

Friday 17th May 1996

A few minutes before midnight Eileen snapped awake. She lay still, her breathing shallow, and felt her blood pump and surge. Anxiety lay over her heart like a clammy hand. She groaned quietly as she forced herself to sit up. What had awakened her? A dream? The cry of a hunting owl? Rags and tatters of memory floated across her conscious mind, gone before she could grasp them.

Then she remembered, and in the warmth of her quiet bedroom she shuddered in sudden cold.

Eileen glanced at the kitchen clock. Four thirty. Marie would be home.

She dried her hands on a ragged bit of towel and went to the phone in the hall. After the bright sunshine in the kitchen it was quite dark, and the stone floor felt agreeably cool under her bare feet. She dialled, and waited. 'Marie? Hi, it's Eileen. How long have you been back?'

'Oh, an hour or two. Stan came for me after lunch.'

'So, what did the consultant say? Is he happy with the way it went?'

'He seemed to be. You know how they are. He must do hundreds of these operations. Bit of a bore for the poor chap, really.'

'Even so, it's your body, your uterus. You've got to live with it, not him. Or without it, rather.'

'Good riddance to the blessed thing, I say. It's given me nothing but grief. Well, apart from producing Stephanie.'

Eileen laughed. 'And how is Stephanie?'

'She's just this minute handing me a cup of tea.'

'She has her redeeming qualities, whatever her hard-hearted mother would have you believe.'

'Hm. Maybe.'

'Marie, shall I come and see you in the morning? I can pick up a few things for you from the shop if that would help.'

'That would be great. A loaf and a drop of milk is all I need. I stocked up before I went into hospital.'

'All right then. I'll be over about ten.'

'That's lovely. How are things with you?'

'Much as ever. Christina's home for the weekend.'

'Have you heard from David?'

There was a barely perceptible pause. 'David should be phoning tonight, as usual,' Eileen said, her voice bland. 'As far as I know, he's well. He always rings when he knows Christie's here.'

'Of course he does. Whatever else, you know, he loves his children.'

'I'm sure you're right,' Eileen said. She frowned. Did she know any more what David thought, felt, liked, hated? 'Well, my dear, I don't want to wear the invalid out, so till tomorrow, all right? If you think of anything you need, call me.'

'I will. Thanks for ringing.'

'Bye.'

Thinking about Marie, Eileen turned back down the hall and almost tripped over her old dog, who had been lying quietly by her feet.

'Right, old girl, I think there's just about time for a stroll. Let me find some shoes.'

Eileen stuffed her feet into her old beach shoes and stood by the open door, blinking in the strong sunlight. The back garden sloped gently downwards, part of the general fall towards the river as it wound its way slowly to the sea, opening out into a broad and sluggish estuary just visible now between the trees. The afternoon sun sparkled on the water.

The old dog grunted and sighed a little as she rose to her feet and followed Eileen down the overgrown garden path and through the gate. They turned right along the footpath as it led down towards the woods. The dry weather over so many weeks had left the paths deeply cracked and rutted. Everything had come early: the bluebells were gone, leaving only the crushed and sad-looking stalks, and much of the blackthorn blossom had fallen or turned brown round the edges. Off the path and under the trees, ground ivy, campion and wild garlic grew in abundance. Among the clinging honeysuckle with its nascent buds even the odd dog-rose was beginning to unfold, and along the edges of the wood cow parsley and stitchwort grew in white banks.

Eileen's path ran downward, sometimes steeply, sometimes more gently. The afternoon sun, still very warm, slanted through foliage already dense, and a tiny breeze ruffled the topmost leaves. The elms that had once dominated here had gone, ravaged by Dutch Elm disease twenty years ago. The massive oaks had fallen to the great storm almost a decade before. Because they were old and shallow-rooted, the hurricane-force wind had ripped them up and tossed them aside. Those that survived had lost branches or been torn from the earth. There were ash in the woods too, hosts in the damper seasons to dish-shaped fungi which grew high up the trunks.

Eileen breathed the balmy air and smiled, at home and at peace. The old dog flopped at her feet and sighed deeply.

Then, in the deep quiet, she heard a sudden crash, crunching footfalls, breaking branches, and, softly but unmistakably, a string of curses. The dog cocked her head and growled in the back of her throat.

'Hush, Tillie.' Eileen stood still, staring into the green thickets. She caught sight of a hand, a grubby white tennis-shoe, and then a man came into her field of vision. She had time to notice his dark hair and vividly-striped jumper before his head came up and he saw her—and froze. A sickly half-smile wavered on his pale, dirty young face. A long moment stretched out, suspended. Eileen cleared her throat. She felt she should say something. But then the stranger raised a hand, not so much in greeting, it seemed to her, as in self-defence. In one movement he pulled himself up, turned his back and hared down the path, almost immediately disappearing into the bushes.

Eileen gazed after him, shaking her head and frowning. *How odd.*

She continued on down, her shoes making little sound on the dry mud. Before coming out onto the rough heath above the marshes she took another path that angled off to the left, taking her back on herself into another part of the wood. There was hawthorn here, and many fallen trunks, some caught up in their parent trees. In a thicket off the path a fluttering of foreign colour caught her eye, and the dog ambling by her side raised her head and sniffed, whining. A shifting patch of yellow and blue moved behind a rough tarpaulin camouflage, then a glimpse of hair and a muffled laugh.

Eileen smiled as she moved quietly on. 'It's all right, Tillie,' she murmured to the dog, gently brushing the smooth black head with her fingers. 'It's only Michael and Stephen. Don't let on we've discovered their bivouac.' She glanced at her watch. 'We'd better move, old dear. I've got to be at the station at five thirty, and we shouldn't be late for choir practice.' Nevertheless she stood still for a moment. The memory of her dream, if such it was, brushed against the edges of her consciousness, reviving her anxiety. The oddity of the man in the woods, the vulnerability of two heedless little boys, the uneasiness seeping from some dark unconsidered region of her mind, combined to create an ambiguous sense of insecurity,

as if, barely noticed, the world was beginning to rock and sway under her feet.

But time was pressing on, and they had to hurry home. The station was at Caxford, six miles away. Holton had never had a railway service and the buses were few and unpredictable.

Tillie flopped down panting onto the hallway tiles. Eileen, changing her shoes, looked at her with concern. 'It's still too hot for you, isn't it? Perhaps I'd better leave your walks till later while this weather lasts.'

She scrabbled in her handbag for car keys and sunglasses, then left the house by the front door. Her ancient Citroen stood on the gravel drive, its flaking bilious yellow looking tawdry in the early evening sun. The first clouds in weeks were beginning to form overhead, and what little wind there was had died to a sultry stillness. Crickets buzzed and clicked in the overgrown hedges, and swallows feasted on the myriad hovering bugs.

Eileen looked at her watch again as she started the engine. The road to Caxford was narrow and winding, and there was every likelihood of meeting a tractor or a herd of cows going home for milking. She roared off down the road in an explosion of exhaust fumes, past two other cottages which had once been similar to her own but were now more modern and smartly painted; then into the main village street, past the church, the pub and the bit of green; past a few more houses, the village shop and the lane up to Marie's cottage, then out of the village. The road to Caxford followed the line of the fields and was quite dangerous at night, especially for the unfamiliar or those the worse for drink. Cars upended in the ditches on either side were a not-uncommon sight. Not so long ago the road had been bordered only by trees and fields and the odd cottage, but more recently clusters of new developments had sprung up, and some gloomy souls predicted that before long Holton would be a suburb of Caxford. Eileen bristled at this thought. Holton was a backwater, the end of the line, not on the way to anywhere else, and seldom visited by anyone except the occasional party of rambblers or bird-watchers. This suited her very well.

Eileen met no tractors and covered the six miles in thirteen minutes, clattering into the small station forecourt at Caxford just after five-thirty. Christina was waiting for her, sitting cross-legged on the pavement in a pair of washed-out denim dungarees, her overnight bag and sandals beside her. She had her headphones on, and her eyes were closed, but the sound of her mother's car was noisy enough to drown out the loudest music. She scrambled to her feet, removing the headphones, and waved as Eileen ground to a halt and got out of the car.

'Mum, hi.' She gave Eileen a hug. 'The train got in early for once.'

'Hello, darling. How are you? Good journey?' They threw the bag onto the back seat, retrieved the sandals and got into the car.

'It was terribly hot and crowded in London. The station was a nightmare. Remind me not to travel on Fridays.'

Back on the road to Holton, Eileen drove more slowly.

Christina glanced sideways at her mother as they bowled along the road. 'Heard from Dad lately?'

'Oh yes, he telephones once in a while and speaks to Natasha.'

'All right, is he? Not lonely?'

'He seems fine. But you can ask him yourself. I always know he will ring when you're home—nothing surer.' She glanced at her daughter. 'I like your new haircut, by the way.'

'Do you?' Christina ran a hand over her spiky fair crop. 'It got so hot, I couldn't stand it around my neck any more.'

'Well, it suits you.'

For the last mile or two they travelled in silence. The sun was going down, and the trees alongside the road were beginning to cast long shadows. A breeze sprang up, cooling the air. The clouds Eileen noticed earlier had moved to the horizon.

As they came into Holton Eileen said, 'What time is it?'

'Ten to six.'

Eileen brought the car to a noisy halt outside the front door. 'Right. Michael should be in at six, and we'll just have time for a bite to eat before we go. I must have a wash before I go out. I'm so grubby and dusty after the woods and rooting around in the garden.'

'No problem, mother dear,' Christina said. 'I'll wash a bit of salad while you turn yourself into something more like a chorister.'

'Well, I've given up all pretence of great musical contributions, but I can at least be sweet-smelling.'

'Do you ever play these days?'

'No. I hardly dare to. Philip is such a gifted organist, I depress myself if I try to compete.'

She fished for her key and let them both in.

'It's always seemed a bit of a mystery to me,' Christina said, following her mother into the hallway, 'why a musician like Philip could wind up somewhere like this. I should think he'd be more suited to a cathedral.'

'Yes, I know,' said Eileen. 'There's a story behind it somewhere, I think, but nobody knows what it is. Unless Marie does.'

'Is that still going strong?' Christina raised her eyebrows.

Eileen shrugged. 'So it would seem. Marie doesn't say a lot, except for dark hints and occasional quite scurrilous references to his...how shall I put this delicately? Um, amorous accomplishments.'

Christina burst into peals of laughter. 'Mother, you have a wonderful way of putting things.'

'Well, you know,' Eileen said, perfectly deadpan, in a very bad Irish accent, 'I don't want to shock you, you being so young and all.'

'By today's standards,' Christina called down the stairs as she took her bag up, 'nineteen is quite elderly. I'll be down in a jiff to help.' She vanished, humming, behind a carelessly-slammed door.

Eileen smiled to herself as she pulled things out of the fridge and began washing lettuce, tomatoes, cucumber, red pepper, radishes and a rather sad-looking head of celery.

The back door creaked open and a blond head appeared in a shaft of low sunlight.

'Hello, Michael.'

'Hello, Mum. Is Christie home?'

'Yes, she is. Wash your hands first, Michael. You look filthy, and it's choir practice tonight.' But the latter part of the sentence was lost. Michael was already hurtling noisily up the stairs, shouting for Christina.

As she laid the table Eileen thought about Michael, how he had altered out of all recognition from the hunched, defensive, school-refusing five-year-old who had first come home with her. Then, his overburdened, young single mother, with two younger children to care for, had been unable to cope. Now, apart from being several inches taller, Michael had grown into a good-natured, patient and thoughtful boy. Or perhaps he had merely retrieved what had always been his.

A few minutes later he and Christina came downstairs together, arms round each other's shoulders. Looking at them Eileen thought how odd it was that Michael, someone else's son, was more like her than her own natural child, at least superficially. She and Michael were both tall, fair, slow-moving, sometimes clumsy, while Christina was tiny, slim, wiry, deceptively strong, with small, pointed features.

'You're nearly as tall as me,' Christina said. 'It shouldn't be allowed.'

Michael giggled. 'That's because you're a midget.'

Eileen put a loaf of bread, some cold meats, cheese, pickles and salad on the table.

Michael buzzed about like an excited bee, chattering and getting in their way. Eventually they sat down and in a tiny quiet gap managed to say grace before starting to eat. The front door opened and banged shut. Heavy determined footsteps sounded on the thinly-carpeted stairs. Everyone looked up.

‘Natasha’s home,’ Christina said.

Eileen put down her fork. ‘Natasha!’ She frowned. ‘Food on the table.’

‘Not hungry. On a diet,’ came the distant reply in decidedly cranky tones.

‘Don’t worry, Mum,’ Christina said. ‘I’ll talk to her later, when you and Michael are out. She’ll be OK, she always is. It just takes a while.’

‘Things are improving a bit with Tash,’ Eileen said with a sigh, ‘but there are still times when she behaves as if I were her bitterest enemy, for no reason that I can think of. And until recently she’s seemed to delight in knocking about with the village dregs.’

Christina’s eyebrows shot up. ‘What a snob you are, Ma.’

‘Well, it does seem about time she started acting like an adult instead of a thirteen-year-old at the mercy of her hormones.’

They ate for a while in silence, then Christina said, wiping every last smear of mayonnaise from her plate with a crust of bread, ‘Maybe she needs to get away from here.’

‘She can’t afford to, not on her pittance. I suppose it’s something she’s stuck that job so long, but oddly I think she’s grown to like it.’

‘At least she’s got some independence.’

‘Michael, have you finished? Do you want some ice cream?’ Eileen pushed back her chair and went to a curtained alcove in the kitchen behind which lurked an elderly and loudly-humming freezer. She thumped the door hard, then opened it with difficulty. ‘This blessed door’s sticking again,’ she muttered. ‘Will strawberry flavour be all right? I’ll do a bit of shopping tomorrow while you’re down at Charley’s.’

‘Strawberry’s OK. Am I seeing Mummy tomorrow, then?’

‘Yes. Had you forgotten?’

‘And Harry and Ellie?’

‘I guess so.’

‘Will Christie still be here?’

‘She’s here till Sunday afternoon. You’ll have plenty of time. Anyway, you haven’t seen Mummy for a few weeks. It’ll be nice. Christie and I can go shopping while you’re there and get some things you like.’

Michael nodded. ‘That’s OK, then.’

‘Finish up quickly now, and go and get washed. I don’t want to be late.’

When he had gone Christina said, ‘Doesn’t he ever go to his mum’s flat any more?’

‘No,’ Eileen said. ‘That’s never been reinstated. The visits at the Family Centre seem to go better, so we’re sticking with it.’

‘Is the boyfriend still around?’

‘What, the one Michael took against? I don’t think so. I think Denise is on her own again. Poor Denise. She doesn’t seem to have much of a life.’

‘Did Charley ever hear what happened to Michael’s dad?’ Christina said, filling the kitchen sink with hot water. ‘It’s like he vanished off the face of the earth.’

Eileen shrugged. ‘Charley and I both have our suspicions, but I won’t go into that. Little boys have very long ears.’

‘Point taken. Why don’t you go and get ready? I’ll finish tidying up.’

‘Right. Thanks, love.’ Eileen paused by the stairs. ‘I’m just thankful Michael seems so happy now. But, you know, it can’t last for ever.’

‘Can’t it? Why not?’

‘That’s just not the way it works.’

‘Couldn’t you adopt him?’

‘Somehow I don’t think Denise would ever agree to that. Would you, if Michael was yours?’ She called up the stairs. ‘Get a move on, Michael, will you?’ As she reached the landing, the phone rang. ‘That’ll be your dad, Christie.’

Ten minutes later Eileen and Michael left the house in a hurry, having remembered at the last moment that Bill, Michael’s guinea-pig, had not had any supper. They waved goodbye to Christina who was still on the phone. It was dusk but still warm as they crunched across the drive and onto the pathless road for the five-minute walk to the church. Michael took Eileen’s hand and swung it as they walked. The church bells had been ringing; they left a tinny echo in the still air.

‘Mum.’

‘Mm.’

‘What are dregs?’

Eileen smiled slightly, then sighed. ‘Sorry, Michael. That was not a very nice way to talk about people.’

‘Why not?’

‘Dregs are the bits you find at the bottom of a classy bottle of wine, so calling people dregs means they are the sludge at the bottom that nobody wants.’

‘Are Tashie’s mates like that, then?’

‘No, of course not. Nobody is, at least, that’s what we are told to believe, because God values everybody even if we don’t always.’

‘Is Tashie a dreg?’

‘No, of course she isn’t! I wish I’d never said it now. It wasn’t a very kind thing to say anyway. Forget it, there’s a love.’

‘OK.’

After the gathering shadows outside, the church was brightly lit as they pushed open the heavy door. A knot of people stood at the back of the nave, by the bell-tower, talking as Eileen and Michael entered. On the far side of the church, behind the half-open door of the vestry, more voices could be heard: the choir, sorting out books and music, gathering for practice as the bell-ringers, finished with theirs for the week, made their way unhurriedly to home or pub.

Some bell-ringers were choir members too, and were even now detaching themselves from one group and making their way to join the other. Arthur Thompson, small, frail and elderly, his white hair immaculately combed, his old, dark suit and shining shoes formal, leant on the arm of his granddaughter, Georgina Quilley.

‘Good evening, Eileen,’ he said.

‘Hello Arthur, hi Georgina,’ Eileen said. ‘How are you feeling today, Arthur?’

‘A little better, thank you,’ Arthur replied in his shaky voice. He had been in church choirs almost all his life, and although his voice was reedy now, nobody minded. A tenor who could sing in tune was a precious thing in a tiny choir.

Bell-ringers greeted Eileen as they ambled off towards the door. The two church-wardens—retired farmer Frank Aherne, red-faced, with bristling sideburns and corkscrew hair, port drinker’s nose and dusty tweeds, and Richard Dyer, a businessman in his fifties, out of his city suit now and dressed for the rural weekend in balding corduroy—were the first to leave. Rumour had it that Richard Dyer was having an affair with Anita Bloodworth, wife of one of the bell-ringers, and had been for years. Eileen wondered where they were supposed to conduct their trysts. Don Bloodworth was usually at home, working in his huge greenhouse; and Annette Dyer, a woman of fragile temperament given to bouts of depression, likewise rarely left her house. Eileen, making her way up the nave in Michael’s wake, suppressed a brief and shameless vision of Anita emerging from behind a haystack with straw in her hair

and laddered tights. If the stories were true, though, she was sorry. Don was a bit of a bore, but well-intentioned. And she liked Annette Dyer, and pitied her, with her huge untidy house and garden, her crushing moods, and her relentlessly cheerful, loud and popularity-seeking husband. The Dyer children, two sons who had long since married and moved away, resembled their father, not least in treating their mother with blithe and patronising insensitivity. Privately Eileen wondered, as she often did looking at long-married couples, what had brought them together in the first place, and what, in Annette's case, had kept her from flight all these years. For a moment she thought of her own situation, and how it must appear to others. Mysterious, probably: a husband permanently away from home, and three children only one of whom she had given birth to. She walked into the vestry. Everybody was chattering, and Philip was calling from the organ, chivvying them to start.

Eileen took her place in the choir-stalls next to Georgina.

'Right, everyone, quiet down now, please,' Philip said. The little girls had a last snigger and came to order. Though he was never unkind, their respect for Philip had an element of fear in it. 'For Sunday, I thought we would do the Wesley. We all know that quite well, and perhaps Georgina can do the solo verses. All right, Georgina?' He glanced up momentarily from the lectern, his dark eyes seeking the girl out. 'Good. And the Stone setting of the Lord's Prayer. That's reasonably familiar. But we'd better begin working on something for the induction service. It's bound to happen sooner or later, and we might as well start preparing now, and decide what we're going to sing before half term.' At the mention of the induction there was a buzz of speculation. Philip quelled it by a tap of his baton on the lectern and an inscrutable glance that swept over every member of the choir. 'I thought we'd try this Bach anthem, "God is our hope and strength." It's not beyond us but there are some tricky bits and you'll have to count.' He smiled fleetingly. 'You get very little help from the accompaniment as I have a lot of twiddly semiquavers. Right—the music's in your folders, so let's give the Bach a run through and see how we get on.'

The first effort was, predictably, a shambles. It had no shape, and nobody could make much sense of it. But by the end of an hour it was hanging together; the steady four-crotchet beat had been hammered home; the foundations were laid. In addition, they had warmed up the Wesley and the Lord's Prayer for Sunday and run through an alternative to the Bach, an anthem by Ouseley which they had done a few times before. Sunday's hymns were given a cursory play-through, and then they were released.

'Anyone taking music home, please sign the list as usual,' Philip said as they disappeared.

Gillian Clayton, the only adult treble in the choir and mother of one of the little girls, cornered Eileen in the porch. 'Do you think he knows something about the new Rector?' she said. 'Seeing as he's dreaming up music for the induction.'

'I haven't a clue,' Eileen said. 'He'll know before we do, I suppose. But surely he's right. It can't be much longer.'

'Hm. Frank and Richard have been having their own way long enough, if you ask me,' Gillian said. 'I for one will be delighted when we get someone permanent. Oh well. No doubt we'll find out in good time. Are the children in the churchyard again? Joanne!'

After some hooting and shoving, four girls appeared from among the gravestones and were taken away by Gillian. Michael was still inside. A moment later he emerged with Philip, who switched off the lights and locked the door. There was still light in the churchyard.

'Philip.'

Philip looked up. He looked nervous, embarrassed, ready to bolt. Eileen noticed his elderly jacket, chalk-flecked baggy trousers, scuffed brown shoes, a new maroon shirt at odds with the dusty tweed, the loosely-knotted tie.

'Marie came home from hospital this afternoon,' Eileen said. 'The operation went all right.'

Philip stared at his feet, then at Eileen, a dark stain spreading upwards from his collar. 'Good,' he muttered. 'I'm glad to hear it.' He made a visible effort, clearing his throat. 'So, um, when will she be able to sing again, do you think?'

'They said six weeks' convalescence, but I guess once her wound is healed singing will be OK. It hardly constitutes violent activity. I guess she'll be back in two or three weeks.'

'Yes. Well, um, give her my best wishes, won't you.' Michael started clattering about impatiently. Philip seemed relieved to be interrupted. 'Goodnight,' he said, making off down the path. 'See you on Sunday.'

'Come on, Michael. Let's go home.'

'What a strange man Philip Elsdon is,' Eileen said to Christina, after Michael had gone to bed. 'I told him about Marie, because I knew he wouldn't have asked. You'd think he'd make some polite enquiry at least. She's in his choir after all, quite apart from anything else.'

'I don't think you're supposed to know about the *anything else*, are you?' Christina said.

'That doesn't seem very realistic to me,' Eileen said. 'He knows Marie is my friend, he knows we talk. How can he think I don't know?'

'He probably thinks you disapprove,' Christina said, stretching her legs the length of the sagging sofa. 'He always seems uncomfortable, doesn't he? Guilty, even. Maybe he thinks you're going to stand in the vestry doorway and demand to know if his intentions are honourable.'

'I think it's all gone beyond the realm of intentions,' Eileen said, pursing her lips. 'Anyway, Marie's a grown-up. She's quite capable of making rotten decisions, just like the rest of us.' She smiled suddenly, kicked off her shoes, and flopped into a chair. 'How about making me a cup of coffee? You probably have no idea how exhausting Bach can be.'

'Sad, but true. I am such a Philistine. I'll put the kettle on.' Christina dragged herself up from the sofa and ruffled her mother's hair as she went into the kitchen. 'So, tell me, what's Philip really like?'

'Well, as you rightly said earlier, he's a fantastic organist, far too good for a backwater like Holton.'

'Bit of a mystery, then,' Christina said.

'Mm. But he's a good teacher too, though maybe you wouldn't expect that. He gets an amazing standard out of our little choir, considering there are only two men, three women, no, four if you count Georgina, four small girls and Michael. But he is a bit of a mystery, you're right. Sometimes I go up to the church to change the flowers or do a bit of dusting and he's there, practising. Only it isn't like practice, because there's nothing wrong with it. And I've played that organ, and I know I couldn't make it sing like he does. But if he notices me there, he packs up and leaves. It's odd, as if his gift is an embarrassment to him.'

Christina came in with two mugs of coffee. 'It doesn't seem to hang together, what you've told me about him, with having a fling with Marie.'

'I know what you mean,' Eileen said. 'I get the impression he hasn't had too much female company, and Marie's just knocked him off his feet.'

'So where does he go when he's not here?'

'Oh, he has a job. And a flat, I believe. He teaches at that private boys' school the other side of Caxford. I can't remember its name.'

Christina sipped her coffee. 'And we have an idea what Marie sees in *him*,' she said with a wicked grin.

'He's actually not bad-looking,' Eileen said. 'Anyway, people are peculiar. Who knows anything about why one person is drawn to another?'

'Who, indeed? I'm going to take my coffee upstairs, Mum. My dear sister has persuaded me to go to the pub with her tonight. She's paying, so I'm not arguing.'

‘Oh, OK. Try not to roll home drunk, won’t you?’

‘Chance would be a fine thing. Knowing Tash we’ll probably have to make a half last all night.’

Eileen lay propped up in bed, her Bible open at Romans 12. With her reading glasses on the end of her nose, beneath her bent head the small print glowed in the light of her bedside lamp.

“So then, my brothers and sisters, because of God’s great mercy to us, I appeal to you: offer yourselves as a living sacrifice to God, dedicated to his service and pleasing to him. This is the true worship that you should offer.”

Eileen looked up, catching a dark glimpse of herself in the mirror across the room. St. Paul was a single-minded idealist and a hard taskmaster. Inspired by his own great vision, he had given up all dedication to self. And who could contest his argument? God has been merciful to us, and we, in responsive love, must sacrifice ourselves to him. *But there’s something in me that’s fighting this inch by inch, even though I think it’s right. What is it? Something atavistically wicked? Pride? The old Adam? Or just a desire to survive as a self?* As she pondered this puzzle, not for the first time, it occurred to her that what she read and, indeed, believed, instead of meshing smoothly with her thoughts, seemed to shriek and grind like a machine devoid of oil.

She went back to her reading.

“Do not conform yourselves to the standard of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.”

That must be it. I am resisting that complete inward transformation. Like everything else, I want to do it by myself.

Thinking about this independence of spirit, her thoughts drifted, and she found herself mentally picturing her mother standing at the back door of the house where Eileen had grown up, a house not unlike the one she lived in now, but neater, with a well-ordered garden. Her mother stood, one hand shading her eyes against the sun, the other shaking a duster, wearing a floral apron, tall, broad and fair like her older daughter, with that same dancing light in her eyes.

It was she who has made me the way I am, in great measure. She taught me, both in what she said and how she just was, to depend on myself. Those early habits take some breaking, and I haven’t done it yet, if I ever do.

She tried again.

“And because of God’s gracious gift to me I say to every one of you: do not think of yourself more highly than you should. Instead be modest in your thinking, and judge yourself according to the amount of faith that God has given you.”

But that was the hard part, simply because those standards were not of this world, which was always trying to persuade us to judge ourselves and others by any number of different criteria. And the world used methods both fair and foul, whereas God’s were always an appeal to the better bits of us.

She read on. There was the passage about being part of Christ’s body and working harmoniously with the other parts, followed by the right use of one’s gifts. She sighed. What were her gifts exactly? They all seemed so nebulous, so commonplace. Perhaps she was suffering from some kind of spiritual blindness, so that any way ahead was featureless, devoid of signposts.

She gathered herself with an effort and finished the chapter. Full of instruction about living the Christian life out in practice and defeating evil with good, she had no trouble with it theoretically, hard as it was to do.

She closed her Bible and let it rest in her lap.

So what was this obstacle? The orthodox would have said it was sin, no doubt. Perhaps it was her whole situation of rebelliousness. Perhaps she should have gone dutifully off to Scotland with David. Maybe that was what some people thought. Was it what God thought?

Weariness settled on her like a weight. She put the Bible on her bedside table and closed her eyes. A thirty-year-old scene rewound itself before her mental vision: herself aged eighteen, coming home from her secretarial course, walking up the garden path, putting her key in the lock, and finding her father inexplicably home early from work, sitting on the sofa with his younger daughter weeping beside him. As soon as Eileen entered the room, before she had time to utter a word, Marilyn had leapt up and flung herself into her sister's arms, spilling out between sobs the terrible news: how she had come home from school that afternoon to find their mother collapsed by the kitchen range, a broken milk-jug in her hand, dead of an aneurysm at forty-one.

Everything changed after that. Her father seemed shocked into immobility; Marilyn, always rather childlike, began to treat her sister as if she were another mother. Eileen felt years older than either of them. She had informed what few relatives there were, organized the funeral, paid the bills and run the house. Everything her mother had said to her was true. Other people were kind, charming, lovable even, but not very reliable. They seemed, in Eileen's experience, to lack stuffing. Only she and her mother were rocks of strength, and her mother was gone.

Eileen thought of her family, how distant they seemed. Her father had died of lung cancer barely two years after his wife's death, his body emaciated, his spirit crushed. Marilyn emigrated to Australia with her new husband and baby son. She had been there now twenty-five years, and never once returned. Nor had Eileen visited her. The sisters exchanged Christmas cards and photographs of children and grandchildren. But it seemed to Eileen that a door had shut firmly on her early life, and now it was alien, like someone else's story.

Eileen leaned over and turned off the lamp. She resettled her pillows and lay down with a sigh. In the darkness she contemplated her twenty-one-year-old self as if she was a stranger from another world.

Perhaps I coped so well because I was so ignorant.

Marilyn was gone, her parents were dead. Eileen settled the debts, sold the house, disposed briskly of the contents, sent half the proceeds to Marilyn and banked the rest. Then she took a week off from college to consider what to do, and went to the coast for a holiday.

She looked forward to that week as an oasis of calm: the chance to look back, gather her thoughts, and, free of duties, to grieve for her parents. She grieved too for herself, young and alone; but the part of her that was her mother's doing exulted. If there had been more time, young would have meant full of hope, and alone would have been another word for free. As it was, life picked her up and whirled her about before her feet fairly settled on the ground. One warm afternoon, on the crowded pier of the little seaside town, she met a young sailor called David Harding.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

In the warm darkness Eileen tried to pray. She asked God to open the eyes of her spirit so that she could see what it was he wanted of her. More truthfully, she prayed for the desire to change. She prayed for the world, her church and her children. She prayed especially for Natasha. Then her mind wandered, undisciplined, back into the past.

Eileen had never fathomed what David had seen in her, but she had a clear recollection of what had attracted her to him. She smiled to herself in the darkness of her quiet bedroom, remembering the twenty-four-year-old David, his compact frame, his skin tanned from months of tropic sun, his worldly-wisdom—or so it seemed to her—his sheer ease and lack of awkwardness, his naturalness, the life in him that was as powerful as a magnet. He had travelled, he had seen exotic places and met uncommon people, and for Eileen he was a

revelation. Every day, and soon every night, was spent together. David was an intense, hungry and demanding lover, and Eileen, dazed and overwhelmed, discovered something akin in herself.

How things change.

Why hadn't it ended there? Perhaps it should have. But after his leave was over David wrote letters from sea, long, literate letters, telling her about his life and the things he saw, particularly the animals and birds, which even then were his deepest interest, and begging her to wait for him. He was full of plans. Almost overnight her world took on a very different hue. So long grey and circumscribed, now it seemed to abound with promise. How could she have withstood him?

The dream came back to her. She was running through the woods in unsuitable shoes. The trees were rain-soaked and the paths slick, and she slipped and slithered and fell to her hands and knees. Plastered with mud, she struggled back to her feet and ran on, tears rolling down her face, her breath coming in painful gasps. Michael was missing, and she feared for his life. Someone had taken him. Who? Why? He was someone else's child, and she had failed to protect him. She felt the weight of responsibility like a roof suddenly caving in.