot in a chapel down in Glasgow.”

“Yesterday, if you must know.”

“Oh really?” She held Liz’s eye.

“Yes.” Liz stood up straighter.

“Well I hope you weren’t wearing those,” she pursed her lips and nodded at Liz’s slacks.

“You’d better go and get changed.”

She tried to keep her face blank as she stepped back and pulled the door closed behind her. Yes Matron. As you wish. But bugger it she was going to have a cup of tea first.

It was after her cup of tea at the Uni Café that she went, after all, to St Simon’s at the bottom of Byres Road. Ramsay had just left her to catch a tram into town. She hadn’t been able to look directly at him as they said goodbye, so it was only after they’d gone their separate ways and she turned to see his back moving briskly along the street that it struck her – this feeling of being suddenly untethered. It was her own fault for forcing a gap between them as they’d walked along the pavement. For standing there so stiffly as he spoke, and only mumbling a

brief reply. She was too annoyed, and too disappointed. She had told him what she wanted and he had told her she was wrong. She pulled her eyes away from his back and turned to go, because he would only get further away now. It had given her a horrible feeling inside. Nothing to do with her heart though, contrary to the notions of popular fiction. Vena cava right atrium, right ventricle, pulmonary artery; it would keep going regardless of what Ramsay did or didn't say. Pulmonary vein, left atrium, left ventricle... The human heart was roughly the size of a fist, and that suddenly seemed very fitting. Why did that never come up in novels. All the better to sock you with my dear.

She'd had the awful feeling that she might cry and couldn't think of anywhere less comforting to be than the nurses' home at that point in time. So she'd gone to St Simon's and sat for a few minutes with a prayer book in her hands that she didn't really intend to use. When she opened it she discovered it was in Polish anyway. And that had helped. She stroked the cover of it slowly before putting it down again. What right did she have to feel sorry for herself. She wasn't going to cry after all.

The kettle was boiling. She lifted it off the grate and looked around for where she had put the teapot. The kitchen was gleaming, even if she did say so herself. Or gleaming as much as the worn wood and stained walls would allow. It could do with a coat of paint really, if you could get hold of such a thing these days. That would give her something to do. Something about the house. She'd set to scrubbing the kitchen the previous afternoon, as soon as her mum started asking her when she was going out – was she not going to see Annag? And now here she was being forced to Mass, where she wouldn't even see her old friend. Annag wasn't a catholic anymore, although she was doing a bloody good impression of one.

“Are you sure you’ll manage okay getting down the hill there?” He pinched his damp top lip between his thumb and fingers, folding the flesh awkwardly.

“Oh yes,” Liz’s mum laughed. She was leaning against the side of the front porch, her crutch propped up next to her. “Don’t you worry about that now John.”

Liz wished she could share her confidence. She glanced down at the steep path and then back at John, still slightly red about the gills from wheeling the thing up to them. He met her eye and gave a slight shrug. Well, he had tried to warn them.

“If you’re sure then, I’d better be getting back.”

“Right you are, thanks again now John.” Her mum waved him off.

“Aye, thanks a bunch,” Liz added, mostly to herself as she watched him zig zagging back down their bloody goat trek of a garden path. When she turned around again she noticed that her mum was frowning at her, head tilted to one side as if gauging a measurement. What now? Surely there could be no objections to the petrol blue frock she’d put on. Though it did feel looser than she’d remembered it.

“We can take it slow; in stages. I don’t like the look of these,” she placed a hand on one of Liz’s thin forearms. “I better not go breaking you into the bargain.” She kept her hand where it was and Liz stayed perfectly still, noting how it felt neither particularly warm nor cold against her.

They were fine once they got on to the flat, though Liz kept her eyes low, watching the wheels and the cracks in the pavement. She stopped bothering about that when they reached the prom, in fact she stopped in her tracks entirely for a moment, looking out across the sea to the hills of nearby islands. The mountains of more distant ones. Dark points and ripe green curves rising from water that grew bluer and more precise the further away it got. The shallows by the shore shuddered and sparkled in the light, and she felt her skin tingle as the

breeze found the back of her neck. It wasn't that she'd forgotten how beautiful it was; she'd never had anything against the hills or the sea. She could rely on them. Always the same, though there had still been catalinas in the bay the last time she'd been – and then she had the cheek to wonder why her mother didn't telephone?

“Why have we stopped driver?” She turned round to look up at Liz.

“Are you warm enough?” She leaned over to tuck the rug tighter around her mother's legs.

“Yes, no need to fuss,” batting Liz's hand away and clutching the rug herself. “I don't know why you insisted on this thing in the first place. It just reeks of the elderly invalid.”

“Well...”

“If the cap fits, is that what you're saying?” she started to laugh.

Liz laughed too. “You said it, not me.” She was smiling, feeling the sun and the sea air against her cheeks, but then there was a loud whizz and the sound of something cracking off the pavement just next to her. She ducked down and put a hand over her head.

“What on earth...” Had somebody actually thrown a stone at her? In broad daylight? After all this time? She turned to look around the esplanade, meeting the stretch of smart streets and the tower's steady gaze. But the nearest people were over by the putting green. Others trickled out the hotels.

“Calm yourself, it's only the gulls getting into their breakfast.” Her mother pointed behind Liz.

She looked back at the pavement and saw now the mussel that had been dropped there. The iridescent blue shell was still closed tight, only slightly chipped – they would need to try harder than that. She stood up straight again and moved on.

“Hurry up now,” her mother said, “I don't want a palaver when we get there.”

Liz had wondered how easy it would be wheeling the thing inside, but of course there was Davey Crooks who came every week and had lost both his legs in the last war. Davey Crooks with his winking eyes and pinned up trousers; what exactly had he made of the last nine years?

The cathedral roof still wasn't finished, though the corrugated tin walls had been replaced by smooth pink stone some time ago. It didn't seem to matter what stage of construction it was in, how long or tall the hallowed space, it always seemed the same to Liz. When really it was only that it always smelled the same. That strong musty scent – was that what the pull was? Why she still found herself seeking these places out though they had ceased to mean what they were supposed to. The chemical continuity of frankincense. She focused on breathing it in as the Mass built itself around her. When it came to communion she felt a sharp nudge from her mother.

“You go, seen as I can't.”

This didn't make any sense seen as she could hardly regurgitate the thing for her when she got back to her seat. She couldn't help frowning.

Her mother noticed this. “Or can vegetarians not have the body of Christ?”

“Oh not this again.” All because she'd turned down her mother's meat ration the night before. She'd eyed Liz, nostrils flared, as if to say – so you're one of those now too are you. Just to top it all. Liz readied herself to get up from her seat, more to get away from her mother than anything else. And she could hardly admit now that she hadn't been to confession for years – hopefully she wouldn't choke on it.

Choking on it would have been too straightforward a punishment though, when everyone knew how mysterious the good lord's ways were. And swift. Yes, she would give him that. Because she had barely reached the aisle, not even got right out of her row, when she saw who it was that was coming out the one opposite. Their eyes locked for a terrible moment.

She clenched her jaw, her fists, and any other bones she could, trying to fight the sudden feeling that they'd all become too loose. He turned sharply away and joined his queue, but it was neck and neck with hers, moving at the same rate. So there they were, her and Sandy, stuck walking down the aisle together. She might have laughed – good one! Good one, good lord – if she hadn't been concentrating on keeping the blood from her face; willing it, with every cell in her, though she knew it was an impossible task. She could see out the corner of her eye the familiar tall frame, his neat hair looking even blonder than usual atop the soft dark lines of his Sunday best. He was standing poker straight, eyes fixed on the altar. The queues shuffled along at a painful pace. Then her side suddenly quickened and she was silently thanking god, on her knees now, telling the priest – amen – lifting her head towards his too slow hand, and seeing the tremble in her own as she touched cold fingertips against forehead, chest, one shoulder after another. She leapt up. Christ. She could've done with a swig of his blood instead, because my god she needed some miracle of fortification to get herself back to her seat. The urge, almost overwhelming, was to run out the front door instead.

This was all her mother's fault. Liz took her revenge by grabbing hold of the chair and firing her out of the cathedral before the final strains of the last hymn had fully died out.

"We don't want to be getting in folks' way," she said when her mother protested that she had people she wanted to speak to. There was no chance, absolutely no chance, Liz was going to hang about for that.

"We need to get back to the house...I've got to...I've got to change the beds."

"Don't be ridiculous you've only been in it one night."

"Well, your bed then. It's washing day tomorrow."

"You've picked up some strange habits in that nurses' home." She turned to look at Liz.

"You're looking very pink."

“It’s the wind.”

“Oh?”

“Bracing...good for the immune system. Very good.”

“Is it? You’re not looking too great if you ask me.”

“Oh I’m enjoying the sea air immensely.” She looked over the top of her mother’s head, along the length of the prom as it curved back into the centre of the town.

“And how did you enjoy the Mass?”

“Aye it was all right.”

“Only there wasn’t any wind in there as far as I recall.”

Liz looked down at her mother as she turned back round in her seat. Was she making fun of her now? Oh yes, it was all very bloody amusing.

“The sea’s lovely today isn’t it?” her mother was saying, gesturing out with her arm as they approached the Oban Times slip.

“Yes, care to take a closer look,” Liz pretended to veer the chair towards the slope.

Her mum laughed as she swung it straight again. A couple of tourists were giving them funny looks.

“What’s got in to you?”

“Nothing.” She winced as the wind threw her hair back in her face. “The body of Christ I suppose.”

“Well...you were certainly in enough of a rush to take it in the end.”

“Mmmm.”

“You who didn’t want to go in the first place – just about took the hand off the priest.”

“Oh you saw that did you?”

“Oh I saw, alright. I saw.”

“Well, can you blame me then?” She had shouted the words, gripping tighter to the handles of the damn chair so that she felt the muscles in her arms beginning to shake.

The only answer came from the wind, which rushed at them from the far side of the North Pier, and the loud cries of gulls, moving and not moving. Catching the currents so they hung in the air, absurd, like her words.

Because yes. Yes of course she could.

She had seen everything, but would blame Liz all the same. And what about him; had he noticed her blush? According to Darwin it was the most human of all expressions. You couldn’t fake that kind of remorse. So in some ways it was better than a verbal apology, which in the end was only words. Though she’d never actually offered one of those, so she couldn’t rightly say just how much ice that would cut.

She was still frothing with the shame and frustration of it when they got to the house. In an act of excessive bravado, she insisted on pushing her mother up the path at pace. Up was easier though. Up gave her the upper hand; she could lean her whole body against the chair when she needed a rest, there was the subtle threat of violent release, and the promise of a cup of tea when they got to the top. By the time they sat in the living room sipping it in silence Liz could feel the sweat clinging to her back.

She could sense her mother glancing over occasionally, though not saying anything. Possibly still getting over her rather bumpy ride. Liz doubted she’d be asked to undertake porter duties again anytime soon. Well the leg was propped up nicely now at least. She’d been wondering about just how bad a break it had been. Her mother was so vague with the details.

“Do you have the x-rays?”

She gave a brisk laugh. “What would I want with those?”

“You weren’t interested to get a look at your bones?”

“Och, no. They’ll be all that’s left of me soon enough.”

“That’s a bit melodramatic, it’s only a fracture.” Her mother wasn’t yet fifty and in excellent health.

“Well, if it’s bad enough to warrant my own Sister, from the Western Infirmary no less... I notice you’ve got the two cases with you. Staying for a wee while then?”

“Yes.” She looked at her mother, meeting her clear blue eyes. Not unlike those Liz occasionally confronted in the mirror. The clock ticked several times without either of them looking away, but her mother suddenly produced a pair of glasses and put them on to gaze back at her, which had the effect of pressing the question further.

Liz shrugged. “I’m owed a lot of leave.”

“I wouldn’t have thought they’d be able to spare you right now, but maybe they want your holidays out of the way, what with everything that’s going on. That reminds me –where did I put that thingummy now.” She looked in the newspaper rack next to her, glanced at the table and twisted her head round the room before directing Liz towards the sideboard.

There she found a small leaflet tucked in beside the wireless. Your Health Service: how it will work in Scotland.

“I got it the other week,” her mother was saying, “I suppose you’re champing at the bit. Well I must say, it looks like your Welshman got there in the end.”

Liz turned the leaflet over in her hands and ran her fingers across the cover.

“Give the man his due, I suppose you need that sort of singlemindedness to get things done.” Her mum lifted her cup and took a mouthful of tea. “A bit bombastic for my liking.”

Liz frowned. “But it’s the dawning of a new era.”

“That’s exactly the sort of talk I mean. Look where it got the Germans. Most politicians these days think they’re the second coming. I wonder how their wives put up with them.”

“Bevan’s wife’s a politician too.”

“Is she?”

“And she’s Scottish.”

Her mother for some reason saw fit to tut at that.

“Remember we heard her on The Brain’s Trust?”

“Not particularly.” Her mother only liked Joad on that programme, though she herself had married a Huxley. “She can’t have been that memorable. I suppose he’s the big noise in that marriage.”

“Can there only ever be one big noise?”

Her mother took another drink before putting her cup down on the side table. “Your tea’ll be cold.”

Liz sat down again, still holding the leaflet, and picked her cup up with her other hand. The tea was still piping. “Where did you get this?” She leaned her elbow on the arm of the settee and held the leaflet over the space between their chairs.

“Through the door last week, they said on the wireless that everyone in the country got one.”

“Except nurses apparently...well, that sounds about right.”

She tilted the paper so it caught the light from the window. There was a doctor on the front, an old man holding out his stethoscope. She assumed it was supposed to be reassuring, to give an impression of preparedness; they were ready and waiting and if you listen carefully this chap will tell you all about it. But he seemed to be warding Liz off more than anything. Pointing the end of his stethoscope at her – just you stay there, don’t you be coming any closer now. She stood up and put the thing back on the sideboard.

“Seen as you’re up, could you bring me one of those big pillows from the linen cupboard?”

“Of course.” Liz turned to catch the wince as she adjusted her weight in the chair.

“Then you should be off out,” her mum added quickly. “Aren’t you going to call on Annag?”

“Och, she’ll probably be busy with the family today,” she was pacing in front of the fireplace now and turned to look instead at the mantelpiece – was that another new clock? “I thought I might catch up on any housework you’ve not been able to get at.”

“On a Sunday? There’s nothing that can’t wait. And you know I’ve never exactly set much store by that sort of thing.” She looked up at Liz. “I didn’t think you did either.”

“Well, that was before. I am a—”

“Trained nurse, yes. How could I forget.”

But her mum was right, it did seem a bit silly in that context. Nobody needed an aseptic home. There was no point at all but she had to do something. The cleaning and washing would only see her so far. What was she to do on Tuesday for example. Or the day after that. Or for the next ten years. She stalked along the hall, past the bedrooms. The door of her old room – her only room – was sitting ajar, and as its innards caught her eye she felt almost guilty. As if she had no right and it was nothing to do with her, seen as she could picture the younger girl but couldn’t feel anything for her. She reached the cupboard at the far end. The smell of the linen inside did her good. Soap, and sunshine. She surveyed the shelves of bedspreads and pillowcases, unfamiliar in their colours and patterns and entirely domestic scale. She clasped the folds of a cool smooth sheet and pressed her forehead for a moment against the wooden edge of the top shelf. Closed her eyes. Listened to the sporadic hiss of the pipes in the wall. She had to do something. They had to let her do something. She hadn’t done all that for nothing.

She thought again of the stern faced leaflet – tell me then doctor, how is it going to work.

The huge linen cupboard on the top floor of the hotel was always emptiest on Sundays. During the week Dorothy was lucky if she could wedge herself on the middle shelf and often had to just stand there, in the dim warmth, like the sneak that she was, listening to the comings and goings of the top floor guests and other staff members who were actually doing what they were supposed to. But by the weekend there'd be plenty of room for her and Annag, and no need to rush off to school; so sometimes she was able to tempt Annag in with her for their tea break, and that made it feel more like a society. You couldn't really have a society with just one. That was just her really – and her book. And she had to be careful with her book because if she left it lying around it was likely to get buried on the Monday under a pile of sheets. When they were all piled up they were surprisingly heavy, and hard. You could sit on top of a stack and it wouldn't give in the slightest. Not even for Annag either.

Dorothy would've liked to sit down with her book and forget all about Annag, but she'd only come in for a tablecloth, and she'd probably been too long about it already. And she'd promised herself she'd be especially nice to Annag today, all things considered. She'd already told her that she had lovely dark hair, and that she should try wearing it in a centre parting like Hedy Lamarr. Annag had just laughed though, which worried Dorothy slightly because she obviously had to do something. But what could she say. She knew fine well it wasn't her place, even if her mum was always laying off at her for being, what she called, pass-remarkable. As if Dorothy didn't keep most of her thoughts to herself; she hadn't, for example, told a single soul what she'd seen at the train station the day before. It was making her feel a bit funny. Not very nice. As if the shady cupboard was really the best place for her.

She pulled a tablecloth down from the shelf and went back out on to the landing. She had a sudden thought that she'd better check it, because there would be nothing worse than getting down to the dining room and realising it was a bedsheet all along. That wasn't totally unheard of – but really, what a lot of white fabrics. If it was her hotel she'd have a different colour of sheets for each floor, and maybe checked tablecloths like they had in Paris. Or was that Rome? It was exasperating not knowing these things. Not even knowing anyone who would know, except possibly her Uncle Tufty who had been through Paris during the war. But what on earth would he do with himself in a restaurant, or café? It was embarrassing to even imagine. The only time she'd heard him talk of such things was when he told the story about the ram going through the window of Kennedy's tearooms. Thank goodness they didn't have to worry about rams and that sort of thing until the Autumn, when there was no chance of any Mitfords in the hotel. Being right next to the pier, and the station, and not far at all from the mart itself – well, looking out the top windows it was sometimes like the Wild West out there. Except not even any cowboys, just a lot of old men in soiled soggy coats. Anyway, she didn't care about cowboys. They wouldn't get her any closer to Paris.

There was a fair bit about Paris in her book: *The Pursuit of Love* – it was the same one she'd had from Boots for weeks now. Not tired of it yet, though increasingly tired of Annag taking the mick, nodding towards it smiling and asking Dorothy if she'd not found it yet. When really it wasn't as if Annag had much to smile about; she might even benefit from a read of it herself. Dorothy knew all about bolting now, but the thought had probably never even crossed Annag's mind. What with Jimmy's bad leg - and it was mostly the women that bolted in books. Pursuing...something. Apparently Nancy had written it from her own experiences. She was the one that lived in Paris. That would be why she never came to the hotel with her mum and her sister, on their way over to Mull. Inch Kenneth it was, actually. Banny the boatman had told her all about it one time; about how Nancy's name was Mitford

but her mum was Lady Redesdale, and how Nancy's sister was called Unity Valkyrie – which was probably what had put her all wrong in the first place.

Dorothy glanced out the big window, catching the distant hills of Mull as she ran down the rest of the stairs. The thud of her flat shoes was loud against the thin carpet. She tried to at least stand up straight once she was on the flat so she might make a more graceful appearance, seen as you never knew who might be at the front desk. She attempted her most elegant glide across the foyer to the dining room. But there was only Mina on reception, and she didn't even look up from her magazine. Oh to be a receptionist reading a magazine...

"Sorry," she burst through the doors to the dining room, where Annag, much to Dorothy's shame, had almost finished setting up. "It took me ages to find one."

"Oh so there was one – well done Dot. I did wonder after I'd sent you if it was a fool's errand.... Give it here then."

Dorothy went to her and the two of them took a side each, whipping it out so it ballooned for a moment between them, like a parachute. They smoothed the crisp white fabric over the table. Dorothy liked the feel of it against her palms. And she liked looking at her hand against the plain surface; it made the French manicure her auntie had given her appear even more sophisticated, though she wished her fingers could be a bit longer, and that Mr Devine permitted rings. You'd only ruin them – Annag had said. Although she wore her wedding ring all the time. Dorothy suspected that she might not be able to get it off. It was a shame she wouldn't be able to throw it in Jimmy's face when the time came.

They were laying out the silverware now. Dorothy found that holding that, with her French manicure, was quite nice too; the closest thing she'd get to precious metal. She noticed Annag's hands, red and swollen, the dull gold of the wedding ring failing to hold its own even next to a sparkling fork or spoon. She wished she hadn't noticed that. It made Dorothy feel not nice again, because she'd skived, and then fibbed, and Annag hadn't even given her a

row in the slightest. Poor Annag. Everybody's mug. It wasn't for Dorothy to say though. Even if it was her fault for wishing that something – anything – out of the ordinary would happen. She hadn't meant to drag Annag into it. She would keep her mouth shut and her wishes to herself from now on. Still, it was something...

"Mr Devine said I could be trained on silver service over the winter."

"Did he now?" Annag didn't look up.

"I don't see why I can't do it now."

"You should be glad he doesn't want young ones in the dining room, otherwise you'd be stuck here until all hours instead of getting to escape with me." She looked up then, and smiled at Dorothy.

"But wouldn't you rather do silver service than making beds and cleaning the toilets?"

Dorothy wrinkled her nose.

"When was the last time you cleaned a toilet! Trying to get you to clean a toilet is like getting blood out a stone!"

"I did some last week!" She tried her best to look offended.

"Aye, last week was last week. People don't just go to the toilet once a week you know. You'd be surprised the damage a person can do over the course of a one night stay. Even those Mitfords of yours."

"Oh no – I'm sure their toilet always smells of perfume and rose petals." Dorothy laughed, though she was only half-joking.

"I take it there was no sign of them again yesterday." Annag still had her head down, so the look she shot Dorothy came from beneath a furrowed brow.

"No."

"Oh well, it was barely worth the skive then."

Dorothy picked a bit of fluff off the tablecloth and flicked it onto the carpet, where it stood out even more, a fleck of white in the red.

“Not exactly the best use of your time I’d say. You do know that half of them are Nazis.”

“Not Nancy.” Dorothy stared at the fleck of white but decided not to pick it up.

“Well,” Annag had a knife in her hand, inspecting it under the light, with one eye shut. “We only have her word for that really.”

“Yes, but her words are the best!”

Annag put the knife back in its place. “Hmm.” That infuriating noise. “If you say so.” But she didn’t even need to say that part, she had already said that with her hmm. She had already said – don’t be so stupid Dorothy. Their eyes met and Dorothy noted the deep brown of Annag’s, her long eyelashes – obviously still quite pretty if she bothered her shirt in the slightest. Dorothy felt herself stiffen as Annag went on: “Decent folk don’t go about carrying on like that.”

“Like embracing women who aren’t their wives?”

“Well,” a ripple ran across Annag’s furrowed brow, “aye. That sort of thing.”

Dorothy wished she hadn’t said anything but it was too late now – the face was already skelping her. She tried to keep her expression clear, and lowered her eyes to the floor. She tried bending her whole body away from Annag’s gaze. But that just made the blood rush all the more – her face was probably matching the carpet now.

“Dorothy?”

“I’m just checking...” Where was that fleck of fluff when she needed it?

“Have you been listening in on your mother’s parties again?”

“No.” Still avoiding Annag’s eye.

“Whose wife was she talking about now?” Annag had put a hand on her hip and Dorothy looked up to see her shake her head. Tutting. Muttering something, “...honest to god...”

“It wasn’t anything my mum said actually,” she stood up straight. Louder again. “I saw it with my own eyes.”

“Oh aye?”

Dorothy tried to stand completely still, as if that might help her somehow. As if she might turn into a statue that wouldn’t have to answer any questions. What on earth was she supposed to say now? Why not leave the blame on her mother after all? She knew fine Annag’s feelings in that department. But now she’d said her own eyes! She blinked. They were actually starting to sting. This wasn’t what she’d wanted at all.

“What did you see then?” Annag’s voice was softer now.

Dorothy swallowed. She supposed that someone would end up saying something. It was unfortunate that it was her on the spot like this though; her who was only a girl and so wasn’t expected to know. But she had eyes in her head. And she’d been on the lookout for that sort of thing ever since her mum had taken her to see *Brief Encounter* at the pictures. There weren’t really that many trains coming in and out of Oban, and it was bad luck to be at the end of the line, but that didn’t make romance impossible, obviously – well just look at Jimmy! She hadn’t seen that one coming. With his bad leg and his brash way of speaking. Those weren’t the sort of chaps that women in books bolted with. She tried to think of what Nancy might have said in her situation. Nancy wouldn’t make any bones about it. Nancy wasn’t a silly little girl.

Dorothy sniffed. “I saw Jimmy...” How to put it. What was that phrase they used? “In fragrance...” That sounded about right, all the perfume and aftershave mixing together. But Annag was looking at her quizzically, and probably didn’t read many novels these days, so she added for good measure, “embracing...a woman.” She tried to speak quietly so as to not draw the attention of the barman stocking up, but Annag let out a hoot of laughter that soon had him looking over.

“Did you now?”

“Yes.”

“Embracing – hah! It’s a wonder he remembers what that is.”

Dorothy frowned. “Quite an elegant looking lady too, with very blonde hair, though she was trying to hide herself, I thought for a minute it might be Diana Mitford—”

“Ah,” Annag stopped what she was doing for a minute and rested a hand on the back of a chair. Nodding now. Maybe she knew about the blonde woman already. She might have had her suspicions all along and that’s why she didn’t seem particularly shocked. Dorothy herself had been astounded – I mean who would want Jimmy, apart from Annag obviously, and she was pretty much stuck with him now; well she couldn’t get the ring off so that was that. But this blonde lady surely had options. Very slim, with fine features and clear blue eyes – again like Diana. So there had been a wee minute there when Dorothy really thought she was on to something, spying the headscarf through the steam; but then there was Jimmy, and as amazing as it was that any blonde lady would want him it was another thing entirely to imagine a Mitford saying hello like that. Even if he was very good with their cases and everything.

“It must be...” Annag was saying. Talking to herself now as opposed to Dorothy, which was the first sign of complete mental collapse. “Yes, it must be Liz.” She was smiling though.

“Liz?”

“Yes. I had no idea she was coming, but you never really know with her. I bet that’s who it was. And it would be just like Jimmy to forget to tell me.” She pointed the prongs of a shining fork at Dorothy and her eyes took on a glint of their own. “What good news Dorothy. Well spotted.”

Liz. Not the most glamorous name, but then again not a lot of names had a z in them. Zelda. Or Zena. Those were interesting names, but this lady was Liz. Elizabeth; like the princess who got married. But what business had she with Jimmy of all people?

“So is she a friend of Jimmy’s? From Glasgow?” Even if Annag did know her it was surely a bit risky.

“No she’s from Oban, and she’s my friend.” Annag was still smiling as she folded the last napkin. “My old school friend.”

Dorothy looked at Annag and tried to imagine her in a school tie. Or with a very blonde friend. But it was no good.

“Do all of your friends embrace Jimmy?” She wasn’t ready to abandon the affair just yet. Annag laughed again. “Only the ones who have strong stomachs, but Liz is a nurse so she can bear anything.”

“A nurse?”

“Yes, in operating theatres even.”

“Oh?”

“And in the war, in the middle of fields and all that with the Germans bombing you to bits.”

“Really.” Well that was at least something. The minute she saw the lady there had been some air of mystery or spark of glamour that not even Jimmy could extinguish entirely.

“What’s her other name?”

“Black. You’ve probably never met her, she hasn’t really been home much since the war. Her dad was Sooty, the old science teacher.”

“Sooty?” Black. Liz. She remembered hearing a story.

“That would’ve been before your day I suppose.”

Indeed, there was no Sooty by the time Dorothy got to the high school. There was a disappointing lack of nicknames in general – though there was always The Weed...

“God rest his soul.” Annag raised her eyes to the heavens which somehow helped Dorothy remember the story.

“Is she the one then that was supposed to marry Sandy MacPherson?”

“How do you know about that?” Annag moved around to Dorothy’s side of the table, so Dorothy couldn’t see her face as well.

“Oh I’ve heard all about it.”

Annag turned to look at her with a raised eyebrow. “More eavesdropping on your mother?”

“No, she told me that one herself.” She stepped back to make way as Annag set about straightening the settings on her side – but it was straight already.

“She told me it about Sandy MacPherson, said there was a big stooshie at the time, although I don’t really remember.”

“You’d have been too young to care, not that it’s any of your business now mind you.”

“But don’t you think that’s funny that he was supposed to marry her but now he’s married to Betty.”

“Not particularly.” Annag folded her arms in front of her and turned to scan the rest of the room. Dorothy could see her mouth move as she counted up the settings – she normally got Dorothy to do that.

“But Annag,” she tried to slide her body between Annag and her counting. Between 16 and 25. 31, 32... “They’re both called Elizabeth! He swapped one Elizabeth for another one. He must really like the name.”

Annag shook her head and started to walk off. “Everyone calls Betty, Betty. And Liz is Liz.” But she paused then so that Dorothy could tell she was remembering something.

“What?”

“Nothing.” She frowned.

“Oh Annag – you have to tell me!”

“I certainly do not.”

Dorothy sighed, but knew that Annag would never tell. She was a demon of a secret-keeper. Once Dorothy had broken a necklace in room ten and Annag had faced off Mr Devine cool as you like. She would no doubt have done well under interrogation – but that wasn’t really something to joke about because Jimmy actually had been a prisoner of war. And from what she’d heard her mum saying about it, it was hardly a laughing matter. His limp wasn’t from a battle or anything, it was because his foot had been eaten by something. Dorothy hadn’t quite been able to hear what, which almost made it worse. Rats? Another prisoner? She shuddered whenever she thought about it, though she tried to be nice to Jimmy anyway, because he was nice really. Maybe that’s what Annag meant about the strong stomach. That Dorothy obviously lacked. And now accusing him of all sorts into the bargain. She felt herself blushing.

Annag twisted her head towards the big clock. And back again.

“Believe it or not we’ve actually finished on time.”

Dorothy could not believe it. Maybe she hadn’t been skiving as much as she’d thought.

“Time I was heading back to the mad house. See what that philandering husband of mine’s been getting up to.” She gave Dorothy a cheerful nudge.

“You won’t tell him that I...” That she’d made a fool of herself – again.

Annag turned to her, with her dark eyes, that glowed even though they had dark smudges underneath them. Tired. Smiling. “Come on Dot.” She held her arm out.

Dorothy took it, squeezing it tight, leaning her head for a second on top of Annag’s shoulder. She was glad there wouldn’t be a stooshie after all.

Three days after she'd first noticed them, Liz asked her mum about the clocks.

"Yes, they're new. Do you like them?"

She paused. She hadn't really considered them in those terms, merely registering the change. They had struck her as incongruous if anything.

"I suppose I do. More so the one in the sitting room." It had a speckled green metal body, squat and rectangular, flanked by panels of copper and black Bakelite. A Deco looking thing. It had proved French on inspection. "Where did you get it?"

"Argyll Antiques." Her mother was sitting at the kitchen table, rustling the morning paper, whilst Liz stood at the counter with her back to her. "What with things being the way they are," there was a momentary stop in the rustling, "poor Mr Montague was barely shifting a thing. It got so that I couldn't go in and have a nosy without the guilt of it getting too much. I got three altogether."

"That's very Christian of you."

"Yes, I thought so." The rustling resumed. "Of course I daren't go in at all now."

"Oh well," Liz allowed a smile to edge across her face – like the light that was coming in the kitchen window. "At least you'll always be sure of the time."

Everywhere she went she was confronted with an appalling amount of hours. Although the one in the hall was a sort of abstract sun, with long metal spikes that she was still getting the hang of. She could pass that one occasionally without totally grasping how long, or short, it had been since her last trip to the bedroom, or the bathroom, or the room that used to be Cathy's and that had been Donald's before that, but was now disappointingly sparse and free of such things as dust, clues, associations. It was a curious business though, this with the clocks; she could hardly blame them for the bending and stretching of things, when they

stayed all the while where they were supposed to – on top of the mantelpiece. A nail on the wall in the hall.

When she was at work everything was rushed. Folk were forever exclaiming how there were never enough hours or minutes, and cursing repeatedly under their breath. That was why she preferred the theatres, where cursing occasionally occurred out loud, and where time itself dissolved completely; the drawn out seconds of arterial bleeding or not breathing, the complex cases that swallowed up whole mornings for breakfast. Either could be concluded with a blunt return to the precise theatre clock: time of death 18:42 – really? My wife will be furious.

In the kitchen of the old house she could at least take her time making the breakfast. A late breakfast at that; the sun dials pointed to it being nearer nine than anything. Her mother was still in her dressing gown, warming to the role of the invalid. So Liz was making her the invalid's breakfast.

“Would you like it poached or scrambled?” She paused, hands poised above the bowl she'd been working over, the tips of her thumb and middle finger covered in the wet viscous substance.

“Better go for scrambled, it's the more forgiving of the two.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“Well, what you do with eggs is criminal, considering the shortages.”

“Eh?” She threw a glance over her shoulder, but her mother was bent over the paper.

“Picking at the thing until there's only a fraction left.”

“I was just getting a bit of shell out.” How the hell could she even tell from there?

“The slightest blemish and you start fussing with it...”

Liz was indeed trying to extract a brown spot – a suspect looking sign of life. It was no good though, the white held its form and jumped in and then out again of the coaxing shell as

one slippery mass. If only she had more precise instruments, it would be easy then to isolate the offending bit. Get rid of it.

“I’ve never known anyone so squeamish as you,” her mum was turning the pages and rustling again with a vengeance, so she helpfully raised her voice to bellow out over the newspaper: “and to think, you being a nurse too.”

Liz sighed and put the shell to one side. She went to the sink to wash her hands, waiting for the comment – is that you washing your hands again? It was a good job she had brought her own soap, at least she couldn’t be accused of criminal usage on that front. But she didn’t bother bringing that up because no comment came from the kitchen table after all. She picked up a fork and turned back to the egg, primordial looking, floating in the white dish. She stabbed and whisked until it was all pale and frothing, but still with that coagulated gloop that made it cling to the lip of the bowl before sliding onto the hot pan with a hiss. Watching it turn hard was interesting in a way, like a chemistry experiment – but who wanted a chemistry experiment inside them?

“Aren’t you having any?”

“No,” she put the plate down in front of her mum. “I don’t think I’ll bother after all.”

“First you don’t want meat, and now eggs. Rationing must be no trial at all with your eating habits.”

“Well, if you don’t miss it, why bother.” She sat down and poured the tea out. “Perhaps more people will think about that when it ends.”

“I doubt that – if it ever ends.” Her mum folded her newspaper, smaller, but not away. “I imagine it’ll have the opposite effect,” she was saying. “Most folk will probably go meat mad as soon as they get half the chance.”

“They might have lost their appetite for slaughter,” Liz carried on.

“Whoever had the bright idea of vegetarianism, well...”

“Breeding things just to be killed...”

“They must be a sandwich short of a picnic whoever it was, but then aren’t we all these days. A nice roast beef sandwich – even a bit of luncheon meat...”

“That’s what all those imperialists want.”

“A ham sandwich?”

They looked at each other.

“Never mind.” Liz picked up a piece of toast and scraped margarine on to it. The rasping sound of it was satisfying. Solid.

“Going to see Annag today then?”

She waited until she had finished chewing. “Aye.” Swallowed. “I’ll catch her when she finishes work.”

“She’ll be wondering why you haven’t been yet...unless that was her you went out to see last night?”

She was about to take another bite but paused. “No, I told you, I was just going for a walk.”

“In the dark?”

“It wasn’t that dark.” She had slipped out under cover of twilight, which was the most that could be mustered, and even that hadn’t arrived until almost ten.

“Go anywhere in particular?”

“No.”

“No?”

“No.”

She ignored her mother’s eyes on her as she ate. She had in fact gone up the glen, but fat chance she was about to admit to that.

“See anyone?”

Liz almost laughed. Why didn't she just come out with it? Sandy – did she see Sandy. Still the golden boy even now.

“No mother, I didn't see anyone.” She got up from the table and put her plate in the sink.

“Well, nobody I knew anyway.”

Or maybe she did but maybe she wouldn't recognise them after all this time. And she found that she was filled with an equal dread of either being, or not being recognised, herself. It was a sensation that sat oddly in her chest and had made her turn away from the town when she'd left the house the night before, turning left instead, until she could hear the burn running alongside the low stone wall. She hadn't particularly wanted to go up the glen. She would have quite happily sat on that low stone wall, tucked under the trees, listening to the burn and the quiet not city night. But the midges had kept her moving up the hill, past the crossroads. She liked walking through the thickening dark, smelling the green air of the woods – the scent of living things – but not having anyone near her for miles perhaps, except the light of the farm at the end of the road. She had walked that road, between her house and the farm, hundreds of times, in all weathers and all shades of night. But she didn't even know who lived in it now. So really it didn't matter where she walked. Or what time of night it was. Or who saw her. It didn't matter at all, and they could mind their own bloody business.

It had given her a taste for being outside though. Enough to draw her from the house and into the open. She'd left her mother concentrating on the crossword.

“That's me away out then.” She hovered in the doorway.

“Oh?” Her mum didn't look up.

“Yes.” She shifted her cardigan from one hand to the other. “You'll be all right here I suppose?”

“Yes, fine.” Just the back of the head visible as she peered at the paper – six down, nine letters, ends in off.

Liz turned and headed straight out the front door.

She intended to go straight down the town, but only got as far as the junction at Quarry Road when she veered, at the last minute, away from the main drag and towards the Dalintart hospital, which seemed like the safer option. Not that she meant to haunt the local hospitals like some desperate spurned lover the whole time. If she did though, she at least had four to choose from, what with the hodgepodge of service provision; infectious diseases to the south of the town, the sanatorium up by the tower, the cottage hospital round the corner. Most of the buildings had been built or donated by well to do philanthropists, and put a suitably well to do face on. But the Dalintart was different. It was the oldest and beyond such things. Funny how you could tell just by looking at it that it had been the combination poorhouse; it had that official Victorian shape to it. Plain and substantial, with a penitential air. They’d been scared of the place as children. But that was more because of the patients of the back wing. Those serving life sentences. Poor souls really and they’d ran away from them and made up stories. There was the wee fella in the chair, that sang, and the big fella that paced about but didn’t speak; Bing and The Nin they’d christened them, which wasn’t at all Christian of them really. She turned away from the off-milk pallor of its walls with a kind of horror. She’d never had the stomach for geriatric cases – all dribbles and mess and mashed up meals. Or maybe it wasn’t her stomach at all; maybe she was deficient in some other vital organ. That was more like it. That’s what her mother would have said.

She adjusted the waistband of her slacks, which had made a reappearance after being banished on Sunday. She was hoping that the loose feel of them against her legs would somehow help cultivate a holiday attitude, so she could perhaps tell herself that’s what was going on here. She was just taking her holidays. A tourist. The sun seemed to help. As did

any indication of business as usual in the buildings she passed: porters, message boys, whistles and shouts from the back playing field. She was at the High School now, her father's domain, and scene of her own early triumphs. What did she have to show for them now? Not the degree they'd spoken about before he died. He had said she could go to university, and if she had been more patient then maybe she would have. But certain things had forced her hand. Hitler was only one of them. It wasn't him that had been after her hand – though she supposed he'd got at them in the end. Would her father have stopped her enlisting as a nurse? He would've certainly seen right through any of the patriotic arguments she'd come up with, trying to dress it up at the time as anything other than running away.

She looked up at the school building. Perched. On higher ground. It had the same symmetrical gable as the Dalintart hospital, but bigger. Darker – this is a serious place you know. Her father's classroom had been on the first floor just off the central hall. A high-ceilinged room with draughty windows. In winter he would try and heat the place with a series of Bunsen burners that flickered and swayed, fat orange flames begging to be tickled and grabbed at by idle adolescent hands. Well it was his own fault for telling them – when the valve is turned this way children it can't hurt you, look: running a steady hand back and forth, then a final more theatrical swooping, which whilst painless did leave a dark residue on the palm. But that was Sooty for you. She had never been sure if that was where he'd got his name, or if it was him being Mr Black, or, just as likely, the Oban flair for the ridiculous that had christened six foot ten Willy MacKay Titch, because her dad's hair had been as blonde as Liz's. Where they got that from she couldn't say. Ramsay had speculated along the lines of Viking raiders, which just about tallied with his views in general on life north of the Trossachs. If they'd been born now, fingers might have been pointed at the Norwegian navy. She was sorry in a way to have missed all that – Oban turned suddenly cosmopolitan. What with the Norwegians, the Canadians, the Poles. But she'd met Poles of course. She stopped

– feeling the breeze cooler now – and did up the buttons on her cardigan. Remember instead: the separate girls and boys’ stairs that no matter how hard you looked appeared to be identical, the sound of dozens of school shoes scuffing on stone, polished patent. She would like to go inside the school again. Straight in the front door to the dark waxed floor of central hall with its railed balcony. She still often dreamt about that balcony – about trying to cross it, but there was no railing, and then no wall, so that it was just a sort of floating path and her feet wouldn’t work properly.

The three of them used to walk around arm in arm, Annag on one side of her, Betty on the other. Her personal guards, Sandy called them. Annag had laughed at that.

“Oh I’d be willing to tackle him,” she said with a glint in her eye, “just as a favour to you like.”

Though of course it was Betty in the end who had taken him on.

She suddenly wanted desperately to see Annag. Why hadn’t she gone yesterday, or the day before? And now she was having to wander about whilst Annag was at work. Everyone would be at work; Liz found herself walking too quickly, as if she had somewhere better to be. Though she only ended up back at the train station again, tilting her head up, squinting towards the clock tower that looked like a steeple. Most stations hung their clocks out like a flag, but here was theirs – inordinately churchy, and telling her it wasn’t even one yet. She could perhaps buy a book though, that would give her something to do, like these other people who were coming and going and not really taking much notice of her. She could do with a novel, all she had brought were some textbooks, including the one Ramsay had given her. Lent her – she should say. But then who knew when she would even see him again. For some reason this made her do a strange scoffing laugh to herself that made a passing man turn and look at her. Ramsay was only in Glasgow for crying out loud. If she got on a train

right now it would soon take her the hundred miles or so – but what then? She would need more than a train to get over the chasm already forming between her current existence and the very idea of him. It was unpleasant but she shouldn't be surprised really. People just fell out of your life sometimes and it wasn't always down to human biology. Nothing to be alarmed about really; she clasped each hand around the opposite elbow and squeezed, digging her fingers into bone, blinking at the sun, which was surprisingly strong – and it still wasn't one o'clock yet. She could always post the book back to him, if that wasn't too melodramatic a gesture. It was only a book. A medical book; and she was only a nurse after all so it would only give her ideas. It wasn't as if it was something he'd gifted her as a binding symbol of his affection, that she was then dropping into the corner of an envelope with just a scrap of a note that no extent of paper rationing could excuse. What kind of person would do a thing like that.

“You! Back here again? Don't tell me you've had enough of the town already?” Jimmy was bowling towards her wheeling a trolley. When would she ever remember about him working there? She had the feeling of being somehow caught out and tried to disguise it with a smile.

“What's that you've got there?”

“Och, you don't want to know.” He came to a stop and she noticed him shift his weight automatically to one side. “Your ears must have been burning,” he nodded towards her, “we were just talking about you this morning.”

“Oh aye?”

“Aye, Annag was saying she hadn't seen you yet.”

“I know, I've been terrible. I was hoping to catch her this afternoon though, what time does she usually finish?”

“Och it depends.” He lifted his hat and ran a hand across his forehead. She wondered again what was in the chest he was wheeling. “Why don’t you just head over.”

“I don’t want to interrupt—”

“Dorothy, make yourself useful and take Liz back with you.”

Liz hadn’t noticed the girl standing behind them looking down towards the platforms. Tall but young looking with auburn hair pulled back – and the old school uniform.

“I’m not going back, I’m at school today.” She turned to face them. “But I can take you over anyway,” she smiled at Liz, then looked down and folded her hands, “if you like.”

“It’s a wonder you get any schoolwork done, what are you training to be anyway? An engine driver?”

The girl made a face. “It’s lunchtime.”

“Well, have you no lunch to eat?”

She blushed but said nothing.

“She can’t stay away from me.” Jimmy winked at Liz.

The girl tutted and looked away.

“Well, if you don’t mind,” she turned again at Liz’s words. “I’d rather not go barging in. Maybe you could take Annag a message?”

“Aye, she can do that no bother,” said Jimmy, “I’ll leave you ladies to it.”

“Cheerio then Jimmy.”

He doffed his cap to them and trundled off.

“Dorothy was it?”

The girl met Liz’s eye and nodded, a small smile on her lips. They turned and walked towards the hotel. Liz hoped that Annag wouldn’t mind her showing up like this; she wouldn’t have taken too kindly to it herself. Your work was your work. But that was a bit rich coming from her, all things considered.

“Do you know what was in that chest Jimmy had?” Dorothy asked her.

“No, he wouldn’t say.”

“It was the washing. It always puts him in a bad mood.”

“Oh?”

“Clothes and things, going to the cleaners.”

“Yes.” Liz smiled, she was ready to take it as a compliment that she could pass for a person unfamiliar with washing. “Going on the train though?”

“To London.”

“Really?”

“Harrods!”

Liz looked at the girl askance.

“87 Brompton Road, Knightsbridge, London, SW1.”

They crossed the street without pausing. There weren’t many cars about, just the postman on his bicycle and a boy with an ill-functioning wheelbarrow; so take that Brompton Road.

“That’s very specific,” Liz said.

“It says it on the label.”

“What well-travelled washing.”

Dorothy smiled. “I know – lucky old laundry.”

“And what’s it going all the way down there for?”

“Oh that’s where they always send it.”

“Who?” Who in their right mind sent their washing out of the fresh air and right into the middle of busy, dirty, battered London.

“The Mitfords – they often stay here you know.”

Dorothy looked over at Liz, as if to check she was suitably impressed, accepting her wide-mouthed bewilderment with a nod before pushing open the tradesman’s door of the hotel.

“She’s probably up the stairs. I won’t be a minute.” Dorothy dashed ahead up the bare iron steps, but paused and turned back to give a sort of curtsy. “Pleased to meet you.”

Liz nodded. “And you.”

She heard a door swing to as she looked around at the piles of old chairs and odd bits of carpet. So the Mitfords were leaving their mark on Oban, and Oban was leaving its dirty marks on their clothes. Surely they didn’t really send their washing to Harrods though. That didn’t make any sort of sense. There was no accounting for the upper orders, but even so, she’d have thought the war would have put paid to all that sort of carry on. Imagine Jimmy with his bad frostbitten foot, having to haul their dirty washing about – she began to pace around the space – it didn’t half stick in the craw. There was Dorothy there, a pretty thing when she blushed in her round fresh face, reduced to envying someone’s laundry. Now what exactly would Ramsay have made of that? It annoyed her how quickly the question came when there was no possibility of an answer. She stopped and leaned a hand on the side of one of the chairs. The metal felt cold on her palm. It was colder in that entranceway there than it was outside. A bit damp perhaps. She could hear a distant dripping and every now and then water gushed through the pipes above. The guests doing their ablutions – or something else.

“Well hello hello hello hello.” Annag came rushing down the stairs towards her.

Liz grinned as she stepped forward to throw her arms around her friend. As the taller of the two she was squeezing Annag’s shoulders – firm and soft at the same time – whilst Annag had her by the ribs.

“It’s so good to see you. Why on earth didn’t you tell me you were coming?”

“Och I meant to, but then you know what it’s like.”

“Still working all hours?”

“Not as many as you I’m sure.”

“What? I’m hardly in here.”

“But between that and the kids...you’ve quite the squad now!”

“I know, I know,” she sighed. “You don’t have to say it.”

They were still holding each other. Liz rubbed both hands briskly over the top of Annag’s arms as she drew away.

“I’m looking forward to meeting the full set,” she said.

“Really?”

Their eyes met.

“Well...”

Annag laughed. “It doesn’t exactly make for a quiet home, but they’re not the worst shower of shites.”

Liz laughed.

“And anyway, I’ve made my bed...” Annag took off her apron and hung it over a chair.

“I’m surprised you have time to make it, between—”

“Oh here we go!”

They laughed again.

“Come on then, let’s get out of here.” Annag took her arm and they headed outside.

They turned towards George Street, so the view to the left of them opened out into wide expanses of clear sky and sea. The water glittered like broken glass whilst overhead was spread with blue, brushed with white – small clouds and the pale shapes of birds. On the other side they were faced with displays of potions, and leather goods, and the ghostly shapes of themselves. Liz looked from the windows, to Annag, to the far side of the sea, trying her best to ignore all the life in between. She hadn’t ventured this far for some time. She hadn’t been so bold as to saunter down the main street in the middle of the day, because she could well remember what it’d had to say – just who does she think she is? And something about

chocolate and eating herself; she'd forgotten about that one until they passed the window at Lovatt's. There was a large cake with elaborate royal icing on display. She stared at its crisp white layers and Swiss dots. It wasn't until she was standing right in front of it that she realised it was made of paper.

Annag was saying hello to every second person. Liz knew she should probably at least smile, otherwise it would be – oh she's still got tickets on herself that one. Bold as brass with her nose in the air. But there she goes down the street, arm in arm with Annag Campbell, so she can't be that proud after all – because there was Annag, arm linked with hers, leaning into her now and then as she chatted away.

"So what's brought this on then – the prodigal return?"

"Well..." Liz felt herself stiffen and wondered if Annag noticed. She couldn't really tell her about Matron without telling her about Ramsay. And how to put that...

"Och I'm forgetting about your mum." She squeezed Liz's arm. "I thought you'd be up right enough when I heard about her fall."

Ah the fall – thank god. "Yes...the fall. Mind you she wouldn't like to hear you calling it that – she hates anything that reeks of the elderly invalid."

Annag laughed. "Well what was it then if it wasn't a fall?"

"You know my mother, nothing's ever straightforward. It'll be the ground's fault. The ground wasn't doing what it was supposed to."

She laughed again. "You're terrible – your poor mother."

"Och I know." And it was terrible to think of it in terms of its convenience to her, when really she still didn't know the extent of the damage.

"Was it a bad break – hello, how-are-ye." Annag nodded at an old man who had winked at her. She seemed to know them all. The shop-girls to the shoe repair man.

"Hello Annag."

“Annag, how ye getting on.”

“Hello Annag....Liz.” Liz looked up; was that...

“How long does she need the cast on for?” Annag was asking her.

“I’m...eh...I’m not really sure yet but the doctor’s coming tomorrow.” Well. That was interesting – May MacPherson addressing her in broad daylight without batting an eyelid. Liz turned back to look at the woman, but yes, yes it was her. She looked at Annag to see what she was making of this, but she just carried on:

“It must be driving her mad being stuck in the house mind you.”

“Oh aye.”

“And she’s never an elderly invalid – a fine looking woman like her. You can tell her from me that there’s nothing to worry about on that account.”

“I’m sure she’ll be delighted...”

“She looks so young compared to my mum, you’d never in a million years think they were the same age.”

“Well...your mum’s had ten children to contend with.”

Annag exhaled, long and loud. It seemed to empty her out so that when she next spoke the words were quieter. “And how on earth she did that I don’t know.” Flatter.

“Well, you’re half-way there yourself.” Liz felt bad as soon as she’d said it, though she hadn’t meant it badly. She’d only meant it as a statement of the facts. It was the facts that were bad.

“Oh god don’t. Sometimes I just think...”

“What?”

“I just wonder...Oh, look there.”

But Liz had been looking at her friend's face, watching her dark eyes that darted away and the round pink lips, that wouldn't in the end say – because she was craning her neck, nodding down the street.

“Did you see who just dived into Chalmers?”

She dreaded to think. “Who?”

“Betty's mother. Have you seen dear Betty?”

“No.” Well, rather the mother than the daughter. Still, she was glad when they turned off the main road and up Annag's street. “I haven't spoken to Betty in years.”

“Hardly surprising.”

“It's not like that though, I mean I'm not bothered about that.”

Annag looked at her.

“Honestly.”

“Well I'm sure I would be if I were you.”

“No. Why should I mind? I don't mind at all. It's just awkward is what it is.” She looked straight ahead along the street. Two narrow rows of flats, ending in a view that was entirely vertical: congregational church, raw cliff face, suicide cottage, and – eventually – sky.

“Hmmm.”

“Did you notice back there,” Liz tapped Annag on the arm, “his Auntie saying hello to me like that?”

“Her? As if she could talk. Her daughter who's married to the eldest Munro was doing a line with a pilot, practically the whole war.”

“Oh.” Liz wasn't quite sure what that had to do with her – but it was cheering to hear nonetheless. “And do you see much of himself?” She had been in a rush to get the question out in the same tone as the words before. It occurred to her that she was avoiding his name.

They stopped. They were outside Annag's close now. She could already hear the sound of a child crying. Annag's eyes darted up to the window, then back to Liz.

"Not really. But from what I hear he's gone all to hell."

"How?"

"With the drink and that, though you'd never think it to look at him sometimes. Still the blue-eyed boy. He must have a portrait in the attic somewhere."

They pushed open the gate and walked into the dark close. It was cold and damp and Liz felt the chill run through her. When she forced herself to speak her voice sounded strange and hollow against the stone stairwell.

"Actually I saw him the other day."

"Where?" Annag turned to look back at her.

"Funny story really." She tried to smile. "Honest to Christ you couldn't have made it up."

“I didn’t ask him to come,” her mum said, as she lowered herself on to the armchair. “He very much invited himself.” Their eyes met as she landed with a wince which they both chose to ignore. “Are all doctors like that?”

Liz was picking knitting needles and newspapers up off the floor; she paused for a moment before answering. “Yes.”

Her mother tutted and shook her head.

“But I’m sure he only wants to see how you’re coming along.” She leaned across to shove the stuff in the magazine rack. Her mother had a habit of folding the newspapers so they got smaller and smaller until the whole of the world’s affairs had been reduced to the size of a crossword puzzle.

“It’s not that I don’t like the man,” her mother was saying, “it’s just the whole....”

“Laying on of hands?”

“What?” Her mother stared at Liz as if she had just accused her of having it off with Dr Beaton.

“It’s not uncommon. I’m sure he’s used to it.”

Her mother closed her mouth into a tight frown and said nothing.

“It’s only your leg though.” Liz glanced down at the bulbous white shape jutting out from beneath the dark material of her skirt. Her mum usually favoured fitted tweed but she’d had to revert to the looser fashion of an earlier time. It suited her, with her Edwardian hairdo and neck hanging with glass beads. She could almost pass for eccentric. She was still scowling at Liz so that the lines of her face, the sharp rise and fall of her cheekbones, looked more pronounced in the shady light of the living room. They’d left the lamp off in favour of the afternoon sun.

She could see the problem though, her mother not having lifted her skirt to a man in over a decade. She supposed his medical station didn't entirely cancel out the awkwardness of it. Though he might not even examine her. If Ramsay was to be believed he may well just take one look at her, ask a couple of questions and have the bill sent round before teatime. She didn't know this Dr Beaton at all.

"Would you like some more tea?"

Her mother had gone quiet. Perhaps she shouldn't have brought that up about the touching.

"No I'd better not." She was clasping and unclasping her hands in her lap. Thin fingers looking pale, almost white; neither her or her mum had very good circulation. That was something people said casually, usually about women, because they were feeling the cold. But did it equate to an aspersion cast on the heart? Some sort of deficiency of life itself? Circulation, after all, was everything.

"Do you want your heavy cardigan through?"

"No, I'm fine as I am. It doesn't look a bad day."

They both turned their heads towards the window – which framed finches fluttering against a sheer blue sky, though Liz for some reason suddenly shivered.

Her mum leaned back in her seat. "I suppose you're used to the central heating at the hospital."

Liz made a murmur of agreement, though really the Western always seemed either inordinately hot or cold in all the wrong places. She sat down on the settee and glanced around the room. "Well." It had taken on a glow that picked out the peach in the pattern of the mint green wallpaper, and matched the cushions that were already keeling over again. She had dusted the dark wood of the tables and the sideboard. Straightened the rug. "I think we're ready to receive our visitor."

It wasn't until Liz said this that it occurred to her – there had been no other. She cleared her throat and looked at the material of her dress, rather stiffly brushing away some imaginary crumbs. “Be nice for you to see someone besides me I suppose.” She tried to say it lightly but was almost ready to be offended on her mother's behalf: what had her mother ever done to them?

“Yes, well” her mother fished an arm into the magazine rack and retracted the *Radio Times*. “I had plenty of visitors – before.”

“Before I arrived?”

She kept her eyes on the paper in her lap. “Yes.”

“Good.”

“It was as a matter of fact.”

“Yes, I'm sure.”

They sat in silence for a moment until her mother turned to her again.

“You might put the wireless on. We needn't worry about hearing Dr Beaton, I'm sure he'll come right in anyway.”

Liz was rather curious to see this Dr Beaton, to get a good look, up close, of any general practitioner in action. The GPs were so tied up in Ramsay's BMA bashing that she half expected him to come through the door in devil's horns. Of course, the consultants at the Western all had their own practices too. It was difficult to imagine them going into women's living rooms or sitting behind desks writing out prescriptions for cod liver oil, but that's what happened. How much did they charge for the honour? She dreaded to think. There were no caps on fees in the city; it was only the Highlands and Islands that had been taken in hand so far. So it perhaps wasn't surprising then that the Scottish doctors were more game than most for the new service. Maybe this Dr Beaton was all for nationalisation. It wasn't as if a

physician with rampant capitalist aspirations would set himself up in Oban, of all places. The odd thing was that she couldn't remember ever seeing a doctor in their house – absurd of course. There must have been someone when Donald took ill. All she could remember though was waking up to find her parents gone and Mrs MacSween from next door in the kitchen. They'd taken Donald to the hospital and if Liz wanted to help him get better then she would sit down and eat her boiled egg all up. She could still remember Mrs MacSween patting her and Cathy on the head after they'd finished. They were allowed to go and play but they stayed sitting there, being good – silent. And still no Donald.

Sometimes she thought of his wee body in one of those huge terrifying iron lungs, even though that hadn't happened at all. They hadn't had those back then. So she wasn't sure what exactly they did with Donald when they took him to the McKelvie hospital, on the top of a hill right at the edge of town; it was where they sent all the infectious cases. They weren't allowed to visit him, though their mum went sometimes to wave at him through a window. Liz and Cathy only got as far as the bottom of the hill. They made a den in the gap between the rocks and spent days sorting dock leaves into empty glass jars, with a kind of vague pharmacological intent, thinking Donald might join them if he got a bit better. But then Donald had died, and their parents suddenly aware of them again, kept her and Cathy indoors until the memory of contagion faded. Strangely it had been less upsetting to think of Donald as dead than of him lying all alone in the hospital on the hill. And again during the war she could remember thinking it – I'm glad he's already dead. Brother's had been a liability then. At least she knew where hers was. At least he hadn't had to see that.

“How do you do.”

Liz reached her hand out towards that of Dr Beaton and gave a slight smile. He was very tall and angular, and his close clipped hair and speech reminded her of a physician in a film –

one of those ones that they'd shown in cinemas about the importance of the independent family doctor: well you wouldn't want just anyone touching...

He pressed his palm to hers in a firm warm grip and she noted the contrast between his grey hair and astonishingly dark eyebrows. It gave him an intense look, which he dispensed sparingly, though he began directing his brisk bursts of speech towards Liz.

"That's a nasty one," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

He let go of her hand then turned her palm upwards so the smooth scar tissue glistened at them.

"Yes." Had he really managed to feel that through his palm? "I had an accident." She was trying not to be impressed. But he didn't have her sussed entirely – because really it was a nasty two.

He was still eyeing the suspect stretch of skin. "Lucky there was no tendon or nerve damage."

"Yes." She could feel her face growing warmer, and was glad when he added:

"I hear you're a nurse at the Western. Tell me, is Patterson still operating there?" He had put his bag down on the floor and now swiftly shrugged off his jacket. His sleeves underneath it were already rolled half way up the forearm.

"Yes." She wished she had something more to say than this constant repetition of the affirmative.

"Still teaching?"

She almost winced, but what could she do. He was indeed still teaching. "Oh yes."

Dr Beaton smiled to himself and draped his jacket across the arm of the settee. She saw her mother look at it, then at her, as if to say – you see how it is, he'll be asking for his pipe and

slippers next. But Liz liked his contradictory manner; casual indecorousness with a cool clinical core.

“Last month,” she said, standing straighter, “I was able to assist him with a series of splenectomies.”

“Is that so?” Dr Beaton raised his eyes to look at Liz. Dark but glowing. Small. Concentrated. “And did you find that interesting?”

“Of course.”

He paused. “Yes.”

She felt better now he had said one too.

“Your mother tells me you have all sorts of unusual interests.”

She didn’t quite know what to say to that; what was so very unusual? Her mum thought lots of things she did were unusual. Or was it Dr Beaton that had judged them so?

“Indeed,” her mum suddenly said. “You never know what she’ll come up with next.”

She was one to talk though; where, for example, was this conversation going?

“She’s practically a vegetarian now,” her mum dragged the word out, as if it contained a preposterous amount of letters. And then more briskly, “like Herr Hitler.”

Liz gasped and glanced at Dr Beaton, half expecting him to laugh, or shake his head, but he just looked at her with a slightly raised eyebrow – an abnormally black arch – and nodded.

“I don’t see that there’s any need to bring Hitler into it,” she couldn’t help saying.

Then he did smile. Just a flicker before turning to his bag.

“Well Mrs Black would you like your daughter to stay while I examine you?”

“Certainly not.”

Liz had intended to lurk in the hall to try and listen in but her mother called out, asking for her cardigan to be fetched from the bedroom.

It was odd standing there in the lemon coloured room – which happened to be the same shade as the dress she had on, so for a moment it felt just like disappearing. Her blonde hair and pale skin didn't help. Only her lipsticked mouth caught her eye in the big dressing table mirror. A flash of red that her mother had commented on at breakfast.

“Nice to see you making an effort.”

She had wanted to wipe it off then but of course couldn't. That was tantamount to admitting defeat. No. She'd have to wear it all week now.

The bed had been made, not quite as neat as her own, but still...not a bad effort considering the broken leg. She wondered again if it was too much – was her mother telling the doctor she'd been doing all this? Liz would have to try and catch him somehow. She turned her head towards the open door but there were no sounds of movement. It was then that she noticed the photos on top of the chest of drawers. There was a selection of silver frames. Her father. The three of them as children. Grown up Cathy, on her own, as opposed to the wedding one, which was on public display in the living room. There was an empty frame too – another sympathy purchase from Argyll Antiques? – and some photographs sitting loose. Liz flicked through the candidates, curious to see if she was amongst them, only to be astounded by the faces she found looking back at her. A fine looking couple staring blankly into the camera. Sandy in his uniform, holding his hat under one arm and Betty's hand under the other. She was beautiful, with flowers pinned to the front of her dress and in hair. They were on the cathedral steps with the half-finished structure rising up behind them. Why not cross the road and be photographed with the whole of the bay stretching out into the distance? Instead of just standing there – up against the wall; it wasn't like anyone was making them. Still...her mum obviously thought it was a good shot. Had she been given that in lieu of an invitation? So she could see her golden boy on his big day. Christ. Liz shook her head. She wouldn't actually put it in a frame though. Surely. Would she?

Liz grabbed the cardigan and flew along the hall, barely pausing to knock before bursting into the room.

“Here you are.” She thrust the cardigan into her mother’s lap.

“Oh,” her mother looked at it, confused, “oh right....yes. Thank you.” She left it in her lap and lifted a hand to pat the back of her hair. The room seemed to be getting warmer. And dustier? – they all three of them cleared their throats one after the other, though Liz had only polished it that morning.

Dr Beaton, about to head out now into the full force of the sun, still had to put his jacket back on. He tugged on the lapels so it hung straight from the sharp corners of him.

“Thank you doctor.” Her mother’s eyes met his. His black brows took on a soft v. A u then, that seemed to say, yes you Mrs Black – you have not been looking after yourself.

Liz gripped the back of the settee wondering where he was off to next and how she might intercept him.

“Well,” he moved his face into a smile then turned towards her. “Tell me, how would you like to see our hospital?”

It was a cottage hospital, although the building itself was more like a villa. Bigger than a cottage and quite elegant really with the wee veranda out the front, where two of the patients were sunning themselves. A smart elderly man and a round middle-aged woman. They both called out greetings to the doctor as he approached, but then met him, when he and Liz passed, with lowered eyes and bowed heads. They at least knew who they were dealing with.

She had almost put her foot right in it during the five minutes it took to walk round from the house.

“Do they carry out many operations?” she’d asked as they turned along Glencruitten Road and the trees rose around them.

“A good deal, though not compared to your hospital, as I’m sure you can imagine.”

“Are there many surgeons then?”

“No, though consultants occasionally come up from the city.”

She had been wondering what kind of doctors they had up here. Surely they’d be no great shakes as surgeons if they were hanging around the West Highland cottage hospital, though it did have the unique draw of being positioned right next to an eighteen-hole golf course. She found herself smiling; yes, that was much easier than motoring all the way back from Milngavie. She could just imagine what Ramsay would make of that one. Not that that mattered.

“And do you think it a good hospital?” They were turning up the hill, towards it. It was a steep incline that turned his long arms into pendulums. His bag swung, marking time, though the chorus of birds paid it no attention.

“I’m not sure I can speak objectively,” he was saying, “being the superintendent.”

She wanted to say – oh? Or – really? But realised that wasn’t quite polite. Why shouldn’t he be superintendent? Was it really so surprising? Just because he occasionally removed his jacket, saw fit to give her the time of day, and agreed that her mother was a terrible force that would not be told.

They were greeted inside the hospital by the matron, smiling in her apron, like any good cotter. She needed a word with Dr Beaton so Liz waited in the hall. There was a wooden bench but she preferred to stand and look. The gloss on the walls reminded her of something; bath enamel, or sallow skin, transparent against the bone – no. She closed her eyes and turned to the left, opening them again to look through the glass in the door Dr Beaton had gone through. As she watched the same two nurses occasionally passed, one way, and then the other. Gliding, because she couldn’t see their feet, though she doubted they were run off

them. She tried to place what either might do, any differences in rank, but the grey and white uniforms looked the same and there was nobody bellowing – was this even a proper hospital?

The matron then appeared, marching directly towards Liz so that she jumped to lift her head and look at the ceiling – of course it was a proper hospital. She wouldn't dream of insinuating...

"Hello again, my apologies for detaining the doctor." She had a thick Western Isles accent. "Miss Black isn't it? I hear you're a sister in the Western Infirmary?"

"Yes, that's right."

"I'm Miss Gilchrist." She held out her hand and Liz shook it, standing up straighter and looking at the woman again. Older than her, but not that old. Forty? Maybe less. So why was she still taken aback by the Miss? She knew fine well what it meant to be a matron.

"Pleased to meet you."

Miss Gilchrist nodded and returned her small smile. "You must find us a very parochial set up here?"

"Not at all, it seems very pleasant," she turned again to glance around the entrance-hall. It smelled of Dettol and onions.

"I understand you're theatre?"

"Yes," Was she though? Technically she wasn't anything at the moment. "Yes, I'm theatre."

"I imagine they have all sorts of interesting procedures at the Western."

"Yes."

"Have you been there long?"

"Since 46'."

"I see." She paused. "And during the war? QAs was it?"

Liz kept her smile fixed and nodded.

Perhaps Miss Gilchrist had been in the QAs too. Liz waited to see if she would ask – which units? She was aware of her own breath loud in her ears. She noticed Miss Gilchrist’s clear skin and pink cheeks, as if she’d just come in after a bracing walk – as if she could manage any amount of bracing walking, traipsing over the machair, wherever she was from, visiting patients in their cottages; a natural cotter. So maybe not the QAs then.

“I was here, of course, for the duration.” She smiled, slightly too broadly. “We had quite a time of it.”

Dr Beaton powered Liz round the hospital with a surprisingly complex commentary. Yet the proportions of the place were so small and perfectly formed that she didn’t think she’d ever seen one so pleasing. Not even on her first posting to Peebles Hydro where they’d operated in the honeymoon suite. The cottage hospital, in comparison, was more like a well-run guesthouse. The main male and female wards had six beds each. The male ward was slightly spoiled by having an ostentatious armchair plunked in the middle of it – she could only imagine that they took it in turns to lord it up. But the female ward was as crisp and clear as you like. Highly polished dark wood floors, large windows, and huge iron beds. The patients appeared dwarfed in comparison, tightly tucked in vast expanses of linen. She found herself smiling at those who were awake, which made her think for the umpteenth time how unlike the Western the whole thing was. How on earth did they manage though, in this doll’s house of a place, to tend to the whole town? The whole district even? There were the other hospitals – each with their own job to do – how exactly were they going to fit it all together into one service? Perhaps they’d end up with a big new hospital, all white and flat with walls of windows. Stuffed with penicillin and blood, and iron lungs – like something from the future. They would all probably hate that.

Dr Beaton led her to the operating theatre; it continued the Spartan theme of the place, to the point where it reminded her of a basement they'd commandeered near Eeklo. She hadn't said a great deal as he marched her briskly from room to room, but when they arrived at the theatre, and he stopped still, and stopped talking, Liz found herself breathing differently. Taking in the blank space of the place, and saying:

"I believe I'm starting to miss it already."

Even before she'd finished saying it she wondered why she had. And regretted it, and because he hadn't immediately answered, wondered what else she could say by way of counteraction. She was standing in front of him and didn't turn around to look, feeling instead, or imagining at least, his eyes passing curiously across her back.

"If you really mean that I could use you next Thursday afternoon. I've a full list and no medical man to assist."

Liz made herself take a breath in and out before she turned and answered.

"I'd be delighted." Of course she would – a full list, well, she was the man for the job.

"Only I'm not sure we'd be able to pay you much – which would put you on par with the visiting consultants of course." He almost smiled then. Chancing his luck? Separating the worker from their productivity? She could imagine what Ramsay would...

"That won't be a problem at all."

"Good," he held the door open for her to leave. "See Matron before you go then."

She was feeling remarkably pleased with herself by the time she got home. Her mother though could always be relied on to see to that – there she would be, looming, ready with the dampeners. She should have been a fire watcher really. She would probably have enjoyed that. She had sat on the edge of her seat when Liz had told them about the night Partick and Hyndland got bombed. At first Liz had thought it was out of concern; Sandy, sitting next to

her, with her arm locked in his, had been horrified. But her mother was totally intrigued. Listening as Liz struggled to describe the sound of an explosion – it’s just like you’d imagine it to sound – like movement, but heavier, as if sound and speed have come crashing together – like...like physics out loud. Her mother had nodded. Sandy was watching her, frowning – but you might have been killed. Nearly a hundred people had been. Hundreds more across the city. And as trainees it had been their first experiment in not particularly thinking about that. It had weakened Sandy’s argument too; this cheapening of life – the flesh. Her body on the line. He hadn’t counted on that; on her beating him to it.

She stood now, back in the sitting room, which had cooled again and grown dull.

“I just don’t see why it’s necessary,” her mother was saying, “surely there are other nurses at the cottage hospital. Bessie Brown works there – why can’t she do it.”

“I’ve no idea who Bessie Brown is but Dr Beaton asked me, and I’m interested to see what it’s like. It’s not as if I’ve got anything better to do.” She gave her mum a look.

“And what’s that got to do with me?”

“I keep offering to help but—”

“If you’re at a loose end you’ve no one to blame but yourself,” her mother inhaled sharply, “I would have thought that was perfectly clear.”

At that point Liz had gone to her room and actually lain on the bed, though it was still the middle of the afternoon. She’d listened to the birds outside and the blood in her ears and decided, that just for a minute, she would let herself wonder what Ramsay might be doing. Wonder if he’d given her a second thought since she’d left. It was appalling really that after all this time they were still on such unsure footing that she didn’t know the answer. How had it got to that? Well, she had an idea, an unpleasant one – that it was all somehow her own fault. Something that had started, along with everything else, when she leaned over a round table with a red and white checked tablecloth, and announced over the swing of the band and

the clinking of glasses, through a haze of gauloises and the gazing eyes of the group – that all property is theft. The girls had giggled – well that depends where he got the ring from. I fell off the back of a lorry myself last week. Help yourself to my cigarettes why don't you then? And Liz had smiled at that and accepted one from the pack offered her. Sitting back in her seat and slowly lifting a flame towards the tip, suddenly very aware of her lips pressed around the small circle of it, and of Ramsay – looking at her now with a new interest, like he was supposed to.

She sat up on the bed, quite disgusted with herself. Lying about all mooning and pathetic – she'd never done that when she was a girl. Or at least not that she could recall. She looked about the room for a sign of herself, as if it would somehow tell her. As if the longer she stayed back there, hunched on the cornflower counterpane, the blurrier everything in between would become. Was that what she wanted? Everything undone. No. And yes. It was the difference between sleeping and starting to scream. There had to be something in between. She wanted Annag. She needed to speak to Annag. It was okay though; it was only a matter of hours.

Dorothy usually avoided the backstairs at all costs. They were dingy and grimy and haunted by the smell of boiled cabbage. She wasn't even sure the kitchen served boiled cabbage – but that was the back stairs for you. Not like the front ones, with their sea views and a vase of flowers on every landing. And at this time of day you might pass freshly scented guests heading down for their aperitifs. The hotel had a different atmosphere, without the rush of breakfasts and Annag tearing through each floor gathering dirty washing like a woman possessed. By the afternoon all the beds were made and there was only the odd bit of ironing or dusting to be getting on with. None of the heavy duty stuff that happened behind the bedroom doors. It made Dorothy wish she could have more shifts like that, but it was only on a Thursday that her and Annag were asked back. On Thursday afternoons Mrs Parr the head housekeeper went to the cottage hospital for some sort of appointment – though nobody would tell Dorothy what sort. Whatever it was it would take at least six more weeks, which was fine by her. And if Dorothy quite liked their Thursday afternoons, Annag absolutely delighted in them. She sent the kids to her mother's and was in no rush to fetch them back. She could easily be persuaded for a cup of tea in the linen cupboard. Dorothy had initially been surprised that she'd seen the appeal, but nobody ever thought of looking for them there. And it was easy to carry contraband up the backstairs; you just had to avoid breathing through the nose.

She had piled the last of the pillowcases for Annag to sit on, while she perched on the cupboard shelf with its wooden ledge digging into her backside. She was trying to balance the bones of her bum against the hard edge, nice and steady so she wouldn't disrupt her mug of tea, balancing further along the thin wedge of shelf. Her hands were occupied with a bit of the shortbread they'd managed to get from the baker. One hand held the sweet crumbly biscuit to her mouth whilst the other one was cupped by her chin; she was under strict

instructions not to drop a single crumb, on pain of death. Annag held hers over her tea so that any stray bits fell in there. She had lowered herself on to the pillowcases with a sigh. Not an ideal cushion Dorothy supposed, but better than nothing, and Annag didn't seem to mind. She took a swig of her tea and sighed.

"Oh I was needing that."

Dorothy smiled.

"And to think – no dinner to be made. Oh!" Annag gave a light laugh. "I'm even getting a social call this evening, from my friend Liz."

"Oh?" Dorothy reached for her tea but could feel Annag looking at her. She felt her cheeks grow warm as she lifted the cup to her lips and blew little camel coloured waves. She would never live that one down. Thinking Liz was some sort of fancy woman. The odd thing was that Dorothy still couldn't be completely sure she wasn't – all things considered. Especially after what her mother had said to Mrs Menzies. But if anything, it only made Dorothy more curious.

"Tell me more about Liz."

Annag shrugged, "oh I thought you already knew all there was to know."

Dorothy didn't dignify that with a response. "Has she been to Paris?"

"Yes, I think so," Annag paused. "But don't go asking her about the war and all that sort of thing."

Dorothy frowned. "As if I would." For any favour. She'd never be any the wiser at this rate.

"It's not as if it was some jolly you know."

"I know." She rolled her eyes, but could see that Annag was serious. Paris would have to wait. "Does she have any brothers or sisters?"

"Not really."

She could only raise an eyebrow, seen as she'd just shoved the last of her shortbread into her mouth. What kind of answer was that though; you either did or you didn't. Dorothy didn't. She was an only child. It was something she felt set her apart from other folk. Her mum had never wanted any more. Dorothy had heard her say this many times, over the course of many years – oh no, well the whole business is just shocking really, I mean Dorothy very nearly killed me. And Dorothy had wondered – what did I do exactly? They were always telling her how clumsy she was, but even in there? It was an odd thing to imagine.

She looked at Annag again, who was obviously made of sterner stuff having had five children already, though she was younger than Dorothy's mum. Maybe Annag just liked children more. That was probably the case, though even she complained about hers, all the time really, and had said to Dorothy in so many words that having a lot of young children wasn't all that advisable. What Dorothy couldn't quite understand though was how her mum just seemed to decide and then that was that, whereas Annag's just kept coming.

Dorothy checked her face for crumbs and licked the sugar from her lips. "What do you mean not really?"

"Well," Annag tipped her head back so it rested against the wall. "She does have a sister but she lives in Canada now, and her brother died when we were wee."

"Oh." So not an only child at all then; as far as Dorothy was concerned even siblings who were dead or in the colonies counted. She wasn't sure why the fact of Liz's siblings should come as a disappointment. "I suppose I might quite like a sister in Canada."

"Only if they were in Canada?" Annag looked amused.

"Well, it would be nice to have someone to write to..." It might even be better to keep them at a safe distance like that, because although it would liven things up to have lots of sisters it wasn't as if you got to choose them. Look at the Mitfords; sisters could turn out to be Nazis, or put you in their novels, or be much prettier than you.

After their tea they headed downstairs again, then round to the foyer so Annag could talk to Alec the porter. Dorothy waited for her, edging towards Mina's desk, where there was no sign of Mina but her *Vogue* was visibly splayed open – face down – on the seat. She tilted her head to one side, trying to read what was on the cover: Summer Travel. Where to go – what to wear. The lady in the picture had a lovely red coat on. Off to France, or Switzerland maybe. If Dorothy was quick she could probably manage a peek inside – where to go? What to wear? But she knew fine well she wasn't going anywhere, and she knew better than to touch Mina's things, especially her magazines. She left the lady in the red coat lying where she was and sidled up to Alec and Annag.

"Aye, I was meaning to say when I noticed it the other day but I think I'd forgotten again by the time I got to the bottom of the stairs," Annag was laughing. "Anyway, I better be off."

"Right you are." Alec nodded, and winked at Dorothy as she approached.

"How's Effie?" she asked. She was quite friendly with his youngest daughter, though she was a year younger than Dorothy. "I haven't seen her in ages." A year younger but already a year out of school. Dorothy was still a bit jealous of her job in the shoe shop.

"Are you not going to the Gaelic choir anymore?" he asked.

"Me?" Dorothy felt her eyebrows rise as she looked at him. "Oh yes, but..."

Annag was turning to leave.

"I'll put that in the repair book just now before I forget," Alec said.

"Thanks for that. Let's go then Dorothy."

"Cheerio now girls."

"Come on Dot, before Mr Devine accuses us of cluttering up his foyer."

They were standing just a few yards from the front door – Dorothy could see right out it and across to the station. Still, off they went, down the back stairs to the basement and out the

tradesman's entrance by the side of the Black Lynn. There was always a damp fusty smell and the door didn't half stick. Sometimes Dorothy walked straight out of the front door instead, past the glass covered terrace. She knew she wasn't supposed to do that but she liked the idea that one of the tourists walking past might take her for a guest – coming out of her hotel and going to the station to meet someone off the train. They didn't give her a proper uniform, she just wore a skirt and blouse, and lots of people just wore a skirt and blouse these days. She had a wee pinny, which she had to use her own coupons for, but she usually plunked that somewhere on her way out. It had good pockets, which was a novelty for Dorothy seen as her mother didn't approve of pockets in general. It was nice though, having somewhere for your hands so you didn't have to account for them all the time.

As she walked along the street with Annag she kept reaching down, forgetting she'd taken the thing off, then having to just clasp her hands a bit awkwardly in front of her.

"It's odd," she said, "about Effie and the Gaelic choir."

"What about it?" Annag squinted into the sun as the breeze blew her hair away from her face.

"Alec said it as if I was the one that wasn't there, but it's Effie that hasn't been."

"Well..." She could tell that Annag wasn't really listening. Already thinking about the next thing. The rest of her day. Her evening with Liz.

"It's odd is all." She noticed her arms had dropped to her sides again and were swinging in an ungainly fashion.

"It's odd that you're so quick to pick up on it. Taking an interest in other folks' business." Annag looked away.

Dorothy frowned. "But it's not as if I stuck my neb in – I didn't let on at all, did I? I was only wondering..." she slowed her step, suddenly aware that she'd almost walked Annag all

the way home – again – without even meaning to. She came to a stop though they were still a few doors down. “Socrates said ‘wonder is the beginning of wisdom.’”

“Did he now?” Annag smiled. “Well I can’t see Socrates minding who goes to Gaelic choir.” She turned to carry on up Argyll Street. “See you in the morning Dot.”

Dorothy turned back, knowing fine that she should probably be heading home too – that there would be potatoes to peel or a pudding to mix – but she crossed over to the seafront anyway. Stopping to look at the hills over on Mull – two ample peaks – while the holidaymakers passed along the prom behind her. Alright for some; who knew when she would ever get such a thing as a holiday. Working at the hotel had been part of the deal though. If she was to be allowed to stay on at school then she had to earn her own digs money. So she got up early in the morning and helped with breakfasts at the hotel before school. It had almost been enough to put her off the whole idea – all this getting up at five o’clock. She hadn’t even been that bothered about school in the first place, but Mr Donaldson had come to the house and spoken to her parents and they’d looked at her a bit differently after that, which could only be a good thing. This was where brains got you then, a silent sort of prestige. Mind you Mr Donaldson’s ideas of where her brains might get her were none too appealing – a teacher, a clerk of some description. Oh well, at least she wouldn’t have to get up at five in the morning or clean other people’s muck out of toilets. She could wear tailored dresses and clipping high-heeled shoes. And Liz’s dad had been a teacher so that gave it some charm, even if he had been called Sooty. Mind you, science wasn’t really one of Dorothy’s strong points. Liz was a nurse; was that better or worse than being a teacher? She wasn’t sure. She would need to ask her mum, who knew about where these things put you in the grand scheme of it. She wouldn’t mind wearing a nice uniform – which you didn’t see so much of these days – but there was all sorts of silly headgear for

nurses. It seemed a shame, thinking about Liz's nice blonde hair stuck under some sort of wimple day in day out.

She moved off again, walking behind a well-dressed couple. She looked at the woman's small round shoulders, dainty in a mauve cinched-waist coat with pleated skirt. Dorothy longed for a cinched-waist coat with a pleated skirt, though she knew that her waist wouldn't look as neat as this woman's. She liked seeing the tourists in the latest fashions – but she wished she didn't get quite such a showing up when she had to walk in amongst them. And even the fanciest shop in the town only displayed tweed suits and headscarves and wellington boots. Not exactly thrilling but then that was what the Mitford mum, Lady Redesdale's wardrobe consisted of – almost exclusively. Dorothy had seen it with her own eyes when she'd snuck into their room last time. It was a bit disappointing seen as she was a peeress, but she was also the mum, and it was normal for mums to wear tweed suits. The thought of her own mother in a frilled apron, shouting across the rising steam – where on earth have you been – made Dorothy quicken her pace. As she passed the station clock it told her that she should really probably run. But it also told her that the last passenger train would be arriving any minute, and if she was going to have to run anyway, another minute wouldn't exactly hurt. She liked waiting in the station for the engine to appear round the corner and come thundering towards her all heaving and spurting out thick streams of steam until she could feel the platform shake. There was something very dramatic about it, and thinking that the train had come from the city, and would return to the city, and she envied it its easy cosmopolitan lifestyle. The station managed to muster quite an exciting air about it. It was the biggest station for miles and miles. Quite pretty really, although the cafeteria tended to attract the wrong sorts and wouldn't really do for the likes of Laura Jesson and Dr Alec Harvey. But sometimes when she stood there, and the train came roaring in, and there was steam everywhere so you couldn't really be sure who anyone was – apart from Jimmy and his

strange gait that you couldn't miss, lumbering through even the densest fog – it almost felt as if she might be somewhere else entirely. Then the haze cleared and the pier, the bay, the hotel, Boots, Kennedy's tearoom – were all there, exactly as she'd left them.

She stood waiting, with the feeling of something being wound tighter and tighter inside her, and another feeling, somewhere in the background, like the nagging gnaw of guilt. The glass roof had caught the sun and kept it. It was May now. Summer. The Mitfords would be here soon – surely – and maybe this time, he would come too.

Excellent; there was still a half full bottle of whisky tucked in the bottom corner of the pantry. Well if it hadn't been required for either the peace or the bomb of 45' then it probably never would be. Liz put it in her bag, trying to avoid any clinking sounds or the sloshing of liquid. She might have just asked her mother, but she didn't feel like having a conversation about why exactly she was taking to the drink. The evening seemed to demand it though. It was like the whisky, glowing amber, and thick with the feeling of a time and space without clear edges. The night unbound. It was an embarrassingly novel feeling for a woman of her age. As she walked into the cool but not cold evening air she thought – this is only temporary. It was always only temporary. But at least this time nobody had to die first. So it wasn't quite like the last time, because surely millions of men didn't need to die just for women to be able to have things a bit better. Surely there were easier ways.

She walked down and along the road, with the day already over the hill, leaving only a fresh earthy smell and swarms of blasted midges. Then as she curved round into the town centre, thin warm fingers of light reached past tree trunks and pounced repeatedly at her, picking out the loose thread of her hemline, playing around her ankles, and then suddenly coming up close, sweeping the whole front of her, as she neared the bay and it flowed golden over every roof. On this side of town it stretched out across the streets and pulled people back with it, like the tide; so that they found themselves pressed up against windows or drawn from their very homes, out from the hotels, to walk or just stand and stare on the prom as the sun lowered itself onto the mounds of Mull. Liz moved among them, and the orange and red and something verging on purple. All the colours of an open flame, tearing through the sky and catching on the water – but this time nobody had to die. Just molecules scattering photons. Yet devastating in its own sort of way; she wished that Ramsay might— no...she didn't wish at all, she had two eyes of her own. If anything maybe she wished that Annag could see it

too. But she would take it to her now – it was following her up Annag’s street. She would take what she could up the dark stone staircase where her step rang hollow and the walls felt slick. Into the small rooms with their carnival air of endless washing strung up in intricate arrangements. She’d sat the other day under a napkin bunting with little Isobel on her knee, and it wasn’t until she was about to leave that she learned of an earlier agreement, where promises to be good and to be quiet meant she was allowed to stay in the room and could touch Liz’s hair if she asked nicely. Liz felt that the girl had been pretty badly cheated when she offered her thin blonde waves to be stroked by the wee hand. The child was extravagantly gentle and surprisingly satisfied.

She was glad the children were in bed though. There was something about little eyes and mouths that demanded too much. You had to either simplify or exaggerate yourself. They required too many lies – Auntie Liz works in a big hospital making people feel all better again; yet they themselves only told the harshest truths, asked the boldest questions – why don’t you have any children? At least you knew where you were with the crying babies: hell. But Annag had already packed them all off to bed, so there didn’t seem any reason not to immediately pour themselves a drink and settle down on the settee. She and Annag positioned themselves so they were both holding their faces up to the broad strip of sunlight that was currently thrown across the back wall. They watched this glowing rectangle, with the automatic single-mindedness of cinemagoers; like it might suddenly show them a newsreel or a cartoon, or something other than the day’s dying fall. Annag leaned back so she was deep into the corner, where a spring had apparently gone, but she claimed to like the spot the better for it. She propped her ankles on a stool and raised her glass.

“Here’s to you, and all who sail in you.”

Liz lifted hers, smelling, before it even passed her lips, the burning smokiness particular to that liquid. Amazing what they could do with water really – what trials by fire did they put it through before they could call it life?

“Jesus.” She coughed. “It’s been a while.”

Annag raised an eyebrow, “they not have whisky in the big smoke?”

“Plenty,” Liz poured a drop more water into her glass – they called that drowning it. Funny how she preferred drowning; it seemed to taste sweeter. “We usually just stick to champagne though.”

“Aye,” Annag smiled, “that’ll be right.” She lifted her legs, one at a time, to draw small circles with her ankle. Round and round, pointing her lisle stockinged toes, until the bones clicked. “What does that mean?” She looked at Liz.

Liz shrugged. “I don’t really know that it means anything.”

“Well, that’s great that is. Three years that diploma took you was it?”

She smiled. “Nothing to be alarmed about – it’s just...mechanics.”

“Mechanics she says; well maybe I’d be better getting myself down to the garage.”

Liz raised an eyebrow, tilting her head towards her friend. “You wanting old Shuggy to have a root around under your bonnet?”

“Oh here...” Annag laughed. “If I’m needing oiling it’s only because I’m up and down five flights of stairs however many times a day.”

“Busy at the hotel is it?”

“Och, no more than usual really – but they were all up to high doh because the Mitfords finally arrived.”

“Oh, which ones?”

“Just the usual; the mother and the Hitler-lover.”

Liz held her hand up to her forehead, “oh don’t remind me.”

“What?”

“That’s probably what the doctor’s calling us at the hospital.” She took another mouthful of her drink, winced slightly, and let the expression stay a while on her face as she thought of how her mother had casually slung her in the same boat as Hitler, just for being a vegetarian. And she wasn’t even a vegetarian, it was only that she found it more and more difficult to face the realities of meat. Flesh and blood. Bones. .

“Eh?” Annag was laughing.

“That bloody mother of mine, she never misses an opportunity to give me a showing up. And she seems to almost take a perverse sort of pleasure in defying the doctor. You should have seen her face when he asked if she wanted me to stay in the room.”

“She didn’t want you to?”

“No, she did not Annag. I think we can safely say that. Though I grassed her up first chance I got anyway. And she hadn’t told me the half of what the doctor had told her – not to be doing this, definitely not to be doing that. Maybe that’s why she doesn’t want me up at the hospital helping out.”

“So you’ll actually be working on the people of Oban? Lucky us.”

“Hardly.” A disgraced refugee from the Western? It was probably against the rules – but then what did the West Highland Hospital have to do with the Western Infirmary? They were further estranged than their names suggested. For now at least.

Annag wasn’t fussy though. “I’d love to have you operate on me.”

“Would you? Nice of you to say so.”

“Don’t mention it.” Annag winked.

“I’m sure that would be my mum’s nightmare. I don’t think she thinks I’m a bad nurse – well, no she does think I’m a bad nurse because she actually said exactly that when I first arrived,” she watched the smile of amusement spread across Annag’s lips. “I think she knows

I'm capable though. That's probably the main problem. She wouldn't want me lording it over her in any way."

"So she accused you of being like Hitler? Does she think you're wanting to bump her off?"

"I mean, I doubt she thinks I'm actually capable of murder, mass or domestic, she's just a bit funny about things like that."

Annag held out a hand that said – well, what can you do. It wasn't as if you could choose your family, you just had to get on with it. Or failing that there was Canada. Cathy seemed to like it there, though of course she missed Liz and her mum. Of course? Neither of them had seen Canada coming.

"Anyway," Liz carried on, "it worked out all right in the end. Dr Beaton didn't seem to hold the slur against me. It's not as if we were actual Mitfords putting framed pictures of the Fuhrer on the bedside table and that." She raised an eyebrow at Annag. "Do you have to polish them?"

"Oh aye a good spit polish. Plenty of spit – hold the polish."

They laughed. Should they be laughing really? Liz had laughed at worse, but things that were excusable when you were covered in other people's blood and excrement were perhaps not, once it was all over and you got to put your feet up. Because for others it would never be over, which was a hell of a thought. Hell.

"I've never actually seen anything of the sort," said Annag. "I don't take much to do with them mind you. I just keep out the way and try to keep Dorothy under control... I don't think it can be right the way she goes so wild about them."

"Och, I suppose she's dazzled by the glamour and eccentrics." Liz stretched an arm behind her head and rested against it. "Some of them are awful though."

“Well, there’s one of them married to Mosley, and there he was the other day causing a ruckus down in London. Him and his black shirts, and the wife too. It was in the papers last weekend.”

Liz hadn’t seen the papers last weekend. The papers were solid things, names and dates in black and white, whereas last weekend was not a solid thing at all. So of course they had been playing up when she wasn’t looking, these snakes. These buffoons in black – though it was always a flattering colour even for men less handsome than Mosley. She could picture the grainy photograph of him with his chest thrust out, and Diana’s hair catching the light, her wide eyes; but she couldn’t picture the others. The followers. She didn’t want to believe there was such a thing. But if there was, as the papers said, who on earth were they? What did these people look like who could go along with it all – after everything. There was no excuse you see. They were choosing it. They had sat in the cinema and watched the reports and still they chose it, so she had no words for them. And no eyes. No stomach for it either, just the sick feeling, rising again. She took a large gulp of whisky. Annag was looking at her. Her other arm, behind her head, had gone numb. She wondered how long she’d been sat there not saying anything. It was difficult to tell sometimes.

“Sorry,” she said, catching Annag’s eye.

“That’s all right.” Something in Annag’s voice was too warm. It made Liz feel too soft.

“Did you say something else?”

“No, nothing.” Annag smiled; it made Liz feel even more self-conscious, though it was just Annag’s plain old smile. There was nothing wrong with Annag.

She smiled back. “I haven’t done that for ages.” But Annag could only take her word for that. When she’d first come back Liz was forever taking funny turns. It was as if her whole body froze and was nothing to do with her. It had been a worry, what if she did it at work – but it was only at work that she never did that.

“So what was it...what...” Liz reached a hand out, as if to grab the loose thread, something about the papers, “the papers.”

“We can talk about something else.”

“No, it’s fine. What were the papers saying?”

“Oh just about the march Mosley had organised for May Day.”

May Day Lizzie... or had you forgotten again, well here’s a punch in the heart as a wee reminder.

“A shambles by all accounts.” Annag shook her head.

“Good. It’s when they start getting efficient that we need to worry.”

“Yes.” She gave a slight laugh. “Do you think they should have let him out though?”

“Who Mosley?”

“Aye.”

“Och, I suppose so, if he hasn’t actually broken the law. You don’t want to go making martyrs of those sorts, it only gives them ideas.” Liz tried to shift herself into a more upright position but the state of the couch made it tricky.

“It’s odd though isn’t it, thinking about him coming here, what with his in-laws being over on Inch Kenneth. Jimmy says if he saw Mosley at the station he would leave him to bloody well carry his own bags.” Annag brought her chin down in a firm nod of a full stop. She obviously approved. It would be her and Jimmy against Diana and Mosley. So was that part of the arrangement when you married someone? Liz couldn’t help thinking Jimmy was being rather restrained in his planned protest. And even if he did take nothing to do with the cases he would probably still be lumbered with the washing chest at some point. Sheets on their way to London that had suffered under the man himself? Maybe even tainted from some bizarre strain of fascist intercourse. Fascists, for all she knew, might have intercourse like anyone else – but she doubted it. She would put money on it involving props, brutality, other

orifices. They were all theatricals those sorts. And what about communists? Did they make love equally? Collectively? She laughed to herself.

“What are you smiling at?” Annag asked.

“Oh just considering the permutations of sexual intercourse.”

Annag choked on her whisky laughing. “What! That’s a hell of a subject.”

“Well....” she shrugged. “Sorry.” But then curious, “you don’t think about it?”

“God no. I’m never opening my legs again, I’d never be out the family way. I’m telling you... I only have to pass Jimmy’s trousers hanging in the hall.”

Liz laughed.

“And to think they said, after he’d been in the camp that he couldn’t have any more – we had two that year!”

Liz was already laughing so much that she couldn’t make it stop. Not even at the mention of that word. It just made her eyes widen at herself and she covered her mouth with her hand.

“I’m glad you find it so amusing!” But Annag was smiling, and Liz thought – she is glad, how nice of her; she’s the better friend.

“I’m sorry,” she took a deep breath. “I am, on behalf of the profession. That’s what you get for trusting these medical men.”

“Tell me about it. I’d have been better tying a knot in it.”

“I suppose it’s not Jimmy’s fault—”

“Are you kidding, he was delighted with himself! Saw it as one in the eye for the Nazis.”

Liz shrugged, “....one for each eye to be fair.”

“Well, one more I could have dealt with he was that pleased. But honest to god...”

“So what happened with Thomas? Were you using anything?”

“Well,” Annag made a face, then looked over her shoulder though there was only the blank wall behind her. “You know, just the usual. We try and be careful.”

“What sort of usual? Have you considered a cap?”

“Christ.”

“Have you tried it?”

“No.”

“Sheaths?”

“Sheaths! For any favour!” Annag was beginning to blush. “You medical sorts – really.”

But what was the point in blushing; it was hardly a secret that she and Jimmy had had relations.

“What did you use then?”

“Just – you know – well,” she shook her head as if to say: this has nothing to do with me by the way. “Jimmy calls it getting off at Haymarket.”

“Haymarket?” Liz furrowed her brow as Annag started to laugh.

“Don’t tell me I need to spell it out to the expert over there. Have you never heard of anyone taking the pot off the cooker before it’s boiled?”

“Oh that!”

“Finally!”

They both laughed.

“I get you now. Trains on the brain your husband eh. You might’ve gone a bit more local though. Something from the Ballachulish line?”

“Oh because that’s a word you want to hear in the bedroom!”

“Hah!” Liz sighed, wiping the sides of her watery eyes, then shook her head. “Not very scientific mind you. I mean, it hasn’t really worked out very well for you has it?”

“Well, I don’t know, I might have had ten by now otherwise.” She looked up at the ceiling and Liz followed her eyes to a damp patch the shape of Spain.

She pressed her lips together, hoping there wasn't much lipstick left on them. Annag had admired it when she arrived, and apologised for looking like a skivvy. Liz couldn't help feeling it would somehow be easier to speak plainly without the lipstick on.

"There's plenty of other methods you might try."

Annag waved her hand. "Och, I wouldn't know anything about that."

"I've got a book I could lend you."

"And what's that for – throwing at Jimmy when he starts getting ideas?" She shrugged, then turned her whole head towards the window.

"It might...well, it might give you an idea of something to try."

"Och I don't know. Where would you even get hold of the things?"

It was a good question. In Oban? Liz had no idea either. When she didn't say anything Annag turned back and tilted her head towards her – so you see my situation.

"Leave it with me," Liz said.

"Oh god, I'm not sure I like the sound of that."

"No, no," Liz sat up and reached for the bottle, "I can be discreet."

"Aye?"

"Of course. I'm all tact."

Annag stiffened, "well..." she avoided Liz's eye, "anyway," on a lighter note – only a little bit forced, "you save your tact for your own battles. You'll need it when you see Betty if that's you decided to put a face on it and pretend everything's hunky-dory."

Liz tutted. "Here, give me your glass over."

Annag stretched her arm out. "You haven't bumped into her then?"

"Och...I haven't really had a chance to get out much, what with mum..."

"You mean you haven't called on them?"

"I might." Liz picked up the bottle.

“What? I was only joking.”

Liz paused, wrapping her two hands around the glass neck. “If I went to see her it would at least get it out the way....and there wouldn’t be everyone looking, like if we met down the town.”

“Hmm,” Annag held her head back and exhaled loudly. “I suppose...”

Liz ran a fingertip around the bottle’s metal cap, her skin catching on the sharp edges where the seal had broken. “Who is it that’s got the farm now anyway?”

“No one.”

“What do you mean? I’m sure I saw a light when I was up there the other night.”

Annag’s eyes widened. “No, it’s sitting empty. What were you doing up there?”

“Nothing.” She looked away. “I told you before it’s nothing to me.”

“You’re full of it, so you are. It’s a bloody outrage. When I think of the brass neck – of Betty Henderson, of all people.”

“Och away with ye.” She took the lid off the bottle and poured them out another finger each. “Here, one for the road.”

“It just doesn’t sit right with me.”

“Put more water in it then.”

“You know that’s not what I mean.”

The house was already dark when she got home. She didn’t bother turning any of the lights on – not wanting to disturb the night. Its blue haze had surrounded her on the walk back, and flowed through the place from the big sitting room window where the curtains hadn’t been drawn. She left those too. Walked slowly along the hall. She pushed her bedroom window wide open to the trees outside, keeping her eyes on them as she stripped down to her underwear. She badly wanted a cigarette. That was the whisky making her want it, making

her go silly over the shadowy trees that stretched up tall and benign and whispering comforting things. She leaned her bare arms out against the night air – pale skin catching the moon. Until she was cold.

There were lots of things about living in a small town that struck her as odd after being in the city. Some of them she quite liked. The total disregard of any sort of home security for instance, she took, rightly or wrongly, as a small victory over the corrupting forces of capitalism. Hardly anyone locked their front door, and on days as hot as this – which of course wasn't hellish often – they might even leave it gaping open whilst they went about their business. This was all very well but made it a bit awkward for callers. Liz was halfway through the hall and her third tentative – hello – before she detected any sign of life in the smart villa on Rockfield road. She might be away with the family silver. She knew for a fact that Betty had such things. The thought made her want to turn around and go, but it would be worse to be caught thus, and there had been a sound – perhaps just the wind? There wasn't a breath of it though; her walk up the hill had left her exceedingly warm underneath her pale blue dress with its mandarin style collar. She could feel a single drop of sweat making its way down the space between her breasts.

“It's you?” Sandy leapt from his chair with an awkward movement – a half backing away, half stagger – chair legs scraping along the living room's parquet floor.

She was still in the hall but had stepped right into view, framed by the doorway. She wanted to put a hand out to brace herself against it, but she felt like touching it would be taking some sort of liberty. She had no right to. She had no right to be there at all.

“Hello Sandy.” Her voice sounded calmer than she'd expected. She pressed her palms against the skirt of her dress.

He took another step back so he was partially illuminated in the brightness of the sun. It left one half of him in shadow whilst the other side shone from the waist up, starched white shirt to the tips of his blonde hair. And though she could see the whole of his face, it made it look like he was staring at her from a single blue eye, that seemed to pulse bigger, then smaller. She realised it was his head moving ever so slightly backwards and forwards with each heavy breath. It had a hypnotic quality, that pulsing eye of his.

“Hello Elizabeth.” He paused, then gave a breathy burst of laughter. “Fancy seeing you here?”

She noted his suit jacket, lying crumpled on the settee, and the glass on the mantelpiece. He took a step forward then stopped, feet first, the rest of the body hanging back a fraction, sending a ripple through the whole of his huge frame. “Well, in you come.” He said the words too loudly, with a mock brightness that made them hard. “Welcome to my humble seat.” He thrust an arm out and gestured around the room. It drew her eye to the window.

She moved instinctively towards it. “What a nice view you have.” The whole bay. All the islands spread out and the sea sliding between them in silvery sheets.

“Yes.” He had an amused snarl that she couldn’t really blame him for – were they really going to talk about the view? But why the hell wasn’t he at work?

There were two couches and several other chairs in the room, yet they stood there, in the middle of it, not quite facing each other. As she turned she caught herself in the mirror – the blue dress with the mandarin style collar. There was something clinical about it. Just a variation on her uniform, but with hair hanging down in icy waves. She looked back at his, casually combed and parted. Shining. They had always been a ridiculous pair, absurdly fair – like something from a fairy story. His broad body looked agitated in its office attire. He seemed to be shifting his weight from one foot to the other, or from the balls of his feet to the

heels; whatever it was it caused a slight creaking of the parquet floor and the occasional flutter of a trouser leg.

“Quite a change from the farm—”

“We don’t talk about the farm.” His eyes were fixed on her, so she focused on breathing from her diaphragm, not wanting to think of her chest visibly heaving.

“We?”

He shrugged.

“The royal we?”

“Well I don’t mean you and me.”

“No.” She held his eye. “I’m sorry to appear like this.”

“I thought you might be sorry for disappearing.”

“I’m sorry for that too.”

“Well which is it?”

“Both.”

“Oh, what an awful sorry state of affairs,” he gave another harsh burst of laughter. But this time it seemed to empty him out so that his upper body crumpled forward.

She tried to gauge just exactly how drunk he was; it was hard to guess if it would make things easier or not, but it certainly didn’t help the raw feeling in her chest. It wasn’t yet twelve.

“Maybe this isn’t a good time – is Betty—”

“Betty isn’t here,” he moved towards her. “It’s just me, and...”

There was another pause, it seemed to swell out between them. It seemed to make the parquet floor creak with the weight of it. She could feel her skin growing warm all over her now; the back of her neck, the spot where her brassiere fastened, the band of her knickers.

“I want to ask you something Elizabeth.” She could see the sweat glistening on his temple, and on the other side a lock of hair threatened to drop right over his eye. But he didn’t lift a finger.

“Yes.” She said it very matter of fact. Still he didn’t move, not even a hand to his own forehead. She had forgotten this technique. This forced attentiveness that so often appeared to have the same hallmarks as agony. Why did he do it to himself? As if he thought that if he moved he might startle her, break whatever momentum he had built up. “Yes,” she said again, “ask me anything you want.” What was the worst he could throw at her; it wasn’t as if he could propose again. She could almost have been amused by that thought, but not whilst he was moving towards her with his jaw clenched in a wincing expression that made her suddenly think – I don’t know this person at all. Which made it even stranger when he took hold of her – his arms sliding up to her elbows – and pressed his forehead against hers. She felt the dampness of it, the hardness of skin covered bone. The pulse throbbing in his temple. And his eyes still staring, awkwardly too close now to hers, obscuring everything, but still he appeared to be looking for something. Looking right inside her head, for something that might be tucked in a socket or hiding behind a retina. She had forgotten how it felt to be pressed against someone as tall and broadly-built as he was. It made a strange jolt run through her and a flush roar across her face. She was almost glad of the knock she got from his whisky breath as he spoke:

“Were you disappointed that I didn’t get killed?”

“No.” She was too close to do anything but whisper it, her eyes widening. Watering. Barely the room to blink. “No, of course I wasn’t.”

He took a deep breath and lowered his lids completely.

“I was.” He dropped his arms and lifted his head. Walked back to the table where the bottle was waiting for him.

“That’s ridiculous.” She followed him and touched his elbow as he went to pour, but he shrugged her off.

“Yes, you’re quite right,” he turned and raised his glass, “I’m ridiculous.” He drained it off in one gulp. “Sorry, did you want one?” He tilted the empty glass towards her. It was tempting.

“No thank you.”

“Yes, good idea, one of us should stay sober. We don’t want to go forgetting ourselves.” He reached a hand towards her waist but she caught it with both of hers and squeezed it.

“That’s not going to help anything.”

“It might do.”

“What if Betty were to walk in?”

“Oh,” he rolled his head back, “screw Betty.” She tried to keep her face blank as he perched himself on the edge of the table. “Now there’s an idea – would you rather it was the three of us? Like something out of bloody Bloomsbury?”

She tutted. That was a bit rich really, considering it was him that had made the triangle. He had done that to them.

“I should warn you,” he was saying, “she’s not much fun in that department.”

“Sandy.”

He paused and reached a hand out to steady himself on the table. “No, you’re right, that wasn’t very gentlemanly was it.” He had turned pale. She noticed the dark smudges on the skin below his eyes.

“I think you should have a lie down.”

“So now you do want to get me in to bed,” he stood up again and laughed, “I can’t keep up.” He walked past her and out of the room. She stood perfectly still for a moment, and tried to breathe normally. She looked around at the furniture in the room – the Persian rug and the

huge aspidistras. She looked for any sign of the old farmhouse living room, but found none. Then she heard his laughter coming from the hall and went out to find him clinging to the bottom of the banister.

“Funny thing,” he said, without looking up at her, “I seem to have forgotten how to do stairs.”

Without saying a word she ducked under his outstretched arm so he had the banister on one side and her on the other. She push-pulled him up the stairs with his arm slung over her shoulder, both of hers around his torso, whilst he mumbled, “Ah Elizabeth...Elizabeth. I know it isn't really you.”

“It is me,” she said, “which one's your bedroom?”

He made for a door on their left and she nudged it open with her foot.

“I'm all right really,” he said. “You don't have to carry me.”

She loosened her grip and he took the couple of steps needed to land on the bed.

“That's better.” He sighed, lying down and closing his eyes.

“What a state to be in at this time of day,” she sat next to him on the edge of the bed. “I don't suppose you've got any coffee I could make you?”

“Which is it I've to do, sleeping or awake?” He held his hands up in the air and she couldn't help laughing.

“You're right – I need to get my prescriptions straight.”

“I thought you were supposed to be a nurse.”

“Well drunkenness alone isn't really a medical matter.”

“Tell that to my doctor please.”

“Oh Sandy, is it really that bad?” She had the urge to stroke his hair, which had finally fallen right over his eye.

He shook his head as if refusing to hear that bit. "I'm all right really." He turned back to look at her, opening his eyes – wide – as if he wasn't entirely expecting to see her there.

"Aren't you joining me?" He propped himself up on one elbow.

"No...you know I can't."

"That's right Elizabeth." His look hardened again. "You don't do that sort of thing." He gave a long low laugh. "Not much!" He laughed again and mumbled something, of which she could only make out the word nurses, and then 'report for duty fanny first'.

She raised an eyebrow.

"Sorry, sorry...of course...of course your lot came quite recommended." He rubbed his other hand across his mouth, pulling the skin above his top lip where it was wet, keeping his eyes on hers – suddenly seeming quite lucid when he said: "less likely to get the clap than with the French tarts."

She should be offended by that. Why wasn't she offended? Was it because she felt she owed him one – and that he happened to have a point.

"You'd better take that back," she kept her expression neutral, "the French tarts are nothing if not consummate professionals."

He stared at her a moment, then smiled, a real smile, the first since she'd arrived. His blue eyes creasing around the edges, the corners of his mouth sliding up the valleys below each cheekbone; but the sweat on his face made him look young and pink and she all of a sudden wanted to cry, because she thought – maybe I do know this person after all.

He must have somehow noticed, or guessed, or planned it all along because he leaned forward then, and kissed her. His mouth was hard and wet and tasted overwhelmingly of alcohol. She felt his fingers pressing into the back of her head, but she pulled away then.

"Ramsay, we can't." Christ – had she just called him Ramsay?

He didn't appear to notice. He had collapsed back onto the bed and shut his eyes. "Yes. You should go."

She stood up.

"You shouldn't be here."

"I know, I'm sorry."

"You should go."

She turned to leave, but could still hear him mumbling as she went down the stairs.

"I didn't ask you to come."

She closed the door behind her and turned back down the hill. If she took the shortcut through the woods then nobody would see her, and it wouldn't matter whether she cried or not; so she turned instead and walked slowly and deliberately right down George Street, as if to prove something. Straight through the town, all the way to its southern parameters. The hills of Soroba, and the hayfields at Glenshellach. She kept walking until she found a tree big enough to sit under. In the shade now. Hiding. Proving, if anything, that she was back to where she started. But at least the grass was looking lovely, iridescent, the way the green still came through the golden top of it. If there was a breeze it would have been even better. Then she could watch it move in glowing waves – be lulled by soft sounds. Anything to distract. But there was no wind, only the sun, doing its best Rumpelstiltskin act. Why were all fairy stories so troubling in the end? There was always so much bargaining – bargains made with bodies and in blood. She leaned back against the tree and stretched an arm up the length of it, catching a whiff of herself. Or more accurately, of him. Initially she hadn't been able to smell anything off him other than a general maleness; aftershave, tobacco, and alcohol. His sweat, however, was more specifically familiar. It had struck her when he lifted his armpit to her shoulder. Now he had left his mark; she turned and bent her nose towards

the dampened patch of blue. It was funny how smells reminded you more than anything, and how you couldn't bear some and yet others... Others... She wished she knew more about how it all worked. The chemistry. Reactions. She had some ideas.

She pressed a relatively cool palm against a cheek that was still burning. She could still feel his hand on the back of her head. She'd had both her arms round him at one point, around the girth of him, and still she wondered if it had actually happened. Had she really been there – I know it's not really you, he'd said. And maybe he was right. She wasn't there at all. It was so unusually still and dazzling that the scene before her looked like a painting – some Constable or other – until she noticed a single figure making its way through the middle. That was unusual too though because most people knew not to walk through fields like that at this time of year. They were likely to get the sharp end of the farmer's tongue. But this person didn't care, or wasn't concentrating, or for some reason kept havoring now and then and holding their hand up to their face. Her face. It looked like a her. And then like nothing, because she had suddenly disappeared.

“There we go.” Liz tried to make her voice sound light, easy – as if the woman hadn’t seen her struggling all the way up the hall. Peking, after the stairs. Even now she was free of her load, having got the girl onto a chair, she could feel the sweat coating her. But she tried to keep her face clear – furrow free – because the woman, the girl’s mother, was already up to high doh about how Liz had managed all the way from Hayfields. Never mind the fact that her daughter was slumped and silent on the chair in front of them. The mother in her panic had grabbed one of the dining chairs and brought it into the middle of the room, so the way the girl was seated, with the two of them staring down at her, it was as if they were about to start some sort of interrogation. The girl wasn’t giving hellish much away. Not much of a talker at least, though Liz of course had other ways of knowing.

“Could you get her some water,” Liz looked at the girl again, “and a sweet tea.” She heard the woman scurrying off down the hall as she bent forward to examine the flushed face. Puffed and relentlessly pink, with swirls of fine hair plastered like cornicing on each temple. Liz raised her hand, hesitated – just slightly too long – then pressed the back of it against the girl’s forehead; well, it wasn’t as if what ailed her was contagious. Still... The coolness of the dark flat was working its way down Liz’s damp back, and she gave a shudder – worse yet, she could still feel where the tips of Sandy’s fingers had pressed through the mass of her hair. No, it wasn’t the poor girl she had to fear. She held her hand steady for a moment; noting the connection of hard knuckles against skull, as well as the permeating warmth. The salt residue. The girl shut her already downcast eyes and sighed hot air onto the inside of Liz’s arm. Liz kneeled down, feeling the thinness of the dark green carpet. Between the colour of it, and the coolness of the room, she had almost expected it to be damp. Like moss. But it was hard and dry against her bare knees as she took the girl’s wrist now, where a steady pulse fed cool clammy hands. She might be wrong of course – jumping the gun here. All this hot

and cold could mean anything really. And the faintness. Liz couldn't help wishing though, that she'd no part in it. Well, she didn't have any part in it! None at all. She'd taken great pains to avoid all that – the same desperate look on Sandy's face, the same guilt – though someone might have warned the girl. Liz supposed she'd better try and get her into a more reasonable state before she left. She took her by the shoulders, then the head – what was going on there exactly? Did she even know herself? Angling the face towards her so she could get a good look at the flushed cheeks, the twitching translucent lids – she almost jumped when they opened, eyes focused suddenly on hers, and the girl spoke in a faint but distinct whisper:

“They won't call the doctor, will they?”

Liz frowned.

“Here we are.” The mother appeared behind her with a glass of water which she gave to Liz rather than the girl. “The tea's coming,” she added before folding her hands in front of her again.

Liz was still wondering who their doctor was. Dr Beaton? Who would object to him? Though a broken leg was one thing, and this was something else entirely.

“Could you manage a drink of water?” she asked holding the glass up, and holding the girl's eye, until she nodded and reached out to take it herself. Liz noticed that she seemed to be gritting her teeth and moved slightly to one side so she wasn't quite in the firing line should things take a gastric turn. It was a bit much all this swooning and sweating and god knows what – not her sort of scene at all. She preferred blood and guts and patients that had fasted for four hours. They should maybe get something for the girl to vomit into, just in case. She was about to say something to that effect when she became aware of a noise behind her and turned round to see a familiar looking man standing in the doorway. He squinted at her for a moment and she recognised him as the porter from The Station Hotel. Alec something;

Annag had worked with him for years. Liz was surprised that a man as old as him had a young daughter like this. Though he maybe wasn't as old as he looked; stooped shoulders, drawn face, thin greying hair – it wasn't always old age that did for you.

“Effie?”

So that was the girl's name. Liz had been too distracted to pick it up earlier, or perhaps the mother hadn't said it – she hadn't said much – or thinking about it now, it was Liz, in fact, who simply hadn't asked. Effie. They all looked at the girl again and her head seemed to roll towards them, unnervingly loose. She lifted her eyes to her father and at the same moment dropped the glass on to the carpet with a clear thud. It sent a small spray across the crotch of Liz's dress.

“Oh for any favour.” The mother darted forward to pick up the glass, which hadn't broken. “Effie, you've spilt it all over the nurse now.”

“It's fine,” Liz stayed kneeling where she was, not even bothering to shake off the loose drops; a spot of water she could handle, “might we have some more?”

“Yes, yes of course.” She grimaced as she glanced at Liz's dress, her small mouth twisting in on itself as her eyes expanded. “I'll get you a towel.”

“It's no matter, really.”

She could hear Alec mumbling behind her – what on earth's wrong with Effie? But there was no answer from the wife, just the brisk tread of her shoes down the hall and when Liz looked up again he just cleared his throat.

“She's overheated for a start,” she told him, watching the girl's face again for any flicker of acknowledgement, but she seemed to be retreating into her flesh again. Liz held the back of her hand against Effie's cheek now. Her pale fingers very cool on the flushed skin. At this point Alec, who had been standing stiffly, came a few steps closer.

“Aye, it’s hot out right enough.” He put his hands in his pockets and said, in a lighter voice, “You must be Sooty’s girl from up the hill there.” When he said about ‘up the hill’ he jerked his head back in the general direction.

“That’s right,” Liz couldn’t help matching his smile, though she felt it was somehow inappropriate under the circumstances. A complication. Alec’s smile widened – but *he* didn’t know what was coming. Liz again had the urge to get out of there as quickly as she could.

“You’re the double of him,” he said. “Do you not remember Mr Black, Effie?”

Effie just exhaled loudly.

“No,” he carried on undeterred. “It must have been the older ones. I’ve four daughters altogether – can you imagine?”

Liz could not.

“Aye, the other girls would remember right enough.”

His wife appeared back with the water, and the sugary tea, giving them both to Liz. She took the glass first, lifting it to the girl’s mouth herself. Pushing her thin brown hair to the side, so she looked even younger than before. 15? 16?

“Just little sips for now.”

Effie nodded. Swallowing. A dribble escaping from her lips. She lifted a hand up to wipe it, which Liz noted as a good sign.

Alec too apparently. “That’s better than yon puppety head she had on before is it not?”

“Yes.” Liz went for the tea now, curving her hand all the way round the cup to make sure it was only tepid. Noticing how nice the cup was – fine china, with wee pink blooms – and wondering if that was for her benefit. The thought sent a disproportionate wave of guilt through her and she hoped that at the very least, nobody would drop that. She looked at the

mother who stood awkwardly with her lips pressed together, as if she still didn't know what to do with this stranger in her house. It was awkward being in folk's houses like this.

"What lovely teacups you have." It sounded daft as soon as she'd said it. A doctor wouldn't have said that. But the woman was at least smiling now. And the girl was taking great gulps of the tea.

"Thank you" she took the cup from Liz. "I feel much better for that." She looked up at her father. "I just took a bit of a turn when I was out walking."

"A turn?"

"I was looking at the hay in the fields. I got a bit too hot."

He nodded, though his brow had deep furrows.

"The poor nurse practically had to carry her home!" the mother said in a high voice, with her eyebrows raised and an odd nervous laugh.

Alec's brow suddenly cleared as he looked at Liz with wide eyes.

"How on earth did you manage that?" He was looking at her outstretched arms that were still resting on the edge of Effie's chair, paler than the chair legs – but sturdier. Surely she wasn't such an entirely pathetic picture.

"It was no trouble."

"I'm sorry," said Effie, "I don't exactly remember..."

"No need to apologise," she gave a slight nod. The girl had blacked right out, though she was already coming round by the time Liz reached her, lying in the grass so it flattened and splayed all around her – golden rays reaching out. A sinister sort of sleep that had made Liz think again of fairy tales and curses, but the symptoms were real enough. There was no getting away from that.

She straightened herself, sitting up tall and turning away from Effie's absurdly rosy cheeks – a Deirdrê, or a Snow White – "I do think you should have the doctor look her over."

“No, I’m fine,” Effie gave her an offended look, “I don’t need the doctor.”

“Just to be sure.”

“No really, I’m fine now.”

“I’ll fetch him myself,” Alec said rubbing a hand over the top of his mouth.

“No dad, please!” Effie started to cry. Liz watched, frowning, as large tears tumbled out of her eyes – it wasn’t as if she could spare the fluids.

“What’s all this now?” Alec asked.

“I don’t need the doctor, I just want to lie down – the nurse has seen me. Why can’t you just see me?” She darted another look at Liz.

“Effie!” The mother appeared as perplexed as the father. Only Liz sighed to herself; she had been afraid of as much.

“You don’t need the doctor to come out when there’s nothing to come out for,” Effie had stopped crying as quickly as she’d started. She sniffed. “It’s a waste of five shillings.”

“Effie, what a thing to say!” The mother reddened and looked away from Liz. “We’re not quite so destitute as all that,” she added, then turned to her husband, who took a moment to realise that something was required from him now:

“No...” more perturbed by this than anything else so far, “no, of course we’re not.”

“But I’m fine now anyway.” Nobody was particularly listening to Effie.

“I can fetch him on my way back to work,” she heard Alec say.

“It’s early yet for your split shift, is it not?” His wife was clutching at the collar of her blouse where it fastened round her long thin neck.

The husband shrugged, “well, if I’m going that way anyway...”

Liz wasn’t about to have that. If there was anyone leaving it was going to be her.

“She needs to lie down anyway,” she tried to stand up quickly, though her knees were stiff and her back was beginning to ache. She supposed that was what came of hauling folk

around all morning. She started to feel her own blood making its way to her face, at the thought again of Sandy, or maybe just the getting up too quickly. But that was the wrong way round. The wrong direction. She breathed in and flattened the front of her dress where the water had left a patch of darker blue. “I can always get the doctor when I go,” she looked at Effie again, adding, “if need be.” And then to the mother, “have you got a thermometer?”

The woman nodded and disappeared again.

“But it’s right out your way,” Alec was saying. “You’ve done enough as it is.”

“It’s no bother.” She looked away, looking around the room, at anything; the brown armchairs sat at ten to two against the fireplace, wearing antimacassars like collar and cuffs, a vast array of photo frames...

“That’s my rogues’ gallery,” Alec said, then he laughed. “They’re good girls really.”

Liz looked down at the thin green carpet – where there really was a damp patch now. She could imagine the feel of it against her knees, very like moss.

“Oh yes,” she tried to smile, “...perhaps we should take Effie through.”

“Aye, right you are.”

They were already standing at opposite sides of Effie and moved now to help her up. He was still looking at Liz.

“You’re awful like your father.” He smiled. “He was a nice man too.”

Liz smiled back, though it somehow made it all worse – him knowing her father. Intent on placing her, making the connection. Again she thought – he wouldn’t be saying all this if he knew what was coming.

He led Effie by the arm along the hall. As Liz followed the father and daughter, with their slow halting step, it began to feel absurdly like a bridal march. She had a mind to carry on down the hall and straight out the door. To just leave them to it. It would come out eventually – though maybe not for a few months yet.

Effie sat on the bed with a sigh and her mother appeared with the thermometer for Liz. The question of the doctor still seemed to be hanging in the air though Liz wasn't sure whether that was down to Effie's objections or the five shillings. When she said she would give the girl the once over the parents looked relieved and left the room, though she didn't ask them to.

She turned to Effie. "You don't mind if I have a look at you then?"

Effie shrugged.

"You know, I might not be a doctor but I'm no fool either."

Effie stared at her, but said nothing.

"Come on now," she nodded at her jumper and her thick tweed skirt, "you'd better take that lot off for a start."

When she walked back along the hall to the sitting room she hadn't meant to be quiet, but she could hear Alec and his wife – talking – not hearing her.

"What a royal showing up this carry on is – making out as if we couldn't afford the doctor?" The wife's voice sounded surprisingly sure of itself compared to the few peeps Liz had heard previously.

"You're aye on at the girl that we're not made of money. She just wasn't thinking about the nurse being there. Do you know her?"

"It's Liz Black, you know her fine yourself."

"Liz...is that her name then, I knew she must be Sooty's daughter."

"Of course she is." The woman was pacing the room. "She's his double. Queer like him too."

"What do you mean by that?"

Liz didn't want to know what she meant by that so she went back and came down the hall again at more of a stomp. They both turned to look at her and she heard Effie's voice again – pleading – can you not just tell them? No she could not. This was above and beyond as it was, but she promised Effie she would stay until it was done – though it was hardly now a medical matter.

“I think you'd better come through.”

She had got Effie to strip down to her slip and had pulled the sash window above the bed wide open. Effie lay with her slip catching in the breeze, so the white linen material ballooned out, then pressed back against her body – where it was swollen and firm, and round.

Both parents stared at the girl. Then, to Liz's horror, at her. She felt her face burning and tried desperately to keep her expression blank.

“I'd say she's about five months gone.” Her voice at least came out cool as you like. About five months. That was her guess. As if it was a prize at the games.

The mother said, “oh”, and Effie started to cry again. Liz said she could probably do with more water and hurried off to where she assumed the kitchen was.

It was bad enough being in the room with just the girl; feeling compelled to ask – who's the father? Though it was none of her business really. Someone older, was all Effie said. Well, she could believe that. Older and a secret. Married? She'd felt the question forming in her mouth like rising nausea, though she wasn't sure why, and had swallowed it all down again telling herself to be bloody reasonable.

She let out a small sigh as she went into the kitchen and grabbed the cold metal of the taps with both hands. As the water came gushing out she lifted handfuls of it on to her face. God she felt filthy. It was a filthy business. A filthy bloody morning. Though as she pressed her dripping face into her bicep she could no longer smell anything of Sandy anywhere. Not

even the faintest trace... It was probably just as well. She was already being reminded of too much – that blind fear, being certain she'd rather die; how odd it was then that she'd given herself so readily to Ramsay. Did it have more to do with his piercing eyes or his demonstrable mastery of long sharp implements? Lord, if it had ever come to that. But that was sloppy. Not their style at all.

She had turned the water off but was still gripping the tap, as if the cold round bits of metal were all that was keeping her up. The thought of facing the family again was horrendous. Now that they knew what she knew. She would have given anything for a surgical mask – a gown even; she could disappear out the door... Or she could just get a hold of herself.

When she went back to the room Effie's mum was sitting on the bed next to her but Alec appeared to have gone. Neither of them paid Liz any attention. They were looking at each other, both teary now. Liz set the glass down on the dressing table and slipped out again. No reason for her to intrude any longer. She turned back towards the front door and met Alec in the hall. He already had his fingers wrapped around the handle, and his face, when it turned to look at Liz, had the expression of someone sprung.

"Work," he said, not quite meeting her eye.

"Yes, I best be off too." She didn't blame him really. He held the door open for her and they walked down the cool stairwell, not saying anything so it was just the scuffing – almost hissing – sound of Liz's steps, and the clearer click that came from his dress shoes. Black. Highly polished. Glinting now as they left the close and turned into the heat of the day.

"It's almost time for my next shift anyway."

She wanted to say that she didn't blame him. She didn't blame him for wanting to get the hell out of there, for not looking at her now, or for wanting to change the subject.

"Busy at the moment isn't it?" she found herself saying.

"Oh aye."

“I’m a good friend of Annag’s.”

“Oh aye?” he turned more towards her, squinting in the sun so his eyes looked small.

“That’s right.” Too many connections now.

They were walking along Quarry Road together. There was no avoiding it – they knew where each other was going, knew precisely. As she looked down at the pavement, and noticed again the smartness of his shoes she felt like sobbing, not even sure why.

“I hear you’ve got some famous guests at the moment,” she was willing to tolerate any subject that might remind him of how smart his shoes were. “That must be hard work.”

“Lady Redesdale? Oh not at all,” he answered quickly. “She’s a nice woman. Cuts a fine figure too, you know. Carries it well.” Liz noticed that he was standing taller himself.

“Carries herself very well, even after...everything.”

Liz could well imagine the woman – nose up, shoulders back. Never slouch. Never recant – even after everything – Hitler was always so charming you see. Have you met my son in law? The most marvellous posture...

“Don’t the staff mind?” She couldn’t help asking, thinking of Annag. Jimmy. There were other Jimmy’s, surely.

“No, her ladyship’s always very good to us,” he was quite upright now, meeting her eye again, “very good. Though Unity can be difficult, what with...well...she’s not right, anyone can see that.”

Hard right, Liz wanted to say, but she let him go on.

“It’s not easy with Mina mind, her being of German extraction an’ all. I had to have words with her once – fair cried her eyes out.”

“Really?”

“Not because of me like, because of...well, Germany I suppose.”

“Yes.”

“Mind you it’s not a competition....”

No – though Unity would’ve surely won, seen as she shot herself in the head for Germany. That took some topping. But it wasn’t a competition right enough. Liz was appalled that the way he had said it made her want to laugh. All the violence; the shattered skull and torn matter, the hot tears for a ruined home – and all she could think was how odd it was that they should be connected to this man, standing on Quarry Road pulling a bunnet out his pocket and wiping his forehead with a handkerchief.

“Half of what they say about her these days isn’t true.” He placed the bunnet over his head with one smooth flick of the wrist. “All that wild talk...” He stopped. Colouring. Thinking no doubt about the rumours of illegitimate babies. The hot tears for his own ruined home. Thankfully they had reached the end of the road. “I best be off.” He touched the tip of his flat cap and turned to go.

“Yes.” Liz paused. “Of course...I....I won’t say a word to anybody...”

He looked back at her. Nodded. She could see that he resented it. But it needed saying all the same. “Well...” She waited for him to turn again, but instead he pointed at her leg.

“You’ve hell of a cut there.”

She looked down, twisting the calf round slightly so she could take in the length of it. Long and red where it had bled and then dried already. A dark angry looking thing that she hadn’t even noticed.

“So I have.” Now how would she account for that?

They were both looking at it now, standing at the end of Quarry road. Stuck. She wanted to say to him, it’s okay, you don’t owe me anything. He put both hands in his pockets and for an awful moment she thought he might try and give her the five shillings. Though that was ridiculous. She was sure he didn’t have five shillings. She suddenly wished that he could at least have that.

Liz had always liked how they dressed Boots up as a library, like there was nothing at all strange about it – having all these books just plunked there. Going up the stairs you were suddenly surrounded by a hush, warm light, rows of wooden shelving and the dry chemical smell of a fresh bind. It didn't matter if people were buying boil cream below, up there they dished out their prescriptions with an air of gentility: Daphne du Maurier or T E Lawrence. Betjemen; twice, daily.

“Can I be of any assistance?”

The woman had thin coral lips and a prodigiously powdered philtrum. Liz remembered her from before the war. Though there'd been an air of glamour about her in those days – about the whole place really; all lipstick and romance novels, but that was before Liz had become familiar with things like poultices and enemas. But that was hardly the woman's fault. And she'd asked Liz a question.

“Actually yes,” she turned to her and smiled, “what can I get with this?” She held up the small pink pouch. The ticket inside said A 12: Mrs Evelyn Black.

“Class A is it?” The woman squinted. “Any book within three days.”

“Any book at all?”

“Well, providing it's in print of course.”

Of course, still, it sounded frightfully efficient – particularly for the west highlands. Liz was about to challenge the claim but the woman was already glancing past her, eyes narrowing again into a pair of dashes; it gave her too many straight lines on a face that didn't otherwise look old.

“Return is it?”

Liz stepped aside before clocking the next customer.

“A renewal please.” Dorothy slid her book onto the counter, shooting a brief sideways glance at Liz.

“Hello Dorothy.”

“Hello,” she looked up and smiled. Her eyes were green, but dark, like a dispensary bottle that was all the way full. Bright against her pale skin and red hair pulled into a ponytail.

“I’m afraid not,” the woman at the counter said. “You’ve had it reissued twice already. Somebody else might want it.”

Liz glanced at the title: *The Pursuit of Love*. Yes, she supposed there were plenty after it one way or another.

“Oh.” Dorothy still had the tips of her fingers touching its hardcover when the woman pulled the book away and placed it on her trolley. “Oh,” she said again, cheeks turning pink; sliding her hands back along the counter until they dropped off the ledge.

“I’d be happy to recommend something other than Miss Mitford...” the woman eyed Dorothy.

“No thank you, that’s all right,” she was backing away now. She turned and walked quickly over to the shelves on the far side.

Liz followed her, hearing the slow clip of her heel on the polished wooden floor. She was getting more used to the sound of herself. Still, she lowered her voice. “Who needs the book when you’ve got the real deal at the hotel, eh?”

Dorothy turned and smiled. “Did you see them?”

“No. Did you?”

She nodded.

“Well there you go then.”

“I was brushing the stairs when they were on their way out.”

Liz raised an eyebrow and turned towards the shelves, there was something about the towering regimented rows that pleased and alarmed her at the same time. “Did they say anything to you?”

“Oh no.” Dorothy giggled at the idea.

Liz could feel the girl’s eyes on her as she moved along the line of books, raising her hand to a spine every now and then. “No,” she repeated, without looking at Dorothy. “I don’t suppose they would.”

Dorothy stepped closer, speaking quickly. “It’s not like that though – they talk to Alec all the time and he’s only a porter. I don’t think they saw me really.” She paused as if trying to remember. Telling herself. “I was standing right up against the wall on the first floor landing, to get out of the way, you know.”

It sounded to Liz like something from a maid’s manual: be invisible at all times, or failing that – freeze.

“What would you like to have said to them?” she asked.

Dorothy shrugged.

“What about – is there any truth in all those rude songs about Hitler?”

Dorothy’s eyes widened. “I’d never dare say that.”

Liz turned back to Lord Cochrane and Commander Campbell on the biography shelf; no, they probably wouldn’t approve of that tack either – or at least not of her talking testicles to a teenager. Would she even dare say something like that herself if she ever came face to face with the real life Valkyrie? Or would she be more tempted to slap each one of the porcelain cheeks until both of her palms stung.

“I know she’s bad,” Dorothy was whispering now, “...Unity.”

Liz could still see her out the corner of her eye.

“I know she’s no good,” Dorothy glanced either side of them, following Liz further and further along the row, “with all sorts of bad beliefs and...and deviant...things.” So she’d heard the rumours too; hopefully not about the ten Germans at a time and any old Joe round the back of the village hall – but maybe about the baby. Liz thought again of the girl Effie; she changed direction, back down past the Ds and Cs. Dorothy moved backwards, without looking. There was something about her flushed cheek, the hint of a smile; it made Liz think maybe Annag was right. Maybe Dorothy was ripe for getting carried away. Her eyes were darting about and the rise and fall of her bust made the gap between buttons open and close – as if her shirt had grown valves. Liz stopped moving and turned to face her straight on. A thick shaft of sunlight cut across the room so she could see her own shadow looming out to the left and the tiny glittering particles of dust suspended between the two of them.

“Unity is a fascist, and fascism must be confronted wherever it rears its vile head.” She was aware that the words sounded semi-automatic in her mouth. “Come on now,” she touched Dorothy’s sleeve. “Let’s find you something else to read.”

It was somehow fitting that she should meet Dorothy there, of all places. Liz, Betty, and Annag, had all been Boots regulars when they were schoolgirls, though they thought they were doing well with a Class B subscription between them. Liz was still partial to a novel now and then, even though she tried, rightly or wrongly, to study what medicine she could in her spare time. And then there was Ramsay, ready to mock her, for the novels, and now for the other thing too. What did he read that was so good? Men with long consonant-crammed names and even longer beards. Women were very occasionally mentioned. He’d given her that one about Rosa Luxemburg.

“I thought you might find it interesting,” he said.

“I did.” She had brought it back to his flat where they sat stiffly drinking tea, as if in a Berliner salon; as if he hadn’t had her on the floor the day before, though she could still feel the bruise coming on her hip. The wooden boards too hard against her spine that was too hard, so it gave a crunching sound that she could bear any amount of because this was what they did to make themselves soft again.

Ramsay’s teaspoon rattled against his saucer. “But?” Crossing one leg over the other, tilting his head towards her.

She frowned, almost annoyed. How did he know there was a but? How did he always know.

She shrugged. “She’s a very impressive woman, but my god – there’d be no living with her.”

“No?” He smiled. “How interesting.” He gave a slight chuckle to himself. “Funny you should say that.”

You. Of all people.

“What about this one?” She handed Dorothy a small pale blue volume. “I think I was about your age when I read it.” Was that true? She wasn’t entirely sure how old Dorothy was. Old enough to have left school if she’d wanted to? Old enough to marry? But still in need of a shell; something hard and thin. A small blue volume – to be taken daily after mealtimes.

“*The Death of the Heart*.” Dorothy read aloud from the title page. “It has a sentimental frontispiece.” She held the offending page open and turned it to face Liz. “That’s usually a bad sign.”

“Didn’t anyone ever tell you not to judge a book by its frontispiece?”

Dorothy laughed.

“Frontispiece – is that what they’re teaching you in school these days? Very grand. It sounds like an item of Victorian underwear.”

Dorothy laughed again. “I’ll take it though. Even if the title does sound quite depressing.” She shut the cover and tucked it under her arm.

Liz shrugged. “And a bit silly I suppose, considering the death of the heart is really just death.”

“But you can’t call a book ‘just death.’”

Just Death; Liz pictured it in black hardcover – to be consumed on capture by enemy forces.

“No,” she sighed. “I suppose not. That’s why Elizabeth Bowen writes novels and I’ll stick to the nursing.”

“Did you always know you would be a nurse?”

“No,” she paused. “Quite the opposite.”

Dorothy looked at her quizzically but she wasn’t inclined to offer any advance on that.

“What do you want to do when you leave school?”

“I suppose the whole point in staying on is to go to university, but I can’t quite imagine that.”

“Don’t imagine it then. Do it.” She smiled. “You might not get another chance.”

Things only seemed to get more difficult the further you got down any one path. What if she had gone when she was supposed to though? No nursing. No war. No Ramsay. But now she had that feeling again of being swept along in one direction, and violently pulled in another. Maybe it was her though. Maybe she would always be a bolter. And she was perhaps expecting too much of Ramsay, hoping that he would understand. But he should – she heard the words in her head in a harsh Polish accent – it is a weakness – yes Rosa you’re quite right – a weakness I tell you!

That's what it was though, he was human after all. She'd always thought of him as something apart, or above. Ever since Normandy. Ever since the rally in George Square. Ever since that day in his rooms when he'd handed her a pig heart – and a pair of scissors. She remembered the pig's heart was heavier than she'd expected, and she hadn't been prepared for it looking, actually, slightly heart-shaped. Because it did have a point; an uneven tapering off of the ventricles. Or maybe she had been imagining it. Looking too hard. She had asked him to get her one and was delighted when he did.

“Here you are darling, it's all yours, just try and be gentle.”

“Hhmm, I don't know about that, looks tough as old boots.”

“That's the butcher's best you've got there – not to mention most of my week's ration.”

“Well, as long as you don't expect me to cook it for you afterwards.”

And he'd moved all his books to one side so she could stand leaning over it. Noticing as she lifted it, the dark imprint it left on the brown paper – like two heads talking. She looked at the stains on his hardwood table and wondered – poking her fingers into what was left of the pulmonary trunk – what else has he cut up here? She felt around the firm pink arterial tissue, and tried to ignore his breath on the side of her neck. The scissors went through the right ventricle easily enough. As she gazed down, the rising raw stench of it, and the snip snip sound of steel closing through flesh, somehow conjured a metallic taste in her mouth.

Ramsay was so very close, did he taste it too? It made her think of the fat muscle of his tongue, wet lips, the omnipresent threat of hard precise teeth – and then she couldn't think of anything except the tuberculae carneae, which, as she pulled the ventricle open, spread out before her like a dense and tiny forest. Sleek bare winter branches, reaching up and out and all intertwined – she was being sentimental again. He wouldn't approve of that. And really this was the same sort of thing she'd seen pulsing violently in the pericardial cavity. She thought, not for the first time, how wonderful it was, how bloody typical it was, that he

should set his sights on mastering this, of all things. This organ whose need of movement was so insistent that it seemed to mock their own need for stillness – precision. Time.

“It’s like a forest in there,” he said.

Then she looked at him, wide-eyed, and smiled. Their retinas, or their optic nerves, their occipital lobes... – something was in tune. It was a pity there wasn’t some beast whose brain was disconcertingly similar to theirs, so she might cut that up too. But that only worked for certain animals, certain organs.

“Isn’t it odd,” she said, “to think that we’re all pigs at heart.”

“Not that odd.”

“That’s right, you thought we were all pigs anyway.”

“I can’t say that’s true,” he spoke the words in an even tone, still looking down at the split and splayed out organ. “Despite seeing evidence to the contrary almost daily – I can’t say that’s true.”

Her eyes were so near his jaw as it moved she could see how the rough surface was speckled with black. It was a battle he could never win; skin like a smutted net curtain you could never get quite clean. A net curtain in a room and kitchen he would never go back to. A battle – too many battles – he could never win, but still...

She picked her mum’s Agatha Christies up off the librarian’s counter. Any book – any book at all mother, and you’ve chosen these.

“Did you want to place a special order then?” The woman eyed Liz, reaching to the side for her ledger. It sent a waft of lavender across the counter and the violent dried up smell of it made Liz hesitate for a moment. It was a smell that stalked the halls of the nurses’ home; she’d smelled the same thing in Miss Gilchrist’s sitting room at the cottage hospital. And

here it was here too, stopping her from saying out loud what it was that she really wanted.

All these ladies in lavender.

“No, I’ll just take this lot today thank you.” She turned and saw Dorothy waiting for her at the top of the stairs, her back pressed to the wall as some dolled up girls passed her. Could she smell it too – a destiny so small and perfectly formed it was almost intoxicating.

She turned back to the woman. “But I’ll bring you a list next week. There are one or two titles I require.”

For herself, for now, she’d come away with a book about Marie Curie and a tin of germolene. Though it had taken her long enough to notice the cut on her leg, it was bothering her plenty now. She must’ve caught herself quite badly on something when she’d darted off through the field. Now the wound was starting to throb. Well, inflammation was part of the healing process. Unless the pulsing pink flesh was an indication of something else. Something more sinister. On the walk home she tried to pay attention to the movement of her knees. It was difficult to tell if she was any more stiff than usual, though she tended to carry most of her tension in the head. Her natural expression when at ease teetered towards the severe, or so she’d been told by various family members, teachers, strangers in the street; as if her face was any of their business. Her face was her face and there wasn’t much she could do about that, though on the downside she might have lockjaw for hours before anyone would take the slightest bit of notice. She paused under the trees on Glencruitten Road to stick her foot out behind her and glance down the back of her leg. The long gash looked almost black under the green hue of the sun coming through the leaves. Christ, tetanus was just what she needed. She sighed as she moved off again. She would have to do something about that. Still, it was an easier problem to fix than the one facing the girl Effie. Liz wondered again how it had come about. Someone older. Unhappy. Unhappily married? A jaded but handsome old

soak? No; she had no basis for that at all. All she knew was that some man had pushed himself inside the girl without caring what came of it. There were approximately three hundred million sperm in an ejaculation. Liz had always found the thought particularly alarming. They could take a surprisingly long time to die, it all depended on the pH of the environment. She harboured a suspicion that her own was fairly hostile – but usually left her cap in overnight just in case. What would a young girl like Effie know about caps though. Or sperm. Even the man might not have much of an idea. And those sperm were no longer his concern. That was the problem with men – their ability to detach, eject, casually leave three hundred million dead.

And the poor girl Effie, stuck with it and spoken about. Her parents would get pelters too, though for all the wrong reasons. Liz tried to imagine her own mother's reaction if she'd got herself into trouble at that age. Of course there had been no danger of that. Her mother might even be surprised to know how little danger there had ever been of that; in the face of war, in the face of certain death – had he used the word certain? But then Sandy could do no wrong in her mother's eyes.

When she got back to the house her mother was in the sitting room. Giving the usual protestations about not needing anything, having got herself a cup of tea, and telling Liz she'd better unpack the shopping instead of standing there like a disapproving school teacher.

When she came back through she asked her, "when's Dr Beaton coming again?"

Her mother's eyes shot up from her book and flashed at Liz, offended.

"I don't know, do I!"

"Well you might – he's your doctor."

"So why do you want to know? I'm perfectly fine." She snapped her book shut and placed it in her lap so she could give Liz the full force of her stare.

“Nothing to do with you actually,” she threw herself down on an armchair. “I might need a tetanus injection if you must know.”

“What have you done now?”

She took a deep breath before answering, running her hands back and forth over the rough pile of the material on the chair arms.

“Well?” her mother pressed. “Don’t do that, they’re worn enough as it is.”

“Why don’t you get some antimacassars?”

“And have the place look like a nursing home? No thank you.”

Liz didn’t particularly like them either. “They’re easy to wash though.”

“Oh, don’t be starting with that again.” Her mother was about to return to her book.

“I’ve cut my leg.”

“How did you manage that?”

“At hayfields. I just caught it on a stick or something.”

“Let me get a look at it?”

She twisted her calf round to point the scabby area at her mother.

“It looks deep for a scratch.”

“I was...moving quite quickly.”

A fan of wrinkles shot across her mother’s forehead. “Aren’t you a bit old to be running through the fields?” Then a corner of her mouth twitched and Liz felt herself beginning to laugh a little at the thought of it too.

“I’m not that old.”

The lines on her mother’s forehead deepened then she gave a sort of tut and raised both eyebrows sky high; tipping her head back and inhaling noisily – what would you ever do with a daughter like this.

“Shall I put the wireless on?” Liz didn’t bother waiting for an answer before going over to switch it on. That way they didn’t have to think about how old she was and all the arguments that went with that. They would be provided with another topic that would lead them back to safe ground.

...our Saturday Matinee ‘What Would you Do With It?’ by Alfred Sangster...

Or perhaps not.

...And now the Orchestral Hour, with BBC Northern Orchestra and conductor Charles Groves...

It would depend on the piece. The Romantic composers made them tetchy; the room would swarm with aching strings and swelling crescendos so they felt obliged to avoid each other’s eyes. Liz found the emotion of it almost indecent in company. Particularly, as she recalled, on the occasions when Sandy had sat on the settee next to her – pressing the full length of his thigh against hers. They’d often done that on Sundays – god forgive them. He would come to the house with them after Mass and stay until dinner time. Every Sunday the same, the notable exception being the day war was declared; that was a Sabbath too, so really hers and Sandy’s sins were mild in comparison. There was a deviation from the schedule that day, and Sandy hadn’t been there on account of a falling out they’d had.

Funny how she could remember quite clearly the argument they’d had in 39, yet the one they’d had only yesterday was already getting to be a blur. She hadn’t been the one who was drunk. How then, for example, had she ended up kissing him? She glanced in the direction of her mother, as if she would somehow pick up on the thought. But she had her book and Superintendent Battle, and they were safe enough with Haydn’s 95th making its regular progress across the space between the sideboard and the settee.

“I meant to ask you,” her mother said, without looking up, “how’s Annag getting on?”

“Oh fine. She sends her best wishes.”

“That’s nice.”

Liz crossed her legs, then her arms. “I don’t know how she copes with all those kids in that tiny wee flat.”

“Small houses can still make happy homes.”

“Well that’s easy for you to say – I wouldn’t like to face her washing in that kitchen.”

“Mothers always manage, one way or another.”

Liz frowned, then shrugged. “I suppose some manage better than others.”

Her mother stopped reading to shoot her a look, but waited a moment before saying, “yes. I suppose that’s true.”

Though Liz hadn’t meant it as an attack on her. She was thinking really of the woman from yesterday – the thin woman with the four daughters; how had that been in their flat? And Effie, how would she manage? Well, she couldn’t tell her mother any of that.

She gave a slight start as the music grew louder. Elgar now. Riskier. She picked up the *Radio Times* and sat with it open on her lap, scanning advertisements for OK sauce, meat soup, all-bran. She forced herself to read through it, as if between them the listings might keep her rooted where she was. It was all there; the time, the date, the year. The words matching the sounds. The suggestion of familiar concepts, like home. And service. Still it felt too light, too loose. And she couldn’t help looking around the old room for the others that weren’t there anymore.

Chamberlain had come on almost the minute Liz had come in the door, so neither her mother or Cathy had the chance to ask where Sandy had gone; they just sat in the living room, looking at each other, suddenly feeling an absurdly female gathering. Cathy looked at the radio, appalled, as if it had turned on her. It was supposed to bring the afternoon concert, instead of confirming in a stiff tin-can voice that there would be no withdrawal from Poland.

Liz wondered how he could get the words out; picturing the movements of his greying moustache, silver brows over sad dark eyes that wailed silently – I tried. I tried. Cathy was almost green by the end of it and her mother had pressed her lips together with a force that made them hold their wheesht for a full five minutes. Ten. More. The relief when Sandy appeared, breathless through the door, had been palpable. She forgot all about the falling out on the hill not an hour before.

Sandy wasn't allowed to sit near her at Mass but they'd usually sneak a glance now and then. That day she had only met his eye at communion, when she was walking back to her seat, still sucking the body of Christ; waiting for the wafer to turn soggy – nobody ever seemed to chew it. It was an unspoken rule that made her wonder how the rest of them all managed to swallow it. But she pressed it into the roof of her mouth, which she fancied gave her a slight pout as she walked past; him, already on his knees, looking up at her in a way not at all fitting for a place of religious worship. He gave her the same look when they went for a walk on the hill afterwards. There was nobody about so he could kiss her up against a tree, or a gate, or anything hard and jaggy that would keep her still. And there had been all the usual arguments, pinning her with tormented eyes, his voice growing hard and annoyed until it dug into her hip.

She'd left him seething, slumped against the grass whilst she turned down the side of the hill, a cold breeze at her back.

"How can you be so cold," he'd said to her. And she wanted to say, I can't help it, same as the breeze. She wanted to run back and tell him but when she got back round the corner she saw him lying with his eyes closed and his trousers open, arm flailing furiously; and she knew then that he was right to be angry with her, because she could feel all over her that she wasn't really cold at all. It was only that she didn't want to marry him.

But then that hadn't mattered, because there was no withdrawal from Poland. And what on earth were her and her mum and Cathy supposed to do, apart from just sit there. They had all stood up when he came in, rushing over to him, even her mother had squeezed his arm – but then she had looked away, biting her lip. And Liz had thought – yes, it's better that we're women after all, because what would they do to him? He didn't mind though. He was needed. He was holding her in his arms again. He had a new angle.

“It's not that bad is it?”

Liz turned from the *Radio Times* to her mum, and raised an eyebrow.

“You look as if you've lost a pound and found a penny – you can turn the radio over if you like.”

“Oh.” She sat up in her chair so the paper rustled on her knee. “No, it's not that.” She lifted it and held the back page up to show her mother. “Must they really put the nursing recruitment advertisements right next to the VD ones?”

“Hmmm.” Her mother raised an eyebrow as she shut her book and reached instead for her workbag. “Funny that.”

Liz wanted to protest – was that what her mother thought of her? But then realised she didn't quite have enough legs to stand on. Not anymore. She was appalled to find her cheeks getting warmer, and even more so when her mother asked her to help roll some wool. That meant pulling the stool over so she was sitting, in plain view, by her mother's right side. Hands held high, ready for the hank of wool to bind them – apart rather than together. A restraint that relied on her own force, and the blank space in between. Her mother took the end of the wool and started to curl it in her palm. Liz was relieved not to have to meet her eye – well, that would teach her to go mentioning VD in the first place. She tried to ignore the heat that remained in her face, concentrating instead on her mother's long pale fingers.

Swooping and looping the wool with fast automatic movements. Round and round until a sudden tangle made her pause, fumble; wool caught on the setting of a ring. But the rhythm soon returned – how many times had they sat just so? It felt a long time ago. She had a sudden vision of her mother – alone.

“What would you like for tea?” Needing to say something. “I thought I might make a potato pie. You like potato pie, don’t you?”

“Very nice...very nice indeed.”

“Mmhmm.” Liz lifted her elbows higher so she could rest them on the arm of her mother’s chair. “Potato Pete – off the ration at last.”

“Mmmm. That’s something I suppose.”

“Why do the government try and make you eat things by giving them a name and facial features? Do you remember the song they had about the potato?”

Her mother looked at her very seriously for a moment, across the woollen barricade, then began to sing:

Potato Pete, Potato Pete

See him coming down the street

Something something... things to eat

Get your hot potatoes from potato Pete

She paused. “I forget the rest.”

Liz stared at her for a moment, then burst out laughing.

“That’s the gist of it though – no?”

“It’s worse than I remember.”

“My singing?” Her mother was laughing now too.

“Hah! No – Pete, and his song that doesn’t make any sense. Why would he be wanting folk to eat him and his....family?” she shrugged, “...if you can call it that.”

“Oh don’t tell me you’re going to stop eating potatoes now too—”

“No no.”

“If anything I thought it would be the carrot one you’d object to...your lot.”

“What was the carrot called again? I can picture it actually – a top hat and a rather mincing step.” Who exactly was ‘her lot’?

Her mother was laughing again.

It was a very bourgeois looking character but what was he called?

“Oh of course!” As she moved to sit up straight she felt the wool slip to her wrists. “How could I forget Dr Carrot.”

Her laugh trailed off into a sigh as she pictured herself, struggling towards ‘her lot’ – on all fours. There was the carrot. Now where was the stick.

The hospital held rather a lot of ATS, ready to be injected into any unfortunate farm hands. Or farm legs. Liz liked how the wound was on her leg but the needle would go into her arm. It made her feel unusually and reassuringly whole: the eyes looking down at the hand rolling up the sleeve, to reveal – a pale curve of shoulder. She felt indecently bare next to his three piece suit and white coat. Dr Beaton had insisted on doing the honours himself, was glad even, of a chance to repay her. They'd had a busy morning of it, but she'd enjoyed herself. They'd had an interesting discussion about the last BMA plebiscite whilst she helped him clear a biliary obstruction – which seemed rather fitting; he laughed when she said that. It wasn't until after his eyes creased and he let out the sharp – hah, that she wondered what on earth had possessed her to be so presumptuous. She barely knew the man, never mind his politics. He might have balked at the prospect of being bossed about by a minister. Being bossed about by a miner even. But she had somehow known he would be on their side. Free health care for all; that was what mattered. There was a glint in his eye when he spoke of it and they were suddenly the eyes of a much younger man.

“And look at how well we've done out of the Highlands and Islands Medical Service. Cars for doctors, motorbikes for nurses, hospitals – surgeons even.” He glanced up at her. “All state controlled, but you can't tell that to a lot of Londoners; they think the government's inventing the wheel.”

“You'd think it was the breaking wheel, the amount of noise there's been made over it.”

He'd laughed at that too; like the light catching a blade.

Now she was sitting in his office, a single bare shoulder pointed at him. It could have been worse though. There were paler, rounder places to stick needles. It would take more than a deltoid to faze Dr Beaton.

“Well.” He suddenly had a hand gripping her arm. His fingers stretched almost the whole way round. Warmer than she’d expected. He wiped the skin with alcohol. Colder now, as it caught the air.

“When was the last time you had a tetanus injection?”

“17th of April 1945.”

“That’s nice and specific. Don’t clench your fist.”

“Sorry.” She closed her eyes and relaxed as the spike of the needle sank into her, then out again. He was quick. Had he always been that quick? Where had he been in April 1945?

“Thank you Doctor.”

He took a cotton ball and began massaging the site. Dispersing the serum. He didn’t have to do that.

“You’re bleeding a little.”

“Oh, sorry.” She turned her head to look and saw the flicker of amusement on his face. He took her free hand and placed it on the cotton ball.

“Don’t be sorry. My fault.” He jumped up. She almost jumped too – because it wasn’t his fault either. Nice of him to say so though. He took some sticking plaster from his cabinet and sat beside her again. They were both waiting now for her blood to coagulate. She willed the platelets to stick and plug more quickly, though they were no doubt doing their best. If you waited long enough, shed blood collected in a test tube would eventually separate; the clot rising to the surface. Without anything to heal it just stuck to itself.

“April,” he said. “1945.”

“Yes,” she lifted the cotton from her arm, aware that it wasn’t a question. “I think that’s me now.”

Maybe if he hadn't said it again at the end there then she wouldn't have thought about it the whole way back through the hospital. But Ramsay had given her her last ATS injection, and she suddenly felt the need to remember it – exactly. Had he held her arm differently?

Pressed more of his skin against hers? He might have been gentler, let his arms linger around her, because unlike today, she had been in considerable pain then. More pain than she could even register when he asked her – or no, hadn't he given her something for that too? Yes, later though. That had been more difficult for him to locate. So first he had only used the one injection, and several mouthfuls of brandy, and his own two hands.

She rushed back to the changing room, swallowing down the rising sick feeling, concentrating on the routine of getting ready, and thinking back to the hospital she should've been in. The buildings were very different but operating theatres offered a bland sort of continuity wherever you went. She could well imagine, for example, Ramsay waiting for her at the table. She could imagine people and cars and Dumbarton Road, as opposed to the trees that stood thick around all sides of them now. There was birdsong in the changing room, but in the scrubbing area there was only the sound of the water as she nudged the tap too far. It gushed out and through the pipes, rivalling the regular shoosh of bristles against flesh.

A new packet of gloves had been set out for her. She liked the way that they set things out for her here. How they had sought her out. How they gave her tea and cake, civil conversation, and free injections. She had to remind herself it was in lieu of any actual pay. That didn't really bother her though, unless it made her some sort of a scab. Whose ill-fitting white rubber boots was she filling exactly? Didn't anyone want them? Had they all been enticed to the city, or the army, or out to the remote districts? The Isle of Skye where they could buzz about on a state-issued motorbike – she might have considered that herself if she thought she could cope with general medical ailments for even a minute. Look at how she'd

hopped it out of Alec's the other day. Worse than useless. She wasn't quite sure if it was because she was too hard or too soft, but whatever it was ruled her out for that line of work.

She lifted the sleeve of the packet of gloves, and pulled out a thin rubber hand. As she did so a puff of powder escaped and left specks on the counter. Tiny pale flecks like icing sugar, as if she was opening a box of truffles. It made her think of those old fashioned sheaths that folk reused and kept in little boxes of talcum powder. Hell of a thought. Did Annag think she'd meant that sort of sheath? No wonder she didn't want to know. The modern ones weren't half as bad though, it was just that the initial sensation was akin to something more like a medical examination. A foreign rubber-clad invasion. The latex was too smooth, and at the same time too irritating. She supposed it was a bit rich of her, trying to force onto Annag something she wasn't keen on herself. Annag at least didn't have to worry about Jimmy picking things up elsewhere; that was what it came down to really wasn't it – owning each other. And not owning each other – did that mean the opposite? She would rather not think about that.

A French letter; that was what she had called them at first. But then she'd noticed how Ramsay smiled a certain way when she did, and exchanged the term for something more technical. Though it did have a nice ring to it – and they had been in France after all. She could remember being perched on the end of his boarding house bed and wondering who had been in it before them. Who was the last battalion to pass through that room with the creaky floorboards and peeling wallpaper, and what the hell had they done to the springs in the bed? The arse end was almost right out of it. So perhaps bare American or even German skin had rolled and writhed on those sheets that she pulled round her naked body. She didn't particularly care which as long as they had been washed. And the place had water at least. Ramsay was bent almost double at the sink in the corner of the room, pulling handfuls of it

towards her chest and down the front of his dark crotch. She knew it wasn't quite polite to watch him but couldn't help catching his lean frame out the corner of her eye. She could see the stringy looking muscles going up the back of his legs. His slim hips and clear line of spine; lithe as a long distance cyclist. As he worked his hands between his legs she turned her eyes to the floor – was that her? It must be her he was washing away. She caught sight of a small white packet, fluttering slightly where the breeze came through the boards. She picked it up and looked at the red lettering: do not leave this in a public place as it is likely to cause offence.

“Oh sorry about that.”

She looked up to meet his eye as he came towards her, then down to his swaying genitals, and back.

“No,” he laughed, “I suppose we're beyond bits of paper now.”

And of course she hadn't cared, even though the rubbers, the room, the warnings – they had all probably been issued with prostitutes in mind, and yet there she was. Unrepentant. And to her those words had seemed one of the few acknowledgements that the men they were drilling and dressing and packing off in every direction, were actually human. Because not only did they have natural biological urges, they also – after everything – could still understand concepts such as offence.

“We had tried a pessary ring but the uterine prolapse now requires surgical attention.”

“I see.” She did see. Dr Beaton was pinching and pulling on the bulge of red hanging flesh as she bent next to him, the woman's legs shooting out either side. “It's been a while since I saw one of these,” she straightened her back, “– a prolapse that is.” Why had she gone and said that? It wasn't as if she made a habit of staring at female genitalia in general.

“Well,” his dark brows rose and fell again, “I think you’ll be in for a run of them down in Glasgow when the new health service begins.”

“I hadn’t really thought about that.”

“Terrible how many women are walking around in such a condition.”

Christ. She could already feel a slight burning in her knickers just thinking about it. It was so raw and angry, and just hanging there.

“I remember rather a lot of those sorts of complaints at the Clydeside clinic,” she said.

“Involved in that were you?” he turned his head to look directly at her and she was appalled to feel herself blush.

“Well...I...someone I knew...one of the surgeons, he...yes.” She cleared her throat, feeling the mask warm against her face. “Yes, I suppose I was.”

“A very good scheme. I’m sure you saw all sorts there.”

“Yes, you could certainly say that.”

They’d been shocking some of those women. She’d almost forgotten about the horrors of the female reproductive system after years of the army and bodies that were almost exclusively male. It was something foreign again – this fallen down flesh. This wear and tear that apparently just happened. At least you knew where you were with acts of violence. It was the Nazis. Hitler even. He was to blame for the blown off bones and the bullets in the brains. But who was to blame for the rickets and the typhus and the black empty mouths? There were evils more pervasive than Hitler; they had no face, and came in fives. Disease, ignorance, idleness. Squalor.... And another one. She knew there was another one....

“Can you hold these for a minute?” Dr Beaton indicated towards the Taylor’s forceps in his right hand, edging them free as she moved closer. “That’s it – I need you to keep the tension there. Yes, just like that.”

She was pulling on the pink flap whilst he felt around it. She was pulling the woman inside out – her own muscles began contracting involuntarily. And why was there something embarrassing about this, as if she should apologise for the fault in the female organ. It was certainly nothing to do with her. She was only holding it, feeling, even through her glove, the warmth in the metal handle where his hand had been. Again she was filled with a wave of gratitude. It was a stark contrast to the same time last month when she'd been in the middle of a surgery and all of a sudden found herself unable to let go of one end of a gelpi retractor. She had put her fingers through the finger holes – where her fingers had no business being. And the house surgeon had looked at her, then gone to take the instrument, and even then she held on to it for a few seconds more. It had seemed longer, thinking back, and the surgeon actually tugging before she let it go and gave him a look that stopped him from saying anything. What if it had been one of the consultants? It was a worry. Maybe Matron had been right about her needing to take leave, get a change of scene, and Matron didn't even know about the gelpi retractor. Her weakness. Her poor treacherous hands.

She straightened her neck and watched the back of Dr Beaton's head.

"Do you know many women surgeons?"

"No."

She waited to see if he was going to expand at all. Perhaps now wasn't quite the right moment. He had enough women to deal with right now. He was up to his wrist in them.

She had forgotten she'd even asked the question by the time she was back in her civvies and getting ready to go. The too tight boots had rubbed and pinched against her scabby leg, and she took the dressing off it now to let the afternoon air in on her walk home. The sun was coming through the high window and she was champing at the bit to get outside. Her feet might have been aching but she could still feel the thrill of a good day's surgery running

through her. Without death or histrionics. Just a series of routine procedures carried out with care – and a running commentary. Almost as if she was an undergraduate.

And he caught her on the way out – on the veranda, so they were more out than in. The awning stretched over them but the air was light and fresh. A white butterfly landed on the toe of Dr Beaton's polished shoe.

"I lied earlier," he said.

She looked up at him, waiting for her eyes to adjust to the light and shade. Which part had been a lie? Did he in fact prefer No 3 catgut and not No 4 at all. Did he think Mr Laird's prognosis was in fact dire. Had he not enjoyed having Liz there. Had she not been of any use at all.

"I know two women surgeons come to think of it."

"Oh."

"Both as capable as any male colleague, though they perhaps lacked the same opportunities."

Of course. She gave a half smile and a small nod. She didn't expect it to be easy.

"It shouldn't stop women though, not if they're set on it – nothing to stop them at all, especially now." He paused, holding her eye. "If there's ever anything I can do..."

A breeze blew through the trees and made the lapels of her dress flutter against her chest. She felt as if she might easily float away on it.

"I wouldn't even know where to begin."

He nodded. "I suggest you write to the Secretary and enquire, then simply take it one step at a time."

It sounded straightforward enough a thing, yet as he disappeared inside Liz struggled to get her feet to move at all. She took a long breath as the leaves rustled the trees.

“I meant to say, you’ll be coming to the dance tonight won’t you?” Sister Cameron was that short Liz hadn’t noticed her head popping out the front door.

“Oh...” She was a nice wee woman. Very matter-of-fact. Why wouldn’t Liz be coming to the dance?

“Half the town’ll be there.”

Christ.

“Lovely raffle too.”

“Aye?” It would be a bold move. A very bold move indeed. She took a step backwards off the veranda – feeling the light on her all at once. “Aye, why not. I’ll see you later then.”

It was a long time since Liz had been to any sort of dance, and longer still since she’d been to one in Oban. When she first moved to Glasgow the most thrilling thing about the dancing was the sheer impersonality of it. Unfamiliar people, many of them in uniforms, though no Dashing White Sergeant. No Strip the Willow either – but you can strip my willow any day, hen. Latterly there hadn’t been a lot of actual dancing, just heated debates in huddled corners so that when they all stopped to sing the red flag it was like something out of a musical and she sometimes wanted to laugh; though by the end she’d be near crying. It was the nights out in Belgium she’d liked best. France too. They had not danced in Germany.

She’d put on a forest green wraparound dress and left her hair in loose waves. Her lips had dark lines on them from where she’d bitten the skin right off, so she’d picked out the best lipstick she had and filled them in bright red. That and the dress made her think of the old rhyme: red and green shall never be seen except on the gown of an Irish queen. Was it a warning or a command? Either way she wasn’t listening. She twisted her head round to check the lines of her stockings. There was an extra bold line where her cut had scabbed over, but there wasn’t much she could do about that now. She was under no illusions as to

what kind of figure she would cut at the dance. It wouldn't be like the days when she'd been the envy of all the other girls; though that had never had anything to do with her, and everything to do with Sandy. Not that she was bothered either way. Her pace slowed as she neared the hall. There was a couple going in in front of her and the gentleman stayed holding the door open. So she had to smile and thank him, and take the one, two, three steps in, thinking the whole time – bugger bugger bugger; what the hell are you doing now?

Inside, she was glad that Sister Cameron waved her over straight away and sent her husband to the refreshment table for them. She hadn't realised Sister Cameron was married, but it made sense now she thought of it. That calm capable air she had; a day on the wards then dinner on the table. The other nurses were chattering around her and Liz limited her looks to their faces, not wanting her gaze to roam too far into the hall. Not just yet. But as the band started up again the dancers left gaps round the table. She was more and more exposed, clutching firmly to her cup of sour tasting punch. There was no point coming to a dance then skulking in the corner. She turned out towards the crowd and the circling single males, straightening her shoulders and lifting her head up to the light.

The boy looked barely twenty but that didn't matter; she was on her feet and away having said barely two words to him. It was a Gay Gordons which would suit her just fine. She would have to suffer his underarm odour but there would be little opportunity for conversation or direct bodily contact. Though he did try.

"You're like Carole Lombard," he said as they turned, ready for the back, two, three, four. And one, two, three, four.

"Och, away. I'm nothing of the sort." Back, two, three, four.

"It's true!" He held his arm up higher to spin her round, unleashing a fresh waft of himself. She had smelt worse.

She twirled herself round, and round again, only the tips of their fingers still touching.

“You must be her twin.” He pulled her closer for the waltz step. “Come to think of it, I’ve never seen you both in the same room.”

“She is dead you know.”

He frowned, “well I’m sure that’s what you want them to think.”

She laughed.

As they readied themselves for the next round he smiled and shook his head.

“Dead, eh. Break it to me gently why don’t you.”

They were working their way round the floor at speed, so that everywhere she looked she saw familiar faces blurring into each other. Sometimes, at the end of a turn, a single mouth or pair of eyes would come alarmingly into focus. Twitching. Twitching in her direction? She scanned the hazy hordes for a flash of fair hair, but found none.

When the dance finished the boy wanted to get her a refreshment. She politely declined and waited until he was out of view before turning to slip outside. She needed air. She couldn’t think straight with the noise and the heat and the everyone watching everything. Outside it was only just darkening – that buzzing blue hue of the not quite yet night – and the cool air brushed against her bare arms and the front of her neck. She walked round the side of the hall, where she could hear the burn running and distant laughter, but could see the source of neither. Only the seagulls above were both loud and visible, she watched them swooping around each other, unable to tell whether the actions were friendly or not.

“Where are you off to?”

She turned and saw Sandy leaning against the back wall. “Nowhere,” she said.

“Fancy that,” he had a cigarette wedged between his lips, so when he spoke it was in white clouds. “I was just heading there myself.” The words tumbled towards her but dispersed just short. She caught the scent though.

She hadn't yet moved.

"You been in the wars?" He nodded down at her leg which was still poised behind her where she'd turned. She looked at it, then back at him.

"Yes, actually."

He laughed. "Yes, of course. How could I forget." He threw the end of his cigarette on the ground.

She walked over and stood beside him. Tucking her hands behind her back so that they, and not the seat of her dress, were pressed against the stone.

"Enjoying the dance?" he asked.

"Not really."

He smiled. "No, well...I didn't expect to see you here."

"I didn't expect to see you either."

They turned to glance at each other. She hadn't expected it; not really. But had she hoped? Was that why she had come? And what about him?

He swung himself round and put his hands on her waist. Pulling her back off the wall, towards him.

"Someone will see."

He brought his face closer to hers. "They expect it," he said, his breath hot on her. The whole of him covering her.

"No," she held his eye. Not able to swallow but hearing the words come. "They don't."

He stared at her a moment more, then dropped his grip – so suddenly she felt herself stagger – as he turned back to lean on the wall. She kept her eyes straight ahead, and concentrated on her breath. She heard him snigger.

"If you won't there are others who will."

She looked at him, then stood up to walk away.

“Elizabeth.”

She kept moving, trying to ignore the thought – which others?

“I’m sorry, I shouldn’t of said that.”

“You’ve been at the drink again.”

“Haven’t you heard dearest, I’m always at the drink these days.”

“Why? It’s pathetic.”

He paused, holding her eye, then stood up straighter. “Quite the lucky escape for you then really. You must be pleased with that result.”

“It wasn’t all my fault you know, you didn’t exactly give me much of a choice.”

“The choice was yes or no. You only had to choose one. Not one and then the other.”

“I...” A couple came out from behind a tree with their arms wrapped around each other – but it was her and Sandy, standing ten feet apart now, who looked at the ground, at the sky. She cursed it all.

He followed her back into the hall and she saw several sets of eyes turn on them. Dolly Dunbar visibly nudged her sister. This was ridiculous, why the hell had she come. She looked around for Sister Cameron, but her and her husband were up doing a Boston Two-step. The whole place seemed suddenly a lot busier. She saw Jimmy’s brother Bill, and several girls she’d been at school with. They all looked old. Well not old, but somehow aged. Set. Was it their clothes, or perhaps their hair? Or some underlying air of respectability. How did it make such a difference when most of their rings were only gold-plated?

She turned and looked for Sandy. Almost pleased now that he was still standing next to her. But that was probably a bad sign.

“Tea?” he asked.

“No.”

“Dance?”

“I don’t think so.” They looked at each other, pressed closer together in the crowd. He seemed suddenly quite sober. More awkward.

“Bugger this, let’s get out of here.” Without visibly moving his top half he slid a hand on to her forearm. She felt the heat of it, the weight, and thought – don’t look. Do not look at him.

“Oh there’s Dorothy – Dorothy!”

Dorothy turned and smiled as she beckoned her over.

“Hello,” Dorothy glanced briefly at Sandy, then smiled again at Liz, “I like your dress.”

“Thank you.”

“I begged my mum for one of her frocks, but she insisted I wear this old thing.” She pulled on the hem of her tartan skirt where it was pinned, frowning. Liz looked at the skirt and the white blouse on her long body – oddly like someone playing at being a schoolgirl.

“Sandy, do you know Dorothy?”

He was shifting around, from one foot to the other. He muttered something to Liz that she didn’t quite catch, but Dorothy didn’t seem to notice.

“How do you do.” She gave him that small curtsy of hers.

“Hello Dorothy.” He turned his head to one side, his lip curled up – could that pass for a smile?

“Dorothy works with Annag at the hotel.”

“That so?” He was glancing around him, suddenly unable to keep still. “Well, I’d better leave you ladies to it.” He gave Dorothy a better smile, then turned and walked off without looking at Liz again.

“Why don’t we sit down?” Liz was already making her way to the nearest free table. If she could sit down for a moment then she would be fine. Then she would go home. And nobody

would have anything to talk about. “Have you been dancing?” she turned to Dorothy who had pulled up a chair opposite her.

“A bit, but not with anyone very interesting.” She glanced around, as if checking for any imminent offers.

“How’s school this week?”

“Oh,” she sighed, “fine. Thanks.”

“Any more thoughts about university?”

Dorothy looked straight at her again. “I’ve started making enquiries.”

“Have you?” she smiled. “That’s good.”

Dorothy nodded, her cheeks flushing slightly. She was very pretty when that happened, it seemed to make her eyes greener – though red and green should never be seen...

“Actually, I’m making enquiries myself.”

“You are?”

“Ancient amn’t I – but yes. I wrote a letter this evening.” Though she hadn’t posted it yet. It was still sitting on her desk. Alongside another envelope – both Glasgow addresses.

“What does the letter say?”

“Oh,” she reached her hand down to scratch her leg where the cut itched. “Just a general sort of enquiry.” *Dear Ramsay...* “Though I’m not sure how well it’ll be received.” If she carried on scratching like that she’d end up with a hole in her stockings.

“I’ve a meeting with the head of English on Tuesday.”

“Oh, that sounds just the ticket.”

“I wonder what he’ll ask me though, I’m sure I won’t know what to say.”

“Of course you will. Just listen to what he asks you and answer clearly.”

And don’t change your mind half way through.

She looked up, across the hall again. He was still there, taller than the rest. Brighter. She could see him, running a hand over his hair.

The tips of her fingers felt suddenly wet. She looked down at her leg and saw she had pulled the whole scab right off.

Dorothy was on her way to the kitchen when Mr Devine extended a forearm in front of her, making a blockade of his rayon blend and crisp cuff. She walked into it chest first, rather embarrassingly, though he didn't see her blush because he was eyes front the whole time. He muttered at her out the side of his mouth.

"No more toast for room twelve, he's really taking the Michael now." He smiled suddenly. "Have a pleasant day ladies." Bowing his head to room nine as they headed past.

Dorothy sighed and made her way back to the table with the empty toast rack, wishing she had thought to plunk it somewhere. The sight of the miserable metal bars – a few measly crumbs – it only served to exacerbate the situation.

"I'm terribly sorry Mr..." Michael? No, that wasn't it. That was Mr Devine putting her all wrong. "Mr Martin." She was a great one for remembering the names. She smiled at his thin face with the thick spectacles. "I'm afraid there's no more toast to be had."

"Ah," he raised then lowered his eyebrows. "No," lifting his teacup he turned back to the window, "I suppose there isn't." He said it very matter of fact, as if he expected nothing less than to be continually disappointed in life, though it was a fine day out the window with the fleet already out and the sun sparkling off the sea.

"Sincere apologies," she bowed her head the way she'd seen Mr Devine do whenever he was refusing guests something or other. It wasn't quite right though; it went against the grain of her instinctive hospitality. Mr Devine would be giving them all a bad name if he carried on like this, and there was only so much of it he could blame on the Ministry of Food. What would happen when rationing ended eh? Imagine that – rationing, ended!

"More tea?"

Mr Martin looked up at her briefly. "No thank you dear; I'm fine as I am."

Well at least he'd had the offer. She had tried her best – and as Annag often said, that was the main thing. She stopped to clear the plates from room five. They'd done a good job themselves; nothing left but grease and tomato seeds and a smear of yellow yolk. She took them back into the kitchen which was still thick with the smell of fried sausages and tattie scones, and oh god – what were they trying to do to her now. She pressed her lips tightly together and tried to somehow plug her nose from the inside. If she tensed the back of her throat, squeezing it upwards, she fancied that helped cut off the flow of the stench that was already creeping from the far corner of the cooker. Someone must have ordered kippers. Some cruel person. She separated the cutlery for the kitchen porter and legged it out of there as fast as she could. Gasping as she resurfaced in the dining room, pausing for a moment behind the branches of the tall pot plant. Another of her refuges. Annag said it would end up ruining the carpet but Dorothy liked its thick glossy leaves and air of the exotic – it should be surrounded by Egyptian cigarette smoke and the tinkling of jazz, Bogie and Bergman – play it Sam – but what did they surround it with? She cautiously lowered the tip of her nose to the corner of her white linen shirt. Smelling of fat and burnt toast was one thing, but she couldn't go to school smelling of kippers. That took the absolute biscuit. And really – who in their right mind wanted fish at this time of the morning. If they really must then why not stick to kedgeree. It was so much more sophisticated; it was a favourite with the Mitfords. It was already sitting on the sideboard in silver salvers and wouldn't reek round the whole kitchen for hours afterwards.

The other girls could deal with the kippers though, seen as the breakfast rush was ending and it was nearly time for her to be heading to school. It was good being able to flounce off before they started with the heavy cleaning. All she had to do was serve the tables and make the tea and toast. Mr Devine was very pleased with her at the moment because of what Captain Crawford had said to him the other week:

“The way the young lady asks if I wish more toast – I could eat toast the whole day long.”

Of course now that would come back to haunt her. If this was Mr Devine clamping down on the toast, next thing he’d be rationing the pleasantries. She could imagine him saying – perhaps if you weren’t quite so charming...they wouldn’t be eating us out of house and home. It was important to speak well though, her mother had always told her that. And it meant that she’d be ready – she’d been practising – for whichever Mitfords turned up; Lord Redesdale himself could walk through the dining room doors and she would be able to glide up to him in her starched cap and give him all the tea and toast he could wish for. She was sure she’d recognise him from the Picture Post; it had been an old photograph, taken before the war, but he couldn’t have changed much. It wasn’t as if he’d been fighting or off in a camp somewhere, or in Holloway prison like Diana. He’d been here – rather a lot according to Alec. So why did he never come with them now? She’d hoped his wife or one of the daughters might have a photograph of him amongst their things, but Lady Redesdale only had the son that died, and Unity only had Hitler and goats.

Oh god, the smell of the kippers was working its way out of the kitchen now. Why didn’t Mr Devine do something about it, him that was so sensitive to smell as well. She spotted him pouting over the lunch menu – might they notice if we give them lentil again? Why did they even pretend there was the faintest chance of it being anything else.

“Mr Devine, may I please leave now?”

He didn’t look up. “All right Dot, same time tomorrow, there’s a good girl.”

She turned to go.

“Don’t forget the napkins now.”

“Yes Sir.” Yes sir, but thankfully it was only the one bag full.

She lifted the thing up by the corners and carried it through to the laundry. It was very quiet in there at this time of day – before the breakfasts had finished and the beds had been

stripped. She stripped the beds at the weekends though. If Annag didn't get to them first; the sheets sometimes made Annag turn exceptionally brisk, and a little bit red in the face, and then she'd take them away before Dorothy could see. Nothing to see though – that was what Annag said anyway. And in a way she was telling the truth because you couldn't really see much but if it caught the light just right you could see something, dried in and grainy, that reminded her of the splashes the seagulls left all along the prom. She knew she wasn't supposed to ask about it, but at the same time – it was annoying not knowing.

More infuriating was the fact that Unity's sheets disappeared every time without fail. Every time Dorothy went to the room the bed was already stripped and pulled out, and the window flung open, as if an exorcism had taken place. What on earth was on Unity's sheets that nobody was allowed to see? They said all sorts of things about her – the boys at school said she had a baby by Hitler. Lots of people said that. Dorothy wasn't sure though because Unity didn't seem at all like the mothering sort. Though she supposed that didn't always matter. If she could see the sheets though, that was the thing. Then she would somehow know for sure.

She threw her load of napkins down, leaned against the sink and was overcome by a huge yawn. That was no good. If she started yawning now she'd never survive Latin. A cup of tea would probably help, if Annag hadn't already had it without her; she was ironing in the still room. Dorothy yawned again. Her yawns wouldn't exactly be welcome in there either though. Annag had already tutted and sighed when Dorothy told her she'd been out at the dance until almost midnight.

“On a Thursday night?”

“But it was for the pipe band.”

Annag just raised her eyebrow and set the iron down with a hiss.

It had been worth it though, in ways she'd never have imagined. Even though she'd only danced with Jo from along the road, and Alf the baker, and her cousin Mal, and the boy with the funny eye. But she had sat with Liz, with everyone looking at them – Liz with her blonde hair in waves, and her lips drawn in dark red; crisp and unreal, so that you wanted to touch her to make sure she was entirely there. Dorothy had seen Sandy touch her, his big hand gripping the whole length of her forearm. But she could tell by the way he looked at Liz, that touching her didn't really help matters. Or at least not the arm. She wondered what it would feel like to have Sandy MacPherson's big warm hand holding the whole length of your forearm as if he could crush it in an instant if he felt like it. He even looked as if he wanted to crush her – Dorothy – for a moment, when Liz had called her over. Or maybe it was Liz he wanted to crush the whole time. Standing, not looking at either of them, all sad and itchy and angry. Not like when her Uncle Tufty was drunk and just smiled and smiled until the tears squeezed out the corners of his eyes.

Sandy hadn't stayed with them long though. And she'd tried to listen to Liz talking about university, but the band was loud and the sound of the feet pounding around her, well it was more like a big roar – a rushing of something backwards and forwards in her ears and she couldn't help looking at Liz's forearm, half-expecting to see a palm print with long fingers curving round. But there was nothing to see.

"Of course it's my own fault," Liz was saying. "I should have taken the opportunity when I had it."

"Oh," Dorothy tried not to look shocked.

"It might be too late now." Liz shrugged and folded her arms, so that the pale stretches of skin pressed into each other, and pressed down on the table – which wobbled and was a little sticky, but Dorothy mirrored Liz's pose anyway. Leaning forward. Confidential.

"No, I'm sure it's not," she said, shaking her head now. She was sure. She had seen it.

And she had seen what Liz hadn't as she said goodbye to Dorothy and crossed the hall to go: Sandy watching, then heading out the door behind her. She could picture the two blonde heads leaning together and disappearing into the darkness. And what would Annag have to say about that.

There was someone else in the still room with Annag. She could hear the talk. As she moved towards the door whole words rose and caught in the air – Dorothy – dancing – disgrace. Disgraceful. What had she done now? She slowed herself down into silence, and listened.

“It's more the letting her run around so much on her own. Her mother wasn't even there – can you imagine? She could be getting up to all sorts, not that I think Dorothy would, but there's them that might. That mother of hers is bone idle though; she's only got the one, and still she doesn't bother her shirt.”

She concentrated on looking at Annag's back. Eyes narrowing.

“There's none of us perfect parents.”

Dorothy moved her head so she could see Alec standing on the other side of the ironing board. She pressed her face right up to the door and felt the coolness of the wood against her flaming cheek. Well, at least it wasn't Liz she was saying it to.

“Oh, don't I know it,” Annag went on, “do you know what Jimmy was after saying to me when he got in last night?”

Alec didn't answer, he just clasped a hand over his mouth, gripping the whole jaw as if he was bad with the toothache. Annag didn't seem to care. Relentlessly forcing out every last crease in the sheet.

“He says, I don't think we've christened Thomas yet.”

Well – Dorothy pursed her lips to stop from butting in – Jimmy was quite right. She had given up a long time ago on wondering when it would be. She thought she might be able to wear her lilac dress that she never got to wear anywhere but then her cousin Eilidh got married, so it had been all right in the end. But what about poor Thomas? Why hadn't Annag bothered her shirt about him?

“And I said, what on earth's made you think of that...” Annag was laughing now.

Dorothy wanted to ask - is a child's damnation hanging in the balance not enough? But she wasn't supposed to be listening; she was supposed to be going to school. She was going to school – she turned and untied her apron. And she wasn't talking to Annag anyway.

She wasn't great at not talking to Annag, but she could do it when she really put her mind to it. When the need arose. Not that Annag would realise until tomorrow, now she was stuck at school for the rest of the day. School – where not talking to folk was easy. There was the teacher's glare and the strap hanging up, and the atmosphere of general oppression. Even in English, which was Dorothy's second favourite. They had English in one of the classrooms off central hall, with windows all up the back wall so it was a bit like a conservatory really, though she imagined conservatories weren't so draughty, and didn't smell quite so much of chalk.

They were doing *Hamlet*. Dorothy had read it twice already and learnt all Ophelia's lines, but she'd only got to read out a tiny bit in class the other day, and Fergus Shaw had called her a green girl so violently that she'd been quite taken aback and forgotten where she was. She hadn't had Fergus Shaw down for the dramatic sort.

Dorothy was sure though, that her mother wasn't half as bad as Hamlet's. Mothers in books were always faffing about and getting things wrong, or being unnecessarily strict. Her mother would never dream of marrying her father's brother though – she despised Uncle

Tufty with a passion. And Dorothy was fairly certain that she'd been christened very soon after she'd been born, as would Hamlet surely, what with him being the Prince of Denmark. So that just went to show didn't it.

She wondered how it could be that it was so warm outside and yet so cold in their classroom. There was a draught coming from behind, past Sheila McQuade, smelling of hay, and catching on the back of Dorothy's calves. When she brushed against the metal leg of the desk, that was colder still. At least it wasn't damp though, like some of the other rooms where the chalk sometimes felt slimy in your hand. Mind you, it did give awful nice bright lettering then, with none of the usual powder trails. She gave a slight shiver. Perhaps if she wasn't so tired – but she felt spent, like she was all hollowed out. She hadn't been that late last night really, it was just that she hadn't had time to have her tea with Annag this morning – to climb into the hen's cupboard with a nice warm cup. She wondered if Annag had made her one, and waited with it sitting on the sideboard – not knowing that Dorothy had already gone, and that she wasn't speaking to her anyway.

She felt a tightening around her stomach, as if something was reaching in and squeezing her, but she tried her best to concentrate on her exercise book. She might put: Hamlet is a somewhat ungrateful son, willing to believe his own hallucinations over the word of the woman who raised him. But she didn't really want to put that, because she did quite like Hamlet after all. She sympathised with him up to a point; she was always putting off her homework till the last minute. Why couldn't the boys in her class be more like Hamlet. She imagined him as blonde and brooding, along the lines of Sandy MacPherson. None of these lads, sitting in rows, in short trousers, would ever be as tormented as that – even though Fergus Shaw had been quite convincing the other day. She looked over at the back of Fergus' head; wild red hair combed into a parting but still sticking up slightly on the one side. His hair was even redder than hers, so perhaps they were destined to be connected in some

way – like Liz and Sandy. But she couldn't quite accept that because that made it all too easy then. If you could tell just by looking at a person, well, where was the fun in that? Everyone matched as if it was a game of cards. That wasn't exactly the stuff of novels; not for Nancy, not for Elizabeth Bowen.

She could feel the muscles in her throat shudder and the wave of a yawn about to break. She pressed her lips together and brought her fist to them – which would hopefully look more thoughtful than lethargic. To sleep, perchance to dream – aye, chance would be a fine thing. She'd already got into trouble twice in Latin. *Tribulatio. Ego tribulationis.* She loved the way the words felt in her mouth; even better than Shakespeare. Everything that was nice made you sound different. But she tried to sound as nice as she could – do you wish more toast? She could only try her best.

She was sure her mother tried her best really. Even though she didn't want to go to the dance last night, she had still let Dorothy go, and that was the main thing. Dorothy wasn't allowed to wear her mother's frocks out but she was allowed to try them on whenever she wanted. If she could have chosen one it would've been the dark blue one with the white flowers. She had tried it on again the day before anyway. Then rooted around the back of the wardrobe for a pair of navy blue shoes; amidst the wee boxes with brooches, and a pearl necklace, and strange plastic contraptions covered in talcum powder. She didn't quite know what to make of those, but she had to watch out for them because they sometimes puffed clouds out onto the hanging hems. The tweed skirts and tea dresses and the coat with the fur trim at the far end. She'd taken that out of the wardrobe too and put it on over her slip – which she could barely feel – so it ended up she was almost wearing it like a skin. A hide. But it was heavy and strange smelling, so it felt more like some great beast had her in his grip. And she'd stood there feeling very strange, pulling the coat tighter and tighter around her, until she thought she heard someone coming in downstairs. She'd shoved everything in

behind the polished wooden doors and rushed to the loo. Standing then, in the middle of the bathroom, not quite knowing what to do with herself, then thinking maybe she needed the toilet. Or it could be her time of the month – seen as she was due any day. But there'd been nothing to see there.

That was it though. She finished her sentence and paused, her pencil hovering as the scratching of lead across countless other pages whispered to her from either side. That was what was putting her all wrong and tired. Sore and hollowed out; there was the tell-tale ache beginning to creep up the base of her. So perhaps there would be something to show for it now. She would need to have a check in case it went right through her skirt. It was awkward though. Mr Collins, the Head of English, was taking their class now. It was supposed to be a good sign but they preferred their usual teacher, even if they did call him The Weed. He liked to make them all laugh – silence children, I want to hear a pan drop! And he would laugh most of all, and because he only had the one lung that would very often be him, sighing and spluttering for the rest of the class. He wrote poems that were sometimes in the papers too, though you wouldn't think it to look at him. Dorothy thought that should be enough to make him the head even if Mr Collins was older, and still had both his lungs.

The pain in her stomach was getting worse, though she knew it wasn't really her stomach. She raised her hand. It seemed to hurt more with her hand like that. It was better to curl right up in a ball if you could. But she needed Mr Collins to see. He probably already had and was choosing to ignore her. She concentrated on breathing small breaths that didn't move around her middle too much.

“What is it?”

“Please sir, may I be excused?”

“No.”

She paused – in for a penny...“Please sir, I need to use the lavatory.” There was a slight snigger from the class.

“I said no. There’s no need to give yourself an additional showing up. This isn’t the infants you know.” There were more sniggers from all sides now – you were allowed to laugh when it was the teacher making the joke. Only this wasn’t like with The Weed, because Dorothy wasn’t laughing with them.

She felt herself turning red and shifted in her seat – well, as long as she didn’t turn it red. But movement of any sort was a mistake. She was definitely bleeding now. She could feel it sticky against the side of her thigh. Oh god. What on earth was she supposed to do; she couldn’t just sit there, in the middle of English, bleeding between the legs. If she was as bold as the boys she would climb out the back window without the teacher even noticing. They sometimes did that – and then walked back in the front, quite the thing, just to confuse matters. But what if she couldn’t get the window open properly, or if she didn’t fit through the gap? That would be even worse. She turned in her seat to eye the panels – the thin sheets of glass that were the difference between being inside and being out. What if she ran straight at it, smashing through like they did in cartoons. If she was bleeding everywhere then her skirt didn’t matter one bit, but surely she didn’t need to resort to potential death or mutilation just to get to the lavatory! If she stayed any longer she would die of the embarrassment anyway. It didn’t really bear thinking about. She grabbed her bag and holding it firmly against her backside, ran straight down the side and out of the room.

Mr Collins shouted after her – where the hell did she think she was going. Mr Collins was that one who could go to hell though. Imagine shouting hell like that, showing himself up. The Weed would never have done that. Well she was out now and that was the main thing. Outside even, though she hadn’t really meant to go all the way through the back door and into the mid-morning sun that stung her eyes. As if it wasn’t embarrassing enough without crying

into the bargain. Dorothy felt a single drip forming on the end of her nose and swiped it off as if she was swatting a fly. Silly really. At least there weren't any drips yet making their way down her leg. It wasn't fair though. What on earth was she going to do now?

It would've been quicker to cut past the back field but a gym teacher might've seen her or there might've been boys practising shinty, so she had to just sneak down the side of the Dalintart, past the rhubarb gardens where it jutted up at her with their pink sinewy looking stems, ribbed and stringy – like the stripped back muscles from her biology textbook. Bloody biology. Bloody bloody bloody. Her mother didn't like that word. Her mother – she could see her already, as she turned up the garden path. She was sitting out the back, eyes closed to the mid-morning sun; well she had to get it while she could, it was for the good of her health – I need all the vitamins I can get, you know I've never felt entirely well since Dorothy.

Dorothy had the sudden thought that she would be in trouble here too. It was her own fault for not wearing her belt when she knew this was going to happen at some point – but honestly, that belt was the most awful thing. She hadn't quite believed it when her mother had first given her it; though at least she'd finally got to the bottom of the small packages wrapped in newspaper she'd been sent to Miss Silverton's for each month.

Her mother shot up, as if she could somehow sense that there were unsavoury thoughts being had somewhere in the vicinity. And it was Dorothy no less, and she had fouled her school skirt no less, and made an exhibition of herself, and was jinking school now into the bargain; so she ran straight past her mother, in the front door and up the stairs, as fast as she could.

The bathroom was cool and bright, bathed in the midday light. Dorothy caught her breath, took off her shoes and unbuttoned her skirt. It wasn't so sore not having it buttoned all tight across her stomach. The linoleum felt cold and hard against the soles of her feet, with only her socks between them – slidey too, as she stepped out of her skirt, almost catching her toes

on the waistband. She picked it up and examined it next to the window. But there was nothing to show on the dark material as she blinked and turned from the too bright light. But when she pressed the tips of her fingers into it...

“Dorothy?” Her mum was coming up the stairs now. “Dorothy? What are you doing home?”

She was staring at her hand when her mother opened the door. Holding it up slightly so she was almost waving, a glistening red wave – like a child who’d got at some potted plants.

“I asked to be excused but Mr Collins said I could go to hell.” She looked at her mother, then back at the skirt; and now she’d said hell, just to put the tin hat on it. She gave a loud sniff, though her mother wouldn’t like that either.

“Oh dearie me.” She moved towards Dorothy, then paused, eyeing the skirt and her red right hand; taking her eventually by the wrists, she led her towards the sink.

She wasn’t feeling as sore as she had earlier but she let her mum put her to bed with a hot water bottle anyway. Then she brought her tea, and a bit of cake, and two of her best magazines –and Dorothy wished that Annag could see her now, though strangely the thought of that, as her mother stroked the side of her head with soft thin fingers, made Dorothy want to cry again. What did Annag know anyway? Motherhood wasn’t just about breeding like a rabbit the whole time.

“That Mr Collins is a brute,” her mum said.

“But I’m supposed to see him on Tuesday,” she could hear her voice starting to shake again.

Her mother scoffed. “Absolutely not.”

Dorothy sighed. Relieved in the main because she didn’t want to see Mr Collins on Tuesday, or any other day. She didn’t give a stuff about him or university. But there quickly followed the niggling thought, of what Liz would say about that. Might that be counted as

giving up? Really though, Liz had told Dorothy to do one thing when she herself had done the other. And even after Liz had left Oban – she'd come home again anyway, hadn't she. Back to the familiar. Dorothy repositioned her hot water bottle. The warmth was working its way right through her.

“You know,” her mother said, “that’s a rotten way to treat a girl.”

“Mmm.” She was suddenly feeling tired again, what with the hot water bottle, and the soft pillows, and her belly full of milky tea. And the one thing after another slipping away with the stroke of soft thin fingers that smelled of lavender; all unpleasant thoughts of rabbits, or skirts, or Tuesdays.

“And you know, if you don’t like school anymore, well...” her mum pulled the pink and white blanket closer to Dorothy’s chin, “there’s nobody forcing you to go back.”

Her eyes seemed to close of their own accord as her mother’s voice faded.

“....besides.....”

Coming in waves.

“....queer ideas...”

Nothing to signify.

“.....it never did me any harm.”

PART THREE: JUST DEATH



13

Liz hadn't even been walking a whole hour and her feet were already sore. It was the rain rather than the distance. Her stockings were soaked through. The thin permeable layer of lisle got trapped and pressed by the hard edge of her leather shoe, until it rubbed the skin raw. It was enough to make her long for the ill-fitting theatre boots back at the cottage hospital. Any boots at all would have been a blessing. She glanced along the road ahead, the glen spreading out to either side of her, the hills lined up in height order so that the furthest and tallest disappeared into thin air. Air that condensed and fell again in a light all-pervading drizzle. It wasn't quite the occasion she had dressed for. The pale greyish tunic and starched apron weren't much help to her now, though it was good of Miss Gilchrist to have loaned her the uniform. Especially seen as she wasn't quite on cottage hospital business; this was a different business altogether, and she would be paid accordingly – by who exactly? The thought chilled her, though it might also have been the wind. What she really needed was some anti-vermin overalls like they'd had in the QAs. Lord how she'd hated them at the time, but they'd seen her to hell and back – and here this was only a bit of rain. She tutted. Enough complaining. Think of the miles folk had had to march all over Europe. The Soviet soldiers marched for days on end, in the bitter cold, and no provisions left. Every hardship on the grandest of scales, the most miles, the lowest temperatures. They had done it for mother

Russia though. Who was she marching for? Dr Beaton? Dr Beaton and the Hippocratic Oath? Hypocrite perhaps. Aye. That was more like it.

The man who stood winding rope on Salen pier knew Dr Beaton. She'd listened to him talking away, the pier creaking and swaying beneath her; though it was maybe still just the feeling of the steamer – the sea really – somewhere inside her. Molecules refusing to still. She'd waited, looking about the place for the Mull doctor that was to meet her. The man with the rope knew all about him too; how she'd be in for a long wait seen as he was still stuck on Inch Kenneth. Hadn't anybody warned her? No? Well, that was too bad of them – not that he blamed Dr Beaton, certainly not; a man of his pedigree.

“Aye it's a shame you're not going by thon road to Pennyghael,” he said, “you would pass by the Beaton cross. A nice big cross it is – for those that were doctors to the Lord of the Isles.”

“He had a Dr Beaton too?”

The man gave a short – pah – and shook his head. “Well there was more than one Lord, and more than one Dr Beaton.” He shrugged as he turned to hang his rope, then held his hands up. “Not saying that he's a direct relative, or that there's any straightforward sort of connection mind you.”

“No.” She was looking at his hands, still marked where the thin grubby cable had wrapped tight across each palm.

“But I liked seeing him fine when me and the wife were living in Oban. I thought – Beaton is it now, well, he's the man for me. What's good enough for the Lords of the Isles...” He turned to face Liz, grinning now so she could see, even in the dull day, the dark corners of his mouth that no amount of Beatons had been able to reach. There was a particularly large gap on the bottom right into which he swiftly lodged a pipe. She smiled back at him, liking the

way he spoke and the strong smell of his tobacco. He was awful sorry that he couldn't take her to Gribun himself – but he could drop her up by the hotel and there would be someone in Salen would take her.

There was nobody at Salen to take her. At least not right at that moment. The man from the hotel said he could take her after teatime, and the man in the garage had raised him to 5pm. Both of them told her there was no point leaving before that anyway – there would be no getting on or off Inch Kenneth for a while yet.

But she wondered how they could be so sure, seen as it wasn't all that stormy on the east side of the island. It wasn't that she didn't believe them, but she was that anxious to be off that she'd found herself heading west of her own accord. Her feet weren't so bad yet as to make her regret that decision; she was more conscious of the envelope she could feel jutting out of her inside pocket. It was digging slightly into her chest in a way that pleased her – reminded her of him. Reassuring and provoking in equal measures.

She had been determined to wait for Ramsay to write first. The only reason she'd buckled was because of Annag; her needs were surely more important than Liz ceding the upper hand. Not that she had mentioned Annag in her letter. Of what concern was Annag to him?

Liz had tried to read his reply through twice whilst she sat waiting on the pier at Salen.

Then the man had come up to her, quite the thing, and peered over. "Is that Gaelic you've got there?"

"No, it's French."

"You speak French do you?"

"Not really, no."

"Why is your letter in French then?"

"Oh, just somebody's idea of a joke."

And she had to laugh really. She'd opened it earlier that morning, quietly closing the bedroom door before plunking the small package in the back of her wardrobe. Perched on the end of the bed, she scanned the page, laughed out loud, then cursed him under her breath. Well...it served her right for being so short with him in hers:

Please send me as many rubber condoms as you can lay your hands on – at least half a dozen...

She would have to write him again now to say thank you. And what else would she tell him? Would she refer to their last discussion, in the uni café with all those mirrors that only served to confuse. To compound matters. Easier to dismiss all that in a letter – thank you for the expert careers advice; I've decided to disregard it entirely. She would have to tell him at some point though; her application to the university was already in the post. There was a special form to fill in: For applicants seeking special concessions on the grounds of National Service. Please make application to the Secretary of the Board, giving full particulars and sending certificates. She'd at least sent them all the certificates. The particulars were more problematic. Sandy's face flashed through her thoughts – well, hadn't he had his life interrupted too? Yes, and worse than her because he was stuck now. But she knew he'd made his own bed there – she knew it had a peach coloured counterpane! Anyway, she couldn't blame him for her actions. She could've just said no to him without bringing the national interest into it. Though here she was maybe getting her second chance, at the degree at least....She couldn't help wondering again, how it might have panned out first time round had her father still been alive. He wouldn't have stood the interruption to her examination for a start; but what of the other business? No doubt it was him that would've been asked first – may I have your daughter's hand? She could just picture it; absurd male bartering. And her

father would frown like Mr Bennet in his study – you want her hand now do you boy, well just what am I supposed to do with the rest of her?

Her hands weren't much good to Sandy now, but did he still want the rest of her? She didn't think so – not really. Though she had felt herself grow warm under his grip the other night; standing next to him in the hall noticing the feel of him, the size of him, how he looked at her with an intoxicating mix of need and contempt. It was almost enough...if they went far into the woods nobody would see them. Instead she'd walked home and made do with firing a pointed missive at Ramsay, as if he was a sales clerk at the London Rubber Company. Leaving out the words she really wanted to say, wanted him to hear – they aren't for me by the way, but they could be.

Come to think of it she hadn't said much in her letter at all. Her shame had made her cold, too bold, crude even. As if she was somehow now blaming her banishment on him; but she had a plan, she knew what she was going to do – only maybe she wouldn't tell Ramsay about the application until it was all arranged. There were only so many places and she could still hear his voice coming through the clink of cutlery on crockery, and laughter – but would they even have you? The Secretary had told her, unprompted, that they now had a substantial cohort of female medical students. Liz wanted to ask him if this was a recent development, or where they were all going, because none of them appeared to be practising at the Western. She could hazard a guess at the answer though. At best – general practice, or women's problems at Redlands. At worst – married. Married and disappeared, never to be seen again.

The cool air buzzed with insects and birdsong and, when she looked up at it, fell, wet, on her lips. The fresh rain so different to the sea spray with its salt taste – she pictured the storms on the West coast, the wee boat to Inch Kenneth. Was she expected to actually go to Inch Kenneth?

Dr Beaton hadn't said so, but of course he hadn't intended that she would walk from Salen either. The Mull doctor was to meet her off the boat and drive her in his car back to Gribun. Then they would get the patient settled and start the journey all the way back again.

"She's likely to be in considerable discomfort," Dr Beaton had paused to look at Liz. "You've heard of Unity Mitford?" His voice barely rose, but the strength of the grey stare turned the sentence into a question. The question. They were getting to the point now.

"Yes..." she paused, "I'm familiar with her work."

"Indeed." Dr Beaton nodded. Grave. His sharp face was lined with shadows and worry – she wondered just how long he'd been at the hospital. He'd sent the messenger boy to fetch Liz just after sunrise. So she had shuddered walking over through a sea of damp bluebells, thick clouds of midges and the absurdly loud dawn chorus; along the road, and into Miss Gilchrist's sitting room where Dr Beaton was waiting with tea and a favour to ask – I'm afraid it's of rather a delicate nature.

He had stood up and turned away from her, and Liz ventured to take a sip from her cup.

"So you'll be aware that she shot herself in the head in 39', when war was declared." He spoke into the window, with his hands clasped behind his back – like a politician. Like a politician about to have someone shot. Perhaps declare war. But that had all already happened – so what was it to them?

"Yes." Liz put her cup down again and clasped her hands in her lap.

"They were never able to remove the bullet. She had the best possible care of course, Hitler saw to that himself." He turned and glanced back at Liz, with something unfamiliar in his eyes. Anger? Or something less. Bitterness then? She still didn't know how he had spent the war. "But," he carried on, "there's only so much you can do when it comes to the brain before you start doing more damage than good."

Of course. She knew that; first, do no harm.

“In the end,” he turned to face her again, “they sent her back to England – and gave her about ten years.”

Ten years. Give or take. Their eyes met across the room and for a moment neither said a word. The birds had grown louder but the sky was still grey; perhaps that was as light as it would get. There were storms, after all, coming off the Atlantic.

“Aren’t there nurses already on Mull?” Liz asked.

Dr Beaton nodded. “There is, but we ideally want someone to bring them all the way here and the Mull nurses mustn’t be away from home overnight. There was one ready to meet them when they came off Inch Kenneth, but that was two days ago and now she’s gone to a family in Glenforsa with Typhus.” He cleared his throat. “The weather has made things rather difficult, and the Glenforsa family were struggling....caught off-guard...”

“Well, nobody asks for typhus.”

“Quite.” He looked straight at Liz again. Trying to read, to judge perhaps. Would she say yes? Would she go and meet the Mitfords, the Valkyrie herself; mop her brow, keep her clean, comfortable, not mention Hitler. Bite her tongue, keep her touch firm but light. Do no harm.

Liz nodded. Of course she would.

Inch Kenneth was only a small island off the west of Mull, so the Mitfords didn’t even have such a thing as a telephone; they had had to signal the boatman at Gribun when Unity fell ill, and then again when the Doctor got stuck there too. That wasn’t such a problem for Unity – her own doctor, hostage – it was hard on the rest of his patients though. Liz wondered how often it happened like that; Mull was so big, and the folks so spread out over it. At least the doctors had cars these days. Not that they had been much use to her. She tried to ignore the burning sensation in her shoes and concentrated on looking around her as the road turned

down the side of Loch na Keal. There were rocks strewn everywhere, as if it was only last week that they'd cracked and rolled, or been blasted and blown up from wherever it was they came. The trees lined the left of the loch, facing out to the Atlantic, heads thrown back like long haired ladies laughing. That must be where Inch Kenneth was, straight down the sea loch. A whole island just for them – she imagined them, these Mitford girls, lined up like in the newspaper pictures, with their laughing lips, and their dead eyes, and their curled bobs thrown back behind them. They always looked like painted dolls in the pictures. But Unity had a scar on her temple, Dr Beaton had told her, and the Mull doctor reported that it had started to bulge.

Liz tried to notice if the cut on her leg was still throbbing, but it was difficult to differentiate seen as she wasn't really talking to her lower half at the moment. Would she end up with a scar? She'd made the whole thing bleed again after the dance the other week. An open wound that she'd had to dress in a crisp sterile bandage. So that was fine then. Under control. It was all under control.

The rocks to the left of her were appearing in increasingly precarious positions. She found herself softening her step as she glanced up at them; though that hardly mattered when there was a gale growing the whole time. As it went on the road narrowed, wedged in between the raw tall cliff face and the small stone wall that was all that separated her from the loch – which was really the Atlantic already. It must have been difficult building the road on the rocks like that, almost cutting into the cliff's side, following the curve of it like a neat incision – but leaving this wide single track scar. Gaping rather than bulging. Rock didn't have the abilities of the flesh. But what kind of shape exactly did a bullet leave?

The dressing on her leg would be getting wet, but that was okay. It would hold. Even if it did look a bit odd – the plain white strip in the midst of her. No more scratching though. She was as bad as her mother with her knitting needles down the side of the plaster. Liz hadn't

been able to tell her mother when she'd be back. Dr Beaton said he would pop in to check on her after morning rounds. So that would be another black mark against Liz. Poor Dr Beaton, she could just imagine her mother's face – you again is it? And now this was a fine business to have got her daughter mixed up in.

The road opened out again, the cliffs backing off and the shore spreading out between her and the water – she was getting nearer the point. The edge of what could only be Inch Kenneth began to reveal itself. Inch by inch. The wind was wild now. She braced herself against it, clutching to her bag and the front of her cape; hunching forward, so it took her a moment to notice, amidst the rise and fall of the land and sea – blue, green and grey, with yellow flashes of gorse – the almost perfectly white almost perfectly square house, that sat rather incongruously on the island in front of her. It had a queer modern shape to it and too many blank eyed windows. She had a sudden horror that she might somehow get stuck over there herself, in that odd Argus of a cube – and god only knew what went on inside it. Or perhaps god and St Kenneth, poor sod. Must stick in the craw to have one's name tainted like that. But the Mitfords would come and go and leave Kenneth as he was, and nobody would be very interested in them anymore. The wind howled. She tried not to think of the rocks on the hill above, thinking instead of something bright...of Dorothy. Yes, Dorothy. She would be interested. Liz forced herself to look up at the house again. She must remember it all. She would tell Dorothy everything; she had to be warned.

There was a cottage up ahead now with a light in the window. She would need to just ask – throw herself on their mercy, seen as she was stuck there now, without so much as a patient. She would have to tell them that she was waiting for Unity. And what would they make of that? What did they make of that house full of Hitler, and it staring right on to them with its ghostly gaze. Theirs was a nice wee place, just a normal stone cottage, with animal sounds coming from the outbuildings and smoke coming from the chimney. She imagined them

drying clothes by the fire, maybe boiling a kettle – well, she could only hope! And they would hopefully understand, you didn't get to pick your patients. They would know that something was wrong already; it was probably them that saw the signal in the first place. Unity is unwell – the doctor must be summoned. And that was two days ago. What sort of state would she be in by now? Liz frowned and lifted her hand to knock the thick black door.

“It's an interesting story,” the man said.

“Interesting?” His wife made a face.

The man shrugged. “Well, you know what I mean.”

The wife tutted to show that she knew only too well, and that perhaps it wasn't that interesting to her, because she went back to peeling the potatoes.

Liz had carefully arranged her fingers around her cup of tea so that each one got the heat of it, all slotting into each other and pressing against the smooth ceramic surface.

“So what was the story?” she asked, leaning her head forward. Something to do with the wind? She'd been asking them about the wind, and the rocks – the lasting impressions from her walk over. Those and the strange bent backwards trees with their thin intricate webs of branches. They had started looking more and more like neurons, dendrites – hand-drawn in dark ink. It had been a long time since she'd looked at those diagrams. Too long. And yet they had sought her out here, of all places.

“Aye,” the man sat back in his seat. He had a round face and a thick beard. “There's that big rock you would have passed just before you got to the house. They call it the stone of the courting couple – Clach na Leannan.”

“Oh.” She couldn't say that she'd noticed any one particular rock. But she could easily believe they were handy enough places for a sly winch.

“You can spot that rock,” the man was saying, “because it has a wee stone wall to the front of it.”

“Yes, I do remember the wall now you mention it.”

The man nodded. “There was a young couple married and given a croft over there,” he gestured to the back of the house; towards the rock she supposed. “They moved into the house on their wedding night, but when the family went to call the next day, there was only the rock, and everything crushed beneath it.”

Jesus.

“Terrible sad so it is – aye.” The wife had the habit of sharply inhaling on the ‘aye’ so it was spoken as more of a sigh.

“Yes,” Liz nodded, she could feel her brow contracting, “yes, that is sad.” Like a wince.

“When I was a boy you could still see the rafters lying under it.”

“Really?”

“And of course the couple themselves lie there yet.”

The way he said that, and the way the wife shook her head at him, made Liz think he’d told the story many a time. Maybe to strangers. Maybe on evenings like this when the rain lashed and the wind shook the windows and you wondered how on earth there were still rocks left up there. The man nodded at her and smiled and picked up his cup again. It was, after all, a bloody good story.

She sat back in her seat, enjoying the warmth of it all. Being fed and watered, and was that it now? Would she just live with these people always? Maybe become a district nurse, get herself a motorbike – she would quite like that. Or did she only like the fact she was a stranger, and that was a novelty doomed to fade. They would eventually wonder what it was she was doing, question who exactly she thought she was, and insist above all else, that

despite the risk of being crushed to death, it was about time she was getting married and settling down.

“Are you married yourself?” the man had asked.

“She’s a nurse,” the wife broke in, as if that settled the question. Then smiling at Liz as she lifted her plate away, “it must keep you very busy.”

“Oh yes. Never a dull moment.”

Liz hadn’t been sure how to describe her commission when the woman had first sat her down in front of the fire. She was saved the bother however, just by taking off her cape.

“Oh thank god, you must be here for Miss Mitford, the other nurse left days ago with no word of coming back, and here the weather’s supposed to change this evening. Imagine the doctor stuck as well – aye. He’ll be glad you’re here. Terrible road so it is. Terrible road. And you won’t even have seen what he’s got for an ambulance.”

She hadn’t really got as far as imagining what the journey back might be like. The bad roads and the rundown vehicle. And Unity. The wind had been battering the front of the house with a steady rumbling sound that she’d stopped paying attention to – until it stopped. A quiet spread itself out over the room, across the table where she was still sitting opposite the man; their eyes meeting for a moment – longer, then they stood up. Liz followed him outside without speaking, folding her arms against the breeze. His face looked different in the clear grey light, and with the serious expression. His cheeks weren’t so round and there were lines on his forehead, deep and angled so the flesh looked marked. He was squinting across at the shore opposite. It was odd how through all the wind and rain, all the air in between them moving this way and that, she could see, clear as day, the strip of bleached beach and the front of the big house – like two blank spaces cut out of a landscape painting. There was a beach on their side too, a pale stretch of sand made smooth by watery windy caresses, that would receive the sharp edge of the hull as they brought the vessel in. As they stood there

looking out across the sea, waiting, she noted her quickening pulse. It was only a short crossing – should they go down to the beach yet? She couldn't even think of the word beach without the word 'fight' barging in on her. Bloody Churchill. Cousin Winston she should say. That's what it was like though, it reminded her of the war. Always waiting for the next casualty – or the last. Ten years was a long wait. In the field she'd been prepared for noise and mess and maleness. But this was an old wound she was dealing with now. Violence that had stopped bleeding, sunk deep, got into the system and left it weak. Most likely an infection, Dr Beaton had said. Probably meningeal. Liz imagined the swollen layers, the building pressure.

She concentrated on her breath. In. Out. Keeping time with the repeating waves which had lost their urgency and flopped on to the beach like tired travellers. She gave a slight shiver, though she wasn't at all cold. The man moved his arm, and she thought for an awful moment he was going to put it round her.

"There."

But he only pointed at something.

"Over there."

She squinted.

"That'll be them coming now."

The water was full of knives, hacking their way up her legs. Christ. She stumbled. She couldn't hear where she was going, she couldn't hear... The wind maybe, or just the roaring of blood in her ears. Blood rushing this way and that – a single electric sounding ring that pushed the voices too far, though there were bodies next to hers. A shoulder in direct contact and their arms crossing under each other as they reached out and held tight – making themselves into a cross. A cross to bear. Something was being shouted, grabbed away by the wind and beyond the ringing ringing – as if there had been a direct hit. A bomb. A shell. She had stumbled on the shells. Sharp things, but she couldn't feel anything hacking her anymore. Her legs were frozen and her arms were on fire. Heave. The purchase of her skin being pulled in two directions at once. Hold. Lactic acid building. Hold the line. Face bowed to the wind, teeth gritted – heaving. But she was sinking and slow, and the beach still ahead of them, stretching on and on. Liz stumbled again, righted herself, and glanced back to see a flash of white in the distance as a chill spray shot up between her legs. Heaving again now; head bowed to the enemy. She caught a flash of the white porcelain face as it burst open and unleashed, through the noise of the wind and the blood in her ears – a single searing scream. The sound reached right into Liz's head. She heard the shocking burning clarity of it. And then nothing.

According to Sister Tutor, her father, her high-school Latin teacher, and various authors of the better sort of anatomy textbooks – Cochlea meant snail in Greek. But Liz always thought it was more like a seashell; the distinct spiral full of a salty sort of fluid. Like the abandoned home of some swollen clutching crustacean. Still inclined to nip. You could even feel the swill. The stiller your head was the louder it got, as blood spoke to salt water and sent signals to the brain. Though she didn't need to hear herself quite so much, this swoosh of regular

waves that kept her awake at night. The relentless sound like the sea of home. Though she must swoosh. Pump. Breathe – hear – thrum. It was worse when something failed, and then it was like a snail after all. Her mother had accused her of being hard of hearing – not surprising really if you will insist on making a beeline for the battlefields – but Liz knew it had only made her slow. Slow of hearing. Every now and then. As if her whole body had turned to a slimy limbless slug, that had somehow come detached from its shell; the cochlea, that she had to find her way back to again. Towards sound. Muffled at first, like the space between frequencies – and then...

The Mull doctor had very thin very pink lips. There was something grotesque about the way they opened and closed on his face, or disappeared into themselves, into the silence of the held back words stuck in their dark wet cave. She lifted her eyes to his. Still not knowing his right name; she hadn't managed to catch that, she hadn't managed to catch anything. The lips moved again and she heard the word sulphathiazole. Yes. Distinctly; it was a drug used against infection. She clutched to it at once – sulphathiazole. Swallowed loudly.

“Yes, I see.”

“Of course,” he continued, “the mother’s against medicine in general, but I don’t expect she’ll make a nuisance of herself.”

Liz frowned.

The Mull doctor noticed. “Hell of a night ahead I’m afraid, but I’m sure you’ve seen worse.” His voice for some reason grew lighter at that. “Dr Beaton speaks very highly of you.”

“Oh?”

“But do just give a knock if you need anything, there’s a good girl.” He put a hand on her shoulder and steered her towards the back of the ambulance. “I’ll get the door.” She wasn’t conscious of making any effort to move, but the hand somehow pressed her forward and

down, compressing her into the back of the tin-can vehicle, through the low double door that she turned back to see closing against the light. He'd shut them with the gentlest of clicks, but there followed a slight whimper, then a distinct tut, and Liz was suddenly very aware of the women next to her. The one prostrate and swaddled, with the other sat at her feet, less precise; the scarf tied round her head, and her drawn face and shadowy features, made her look more like some sorry babushka than the wife of a peer of the realm. Lady Redesdale was presumably sitting on something like the thin wooden seat Liz pulled down from the van's side. Wedging herself between the side of Unity's stretcher and the thin sheet of metal that was all that was keeping her from the ditch at the side of the road. The vehicle had come from some local garage. Been on standby for days, though they hadn't apparently used the time to make it any more comfortable.

"The water's fresh," the driver had assured them, and she'd been reminded at once of the salt water creeping up her legs.

It felt sticky now, at the knees, as she squatted on the vehicle's floor. Checking to see if the water was in fact fresh, and what else they'd seen fit to kit her out with. Not hellish much; she peered into the small fixed cabinet, and two cubby holes worth of bandages. It was no more than she expected though really. They would be used to accidents, broken bones and bleeding bits – and it wasn't as if there was much to be done for Unity anyway. Was that part of the reason why she'd yet to meet Lady Redesdale's eye? It was too awful up close to them like this – and yet the woman was probably taking it, if anything, as a sign of deference.

Liz had already noticed, once they'd got their patient off the beach and into the ambulance, the thick scar on the side of Unity's head which was visibly pulsing. She couldn't help staring at it. A scar, as far as she knew, was a mass of devascularised fibrous tissue; so what collagen fibres and capillary networks had managed to make it so – angry? As if it had tapped into something that had spent the last ten years quietly simmering below the surface.

Because there must have been a certain amount of anger when she pulled the trigger that day in Munich. In the English Gardens; that was a nice poetic touch – Liz had to give her that. A bit obvious perhaps, a bit unpleasant for the children passing by, the families out for a stroll – but of what concern were they to the Hon Unity Mitford. The papers had said it was a nursemaid who found her; part nurse, part maid – was there any lowlier creature?

Liz eased herself back on to the seat. What else was she supposed to do? Staring at the scar wouldn't help, it just meant its pulse appeared to grow – she pictured a homunculus with a tiny moustache banging down the temple door. She could almost hear it reverberating through the compressed air of their tin van. When they'd carried Unity in her lips were moving, but no words came out. And Liz couldn't seem to find any either. Though she knew the sort that were expected – that's it, easy does it. You're all right.

The engine started with a sudden rumble and a low wheeze. Unity moaned and writhed and Lady Redesdale lunged forward, but could only grip the edge of the blankets with withered white hands. Her wide eyes caught Liz's for a moment, and she felt in them the question that was already forming in her own head – is it really going to be like this the whole way? Though unlike Lady Redesdale Liz knew fine well that there was every chance that it would. That the human body was capable of miles and miles of suffering and moaning. Lady Redesdale was still looking at her.

“I'll make her as comfortable as I can.” The words came out like a cold sort of shrug, though Liz was feeling warmer and warmer. She took off her cape, squatting again on the floor, thighs burning – though her feet were still frozen – as she prepared the compress. The cool clean water on the tips of her fingers helped, and she concentrated on folding the fabric along damp imprecise lines. When she turned towards Unity she was again taken aback by the familiarity of the face. The face from the papers, that migrated from the society columns to foreign affairs. Letters to the editor. Opinion pieces: please print my name in full as I

want everyone to know that I am a jew-hater. The Hon Unity Valkyrie Mitford. Liz moved towards her with the cloth outstretched, almost shaking with intent. Small searing drips made their way past her wrists, wrung out under the tightness of her grip. Better a bloody pillow and be done with it. She brought the compress down on the pale forehead and let it lie there limp. At least it would keep the eyes closed; Liz couldn't look at those wide pools of pale blue without wanting to spit. Like something bitter and cloying had found its way into her mouth, though the smell coming off the sweating woman was sickly sweet. She could feel the perspiration forming on her own face. Just then the van lurched into movement, and as she went to steady herself against the stretcher Unity's flailing right hand caught hers. Liz flinched, pulling away at once, but could still feel where the hot clammy fingertips had touched the palm. Her scar. Burning. She felt the vehicle vibrating around her. Borne forward now. She pressed her lips together tight and concentrated on not being sick. Crouching on her slat of a seat, bent almost double, folding her arms tight as if they might disappear inside her – out of harm's way. Lady Redesdale was still clutching the blankets, wringing them in her hands now. The noise of the engine at least acted as a counterpoint to the low moan of the patient, like two drones from the same pipes. It was all the same to Liz now, but this wringing of hands infuriated her. As if Lady Redesdale hadn't had a hand in the whole thing, and she'd only now suddenly developed a capacity to comprehend suffering. They should have made them go...they should all have been made to go and look. To see the scale. Though they'd have seen the papers, the films, all those awful photos – but he was such a charming man you see... They should've been made to smell, that was the thing. The smell. There was very little to hear all in all. Quiet as the grave by the time they'd got there.

“Do settle dearest...”

The wringing in her eyes and ears....

Liz lunged forward again. “I'll adjust the blankets.”

Lady Redesdale let go of them at last.

First Liz folded the blankets down to the bottom of the stretcher. Unity's long body took up almost the whole length of it. Mounds of ample flesh, that flopped and flapped with each bump in the road. Liz leaned right across and tucked the whole of a thick sheet along the far edge of the stretcher. As she moved back across, Unity again clutched blindly at her, securing a forearm this time in a surprisingly firm grip.

Liz prised herself free, "that's enough, now." The woman was unable to so much as brace her own bones, and yet still grasping, grasping. Liz pinned both the patients' arms to her side, and quickly pulled the sheet tight. It was more difficult to tuck it firmly on this side, with the body in full beneath it now, but the tighter she pulled, the stiller it grew. The rest was easier. Layers to hold the position. Strengthen defences. The patient was motionless, and silent, by the time Liz had finished. She replaced the compress and sat back again. Sweating. Aware of her own breath. In the relative calm she looked again at the waxen face, and cursed it to hell. Though there could be no doubt it was there already. All genuine enough. The raging temperature and racing pulse. The growing pressure of the fiery burning pain, but she didn't want to think about that – she had no interest in what went on inside that head. But...well, where exactly was the bullet they had left in all those years ago? Maybe they would x-ray her at the West Highland. Was it too late to consider taking it out even now? Surely there was some way they could ease the strain. Cut neatly through the cranium with one of those delicate circular drills, that whirred and buzzed...

Unity shrieked as the van lurched over a bump in the road. Then another. The cries growing deeper with each jolt to the head. And Lady Redesdale wincing, closing her eyes tight; why not pop a hand over each ear and be done with it. Forget about the whole rotten business. Liz tried to steady herself on her seat. Steady her breath.

"You might ask them to drive more carefully" Lady Redesdale piped up.

“I’m sure they’re doing the best they can.”

Lady Redesdale looked away again, clasping and unclasping her hands. The last thing any of them needed was to be stuck in the back of that thing for longer than was strictly necessary. Liz dreaded to think what she might be tempted to say by the time they got to Craignure.

Lady Redesdale had resumed her wincing, in accompaniment to her daughter’s whining. Liz brought her hand to her own forehead. Pinching the brow above her nose. Feeling the flesh against the bone, and the sweat and even a few grains of sand that had lodged themselves there. She closed her eyes for a moment and felt her whole body rise and fall with the uneven sway of the vehicle. This time Unity cried like a beast giving birth and Lady Redesdale let out a quivering wail of her own.

Right.

Liz sidled up to the patient again, who was still secure in her sheets, with only the head lolling and jolting, which of course was the bit that mattered most. She propped herself on the side of the stretcher and slid her left arm under Unity’s pillow. Keeping it firm. Bracing herself against the impact, absorbing the worst of it, and holding the patient still. The horrendous sounds stopped. She felt Lady Redesdale’s eyes on her, then sensed the woman sliding back into her seat. But the whole time Liz looked straight ahead, at the thin metal wall separating her from the doctor, as if she might will herself into his position. Was he sitting comfortably, staring out the window at the fading light on Ben Mor, or any of those other hills she’d seen. Odd to think it was only a matter of hours ago she’d stood... Utterly alone in a light rain. She was surrounded now, by the sweat and breath smells of the unwell, which she could just about stomach until the patient started muttering. A murmuring

muddled noise that sounded appalling like speech; a drawn out and broken German? That'd be the bloody bullet talking. Saying what exactly?

"Shhhh." The shoosh of the library rather than the nursery.

Unity did what she was told. Lady Redesdale said nothing. The little light that had been making its way to them was struggling to hold its own. The dark that thickened seemed to lie on Lady Redesdale like a thick winter shawl – weighing down her shoulders, her head.

Aging by the minute. And Liz wasn't exactly in great shape herself. Her arm was beginning to go numb – well, that was all part of it really, when you put yourself at the services of the upper orders. But she was trying her best, trying to hold her elbow just so. Pressing her fingertips into the bed below, and like that she gathered all the bumps and curses inside of her like some sort of inglorious human shield. Grudging. And grubby. She turned her face as far to the side as she could – wanting her own air at least, though it was all the same now. At least the army had proper bloody vehicles, she would certainly bloody well give them that. Instead of this slumped and squeezed in affair so the left side of her arse was going numb now too. Humiliating. How could she ever tell Ramsay about this. Mind you, numbness was perhaps preferable really. She was somewhere else. This was some other person in her very own arms. And what on earth would Ramsay make of it all, of her current posture even? An excellent embodiment of class relations if ever there was one. Though she'd done it for the men too – her dears in Heads; awful to have to move that lot when they were lucky if they had a whole head between them. You never knew what might get left behind. Something might slip out so many skulls split open; even the tiniest of movements.... A man's sight, smell, short term memory, left trodden in the mud somewhere up the line.

The Heads Unit had been one of her favourite postings though. Not just in comparison with what had come before and after, and not just because that was when she'd really got to know Ramsay. He was attached to another unit at the time, but by that point there were so many

hospitals, with so many units, they started referring to that stretch of the Bayeux-Caen road as Harley Street. Heads though consisted of one tented ward and a single theatre. She spent most of her time trying to keep her patients cool; their injuries put their temperature regulation all to hell, so the matron had made a special allowance and they were allowed to lie naked under a single sheet. Liz would pin the doors open and will the breeze in, continually doing the rounds with her sponge, and sometimes a fan which she wafted at them as she spoke, so that they held their faces up like babies being blown on. Quite like babies really; unable to feed themselves, speak, go to the toilet. Then they might become alert but confused, or agitated, or prone to spring up and run off causing the sister in charge no end of embarrassment. She remembered the CO once pointing at a bare arsed private and shouting at them – what the blue pencil’s going on here? And one of the orderlies piping up – no chance of his pencil going blue in this heat Sir.

Liz was on her way back from her dinner one day when she saw him – Ramsay – walking towards her, holding Major MacKay’s hand.

“I believe this is one of yours sister,” he looked straight at Liz with a glimmer of amusement that she felt was at her expense rather than for her benefit.

“Yes,” she turned to the naked man, “Now Major, you know you’re to stay in bed.”

“But I was supposed to be at the palace hours ago.”

“You can’t go to the palace like that, can you?”

The major screwed his face up but then started to laugh hysterically. She noticed a smile flicker across Ramsay’s face.

“Come on now.” She took hold of the Major’s other hand.

“Why don’t I accompany you?” Ramsay said.

She nodded, so he kept hold of the hand he had, and they made their way across the field as if they were on some sort of bizarre family excursion. She pretended she didn’t notice his

glances in her direction, or the Major's shrivelled appendage. She was enjoying the breeze and the fading sun on her face, and the sight of the ward sister and the orderly running towards them; holding a sheet out between them, that caught, and floated in the wind – like a raised sail.

“If you're needing the lavatory you best go before you get in the boat – lord know's there'll be enough to contend with once you get going.”

“What?” Liz stood up straight again. “No, I just,” she held her face up to the wind, “my back...it's very cramped in there you know.”

The Mull doctor gave her a look.

“Not that it could be helped...” For god's sake she better not start on him now into the bargain. They were on the same side. Were they not? She looked at him again. “Her temperature hasn't budged.”

“Yes, I saw that.” He shrugged.

She was thinking of the sulphathiazole, but he turned to look out across the sea and said:

“We're all of us in god's hands now.”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? For any favour – was this man even a proper doctor? Him and his strange air, halfway between wistful and fatalistic. Or maybe he just knew something about the boat that she didn't – well if the ambulance was anything to go by!

“I'd better get her ready then.” She tried to walk as purposefully as she could back to the ambulance where she'd left her charge for a few moment's respite before attempting the next transition. At least they had a proper pier this time. Not that it would've mattered much considering her shoes were still wet. Her stockings torn. Was it any wonder Lady Redesdale was looking at her in horror.

“I suppose we need to move again now,” she said.

Liz nodded.

Lady Redesdale pursed her lips and for a moment Liz thought that she might slump slowly off the fold-out seat entirely. Had she ever spent so long on a fold-out seat? But of course it wasn't that.

They both turned to look at Unity – asleep; Liz had thought that the best term for this new sort of unconsciousness.

“Let me help you,” she took Lady Redesdale out by the arm. Soft but sturdy beneath a huge wax coat. The sea air would at least do the two of them some good after being stuck in that black hole on wheels. Lady Redesdale took a moment to compose herself, then simply walked away from Liz, carrying on straight-backed and stiff-lipped, right down the gangway. Right. There was just the small matter of Unity. Of how...just how...

The driver had a job dissuading Liz from taking an end herself.

“I can manage no bother,” she'd told him. “You should see me at the casualty clearing station.”

Man must have thought she was mad, but it was the muscle memory you see. The body remembers, even if the head doesn't. Her poor head. It wasn't half louping now. She swallowed two aspirin when nobody was looking. Probably a blessing that she didn't have any piercing screams to contend with when they moved the patient this time, but at least you knew where you were then. This silence like sleep – or something else – and the rounded watery sound that the night wind blows across the sea, only made her wonder – surely they all wondered – how bad is it now? The point where the flame licks white. Turns invisible. No longer to be perceived, comprehended, borne. But they were only borne half-way when the noise started up again. Loud as ever, what with the wind and the engine, as if it was some sort of competition – cutting out across the dark water, with their backs to the dying day. As if the whales might wail back, or scores of seamen be driven onto the rocks. Liz tightened

the sheets. Mopped the woman's brow. Felt the steady moan travel through her like the humming of the engine. Hearing the vibration in the voice itself, like a child sitting for the first time in a motor. A long low trembling tone, like the call of some distant native people – Unity wouldn't like that at all. Still she persisted. And Liz thought – was this what the doctor meant then? Would they all be driven mad and overboard, one after the other. The Valkyrie having decided to carry them off after all.

"I've always loved the sea," Lady Redesdale said suddenly.

"Really."

"My father was a very keen sailor." Her face looked as if it had crumpled in on itself.

"How nice." Liz tried to hold her head up.

"Do you sail?" The voice strained but still managed to find its way over the rising squall on the stretcher.

"Can't say I do." Liz pressed her lips together and prayed to god that the woman wouldn't say anything else. She noticed, out the window, how the night came but not quite the dark. The clouds having all gone, or not having arrived yet – so there was the moon, huge; bobbing into view through the window now and then like a fat faraway buoy. Though you didn't always want to be too bright – too visible; waiting, listening to it all, bobbing up and down like a fat faraway buoy – not quite far enough to be out of range. That sort of sailing probably didn't count.

Unity's noise changed into a strange sort of hiss.

"Hush now," Liz whispered. "You'll tire yourself out." Chance would be a fine thing; the woman was clearly possessed.

Lady Redesdale was clutching the blankets again with that same pained expression.

Liz tried to sit up tall. Knees squeezed together. Why wouldn't her ears close now? She needed something to absorb, deflect – something to put between her and them. She reached a

hand down to her leg and slid her fingers beneath the layer of torn stocking, and exposed bandage, to where the skin was hard and crusted over and hoping to be left in peace. She reached right to the bottom of the wound, dug her nails in as far as she could, and dragged them up the length of it.

Enough. That was enough now.

Unity had again grown silent, and Liz's own breath deeper and easier. She could appreciate the moon now. And the sound of the firm but not fierce wind against their sides – even the feeling of everything below, smoother than before. As if the water had changed. Had a new quality to it. Though she supposed it might have been her. Blinking. Tired for the first time that night. She was surrounded by the sense now that everything could possibly turn out to be okay. It was only then that she realised the boat had entered the bay.

“Almost there.”

Lady Redesdale looked up at her and gave a slight smile.

Liz smiled back involuntarily. Then felt herself blush. Lowered her head. Turned to Unity instead, running a hand across the blanket's edge. “Almost there.”

“The last thing she said before we left Inch Kenneth...” Lady Redesdale's voice suddenly faltered, “...it saddened me more than anything.” Leaning towards the stretcher now. “She looked up and said...I'm coming.” Still gazing at her daughter as she shook her head.

Which was just as well because Liz had lost all control of hers – could feel her eyes huge, mouth gaping and twisted. Teeth bared.

“Has her head been bleeding?”

“No.” As she turned again to the night matron Liz saw it was her own hand the woman was staring at. “Oh...that was nothing.” She tucked it beneath her cape, with the rest of the mess.

She was all sweat and salt-water, ripped stockings, and windswept hair. It had struck her anew in the corridors of the cottage hospital. Amidst the calm voices in pressed white fabrics – the delicate rattle of a distant tea-tray. She couldn't have them see her like this.

“Listen, I'll be back for my shift this evening then.” And without waiting for another word she turned and left.

She ran all the way to the bottom of their path. That bloody path that seemed determined to finish her off one of these days when she'd worked through the night and could barely force one foot in front of the other. Like that first day she'd come back. Over three weeks ago now. She hadn't seen him for three weeks then. How often had he thought of her? Wanted her. Surely three weeks wasn't long enough to forget that sort of want. It was difficult to tell. She'd gone three years without seeing Sandy at all – but you couldn't exactly compare. And since when had she taken to thinking of them in the same breath like this?

She let herself in the front door and tried to close it again as quietly as she could. God only knew what the hell sort of time it was. God and the birds, but no bastard would keep her awake long the way she was feeling.

“Argh,” she turned away as if in pain from the light that sprang on, down the hall. Holding a hand up to her face and squinting she saw the silhouette of her mother, leaning out of her bedroom door. Stooped. Shadowy. Shrouded in something.

“So you're back then.”

“Yes.” As her eyes adjusted to the light Liz tried to straighten her face. Her back. She tucked the hair that had come loose behind her ear. “Sorry if I woke you.”

“Woke me?” he mother seemed incredulous for some reason Liz couldn't quite account for. She was still watching her. Waiting. Well? Maybe she had said something else – it was hard to tell.

Liz moved slowly along the hall, pressing her lips together, feeling how dry and hard they were. And the pain in her throat when she made herself swallow. And her sore tired eyes that met her mother's as she passed them by, and she was appalled to find them stinging. Filling. She gritted her teeth and muttered.

“She didn't die.”

Her mother's eyes widened. She pulled the shawl tighter around her shoulders. “Well you needn't sound so disappointed.”

Liz ran the rest of the way to her room and slammed the door behind her. She sank right on to the counterpane with a single sob. She pulled both hands to her mouth. One on top of the other for reinforcement. A shaky stopper of stringy flesh and brittle bone. Scarred skin that she pressed across the gaps, the air, the waves.

The main thing was for her mother not to hear.

Liz woke up thoroughly disgusted with herself. Could she not at least have taken her cape off? As she sat up, the side of her arm peeled away from its wax lining, grown warm and sticky, but she still felt strangely straightened by the thing. Wondering why it was heavier, before realising that there was a blanket over her too. It slid off as she swung her feet round – and no shoes. Her mother must have seen to them. When? She frowned, feeling what remained of her salt-crusted stockings pulling and nipping the fine hairs above her ankles, a sensation somehow more aggravating than the sharp pain coming from her left calf where the bandage had dried into her. Something fluttered on to the floor. A letter – so her mother had turned postman now too. Liz poked it with a protruding bare toe, squinting at the envelope. When she saw the mark on it she quickly removed her foot with a slight gasp, as if the university would somehow know how she was treating its correspondence. Yes, it was definitely from the university; she picked it up and read the address on the back. And her own address on the front. Her mother's really. It was odd seeing it typed out like that. Though not the oddest thing she'd had in the post that week. She glanced over at the cupboard where she had stashed the rubbers Ramsay sent. Picturing the light rectangular box, the delicate creases and folds where his fingers had touched the paper. It would go to Annag though; she'd got them for Annag. The thought of her friend helped her on to her feet and the blanket fell to the floor entirely. She left it lying there and shuffled out the room.

She could tell by the low hum in the hall that the water would be hot for her. Thank god. As she ran the bath she turned the letter over in her hands again. She wasn't sure why she was reluctant to open it. It was too early to be anything very definitive – so why then write to her at all? She knew what she had to do, and the bursary exams weren't until August. The envelope was taking matters into its own hands though, its back flap curling slowly as the steam accumulated. She balanced it behind the taps and began to strip. She would maybe

tell her mother about the application later – that should be a sufficient enough change of subject to avoid going over whatever sort of sorry sight she'd presented last night. Or earlier that morning really. Either way. She didn't have to be back at the hospital until eight o'clock. There was plenty of time to work herself up to that sort of conversation. She kicked each item of clothing away as she removed it. For the fire – had been her first thought; but she knew she would wash and starch it all carefully before dropping it back to Miss Gilchrist at the cottage hospital. Thank god Miss Gilchrist hadn't been around last night. This morning. This night morning. Liz rubbed her eyes and sighed. If she'd been less filthy she might have slept longer, but there it was. She'd made her bed. Well, she hadn't made her bed. When had her mother come through then? Seen her curled up clutching the counterpane – well that'd need washed now. She shook her head and sighed again. The air grew warm and moist around her as she bared her skin to it – all but the bandaged patch of her leg. She bent down, braced, and whipped it clean away, registering the satisfaction that came from the stinging pain. But that didn't count – she turned to meet her eye in the mirror – that was the best way to remove a bandage anyway. Her face was just a blur in the fogged glass. She climbed into the bath, and was surprised for a moment to discover the grit feel of sand on her soles, but of course... She lowered herself in and let the water lap over her. She didn't want to think about the sand. But there it was.

She let her cut leg soak for a while then lifted the ankle across to rest it on the opposite knee. Her hips clicked like a cocking gun and she felt the rush of water between her thighs. Warm. Searching. She reached her hand down and ran a finger along the top of her cut, stroking the edges of discoloured flesh that had grown soft and imprecise. Staring until she knew every inch of it. Knew what she couldn't see. Stared until her joints ached – but it seemed to help – then she stretched herself out again.

She turned her attention back to the envelope, which she quickly disembowelled and discarded. After she'd read the letter she looked at it a moment longer – right – until she felt her hand loosen and the thin sheet of paper fell flat on the water. She watched it dampen, darken – typescript swimming – still floating, but growing heavier as it crept up over her chest; catching. Clinging to her breast.

She scooped it up with one swift movement and flicked it on the tiled floor with a splat.

It was after midday by the time she went through to the kitchen and found her mother hunched over her lunch. She sat up when she saw Liz and pulled her cardigan tighter. Her hair was lying loose over her shoulders. Liz was taken aback by how long it was. Long and lined with grey – so why then did it make her look younger?

She pulled it to one side. “So you’re up then.”

“Yes.” Liz glanced at the teapot.

Her mother followed her eyes but said nothing.

Liz crossed the room and made a point of leaning casually against the countertop. “How has your leg been?”

“Oh, you know,” her mother glanced down at Liz’s leg, which was now thoroughly disinfected and bandaged right round. “Fine.”

Liz looked down at it too then met her mother’s eye and nodded. “Good.”

“Mmm.” She looked at Liz’s leg again.

Liz tilted her head, peering round the table at her mother’s cast instead.

“Didn’t Dr Beaton give you a report?” her mother asked.

“No, he didn’t get the chance.” She had bolted before he could lay eyes on her. “He said he was sorry to have to ask me—”

“Well he didn’t have to, did he?”

Liz sighed and felt her shoulders sag. Her whole frame. Clutching the edge of the sink now. Cold and smooth and clean. “No, I suppose he didn’t.”

“Well sit down then, there’s tea in the pot.”

Liz sat and poured.

Her mother looked out of the window as she spoke. “I hear they’ve had a police guard for your woman at the hospital.”

“My woman?”

“Aren’t you her personal nurse?”

Liz frowned. “Hardly....well, technically....”

“The police have been there all day apparently.”

“That’s funny, they never showed much interest in her before.” Back in 39’ when she came direct from behind enemy lines, no questions asked. Some people had objected to that. Mind you, what exactly could she have done. Recant? Not even Lady Redesdale would do that. Her mother was eyeing her over her teacup. “It just seems a bit over the top.” Liz shrugged. There wasn’t much point attacking someone who was already unconscious. “I can’t see the baying mobs descending. Who told you that about the police anyway?”

“Mrs Campbell from along the road, though she’d had it from someone else. They’re worried folk might take amiss at them entertaining Nazis up there.”

“Hardly entertaining! But how did they even know about Unity?” She looked at her mother. “You didn’t let on did you?”

“Certainly not! I barely got two words on the subject from Dr Beaton – and none at all from you!”

“Right, I’m only asking. They must have got it from somewhere. Surely none of the staff...”

Her mother raised an eyebrow.

“Well...”

And the other one.

“Honestly, is there nothing secret in this town.”

And having nothing left to raise her mother gave a single sharp laugh and turned back to her tea. They sat for a moment in silence.

“What was in your letter then?”

“What letter?”

“The letter I put in your room.”

“Oh that.”

“Yes, that.”

“It was nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing important.” Not anymore. The sooner she got used to the idea the better.

“Evening nurse.” The young man smiled and gave Liz a small sort of salute as she walked down the corridor towards him.

“Good evening.” She tried to place where she knew him from. Had they maybe been at school together? He looked much younger than her though. His smooth cheeks had a pink glow to them – but that was maybe because she was still staring straight at him. His age wasn’t so strange really; she had certainly seen younger men in uniform. It was just that he looked odd there, in his pitch black clothes when everything in the hospital was so white.

“Have you been here all day?” she asked.

“No I’m not long back on shift.”

“Oh, bit like myself then.”

He grinned, and she wondered whether any of that could have been considered encouragement.

“Has there been any trouble?” She pressed her hands against the door, ready to push it open.

“Oh aye.”

“You’re joking,” she turned to face him again.

“There was a deputation not at all pleased.”

“A deputation of who exactly?” A local branch of the communist party? She wasn’t sure such a thing existed.

“I’m afraid I can’t say.”

“Yes, sorry, I wouldn’t want you breaching protocol.”

“It’s just that I didn’t see Miss, it was all over by the time I got here.”

“So did the other officer have to fend them off?”

“Well, sort of.” He was turning pink again. “But I believe Dr Beaton went out and sent them away.”

“Did he now.” She could well imagine it. “We better watch ourselves then, eh.”

She hoped Dr Beaton was still around. “Who knows what else might happen.” She didn’t, for example, trust herself. Not a second more.

She wondered, as she moved about the room, who the protesters had been, and why they had chosen this moment to make their feelings known. Why had they never rallied on the veranda of The Station Hotel? Interrupted afternoon tea? Had Annag ever been tempted? But Annag had to earn a living somehow. And what had Dr Beaton said to the folk that came? I appreciate your objections, but it’s only a matter of time before the issue will resolve itself...

Though it wouldn't. The woman would just die and get out of it all over again, without ever thinking that she might have been wrong.

Amazing really, what you could get away with when you were 'a woman of personal means' – the phrase seemed to ring in Liz's ears, though it was only in her own voice, seen as the words had only been written to her, and she didn't even know what the Secretary at the University sounded like. He seemed a very pleasant chap, so she felt that she couldn't blame him at all and possibly shouldn't have drowned his letter. After all, he hadn't needed to write to her again – he might well have left it at that and she would have blundered all the way through the admission process like a fool. The letter had advised, amongst other things, of the fees and expenses she could expect seen as she was too old for any of the bursaries now. But please do not let that dissuade you Miss Black – she could picture him dictating it, behind a vast oak desk, horn-rimmed spectacles – most of our female students tend to be mature, and of personal means; you will find yourself in good company, very good indeed. It was flattering really, the way that he had put it; taking it almost as a given that she was also just like that: the mature woman of considerable personal means. The sad fact being she was nothing of the sort. So there it was again, the grasping entitled hand. It didn't matter how old you were. You could be anything you wanted to be, as long as you had the means; anything at all. Even a Nazi. A self-mutilating Nazi, though that hadn't really been about politics; Liz didn't believe that for a minute. It wasn't about England or Germany or ideology. It was about Hitler being a tease. Maybe even impotent. Odd to lose it over such a small man. Mind you, when you lived like that lot it probably took a dictator to make one feel dominated. Strange to be thinking such things with the woman prone in front of her.

Liz walked around to the other side of the bed to take a temperature reading. Unity lay still, eyes closed; her mother for some reason was reading to her.

"God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble..."

Lady Redesdale had muttered a short prayer when their feet finally touched the pier in Oban, then telling Liz how Unity had taken to religion since her accident. Liz had nodded silently, noting the word accident, and the dogmatic need.

“...though the earth be removed...” She spoke swiftly but determinedly.

Liz studied the thermometer and marked it a hundred and three. Up again. She glanced at the scar on Unity’s head, still beating away; she could almost count the pulse by observation alone. That would save her the bother of touching. Her hands hovered above the patient’s arm – oh for god’s sake get on with it. She took a firm grip and pressed her fore and middle fingers into the wrist.

“and though the mountains be carried into the midst of the sea..” Lady Redesdale paused.

Liz looked up and caught her eye. Was she also remembering the roll of waves, the roar of wind over water, and that other appalling sound?

Liz glanced down again and softened her grip.

Maybe it was just as well she couldn’t afford to be a doctor, she wasn’t exactly doing a very good job of being a nurse. She felt the fast pace of the patient’s pulse against her own; so fast in fact that her own began to quicken involuntarily. She tried her best to ignore it – her pulse being of no consequence – and checked the patient against her watch. Pulses varied for all sorts of reasons. Sex. Age. Class – though they didn’t call it that in the textbooks. They spoke of conditions of living, conditions of work, but perhaps in future they would call it by its name. They would never all be the same, but that was a nightmarish vision anyway – everyone walking around pulsing in unison to the beat of a large totalitarian drum. There had to be something in between.

The patient’s pulse would remain fast as long as her temperature remained high. If they could keep her relatively stable though, they would move her again in the morning. The Mitfords might have been able to summon Liz to the inner Hebrides, and dispatch their

laundry regularly to London, but not even they could get a consultant neurosurgeon north of the Rest and Be Thankful.

“The heathen raged, the kingdoms were moved: he uttered his voice, the earth melted.”

It was a strange choice of reading material, but nothing would surprise Liz about that family now. She walked around Lady Redesdale and went to close the curtains.

“Would you mind leaving them open a little longer nurse?” Lady Redesdale asked. It was after nine o’clock, but still light. A muted light that painted the tree trunks blue and seemed to amplify the occasional call of a lone gull.

“Of course.” She pulled them to the sides again and straightened them for longer than was strictly necessary.

“And could you possibly open the window a little further; air circulation is so important in a sick-room.”

“Yes.” Liz stiffened, mentally cursed Florence Nightingale, and pushed open the highest pane so the smell of wild garlic rushed in. “Mind the midges now.” She turned and walked back towards the door. “You know where I am should you need me.”

Lady Redesdale nodded and turned back to her reading: “He maketh wars to cease unto the end of the earth; he breaketh the bow, and cutteth the spear in sunder; he burneth the chariot in the fire. Be still, and know that I am God...”

Unity, if nothing else, certainly had a type.

Dr Beaton called in – on his way home? – and asked to speak with her in his office. As she followed him her thoughts flew to that last day at the Western; the girth of Chops’ arse on the stairs, the disappointment in Matron’s eyes. Only this was all much worse. She was much worse. Not fit to lick his boots, though Dr Beaton just turned and smiled and started on about how grateful he was. Then giving the overdue report on her mother; how he’d been round

and she'd been doing fine but still doing too much, and he was sorry to keep Liz away from her for so long. He had looked genuinely pained when he said that.

"Of course you came here to look after your mother, not..." He trailed off, then shrugged.

"Then I drag you all the way to Mull; it was perhaps inconsiderate of me to ask."

"Not at all." Liz shook her head.

"In any case, having robbed her of her nurse it left me no solid ground from which to preach rest." He gave a slight smile then. "So she at least had that satisfaction."

Liz dreaded to think what her mother had actually said to him. If she had complained about the loss of a carer then it would be the first hint of Liz contributing anything at all on that front. Liz certainly didn't feel as if she had.

"I thought I'd best fill you in on the plans for her removal." For a moment she thought he was still talking about her mother and felt herself stiffen in alarm. "You're familiar with the neurosurgical unit out at Killearn?"

But they were back to her patient. "Yes." At ease again. "I've never been," said Liz, "but I have heard of it." They had to send them all their most interesting cases. She was really starting to hold quite the grudge. "What's it like?"

"A few huts in the middle of some hills."

That didn't sound bad for a start.

"An old EMS site, but I suppose the rural tranquillity suits its new purpose," he was taking papers out of his bag – notes from this evenings house calls? Rounds? Not much rural tranquillity for him; no wonder Ramsay was so set on specialising, though he'd never admit to it on those terms. "You'd never think to look at it," Dr Beaton was saying, "that some of the most complex operations in the country were being undertaken there."

"It's under Sloan Robertson isn't it?"

“Yes, in the main.” He eyed Liz as he snapped his bag closed. “Is Neurosurgery another of your interests then?”

She was appalled to feel her cheeks growing warm. “No.” Better not to have said anything at all. “No – it’s certainly none of my business.”

He shrugged, as if to say – who said anything about business, and looked around the room for his jacket.

Liz lifted it from the hook behind her and held it open. He nodded and walked towards her, turning at the last moment to reverse into the sleeves.

She spoke again once he had his back to her: “It’s just that I spent some time with a Heads Unit during the war...”

He shrugged the jacket over his shoulders. “Thank you.” But didn’t turn round again. “I imagine that was something of a challenge.”

“Not really.” She paused. “Not for us nurses anyway.”

He turned to face her again.

“We nurses are nothing if not resilient.” Nothing. She forced herself to smile, then turned to open the door for him. “Good night sir.” She walked behind him to the end of the hall, before turning right, back to Unity.

Oh for a bullet in the brain under any other name; it was the closest she’d got to a head case in ages. She had started to wonder what it might look like inside, imagining the layers and folds and where she might mark the bullet on the page of a brain atlas. There were some fascinating plates in that book of Ramsay’s she’d brought home with her. The brain atlas was her favourite, because of everything it showed and everything it didn’t; so many roads not travelled – here be monsters. She even preferred those over the grand gravid uterus in the Hunterian collection, though she’d marvelled at that and made sure to ask a number of intelligent questions. She might have enjoyed it more if it hadn’t been Ramsay with the

answers, standing next to her the whole time, because there was something about him pointing at the grub-like curve of the foetus, with the mother's thighs lying there splayed and butchered like a pair of ham hocks, that she'd found horribly embarrassing. As if she was somehow implicated, though his finger was pointing away from her – long and elegant and precise, with the suggestion of straining tendons just below the cuff. She thought of those instead, of the arm stripped back and bulging. It wasn't the anatomy that bothered her, she'd visited the collection often enough. The cloisters themselves were more intimidating; curved lips of v's rising to meet and repeat themselves all around you, so that the slightest misstep – the scuff of a shoe – rang loud and out of all proportion. Ramsay's voice, not caring who heard:

“It makes you wonder how they procured their women...”

Still, it was good of him to take her on such expeditions, and lend the occasional book. Throwing her a bone so to speak, when really it wasn't any of her business. At least she hadn't had time to tell him about putting in the application. It would have been too embarrassing having to fire one letter off after another – please disregard previous. But at the same time, it would have been nice to talk to him. Have him hold her. Furnish her with countless curses for the women of considerable means.

“Really,” he'd said that day, taking her arm in his, “all of anatomy...it's knowledge built on the backs of the poor.”

“More than just their backs.”

“Quite.” And it was an awful thought really, but once they'd agreed it was awful they could at least smile at each other, as they neared the afternoon rain that had brought musty scents out of the old stone structures, and the cold tips of his fingers found hers.

She nodded at Lady Redesdale as she entered the room, taking up her position on the opposite side of the vast iron bed. As Liz changed the compress on her forehead Unity's eyes fluttered and she gave a soft sort of sigh.

"Yes dear," said Lady Redesdale, "the nurse has been looking after you beautifully." She looked up at Liz and smiled, a tired hollow smile. "Thank you for all your kindness." She leaned in and put her hand on Liz's wrist as she said that and Liz felt an almost physical pain – it was so undeserved.

"I've often thought," Lady Redesdale continued, "that the west highland people are some of the kindest in the world. We've been so lucky on Inch Kenneth."

Liz nodded and swallowed appallingly loudly. "You enjoy living there then?"

"Oh yes, I can't imagine being without it now. Moving is so exhausting, and...well," she paused, "the family's been so spread out since the war."

Indeed. From the Hebrides to Holloway prison. Liz straightened her neck and tried to smile.

"It's so practical you see. I have the vegetables, and the animals."

"And how do you find the weather?" She was thinking about the wind and the rocks – the three days stranded.

"Oh it's not as bad as I'd feared. I can hang the sheets out most mornings."

"The sheets?" So not all the washing went to Harrods then.

"I'm afraid we get through rather a lot of bedsheets," she met Liz's enquiring eye, then looked back towards her daughter.

"Yes...yes, of course."

It was one of Liz's duties throughout the long night to make sure the patient was kept dry. She hadn't done this sort of nursing in years; brow mopping and arse wiping. Brought low

by the landed gentry, well, was it not ever so. She felt like a minor character in a Victorian novel – holding vigil by the bedside with her ladyship. Only Liz hadn't used that address once. She had to draw the line somewhere. She had to be able to stand in front of Ramsay again one day with a clear conscience. One day? Had she really begun to think of it in those terms? As bad as all that.

“Can I help at all?”

Liz's eyes shot up. If Lady Redesdale was going to insist on staying there at all hours it would be far preferable if she didn't keep trying to talk to Liz.

“No thank you.” She was perfectly capable of folding a blanket, though she realised that her brow was entirely furrowed and her face drawn into a definite scowl.

“It must be a very tiring profession.”

She tried to relax her scowl, but didn't entirely succeed. “The shifts are long.”

“I've struggled with only one charge.”

Liz's face softened. “Yes but we at least have our off-duty.” And a separate laundry.

“I suppose it's different when you're caring for a family member.”

“I wouldn't know much about that.”

“Did you never wish to marry and have children?”

Liz gave a slight start, partly due to the nature of the question, and partly due to the framing of it. As if it was all done – decided. Passed.

“Well....” What business was it of hers anyway? This woman who she barely knew; who she in fact disliked. Hated even; if not personally then at least in principle. She was opposed to the very idea of Lords and Ladies, in part, because of Ramsay. So how could she think of him now, in this sick-room that there weren't enough windows in the world for. Him, who she hadn't spoken of to anyone. Why was this stranger, asking, not even looking at her

anymore – had probably forgotten already that she posed the question. “Well,” she heard herself say, “there is someone...”

Lady Redesdale looked up and smiled and was about to open her mouth when the whole of Unity’s body turned rigid. As if an electrical volt had shot right through the length of her. Except Liz knew that the impulses were all contained within, so she could lean over and press a hand on each jolting arm, turning to Lady Redesdale with a blank face and a calm voice that rose above the gurgling and the shuddering of the iron bedstead.

“Would you mind please fetching the night matron.”

By the time Dr Beaton arrived the fitting had long ceased.

“To be expected with meningitis.” His eyes narrowed as he studied the chart. “We won’t be able to move her now.” He turned away from Liz, back towards the bed. “I’m afraid there’s not much we can do Lady Redesdale.” He lowered his head in a sombre bow, then pinched the bridge of his nose. “Nurse Black will stay with you.”

So Liz had been left once again sitting opposite Lady Redesdale. It was odd to be sitting by a bed. There was no sitting at the Western Infirmary. She hadn’t done that since the war. And even then it was only rarely, and only so the poor sod wouldn’t die alone.

The tidal breathing started just after two AM. Lady Redesdale looked up at Liz, across the expanse of undulating white linen that had transformed into a rolling sea. Deepening waves growing louder and louder.

“Is this...?”

“It can be, but it can be some time.” Months even. Although she hoped not, for Lady Redesdale’s sake.

The breath grew increasingly deep, and noisy – then fell quiet. Liz was reminded again of the storm at Inch Kenneth.

Lady Redesdale looked at her with wide wild eyes.

“It’s shallow now.” Liz could still hear the movement of air though. Lower and lower. “It often ceases for a few seconds at this stage.”

Unity fell silent right on cue.

Then the whole horrible cycle began again.

Liz could still remember reading as a probationer, about the seven signs of death: breath, chest, vapour, heart, pupils, cold, stiff. The families were rarely satisfied with the facts though – they required the language of metaphor. She’s gone now, no longer with us. She’s at peace. Passed. Unity was dead. Lady Redesdale understood that.

“Is there a telephone I can use?”

“Of course,” Dr Beaton replied. After she’d left the room he looked at Liz and then to the night matron. “Well that’s the end of that.”

The night matron inhaled sharply and rested her hand on her chest. “Poor woman.”

“Yes, I’m afraid she did suffer rather. Meningitis is a terrible thing.”

“I was thinking more of Lady Redesdale.”

“Well she’s certainly suffered too.” He wasn’t exactly looking great himself. Thin and drawn and still running about at all hours. He cleared his throat. “Perhaps you can make sure Lady Redesdale has everything she needs.”

“Of course.” The night matron nodded.

“Would you mind tidying her up a bit?” he asked, as they both turned and looked at Liz. The night matron, a robust brunette with a flair for the dramatic seemed to be watching her with bated breath.

“Certainly.”

“I suppose,” said the night matron, “that chap won’t need to see her?”

That chap was a locum pathologist with a shrewd look and an Edinburgh accent. He didn't need to see her. But he came anyway.

"A curious business don't you think Dr Beaton?"

"Yes, well, it's all over now."

"And to think it started in a garden in Munich."

Liz frowned as she listened, though she had had the same thought herself. She'd tucked Unity's sheets neatly and was now placing her arms down gently at her side. No need to restrain them; there was nothing Unity could do to her now.

"They say she and the Fuhrer were lovers."

"Mmm." Dr Beaton signed the chart and hung it again.

"I wonder if she's virgo intacta."

"I don't see what that's got to do with anything?" Liz glared at him. She still had Unity's cold hand in hers.

The man started, then sneered. "I'm not sure we need you here anymore nurse."

"Finish what you're doing nurse," Dr Beaton didn't look at either of them. "Her mother will be back soon. Come with me Dr Allinson."

Liz stared at him until he left the room. What a thing to say. And then to speak to her like that. He was probably asking Dr Beaton right at that moment – who was that upstart nurse? Some sort of fascist sympathiser is she? One of them?

She finished wiping her cloth over Unity's arms and then started on her face. Smoothed her hair. The scar was completely white now. Surrendered at last.

On her way out of the room Liz stopped to speak to the tired looking constable.

"See him talking to Dr Beaton there? Yes. Don't let the bastard anywhere near her."

“Urgh,” Dorothy frowned at the mud on her shoe, lifting her ankle and turning it this way, then that. Oh well, as long as she didn’t let Mr Devine see. She carried on up the hill, twigs catching on her ankles; she had to duck the occasional swipe from a low-lying branch or overblown bramble bush. She had told them it would be better to go back round the road and up the proper path, but they said that would take too long, and what was she afraid of anyway?

Ruining her shoes for a start. The wrath of Mr Devine second. It was all right for the rest of her pals who were already finished for the day, or didn’t have jobs at all – but she did a split shift on a Saturday. Not that she at all minded having to go back to the hotel that afternoon. The place was still buzzing with excitement; she couldn’t expect her friends to understand that. They didn’t care that Unity was dead, or that David was on the train from London. David. It was an ordinary sort of name for a Lord, but it was better to know it than not.

“Like the Prince of Wales,” her mother had said, after reading it aloud from the newspaper.

“The Prince of Wales?”

“The King that abdicated I should say, you were only wee at the time though. He was terribly handsome; I think I’ve still got pictures of him somewhere.”

She said it as if he was a family friend they’d perhaps spent a holiday with, but when her mother came back into the sitting room it was with magazine cuttings. She sat next to Dorothy on the plump pink settee and passed them over one at a time. Her mother glanced at Dorothy, with a raised eyebrow – well?

He was walking towards the camera with his jacket slung over one shoulder. The flash of white shoes, from beneath loose legged, tight-waisted slacks.

“That photograph was taken by the Mediterranean.”

“He looks like a film star.”

“Even with the black and white you can still see how tanned he is.”

Dorothy peered closer at the sculpted forearms. The tilted, wide-eyed face. “Oh yes,” she nodded vigorously. “Brown as a berry I bet.”

She knew that Lord Redesdale was only coming from England, but she had ended up thinking of him along those sorts of lines. And really there was every possibility he might have worked up some sort of tan himself; it was always sunnier in England, the guests were forever telling her that. The memory of his actual face was a bit hazy though. He hadn’t been in the illustrated papers for a while. Why hadn’t she thought to take clippings like her mum? Then she could have shown them to her friends and they might have been a bit more interested in hearing all about Unity and the bullet she had put through her head.

“Nobody wants to hear about your stupid Nazis Dorothy,” Jessie looked at her and pretended to yawn.

“My dad says the only good Nazi is a dead Nazi.” Mary casually pulled the head off a flower and let it fly off into the breeze.

“But she is dead, that’s what I’m saying.”

“You and your books Dorothy,” Jessie shook her head, “they’re so childish.”

“No they’re not. Most books have a tonne of romance in them if you read them right,” Mary looked up at her, but Jessie just sniggered. “And anyway Unity didn’t write books, Nancy’s the one that writes books.”

“As if you know the first thing about romance, Dorothy.”

She felt her cheeks getting warm, though it wasn’t as if there was anyone worth romancing at school. The blazing profile of Fergus Shaw flashed through her head again – Pooh! You speak like a green girl! Was it because he’d shouted at her? It would’ve been better if the line hadn’t had pooh in it.

“Let’s go up to the castle,” Jessie said, turning her back on Dorothy.

“But the path’s that way.”

Dorothy wished she’d thought to ask Jessie what made her such an expert, but she wasn’t entirely sure where they had gone. By the time she neared the top of the hill, it had started to rain. It might have started before but she hadn’t noticed with the trees thick around her. Now she turned to look back and saw the girls already on the road back to town. Wee cows, the lot of them. Though that was hardly nice either. On another day she might have cared more, but Jessie couldn’t touch her today. Jessie was only jealous, as usual, because Dorothy had got to read Ophelia again that week – Mr Collins still hadn’t really looked at her, but he had given her Ophelia, and a good mark on her last essay. She was glad she hadn’t let her mother shout at him now; it was much better that The Weed had intervened. Jessie didn’t think that was very fair though. She had the idea that because she was the prettiest she should be Ophelia. Dorothy didn’t entirely disagree but Mr Collins had decreed it, so who were they to argue. And Jessie was only pretending not to be bothered about the comings and goings at the hotel – she loved the illustrated papers more than anyone. And now, to put the tin hat on it, Dorothy was going to be a godmother, which wasn’t quite as good as being a bridesmaid, but still at least involved a new outfit. It was a lot more responsibility than a bridesmaid really – a lot more grown up. Jessie had made a face when she told them all, and now they’d gone back into town without her.

It didn’t matter. Though she was getting a bit cold, and wet. She was only in short sleeves and the round fleshy parts of her arm were all covered in goose bumps. At least she didn’t have to go up to the creepy old castle now. She was as well to go back to the hotel. Maybe Annag would still be around and she could ask her some more questions about the christening. She’d already quizzed Annag as much as she could after the breakfasts. But

Annag had just said that she hadn't given the thing much thought, which was obvious, considering Thomas was almost a year old.

"What do you think I should wear though?" she'd pressed.

Annag laughed. "Anything you like."

"Anything?"

"Whatever you would normally wear to church."

Dorothy frowned. Oh dear Annag. I think we can do better than that. And she still couldn't believe Annag had asked her. Her! "You are sure?" she said. "You really want me?"

"Well," Annag paused and Dorothy felt her face growing warm. Why could she never keep her mouth shut. "It was Liz's idea actually," Annag carried on, "and I happened to think it a rather good one."

Dorothy couldn't help grinning. "I won't let you down!" Imagine Liz recommending her too. "I've always said Thomas was my favourite."

Annag laughed. "That's only because Thomas can't answer back."

Even though Annag had taken an age to organise it, the timing was perfect after all because Dorothy had just seen a pattern to die for in *Home Chat* and now she had a ready-made reason to beg for it. A summer frock with a pretty scalloped neckline, kimono capped sleeves, and a full skirt gathered at the waist. That would be the sticking point though; she could already hear her mother – a full skirt? You do know how many coupons that'll use? But she had to have it. It was the only way. Surely at some point she had to start looking more along the lines of the person she was going to be.

As she traipsed back down the hill she got a nice view of the bluebells over in the back meadow. That must be some consolation for the folk at the big house, even if their castle was

all haunted and falling down. She wondered if they knew the Mitfords; she had a vague notion that all rich people were somehow related.

It was all happening now; a death, a christening – if only there would be a wedding too. She would have to keep her eye out. Not that there was much romance to be seen. Liz and Sandy? He was already married of course, and Catholics were funny about that sort of thing. As she crossed over the road at the war memorial the cathedral swung into view. There was a nice pink colour to the new stone – not wholly unlike the salmon shade recommended for her dress pattern. It was a shame she wouldn't have the frock in time for Lord Redesdale's visit. Who knew when he'd be up next, what with Unity dead and everything...he might never bother coming again. She'd heard her mother say he and Lady Redesdale were estranged, and something about some floozy of a nurse. A nurse or a maid – one of the two, though they were very different. A maid was quite the breach of decency on his part. A nurse – might look something like Liz, so that was understandable wasn't it.

Liz had been there when it actually happened. The precise moment of death. Dorothy couldn't believe it, but when she asked her about it Liz just shrugged her shoulders.

“One dead body's very much like another.”

Which wasn't true at all. All bodies were utterly different – even Dorothy knew that much.

If only Liz had gone over to the house and seen inside. That would have been ideal – though Liz didn't seem to think so one bit. She'd had tea with Dorothy and Annag in the hen's cupboard, slumped on a sack of bathmats; she kept rubbing her head and sighing. Dorothy had noticed how the skin on her temples was so pale that it was almost translucent, showing thin purple lines where the blood must be. She was so much more delicate than Dorothy was, with her blonde hair and her small frame – she watched Liz rubbing her head – almost afraid

she might break like the shell of a meringue. But heads must be harder than that. They didn't just shatter. Look at Unity – she'd only had the one hole.

"I'm afraid I'm rather tired," Liz said as she looked up, so that Dorothy felt bad for asking so many questions. "How are you getting on with Elizabeth Bowen?"

"Oh yes, I read it all at once. I like her writing – but the main character's pretty stupid."

Liz smiled. "Sometimes clever people do stupid things."

Dorothy wondered if she was thinking about Sandy again. Thinking that they were stupid to not have got married when they had the chance. It couldn't be easy – him being married to someone else. She supposed that it wasn't right really, if there was still something between them now, though she couldn't help wanting it. There'd be hell to pay for them both of course, but that didn't necessarily signify. Sometimes clever people did stupid things.

"You're soaked." Annag looked her up and down and tutted.

"It's not that bad." She felt a drip fall from the end of her nose.

"I can see your brassiere."

"Can you!" Dorothy crossed her arms over her chest. "I walked all the way from Dunollie Point like this."

Annag held both of her hands up, "Well, no, calm down... I suppose it's not that bad. More of an insinuation than an outline."

"What?" She looked down, but it was all the same to her. "I've still got the ironing and the evening towels to do."

"There's a spare blouse in the still room, you can put that on."

Dorothy crossed her arms again, and ducked along the corridor. Imagine if she bumped into Lord R with her brassiere on display!

She could hear Annag going over to Mina now. "I hear himself's in room 19."

Himself? Dorothy started running.

It wasn't far to the still room, it was joined to the laundry room on this side, and the north stair passage on the other. When she slipped in and looked around for the blouse she noticed that there was someone else over by the far door. Two people in fact. Alec the porter and an old man – only she'd thought it was one person at first because they each had an arm on the other's shoulder. As if they might cuddle. Alec had been awful down since Unity died. Dorothy had never seen him so down. He'd always been the closest to the Mitfords – but even Dorothy knew that Unity wasn't a nice one. And now here he was having to be comforted by some old man; must have been a friend of his, they looked about the same age and guests didn't exactly frequent the still room. It was a muddle of bottles of brasso and vases to be mended, and there was the blouse now, hanging up on the back of a chair. She whipped it off and slid out of the room again, with Alec none the wiser. It was very odd seeing two grown men touching like that. Men were only supposed to touch for a second or two, usually just some hearty slaps on the back, accompanied by some throwaway line or other. You're a real pal – a real pal I tell you. Or – what a swell guy. She was glad that Alec had a pal though. She would need to remember to be especially nice to him for the next while. Had he heard about Thomas' christening? That might cheer him up, though he didn't have the same honour as Dorothy. Or at least not as far as she knew. Annag hadn't mentioned who she had asked to be godfather. Dorothy paused for a moment before pushing open the door of the staff toilet. She couldn't believe she'd forgotten to ask Annag that. She shivered as she felt the chill of the room. The window didn't close properly; she'd nearly fallen down the pan one day, standing up on the rim trying to force it shut. There was a constant high hiss from the pipes as the water worked its way round, and an irregular plip from some invisible lone drop. Dorothy stiffened. It would be just her luck if Annag had chosen Alec. Just her rotten old luck. She felt her face squeezing into a grimace as she tried

not to even think the thought – please let it not be Alec. She was so horrible. When perhaps it was just what Alec needed to cheer him up; hadn't it cheered her up? After all her pals leaving her. Always running away from her. And poor Alec so upset. But he was a big lump, and absolutely ancient. He would suck every inch of prestige out the position. She would have to stand across the front from him, with the minister between them, and her, delicate in her kimono capped sleeves. No; she didn't want that. Why was she so awful?

She locked the door behind her and peeled the wet shirt off. Shuddering and tensing her whole body as the draught brushed by. She was getting ahead of herself anyway. One thing at a time. She would make herself presentable – and go to room 19.

She caught herself in the big mirror on the second landing. The blouse was actually quite flattering. It was a different shape from the ones her mother usually got her. More fitted. She turned her body round, stretching her neck as far as it would go – eyes trained on the mirror the whole time. Should she leave her apron on or take it off? On, had the distinct whiff of a maid – which was technically the case. And did he not have a floozy of a maid? Or was it a nurse after all? It was generally better to not look like a maid, but then that was her excuse for being there in the first place.

Her face felt very warm, though she was taking the stairs unusually slowly. It was fine though, he probably wouldn't be there. She was just going to have a quick look around, then leave everything exactly how she found it. She wouldn't linger – she would have to get the key back before Mina noticed. She just wanted to see what a Lord kept in his suitcase. Did he have white shoes and loose slacks? Probably not white shoes considering he was in mourning. Black shoes then. And perhaps a spectator variation for half-mourning. He probably had some fancy toiletries. Cologne. She could spray some on a bit of toilet paper and keep it in her knicker drawer. Or maybe not her knicker drawer...that was a bit...well,

that was where she usually hid things, but that didn't seem quite right. She felt odd as she pondered it, gripping her whole hand round the banister and pulling herself up. She could touch the pillow where his head would be, feeling the smooth cool linen that would be warmed by him – it would be better if he had been in the bed already. But there was always tomorrow, and if he came in she could just say she was checking the bedding. Just to make especially sure everything is in order your Lordship. And is it...in order? Yes your Lordship. You're quite sure of that?

She could see the door to room 19. She found herself moving towards it and giving a soft knock. Why did all her movements feel so slow. Like she was moving through treacle. She slid her hand down the door's wooden front. Leaning in close to it now – listening for a possible answer, though she was already putting the key in the hole. Slipping it in silently, and turning until she felt the resistance – holding the door open less than an inch, and taking the warm metal of the key in her hand again. She pushed the door open more, but still clung to it, poking only her head further into the room.

“Hello?” She tried to keep the pitch of her voice low. “Housekeeping.” She could see the bed. The open suitcase. She took a step forward, fingertips still curled around the rough edge of the door. “Hello?” The air felt thick – scented. A pine forest midsummer. She almost wanted to shut her eyes, but there was something glinting within the suitcase. A picture frame? The floozy? She walked towards it, reaching with both hands before she even got to the bed; but it was only a small frame – with an old woman in it, much too old. The door creaked behind her. She turned her head towards the noise. She had left the door open but could see from there, the dressing gown hung on the back of it; it was horribly familiar – so not Lord Redesdale's at all. Blue with white diamonds, but old and worn thin. Oh no, not the peculiar man from the Pru!

She heard the sound of a door opening in the opposite direction. As she swung her head round a puff of steam emerged first, then a man wrapped in a towel.

Dorothy gasped but seemed unable to move. “I...I...” Why wasn’t he saying anything? Or looking surprised? “I’m so sorry....I,” she dropped the picture frame and heard it fall into the suitcase with a thwack.

“I...” she managed a step backwards.

He stepped forwards. It was just the one step, but it seemed to cover a lot of ground, partly because of the length of his stride and partly because of the way he pulled open his towel and projected his paunch into the room. The bulge of pink skin lined with a trail of black hair, that thickened between his legs, in the shadow of the overhanging flesh, where his long slack thing hung.

Behind her she heard a click; not the tap of a white brogue in the hall – a metal semi-automatic click. Not the cocked weapon of some intrepid rescuer. Just the door swinging to, and closing itself behind her.

Liz had only really come in the shop to get out the rain, but it was that long since she'd been in it she found herself gazing at the rows of tartan scarves – drawn deeper and deeper into the wood panelled, brass railed innards of the place. She stopped to look at a display of compasses and little knives, though she preferred her knives even littler. Sharper. And she didn't need a compass either – it wasn't as if she had anywhere to bloody go. Not without considerable means. She closed her eyes for a moment. She could feel the thick carpet under her shoes, and the smell of the place – tweed and uncut cigars – as if she'd wandered into a country house. Except, if she wanted to, she too could come away with this pen or that glass ornament, of uncertain shape but a reassuring weight. Cold and smooth in her hand as she turned it over to read 'Made in Czechoslovakia.' She could see right through the thick curve of the glass to her palm. The skin magnified. Distorted all over again. Same as poor Czechoslovakia.

"Can I help you at all?"

"No. No thank you."

She carried on up the stairs, past the glazed-eyed stuffed animal heads, so you half expected to find a laird in his bed. Though what did she know, the only big houses she'd been in were commandeered. And stripped bare. And the last time she'd been upstairs in this place it was with Annag in 1940, and they'd had – of all things – a model POW camp for the children to look at. She wondered how long they had kept it on display. Long enough for Annag to go back in 42 and wonder about Jimmy?

She realised that there was a woman standing in front of her, with a shopping bag and a patterned headscarf, and smiling expectantly so Liz realised she must have said something and Liz was now supposed to say something back. She was vaguely familiar.

“I’m sorry,” Liz tried to focus on her. “I didn’t see you there.” Was she from the church? Glencruitten? One of the school wives? Yes – that was maybe it.

“How is your mother getting on?”

“Well, thank you.”

“It must be much nicer now she has you looking after her.” The woman smiled though Liz couldn’t help feeling the reproach. A smiling reproach? So not from their church then. They wouldn’t bother with the smile.

“I just popped out to pick up her books from Boots.”

“How nice. It must be awfully boring for her stuck in the house all day.”

“Yes.” She tried to adjust the bundle of books under her arm so there were no red labels on display, but it was too late. The woman glanced down. Liz watched her eyebrows rise and fall. In much the same way the librarians had when she handed over the selection Liz had ordered. Three red labels in all. It was probably a branch record.

“The red labels denote explicit or sensitive content,” the librarian had informed her, without lowering her voice.

“Yes, I’m aware of that.”

“And is the account holder also aware of that?”

“Of course.” Liz held the librarian’s gaze. “I’m here on her behalf.”

“Really?” She looked pointedly at the front cover of the first book: *Contraception*, by Dr Marie Stopes. If Liz hadn’t been so annoyed she would’ve been tempted to laugh. The very thought of her mother...

“Yes. She also gave me permission to request some books for my own personal use.” The librarian was beginning to flush. “I’m a nurse you see.”

“Ah.” The librarian nodded. Relieved. “Well you should have told me earlier – there’s another form for that.”

“For being a nurse?”

“Yes.” She pushed the sheets of paper towards Liz. “We don’t want our books carrying infectious diseases now do we?”

No. Liz supposed they did not, and grudgingly acknowledged that it was a reasonable precaution as she signed an agreement promising she’d do her best not to contaminate anything. It made her imagine nurses’ homes up and down the country, full of women lying in bed fingering Elinor Glyn – with gloves on.

“Mother’s always been an insatiable reader,” Liz found herself smiling at the woman who was still eyeing the books and beginning to blush slightly. So that was why the labels were red. The effect was almost instant. Highly contagious – was there a form for that?

“I had to get some books for myself too,” Liz added, taking pity on the woman. “I’m a nurse.” It was her second declaration in two hours. It was the truth after all; so why did she feel like Simon Peter?

She pulled the anatomy textbook out from the pile and held it up for the woman to see.

“Oh yes,” she gave a nervous laugh; still too close to the bone. “I don’t know how you can bear all that. My Kate’s the same – Mary’s eldest.”

“Really?” Liz hadn’t a clue who they were either.

“She’s just gone to train at the Victoria Infirmary.”

“Good for her.” She lowered her head in a solemn sort of nod. “Victoria girls are considered a cut above.”

The woman beamed. Though it didn’t say much for a hospital when their greatest claim was having the best looking nurses.

She could remember Ramsay asking her about it as she assisted him with a rather hopeless abdominal case. He hadn't spoken to her much before that, but he probably thought the chatter would distract her from the thuds and shudders and gunfire that seemed to be getting closer by the second.

"What made you choose the Western then? I thought most young girls made a beeline for the Victoria."

She felt her brow furrow, "just a hunch I suppose."

"A hunch eh." He was himself bent almost double, so she couldn't see his eyes, though she was certain of their roll. What exactly was she supposed to say?

"I suppose the Western was the least regal sounding." The least intimidating. The most like home.

"Really," he looked up, so his eyes met hers. She could see that he was grinning. "Oh they wouldn't like that one bit."

Liz left the shop but lingered under the covered entrance, listening to the rain. Watching the street and the sea, both a slick grey. Whereas she was in a pink granite cave, with polished slabs of it underfoot. Marbled with white like a thin slice of luncheon meat. Not altogether unpleasant. She remembered there were quite often people stood there, rattling their tins for some charity or other. The cottage hospital even – just waiting for anyone with a spare penny. As if they couldn't do better than that; life and death on par with the cathedral roof!

A man walked past with his collar up and his shoulders squeezed in tight. Liz put her library books inside her shopping bag – where she had other similarly offensive items – clutching it close as she stepped out into the drizzle and made a dash for the hotel. Hopefully Annag was still at work. It would be too awkward trying to hand them over in the house,

what with the kids buzzing about and her mother in law hovering. Today was her late day though.

“I’m never late,” she’d said to Liz once. “So I can tell right away, and it’s the thought that makes me sick more than the baby ever does.”

Well, that wasn’t any way to live; beside yourself from month to month. Or else not really man and wife at all.

She went in one of the hotel’s side doors, not wanting to attract too much attention. She thought she’d be safe enough creeping in like a drowned rat that way, but she was almost immediately spotted by Alec – and a bleary-eyed man that she quickly recognised as Lord Redesdale. Of all people. She froze in spite of herself, noticing Lord Redesdale’s hand on Alec’s shoulder, as if this was somehow his domain, and he was giving the other man a tour of the stables. So that was him arrived then. Liz felt how strange it was, that she’d been there at the end, and he didn’t know. Didn’t know her from Adam and she only knew him from the papers. She wondered whether she should say something – but what? And how could she even consider speaking when she wasn’t even able to control her feet. She forced one in front of the other.

As she approached, Alec gave her a nod and a small sort of smile.

Lord Redesdale bowed, holding one arm behind his back in a terribly charming fashion, and bending his grey head right down. She nodded back at them. Nobody spoke. There was nothing to be said; she could tell by the pair of solemn slack faces. The sins of the daughter shall be visited upon the father...though the father still walks in the light.

“So they don’t always make you drink your tea in a cupboard?”

Annag laughed. “No – good of you to humour us yesterday though. Well, humour Dorothy really, though I’m getting to like it fine myself. Nobody thinks of bothering you there.” She

pulled a seat out and sat down opposite Liz at one end of the huge wooden table that ran almost the length of the still room. The still room was the opposite of the cupboard, high whitewashed walls, bright with light and hung with aprons and shirts, so that she'd spotted Annag's dark head of hair as soon as she'd poked her nose in.

"Where is Dorothy?" Liz asked.

"Och, who knows. There's a pile of ironing waiting for her but I suppose it's not going anywhere." She gestured towards the other end of the table where it was stacked, a crisp linen barricade against the far end of the room.

Annag picked up her cup of tea but Liz pushed hers to one side.

"So you know what we were talking about the other night..." She almost wished they were back in the cupboard; anyone might look for Annag here, and the last thing Liz wanted was to get her into some sort of trouble.

"Mmm." Annag had her lips pursed, concentrating. Liz could see her tongue moving within as if she was sucking a boiled sweet. Then she grimaced and lifted her hand to her lips. "Jesus." Spitting into her palm now. "For crying out loud."

Liz just stared for a moment.

Annag looked up at her, brow furrowed.

"Did your tooth just fall out?"

"Yes," she kept frowning, "it bloody well did."

"Christ – let me see."

She held it out towards Liz.

"No I mean in your mouth, open your mouth."

"Eh?"

"Go on." Liz stood up and leaned across the table.

"For any favour."

She took Annag's chin in her hand – the skin softer than she'd expected – and peered in at the pink flesh, turned red in places. It glistened around the rows of pale teeth, with their aging whitewash and occasional bombed out section.

“You've two gaps there.”

“I know.” She shut her lips round the word like a plug. The hint of a pout.

“Have you been to the dentist?”

“The man wanted four shillings before he would even let me over the door. And anyway it's a bit bloody late to do anything about it now.”

Liz sat down again. That was true of course, it was too late; but she couldn't just say that.

“The rationing doesn't help.”

Annag scoffed. “You can say that again.” She looked up at the ceiling – heaven help us.

Liz reached for her cup and raised it until it was almost touching her lips before saying, “the rationing doesn't help.”

Annag snorted this time. Shaking her dark head at Liz's small smile.

It was a hell of a thought though, bringing up a family on rations. There was only so much orange concentrate could do. And every pregnancy sucking that bit more out your bones.

“When did you stop nursing Thomas?” Liz often wondered why they had to use the word nurse when referring to that business too – when nurses rarely had children. Just the plain dry breasts. Or vinegar tits in her case, depending who you asked.

“Och, ages ago.” Annag crossed her arms in front of her. “Poor Thomas. At least he's finally getting christened.”

“Yes,” Liz pushed her cup to the side again and looked at her hands. It wasn't her fault she couldn't be Thomas's godmother, but she didn't need to feel quite so relieved.

“And you were right, Dorothy was fair delighted when I asked her if she'd do the honours.”

“Good.” She smiled, and Annag smiled back, before closing her mouth again and cringing.

“Can you see the gap when I smile?”

“Smile again. A bit more. Wider.”

“Aye, that’ll do – I can’t imagine they’ll be much call for any more than that.”

“What if you get home and Jimmy’s done all the housework and got the tea on the table?”

“Then I’d keel over and lose the lot of them.”

They smiled at each other again; wry little close-lipped smiles. It made Annag’s dimples stand out more. Liz remembered how she used to envy those dimples. But they’d never have looked right on her.

Annag dropped the tooth on to her saucer with a tinkle so it sat there, off-white and crumbling, like a lump of old sugar.

“You can’t see any gaps anyway,” Liz said.

“Not that I’ve any right to be vain.”

“You’ve got a lovely smile. And we’ve all got a right to teeth for christ’s sake. Nobody wants to be walking about with a mouth like the black hole of Calcutta.”

“No.” Annag stretched her arms out against the edge of the table. Pushing her wrists up so Liz could see the blue line of the cephalic vein. “Not very nice at all.” She lifted her hands and rubbed each wrist in turn.

“Here.” Liz lifted her bag and pulled the box out. “You’d better have these.”

“What’s that, a new set of teeth?”

“Sadly not.” She handed it over.

Annag gave her a quizzical look before turning to the box. “Chocolates? I thought they were bad for your teeth.”

“No, sorry, that’s just the packet.” Another of Ramsay’s little jokes? “They give them all sorts of wrappers to throw folk off the scent – look inside.”

“Oh my god, it’s never....” Annag laughed. “Jimmy’ll have a fit wondering where the hell I’ve got these.”

Liz waved her hand. “Just tell him you got them from me.”

“Aye, that’ll be right. He’d never let me out with you again.”

“Really?” It wasn’t her fault he hadn’t the sense to get hold of them himself. And they never went out anyway.

“I suppose I could say it was a medical thing, that might get you off.”

“Well, I am a nurse.” That was three times now. What happened next – would she be struck down? Struck off? She couldn’t remember what had happened to Simon Peter. “Why would he mind though?”

Annag just laughed and shook her head again. “If I said you got them from a medical man, then maybe not, but who knows. Where did you get them from anyway?”

“A medical man.”

Annag laughed again. “Oh well.” She closed the box and looked at it. “I’d have preferred the chocolates, but never mind.”

“There’s other things too – I got you a wee mail order leaflet and this book has a description of all the different appliances.”

“Appliances? Are you sure you didn’t just pick up the catalogue from Woolworths?”

Liz laughed.

“What I wouldn’t give for a washing machine.” Annag laughed too, but then paused.

“We’ll see I suppose,” she covered her face with her hands and sighed. “But what on earth am I supposed to say to Jimmy.”

Liz pressed her lips together and tilted her head to one side. What married couples did or didn’t say to each other was quite beyond her.

“I don’t know,” she glanced again at the tooth, “but you have to say something.”

Annag noticed her looking at it. She picked it up and swiftly put it in her pocket.

Well that was one less red label for Liz to be carrying about. She pushed open the door to the back stairs of the tradesman's entrance. Annag had told her there was an umbrella she could take, which was just as well because she could already hear the rain running along the gutters as she rattled down the metal staircase. The steel frame continued to clang even after she'd descended and turned to look around at the assorted bits of pipe, and sandwich boards, and Dorothy sitting in what appeared to be a wheelchair.

"Oh, hello Dorothy – had an accident?" She smiled. Dorothy didn't. "Oh dear, you haven't really had an accident have you?" There was something unnerving about Dorothy's expression.

She looked at Liz with wide eyes and swallowed loudly. "It was my fault," she said. "I shouldn't have been in his room."

Liz could hardly feel the rain at all by the time she reached the top of the hill. The trees were low and fat with fresh leaves so she felt like she was wandering through their innards; a vast network of branches and roots that glistened and bulged above and underfoot. She reached out to run her fingers along a length of bronze-looking bark. What kind of tree was that now? It was wet and smooth and fat in one section, like an aortic aneurysm. She squeezed it with her thumb and middle finger as she passed by. She should know the name for it; her father would have told her it once. He had known every species, native and non-native. She was jealous of that brain that had been buried; it seemed like such a waste. All that education, the sum of his knowledge, gone, though there'd have been nothing to see if you'd taken it and sliced it open. Nothing at all in the neural tissue about the nitrogen cycle, or migratory routes, or to indicate that he was tone deaf but sang anyway, preferred raspberry jam to strawberry – there would be no long index tucked between meningeal layers, listing the leaf shape and the Latin of every possible tree. She paused to push a loose strand of hair under her hat, sliding her fingers up the indentation of her temple, noticing the hard feel of it, and the sink of the soft ground. It was more than ten years since they'd buried him; she started walking again. Anatomy and geology in complete union now – he would like that.

The trees began to drop away leaving a show of pink rhodies, the odd fleck of rain against her cheek, and the huge hydropathic ruin itself appearing out of the green light and insect air. Although she had been expecting it – it was where she was going – it still came as something of a surprise, this rather grand stone skeleton of a hotel that was never meant to be. She supposed that should make it less haunting, the fact it had never been finished. Never occupied. As far as she was aware, nobody had ever died there. It was a strange feeling nonetheless, walking up to a section of the thick stone wall, its curved turreted corner beautifully carved and putting a brave face on it, though its sides were crumbling and the

trees getting closer every year. They would soon start to impinge on the view from the lower windows, though that was all right considering there were no rooms, no roof. No guests. Only the ruined remains – and her, looking down, like it, on the rest of the town. She liked being that high up. The feeling of seeing without being seen, and of seeing for miles and miles, so you could put it all into context: the square, the river, the castle, the islands, the sea, the sea, the sea. She had dragged Sandy up a fair few hills over the years. Though it was him that had suggested they meet at the hydro.

At first she'd thought it was a good idea. It was secluded. Abandoned. But those were qualities sought for other sorts of meetings. All she'd suggested was talking somewhere private, when they were both sober – he'd snorted at that bit. Yes, it had seemed like a good idea at the time; talking. Just talking. Now though she doubted whether she could rely on her mouth to move, or for her brain to summon the words and send them down the thick inelegant muscle of her tongue. It wasn't something she took for granted. She'd seen men in the Heads unit with aphasia. There had been one particularly bad case; the MO and his man had stood at the end of the bed, talking to each other and glancing occasionally at the poor chap.

“Lost a chunk of his left temporal lobe I'm afraid. Total speech arrest. Dumb as the day he was born.”

And she had wanted to shout at them – he's not deaf you know. Because she could see how scared he was, though he wasn't looking at them. He was cowering away from their blunt words and sharp looks, and it was her that his pleading eyes were fixed on. Desperate, though they softened as she took his hand slyly in hers. Trying to ignore the mouths at the foot of the bed, though they couldn't help hearing. Not knowing whether to laugh or cry:

“And what's the prognosis?”

“Well...it's difficult to say.”

She reached out to steady herself against the wall as she stepped over a moss covered rock. She landed in a doorway; sheltering on the threshold between nothing and nothing. Then Sandy appeared, cutting a path through the bluebells at a pace she couldn't help thinking seemed unnecessarily brisk. What had the poor bluebells ever done to him? She still couldn't tell whether he'd seen her, so positioned herself more conspicuously within the stone frame, as if she were a remarkably dowdy tart on the tout. He appeared to be coming straight at her, quick sure steps that showed no sign of slowing. Head down. Close enough now that she could hear the swish of wet grass and the high pitched squeaks of stalks squashed under the sole of his shoe. The bottoms of his trouser legs were damp and flecked with tiny white blossoms. Would that be noticed back at the office? Wouldn't they wonder where he'd been, in the middle of the afternoon – in the rain.

He suddenly called out. "You look like something out of the bloody resistance."

"What?"

"The hat and everything." He pointed at her beret. "You couldn't look more suspect if you tried."

"It's the only hat I've got," her hands flew to its defence, pulling the sides firmly in place, "and I happen to like it." He was still powering towards her, and she was beginning to think he'd either bowl right past, or straight through her.

"Pick it up in France did you?" He came to an abrupt halt at arm's length and she had to try not to flinch.

"No." She chose to ignore his tone, and the desire to ask what exactly he'd picked up in France. Instead she held his eye. "Anyway, nice to see you too."

He scoffed, then looked away so she got his full profile, gazing up the bulge of his throat as his breathing slowed and the rain caught at his cheekbones.

“Won’t you come in?” She stood to one side of the doorway and gestured with her hand.

He stepped past her and looked up at the open sky. “I think you might have a leak.”

“Really?”

“Just a small one.”

“Well it is a hydropathic spa.”

“I’m not sure this is what they had in mind...” he gestured around the room that wasn’t quite a room.

“I believe it’s all the rage in London.”

He smiled, moving so he was standing in the doorway with her now, leaning his back against the far side of it.

She leaned on the side nearest her so they were facing each other. Framed. Bodies curving away from the straight lines like a pair of mismatched corbels. “Why did you want to meet here?”

“Why did you want to meet at all?”

The points of her shoulder blades made contact with the hard stone wall; she could feel the coldness of it through the thin layer of her gabardine coat.

She supposed he did have a point about her clothes, though she hadn’t dressed herself that morning with subterfuge in mind.

She had, however, considered, just for a moment, sneaking out without any word to her mother. Her mother had gone for a lie down and this was such a rare concession to her injury that Liz didn’t want to wake her. She crept along the hall listening for any movements and heard nothing. Yet when she’d paused in front of the bedroom door her mother suddenly called out:

“Are you coming in or not?”

Liz stuck her head round the door and met her enquiring eyes.

No blackouts today. Liz gestured to the exposed window, “there’s been complaints that you’re showing a light.”

Her mother apparently didn’t find that amusing, responding only with a slight sigh.

“I just need to pop out for a moment.”

“Oh right.”

“Do you need anything?”

“No, no.”

“Can I get you a cup of tea before I go.”

Her mother pulled herself into a more upright position. “Yes, I think I will have a tea thank you.”

“You will?”

“Well you did offer, but if you don’t have time...”

“No, no. I’m happy to make it; won’t be a jiffy.”

Whilst she was waiting for the kettle to boil she considered whether she dared risk adding a slice of bread and jam. Or would that be an attention too far?

Yes. Her mother eyed the tray suspiciously when she brought it into the room.

“I won’t manage that, you’ll need to have it.”

“You might want it later.”

“How long are you intending to be?” Her eyes had a dark look to them. Pained? Or just annoyed again.

“Not long...” Liz sat on the edge of the bed, “I need to go to the post office.”

“Yes, I noticed there’s been an increase in post of late.”

She looked at the ceiling.

“And some from the hospital?”

She nodded. Well, Ramsay counted as the hospital.

“They’ll be wanting you back.”

If only.

“You should go. They need you more than I do.”

“Thanks very much.”

She took a long time swallowing her tea. “There’s more of them than there are of me. It doesn’t make sense.”

Liz stood up again. “There’s no rush.”

“Isn’t there? July’s not that far away.”

“They seem to be managing perfectly well without me.”

Her mother frowned.

“I’ll be back in time to put the tea on.” She turned to go, closing the door behind her and walking along the hall where she carefully folded her hair under her beret and tied her coat closed, pulling the belt until she could feel it tight against the bottom of her ribs. As she had a final glance in the big oval mirror she noticed the odd expression on her face. Odd because it was blank. Because there was none of it news to her. Her mother had never asked her to come, why should Liz be surprised if she wanted her to go. It did rub it in rather though, repeating Ramsay’s utilitarian arguments back to her like that, and reminding her of the importance of what she was missing. July was not far away at all and she was out of the loop entirely. Missing it – their big moment. She was lucky if she caught Bevan on the BBC. Ramsay hadn’t even seen fit to fill her in on it. What business was it of hers.

Liz had replied to his French letter to say thank you. And she’d told him about her shifts at the cottage hospital, though he didn’t appear at all interested in that. He’d written back: glad to hear you’re keeping busy; once you run out of rubbers we could always do with an extra pair of hands at the clinic.

Well, she had asked for that. And she didn't so much mind the jibe about the rubbers, it was the insinuation that whatever work she'd found couldn't possibly be as important as his. His patients were more numerous, more ill, more deserving. And of course the worst part was that it was true, so she was right to feel guilty really. She felt as guilty now for being in Oban as she had for not having come sooner. And her mother getting in on it too. And neither of them really wanting her.

Was that why she'd asked Sandy to meet her?

"What do you think this room was?" She looked up the wall where there was a gap with some sort of vent.

"Haven't a clue."

"They might have intended it for one of their water treatments – it could come in there and out there," she pointed towards the far corner.

Sandy pulled a face. "What sort of treatments?"

"Oh I don't know; bathing, steaming. Pumping it where it doesn't belong."

"Up the hill."

"Up the arse."

He laughed, shaking his head – what was she like. "Why would they want to do that?"

"Oh the upper classes were always at that sort of thing. One has to wonder what they were trying to cleanse themselves of."

He shrugged, a big firm shouldered shrug of a country man who couldn't care less.

But still she went on. "Maybe it was all that dirty money made from the sweat of others."

He shrugged again. "Syphilis, I should think."

"Yes." She smiled. "Syphilis indeed. How did we manage to get on to that?"

"Don't look at me."

But she did, and saw the glittering drops of rain caught in the front of his hair.

He ran his hand across his forehead. Drying? Deflecting? “You’re the one going off on a tandem, going on about waterworks and what not.”

“I’m sorry.” She laughed at the old joke. She was always going off on a tandem according to him – but you needed two people for that. She held her hands behind her back; two fists pressing into the base of her spine. Then she couldn’t think of what else to say, because that was it really – that was what she wanted to say, though she realised it wasn’t quite enough. She stood up straight again and looked around them. “Isn’t it odd though to think what it might have been like if it hadn’t burnt down.”

“It would’ve been too grand for the local people anyway. It was better with the fire, then they were able to pinch the stone for themselves.”

“Really?”

“Oh aye – did nobody ever tell you that?”

“No. Who told you that?”

“The old man I think.”

“Is there a very ornate barn somewhere on the farm?”

He laughed, shaking his head again.

“I meant to ask you, has somebody got the farm now?”

“No.”

“It’s just that I’ve seen a light on, quite a few times now.”

“Aye?” He stepped past her again out into the open grass. The open rain.

“It might be tramps or something I suppose.”

He started pacing about in front of the doorway, kicking at the tufts of grass. “It’s not my concern anymore.”

“No...no, I suppose not. I just thought maybe I should say.” She paused. “It looked like they were in the kitchen – it could be kids I suppose, though it was a bit late.”

“What were you doing there anyway?” He stopped pacing to look at her, shoulders hunched against the drizzle, brow furrowed.

“I was just out walking, and I saw the light, and...” she shrugged, “I don’t know, I suppose it bothered me, though I don’t know why I should care... You obviously don’t.”

“Huh.” He sniggered. “Well thanks for taking an interest,” he turned and gave her a sharp look, “first time for everything I suppose.”

She sighed.

He turned and started pacing away from her again. Maybe he would just go now, maybe there wasn’t any point in saying any of it.

“I was sorry you know, when I heard that you’d lost it.”

He turned and veered towards her again, raising his voice now. “I should have been there.”

“You couldn’t.”

“I didn’t need to volunteer myself.”

“You wanted to though – he should have understood that.”

“I could have waited, what with the exemption. I could have made sure the old man had the help in place, but no I was in too much of a bloody rush because I didn’t want to be outdone by you.” He was shouting now, or at least it seemed loud to her, ringing around the stone surfaces of her shelter; though he was out in the open, talking back to her from the middle of a grass circle of his own making. Curved flattened lines where the green looked darker.

“I never asked you to do anything—”

“We were going to be married – how could I have looked you in the eye if you’d been there and I hadn’t. I wasn’t to know you didn’t mean a word of it.”

She felt that she had to shout to get her words out to him – out there. Though she didn't shout. Not as a rule. You just had to find the right pitch, the right tone; like on the wards, or with that pervert at the hotel yesterday. Why could she never find the right pitch for Sandy?

"It wasn't all my fault you know."

"No?"

"No!" A definite shout. There was no dressing it up. "It was too much," she could feel the sound of it vibrating down her throat and into her lungs, "like you were putting your life in my hands – I didn't know what else to do."

"So you thought you'd just run away to the army and hope I forgot all about it." He looked almost pleased with himself; he had her all figured out.

"No, I didn't know what I wanted; I only knew what I didn't want."

"Aye – me." He gave a short hard laugh – pah!

"I knew I'd be useless as a farmer's wife—"

"So it was the farm you didn't want."

"Well...in a way. But I wanted you to have it. How was I supposed to know your father would take against the Ministry like that—"

"He didn't like taking orders from anyone."

"Well tough – sometimes we have to just lump it. There was a bloody war on."

"I could have kept it producing."

"Not without the extra labour."

"I'd have brought him round to that."

"Really? To the Germans? And the girls?"

"I could have done something Liz – for christ's sake – it killed him losing that farm." He stopped pacing and stared at her. Shaking.

"I know." She was sounding like herself again. "I'm sorry. I really am."

“It killed him.” He lifted his hand to his brow. “And I wasn’t here. I was going backwards and forwards across the bloody desert – wondering” He pressed his sleeve to his mouth.

She went to him and threw her arms around him. Her arms felt too short and too thin to contain him though; she clutched at his hard shoulders, feeling horribly insufficient, until he reached out for her waist and she was suddenly tucked – the whole of her – right down the front of him. Her hands stretched to the nape of his neck and she pressed her cheek into the damp tweed of his breast pocket. It was raw and scratchy against her skin but that only made her press harder. And still it wasn’t hard enough. She leaned in with the whole side of her tightly clenched jaw until it started to burn.

“It was me by the way.” His voice sounded calmer now. She could feel it coming through his chest cavity.

“It was me too, I—”

“No I mean the light. That light you saw – it was me.”

“Oh.” She wanted to look at his face then, but didn’t.

“I just...I go and sit there sometimes.”

Of course. Why hadn’t she thought of that at the time? The thought of it now was almost too much – of the pair of them, either end of a dark field. She felt like she might start crying, or never let go, but he suddenly cleared his throat and pulled away from her.

“Anyway, it’s done now.”

She steadied herself against the sudden absence of his body. Looking away, and trying to think of something else to say. “Couldn’t you try and get it back?”

He was trying to light a cigarette. “I don’t have that sort of money.”

“Betty does.”

He spoke with the cigarette wedged in his mouth. “I’m sure Betty would rather keep things as they are.” Hunching over the flame though it was getting smaller all the time.

“With an unhappy alcoholic philanderer of a husband – I don’t think so.”

He let the fag drop from his mouth. “Jesus bleeding Christ Elizabeth, talk about kicking a man when he’s down.”

“You might at least ask her.”

“What sort of man uses his wife’s money—”

“Every sort of man who ever had a wife with money!”

He sighed and shook his head. “What would you think of me though,” he gestured towards her, “if you were Betty?”

“Well, I couldn’t say – I’m not Betty.”

“No, indeed you aren’t.” He looked at her in a way that made her feel suddenly exposed. In her damp coat, and her hat pressed flat, and her hollow cheeks and her pale skin – with the red raw mark along the jaw now too. The haze of cloud made the day brighter, and she suddenly remembered it was the first time he’d been sober enough to have a proper look at her. After all these years. How did she compare to his wife’s soft curls and full lips, her bright smile and those glittering brown eyes. Liz hadn’t seen Betty since she’d got back, so she only had the youthful Betty with which to make her thoroughly unfavourable comparison. Betty didn’t complain, and would give him babies, and would do whatever he wanted if he would only ask her; her only crime was having more money than him, and had he not learnt his lesson by now?

“Don’t let pride get the better of you Sandy.”

He paused. She could hear him clicking the lid of his lighter open and shut again. Open – and a loud metallic closing. “You think that’s what did it for us?”

“Probably – but only because I was as bad as you.”

“You don’t think Betty’s at all proud?”

She folded her arms.

“You think she can’t be proud because she married me?”

“No. She’s just more the marrying sort.”

“It was me that rushed her into it you know.”

“Well...” Had that been to get back at her? To prove something. Or because he needed someone; someone who was there, and who wasn’t going to run away. “So you’ll talk to her about the farm—”

“Yes – Christ almighty – I’ll look into it.” He pulled both his hands over his face and sighed. He sat like that for a while before he looked up again. “And what about you anyway?”

“Me?”

“Yes. How’s your surgeon?”

“Oh...that was never really anything.” She pulled her hands over her own face, slick with rain – stinging slightly on her chin. “We’re getting drenched. Let’s go under the big tree for a minute.” She walked ahead of him past the tallest section of the ruin, stepping over the remains of a bonfire, and catching the charred smell of it. Fitting really, considering the place had burnt down, and all that was left of the highest wall was four stories of open windows and the outlines of fireplaces. It was eerily like a bombed out block. She stood underneath the tree, listening to the steady shower – and then Sandy’s breath as he stopped beside her.

“Do you ever talk to Betty about the war?”

“Why would I want to do that?”

“I don’t know. It can tie people together somehow.” She glanced across at him, but he was looking up at the highest floating hearth.

“I don’t want her hearing about all that. War’s not a thing for women.”

“It shouldn’t be a thing for anyone.”

“You were quick enough to choose it; I don’t suppose you regret that.”

“No.” She felt obliged to say it quickly.

“What did you do to your hands?”

She automatically looked down at them, holding them up, though they had only been hanging at her side. So when had he noticed?

“I had an accident.”

He looked at her a moment longer, then shrugged.

“I’m glad you came Sandy.” She slid her hands into her coat pockets. “I’m sorry I’ve kept you so long.”

He scoffed. “That me dismissed then is it?”

“Don’t be ridiculous.”

“No, no, as long as you’ve got whatever it was you wanted off your chest – don’t you bother about me.”

Was that really what he thought had just happened?

He turned and started walking away.

“Sandy.”

His pace seemed to quicken. Another trail of innocent bluebells mown down, as he made his way back towards the path; back to the office? Back home? Where did he keep his bottles? She really was glad, and rather touched, that he’d been sober – but she couldn’t exactly thank him for that without sounding patronising. He was hardly likely to stand for that, though he’d let her off with a lot that afternoon; she had a cheek even asking for the time of day, never mind bothering him about the farm. But maybe... Maybe he would think about that at least. It didn’t make any sort of sense it sitting there, and him breaking his heart for it. He just needed a shove, or a boot up the backside, and obviously nobody else had seen fit to do it so far. It may as well be her he held it against; what was another black mark.

She started to feel more hopeful as she headed back down the path, muddy now. Maybe she could do some good while she was home – even if it didn't involve looking after her mother – she would have to wait and see. And there was Dorothy of course; another disaster avoided there. Still, even better if it hadn't happened at all – if she had been warned. Who had warned Liz? She lifted her fingers to the side of her face and felt the raw skin. That wasn't very clever really; it probably looked as if she'd been violently kissing a badly shaven man. But Sandy hadn't tried to kiss her once. Maybe he would never try and kiss her again. That was as it should be. So why did it stick in the craw?

It was only when she came within view of the house that she realised she had no idea just how long she had been. Too long no doubt. She would need to get the tea on quick smart, but she would have to get out of those wet clothes first.

“Mum?”

She went in by the kitchen and through to the living room.

“Mum?”

Surely she wasn't still in bed – she darted down the hall and threw the door open without knocking. But it was okay. She wasn't there either. She must just be in the bathroom.

“Mum?”

She tried the bathroom door and found it locked.

“Mum, that's me home. Sorry I was a bit longer than I expected.”

She waited for a reply. She supposed it was rather undignified to be forced to shout from the toilet, but still...

“Mum?” She rapped on the door. “Mum, are you in there?” Of course she was in there – who else would it be? “Mum!” She was banging now. “Mum, are you okay?” Of course she wasn't okay though. This wasn't okay.

Liz pulled back from the door and kicked it as hard as she could. It shifted in its frame, and the heel of her shoe scraped against the white painted wood, but it stood there just the same. She ran down the hall back into the kitchen, trying to think what was big enough, or hard enough – goddammit, Sandy could have done it with just the one shoulder. She pulled open the cupboard under the sink and rummaged around until she found a chisel and a hammer. Running back down the hall.

She shoulder-barged the door until there was a wedge large enough for the chisel, slipping it in and whacking it until it had driven the snib on the other side free.

And there was her mum; sprawled on the floor, with blue toes and a fever. Hell hell hell. God damn it – she was worse than useless – right under her nose – worse than bloody useless. God damn it. No she didn't mean that. She meant please. Please god. Please dear god.

Every Heart Desires a Mate.

It was a good opening sentence. Dorothy had read it three times now between pauses where she thought she'd heard steps in the hall, to the point that all her heart really now desired was a lock on her bedroom door. Then she could have read in peace without looking up all the time, holding her ears high, like a deer trying to graze, and imagining her mother barging in. She had been in two minds whether to even bring the book into the house; she'd got through most of it in the hen's cupboard earlier and it would've been safer to leave it at the hotel, where it might have been anyone's. But she couldn't quite resist. What if she were due to have a sex-tide and she didn't even know it? It was rather alarming really.

She flattened the pages out on the desk in front of her. It could always pass as homework, her mother wasn't likely to pay much attention to that. And some of the language, even if she did glance at it, well, there were science sounding bits – others that were flowery like poetry; none of it, if she was being honest, making a huge amount of sense. None of it telling her exactly what it was she was supposed to be finding out about. There wasn't much on the actual bodily union, and rather a lot about the invisible glories of the wave-lengths of the soul. Had Liz actually read this herself? It said at the beginning it was specifically for married people, but Liz wasn't likely to bother over a bit of bold type – and Dorothy wasn't married either. Yet here she was.

She looked up again when she heard a noise outside, though it was only Mrs Menzies and she would hardly be able to see what Dorothy was reading from out there. What was she doing out in the rain – shouting something to her husband. She was always shouting something or other at him. Mr and Mrs Menzies obviously hadn't discovered the joys of mutual adjustment; though the phrase only made Dorothy imagine them sitting in front of the fire hemming each other's nightshirts.

The rain was coming down faster than before. So it gathered on the windowpane, making channels and deltas, and fat drops that chased – and eventually swallowed each other up.

Bodily union. But she knew that water was two hydrogen and one oxygen, and it had tides of its own to contend with.

If a swimmer comes to a sandy beach when the tide is out and the waves have receded...does he, baulked of his bathe, angrily call the sea capricious?

Dorothy wasn't sure where Dr Stopes went swimming but she couldn't say she'd ever had that problem at wee Ganavan. If the tide was out you just walked the extra however many yards and that was you. She couldn't help laughing at the idea of a man walking up to the wet sand, raising his fist to it, and walking away again. Of course Dr Stopes wasn't really talking about the sea, that was another one of her metaphors. And it conjured a picture of husbands approaching the marital bed equipped with goggles and flippers. Ready to embark on the sacred journey whose final destination was, as far as she could gather, some sort of quivering eternal rainbow. So that cleared that up. She supposed that the horrible man at the hotel had at least given her a glimpse of what a grown man's privates were. Though there was nothing private about his, and she barely registered them before bolting. She doubted there was anything in all this watery talk about what would possess someone to do a thing like that. There were liquids involved of course – she knew that much.

She had sat under the backstairs for half an hour before Liz came, listening to the water running off the roof, into the gutter, and down the shining black lead pipe, into the Black Lynn flowing behind them – that was just as black and just as slick. And the Black Lynn flowed out to the sea, just the other side of the road there. Maybe the tide was in. Maybe that's why he had done it. But Dr Stopes wrote that men didn't have sex-tides. They were high-tide full-time, which was an appalling thought if it was true. Even Mr Devine, who

never had so much as a girlfriend? Even old bodachs like Alec? Liz's reaction seemed to confirm the statement though; the most surprising thing being that she wasn't surprised in the least, though Dorothy could barely even think of the words and felt that her face was fit to burst. But Liz just asked her a series of questions: did he hurt you, did he touch you, did he touch himself. Dorothy hadn't even considered the last one as being a possibility. How would he even find his thing under that huge belly of his? She didn't want to think about that – the way the hairs trained inwards like the back end of a hog. She never wanted to think about him, or see him again. Though she did wish she could have somehow been a fly on the wall in the hall outside room 19, just so she might have heard what Liz had actually said to him.

She'd appeared down the stairs again looking exactly the same as when she'd left, though coming down she moved a little bit quicker. Lighter. Her hands sliding down the rails, so it seemed like she was gliding despite her straight skirt not lending itself much to flouncing.

"Well that's that," she stopped in front of Dorothy, "he's going and he won't be back."

"Are you sure?"

Liz went over and pushed open the heavy side door, with its high-pitched scrape along the floor, and peered out into the rain. "Yes, that's him heading down the road now."

"Really?" Just like that.

"See for yourself if you like?"

Dorothy shook her head.

"Come on, there's nothing to be scared of."

She went up to Liz, who took Dorothy's arm in hers, pulling her over so their sides touched and she could point to a figure in the distance. A round figure with a rectangular case. Holding on to his hat and running.

It wasn't until a bit later that Liz had given her the book.

"We don't want you to go getting a complex now Dorothy."

Something about her tone made Dorothy stand up straighter. "I don't intend to."

"Good." She nodded. "It's a silly thing really, the male genitalia. But the woman's isn't any better when you get a good look at it. It's all pretty grim." She sighed. "But don't let me put you off. Here..." she picked up the shopping bag that she'd left by the banister earlier, taking out a book and holding it out to Dorothy. "You may as well take this. See what she has to say on the matter."

Dorothy would have preferred to hear Liz's own views, but that wasn't quite polite to ask – and she was good enough to give her her book. Or a book from Boots at least. Dorothy's first red label, what would Jessie say if she could see that? She could take it round to Jessie's, just to flash the label at her then tell her to mind her own business when she asked to see inside – I thought you weren't interested in my books Jessie. She got up and walked over to the window. It might get wet in the rain, which had softened again, but to that sort that hung in the air and seemed to come at you from all angles. So you were wet before you even realised. And anyway, she had no real desire to see Jessie. No, it wasn't a good idea at all. Jessie, she had learned by now, could not be trusted. Only the other week she had plucked Elizabeth Bowen out of Dorothy's hands during break time and read from it in a stupid mincing voice. There had been a few smirks until Dorothy piped up:

"Well if that's the best you can do it's no wonder Mr Collins never chooses you."

Jessie hadn't liked that at all. Then Dorothy had whipped the book back from under Jessie's nose and her pouting lips and walked away with what she hoped was a cool stride. As if she was walking down a hospital ward, or going to meet Sandy MacPherson, or casually dishing out justice to dirty old men.

“Dorothy I need to measure you.”

She gave a slight start but could tell by the volume that her mother had shouted her from the living room. A safe enough distance.

“Coming!” As long as she went now there would be no need for her mother to come into Dorothy’s room. Still, she tucked the book under her mattress before she bounded off.

Her mum made most of Dorothy’s clothes, which meant long periods of standing still whilst measuring tape, or pins, or bits of paper patterns were moved around her.

“Stay still.”

Yes, if her body would stay still her mother wouldn’t have to keep measuring it.

“For goodness sake Dorothy, look how tall you’re getting.” Her mother held the point on the tape out in front of her, though Dorothy only sighed and thought that really her mother was partly to blame too. She was the one feeding her.

“Now, arms up.”

Oh no, this was the worst bit. It was good in a way that her mother rushed it, so Dorothy only had a few moments when she had to hold her red face to one side, eye to eye with the Chinese lady on the Welsh dresser, pretending that none of it was happening; but it was bad in another way because her mother never seemed to get the fit of her bust at all right. The finished items were generally too tight, so she was scared to breathe too deeply and always thought her bust looked a bit sad and flattened rather than the distinct twin points all the prettier girls had.

“Well at least that hasn’t changed much.” Her mother made a note with her pencil then looked up at Dorothy again. “That’s enough of a bust to be getting on with.” She said it as if Dorothy had grown it to spite her.

Still, Dorothy shouldn’t complain. She was getting her dress and that was what mattered.

“What are you at anyway, I thought you were going to do your father’s shirts seen as I’m slaving away on this dress of yours.”

“Yes, I’ll do them later...I’m just finishing some homework.”

Her mother had a needle between her lips by now so she had to make do with a roll of the eyes. As Dorothy went to leave the room again she reached out and ran her hand along a length of the pink spotted fabric her mother was marking out, for which she received a light whack – but Dorothy just grinned. All she could feel as she walked back along the hall was the softness of the material against her fingertips. It was going to be her best dress yet.

She was ashamed that the first chance she got, alone with the book in the hen’s cupboard, she’d flicked through the thing in the hope of some sort of illustration. But no luck there. The most she got was a pair of graphs. They were supposed to chart the curves of arousal at certain points throughout the month, though there was nothing curvy about them. There were two spikey mountain ranges that she struggled to see the significance of. It was, however, interesting to compare the ‘normal’ with the ‘depressed’ or ‘overworked’ specimen, who was lucky if they got up one mountain a month. It mustn’t really signify though because nobody was more overworked than Annag, and she’d obviously got up enough mountains to somehow have five children. And that just made Dorothy imagine women finding babies up mountains – like, who was that now, Moses? Or no, babies weren’t born on mountains, they were killed on them. The Classics rather than the bible. She preferred the Classics; they were somehow more believable. Though she couldn’t really take them as a religious model. Not when she had a godson depending on her.

At the hotel earlier, Annag had asked Alec if he would be godfather. It was just as she’d feared; she was prepared to bear it though. Alec needed cheering up even more than she did. But Alec wasn’t having any of it.

“Oh no pet, you don’t want an old fool like me getting involved.” He gave a small smile though his lips were pursed and he shook his head.

“Don’t be daft, you’re the ideal candidate.” Annag gave him a wee nudge, then turned to Dorothy. “And anyway we need an old yin to keep Dorothy right, isn’t that so Dorothy?”

Dorothy hesitated and considered objecting, until Annag fixed her with a look and arched her eyebrows towards Alec.

“Aye...”

Annag frowned.

“That’s right,” she added for good measure. Well it wasn’t her fault if Alec wasn’t interested.

“Och,” he waved his hand, “Dorothy’s a good girl.” He paused to lean against the laundry trolley.

Dorothy went to hang up her apron, but noticed when she turned back that he was still looking at her.

“You’ll be all right eh Dorothy?”

She looked from him to Annag and back. “Oh yes, but Thomas needs a godfather too. There’s always a godfather.” She tried to remember the last christening she’d been to. What exactly did the minister say during the service? Did he go into anything about how the godmother and godfather were in it together – united by the child. An out of body union. She supposed that thinking about it there were worse folk than Alec that it could be. What if it was one of Jimmy’s slick-haired brothers who would stand at the other side of the font winking at her. That was all she needed. “You’d be a good godfather Alec because you’ve already proved yourself – thrice over.”

“Thrice?” Annag looked at her.

“Three times.”

“I know that,” hand on her hip now, “Alec’s got four daughters though.”

“Oh sorry,” she turned back to Alec, but she didn’t know what the word for four times was, and he had his hand covering his brow so she couldn’t see if he was paying attention or not.

She mumbled, almost to herself, “...quince then.”

“Quince!” Annag burst out laughing.

“Well I don’t know!”

Alec smiled at her, then shook his head again. She thought she heard him say something else about her being right the first time, but she didn’t quite follow.

Annag was still laughing.

Dorothy shrugged. Well, at least somebody found her amusing.

It was no good. There was something about her bedroom, or maybe their whole house, that prevented her from concentrating on the words on the page. She couldn’t think about ‘the fundamental pulse’ in front of Dolly Dodo, even though she herself was slumped on the shelf legs akimbo. She may as well put it away and try again somewhere else. She could take it back to work, or—

The door flew open and her mother appeared.

“Shirts Dorothy.”

If she had sat with the book open or closed her mother wouldn’t have batted an eye, but of course she had jumped and clutched at it and held it to the side of her in the worst possible pose.

“What’s that?”

“A book.”

“What sort of book?”

“Just something that Liz lent me.”

Her mother's eyebrows shot skywards. "Oh really?"

"Elizabeth Bowen, she thought I might like it and – no!"

Her mother lunged towards her and made a grab for it. "Give me that book this instant Dorothy Jane."

"I'm just looking after it."

Her mother had it now. She took one glance at the title page and stared back at Dorothy. Her face twisting into an open-mouthed sneer, nose wrinkled and teeth exposed as if she was about to take a bite out of something unsavoury. "What on earth..."

"It's written by a lady doctor, it's supposed to educate people, especially women."

"Aye women – married women, see that – married," she held it up to Dorothy's face tapping her finger on it. "It's not for young girls so you can go getting ideas."

She took the opportunity to reach out and grab the book back. She opened it and started flicking through the pages, trying to find the most scientific looking bit she could. "Dr Stopes says...well, she says it's natural to have ideas..."

Her mother didn't dignify that with a response. She was already reaching down for the slipper which she visited on the back of Dorothy's legs at times like these.

"It's physiology," Dorothy said, "you just don't understand—"

For a moment she wasn't sure if the slight metallic tang was coming from the unclean sole, or if there was blood in her mouth from where it had made contact across the side of her face.

Her mother pointed the toe of the slipper at her. "I don't want to hear any more of that sort of talk – not one word more."

She remained silent – unable to speak even if she'd wanted to; her mother at least lowered the slipper again.

"You're going to give me that book right now, and we're going to take it right back where it came from."

It was from Boots, she could hardly take it back to Boots.

“And I tell you another thing I’ll be giving that Elizabeth Black a piece of my mind. How dare she be giving you that sort of thing – sending filth into this house.”

“It isn’t filth though—”

Whack.

“What did I tell you about that sort of talk – well at least I know where you’ve been getting it from. And there’ll be no more of it. Do you hear me!”

She grabbed the book from Dorothy, then grabbed Dorothy’s arm. Dorothy hadn’t been prepared for that, she didn’t have time to tense any muscles or get her balance, she was just dragged the length of the hall and down the stairs. Her mother paused at the front door to swap her slippers for her shoes and put on her raincoat. Dorothy just stared at her instead of putting on her own, so that when she was shoved out the front door it was straight into the rain – and the book would get wet now! That was the least of her troubles, but she might try...

“Where do you think you’re going?”

“My coat,” she ran back to the door and only just managed to get it off the hook inside before her mother grabbed her again and pushed her down the path this time.

“What’s this then Iris?” Mrs Menzies had appeared at her door, which temporarily distracted Dorothy’s mum.

She turned towards the fence. “That Elizabeth Black – you will not believe the filth she’s given my Dorothy to read.”

Without missing a beat the old bitch was at it too. “Huh! Try me. I’d believe anything of that one.”

“The cheek of her, to be interfering with my daughter...”

“Oh I’d be ropable, Iris...”

Dorothy edged herself out into the street. She briefly considered bolting but her mother's grip tightened and they were off again. To Dorothy's horror Mrs Menzies reappeared, flailing in a mackintosh, after them.

"It isn't Liz's fault mum, honestly, she was only trying to help."

"Help?"

"It was...there was a...it was my fault."

"It's as much hers as it is yours, and she's the adult – hurry up." Her mother gave her a nudge but Dorothy instead stopped dead. "Move it!"

"No!"

"Dorothy!"

"No, you don't even know. You're just making a fool out of both of us." She was crying now, though that didn't exactly signify given the rain already running down and stinging her cheek.

Her mother and Mrs Menzies, and several neighbours at nearby windows were all staring at her now, appalled in varying degrees.

Dorothy's mother reached down and took the shoe off so her own stockinged foot was on the wet road now – so set was she on violence. She whacked it against the back of Dorothy's leg in the usual spot. The shoe was a lot harder than the slipper though and the sharp heel of it scraped the skin on the back of her calf. Why had her mother bothered to take the shoe off? Why not just kick her and be done with it.

There was no point fighting really. The best she could do was try putting in her tuppence worth when they got there. She let herself go limp and be dragged along by the wrist. All the way along to Glencruitten Drive, along Quarry Road, where Alec stayed. Oh god. She didn't want Alec to see – though he would hear. It was only a matter of time. He would know then that she wasn't a good girl at all. Everyone would know. They would think she was...what

exactly? She could feel a jolt along her arm every so often as she was pulled this way or that, but it no longer really felt like her arm. Maybe it was the ferocity of her mother's grip on her wrist that made her fingers numb, the muscles loose. She was still sobbing quietly to herself whilst her mother ranted, either to her, or to Mrs Menzies, or maybe to herself – Dorothy didn't care. But she could see the house now, and that roused her somewhat as the whole horror of the scene struck her anew.

“Hurry up – I'm wet enough as it is without you dragging your heels.”

She could still feel the point where the heel...

“As if I've not got enough on my plate as it is.”

A rawness on the side of her face...

“All because of her sickening behaviour.”

The urge to vomit. To fall down dead. Anything to avoid it.

Her mother pushed her through the front gate first, then Mrs Menzies, which was sneaky because Dorothy felt obliged to move whereas she might have stood still had it been her mother shooing her up the steep slope. She'd never been up the path to Liz's house. It was so steep that she could soon hear Mrs Menzies wheezing behind her, though the old woman was speedy enough – in her element. Wouldn't miss a scene for the world. But Dorothy couldn't go any faster because those weren't really her legs anymore. As they reached the top she wanted to jump up, out of her skin and away from the mess of it all. But the shame was growing heavier and heavier. So maybe down, maybe she could sink out the soles of her shoes into the ground and stay there. She started at the sound of the brass knocker. Set on the middle of the green glossed door, glass panels either side of it. Her mother knocked again, then moved on to the glass, then back to the knocker again before pounding the door itself. She only did that once though, then pulled her fist away to rub it. That had hurt her.

Good. Served her right. Maybe she would try kicking it next. Maybe she would try the heel of her shoe on one of the glass panels. She was banging on a window now – shouting.

“You’ll not get anyone.”

A man called up at them from the road.

“I’m not going anywhere until I do.”

The man frowned. “Well, you’ll have a long wait. The ambulance came about an hour ago.”

PART FOUR: MADAME CURIE



“We cannot hope to build a better world without improving the individual.”

— Marie Skłodowska Curie, from *Madame Curie* by Eve Curie

20

She stretched her legs out slowly, sliding her stockinged feet down the linoleum that she couldn't really feel the coolness of anymore, because she had been sat on it so long now, and because her legs were heavy and numb. She had to use her hands to untuck her left foot, letting it thump onto the floor as if it was nothing to do with her. As if it was somebody else's, only she'd never be that rough with somebody else's. She leaned her head against the back of the cupboard. She would have to wait for her nerves to come back, for blood loaded with pins and needles – but that was okay; she had no desire to get up yet anyway. It was obviously a day for the floor. Everything Liz touched had ended up there.

On the other side of the table, near the sink, lay the shattered remains of a teacup and saucer. A tiny puddle of dark brown liquid – the priest didn't take milk. She should probably wipe that up in case the tannins marked the lino. To the left of her there was a pile of brownish mush on the floor that trailed half way up the back wall. She should have wiped that up hours ago. She shouldn't have thrown it in the first place. At least she hadn't broken Annag's dish. It had bounced off the wall she launched it against and landed right way up, and unscathed – and empty. What even was the mush? Some sort of mashed potato or split

peas, and something orange; carrot? Whatever it was, her friend had made it, and brought it round to her, and she had thrown it on the floor. It was a waste. She ought to be ashamed of herself. She reached out and scooped some of it up with her fingers. Wasted on her, wasting away on the kitchen floor. She pressed it into her mouth. The sweetness of turnip and the heaviness of potato. Fortunately she didn't have to go to the effort of chewing very much, just enough to get it down without choking. Waste was a sin. She didn't need the priest to tell her that. But she hadn't asked Annag to bring her anything; to use the family fat ration on her so that Annag would have less, or go without. That was Annag though – always the bloody martyr. Liz picked up more of the mush, then deciding against it, threw it back down with a splat. It stuck to the ends of her fingers in a thick paste. No; she couldn't eat any more without choking. Not with all the bitterness boiled into it. She could already feel the one mouthful sinking like a stone into her stomach. She could feel it under her fingernails, on the tip of her tongue. Like she could still feel on her skin, the residue left by the priest's sad yellow eyes. The weight of disapproval outside and in. She needed a bath. Now.

Annag had come in holding the dish out in front of her like some sort of targe.

“How is she?”

Liz moved towards the chair on the far side of the table. “They've got the infection under control, but she needs to have the bone reset.”

“An operation?”

She turned to meet Annag's eye, nodded, and sat down.

“At least she's out of the woods.”

Liz nodded again. Maybe if *she* hadn't been in the woods that afternoon...if she'd been there...

“I brought you something to eat, I thought you probably wouldn’t have been for your messages.”

“Thanks.”

Annag put the dish down on the table but stayed standing, just looking at her.

“Can I get you a cup of tea?”

“No thanks I can’t stay.”

“Right.”

“You do realise you’ve raised merry hell with Dorothy.”

Liz looked up, trying to focus her tired eyes, her tired brain. “Oh,” she sighed, rubbing her temples, “I was wondering about that.” She had come home, in the middle of the night, that first night, to find a book splayed out on the front doorstep. Face down, like a tired traveller begging for refuge. She lifted it, looking at the damp pages under the hall light, and recognised it straight away from the chapter heading: ‘Woman’s Contrariness.’ But Dorothy wasn’t contrary – was she?

“Well,” Annag folded her arms, “you know what her mother’s like...”

“Actually, I haven’t the foggiest.”

Annag inhaled sharply so her cheeks sucked into a pout. “Perhaps you should have bothered to find out then before you went giving Dorothy that sort of thing.”

“It was just a book, by a doctor, she needn’t get her knickers in a twist.” Though even as she said that she thought of the red label. Trying to warn her. “I haven’t actually read that one myself – was it very bad?”

“Oh!” Annag scoffed loudly and shook her head. “Typical. You don’t even know what’s in it, yet you give it to a sixteen year old girl.”

“Sixteen’s old enough to get married is it not. It’s called *Married Love*. It can’t be so very bad if it’s got the word Married in it.”

“And what the hell would you know about married love?”

Liz paused, lifting her shoulders up to sit straighter in her chair, which let out a loud unhealthy sounding creak. She felt as if Annag was suddenly projecting the full force of her bust across the table. The rise and fall of it was distracting as she tried to hold her eye. “No,” she felt her cheeks hollow around the word. “I suppose you have a point there.”

“Well,” Annag tossed her head to one side sending her dark locks flying, “the whole town’s talking about you again – just the way you like it.”

Liz pressed her lips together. Felt her brow contracting. Cast her eyes up to the overdone milk pudding of a ceiling – pallid and peeling and browning at the edges. She should do something about that.

“And what about the one you gave me,” Annag said, “had you read that?”

“Yes.”

“And you still thought you should give it me?”

“Well, it was a while ago, but I thought because it had the device descriptions, and the pictures—”

“Oh aye, it would need to have pictures right enough, what with me clearly being the unintellectual incorrigibly fertile type.” Her cheeks had turned pink.

“What?”

“Do you not remember that bit? Oh,” she threw up her hands, “I thought you’d have marked that bit out so you could categorise your patients as if they were beasts at the mart.”

“Oh...I remember now.” Bugger it. But it wasn’t as if she’d written the bloody thing.

“It must be nice then,” Annag went on, “not having to worry too much on your own account.”

Liz stiffened. “You mean on account of my brains and my acid vagina?”

Annag gasped. “You can’t just come out with that sort of thing – that’s your whole problem.”

“Why not – it’s what we’re talking about. And all that acid and alkaline business being linked to intelligence is obviously a load of tosh – I didn’t think you’d read that bit. I didn’t think you’d take it so personally.”

“How can I not take it personally,” she took hold of the back of a chair, leaning forward. “Just because she makes the working class sound subhuman, doesn’t mean we don’t have feelings.”

“Look, those bits aren’t important, they were written over twenty years ago – for medical practitioners—”

“Don’t be so bloody patronising.”

“I specifically gave you that one instead of the *Wise Parenthood* one because I was trying not to be patronising.”

“Well thanks very much. What’s in *Wise Parenthood*, cartoons and captions?”

Liz sighed. “I’m sorry if I offended you. That wasn’t my intention. I didn’t think about it that way.”

“You never think, that’s your problem. And you might not care what other people think – but I do.”

“What have other people got to do with it?”

But Annag wasn’t really listening. She was still shaking her head. “Some of the chapters – all that eugenics sort of thing – I don’t know how you can....you of all people....”

“It’s to be used as a reference book, not a bible.” She’d said that louder than she meant to.

Annag stared at her.

She stared back. She leaned against the back of her chair, feeling the band of hard wood against her shoulder blades, and crossed her legs under the table.

“A sorry sort of bible that would make.” Annag let go of the chair and turned away, so it was as if she was asking the world outside the window: “what sort of Catholic goes about dishing out what the church is against?”

“I may go against the church but at least it’s on principal and not just because a man wants me to.”

“Oh aye, here we go.”

Liz leaned forward and propped her elbows on the table, seen as her mother wasn’t there to tell her not to – and she suddenly needed something to lean on.

“You’ve never approved of Jimmy.”

She lowered her head into her hands, so her voice sounded different. “That’s nonsense.” More muted.

“What is it then – jealousy?”

“No.” She barely bothered with more than a whisper.

“Really?”

“I just want you to be happy.” She closed her eyes and rubbed them. When she opened them again Annag was still looking at her.

“Who says I’m not happy?”

“You do – all the time! And I’m sorry for that but don’t take it out on me. And I know I’m not perfect, and no man would want me, and I’m a disgrace to my family and my profession, and god knows I’m not happy either – but I can’t pretend I’m something I’m not. Mostly I’m knackered though, so if you’re quite finished...”

Annag shifted.

“You can come and shout at me again tomorrow if you want – I know I deserve it – but I’m done in.”

She pulled the plug out of the bath but stayed lying as the water receded around her. It gave her an odd dragging sensation that she found rather reassuring. It made her flesh and bones feel heavy – the opposite to the weightlessness of being in the water, where her pink thighs had bobbed about like overcooked joints. She wanted the feeling to go on and on but already she could hear the rasping drain growing louder; the water almost all gone. Just her own body lying limp against the enamel tub like something that needed disposed of. Discarded. Slung into a pit. No. She tried to get up too quickly then. Her limbs were still too heavy and her head too light. She fell back in with a clatter of elbows and knees. As if she had been pushed – slung in – as if there was something being thrown on top of her. She scrambled, too quickly again, heels sliding on the enamel, gripping the edge with wet fingers until she pulled herself up. Out. Standing, shaking, on the cold tiles. It wasn't until she drew the towel round her shoulders and clutched the ends together at her chest, that she realised she was sobbing. Bloody idiot. There's nothing to cry about here.

She pulled on her dressing gown and belted it tight round the waist. It was wine coloured with a thick tasselled cord that made her feel like the high priestess of some unholy cult. Imagine if she'd greeted the priest in that earlier; they'd be coming with the torches by now. They still might.

As she walked down the hall she wasn't sure if it was dark just because she had closed the living room curtains, or because she'd closed the living room curtains and it was cloudy outside. She had heard the wind crash by a couple of times as she lay bathing. Now through her bedroom window she could see the evening was overcast and the rain lashing down. She sat at her desk and combed her hair back, away from her face, so it sat slick against her head. Her skull. A brutal outline reflected on the windowpane – with dark pits of eyes and clenched mechanical looking jaw. Better not to look at all, though she was glad that it was raining. It would hopefully deter any other visitors from venturing up to her. Not that

anyone would want to see her, but they might want to ask about her mother. Her mother wasn't allowed any visitors today – not even Liz. Though Dr Beaton had told her it was all going to be fine and she should have a rest herself. She didn't need to worry in the least. He'd chosen the surgeon himself. A consultant from the Royal with a special interest in orthopaedics – rest assured, he's the best cutter I could get.

She lifted her leg up on to the bed to inspect the scab. It was soft and wet, which would make it less satisfying, but there was nothing she could do about that now. She swabbed the skin with Dettol and turned back to her desk where she'd set out a razor blade and a packet of matches. Not as many instruments as she'd have liked but still... She struck the matches, one after another, holding them up to the sharp edge, touching the flame against every bit of it. Heat purified – she could already imagine the burning pain, the trickle of warm blood – it was why they were constantly boiling things at the hospital. Heat and chemicals – you had to kill all the germs before you could begin. You had to dress appropriately, make yourself a crisp new page. Blank. Sterile. She stared at the flame.

There was a loud banging. The obnoxious metallic clang of the knocker on the front door. Christ. Who was this now? Someone else looking to dish out a piece of their mind. She'd had quite enough of that; she sat firm in her chair, watching the matchstick burn and curve. She waved it out, dropping it, then noticing the black marks on her fingers. Sooty. Now fancy seeing you here?

Whoever was at the door was still knocking.

She looked at the blade, still in her other hand. It was an aseptic sort of scratching, that was all. The wound was already there, what she did with it now was her own business. She just had to...do...something. Feel the searing sensation. A nice clear incision would be just the thing; tidy it all up, see what was going on. Sometimes you had to cut deeper before you could begin to repair.

The knocking carried on.

They might be cutting into her mother right now. Right to the bone – it didn't get much deeper than that. Fixing what her mother wouldn't leave be and let heal. So, Liz had to wonder: what exactly she was doing, with the razor, and the matches? And her hand shaking....shaking.

“Elizabeth.”

Sandy.

“I know you're in there.”

He'd come rushing past her into the hall, out of the pelting rain, so it wasn't until she'd shut the door behind him and he'd hung his dripping coat on the hook, that they turned to face each other. He looked at her, then the gaping front of her high priestess dressing gown, and blushed.

“Sorry,” he looked away, “sorry to drop in...unannounced.”

She pulled the front of it tighter – adjusting the medieval cord. “That's alright. I wouldn't recommend it though. You don't want to be seen visiting a known deviant.” She walked into the living room, where it was already dusk. The dull afternoon shut out and the low lamplight giving off an orange glow.

“Well,” he followed her, “what's an alcoholic philanderer like me got to lose, eh?”

She groaned and slumped down onto the corner of the settee, tucking her legs under her and looking up at him.

He was smiling.

She smiled back. “I'm sorry about that.”

“Don't be.”

“...anyway...it isn't the same for men...”

“No.” He sat down in the armchair across from her, away from the lamp, so he was in the shadows whereas she had the full force of it.

She held her head to one side and felt a drip run over her collar bone. “I was wondering actually...”

“Yes?”

“Did everyone always hate me and I just didn’t realise it, or was it only after the business with you?”

“Everyone doesn’t hate you.”

She raised her eyebrow at him. “Damn near.”

“I don’t.”

She had to laugh out loud. “Don’t you?”

“No, of course not. Do you really think that?”

She laughed again then pressed her lips together in a hard close-mouthed smile.

“Why would I be here if I hated you?” He was looking straight at her, blue eyes coming out of the shadow. The light catching on the top of his head.

“Perhaps to tell me what an idiot I am. Or that I’m wicked maybe...that’s been the theme of my guests so far.”

“I was worried about you.”

She shook her head, still with the stiff smile. “You don’t need to worry about me.”

“Who have you had round calling you wicked – do you want me to go and box their ears?”

“The priest for a start.”

“Aye?” he shifted in his seat, “well, maybe not then.”

She laughed.

Sandy smiled. “He’s got the monopoly on wickedness I’m afraid.”

“He asked me if I wanted to confess.”

“What, here?” he pointed to the floor as if he meant that exact spot. “In your own living room?”

“Aye.” So maybe that was why she’d thrown herself on the kitchen floor – some sort of delayed reaction. Bless me father for I have sinned.

He raised his eyebrows. “Talk about special treatment.”

“I know.”

“He’s never offered me that.”

“You’re obviously not enough of a disgrace yet.”

“Well,” he paused, “I’ll have to keep trying I suppose....think of something really bad to do.”

She held his eye, suddenly very aware of the light on her. Her wet hair and the long v of damp skin cutting right down the front of her.

“I could do with a drink,” she said.

He nodded.

“Although I already drank all the whisky.”

He smiled, and lay his hands flat on the arms of the chair as she stood up. “Nothing for me thanks.”

She kept moving, fighting the urge to pause – don’t make a fuss about it. So she just glanced at him on her way to the door. “Tea then?”

“Aye,” he tapped his fingers against the chair, “tea will do just fine.”

She had to be careful in her bare feet to avoid the priest’s teacup that she’d smashed on the floor the minute he’d left. There had been no need for that really. She had even wondered for a moment what she might get out of some sort of confession. But she couldn’t think what he, who knew nothing about sex, could do to help her. So she’d politely declined, and soaked up the disapproval he was obliged to imply. The poor priest though. She remembered the way

he'd chewed the bit of shortbread she'd given him. His thick fingers clumsy on the teacup. Why did she find these little things so touching? He was a nice man really. And what kind of a life was it for him? For any of them. So she didn't hold it against the priest. Not at all.

Trust Sandy to go on the wagon all of a sudden, on the one day when she was gasping for it. Still, it was good of him to come...

She took him his tea and settled herself on the sofa again

"I've been to see the bank" he was saying, "...about the farm."

"Have you really?"

He nodded. Then shrugged. "Ach, we'll see." But he smiled then. "We'll see."

She suddenly felt like she was going to cry.

"I tell you, it's funny being in here again," he gestured around the room, "it's been a while eh?"

She smiled and nodded. Blinking into the lamp. God damn that bloody lamp.

"I suppose the last time was when I was home on my embarkation leave and you managed to get back from the infirmary. I could never seem to picture you there...I seem to recall that you didn't like it very much then."

She laughed. "I'm not sure I like it very much now."

"No?"

"I love the theatre," why did it always sound like a bloody hobby, like she was a lady of considerable means with a box at the Royal. "What I'd really like is to be a surgeon."

"Aye?" he tilted his head back. "Aye?" he tilted his head to the side now, as if still struggling with the picture. "Well, I wouldn't know about that sort of thing."

No. But then she hadn't expected anything from him. He wasn't the one she needed to...he wasn't... She blinked again, chest tightening. "It's not going to happen anyway."

“No?”

“No. I can’t afford it. Though that’s all academic now. I need to stay here and look after mum.”

He exhaled loudly, then nodded. “Aye, I suppose so. How long do you think that’ll be?”

“I don’t know. I’ve already written to the matron at the infirmary and told her I’m not coming back.”

He rubbed his jaw but said nothing.

“I was hoping they might have some more work for me at the hospital here – but who knows now my name’s muck again.” She covered her face with her hands and groaned. “Oh Sandy it’s too awful.”

“Since when do you care about what other people think?”

“I don’t really. But I let my mum down...and Annag’s fallen out with me.”

“Why has Annag fallen out with you? Because of the fuss that woman made over a bloody book?”

“Well, that, and there was another book that I gave to Annag, and that upset her too.”

“Christ I thought you wanted to be a surgeon not a librarian.”

She laughed. “I don’t think I could be a librarian.” She lifted her head up to look at him and laughed again. “It’s much too dangerous.”

He smiled.

“Bodies are more predictable than people,” she said.

“I thought bodies were people.”

“Sometimes it feels like the oddest fit.”

He looked at her, then shrugged. That tandem again – though she could hardly blame him when she barely knew what she meant herself.

She wondered if she was visibly shivering, she was feeling all of a sudden tired, and cold.

“I’m sorry about the other day,” he said. “At the hydro.”

“What for? It was me who was dishing it out...”

“What you said though, about it not being just your fault – I never thought it was. I always knew it was my fault, that’s what made me so angry.”

“It wasn’t your fault.”

“I know I was unfair. I was just...I don’t even know what I was – an animal mostly. No better.”

She was shaking her head.

He looked up at the ceiling, so she could see the muscles strain in his neck. “I would’ve done anything to bed you.”

“Aye, like propose marriage.” She tried to make her voice light but he sat up in his chair and turned to point his eyes right at her.

“I did want to marry you though Liz, course I did.”

“I know...” She forced herself to keep looking at him, though she could hear her voice getting quieter. “It was just that I wasn’t sure I wanted to marry anyone, you know...not then.”

He nodded, then ran a hand over his still damp hair.

She could feel the heavy chill of her own against her neck. Her back. “I did want to go to bed with you though.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. It wasn’t easy for me either.”

“Really?”

“I’m not a machine you know.”

He sat back in his chair and looked at her, then raised his eyebrows. “No I suppose not.”

“Women need it too you know—”

“Don’t tell me,” he held his hand out, “there’s a book on it. Aye, we know, we know.”

She laughed. “Oh god – will I never learn, eh?”

“You just need to remember that not everyone’s as broad-minded as you.”

She sighed.

“Or as clever, or kind, or bothered about doing something with themselves.”

“That’s not me,” she shook her head and smiled and tried to ignore the fluid gathering in her eyes.

“That is you Elizabeth.” He moved forward in his seat, as if to get up.

“It’s fine.” She wiped both of her eyes on the sleeve of her dressing gown and sighed.

“You old charmer.” She gave a light laugh. She didn’t want him to come over and hold her. Because if he did that she might never stop crying, and he had things to do. Places to be. He didn’t owe her anything. He wasn’t hers to detain, and yet...

“You said ‘not then.’” He sat back.

“Not when?”

“You didn’t want to marry anyone – not then. That mean you do now?”

“Och, things are hopeless now.”

“The surgeon?”

She paused. Then nodded.

“Do you want me to box his ears?”

She laughed.

“Is he in Glasgow then?”

“Aye.”

“And does he know you’re not going back?”

“Not yet, but I can’t imagine he’ll be that bothered.”

“I don’t believe that for a minute.”

Why was Sandy so certain about everything all of a sudden. Or was it just that she'd forgotten how he spoke in absolutes. He was sure of things. Life was good to him. He was the golden boy. She wanted him to have that again.

"What's his name?" He was still looking at her, head bent back.

"Ramsay."

He screwed up his face. "What sort of a name's that? Like the last Labour man."

"Oh he doesn't like to be reminded of that."

"Hmm."

"He's hard left."

"I see."

"And hard work."

He smiled.

"And I wonder what he says about me."

It didn't really bear thinking about, because really, if she was being honest, her biggest fear was that he didn't have much to say about her at all. To anyone. But that was a bit rich considering she'd only just this minute spoken his name out loud for the first time since she'd been home. And to Sandy. Of all people. Why was it so important to be able to imagine Ramsay talking to his friends? She'd met his friends – they were in the movement. She had been to meetings with them. She had met them at the clinic. She had danced with them and talked to them – but what did he tell them about her? How did they refer to her? It was appalling this urge of hers to pin him down and let him loose, as if she was the oil and the water at the same time.

She could remember when that feeling had first come over her. Staying in a seedy boarding house in London after she'd been invalided out. She had fallen asleep, still in her coat, on top

of the divan. Unsure of the sheets, and of how long they would be staying. She didn't mind the room though. It was still a room, and they were back in Britain, even if it was funny old England. Falling-down London; she'd never seen it the right way up. And the astounding thing was they were still somehow together. He'd managed to get leave; he was going to take her home. She hadn't had the chance yet to decide quite what any of that meant.

But she woke up, taking in the sour tang of the dampish divan, and was surprised by how little the night had advanced. Light, both real and unreal, was pressing in through the open window, exaggerating the shadows from the furniture, and the black back of his head. She could tell by the way he was sitting bolt upright, that he was thinking. Making himself hard against the sunken chair, though she could also tell he had undone a button, maybe two. Room to breathe. The window was open slightly and she could hear a tune seeping in from somewhere below: I'm nothing but a nothing, I'm not a thing at all.

He looked so still, that she suddenly wanted to shake him, or at least ask him what – what was it he was thinking, thinking. But she had a horrible feeling that she already knew. She stared for a moment at the hair tapering down the nape of his neck. Curving against his will, into a soft comma. Thinking: what on earth am I going to do with her now?

She stood up and he turned to look at her.

“Alright?” he asked, tilting his poker-straight spine.

She nodded and walked over to him, the chair objecting loudly as he pulled her on to his knee. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders so his head was against her chest and her fingers found the dark curls on the side of his head.

“They’ve asked me again about visiting the clinic in Tradegar—”

“Well,” she spoke the words nicely, near his ear, trying to make herself soft and hard at the same time. “Don’t you think I had much better make my own way home?” She concentrated

on the feel of his hair against her fingertips, and tried to ignore the movement of his scapulae, trapezius, deltoid; the treacherous trail of tension, slowly releasing.

“If that’s what you want.”

“No point putting it off.”

She couldn’t have him feeling obligated now. That would never do. That would miss the whole point.

“I wasn’t sure I’d ever see him again, you know, after the war...”

They paused for a moment, holding each other’s eye. She noticed she was running her right thumb over her left scar, and clasped her hands quickly together – or would she tell him about that? Was he maybe going to say something? Tell her what he’d seen?

No.

“But you did see him again,” he said.

“Yes, and with us both working at the Western...well, that seemed like a good idea at the time. Silly really, all the grief it’s caused us.”

He tilted his head back, eyes glinting. The beginnings of a smile. “Well you never were one for the easy life – still, at least you don’t have to worry about working there anymore.”

“Yes...that’s right,” she was all at once seized by the horrifying realisation – that was it; she would never see her theatre again. So that last surgery with Ramsay had been it. Her final bloody curtain call. And she hadn’t even known it.

Sandy shrugged. “Maybe he’ll come here then.”

“He’ll never leave the Western, not unless he has to, and even then he’d go somewhere bigger, better...” She rested her elbow on the side of the settee and leaned her head on her hand. “I couldn’t hold that against him.”

“Well...you could...”

“No,” she sighed. “I suppose I’d be the same in his shoes. Given half the chance.”

“You could still ask – or at least let him know what’s happening. You’re in love with the man are you not?”

She paused, feeling her fingers pressing in to the side of her face, looking at him – with a fixed smile – then towards the window where the rain tapped from behind closed curtains, then down at the table that filled the space between them. “I’ve been reading this book about Marie Curie.”

Sandy laughed. “You’re getting as bad as your mother for that.”

“What?” She sat up straight again.

“Changing the subject when you don’t like it.”

“Am I? Sorry.” She folded her arms in front of her. “Though it is sort of connected...in a way.”

“Is he a relation of hers?”

“No,” she smiled, “but I was thinking about it...I was reading this book, about this amazing woman, all her achievements, all of the people she’d helped, all that hard work – and still they wouldn’t let her have a boyfriend.”

Sandy burst out laughing.

“It’s not funny.”

“I’m sorry, I just really wasn’t expecting you to say that.” He shook his head. “I thought you were going to come out with something scientific – or profound.”

“That is profound.”

“Oh Elizabeth.” He slid to the edge of his chair. “Look, I better be going. But you let me know if you need anything. And don’t worry – I’ll put folk right.” He stood up. “And you get writing to your man.”

She looked up, the long line of him blocking out the light so they were both in the shadow now, and she couldn't see the mouth that moved.

"Think of poor Marie Curie missing out and there's you and your big chance."

She sighed, standing up to walk him out.

"You're too good Sandy," she followed him down the hall. "I don't deserve it."

"Here, less of that now."

She thought he was going to walk straight out but he turned at the last minute and hugged her tight. Even gave her a light kiss on the top of her head. As if she was his bloody niece or something. So that was it now was it. Okay. It was as it should be. It was better for him anyway.

"Thank you for coming."

She shut the door behind him.

Where oh where was the bloody brandy. Once she'd found it and poured herself a large measure she went back through to the living room. Turned the wireless on. Reached for her book.

"Well Madame Curie, what are you saying to it?" She noticed that Madame was due back at the library already, so there was another black mark against Liz. She found her page, though she knew how it ended. Her whole life devoted to her work – and then it killed her.

She tried not to think about her mother up the road. Dr Beaton would manage it all perfectly well. But still.

She had another brandy and sat down at her desk again, dropping the matches and the razor blade into the drawer and taking out a sheet of writing paper, which was really the blank page she had been looking for all along.

Ramsay. Dear Ramsay. It had to be done; Sandy was right about that – but what exactly was she going to say? She sat thinking for a moment, running the pen back and forth across her bottom lip.

She could tell him about how she'd nearly killed her mother, or how she'd watched over the death of Unity; or how her name was muck and always would be, or how they all hated her and she hated them. And about her application, and her failure; the death of a dream. Or how she was lonely and scared and she missed him more than she ever thought possible; an almost physical pain in the thoracic region, so all things considered she could really do with his immediate attention.

But instead she picked up her pen and scribbled furiously:

I might as well tell you, I'm not coming back. I'm needed here, as incredulous as that may sound. They do however have hospitals here and people doing good work. The Highlands and Islands Medical Service, as you'd know if you'd ever bothered to look into it, has been doing all sorts for years now; offering a working model of an efficient centralised service under state control. In fact, the Secretary of State for Scotland...

PART FIVE: FREE AT THE POINT OF SERVICE

“To all of you who’ve served in the past... You have as so often happens in this country, blazed the trail. I would like you to look on this new social security plan not as the ending of your work but as its fulfilment...”

— **Clement Attlee, addressing the nation, Sunday 4th July 1948**

21

The sun flowing into the lemon coloured room made everything warm and soft and she wished she could just stay lying there. Liz had never really noticed the leafy pattern on the cornicing before – vine leaves perhaps – it was strange seeing her mother’s room from this angle. And she could hear the birds outside the window, chattering quite the thing. If she could just lie there, listening to them, that would be fine. Only she had to be at the church by ten. There was no way round it. She crossed one ankle over the other and stretched her arms out in front of her.

“Oh...,” from there the stretch slid gradually into a yawn, which she spoke through in a muffled drawn out sigh, “I can’t say I’m looking forward to this christening.”

“Och you’ll enjoy it once you’re there.”

“I don’t think so.”

Her mother turned her head to fix her blue eyes on Liz. “Not if you go there thinking that. And what about poor me stuck here?”

“I can always push you round there if you like?”

Her mother laughed. “No thanks.”

“It won’t take me a minute to get the chair, I’m sure John’s got it on standby.”

Her mother nudged her elbow against Liz’s. “Away with ye. I don’t think I’ll be venturing out on that thing again and I’d certainly need to have a death wish to let you steer.”

“Mmm.” It was true enough; she hadn’t exactly proved a safe pair of hands.

“Sandy offered too,” her mother’s eyes didn’t move from her breakfast tray, “...when he was round the other night.”

“Did he? That was nice of him.”

“Yes.”

“I’m sure he’d do a better job of controlling it.”

“Probably.”

They were quiet for a moment. Liz sat herself up, trying not to rock the bed too much.

“He looks well,” her mother said.

“Yes.” She fought the urge to look over for the photos on the chest of drawers. “Good.” She pressed her lips together and smiled. “I suppose I better get ready.”

“What are you putting on?”

“Oh I don’t know,” she shrugged her shoulders then rolled her head up towards the ceiling again. “Maybe my lemon frock.”

“Yes, that’s nice,” her mother scraped the bottom of her bowl and scooped the last of her porridge into her mouth.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright? I shouldn’t be more than an hour or so.” Annag would understand if she didn’t hang about after. Or would she think Liz was still sore on some account, or too high and mighty for such domestic celebrations? She would tell her though. She would just tell her.

“I’ll be fine.”

Liz raised an eyebrow.

“And I promise I won’t hardly move an inch.”

“But you don’t want to get—”

“Apart from my stretches, yes, I know. And anyway, Dr Beaton said he would look in.”

“Did he?” He hadn’t mentioned anything to her about it.

“Yes.”

“When did he say that?”

“Oh,” her mother waved her hand, “I can’t remember exactly....I’m sure you were there at the time.”

She tried to remember, but couldn’t. That was just like him though – he was so very good like that. And she could still remember how relieved she’d been to see him, already there, that night, a whole month ago now, when the ambulance brought them to the hospital; and the odd way he walked towards them – gliding almost, and saying just the one word, calmly but quietly, so she wasn’t sure if anyone else had heard:

“Evelyn.”

She had thought about that word several times in the weeks since. There weren’t many folk who called her mother Evelyn, though it was of course her name, so there wasn’t anything so terribly outlandish about it. It sounded strange though, just the first name popping out all undressed like that.

She pulled on her lemon frock and brushed her hair. She thought she should probably aim for passable rather than notable; but she also thought – to hell with that, and looked out her red lipstick. She’d given the pink one to her mother the day before; dolling herself up for Dr Beaton? She couldn’t help smiling, then caught herself in the mirror, then wanted to laugh because it was silly really. But then she looked at the whole length of herself looking like someone who was going out. Flattening the front of her frock against her abdomen. Frock, slip, suspenders, knickers. And her guts playing up, though she knew they were fine really. It would all be fine.

She cleared their breakfast things, carrying them back through to the kitchen and leaving them in a pile next to the sink. They would have to wait.

“Promise me you won’t do the dishes.”

Her mother sighed and rolled her eyes. “Of course I won’t.”

“You say that as if it’s an outlandish accusation.”

She rolled her eyes again. “Well, I learned the hard way, didn’t I...Matron.”

“Right – there’s no need for that.” She hung a white silk scarf around her neck and lifted her hair out from under it; it sat soft and cool against the skin. “And you won’t try and get up?”

“No.”

“Even if it’s just to the bathroom—”

“Oh for any favour.” Her mother clapped her hands down on top of her quilt so it puffed up in a wave. “Would it make you feel any better if I went now?”

Liz paused in the doorway, as her mother looked up at her with the beginnings of a sarcastic smile. “Yes actually. It would.”

The church bells started ringing as she was walking down the path, so she let herself go, giving into the gravity of it, flying along and out the gate. It was okay though; she would be there just before they stopped. She had planned it that way so she could slip in at the back and not have to make small talk about how lucky they were that the weather had come right again, or how fine Thomas was in his white gown, as if he had the faintest idea what all the fuss was about. Although it was, in fact, a very nice day, with the sky a brilliant shade of blue and the few clouds that were there, were fat and round and crying out for a reclining cherub or two. She quickened her step, clipping across the road and round to the front of the church.

The organ was playing as the congregation settled itself. Liz avoided looking at anyone in particular as she entered at the aisle and slipped silently into the end of the last occupied row.

She looked straight down towards the altar, picking out the back of Annag's head, though she couldn't stop her eye noting another – the flash of blonde – almost a full head above everyone else, just out the corner of her left eye. She tried to ignore him. Noting instead Annag's peach frock and hat, and how the pastel colour against her jet hair had a surprisingly sensual effect. It looked, from where Liz was sitting, almost as if she wasn't wearing anything, and the dark locks were draped across bare shoulders. Like the first woman. Annag probably hadn't been aiming for that – but there it was nonetheless.

The blonde head moved. She wondered if it might have turned to face her. Perhaps looking for her to say hello – I'm here – you've got a pal. She didn't deserve that though. And she didn't want to look over at him because she knew what she'd see. She didn't want to have to see. She was a bloody coward, managing to avoid the thought the whole time... She forced her face quickly towards him and smiled. He nodded and gave her a swift blink of a wink. Right over the top of some caramel coloured curls in a cream calot hat. The organ powered on. Betty's small frame was almost completely obscured by the woman on the other side of her. She needn't even know that Liz was there. Watching her. Winking at her husband – no, that was his fault. Though he had turned round again, whereas there was Liz still peering over. Leaning forward in her pew, so that the man next to Betty turned to look at her. And then Betty looked too – lifting the small point of her chin until her whole face met Liz's. Christ. If Betty snubbed her now that would be hell, though maybe no better than she deserved. Liz slowly raised her palm in the air – holding it up still, like an Indian chief in a film. Did that make Betty John Wayne? Betty had always complained that she had eyes like a cow – big and round and brown. She had a point. Liz could see that now, even if they were more lined than she remembered; little creases that deepened as she smiled and raised her fingers in a delicate tickle of a wave. But Liz had always thought cows had the most beautiful eyes. She sat back in her seat again. So that was that.

The organ stopped and they were directed to their hymn books. Liz looked up at the plain white walls and gothic windows, their clear glass meaning it was the bright blue day that was framed and glowing – glorified. But she should really be looking at the words in her hymn book – they always had such dull hymns. The notes from the organ grew long and gasping. And suddenly everyone was on their feet except her...and Sandy. They glanced across at each other as they scrambled up. Smiling now, because she'd forgotten they were great ones for standing up at the last minute these Protestants – as if they were trying to catch out any interlopers. Damn effective then. She was appalled to feel a laugh rising within her, trying to cover it up by clearing her throat, looking for the place in the book, though she couldn't quite make out what they were saying and she didn't know the tune anyway.

It was more interesting when the family got up for the blessing and she could see them properly. Annag's cheeks glowing as she stood there in front of them all, pure in peach, and Thomas tucked in her arms. Thomas was in a simple white gown, without frills or ribbons, so that with his serious little face and furrowed brow, he looked as if he disapproved of the whole thing and would really rather be joining a more ascetic sect. And Dorothy, stepping up now – looking very pretty in pale pink, with her milky skin and her red hair pinned up on one side. Her mother must have softened in the end, though she'd initially been all for tarring Annag with the same brush as Liz. Who was it introduced them after all? But then she couldn't keep Dorothy from Annag without giving up the hotel pay too, and they couldn't be having that now. Liz looked at Dorothy's face for some sort of sign; some sign of trouble – or was she in fact okay? She was looking at the minister, repeating after him. Liz couldn't hear what they were making her say. They were foutering about the font for a while; the closest thing to stagecraft the poor minister got probably.

The women in front of her were whispering to each other. Long breathy sentences like a low humming, until her ears pricked up at the mention of his name: Sandy. And did you hear

about him getting the farm back? Is that so then? Soon to be, or so I hear from Catherine-Anne anyway. It's good that he's doing so well. It sometimes takes them a wee while you know – to get over the shock of it. It can't be easy. Lots of soldiers go off the rails, it's getting back on the straight and narrow that matters. Oh aye. Aye. Aye. He's a good boy.

So, that was Liz written out completely now – well, she supposed she should be grateful. It had always been the farm though. It was the farm he really wanted, and the farm that had put him all wrong. She was pleased for him. She really was. It just gave her a distinct pain in the guts.

The organ had started up again. She'd missed the hymn number but she was ready to get up this time. The notes came haltingly, and the pew creaked as she sat forward in anticipation, though everyone else was sitting cool as you like. As the music slowed towards the pause she noticed out the corner of her eye, Sandy shooting up, then quickly sitting down again. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Then the real pause came and everyone rose. He looked over and saw her laughing at him. Rolled his eyes, threw his head back and sang the first line with exaggerated enthusiasm. Then she noticed him bend to nudge the person on the other side of him. A small boy – must be one of Betty's wee nephews. One of his wee nephews then. The boy was having the same struggle as Liz, but with less success. He kept hunching forward and turning red, so that Sandy in the end put a steadying arm round his shoulders. Pulling the boy closer so he was less conspicuous. He turned and looked again at Liz. Smiling. Trying not to laugh himself. Liz smiled back. It was good to be friends again. She watched as Betty leaned over to give them both a whack. Sandy ruffled the boy's hair. Aye, it was good, it was just that these bloody guts of hers. Hell, maybe she was ill.

The church was very hot, what with the glory of god shining in on them full pelt. She was gripping on to her hymn book too tight. She wanted to kneel down. She wanted cold hard granite, and castigation. And salvation. She looked around for Christ on a cross, the kind of

gore and violence that helped put things into perspective. But all she could see around her was the congregation itself. Mums and dads and grandparents. Pressed and polished Sunday best. She wanted to go. She wanted to leave now. There was a voice getting louder in her head – insisting on telling her: maybe you should have stayed. Imagine that. No nurse's home, or army billets, no Bayeux, no Brussels, no Belsen.

The singing was over, so she could at least sit down again. Putting the hymn book back against the ledge and clasping her hands together. Her fingers felt cold, despite the heat. She uncurled them so they lay on her lap, chalk white and numb feeling; but there had been no nerve damage. No need to go losing it now. Even her scars looked white – like Unity's, but hers had only turned white after she'd died. So where did that leave Liz? Somewhere in between? And she'd almost told Sandy the other day – she'd almost said something. But she was glad that she hadn't. He didn't want to hear that sort of thing at all, not war stories; especially not from the likes of her. Though it was a story about Ramsay too. Which perhaps would have made it even worse. Or perhaps not. It was not a love story.

She had been standing, one day, the third day, looking at the forest. Wanting to look at something else just for a moment because that would help; despite the stench of the rot and the durchwall, the taste of vomit and the burning at the back of her throat that no amount of disinfecting could rid her of for three days now. But perhaps if she just looked for a moment at the trees... She'd stopped at the fence, turning her back on the road that went between the de-lousing station and the barracks. It felt as if she had only been there a few minutes when she heard him calling out to her.

“Sister?”

She turned to see Ramsay, staring at her, slowing his step. “Everything alright?”

“Oh yes.” She could feel herself smiling though that was hardly the thing to do either. And it was only when she went to go, to walk towards him, that she realised she couldn’t. The body moved, but her hands stayed, stuck to the barbed wire fence. She must have been gripping on to it the whole time.

She couldn’t remember how he’d got her free, but it involved squeezing her wrists so hard he left purple thumbprints. The next thing she recalled was standing holding her hands out – like two saucers of blood. And he wrapped them up together so when he led her off she felt like some sort of prisoner; but then he put his arms around her and squeezed her whole body against him. Until it hurt, and suddenly she felt it all hurt. But it was okay, he said. It was only superficial. She needn’t worry. He would fix it.

She could feel her cheeks growing warm, just thinking about it. No wonder Ramsay didn’t think she was up to much. She was weak – he knew that. The organ burst into life again and she was pleased; the louder it was the better the chance of it drowning out everything else – everyone stood up, except her – thinking it again: you may as well just have stayed. Maybe she had never been good enough. Maybe. Maybe. But no, there she was, bolting again – incapable of staying anywhere – not only on her feet now, she was at the door. She was outside, gulping down the air and reaching a hand out against the stone wall. Then she turned and started walking. Until she couldn’t hear that bloody organ anymore.

She walked at pace until she reached the pier at Port Beag, and then stood, stiff as a pole, looking out at the sea. It lay like taut satin, draped over the abyss between herself and the long line of Kerrera’s shore, or between herself and the town stretching out to the right. Between herself and the castle at the other extreme of the bay’s curve. And sitting in the

middle of it all was the small mound of Maiden Island. Annag had told her and Betty – if you try swimming out to set foot on it you’ll never get married.

“Do you think that’s true?” Betty asked, standing up to look at it better.

“Oh yes,” Annag had picked a flower and was running it across her cheek. “Folk have always said that.”

Betty turned and looked at Liz, “what do you think Liz? Could it be true?”

“Technically I suppose...” Betty nodded, she could rely on Liz for a technical truth. “If you’re not married before you drown then you certainly won’t be after.”

There had been RAF lookouts all round the bay during the war. Liz wondered what they had seen when they looked out – not myths and legends, the ghosts of spinsters and green ladies. This same stretch, but filled with seaplanes and temporary harbours. Or did they see it in lines and grids, or tides and rips. Rocks. Wrecks. The sea was better at hiding such things. Burying its own dead. Instead of the ten thousand just lying there. She closed her eyes for a moment. But open was better. If she opened them she could see that she was here and not there. And that was a good thing – here. She was going to stay here. She had told Ramsay that. It didn’t matter whether he approved or not – though she still hadn’t been able to open his letters. There were other sorts of duties to think of though. And she could still do something for the greater good. Dr Beaton would give her a job...eventually. Though he’d been surprisingly slow to commit to anything. So perhaps she wasn’t that much of a catch for a cottage hospital after all.

“We can perhaps discuss it further in a month or so, when your mother’s better.”

“Of course.”

“And you’re sure that’s what you want?”

“Yes.”

They were standing in the middle of the living room. She could see the back of his grey head in the mirror over the mantelpiece, and feel his grey eyes on her, not believing her for a minute.

She wondered if he was going to question her further, but he just opened his bag and started taking things out of it.

“Here, you’d better take these.” He handed her a black box and a stethoscope.

She looked at the box. “Blood pressure?”

“Yes.” Snapped his bag shut again. “Morning, noon and night and temperature every two hours.”

She couldn’t help wondering if it was really necessary, or if she was being made to play at being doctor, sat on the edge of her mother’s bed with the stethoscope hanging from her neck.

“Well if it saves him the bother,” her mother said, holding the pale underside of her arm up. And Liz did like listening, with his good stethoscope, for the tapping, that turned to whooshing – as if somebody was blowing into her ear. A direct line to her mother’s brachial artery. And it helped, having her homemade charts – something to go by other than the ‘fine,’ or the ‘not too bad,’ that wasn’t always to be trusted. She even turned the stethoscope on herself occasionally, slipping the cold metal bell down the front of her blouse and counting the thuds. There was something shockingly mechanical about it, these crude sounds that belied the complexity of it all. Because a heart contained a multitude of moving parts, and was soft and tough at the same time – forests and half-moons and muscle and string. It all had a job to do.

The first time she went to cuff her mother for a reading, her patient had stiffened and looked out of the window. Then as Liz pressed against her antecubital fossal, she felt her distinctly flinch.

“It’s tickly.”

“Well do please try to control yourself.”

But they were both smiling by then.

“Just relax.” As she listened to the artery, collapsing and releasing, she felt her mother’s eyes on her.

Asking in a small voice, “what does it sound like?”

“A sort of snap.”

“A Snap? That doesn’t sound good.” Her mother frowned at the device.

“But it’s nothing breaking.”

“I should hope not,” she looked at Liz, with tired eyes, “I’ve had quite enough of that.”

“It’s just the wall of the artery filling out again...it’s like...like when you take the ends of a sheet and flap it out taut for folding.”

Her mother was still looking at her with furrowed brow. Then shrugged. Sighed. Nodded – very well then. “I suppose I’ll have to take your word for it.”

“They’re called Korotkoff sounds.”

“That’s a funny name for it.”

“It’s Russian.”

“Oh...well, my Russian’s not much cop either.”

How had she ended up standing at Port Beag when she was supposed to be at the parish church? Christ. The last thing she wanted to do was upset Annag again. She still felt horrible about everything she’d said, and then for the extra hassle of having to smooth things over with Dorothy’s mother.

“Don’t worry about that,” Annag had told her though.

“Oh?”

“Alec spoke up for you and managed to sort it all out.”

“Alec did?”

“Yes. He speaks very highly of you...I didn’t mean to sound so surprised there,” Annag was blushing. “Of course he does. We know you mean well.”

And she’d felt herself squirm when Annag said that because intentions were one thing but it was outcomes that mattered.

Alec was one of the first to come out of the church. Rushing almost, though he paused when he spotted her. As if he didn’t want to have to speak to her. Because of course she was desperate to ask him – how’s Effie? What on earth are you going to do? She wouldn’t though. She just moved off to the side; letting him pass, returning the small smile. The nod. Of course it was none of her business. It would have to come out soon though, surely?

She spun round looking for Annag. Hopefully she hadn’t noticed Liz’s abrupt departure, though others would have. Probably wondering what the hell she was at now – the whole town’s talking about you again, just the way you like it. She felt herself stiffen.

“Excuse me.” She had better make her way through to Annag at once.

“Oh Liz I didn’t see you there.” It was one of the old women who had been sitting in front of her – Sandy’s fan club. Had she noticed Liz rushing out? “I’m glad I bumped into you though, look here...”

Liz sighed. Braced herself.

“I’ve a terrible sore that’s giving me no end of grief. My mother used to use honey for that sort of thing, but I haven’t been able to get any, do you think jam might work instead?”

“Eh...” it took her a minute to register the question. “No, I wouldn’t do that.”

“I wasn’t sure it would work, but that grape jam is all I’ve got.”

Liz’s eyes were flitting between the woman’s face, and scanning the crowd for Annag. “We just got given honey the other day, I can bring you over some.”

“Oh that would be great.”

What was she saying though? “But I wouldn’t rely on that for the sore.”

“Oh?”

“Where is it?”

“I’m not sure I should say,” shooting a look up at the steeple, then lowering her voice but mouthing the words theatrically – “*inside leg*, you know.”

“Oh right. Have you seen a doctor?” There. She could see Annag now, just come out the door. She smiled.

“Oh I didn’t think I would bother with that...not yet. It’s not so bad yet, only about the size of my fist.”

“Goodness.” She looked back at the woman. “By all means get it seen to before it gets any worse. Prevention is better than cure.”

“But if I had a bit of honey...”

She touched the woman’s arm. “Yes, I’ll bring it round.” She started edging away. “Go to your doctor though, they can tell you what sort of dressing to use. You want to make sure it’s not infected.” She was backing off through the crowd, just turning to call out to the woman. “Go tomorrow – free of charge!”

There was a steady stream of folk kissing Annag and petting Thomas. Isn’t he gorgeous. What a beautiful boy. So handsome in his gown so he is. Just gorgeous. Annag smiled when she clocked Liz. She kept nodding and thanking, but reached out her free hand to squeeze Liz’s. Her Auntie was bent over pinching Thomas’s cheeks, whilst he just stared at her.

Liz leaned her head towards Annag’s. “You look lovely too by the way.”

Annag laughed. “Thanks. Here, can you come back to the house for a cup of tea?”

“I’d better get back to mum; I’ll come soon though.”

“Yes, do. And thanks for the cake. I didn’t know you were such a baker.”

“I’m not, I had to get mum to shout the instructions at me. I thought it would do her good.”

Annag laughed. “I’m sure it did.”

Liz left her in a crowd of cousins, and moved off towards the road. As she passed the graveyard she noticed Dorothy, a bright pink amongst the headstones, and waved. How was she enjoying her day of being godmother? And her pretty new dress. Liz wanted to know, to tell her how lovely she looked, but she kept on walking. She wasn’t allowed to talk to Dorothy anymore.

“How was it then?” her mother put down the book she was reading.

“Oh, very nice, yes.”

“Did the wee one cry when they put the water on him?”

“Erm...” had he? “He was very good.” She perched on the edge of her mother’s bed.

“And what about you?”

“Oh I’ve been very good too.” She sighed. “What choice do I have between yourself and Dr Beaton.”

“He came then?”

“Yes, he left you a journal too. He thought you might want to read a letter in it – something about HIM.”

“About him?”

“H I M – I’m sure that’s what he said.”

“Oh – HIMS.”

“Hymns?”

Liz laughed and shook her head. “Where did he put it?”

“The living room I think.”

She was still laughing when she picked up the *Lancet* he'd left lying on the coffee table, open on the letters page. Well this was a turn up for the books, the Highland Service actually getting a look-in – just as it was all ending. Well that much was typical. She found the letter and read it through. Once. Twice. Then a third time. And still not quite believing it. The gall. The absolute cheek of it.

“I can't believe it!” She stormed down the hall with it in her hand.

“What is it now?” Her mother looked up at her with raised eyebrows.

“This! This letter.” Liz waved the paper so it rustled against the doorframe.

“Who wrote it?”

“Well... me I suppose.”

“Eh?”

“It's my words,” she looked at it again, “mostly. Though they've changed some of it.” The more scathing sections.

Her mother was watching her with brow furrowed.

“He didn't put my name though, or even anonymous, which would have made more sense really if he was so determined to broadcast it to the world. Not that he even cares about the Highland service; and he's put his name on it. Him! Of all people!”

Her mother was staring at her, part wonder, part amusement as Liz stood there trying not to shake.

“I'm afraid you've lost me again Liz, who are we talking about here? Who is 'him'?”

Dorothy walked back along the path, which was just a thin line where the grass was flatter; still, she stuck to it like a tightrope placing her polished shoes heel to toe, one in front of the other. She didn't want to stand where the bodies were. It was bad enough they were all around her, and her heels sinking into the soft earth. But she liked it there all the same. It matched her mood: grey and quiet. And the main thing was that it was away from them.

Her mother wouldn't look for her yet. She would be too busy talking outside the church. Telling them all about Dorothy's prizes at school, though she'd almost stopped her from going for good – really, what on earth would Dorothy ever do if it wasn't for The Weed. And she'd be telling them all how she'd been up past midnight finishing Dorothy's dress, making them lie and say how nice it was – how well Dorothy was looking. She kicked a pebble and it rattled off a headstone. That of a Blacksmith's daughter who had died in infancy. She was sorry for the pebble then. She was sorry. She looked up at the road again. She could always just walk home. They would look for her but she didn't particularly care. They might think she had gone to Annag's without even asking them. Annag had made a point of inviting her, when they'd been standing at the front of the church, waiting for it to fill up.

“Come to the house afterwards and have a bit of cake with your godson.”

Dorothy smiled though the very thought of cake made her feel ill. She could imagine chewing it, the feel of it in her fat cheeks. And then it just lying there, all heavy in her stomach.

Annag looked at her, and when she didn't say anything added, “Liz made it.”

“I don't think I'll be allowed.” She had said that although she didn't know for sure. She might've been allowed, if Liz wasn't going to be there. But then if Liz wasn't going to be there what was the point.

Dorothy had already seen Liz come round the side of the church and head towards her own house. Away from Annag and the rest of them. She might have made the cake, but she wouldn't be eating it either. From where Dorothy had been standing, between a sailor and the blacksmith's daughter, she had only seen the top half of Liz as she passed the wall. So it was as if she was floating by. Pale and calm in loose fitting lemon. Raising a ghostly arm so the fabric fell away from her shoulder, and smiling at Dorothy, though she kept moving the whole time – floating further and further away. Dorothy hadn't even had the wherewithal to raise her own hand quick enough; by the time she had got the muscles to move Liz had turned away again and was disappearing round the bend. She was annoyed at herself, at her arm, because she didn't want Liz to think she was angry, or that she didn't want to speak to her. It was only that she wasn't allowed. She could feel her face growing warm as she thought of it, and that was the last thing she wanted. She wanted to be pale and ghostly, though she might give someone a bad turn, wandering between the graves like that. As it was there was no such danger, the worst anyone who looked at her would get was a sudden craving for a jam roll! Yellow was a much better colour for a dress than pink. Pink didn't go at all well with her hair and only made her face rounder and redder than ever. She couldn't remember why she had ever wanted it, though she could remember the feeling of wanting it. The yearning. And then the oddness of how little she cared when her mother told her no – that was it. The dress was cancelled. The christening was cancelled. Measures designed to wound but Dorothy had just felt numb.

She hadn't been particularly surprised that her mother had put her foot down. Not after the heel on the back of her leg. It wasn't like her mother to get that physical, but she supposed the punishment had to fit the crime. You should never admit to that sort of thing; it was vulgar to want to know. Nice girls didn't know and nice girls didn't ask. It was best just to

ignore it – even when it was soaking through your skirt, or bursting out the buttons of your blouse. Well, she knew that now, though they might have told her sooner.

And she hadn't really cared by then about the dress or the christening. She didn't want anything nice. She didn't want anyone looking at her. She only cared about Latin and History and English. And Mathematics even; she was even trying her best at that. She was doing everything she could, tackling each subject with a new determination. She was amazed at how focused she could be when she tried. There was no humming and hawing and hedging her bets. She would have to go to university now. Anything to get out of this place.

She couldn't even be bothered with her friends anymore, because they weren't really her friends. They had all laughed when Jessie made fun of her and called her all sorts of names that sounded made up. Something about Lesbos that Dorothy didn't quite catch, though she was usually so good with the ancients and knew all about Greece. It was exasperating, and it was exasperating wanting to know more about the Greek stuff but being too scared to look. As if the school librarian was watching her...and the woman at Boots. She'd had to start reading her mother's magazines, but they seemed full of all the worst sort of things – so why didn't that signify?

She didn't talk to any of the girls at school for a while. And Dorothy didn't mind being on her own in between classes, or at the end of the day. But then they'd been lined up for PE one time, out on the back field, and the girls started giggling and nudging each other, and Dorothy wondered who was making a joke about her now? They were adjusting their skirts though, and smoothing out their hair – which she found even more worrying for some reason. But they were all facing away from her, and when Dorothy looked around she saw that Sandy MacPherson was strutting past on the far side of the field. Heading off down the glen, in a heavy pair of boots and rolled up shirtsleeves. He seemed to be glistening in the sun, whether

it was the bloneness of his hair, or the whiteness of his shirt, rolled right up past the elbow to the point where the muscle bulged. The girls stared at him. Dorothy frowned. She was standing apart from the rest of them, so that when he looked over and waved, there was no denying it was at her. She forced a smile, and waved back. A dozen sets of eyes turned and stared at her then. Wondering how. How... Edging nearer – as hopeful now, as they were fearful before, that something might rub off.

She'd barely a moment's peace at school after that but no doubt they would soon forget all about Sandy MacPherson in his shirtsleeves. There would be some new excitement. Or maybe some of the boys from their own year would come back from the break a foot taller and more dashing. It was unlikely, but you never knew. Fergus Shaw was quite tall already. Dashing was pushing it a bit, though he was nice enough. He shared his book with Dorothy when she forgot hers, and their knees had bumped once under the table.

He had been in the church, at the christening, and had smiled at Dorothy when he saw her. He had been standing outside too, not far from where her mother and father were. She could easily have said hello. But instead she'd gone straight to the graveyard. It was bad enough that he'd seen her in there, standing up in front of everyone, looking the way she did. She crossed her arms and sighed. The guilt of it was giving her a stomach ache. Because it wasn't her mother's fault really. Her mother had tried. Or if it was her mother's fault it was only for having had her in the first place.

She looked at another one of the gravestones. So many of them had been put up by grieving parents. Dorothy wondered how the folk had died, but they didn't put the cause of death on gravestones. Some of them gave a clue: a mother and baby with matching dates. Dorothy of course had very nearly killed her own mother, though funnily enough she didn't feel remotely

guilty about that. There wasn't much she could have done. It wasn't as if she had asked to be born. But it was the things they gave without the asking that made you feel the worst.

She hadn't asked to be allowed at the christening. She'd come home one day to find Alec in the living room with her mother. She hovered at the door trying to hear what they had been saying but all she got was:

"Well, if you say so...I suppose she's not all bad – Dorothy is that you?"

Was it her? Who else could they have been talking about?

But the next thing she knew she was being reinstated as godmother. The title made her skin crawl now. She hadn't given birth to anything and she wasn't about to. She would rather die. Imagine having a baby stuck inside you – for everyone to see. At least she didn't have to worry about that. She was only godmother. And god could just mind his own business and not go getting any ideas.

Dorothy had to pretend to be grateful though when her mother told her.

"You can go to the christening." She stood back and leaned against the kitchen counter, watching Dorothy's face.

She wasn't sure if she was expected to smile. She was supposed to be pleased but if she smiled too much that might look impertinent. Like she hadn't really taken her telling. What was the right amount of smile? It was a moot point. She couldn't have conjured one for love nor money.

"Thank you." She looked at the floor.

"You're still not getting the dress mind you."

Dorothy nodded, then went up to her room the first chance she got. She spent as much time as she could in her room – away from them. And when she was made to sit in the living room, or at the dinner table, she barely said a word. But that meant that they gave her funny looks all the time, and her father said silly things like – what have you done with Dorothy?

As if she was someone else. Some sort of sulking imposter. So then she tried to say the sort of thing she would normally say, only she couldn't really remember what that was and it didn't seem to come out right anyway. It was as if her tongue had grown too big for her mouth; fat and lazy and not behaving like it was supposed to.

The morning of the christening she was sitting at the breakfast table with her father when her mother appeared behind him.

"Look Dorothy, I was up past midnight but I managed to get it finished." She was holding the dress out in front of her. Holding it by the kimono capped sleeves, so that the scalloped neckline hung between her hands like upside down bunting. Dorothy had seen the material before, but now it was sewn into shape it looked like a lady – a powder pink lady, swooning into her mother's arms. Probably because she had come out in fine dark spots. A fleck rather than a polka-dot. But only when you held your eyes up close. She reached out her hand to touch the skirt, stroking her fingers against the soft silk. But she suddenly felt indecent, clutching the swooning lady like that, and let it fall down again.

"Well you'd better try it on then." Her mother was still smiling, still watching her. "Make sure it fits alright."

Was that an order? She would have to make it fit – though the swooning lady looked like she wanted nothing to do with Dorothy.

"Go on then," her father said, smiling at her too, with his crinkled eyes and crumbs in his moustache.

She already knew that the bust wouldn't be quite right. It was so tight it gave her the sensation of being bound around the chest. The rest of it seemed to fit, or at least the measurements of the fabric matched the measurements of her body – but there was still something that wasn't quite right. Then she realised that of course it wasn't the dress – there

was nothing wrong with the dress, it was just her. She could see under the flowing lines of the thin fabric, altogether too much of her. As if she was a girl dressing up as a woman, dressing up for a man. But still just a girl really; everything too pink and too round – ungainly. Not at all like the magazine.

“Let us see you then Dorothy,” her mother shouted along the hall.

“Come on Dot, we’re ready for the fashion parade,” her father added.

She turned away from the mirror and concentrated on breathing.

“Hurry up now, we haven’t got all day. Your mother’s been working half the night on that.”

Dorothy stepped out into the hall and started walking. She tried lifting her head right up, pulling her shoulders back, but she couldn’t pull them back too much because then that made her bust want to go shooting out, only it couldn’t so it felt as if it pressed into her lungs and her heart and might very well kill her if she wasn’t careful. That, or it would come flying out the front of the pink polka dot. Bursting through like some sort of monster. No. She let her shoulders hang where they wanted to and concentrated on her face. A smile was definitely in order. She tightened the corners of her mouth and tried to ignore the burn. Her cheeks were skelping her, and there wasn’t even anyone looking at her yet.

“Here she is,” her father stood up. “Well well, pink to make the boys wink.” Dorothy noticed that he had crumbs all down him and the bottom of his cardigan had rolled up where he’d been sitting. For some reason the sight of his dishevelled thick knit and carved wooden buttons made her eyes sting. His twinkled. He didn’t care what he looked like and she didn’t want him to – that was just how he was. It was better to be like that. “Give us a twirl,” he said.

Dorothy twirled. Smiled.

“What do you say then?”

“Thank you,” she turned to her mother.

She was smiling expectantly, “how do you like it then Dorothy?”

“I love it. Thank you mother.”

“It is rather good, even if I do say so myself.” Her mother kept smiling, though Dorothy noticed that it seemed to harden the longer she looked at Dorothy. “Yes, I’m not sure I should have agreed to the pink.”

Dorothy carried on smiling. “Thank you mother.”

She wondered how long she had been walking around the graveyard. She would quite like to sit down, but there was only the ground or a gravestone and either would get her into some sort of trouble. You didn’t just go plunking yourself down on people’s graves, unless perhaps it was that of a dead lover and you were still in the first throes of grief. And she couldn’t go home with grass stains on her dress. Not after her mother had been up all night making it. Think of all the work that had gone into it, never mind the coupons. If she thought about it too much she wanted to cry. It had been foolish really to think that any frock could fix her. She might have saved her poor mother the bother. There were poor girls who didn’t even have one frock, and yet Dorothy had got yet another one. Some people were just skin and bone in rags, and here she was – a big lump in a new frock.

She walked round towards the front of the church again and was surprised to find everyone already gone. Really? All that nonsense about what she was and wasn’t allowed to do, how they would be keeping an eye on her at all times – and then they had gone and left without her. No doubt she would still get the blame for it. What was she doing in the graveyard anyway? That was probably considered unnatural too. She sighed and turned towards the road. But when she got there she paused, looking back at the green grounds spiked with grey. So this was where Liz has been when she waved to her, just over there...

There was a loud screeching sound. Dorothy turned to see a car hurtling towards her – a car! It stopped just short, still shaking and puffing, but no longer screeching at least. She stared at it, though it was her fault, she'd been standing right in the middle of the road. It was only really the doctors that had cars though, and you could hear Dr Campbell's coming a mile away. This man wouldn't know that though. He was bound to shout at her. He was bound to...do something. Why was she still just standing there – so he still couldn't get past! But he wasn't going anywhere. He was getting out.

She wondered if she was visibly shaking. She felt as though she was but it might have just been from looking at the car and the way the front of it vibrated. Her mouth had gone completely dry and she could taste the smoke coming out of the thing.

The man looked at her. She wanted to cross her arms but that might only draw more attention to the front of her. To her ridiculous flat-tyre chest, feeling tighter by the second.

He was looking her right in the eye though. "Alright there?"

She could only nod in response.

"I don't suppose you know where the Blacks live?"

"Liz Black?"

"Yes – Liz."

"Oh yes," she stood up straighter, "I know Liz."

"You do?" He smiled now. He had a nice smile. Deep brown eyes. A dark suit.

"She just lives there." Dorothy pointed.

He craned his neck to look but had to come and stand next to Dorothy before he saw the side of the house peeping round the corner.

"Thank you very much..." he tilted his head towards her, ready to catch her name. As he did so a dark curl tumbled in her direction.

"Dorothy."

“Dorothy.” He pushed the hair off his face. “Yes, well Dorothy I’m much obliged.”

She suddenly wondered if she’d done the right thing, pointing out the house like that. What if they didn’t know this man from Adam? “Are they expecting you?”

He paused and looked at the ground before shaking his head. “No, no they’re not.”

Then she felt bad for having asked it and wondered how she could make it up to him. “It’s just that Mrs Black had to have an operation.”

“Did she now?” He raised an eyebrow and wiped a hand across his mouth.

She wondered who this man was, and how he knew Liz but didn’t know that her mother had had an operation.

“I’d heard she had been unwell.”

That was something at least.

“And what sort of operation might that have been?”

She wasn’t sure if she should say. “For a broken leg.”

“Well, I’m sorry to hear that, still...it could be worse.” He scuffed a shoe across the rough surface of the road. “Bones are pretty good at healing themselves. The trick with orthopaedics is to keep everything in line.”

He was a doctor then, this man, with his car. That surely made it okay then, if she was speaking to him in the street, and showing him where Liz’s house was and everything. Even so, she hoped that nobody saw her. The story might reach home before she did – who was that strange man I saw your Dorothy with on Glencruitten road?

“I best make haste then, thanks again. I’m Ramsay by the way,” he held out his hand.

She couldn’t remember anyone holding their hand out like that before. It was something men did in films, usually to other men. And now, was she supposed to shake it? As if she was a man, or as if she was the same age as him. How old did he think she was? Too old to

be scared of touching a man's hand, and to be staring and dumb, and turning red no doubt. It was too embarrassing.

"Pleased to meet you." As she said the words she almost curtseyed automatically, the way her mother had taught her to since she was a child. The muscles in her legs seemed set on it; it was as if she could feel the bend happening independently. How appalling to lose control of her own body like this.

She stood up straight, reached her hand out towards his, and shook it.

“Easy now...easy does it.”

“You make me sound like a beast being driven in.”

Liz started to laugh, but that wasn't a good idea because she was still taking the weight of her mother as they edged her up to her chair in the living room.

“Stop shoogling me now!”

“It's your fault for putting me off!”

“What?”

“And turn that way. Reverse – reverse.”

“A bus now is it?”

Liz smiled. “Stop it!” They had to pause while she repositioned herself.

“You're right up my oxter now.”

“You're nearly there.”

Her mother held tightly on to Liz as she lowered her down and arse finally met cushion with a soft thud.

“Well...” her mother sighed and smoothed a hand over her hair where it was pulled back.

“I've made more dignified entrances...”

“I think that was an improvement on last time though.”

“It was certainly an improvement on last time.”

They both laughed.

“I can't blame you for wanting a change of scene.” Liz straightened her dress, smoothing the front of it with both hands.

“My evening shift into the living room's fast becoming the highlight of my day.”

Liz wandered towards the fireplace, catching her own eye in the mirror as she said, “I think I’d go mad.” So she was talking right at her reflection – which was surely the first sign of anything along those lines.

“Yes,” she heard her mother sigh, “...well, it’s not exactly a barrel of laughs for you either.”

“Oh I don’t know,” she turned to face her again, “...it has its moments.”

They both laughed.

“But seriously...” her mother said.

Liz bent over to pick up the books and journals she’d left sitting on the table, having made herself quite at home there over the last few days.

Her mother carried on, “...you can’t stay here forever.”

“Well – thanks very much.” Liz shot a look over her shoulder.

Her mother waved it away and straightened her long neck. “I’m just thinking ahead...being practical.”

“What’s not practical about it? I’d say it’s a very practical arrangement.”

“Well maybe practical isn’t the word, but don’t you think you’ll get fed up?”

Liz sighed.

“See, there you go – you’re fed up already.”

“I’m not fed up, I want to be here,” she crouched down lower and touched a hand against the table to steady herself. “I want to help you...not that I’ve been doing a very good job.”

She looked at the books instead of her mother. Human anatomy, bound in a neat rectangle, though she’d pulled it apart more than once.

“I’m pleased you’re here, but that doesn’t mean I want you to stay indefinitely, and give up everything else.”

She could feel her mother’s eyes on her as she stood up again. “I can work here – once you’re a bit better.”

“Don’t you want to go back? You must have *some* friends in Glasgow...” The tone of her mother’s voice indicated that she wasn’t entirely sure about that.

Liz was even less so, turning to face her mother again. She pressed her lips together and frowned.

“And you know,” her mother glanced at the journals she was holding, the accumulation of a drip feed from Dr Beaton, “if there was ever anything else you wanted to do with yourself...I’d be happy to help you...to assist...you know, in any which way.”

Now what had brought that on? “Really?”

“Of course. In fact, I was thinking you ought to take your father’s pensions.”

“No, I couldn’t do that.”

“Of course you could – don’t you think he would like that?”

“But...” She could feel her eyes widening as she stared at her mother, though her mother was no longer looking at her.

“It’s not as if I’ve a great need for it. Mr Falconer says I can sign it over no problem.”

Liz didn’t know what to say. She was still standing next to the coffee table with the pile of publications in her arms. She gripped at their spines and squeezed the flat front of the top cover against her chest. That was just what she needed to become a woman of any sort of means. But it would take a different sort of meanness to leave her mother like this, after everything. It was surely a question of duty. Liz swallowed loudly.

“So,” her mother waved a hand, “I just wanted you to know that.”

Liz nodded. Still saying nothing. So she probably appeared the height of ingratitude. And her mother was already fishing her knitting up from the side of her chair, not apparently expecting her to say anything. Not even expecting Liz to pick her knitting up for her, though surely she could at least do that. But no. She was still just standing there, and her mother had got hold of her needles now anyway. Holding the piece up to inspect the last row, then

flattening it onto her lap, peering down so her eyes folded in on themselves and the skin below her cheekbones grew slack.

“What are you knitting?” she asked, surprised by how quiet her voice sounded.

“I’m doing you a cardigan.” As she spoke she fumbled with her needles, fitting them between long bony fingers, rings clicking – were they even looser now? Liz wanted to check, she wanted to reach out and touch the soft skin of her mother’s hand.

“Thank you.”

“Not at all, it might take a while to finish mind. Put the wireless on would you?”

“Yes...of course.” She turned and walked towards it, balancing her books and reaching a hand out. The leaflet was still there, sticking out the side of the wooden casing. Your National Health Service. Your – National Health Service. The man was pointing at her. More like Kitchener now – You. But it was all happening – tomorrow – without her. The thought made her wince. Though it was only one day. There would be others; there was still time. Wasn’t there? If she left her mother there was still time to be a bachelor, though that sounded absurd. Why did bachelors sound young and spinsters so old? Spinster. Matron. Dried up old crow. But a bachelor with a degree, that conjured the image of a dapper chap, swinging his bag. Homburg hat in hand. Christ; she realised she was picturing Doctor Carrot. A bloody cartoon. Mind you, that was still easier than trying to picture herself!

“I think we can give children’s hour a miss?”

“Eh?” Surely she hadn’t actually said anything about the cartoon out loud? Doctor Carrot: the children’s best friend. Guards your health.

“Will you change it to the Light Programme?”

“Oh yes...right you are.” She turned the knob until an orchestra came out. “Well, I’d better get the dinner on.”

“What are we having?”

She cleared her throat. “Carrot tart.”

“Oh well.” Her mother turned back to her knitting. “I suppose it was a decent enough bit of lamb at lunch.”

Liz walked along the hall, arms laden, and turned into her bedroom. She dropped the books and the journals so they scattered over her bed, though she should probably be more careful, considering none of them were hers. She folded her arms in front of her and looked at them. Biting at her bottom lip. Why hadn’t she said anything? Probed the point. Why hadn’t she bitten her mother’s hand off? Or held it tight. It was one or the other. The duty or the calling. And her mother was letting her go – telling her to go; but of course, that’s what she would say.

She cooked dinner accompanied by the distant tones of the Carnival Concert; a rather sad sounding tenor coming to her from the Winter Gardens, via the living room. She worked quickly, enjoying cutting the carrots into very thin slices. Too thin her mother would say – that was just showing off. But it was worth it when the top layer crisped and turned sweet.

“Liz.” Her mother was calling her from the living room. “Liz.”

She went through to see what it was.

“I think there’s someone at the door.”

“Oh. Right you are.” She went to go out into the hall again.

“Liz.”

“Yes?”

“Perhaps without the knife?”

She went back to sit the knife on the kitchen table and wiped her hands on a tea towel. Not very thorough but a little bit of carrot never hurt anyone; guards your health in fact. Still, she

could feel the dampness on her fingertips – a slight stickiness – as she reached out for the door handle and pulled it open.

“Hello.”

Ramsay. Jesus Christ. No; it was definitely Ramsay.

He smiled.

She stared at him, taking in the open jacket, the hard flat front of his shirt; right up to the soft warm eyes with fine lines reaching out.

As she kept staring the smile began to waver. She noticed his throat move up and down in a slow clunky swallow.

“What are you doing here?”

He frowned. “I had to come and see what on earth was going on – why didn’t you tell me your mother was ill?”

Her mother? “I didn’t think you would be particularly interested.”

He paused. “Well it would have saved me a lot of hassle with Matron for a start...”

She sighed. That was more like it.

“Before I went accusing her of all sorts only to find out it was you that jacked it in all along.”

“I told you that—”

“No you didn’t. I’ve been up to high doh.” He lifted both his eyebrows as if to demonstrate.

“I told you I wasn’t coming back.”

“I didn’t think you would have just quit like that.”

“Well I did.”

“Well I know that now. I had to hear it all from Matron, and I tell you she wasn’t very impressed with me either – told me to get my facts straight.”

“Quite right too.”

He sighed and tilted his head back. “This is absurd.”

“What is?”

He leaned towards her. “You’re really not coming back?”

“Liz?” Her mother was calling her from the living room.

They looked at each other – then through the door into the hall.

“Who is it? Aren’t they coming in?”

Ramsay raised an eyebrow at her.

“That’s my mother.”

“Are you not going to invite me in?”

“You do realise it’ll mean introducing you.”

“Naturally.”

She scoffed. There was nothing natural about it. Was he trying to make things difficult for her?

“I just hope you didn’t get your hospitality training from her.”

She whacked him on the arm.

He held her eye. A glint of amusement now.

She tried to take it all in, still feeling the rough cloth of his sleeve on the back of her hand.

He was really there then – standing on the doorstep, almost smiling, though she detected a slight droop in his dark eyes. Tired no doubt, from the train or the drive or however he’d got all the way here – to her. God damn it. She threw both of her arms around his shoulders and he squeezed her against him, sliding one hand up her spine and the other as far as her neck.

She had to bite her lip as her cheek pressed into his and she breathed in that city smell.

Cheap tobacco and complex chemicals. And the warm coppery scent of his skin.

“You’d better come in then.” She broke away from him, and ushered him inside, avoiding his eyes as she closed the door behind them.

He pressed himself against the hall wall to let her go first. Reaching out to touch the tips of her fingers as she passed.

“Liz.”

She pulled them away.

“Not now.” She couldn’t touch him again without crying and she couldn’t start crying with her mother sitting there in the next room, knitting.

She heard him sigh. But what did he expect? Barging in on her like this? Probably a warmer welcome than he’d got. Was it supposed to be some kind of gesture, and if so a gesture of what exactly? Solidarity? Just making sure she hadn’t been unfairly dismissed? Or was he just annoyed because he’d put his foot in it with Matron and it was all her fault, again.

She strode into the living room. “It’s a friend of mine mother; a surprise visitor.” She turned and gestured towards the door as Ramsay walked in, rather sheepish, looking thin in his suit and smoothing his hair, though the thick curls never did what he asked of them. She suddenly wished she had held him longer, kissed him when she had the chance. God she had missed him and now he was here. And he had tried with Matron. He had meant well.

“Hello,” he walked further into the room and stood a little away from her. He gave her mother a small smile, and Liz turned to look at her too. She was staring at them both with wide blue eyes, neck slightly held back as if she was rather wary of whatever they were up to. And Liz wondered how she struck Ramsay, this woman with her hair piled on top of her head and her glasses tucked in there too for good measure, her sharp sculpted cheeks moving slowly into something more like a smile.

“How do you do.”

“Ramsay Kincaid,” he leaned over and shook her hand. “Sorry to hear you’ve been unwell.”

“Thank you...Ramsay...oh, we were just talking about you.”

“Were you?” He swung his head back round and smiled at Liz.

Bugger.

“Earlier today, Liz was saying that you were a...what was it?”

Oh good lord.

“A thoracic surgeon,” he said.

“Oh, that wasn’t quite the words she used,” Liz glared at her mother. “But that sounds very interesting.”

“It is, it is. I eh, I hear you’ve been under the knife yourself recently.”

Liz turned to him now. “Who told you that?”

“Dorothy.”

“Dorothy?” She could feel her brow furrow further. “Where did you speak to her?”

“Just on the road there. I needed some assistance, though the chap at the station gave me directions too.”

“Jimmy?”

“I’m afraid I didn’t catch his name.”

“Short, with a gammy leg?”

“A gammy leg?” He was smiling again.

“A limp she means.” Her mother added.

“He knows fine what I mean.”

“Jimmy got terrible frostbite when he was a POW,” her mother inclined her head confidentially towards Ramsay. “Lost a few toes you know.”

“Yes, sounds like him alright. He had a child christened this morning.”

Liz raised an eyebrow. “You’re very well informed!”

“Well I had to make some enquiries – I’ve never been to Oban before.”

“Really?” her mother smiled. “Well, how nice that you’ve had the chance now. And what is it brings you to these parts?”

Liz felt her whole body tense. A great flush rushing to her face; a burning. “The tart!”

“I should hope not,” her mother said, and Ramsay gave a great burst of laughter that he then tried to stem by bringing a fist to his mouth and clearing his throat.

Worse than a musical comedy.

“Can’t you smell that?” Liz raised her nose to the air, though it was still all Ramsay.

Her mother looked at her. “Well aren’t you going to take it out the oven?”

“Yes, yes...you must excuse me for a moment.” That was even worse though, the two of them alone. But what could she do now. She flashed Ramsay a look as she turned to leave.

“You will join us for dinner won’t you Dr Kincaid, or is it Mr for you fellows?”

“Please, call me Ramsay. And yes, I’d be glad to join you. Thank you.”

Liz walked into the kitchen in a sort of daze. She automatically opened and closed the oven door, though the tart wasn’t remotely near burning. She went to the sink and washed her hands properly. The shock of cold water seemed to help. She wasn’t quite ready to believe Ramsay was in the other room with her mother. Making small talk, though neither of them were particularly good at that. So what on earth were they talking about in there? And what was she doing in the bloody kitchen?

She dashed back along the hall and into the living room where he was sitting now on the couch. It was so odd seeing him there, chatting away to her mother quite the thing.

“I was just saying,” her mother said, looking up at Liz, “we’re very uncivilised at the moment with our eating arrangements – what’s to be done?”

“Don’t bother yourselves on my account,” Ramsay leaned forward in his seat, coming over all earnest now. “I’ve eaten in plenty of thoroughly uncivilised places.”

“Glasgow?”

“Mother!”

Ramsay laughed. “I was thinking more of my time with the RAMC.”

“Oh of course, of course. Liz was in the QAs you know.”

“Yes.” He glanced at her. “I remember.”

“We’ll just eat in here then,” her mother gave a decisive nod. “I hope it wasn’t burnt?”

“No...no...it was fine actually.”

“Well for goodness sake sit down – or get this young man a drink.”

“Now there’s a good idea.” She could do with one herself, if her mother would even tolerate that. Ramsay certainly seemed to perk up at the mention of it though, and she’d be damned if she’d just sit there and watch him go at it.

“There’s a bottle of whisky in the cupboard,” her mother was saying.

Bugger. “Oh...actually...I’m, I’m not sure there’s much of that left.”

“Well there’s brandy, if you don’t mind brandy—”

“Erm...is there? I’m not sure there is...”

“For any favour I didn’t realise you’d taken to the drink,” her mother raised both eyebrows, “is there a drop left in the house?”

“Maybe not actually.” She didn’t dare look at Ramsay, who was no doubt enjoying the debacle, but her mother turned to him now.

“I can only apologise.”

“No I should apologise, turning up empty handed.” He wore a surprisingly serious expression, inclining his head towards her mother so Liz could see the long line of his nose, the dark lashes.

She turned to go back to the kitchen. Not caring what might be said about her now – anything to get out of there. “Dinner will be ready soon,” she called over her shoulder.

Christ. She sounded like a resentful maidservant – outrageously domestic in an apron. Bugger, she’d forgotten she’d been wearing that. Too stunned at the sight of him; what on earth kind of a sight was she? She quickly untied it, though she could imagine him saying – what’s wrong with that? A maidservant is a perfectly respectable job.

She served her mother on a tray and she and Ramsay sat on cushions next to the coffee table.

“Like the Japanese,” he said.

Her mother frowned. “Please do try not to commit any atrocities before pudding.”

Liz couldn’t bring herself to eat a bite. She kept thinking about Doctor Carrot and his huge head. Sliced very thinly. She kept looking at Ramsay, his brow furrowed but shovelling it in nonetheless.

“This is very good Liz,” he glanced at her. “I didn’t know you were such a keen cook.”

“I’m not.”

“She made a cake yesterday.”

“Mum.”

“Well,” her mother looked at her, “you did.”

“I know but Ramsay doesn’t want to hear about that.”

“On the contrary, I find it fascinating,” he smiled at her.

She wanted to hit him with something but settled for glaring at him. Then she looked up and saw her mother watching them. Raising an eyebrow. Liz shrugged and shook her head – what? What was she supposed to do?

“So Ramsay,” her mother set her knife and fork very deliberately on her plate, “we read your letter in that journal earlier.”

“You did?” He glanced at Liz.

“Yes – Liz said you cribbed it from her, why would you want to do a thing like that?”

Liz dropped her cutlery onto her plate with a clatter. She couldn’t believe her mother had just come out with it like that – but at the same time...at the same time – well, it was a bloody good question really.

“I’m afraid, Mrs Black, that I had to try a letter in the journal, seen as she stopped replying to any of my own.”

Liz felt her cheeks fit to burst.

“Oh I see.” Her mother went back to cutting her food. “That’s not very nice Elizabeth.”

She cleared her throat. “I might have replied if the letters I received hadn’t been so condescending.”

“Condescending?” He leaned back so he could look at her in a more...condescending way.

“Yes.”

“Oh dear.” Was that a smile that her mother was fighting?

“You see mother, Ramsay doesn’t think there’s any work worth doing north of the central belt.”

He turned to face her mother. “That’s...a gross exaggeration.”

“How interesting.”

“It’s just a question of population. The areas with the most people need the most doctors.”

He glanced back at Liz. “And nurses of course.”

“Of course.” Her mother closed her knife and fork together on her plate. Half past six – though it was actually half past seven according to the little green clock on the mantelpiece.

“So what do you think Liz should do with herself now she’s left the infirmary?”

He finished chewing. Swallowed loudly. Turned to meet Liz’s gaze straight on. “I think that’s entirely up to her.”

She tried to hold his eye but felt that hers were beginning to sting. Had he perhaps changed his tune then?

“If you’re all quite finished...” She got to her feet and picked up her plate. “Ouch. Pass me that then.” He held his plate up to her and she went to get her mother’s tray. “Oh.”

“Are you alright?” Her mother was looking at her.

“Yes fine. Oh – damn it. Let me take that.” She piled the plates together on the tray and lifted it. “Just a bit of pins and needles.” She hobbled out of the room with as much dignity as she could muster.

She had to stop in the hall and lean against the wall. Wiggling her toes and groaning inwardly. She could hear his voice coming through.

“I would have offered to help,” he said, “but mine’s gone completely dead.” She heard a loud whack of a sound, then her mother laughing.

“Must be catching,” she said, “look at the state of mine.”

Liz couldn’t help smiling, standing there, with her tray, in the dark. Why had she never imagined it would be nice having him here? Why had she never let herself imagine? Was it because she didn’t think he’d ever want it – yet here he was, without even being asked. It was a gesture, even if he hadn’t meant it to be. Something solid. But what use was that now?

“There’s to be an announcement,” she announced, when she went back in. They both looked at her – both smiling. The two of them. Everyone that mattered – though there was Annag too; she still needed Annag, it was just that Annag didn’t need her. Liz wondered if she should just make an announcement of her own and see how that went down all round. Only she didn’t know which to cling on to and which to let go.

“Yes?” Her mother tilted her head back.

She was going to be a surgeon. She looked at her mother. More pink in her cheeks now. A deep glow in the eyes – the tired eyes, with dark smudges below, where the skin looked so

thin to Liz that it almost hurt her. That sort of thing was no good if she was going to be a surgeon. So what would she be then? “The Prime Minister,” she said. “He’ll be on just after the nine o’clock news. It’s about the new services.”

Ramsay was back on the couch. She went and sat next to him, feeling her bones stiff against the soft give of the cushions.

“Well, here we are at last.” He said it in a low voice. Smiling at her, then quickly reaching across to squeeze her hand. “The new service, finally here.”

“Yes.” She felt all at once breathless. She looked at her mother and saw her watching their hands before she suddenly became very interested in something out of the window. “Isn’t it exciting mum?”

“Thrilling!” Smiling out at the absurdly bright blue of the evening sky.

Ramsay was still looking right at her with his liquid dark eyes, stroking her hand now with his long cool fingers; the back of her hand that she’d whacked him with, the palm of it that he’d stitched himself, her fingers that handed him things and held things and had touched every inch of him. And she knew she was imagining the pulse that flowed from him to her, or was it from her to him. Or were they just two very separate things. Look at the size difference for a start. She stretched her fingers out against his, resenting the extra inch.

“I could have been a piano player,” he said.

She smiled. Trying to picture it. “Did you ever play?”

“No,” he gave a slight laugh, “bloody bourgeois waste of time.” After he said it he gave a slight start, and glanced at her mother. “Sorry.” He let go of her hand and cleared his throat. He looked around the room and seemed relieved that there wasn’t any sign of a piano.

Liz felt herself stiffen. “Music the opium of the people now too is it?”

“That depends.”

“Are you a communist Mr Kincaid?”

Oh Christ.

Her mother leaned forward. “Liz has been getting very pally with the landed gentry since she’s been up here.”

Oh for god’s sake.

“Nazi ones at that.”

He started to laugh then noticed the glare she was directing at her mother. “What, really?”

“Well...”

As he was looking at her his features seemed to grow closer together, as the eyes lowered, nose wrinkled, mouth beginning to pucker.

There was a knock on the door – the living room door. She was filled with a sudden horror. Oh no, dear god – dear god that so liked to punish her that way. She was almost certain as she called out to come in, that when the door opened she would see Sandy standing there in front of them. Just to complete the scene.

It was a messenger boy though.

She exhaled loudly. “Neil.”

“Sorry Nurse Black, I was at the front door but I couldn’t hear any answer.”

“That’s quite alright, did Dr Beaton send you?”

“Yes Nurse, he says it’s an emergency.”

“I’ll be right there.”

“Sorry Nurse but he says I’ve to ask for the gentleman.”

“The gentleman?”

The boy looked at his scrap of paper. “Mr Kincaid – Dr Beaton says he’s sorry to interrupt your holiday but he’d be much obliged seen as it might be a matter of the heart.”

Liz’s mother laughed.

“Mother!”

“I’m sorry but it makes it sound like a proposal from Dr Beaton – for Mr Kincaid.” She laughed again.

“Someone could be lying dying up there.”

“Yes, sorry,” she straightened her face. “You’re quite right.”

She looked at Ramsay and saw that he was suppressing a smile too. Of course he was. Smug git. He couldn’t break wind without the local hospital begging him to bottle it. How did they even know he was there?

“Of course I’ll come at once.” He stood up.

Liz stood up next to him. “Well I’m coming too.”

She hadn’t been able to stand the thought of him marching into the cottage hospital and taking control. Though of course Dr Beaton was there, and it was his show. And all Liz could do was sit, and wait. And she hadn’t seen either Ramsay or Dr Beaton for ages, so she should perhaps just give up and go home. She had, after all, rushed her mother into bed and left her there without a second thought. Had she learned nothing? It wasn’t as if they even needed her at the hospital. She had been told she was welcome to observe. Observe the master in action – no thank you. She’d had quite enough of that over the years. No, she would go. She stood up just as the matron came in. Miss Gilchrist wasn’t in uniform; it was officially the night watch now.

“I was wondering if you’d like to join us for the Prime Minister’s address?”

“Oh yes,” Liz nodded. “Yes I would like that very much.”

She followed Miss Gilchrist up to her sitting room where the off-duty residents and the ward sister were already sitting. Drinking tea out of floral patterned cups and passing round a plate of petticoat shortbread. Liz smiled at them all, though she felt suddenly nervous. About them, about Attlee, about what Ramsay was doing downstairs.

“It’s a good job your friend was here,” Miss Gilchrist said as she passed her a cup.

“Yes...I hope he can be of some help.” She pressed her lips together and looked away. “He doesn’t often treat babies.”

“Well, let’s hope it doesn’t come to that.” Miss Gilchrist smiled.

There was a chorus of mumbles around the room: the poor parents, and the mother didn’t keep well herself, had been told not to have any more apparently. Really? Yes. And wouldn’t it be just like the thing for her to take unwell now, and them with five already at home. But there was no use thinking about that. They could only hope for the best...a prayer or two...the best possible hands.

As they sat through the nine o’clock news Liz realised that though he didn’t even know it yet, and was working in a small white cube of a room with no windows, the town’s eyes were firmly fixed on Ramsay. She clung to the tiny fragile handle of her teacup and stared into it, as if she might divine – all shall be well. Please let it all be well.

“I must say I can’t help feeling nervous about tomorrow,” one of the nurse’s spoke up. An off-duty one, in a spotted blouse.

“It’s natural there should be a degree of nervous excitement,” Miss Gilchrist said, smoothing her skirt. “There will be a period of adjustment. But we are prepared.”

“Are the government prepared though Matron?”

“In London half the doctor’s lists haven’t been put up yet,” another added. “There were questions in parliament.”

Miss Gilchrist frowned.

“We can hardly blame the Minister of Health for that,” Liz said. “He’s been telling the doctors for months to sign up, it’s the professional bodies that have caused the delay by telling them not to.” They were all looking at Liz. “Even when they eventually accepted the national service they still went about saying there was no rush.” Miss Gilchrist was looking

at her too. Liz felt herself redden and looked back at her teacup. “Not that I put the blame on the doctors.”

“No,” Miss Gilchrist said, and there was a general mumble of agreement. “Heaven forbid.” She smiled at Liz.

They fell silent when Attlee came on. Liz felt her chest becoming tighter and started to worry that she might cry. His voice was so calm and sensible and right – though he might have sung it from the rooftops; absolutely nothing to be modest about. He acknowledged the work of others across the board, talked through each of the services; her mother should be pleased – not even the hint of a messiah complex. Her mother though! Liz hadn’t even thought of leaving the radio on for her, she’d been that intent on sticking her oar in here. And Ramsay was missing it too, though essentially – he was it. It was only a matter of hours now.

The words rang steadily out. “To all of you who’ve served in the past...”

She looked at Miss Gilchrist. The small pretty woman who had been running the whole place for years. And she thought about Miss Wood, her matron at the Western – not her matron anymore. She didn’t have a matron. Not officially. Though it didn’t particularly feel like it, here, in the bosom of the place. A pretty sitting room full of bright young women – what was so wrong with that at the end of the day?

Miss Gilchrist lifted a handkerchief to her eye.

There was a sudden commotion on the stairs.

“Is Nurse Black still here?”

Liz excused herself, and missed the end of the speech as she followed Dr Beaton down the stairs and along the corridor.

“You’re needed,” he said.

“Oh, I thought there were already plenty of assistants?”

“We need your blood – it’s a direct match apparently. Mr Kincaid seemed to think you wouldn’t mind.”

“No,” she tried not to frown, though her face had probably turned the colour of a post box – a direct match. At least her circulatory system was in good working order. “Of course.”

As she lay, draining on the bed, any encroaching sleepiness was kept at bay by the blinding lights overhead. They gave the room a vague white glow so that had she drifted off and woken again she might have expected to meet her maker.

But no, it was the night matron, eyeing her line and giving her an occasional flick on the arm – as if that was going to speed things up. It was odd because she knew the woman quite well but as soon as she lay down to have her arm swabbed it was as if a barrier had gone up. One through which Liz could be looked at but wasn’t expected to look back, or speak, or hear; unless it was something spoken in a loud exaggerated tone designed to overcome the barrier, and apparently other dense objects.

“You’re doing ever so well.”

Liz was in fact feeling rather woozy. As if she was sinking further and further into the bed, though it was actually a hard thin examination table with long metal legs that were going nowhere. It wasn’t an unpleasant sensation. Almost relaxing. She should have probably mentioned she was menstruating, but it wasn’t the kind of thing she wanted to admit to in that context. She couldn’t go letting the side down. Not when this was all she was good for.

“How is it all going?” she asked.

“Oh nearly there,” the night matron tapped her on the arm.

“Not me – I mean the baby. The mother and baby.”

“Wonderfully. The mother is out of the woods now, and they say the baby will be fine once he’s had his pint.” She lifted the bottle to look.

There she was. Her dripping dark red insides.

“I’ve got you a nice glass of lemon barley for after.”

When it was time to sit up she made sure she took it slowly. The last thing she wanted was to waver in the slightest and be fussed over, or confined somewhere. A weakness.

But she must have taken even longer than she thought, because by the time she was on her feet Ramsay and Dr Beaton were in front of her. Grinning and slapping each other on the back.

“Everything’s alright?” she asked.

“Couldn’t be better,” Dr Beaton said. “The parents are extremely relieved, as you can imagine.” He turned to Ramsay. “I said you’d look in on Mrs Jackson again before you left, I hope that’s alright.”

“Of course.”

Liz followed, slightly behind, as they walked down the ward. The ward was making her feel woozy now, because it was as dark as her room had been bright. Except at the end of it she could see where a woman lay, illuminated, like the bloody nativity, though there was no babe in arms, and only the three of them making their way towards her. Liz hovered at the back whilst the mother gushed her thanks at Ramsay.

“There’s really no need Mrs Jackson. It’s a common disorder really. I was happy to help, though Dr Beaton here did all the hard work.”

Elbow grease? Forceps? She better not think about it too much, she was feeling faint enough as it was.

“Not at all,” Dr Beaton said. “Mr Kincaid had sole charge of the little one.”

“I don’t know how to thank you doctor. We should call him after you – what’s your Christian name?”

“Ramsay.”

“Oh...” she smiled, “...perhaps for the middle name.”

Liz burst out laughing. A mad high pitched giggle that made them all turn and look.

Ramsay’s eyes widened and she could see he was trying not to smile. “I’m afraid nurse is a touch light headed after the transfusion.”

“Oh of course,” the woman tried to lean forward, then winced. “Thank you too nurse.”

“My name’s Elizabeth but I don’t suppose that’s much use.” She laughed again, then stopped abruptly. “I’m so sorry.”

When they eventually stepped out of the hospital the sky had darkened to a deep petrol blue.

They moved slowly beneath it, alone now, and awkward.

“Isn’t there somewhere we can go – take a walk or something, I know it’s late but...”

Ramsay looked around at the trees, as if they were conspiring against him, hiding secret forest trails. They buzzed and swayed with nocturnal activity. Animal. Clicking and calling that they would never understand.

“There’s a path this way,” she turned up the hill, without looking at him.

He followed, walking close to her. Breathing deeply as the air thickened; damp wood threaded with the ghost of wild garlic.

The pale bodies of trees caught the night light and shimmered. Gnarled old bones and bright young things with buds on. She could taste the cut-grass freshness of them on her tongue. As the path narrowed they reached out to her with lacklustre arms – spindly and sharp, holding wide green fans. The fat veins of leaves. She lifted her hand and picked one, ripping it into smaller and smaller pieces until her fingers were damp and sweet smelling. She sprinkled the fragments mid-air, where they disappeared into the dull twilight. This was about as dark as it would get.

She looked at him, looking up, not at her, or the trees, but straight to the stars.

“Isn’t it terrible about the blockade,” she said.

“I didn’t come here to talk about the bloody blockade.” He still wasn’t looking at her.

Watching his step now, as they navigated the rough ground, shadows on shadows.

“But I thought you loved an international political crisis?” As soon as she said it she regretted the word ‘loved’.

“No, I’m afraid I’m here on a personal matter.”

Was he ever going to look at her again? It was her own fault for taking him round this back way. She had to concentrate herself now. Frowning down at her feet.

“How unpleasant for you,” she said. “Personal matters can be so draining.”

“Distracting,” he said with a slight scoff. “I never actually said draining.”

“Well that’s alright then.”

“No it isn’t actually – you do know all hell’s about to break loose tomorrow.”

“Hell?”

“You know what I mean.”

“Yes.”

He looked at her now.

“When are you going back?” she asked.

“I suppose I’ll have to head back in a couple of hours.”

“Really?” As soon as all that. She would rather not think about that. “You came in a car?”

“Yes – I’m a regular swell these days...borrowed it from a chap in the path lab.”

“When do you take up your new post?”

“Tomorrow.”

Tomorrow, and yet he’d chosen the day before to come here? And it was almost already tomorrow. She didn’t quite know what to say to that. They were out of the woods now, and as they turned the corner on to Ardconnel Road the bay opened up in front of them, blue and

imprecise. A metallic sea made darker in parts by the round bodies of hills. The suggestion of water and space stretching out and out. He slowed for a moment, looking for it.

“Congratulations, by the way,” she said. “I’m glad I’ve the chance to tell you in person. I’m really very pleased for you.” She moved off again, slightly quicker now. Though as she looked down the steep side of the hill she felt herself becoming unsteady again.

“It’s funny,” he said, easily catching her up, “you don’t sound particularly pleased.”

“I’m tremendously pleased. Honestly.” She put a hand out to touch his chest but her aim fell short and it ended as a limp waving away. “I knew you would get it though, I knew all along. They’d be mad not to keep you.”

He was looking at her, at her limp hand – concerned or confused, one of the two. “They’re very sorry to lose you, you know.”

She forced herself to keep moving. “I doubt that.”

“You were the best they had; they should have told you so.”

She just shrugged. She should have been happy to hear that – from him at least – but what did it matter now. His voice already sounded too far away, coming across the slow swooshing in her ears, though he was here. He was right here.

They were coming round the side of McCaig’s Tower now: a ring of grey granite with two tiers of arches. It perched on the top of the hill, colosseum-like. Brilliantly heathen. Though tamer than the stone circles to the south of the town.

“What’s all this about?” Ramsay was gazing up into the gaping mouth of the entranceway.

“A fight to the death?”

She laughed. “I hope not.” She didn’t fancy her chances, even the uphill path was taking it out of her. She felt her eyes growing heavier, then his arm slipping through hers. She smiled at him, then frowned. “I need to tell you something.”

“I need to tell you something.”

“Okay, well, it’s not a competition.”

He smiled. “Why don’t we sit down.”

Was she swaying? Slightly too heavy on his arm?

They walked through the middle of the stone circle with its scraps of bushes and uneven path. She directed him towards one of the far arches that was low enough to slide on to and swing your legs through.

As he watched her do it he muttered – “Interesting.” Frowning, as if she might very easily tumble backwards. Or forwards.

“This is the best spot.” She liked the feeling of shelter and hush, but also of her feet dangling on top of the world. Her world, at least. Her sixteen-year-old world that could all be seen at once. From right there, though darker now. The trail of gaslight through the town. Blinking buoys and the sight of a ship passing in the night. She took a long breath, imagining the air rolling in off the Atlantic, past the Mull hills, rushing across the water and all the way into her lungs. And still her chest ached as she sat stiffly amidst the granite – feeling the heaviness of it reaching up into her. And her insides – expanding. Heartstrings, plucked and heaved, though the tiny white threads were stronger than you’d ever imagine; could take the weight of the whole organ quite the thing. And he, bending down behind her, was looking out too, though he could barely see the half of it. In the light of day the tower looked down on everything. Everything, and nowhere to hide. But she did love it – yes. Of course she did. And she was glad he was here. Though he would go soon. He would go.

“It’s a shame we came so late,” her voice sounded loud in the stone arch, “or you’d see the west highlands does have its perks.”

“I can see well enough.” She could tell by his voice he was smiling. “But you don’t expect me to believe you’re going to stay?”

“Why on earth not?” She turned to look at him.

“Come on Liz. I know you.”

“You don’t know here.”

“Forgive me but you never seemed that enamoured with it before,” he suddenly leapt on to the ledge, getting his leg over absurdly easily. He squeezed himself down beside her whilst she budged away and pressed herself as close to the cold stone side as she could. “There’s so much to do now,” he carried on, “don’t you want to be in the thick of it? Making a difference?”

She tutted. “You don’t think Dr Beaton makes a difference?”

“Of course he does, that’s not what I meant at all.” He rubbed a hand over his jaw. The creeping darkness of his 2am shadow.

Of course; of course he made a difference – he was a doctor. She pressed her fingers against the rounded edge of the ledge, feeling the roughness of stone dust. Salt crust.

“Anyway,” he said, “they don’t have a medical school here.”

She turned to look at him. He had a small smile on his lips. Making fun of her now?

“Yes, I’m sure it’s very amusing, the thought of me at the medical school. Well they *would* have had me by the way... at least they would if I passed the exam, and of course I could’ve passed the exam. And I know I’d have been useless for years but I’d have been more useful in the long term and you can’t have your utilitarian arguments all one way you know.”

He was still looking at her; bent awkwardly, bracing himself against the wall.

“And I’m well aware that I was only doing it for egotistical reasons – but ego’s got to come into it somewhere. We’re only any of us human for god’s sake. I’m not a machine.” It was becoming quite the recurring refrain with her. It would at least be something to put on her grave, proving the point once and for all. Here lies Miss Elizabeth Black: Definitely not a machine. And because he still hadn’t said anything and she didn’t know what else to say she was appalled to find herself saying it again: “...I’m not a machine.”

“I’m glad to hear it, I hate to think what you’d set me back in parts.”

A bloody joke; she thought she might push him right off the ledge. Or cry. Or maybe do nothing because she was actually very tired. When she looked up he was staring at her intently.

“What?”

“Why are you talking as if it’s all in the past – as if you weren’t going to do it?”

“Because I can’t do it now can I?” She heard the tremble in her voice. Like a petulant child, in need of bed. Or a good slap.

“Why not?”

“You were the one who thought it a ridiculous idea in the first place. I don’t see what you’re—”

“For heaven’s sake, don’t listen to me whatever you do. You’ve just done a fine job of telling me how wrong I was – you’ve always done a fine job of that.” He leaned closer and raised a hand to the back of her neck. But she shrugged it off, shaking her head. If he held her now...

“I can’t leave my mother.”

He exhaled loudly. “Your mother will be just fine.”

“She might have died.”

“She might have, but she didn’t. She will though, one day. So will you – don’t you want something to show for it?”

“Nursing is a perfectly respectable profession.”

He scoffed. “Yes, but what about that ego of yours what do you intend to do with that?”

She studied the points of his pale face and saw that he was quite serious. And right. She knew that. And hadn’t her mother as good as told her to beat it? She would never ask Liz to do anything though – that was the whole problem. Having to guess what was right. She felt

incredibly tired. As if she was sinking into her stone seat, or could seep slowly down the sides of it – drip, drip, in one big dark red puddle.

“It’s probably for the best anyway.” She looked at him, trying not to shiver, it would be better if she wasn’t shivering so much. “I’m too weak.”

“You’re not weak.” He pressed his shoulder against hers.

“I might lose my nerve.”

“No,” he shook his head.

“How do you know?”

“Because I’ve seen what you can do.”

“Haven’t you just.” He watched as she lay her palms out on her lap so the pale skin shone – two saucers of moonlight.

“Nothing the infirmary can throw at you will ever be as bad as that.”

She could feel the words warm against her cheek, burning.

She clasped her hands together and sat stiffly, looking at them. So cold they were going numb now. Her backside too. It made her think suddenly of her tin-can travels across Mull.

“I haven’t really been palling about with Nazis by the way.”

He laughed, and she felt it reverberate and rise, right to the tip of the lancet arch. “I didn’t think so.”

But she knew he had wondered, just for a moment. It was okay though. Accountability was all part of the appeal – as long as it worked both ways. “Mum likes to put that sort of thing about, as if I wasn’t popular enough already.”

He laughed again. “I like your mum.”

She smiled, glancing up at him. “I’m glad that you met her. I am glad that you came.”

“So am I.”

“Why now?”

He paused and clenched his jaw in a sort of wince. A quite physical pain. “All of the excitement about the new service...our new era...I wanted to be with you when it happened. I don’t know why – god knows I’ve enough to do in Glasgow. But it didn’t seem right somehow, not being with you.” The way his body was twisted towards her made one of his arms disappear behind his back. Into the night. Into the granite; it seemed to be turning to butter beneath her.

She bit her lip as hard as she could. “So you didn’t just come to lecture me on population?”

He sighed. “I’m a horror aren’t I,” he shook his head. “Imagine taking the entire population of a country in vain like that.”

She smiled.

“I do love you Liz.”

She closed her eyes for a moment, to feel the words. Soft against the roaring pulse behind her ears, behind her eyelids. Red – and open again. “Was that the something that you needed to tell me?”

“Yes, I suppose it was.” He mumbled hurriedly, throwing an arm in the air – “because I do. And you can do what you want with that.”

She looked back at him, right into his eyes until they started to blur and she blinked once. Twice. Because she knew what she would do with that now.

She glanced out, up at the grey sky. Lighter than it had been. So that was it then, the new day already here. It had snuck up behind them when they weren’t looking – this was the west coast after all. No blazing new dawn. Just a quiet sort of revolution. An indiscernible seismic shift.

They reached out their hands and held on.

CRITICAL COMPONENT

INTRODUCTION

In her opening Reith Lecture back in 2017, Hilary Mantel began by asserting the importance of history when considering our understanding of the present world and our present selves.

‘We rely on history,’ she stated, ‘to help us put our small lives in context. But if we want to meet the dead looking alive, we turn to art’ (2017a). This quote highlights one of historical fiction’s unique draws – and the subject of this dissertation – its ability to position the reader, not only in a reconstructed time or place, but inside historical bodies. Historical novelists are thus in the business of resurrection, grave robbing, and writing flesh on to bone. This is a task that sometimes leaves us tainted, and understandably questions are asked; who gave you permission? What are you going to do with that? Is anything you are saying true?

Somewhere between the past and the present, between history and fiction, between multiple levels of literary ‘brow’, the historical novel occupies a liminal space from which its creative potential has the power to attract and/or repel. As a form it is disruptive, even abject – being that which ‘disturbs identity, system, order’ (Kristeva 1982, 4). This same quality has seen it branded ‘bastard’ (Brandes 1905, 125), dismissed by conservative historians¹ and viewed, by even the creatively engaged variety, with ‘fascination mingled with distrust’ (Bickers et al. 2020, 2). Yet, as historians increasingly acknowledge the subjectivity and creativity inherent in their own discipline,² the relationship between history and fiction continues to evolve.

Crucially, writers of historical fiction are able to move past debates as to what extent their work is valid or accurate, and towards an examination of the form’s functions and ability to

¹The now disgraced historian David Starkey famously dismissed historical fiction as ‘mostly tosh’, revealing what the critic Wallace describes as, ‘an anxiety about what he calls ‘proper history’ being contaminated by both fiction and women’ and his ‘attempt to police... permeable boundaries’ (2012, 209).

² For example, in a piece on his website titled, ‘History as Creative Practice’, historian Will Pooley likens his method to collage, stating: ‘I don’t think we (historians) spend a lot of our time reflecting on cutting and pasting as a creative act...when I finally publish a piece using all of these gathered pieces it is easy to forget that they did not find one another: I found them, I put them together’ (2020).

open up new narrative spaces – particularly when it comes to embodied, and gendered, experiences of the past.

Corporeal feminist theorists such as Grosz – who features throughout my analysis – have demonstrated that the body is a product of history (1994, 148) and culture (1994, 23); furthermore, in emphasising the gendered nature of production, Grosz argues that the female body has come to be represented, ‘not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as...a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order..’ (1994, 203). The embodied narratives of historical fiction thus offer a double dose of disruption when focused on representations of the female, and have much to tell us about gender dynamics and body politics, past and present. Reading and writing fiction allows us to transcend ourselves, to try on other cultures – other bodies. Cognitive scientists are increasingly researching how this works, probing the links between reading and empathy, and how our brains ‘feel’ metaphors (Lacey, Stilla, and Sathian 2012), using ‘theories of embodied cognition and perceptual symbols’ (Zhong and Leonardelli 2008, 839). We process the sensory detail of embodied narratives through our bodies – which are themselves cultural products – thus implicating our own society as much as any past. Playing out the point where bodies and body images come up against normalising social codes opens up the possibility of critique, but also of resistance. As Grosz asserts, ‘The body is not simply a sign to be read, a symptom to be deciphered, but also a force to be reckoned with’ (1994, 120). Another feminist theorist, Cixous, points to a particular form of resistance when it comes to limiting gender ideals and the struggle for female autonomy: ‘Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies’ (1976, 875). She conflates the call for women to take up space in public places *and* pages. Through both the critical and creative components of my PhD project I am seeking to explore the forces at play in socially constructing this exiled female

figure, and the techniques and considerations involved when seeking to represent her in historical fiction. Inherent in each is the question of possible return, and the potential implications of heeding such a call.

When writing *Unity*, I wanted to explore post-war politics, family and gender dynamics, the medical gaze, and contemporaneous concerns around sex education and contraception, each of which has a particular relation to, or significance for, the body. The novel invites readers to inhabit the past through my characters. This dissertation examines the literary devices used to locate readers within historical bodies, and what the embodied narratives of historical fiction can tell us about gendered experiences in the first half of the twentieth century. To this end I will be examining Pat Barker's *Toby's Room* (2013) and *Noonday* (2016), and Sarah Waters' *The Paying Guests* (2015) and *The Night Watch* (2007).³ I have chosen these novels as they occupy similar periods and thematic spaces; their collective settings span from 1912 to 1947 and offer a range of female experience. Although the majority of my novel is set in 1948, inhabiting the mental space of 1948 required an understanding of what had gone before. I had to imagine not only my protagonist's formative years, but her mother's too; I had to consider how communities, professions, and ideas had been shaped and contorted – the sum of the century up to that point. As will be demonstrated, the type of research I undertook to do this may at times have passed for that of a novice historian, yet the disciplines notably differ in terms of final output, in which we each face our own set of struggles. We writers generally cover up these struggles, aiming to make seemingly effortless what de Groot calls our 'performance of pastness' (2013, 58). It's a performance, which by its very nature aims to convince the reader of its fiction, rather than its factuality, as – to refer back to Mantel – facts alone cannot make the dead look alive. A focus on physicality, our embodied commonality, can act as an outstretched hand reaching across the decades; something solid.

³ Subsequent citations are to these editions; page references are given parenthetically in the text.

Warm. However, vicarious writers carry a moral responsibility towards their subjects. Bodies must be handled with care – they can be weaponised, they can be abused, and every inch of them can talk. My research called for a careful listen to the notable silencing of women's bodies in the past, and my analysis includes considerations of the ethical implications. What happens when we raise the past or try to speak on behalf of the dead? In the first chapter of *Unity*, my protagonist Liz runs through a hospital that no longer exists, 'like a ghost – floating white and silent, in rubber soles' (4). Liz is an unreal messenger from an imagined past, yet, the image of the ghost is immediately undercut by the unglamorous detail of her functional nursing attire. Rubber soles as opposed to lost souls; my interest in history is distinctly material. The mundane is not that which diminishes, but that which roots our characters in reality and gives them their humanity. Gives them legs. Feet. Bones that ache and skin that rubs. Each chapter of this dissertation is concerned with the role such details play in illustrating the gendered constitution of bodies, body images, and bodies of knowledge.

Chapter one: 'The Politics of Cleanliness' opens this investigation of the visceral by examining bodies in relation to gendered, historically, and socio-politically produced notions of cleanliness, exemplified in depictions of cleaning, smells, and bodily functions.

Chapter two: 'Under the Skin' moves from the body's porous surface to the tissue and organs beneath, with a close reading of cutting, healing, and the medical gaze.

Chapter three: 'Sex, Blood, and Rubber' continues this inward focus with a gynaecological turn, considering the symbolism of blood, representations of the vagina, contraception, and sex education.

However, I will first outline the rationale and context for the particular scope of my inquiry and give an overview of my practice-led methodology.

Bodies

Defining ‘the body’ has been, as Hanson notes, a ‘hotly contested area of... feminist debate, particularly after the publication of Butler’s *Gender Trouble* and *Bodies that Matter*’ (2000, 16). Art, and specifically literature, has played a crucial part in that debate. I have always been interested in using fiction to explore notions of alienation from our own bodies, the disjuncture between body and body image, which, as Grosz points out, ‘is as much a function of the subject’s psychology and sociohistorical context as of anatomy’ (1994, 79). Gatens notes that, ‘our body image is a body double that can be as ‘other’ to us as any genuine ‘other’ can be’ (1996, 35); this quote from *Imaginary Bodies* effectively encapsulates one of *Unity*’s key themes, and a vital component of this dissertation. Of course, the act of writing fiction requires a conjuring of imaginary bodies and in this method of abstraction we are edging towards the arena of body theorists, like Butler, from whom we have learned that ‘to invoke matter is to invoke a sedimented history of sexual hierarchy and sexual erasures’ (1993, 49). Whilst fascinated by the writings of body theorists, I have often found myself echoing the voice of Butler’s less than ideal reader who haunts the pages of *Bodies That Matter*, asking, ‘what about the materiality Judy?’ (1993, ix). As a writer rooted in historical realism it was more appealing for me to explore my philosophical ideas using bodies – even if they are imaginary – as a vicarious form of praxis. It was also a way of taking a feminist approach to the history, attempting to shed light on under-represented experiences. It was this focus that dictated one of the first facts I settled on when planning my novel: my main character, Liz, would be a nurse. This would allow me to explore different forms of bodily knowledge and how these played out in medical settings, at either end of the medical gaze. This form of focalising figure required specific knowledge of the body itself, viewed through an uneasy varifocal lens of 1940s femininity and the tenets of anatomy. The reader thus experiences Liz’s specificity. Fuss has noted that, ‘bodily experiences may seem self-evident

and immediately perceptible but they are always socially mediated', and goes on to say, 'there is little agreement amongst women on exactly what constitutes 'a woman's experience'' (1989, 25). But whilst theorists like Fuss question the essentialism of categories such as 'the woman', 'woman', or 'women', writers of fiction can construct particular women with particular experiences. Indeed this specificity is identified by Flannery O'Connor in 'Writing Short Stories' (1970) as not just a function of fiction, but *the* function, on which the success of any story depends. Fictional bodies thus warrant further examination.

The body of work on the subject of the body itself is gargantuan. As Eagleton has pointed out, 'there will soon be more bodies in contemporary criticism than on the fields of Waterloo' (1993), but over the course of my research there appeared to be a lack of focus on how we inhabit historical bodies through fiction. And what's more, nothing has been settled. The body remains a site of conflict.

Female bodies

Dichotomous thinking in western philosophy, cemented most notably by Descartes, has created a correlation between mind/body and male/female, through which 'woman and body, become representationally aligned' (Grosz 1994, 4). Yet this same alignment has been utilised within patriarchal systems to historically censor and marginalise the female body, as the earlier Cixous quotation so succinctly points out. This leave us with gaps in the record of female embodiment, particularly when it comes to sexual and reproductive experience, which is where writers like Barker and Waters can retrospectively offer imaginative insights that are both historically-specific and self-reflexive. They use the powers of their art to show female characters struggling to take up space in the world, and who have complex relationships with their own bodies.

In gravitating towards certain silences surrounding sexual and reproductive experience, I am aware that I do not then have space within the scope of my study to sufficiently comment on the noise surrounding women's bodies, generated by fashion, beauty, and media industries. These key architects in the production and commodification of contemporary body images, and the manufacturers of wholesale lack, have been given much critical attention. The seminal works of feminists such as Frieden (*The Feminine Mystique* 1963), Orbach (*Fat is a Feminist Issue* 1978), Wolf (*The Beauty Myth* 1990), and Bordo (*Unbearable Weight: Feminism, Western Culture, and the Body* 1993), complement historical studies into women's magazines (Buckley 2002), fashion (Entwistle 2015), and glamour (Dyhouse 2011). These are all hugely important topics when examining gendered experience – for as Butler notes, 'The effect of gender is produced through the stylisation of the body' (1999, 179). The close relationship between beauty, fashion, print media, and the film industry is particularly pertinent to the 1940s. Britain by then was a nation of cinemagoers and film was an important part of war propaganda, propagating myths about blitz spirit and mass society, but also about the female body.⁴ I have, however, had to put my critical work on fashion and beauty to one side – to form its own journal article – as this dissertation required a study trained on the body itself – the flesh blood and bones which more precisely serve my inquiry into abjection, the medical gaze, and the medicalisation of sex.

Female bodies in the early twentieth century

For their respective novels, *Toby's Room* and *The Paying Guests*, Barker and Waters have chosen settings during or just after the national trauma of the Great War. This period, this wasteland, is fertile ground for the writer interested in exploring the push-pull of gender dynamics, as they were in flux as never before. As Caine and Sluga note, 'The importance of

⁴ I addressed this topic in a conference paper titled 'Body Politics and the Bloody Blitz in Sarah Waters' *The Night Watch*' delivered to the 2021 Historical Fictions Research Network Conference.

gender, and indeed of a ‘gender crisis,’ during the First World War is now widely accepted’ (2003, 145). Gender dynamics of the period tend to be represented using the increasingly autonomous female figure alongside that of the displaced and defensive male.⁵ Wallace has demonstrated how the war ‘hastened...the birth of a modernity’ which included a blurring of traditional gender roles (2005, 220). It was at this time that many women began to participate differently, or for the first time, in the world of work and the public sphere. Yet the early twentieth century was a period when sex difference was to the fore – the state took control of male bodies and sent them off to war. Bourke has noted that many returning soldiers experienced, ‘a desire to resume a normal life’ including ‘a preference for a pre-war gender order’ (quoted in Caine and Sluga 2003, 166); a notion that wasn’t limited to soldiers, or men. As peace ensued, many sought comfort in the domestic and to reassert control by re-gendering the world around them. Thus, on closer inspection we see that the journey towards greater female emancipation and participation was not one of continual advancement from one war to the next; we also see why the interwar years provide such a striking insight into the precarious nature of progress and the complexity of social and personal relations between the sexes.

With the onset of the Second World War – during which Barker’s *Noonday*, Waters’ *The Night Watch*, and *Unity* are all at least partly set – women were again called on to participate in society and the workplace, yet they still faced many basic obstacles and contradictory judgements when it came to certain freedoms, or their civic duties. Glamorous servicewomen beamed down from propaganda posters – reaching for the skies, flexing their muscles – encouraging women to join their ranks. Yet, those that did heed the call faced

⁵ Miles vividly characterises the crisis in masculinity thus: ‘Those men who had survived the holocaust of the First World War were under a variety of pressures to examine and exert themselves, but at the same time found that various previously accepted modes of masculine behaviour – father, husband, soldier, lover – were never again to mean what they had meant before. Small wonder then that *cojones*, in Hemingway’s evocative term, seemed to emerge as the ultimate standard; here, at least, was something a man could hold on to’ (1987, 75).

censure from certain sections of society. Reactions ranged from crude jokes to all out moral panic and large portions of the public never quite managed to reconcile themselves to women in uniform.⁶ However the Second World War is primarily remembered as a time of great activity for women; they were needed, if not always valued, and determined to rise to the challenge. Historians have pointed out that this has left us with another set of rose-tinted stock images, products not only of propaganda but of the collective memories in which they took root (Sheridan 1990, 9). As the Second World War drew to a close, women were once again pushed out of the workplace and back into the home (Kynaston 2007, 98), but there was no returning to an imagined status quo and the renegotiation of gender roles continued. One reason so many memoirs and biographies look back on this period of great personal hardship and heartache with such affection is perhaps the fact society appeared more equal than usual; as Kynaston put it, ‘The 1940s constituted in Britain, a kind of zenith of mass society...’ (2007, 178). There were always those more equal than others, however, and it would take more than the war, the holocaust, or the atomic bomb to shake Britain out of the binds and stays of her entrenched class system; but the ‘Spirit of 45’ brought new hope, prompting a young Iris Murdoch to write: ‘Oh wonderful people of Britain! After all the ballyhoo and eyewash, they’ve had the guts to vote against Winston!’ (quoted in Kynaston 2007, 77). Although the immediate post-war years were ones of hardship and deprivation, which saw even bread rationed for the first time, electoral success, and the threat of what revolutions might come otherwise, enabled the new Labour government to push through a series of pioneering welfare reforms. In setting my novel in 1948 I wanted to capitalise on this political context and explore the relationship between the individual and society. This interest extends to the body via public health, fertility rates, and the establishment of the NHS: public bodies and the body politic. As birth rates declined and became a concern of

⁶ Nicholson notes that: ‘Early on, the *Daily Mail* invited readers to send in their ideas for what they most hated about the war: ‘Women in uniform’ came top’ (2011, 146).

national importance (Evans 2013, 264), women were reminded of their primary duties – within the family. By 1945 the preface to a Mass Observation publication titled *Britain and her Birthrate* acknowledged that ‘contraception...is here and is likely to stay’ (1945, 7). Yet they also warned that if current trends continued there would be ‘no babies, no Englishmen or Englishwomen, for war or for peace’ (1945, 7), and ‘only those who do not like the English race can look forward to that’ (1945, 23). The author of the preface appears as oblivious of the impending baby boom as they are of Scotland and Wales, but arguments such as these show that female emancipation could be perceived not only as a danger to national security, but as an existential threat. Prior to the war average family sizes had reduced dramatically and many women had greater knowledge of and access to contraception, but despite a flourishing sexology the dissemination of knowledge was uneven to say the least, and women’s bodies were still socially policed or self-censored when it came to acceptable modes of sexual behaviour. Thus when looking at bodies I am interested in both the biological functioning of the female sex – including menstruation and conception – and the gendered roles and attributions tied up with societal ideas of the female, drawing on Butler’s notion of gender performance, i.e. gender as ‘an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylised repetition of acts’ (1999, 179).

Female bodies in early twentieth-century fiction

Received notions of femininity in the early twentieth century can be ascertained by, amongst other means, an assessment of the literature of the time. But neither the unfairly labelled ‘feminine middlebrow’, high modernism, or even 30s realism, were able to fully articulate the bodily experiences of modern women, due to restrictions of censorship and the self-policing associated with gender performance. Whilst Joyce, an Irishman in exile, was breaking boundaries in his masterpiece *Ulysses*, turning everything from defecation to masturbation

into the highest art – British women writers of the 20s and 30s had to, as Humble put it, pick ‘their way carefully through the minefield of sexual description, evolving a respectable discourse for the representation of the previously unmentionable’ (2001, 198).

The work of women writers was, for much of the twentieth century, largely overlooked in critical appreciations of the period; this was in part due to the belief that women didn’t write about subjects like war or politics, and were better placed sticking to domestic matters (Miles 1987, 88), locating their works within the home – though perhaps not the bedroom. Recent reappraisals have gone some way to show the skill and deftness with which women such as Storm Jameson and Winifred Holtby were handling the so-called ‘big themes’ (Feigel, Hartley, Joannou). In the 1930s many women who were writing about political issues were preoccupied with the immediate threat of fascism, and the advances that had been made led some to prematurely believe that women’s ‘struggle for equal citizenship was effectively over’ (Joannou 1999, 9). Writers such as Naomi Mitchison, however, show us how the anti-fascist and feminist agendas intersect, most notably in *We Have Been Warned* (1935).

Another noteworthy aspect of this novel is its unusually candid treatment of sexual themes. Tellingly, Mitchison’s bold commitment to the visceral and employment of direct language met with almost universal criticism and the full force of the establishment’s censure, meaning that much of that novel’s broader subject matter has been overlooked.⁷

By the 1940s, total war had seen the inevitable intrusion of women into that formerly male domain both on and off the page, as Hartley has so brilliantly documented (1997). It was an intrusion resented by writers like Robert Graves – who lamented the loss of the lone poet of the previous war, and the fact a soldier ‘cannot even feel that his rendezvous with death is more certain than that of his Aunt Fanny, the firewatcher’ (quoted in Hartley 1997, 8).

Critically side-lining women’s literary contributions proved an effective way of maintaining a

⁷ I discuss this in more detail in my article “‘What Does a Socialist Woman Do?’ Birth Control and the Body Politic in Naomi Mitchison’s *We Have Been Warned*” (2021).

gendered hierarchy. Women's work and innovation, including their writing, was vital to the war effort, yet as Hartley notes, 'While new ways with food were applauded, new ways with sex were greeted with more ambivalence: some boundaries were still essential and not all doors could be flung open with impunity' (1997, 54).

Though the war only features in flashbacks its repercussions resonate throughout *Unity*, and like Mitchison I am interested in how feminist and anti-fascist issues intersect. A focus on female physicality and unfetishised biological realities partly appealed to me because it seemed to offer a counterpoint to the Nazis' eugenics-fuelled cult of the body,⁸ that grimly worked its way from the gymnasium to the gas chambers.

Female bodies in historical fiction set in early twentieth-century Britain

The fact that in the early twentieth century, writers across the spectrum were limited in how they articulated such biological realities presents the historical novelist with an opportunity to add something to the conversation. They can bring sex more firmly on to the page for a start, and this is important when playing out the social and emotional dynamics of the day. For as Miles puts it, 'what can compare with human sexuality as a tormenting paradox? Rich with tensions and contrasts...' (1987, 151). With historical fiction we are able to interrogate the sexual politics and nuances of the past – while at the same time revealing and questioning contemporary attitudes. Indeed, many writers, as well as critics (Cooper and Short, de Groot, Wallace) have identified the distance built into the genre as offering a useful space in which to engage with sexual themes, giving both historical perspective and a buffer from the censure and ideals of the immediate present.

⁸ Kant has demonstrated in her discussion of German gymnastics, Volk rituals, and Nazi aesthetics, how in the 1930s, 'the complex legacy of German body culture...arrived at a moment when it could pass triumphantly into the main stream of Nazi culture', most apparent in 'the inherent racism of the Volksgemeinschaft...displaying purity, unity, and strength of the healthy body as a racialized entity' (2016, 15-16).

Neither Barker nor Waters shy away from viscerally representing the female body. In this dissertation I will be referring to the final two novels from Barker's *Life Class* trilogy. *Toby's Room*, set 1912-1917, follows three artists from the Slade through their experiences of the First World War. Whilst Paul and Kit see their work, and lives, derailed to varying degrees by war injuries, the female protagonist, Elinor, has a narrative arc shaped first by an incestuous encounter with her brother Toby, then Toby's death in action. Over the course of the novel she struggles to free herself from him, and form relations with others, but she is constant in her determination to work and follow her own path. When we meet her again in *Noonday*, set in 1940, she has been married to Paul for some time but seems altogether less sure of herself. Their second war presents a new set of challenges, but again Elinor finds purpose in her art, and her war-work. The two distinct period settings provide an interesting contrast in terms of changing gender dynamics, not only as social attitudes change, but as the female body itself ages. I have chosen to examine these novels alongside two from Sarah Waters. *The Paying Guests*, set in 1922, is the story of the Wray family who, through a combination of personal and national catastrophe, are forced to take in Mr and Mrs Barber as lodgers. Frances, the daughter of the house embarks on a lesbian relationship with Mrs Barber, which inadvertently leads to Mrs Barber first terminating a pregnancy, then killing her husband. Much of the second half is taken up by the latter melodrama and ensuing trial – yet the novel is at its best in its initial domestic examination of class and gender dynamics. *The Night Watch*, set 1947-1941, uses a striking reverse chronology to explore these same dynamics. It takes us backwards into the Second World War to trace the threads of several sets of doomed lovers. In its various representations of how gender could be performed at this time, work and sex are prominent features – depicted in detail. Waters' and Barker's employment of embodied narratives and transgressive female protagonists have been influential in the construction of *Unity*. *Toby's Room* and *The Night Watch* in particular offer

interesting comparisons in the treatment of historical medical detail. I am interested in how Barker and Waters construct their characters and narratives, but also in their broader approach to writing historical fiction. It was helpful to look to them when considering my own relation to the history and my historical characters – which was necessary not just at the point of writing, but as soon as I began planning my research.

METHODOLOGY

As my project is an interdisciplinary one I have employed a range of methodologies, which I have outlined in the following sections under the headings; reading; archives; oral history; experiential. The form of my final output meant I employed reader reception and narrative theories; although these theories are concerned with the construction of texts, I would argue that they came into bearing from the outset, shaping my research in ways that differ from the historian. To illustrate the point of distinction I will use, as an example, a collective of historians at the University of Bristol⁹ who have been exploring the ways they can incorporate creativity into their processes. An article detailing one of their experiments includes the following passage: ‘At that early stage...we were content to imagine...Lack of evidence or verifiable fact did not hold us back – yet. The time for facts would come later, as we moved to explore a range of archives and compose our textual responses’ (2020, 7). The reverse is true of my own methods. For me the time for facts is precisely ‘that early stage’ – everything that comes after is fiction, no matter how accurate its content may be. It is this positioning that distinguishes the writer from the historian, who we assume is always striving to move closer to fact, though on the way they may share our modes of interpretation, speculation, and narrativisation. In my own research, gaps in the history provided a starting

⁹ As discussed in the collaborative work, ‘Creative Dislocation: an Experiment in Collaborative Historical Research’ (2020), by Robert Bickers, Tim Cole, Marianna Dudley, Erika Hanna, Josie McLellan, William Pooley, and Beth Williamson.

point for imaginative acts as well as investigatory ones, actively constructing a past, or a form of pastness, in a way that echoes Iser's processes of making meaning from a text (1988, 216).

I propose that whenever we come into contact with fact, whether we decide to utilise or disregard it, we ought to give it due ethical consideration. Whilst ethical concerns feature throughout my work, and indeed this dissertation, the research stage was the only one requiring approval by committee; it is thus an integral part of my discussion on methodology.

Crucially, I also considered narrative point of view and focalisation when determining the range of research I would need to undertake to confidently create my character's physical environment and world view. Knowing I wanted to produce embodied narratives with internal focalisation caused me to seek out certain sorts of detail; the physical, the sensory, the material, the psychogeographic. If writing is about selection, and selective detail, then the research is what equips you with your options, though you don't always want too many. The novelist A S Byatt has said of her own methodology, when researching *The Conjugal Angel* (1992), 'If I had been writing biography or literary history I should have ransacked the papers at the Tennyson centre in Lincoln – whereas as a writer of fiction, I felt a strong inclination to stop. I had the facts my imagination wanted to fantasise about, and I wanted space...' (2000, 105). This quote illustrates how tentative each step of the process can be. The facts are what fuel the imagination, but they mustn't be allowed to overwhelm it. I was thus also interested in exploring the research methods employed by other historical fiction writers and how they went about achieving this balance in their creative work.

Reading

Reading is so necessary to any doctoral project it is difficult to discuss without sounding obvious, simple, unremarkable; the books I read are none of these things. Each one informed my project and shaped my research in a unique way – even if that involved deciding a book

was not relevant, or that my only use for it was to reinforce the boundary line where my scope ended. Texts helped gauge and define the contours of my creative and critical elements. Texts spawned ideas. Texts led to other texts. It was by reading texts about, set in, or written in, the early twentieth century that I was able to access that world, and due to the aims of my project, I was always interested in the narrative operations within a text, as well as its contents. My reading consisted of history, medicine, fiction, criticism, and a range of primary sources from the period, from leaflets to legislation, and letters in women's magazines. A bibliography is included at the end, however, there are three key texts I want to single out in an attempt to illustrate the different ways I interacted with various sources, and the impact individual books had.

Millions Like Us: Women's Lives in War and Peace 1939-1949 (2011), by Virginia Nicholson, is a compilation of memoirs, diaries, and other autobiographical writings that I read during the first phase of my project. It presents and contextualises a diverse range of female experience within the UK, using a chronologically and thematically ordered selection of women's reflections on, and recollections of, events of national, international, domestic, local, or personal significance.¹⁰ Crucially, the accounts from this wide-range of women are given in their own words. Their narratives are intimate, evocative, often humorous, and hugely moving. It was Nicholson who introduced me to Naomi Mitchison, many nursing memoirs, and *Mass Observation*. She also appears to share my interest in material and visceral detail.

¹⁰ Whilst the domestic minutiae described within the collection was of great interest to me, I was also particularly drawn to its focus on work – nursing in particular – and the visceral, often grim, realities of life and the body. Nicholson evocatively summarises the range of topics covered: 'Days on the factory floor, followed by 'straight to bed, buggered'; rising at 4am for a working day on the Sheffield trams; frozen early mornings in the conifer plantations of northern Scotland; grief, and ennui; 'Missing, presumed killed'; pouring rain and counting the bricks in the wall; rubble; destruction; death on the ward; the swabbing of shit from traumatised soldiers after D-day; lisle stockings and snapped knicker-elastic; waiting, hoping and despairing' (2011, 440).

Birth Control, Sex, and Marriage in Britain 1918-1960 (2006), by Kate Fisher, details, analyses, and contextualises Fisher's seminal oral history study on this topic. Excerpts from the interviews are presented throughout – and again, it was hearing people discussing intimate topics in their own words that was invaluable. I was fascinated by the language used, the attitudes expressed, and in particular the way knowledges were unpacked. The whole book was influential in informing my decisions when it came to constructing my characters' sexualities.

Contraception: It's Theory, History and Practice; A Manual for the Medical and Legal Professions (1924), by Marie Stopes, is one of her two publications referred to directly in *Unity*. In this book we see Stopes the scientist addressing her fellow professionals. It contains a valuable history of contraception, as well as giving an overview of contemporaneous debates and the various devices available at the point of writing. It is a fascinating, surprising, and sometimes disconcerting book, and will be discussed further in chapter 3. Unlike the other texts mentioned this one was in itself a historical source for me to interpret – this meant negotiating its eugenic aspects directly, which called for an increased ethical awareness.

Utilising publications from the period and history books that foreground personal testimony helped me craft a voice that would work with, and not against, my 1940s setting.

Archives

Farge has written evocatively not only of the semi-mystic, almost spiritual *Allure of the Archives* (2014), but also of how intimidating, frustrating, and dull they can be. She writes: 'In the archives, whispers ripple across the surface of silence, eyes glaze over, and history is decided... Beyond the absurd rules of operation, there is the archive itself. This is where our work begins' (2014, 49). But even to reach this point of beginning Farge has had to go

through a number of processes, captured to comical effect – but for others these processes form yet another barrier, which they may or may not overcome. As King notes, ‘success in accessing archival holdings may be influenced by one’s scholarly or social status, age, nationality, gender, race, or socio-economic level...’ (2012, 21). This matters when, as Farge points out, it is a place where ‘history is decided’, and in the past that meant history was decided by the privileged few. In the civic societies of the twenty-first century most archives have outreach programmes, online catalogues, and social media accounts. They have also freed themselves, at least in the UK, from any gendered notions that worked their way from the related professions and into the process of research itself; for example, in the 19th century archival research was ‘manly’ work, with archival documents, like ‘so many princesses, possibly beautiful, all under a curse and needing to be saved’ (Ranke quoted in King 2012, 18). Sexism aside, I can appreciate that sentiment. There is something otherworldly about the things you find in the archive, and they elicit a range of emotional responses. Farge says that, ‘The archival document is a tear in the fabric of time, an unplanned glimpse offered into an unexpected event’ (2014, 6). But the very nature of the archive – which is a hierarchical administrative entity – means that somewhere, at some point, plans were made and values imposed. Someone else has already decided what to keep and what to leave out. This partial quality is part of its ‘allure’ of course, and one the creative writer is particularly susceptible to. It also works both ways – we can be equally as baffled by the inclusions as we are the omissions. In any case we cannot plan for what we might find. This may feel overwhelming, but as King reassuringly points out, ‘it is literally impossible to ‘not find anything’ in the archives...’ (2012, 22). Both she and Farge agree that the archive only yields answers when asked the right questions – the historian thus imposes order. For me the questions could be as simple as: I wonder what that felt like? At other points the materiality of the collection itself was what mattered; seeing, touching, and smelling archival objects created a direct link

between myself and the past. For example, in the personal collections at the Royal College of Nursing Archive, I read about the rules and curriculums that trainee nurses studied under during the 1930s and 40s, and how this evolved with the shift into wartime.¹¹ But what also stuck with me were the handwritten exercises – ‘The Digestion and Absorption of a Piece of Bread and Butter’ – and the anatomical diagrams carefully copied out in colour pencil; these details offered a more personal connection, helping me conjure more fully-formed individuals than official publications alone allowed. I lifted such details whole and planted them in the midst of my novel. Other examples required more imagination. I was unable to make much of the old Western Infirmary architectural plans, held in the NHS archives at The Mitchell Library. However, certain things stood out, such as the conservatory which came up again and again in personal accounts and provided the backdrop for the annual residents’ photograph. Though the pictures in the collection only offer a partial view, I was fascinated by the intense symbolism of this liminal space, this hot house that separated the hospital from the nurses’ home. In the novel Liz finds the air thick and stifling; ‘(she) could never shake the feeling of damp, and of being observed like an object in a display cabinet’ (4). Or, as the case may be, like an object in the NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde archives.

In the archive we are reminded most obviously – and repeatedly – that we must handle the past with care. At the Highland Archives I looked through correspondence relating to rural hospitals. I held pleas for employment and black edged requests for leave, before carefully folding and tying the bundles again. I remember the tone and the types of words used. I cannot remember the senders’ names. It is painful to tuck lives away again unacknowledged, but privacy is something to be valued too. The material I have used has been carefully considered. I would argue that misappropriation can be worse than neglect. That is how I choose to interpret Farge’s statement that, ‘we cannot bring back to life those whom we find

¹¹ By 1941 they were beginning with fractures, poison gas, and burns, as opposed to hospital etiquette and the ethics of nursing.

cast ashore in the archives. But this is not a reason to make them suffer a second death’ (2014, 121).

Oral history

One of the most rewarding and challenging aspects of this project has been my use of oral history. This method was particularly useful when it came to investigating and mentally reconstructing Oban’s old hospitals, which were decommissioned in 1995 and have since been demolished. In conjunction with a local arts and heritage centre, I first hosted a community engagement session and recruited interviewees. I spoke to former nurses, doctors, and other administrative staff from all five hospitals, asking them a range of questions regarding the buildings, their work, the atmosphere, and the closures. This approach seemed to complement my novel’s focus on community. As Abrams has noted, ‘the personal testimony produced in the interview mediates between personal memory and the social world’ (2010, 7), and the more we bring our memories out into the light the better we can see these connections and hallmarks. Collaborating like this, with members of my own community, allowed me to tap into a collective past I have always felt very attached to; this was further emphasised by the regular references interviewees made to members of my own family. Portelli, has written about the fact that early in his interviewing career, he accepted the positivistic tradition that calls for the interviewer to be a neutral, impersonal presence. This was never really an option for me – given the size of Oban (and the size of my family) – but I would argue that my interviews benefited from the fact I was known. An invested insider. Our common ground meant I was able to quickly establish a rapport with my interviewees. For some it was why they had agreed to participate in the first place. Such benefits have been acknowledged by practitioners since the 1970s. Portelli describes the shift away from the positivistic tradition thus: ‘From the original perception that for the sake of

authenticity and factual reliability oral sources ought to be cleansed of the presence of the interviewer and of the subjectivity of the interviewee, we moved to the realisation that the real deep meaning of the encounter lies precisely in these apparent impurities...' (2018, 247). I was struck by his language: cleanse, impurities – elsewhere he talks of contamination. The need to sterilise – to make knowledge scientific and impersonal – which Portelli rejects, echoes one of the main motifs from *Unity*, which is discussed further in chapter 2. I was similarly intrigued by Portelli's description of the oral history interview, as being '...*about* the past...but *of* the present' (2018, 245) – in this it occupies a similar liminal space as historical fiction itself. The interview process helped me consider the relationships we have to past and place, and the roles of narrativisation, memory, and nostalgia. All of my interviewees spoke of the old hospitals with immense warmth and affection; quite a stark contrast from the way in which they spoke about the single, large, purpose-built hospital that replaced them. Interviewees descriptions of the hospitals helped me better visualise their structures, but I also got to hear narratives at work, or play, not to mention the localised language, rhythm, and intonation of the speech itself – gold dust for dialogue. As a form of fieldwork oral history offers generous returns, though it comes with its own problems too.

Whilst the interconnectedness oral history offered complemented the themes I wanted to explore in my creative work, it also raised the ethical stakes in terms of the implications of any final outputs. My novel is a work of fiction, but is set in a real place, and refers to real events. I have tried to remain sensitive to this and it was important for me that my focalising characters were entirely fictional, especially as the narrative touches on sensitive topics such as war and the holocaust. When considering how best to approach this I returned time and again to Barker, whose dissections of wartime experiences in *Toby's Room*, engage with both the medical gaze and the artist's gaze, and – as will be demonstrated in chapter 2 – offer a unique form of voyeurism that masterfully contains its own critique. It is unsurprising then

that Barker, as Tolan highlights, has strong views on the ethics of borrowing: ‘Discussing the careless or even malicious appropriation by novelists of real lives and real experiences as fictional ‘material’, Barker states, ‘it’s a point at which writing fiction then becomes quite disgusting... all writers have blood on their teeth’’ (2010, 378). The mention of bloodied teeth conjures the image of the parasitic writer feeding on the flesh of others. Though potentially a negative exchange I would argue, and indeed Barker herself has proven, that sensitivity can make it a positive one – nourishing even.

Experiential

With practice-led projects it is hard to tell where the research begins. Although I have titled this section ‘experiential’ – all methods have an experiential element to them, as when a writer writes they are drawing on the sum of their experience up to that point. Experiential research can thus take many forms. For example, I undertook a number of site visits but also went for exploratory and somewhat aimless walks, which could be more neatly packaged in this context as ‘dérive’.¹² The wandering narratives that arose during interviews complemented and intersected my own physical wanderings through the repurposed spaces of the old hospital sites, which retain a certain psychogeographic charge. Psychogeography is, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory*, ‘the study of the specific effects (and affects) of the built environment (intended or not) on the emotions and actions of individuals’ (Buchanan, 2018). As Löffler highlights, it ‘builds on subjectivity...as it prioritises the emotional and psychological dimensions of urban experiences’ (2017, 6). This seemed fitting for a historical fiction writer trying to sense her way through various environments, unpicking the layers of the past. As with oral history, I felt this method was in natural sympathy with

¹² Defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Critical Theory* as: ‘An experimental technique of walking or moving through the urban space in a manner contrary to its design yet consistent with one’s own desire.’ (Buchanan, 2018). One of the aims of *dérive* is to notice what you notice – also a key dictum of the creative writing classroom.

the politics of my novel. Guldi has noted that spatial theories like psychogeography emphasise that, ‘history is not some jewel locked in a rare archive only accessible to the funded and privileged few. History is around us all the time... It is the purview of any who open their eyes’ (2012, 77). At the old hospital sites I noticed the views, the grounds, the isolation, or conversely, the proximity of other buildings. There are other buildings featured in the novel that are of course still standing: Glasgow University, The University Café, McCaig’s Tower; The Station Hotel is now called The Perle, though for most of my life it was The Caledonian and I have not quite got into the habit of referring to it otherwise. With every site visit I was intrigued by what had or had not changed since 1948, never really knowing for sure – even trying to gauge things like the rate of tree growth. However, my psychogeographic approach helped me focus on sensation, a key component when creating embodied narratives. It helped me worry less about getting details wrong, for as Lefebvre has shown us, literary spaces are never just blueprints of existing spaces, but always representations of those spaces (1974) – and historical fiction in particular moves away from history and towards fiction every time we step inside a character’s head, hear their thoughts, utilise their eyes, nose, feet, hands.

This focus on the senses, the body, and materiality is something the University of Bristol collective, previously mentioned, have also experimented with. Discussing their first day trip into creative history they write; ‘We took ourselves to Branscombe, immersed our bodies in the cold sea, sunned them on the beach, played with smooth pebbles with our hands...’ (2020, 5-6). This was their way of tapping into the history of Branscombe – every body part is recruited. That was also the case with my trip to Edinburgh’s Surgeons’ Halls, where on top of visiting the museum and pathology collections, I carried out a pig heart dissection as part of an anatomy workshop. As my main character is a theatre nurse and aspiring surgeon, I wanted to know not only what the inside of a heart looked like, but what it felt like to hold

the instruments in gloved hands, to cut into flesh and isolate the intricate components. It was important for me to experience the weight of the organ. The textures. The smell. These were the kind of visceral details I wanted to include in my narrative, and experiencing them first-hand sparked countless connections and comparisons I was able to exploit poetically as well as scientifically. In the novel Liz dissects a pig's heart that Ramsay has procured for her. Her observations come from my own: 'the tuberculae carnae...spread out before her like a dense and tiny forest. Sleek bare winter branches, reaching up and out and all intertwined – she was being sentimental again' (138). By combining my reading and experiential research I sought to match Liz's knowledge and thus frame the observations as hers within the focalised narrative. However, I have inadvertently built my own uneasiness into the narrative too – is a medical gaze also allowed to be sentimental? Fortunately I feel that that uneasiness is also appropriate in Liz, who is anxious to be taken seriously; but I was cheered to read in Rachel Clarke's recent medical memoir that she met her future husband in the early stages of her first dissection, and, 'later that week, as I held a human heart...in my hands, in my head I was composing bad love poetry' (2020, 63). It raises an important point about emotion and detachment that will be discussed further in chapter 2.

It is interesting to wonder whether Barker ever dissected anything herself, considering the vividness with which she narrates Elinor's experiences in *Toby's Room*. She certainly carried out a huge amount of research into the maxillofacial unit at Sidcup and the work being done by Harold Gillies, the father of modern plastic surgery, who features in the novel. Dr Andrew Bamji, Consultant Rheumatologist and Curator of the Gillies Archive, is one of those singled out for particular thanks in the concluding Author's Note. Both Barker and Waters cite specific texts they have used in their research, though each list is presumably just a glimpse into the sources that informed their writing.

Incorporating research

Whilst each author has their own approach to what we might refer to as project-specific research, common themes emerge in the discussion of how this is best incorporated into the narrative. The novelist James Meek has said:

The more research you do, the more of a problem it becomes. You want to try to avoid a situation where the information that you've learned is just regurgitated on the page. The ideal is that you read wide and deep but then almost try to forget it. So you get to the point where you're not entirely sure if the world that you've got inside your head is something you've made up or something that you remember. (2019)

Meek acknowledges the importance of mentally inhabiting the world you are trying to create, and for me the inclusion of other research methods, such as experiential and oral history, helped me construct settings robust enough for me and my characters to inhabit with the physicality I was seeking. Other writers such as Mantel, who has famously spent years researching individual novels, seem to refute the idea of there ever being too much research, though one has to start writing at some point. She has said of her early years as a historical novelist, 'I would make up a man's inner torments, but not...the colour of his...wallpaper' (2017a). Not all writers, myself included, are so committed to such particular details, but here Mantel is drawing a distinction between what is verifiable and what isn't. This leads us to more questions, such as what to put in and what to leave out, what to change, what to make up. It is not only PhD candidates who must be able to defend their decisions; as Mantel has said of historical novelists, 'no other sort of writer has to explain their trade so often. The reader asks, is this story true?' (2017a). She agrees that writers should face such questions, but also refuses to cede to historians the ground she would to scientists. Byatt has highlighted the modern, or postmodern, notion that when it comes to the past, 'all interpretations are provisional, therefore any interpretation is as good as any other' (2000,

11). Yet, there has to be some form of hierarchy; the sort that places the likes of holocaust deniers below everyone else in terms of their legitimacy. Disinformation is an increasing problem in the twenty-first century but it could be argued that rather than fuel this, historical fiction offers an exercise in navigating grey areas. Readers need not be cosseted. Although ‘post-truth’ was declared word of the year by Oxford Dictionaries in 2016, history shows us that the concept is not new, and historical novelists offer us nuanced ways of engaging with the past that involves an active participation from the reader, both in terms of the construction of meaning (reader reception theory) and critical thinking (is this story true?).

It is interesting to bring Waters in at this point. Whilst agreeing with Barker that it is important to be sensitive to the past, she is more forthright in deciding not only what her characters think and feel – the inner life we can only ever imagine – but also what they do. And it forms an important part of her agenda as a lesbian writer. She states, ‘lesbian historians might agonize over whether women in the past had sex with each other, but if I want my lesbians in the 1860s to have sex, then they just do. I’m in charge’ (quoted in Mitchell 2013b, 136). It is a stance that has drawn criticism from, for example, Rachel Cusk, who in her review of *The Paying Guests* accused Waters of writing the sex scenes with modern readers in mind, and thus undermining ‘the novel’s integrity as a period piece’ (2014). But surely Cusk doesn’t expect historical novelists to write for imagined readers of their chosen period? Her comments do, however, highlight the precariousness of the balancing act between past and present, which is crucial to the success of any work of historical fiction.

For me, the research is what gets me as close to the facts as possible – though it doesn’t necessarily mean sticking to them, and I’m interested in the ethical questions this raises along the way. My aim though, is to keep my story and characters within the realms of historical believability – so that the artifice of the novel may be swallowed whole. Thus research must

be carefully incorporated into the narrative flow to avoid sounding forced, or cluttered – undigested, or ‘regurgitated’ to refer back to Meek’s expression. When writing *Unity*, character and narrative point of view were key to achieving the necessary balance. I have sought to impart historical medical detail to the reader through Liz, who is gainfully employed as a nurse at story level, and as a ‘reflector figure’ within the narrative. Fludernik describes the ‘reflector figure’ as a character who ‘serves as a focaliser or lens; the story is put across to the reader through the filter of the focaliser’s thoughts and perceptions... they ‘reflect’ the story to the reader rather than telling it to them as a narrator persona would’ (2009, 36). In *Unity*, using a figural narrative style, with internal focalisation, has been vital, not only for incorporating historical medical detail into the narrative flow, via the prism of Liz’s consciousness, where such details come par for the course, but also – aided by the use of sensory detail – to enable the reader to inhabit the character’s historical body. Our character encounters thus become intimate, potentially painful, or even – as will be demonstrated shortly – downright disgusting.

CHAPTER ONE: THE POLITICS OF CLEANLINESS

An examination of notions of cleanliness, and its inevitable counterpart, dirtiness, takes us right to the boundary lines of the body. The boundary is a permeable one; we are marked by our surroundings and we mark them. This porous frontier is best symbolised by the surface of the skin, which almost contains us. What escapes becomes ‘abject’, to use Kristeva’s term (1982). That which threatens to breach is also abject, yet, it is not a wholly corporeal concept; as Lazler states, ‘the term denotes something once part of the body since expelled, but the term applies equally to any evacuation of the self or collective, whether understood in physical or psychological terms’ (2005, 279). Its transcendence of the mind/body dichotomy makes it a useful theoretical tool to probe imaginary bodies with, thus the concept – simultaneously visceral and elusive – lingers around my analysis like the proverbial bad smell. This is indicative of my quasi-anatomical interest in the grim realities of the body as a source of tension in the construction of body image, particularly within the context of gendered ideals. In the exploration of cleanliness that follows I have chosen to focus on acts of cleaning, depictions of smell, and bodily functions, reading the role these elements play in the historical and political constitution of fictional female bodies.

As concepts of cleanliness form where the personal meets the social, it has been a point of intervention for agents as diverse as public health officials, medical professionals, magazine editors, and men of the cloth. These interventions and the body images they help manufacture reflect cultural as well as scientific developments. Halliday has shown how, by the twentieth century, Britain’s most influential scientists and public health reformers had finally moved away from a miasmatic theory of disease causation, which had dominated the previous century and fuelled a number of public health movements connecting disease with

dirt, or more specifically – foul odours.¹³ Halliday defines the miasmatic theory as the belief, ‘that most, if not all, disease was caused by inhaling air that was infected through exposure to corrupting matter. Such matter might be rotting corpses, the exhalations of other people....sewage’ (2001,1469). These material examples tie neatly to Kristeva’s classifications of the abject – the corpse, bodily emissions, excrement – thus highlighting the biomedical roots of much of our disgust; the horrifying powers of the body. Halliday’s examples also chime with Mary Douglas’ famous definition of dirt as ‘matter out of place’ (1978); the dead should not mix with the living, nor the clean with the unclean. Yet the very idea of things having ‘a place’ implies an imposed order and demonstrates the political implications of any dirty/clean classifications. Cohen and Johnson have indicated how, for example, Victorian public health campaigns could be viewed as controlling and stigmatising the poor, keeping them in their place, whilst consolidating bourgeois identity (2005, xx). Although by my period of investigation, microorganisms had replaced miasmas as public health enemy number one, the moral tone set by Victorian campaigns couched in class anxiety continued to underpin the construction of clean and decent bodies. The twentieth century and its wartime shifts towards mass society also brought new waves of class anxiety, as increasing electoral and welfare reform saw the body politic evolve considerably between 1914 and 1948. Smith states, however, that ‘Despite the social upheaval of the war years, class boundaries were still strong in 1950s Britain’ (2018, 68), and clean/dirty classifications were one way of separating oneself from the great unwashed. As Shove puts it, ‘describing people, things or practices as clean or dirty is not a socially neutral enterprise’ (quoted in Campkin and Cox 2007, 5). Furthermore, there is a historic association between filth and the

¹³Halliday also emphasises the stubbornness with which key figures clung to the miasma theory; Edwin Chadwick continued in his belief, ‘unshaken by Koch’s discovery, in 1883, of the *Vibrio cholera*’ (2001, 1469).

female body that make it a particularly feminist concern;¹⁴ this connection is perhaps best exemplified in Britain's contagious diseases acts of the 1860s, which stigmatised women as the source of venereal disease and played into the symbolic synthesis of the 'leaking, uncontrollable, seeping' female form which Grosz theorises (1994, 203). Indeed, as politicised concepts, cleanliness and dirtiness have been intensely theorised, when they are also, of course, material states; a lived experience. The projected praxis made possible through embodied narratives is thus useful in exploring both the states of cleanliness/dirtiness, and the functional and performative operations of cleaning that contribute to the formation of body image and self. This extends beyond the body and into its surroundings, predominantly the home; our environments shape our body image, and our efforts to control our environments involve a projection of that image back – outwards. Yet, whilst the cleaning of both the home and self is inextricably bound to appearances, the widespread acceptance of germ theory in the twentieth century meant there were new invisible threats to contend with. Though only observable in the laboratory, increasing awareness of disease carrying microorganisms impacted cleaning and personal hygiene practices in the home (Martens 2007, 38), as well as the hospital – which will be discussed in due course. Keeping oneself clean at least became easier for many in the early 20th century as improvements in housing saw an increase in indoor toilets and baths.¹⁵ Habits were increasingly influenced by Hollywood as opposed to health professionals. After centuries of viewing the body in humoral terms there had been a belief in pre-Victorian Britain that bathing was distinctly detrimental to health, unless specifically prescribed;¹⁶ Wright states

¹⁴ As Cohen and Johnson note, 'because of the equation between women and sex that is axiomatic to a male-dominated heterosexual order, female sexuality (and femininity itself) have a particular connection to filth' (2005, xii).

¹⁵ Eveleigh notes that, 'The new mandatory council homes built from 1919 were put up according to the recommendations of the Tudor Walters Report of 1918...all included indoor toilets and baths' (2002, 166).

¹⁶ Eveleigh discusses this at length in *Bogs, Baths and Basins: The Story of Domestic Sanitation* (2002) and quotes Thomas Webster reporting in 1844 that 'there had long been a prejudice against bathing in England' (62).

that it was not until the early nineteenth century that, ‘the fear of water began to give way...though it was still thought eccentric to bathe for any but medical reasons’ (1960, 158). However, by the time we get to the 1920s, as Eveleigh notes, ‘many people, taking their cue from film stars such as Gloria Swanson...were prepared to admit to the sensuous pleasures of bathing’ (2002, 170). Luxuries of the silver screen, however, often bore little resemblance to reality, and Cook notes that many working-class women did not even have ready access to water in the inter-war period (2004, 154). Cook also points out that the historic move from a focus on cleaning outer garments to cleaning inner garments and the person/skin was, ‘still ongoing’ in the 1940s (2004, 145-146). The editors of a Girl Guide health handbook, that appears to have been in circulation in 1945, felt the need for a whole section under the bold heading ‘Washing “WITH THE SHIRT OFF”’ (n.d.).

There were by then the added disruptions of a new war to contend with, and the privations of rationing, which included soap and clothing. This fed into my own depictions of washing/cleaning in *Unity*. For example, Liz brings her own soap to Oban with her so she can continue her habitual handwashing without her mother accusing her ‘of criminal usage’ (63). This demonstrates how a range of contemporaneous concerns – from rationing to germ theory – can be reflected in characters’ embodied experiences, but crucial too is what their embodiment reveals regarding the individual psyche. This idea recurs in *Unity*; it is also significant in the texts I have chosen from Barker and Waters, who are willing to linger on unsavoury physical details – the abject that draws and repels – fortifying their embodied narratives and character development in ways women writers of the early twentieth century were not always able to.

When it comes to writing historical fiction, however, there are risks. In a bid to examine and expose the unmentionable, the historical novelist might instead romanticise or exaggerate the squalor, revelling in the filth from the comfort of their writing desk. Mantel in her second

Reith lecture talks about ensuring her Tudor historical figures be allowed to retain their dignity: ‘you are not in fact squalid, you are not flea-ridden. And unless they have been knocked out, you probably have most of your teeth’ (2017b). Of course, Mantel is dealing largely with the upper echelons of Tudor society, but the point remains that dignity must be delicately balanced when our characters’ situations present us with a range of intersecting issues; how clean, and who cleans, are deeply political questions.

In the context of early twentieth-century Britain, examining embodied narratives set in the aftermath of each world war can reveal the complex shifts in social tensions and highlight how feminist struggles were often reflected in and obscured by anxieties around class. My analysis teases out the relationship between cleaning, cleanliness, work, and home, through a feminist lens that seeks to keep class dynamics in view. The following three sections demonstrate this, utilising first Waters’ then Barker’s texts alongside my own. The chapter then ends with an extended consideration of a particular type of cleanliness – asepsis – and how this functions in *Unity*.

Rolling up their sleeves

Waters’ *The Paying Guests*, set in London 1922, is the story of Frances Wray and her telling domestic situation. Following the death of her father and brother, Frances and her mother find their circumstances considerably reduced. With Mrs Wray determined to stay in their large suburban home, they must take in lodgers to make ends meet. Frances is consumed by the upkeep of the house, yet she seems to take an almost perverse pleasure in the manual exertions required of her, ‘liking best those rather out-of-the-way tasks – stripping the stove, cleaning stair-rods’ (24). The words used often have sexual connotations and there is a corporeal masochism involved that she relishes. She describes washing her hands after a particularly dirty task; ‘the muck got under her fingernails and into the creases of her palms,

and had to be scrubbed off with lemon juice and salt' (38). The specificity of the description enables the reader to imagine the feel and pervasiveness of the dirt – but unlike Frances we wince at the sting that follows. Frances becomes a martyr to the house as well as her mother's need to keep up pre-war appearances. It also provides a physical form of penance in the wake of her scandalous lesbian relationship with Christine, though interestingly as her attraction towards Lillian, the lodger, grows, the housework increasingly acts as an outlet for Frances' sexual frustration. Whilst Lillian is having a bath Frances imagines 'that round flesh, crimsoning in the heat...She adjusted her pose on the mat, took hold of her cloth, and rubbed hard at the floor' (30). The word 'rubbed' links Frances on the mat with Lillian, washing herself in the bath, and has added masturbatory connotations, toying with Frieden's famous second wave feminist phrase: 'no woman gets an orgasm from shining the kitchen floor' (quoted in Doward 2006). Although Frances accepts her lot, and even learns the lingo – "'the brights...the roughs'" (27) – those around her prove less adaptable: 'Neighbours...tradesmen...her mother's friends, all of whom had got themselves through the worst war in human history...seemed unable for some reason to cope with the sight of a well-bred woman doing the work of a char' (27). Even Lillian gazes 'in a mortified way...at her rolled-up sleeves and flaming hands' (26). These physical details help us empathise with Frances. Again, it is an uncomfortable burning sensation that is evoked, but the redness of her swollen fingers also echoes the burn of shame which Lillian projects on to her. Frances is caught red handed transgressing class expectations, but her fluidity is an integral part of her character. It is easy to frame this as a personal sort of heroism, but reminders of the physical and emotional toll of her toil help humanise her, cutting through her stoic attitude and 'jolly hockey sticks' language. The fact that Frances has had to fill the gaps the war left by becoming both de-facto head of the family *and* maid of all work, is telling; she is able to assume typically male responsibilities, but these come on top of the housework. The Wrays

can no longer afford 'the help', though increasingly, following the First World War, help was not so readily available. As Wright notes 'the housemaid had found in the munition factory comparatively easy work and for better pay, and did not return in 1918' (1960, 258). Many middle-class women had to face the prospect of managing their own homes without staff. As Humble points out, this development was reflected in the magazines of the time: 'Because she had to do housework, a burgeoning number of woman's magazines, cookery books, and hostess manuals insisted that housework was now stylish' (2001, 124). Here the act of cleaning is incorporated into the stylised feminine ideal and a new set of hierarchized standards. Yet Frances shows us that housework can be performed differently, mirroring her rejection of overtly feminine attire and modes of behaviour. She enjoys the tasks that require 'planning, strategy, chemicals, special tools' (24) – it is the closest she gets to a skilled occupation.

Though *Unity* is set 26 years later, in the wake of another war, Liz, like Frances, uses cleaning as a coping mechanism when she is suddenly separated from hospital work and the sterility of the operating theatre. Thrown instead into the family home, thick with patterned wallpaper, memories, and emotional obligations, her initial reaction is to rigorously clean, though she knows – despite the domestication of germ theory – 'Nobody needed an aseptic home' (50). She is also similar to Frances in the way she uses housework as an excuse to avoid her mother, finding more comfort in the linen cupboard than the living room:

The smell...did her good...She surveyed the shelves of bedspreads and pillowcases, unfamiliar in their colours and patterns and entirely domestic scale. She clasped the folds of a cool smooth sheet...Closed her eyes. Listened to the sporadic hiss of the pipes in the wall. She had to do something. They had to let her do something. She hadn't done all that for nothing. (50)

In this scene I wanted to highlight the sensory details of home and Liz's response to the feels and smells, which wavers between nostalgia and alienation. Her identification with the industrial scale cleaning and laundry of the hospital is a sign of her rejection of the domestic – her desire to pursue a profession rather than the role of wife or mother as might be expected at the time. But I also wanted to hint at a deeper sense of alienation, the need to ground herself in clean sterile spaces, even if it is just holding a freshly washed sheet between her fingers; a tactile sort of satisfaction I hope the reader might relate to. Although at this point in the novel, the final sentence, 'she hadn't done all that for nothing', is likely to be read as a reference to her career progression, it is also supposed to foreshadow the trauma she suffered as a QA¹⁷ forced to witness the horrors of Belsen. Indeed it is her experience of the camps that has driven her into the theatre, where she is clean and in control, something I will examine further in the chapter's final section.

Annag cleans for a living, yet the work she undertakes at the hotel is not viewed through the same sort of professional lens as Liz's aseptic technique. Annag, like Frances, has red swollen hands; at one point in chapter four, Dorothy notices their unattractiveness but immediately feels guilty for doing so. Again, there is a sense of shame involved on the part of the observer. Dorothy begins to realise the difficulties of Annag's lot and how far removed she is from the glamorous magazine ideals – which often criticised women for neglecting their hands¹⁸ – though she is still judged, even by Dorothy, on those terms. Washing comes up again and again in the novel, not just because laundering is one of the oldest and least valued female professions, but also because of the central role it played in women's lives in the days before electric machines, requiring an intensity of manual labour

¹⁷ A nursing sister with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service

¹⁸ There were several examples of this within *Good Housekeeping* alone. A 1945 piece, '4 Ways to Look Your Age', conceded that 'war-work has been harder on our hands than on any other feature,' but was adamant that 'there are still many unnecessarily old-looking pairs about...' (Cox 2007, 103). The accompanying illustration shows a woman with bright red hands leaning over a sink.

unacknowledged in feminine ideals of the time. Furthermore, as Caldwell observes, 'The distinction frequently made between 'productive work' and 'household work' tends to obscure the value of some forms of work...There is a continuous downgrading of the value of women's work that misrepresents its significance' (quoted in Cook 2004, 29).

Dorothy and Annag are subservient to the hotel guests they come into contact with, a situation that is emphasised through the Mitford family, members of the landed gentry who Liz too will serve in due course. Growing up in the west highlands, I have always been interested in the strange relationship between politically dubious landowners and local populations. Dorothy and Annag's work in the hotel brings them in close contact, not with the Mitfords themselves, but with the traces they leave behind. Bedsheets are particularly important as they are close to the body and most dirt that gets on to them comes from the body itself. Dorothy is frustrated by her inability to read the hotel sheets for the secrets of the body. These secrets are purposely kept from her, some sexual – like the white grainy semen stains that make Annag blush – but not all: 'Every time Dorothy went to the room the bed was already stripped and pulled out, and the window flung open, as if an exorcism had taken place. What on earth was on Unity's sheets that nobody was allowed to see?' (168). She guesses correctly that the white stains 'that reminded her of the splashes the seagulls left all along the prom' (168) are something sexual that she is therefore expected to ignore. However, she fails to read Unity's sheets, or lack of, correctly, thinking that if she could see them she would somehow know whether she had had a baby by Hitler.

Liz, also attempts to read the Mitfords through their laundry, and also makes mistakes. On discovering that they sent washing to Harrods on the train she immediately imagines linen and is appalled by the needless extravagance of the practice. She too makes the link to the sexual, imagining sheets that might have 'suffered' under the detested Oswald Mosley, who was married to Diana Mitford. Later, however, when talking by Unity's sickbed, Liz realises

the true extent of Lady Redesdale's load: Unity's incontinence – an after effect of her head injury – means they have to wash sheets daily on Inch Kenneth. Liz's feelings towards the Mitfords become more complex when observing them up close and at their most vulnerable.

It was important for me to include this Harrods thread because it was one of the first things that baffled me when discovering the Mitfords' connection with Oban. Lovell's comprehensive family history says of Lady Redesdale: 'At dinner there were no napkins – the penny pinching peeress still saved money on those – yet she sent all the other linen to Harrods by train in a huge laundry hamper...' (2001, 439). When interviewing the grandson of the caretakers on Inch Kenneth, I asked him about this, expecting an amused denial or a 'don't know'; instead the reply came quickly; yes, his granny used to pack their good dresses and things into a big trunk to be sent down. Lovell may have made the dispatch sound more frequent than it really was, and others like myself, and Liz, might have jumped to relish it as evidence of lavish eccentricity – but either way it still sets the family apart from the rest of the community, who, unlike the Mitfords' laundry, would probably never get anywhere near Harrods. Liz resents on Dorothy's behalf the gulf that it shows between the haves and have-nots, as well as on her own behalf, unable to fund a medical education irrespective of the strength of her calling.

Barker's Elinor comes from a distinctly upper-middle-class family and leaves her sheets 'on the landing for Mrs Robinson to find' (264); yet as a painter, she does in some ways get her hands dirty. It is as part of her artistic education that she comes, in *Toby's Room*, to study anatomy and dissection, which later leads to her war-work at Queens hospital. She feels that because she paints mostly women she would prefer to dissect a woman, but on voicing this request she is told, "Believe me, Miss Brooke, you do not want to work on a female cadaver. The fat gets under your fingernails and however hard you scrub you can never quite get it

out” (37). She is repulsed by the comment, feeling the intentional slight on her sex which makes ‘her cheeks burn’ (37). The disgust is unavoidably directed inwards, and manifests itself corporeally in her blush. Woman’s association with the body and filth is something that implicates her too – ‘you can never quite get it out’. For Elinor, this is compounded by the sexual shame she feels in the wake of her incestuous encounter with Toby. It is this incident, rather than any active adoption of a modern aesthetic that leads her to cut her hair off. She seeks to assert control over her deviant body and distance herself from the feminine aspects of it she distrusts. But she is left somewhat exposed and Barker draws a sensory response from the reader by drawing attention to the sensitive area at the back of the neck: ‘she raised both hands to the nape of her neck, feeling the dangerous freedom of the shorn ends’ (20). Elinor’s defiance hardens, however; when others stare at her hair, she stares back, before noting, ‘At least my hair’s clean. I never noticed till the last few days how dirty most women’s hair smells (31). She is now actively associating women with filth, whilst dissociating herself, but similarly to Liz this leads to alienation and isolation. As an artist and a modern, Elinor operates outside of mainstream gender ideals, and her class allows her to adopt a somewhat lofty position at times; this is even reflected in the war-work she eventually undertakes, which is all about observing – and will be discussed further in chapter two. There is a marked difference by the time we meet middle-aged Elinor in *Noonday*’s 1940s mass-society setting, where she is immersed in the messy and dangerous work of an ambulance driver; in the midst of the rubble of blitzed London, the dust clings to her hair so she is ‘aged by it’ (112).

Work, and the type women were permitted to do, is an important theme in Waters’ 1940s novel *The Night Watch*. Several of its female characters undertake dirty and dangerous jobs during the war – embracing roles, such as ambulance driver, as well as the more masculine

modes of attire this required. Julia's war-work surveying damaged buildings sees her don dusty overalls and have palms 'permanently' engrained with dirt. Yet viewed through the prism of, soon to be lover, Helen's consciousness, she cuts a glamorous figure, at ease amidst the crumbling grandeur of the buildings she inspects. Helen, in contrast, is in awe of the many 'lovely things', just as she is in awe of the upper-class Julia. Julia tells Helen "...nothing like that matters any more, does it? Not these days. Not now we all dress like scarecrows and talk like Americans – or else, like chars..." (273). But Julia is only playing at slumming it (far from being a char, and cleaning, she litters the property with her cigarettes) which is part of the same loosening of the social fabric that allowed women to experiment with more masculine modes of dressing and being – to the chagrin of many. Waters' characters' rejection of both gender norms and heteronormativity seems to confirm the worst fears of reactionary contemporaneous commentators; Nicholson notes: 'underlying the prejudice against masculinity in women was a fear too of female homosexuality which remained, in the 1940s, a topic both inflammatory and surrounded by ignorance' (2011, 132).

The omnipresent dust in the novel is symptomatic of the seismic shifts taking place within society at this time. Anything might happen; the disruptions of war could open new spaces – or the ultimate abyss. When talking of their work, Julia's dad says, "Rum sort of job, isn't it? All dust. Not like the other war: that was all mud. Makes one wonder what the next one will be. Ashes, I expect..." (280). Dust acts as a memento mori, but it can pose real as well as symbolic danger, like in the operating theatre where Liz notes it is 'never allowed to settle'(13). There it is neutralised, made safe. But for Simone de Beauvoir 'all this halting of decay', represented by relentless cleaning, 'is also a denial of life' (quoted in Kelley 2009, 730) – messy, dusty, finite, life. Characters like Liz and Frances must go on to find the right balance between cleaning and being.

Holding their noses

In *The Night Watch* Helen and Julia ‘do’ for themselves, but not through choice: ‘Other people of their age and class, of course, had chars. They couldn’t do that, because of the business of sharing a bed’ (50). Their lesbian relationship means their home is a sacrosanct and secret space – though they still have to share a bathroom with the couple downstairs.

Waters noted in an interview:

If you go back more than about 40 years you are instantly in a landscape in which people shared intimate spaces all the time... what that meant in terms of basic things like sounds and smells, what you saw or what you weren’t supposed to see, your own personal space and how you related to your own body if you were in continual contact with other bodies – again that’s part of the excitement for me in writing about the past, trying to get into that world and hopefully take a reader with me. (Mitchell 2013b, 139)

She takes us with her by drawing attention to these sounds and smells, these sensory experiences; whether that be Frances hearing the nightly report of her lodger’s belch ‘on the dot of half-past ten each night’ (35), or Helen listening to her neighbour telling his wife to ‘work it up your arse!’ (48). The description of Kay’s bed in the opening of *The Night Watch* conjures a particularly vivid image of the unclean, and marries it with notions of proximity and contamination: ‘the sort of bed which turned your thoughts, not pleasantly, to the many people who must...have slept on it, made love on it, been born on it, died on it, thrashed around on it in fevers. It gave off a slightly sour scent, like the feet of worn stockings’ (4-5). Smell can be particularly evocative, but historically its associations have leaned more towards the negative, going back to the miasmatic theory discussed earlier. Edwin Chadwick, one of the foremost figures in Victorian sanitary reform, went so far as to claim in 1846 that, ‘All smell is disease’ (quoted in Eveleigh 2002, 11). Some theorists argue it is

impossible to relay; Trotter states, 'Every time the sanitary inspector enters a slum-cottage, he recognises its utterly distinctive odour, but...he will never be able to re-present it in his written report...' (2005, 39). It is true that lacking sensory-specific terms, descriptions of smell are couched in simile and metaphor, but writers like Waters – with her sour stockings – show how effective, and specific, its invocation can be.

Smell is something Barker is also adept at exploiting. In *Noonday*, Elinor's marital home is destroyed literally and figuratively, first by German bombers, then her husband's infidelity. She writes that she had 'forgotten what living in furnished rooms feels like – the smell of other people's lives...' (182). It is something transient and temporary compared to her own home and she feels the discomfort – like an animal yet to mark its territory. It is a situation exacerbated by the fact she is single again, and has decided to move back to the street she lived on as a student in a meagre attempt to undo the intervening years. She no longer has a room with 'that familiar married smell; male and female scents combined' (26) – which makes the reader think of perfumes and aftershaves, but also of mingled bodies, sweat, sexual fluids.

At one point in *Unity*, Liz has to carry a drunken Sandy up his stairs; she later notices a patch on her dress where his sweat has stained it and takes pleasure in sniffing the familiar scent. She then thinks, 'It was funny how smells reminded you more than anything, and how you couldn't bear some and yet others...She wished she knew more about how it all worked' (119). Pheromones were not defined until 1959, and research into their role in human reproductive behaviour is ongoing,¹⁹ but Liz senses the sexual aspect in olfactory appeal. Sandy's smell is that of a young and distant desire which she does not attempt to articulate. But when she sees Ramsay again and breathes in his 'city' smell, it consists of 'cheap tobacco and complex chemicals. And the warm coppery scent of his skin' (327). It is the

¹⁹ For example, some studies have shown that women seem to prefer the odours of immunocompatible men (Grammer, Fink, and Neave 2005).

smell of him, rather than the sight of him that elicits a sob. In his discussion of ‘the phenomenon of odour memory’ (2016, 36), Sensory Scientist Moore notes that, ‘the visual and auditory stimuli of our world are shipped off to the thinking areas of the brain,’ but, ‘the olfactory stimuli pass through the emotional centres first’ (2016, 37). When we use language to invoke smell we are thus seeking a shortcut to the brain’s emotional centre. The context dictates whether it is an enjoyable experience for the reader or not. Liz sobs when she smells Ramsay but Unity’s sweat makes her want to vomit.

There are more offensive smells and sticky sensations to be explored, going back to *Noonday*. Bertha is a medium, but everything about her is large and exaggerated, described in sometimes disturbing visceral detail, including her odour. We meet her buying a cod’s head, immediately conjuring that stench; she then notes: ‘Probably ponged a bit herself, to be honest, in this heat. God, it was hot. She could feel the sweat soaking through her dress shields, and the Vaseline she rubbed into her thighs to stop them chafing had long since melted into a claggy mess’ (69). There is a slippery formlessness in many descriptions of Bertha, reflecting her dangerous disruptiveness as both spiritualist and ‘fallen woman’. Dehumanised as a ‘pendulous...sagging...half-melted candle’ (122), she offers a bleak picture of those lying outside feminine ideals. In fact Bertha is such an outsider within the world of the *Life Class* trilogy that readers might wonder why she suddenly appears in its final novel. Those familiar with Barker’s earlier works, such as *Union Street* (1982), know however, that the downtrodden, and sometimes degenerate woman is a figure Barker feels deserving of attention, and one she takes pains to draw – unflinchingly but compassionately. At one point in *Noonday*, Paul, an ambulance driver, is trapped against Bertha in a confined space, forced to breathe her in. Barker knows the smell of outcasts like Bertha can induce powerful disgust; it signifies a troubling blurring of boundaries, our very bodies breached by the vapours of an-other. Might poverty, misery, or misfortune be contagious? Paul works

hard to rescue Bertha but is then haunted by the memory of her, ‘in his arms, piss dripping down her legs’ (159) – repelled, yet ultimately compelled, he is the only visitor to her hospital deathbed. Paul’s encounters with Bertha throughout the novel are uncanny in that she seems to be able to read his thoughts, and sees what ails him. But she is also a reminder of his own humble origins – the places and people he escaped.

Elinor’s upper-middle-class status allows for a more detached sympathy. She remembers seeing Bertha in the public air raid shelter and feeling sorry for her, because her obesity meant that ‘the latrine bucket was harder for her than for most’ (183). And no doubt it was already hard for most, with only a blanket between their bodily functions and their entire neighbourhood. This situation, which women of all ages – and to a lesser extent, classes – found themselves in, would have been unimaginable in the 1920s for the likes of Mrs Wray, Frances’ mother from *The Paying Guests*. She is appalled at even having to converse with the lower classes, never mind urinating alongside them.

In *Unity*, the Mitfords social status makes Dorothy view them as almost superhuman. Annag tells her: “You’d be surprised the damage a person can do to a toilet over the course of a one night stay. Even those Mitfords of yours.” But the exchange continues thus: “Oh no – I’m sure their toilet always smells of perfume and rose petals.” Dorothy laughed, though she was only half-joking’ (54). Dorothy’s idolising of the upper class Mitfords can’t quite be reconciled to the fact that they have bodily functions like anyone else.

In *Noonday* Elinor’s family distinctly resent the presence of ‘the help,’ whilst acknowledging that they can’t get by on their own, especially during the last days of her mother’s illness. As her mother’s end approaches: ‘she started to vomit. They stared at the stains on the sheets. Elinor thought: That’s not vomit; it’s shit’ (30). This horrific detail signifies that even upper-middle-class old women, dying warm in their beds must confront the limits of their own bodies in the end, however buffered by their class or obscured by their

gender they have been in life. Elinor and her sister witness the horror of it – but someone else will change the sheets.

In *The Revaluation of Obscenity* (1931) Havelock Ellis notes that whilst the taboo on the sexual obscene has a moral and religious element, the taboo on the excremental obscene ‘is only conventional and social’ (quoted in Miles 1987, 151), though his use of the word ‘only’ is rather misleading. Shit has potent political potential. It has the power to transgress social conventions – it being one of the great equalisers. However, the business of going to the toilet is of course heavily gendered, not only in terms of its sex relative mechanics, but also how it feeds into expected behaviours. In the 19th century, women, despite their association with the body and the material, were necessarily divorced from anything as indelicate as bodily functions. This not only meant that these functions were not generally catered for – illustrated by the difficulties Jennings had when seeking to provide the first public toilets²⁰ – there was an associated and far-reaching shame; as Eveleigh states: ‘Victorian ladies were, by all accounts, capable of blushing at the sight of water closets on display in a sanitary engineer’s showroom’ (2002, xiii). This dissociation with unfeminine biological necessities such as bowel movements must have been a façade difficult to maintain in the days of shared privies, and nigh on impossible when faced with the communal latrines of wartime. Whilst men have acknowledged the democratising effects of shitting side by side since Roman times (Kilroy 1996, 9) – the shame-bound twentieth-century female can barely cope. QA Sister Lorna Bradey’s Second World War memoirs describe ‘an eight-seater communal latrine to be constructed in the museum courtyard with buckets,’ and though she had seen ‘suppurating wounds, amputations, burned-away faces... of all the experiences she underwent this was among the most traumatic’ (Nicholson 2011, 236).

²⁰ Wright quotes Jennings stating his difficulties in getting his proposals for public conveniences accepted: ‘My offer (I blush to record it) was declined by Gentlemen (influenced by English delicacy of feeling) who preferred that the Daughters and Wives of Englishmen should encounter at every corner, sights so disgusting to every sense...’ (1960, 201).

In the twentieth century, toilets and bathrooms are supposed to be private places where unmentionable bodily functions are carried out. It is interesting then how much happens in them in Waters' novels; in *The Paying Guests* Lillian and Frances have their first sexual encounter in the bathroom, and in *The Night Watch* Viv meets her future lover in a train toilet. They are taboo spaces for illicit relationships, where the association with exposed genitals is never far away. Unfortunately toilets play a key role in the development of Viv and Reggie's relationship, as we follow her there to see her throw up 'a mixture of tea and half-digested garibaldi biscuits' (286) in the early stages of her pregnancy, and she almost dies sitting bleeding into one following her botched abortion. Such unflinching attention to these sorts of visceral details is not something often encountered in women's writing of the 1940s – though the indomitable Storm Jameson certainly has her moments.²¹ They jolt the reader to attention, but also elicit sympathy, not only because we are seeing another suffer – but because every one of us has sat on a toilet, and vomited into one. However, it is none of the abovementioned experiences that makes Viv flinch at the very mention of the word toilet. She is instead scarred by the memory of a job interview she once attended, where a well-bred woman announced: "'it'll be a cinch, girls! They'll just want to see that our hair's not dyed, and that we don't use words like dad and toilet and horrors like that'" (247). As with QA Lorna Bradey, Viv's private suffering pales into insignificance compared to the prospect of public mortification – but here the mortification is class based rather than bodily.

The equality of excrement and other bodily functions is after all only the equality of death, which comes too late to be enjoyed. Kristeva writes: 'These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being' (1982, 3). But body fluids in and of

²¹ For example, this description of Enid from *Here Comes a Candle*: 'she rolled sideways out of bed...her feet, puffy and not over clean...The stockings lying there had kept the shape of her feet. Looking at her face in the glass, she thought, I shan't wash...There were creases in the skin near her mouth, where she had lain with her face pressed into the pillow...There was a dressing-table...a washstand, a slop-pail with combings of hair floating on top...' (1939, 49).

themselves are first and foremost indicative of the continuation of life: digesting, sweating, secreting. This link to life is particularly true of menstrual fluid and semen, which will be discussed further in chapter three.

Aseptic technique

Life as a living organism is inherently messy. However, perceptions of cleanliness within the medical profession changed dramatically in the middle of the nineteenth century when Joseph Lister – who is briefly mentioned in *Unity*²² – successfully introduced carbolic acid solutions into his surgical practices; thus the antiseptic – or aseptic – technique was born. Lister was the first to apply germ theory to surgery and his methods were not uniformly adopted straight away, however, by the time Liz was training as a nurse, in the early 1940s, such practices had extended beyond the theatre and formed the backbone of an entire professional identity.

Liz's work is important to her, providing purpose and something solid to define herself by, but also something to disappear into, in an escape from the world and the expectations of others. She is in her element when assisting in theatre, enjoying the fact that 'she was required on these occasions to dress herself up like negative space: gown, mask, cap' (11). The attire is a symbol of her professional status, but it also provides her with a defensive layer. Something she can hide her feelings for Ramsay behind; she wants to hide them from her colleagues, but also from him. This 'negative space' then is something that she must overcome over the course of the novel.

White is associated with the modern and the clinical, and indeed Cleere highlights how increasing germ awareness resulted in the rejection of Romantic dilapidation and the many nooks and crannies of the Victorian 'dust trap' home; this meant, 'The transition to a sleek, seamless modernism in British art and architecture looked less like an aesthetic revolution

²² In chapter two Liz notes 'how (Ramsay) longed to be allowed a beard. Not very aseptic – she had said to him before. Have you seen the sideburns Lister had? – was what he said to her' (20).

than the inevitable effect of Victorian sanitary reform' (2005, 135). However, the clinical can also be cold, and interestingly, cognitive scientists have demonstrated links between cleanliness and harsh moral judgements (Zhong, Strejcek, and Sivanathan 2010).²³ There is a frostiness in Liz, particularly at the start of the novel, that I sought to reflect in her icy blonde hair and associated aesthetic of the aseptic. The colour white is symbolic but for Liz it doesn't represent the traditional fresh start - more a blankness that reflects her frozen emotional state.

White can indicate sterility, but sterility is not a positive thing outside of the operating theatre, particularly for a woman, whose duties were seen at this period to revolve around childbearing, not only for their husbands but for King and country. White is also connected to more sinister sides of science – eugenics, with its overtones of white supremacy; something that infected the birth control writings of many scientists and campaigners aside from Marie Stopes, who is mentioned in the novel and will be analysed further in chapter three. Zhong, Strejcek, and Sivanathan point out that the Nazis' obsession with hygiene 'coincided with their persecution of Jews and other "social undesirables"... The removal or sterilisation of these individuals was considered a public health measure....' (2010, 859). In the BBC series *A History of Art in Three Colours*, Dr James Fox says of the colour white: 'In the modern age, this once virtuous colour was used by artist's, architects and sculptors to divide, to control, and finally, to conquer' (2012). He refers to Le Corbusier's manifesto on 'the law of ripolin'²⁴ and Mussolini's sculptural and architectural futurist projects, which both utilise 'a totalitarian white...the enemy of individuality' (2012). It is thus in danger of taking us back to the camps, as Liz discovers in the waiting room of the West Highland Cottage

²³ Experiments conducted by Zhong, Strejcek, and Sivanathan showed that 'a clean person may not only feel dirt-free, but also morally untainted. This elevated sense of moral self can in turn license severe moral judgement' (2010, 859).

²⁴ Ripolin is a white emulsion paint that Le Corbusier wanted to impose on the masses. His manifesto reads: 'The law of ripolin would bring the joy of life, the joy of action. Give us the law of ripolin' (quoted in Fox 2012).

Hospital: ‘The gloss on the walls reminded her of something; bath enamel, or sallow skin, transparent against the bone – no. She closed her eyes and turned to the left, opening them again to look through the glass in the door Dr Beaton had gone through’ (86). Here the narrative point of view is key; situated at once inside and outside of Liz, we see both her physical and psychological struggle to retain control, though at this stage we only get a glimpse of what it is she is repressing. She symbolically turns away from the wall and looks towards Dr Beaton, though she is not yet able to follow him.

I purposely did not spend a lot of time with Liz and Ramsay in Belsen. I was wary of becoming a voyeur, exploiting the suffering of others for my own artistic aims. However, as the nadir of modern civilisation in Europe, the holocaust still haunts us; furthermore, I was shocked at the extent to which anti-Semitic views persisted in Britain in the years that followed. So I did not want to ignore the crimes that were committed in the camps, or the trauma spoken of in the memoirs of any nurse involved in the relief efforts – trauma that followed them throughout the rest of their lives. Only one flashback scene is set in Belsen itself, though Liz’s body bears the mark of it throughout:

She had been standing, one day, the third day, looking at the forest. Wanting to look at something else just for a moment because that would help; despite the stench of the rot and the durchwall, the taste of vomit and the burning at the back of her throat that no amount of disinfecting could rid her of for three days now. But perhaps if she just looked for a moment at the trees... (301)

By now the link between her emotional trauma and physical craving of the aseptic is clear. She attempts to remain calm and connected to the natural world but the manmade barbed wire fence – designed to separate and to wound – prevents her. Whilst not wanting to dwell too much on the dehumanising details of atrocious smells and sights, I did want to evoke the violence of the experience for the reader. For this I took refuge in Liz’s body, containing the

violence in her physical reaction to it – the acid burn of her vomit. It is her own bile that burns her – we are all implicated in humanity's crimes. Yet there is only so much her body, like our imaginations, can comprehend. In *Powers of Horror* Kristeva talks of, 'The spasms and vomiting that protect me' (1982, 2). Vomiting can be a physiological response when the body seeks to eject a tainted or parasitic element. It can also be a response to psychological trauma. The instinctive need to reject. Here the interrelation of mind and body comes to the fore, and under pressure.

Cleanliness and dirtiness are not just external, or surface conditions. They are psychological states that we both absorb and project - seeping in and out of us – highlighting the tentative and complex processes involved in manufacturing body image. Depicting how characters experience their environments immerses the reader in a distinct socio-historic setting, but also the consciousness of a particular person. This may not always be a comfortable or coherent experience, but it is the arising tensions – within the narrative and reader response – that are most telling. Socially constructed factors like gender, and in this chapter's case class, begin to reveal the extent of their impact on embodiment. The next chapter examines this tension further, within specific gendered and professional contexts, exploring how these shape, not only body image, but the constitution of the body itself.

CHAPTER TWO: UNDER THE SKIN

As Nicholson has noted, ‘nurses were among the few women who had close-up experience of war in all its frightening, sick, ugly reality’ (2011, 127). But even in peacetime, nurses were privy to unusual sights. They were exposed to the bodies of others in ways other women were not – they saw expanses of skin normally covered by clothing, and sometimes, as in Liz’s case, their patients’ very insides. For Grosz, work is one of the factors that can ‘mark the subject’s body as deeply as any surgical incision’ (2018, 35). With Liz then, I wanted to explore how work experience might influence a 1940s woman’s relationship with her own body, and the bodies of others; how does the context of medicalisation play out in daily life? And what is the impact of the veil being lifted on the biological functions of sex? In the novel these questions are played out through Liz; her body and body image thus reflect socio-historical norms as well as her own emotional state. This, again, is where the figural narrative style and focalisation come into play, taking us into the heads of our characters: under their skin. I am aware that this is an examination of a particular sort of skin. All of the characters in my novel, and the other texts discussed, are white; the period of my investigation draws to a close just as a new wave of West Indian immigrants were arriving in the UK, with many set to join and shape the new NHS. There is an earlier history of BAME medical professionals in Britain, which requires more in-depth historical investigation. My analysis, however, is limited to reading the skin presented in *Unity*, as well as in the novels by Waters and Barker – as I bring *The Night Watch* into my discussion, before moving on in the second section to a closer dissection of *Toby’s Room*. This chapter first focuses on breaks in the skin – scarring and healing; loaded terms that lock the physiological and the psychological in a cycle of metaphorical invocation. The latter section then explores the function of the medical gaze which reads bodies inside and out, shaping the body image of the subject as well as the clinician.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the skin is the last line of defence between our insides and the rest of the world – where the personal symbolically meets the social. It is thus a form of liminal space that can be written on, a signifier that can be made red. Whilst I am interested in the tissue itself, the epidermal layers and how these operate, I am also interested in how they are penetrated, literally and metaphorically, by clinician and self.

Scarring and healing

The following extract is taken from the 1948 edition of *The Essentials of Modern Surgery*:

As this formation of granulation tissue...continues, the arcades increase in depth and number, until finally the gap is bridged and the healing surfaces are united.

Meanwhile in the deeper...older, layers, deposition of collagen fibre increases, the capillary network is reduced to a small number of better developed vessels, and eventually firm fibrous tissue alone remains to mark the place where the body had triumphed over the invading forces. Such an area of fibrous tissue is called a scar.

(1948, 4)

I found this passage strangely poetic and deeply symbolic. The metaphorical language of invasion and retaliation is common in medical literature of this period – when so many advances were made within military contexts. We often talk of ‘battling’ illness; whether the battle is waged against an invading force, or more complicatedly against one’s own deviant body, it calls for a psychological response to a physiological threat, demonstrating their interdependence in our will to live. The word choice in the above excerpt highlights the analogous potential of battle narratives, which are particularly tempting when considering psychological and anatomical trauma within a wartime context. These images help conflate mind/body but also bridge a gap between specialist and layman. As cognitive scientists Zhong and Leonardelli have pointed out, ‘metaphors are not just linguistic elements that

people use to communicate, metaphors are fundamental vessels through which people understand and experience the world around them...' (2008, 840). Yet, the biological processes described in the excerpt are naturally occurring. Automatic. Action takes place, but at molecular level. The recurring motif of scarring and healing is used in *Unity* to highlight a tension between the active/passive, as well as the mind/body.

Liz has a scar on the palm of each hand, obtained at Belsen, as described in the previous chapter. The first reference to these scars comes in chapter two of the novel when she is sitting in a café with Ramsay and he strokes 'warm thumbs across the scars she had on the palm of each hand' (29). At this point no explanation is given, the reader is more likely to notice, as Liz does, the repeated reference to their difference in temperature; her physical coldness is another reflection of her frozen emotional state, which her scars are directly linked to. The fact that the scars are on her hands is significant as hands have a dual symbolism in the novel. Crucially, they are a professional tool. Ramsay acknowledges in chapter two: "'You've got hands Liz, they all know that.'" That was what they said when you were good with them – as if everyone didn't have a pair. But hers were quick, precise. It had meant something to have them say so' (31). Foucault has demonstrated how the medical gaze is plurisensorial²⁵ (2008, 202); I am particularly interested in touch, and the complex history – couched in class and gender anxieties – that surrounds physical examination, or as Liz puts it, much to her mother's mortification, 'the laying on of hands' (78). Physical examinations were not commonly conducted until later in the 19th century, and even then depended on a number of factors regarding the social status of both physician and patient (Nicolson 2013, 108). However, the comparatively manual nature of the surgeon's craft,

²⁵ Foucault states, within the context of the early 19th century: 'The medical gaze is now endowed with a plurisensorial structure. A gaze that touches, hears, and, moreover, not by essence or necessity, sees' (2008, 202).

which had seen them historically dismissed as ‘sawbones’ tradesmen,²⁶ produced a particular type of embodied knowledge, as discussed by Brown (2018), that was eventually seen as an integral part of any medical education. Scottish surgeon and anatomist Charles Bell wrote a treatise on the hand in 1833 that Berkowitz states, ‘valued the hand as a necessary expression and extension of the eye in building knowledge and as a vehicle for expressing the will through action’ (2014, 382). This idea of embodied knowledge links back to my own humble exercises in experiential research. The beauty of my dissection workshop was that unlike those attending Tulp’s Anatomy Lesson – as painted by Rembrandt, in the most famous representation of an anatomy lesson – I engaged my hands as well as my eyes. In Rembrandt’s painting, Tulp is the only one touching the cadaver (using an implement), but crucially it is the forearm that is being dissected, drawing on a professional symbolism that goes back to Vesalius, father of modern anatomy, whose own portrait in the *Fabrica* (1543)²⁷ features a dissected forearm alongside. This recurring motif in anatomical art is something Liz would have encountered during her visits to The Hunterian with Ramsay, as mentioned in chapter fifteen of the novel. However, to her it can also appear as the raised hand of denied entry – an anatomical stop sign. When she attends a talk at the university, the prospective female students are shown a dissected hand specimen, which Liz sees as an attempt at discouragement from an institution that does not really want her. Indeed, although Liz ‘has hands’, and her skill has been noted, that not only fails to help her get the respect she craves, it proves to be a liability; in the heavily gendered hospital environment she is punished for disregarding professional hierarchies, as well as for her implied sexual transgression.

This leads to the other symbolic use of hands in the novel – their association with marriage rites, signified in the associated lexicon, but also material traditions such as ceremonial hand-

²⁶ Berkowitz observes that ‘Historians of science and medicine have attributed surgeon’s low standing to the physicality of their work – it was craft, labour of the hands, messy’ (2014, 390-391).

²⁷ To give it its full title, *De Humani Corporis Fabrica Libri Septem* translates into English as *On the Fabric of the Human Body in Seven Books*.

fasting and the exchanging of rings. This symbolism is invoked in chapter five when we come to realise that Liz's anxieties regarding Oban are connected to Sandy and their broken engagement. At one point Liz reflects on her reason for going off to train as a nurse instead of staying at school and then going to university: 'certain things had forced her hand. Hitler was only one of them. It wasn't him that had been after her hand – though she supposed he'd got at them in the end' (68). In these sentences she links the personal to the national. It was the declaration of war *and* the proposal of marriage that spurred the young Liz to action; unable to articulate her unease she simply fled Oban and the obligations of any form of family life. It is interesting then to consider the scene in chapter six where Liz meets Dr Beaton for the first time:

He pressed his palm to hers in a firm warm grip...

"That's a nasty one," he said.

"I beg your pardon?"

He let go of her hand then turned her palm upwards so the smooth scar tissue glistened at them.

"Yes." Had he really managed to feel that through his palm? "I had an accident."

(82)

Liz can't help being impressed at the sensitivity of the doctor's hands, though it does leave her feeling somewhat exposed. She is deliberately vague in her explanation and, as in other chapters, uses the word 'accident' – though the reader will eventually see that doesn't quite cover it. This lexical choice reflects Liz's reluctance to confront her breakdown at Belsen, but it also reflects the limits of the language available to her, as will be discussed further towards the end of this section.

Dr Beaton, however, goes on to observe that the scars are superficial – there has been no physiological nerve damage, so Liz has retained her full dexterity. It is the emotional wounds

that she must overcome to pursue the career she wants. In the closing scene of the novel she mentions her failure to cope with the traumas of war, out loud for the first time. When she holds up her hands, the ‘saucers of blood’ have become ‘saucers of moonlight’ – full of possibilities, though I have left room for the reader to decide whether this extends to the possibility of marriage.

We have then come full circle from one of the opening lines of the novel; ‘sometimes you had to cut deeper before you could begin to repair’ (1). The narrative arc of the novel required Liz to suffer further before finding her way forward, and her struggles to cope with the emotions she faces are played out through her body – not only the scars on her hands, but also the cut on her leg. She receives the cut when running through a field towards the swooning Effie. She doesn’t notice doing it at the time but it soon becomes a focus for her anxieties as she is unable to stop scratching and picking it. It seems to flare up, in particular, when she thinks of Sandy, the vicious scratching giving her an outlet for her guilt, her resentment, her emotional and sexual frustration; ‘She looked up, across the hall again. He was still there, taller than the rest. Brighter. She could see him, running a hand over his hair. The tips of her fingers felt suddenly wet. She looked down at her leg and saw she had pulled the whole scab right off’ (164). The language in these scenes – the sudden wetness mentioned above, and when she is in the bath²⁸ – veers towards the masturbatory as it describes Liz’s unsanctioned touching of herself.

The scab troubles her throughout the novel; healing is an uncomfortable process. She is particularly brutal, digging her nails in ‘as far as she could’ (204), on the boat back to Oban, after the punishing journey with Unity, during which Liz’s professional and political ideals are sorely tested. But it is her failure as a daughter that drives her towards her most drastic action. At one of her lowest points Liz prepares to cut into her leg with a razor blade and is

²⁸ In chapter fifteen: ‘she felt the rush of water between her thighs. Warm. Searching. She reached her hand down and ran a finger along the top of her cut, stroking the edges of discoloured flesh that had grown soft and imprecise’ (208).

only prevented by Sandy's appearance. It is a turning point in their relationship and indeed the whole novel; the single chaptered section is called 'Madame Curie'. Symbolically, Liz has found comfort in the biography of a remarkable female scientist, written by her own daughter. She is beginning to realise 'her multiplicity', as Irigaray puts it (1980, 73), and to de-compartmentalise her life; she sees that she must reconcile her familial bonds with her professional calling, her emotional needs with her intellectual and physical ones –though she sees, as Marie Curie did too, that certain sacrifices are inevitable. And not the sort that can be made in blood. Not even Naomi Mitchison, who lived nine lives according to her biographer (Calder 1997), could envision the total unity of work and family life, writing in 1930; '(women) insist – as I think they should – on having both worlds, not specialising like bees or machines; but they must give up something of both...' (1930, 25). Liz asserts several times towards the end of the novel that she is 'not a machine', but she is only forced to do so to contradict the unshakeable image she herself previously sought to project – as will be discussed further – in the face of disappointment, disapproval, and her most problematic of patients.

Unity presents us with another scar in the novel – an extreme example of self-harm in that it is an attempt at self-destruction. Lovell records how Unity's scar became inflamed and bulging when she fell ill (2001, 412). The unusual scar marks Unity out as being different, as did her behaviour before and after her brain injury – but it also connects her to Liz. Both women have been scarred by the Second World War, and Liz is driven to hurt herself whilst caring for Unity. The severity of their injuries, and interpretations of their acts, are of course very different. Unity's attempted suicide falls more neatly into a recognisable twentieth-century term, whilst as Millard has demonstrated, the idea of 'self-harm' did not exist in the early twentieth century (2015). In the Victorian period, causing oneself injury could form part of a hysterical presentation, but as Millard states: 'from the late 1970s onwards...the

generic category ‘self-harm’ comes increasingly to refer to self-cutting, seen not as a communication or appeal for help, but as a method of regulating internal tension or dispelling a sense of emotional deadness’ (2015, 13). Interestingly, Millard also highlights the subsequent gendering of this sort of self-harm – the internalisation of violence – as a predominantly female act; echoing a theme that runs through several disciplines, associating the male with the external and the female with the internal. There is no real way of knowing when, how or if people cut themselves for similar reasons in the past. However, Waters is a writer who does not shy away from uncertainty. She incorporates modern notions of ‘self-harm’ into her 1940s novel *The Night Watch*, as we see in this scene with Helen, which follows a fight with her partner; ‘The shock of cutting...had produced some change in her, some almost chemical change: she felt quite unnaturally clear-headed, alive, and chastened. She’d lost the certainty that the cutting of her leg was a sane and reasonable thing to do’ (155). Helen doesn’t quite understand why she felt the need to cut herself, but has all the same gone through the physical and psychological processes we would recognise from reports on the practice today. In rooting the act within a well-developed emotional context, Waters appears to be taking a reasonable step in suggesting her character may have acted in this way. Similarly, before reading Waters’ take on this, I had found myself writing about Liz’s scratching of her leg, and indeed the intent to cut, as something simultaneously connected to her stress reaction, her alienation from her body, and her genuine preoccupation with anatomy: an attempt to actively self-regulate rather than seek outside help. I became less comfortable with my treatment of this topic after reading Millard’s problematisation of ‘retrospective diagnosis’, where he states that, ‘the idea that individuals might harm themselves consciously, and not intend to die, seems timeless. However, this timelessness is often achieved by projecting our current ideas and concepts back into the past, making past ideas and events correspond to our current understandings’ (2015, 18). But as Waters has

often pointed out, writers of historical fiction will always reflect the period in which they themselves are writing, and the inclusion of these acts of self-harm do serve a narrative purpose in emphasising the characters' emotional anguish and the need to materialise it. Waters draws attention to the shock of the initial incision, then focuses on the blood, trickling and congealing, with the red reflecting Helen's anger and sexual jealousy, slowly ebbing away, and turning into something harder - darker. In my novel I have focused on the wound itself, the inflamed flesh, and the irritation. Both views employ sensory detail and textural descriptions to bring the reader closer to the characters' discomfort.

There is a difference between Liz's acts of self-harm that keep the wound on her leg open, and the scars on her palms incurred at Belsen, the latter not being consciously inflicted. Liz was not aware of her impaling actions and sees her body as having responded of its own accord to the trauma and shock she experienced – which further disturbs her due to the loss of control. The resulting dissociation paves the way for the self-harm she inflicts on her leg; an attempt to control and release, but also to hurt and punish. Her psychological state is complex, and the reader may interpret things differently of course – this subjectivity and opaqueness is in-keeping when considering a practice that seeks to articulate through the body that which cannot always be made into words. I am thus reluctant to impose a conclusive diagnosis on to Liz through this analysis. I would instead argue that the questions it raises link to important debates in body theory, particularly around Cartesian dualism which insists on the dichotomy between mind and body,²⁹ when the human condition is increasingly understood as, what Grosz calls, 'the radical inseparability of biological from psychical elements...' (1994, 85). Liz's attempts to negotiate this, and move towards a wholeness that is autonomous without being monistic or isolated, forms a crucial component of her narrative arc. It is telling of the complexity and instability of such a goal, when part of

²⁹ Grosz also highlights the concept's inherent hierarchisation: 'Dualism, in short, is responsible for modern forms of elevation of consciousness (a specifically modern version of the notion of soul, introduced by Descartes) above corporeality' (1994, 7).

the striving towards a unified body image can involve an attack on the body itself – a break in its surface. But the novelist is always most interested in tension, when things fall apart. It is a particularly perverse predilection that draws so many writers time and again to the points where language fails. Embodied narratives allow the story to continue.

Mitchell has noted how ‘in a post psychoanalytic age’, novelists are drawn to ‘shame’s role in the constitution and disruption of identity’ (2013a, 324). Helen and Liz’s urge to self-harm is both a product and producer of shame, but when characters experience shame, blood need not leave the body to be read. Darwin referred to blushing as the most human of all expressions (quoted in Johnson and Moran 2013, 2). It is an uncontrollable physiological reaction to the social construction of shame. As Johnson and Moran point out: ‘The cycle of feeling ashamed of being ashamed works crucially through the body, for the visual manifestations of shame make it impossible to hide or conceal the visibly shamed self’ (2013, 5). When Liz is unable to stop herself blushing she resents her body and sees it as weak – overtly feminine; it is perhaps not surprising then that she sometimes expresses her frustrations on the surface of it. As Bartky notes, ‘shame may generate a rage whose expression is unconstructive, even self-destructive’ (quoted in Deveaux 1994, 97).

Liz’s idea that her face should remain a blank canvas at all times seems to be tied in with her medical ambitions and raises interesting questions about the exchanges between medical professional and patient. In *Containing Trauma*, Hallett’s history of nursing in the First World War, she writes:

Nurses appear to have believed that one way in which they could help their patients was by remaining emotionally ‘strong’ themselves... Presenting oneself in this controlled self-disciplined way was seen by later commentators – particularly those writing in the more open cultural environment of the later twentieth century – as part of the pathology of war. (2009, 202)

Having a nurse, and particularly one that aspires to be a surgeon, as my main focalising character allowed me to engage with such issues further; I wanted to explore the problems that come with this sort of emotional detachment, not just in the individual's mental and physical health – but the broader social and political implications. One of the first to be implicated in this context is the patient, and as Dolezal has illustrated, for them, 'the medical encounter is unavoidably "emotion laden" and...shame is frequently, if not inevitably, a feature' (2015, 573). It is the patient, after all, who is subject to the full force of the medical gaze.

The medical gaze

How does it operate, this 'gaze that burns' (Foucault 2008, 147), but is at the same time the 'gaze of concrete sensibility' (Foucault 2008, 148) – cold and hard. It constitutes a physiological exchange that is built on power and runs on knowledge; it generates more knowledge, more power – powerlessness and shame are thus some of its by-products.

Another by-product, as will be discussed, is life. An examination of the medical gaze, as we have come to know it through Foucault, must consider its history and domain, both of which require reflection on the rise of hospital medicine in the 19th century. My analysis does this by drawing on two key texts, and even simply listing their titles alongside reveals their dialogic potential; these texts are Foucault's *The Birth of the Clinic*, first published in English in 1973,³⁰ and Jewson's 'The Disappearance of the Sick-man from Medical Cosmology, 1770-1870', first published in 1976. In their respective analyses around the impact of the move to hospital medicine, the latter is immediately signalling a focus on what has been lost. Observation was a key practice of the new medicine and its teachings, and thus shaped the types of knowledge that were produced; as Foucault notes, 'a way of teaching and saying

³⁰ *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception* was first published in France in 1963.

became a way of learning and *seeing*' (2008, 77). Foucault agrees with Jewson's view that, 'The eclipse of Bedside Medicine by first Hospital and then Laboratory Medicine represented a shift away from a person orientated towards an object orientated cosmology' (2009, 626), but to interrogate and exemplify their differing interpretations of the potential impact of this practised objectification – on both patient and clinician – I will analyse the medical gaze in action, via embodied narratives, namely in *Unity* and *Toby's Room*.

In writing the medical gaze, as in any act of creative writing, Barker and I face some of the same problems as the examining clinician – dependent on narrative and metaphor in a quest to verbalise the nonverbal; to, as Foucault put it, 'push a little further back the foamy line of language...' (2008, 208), in a striving towards specificity. But language that becomes too specific is ultimately exclusionary. The role of observation in early hospital medicine meant medical language remained rooted in the everyday ('as big as..., of the size of...' (Foucault 2008, 209)), made to bend and flex in cooperation with the senses, working across the surface, and into the very depths of the body. But by the time laboratory medicine gains dominance in the twentieth century, Jewson notes that 'technical jargon and concepts served as a ritual mode of differentiation between the established and outsiders' (2009, 629). As someone outside of the medical profession, my knowledge is very different from that of the characters I attempt to represent. But the dynamics of the patient/clinician relationship, and its evolution, has much to tell us about society at any given point in time; about the social status of specific sorts of medics, of women, of emotion, and of science itself – but also about the social fabric and political agendas of nations. Crucially all of this feeds into how knowledge of the body was pursued, and thus how the body itself came to be constituted.

One of the first ways the move to hospital medicine altered the dynamics of the medical gaze was in terms of class. Doctors traditionally treated upper-class patients, who held both the

power and purse-strings, but as Armstrong notes, this dynamic was reversed within the clinic (1994, 18-19). Power was now with the medical professionals whose status as professionals was continually increasing whilst they treated relatively poor patients in the first public hospitals. Foucault notes, in the French context, the ethical problem this power dynamic presents when poor patients are at the mercy not only of the clinician's medical gaze, but also, potentially, their experimental treatments. Yet Foucault sees this as necessary in the development of medical knowledge. As he puts it:

Can pain be a spectacle? Not only can it be, but it must be, by virtue of a subtle right that resides in the fact that no man is alone, the poor man less so than others...disease can be cured only if others intervene with their knowledge, their resources, their pity....what is benevolence towards the poor is transformed into knowledge that is applicable to the rich.. (2008, 102)

Hospital medicine thus developed an economy of bodies and knowledge. It is interesting that Foucault includes the word pity; here it is used in connection to the rich population whose donations the public hospitals, and thus the sick poor, depend on. On the whole he paints a picture of the clinic as a rather pitiless place.

In the UK in the 19th century, there were hospital wings within poor houses and asylums, and the voluntary hospital system saw an increasing number of infirmaries in the cities, whilst cottage hospitals were established in rural areas. Changing healthcare needs meant the addition of isolation/infectious disease hospitals and county sanatoria.³¹ All the while, the wealthiest could be treated in their own homes, private nursing homes, or private wings within the larger hospitals. In 1948 the establishment of the National Health Service, famously free at the point of use, meant even those citizens unable to access the old voluntary hospital system were now guaranteed medical treatment, from increasingly educated medical

³¹ Richardson offers an excellent overview in the Historic Scotland publication, *Building Up Our Health: the architecture of Scotland's historic hospitals* (2010).

professionals. This maintained the prior hierarchy of medical dominance within the exchange. However, in terms of class mobility, it was increasingly the case that one need not possess much personal wealth to be able to embark on a medical career. It would be false to say that initial entry into medicine became purely meritocratic – though certain scholarships helped – and even today a disproportionate amount of students come from higher income families,³² but from 1948 those who made it into the profession could look forward to an annual salary and were thus no longer reliant on private income or private practice. This historical context is given in *Unity* through Ramsay, with his refusal to ‘whore himself out’, hoping instead to secure a hospital position within the new service, and Liz, who can only hope to pursue her studies after her mother offers to support her financially.

Ironically, however, the National Health Service did precipitate a further relinquishing of one sort of patient’s power as they were no longer paying customers able to vote with their feet. Whilst money ultimately talks, citizen’s rights might not speak quite so loudly, particularly to the likes of GPs who were the last to come to terms with the prospect of a national service.³³ And as more people were able to access hospital medicine, they too could share in the experience of objectification. Whilst by the early twentieth century practices were regulated in a way they had not been when Foucault highlighted the poor patient’s guinea pig status, some practices were still a long way from ‘best’, particularly when it came to women’s health (Cook 2004, 134-135), and Jewson’s definition of the hospital patient still applied. He notes that in the 19th century: ‘The new occupational standing of the clinician was matched by the emergence of a new role for the sick-man, that of patient. As such he

³² Steven et al. have carried out a retrospective analysis of the 2009-2012 data and observed that ‘medicine in the UK remains dominated by those from more affluent backgrounds’ (2016).

³³ The British Medical Association were still advising members to refrain from joining the national service when the fourth plebiscite was taking place on 1st May 1948. The result of the fourth plebiscite showed there was still a majority opposed to joining the service, but this majority not containing the requisite number of General Practitioners, the Association was forced to adjust their directive. The letters section of BMJ issues in the months preceding nationalisation show a striking range of views amongst the membership.

was designated a passive and uncritical role in the consultative relationship, his main function being to endure and to wait' (2009, 628).

This notion of passive compliance came through in some of the oral history interviews I undertook, with testimonies illustrating how this played out in interpersonal terms of treatment, based on modes of communication. One interviewee who spoke to me of her experience in a maternity hospital in 1951 remarked on how strict the staff were with the patients, saying, 'they weren't nice to people', and, 'I didn't like that Matron at all', before going on to reflect that 'in these days you didn't open your mouth. You just took it for, well...you know...best' (Participant P1, 2019). Here, however, we have moved specifically to the subject of nurses, who themselves were a product of a subjugating and often humiliating training regime, though it may have been little consolation for patients to consider that junior staff were treated just as badly as they were, if not worse. The militarisation of the nursing profession may have been partially responsible for the regimented way many matrons ran their hospitals. Starns has pointed out that 'the change of image from angel to battleaxe was just another step on the road to commissioned officer status and full military recognition of the worth of registered nurses' (2000, 57) – thus linking this development to the fight for professionalisation. It is interesting to compare the evolution of the professional identity of the nurse, to that of the surgeon; the career Liz has, compared to the one she wants. Nurses were historically perceived as slatternly – and probably alcoholic – creatures of the Mrs Gamp variety until the lady with the lamp, Florence Nightingale, remodelled them as ministering angels in the eyes of the nation.³⁴ The eventual professional battleaxe of brutal efficiency was constructed borrowing heavily from the attitudes adopted by other medical professionals. Surgeons, however, had first sought to distinguish themselves *on* emotional grounds. Brown has written of how Scottish surgeon

³⁴ An 1874 *Handbook for Hospital Sisters*, dedicated to Florence Nightingale, lists 'Sobriety' as second only to 'Cleanliness', under 'qualifications which are required in a nurse' (Lees 1874, 7).

and anatomist John Bell (brother of the previously mentioned Charles), argued, in the 18th century, that ‘a highly attuned sensitivity to the feelings of one’s patients was a vital clinical skill’ (2018, 34). His argument was that the surgeon’s embodied experience mattered, because it was through ‘exposure to the physical suffering and mental distress of his patients that the surgeon came to be formed as a man of honest, heartfelt, sensibility’ (2018, 23). But once the sawbones was accepted as a gentleman, and the cult of sensibility gave way to hard-nosed Victorian rationalism, emotions would be all but banished from the clinic for some time. Certainly by the 1940s when Liz looks for a model to aspire to, it is of the cold and concrete variety.

Institutionalisation appears to breed cruelty, but so does insecurity, and there was a tension in the nursing profession between those who had stayed to run the hospitals at home, and those who had served as QAs and been exposed to new technologies and practices. This produced what Starns calls an ‘anti-educational’ bias in postwar civilian hospitals (2000, 139) – and this is one of the things that frustrates Liz in her work at the infirmary. She is eager to learn and develop her skills, and she rails against the role of either ‘angel’ or ‘battleaxe’, resenting not only the extreme poles that women are often restricted to (see *Madonna v whore*) but also the total desexing, which is reflected in the lexicon – sister, matron. She finds the atmosphere of the nurses’ home stifling and fusty and thinks, ‘that’s what happened when you put so many dried up old women together in the one place’ (13). Yet Liz feels her duties keenly, at one point, on her way across Mull, even invoking the Hippocratic Oath – the most famous of the ancient Greek texts concerned with the upholding of ethical standards: ‘Who was she marching for? Dr Beaton? Dr Beaton and the Hippocratic Oath? Hypocrite perhaps. Aye. That was more like it’ (180). She feels guilty about going to the Mitfords’ aid when she disapproves of them so deeply, but there was never any question of her not accepting the mission.

I did not set out to dehumanise Unity in the novel, though I have all but silenced her, since she only appears semi-conscious or as a corpse. This was largely dictated by plot structure, but I also didn't want to give too much attention to the Mitfords in general – so much has been written about them already, particularly Unity, and my novel is about Liz. I did not see this as a barrier to offering a human response to Unity's death, however, as corpses must be handled with care too. Kristeva writes that, 'The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject' (1982, 4). But Liz is operating within science – within the clinic; for her it was Unity the person with her hateful politics who represented death infecting life. Her corpse is a body to be cared for. Liz not only carefully washes Unity – smoothing her hair, tucking the sheets neatly – she also finds herself breaking rank again on Unity's behalf when she has a run in with the locum pathologist:

“I wonder if she's virgo intacta.”

“I don't see what that's got to do with anything?” Liz glared at him. She still had Unity's cold hand in hers.

The man started, then sneered. “I'm not sure we need you here anymore nurse.”

(223)

Nazi or not, Unity is a patient, and Liz holds her ground to ensure the dead are respected. Corpses in the clinic traditionally have something to teach us – in death the body is made to give up the secrets of disease, and life, under the anatomo-clinical gaze.³⁵ By subverting this Liz learns instead an uneasy form of female solidarity.

Presenting Unity's corpse is problematic, and perhaps ethically questionable, but I have learnt from Barker the possibility of a form of voyeurism that contains its own critique. Liz's rebuff of the pathologist also potentially implicates the reader – perhaps they are disappointed

³⁵ In his chapter on the anatomo-clinical gaze titled, 'Open up a Few Corpses,' Foucault writes: 'it is at death that disease and life speak their truth' (2008, 178).

that the mystery of whether Unity bore a child will not be revealed in front of them. I want them to question their own position, as well as Liz's. The following section illustrates just how expertly Barker does this.

In *Toby's Room*, Barker introduces her discussion on the ethics of voyeurism through Elinor's dissection lessons. Elinor is there not as a student of medicine, but as an artist, and she views the dissected cadaver in architectural terms; referring to the 'soaring chancel arch of a ribcage' (34), and his lungs, 'fanning out in two huge wings to cover the ribs...It reminded Elinor of the roof of King's College Chapel' (34-35). They are startlingly beautiful images, and anyone who has studied anatomy can relate them to the wonder of the body's design. But they are also dehumanising, and as she nears the end of her course Elinor's uneasiness around this centres itself on a compulsion to find out the name of her cadaver. This however is against the rules, and as she leaves the cadaver for the last time she lingers, 'for a moment in the doorway, trying to squeeze out the appropriate emotion, whatever that might be' (46). It is not a situation she has any emotional point of reference for though, and her final thoughts revert to the impersonal: 'He looked like a Christmas turkey the day after Boxing day, when all the bones have been picked clean' (47). This final image is deeply disturbing with its connotations of consumption – Elinor has devoured him. It is one of many references to bird carcasses in these early chapters, the bird carcass perhaps being the most domestic of all corpses; the one that women are most used to seeing. This unusual and intimate exposure to death is understood to shape the beholder. Foucault writes of the impact of dissection on the medical gaze: 'it is no longer that of a living eye, but the gaze of an eye that has seen death – a great white eye that unties the knot of life' (2008, 177). Whilst he focuses on the knowledge gained, the language is chilling. Clarke, in her medical memoir writes how dissection has a numbing effect on medical students: 'You have seen and sliced

and smelt too much' (2020, 58). She also talks, like Elinor, about the smell of formaldehyde clinging to her – they are branded, implicated. But Elinor will have to reconcile herself with worse sights in the chapters to come; the ethical questions raised by the silent nameless corpse are easier to negotiate than those relating to the suffering of the living.

Barker engages with a range of issues in *Toby's Room*, but the most celebrated sections are those concerning the maxillofacial hospital, where soldiers with horrific facial injuries receive pioneering reconstructive surgery. Kit Neville is one such soldier. In the following extract we join Kit as he wakes from one of his traumatic facial operations and describes what he sees:

a tall, straight-backed woman with white hair was standing at the foot of his bed. Gillies was there too: Gillies, the surgeon, the elephant-maker, smiling obsequiously, inclining his droopy eyes and droopier moustache towards her. Their voices mingled: clipped, aristocratic English salted with Gillies's Antipodean twang. Fellow sat on your bed, called you 'honey', called you 'dear', stuck a trunk on the end of your nose and tied you up so you couldn't pull it off. Bloody good mind to tell him what he thought of him. He opened his mouth to protest, words bubbling up like sewage out of a blocked drain, and immediately the straight-backed lady was whisked away, and Sister Lang-widge! Took her place.

"Clench your fist for me now, there's a good boy," she said. "Just a little, tiny prick..."

Insult to injury. Bollocks like a bull, he wanted to say, but then, before he could speak the darkness rushed in and the waters closed over his head. (146-147)

Sister Lang-widge! is forever scolding Kit for his use of expletives. The brusque tone of his delivery reflects Kit's frustration at his helpless childlike confinement, and points to the particular pain of the young man incapacitated in his prime, which was a recurring theme of

the Great War where the male body was dismembered, and reconstructed, like never before.

Kit often refers to his ‘trunk’, which is the pedicle the surgeons must attach to the space where his nose should be, before attempting to craft a nose in its place – thus Gillies, the surgeon is the ‘elephant-maker.’ Readers might not know what a pedicle is, but we are informed about it along with Kit, though we can only squirm on his behalf as he experiences the full horror of it; or note the ironic symbolism as the emasculated soldier ends up with a fleshy penis-like graft in the middle of his face.

Despite his horrific facial injuries and the series of traumatic treatments he has to endure, Kit’s sections of hospital narrative are some of the most dynamic and amusing of the novel. Barker brilliantly captures his complex range of emotional states, whilst always keeping him completely Kit. The narrative devices employed mean we see what he sees, but we also access his thoughts. In the above excerpt we don’t hear Kit’s spoken tirade, ‘bubbling up like sewage’ because it’s foul and because his mouth doesn’t work properly, but through him we experience the frustration of being subject to the medical gaze. This in turn is amplified when his injuries are documented in drawings by his former art tutor Henry Tonks. The medical gaze is rarely just a gaze, and when practised by surgeons it is followed or preceded by the severest forms of action – injecting, cutting, sawing, rebuilding. Kit does his stoic best to endure this physical hardship, but being made into art is unbearable. In contrast to the nullifying objectification of the medical gaze, the artist’s gaze attempts to capture the specificity of a person’s essence; but Kit does not want to identify himself with his changed appearance. Portraiture is too personal – as is his relation to Tonks. He tries to bluff through the ordeal, engaging Tonks in conversation, but ‘No reply from Tonks; just the continual needle-prick of his glances’ (198).

Elinor, like Tonks, comes to practice the artist’s gaze in a medical setting, working on patient profiling pictures at the hospital. This job, and its associations with her brother who

was killed whilst serving as a medical officer, turns her into something of a doctor manqué.

But she is first and foremost an artist, as her initial description of the profiles illustrates:

Were they portraits, or were they medical illustrations? Portraits celebrate the identity of the sitter...And the face is the person. Here, in these portraits, the wound was central. She found her gaze shifting continuously between torn flesh and splintered bone and the eyes of the man who had to suffer it. There was no point of rest; no pleasure in the exploration of a unique individual. Instead you were left with a question: How can any human being endure this? (138)

Elinor must reconcile the medical gaze with the artist's gaze and all the ethical issues tied up with that. But again we are also being given some interesting historical information here; artists from the Slade really did record the profiles and progress of maxillofacial patients at Queens. There is a reference at the back of the book with a link to the archive. In including that, Barker is directly challenging her readers to respond to the same dilemmas she sets her characters. Should we look? What does it mean if we don't look? Where is the line between confronting reality and voyeurism? How do you look at them – portraits, or medical illustrations? In the novel we see Elinor negotiate these complex questions and return again and again to the final one: how can any human being endure this? It is one that Barker can't ultimately account for, though she seems to show us that expert and sympathetic medical care is key, along, perhaps, with enduring and meaningful personal relationships. The novel ends with a particularly strong penultimate chapter in which Paul visits Kit at his parents' seaside home. The visit is fraught with male ego, professional and sexual jealousy, emotional instability, class snobbery, post-traumatic stress, broken hearts, broken heads, tenderness, need, the need to connect, the need to remain human.

It is this need that is so often overlooked by the objectifying nature of the medical gaze, and Barker raises a number of interesting questions around this. It is something I was also eager to engage with in *Unity*. In the final chapter, Liz is lying on a hospital bed, giving blood, and describes the behaviour of the night matron:

It was odd because she knew the woman quite well but as soon as she lay down to have her arm swabbed it was as if a barrier had gone up. One through which Liz could be looked at but wasn't expected to look back, or speak, or hear; unless it was something spoken in a loud exaggerated tone designed to overcome the barrier, and apparently other dense objects.

"You're doing ever so well." (340)

She, like Kit, is frustrated at the infantilisation that comes with being a patient – however temporary. She feels the loss of power keenly, though she herself has also been guilty of objectifying her own patients, even, for example, her mother, whose charts and x-rays she would prefer to consult rather than the woman herself. Of course there are additional tensions at play in those mother/daughter interactions, but it also highlights the social implications of advances in diagnostics and interpretation. With every technological advance since the thermometer, physicians have relied less on the testimony of patients, until we reach the point in the twentieth century where Nicolson notes that, 'The position of the chart at the end of the bed facing away from the patient, is symbolic of the way in which, as the century progressed, the basis of the understanding of disease was taken away from the patient and invested in signs and symptoms that were accessible and intelligible only to the doctor' (2013, 116).

Advances in medicine call for increasingly specialised medical professionals too, though when it came to nurses Hallett has noted that their 'expertise...was often overlooked' (2009, 198). Barker's Nurse Wiggins, or 'the Wiggins' as she is called, in *Noonday* falls distinctly

into the category of ‘the help’, though she is not familiar enough to be absorbed as one of the servants this only makes the family resent her presence. The Wiggins doesn’t appear to have been equipped with enough of a medical gaze to command any sort of respect; her duties are thoroughly feminine, revolving around washing, watching over, and even, when death arrives – providing the corpse with a bouquet.

On one hand Liz wants to distance herself from the figure of the fussing subservient female, and align herself with what she sees as the colder more detached clinical professional. But she is always caring in practice and ultimately comes to realise the falseness of her dilemma. Hallett has written about the different parts played by various medical professionals during the First World War, contrasting the invasive surgeons with the nurturing nurse, further gendering the roles; ‘The surgeon undertook an operation which ‘cured’ the patient’s problem (yet created greater fragmentation, pulling the body apart in order to do so). The nurse kept the patient as whole as possible before, during and after this procedure – she kept the patient alive’ (2009, 225). But the distinction is imprecise; wartime surgeons are in the business of putting bodies together again. They stitch – a traditionally feminine skill which is dominated by men when involving the skin. The flesh itself. Internal organs. And the question of who cares – of empathy at all levels – is one still being debated today within medicine, when words such a ‘patient-centred’ have replaced talk of bedside manner.

Liz’s ambitions coupled with her experiences of gender bias result in a perceived necessity to disavow her femininity; this harms her body image and feeds into an emotional/physical schism. She is able to cling to her sexuality because sexuality in itself was not a key component of female identity in the 1940s³⁶ – and thus could arguably be seen as part of a performed masculinity. She takes an increasingly medicalised view of the body. It is an attempt to align herself with her father, the scientist, rather than her mother, the mother –

³⁶ In her comprehensive analysis Cook illustrates that ‘by the early twentieth century there is evidence that many, if not most, women repudiated physical sexual desire’ (2004, 62).

though Liz has somehow failed to notice that her mother is an intelligent independent-minded woman too, who likely harboured her own ambitions.

Elinor and Toby's father is also a scientist, something that Toby – himself a doctor – characterises as emotionally detached when telling Elinor about the papyrus twin. Elinor is shocked to hear that her dad took the foetus of Toby's crushed twin to be preserved and studied in a museum. Toby responds by saying, ““Oh, listen to yourself: “His own flesh and blood.” He's a scientist, for God's sake”” (27); the insinuation being that they are above the unfortunate female habit of becoming emotionally attached to assorted collections of cells. But Toby's detachment makes him a danger, both to himself and others – his diminishment of blood ties sees him break the incest taboo, and he puts his stretcher bearers' lives at risk. Kit says he was ‘*the most compassionate man I've ever known. And he was also completely inhumane*’ (252). This echoes a passage from Clarke's memoirs, when she says that during her medical education, she ‘recognised that inadvertent cruelty was an inevitable risk in a profession whose essential requirement is the tempering of empathy with detachment’ (2020, 68).

Similarly, when Liz's medical gaze becomes too blinkered, she harms not only herself, but Annag and Dorothy. In chapter fifteen she gives Annag contraceptives, but she also gives her a copy of Marie Stopes' *Contraception: It's Theory, History and Practice; A Manual for The Medical and Legal Professions*. Liz has given Annag the text she herself was familiar with, not wanting to patronise her friend by sourcing the layman's version: *Wise Parenthood*. But Liz has failed to consider how the text reads to a prospective patient and leaves Annag thoroughly offended. An argument between the two ensues in chapter eighteen:

Annag wasn't really listening. She was still shaking her head. “Some of the chapters – all that eugenics sort of thing – I don't know how you can....you of all people....”

“It’s to be used as a reference book, not a bible.” She’d said that louder than she meant to.

Annag stared at her. (277)

Stopes’ book is full of phrases that trouble the contemporary reader. For someone intent on improving their lot, she can strike modern readers as remarkably scathing about those less privileged than her, and just women in general. For example, when discussing how to insert the occlusive cap she writes that ‘some women, however, are stupid and nervous and may require to be shown’ (1924, 141). She also talks about ‘wasteful births’, writing that these ‘taking place as they do mostly in the families of the poor, tend not only to increase their misery and general C3 condition; but also to add to their bickerings’ (1924, 221). I can excuse Stopes the scientist the C3 comment, but bristle at the bickerings; it is a strange combination of clinical detachment and moral judgements couched in class snobbery. Annag, reading the text in 1948, can see the danger of Stopes’ eugenic stance. That is why she refers implicitly during their argument to Liz’s first-hand experience of eugenics – Belsen. This of course is a sore spot for Liz and the argument escalates as a result.

It might seem like a leap, but I wanted to make the connection between the different levels of dehumanisation. A total objectification is the first step towards a world view that rationalises eugenics, and paves the way for the atrocities that follow.

However, Stopes’ contribution to establishing not only accessible birth control, but new modes of female sexuality, cannot be overstated. And characterising the medical gaze solely along these anti-medical lines does not give the whole picture. For example, Foucault’s claim from the outset is that at its ultimate deployment, ‘the gaze is no longer reductive, it is, rather, that which establishes the individual in his irreducible quality’ (2008, xv). As Armstrong puts it, ‘the process of corporal objectification becomes not a destructive assault

on human individuality but the very practice through which that individuality is given a literally solid foundation and manifestation...' (1994, 22). I have also inadvertently touched on this aspect of the medical gaze in *Unity*. Liz is reminded of the reassuring materiality of her body when she is injected by Dr Beaton, and both she and her mother re-establish their connection – their blood ties – when Liz has to repeatedly take her mother's blood pressure. As opposed to side-lining her mother's agency, listening directly to her mother's blood achieves what language has failed to. They can acknowledge their frailty, the possibility of death – and thus the possibility of life, echoing Foucault's 'mortalism'.

Far from taking an anti-medical stance, my novel argues for balance and empathy in the medical encounter. As Dolezal points out, 'medical professionals are in a prime position to incite shame' (2015, 574), but also to 'alleviate shame' (2015, 575). Dr Beaton provides a positive model for a patient-centred approach, as does Barker's beautiful depiction of Gillies – a real historical figure. She emphasises his warmth as well as his expertise, which is why his gaze is ultimately more tolerable for Kit than Tonks' or Elinor's. The artist's gaze demands too much of him. Takes too much. So where does this leave the author? I became aware after writing the novel, of a correlation between the objectifying medical gaze and my own treatment of bodies. As has been shown in previous sections, I often cut past Liz's words, and thoughts, to have her body or her blood talk for her, whether she likes it or not: the writer's dictum of show don't tell put into praxis. But the focus on the body is also to remind the reader of their own, and crucially to highlight modes of alienation in order to bring them into question. Indeed the patient/doctor relationship is only one power dynamic in the matrix of what Foucault calls 'biopower', which characterises our society as bent on 'the administration of bodies and the calculated management of life' (1998, 140). Foucault argues that biopower controls populations that were once directed by the threat of corporal punishment, and highlights how, 'at the juncture of the "body" and the "population", sex

became a crucial target of a power organised around the management of life rather than the menace of death' (1998, 147). The resulting normalising society and reproductive interventions raise a number of feminist concerns. These are particularly pertinent in the post-war context of *Unity* when anxieties regarding the declining fertility rate, and the quality of the nation's stock were prevalent. What would be the consequences for women's hard earned and still inadequate freedoms, at home, at work, at school, and at the clinic? My final chapter seeks to address these issues surrounding reproduction, contraception, and sex itself. It is here that gender norms and ideals must come to the fore – and be held accountable. As has been discussed in the previous two chapters, Liz's body image has been problematized by dichotomous thinking and dissociation, brought on by her worst nightmares (the camps) and her wildest dreams (a surgical career); but the foundations were built on rocky ground to begin with, as the examination of a younger woman – Dorothy – will demonstrate.

CHAPTER THREE: SEX, BLOOD, AND RUBBER

As a point of tension, intersection, and exchange, the question of contraception, and its history, has long been of interest to me. Its deployment creates a material moment where bodies meet technology and, to use Freud's rather triumphant sounding phrase, makes a 'prosthetic god' of Man (1961). It is difficult to think of a less triumphant image than a slack and dripping length of galvanised rubber – the used condom, a body bag for the 'little death' that has occurred. Yet its humble design signifies a triumph of science over nature. All going well, life itself can be prevented – birth, controlled – though as Freud also notes, these 'auxiliary organs...give...much trouble at times' (1961, 90). The trouble with contraceptive devices is only partly to do with the devices themselves; though the evolution of both their design and the attitudes and knowledges that shaped them have much to tell us (McLaren, Riddle, Stopes), my focus is on what we can learn about the production and control of female sexuality. I am thus also interested in how several sister subjects appear in embodied narratives, namely, attitudes towards bodily fluids, genitalia, knowledge, and desire.

In her essay 'Professions for Women', taken from a speech given in 1931, Virginia Woolf imagines a woman attempting to write about sex; plagued by the thought of how this will be received – 'she could write no more' (1979, 62). Woolf goes on to note, 'though men sensibly allow themselves great freedom in these respects, I doubt that they realise or can control the extreme severity with which they condemn such freedom in women' (1979, 62). By the time we reach second wave feminism in the 1960s, writers were arguing that men – and women – *must* realise, in order to examine and ultimately reject such condemnation. 'Write!' Cixous implores. 'Writing is for you, you are for you; your body is yours, take it. I know why you haven't written' (1976, 876). The shift in tone in that last sentence – the 'I know...' that takes us from defiant exhortation to confidential consolation – makes personal the acknowledgement of the censorship and self-censorship patriarchal societies had imposed

on women, and the very real dangers women faced in their attempts to free themselves. Indeed, Woolf and Cixous' reflections on self-censorship echo Cook's analysis of how female sexuality was constructed, to the point that when it came to the subject of sex, 'it was women's *duty* as women to be silent' (2004, 92). This chapter then, focusing on representations of female sexual and reproductive experience, is self-evident of a significant shift over the course of the last century. It draws on a range of women writers, not only other novelists, but feminist theorists, such as Cixous, Grosz, Irigaray, and Kristeva. It is also informed by historians, particularly Cook and Fisher, who are interested in the lived experience of women in the first half of the twentieth century.

Such an interest in the everyday is of course shared by the historical novelist. Our characters help us stay rooted in the material, the personal, the specific. I have sought to explore key sexual themes through the characters in my novel, and in particular, having both Liz and Dorothy's narrative point of view has allowed me to contrast different stages of the unsteady path towards an autonomous female sexuality. Towards positive embodiment, beyond gendered dualist concepts. Towards unity.

The treatment of sex in historical novels can reveal the gender dynamics of the past, and present – and how these relate to broader political contexts. This is particularly significant when considering female sexual activity and reproduction within the early twentieth century, when two world wars had increased anxiety around female emancipation and population decline. Women were expected to procreate, within marriage, and as Caine and Sluga have pointed out, in the period surrounding the First World War, 'the least sign of women's sexual indulgence was regarded as a form of depravity which threatened national survival' (2003, 158). Unsurprisingly then, it was difficult for contemporaneous female writers to approach the topic of female sexual desire. Yet there is a sizeable shift in both behaviours and attitudes by the time we get to the Second World War, and this is reflected in the literature – not only

of radical outsiders such as Naomi Mitchison and Jean Rhys, but even in the work of so-called ‘feminine middlebrow’ and Boots booklovers’ favourites like Elizabeth Bowen. *The Heat of the Day* (1948) is often singled out as being Bowen’s finest novel: the story of a high stakes love affair that eroticises the blitz, albeit far less explicitly than Waters was able to 58 years later in *The Night Watch*. Bowen’s day had the desire – but not the detail of the night. The veil of metaphor and mood was still required, leaving notable silences, pregnant pauses, telling gaps in the record of female sexual experience; for as Gottlieb notes, ‘Words tell a story. So do efforts to avoid words’; this discursive act of omission, she goes on to say, ‘brings us straight to the territory of taboo’ (2020, 145). When Mitchison ventured into this territory, writing plainly about sex and contraception in *We Have Been Warned* (1935), she struggled to get it published, was universally attacked on its eventual release, and was even investigated by Scotland Yard. Mitchison ignored pleas from publishers to tone down the novel, writing, ‘I know Dione (the main character) behaves in an odd way but I am quite certain of her behaviour...Possibly I am suffering from a complex of sexual obsessions myself – I expect many people would say so’ (1979, 173). She was determined to reflect reality as she saw and felt it. Interestingly, for Mitchison the problem was largely language – mentioning the unmentionable. Whilst her essays on birth control had theorised many controversial scenarios, it was the embodied experiences of her characters and their everyday idiom that drew Mitchison most criticism. Whilst, in the novel, Dione generally refers to contraceptives, presumably condoms, as ‘things’, Donald’s Russian lover startles him by saying: “You got – rubber goods – comrade?” (1935, 275). It was all too much for her publishers and public alike.

With historical fiction then, contemporary writers like Barker, Waters, and myself, are privileged in that we have a chance to delve deeper, not just between the sheets but into other unthinkable places, like the vaginal cavity itself. The ability to discuss contraception is also

of great importance as through this we can show how these responsibilities played out in daily life; what couples did or didn't articulate, what that says about the relative status of companionate marriages, and not least, what it says about a female sexuality that Cook convincingly argues had been strategically repressed by both sexes over the course of the 19th century. Whilst women faced increasing social, physical and economic risks associated with pregnancy, men were increasingly able to distance themselves from responsibility, leading women to reject sex; Cook thus offers us an account of female sexuality 'in which sexual repression does not come only from external forces imposing social order, but also wells up from within and below' (2004, 92). It isn't until the interwar period, when living conditions and contraception improved, that Cook says 'internalised sexual repression...was gradually eroded' (2004, 162). Nicholson has in addition shown how, 'compared to the years before the war, in 1939-45 more women were having sex both before marriage and with men other than their husbands' (2011, 105) – contraception, or lack of, was thus an increasingly important issue. And it is ultimately a female issue, despite, as will be discussed, an unwillingness from both sexes to view it as such; no matter how much they gained in terms of personal freedoms, education, or economic independence – women still appeared trapped within bodies that would leave them bearing disproportionate consequences when it came to sexual activity. The following sections seek to examine the biological, social, and political factors at play in constructing and maintaining this situation, via an analysis of representations of blood, the vagina, contraception, and sex education. I will be analysing my own characters alongside those predominantly of Waters' – bearing in mind the fact that the author too is implicated in any debates regarding censorship and repression.

Bloody women

Whilst I am eager to eschew any notions of a limiting biologism, there is no getting away from the corporeal realities of sexual relations and any reproductive interventions. In the first half of the twentieth century, the ultimate price some women paid for a sex life was a squalid and terrifying death at the hands of a back-street abortionist. Jones writes that there were ‘500 deaths a year between 1928 and 1933,’ but, ‘surprisingly few women die as a result of abortion in novels and films of the period’ (2013, 203). Whilst cultural depictions might have avoided the death scene, it is interesting that abortion remained one of the more commonly represented taboos of the time. Abortion can be separated from the sexual act itself – it is after the fact – though there was still some controversy when depicted in the likes of Rosamond Lehmann’s 1936 novel *The Weather in The Streets*. Her protagonist describes six pages of a non-localised pain that stretches across two chapters, but there is no mention of blood. Historical novelists like Waters need not shy away from it. In *The Paying Guests* a man is bludgeoned to death, but that is nothing compared to the bloodbath produced by Lillian following her use of an illegal abortifacient:

The napkin, heavy with blood, resembled a piece of raw meat...Lillian lowered herself with a wobble over the bowl, and soaped and rinsed between her legs...her pose had brought on another gush. Frances, alarmed, could see it falling from her; it was like a glistening dark thread...They quickly put the new napkin in place and attached it to the belt. (325)

The reference to raw meat frames the female flesh and blood as something dehumanised and devoured – commodified and subject to the appetites of others. The glistening dark thread is uncanny in a way, succinctly capturing the viscosity of a particular type of menstrual bleeding that connects women, even if it is never named; as Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler note, the ‘colours and consistency of menstrual blood’ remain ‘extremely stigmatised’ (2020,

191). However, the darkness Waters' depicts also signals danger – it is dangerous to bleed, to be fertile, and to reproduce. And what she depicts is not simply menstrual fluid, which is already abject, classified by Kristeva as 'polluting' (1982, 71); in Lillian's aborted thick dark blood, life and death intermingle appallingly. Whilst some might find the descriptive detail gruesome, Waters is articulating the messy realities of the process. It was not the case that a simple pill could make unwanted pregnancies quietly go away. She also gives us a rare glimpse of the curious sanitary belt³⁷ in action; something women at the time rarely wrote about.

In *The Night Watch*, Viv's abortion goes horribly wrong. Waters takes us right into the examination room with her. Though she loses consciousness during the procedure itself, the reader is privy to Viv's nightmarish ether-induced visions as well as her sensations on waking. Alongside the 'dragging internal ache', which is evocatively described so as to leave the reader wincing, Viv 'could feel, too, where blood had gathered between her buttocks and was starting to grow sticky' (393); she later realises the wetness is water where the abortionist has washed her and is further disturbed by that thought. Abortionists were themselves seen as inherently unclean. Jones has pointed out how this reflected 'not only growing twentieth-century concerns of public health but...also associated the lack of cleanliness with dubious morals' (2013, 205) – going back to the correlations of chapter one. Through Viv we experience the invasiveness of the whole procedure, the total and intimate exposure to an unsanctioned medical gaze. Her ordeal is really brought home to the reader in the accumulation of visceral details and small humiliations. In the aftermath, at the flat with Reggie, the tension increases with Viv's blood loss: 'she tried to stop it with sheets of lavatory paper. The blood slid about, got all over her hands. She'd begun to shake. Her heart was beating wildly' (403). Due to the construction of the novel, we know that Viv

³⁷ A belt with hooks, where small washable towels were attached. This held the towel in position in the days before tight elasticated underwear became the norm.

survives, but we are no less relieved when Kay finally arrives to take her away in her ambulance. Kay saves Viv, not only by getting her to the hospital, but by giving her a ring to help her pose as a married woman. Even at death's door, Viv is afraid of both the legal and social repercussions of her transgression. The hill of respectability was one many women died on.

But Viv's shame is not limited to her sexual transgression and unplanned pregnancy. Immediately after the abortion; 'Mr Imrie said that he'd put a wad of gauze inside her, to take up the blood; and he'd left, beside her on the couch, an ordinary sanitary towel and belt. Seeing that she grew embarrassed all over again...' (393). The female body bleeds regardless of sexual activity. Even when signalling the absence of pregnancy, this sign of potential fertility is steeped in shame, and its trappings such as sanitary products are taboo. As Wood notes, 'The consequence of menstrual taboos for women's lives is significant and varied...contextualised culturally, geographically, and according to religious and other social practices' (2020,321); Gottlieb has gone on to link the taboo on discussing menstruation directly to negative health outcomes (2020, 151). Much has been written on the subject in recent years (Babler, Winkler, Fahs et al.), demonstrating how menstrual shame and the so-called 'concealment imperative'³⁸ oppresses women, highlighting 'the challenges women face as menstruators in public spaces (such as work and school)' (Johnston-Robledo and Chrisler, 2020, 190). This issue is touched on in *Unity* when Dorothy gets her period whilst at school. Not permitted to go to the toilet she ends up running all the way home. She takes off her skirt and can't initially see the stain, 'But when she pressed the tips of her fingers into it...She was staring at her hand when her mother opened the door. Holding it up slightly so she was almost waving, a glistening red wave – like a child who'd got at some potted plants'

³⁸ Wood offers 'the menstrual concealment imperative' as a theory to explain how women's internalisation of the culture of concealment is a form of social control and a body project that keeps women disembodied and oppressed' (2020, 320)

(177). The red hand is symbolic of her feelings of guilt. She is also infantilised by her mother's presence, embarrassed and estranged from her own body, unable to control or decipher it. Part of the shame is that she feels ill-equipped, as if there are ways of handling things better that women are somehow expected to know – unspoken rules; it is a recurring theme with Dorothy that will be expanded on later in the chapter.

Piran states that, 'menstruation compounds the experience of the body as a deficient object...' (2020, 207). Blood is thus associated with shame and the leaking, blushing female body. As Grosz has demonstrated, 'in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; as viscosity, entrapping, secreting...' (1994, 203). This nightmarish vision is linked by Kristeva to fear of the generative power of the archaic mother (1982, 77), but what are the other possible bases for a more coherent female body image?

Liz's relationship with her own body is complicated by her aspirations, which are professional and intellectual rather than domestic or familial. As Grosz states: '...the body has been and still is closely associated with women and the feminine, whereas the mind remains associatively and implicitly connected to men and the masculine' (2018, 32).

Liz is thus susceptible to one of the pitfalls of egalitarian feminism, which Grosz characterises as a striving towards an equality that masculinises oneself and thus suppresses sex specific needs (2018, 52). Thus, to use Butler's terms, Liz finds herself in a performance of masculinity. She baulks at her position below Ramsay in the hospital hierarchy, and plays down her fertile potential by mastering her own contraceptive methods. She sees this as a personal and professional necessity and is aided in this by her uncommon anatomical knowledge. The nature of Liz's intellectual interests conjure a quote from Irigaray's essay 'Is the Subject of Science Sexed?' Here Irigaray asks: 'Is a woman scientist wholly a man? A

genetic aberration? A monstrosity? A bisexual human being? A woman cowed into submission, or not yet subdued? Or??' (1985, 77). The double question mark at the end is tantalising, agonising even – what is Liz? What will become of her?? In 1948 there were still very fixed ideas around this. As Liz notes whilst enjoying temporary anonymity on Mull, 'They would eventually wonder what it was she was doing, question who exactly she thought she was, and insist above all else, that despite the risk of being crushed to death, it was about time she was getting married and settling down' (189-190). The use of 'crushed' is a reference to the story of Tragedy Rock, but it also reflects her very real concerns regarding the inequalities within marriage.

In the final chapter of *Unity*, Ramsay is with Liz in Oban when an urgent message for help is sent from the cottage hospital. Liz is annoyed to discover that it is not hers but Ramsay's help they require – the male mind. In the end the only thing they need from Liz is her blood – the female body, monstrous but necessary. Her agreement to give her blood shows her willingness to harness the energy of all her facets, but it also signals the scale of the challenge that awaits her if she hopes to gain ground as a doctor, in arenas identified by Grosz as 'associatively and implicitly connected to men and the masculine' (2018, 32). The female body is not something to be overcome, but sexism and restrictive notions of gender are.

'My brains and my acid vagina'

The vagina, even today, is shrouded in a certain degree of mystery – which is somewhat compounded by the very nature of its design. Internal, hidden, taboo; both mythologised and medicalised. In the early twentieth century it was still men who were largely setting the tone of any investigations; the likes of Freud, who, according to Kitsi-Mitakou, 'Spoke of female bodies as mysterious, unapproachable territories...dichotomised female sexuality into clitoral and vaginal, and...used male terms in his attempt to define, regularise, and rectify that which

to him was an appalling mystery, the woman's body' (1997, 2). In *Unity* I wanted to explore the idea that both social censure and medicalisation – which are part of the same network of biopower – served to alienate women from their own bodies. However, an examination of the vagina itself can be particularly problematic when historical sources that foreground female experience are lacking. How did women really think, feel, and speak about their genitals and sex lives? Historical novelists must still navigate historical notions of propriety as we seek to tell the truth of the body without putting modern words into our characters' mouths. Irigaray may tell us 'Don't weep. One day we will learn to say ourselves' (1980, 77), just as Cixous tells us to 'Write!' (1976, 876), but the historical novelist treads a fine line between what they can say in the context of a certain period without piercing the verisimilitude of historical believability. One example of a scene that sits rather awkwardly is in Sarah Perry's *The Essex Serpent* (2016). It says much for Perry's storytelling and characterisation that I can just about believe a somewhat frosty fossil-hunting widow could end up being digitally penetrated by a married minister in the middle of a field, in the late 19th century; but I struggled with what followed, when the minister then appears to put his finger in each of their mouths. I became distracted by my scepticism and found myself questioning the action – though perhaps that was exactly what Perry intended. However, many readers don't seem to take issue with, or pick up on this moment, and eight out of ten participants in a related Goodreads thread would feel safe gifting the novel to a 'very, very conservative mother in law' (Goodreads n.d.).

There has been much debate about the treatment of sex in Waters' novels, as highlighted in the Cusk review referenced earlier, though Waters herself has always been clear regarding her approach; as de Groot notes, her doctoral work 'argues that fictional historical representation of sexuality demonstrates clearly the concerns of the moment it is written in more than a clear communication of 'historical' identities' (2013, 58). But Waters is not just

writing about the body in sexual terms – it is the full range of sexed experience that gives her writing such richness. If we return to Viv in *The Night Watch*, following her abortion, I was interested in her alarm, not only due to the traumatic procedure and the accompanying pain, but at the unknowability of her own insides. In yet another key scene that takes place on a toilet: ‘she sat and felt for the ends of the plug of gauze, afraid of it; afraid that it might disappear inside her’ (393). It is not what Mr Imrie has taken out of her that worries her, but what he has put in – possibly out of reach, and certainly out of view; the vagina, in this respect, is more easily accessed by others. Yet the early twentieth century was a period when increasing numbers of women were venturing further inside themselves, with the growing use of the occlusive cap. Stopes recommended the cap above any other form of contraception because ‘the interference with the complete normal sex act is at a minimum’ (1924, 140), though she does note the potential problems regarding fitting and insertion. Her characterisation of women who have difficulties inserting their caps as ‘very stupid’ appears to be a harsh judgement of their intellect, rather than a more understandable frustration at the general squeamishness induced by society at the time. Indeed as Cixous states, women have been ‘turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them’ (1976, 875). Of course, it is impossible to actually turn away from our bodies – what we have been taught is a schism, a shame that not only has detrimental psychological implications, but very real material ones too. Cook notes that distaste about the body was the reason many people struggled to use contraception effectively in the early 20th century (2004, 115).

When Liz gives Annag a copy of Stopes’ *Contraception* to read Annag is hugely offended by a section that links fertility and intelligence. She asks Liz if she read the book before giving it to her:

“Well, it was a while ago, but I thought because it had the device descriptions, and the pictures—”

“Oh aye, it would need to have pictures right enough, what with me clearly being the unintellectual incorrigibly fertile type.” Her cheeks had turned pink.

“What?”

“Do you not remember that bit? Oh,” she threw up her hands, “I thought you’d have marked that bit out so you could categorise your patients as if they were beasts at the mart.”

“Oh...I remember now.” Bugger it. But it wasn’t as if she’d written the bloody thing.

“It must be nice then,” Annag went on, “not having to worry too much on your own account.”

Liz stiffened. “You mean on account of my brains and my acid vagina?”

Annag gasped. “You can’t just come out with that sort of thing – that’s your whole problem.” (276-277)

In this scene the tension between Liz’s need to identify with ‘male reason’, and the looming figure of the fecund female, comes to a head. Liz can’t initially see why Annag is taking the book so personally, though she is quick enough to take offence when Annag refers to her own self-imposed sterility – and possible, if using Stopes’ categorisations, infertility. The categorisation of women by their vaginal secretions, and the direct linkage of this to their intellect, was one of the most astounding things I found in Stopes’ book.³⁹ It is the medicalisation of the modern woman’s dilemma – what Mitchison called ‘brain work’ (1930, 21) versus a family life. But whilst Mitchison writes about how difficult it is to combine the two, Stopes makes it out to be a physiological impossibility. By exploring this dilemma through my characters, I wanted to foreground what is so easily missed from

³⁹ Stopes categories are: ‘(1) Normally weak acid + temporarily alkaline (often associated with fairly intellectual and yet fertile type). (2) Excessively acid + insufficiently alkaline (often associated with “brainy” and ascetic types, tendency to infertility). (3) Weakly acid + strongly alkaline (often associated with unintellectual, fertile type. If extreme, what I have called in lectures the “incorrigibly fertile, alkaline type”) (1924, 61).

theoretical debates: women with large families were not necessarily ‘stupid’ or ‘uneducated’ or ‘unintellectual’ or ‘incorrigibly fertile’, they were individual women with their own sets of circumstances, often with poor access to forms of contraception they were not even supposed to admit to knowing about. The fact that even Liz, who cares deeply about Annag, and approaches the issue with the best of intentions, can slip into such insensitivity shows the complex issues at play when anyone interferes in a woman’s reproductive choices. Yet despite the complex historical context I have tried to incorporate throughout the novel, the biggest challenge in this particular scene was the language – would a woman at that time really use the word vagina? Certainly not in normal conversation, as reflected by Annag’s reaction to it. But Liz isn’t exactly normal in her view of the body, influenced by anatomical textbooks, and I felt this was another example of how her medical gaze, through which she also views herself, jars when extended to an everyday context. The word may stand out for readers, perhaps even striking them as an odd or anachronistic usage – but I decided to keep it. If the word stands out perhaps readers will question why. Why does it still make us uncomfortable? Ultimately (borrowing the same logic used by Mitchison earlier), I don’t know if a woman in 1948 would have said it – but I know Liz would, and I hope the reader agrees. Here character, and consistency of character, is key.

At least with Liz’s preference for anatomical terms I was able to cross-check these, and how widely used the word vagina was, by researching medical texts from the time. It would have been more difficult to trace the appropriate slang words, as these rarely made it into print – and wouldn’t have been written by women. Barker’s use of ‘fanny’ in *Noonday* works because it is Bertha who is thinking it, rather than Elinor whose class would have got in the way of such plain speaking, or even thinking. When Bertha contemplates having to take her séances on the road again she thinks: ‘More cheesecloth up her fanny. Whatever they’d done to her insides that time, it had left a bloody big hole. Which was convenient. She mightn’t

have been much use giving birth to the living, but my God she was a dab hand at giving birth to the dead' (136). The vagina, and possibly even uterus, is characterised as a cavernous emptiness, which symbolises the children she has lost. Some were taken from her, others were aborted; such transgression from the idealised mother figure has made her monstrous – gaping, 'giving birth to the dead'.

One recurring theme when researching both contraception and the establishment of the NHS was the number of untreated uterine prolapses prevalent at that time.⁴⁰ When Liz is assisting Dr Beaton with a hysterectomy, they discuss the problem in much the same terms as the testimonies I read, with Dr Beaton saying, "Terrible how many women are walking around in such a condition" (154). But moving beyond the historical facts, Liz in the next line thinks: 'Christ. She could already feel a slight burning in her knickers just thinking about it. It was so raw and angry, and just hanging there' (154). In her physical response she is identifying with these women, but she is also appalled. She later reflects on the cases she'd seen in the poorer parts of Glasgow; 'They'd been shocking some of those women. She'd almost forgotten about the horrors of the female reproductive system after years of the army and bodies that were almost exclusively male. It was something foreign again – this fallen down flesh. This wear and tear that apparently just happened. At least you knew where you were with acts of violence' (154). Again she seeks to distance herself from the 'fallen down' female body, but this in turn leads to her own exile and estrangement. Liz's lexical choices echo Irigaray's idea that 'There are no words to talk about it except filthy, mutilating words' (1991, 41). This hurts and damages the cohesiveness of the female body image. Liz hopes to become an expert on the body but has yet to come to terms with all aspects of her own.

Waters provides a noticeable contrast to this perception of the vagina and its secretions. The word choice in the following scene is particularly interesting: '(Lillian) put her mouth to

⁴⁰ Many memoirs and first-hand accounts mention this, such as Dr John Marks, whose testimony features on the Our NHS Scotland website. Recollecting the 5th of July 1948, he states: 'There was a colossal amount of unmet need that just poured in. There were women with prolapsed uteruses literally wobbling down below their leg'.

Frances' breasts, her fingers between Frances's legs. "You feel like velvet, Frances," she whispered the first time she did it. "You feel like wine. My hand feels drunk" (244). 'Velvet' and 'wine' offer a softer more celebratory image, compared to the brutal and 'mutilating' words Liz uses. Waters' lesbian characters can view and desire the vagina as other, outwith their own complex and potentially negative body images. For Lillian it is not even an uncanny experience – she seems surprised by the feel of it. As Cook has pointed out, 'there was no socially sanctioned reason for women to touch their genitals in the early 1920s' (2004, 151). Similarly there were few socially sanctioned words. To describe her sensations Lillian has to draw on the everyday, on metaphor that is romantic rather than precise. The narration, focalised through Frances, reflects this discretion, locating us merely 'between Frances' legs', leaving the reader to decide whether the textural metaphors imply external or internal touching.

In contrast to the above discussion, the male reproductive system is characterised by its external qualities, due to the formation of the male genitalia and its ejaculatory functions – or what Liz describes pejoratively as 'their ability to detach, eject, casually leave three hundred million dead' (141). This thought occurs to her when wondering who the father of Effie's baby is, three hundred million being the average number of sperm in a single ejaculation; it is of course also a reference to the wars waged within patriarchal systems.

In *The Night Watch* Waters gives us a rare depiction, within this historical context, of the female experience of semen. When Viv catches Reggie's ejaculation in her hand he immediately asks her:

"Got it all?"

"I think so."

"Careful."

"I am being careful."

“Good girl.”

...she looked around for a handkerchief, something like that; and finally wiped her hand on the grass.

He watched her do it, approvingly. “That’s good for the ground,” he said... “that’ll make a tree, and a knickerless girl will one day come and climb it, and she’ll get in the club by me.”” (71)

The male orgasm is messy, but responsibility for it immediately devolves to the female. She is implicated by the mess of the seed, quite apart from having to bear the burden of any future fruit. With his comment about the tree, Reggie is able to simultaneously distance himself from the act of conception, whilst identifying with the permanent and fertile earth; but later when Viv looks at her hand she sees, ‘the spunk on her fingers had dried as fine as pretty lace; she rubbed at it, and it became plain white flakes that drifted to the ground and were lost’ (72). Reggie is not permanent, he will not bear fruit, and his so called seed is first feminised, then simply floats away. Such depictions of semen also become politically charged when considered in the context of Grosz’ observation, that in phallogentric cultures, men tend to ‘project themselves and their products as disembodied, pure and uncontaminated’ (2018, 42). She notes elsewhere: ‘Phenomenology is generally displaced in favour of externalisation, medicalisation, solidification. Seminal fluid is understood primarily as what it makes, what it achieves, a causal agent and thus a thing, a solid...’ (1994, 199). Waters manages to succinctly, even beautifully, debunk such claims.

Compared to Reggie, Ramsay is less patronising and more considerate in his sexual conduct. There is a scene in *Unity* where Liz watches him washing himself after sex: ‘As he worked his hands between his legs she turned her eyes to the floor – was that her? It must be her he was washing away’ (153). She is vague in her unease regarding her sexual secretions, reluctant to think the words – forgetting that he has his own fluids to contend with, even if

they have the technology to trap and dispose of those. Ramsay has not projected his mess on to Liz, but she has somehow still managed to construe herself as the unclean one. This is rather depressing given her and Ramsay's relatively sex-positive relationship; after hundreds of years of being deemed intrinsically unclean the female remains tainted.

Earlier drafts of *Unity* featured a sex scene between Liz and Sandy, where the post-sex mess played a prominent part in teasing out the gender dynamics within their relationship; Liz wiped herself with Sandy's shirt, which she then ended up having to wash for him. This was going to symbolise his attempts to impose a more traditional role on her, but as the plot and characters evolved I began to question the whole idea. The act seemed incongruous with my characters' motivations and I didn't want to undermine her attachment to Ramsay. In the end I sacrificed part of my political agenda for my artistic one. However, depictions of semen, and the mess of sex, are not just important because of the gender politics they portray – by skipping over such details we are also often skipping over the question of contraception.

Contraception and sex education

As alluded to earlier, a focus on contraception rather than abortion brings attention onto the sex act itself – something historically difficult to depict in fiction, due to both self-censorship and the very real threat of prosecution for obscenity. The inseparability of contraception from sex has also made it difficult for couples to discuss, to this day. As Fisher has pointed out, 'many women regarded sex as so private an issue that they did not want to discuss it even with their own partners' (2008, 211). The impossibility of discussing contraception is thus self-evident. It is also linked to the conditioned denial of female sexual desire. As Fisher also states: 'For women, taking control of contraception meant talking about sex, preparing for sex, and adopting a sexual persona, steps which most women in this period would not countenance. Their sexual identity was bound up with passively receiving the

sexual attentions of men' (2008, 210). There is indeed an irony, that what itself started out as a sort of contraceptive measure – if we accept Cook's previously discussed analysis on the rejection of female desire – then became one of the major barriers to effective use of contraception.

Some methods required greater preparation than others. To return to the occlusive cap – this was something that had to be inserted prior to sex. Those brave enough to venture that far up the vaginal passage had to own the fact that they expected to have sex, or, heaven forbid, wanted to; they also had to contend with the awkward sense of rejection if the man didn't happen to be in the mood, which could be doubly shaming.

Despite her considerable flaws, there is no denying Stopes sought to empower women, and her promotion of the occlusive cap was part of that agenda. It is also worth bearing in mind that the language she employs is no harsher, indeed probably less so, than much of the material of the time.⁴¹ Similarly, her idea of empowerment does not match modern notions. She writes of the cap: 'A further advantage of this contraceptive measure is that the woman herself is responsible for its correct use, and she is safe even if her husband be drunken, careless, obstructive or antagonistic' (1924, 157). Whilst drunken antagonistic husbands remain an appalling prospect, with or without a cap, removing the fear of pregnancy may well have given comfort to some women facing this domestic reality. Stopes doesn't go so far as to point it out, but this was, after all, still in the time of marital immunity against the charge of rape.⁴² The figure of the brutish husband, however, should not be taken as the norm, and Fisher has pointed out how responsibility for contraception and control of family size was an increasingly important component in the construction of positive masculine identities (2008, 193-194).

⁴¹ Whilst D. H. Lawrence may despair of Stopes' attempt to 'disinfect the dirty little secret' of sex, Cook points to the fact that her portrayal of the body was 'less mechanical' and 'more emotional' than the writers of sex manuals that followed her (2004, 125).

⁴² Marital immunity against the charge of rape was not abolished in Scotland until 1989, and 1991 in England and Wales.

In-keeping with the construction of her identity, Liz takes control and uses a cap in her relations with Ramsay, though they initially used condoms when their affair began in France. In one scene she remembers finding the empty packet on the floor of a seedy boarding-house:

She picked it up and looked at the red lettering: do not leave this in a public place as it is likely to cause offence.

“Oh sorry about that.”

She looked up to meet his eye as he came towards her, then down to his swaying genitals, and back.

“No,” he laughed, “I suppose we’re beyond bits of paper now.” (153)

Their disregard for conventions such as marriage – bits of paper – is what initially unites them, though it becomes problematic again in peacetime when Liz feels ashamed of any impulse to ‘own’ Ramsay. She insists on politicising her emotions instead of acknowledging the role of her own ego – or her own sex specific needs, to go back to Grosz. Again though, this scene shows us that she is relatively liberated when it comes to her sexual urges; not caring ‘even though the rubbers, the room, the warnings – they had all probably been issued with prostitutes in mind, and yet there she was’ (153). What does bother her however is the physical sensation of the condom itself, ‘akin to something more like a medical examination. A foreign rubber-clad invasion. The latex was too smooth, and at the same time too irritating. She supposed it was a bit rich of her, trying to force onto Annag something she wasn’t keen on herself’ (152). Liz again conflates the medical and the sexual, as with her observations earlier in the novel of Ramsay’s fingers in his surgical gloves. In the extract above, she is also acknowledging the gulf between her and Annag’s situations, and has rightly identified the best contraceptive method for her friend, though she feels guilty about having done so. The condoms – a barrier method contraceptive – that she gives Annag are symbolic of something coming between the friends; Annag is now a mother, but she is also trapped in a

low socio-economic position, whereas Liz, despite her complaints, is relatively independent and upwardly mobile. She cannot understand why her friend would not take steps to avoid further pregnancies, or even want that life in the first place. However, it is Liz herself who is the anomaly – the monstrosity to go back to Irigaray’s term – for as Fisher has pointed out; ‘control of reproduction and the ability to control their own bodies was not an aim for most women in the 1930s and 1940s, indeed, it was actively rejected by many’ (2008, 213). Liz’s position as outsider is an important device within the novel. She returns to Oban, having previously been ostracised, only to be cast out once again in the wake of the *Married Love* scandal. Her reasons for giving that book to Dorothy are legitimate but she has again been let down by her blinkered medical gaze, failing to see the potential implications, not only for herself, but crucially for Dorothy.

After the incident with the flasher at the hotel, Liz wants to somehow demystify sex for Dorothy, telling her, “we don’t want you to go getting a complex now...” (263). She is aware of the state of ignorance young women are kept in, and as someone always eager for knowledge herself, she is keen to facilitate this for Dorothy. Indeed, their friendship is full of positive potential; Dorothy is navigating the tricky transition into womanhood, and as Piran points out, ‘relational connections’ are one of the key factors that contribute to ‘positive embodiment’ (2020, 202). Yet, Evans notes that ‘by the 1940s only a third of secondary schools across the country provided (sex education). Many schools had to wait until the 1970s to receive any at all’ (2013, 263). It is unsurprising then that Dorothy has not encountered any guidance on the subject and is left wondering how Annag has so many children while her own mother just has one. Her mother’s reaction to Liz’s intervention is also telling. I wanted Dorothy’s mother to represent the policing of the ‘maintenance of ignorance’ Fisher writes about (2008). Dorothy’s mother obviously has some understanding of sex and childbirth, as her negative allusions to the latter confirm, but she insists that

Married Love is filth and tells Dorothy “It’s not for young girls so you can go getting ideas” (268). When Dorothy tries to take refuge in the scientific aspects of the book, it only serves to anger her mother further; when Dorothy says “It’s physiology...you just don’t understand— (268), she is immediately slapped across the face. Her mother’s reaction is fuelled by a combination of factors; resentment of the implied slight on her own stance, her jealousy of Liz’s influence, and a horror at Dorothy’s unfeminine alignment with science and knowledge. As Fisher has shown, ‘women in particular sought to preserve and maintain a state of naivety in defiance of the spread of information. Ignorance implied moral purity, innocence and respectability’ (2008, 27). This is the same situation that came to be lamented by Cixous, who condemns ‘stupid sexual modesty’ that has made women ‘victims’ (1976, 875). As a result of transgressing society’s normalising and heavily gendered moral codes, Dorothy is both publicly and privately humiliated, resulting in a deep-seated and long-lasting shame. She has already felt the shame of her procreative potential marked by her period and her increasing bust measurements. She can now add the shame of original sin; in our final chapter with Dorothy she reflects: ‘You should never admit to that sort of thing; it was vulgar to want to know. Nice girls didn’t know and nice girls didn’t ask. It was best just to ignore it – even when it was soaking through your skirt, or bursting out the buttons of your blouse. Well, she knew that now, though they might have told her sooner’ (311-312). She realises at once the absurdity and the inescapability of the situation. She is trapped, not only within the gendered moral codes of her community, but within her own – to go back to Grosz – leaking, seeping, secreting body. The longed for christening dress plays a crucial role in highlighting her situation; it becomes tied up with feelings of guilt, not only regarding her sexual impulses and curiosity, but also the way this impacts on her relationship with her parents. Earlier in the novel Dorothy describes the awkwardness of having her bust measured by her mother, and her mother’s attempt to ignore Dorothy’s developing body, regardless of what the tape

measure might say. As a result, the dress ‘was so tight it gave her the sensation of being bound around the chest. The rest of it seemed to fit...there was nothing wrong with the dress, it was just her. She could see under the flowing lines of the thin fabric, altogether too much of her’ (315-316). She feels simultaneously exposed and constrained. Her reaction to the dress prompts a multi-faceted guilt that ultimately rests and manifests itself as a disgust with her own body:

Think of all the work that had gone into it, never mind the coupons. If she thought about it too much she wanted to cry. It had been foolish really to think that any frock could fix her. She might have saved her poor mother the bother. There were poor girls who didn’t even have one... Some people were just skin and bone in rags, and here she was – a big lump in a new frock. (317)

She feels numb, ashamed, and dissociated from her own body. Her adolescent vulnerability reflects Bobier’s observation that ‘women are especially at risk of adopting an observer’s perspective of their body during times of physiological change...’ (2020, 306). Liz was trying to enlighten Dorothy about sex in a way, but focused on the physiology, an acceptance of the biology rather than an introduction to the more complex social constructs; a conflicting trap in which, Irigaray notes, women are ‘eroticised and called to a double movement of exhibition and of chaste retreat’ (1985, 26). It is this that Dorothy thinks they might have told her about sooner – this rocky ground on which body images are liable to fracture and collapse, something Liz herself is still struggling to negotiate. To borrow Mitchison’s phrasing: she might have been warned.

Blackman notes that ‘as reproductive beings, women were often portrayed as primarily bodily, and also as lacking control of their bodies’ (2013, 376), but far from being a natural state of affairs, the theorists cited in this chapter have shown that this situation was

manufactured by patriarchal societies and states seeking to disempower women. In the early twentieth century, as Caine and Sluga point out, ‘most governments clung to their authority over women and women’s bodies in the interests of family and nation’ (2003, 168). This is Foucault’s biopower in action, the result of which is played out through Liz, and then Dorothy’s attempts, and failures, to take control. But it is also inadvertently played out through their relation to each other. For Foucault, sexuality is ‘an especially dense transfer point for relations of power: between men and women, young people and old people, parents and offspring, teachers and students...’ (1998,103). Liz has underestimated her own power and Dorothy suffers as a result.

Dorothy has at least now been warned. She has learned to censor what she says and does. Next she will learn to censor what she thinks and feels. This type of self-censoring can be automatic in certain contexts. In *Noonday* Elinor notices how her art is impacted when she is physically and mentally inhabiting the family space – in daughter mode. She is unhappy with her drawings; ‘Cabbages are shocking if you get them right, especially those thick-veined outer leaves: positively scrotal. Only she couldn’t draw them like that, not here, surrounded by her family. She was unconsciously censoring herself, and it wasn’t just what she drew, either. It was what she let herself see’ (13-14). These lines were of particular interest to me, as a writer tackling sexual topics, against the backdrop of my own hometown – thus implicating myself, my family, and my wider community. There is no doubt that the historical context has made this more manageable, but I also know that I have been self-censoring, consciously and unconsciously. I have been inspired though, not only by the graphic reality revealed in retrospective publications such as memoirs, diaries, and private correspondence, but also by a growing realisation of my relative freedom, one denied many of the early twentieth-century novelists I have referenced, and hard won by the feminist writers and theorists who followed.

I have written the novel that I wanted to write and expressed my ideas as I saw fit. But I must also accept that concepts such as ‘decency’ or ‘offence’ are subjective, and like Liz I have decided to pursue my goals regardless. Ultimately I have tried to handle the historical material sensitively and have written about my hometown with a deep and genuine love. Like all loved ones, it can be suffocating at times; a key component of Dorothy’s shame is the public nature of it. Social codes are upheld by whole communities rather than individuals, but they are also influenced by progressive politics, advances in science, technology – art. So we write on.

Whilst the novel ends with Dorothy at a low ebb – in contrast to Liz’s high – there is a glimmer of hope. Interestingly Ramsay has a role to play in both narrative arcs; Man is not the enemy. Enlightened man is not the enemy at least. As Grosz is careful to point out in her own theories, ‘it is not really a question of blaming men but of understanding that certain perspectives are particular to their social and corporeal interests’ (2018, 39).

When Dorothy meets Ramsay in the street she is embarrassed at the prospect of having to shake his hand, but it offers her an opportunity to assert control – to greet him in a grown up way rather than the subordinating, overtly feminine way she has been trained to:

“Pleased to meet you.” As she said the words she almost curtsied automatically, the way her mother had taught her to since she was a child. The muscles in her legs seemed set on it; it was as if she could feel the bend happening independently. How appalling to lose control of her own body like this. She stood up straight, reached her hand out towards his, and shook it. (320)

As previously mentioned, hands are hugely significant in the novel. From the depths of her depression Dorothy is able to reach outside of herself and connect with another. Whilst Liz cannot gift a painless unity or autonomy to Dorothy, or the younger self that Dorothy to some degree represents, she has at least shone a light along some crucial socially-constructed

boundary walls, and the possibilities that lie beyond. To expand on the earlier Piran quotation; ‘In particular, physical freedom, mental freedom...social power and relational connections contribute to positive embodiment’ (2020, 202). Both Dorothy and Liz end the novel looking towards furthering their education in the city – a potential path to physical and mental freedom, as well as longer term social power – but Liz has at last come to realise the importance of connections to home and family too.

CONCLUSION

I embarked on this PhD project wanting to tell a particular story about the death of Unity Mitford. I am by no means alone in finding her a person of interest (Litchfield, Pryce-Jones, Rehak), but what drew me to her most was not her outrageous history, her relationship with Hitler, the sexual slurs, or the specifics of her brain injury – though these were all contributing factors – it was the Oban connection; it was reading about ‘bright young things’, looking for insight into another world, only to stumble upon home when least expected. The idea of home has remained central to the project – informing, complicating, and always grounding – but it has also taken on a broader significance when considering the body as something we may or may not feel at home within. As these concepts unite and play out through Liz, much of what I have sought to communicate depends on our understanding of where she ends up by the end of the novel. My conclusion thus begins with that end. I will round off my textual analysis, draw together the theoretical threads of the preceding chapters – tracing these from the past into the present – and make claims as to how my processes and findings contribute to knowledge on female embodiment, historical fiction, and practice-led research itself.

Endings

In the final scene of *Unity*, Liz sits at McCaig’s tower with Ramsay in the early hours of the morning. We know by now the reasons that have stopped her fully owning both her feelings for him and her career ambitions, yet, as the barriers begin to break down – and it is all there for her to reach out and take – there remains a significant degree of uncertainty. We do not know what will happen to Liz now, or even whether she is left holding Ramsay’s hand, or gripping the stone ledge which has somewhat disturbingly turned ‘to butter beneath her’ (349). Her resolve to retain her barriers is only weakened once her body is, after she is bled

like an ancient hysteric. She acknowledges her drives and desires that are both sex-specific and socially transgressive, however, this only brings the divergent paths offered her into starker relief. She still faces the same socially-constructed dilemma that Mitchison discussed in 1930 – ‘brain work’ v family life (1930, 21), not to mention the medical profession’s own ‘re-cemented’ gender hierarchy (Yeo 2006, 155). The marriage bar may have been officially lifted in the UK in 1946, but women were still being roundly urged back into the home by those across the political spectrum.

This sense of women’s post-war disappointment is evocatively conjured in *The Night Watch*. By starting her novel in 1947 – two years after the allied victory – on a note of utter dejection, Waters highlights the transience of the apparent boom in wartime women’s liberation. The atmosphere evoked through the characters’ body images is one of a weary and battered London, where everyone is down at heel and fed-up. Viv is described as having ‘A sort of greyness. A layer of grief as fine as ash, just beneath the surface’ (18); an anaemic appearance that reflects her past trauma. What’s more, the peace has brought a return to the old order with many women, no longer useful in the work place, expected to return to more traditional roles and feminine modes of being. Nicholson has noted that feelings of redundancy and ‘isolation’ were widely felt by women (2011, 346), and that ‘Immediate post-war Britain was not a showcase for emancipation’ (2011, 382). The range of memoirs included in Nicholson’s analysis shows that some women were only too happy to banish memories of death and deprivation and focus on family life, but others, such as hospital social worker Phyllis Noble, balked at the prospect of the kitchen-sink. Phyllis – married in July 1948 – fought to retain her career and achieve, ‘to the limits that she could have hoped for’ (2011, 432), a ‘marriage of minds’ (2011, 434). Similarly, Liz is ‘not a machine’ (286); she wants Ramsay, and wants love, but is aware that the conventional models available to them are insufficient and potentially stifling. In this context Liz’s control over her

reproductive body is crucial, but her medicalisation of sex does not help her accommodate its emotional attachments. To countenance further commitment to Ramsay she would have to trust him to put his money where his mouth was in terms of gender equality – not something those involved in leftist movements could be relied on for.⁴³ Yet, this idea of potentially losing oneself in love is pertinent in any historical context. Later in the century Irigaray was still asking, ‘When he tells me, “I love you”, does he give me back myself? Or does he give himself in this form? His? Mine? The same? Another? But then what have I become?’ (1980, 70). In patriarchal societies love lives are traditionally riskier for women, expected to submit to their partners, something previously enshrined in law via marriage legislation. The post-war renegotiation of gender dynamics, companionate marriage, and women’s rights had, as modern readers know, many difficult decades ahead. Furthermore, a woman can face different obstacles at different stages of her life.

For example, by the time we meet middle-aged Elinor in the 1940s, in *Noonday*, she has been married to Paul for some time. She has continued to work as an artist but she does not present us with an overtly positive picture. Having been unable to have children, she feels she has failed as a woman – something that is compounded when her husband embarks on an affair. In this context it is interesting how few descriptions of Elinor’s appearance we get in this novel. In her middle-age, Elinor, like many women, seems to have become invisible. Indeed on the occasions she is reminded of her own body it is uncomfortable, for example when talking to her nephew Alex: ‘Beside him she felt like a spindle-shanked elderly virgin’ (15). Her sense of redundancy is crucially played out through the body. Yet, through her work she is able to regain a sense of purpose and independence. By the end of the novel

⁴³ Davis points out the TUC’s support for the post-war closing of nurseries and the abandonment of its commitment to equal pay. She further notes; ‘In a rare statement of its underlying philosophy, the 1948 Annual Report of the TUC contained the following gem of unenlightenment: ‘There is little doubt in the minds of the General Council that the home is one of the most important spheres for a woman worker and that it would be doing a great injury to the life of the nation if women were persuaded or forced to neglect their domestic duties in order to enter industry...’ The message for women was clear’ (2009, 261).

there is also a tentative reconciliation with her husband. Paul, despite his infidelity, remains a sympathetic character; Barker successfully shows us the depth and complexity of their connection. They have struggled to find the ideal balance between security and freedom – but ideal marriages are not the stuff of realist fiction like Barker's.

Elinor and Paul have to negotiate Irigaray's question – 'how can I say "I love you" differently?' (1980, 70). It is one Liz does not have an answer for either; ultimately she has no way of knowing what a future with Ramsay holds, but the question of love or autonomy is false in itself, in that we are never truly autonomous anyway. As Gatens points out, 'The self only exists in the complex web of its varied relations – there is no 'above or beyond' of these relations, no apriori or transcendent 'I' (1996, 38). What then, have our female characters been striving towards? Where does the character arc of Liz, the embodiment of this PhD project, actually take us?

The death of unity?

In my thesis' introduction I referred to the exiled female figure of western philosophy – banished from her own body and begging the questions: how did we get here? How do we get back? Through my own writing, and in my analysis of others, I have sought to demonstrate the means of this figure's production, highlighting some particular problems socially-constructed gender expectations can create for women when it comes to coherent body image, and thus positive embodiment. Over the course of the last three chapters I have shown how authors draw the reader into their character's bodies and psyches, presenting rounded characters in specific situations and utilising sensory and visceral detail in their focalised narratives.

Chapter one outlined how definitions of cleanliness/dirtiness are socially constructed and heavily shaped by class and gender. How we experience them is thus unique, but we are also

subject to broader concepts that seek to police, in particular, the body politic and female sexuality. Here we see tension arising from woman's historical theoretical association with both the body and filth. We see the othering implicit in processes of abjection, again shaped by both gender and class, but how this also extends to the self and enables notions of bodily alienation. We see how this plays out through characters' embodied experiences of their environments, and how efforts to control these reflect a striving for a more coherent body image. Such acts can be positive, as Douglas notes; 'There is nothing fearful or unreasoning in our dirt-avoidance: it is a creative movement, an attempt to relate form to function, to make unity of experience' (1978, 2). But extreme avoidance of either dirtiness or cleanliness is symptomatic of a deeper body image dysfunction.

Chapter two continued the demonstration that dichotomous thinking regarding the mind/body obfuscates positive female embodiment, particularly when women attempt to occupy male-dominated areas and professions. Gender biases within the medical profession have historically reinforced this, but they have also, more perseveringly, propped up a culture of emotional detachment, potentially damaging to both patients and physicians of any gender. As Clarke notes when reflecting on her 21st century experience, 'The challenge... for every doctor was to acquire sufficient detachment to be useful, while maintaining one's essential humanity. But, as students, no one ever discussed this with us. Indeed, doctors did not seem to acknowledge the emotional toll of their work at all, affecting , instead to take it blithely in their stride' (2020, 68). Clarke makes clear something I have sought to show, namely, how modes of behaviour are perpetuated through practice and education, from generation to generation, but also – whether it be memoir like hers, or fiction like Barker's – how creative writing can highlight, question, and subvert this, and open up new spaces for conversation.

Chapter three illustrates the extent to which women's reproductive bodies have been problematised, manufactured a lack (Grosz 1994, 60), and how depictions of the grim

repercussions of restrictive sexual social codes incorporate direct and visceral engagements with bodily matters, as part of a corrective agenda. We see how individuals, medical professionals, and the state have different investments in reproductive interventions, something reflected in the lexicon as well as how discussions are framed. Again, we also see how dichotomous thinking is passed down through systems of biopower, where the medicalisation of sex – focused on the biological processes of the body – fails to acknowledge the social and emotional aspects of sex. It argues that mentioning the unmentionable is crucial to breaking down cycles of shame that function across time and become subconsciously incorporated and self-sustaining.

I have argued that positive embodiment in the home, at work, at school, and at the clinic, is contingent on articulation of sex-specific experiences and needs, and the questioning of socially-constructed dichotomies and constraints. As a theoretical manoeuvre it is itself paradoxical. Grosz states that, 'If women are to develop autonomous modes of self-understanding and positions from which to challenge male knowledges and paradigms, the specific nature and integration (or perhaps lack of it) of the female body and female subjectivity and its similarities to and differences from men's bodies and identities need to be articulated' (1994, 19). However, for Gatens, the quest for an autonomous feminine subjectivity or sexuality fails to see that what is required 'is the acknowledgement of interconnectedness, not a repetition of the (typically masculine) insistence on autonomy' (1996, 38). So the task faced is the articulation of women's corporeal specificity whilst simultaneously questioning theories that separate mind from body, women from men. We need to see clearly, but also connect. There is an implicit contradiction in an agenda aiming to pin down a theory that can delineate something distinctly but not completely separately. Yet, this tension is utterly indicative of our human condition – trapped within individual bodies but constantly constituted from without – and thus something embodied focalised

narratives reflect all the time. Indeed a novel is itself an individual system, which rather than being self-contained, relies on the reader (and their knowledge of the world, other texts etc.) to complete the construction of meaning, and bring characters to life (who themselves possess a unique/universal occluded quality). Furthermore, the narrative form encourages an engagement that produces something vital when tackling the issues outlined in all three chapters: empathy. Empathy across divisions of class and cleanliness; between patient and doctor; within and between the sexes when it comes to reproductive choices and sexual identities. Empathy for the other, which reaches into the past and back again.

It is difficult to analyse and prove how and where empathy occurs, but qualitative research regularly suggests this is one of fiction's particular strengths. Psychologists McCreary and Marchant point to the 'mood empathy hypothesis,' which states that 'exposure to written work expressing the mood of persons or objects in a particular context engages readers...' causing them to, 'mentally simulate the portrayed situation and ultimately to emotionally relate to the depicted state of affairs — a process quite similar to true empathic concern' (2017, 185). Researchers of touch have studied embodied empathy, discovering some interesting links to language;⁴⁴ these echo findings from cognitive scientists (Lacey, Stilla, and Sathian, 2012) who proved textural metaphors activate the somatosensory cortex (usually used for processing sensory information) indicating that these areas warrant further investigation.

Historical fiction that fosters embodied empathy with historical persons serves to highlight modes of embodiment, whose variance and precariousness can, as de Groot puts it, 'critique the hegemonic structure of a totalising, explaining past' (2013, 58). Fiction is relatable in its specificity but in its self-reflexive artificiality, acknowledges its partiality and does not attempt to make any grand claims as to master narratives or unity of experience. Even the

⁴⁴ In one example, leading Touch researcher Tiffany Field observed that participants in an experiment showed similar cognitive response patterns (activation of the orbitofrontal cortex) whether being touched on the forearm or simply hearing the words 'rich moisturising cream' (2015, 101).

most immersive and least meta-fictional historical novels remind us of their artificiality every time we apply our own historical hindsight, and whenever the reader lifts their eye from the page this coming together – this jarring – of past and present through the person of the reader, offers interesting comparisons when it comes to articulating corporeality within differently configured social contexts. We may discover progressions, and/or regressions. We may link past battles or arguments to those that continue into the present. The questions regarding the interplay of biopower and the body, and the implications on body image, reproductive choices, and the construction of our sexual selves are not only ones the reader is encouraged to ask of the early twentieth century – it is the strength of historical fiction that urges the simultaneous questioning of our own time. Our time of supposed growing body and sex positivity. Of increasingly fluid gender and sexual identities. But also of increasingly identity-based politics. When fear of the other and the urge to normalise remain problematic in national and global contexts. When, frustratingly, women today face the same old dilemmas and stark new choices, with those known as BirthStrikers believing it unethical to bring children into an unstable world that is hurtling towards ecological disaster (Hunt 2019). Though the introduction of ‘the pill’ in the 1960s revolutionised birth control, there is now a growing backlash against hormonal contraception, with many women no longer willing to suffer the various side-effects. This was exacerbated by the concerns regarding the Oxford-Astra Zeneca Covid-19 vaccine, as the risks of blood clotting from the combined pill are far higher.⁴⁵ Where – women taking to social media asked – is the concern for us? For a brief moment it looked like women might be able to control their fertility by the touch of an app, but this has since proved to be another of technology’s golden geese, to which a spike in Swedish abortion rates was attributed (Sudjic 2018). Whilst we have become a more sexually open society, the pornification of sex raises new problems in the development of

⁴⁵ The Faculty of Sexual and Reproductive Healthcare has since sought to reassure users, via their website, that the risks of the combined hormonal contraceptive (CHC) pill remain relatively low and that other pill types are available (2021).

healthy body images and sexual behaviour. A survey conducted in 2020 by the UK parliament's Women and Equalities Commission found that *the majority* of people feel negatively about their body image *most* of the time, and that under 18s want to learn about body image in school. As one teenage participant pointed out, 'It's not only women...it's men too. It affects everything and it sucks' (2020). The survey and report addressed advertising, media, and social media; these are, of course, vast topics, outwith the scope of my investigation, but which nonetheless colour my engagement with the past. In such contexts it is perhaps easy to see the appeal of taking ourselves off to another century. But historical fiction offers a change rather than an escape; there is no idyllic past free from social problems and gender bias. We can, however, look to the past for a model, not of rose-tinted contentment, but of visceral resistance. As Downing notes: 'The application of historically focused work to contemporary debates can offer a valuable corrective to the inward-looking and present-centred nature of some current thinking on sexual cultures' (2013, 527). Each generation tends to think its social problems are unique but recognising versions of these in the past can help identify patterns of production and networks of biopower.

Only connect

To go back to the Mantel quote with which I opened this dissertation - history helps us put our lives in context. But history is not an objective *thing*. It is people. As Nicholson writes, 'if we are ever to learn from history, we must get under the skins of the people who made it... They are us, and we will, in our turn, be like them' (2011, 448). Historical fiction thus plays a crucial role; in getting under the skins of our historical characters we find the vital organs and circulatory systems that made us. Narratives that engage the reader in a critical and creative construction of embodied experience matter, because as Irigaray points out, 'to find ourselves and each other, we have a great deal to take off... They decked us out according to

their desires for too long, and we adorned ourselves so often to please them, that we forgot the feel of our skin' (1980, 78-79). Socially constructed gender ideals that shape our bodies and body images have alienated us from ourselves as well as each other. This results in what Irigaray calls a state of 'déréliction' – but it is a state for which historical fiction offers a possible antidote. In her analysis of *The Night Watch*, Gildersleeve states:

The dérétion of Waters's female characters is described by the uncanny (unheimlich, or unhomely) urban and rural wartime landscapes which render women homeless, but even as they express a feminist anxiety about the derelict state of women in twentieth-century society, Waters's neo-forties novels work to overcome this by constructing a horizontal relation between women in the matrilineal literary tradition (2016, 94).

Waters establishes a visible community of characters, but she also establishes an open line between past and present, drawing on the histories of displaced women and using her fiction to stake a place for them as well as for herself as a writer. Gildersleeve's invocation of matrilineal tradition feels pertinent considering my own aims, when writing my novel set in what Wallace has referred to as 'the twilight years' of my grandparents' generation (2005, 220). I am also writing home, writing pairs of mother/daughter relationships, and writing in dialogue with interwar women writers. It is an exchange that reaches forward as well as back. Reflecting on her controversies of the 1930s Mitchison wrote in one of her memoirs, 'I sometimes hoped I was fighting for more freedom for a whole generation of women. My daughters' perhaps?' (1979, 73). Liz's generation. My generation. Mitchison's insistence on women's voices and bodies being heard is one we all benefit from. She is just one of the many writers I drew on when constructing my protagonist, but there is another community that Liz is much more a particular product of – that of Oban itself. This is due to my methodology but it is also played out within the novel.

In the various quotations utilised above, Nicholson, Irigaray, Gildersleeve, and Gatens have all pointed towards the role of relations, family, community. For Liz, her unsteady and sometimes painful path towards self-knowledge involves realising that she is not an isolated system. Her considerations regarding love and/or her career, outlined in the earlier section, are only made possible once she has re-established her connections to her hometown, and, even more crucially, the person who most embodies it – her mother. On a practical level, she has offered to fund Liz's longed for medical education, but she has also given Liz a relationship with which to anchor herself. Though Liz is slow to acknowledge how much she needs this, it is played out subconsciously through her body as the pair develop injuries on the same leg, both exacerbated by their own actions. This can be seen as a form of mimesis, which Gatens notes reveals our investment in the bodies of our loved ones (1996, 31). Liz has spent much of her adult life rejecting the maternal figure. She indicates a more cohesive and mature self by recognising the importance of that matrilineal connection, no longer afraid of losing herself to it.

Furthermore, her mother is her foothold in the community, and these sorts of social bonds can be constitutive as well as restrictive. We understand ourselves in relation to others. Schilder even states that 'A body image is in some way always the sum of the body images of the community' (quoted in Gatens 1996, 39). This would mean the individual is only as fit as the collective. In 1948 it was the collectivising ethos of the Labour government that allowed for the improvement of each individual's health under one public body. Yet, we have seen through Liz, and to some degree Dorothy, how communal life carries the threat of ostracisation, and just how damaging this can be. In ending the novel looking down on her hometown, Liz's positioning signifies her ability to love the town on her own terms. She is able to view it from an advantageous, and semi-autonomous position. On the periphery. As someone writing from inside the community, this peripheral position – necessary for a more

semi-autonomous creative engagement – was made possible for me due to my historical setting. And like Liz I have drawn on the matrilineal line. According to Nicholson the people ‘who made’ history are ‘our mothers, our aunts, our grandmothers’ (2011, 448) – and millions like them. When constructing my novel I turned time and again to my mother, with questions about my grandmother, as well as questions about hers. Questions about the town, shops, words and phrases, places of work, even feminine hygiene practices. Questions that wouldn’t have been asked back then. The frank answers helped me form a more palpable imagined past whilst simultaneously reinforcing my status as an onlooker, whose interests are modern and occasionally profane. My great grandmother probably never said the word ‘period’ out loud her whole life, yet I only know this because my own mother mentioned it to me. Mentioned it though it was ‘unmentionable’. Taboos can cross into the next generation, but so too can anecdotes that implicitly subvert them. Every conversation or fictional iteration brings us another step closer to a more coherent, and possibly even positive, embodiment. We see more clearly – and connect.

For Kristeva, one of the key components of abjection is the failure to recognise kin (1982, 5). With historical fiction we make the dead look alive, only to find them familiar. As Nicholson puts it – ‘they are us’ (2011, 448). As heart-warming or horrifying as that may be, for the exiled female figure this recognition of the *unheimlich* signals the start of the journey home.

Beginnings

Mangham and Depledge have noted that ‘The history of the female body is a story...that no single discipline can understand entirely (2013, 5). My thesis demonstrates how practice-led research can unite disciplines to build a broader understanding of female embodiment – which already shifts the focus on to variant experience rather than any notion of a singular

passive object. By combining historical fiction with the medical humanities to both read and write the body, I have demonstrated how bodies are moulded in time, and communicated themes and historical detail via vicarious praxis. My thesis foregrounds the body as a means for understanding/experiencing the (gendered) specificity of a particular period. My exploration of the early twentieth century, culminating in a focus on the post-war period, highlights the significance of this time in constituting the modern woman and her dilemmas. Whilst this is a period I will continue to explore, the methods I have used could be adapted to a range of other investigations. This applies not only to future novels, but other forms of creative engagement; for example, I have devised object-based workshops on the history of the stethoscope, in which participants engage in listening to and writing the body, whilst considering the medical gaze and the stethoscope's roots in social, rather than medical, necessity. As well as writing a new novel that continues the exploration of home at an angle and the shaping of reproductive bodies, I will also be aiming to unite my creative practice with my work in the student wellbeing sector, exploring how object-based arts and heritage activities can foster positive embodiment and offer non-medicalised support for some forms of anxiety and depression.

However, aside from benefitting my own practice and professional development, my project more broadly stakes a claim for the incorporation of oral history and experiential research as tools in the production of embodiment in historical fiction. Embodied empathy is thus both the means and the end. The researcher utilises every aspect of bodily experience to connect with the past, this is then harnessed through an embodied narrative, which invites the reader to inhabit the past and communicates specific themes regarding the body itself – this is all then processed through the body of the reader, completing a cycle which enriches our understanding of the past, of historical others, but also of our own bodies. My thesis offers a working methodology for practice-led researchers seeking to foreground the body as a

research tool as well as a locus for knowledge. By contextualising and combining lived experience narratives – whether they be from memoirs, oral history interviews, or the archives – with experiential research – which is project specific, psychogeographic, and object based – we can close the gap not only between past and present, but mind and body.

This process has involved opening myself up to creative possibilities that have helped me trace the emotional echoes of historical persons – and in doing so I have often stumbled upon home; sometimes literally, as in the council archives where I found files detailing our family home's connections to the old isolation hospital. Sometimes more opaquely, as when the legacies of my grandmother and great aunt permeated my oral history interviews. But I have also had uncanny encounters with distant strangers; from anonymous Mass Observation correspondents, to writers like Storm Jameson who I am planning a journal article on. Her best work – strikingly visceral, cerebral, and political – came from within literary London and covered the complex repercussions of two world wars, but it is haunted too by memories of the northern seaside town she came from, with its push and its pull – and I took to her at once. She is part of the matrilineal literary tradition that encouraged me to write the novel I wanted, regardless of how unfashionable or domestic it might appear on one hand, or how crude and unfeminine it might sound on the other. Like Jameson, Barker, and Waters I have carved out a space between national and personal catastrophe; for Liz, for Dorothy, for the exiled female figure, for my grandmother, my great aunt – and millions like them. They have all helped me tell my story of the female body. But writing *Unity* was only the beginning and the cycle still needs to be completed. I listened to the past and it gave me a voice, the challenge now is to make that voice heard. We are not isolated systems – I need a publisher for a start, and a novel depends on others for its meaning. So I leave Liz's fate in the hands of the reader; I leave them to make their own sense of *Unity*.

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