The Behaviour of Moths

Poppy Adams

Published by Virago Press

Extract

VIRAGO

First published in Great Britain in 2008 by Virago Press

All characters and events in this publication, other than those clearly in the public domain, are fictitious and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, is purely coincidental.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Hardback ISBN 978-1-84408-486-9
C-format ISBN 978-1-84408-512-5

Typeset in Bembo by M Rules
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Virago Press
An imprint of
Little, Brown Book Group
100 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DY

An Hachette Livre UK Company

www.virago.co.uk

FRIDAY

1

Lookout

It's ten to two in the afternoon and I've been waiting for my little sister, Vivi, to arrive since one thirty. Finally, she's coming home.

I'm standing at a first-floor window, an arched stone one like you'd find in a church, my face close to the diamond-shaped leaded panes, keeping lookout. For a moment I focus on the glass and catch the faint, honest reflection of my eye staring back at me, a lock of grey straggly hair in its way. I don't often look at my reflection and to peer at this moment directly into my eye feels more disconcerting than it should, as if I can sense I'm about to be judged.

I pull my wool cardy – an old one of my father's – more tightly round me, tucking the loose end under my arm. It's dropped a degree today, the wind must have changed to easterly during the night, and later we'll get fog in the valley. I don't need a barograph or a hygrometer, these days, I can sense it – pressure changes, a shift in humidity – but to tell the truth, I also think about the weather to help me take my mind off things. If I didn't have it to ponder right now, I'd already be getting slightly anxious. She's late.

My smoky breath turns to liquid as it hits the window and, if I rub the mist into heavy droplets, I can make it trickle down the glass. From here I can see half the length of the grassy drive as it winds through the tall, skeletal limes on either side, until it disappears right, curving downhill towards East Lodge and the lane and the outside world. If I move my head a fraction to the left the drive elongates and the tops of the limes veer suddenly to the side, distorted by the imperfections of handmade glass. Moving it a little to the right splits the beech hedge in two on either side of a bubble. I know every vagary of every pane. I've lived here all my life and before me my mother lived here all her life and, before her, her father and grandfather.

Did I tell you that Vivien said in her letter she was returning for good? For some final peace, she said, because now, she said, we ought to be keeping each other company for the rest of our lives, rather than dying lonely and alone. Well, I'll tell you now, I don't feel lonely and I certainly don't feel as if I'm dying but, even so, I'm glad she's coming home. Glad, and a little nervous – a surge of apprehension is swelling in my stomach. I can't help wondering what we'll talk about after all these years and, I suppose, if I'll even recognize her.

I'm not, as a rule, an emotional person. I'm far too – how shall I put it? – level-headed. I was always the sensible sister and Vivi the adventurer, but my excitement at her impending arrival even surprises me.

She is late, however. I look at my wristwatch – the digital one on my left wrist. Her letter most specifically read one thirty and, believe me, it's not my time-keeping that's gone awry. I keep a number of clocks just so I can be sure that, even if one or two let me down, I'll always find the correct time. When you live by yourself in a house you rarely leave and is even more rarely visited, it's essential that you don't lose track of the time. Every minute lost – if left uncorrected – would

soon accumulate to an hour, and then hours, until, as you can imagine, you could easily end up living in a completely erroneous time frame.

Our mother Maud and I were always waiting for Vivi: in the hall before we went to church or shouting for her from the landing to hurry up for school. And it's now, as I wait for her again, that I find snippets of our childhood jumping into my head, slices of conversation, things I've not thought about since they happened: our first pair of boots, which Vivi had chosen for us, long black ones that laced to the top; long afternoons in the summer holidays spent damming the brook to create our own tributaries and islands; sneaking into the loggia at harvest time to drink cider before taking it to the men in the fields; giggling with Maud at Clive's rare excitement when he created a Six-spot Burnet with five spots; our first trip to boarding-school, holding each other's clammy hands with shared anticipation, squeezed among the chemical bottles in the back of Clive's car.

It was a childhood in perfect balance so I'm wondering what it was that came along and changed everything. It wasn't just one thing. There's rarely a sole cause for the separation of lives. It's a sequence of events, an inexorable chain reaction, where each small link is fundamental, like a snake of up-ended dominoes. And I've been thinking that the very first one, the one you push to start it all off, must have been when Vivi slipped off our bell-tower and nearly died, fifty-nine years ago.

2

The Bell-tower

When Maud gave birth to Vivien, on 19 October 1940, I thought she'd borne twelve other children of varying ages at the same time. I was almost three and I remember they all came home from hospital in a minibus. When I asked Maud why she'd had so many she said that we had the largest house in the district and could fit them all in, and two maids and a housekeeper to help her look after them. My father Clive told me later they were called evacuees. They had come from Bristol to play with us and to double the attendance at Saxby village school. I always thought Vivi was one of them and when, three years later, the worst of the blitz was over and the evacuees all went home, I couldn't understand why baby Vivi had stayed.

'She's your little sister, Ginny. *This* is her home,' Maud had said, hugging us both to her in the hallway.

I took a good look at Vivi then, in her little red woollen jumper, her fluffy hair sticking up and her big round eyes gazing at me. From that moment on, I worshipped her. Two more war years passed, and VJ Day brought weeks of celebrations. Then, while everyone else was adjusting to life in

a country on its knees, Vivi and I were just getting on with our childhood together, sharing our secrets and our sugar ration.

Not only is Bulburrow Court the largest house in the district, it's also the most striking. Tucked away in the soft folds of the West Dorset countryside and buttressed against the slope of its own hill, it overwhelms the village of low-lying houses below. A vast Victorian folly.

There are four storeys and four wings. In the reception rooms, marble fireplaces stand squarely under ornately corniced ceilings. In the panelled hall, a large oak staircase pours majestically from the vaulted ceiling on to the parquet floor, while behind the pantries at the back of the house – the north side – winds a much smaller, secret staircase designed to shuttle domestic staff discreetly up and down. By the time we were born, Bulburrow Court's glory days were buried well within the previous century, when the house and gardens would not have run smoothly on less than twenty staff, more if you counted the surrounding tenant farmers and farm labourers, all originally part of the estate.

As we grew up, the Red House, as it was often called on account of the Virginia creeper that turns the south side a deep red each autumn, became better known as a local landmark than for its splendour. It was a reference for directions, a passing spectacle for West Country holidaymakers, iced in Gothic extravaganza and topped with castellated turrets, an observatory, the bell-tower and mock-Elizabethan chimney-stacks that rise above the peaks and valleys within the immense landscape of the roof, all arrogance and late-Victorian grandeur.

Outside, at the back of the house, the cobbled courtyard is enclosed by stables and apple stores, an old parlour, and a butchery still stained with slaughtering devices hanging grimly

from the rafters. Behind them, the loggia, and then, at one time, Maud's kitchen garden and cold frames, a former vegetable patch and a spinney lead up to the north water-garden. To the south, meadows run down from the terraced gardens to the brook, the peach houses, and the riveted tail section of a Halifax bomber that landed in our fields. Then there are the things that only Vivi and I knew about, like the holm oak that looks solid from the outside but is completely hollow in the middle. If you climbed up its branches it was possible to lower yourself into the guts of the tree, where we'd agreed to hide when the Germans came.

Bulburrow Court has been in my family since 1861 and from then onwards, Maud told us, each generation couldn't resist stamping its mark on it so that the house has become a conspicuous register of its own history.

'Either Victorians were vulgar or we were very vulgar Victorians,' our mother would say. 'Each of us put his crest here, initials there, and a turret or two everywhere,' and it was true that if you wandered round the house you were reminded of the relative self-importance, or vulgarity, of each of them. The first, Samuel Kendal, who made his fortune illegally importing agricultural fertilizers from South America (which Maud was not proud of), commissioned an enormous stained-glass window as a backdrop to the hall stairs, spanning the height of two floors. It depicts four completely fabricated – Maud said – family crests along with pompous Latin mottoes as if he had in fact been the progeny of the coming-together of four great families. Samuel's son, Anthony – Maud's grandfather – had too much time and all his father's money on his hands, so he added a star-gazing tower on the east side, which, since I've been alive, has had a far better purpose housing a rare colony of Greater Horseshoe bats. He also embossed his initials wherever he could around the house, which Maud said was a

dreadful mistake because he has been remembered only as ANK.

Since then nothing has been added and lots has fallen off. Likewise, Samuel's fortune hasn't been added to but, rather, has slowly dwindled, as those who came after him pursued a far less lucrative profession: the study of butterflies and moths. So it is that Vivien and I are direct descendants of an eminent line of lepidopterists – including our own father, Clive. The vast attic rooms and the expansive cellarage of Bulburrow Court, along with many of the north-wing rooms and most of the outhouses, have been reserved for more than a century solely for the study of Lepidoptera, with net and tank rooms, laboratories, winter rooms, caterpillar houses, pupation troughs, display cabinets and an internationally renowned entomological reference library.

While life for the other village children revolved round cattle and sheep-rearing or the harvest, our yearly calendar centred on the life-cycle of a moth. For us it was endless hours of pupa-digging in the autumn, moss-gathering in the winter, spring evenings spent dusking and sallowing, and long summer nights light-trapping and sugaring in secret glades and forgotten wastelands. But spring was the busiest time, the time of emergence, as Clive called it, when our captive breeders would emerge from their winter cocoons in our attic rooms and the mating season would start.

Bulburrow Court was saturated with the belongings of four generations. Furniture, pictures, books and *things* – artefacts, possessions, mementoes, letters, papers and countless other bits and pieces – so that the moment you stepped inside, you were aware of the historic progression of the house. The walls leached the desires and fears of those who had peopled it. The style of the furniture, the pictures on the walls, the quality of the rugs and carpets, the toys we played with in our nursery, all

spoke of the wealth, tastes and virtue of its past owners. The silverware, crockery, tapestries, even the linen for the beds, monogrammed for posterity, the stains on a tablecloth, the marks in the woodwork, the wear of the stairs, the wistfulness of an ancestor inadvertently revealed in the eyes of his portrait. They all told part of the same story, so that the house and its contents became a museum to the Kendals, a claustrophobic tribute to one dynasty.

Visitors were left in no doubt as to the family profession or their eminence in the field. The oak panelling in the hall was barely visible behind framed photographs, letters and commendations, honorary entomology memberships, framed newspaper clippings ('Largest Moth in Asia' Found by Dorset Expert), and supercilious photos of one or other of them meeting royalty or receiving yet another accolade.

The centrepiece in the drawing-room cabinet was a black-and-white photo of a fresh-faced ANK in a dense jungle, looking dapper with a clean flat cap angled to one side, surrounded by mud-soaked local porters. He's holding up a board pinned with around two hundred moths that we assumed were the Blue Sapphires he had recorded collecting from Peru in 1898. Next to it, as if in perpetual competition, was the one of my grandfather Geoffrey solemnly shaking hands with the king of Mustang on an internationally acclaimed butterfly expedition to the Himalayas during the first part of the last century, his young assistant behind him beaming into the camera while holding aloft a setting board and a huge bottle of killing fluid as if they were trophies.

Above this, framed specimens were arranged on the walls: *Incatua molleen* from Brazil, the size of a child's hand, faded and worn and lifeless; a completed box-framed plate of all the known Brazilian Underwings, unidentifiable without the tabulated index beneath, set and pinned in the days before they

knew how to fix the colours with ammonia. In the next display cabinet, caterpillar skins were laid out and labelled, the name of the famous nineteenth-century case-makers, White and Sons, stamped across its mahogany top. The skins had been carefully pricked and blown, then dried papery and rigid over a Bunsen burner. Other, larger insects from across the world had their places lining the walls or in glass-topped mahogany cabinets – a bird-eating tarantula, a giant Australian cockroach, an Atacama scorpion, labelled as gifts from other eminences in the field of Victorian entomology. It all led to the impression that, rather than my family having been fond of the natural world, they had scoured the earth in a bid to kill and pin every poor insect that crossed their path. Maud thought the displays repulsive and Clive thought them unnecessary, but neither took them down.

Maud had added her own small exhibit to the museum. Half a dozen framed photos of our family stood together on an occasional table alongside the back of the sofa in the drawing room. One was of a young Maud and Clive embracing on a balcony in a foreign city, Paris perhaps, with the evening light behind them, eyes only for each other. It must have been taken before the war, before I was born. Maud is wearing a pretty peacock-print dress. She's lifting her chin and arching backwards with happiness, Clive's arms looped round the small of her back, supporting her preciously. Then there was the one of me as a baby, wrapped up so you can't actually see any of me at all, Maud and Clive holding up the package between them next to the sundial on the top terrace. Snow hid the ground and lay, heavy and precarious, on the fir-tree limbs above us, and the image was blurred in a couple of places where snowflakes had caught the lens.

Most visitors would remember the house, foremost, as cold. It was built in the days when the vast rooms with their high

ceilings and box-bay windows could only be kept warm if constantly stoked by a staff that outnumbered the family. But after the war Maud said we couldn't afford more than one help in the house and two in the garden so our maids, Anna Maria and Martha Jane (two of nine sisters from Little Broadwindsor), were sent home, and we were left with Vera. Vera was our housekeeper.

Vera said she didn't work in the house but she was part of it, like the hall stairs or the potting-shed. She didn't talk very much but she was most interesting to study. She had wiry grey hair, and had been alive so long that her whole body was slowly shrinking, except for her nose, which grew instead and became redder and more bulbous as time went by. Vivi said that Vera's nose was sucking the life out of the rest of her body for its own independent growth. Sometimes another little lump would appear, or an aberrant grey hair already an inch or so long as if it had arrived overnight at full length. Maud would laugh when Vivi pointed out these things – Vivi was always making her laugh – although she said that she'd be Very Cross Indeed if either of us mentioned it in front of Vera as it was 'a condition'. It was as if Vera's face was in a constant state of flux, perhaps weather dependent or in response to what she'd eaten the day before.

The way we got round a diminishing staff was an evolving fluidity in the volume of the house throughout the year, a constant expansion and contraction, like a lung. In the most bitter winter weeks, we'd lock up the extremities and retreat to the inner sanctum, huddling in the heart of the building – the kitchen, the study and the library – where the fires could be kept continuous.

When we were children, Vivi and I were inseparable. When she went to play in the stream, scour the ridge for mushrooms, collect acorns for the farmer's pigs, turn the apples for cider or

go scrumping in the next-door village, whatever the pursuit, I'd go too. Our parents liked us to stay together. Sometimes Maud would check when she saw one of us setting out: 'Have you got Ginny?' or 'Are you with Vivi?' she'd shout, often out of a window from a higher level of the house. And if she saw Vivi set out without me she'd call her back, even when I didn't want to go. 'Will you take Ginny please?' and I'd feel I ought to go along for Maud's sake. Vivi was always the leader, even though she was younger: she'd have a plan, a contingency plan and an emergency strategy. But I'd be right there, next to her, following her every move.

So, the day we went up the bell-tower for the last time, of course it had been all Vivi's idea. She was eight and I had just turned eleven. We'd crept up there after breakfast with a piece of toast each that we'd been saving, luxuriously spread with our mother's famous loganberry jam. It was Vivi's favourite place.

'We're going to ask Vera if she's seen the stray cat we fed yesterday,' Vivi told Maud at the table.

'With your toast?' Maud had asked.

'No, we'll eat it before we get there,' Vivi said, as we rushed out of the kitchen.

'See? Told you it would work,' my little sister gloated, when we reached the second pantry unrecalled. The second pantry, where Maud stored her cheeses, hung her meat and dried her gourds, was also the start of the secret set of backstairs. Halfway up was a little oak door, one at which even I, at eleven, had to stoop slightly to get through. It had a hole you put your index finger through to lift the latch on the other side. From there, there was a steep oak staircase, unlit except for a shaft of natural light that coursed down from the top, tumbling the dust in its path. It was a magnet for a child like Vivi – any normal, imaginative child, in fact – and at the top was a little

wooden platform open to the air, and a small turret, surrounded by a low stone parapet.

The turret had a peaked wooden hat held up by wooden posts, all painted a kind of limey green, and hanging from its apex was a beautiful, dainty, blackened brass bell. A thick furry red and white striped rope, like an enormous piece of the sweets the American soldiers used to give us (they called it candy), hung from a brass hoop on top. It was just too thick for either of us to connect our thumb and fingers when we gripped it, and it disappeared through a hole in the wooden platform, ending up in the back passage on the ground floor beyond the pantries. It was on this platform, under this bell, in our own little turret, that we found just enough space for two small children to dream.

Truth be told, it was Vivi who dreamed and I who listened, enraptured, for I was very aware that it was a gift that she'd been given and I had not. We'd go there when Vivi wanted to plot her next adventure or scheme her next scheme. Just sometimes I'd offer her a little idea, and just sometimes, not often, she'd latch upon it to help her see through the puzzles in her head. And I'd feel ever so slightly triumphant.

Vivien was from a fantastic world, definitely not the same one as mine. I thought that when God made Vivi he was giving me a window to see the world in a different way. She lived out her dreams and fantasies in our house or in the woods behind it, or in the eleven acres of meadows that stretched out down to the brook. She spent hours meticulously planning her life – and mine.

'Ginny,' she'd start, 'you promise, cross your heart hope to die, not to tell anyone?'

'Promise,' I'd say. I'd cross my heart with my right hand and I'd mean it.

I never tired of Vivi's company, and I always took her side,

even against Maud. Vivi might have been able to make our mother laugh, but she knew how to infuriate her too. (I never argued with Maud, but I rarely laughed with her either.) After they'd had a row Vivi would storm off in an uncontrollable temper and Maud would send me to try to comfort her. Often I'd find her sobbing with such abandon that I truly believed that even the little things sent her mood spiralling downwards, that they really affected her. When she was young she couldn't control her emotions, swinging easily from good temper to bad.

So, if I hadn't been there, squatting in the bell-tower with her, I might have thought she'd jumped. But I saw how she'd slotted herself into a huge crescent-shaped stone, which made up part of the low parapet round the platform. For Vivi it was an irresistible place to perch. She was making herself comfortable while holding her toast level in her left hand. I remember saying that I didn't think she should be there, that it looked too dangerous, and just as she said, 'Ginny, don't be so bor-ing,' a pair of martins, scouring the eaves for a nest site, startled out from underneath her little ledge. My heart leapt but Vivi must have lost her balance. I watched her trying to regain control of the toast that danced about, evading her grip like a bar of soap in the bath. For those slow seconds it seemed as if repossessing the toast was of utmost importance to her and the fact that she was losing her balance didn't register. I've never forgotten the terror in her eyes, staring at me, replayed a thousand times since in my nightmares, as she realized she was falling. I didn't see her grabbing the bell, but she must have stretched out for it as she went because it rang and the echo of that strike gave to me a resounding significance, a lifetime of noise. I looked over the edge and saw her lying not on the ground, three long storeys below, as I'd imagined, but hanging motionless over the battlements that run above the porch. Later, they said the algae,

recently proliferated because of the first few warm days of spring, had made the ledge more slippery than usual.

Peculiarly she didn't die. Or, rather, she died and came back again. Two ambulance men in red and black jackets carried her limp little eight-year-old body, full of plans for our future, on to a stretcher and down a wooden ladder from the top of the porch. I was watching her all the time and I remember the moment she died: while she was on that stretcher I actually saw her Entire Future give up the struggle to survive and leave her, and at the same time I felt my own future reduced to a dead and eventless vacuum, a mere biological process.

It seemed longer but later Maud said that really it was just a minute before they got her back again. She was resuscitated in front of the porch by the ambulance men. I was in the driveway watching when Maud rushed up to me, red-faced and frantic, tugging at my arm in a frenzy. Her usual calm and poise had been shattered, giving way to raw terror. She was leaning slightly forward, as if she was about to vomit, her hair angry, eyes acute and desperate.

'Tell me what happened,' she pleaded. I said nothing. I stared at the hydrangea crawling up the side of the porch, its branches woody, split and peeling. If it weren't for the fresh buds appearing at the tips, you could have been forgiven for thinking it was dead. I had already told her how Vivi had slipped off the tower, how she'd tried to catch her dancing toast.

'Ginny, darling,' she sobbed, folding her arm round my waist, pulling me gently to her, squeezing her cheek to mine, her mouth near my ear. 'I love you,' she whispered slowly, and I knew it was true. 'I love you and I don't blame you. I just need to know the truth.' I could feel her whole body trembling, her tears gluing our cheeks together. My mother wasn't

this wretched person: she was usually the source of all strength. I stood rigid, thinking of the wetness on my cheek, feeling her shaking and trying to understand, trying to fathom what she wasn't blaming me for.

The next minute Clive was striding towards us from where he'd been helping to lift Vivi into the ambulance. He looked at me as he approached, searching my eyes and finding my confusion as Maud clung to me. He leaned over and kissed my forehead firmly while he unclasped Maud's hands from my waist.

'Come on. We're going,' he said, pulling Maud towards him, fastening her arms round him and leading her off to the ambulance.

When they were sent home from the hospital that afternoon they had no news yet of Vivi's prospects. Clive showed Maud into the library to get her a drink, which was what she needed at times of crisis. I helped to pour it. 'Open the cabinet, get a glass – no, not that one, the little one. Can you see the bottle that says "Garvey's"?' I found it and put my finger on it. 'That's the one, finest old amontillado. Mother's sherry.' After that I stayed out of my parents' way but later in the day, as I passed their bedroom on the landing, I heard them arguing, my mother sobbing.

'It's all my fault. I thought we could be a normal family.' She was hysterical.

'We *are* a normal family. Stop jumping to conclusions,' I heard Clive say softly.

'Her sister's dying . . . She's not even crying . . . She stood there staring at the shrubs.' Maud's voice was scathing. 'There must be something—'

'Pull yourself together,' Clive interrupted, in a tone I'd never heard him use before, not unkind but firm and authoritative. 'Save your hysterics until you have the facts.'

I knew they were talking about me and guessed Maud was angry about something to do with me, but I had no idea what.

Half an hour later I was in the kitchen, huddled next to the wood stove with Basil, our elderly Great Dane, when I heard the front door's brass goat's-head door-knocker being rattled. I went to open the door and Dr Moyse, our family doctor from Crewkerne, greeted me effusively.

In our household Dr Moyse was the most trusted member of the outside world. He had cured three of our evacuees of diphtheria, nursed Vivi and me through whooping-cough, and devised a potion for Clive's gout. But everyone seemed to forget that he had consistently failed to rid me of the four warts that cursed the underside of my fingers, which I'd developed the habit of chewing when I was eight. In the end Clive froze them off with pure liquid nitrogen.

The doctor was a favourite of the village children, giving them rides in his white convertible and telling them gory stories between puffs on his pipe. He was in his mid-thirties, incredibly tall and lanky, stooping through most of the doorways even in our house, staying hunched when he was standing. He'd get to his knees to talk to children. He had curly blond hair, wore round rimless spectacles and carried a doctor's case over his shoulders with straps like a sports bag. When he walked he put a little bound in his step as if he'd just got a piece of good news. But Dr Moyse had always made me feel uneasy. He singled me out for little or long conversations, losing his casual manner and becoming more serious, as if allowing me the intimacy of confiding in him, making sure I was aware he was on my side. Maud wouldn't have heard a bad word against him and I suppose he was nice enough. He was patient and kind, perhaps, but he got on my nerves. He'd come and find me, then ask me daft questions right when I was in the middle of something. That day, as usual, I didn't feel much like talking to him.

'Ginny,' he said, 'I came as quickly as I could.' I said nothing. I hadn't known he was coming at all. I opened the door so he could get past me. I was still battling to understand why Maud was angry with me. 'Your mother wanted to see me,' he said, to clarify his presence. 'Any news from the hospital?'

I shook my head. 'Maud's upstairs,' I said.

I left him in the hall and went into the library. A fire crackled and hissed in the grate. Wasps, butterflies and crickets, painted daintily on the tiled surround, were brought to life by the flickering amber flames. I sat on the smooth oak window-seat looking out at the valley in the distance, reddened by the low sun, and the pretty terraces just outside, trapped in the shadow of the house. Two low box hedges with last summer's topiary efforts were still vaguely evident, the stone steps disappearing into rough pastureland, which, in a couple of months' time, would be waving with the rare meadow grasses Maud had sown there. Basil followed me in, his uncut claws tapping on the parquet floor. He rested his chin on my lap, his jowls cold and wet from lapping at his water bowl. From this position his eyes, atop his head like an alligator's, gazed at me, blinking and steady, imploring me, I imagined, to be happy. I stroked his head, and his tail started to bash the window-seat in appreciation, steady like a metronome.

Maud had told me that when I was born we were snowed in for a month. For six days and six nights the snow had fallen until it had reached the height of the ground-floor sills. Maud said that when you sat right here on the window-seat and looked out on to the Bulburrow valley you had the impression that the house had sunk. The tops of the hedges on the south terrace looked like hedge trimmings scattered on the ground, and the stone goose that topped the fountain, stretching its neck and bill high into the air to spurt out the water, looked as if it was just managing to keep its head above ground in a

desperate bid to breathe. It was this weather at my birth that had apparently swayed the balance of my personality. Maud told me it had made me the stay-at-home type.

'Can I come in?' Dr Moyse was at the library door. Basil padded over to sniff him, friendly, bottom low and wiggling in submission, looking for an alliance with all factions.

'No,' I said, because it was what I meant, even though I knew it wasn't a polite answer. I turned back to the window, mainly to avoid my own insolence or the trouble it might get me into. The doctor ignored me and wandered in silently, pretending to look from one book spine to the next, musing among the shelves and the gallery of pictures that hung between them, mostly framed satirical sketches from Victorian periodicals – men in top hats, black trench coats and waders prancing about the countryside, bounding after insects in a bog or leaning precariously out of fast-moving trains, an enormous net in one hand and a bottle of poison in the other – reminders when the pastime was at its most popular, when trainloads of Londoners would flock to the country for a weekend's mothing.

'Pretty, isn't it?' He was beside me at the window, sharing my view as if that would allow him to share intimacies too. He appeared to arrive inadvertently, abreast of me, peering ahead with casual indifference.

'Don't you worry. I'm sure she'll be fine, Ginny,' he said, seizing the moment and laying a hand awkwardly on my shoulder. I turned to the fire and was instantly mesmerized by the bright flames dancing between the logs, squeaking and hissing because, yet again, Vera had taken from this year's woodpile rather than last.

'Who?' I said, thinking of Maud seething upstairs.

'Who?' he said, astonished, pulling away his hand as if I were hot and bending his knees to be at my level. He looked

directly at me, fixing my gaze. 'Do you realize Vivien's in hospital in a critical condition?' he said patronizingly. As if I was an idiot.

'Yes, I know,' I said, slightly irritated. 'I just thought . . . Oh, it doesn't matter.' I wouldn't have been able to explain it suitably for him. I find that once people think you mean one thing you're never able to change their opinion. But how could he be 'sure she'll be fine'? He hadn't seen her or spoken to the hospital.

Dr Moyse gazed at me with a most troubled expression. 'No, go on, you can tell me. You and I are friends, Ginny.' He was always saying that – 'You and I are friends.' I wasn't his friend and I didn't want to talk to him. It seemed far too complicated to explain.

'I just forgot,' I lied.

'We're all on your side, you know, Ginny, but sometimes you have to help us a little,' he said. I didn't know what he was talking about. Then he asked if I was angry about what had happened, how I felt about it, if I was cross with Vivien or with my parents. He went on and on with the most peculiar questions, and really I just wanted to tell him that the only person who was making me angry was him – couldn't he leave me alone? I know Dr Moyse was a good man and he was always trying for the best, but sometimes it felt as if he was interviewing me – what I felt about this and that and stupid things; if I ever wanted revenge. He never did it to Vivi. In the end I told him I didn't feel anything. I'd come to realize this was the best way to end his diatribe. He never knew how to continue when I said that.

Later that evening the telephone rang through the silence of the house. Clive answered it.

'Crewkerne two five one,' he said, pushing out his chin as he did habitually and stroking the thick-cropped beard that

spread down his neck and merged with the hair rising out of his shirt. He rubbed it with the back of his fingers, upwards against the growth. A moment later, 'Thank you, Operator, put the hospital through.'

My heart beat away the time as Maud and I watched him, searching in vain for answers in his firmly set features as he listened. But his face, much of it hidden under the cropped beard, gave nothing away and the rhythm of his hand strokes up his neck were slow and even, unaltered by the news he was hearing.

'The good news is that Vivien is okay. She'll be fine,' Clive informed us matter-of-factly after the call. 'They're watching her closely, but the doctor is confident she'll pull through.'

My world re-grew, not least because whatever the reason for Maud being upset with me soon dissolved into the many layers of a family's misunderstood memories. Later, when we'd come back from visiting Vivi in hospital, it was as if she'd never thought it. She hugged me and told me how lucky Vivien was to have such a loving older sister. Maud was right about that. I've always loved Vivi, even during the years she's been away. And I always will, no matter what.

What Vivi lost that spring when she fell from the bell-tower was not, luckily (as everyone kept telling her), her life but the ability to have children. She'd been impaled on an iron stake, part of the balustrade that had run round the top of the porch. Maud said it used to be a balcony leading from the first-floor landing and my lookout window had been the door that led on to it. For the war effort everyone had to hand over any iron to the munitions factories, Maud said, to be melted down into guns and bullets, so the balcony – along with the house's main gates – had to go.

Vivien had ruptured her womb and the infection quickly

inflamed her ovaries so that a week after her fall she had an operation to take away her entire reproductive system. She lost it to save her life. It didn't bother her, mind. She liked to tell people she had died once already, or give them the weeks, months or years since the accident that she 'could have been dead for'. In the village, Mrs Jefferson assured her that she must have been spared for a reason, that there would be a 'calling' later in her life; and Mrs Axtell questioned her persistently about what she had seen, trying to get a preview of eternity. Later, at school, she impressed her friends with stories of what it had felt like to die. None of them had known anyone who had died before. And once, when she'd found out that all a woman's eggs are already in her ovaries when she's born, she told Maud's lunch guests that she'd lost all her children.

But Vivi herself was still a child. She hadn't yet developed the womanly urge to hold her newborn, to feel and need its dependence, and to understand that that was what life was all about and nothing else mattered. Nor had I, so at the time neither of us realized the true significance of her accident. Only that she'd been so incredibly lucky.