Opening Extract from...

Wrote for Luck

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Here in December the view beyond the lecture room had taken a turn for the worse. Like most scenery, it was less than reliable. Late afternoon

made the overhang of trees by the lakeside ominous; the lake itself downright sinister. There were no students about. They were in junior common rooms, on buses heading townward, into their varied recreations, out of their heads. On the other hand the orange lights – luminous and Belisha Beacon-like – bobbing about in the darkness suggested that someone had taken a boat out into the lake's northward reach. This was odd, as boating was forbidden, along with swimming and kayaking. Definitely odd, she thought, as she raised her head from the page of lecture notes – to be honest, a sheet of Basildon Bond writing paper with the words *Eliot, tradi- tion & individual talent* and *epiphany* scribbled on it in failing pencil – and, gripping the sides of the lectern with a greater firmness than she had previously allowed herself, told the class that what Virginia Woolf had really brought to the English novel when it came down to it was a mythologisation of the processes of ordinary life.

As soon as the sentence was out of her mouth she knew she had made a dreadful mistake, but there was no going back. The class stared at her: not with hostility, but blankly, like a double row of moon calves. They were all there, or nearly all of them. Girls mostly. (A couple of sarcastic boys sometimes sat at the sides asking questions calculated to fox her.) There was the frail, anorexic one who had once fainted from hunger during a lecture on Gertrude Stein. The fat-arsed one, whose mother or whose boyfriend or whose back-line buddy in the lacrosse team ought to have been told to tell her that skin- tight jeans above two-tone pixie boots were a thoroughly bad idea if you weighed one hundred and eighty pounds. The dull, sisterly pair who sat together in the very middle of the front row and had never, in the course of a dozen lectures and a real-live fire alarm, said a word either to each other or to anyone else. And then, squashed into the right flank of the back row, the planes of her face so flattened that she might have been pressed against a pane of glass – not a politically incorrect observation, Amy thought, for this was exactly how she looked – *Mikado* hair-do wilting a little in the heat, Miss Chen, Lily Chen, formerly of the University of Taipei or some such, who, of all the students who had ever waltzed into Amy's class on mid-period modernism, was the one she most wished to throw out into the street on a charge of false pretences.

The Belisha Beacon was still bobbing in the prow of the boat and there was a scrabbling noise as a boy with ridiculous dreadlocked hair put his head tentatively round the door- frame, saw that he had come to the wrong room and then unapologetically withdrew. Two miles away in his office Giles would be writing some press release, or emailing the chairman of the Kidderminster Conservative

Association. A hundred and twenty miles away in the antiques shop in Camden Sam would be doing – well, what exactly would Sam be doing, except what he always did, which was – let us be realistic about these things – to break his parents' heart?

'I expect you can think of other modernist writers to whom this mythologising was an essential part of their engagement with form,' she heard herself saying – brightly, but not so brightly as to introduce an element of pastiche. In fact, Amy had no such expectation, but these days you were supposed to involve them in what were sometimes rather grandly called the potentialities of discourse. Joyce. Eliot. Mansfield. The famous names rattled on, like stones in a tin can. As the lecture hall clock inched forward to five, her audience stirred perceptibly. The race had run its course. The fire had burned down. It was at this moment, at this part of the day, and at this stage in the term that Amy always wanted to throw her notes away and yell: *Give up this world. It will do you no good. Return to the lands you came from. Live humbly and put not your trust in academe*. But that way madness lay. Some of the overseas students were paying £13,000 for the privilege of hearing what she thought about the early poems of Sacheverell Sitwell. A colleague in the department of Creative Writing had once got into seri- ous hot water for telling her students that the discipline they practised was so institutionalised as to effectively constitute a branch of the Civil Service.

The bobbing, boat-borne lantern had disappeared now, possibly to the part of the lake that lay out of sight behind the porter's lodge and the approach to the sports hall. One of the sarcastic boys was rolling a cigarette. Lard-arse was stuffing her roly-poly fingers into a pair of mittens. Lily Chen texted heroically on. Amy brought her hands smartly together, like a supplicating nun in a medieval frieze, concluded her address with the words 'benchmark of modernism's assimila- tion into the literary mainstream of the inter-war era', waited politely to see if anyone wanted to talk to her – there were no takers – and then stalked out into the over-heated, brightly illuminated third floor corridor of Arts Block Three, home of English Literature, Romance Languages, Viking Studies and, somewhat incongruously, Experimental Psychology.

There was relief here, but also uncertainty. The way home led along this third floor corridor of Arts Block Three, next to which the other two Arts Blocks now reared unignorably up, but it also led past a number of departmental noticeboards, any one of which might harbour some unwelcome piece of news guaranteed to stall her progress. And, most calamitously of all, it also led her past the office of her immediate superior, Graham Jamieson, Professor Graham Jamieson M.A. (Oxon), PhD (Warks), 'GBJ' of the inter-departmental memo and known to the junior staff as 'Sound of marching footsteps' owing to his habit of appearing to be in continuous transit along the university's myriad corridors, its concreted

walkways, its greenly landscaped cross-campus tracks, at precisely the time you most wanted to avoid him. He was bearing down on her now, clearly making for his office, but equally clearly making for it at a pace that would enable him to be two yards short by the time she reached the door.

'Hello Amy. I didn't know you came in on Wednesdays.'

'Well I do,' Amy said, wanting to add *You plan the bloody timetables, Graham, so perhaps you ought to*, but in the end merely smiling in what she hoped was a respectful manner. She had never known how to deal with Jamieson. Junior lecturers tended to conceptualise the university on Harry Potter lines. Students were Muggles. The Vice-Chancellor's office was the Ministry of Magic. Of Jamieson it had several times been said that he had gone over to the Death Eaters. He was also supposed to know the name of the Vice-Chancellor's wife's Siamese cat.

'Teaching your modernism class, I expect.'

'That's right,' Amy said, wanting to add: *see what I mean about planning the bloody timetables?* The overhead lighting gave the faces that passed beneath it a washed out quality, and made Jamieson's look like a piece of cold boiled veal. He had short, stubby fingers, curiously whorled with dirt, as if he had spent the past few hours burrowing far underground.

'Many there?'

'Not too bad,' Amy said, the vision of the veal still haunt- ing her, as well as one or two other childhood phantasms she could have done without, and then, quite unable to resist the temptation: 'Even Lily Chen turned up.'

In the context of Amy's relations with Jamieson, this was a step too far. On the other hand, the angle of his body – slumped half-way into his office, one hand pressed against the laminated notice that read *Professor Graham Jamieson, English* – suggested that he had already decided to shanghai her inside.

'Actually I think that's a tiny bit harsh,' Jamieson prof- fered, in his neutral, head-of-department's tone, which made a change from his matey, we're-all-in-this-together tone, but was perhaps more sinister. They were standing in his office now, next to the photograph of him shaking hands with Stephen Fry and a bookshelf on which reposed no fewer than 17 hardback copies of his *Hardy's Poetics*, of which the *Times Literary Supplement* had remarked that it was 'in every sense jejune'. 'I looked up Lily – Miss Chen's – attendance record only the other week, and really it compares very well with some of the other students.'

‘Not, of course,’ Amy said, ‘that we’re allowed to mark them down if they don’t turn up.’

‘Do you know, Amy,’ Jamieson said, pretending, and fail- ing, to be delighted by this remark, and at the same time making an arch out of his fingers, like a small child who has just produced a church and intends to go on and construct a steeple, ‘there are times when I don’t think you like your students very much.’

‘It’s not that,’ Amy said, thinking that the smile on Stephen Fry’s face as he was being introduced to the proud author of *Hardy’s Poetics* could not possibly be genuine. The room, with its powerful scent of Jamieson’s personality – there was even a picture of Mrs Jamieson, Clementine she might have been called, in full hill-walking, up-and-down-daleing fig – had begun to oppress her. She wanted to be back in her own world, however devitalising, with its news of the Kidderminster Conservatives and whatever nonsense Sam had sent back from Camden Town. ‘It’s not that she turns up to one seminar in three, or spends the whole time texting when she is there. I dare say I would have done the same at her age, given the chance. It’s just that she can barely speak English and hasn’t read any of the books she’s supposed to be studying.’ *And that somebody with full knowledge of her accomplishments let her in in the first place,* she wanted to add.

From outside in the darkness came the sound of an ambu- lance hurtling in the direction of the lake. The smile on Stephen Fry’s face was definitely a sneer, she decided. He had seen through Jamieson and despised him.

‘And then there’s her coursework,’ she concluded, think- ing that Jamieson could not make her stay in his office beyond 5.15 p.m. on a Wednesday in December, that she had fulfilled all expectations that could be reasonably held of her, and that she was going to walk out of it whether he liked it or not.

‘Oh yes,’ Jamieson said, with what for him was considerable suavity. ‘I’d rather like to discuss that with you, seeing that we’ve had the second examiner’s report. Perhaps you could come and see me in the morning? I’d say now, but the M.A. people have invited a couple of sound poets to come and talk to them and I really ought to be there. Shall we say 10?’

They said 10. The ambulance siren was still wailing, but the noise of the engine had stopped. Here in his sanctum, surrounded by his paraphernalia – the back numbers of the *Journal of Coleridge Studies* and the collected works of John Cowper Powys – Jamieson’s face looked less palely ascetic. Perhaps he had some kind of a romantic life. You could never tell. She strode off towards the end of the corridor, down two flights of stairs, out through the breeze-blocked foyer and into the dimly lit stairwell where, eight hours previously, she had chained up her bicycle. It was still in one piece, except that someone had plastered a flyer

advertising an LGBT conference slantways across the seat. In the semi-darkness the air was raw and smoky, blown in across the wide East Anglian plain. Eastward, beyond the sports park and the crazed outlines of the dental school, pallid lights winked from the council estates. There would be trouble about Lily Chen's paper on T.S. Eliot's classicism, trouble about the paltry forty-nine marks that Amy, after much soul-searching and not a little annoyance, had ended up awarding it; trouble, and then, once she had taken aboard whatever Jamieson had to say about it tomorrow morning, more trouble. Usually the bicycle was her solace, the quinquereme in which she sailed quasi-majestically down the hill and then up the short slip- road that brought her home, but there was no pleasure in it now, not when all she wanted was news of her menfolk, Giles and Sam, the first of whom had, some years ago, mysteriously lost what was supposed to be the safest Conservative seat in the whole of the West Midlands, and the second of whom had said goodbye – there was no way of getting round this, no possible means of glozing over what had happened – to his reason.

Back at the house there were lights on in hall and kitchen, and a hedgehog lying dead – no doubt symbolically – in the drive. Inside the front door the dog, a debased and rickety dachshund, was toying with some potato peelings it had rooted out of the supposedly unbreachable compost bin and Giles was standing by the telephone, receiver in hand, attending to what sounded like a recorded message playing back. An arctic chill swept out of the drawing room, and she went to adjust the thermostat, noting as she did so that several other early Christmas cards had appeared on the pile on the sideboard and that one of them was from the Prime Minister and his wife.

'The people at Kidderminster called half an hour ago,' Giles said, coming into the kitchen where she stood eating a banana, with the card – rather a dull one with a picture of Downing Street in the snow still clutched between her fingers. 'Didn't even make the shortlist.'

'That's a shame,' she said, the *best wishes from David and Samantha* searing into the flesh of her palm. 'Who did they go for?'

'Anstruther. The Badger. Wimbledon-Smith. The one whose name I can never remember with the prosthetic leg.' A travelling caravan of aspiring Tory MPs toured the safe seats, always leaving one of their number behind on the morning they broke camp. But Giles's place at the caravanserai grew ever more precarious. He was fifty three now, a decade and a half older than the Badger and Wimbledon-Smith.

'I shall really have to start thinking seriously about giving this up,' Giles said haplessly. She liked him much more now that he was no longer in parliament, and there were fewer crackpot phone-callers. 'There's a message from Sam on the

machine.'

The doorways of the house – sitting room, dining room, kitchen, downstairs loo – gaped at her. 'What sort of message?

'Listen for yourself.'

She put the Christmas card back on the pile and, milk- white face with its high, grey-brown halo of hair looming towards her in the hall mirror, switched on the answerphone. Sam never called anyone's mobile. As his rigmaroles went, it was far from unprecedented; comforting even, in that it went no further than distances previously covered. The snow-bound tundra might be gleaming out there beyond the circle of firelight, but the wolves had been kept at bay. While she listened she thought of the moment – irrevocably fixed in her mind – when she had decided that Sam was different from other children, and that a substantial part of her life would be given over to exploring that difference and sanding down its edges. It had happened when he was about three years old and she had come upon him sitting on a sofa, cat gathered up in his arms – that he had liked the cat had always been a point in his favour – watching some children's programme or other, and appreciated – on what evidence she could not quite say – that the look on his face was more than simple intentness, or fixity or vision, that, like some of the outwardly innocuous remarks let fall by Professor Jamieson in his office, it meant trouble. And now there he was, sixteen years later, working in an antiques shop in Camden and living, or not living – nobody was sure about this – with the woman who owned it and leaving bewildering and ironical and sometimes transparently furious messages on the answerphone.

'I don't think he sounded quite as bad as last time,' Giles said when she had finished, coming out of the kitchen with a bottle of wine – the last of the bottles his constituency association had given him on his defeat – in the slender fingers of his left hand.

'What does he do all day in that shop?' Amy demanded, not so much of Giles, who had begun to tug hopefully at the bottle with a corkscrew, but of the world at large, that great unseen audience which lurked silently in the dark garden and thronged the ceiling above her head. 'Does he read books or dust the chairs? And Tamsin, or whatever her name is, what does she do all day? Hold his bloody hand? Read his Tarot cards?'

There was no answer to this. Later on rain fell and she went out into the drive, torch in hand, and, with water dripping onto her head from the leylandii hedge, set about burying the hedgehog.

The big news on campus next morning was of the student drowned in the lake.

This, then, was the explanation of the bobbing lantern and the ambulance churning up mud as it sped to the water's edge. More shocking even than the death, Amy thought, was the manner of its accomplishment. For the girl who had decided to end her life had simply walked into the water wearing a trenchcoat whose pockets were full of rocks taken from the Vice-Chancellor's ornamental garden, like Virginia Woolf consigning herself to the currents of the Ouse. Here on the third floor of Arts Block Three the view from Professor Jamieson's window was full of authenticating detail. There was still a boat out cruising the windblown sur- face of the lake; the landing stage where walkers threw sticks for their dogs was already carpeted with flowers.

It was about half past ten and the overhead lighting was more unflattering to the faces of the people beneath it than ever. Outside in the corridor students were queueing to receive end-of-semester grades, lobby for coursework exten- sions, unburden themselves of feelings of unworthiness, guilt and despair. Did universities have a beneficial effect on the people who studied at them, and the people who supervised them? Was there, when it came to it, anywhere else for them to go? These were not questions that would ever have occurred to Professor Jamieson, who had several copies of Lily Chen's coursework strewn over his desk and was looking at them with unfeigned enthusiasm.

'As you know, Amy,' he was saying, in what she thought was a surprisingly good imitation of dispassionate neutrality, 'we have a series of procedures that are brought into play should it turn out that two examiners disagree. Or, that is, if they disagree to such an extent that the whole basis of the undertaking is called into question.'

'I take it that means the whole basis of the undertaking has been called into question?'

'I think so,' Jamieson said, with irreproachable serious- ness. 'Yes, I definitely think so. If you had given Lily – Miss Chen – let us say a fifty three or even a fifty two, perhaps one could let it stand. But a forty nine... That, I think, is really impossible to ignore.'

In the antiques shop in Camden Town Sam would be staring out of the window at the fine North London rain. Or would he? The problem with Sam was that he so rarely did what anyone else did. The stock response to the stock situation was completely beyond him. He was far more likely to be hurling Frisbees on Primrose Hill. With an effort she returned herself to the business at hand.

'The reason I gave her a forty nine, Graham, is that she can hardly write English. I mean, I take it that students on the twentieth-century course are expected to make subjects agree with verbs?'

Jamieson raised both his hands to the level of his chin, in what was presumably intended as a gesture of self-depre- cation but ended up looking merely odd. In the distance, by the lake's edge, she could see a little drift of students, altogether dwarfed by the immensity of shrub and foliage, come to examine the floral tributes.

'Why don't we step back from this a moment, Amy, and look at the situation from Miss Chen's point of view? Certainly, we have a right to expect our students to write in grammatical English. On the other hand, there is the question of the support that we, as an academic institution, owe to them. Now, I must say that having met Miss Chen in the course of my administrative duties I have always found her to be articulate and indeed enthused by her studies.'

Heads of department had to say these things. All their geese were necessarily swans. Were they any students any- where, Amy wondered, who were dim-witted, uninterested and unable, or unwilling, to read the books? Forty years ago one of Jamieson's predecessors on the faculty had written a semi-famous novel, supposedly set within the confines of Arts Block Three. Advertised as a campus romp, it was, she had always thought, a rather melancholy book, whose subterranean thesis was that the values supposedly trumpeted by universities were all too prey to subversion, that liberalism, when you came down to it, or when you established it in Arts Block Three, had its price. 'Let me ask you a question, Graham,' she said. 'Is anyone here ever allowed to fail anybody?'But Professor Jamieson was too old a hand to be fooled

by this kind of ploy.'I had hoped,' he said wearily, 'that we could have resolved

this. Clearly we cannot. Miss Chen, I may say, has submitted a formal complaint alleging bias. She also claims that you made an insensitive and belittling remark with reference to something she had written about E.M. Forster.'

'All I said was that if she was going to write about Forster's novels, she might at least get the titles right.'

'Has it never occurred to you, Amy, that the Miss Chens of this world – any student, if it comes to that – need careful handling?'

'When I was at Oxford,' Amy said incautiously, 'the Miss Chens of this world would have been given six penal collec- tions and then sent down.'

After that it was agreed that there was no point in going on. They arranged to meet two days later in the offices of the Dean, where the whole question of Miss Chen's coursework and, by implication, Amy's fitness to judge it could be gone into at greater length. Having established that the matter was out of Jamieson's hands, Amy cheered up.

‘Graham,’ she said. ‘Have you ever read *Wonderland*?’

‘You’ve got me there. Is that a new one?’ Contemporary literature was a closed book to Professor Jamieson.

‘The novel by Martin Cartwright. The one set here.’

‘Oh that. No, I don’t think I have.’

‘You ought to read it,’ Amy said, greatly daring. ‘It would tell you something about yourself.’

‘Ah, literature,’ Jamieson said, who had his whimsical side. ‘So often thought to be heuristic. So rarely up to delivering the goods.’

Afterwards, cycling back down the hill into a vicious wind blown south from Jutland, she could not quite work out why she needed to make a principle out of Lily Chen. There had been other Lily Chens over the years, and she had let them go: a boy, once, who had done no work for three years, and with whom she had remained on the friendliest possible terms; a girl who had copied page after page out of Terry Eagleton’s *After Theory* and been let off with the mildest of cautions. Why should they be allowed to prosper and Miss Chen sink into the icy depths? Reaching home at twelve to discover that Giles had gone to his office and that the dog had been sick on the floor of the utility room, she was gripped by a sudden access of resolve, as painful and unsettling as a tumble into a nettle-bed. She would abandon the afternoon’s marking, go up to London on the train and roust out Sam from his antiques shop. No sooner had the idea formed in her head than all the disadvantages that attended trips to London clamoured to supplant it, but she fought them off, cleaned up the dog sick, left a note on the kitchen table for Giles, which said simply, but, she thought, rather enigmatically I HAVE GONE TO LONDON and then stepped smartly outside before she could have second thoughts and caught a bus into the city. It was growing colder, and the people in the streets had that dull, exasperated look so characteristic of the East Anglian winter. Quite often, going up to London on the train, there was someone else she knew, some col- league traipsing up to deliver a paper, some mother of a child from one of the several schools Sam had attended in the vicinity until the educational process grew weary of him. This time, ominously enough, her carriage was almost empty and she spent the journey staring out of the window at the dun-coloured meadows and the pools of stagnant water that ran away on either side of the track, anonymous and alone.

Camden, when she reached it, seemed even nastier and more untidy than on her last visit, and the schoolchildren gathered in the entrance to the Underground station like creatures from another galaxy. What did they want? And what was to

be done with them when they grew older? She had a vision of two of them walled up behind glass in some foreign museum under the rubric *specimens of English youth, London, December 2012*. The antiques shop proved not to be down the side street where she thought she remembered it, but at the far end of a tiny, sequestered square where so many black refuse sacks lay piled up in mounds that they could not possibly have all belonged to the buildings round about and must have been brought in from outside. The twilight was coming on now, and a part of her did not want to go into the shop, feared what she might find there, would have given anything, in fact, to have been able to jump into a taxi and have herself driven back to Liverpool Street, to have left the moral dilemmas which oppressed her to the characters of the books on which she lectured. On the other hand, was there any guarantee that the authors of these works knew any more than she did? She took her hands out of her coat pockets, stared into the shop window – depthless and atmospheric – and was rather relieved to find Sam sitting on a stool next to a pile of dinner plates and an ostrich egg on which the plump faces of their majesties King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra had been blandly superimposed: less disconcerting-looking than usual, she thought, but with a bizarre hairstyle, cropped to the skull on one side but with queer, luxuriant fronds hanging down on the other. When he saw her he got down off the stool and stood awkwardly with his hands by his sides, rather if, she thought, he was a boy scout waiting to be called to attention, and she was struck by how unutterably incongruous her life had become, that you could live for nearly five decades, cultivate the most sophisticated opinions about art, taste and morality, have a complete set of the Scott Moncrieff Proust at your bedside to comfort you, and end up married to a Conservative MP who had lost his seat and staring in the dim interior of a shop called Alice's Attic, wondering if your only son, who looked as if he had been half scalped, would deign to speak to you.

'I thought I'd come and see you,' she volunteered. 'I was just standing in the kitchen at home, without very much to do, and I thought I'd get on the train and come and see you.'

'That's nice,' Sam said. Some of the clumps of hair at the back of his head had been dyed an unlikely shade of blue, she saw.

'Where's Tamsin?' she asked, thinking that if Tamsin had appeared in the shop she would happily have thrown the ostrich egg at her.

'Gone to a sale in Palmers Green, I think.'

A customer coming into the shop might have relieved some of the awkwardness, but Alice's Attic did not seem to run to customers.

'Sam,' she said, not untruthfully, 'whatever you might think of me, it's very nice

to see you. But I haven't had anything to eat or drink since this morning, so would you please make me a cup of tea?'

Later on, when she thought about it – travelling back on a train full of tetchy commuters and then in the skidding taxi – she realised that in the context of her recent dealings with Sam, it had not gone altogether badly, that he had not, as had sometimes happened in the past, talked arrant nonsense, that he had listened to her questions and returned answers that were broadly coherent, that on a scale of ten an informed judge would probably have awarded the conversation six or even seven. On the other hand, as she discovered when they sat eating supper in view of the dark, cheerless garden, it was difficult to explain exactly what part of the encounter she had found encouraging.

'How did he seem?' Giles wondered tentatively. He was much less emphatic these days.

'I don't know. How does anyone seem? He was quite chatty – for Sam. He's had his hair cut in some weird new way.'

'And is he actually living with... Tania, is it?'

'Tamsin. It would be a very odd set-up if he weren't... *Jesus*,' Amy said suddenly, the mountain of reasonableness she had built up for herself over the past three hours instantaneously collapsing into runnels of sand. 'He's twenty. He ought to be at college somewhere, not working in an antiques shop with some raddled old hippy chick who looks like something out of the Incredible String Band.'

'Do you think we ought to tell Tony?' Tony was, or had been, Sam's psychiatrist.

'It can't do any good. But yes, we probably ought to.'

Two other significant things happened that evening. The first was that she found the Prime Minister's Christmas card torn up and flung in the waste-paper basket – flung, she thought, with a kind of ostentation that could only have meant that the flinging was a message to her. The second was that she went up to the book-room and looked out a copy of *Wonderland* in an old Penguin edition with a florid inscrip- tion – *To darling Amy with fondest love from James* – on the title- page (and who was James? She could not even remember) and spent the next hour or so skimming through its parched and curiously friable pages. The reading of it came as a shock to her – not because, as she had dimly anticipated, it was a much more ground-down affair than the jaunty encomia of the back jacket led you to believe, but because the people at large in it – the randy academics, the guileless women they were bent on seducing – were so entirely different from anyone she had ever met. They were not innocent people, and they were not neutral – they were

Marxists, and Feminists and Materialists and (a few of the older ones, anyway) Existentialists, and some- times devious with it, but there was a kind of Romanticism about their efforts to preserve a tiny, uncontaminated corner of the academic world where, untroubled by questions of profit and loss, they could attempt to be themselves. On the other hand, Amy thought, if there was one thing that nearly three decades of adult life had taught her, inside a university and beyond it, it was that you should be deeply suspicious of Romanticism.

Cycling up the hill to the university for the meeting with the Dean, past grey, Titanic lorries that loomed up unexpectedly from out of the mist, she found that there was a paragraph forming in her head which could be used not exactly in her defence but as a way of assimilating the events of the past few days, in so far as they could be assimilated. It went: *all this, all the endeavours on which we are so optimistically engaged, are effectively meaningless. If Miss Chen, against whom I have no personal animus, is allowed to come here and buy a degree, without having the ability to read, much less comprehend, the books she is supposed to be studying, then why shouldn't anyone? As for the idea that what we do here has any relevance to the world beyond the window of Arts Block Three, that literature, as it is currently taught, is an ameliorating force, that it is a source of moral rejuvenation, that it encourages us to see ourselves in perspective – that it possesses all those wonderful sanctifying qualities we are constantly told about – then let me tell you that the experiences of the past week suggest that literature has no bearing on whether I feel happy, sad or anything else, and certainly no effect on my ability to cope with the impediments that life strews in my path*. She thought that this was putting it rather strong, but never, she realised, had she felt keener on putting things strongly.

In the end all this, all this unabashed cultural extremism, went unsaid. For the Dean's office turned out to be empty, its door open, its complete edition of the *New Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* laid out invitingly in its double row, but the long sofa on which supplicants were invited to state their cases quite empty, and the birds flown – if, indeed, they had ever perched there in the first place. She had been there ten minutes and had time to read a whole article about Stefan Zweig in the *London Review of Books* when there came a shuf- fling noise in the doorway and she looked up to see the burly, chronically put-upon figure of Dorothy, the Dean's secretary.

'Are you waiting for Maurice and Graham? I'm afraid neither of them's here.'

'Why not?' Amy demanded, more petulantly than she meant to. 'Why aren't they here?'

'Actually,' Dorothy said, coming into the room and shut- ting the door with an adroitness that belied her all-in-wrestler's physique, 'they're with the V-C.' There

was a pause. ‘I think they’ll probably be there most of the morning.’

Amy cocked an eye. This was too big to be ignored. Much bigger than the Registrar being arrested in the nightclub or the cannabis patch in the woods. Happily Dorothy was an old friend. They had shared bottles of water after the charity fun run and criticised many an outfit worn by the Public Orator’s wife. After she had made a pretence of tidying the Dean’s pristine desk and returned the copy of the *London Review of Books* to its proper place, she said:

‘Actually it’s a disciplinary matter.’ ‘To do with whom?’‘Professor Jamieson.’‘What’s he done?’

There was a pause while Dorothy searched for the appro- priate quasi-legal phrase. ‘Apparently he is supposed to have forced his attentions on one of the overseas students.’

‘Anyone we know?’

‘I believe,’ Dorothy said, indicating both that the conversa- tion was at and end and that Amy could consider herself lucky to be divulged even this much, ‘that she’s called Lily Chen.’

Lily Chen, Amy thought, Lily Chen! What havoc have you wreaked in the breast of occidental man since you first flew in from the University of Taipei, or wherever it was? Such unprecedented news demanded a response, and so she left the Dean’s office, in all its anti-septic splendour, and marched off to the cafeteria in the shopping mall which occupied the campus’s central square in search of a cup of coffee. Outside the foyer they were holding a vigil for the girl who had drowned herself in the lake, and there were students standing about in groups holding placards which said REMEMBER VIOLET. All this, too, seemed incongruous. Nobody was called Violet these days, nobody, and somehow the placards seemed to emphasise her detachment from the world and the forces that had led her to do away with herself. But all this was serious, Amy thought. Whatever Jamieson had got up to, or perhaps only contemplated, with Lily Chen was squalid, or offensive or laughable, but there was no getting away from the placards. When the university reassembled after the Christmas vacation somebody, she knew, would have created a shrine by the water’s edge with pictures of Violet laminated at the campus coffee shop and doggerel poems written by people who had known her.

Drinking her coffee and looking out over the square, she wished that she could separate the critical apparatus she brought to her professional life from the world that extended beyond it. The people who wrote those poems for Violet – if they did write them – would be doing so with the best inten- tions. The last thing they

needed was some bright, merciless intelligence criticising their scansion. There were not many things she envied in her son, but one of them, she thought, was the ability to live your life as it happened, without the eternal critic, that metaphorical F.R. Leavis or John Carey perched on your shoulder. Just as she was thinking that Lily Chen's inadequacies were probably not, or not entirely, Lily Chen's fault, that vast external forces that Lily Chen had no way of resisting had probably brought her here on this magic carpet ride from the mysterious East, she realised that the girl sitting ten yards away behind the copy of *Closer* was, as a certain part of her consciousness had already hinted to her, indeed Lily Chen. Lily Chen, whose knowledge of the Bloomsbury Group was as full of holes as a Jarlsberg cheese, but who had in some grotesque and unfortunate way appar- ently been pawed over by Graham Jamieson. You could not, Amy decided, deny someone the moral support they needed because of their ignorance of Virginia Woolf. You could not even deny it because you disliked them, or you suspected that they disliked you. In her mind she was back in the shop in the Camden square, where fierce old faces looked out of the frames of Victorian paintings, trying, and, as she suspected, failing to say the right thing, not even sure that the right thing could be said. Was there a right thing to be said here? Who knew? Coffee cup rattling in its saucer, the copy of *Closer* flap- ping before her like some ancient guerdon rallying a troop of medieval soldiery on their hill, she moved hesitantly, but hopefully, forward, in search of some elemental solidarity that had once existed in her life but had since gone missing from it, that ancient wonderland where moral feeling was simply moral feeling, babies lay uncontaminated in their cradles, and lakeland water flowed on undisturbed.

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