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THE PARTY WALL

Written by **Stevie Davies**
Published By **Honno Welsh**
Women's Press

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THE PARTY WALL

Stevie Davies

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For Andrew Howdle
poet, painter, friend

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1

He nursed the wall, propped against pillows, attuned to every reverberation. At first, Mark had whiled away the time with a book. Gradually he left off reading and immersed himself in this quiet act of witness. Strangely, the vigil had no power to bore him. Concentration remained deep and constant as he listened out, or listened in, for his neighbour. There'd been an intermittent scratching or rustling sound he was unable to interpret, but that had ceased. Even when the silence remained well-nigh unbroken for half an hour or so, and he had to get up and stretch or pee, Mark experienced no, or little, impatience. Whatever I can do for Freya, I'll gladly and honourably do, he told himself, grateful for the calm intentness of his spirit. She schooled him. She made him a better person. There was an overarching sense of forgiveness. Not that there was anything Mark should be forgiven for.

He brought lunch upstairs on a tray and ate cross-legged on his bed, to be near to her. The sound of his own chewing blocked off any small noises and he occasionally paused to listen.

Next door's dog broke the trance with a desolation of baying, very near at hand. There was a shriek of 'Storm, no! Get down!' Mark started back from the reverberation; soup slopped onto the tray. He disliked mess and would not normally eat in bed. Everything was in process of change.

Dogs know, Mark thought. Dogs smell the death in a house. But not even the damp snout of a dog can nose out the presence of a person through a wall. Freya's bedroom door clicked; animal feet skittered down the Foxes' stairs. She was locking Storm into the kitchen. Out on the landing in his socked feet, Mark detected her footsteps padding back upstairs. As Freya re-entered her bedroom, Mark returned to his. It was the rhythm of their lives. The soup was

tepid. He finished the bread and cheese and brushed crumbs from his sweater.

Mark settled back down again. His body warmth fed the wall and he hoped that a remnant flowed through to Freya. The magpies in Whitethorn Wood set up a quarrelsome churring. Shush! They were the least eirenic of birds. Their violence threatened the songbirds out there, but what could one do? When the predators had finished mobbing whatever it was that had aroused their spleen or appetite, there was a quiet spell, haunted by murmuring. Kneeling, he laid his ear flat to the wall. Was Freya singing to her husband? They say music dies last, and Mark could believe that. The husband's voice had been inaudible for many days.

Now the three of them composed themselves for the long act of waiting and witness, only a membrane between them. This vigil Mark would not have missed for the world. Five months ago, turfed out of his beautiful home, Tŷ Hafan, he'd landed in this terrace of nobodies where walls were thin and neighbours hugger-mugger. He reminded himself that this was temporary, he'd soon be home, with the hope of taking Freya with him. As it had turned out, the move to the crescent had been providential: how otherwise would Mark have come across his darling?

His sole desire was to be close to Freya and open to her. Imagine if this wall were suddenly drawn up like a stage curtain. It would be revealed that he and she were face to face, a metre apart, perhaps, gazing into one another's amazed eyes. His sympathy would flow out to meet her suffering and Freya would know for sure that she was not alone – and never would be. One wished Keir Fox gone but not for selfish reasons. Prolonging the man's life was extending his suffering. And her suffering. And, for that reason, my suffering, he thought.

The bottom line: Mark would do anything for Freya. Except leave off loving and watching over her.

It had come on so suddenly, this final passion of Mark's life. When he'd arrived at the crescent, he'd taken her for an over-age

tomboy, whistling on her patio as she tinkered with her bikes. By and by he'd realised that they couldn't all be hers and that she was conducting her business – noisily – outside his home. The gaunt husband, who called himself an artist, sometimes shambled out to stand beside her, shrouded in layers of coat and scarf. With her oily hands, mucky clothes and hair piled on her head in an outsized pompom, his neighbour had seemed just one of the terrace's many nonentities.

How wrong can you be?

Mark had come across Freya in the gallery café, stopped to talk, and glimpsed the depths of her. Her grief. Her need. *Keir*, she said, *Keir* ... and couldn't go on. She'd just been told her husband had only weeks or months to live. It turned out that she was educated, quite well read, politically engaged and thoughtful. Near-strangers as Mark and Freya had been, the two of them had talked, really talked. Mark had helped by telling her about the loss of his wife, sharing the insights he'd gleaned in his bereavement.

Somehow, in Freya's presence, Mark had shed much of his crucifying self-consciousness. Which was how he knew: the soul recognises its mate. That nervous tic stills at the corner of your eye; the eyebrows stop working up and down. You begin to like your face in the mirror. And this time, there was no mistake. Gullible as Mark had been with women, betrayed (and had paid for it – was still paying for the trap *she'd* led him into), now there was a quietus to turmoil. A sense of presence.

Timbers shifted, stairs creaked, water gurgled through pipes and, in the echo chamber of an attached home, you had a part in your neighbour's world. In a terrace, everyone connects. That is a given.

Some more than others, of course. He had no interest in the banal little lady on the other side and shut his ears to the signs of her existence.

His phone rang. Oh, not again. The pests! This would be the Museum Gallery seeking a specialist opinion. Why would that be urgent when the cultural artefacts had been entombed in the store

for a hundred years? Besides, Mark had received the director's reluctant permission to take an unofficial summer sabbatical, to research a book, provisionally entitled *Authenticity and Provenance*. This would be a big book and perhaps a great one. He'd agreed to pop in now and again when necessary, but naturally he was jealous of his time. *It's you we need*: he could hear in advance the nasal voice of Paltry Patrick, Visitor Team Co-ordinator, so-called – general factotum and gasbag. In one way, the calls upon Mark were flattering. One's expertise was beyond even the most learned of the simpletons at the gallery. He'd risen above the menial circumstances of his childhood to become an authority – a world authority! – on art and antiquities.

Still, since his breakdown, Mark worked strictly part time. What part of 'part time' did they not understand?

On the other hand, the call might be made by the adoring doctoral student seconded by the college. Janine. When he made a motion to rise, the ringing – of course – stopped. It had jarred; he'd lost his place in the book of Freya Fox's life.

Deep breaths. Out there in the wood, cherry blossom frothed and tossed. Nobody had a keener eye for beauty, natural and human. Mark's hands no longer trembled as he brought his ear again to the wall.

*

Freya watched over the undoing of Keir. The once gauntly charismatic face had subsided into a landscape of ridges and shadowed hollows. His brain, burnt-out, remained alive only to fits of restlessness. She'd counted on his leaving in tranquillity, his spirit floating back through the darkening brain towards a final light, where he would find his mother and father waiting to receive him. Instead there'd been this nervous activity, his hand large on the shrunken arm, fingernail scratching at the wall.

Gaps grew between labouring breaths. Keir's hand surrendered

its work. Storm had somehow or other managed to paw open the kitchen door and was racing upstairs.

Shush, Storm. Shush now, darling. She let him in. And why not? The Labrador reared on the bed, licked the sick face, sniffed, licked, recoiled, sniffed, nuzzled Keir's neck. The bedroom smelt of acetone, like nail varnish. Storm's nose must be penetrated by explosive smells, an apocalypse of scent, tens of thousands of times sharper than anything humans are capable of. He knew, of course.

Had Keir been waiting for his devoted animal to return? His lungs released a sougling exhalation. Freya waited. Storm drew back, hunkered, quivered. He had failed. He was afraid.

Keir took flight from himself. Just like that. He was gone.

It's all right, Stormie. He's well now.

The locum arrived; scooped up morphine packets. He filled in the certificate. Did Freya want anything to help her sleep? Sure? Was she on her own?

Not alone. I have Stormie. We just want to sit with Keir for a while. The locum left. Freya sat. On the bed lay an effigy of Keir. She was obscurely frightened of it.

The undertakers lifted their light burden. We are so sorry for your loss. Don't you want someone with you?

Not alone. I have our dog. We'd rather be private for a while – then I'll call everyone.

Hanging on to Storm's collar as he strained to follow Keir, Freya watched the effigy being stretchered down the stairs. It took all her power to drag Storm back with both hands. She and the animal struggled on the landing, he half-throttled, she in a fury of depleted strength. The front door clanged shut. Storm surrendered. The two of them observed from the window as Keir was carried down the path.

Freya sat back down on the bed, staring at the dint in the mattress where Keir wasn't. Everywhere lay traces of him, the imprint of his lip on a glass she'd left on the cabinet for a week. The disturbed dust settled. When she got to her feet, she had departed from herself.

One of her remained seated on the bed, hands in lap, gaze bent, while the other Freya rose. Faint, she sat back down; rejoined herself.

She tried again. And here she was, quite collected, at the window looking out. Cars, shrubs, blank day, Knots of neighbours, gossiping.

Someone knocked. Freya stayed put, where Keir's recent presence was most potent, the sheets rich with his mortal smell, toxic, terrible, precise and precious. Even the signs of his disease were sacred.

She agreed with Storm, and Storm with her, on their need for intimate privacy. An interval.

The wall Keir had been scraping at wore its old blemishes – dimples, flecks and stains – overlaid with scribble. Impossible to decode whatever message, if any, he'd meant to leave. Perhaps in his delirium, he had imagined he was at his easel in the studio. Or maybe he was making a last ditch effort to escape. A residue of powdered plaster and paint flakes lay on the duvet's hummocks and troughs. Keir had once described a childhood attempt to tunnel out of his room with his mum's tweezers. Freedom, he said: I never wanted to be cooped up, I hated it, Frey, I needed to be out of doors, climbing trees, getting the view from up there. That was Keir. Over time, he'd enlarged the hole at his childhood home. No one had noticed. When his family had sold that house, he'd filled the hole in with toothpaste, which soon, he said, hardens.

Try and dig your way out of a terraced house and you emerge next door, Freya thought. A dead end. Out of one box, into another.

Her mouth was parched. A fly or bee knocked against the window outside and reeled away. Soon it would be time for time to resume. The clock hands would be released. Freya must ring round Keir's brothers, their friends; the news would escape and be disseminated and claimed by all and sundry. Not quite yet. Let me have you to myself. You are mine. She lingered, prey to a pang of jealousy – a sensation so visceral that she gasped.

Eventually it had to be done.

First, open the window to let out Keir Fox's spirit.

A scent of wild garlic and freshly mown grass flowed through. Every bough in Whitethorn Wood across the village green was rocking. Blue-tits and bullfinches dipped and dived between the rippling greenery and the Crouches' bird feeder. Pigeons foraged under the feeder, scavenging what the songbirds dropped. The green lay awash with sunlight.

The guy next door was standing on the path, looking up. His name had completely escaped. With his index finger, he was tapping his top lip – perhaps surveying some suspect tile that had slipped. What's-his-name was a fussy man. Always feared the houses were subsiding, homeless strangers were invading the green, the wood was tainted by ash dieback. When his eyes met hers, Freya stepped backwards, dissolving away from his sight.

The eyes had been soft and ardent and sensitive, like an animal's.

Water, Storm. Come on. He bounded down the stairs ahead of Freya. There was food in his tray. He didn't touch it. But he drank; she drank.

*

Kind neighbours, Terry and Pam, ran Freya to the village, parking down a side-street where they'd wait for her. Their temperamental cat lay snoozing on the back seat. Take your time, dear, they said. Freya walked a couple of hundred metres to the funeral parlour.

Would the family care to place a teddy bear in their loved one's coffin, Mr Knott wondered – or some favourite sweets or tobacco? Many families, he said, gained comfort from this. Freya snorted with laughter.

She apologised and did her best to straighten her face.

'Not at all. I quite understand, Ms Fox. Grief does take us,' Mr Knott soothed, 'in all sorts of ways.'

In his profession, no doubt he saw a great deal of hysteria. Or provoked it, Freya thought, and it made her feel more lively to be entertained by him, in his own parlour, with the top hat in the

window, a *prie dieu* and a giant bible open at God knows what. Mr Knott was attired like a boy doll. Freya admired his suit and waistcoat, his silver silk tie, his coiffure, his tan. He was just back, he'd explained, from his hols in the Canaries.

The parlour was stocked with lilies, which always gave her hay fever. Laughter morphed into a sneeze. Mr Knott took a step back.

And Ms Fox's instructions?

No to popping a keepsake in the coffin.

No to a frilled mantle for the deceased to wear. Or had he said mantilla? Definitely no to a mantilla.

No to supplying his best suit. Since Keir didn't possess a best suit or a suit of any description, that was an easy one.

Really, Freya explained, she just wanted simplicity. That had been the reason for the wicker coffin.

'I perfectly understand.' Mr Knott bowed his head. Many mourners preferred wicker, for its ecological advantages. Would Ms Fox like to commune now, with her husband?

He ushered her into the room where Keir was to be communed with. Floral wallpaper and subdued lighting. On the mantelpiece smirked a plaster Madonna, and alongside her lay a rosary. Freya scanned all this before approaching the tressel.

The person in the box was not Keir.

A pang of fear, then the rise in her throat of shocked laughter. For Mr Knott or his operative had plumped up Keir's face and rosied his cheeks. They'd filed his broken nails and painted them pink. The hollows and wrinkles of Keir's face had been filled out. Freya walked all round this artefact, seeking an angle that was not disconcerting. No such angle existed. A simulacrum had replaced her darling. It had made a mockery of Keir. Jesus! In her madness, Freya must have ordered the full cosmetic treatment. Was it offered as a package? She couldn't remember.

Freya laid her hand on the effigy's head and kissed the fridge-chilled lips. How pissed off you'd be with me for throwing money into this fucking pantomime, she thought.

And then she saw it: a life.

The life scurried across its host's wrist and halted. Freya coaxed it to mount her little finger. Instead it detoured, heading for Keir's knuckle, where it stopped again.

'There's nothing for you here,' Freya said aloud.

The life would run into Keir's sleeve and lose itself in mortuary chill. There was nothing off kilter about this concern for a speck of being. To veterans of Earth First, who'd met on the road protests, a miniscule life was precious. Freya grabbed a tissue from Mr Knott's box and edged the creature onto it, lifting it softly.

Freya brushed it off into a pot plant. There you go.

Leaving them both – the dead and the living – Freya stepped out into the glare of the main road. It was like coming from a film matinee into the shrill light of day. Or was she entering the film? Something was very wrong out here. Or back there. Or both. She started over the zebra crossing. Keir has left me, Freya thought. And been replaced by that impersonator. A sense of rejection struck hard. He had abandoned her. Even while she was ministering to him – night and day, day and night – all he'd been concerned with was that scribble he was doing on the wall. A flash of anger against Keir: you took my life with you. The anger was followed by a dark slick of guilt. Whatever should I feel angry about? You didn't choose to go.

From earliest days she'd been a rebel, bolshy, her own person. Keir was proud of her spirit: *Of the two of us, you're the strong one, no question.*

But that was then: before he took her life. In mid-stride, Freya's foot hung suspended. Stasis. The revving traffic ceased to roar. Everything stopped.

Some weird windmill now began to turn its blades in her mind, with incredible slowness. I have been here before, Freya thought, as the street was replaced by a dreamscape. Her foot was still raised. When would it come down? The people on the pavement ahead had all ceased to move, their errands cancelled. Skirts belled, cigarette smoke plumed. Was everyone looking at her? Yes, they'd

all swivelled their necks to see what the stranger on the crossing would do next.

Now Freya was – without registering the process of having got there – on the other side, facing an ash tree. Ivy climbed the trunk but its stems had been cloven, to prevent it from overwhelming the tree. She smelt a tang of vegetation. The winding ropes on the ash trunk were just like the protruding veins on Keir's arms. The council workers had shorn right through. What right had they? It was not right.

Was something about to happen? Something apocalyptic? The blades in Freya's mind speeded up. A person in a blue coat flashed past her as if running from a bomb. She should find the neighbours' car before whatever it was that was threatening hit. But which way was the car? Who was her neighbour? Freya spun on her heels; the world whirled in the opposite direction.

But I'm not going to fall, she thought. Don't let go. Just a bit dazed, dizzy, dazzled. The world whirled. The whirl worlded. There was a smell of citrus. Very sour. Can lemons curdle?

At the edge of the park stood a wooden bench. Freya flopped down, leaned back and, closing her eyes, breathed deep, deep. The fugue-like state seemed to be passing. Was this the incapacitating thing (she wouldn't name its name) Freya had suffered from as a child?

Her neighbour, appearing out of nowhere, said, 'Oh, there you are, Freya dear.'

Yes, of course, she remembered now: Pam and Terry had brought her and would get her home safely. Oh, thank goodness. Terry helped her into the car. They'd have a nice hot cup of tea when they got home, Pammie said, and she'd baked some scones.

'It's very hard,' said Terry, starting the engine. He glanced at Freya's contorted face in the mirror. 'It's harder than we think we can bear. But we do get through. We do. You have a loving family, Freya, and caring neighbours.'

2

Scarlet was a startling colour to choose for a funeral. Maybe Freya would change before she left. Mark knotted his tie at the bedroom window, at an angle to the scene unfolding on her lawn. He looked out at dappled sunlight, shadows chasing shadows from the dancing woodland. Through the red ripple of her silk blouse, he could make out the contours of Freya's body – until one of the brothers-in-law obscured his view. Shift, Mark thought: come on, move. Any sighting of Freya was a chance to ponder and cherish her. The brother-in-law obliged, throwing a ball for the dog. The Labrador chased it listlessly, doubling back towards his mistress, ears flat to his head, tail low.

Freya's hair, it was astonishing: a river of glossy chestnut, flowing down her back. He pulled his phone from his jacket pocket. Mark couldn't miss this moment. One – two – three portraits. She was in process of turning, and he had Freya both in silhouette and three-quarters view. Beautiful, the lustre on Freya's face, the mourning in her long-lashed eyes.

I won't even glance at the pictures now, he decided; then I'll have a sad pleasure in store. It was all part of the chronicle of her life. Best to take no more photographs today, though, out of respect.

So would she change for the service, or not? She was not a creature of dour formalities. His dark suit had begun to feel morbid and insincere. The Freya in Mark's mind was persuasive, always: a hint from her could in a trice reverse life-long assumptions. Removing the tie altogether, with a kind of scorn, Mark unbuttoned his collar. The other mourners, apart from the aged, were not in black. We must reject these trappings of a socially obligatory sorrow. Mark sorted through his wardrobe. Yes, this blue shirt; open-necked, with that grey jacket, would work best. He began to change.

Out in the breeze-swept garden, the dog crouched low to the ground like a hunted creature, against his mistress's legs. Mark noted the sunny gloss on the lab's yellow back and on the woman's bare head. Wind lifted Freya's hair, swirled her blouse in sweet commotion. She was not speaking but the throng surrounded her in listening attitudes, like a court around a May queen. Keir Fox's thug brothers stood out by their tallness. They clustered around the nectar of their sister-in-law, who stood with folded arms, in her slippers, on the lawn. Those slippers must be drenched with dew. He imagined her bare feet.

I hear you weep, Mark told Freya inwardly, moving away from the pane and stepping into his trousers. Through our shared wall. Should the trousers be pressed though? Probably, yes. Removing them, Mark set up the ironing board where he could still keep watch. I hear you, Freya, when nobody else is near. I weep alongside you. And it seemed strange that nobody on Freya's lawn recognised the intimate understanding Mark had of his neighbour and how she was not alone – never would be alone, as long as he lived – with her grief.

When he looked again, the mourners had been joined by mutton dressed as lamb. The women wore flowers in their hair like hippies. Osteospermum, if he was not deceived, ochre, scarlet and white. Of course, he thought, as Freya bent her head to receive her own crown, I shouldn't judge: it may be a rather lovely idea, to turn the funeral into a kind of bridal. And of course, Keir Fox had been an environmentalist as well as a modestly talented and highly prolific artist.

Within the babble of this throng, Freya appeared abstracted. Mark read her carefully. Those folded arms defended her chest. He registered Freya's fractional wince from the women's gush and kisses. The dog read her too. It sidled round her calves, mutely reminding Freya: *he is not here but I am here*. Dogs mourned. Mark comprehended that. The Labrador was the key, he saw.

His love of dogs welled up: it all went back to Pearl, bless her.

Mark could not think of the spaniel without a pang of anguish. The loss, after decades, was never less than fresh.

Her silky, rust-red coat. Her gentle slobber. Her intelligent eyes.

He turned from the window and sat down on the bed. Tears overflowed and yet he also smiled, as if to Pearl, to calm and cheer her. She had taught Mark to be unafraid of animal smells despite his nervous susceptibility. But Pearl had shown him infinitely more. She'd nurtured him in the knowledge of the love of one being for another. Across the species barrier, two unloved creatures ministered to one another. Around the back yard of Gran's house, the walls had been a storey high. The clammy and shadowed earth lay in a black mass, sustaining only chickweed and henbit – and those, scantily. A washing line – on which nothing ever fully dried, for no wind reached it – stretched diagonally across the yard.

Out there Pearl had often been tethered, punished for some infringement of Gran's rules. Mark would slink out, wrapping his arms around her gentleness, removing her mess, tenderly feeding her filched biscuits from his palm.

*

Kindness encompassed Freya. It hemmed her in. You could not stem its urge to stampede your heart. It came uninvited, gate-crashing. Kindness assumed rights of guardianship over its victims.

They all claimed possession of Keir. And why shouldn't they? He had loved his friends and attracted so many. Friends, yes, and friends who had been lovers of his, and it had always been possible that they might be again. Keir's boundaries had been indistinct. Now it was as if each mourner had grabbed a garment of his, claiming it was Keir's favourite. Freya had seldom been jealous in her life, not really. She'd hardly known the meaning of the word. Now she seemed to have found out. But what was there to be jealous of?

I am living in a Perspex box, Freya thought. Everyone else is outside ...

... all except you, she thought. Storm nudged at her leg. Stooping to caress his head, Freya sank to her knees, enfolding him in her arms, skirt spread wide over the moist grass. Storm nosed into the dip between throat and clavicle. Amy, one of those who Keir had loved, bent down to her.

Get up, go away, Freya thought, with a fluey sensation. Don't come near me. Especially don't touch me. She felt like slapping the woman. As a kid, Freya had had a hot temper. Love had tamed her but now the temper seemed to want to come back.

Amy laid a hand on Freya's shoulder. The other cupped Freya's elbow, to induce her to rise. Amy's eyes were red. Just beyond Amy stood Rae and her little girl, Freya's niece. Haf, at almost four, had the look of an adorable demon, vital, smouldering. She appeared nothing like Jamie, the only fair Fox brother, and nothing like her older siblings. *She's a one-off job*, Keir had said fondly. Freya's eyes fastened on the child, her dark shock of hair, her comical eyebrows, and the thought went through her: *Keir loved you*.

She allowed herself to rise; stepped away from Amy. She'd heard Amy explain her yellow dress by stating that Keir had adored that yolky colour. Oh, Freya thought, so you decided to come dressed as an egg? She smiled but it was not a nice smile.

They would have a cup of tea, Jack said.

Yasmin had brought cookies. She'd made them herself, hoped they were not over-baked; they were all, so to speak, individually shaped cookies, you might call them rustic. Or you might call them a mess.

Freya could better bear this prattle than the proximity of weepy Amy. And, of course, she'd worn that dress when Keir painted her portrait. Rae stood looking over Amy's shoulder at Freya with a face of humorous sympathy, which she could tolerate, for they went back and back, to earliest childhood. Rae's little girl reached timid, and then proprietorial, hands to stroke Storm's back.

'Mine!' said Haf. 'My dog!'

They had an hour, said Jamie, before they needed to leave.

An eternal hour! To occupy the same cramped room as her old friends, who were looking concernedly at Freya's skirt. Why was she wearing a fucking skirt anyway? Why hadn't she stuck with her usual jeans and gone as herself? The skirt was blotched with wet from the grass and the slobber that was Stormie's contribution. She did not care. What did it matter how she looked? What had it ever mattered? But something had come unstuck and Freya was no longer sure if appearances might be all we had. The wilder life she and Keir had lived together – and it had been a life, they had not been half-alive – was under assault and shrinking.

Of course they all loved him, as how could they not? Her true self was glad they did.

As she moved towards the house, Freya looked up, to recognise her lonely neighbour looking down. He met her eyes and placed one palm flat against the window pane.

*

With Terence and Pamela Crouch, Mark positioned himself directly behind the family pews and apart from the ageing hippies. Who knew what ancient crumbs lodged in the thickets of their beards? Several were local artists of minor gifts and reputation. These he would be giving a wide berth. A melancholy folk singer strummed and sang about tea and oranges that came all the way from China.

Mark heard Pamela instruct her chubby husband, 'Now, don't forget, Terry – a few words but do not, for goodness' sake, go overboard.'

Actually, Mark thought, favour us with no words whatever, please, Terence. He frowned sidelong at the screed his neighbour produced from his pocket and smoothed out. Not that Terence needed a script to support his flux of benign garrulity.

Behind Keir Fox's wicker coffin, the mourners advanced: Freya with her gangsterish brothers-in-law, the flower women, tiny tots, a teenage boy crucified with embarrassment, elderly relatives. They slid

into the front pews. Light from an arched window gilded Freya's hair. She was so near him. If he leaned forward, Mark could breathe on her neck. On either side sat a brother-in-law – twin book-ends oppressing a single precious volume. Himmler and Heydrich on a bad hair day, he thought, a high quiff and bald sides in the latest neo-Nazi style.

The folk singer completed his dirge and there was a gradual hush. Nothing happened. No priest or leader of any persuasion popped up. Perhaps a Quaker would appear and inaugurate an hour of speechlessness. Mark imagined the body of Keir Fox in that wicker basket, then he banished the disturbing thought. The thought walked around the coffin and reappeared.

Of course, human silence, Mark thought, is relative. People fidget and cough. Toddlers start toddling. And someone was whispering behind him. Swivelling, he glared into disconcerting eyes of milky blue: an aged face like the Brecon Beacons from the air, all ridges and wrinkles.

Freya rose and walked to the front. Mark put forth waves of tenderness, to enclose her in his devotion, as he did constantly, unseen, but it was as if the pity of the massed congregation rushed forward and fenced her off from him. Tears stood in Mark's eyes.

In a clear voice, Freya thanked everyone for coming to celebrate the life of Keir; it meant everything to her. They weren't here to mourn but to rejoice, she told them, with her voice breaking. Keir hadn't believed in a traditional God but he'd been a child of Gaia, the earth, our mother, and he had gone home to her now, where he belonged. He'd left his paintings as a legacy. There would be an exhibition. If anyone else would like to speak, she hoped they would do so. Returning to her seat, Freya melted into tears. Her back quivered. Mark yearned to settle his hands on her shoulders and just gently press down in reassurance.

Freya's courage and dignity overwhelmed him. If only he possessed a tithe of that dignity. Of course, he had spoken at Lily's funeral, in this same space, eloquently. Perhaps too eloquently, he realised now, and certainly his scripted eulogy had gone on too long.

The whole ceremony had been majestic, packed out with her fellow musicians, a music critic from the *Guardian*, the entire staff of the college of music where Lily had trained. A string quartet had played a transcription of Taneyev's Adagio in C. Mark had created a floral display in the shape of a viola, using a glory of roses he'd grown in the garden at Tŷ Hafan ... he'd harvested the lot ... to make amends ... if in any way he had been at fault ... but he had not been at fault. No. Put the word *amends* back where it belongs, he told himself. The plunge into an abyss lay one step ahead of this word. What had he done, for which he needed to atone? And in any case Freya had released him from this perdition.

Mark shrank from a dangerous edge and, with a sweep of his fingers, brushed dust from the narrow shelf on the pew ahead.

Suffice it to say that Lily's funeral had been grandiose. Freya, by contrast, simply offered a few words from the heart – and that, Mark saw, was the way to do it. It was not too late to learn, even after thirty-nine years in this world.

Well, he'd made two mistakes with women. Lily Himmelfarb and Danielle Jones. Lily was gone and he'd shortly be sending Danielle on her way. But Freya – she was another order of being.

'Wonderful lady,' whispered his companion, leaning shoulder against shoulder.

What did Terence Crouch know of Freya? Sure, he shared the other party wall with her. But that was as far as it went. Mark gave Terence a small, sad smile, which was returned.

One by one, mourners came forward and rambled on about the virtues of the body in the wicker crate. A more original and brilliant soul you could never meet. Sense of humour. Social conscience. Lover of wildlife and trees and bees. Green. Red. Fine husband, caring uncle, faithful friend, *nonpareil* painter. The speakers brought with them pouches of tedious anecdote. Not one had a clue about public speaking but at least they kept it short.

Then the flower woman dressed as a buttercup upped and raved. Oh please.

Gripping a sodden hanky, she sobbed out that she'd known Keir from their second year at primary school. Since the age of six, they'd been *so* close. Keir and she had shared *all* their secrets. They believed they were *telepathic*. They had exchanged *curtain rings*! And Keir was the kind of lovely guy who never forgot or dropped you ... if he loved you, he loved you for life ... this was how he was: open-hearted and generous-spirited ...

Yes, thought Mark: promiscuous.

... you felt he kept a place in his heart for you ... all his *life* ... even after his *death* ... he had left her an aura of *love* ...

Preposterously, Buttercup raved on and on. He could have wrung her neck. It seemed to him that a rustle of discomfort spread, on Freya's behalf, as Buttercup milked her moment in the limelight, staking her claim. Mark was aware of Pamela Crouch digging at her husband with a vicious elbow. What was Terence supposed to do? Rush forward and make a citizen's arrest?

... they'd gone to *Africa* together; they'd suffered *malaria* together; they'd ...

Mark did not wish to learn what else this pair of prats had done together. He coughed, challengingly.

... they'd camped on a *farm* in Devon when they were *seventeen* and the farmer had delivered a bottle of milk straight from the *cow* and they'd washed in a *freshwater* stream ... and most importantly, they'd painted together, she had been his *Muse* ... well, one of his Muses ... and, in a real way, Keir's fellow-artist ... a privilege ... oh, the conversations they'd had about Art ...

Mark coughed again, with more expression. How must Freya be feeling, under this cloud of implication? Her lovely head was down; one could only imagine her expression.

... of course he was a free *spirit*, Keir, he had no use for forms and formalities, he went his own *way*, he did not believe in certificated emotion, he told me many times he didn't really believe in marriage

Someone must head her off. There was a rustling discomfort in

the body of the congregation. Terence, goaded by his wife, made a jerky motion as if to stand, but Mark had the advantage of his position at the end of the row. He half rose to his feet and put up his hand.

‘Excuse me...’

A baby cried out. Someone in the body of the hall shushed either Mark, Buttercup or the baby. Mark found himself striding to the front. The speaker hesitated, flushed angrily to the roots of her blonded hair. I’ll faint, Mark thought. No, I’ll do this for dearest Freya. He murmured as he passed that he was sorry to interrupt her reflections but time was short. Buttercup gave way, looking concussed, and faltered back to her seat. Job done, he thought.

Turning, Mark took in the massed eyes of the congregation, Freya’s in particular. She looked at him with, he was sure, surprised gratitude. Now Mark’s loving intimacy must find a form worthy of her.

‘Just a few, a *very* few words,’ Mark promised, clearing his throat. ‘By one who is frankly the least qualified to speak about our dear friend. Freya’s neighbours could not allow the occasion to pass without a word being said concerning the dear and good man we were privileged to know – over the garden hedge as it were, by the Crouches on the one side and myself on the other. I speak for all of us,’ he insisted, to deter Terence.

But what to say? Mark’s heart stampeded; sweat beaded his upper lip. In his panic, he lost touch with the dead man’s name.

And then it came to him: he remembered Freya speaking the name so movingly in the gallery café, when she told him that her husband was not well – *Keir, Keir* – he was terminally ill – *Keir* – and oh the music of her voice – *Keir!* – it was as if Mark heard it now.

‘Our neighbour, *Keir*,’ Mark said, with expressive feeling. ‘We speak a name, don’t we?’ He paused. ‘And a person answers. From now on, when we name *Keir*, nobody will respond. But souls live on – and here I am quoting the great George Eliot – souls live on in perpetual echoes.’

He looked round the audience with tender enquiry. Tears stood in Mark's eyes as he heard the pure truth he was speaking, or that was speaking through him.

'In the end, isn't the reality rather simple? Freya's Keir was a good man. Kind. Plain-dealing. Famous he may have been, in artistic and environmental circles – but from everything I witnessed and that Freya has told me, Keir Fox's feet were firmly on the ground of Mother Earth. We valued and trusted Keir Fox as our neighbour and we know we can never replace him.'

Mark's heart was wonderfully eased once he'd started to simplify, adapting his remarks to the capacity of the hearers. But simplicity leads to truth, he told himself.

Mark's proved to be the final eulogy before a brother-in-law – the one he thought of as Reinhard Heydrich, the Butcher of Prague – explained that Keir would be carried out for private family interment. Later a birch sapling would be planted over him and snowdrops and daffodil bulbs. The lovely people gathered here were invited to a gathering at Freya's next-door neighbours, Terry and Pammie Crouch. Freya and family looked forward to seeing everyone there.

Mark sat trembling with elation. I had them all eating out of my hand, he thought. Out. Of. My. Hand. He reproved himself: this was not what it was all about. Of course it wasn't. It was about darling Freya – her peace of mind. In a small way, he had helped ease her ordeal.

As they stood to file out, Terence rather generously murmured, 'Thanks for speaking on our behalf, Mark. I think you said it all. Trusted neighbour, good man. You put your finger on it. In fact all the tributes were grand.'

Mark pumped Terence's hand. He forgave all the chap's foibles. The plump little fellow had no sins. He was an innocent. And after all, people do their best. They mean well. They really do. Mostly. We are all human beings, he reminded himself. Greater apes, a little lower than the angels. Tears sparked. Tears for Keir Fox; for Mozart

stricken in his prime; for Keats' tuberculosis, and for Schubert's venereal disease (though this affliction might prudently have been avoided).

He queued to exchange a few words with Freya: best to confine himself to a restrained hug, brushing her cheek with his lips. Was that the next funeral, assembling in the car park? Let them wait.

'Now, if there's *anything* I can do, my dear,' some female was gushing. Oh, get on with it, Mark thought. 'Just email me. Text. Phone. Knock on the door. Any time, day or night. Promise?'

'We're going to shoot off, Mark, to organise the eats,' confided Terence. 'Bless her, Freya looks so tired. Want to come along?'

Freya did look tired. But Mark was not about to forfeit the fruits of his public witness.

'No thanks, Terence. I need the walk. Good of you to offer.'

'Righty-oh. See you shortly.'

Not if I see you first.

Patiently, Mark edged closer to Freya, content to muse on her lovely face and await his turn. She stood erect to her not very tall height. His heart tumbled over. At the same time, there was a pang of stage fright. Should he just bolt and catch up with Terence?

My turn. Crumpling of face. Oh no. Transient gripping of hands. Brief kiss on her hot cheek. Could have kissed her lips but he'd chastely swerved. A glimpse of eyes glittering but focused somewhere past him, or not focused at all.

So kind of you, Mark, to speak those memorable words about Keir. I did appreciate it.

And then he was jostled forward. *Memorable*, he thought: she will remember. That was manna in his wilderness.

The mourners milling on the steps parted to make way as Mark emerged into the brilliance of daylight. He stopped dead, deafened by light. Everyone had stepped back when he appeared. Shunning him. No, of course not. They were showing respectful awareness of Dr Mark Heyward's helpful role in the ceremony.

But the inner voice spoke up: you carry a stigma, it reminded

him, always have, always will. I am alone, Mark panicked. I am condemned and cast out. Condemned to survive. Condemned to live in isolation. And now I have made a fool of myself in a public place. He'd been alone from the beginning, abandoned, betrayed, aborted, belittled.

*

Recovering, Mark watched them embrace her, all around, shepherding Freya towards the burial place. A Highlander in Stuart tartan was leading Keir Fox in his wicker home across the interment site, followed by widow, gangsters, gangsters' molls and offspring, and the apparent contents of a care home, complete with a Macmillan nurse in uniform.

He recognised the theme from the New World Symphony, second movement. 'Going Home'.

If Freya had only asked him, Mark would willingly have played a lament for her – for them all – on his oboe. She must often have overheard him practising. He liked to think that Freya listened secretly, receiving the messages he sent through reed and fingertips. The oboe produced just as moving a sound as a bagpipe. Bag, reed, chanter and drone: frankly, who needs all that kit? Way over the top, for the intimate loss his neighbour had sustained. Besides, *pibrochs* and suchlike Scottish music had connotations both kitschy and militaristic, recalling marches, cabers being tossed and sword dances by men in ballet shoes. Even so, Mark was moved by the pipe music, which seemed to call to him – except that it also excluded him, since he had not been invited to attend the private interment.

He drifted in the wake of the procession and hovered at a respectful distance, in the dappled shade of a silver birch.

The body was lowered into the pit. Handfuls of earth, followed by the women's floral crowns, showered down. The birch sapling stood in its pot, ready for planting. This would obviously not happen today. Someone produced champagne and the circle drank

to Keir. The mourners laughed and cried; they told stories and uncorked a second bottle. Mark's throat was dry with a thirst that could be quenched by nothing as cheap as champagne.

'My dear wife is dead,' he'd told Freya that day in the gallery café. 'I'm a widower. I have been somewhere near the place where you are standing now.'

Her heart-melting concern stayed with Mark; it had initiated the bond between them. He hadn't made a drama of it. This wasn't about him. He simply wanted Freya to know that he understood.

'My wife was called Lily,' he'd confided, a catch in his voice, so that the name divided into two parts.

'What a lovely name, Mark,' Freya had said gently, laying her palm for a moment over his hand.

'Yes. Thank you. It suited her. Short for Lilith. Lily was a viola player of rare gifts. There are recordings on the internet.'

'I'll look out for them,' Freya had managed to say, thoughtful for others even as she reeled under the shock of her husband's diagnosis.

Now Mark made his quiet way through the Victorian and Edwardian necropolis of detached homes, monuments over which beeches swayed their canopies and blackbirds sang. Pre-Raphaelite angels strummed lyres and pondered books. The wind winnowed their stony hair. It was a delicious cemetery, especially now in the daffodil season.

Mark looked away, as he had taught himself to do, from the area where Lily lay. Her name passed across his mind like a breeze, and was gone.

Twin columns of cypress marked a central path and, walking down the slope between them, you felt you were in Italy. Mark had never visited Italy; would probably never go, although how difficult could Italian be to a Latinist? If he chose to, Mark could pick up the rudiments of Italian in a fortnight flat. But you had to travel to Rome first and the thought of flight made him squeamish. Then you'd have to stay somewhere, surrounded by strangers of all hues, subject to their conversations in the corridor, their television sets

booming through the walls. In Rome, you'd need to wear a 'bum bag' and look out for pickpockets. Ordering a meal would be a trial of nerve, let alone the embarrassment of eating it in public.

But a new life was beckoning. So much was possible. With Freya at his side, Mark's shyness would slacken its hold. She'd accompany him onto the plane, chatting lightly, without the least idea that he was phobic. They'd sit side by side, holding hands, the contact reassuring him. Her naturalness and excitement would secure him – or at least, to be realistic, it would diminish the terror of leaving the earth. Once they alighted in Rome or Florence, Mark would be in his element, introducing Freya to classical monuments and Renaissance art works; deciphering them for her. He could foresee the wonder in her eyes.

It was midday and the cypresses cast no shadows. Their spicy scent remained with him even when he climbed into the car and buckled up. The thought of Italy possessed him, with a sense of new freedom, to love, grow, travel.

But the wake was the next step. Terence's wife had prepared the food, so the fare would be sloppy and digestible.

3

Oh, the relief to be free of the crush; to kick off her ridiculous high heels; close the door upon everyone, saying she would change her clothes and settle Storm, and be at the party within half an hour. It's a party, she told herself, not a wake.

Freya had altogether lost touch with her sociable side. I saw him through, I saw him across the threshold, she reminded herself. I'm bound to be drained. It's normal, it's natural. Apart from a dash to the shops or an hour at a café, I was with Keir every moment. Bear that in mind. Freya had given up work as a mechanic at the bike shop without a qualm. But there'd been times when she'd inwardly dissociated from Keir. It hurt and shamed her now to think how she'd recoiled from his skeletal frame. But why be ashamed? She'd kept going until the end – beyond the end – when the dilated pupils no longer queried the great enigma of everything and Keir fled back down the labyrinth of his perishing brain to a final explosion of light, and then nothing.

Freya herself had no face left. Keir had stripped it off in his delirium and taken it with him.

But there were things you had to do after the end, faceless or not. A rigmarole of rituals. Too much talking. There were times when you wanted to blurt, *Fuck off, the lot of you!* Where did that anger come from, especially towards those Freya had loved for so long? She took a deep breath. Be fair, she told herself, be grateful to the folk who go out of their way to support you – lovely people, sincere. You didn't know – until you lost your centre – how people cluster round. Folk you'd never really thought of as friends, people you'd laughed at, even, caricatured and privately belittled. And those people – especially the neighbours on both sides – had been more comfort to Freya than some of their old friends, most of whom Keir had slept with in his time.

Yet that had been with Freya's consent. She'd also been free to love and she had loved. This had never been an issue. Not overtly, anyway. It was part of the agreement you made, the balance between you. After her degree in geological engineering and several years with an environmental consultancy, Freya had left to work from home as a mechanic. It had been her own choice: to be close to Keir, to support his art. *I am my own master*, she'd once informed Amy, who didn't disguise her contempt for women who dwindled into wives.

She wouldn't mind if she never saw Amy again. Bug-eyed Amy. Forever finger-combing her frizzy blonde hair. Amy the mouth. Amy the Muse.

Freya's eyes closed of their own accord. Almost at once she jerked awake. Someone hovering above her had passed a familiar hand across her forehead and brushed the hair back from her temples. Freya looked round.

And woke up.

Apparently she had not been awake the first time she'd awoken. How odd. Now she was. The tender visitor had that second left the room. She'd glimpsed his coat whisking away round the door to the kitchen, just as her eyelids parted. Why was he wearing a winter coat in this balmy weather?

You can get summer flu, she thought, and shivered.

Freya peered into the kitchen. All remained as she'd left it, but ailt and rocking. A smell of rotting fruit, not pleasant, hung in the air and seemed to become more pungent. She glanced in the bowl, which contained fresh kiwis and bananas Rae had brought. *You must eat, dearest*. Rae was lovely. (Had he slept with her too, *because* she was lovely? And not told Freya, which would be breaking their rule of candour and openness? Don't think like that, forget that). Amy didn't matter. Never had mattered. Amy had said, *Keir didn't believe in marriage*. How dare she? And yet that was true, in a way, of both Keir and Freya. But did Amy have to say it? Did she really have to, when one had lost a layer of skin and there was no membrane left between yourself and the world?

But, Rae – why did you? Perhaps you didn't. Rae, you are mine, and lovely. And loyal. I will believe that. Rae and Freya were woven into one another's lives.

Of course there was nobody with Freya in the house, there'd been nobody. How could there be? Storm, asleep in his basket, drooling slightly – was he dreaming too? – would have barked the place down if anyone had got in. Even so, Freya couldn't rid herself of the conviction that Keir *had* been here, watching over her. As he would have done, had she been the one doing the dying.

Or would he be committing adultery in the next room?

Of course not. Where did that hellish thought come from? It was not a language they spoke – of marital rules and certificated emotions.

I'm not myself, Freya thought. How would I be, with you in the earth? Humming came from next door, where the wake was starting up. A *wake*? What did that mean? How could you *wake* twice from the same sleep? A nest of sleeps. Her fuddled brain invented specious dilemmas. Not thinking straight. Everything skewed out of true. Freya splashed water onto her face. The stupid mascara ran. A clown's face. Looking in the mirror was like ogling her reflection in a spoon. Wipe it all off then, the cosmetic mask. That was not Freya. My face always looks better naked anyway, she thought. Keir said so.

He should know. Don't cake your skin in muck, he'd said, holding her face between his hands and caressing with his thumbs. Just don't. You of all people don't need disguise. Just be you, Frey. Keir hadn't needed cosmetic enhancement either. But Mr Knott had believed otherwise. He'd plumped out Keir's face and rouged his cheeks, he'd pinked Keir's nails. Keir had not been permitted to appear as an honest corpse.

Keir would have been forensically interested in the planes and textures of his dead face. He had no preoccupation with prettiness.

Next door, the Crouches' sitting-room was warmer than Freya was used to, and overcrowded. Her head swam. The framed watercolour of a fawn gazed with eyes of reproach. Where was its

mother, the fawn seemed to ask. Has she been shot? Was it you who took her? Have you eaten her?

An obese golden Buddha kept company on the mantelpiece with a crucifix Terry had whittled and a garish statue of Ganesh, the elephant god. Folk of all creeds, and in varying degrees of need, turned up at the Crouches' door and were made welcome. Terry had left his ministry at an evangelical church to become a kind of lay preacher. Occasionally Freya would catch through the wall a droning that rose and fell and rose again: a circle of prayerful people chanting in Terry's ecumenical sitting-room.

Alex brought a glass of red wine. 'Knock it back, Frey. Keir's favourite red. We're all with you. Have a peanut. Where's Storm?'

'He's in his basket. Snoring away. No peanut, thanks.'

'You OK, sis?' Alex bent and kissed her cheek. He was the Fox who least resembled Keir.

'Fine. Tired.' Why was he calling her sis? Never had before. Presumably reassuring Freya that the link with her brothers-in-law was unbroken. She had no family of her own except her half-sister in Australia.

'Well, you look lovely,' Alex said gallantly. 'What have you done to your face?'

'Taken it off. Why?'

'You look so young.'

Sleeplessness didn't help. At night, in their home, poor Storm could not sleep and so, of course, Freya had even less of a chance. Keir's pet loped around their house, searching. It had been ten days but presumably the beloved scent still lingered and Storm must track the trail until it ran out. In truth, this was only a version of what Freya was doing, hoarding smears, cup-marks, fingerprints. Every night she conserved the traces of Keir that imprinted him upon their home. She could not bring herself to wash the glass that bore his last lip-print. And if this was so for Freya, what did the forest of intimate smells mean to Storm? The essence of the human body informed the dog: he is here, search him out.

Except that this bouquet of sweat and urine was also the smell of fetor, evidence of Storm's beloved's death. She should do some cleaning when she got home. It was her fault that Storm was kept on the edge of his senses.

'Do you want to sit down?' asked Jamie.

'No, I can stand.' Freya had come down off the stilts of her high heels and stood to her full five-foot-two in flats. So that was a gain in steadiness, she thought. I am earthed. When I go back, I must look at that wall. I must examine it. For you were trying to leave a message. You saw something, Keir, dreadful or consoling, and wanted me to know. At that stage, at the end of everything, there was no language. At least, not the language we use as common currency. There was – it seemed a peculiar thing to think – art. Keir had been trying to draw something on the wall. Some final statement, a message from the edge, and if anyone could interpret it, surely she could?

Pammie, with a tray of bakes, urged Freya to eat – just a little something, a vol-au-vent? Or a mini-quiche? They were home-made, she explained. They were tiny and would slip down easily. But no, thanks, Freya couldn't stomach anything. I have closed down, Freya thought, my body is trying to follow Keir's. Later, perhaps.

Amy was a red-eyed waif across the room. Blessings upon the head of Mark Heyward for seeing her off at the funeral. He'd gone straight for her like a human hornet. My God, Freya thought, if Mark hadn't stopped her, she'd still be waffling on, staking her claim to Keir. Rewriting history, with Amy as Keir's true but tragic wife and Freya some kind of homespun stand-in, useful for bringing in a regular income to support his raving genius.

She was angry with Keir for encouraging this yellow parasite. Or at least, not discouraging her. Keir was soft. He could be vain.

The way Mark had knocked Amy off her perch had been inspired – nearly as funny as the march of Mr Knott, as he swaggered down the crescent ahead of the cortège in his topper, swinging a stick. And

she'd wondered, choking with black mirth as the car crept along, if Mr Knott intended to perform this death dance all the way? Not on your life. Time is money. Once he was out of the crescent, he'd hopped into a car.

And you too, Rae, with your sad Madonna smile. How can I bear you to be so near? She wanted to push Rae away, hard.

She remembered Keir saying, *Rae has inner beauty.*

And *Yasmin has tender eyes.*

All she remembered his saying about the eternally lurking Amy, was, *Poor Amy is so needy.* It was not said without love. He loved you, Amy, Freya thought, and I should love you for his sake, and because you too have lost an anchor.

But I don't.

She glimpsed Mark Heyward in conversation with Pammie. A shyly awkward man, elbows tight to his sides, holding a sausage roll and not eating it. But shy is deep, she thought. She'd seen what it cost him to speak so movingly about Keir. Torment, almost. And yet, with his profession, he must be used to public speaking.

'I need the *toilet!*'

Nobody paid attention to the urgent young voice.

'Mummy, I do, I *need* the toilet! I need it *now!*' Haf tugged at her mother's jacket.

Rae bent to her daughter. 'OK, sweetpea, but we just went, didn't we? Twice!'

'Well, I want to go again.'

'Hey, ask me, ask Daddy!' Jamie said, squatting down in front of her. 'It's my turn. What are daddies for?'

'No!' Haf beetled her brows at Jamie. 'Not you, Daddy.'

'OK. You're the boss.' Easy-going, Jamie went with the flow, as usual.

There must be times, Freya thought, when even Rae's composure cracks. She remembered her sister-in-law in her earlier incarnation as an ambitious lawyer: hard to credit now. Rae had laid it all aside for children and unpaid work for *Ecology Now*. Keir, not particularly

close to his sister-in-law before she'd quit her high-powered job, had afterwards often been round at Jamie's. He'd played with the little ones in the garden; enjoyed long, deep chats with Rae.

About what? Freya had never thought to ask. Rae was quiet, reserved with most people. All my life I've had long, deep chats with Rae too, thought Freya, but what were yours about?

Rae has inner beauty.

Haf gave up tugging at Rae's jacket and took to yanking at her skirt. Children are law-givers, Freya thought, keeping us in order. Could I ever have been a mother? Was it even in me? I had only the one glimpse, and it lasted three days. Mothering changes you in every cell, someone had said. It ripens you. I'll never know now. If you'd been ours, little Haf – if you had – if only you had, and you could have been, or someone like you – Keir would have painted with you, read with you, taken you climbing in Whitethorn Wood, sea-swimming, kayaking. He'd have been a great dad, as he always wanted to be. Perhaps he'd have laid off the wine, stopped smoking, in time for his lungs to recover.

But she wouldn't think of Larch now.

Haf raised her arms, waggled her fingers to be picked up. She looked so much like Keir in that moment that Freya was haunted. What was it about her? The eyes. The searching eyes.

'Hey, why don't I take you, poppet?' Freya suggested, crouching and opening her arms to her niece. A visit to the loo would bring a brief respite from the gathering, an interlude. 'I'd really, really like to. We could do our special dance in the bathroom.'

'Not Auntie Freya! No! Auntie Freya's got *deaded!*'

'Don't be silly, Haf.' Rae looked appalled. 'Sorry, Frey. She doesn't understand. We tried to explain.'

Deaded is about it, Freya thought. 'It's fine, Rae. Of course she doesn't.'

How could children possibly begin to understand? You wouldn't want them to. But they see the holes in us, she thought, they braille-read our scar tissue, they register our fibs and fictions.

Out of the corner of her eye, Freya followed mother and daughter as they left the room. Haf's small, strong arms snared her mother's neck; her whole body clung to Rae's, as if its chief desire was to clamber back in and reunite fully and completely with her source.

Freya made her way to Amy, pityingly, because no one was speaking or listening to her after her exhibition at the funeral. But was it even her fault? The loveliness of Keir – his originality, his giftedness and humanity – had spread a patina of glamour all around him. Amy had tried to show them in her eulogy that she was covered in fairy dust. And that she was worthy of this lustre.

'What you said was very nice, Ames,' Freya told their friend. 'And I know how fond Keir always was of you.'

Nice and *fond* didn't seem to cut it with Amy. She looked quite affronted. Mortified. *Fond* undermined the claim Amy had tried to stake. But *fond* was all Amy was going to get. And a hug and a businesslike pat, for good measure.

That's you sorted, Freya thought. Who's next? She became embroiled in the giving and receiving of commiserations and anecdotes. So sorry for your loss. So sad, so young. We all loved Keir. Battling cancer. Brave. His pictures. He pruned our trees; it was an art he had, Keir was amazing. Great comrade in the road protests. Fabulous mural he did for us. Time, they say, heals. When my mum died. He should have been on *Gardeners' World*. Once he said to me—

I am not really here, Freya thought. I have left me somewhere else. Next door.

Rae reappeared, daughter in her arms. Haf announced to the whole room, 'I didn't really want to go!'

Laughter. Oh, the darling! Riding high, Haf scanned around, from pride of place, confident in her little drama. Freya registered the resemblance to Keir again, quite clearly. The large eyes, the roundedness of the forehead, that thatch of thick, dark hair, done up in a topknot. And especially the singular arch of the eyebrows.

Altogether too many brats. What were they doing at a funeral anyway? You kept tripping over them, especially after the second glass of wine. He never drank at lunchtime.

Pamela circulated with a tray of egg-and-cess sandwiches, cut into triangles. Behind her came Jean or Joan with Kettle Chips, followed by Joan or Jean bearing miniature sausage rolls. Mark helped himself to a sandwich and a roll. The miniature sandwich posed no problem but, raising the sausage roll to his lips, Mark's hands trembled and the attempt failed. It was no joke being paralysed by nerves. All his life it had been the same. Perhaps back away into a corner and swallow it there or deposit the damn thing on a window-sill. There didn't seem to be an unoccupied corner or window-sill. Why not replace it on the silver tray as Joan or Jean bustled by? But they were bustling elsewhere. Mark's horizons shrank to the dimensions of the sausage roll.

'You don't fancy it?' Pamela asked, drawing attention to his misery.

'Pardon?'

'The sausage roll?'

'Oh. Well. Yes. Delightful. Is it vegetarian?'

'Ah, you're a veggie, Mark? Or even a vegan? Dear Keir was not a meat-eater either, was he? *Our* view is that – as long as the animal was happy, and killed humanely –'

'But how do we know that the sausage-to-be was killed humanely, Pamela?'

Now they were both staring at the sausage roll as if willing it to speak.

'I had a very good discussion with Keir about the animals,' Pamela went on.

'Ah?'

'One could speak to Keir directly. Without beating about the bush. He was that kind of person, wasn't he, so much natural

courtesy, he could listen. I remember saying that I'm a simple soul and reality is reality.'

Amen to both those propositions, Mark thought, especially the first – and said, 'It certainly is.'

The sausage roll approached his mouth hopefully – but there it faltered, shedding a shower of flakes. Mark's face burned. It was humiliating to be standing here with this half-baked bun of a woman, who went on to inform him of what the Book of Genesis said about man exercising lordship over the animals.

'But we must exercise our lordship in a respectful and humane way, as Scripture tells us,' she concluded.

Pamela was annoying Mark now. He itched. In point of fact he was not a vegetarian but this was provocation. The hell of self-consciousness needling him built towards explosion. He'd managed to agree that Keir was courteous. And then Mark lost it.

'I'm just wondering, Pamela, which version of Scripture you read?' He'd started, so he'd finish. Big mistake, but the fountain of rhetoric would keep gushing. 'One of these semi-modern translations that has abolished all the poetry (and what is the Bible if it isn't poetry?) and rewritten it in words of one syllable adapted, *some* have suggested, to the intelligence of above-average chimpanzees?'

Pamela gasped and took a step back – but stared in fascination from pale eyes at her next-door neighbour-but-one.

Mark strove to collect himself. He hadn't intended to go off like a rocket, but social awkwardness and the company of asses, not to mention personal grief, had been too much for him.

'Well,' remarked Pamela rather mildly. 'I don't know about the chimpanzees.'

'Oh, my goodness, I didn't mean present company, Pamela! No indeed! I was quoting, of course.'

'Quoting?'

'Richard Dawkins. A late flowering of Darwinism.'

'Aren't you going to eat that?'

It was all Mark could do not to stuff the wretched item of

delicatessen down the collar of her cream jacket. Then he was aware of Freya across the room, looking towards him with those beautiful eyes. Oh dear. But she couldn't have overheard. He hadn't raised his voice. And Pamela's dumbfounded look was an expression her face often wore. It was her default, you could say. The situation was retrievable.

Seeing Freya there, as if people had parted to reveal her, was like hearing a phrase of music through a hubbub of meaningless clamour. All around her, the guests chatted. Mark saw clearly how solitary his darling was – and exposed, like himself – as she approached the Buttercup woman, and charitably embraced her. I see what you're doing, he chuckled inwardly: you're quenching her fire. Freya was intelligent and, like him, did not tolerate fools gladly.

He found himself taking a casual bite and chewing it. Rather tasty. Herbs? Rosemary? He'd have another. Freya had done him good, as she always did.

'Well, it's excellent to have a dialogue, Pamela,' he said, detaining Pamela, as she made a motion to slip away. 'A dialectic. You know what I mean. A bit of good-humoured polemic never hurt anyone. And I always felt – you are so right – that Keir understood that principle. Of dialectic.'

Pamela seemed more floored by this Socratic point of view than by the chimpanzees. And after all what was the woman but (as she herself seemed freely to acknowledge) a well-meaning soul with pouched marsupial cheeks and powder in her wrinkles? Why be hard on her? Mark began to fawn. He was lucky, he said, to have such excellent neighbours – and dear Keir had often mentioned what generous neighbours the Crouches were. He quoted Keir to the effect that you could rely on Pammie and Terry Crouch for anything; they were kindness personified. In point of fact, Mark had never addressed Keir on any topic, since the poor fellow had been ill and practically bedbound since before he'd moved in.

Pamela swayed, bemused.

Mark asked her about the delightful brooch, shaped like a cello,

on her velvet lapel and remarked that the cello was, of all instruments, the nearest to the human voice. Although the viola came a close second. His dear wife had been a musician. Did Pamela play herself? Was she, like Mark, an ardent music-lover? He smiled at Pamela with all his teeth.

From now on, Mark promised himself to defer to everyone on every subject. This was the only way. It was exhausting to be forever sponging one's own verbal vomit off other people's lapels.

And besides (he felt himself flip from one side of his mind to the other), these were lovely people. Salt of the earth. And some of them were intelligent too. The tall woman with her sandy hair swept back from her face was elucidating some nuance of international ecological law to a circle of dunces. *Ecological integrity* was invoked, *ecological debt*. Only it turned out that the listeners were not dunces. The fellow with the grey pony tail and the frayed jeans, for instance, was saying something about the natural resources of the Philippines. It was a valid concept, he said, very valid.

What was valid, Mark did not learn. Terence arrived, offering more wine. He'd doubtless explain to Pamela later, as the couple debriefed, that Mark, with three or four lots of letters after his name, was an intellectual who hadn't meant to be offensive when he savaged the Good Book.

In point of fact, one had meant to be offensive. It irked Mark to have his jibes soft-soaped by facile do-gooders who hadn't even been to university. But no, he reminded himself, you have just undertaken to be pleasant and sociable. So just damn well be it! He advised Terence to try the *patisserie*, which was excellent, as it could only be when baked by Pamela.

'And Joan,' Pamela corrected him. But she smiled with one side of her mouth, and Mark knew he'd begun to hit the right note.

'I think I'll treat myself to another before they all go.'

Mark gravitated to where Freya was standing with her brothers-in-law. Their brawny handsomeness was intimidating – especially the blond beast, with his blue glance. Hair white as wheat, lashless

eyes, albino complexion. These were the sort of men who performed fifty press-ups before breakfast, using one hand only. Mark prepared for another bout of deferring, as he moved into Freya's ken – and she saw him – and reached out to him.

Taking her warm hand in his, Mark squeezed softly. Freya's rings imprinted on his palm. He relinquished the hand, which he would have loved to kiss, allowing his eyes to say what he wouldn't blurt.

'Oh Mark, let me introduce you to my fellow Foxes. David, Alex, Jamie, Will. Keir's brothers. Keir's the baby of the family. This, as you will have gathered, is Mark Heyward, my next-door neighbour. Excuse me: *Dr* Mark Heyward. Thank you for speaking so sweetly at the memorial.'

'A sad pleasure. Good to meet you all properly.'

Four Olympic-standard handshakes.

They were talking about Keir's passionate engagement in Green politics, from his earliest days.

'Before it got to be the done thing,' said the blond horror, the one Mark had named Heydrich, 'Keir was an environmentalist. I always remember – we'd be racketing about in the woods – you'd look round and where was Keir? Stopped behind to check out some mouldy old fungus or collect fir cones or whatever. Never one for sport or lads' stuff, a quiet boy ...'

'I was much the same myself,' remarked Mark quietly.

It was strange how you recognised yourself in the mirror of other people. Now he saw his young self less as the odd-boy-out than as one set apart. A conservationist from his earliest years, Mark's derided effeminacy had actually been evidence of moral strength. The worn soles of second-hand, cobbled shoes were a sign of environmental awareness rather than dirt-poverty. It was a cheering thought. A pearl. He stored it and shone its brightness against the dark sensation of helplessness that rose whenever the memory of childhood surfaced.

'Oh, really?' asked Freya.

'Mmn. I was always told I had green fingers, though naturally I

wouldn't claim to be anything out of the ordinary in that way. Not in comparison with Keir.' With every word, Mark gained confidence in the self-portrait emerging in his mind's eye as he painted it. 'No, my efforts were commonplace. But I do still remember the small thrill of planting cress seeds on wet kitchen paper and watching them sprout. On the window sill.'

And as he spoke, Mark did remember: it flashed upon him – the cream tiled sill, the yoghurt pot with the paper and seeds. Or was it cotton wool? He couldn't quite see. But the view into the walled yard appeared in his mind's eye, the washing-line, the peg bag dangling. Even Gran's attention had been caught by the experiment. She'd bent her head over his to inspect the curious little curlicues of cress that grew so fast and willingly that they seemed animated. Together, along a single eye-line, he and she witnessed the small miracles of mustard and cress that gadded into life. You almost saw the shoots wriggle. A couple of days and here we come! Mark recalled the awe that tickled his tummy and made him giggle and want to bend double. He had forgotten all this. And Gran bent her head. She did, she bent her head over Mark's and screwed up her eyes and said (did she say this? perhaps she did), 'Clever boy, Mark.' Or perhaps she said, 'My clever boy, Mark.' Did she rest her hands on the boy's shoulders?

They were all looking at him. At his expression of quiet wonder.

'I suspect your Keir was much the same, Freya,' he finished lamely. 'But more so. Far more knowledgeably and passionately so. Obviously. And perhaps that love for Mother Nature was linked to his passion for painting?'

Everyone was looking at Mark, with softened expressions. The gentler image of his grandmother stayed with him. My clever boy. You can get it wrong about the dead, he thought. You only remember the shadow, allowing it to eclipse moments of light. There must have been such moments.

'And your garden, Mark,' Freya was saying, 'It's so lovely. Keir used to look out on it – I don't think I told you that? He admired the

little waterfall and the rock pool you built. It gave him pleasure to see it, when pleasure was hard come-by.'

'I'm so glad.' He *was* glad. She was gracious. He loved not only Freya but Keir and the brothers and Pamela Crouch. A glow spread over the whole room.

'But I don't think you've had a drink?' she went on. 'White or red? Alex, would you mind?'

Opting for white, Mark shook himself out of his reverie and was glad to see the back of Heydrich. The fellow had tears in his eyes, just like the original beak-nosed chief of the *Schutzstaffel*, who was known to have blubbed over classical music.

And perhaps Mark was making it up about the cress seeds. How would you know? Who was around to verify the story? The film clip playing in his mind had ended and there was no way to recapture that sense of blessing. Gran had left behind no written account of her feelings. And perhaps that was a good thing. The old wound throbbed a little more and exuded a pulse of poison. He snapped back into the part he was playing.

He had more to say about his green fingers, his membership of Greenpeace and Amnesty International and his concerns for the ozone layer, but the conversation veered and tacked as it was bound to do on these occasions. A tiny tot was giving the guests far too much information about her toileting habits. Evidently she belonged to the international lawyer and wasn't impressed by her mother's conversation. The little darling rebuffed 'Auntie Freya'. *No*, whined the spoilt kid. *I want Mummy, not you.*

What a brat.

Freya took that well. But Mark's antennae caught the hurt. Everything hurt his friend. Nobody else seemed to recognise the weather in her soul. People came and said their piece about her husband. Why couldn't they leave her alone? The charade of it all.

The kid with the lavatory fixation needed some help from Dr Freud.

The crush in the room intensified. Shunted back against the

party wall, Mark found himself the victim of careless elbows. His face felt like a rubber mask; it glowed with the wine. All the while, the brothers-in-law hovered, saying little. Didn't they have wives and children to attend to? Did they all, except the Jamie guy, who'd fathered the strident kid with the urinary obsession, come singly and have nothing to do with their lives but act as Freya's bodyguard? Presumably the flower women were their wives.

Then through the party wall, he heard it, the howling.

Mark's scalp tingled and for a moment, because nobody else seemed to register anything and the noise abruptly ceased, the outcry seemed uncanny. When the whimpering began, together with the sound of frantic scratching, he understood. Freya had caught the sound too, her eyes filling with tears.

'Storm,' Mark said, cupping her elbow.

'Yes. I'll just go and – if I can get through –'

He parted the mourners, to enable her to make her way through, with a courteous request to 'Just let Freya past. Sorry. Thanks'.

And followed her out of the front door.

She struggled the key into the lock. It jammed. I can't get in, Freya panicked. Storm was hurling himself at the door.

'It's all right,' said the kind voice that had followed her through from the party. 'Freya – dear – it's all right. Let me.'

Removing the key from her hand, her neighbour twisted it easily in the lock. He pushed the door slightly open and spoke through the gap, hushing Storm so he'd retreat and let them in.

'There you are, my boy – all's well, all's well. Dogs pick up on everything, don't they? Maybe if we just sit with him for a little, he'll be reassured?'

She didn't think Storm would ever be reassured. He'd smelt the death in his beloved, months before there was the slightest consciousness of pain, long before diagnosis and treatment. Dogs knew so much and had to live with it.

It was a relief to have the reassurance of Mark's calm words. He seemed to understand dogs. Not threatened by them, presumably. Freya was vaguely ashamed of having seen Mark Heyward as a bit of a joke, when she'd thought of him at all. Shy people have wounds to defend. He had nice eyes.

'Yes,' she said. 'Good idea. We'll sit down with him for a while.'

She collapsed on the settee. Storm surged up and slobbered over her face. They trace our weakness, she thought. They scent our grief. It reeks at them. They are alarmed and try to lick it off. While her neighbour went off into the kitchen to refill Storm's water bowl, she took the Lab's comforting body in her arms and listened in to the murmur of the wake, going on without her, through the party wall. She didn't want to go back in there, ever.

'Come on then, Storm,' called the neighbour in the kitchen.

Storm slipped down and loped through the open door. She heard

him snuffling up the water. Resting back her head, Freya closed her eyes. So utterly tired and forsaken. Her body gave a spasm. And there was a smell of lemons. How could citrus be an obnoxious smell? But these lemons were nauseous – as if charred on a grill.

Must have dropped off. Just for a moment.

A very minor episode. No one will have noticed. Where did that voice come from? A man's voice, too. Dad's? No. Some medic, way back? If only Freya could go to bed. Take a pill. Take ten pills. Put the light out. But now she had to go back. Back where? In there, of course, through the wall. Where was the weird smell? Completely gone. One arm was numb and her mind swung wide. Through the wall she must go, where the current drama was in full flow, with herself the leading lady. Freya's scattered self rushed together and she leapt up, heart twanging. There were no lemons in the house. Stormie came in from the kitchen and a dark form manifested in the doorway. A stranger: no, not a stranger. Mark Heyward from Number 7. She was glad of him.

'Would you like me to stay with Storm?' he offered.

His face was all practical concern. He'd owned a spaniel once – Pearl – and later on, a black-and-white collie, he said, a rescue dog, and animals seemed to trust him. His collie's name had been ... Blithe. He'd renamed her in hope and done everything to bring healing to Blithe's early sufferings. That was when his wife passed away. Lily. He'd stay, Mark told her, if she thought it would help at all. Because of course the dog suffered at the loss of his master – in his way, as much as any human. Or more: who could tell?

'I could take him for a walk, if you like? Just say the word.'

Freya fetched the lead and Storm tracked it with eager eyes.

'If you're sure it's no trouble?' she said. 'I think a walk will help Stormie more than anything. Ever since ... he's like an orphaned child ... he's been looking for Keir. Tracking the scent. And the scent dies. It hurts so much to see him.'

'Like Emily Brontë,' he said. 'Her dog, Keeper. Bereft without her. We are their life and they are ours. In a way.'

‘Ah? Yes, I suppose so. What happened to Blithe?’

‘Blithe? Oh, yes. Well, she had a good life. A life – how can I put it? A life glossy with love and wellbeing. What else can any mortal expect? And, Freya, Storm is a life Keir has left you.’

She paused, startled, and looked at him. ‘Thank you. So much.’
‘For what?’

‘For saying that,’ Freya said slowly. ‘You have a way of putting things. A life Keir has left me. It’s true – I’ll hang on to that. And thank you.’

It was not only true; it was bracing to hear it put like this – and helped, when so much of what people said was babble. They meant well but all they had to offer were pieties and truisms, or comparisons with losses they’d suffered, so that you ended up commiserating with *them!* Freya paused and took in the understanding in her neighbour’s interesting eyes, which held a wisdom she’d be able to draw on, if she could just remain in her right mind. She made a note to listen attentively to whatever he said and store it away.

‘I’ll leave the spare key with you, Mark, in case you’re back before we finish in there. How can I ever thank you? Please would you help yourself to anything you want?’

No thanks were due, her neighbour assured her. When she dropped the spare key into his hand, Mark gave her a blazing smile. The panic she occasionally read in her neighbour’s face seemed to have been blessed away by the chance to make a difference. Slipping on her jacket, Freya touched his shoulder lightly before leaving.

*

In that moment of naturalness, he seemed to have happened upon the right words. But somehow, after five minutes, Mark couldn’t recall exactly what he’d said. Only that the barriers had gone down between the two of them. And perhaps within himself. *For he is our peace* – the words floated back from childhood Sunday-school

classes – *who hath made us one*. How did it go on? *He hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us*. A rush of gratitude brought tears to Mark's eyes. It was a positive sign that Freya could trust him with her intimate world. This was a solemn responsibility he would never abuse. He fondled Storm's ears, at the centre of his neighbour's private space. He would not betray this trust: it was unthinkable.

At the same time, Mark could not waste the opportunity for insight that had landed in his lap. To be useful to Freya, one must understand her better. His eyes roved the walls and furniture.

Frankly, you might have been in Herculaneum, with its gaudy frescos. The dead man's hand was still present. For one wall – and it was the wall the Foxes shared with himself – was decorated with a hand-painted scene of natural abundance – an overarching tree, with birds and red squirrels, in the Expressionist style Keir Fox had affected. The tree canopy spanned the long room: a river of greenery swirling up like vines near the ceiling. Tendrils rather than branches flowed like waves. And this odd but affecting creation was the skin on the other side of Mark's own wall. Who could have imagined it? The blazing colours had faded with time. The paint had been slapped straight onto the plaster – probably some time ago, for patches were flaking. Perhaps the artist had intended the irregularly fading effect. Some comment on Time, maybe.

More likely just slapdash and provisional. And the room stank of stale tobacco smoke.

Fascinated despite himself, Mark slipped his hand into his pocket and took out his phone to photograph the fresco.

And who had stitched the tapestry on the opposite wall? This was a rather clever thing, when he came to observe it closely – portraying the Earth seen from space and surrounded by darkness. Surely that must be Freya's handiwork? Not that Mark had anything against men who sewed – rather the reverse – but it was hard to imagine the scruffy and lackadaisical Keir sitting stitching by the hearth. And besides, the work was detailed, with none of the slap-

it-on-and-see crudity that characterised the technique of Freya's husband.

Photographing the tapestry from two angles, Mark went on to video the entire sitting-room, working around debris that had obviously been left by the brothers-in-law – jackets, a backpack, mugs containing residue of tea. As he worked, Storm followed at his heels and Mark spoke to him softly all the while.

Meticulous as he always was, Mark could not bring himself to leave the rest of the house unrecorded. The kitchen was a mess of unwashed pots. The downstairs loo left everything to be desired in the way of hygiene. He didn't hang around, but recorded all that was significant, so as to have a chart of the interior.

'What's up there then, boy?'

He pointed to the staircase and Storm, on cue, bounded up. Mark followed. If anyone came in, he could say, quite honestly, that he'd gone up to fetch the dog.

The front bedroom was the spare one, and filled with junk. Someone had slept in the single bed last night, the beige duvet being rucked and thrown back. That wouldn't be Freya.

Or, of course, it might be.

There had been nights when he had not sensed the presence of Freya and Storm in her own bedroom. After all, would she be able to face sleeping in a bed where her husband had died? Mark had not felt this aversion when he'd lost Lily, but that case was very different. Lily had not been ill. Or not in the way Keir had been. And besides – but there was no need to go there. Presumably Freya had spent some nights here during the long months leading up to the death.

Here, just here.

There is a point, Mark thought, obscurely, at which transgression becomes reverence. I should obviously not be in her private space. And I would not be, in normal circumstances. Love has no boundaries, when it seeks only the loved one's wellbeing. If I slip into the imprint Freya has left, I can know her more fully and love her more perfectly.

But, perching on the bed, Mark resisted the urge to lay his head on the pillow, given that it was more than possible that the sleeper in the spare bed had been one of the greasy-headed louts. He looked round at the clutter. A walking stick with a carved handle. Piles of books. A huge plant – *yucca elephantipes* – very dusty. He inspected it more closely. White, necrotic spots on the lower leaves recorded a death sentence, oh dear. You have been left to die, poor plant. It would have taken so little attention to keep you alive. He felt the soil. Bone-dry, rock-hard. A yucca tolerates near-drought but some water it must have, to survive. Mark fought the yen to water it and set the room's chaos to rights. An occupation for Bedlam, because this was a serious mess.

Dismissing the temptation, he recorded everything cursorily and followed Storm into the main bedroom, where the Labrador mounted his absent master's unmade bed and lay there panting, tongue lolling. The room didn't smell of sickness. Mark sniffed: some kind of perfume. He didn't bother to examine the bottles and pots on the dressing table, just photographed the lot for later, moving on swiftly (having picked up and pocketed the smaller of two hairbrushes) to the bed.

'It's all right, my love,' said Mark tenderly, and lay down beside the bereft animal, feet carefully off the side of the bed, so as not to sully it or leave a trace. His arm lay loosely around the creature's neck. 'You've got me with you now.'

He'd only inhabit Freya's space for a moment. All the while his ears pricked for any sound from below. But Storm would alert him before Mark could sense danger. Dogs know. Know everything; tell nothing. The animal's melancholy eyes gazed at him unblinking. The love Mark had had for Pearl all those years ago, when she was his one and all, throbbed through him.

Across the pillow wandered a couple of long brown hairs. Ah. So this must be Freya's side of the bed – and, with sweet symmetry, it was the side nearest his own on the other side of the wall. When he picked them up and hung them over his hand, the hairs held their wave.

Mark wound the hairs around his little finger, realising that only a cabinet and a wall separated his sleep from Freya's. Nightly they lay like mutual reflections. And she'd be wearing – he burrowed under the pillow – this silky nightie. He ran its coolness through his fingers and nuzzled it with his cheek.

Freya would be reading these books in the light of this lamp. And taking one of these pills – what are they? Ah, yes, Temazepam, old acquaintances – to help her sleep.

Had she tried Nitrazepam, he wondered? Better than Valium for sleep, in Mark's view, but it left you groggy in the morning: on the whole Freya had probably made a sound choice. He could imagine her insomnia with special clarity, since he had been there himself and kept returning. He had helped to calm Lily with Temazepam; it was a very useful medication.

With care, Mark slid the drawer back into the cabinet. Everything was recorded. At least, the essentials.

'We'll go out in a moment,' he told Storm. 'For a lovely walkie.'

Storm reared up, excited; yelped. Whoops, shouldn't have said *walkie*, Mark thought. Stupid mistake. 'Shush, fella, I just need to ... *shush*.'

As he opened the wardrobe door, Mark came upon his own surprised reflection in an indoor mirror, as though he'd been exiled to a cupboard and had given up hope of rescue. He dipped one hand into the coolness between two silk blouses, a purple and a midnight blue. He fingered Freya's grey coat with the large lapels and the belted waist, which she often wore and he liked very much. There was still a white poppy from Armistice Day in the buttonhole. Where did you buy these peace poppies? One never saw them sold in the streets. Online, doubtless: he made a note to check.

But why bother purchasing one? Gently, Mark teased out the poppy and put it in his pocket. She'd never miss it.

Long gauzy scarves. He took a green and purple one, rolled it into a tight ball and slipped it into his pocket. There was a selection of pairs of skinny jeans. This reminded him to get hold of some new

jeans for himself. And his own pink cords – that he was fond of but suddenly was fond of no longer – must be dumped.

Freya's shoes on the wardrobe floor gave off a fusty smell; not unpleasant though. She wasn't one of these birdbrains who went around bragging ownership of three-hundred pairs of footwear. He knelt to inspect them.

Item: two pairs decent black shoes, small heels.

Item: two pairs winter boots, one being brown suede (or possibly imitation suede), the other black and high on the leg.

Item: one pair open sandals, worn, and if you shook them, grains of sand sifted out. Beachwear. Sand Freya had warmed between her toes.

Item: one pair heavy-duty walking shoes, scuffed, shoddy.

Item: three pairs mangy trainers, in varying states of decay. One newish pair with foam insole.

Item: two pairs of ancient slippers, blue, heels trodden down.

They reminded him of the slippers Danielle used to slop around in. But hers had had bunnies on the front. She'd thought they were cute. Danny probably still wore them, scuffing around the usurped house with – God help us – bunnies on her toes.

Enough of Danielle.

Mark took one of the slippers, bunched it up and pocketed it.

Final item: one pair high-heeled shoes, four inches at least, black leather, triangular toes.

He'd never seen Freya wearing those. They seemed out of character. But that was probably not the case. They were the hidden thing, the valuable inconsistency. Everyone has the equivalent. Mark inserted as much as he could of his right hand into an interior and held it there. The shoe squeezed his fingers hard. He rubbed them to and fro, eyes closed. There was something of a protuberance in the left shoe where the big-toe joint rubbed against the leather. Incredibly silly shoes. If she weren't careful, Freya would be destined for a bunion in later years. Of course Freya kept these shoes for when she might be invited to some formal function. That would be the

reason. Removing his fingers, Mark turned the shoe over to inspect its sole. Very little wear.

Scrambling up, Mark slipped his hand into Storm's collar. The second wardrobe seemed to belong to the husband, so he wouldn't bother with that. Freya would need to empty it – if she did it sooner, rather than later, she would better feel its therapeutic effects. There was also the loft. He'd research that on another occasion. Hurry now. What are you dawdling around here for? So much left to do. This may be the only chance you get. At least for a while. Don't throw it away.

For this was love as he had never known it before. That was crystal-clear.

No one could say Mark didn't or shouldn't love Freya. Affection had been secretly budding for the last five months, since he'd first arrived at the terrace. With this death, the bud had blossomed. At first, he'd ignored the tantalising sensation. What started as *agape* had morphed into *eros* – a passionate sense of kinship that made no distinction between body and soul. The Ancient Greeks knew so much. In fact, it had been all downhill from there. This transformed and transforming bond had been nourished by the many gossamer contacts he'd engineered with Freya or that chance had arranged – a bit of both. Such love had its own sovereign laws.

'FREYA – have taken Storm for walk as agreed. Back in hour or so – longer if he doesn't seem properly tired. Rest if you can. M.'

The note was ordinary – friendly, low-key. No endearments. No superlatives. But 'M' was now a shared code, denoting intimacy. On the other hand, it could be read by anyone without suspicion. For the brothers-in-law would be sure to return with Freya, filling the narrow house with wall-to-wall testosterone. When would they be dispersing to their respective gyms? Fastening Storm's lead, Mark closed the door behind him and tested it in a single swift motion. Nobody was about. The buzz from Terence's house had upped a decibel: the wake was still in full swing. Cars remained parked all down the hill. Mark loped off, the Labrador bounding ahead, straining on the leash.