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The Song House

Written by Trezza Azzopardi

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The
Song
House

Trezza
Azzopardi

PICADOR



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Like the Touch of Rain

*Like the touch of rain she was
On a man's flesh and hair and eyes
When the joy of walking thus
Has taken him by surprise:*

*With the love of the storm he burns,
He sings, he laughs, well I know how,
But forgets when he returns
As I shall not forget her 'Go now'.*

*Those two words shut a door
Between me and the blessed rain
That was never shut before
And will not open again.*

Edward Thomas

She's hearing things: the noise her skirt makes as she walks, the low grumble of a distant tractor, a crow laughing in the tree-tops. There's a half-remembered melody playing in her head. She removes her jacket and slings it over her shoulder, humming the tune out loud, aware of how slight her voice sounds in the open air. It's high summer, hot and arid, but the overgrown hedges on either side of the path cast a welcome shade; walking between them is like being in a tunnel. A right bend leads her to a clearing. From here, set back behind a dense thicket of rhododendron bushes, she sees the upper half of Earl House, its tall windows mirroring the sky. She is surrounded by fields of crops; she recognizes the burnt gold of barley, and the silver feathering of ripe wheat. There is no wire to keep her out. She takes a detour off the dirt path and steps between the rows of wheat, feeling hidden and exalted: the only one here. The heels of her sandals sink slightly into the earth. Removing them, she picks her way barefoot over the rutted ground, deep into the centre of the field. Her watch says two-fifteen. All she can see is the wide sky, all she can hear is the tractor drone, very faint now, and the wheat shushing as she moves through it. She doesn't know why she must do this; she has no reason except that it seems a natural thing, a childhood act revived. Despite the awkwardness of the ground, she picks

up speed, turning one way, then another. She doesn't know what she's searching for until she finds it. And now it's here, as she knew it had to be all along: the bowl barrow. She lies down on the mound, splays her arms and legs like a skydiver in free fall, and then she is still, quietly panting into the blue space above her.

On the top floor of the house, standing at the window, Kenneth is watching.

part one

bless the weather

one

Her hair is darker than he thought. When he first caught sight of her, it looked like copper wire, but now he sees that it has an earthy hue, streaks of auburn and chestnut brown. He's pleased with this subtle difference; he thinks it more sophisticated. The woman stands quite still before his desk, her hands loosely clasped in front of her, the suit jacket back on and buttoned – one button done up – so if he hadn't seen her just half an hour earlier, her body spread out in the field below, he would never have known.

Maggie Nix? he says, to which she nods and smiles without showing her teeth, Please, do sit down.

Kenneth Earl does not sit down; he walks to the window again and looks at the wheatfield, then back into the room at her. He has interviewed three others this afternoon, has seen them all walk up the path, has waited while the rhododendrons lining the drive eclipsed and then revealed them again, counted the beat of their footsteps on the staircase. All three were unable to enter the room, to stand or to sit, without first saying something. What a hot day it was, such a nice walk up to the house, what a magnificent room. And it *is* beautiful, Kenneth's office. Situated on the west side of the building, the two original windows give a sweeping view of the Berkshire downs; the interior has plaster crisp as snow, a few discerning antiques, a

thick cream carpet underfoot. Maggie has said nothing about the room; she does not gaze up in wonder at the intricate ceiling rose, or admire the painting hanging on the wall behind Kenneth's desk. She sits and waits, and watches his movements with a clear, open expression. In the sunlight, she looks flawless, a study in oils. Her eyes are completely and unnervingly fixed on him.

Can I get you a drink? A tea, coffee? he asks. She will have to say something to that. She begins to shake her head, and then an intake of breath,

A glass of water, please.

From the closet in the corner of the room, he draws some water, walking back towards her where he sees a bent stalk of straw caught in the curls of her hair.

I'm afraid it's only tap, he says, expecting her to speak again. Kenneth watches her drink it, in quick gulps, like a child would drink, and then place the glass on the low table next to her chair.

Thank you, she says.

He'd advertised in the national papers, not wanting anyone local, anyone who might know of him. He thought he required an assistant, but it was an applicant in the last round, an ambitious young man who had ideas, who heard him out and finally told Kenneth that what he needed was an amanuensis. Or slave, the young man added, going on his way. An amanuensis. Immediately, Kenneth liked the sound of it; it was musical, perfectly right. He wanted to talk and have someone listen, someone to note his words, exactly as he spoke them; someone who did not interject or question or make noise. But he did not specify these skills in the advertisement. An assortment of women had come down on the train from London, with their telephone voices and lacquered fingernails, strident perfume announcing their arrival. Each thought they were progressing their careers by becoming a personal secretary, or a PA, as one of them insisted on calling the job. Maggie, now, he doesn't know

where she has travelled from; he doesn't know what she thinks.

As she sits and listens, he outlines the work. She nods and, once or twice, opens her face with a quick smile. It worries him, this eagerness; perhaps she hasn't taken in the scope of the task he's proposing.

You mention here in your letter that you have shorthand, he says, It's a rare skill, these days.

I have a kind of shorthand of my own, she says, It's quite fast, like texting.

Texting, he says, See you later.

Maggie narrows her eyes at him, and Kenneth's finger draws a squiggle of hieroglyphics in the air.

C, U – you know, I do know what texting is.

Good, says Maggie, Well, it's just like that.

He glances again at her letter, turning the single sheet over in his hand.

What was your last post? he says, I can't seem to find your references.

The blush growing on Maggie's face tells him she hasn't got any.

I was a carer, for a relative, she says, But then – she looks down into her lap – I wasn't needed any more.

I don't suppose they're in a position to write you a reference? Kenneth asks, not unkindly. Maggie answers with a shake of the head.

Actually, she says, raising her eyes to his, Before that I used to manage my stepfather's shop in Dorset. Charmouth. Do you know it?

Can't say I do. Nice part of the world, I believe.

It has lots of fossils, she says stupidly.

Kenneth bares his teeth in a pained grin.

Well, there's your qualification for the job, he says. He gives her a quick look to see how the joke is taken, is gratified to see her smiling again.

Maybe I should show you the library. It'll give you a better idea of what's in store.

Kenneth's plan is simple enough; he wants to catalogue all the music in his collection. Not details of artists or labels or conductors; most of these he already knows, and the ones he's forgotten he can read from the cover. His idea is to insert inside each sleeve a page of notes; memories, associations, what the piece means to him, when he'd obtained it, and why. He wants to be able to draw out a record and say: this is why I love this, or: this is what listening to it does to me. He wants to remind himself of his life – episodes of joy, romance, desire – and so relive it. Kenneth is nearly sixty-eight. Apart from Freya, who comes in once a week to clean the rooms still in use, he sees few people. And lately, he's felt his days merge seamlessly into each other, felt how quickly time can pass; how quickly, and how slowly.

Taking her elbow – a light touch, barely that – he leads Maggie down the stairs. Close up, she's not as tall as he thought, and older; not a girl at all. She must be in her thirties. Under the curls of her fringe he glimpses a scar, pale against the suntanned skin, a thin strike from hairline to eyebrow. He is delighted with this flaw, the most perfect imperfection; and is as quickly mortified by his urge to stroke it. He ushers her in front of him so that she can't read his face, and sees the back of her head again, the piece of straw clinging to her hair. In the light from the landing window, he thinks he also sees a small red mark on the collar of her blouse. From a crushed insect, perhaps, a spider mite or beetle.

The library, down a long painted corridor on the ground floor, is shuttered from the light. Kenneth opens one of its two doors, standing aside to let Maggie pass through. Adjusting his eyes to the dimness, it takes a moment for him to realize that she hasn't moved.

What? he asks.

Like a library in a book, she says, her face flushed with delight.

She puts out a hand in front of her, but still doesn't venture into the room. The darkness inside is so brown and stained that she can't possibly see how not like an ordinary library this is. He feels disappointment nip at him, and doesn't hear the playfulness of her remark. He strides ahead of her, crosses to the window shutters and folds one back: *now* she will see.

Any particular novel? he asks. Maggie steps into a bar of sunlight on the floor.

The Great Gatsby, she says, gesturing to the far wall, The scene where Owl Eyes talks about the books being real.

And then she laughs, as if the idea of having actual books in a library is a peculiar thing. Kenneth laughs too.

Can you hold a silence? he asks.

Do you mean, can I keep quiet?

That's right, says Kenneth. He edges nearer, trying to place her accent.

Because some of the things you'll hear, he says, making his large hands into fists and holding them in the air between them, Some of these things will be quite . . . intimate.

I can keep quiet, she says, And I can keep a secret. But words on a page, they're going to be read, aren't they?

Kenneth nods in agreement.

They'll be read by me. And when I'm dead, they'll be burnt. Not the recordings, just the notes. I've left instructions.

Maggie looks at him keenly now; he sees in her eyes something like recognition.

How many records?

Three thousand five hundred and counting, he says, But we won't be cataloguing all of them, of course.

Green, her eyes are green.

What kind of music?

Blues, jazz, classical, rock, he says, swaying slightly on his heels. To cover his embarrassment, he leads off along the windows, folding back the shutters one by one until the room is sparkling with light.

And rather a lot of Frank Sinatra, Ella, Satchmo. Look, here, I'll show you what there is.

There are no books. Lining the walls, from floor to ceiling, are rows of records, each row divided into columns by a thin strip of wood. In the dimness, it had looked like a design on wallpaper. He hears her catch her breath.

It's amazing, she says, So much to choose from.

So you do *like* music, Maggie? Because, as you say, there's a lot to choose from – a lot to hear.

She turns from the wall, an incredulous look on her face.

Do I like music? she asks, What a bizarre question. Do I like music?

Kenneth is now properly embarrassed. He feels as though he's managed to insult her, but can't think how.

It's just that I've interviewed quite a few applicants. None of them seemed very interested in the actual music. Salary, conditions of employment – he flicks his fingers out in a count – Holiday leave, sick leave, maternity leave— Maggie splay her own fingers in the air between them.

Music is power, she says, her face serious.

Is it? he whispers, Who says so?

Richard Ashcroft. You'd put him in the rock section, she says, and seeing Kenneth's bewildered expression, she adds, Under 'Gods'.

Kenneth grins with relief. He finds her intensity refreshing after meeting the other candidates, with their laptops and their assured manner, their dead eyes. And he likes it more that she seems so interested in the task.

You won't tease me about the rock section, he says, Will you?

Ah. Let me guess.

She closes her eyes. He fixes on the pale bluish tint to her lids, can't concentrate on the list she's reciting.

. . . The Rolling Stones, Pink Floyd, and – The Who.

Bill Haley. Elvis Presley. Eddie Cochran, he counters, Bruce Springsteen.

Really? I didn't know he recorded on 78s.
So she is teasing. He can easily go along with that.

Actually, I'm quite clued-up on the latest technology, the pods and downloads and that. I like to keep abreast of these things.

You have an iPod, she says, not even attempting to keep the disbelief from her voice.

A birthday present. But those little headphones—
Buds.

They make my ears ache.
Maggie nods in agreement,

And they don't do much for the sound. But they're useful, you know, for blocking out other people, their noise.

You'll be listening to my noise. I hope you won't mind that. But at least it will be on vinyl. This here is the system, he says, with a little introductory cough.

He opens the door of a sideboard to reveal a stack of silver equipment, which they both stare at.

It's all made by Linn. The best, apparently. Don't tell him, but I much prefer listening on this.

Kenneth pats the smoked-perspex lid of an ordinary-looking record player.

Who should I not tell? Maggie asks.

My son, Will, he says, You'll meet him. He sometimes pops in.

He gives her a wry smile,

Not too often, he adds, And usually only to raid my wine cellar, or try to sell me some dubious piece of art.

Maggie blinks at this, gesturing to the wall of records.

How many a day, do you think? she asks, Only, you said it was a three-month contract.

It will depend, says Kenneth, On the day, on what I hear first, on what I *feel* like hearing first and what I feel like hearing

next. A three-month contract, yes, possibly extended, all depending on how we get on.

I'd like us to get on, she says, moving to a long glass-topped display cabinet. She bends over it, using her hand to try to block out the reflections on the surface.

We won't be bothering with the sheet music, says Kenneth, dismissive, Those in there, they're relics. They used to have singing lessons here.

They?

The children, he says. He wants to draw her away from the cabinet, eager to make her understand. He's decided she's right for him.

This is what we'll do, Maggie, in here, in the mornings, in silence – silence from you, that is. We'll resurrect history, make the past into a story. I mean, not invented but . . . personal. I'll sit there – he points to a wing-backed chair in a corner of the room – And I'll speak and you'll transcribe and—

He stops himself, hearing how pompous he sounds, and ridiculous, his breath coming quick and excited. But his belief that she could help him, his sudden sense of needing her, pushes him on again,

– And you don't interrupt, you listen to the music and you listen to me talk and you take it all down. Understood? And in the afternoons, you type up the notes.

On a computer?

On a typewriter. There's one in the prefect's office, under the main stairs.

The prefect's office, she echoes, her eyes fixed on his face.

This place used to be a school.

Ah, the singing lessons, she says, Yes.

Not quite, he says, returning to the windows and closing the shutters one by one, After we bought it – after the school closed – the choir still came to practise here.

Must've been exquisite, she says, lifting her head as if to hear the sound of their voices.

It wasn't always *that* tuneful, he says, frowning his eyebrows,
But it was only on Sundays, so we coped.

He watches her turn from him, and turn back again.

On Sundays, she says, Of course, the choir sang on a Sunday.
He's not sure he's understood her correctly, wonders if she's
religious.

Do you have any more questions, Maggie?

The advert said 'live in', she says, So, where do I stay?

t w o

She doesn't know where she is. The light has woken her, pale green, tracing an unfamiliar pattern on the wall. Her body is covered by a smooth tight sheet with the weight of the quilt on top. She doesn't know *who* she is. It's a familiar feeling for Maggie, this fleeting moment when she's caught between the waking and the dead. She'd been dreaming of her mother again. Pushing one leg out across the bed, Maggie feels the coolness of the cotton under her foot: she must have lain in this position all night. The bed is high, like a princess's bed: like the princess and the pea, she thought, but didn't say, when Kenneth first showed her the room. A high bed with a thick floral-patterned quilt and a mahogany headboard, and a dark wooden wardrobe and bedside cupboard and, in the corner, a marble-topped washstand. On top of it is a television set with a dust-sticky remote control perched on the edge. Maggie thinks it is a fine room. It smells amberous and heady, the scent of baked summer. It is nothing like anywhere she knows, and that is good. There's the coo of a wood pigeon, a chatter of other birdsong she can't identify, a power saw off in the distance. From the window, her view is of a cobbled courtyard, in the middle of which stands a tree with massive, hand-shaped leaves and a thick trunk. She looks at it for a time: there are

definitely eyes in the trunk. She doesn't know the name of the tree. She will ask Kenneth about it.

She arrived last night, just before dinner, as Kenneth had instructed. They ate in the dining room. It had wall cabinets full of fine china, plates with gold-leaf patterns on them, but the crockery they ate from was just ordinary; plain and heavy. He's laid the table especially, she thought, looking at the candles and place mats and napkin holders. She imagined him on his own in this big house, eating a ready-meal at the end of the long table, and the thought of it brought a tightness to her chest. He served her pasta, vegetarian, because, he said, he didn't know if she was or wasn't, and no one objects to vegetables. He looked proud when he told her that he'd cooked the meal himself, and made the sauce. It was a mixture of tinned tomato, hard courgette chunks, chopped onion that squeaked between her teeth. Kenneth was very different in this role; slightly bashful and eager to please, and when he gave her some wine, Maggie understood the effort involved: as he poured, he placed his free hand on the base of the glass to steady it.

Call me Kenneth, he said, No need for formalities, which made her feel stiff and oddly angry, as if he were granting a privilege to a servant. And you can call me Maggie, she replied, which made them laugh, and easy again, because he had been doing just that all along. Afterwards, he wanted to show her around downstairs.

So if you get lost, you'll know where you are, he said. He pointed to a half-closed door,

Kitchen. Where I've just spent three hours concocting. And where you will often find me concocting. I am, if I may say so, an adventurous cook.

Maggie glimpsed a large rectangular space with a stove set into a brick hearth.

And the dining room you've seen. I sometimes eat in there, but quite often you'll find me down here. C'mon.

He led her further along the corridor until they arrived at an atrium, stuffed full of tall hothouse plants and wicker furniture. Despite the hour, the heat was intense, trapped by the blinds on the sloping glass roof. It reminded Maggie of a picture in a catalogue, with its pamment flooring and French windows leading onto the courtyard. There was a coffee table in the centre with a wedge of magazines on it, shaped into a careful fan. She couldn't quite see Kenneth deliberating over which type of conservatory blind would best complement the chintz, but someone had definitely styled this space. They passed a closed door with an engraved plate on it.

Music room, she said, reading it.

True, true, but it's where I keep most of my books. The library is oak-panelled, you see, with a coffered ceiling.

Maggie struggled to keep up with him.

A coffered—? she asked.

Coffered. Good for listening to music. So I switched them about. The music room's now my library, and the original library is my music room.

And this is where the schoolchildren came to practise? asked Maggie, perplexed.

What? No, no. It's full of books! The main hall. They used that.

The corridor grew narrow; Maggie had to walk behind him to avoid bumping her elbow into his.

Don't you find yourself rattling about in this place? she asked, just as he came to an abrupt halt. They'd reached the end of the tour, and were facing a painted white door.

I do, he said, Which is why I spend a lot of my time in here: the den!

He opened the door onto a room saturated with colour; the walls were maroon, the curtains midnight blue and covered with golden stars and planets. Two brown leather armchairs were placed either side of a marble fireplace, itself a repellent, mottled purple.

It's very . . . full, said Maggie, eyeing the books and papers stacked up all over the floor. Kenneth smiled at her.

A full life is a wonderful life, don't you agree, Maggie? She wasn't about to contradict him. Instead, she pretended to study the gallery of paintings stretched along one wall: a stag in oils, a stern-faced portrait of a man in a dog collar, a ruin in a garden.

Lots of stuff, she said, moving on to the collection of clocks on the mantelpiece. Each one told a slightly different time: ten past, twelve minutes past, a quarter past. Closer, she could hear their panicky ticking. Her eyes fell to rest on a large glass orb housed in a tubular frame. It looked modern, out of place. As Maggie approached, she was able to separate it from the background. It was an aquarium, swirling with brightly coloured fish.

That, said Kenneth, pointing, Is not my idea. It's a work of art, apparently. But it has a *function*. The fish are intended to keep me active.

Active how? It's not as if you can take them for a walk. As she ducked forward to watch them more closely, the neons flashed away to the far side of the globe.

I'm supposed to remember to feed them, you see, otherwise the little beggars die.

Well, it seems to be working, said Maggie, straightening up again, They look healthy enough.

He drew closer, suddenly serious.

You don't think it's cruel? he asked.

Maggie shrugged,

No more cruel than eating them, she said, Perhaps that's the way to go. Fried in batter, like whitebait.

Kenneth bent his head and put his hands on either side of the globe. He looked like a fortune-teller about to reveal her future.

When they die, they float to the top, he said, I find it quite sad. Like they say, the water gives up her dead.

The sea, corrected Maggie, I think it's from the Bible.

I found a man once, he said, still staring into the bowl, Drowned. Well, I didn't find him myself, but I saw him. What remained. He'd been washed up after a storm. Baggs, his name was. Huge man, lived in one of the estate cottages. It's an awful thing, the smell. You never forget it.

Maggie turned away from him. She didn't want this conversation any more, didn't like the way it had cast a shadow on the room.

These are just little fish, Kenneth, she said, And if you really don't want them, why don't you advertise them for sale? Or donate them to the local school? Or you could sell them to the pet shop at the retail park. That's probably where they came from in the first place.

Can't. Will bought them. One of his less brilliant gifts. You see, Maggie, that's what happens, as you get on. You acquire stuff you don't want. People give you all sorts of rubbish, football-shaped radios, painted china kingfishers, a stacking rooster teapot— he was in full flow now, sweeping his arm across the array of objects on the shelves — A tartanware bloody decanter! His face had gone very pink. Maggie tried not to laugh at him.

Show me the worst thing, she said, offering her palm. Kenneth rummaged on the shelves, brought down a black mug with the Playboy logo etched in gold, and passed it to her. She weighed it in her hand, held it out at arm's length.

You really hate it, she said, her eyes glittering.

Yes I do.

She took it over to the hearth and let it drop.

Whoops, she said, glancing down at the broken pieces, I'm so clumsy. Any more?

Kenneth thought for a second, then fetched an ornate round dish with a transfer image of Frankie Dettori on the front.

Present from a lady friend, he said.

She gave you a *plate* with a *jockey* on it? said Maggie, astonished, And now she's in a home, yes?

Kenneth's laugh turned into a coughing fit. He wiped his tears on his sleeve as Maggie waited.

Ali's – well – she's in a stable, so to speak. Lambourn. It's a village not far from here. Full of horsey types. Breeders, trainers

...

Plate-givers, finished Maggie.

Kenneth held it over the hearth and dropped it. It bounced, twirled on its rim, and settled with a scuttering flourish.

I don't seem to have your knack, he sighed, bending to retrieve it.

Maggie crossed to the shelves, scanned them.

Seriously, though, if you don't want to live with all this, why keep it?

Ah, well, I'm on to that, he said, fanning the plate in his hand, I'm sorting it out. See, here, I'm cataloguing everything. He moved to a low table near the window and fetched an exercise book from the top of a pile. She saw for the briefest moment an emblem on the cover, before he opened it to show her what was written inside: three long columns of words, some of them scored out and rewritten, and on the facing page, lists and bullet points and a great many exclamation marks. It was a wild, meaningless scrawl. And she saw plainly what he'd neglected to mention at the interview: he was unable to put anything down in a coherent manner. His thoughts were everywhere on the page. Maggie perceived his tone, his plea for acknowledgement.

So you're far too busy to do this *and* make your music notes, she said.

That's right, he agreed, and suddenly lit with a new idea, Would you like some more wine? It's such a nice evening, we could sit on the terrace, watch the sun go down on the river. What do you think?

Maggie has her own kitchen up here, off her bedroom: a narrow space with a high window. This first morning she eats,

standing up, a piece of toast and marmalade, waiting for the kettle to boil.

It was only three days ago they'd agreed the terms of the job, but nothing in the kitchen looks newly purchased, except for the milk and bread. The cereal packet has dust on the top, the marmalade has a faded price sticker on the lid, and the coffee granules in the jar are solid: she has to dig repeatedly with a spoon to excavate them. It takes her back, as everything does, to her mother, for whom the simplest things became an act of deep concentration. Place the spoon in the jar, scoop the granules up and hold the spoon steady while you carry it to the cup. It was agonizingly slow to watch. Maggie would have to grip her hands behind her back to stop herself from snatching the spoon or the kettle or the plate – whatever implement it might be – and doing the job herself. After the feat was achieved, she'd sneak back into the kitchen, wipe away the stains and spillages as if they had never happened.

She tries not to think of her mother, because it feels wrong, at this, the start of her new life, to let her old life in: she would like to keep them apart for a while longer yet. But there's a prickling at the back of her neck, a sense that if she were to turn round, quickly, she would find her mother standing there in the doorway with one hand on her hip, shaking her head in disbelief.

And what do you hope to achieve by this?

It was her mother's idea that if Maggie would be staying in Berkshire for a while, she should get herself a job: nothing too demanding, just so that she wasn't stuck indoors all day, she'd said, fussing over nothing, *fretting*. They ordered the local and national papers, and in the evenings they'd look together, Maggie half-heartedly, her mother with more determination, reading out the most ridiculous posts.

Fork-lift truck driver, that's local. Arborist. You could do that. You know about trees and everything.

But the illness progressed so quickly that the prospect of even a few hours away from her mother frightened Maggie; the idea of hours, suddenly, being all they had left together. So she never did apply for work, but they continued to look, all the same; for amusement, for distraction, to pretend that everything was normal. Towards the end, Maggie would sit on the edge of the bed and read the advertisements out loud, one eye on her mother, watching as she slipped quietly into sleep, like a child being told a bedtime story. Then Maggie saw the advertisement for the post at Earl House; a large blocked-out rectangle in the *Times*: unmissable, beckoning. She didn't read that one to her mother.

Unable to finish her toast, Maggie throws it in the bin and rinses her cup, forcing herself to concentrate on the moment, and on Kenneth: she considers how long he might have waited for the right person, feels a thin pulse of satisfaction that he's found her at last. And she's conscious of how long she has waited, too. Thinking again about what he told her at the interview, she is struck by a way of laying her ghost to rest. Make the past into a story, Kenneth said. Resurrect history. Her plan, if she had thought it through, was not dissimilar: to resurrect history, yes – if she only knew what that history was. She has heard stories, has lived inside moments, has memories scattered like light. She thinks these things aren't facts. But Kenneth can tell her, if she can only lead him to it. If he supplies the facts, she'll do the rest. Time to go to work.

She comes down to find the library empty. No sign of Kenneth, no sound from the kitchen. On a low table next to one of the chairs, she finds his instructions. 'Make yourself at home. Here's the office equipment! Be with you soon, K.' Beneath his note is a single slim exercise book, an exact copy of the one he showed her yesterday, the same herald on the front displaying a badge, the words *Veritate et Virtute* scrolled beneath it. The paper inside is ruled with pale blue lines. Placed

next to it is a cheap gel pen. In the dimness of the shuttered room, Maggie sits on the edge of the chair, opens the book and turns to the back. She presses the page down flat with her hand, and begins to write.