
Opening Extract from...

Apple Tree Yard

Written by Louise Doughty

Published by Faber and Faber

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faber and faber

First published in this edition in 2013
by Faber and Faber Limited
Bloomsbury House
74–77 Great Russell Street
London WC1B 3DA

Typeset by Faber and Faber Ltd

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon, CR0 4YY

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

ISBN 978–0–571–29788–7

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

To
Everyone who walks around,
Knowing the truth to be
Different

Like the eye, the ear and the elbow, the genome shows no element of design, but is instead filled with compromise, contingency and decay.

Steve Jones

We go through life mishearing and mis-seeing and misunderstanding so that the stories we tell ourselves will add up.

Janet Malcolm

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Prologue

The moment builds; it swells and builds – the moment when I realise we have lost. The young barrister, Ms Bonnard, is on her feet in front of me: a small woman, as you probably remember, auburn hair beneath the judicial wig. Her gaze is cool, her voice light. Her black robes look chic rather than sinister. She radiates calm, believability. I have been in the witness box two days now and I am tired, really tired. Later, I will understand that Ms Bonnard chose this time of day deliberately. She wasted quite a lot of time earlier in the afternoon, asking about my education, my marriage, my hobbies. She has been down so many different avenues that at first I am not alert to the fact that this new line of questioning has significance. The moment builds but slowly; it swells to its climax.

The clock at the back of the court reads 3.50 p.m. The air is thick. Everyone is tired, including the judge. I like the judge. He takes careful notes, raising his hand politely when he needs a witness to slow down. He blows his nose frequently, which makes him seem vulnerable. He is stern with the barristers but kindly to the jury. One of them stumbled over the words of the oath as she was sworn in and the judge smiled and nodded his head to her and said, 'Do please take as long as you like, Madam.' I like the jury too. It seems like an acceptable cross-section to me; a slight predominance of women, three black people and six Asian, ages ranging from around twenty to mid-sixties. Hard to believe such an innocuous group of people might send me to prison; even harder to believe it now, while they are slumped in their seats. None of them are in the perky, upright pose they all adopted when the trial began, faces bright, filled with the adrenaline of

their own significance. Like me, they were probably surprised at first that the courtroom hours are so short, ten in the morning at the earliest, until lunchtime, finishing no later than four. But we all understand now. It's the slowness of everything – that's what's so exhausting: we are well into the trial now and weighed down by detail. They are feeling smothered. They don't understand what this young woman is driving at any more than I do.

And then, in the wood-panelled dock, behind the thick sheets of toughened glass, there is you: my co-accused. Before I took the stand, we were sitting side by side, although separated by the two dock officers seated between us. I had been advised not to glance over at you while the other witnesses were being questioned – it would make me look more like your conspirator, I was told. While I have been on the witness stand myself, you have looked at me, simply and without emotion, and your calm, almost-blank stare is a comfort, for I know you are willing me to remain strong. I know that seeing me here, raised up and isolated, stared at and judged, will be making you feel protective. Your stare may not look intent to those who don't know you but I have seen that apparently casual glance of yours on many occasions. I know what you are thinking.

There is no natural light in Courtroom Number Eight and that bothers me. In the ceiling there is an arrangement of latticed fluorescent squares and there are white tubes on the walls. It's all so sanitised and modern and stark. The wood panelling, the drop-down seats with their green cloth covers, none of it fits: the life-changing drama of why we are here versus the deadening mundanity of the procedures.

I glance around the court. The clerk, sitting one row down in front of the judge, has sagging shoulders. Susannah is in the public gallery, next to a bunch of students who came in about an hour ago and a retired couple who have been there from the start but who are, as far as I know, unconnected with our case, just theatre fans who can't afford a West End show. Even Susannah, who is watching me with her usual care, even she is glancing at her

watch from time to time, waiting for the end of the day. No one is expecting any major developments at this stage.

'I would like to take you back a bit, in your career,' Ms Bonnard says, 'I hope you will bear with me.' Throughout my examination by her, she has been scrupulously polite. This does not alter the fact that she frightens me, her unnatural composure, her air of knowing something infinitely useful that the rest of us have yet to learn. I guess her to be nearly twenty years younger than me, mid-thirties at the most – not that much older than my son and daughter – she must have had a stellar rise through chambers.

One of the jury, a middle-aged black man wearing a pink shirt sitting on the far right, yawns conspicuously. I glance at the judge whose gaze is purposeful but heavy-lidded. Only my own barrister, Robert, seems alert. He is wearing a slight frown, his thick white eyebrows lowered, and he is watching Ms Bonnard intently. Later, I wonder if he registered something at that point, some clue in her apparent lightness of tone.

'Can you just remind the court,' she continues, 'when was it was you first attended a committee hearing at the Houses of Parliament? How long ago now?'

I should not feel relief but cannot help myself – it is an easy question. The moment has not yet started.

'Four years ago,' I reply confidently.

The young woman makes a show of glancing down at her notes. 'That was a House of Commons Select Committee on…'

'No,' I say, 'actually, it was a Standing Committee at the House of Lords.' I am on sure territory here. 'Standing Committees don't exist any more but at the time the House of Lords had four of them, each covering different areas of public life. I was appearing before the Standing Committee on Science to give evidence on developments in computer sequencing in genome mapping.'

She cuts across me. 'But you used to work full-time at the Beaufort Institute, didn't you, before you went freelance I mean?

The, er, Beaufort Institute for Genomic Research is its full title I believe…'

This non-sequitur baffles me for a moment. 'Yes, yes, I worked there full-time for eight years before reducing my formal hours to two days a week, a kind of consultancy role where I…'

'It's one of the most prestigious research institutes in the country, isn't it?'

'Well, along with those in Cambridge and Glasgow, in my field, I suppose, yes, I was very…'

'Can you just tell the court where the Beaufort Institute is located?'

'It's in Charles II Street.'

'That's parallel with Pall Mall, I believe, it runs down to St James's Square Gardens?'

'Yes.'

'There are quite a lot of institutes round there, aren't there? Institutes, private clubs, research libraries…' She glances at the jury and gives a small smile, 'Corridors of power, that sort of stuff…'

'I'm not… I…'

'Forgive me, how long was it you worked for the Beaufort Institute?'

I am unable to prevent a note of irritation creeping into my voice although that is something else I have been cautioned against. 'I still do. But full-time, eight years.'

'Ah yes, I'm sorry, you've said that already. And during those eight years, you commuted every day, bus and Tube?'

'Tube mostly, yes.'

'You walked from Piccadilly?'

'Piccadilly Tube, usually, yes.'

'And lunch hours, coffee breaks, plenty of places to eat around there? Pubs after work etc.?'

At this, counsel for the prosecution, Mrs Price, gives a small exhalation and begins to lift her hand. The judge looks over his glasses at the young woman barrister and she raises the flat of

her hand in response. 'Forgive me, My Lord, I'm getting there, yes…'

My Lord. My previous experience of criminal courtrooms was limited to television drama and I had been expecting Your Honour. But this is the Old Bailey. He's a Lord – or she's a Lady. You may find the wigs and the ceremonial ways that people refer to each other strange or intimidating, I was advised. But I don't find the wigs intimidating any more than the arcane forms of address; I find them comic. What intimidates me is the bureaucracy, the stenographer clickety-clicking away – the laptops, the microphones, the thought that files are accruing on me, more and more, with every passing word – the whole great grindingness of these procedures. That is what intimidates me. It makes me feel like a field mouse caught in the giant turning blades of a combine harvester. I feel this even though I must be as well prepared as any witness. My husband saw to that. He hired a top barrister, at four hundred pounds an hour, to prepare me. I have remembered, most of the time, to look over at the jury when I give my answers rather than turning instinctively towards counsel. I have taken the advice that the easy way to remember this is to keep my feet placed so that my toes are pointing at the jury. I have kept my shoulders back, stayed calm, made good eye contact. I have, my team is all agreed, been doing very well.

The barrister has acknowledged the judge's authority and now looks back at me. 'So in total, you've been working in or visiting the Borough of Westminster for, what, around twelve years? Longer?'

'Longer probably,' I say, and the moment starts building then, there, a profound sense of unease located somewhere inside me, identifiable as a slight clutching of my solar plexus. I diagnose it in myself even as I am baffled by it.

'So,' she says, and her voice becomes slow, gentle. 'It would be fair to say that with all that commuting and walking from the Tube and lunch hours and so on, that you are very familiar with the area?'

It is building. My breath begins to deepen. I can feel that my chest is rising and falling, imperceptibly at first, but the more I try to control myself, the more obvious it becomes. The atmosphere inside the court tightens, everyone can sense it. The judge is staring at me. Am I imagining it, or has the jury member in the pink shirt on the periphery of my vision sat up a little straighter, leaned forward in his seat? All at once, I dare not look at the jury directly. I dare not look at you, sitting in the dock.

I nod, suddenly unable to speak. I know that in a few seconds, I will start to hyperventilate. I know this even though I have never done it before.

The barrister's voice is low and sinuous, 'You're familiar with the shops, the cafés…' Sweat prickles the nape of my neck. My scalp is shrinking. She pauses. She has noted my distress and wants me to know that I have guessed correctly: I know where she is going with this line of questioning, and she knows I know. 'The small side streets…' She pauses again. 'The back alleyways…'

And that is the moment. That is the moment when it all comes crashing down, and I know, and you in the dock know too, for you put your head in your hands. We both know we are about to lose everything – our marriages are over, our careers are finished, I have lost my son's and daughter's good regard, and more than that, our freedom is at stake. Everything we have worked for, everything we have tried to protect: it is all about to tumble.

I am hyperventilating openly now, breathing in great deep gulps. My defence barrister – poor Robert – is staring at me, puzzled and alarmed. The prosecution disclosed its line of attack before the trial and there was nothing unexpected in its opening statement or from the witnesses it put on the stand. But I am facing your barrister now, part of the defence team, and your defence and my defence had an agreement. What is going on? I can see Robert thinking. He looks at me and I see it in his face: there is something she hasn't told me. He has no idea what is com-

ing, knows only that he doesn't know. It must be every barrister's nightmare, something that finds him or her unprepared.

Below the witness stand, sitting behind the tables nearest to me, the prosecution team is staring at me too, treasury counsel and the junior next to her, the woman from the Crown Prosecution Service on the table behind them, and on yet another row of tables behind that; the Senior Investigating Officer from the Metropolitan Police, the case officer, the exhibits officer. Then over by the door there is the victim's father in his wheelchair and the Family Liaison Officer assigned to look after him. I am as familiar with the cast of this drama as I am with my own family. Everyone is fixed on me – everyone, my love, apart from you. You are not looking at me any more.

'You are familiar, aren't you?' says Ms Bonnard in her satin, sinuous voice, 'with a small back alleyway called Apple Tree Yard.'

I close my eyes, very slowly, as if I am bringing the shutters down on the whole of my life until this moment. There is not a sound from the court, then someone from the benches in front of me shuffles their feet. The barrister is pausing for effect. She knows that I will keep my eyes closed for a moment or two: to absorb all this, to attempt to calm my ragged breathing and buy myself a few more seconds, but time has slipped from us like water through our fingers and there is none of it left, not one moment: it's over.

PART ONE

X and Y

I

To begin where it began – really, it began twice. It began that cold March day in the Chapel of St Mary Undercroft in the Palace of Westminster, beneath the drowned saints and the roasted saints and saints in every state of torture. It began that night, when I rose from my bed at four o'clock in the morning. I'm not a true insomniac. I have never tossed and turned night after night or spent weeks in a dreary fug of exhaustion, grey-faced and careful. Once in a while I find myself suddenly and inexplicably awake – and so it was that night. My eyes sprang open, my mind sprang into consciousness. *My God*, I thought, *it happened*… I went over what happened, and each time I went over it, it seemed more preposterous. I rolled beneath the duvet, the motion heavy, closed my eyes, then opened them immediately, knowing that sleep would not come again for at least an hour. Self-awareness: it is one of the chief bonuses of advancing age. It is our consolation prize.

There is no clarity or insight at that hour. There is only the endless turning and churning of our thoughts, each one more confused and circuitous than the last. And so I rose.

My husband was sleeping soundly, his breathing rasping, harsh. 'Men can achieve a persistent vegetative state during the night,' Susannah once said to me. 'It's a well-known medical condition.'

And so I rose and slipped from the bed, the cold of the room frosting my skin, and took my thick fleece dressing gown from the hook on the back of the door, remembered that my slippers were in the bathroom, and pulled the door to behind me, gently, because I didn't want to wake my husband, the man I love.

There may be no clarity or insight at that hour but there is the computer. Mine is in an attic room, with sloping ceilings at one end and glass doors leading on to a tiny ornamental balcony at the other, overlooking the garden. My husband and I have a study each. We're one of those couples. My study has a poster of the double helix on the wall and a Moroccan rug and a clay bowl for paperclips that our son made for me when he was six. In the corner is a stack of *Science* magazines as high as the top of my desk. I keep it in the corner so it won't collapse. My husband's study has a desk with a glass top and white built-in shelving and a single black and white photograph of a San Francisco trolley car, *circa* 1936, framed in beech and hung on the wall behind the computer. His work has nothing to do with trolley cars – he's an expert on genetic anomalies in mice – but he would no more have a picture of a mouse on his wall than he would have a fluffy toy on his easy chair. His computer is a blank, cordless rectangle. His pens and stationary are all kept in a small grey drawer unit beneath the desk. His reference books are in alphabetical order.

There is something satisfying about turning on a computer in the middle of the night; the low hum, the small blue light that glows in the dark, the action and atmosphere both replete with the sensation that other people are not-doing this right now and that I shouldn't be doing it either. After I turned the computer on, I went over to the oil-filled radiator that stands against a wall – I'm usually the only one in the house during working hours and have my own radiator up here. I clicked the switch to *low* and the radiator made a clicking and pipping sound as the oil inside began to heat up. I went back to my desk and sat down on the black leather chair and opened a new document.

Dear X,

It is three o'clock in the morning, my husband is asleep downstairs, and I am in the attic room writing a letter to you – a man I have met only once and will almost certainly never meet again. I appreciate that it is a little strange to be

writing a letter that will never be read, but the only person I will ever be able to talk to about you, is you.

X. It pleases me that it's actually a genetic reversal – the X chromosome, as I'm sure you know, is what denotes the female. The Y is what gives you increased hair growth around the ears as you age and you may also have a tendency towards red-green colour-blindness as many men do. There's something in that that is pleasing too, considering where we were earlier today. Tonight, right now, synergy is everywhere. Everything pleases me.

My field is protein sequencing, which is a habit hard to break. It spreads through the rest of your life – science is close to religion in that respect. When I began my post-Doc, I saw chromosomes everywhere, in the streaks of rain down a window, paired and drifting in the disintegrating vapour trails behind an aeroplane.

X has so many uses, my dear X – from a triple XXX film to the most innocent of kisses, the mark a child makes on a birthday card. When my son was six or so, he would cover cards with X's for me, making them smaller and smaller towards the edge of the card, to squeeze them on, as if to show there could never be enough X's on a card to represent how many X's there were in the world.

You don't know my name and I have no plans to tell you but it begins with a Y – which is another reason why I like denoting you X. I can't help feeling it would be disappointing to discover your name. Graham, perhaps? Kevin? Jim? X is better. That way, we can do anything.

At this point in the letter, I decided I needed the loo, so I stopped, left the room, returned two minutes later.

I had to break off there. I thought I heard something downstairs. My husband often gets up to use the toilet in the night – what man in his fifties doesn't? But my caution was

unnecessary. If he woke and found me missing it would not surprise him to discover me up here, at the computer. I have always been a poor sleeper. It is how I have managed to achieve so much. Some of my best papers were written at three in the morning.

He is a kindly man, my husband, large, balding. Our son and daughter are both in their late twenties. Our daughter lives in Leeds and is a scientist too, although not in my field, her speciality is haematology. My son lives in Manchester at the moment, for the music scene, he says. He writes his own songs. I think he's quite gifted – of course, I'm his mother – but he hasn't quite found his métier yet, perhaps. It's possibly a little difficult for him having a very academic sister – she's younger than him, although not by much. I managed to conceive her when he was only six months old.

But I suspect you are not interested in my domestic life, any more than I am interested in yours. I noticed the thick gold wedding ring on your finger, of course, and you noticed me noticing and at that point we exchanged a brief look in which the rules of what we were about to do were understood. I imagine you in a comfortable suburban home like mine, your wife one of those slender, attractive women who looks younger than her age, neat and efficient, probably blonde. Three children, at a guess, two boys and one girl, the apple of your eye? It's all speculation but I'm a scientist, as I've explained, it's my job to speculate. From my empirical knowledge of you I know one thing and one thing only. Sex with you is like being eaten by a wolf.

Although the heater was on low, the room had warmed up quickly and I was becoming drowsy in my padded leather chair. I had been typing for nearly an hour, editing as I went, and was heavy-headed, tired of sitting upright and tired of my sardonic tone. I scanned through the letter, tightening the odd phrase here and there, noting that there were two places when I had

been less than frank. The first was a minor untruth, one of those small acts of self-mythologising, where you diminish or exaggerate some detail as a form of shorthand, in order to explain yourself to someone – the aim concision rather than deceit. It was the bit where I had claimed that I write my best papers at three in the morning. I don't. It's true that I sometimes get up and work in the night, but I have never done my best work then. My best work is done at around 10 a.m., just after my breakfast of bitter marmalade on toast and a very large black coffee. The other place where I had been less than truthful was more serious, of course. It was where I referred to my son.

I closed the letter, entitling the file *VATquery3*. Then I hid it in a folder called *LettAcc*. I spared a moment to observe myself in this act of artifice – as I had when I reapplied my lipstick in the Chapel. I slumped in my chair and shut my eyes. Although it was still dark outside, I could hear a light chirrup and tweeting – the optimistic overture of the birds that stretch and flutter in the trees as dawn breaks. It was one of the reasons we moved to the suburbs, that peeping little chorus, although within a few weeks I found it irritated as much as it had once pleased me.

A one-off, that's all. No harm done. An episode. In science, we accept aberrations. It's only when aberrations keep happening that we stop and try and look for a pattern. But science is all about uncertainty, accepting anomalies. Anomalies are what create us, viz. the axiom *the exception that proves the rule*. If there was no rule, there couldn't be an exception. That's what I was trying to explain to the Select Committee earlier that day.

*

There was snow in the air, that's what I remember about that day, although it had yet to fall. That dense and particular chill the air seems to have just before – *the promise of snow*, I thought to myself as I walked towards the Houses of Parliament. It was a pleasing thought because I had new boots, half-boots, patent

leather but with a small heel, the sort of boots a middle-aged woman wears because they make her feel less like a middle-aged woman. What else? What was it that caught your eye? I was wearing a grey jersey dress, pale and soft, with a collar. I had a fitted wool jacket on top of the dress, black with large silver buttons. My hair was freshly washed: maybe that helped. I had recently had a layered cut and put a few burnt-almond highlights in my otherwise unimpressive brown. I was feeling happy with myself, I suppose, in an ordinary kind of way.

If my description of myself at that time sounds a little smug, that's because I am – I was, I mean, until I met you and all that followed. A few weeks before, I had been propositioned by a boy half my age – more of that later – and it had done my personal confidence no end of good. I had said no, but the fantasies I had for some while afterwards were still keeping me cheerful.

It was the third time I had appeared before a government committee and I knew the routine by then – I had been presenting to them the previous afternoon in fact. At the entrance to Portcullis House, I pushed through the revolving doors and slung my bag on to the conveyor belt of the X-ray machine with a nod and a smile at the security man, remarking that I had worn my chunky silver bracelet on my second day to make sure I would get the free massage. I turned to be photographed for my *Unescorted Day Pass*. As the previous day, I made the arch go beep-beep and raised my arms so that the large woman guard could come and pat me down. As a pathologically law-abiding woman, I'm thrilled by the idea that I need to be searched: either here or at an airport, I'm always disappointed if I don't set off the alarm. The guard felt along each arm, brusquely, then turned her hands and placed them in a praying position so that she could pass the edges of them between my breasts. The male guards stood and watched, which for me made the body search more ambiguous than if they were doing it themselves.

'I like your boots,' the woman guard said as she squeezed them lightly with both hands. 'Bet they'll be useful.' She stood, turned,

and handed me my pass on its string. I slipped it over my neck, then had to bend slightly to press it against the pass-reader that made the second set of glass doors swing open.

I wasn't up before the committee for another half hour – I had arrived early enough to buy a large cappuccino and seat myself beneath the fig trees in the atrium, at a small round table. I scattered a crust of brown sugar across the top of my coffee, then, while I read through the notes I had taken the previous day, ate the remaining crystals by licking my forefinger and sticking it in the small paper packet. On the tables around me were MPs and their guests, civil servants, catering staff on a break, journalists, researchers, secretarial and support staff… Here was the day-to-day business of government, the routines, the detail, the glue that holds it all together. I was there to help a committee pronounce on recommended limitations to cloning technology – most people still think that's what genetics is, as if there is nothing more to it than breeding experiments, how many identical sheep we can make, or identical mice, or plants. Endless wheat crops; square tomatoes; pigs that will never get sick or make us sick either – it's the same unsubtle debates we've been having for years. It was three years since my first presentation to a committee but I knew when I was asked to appear again this time I would be rehearsing exactly the same arguments.

What I'm trying to say is, I was in a good mood that day but other than that, it was really ordinary.

But it wasn't ordinary, was it? I sat there, sipping my coffee, tucking my hair behind my ear when I looked down at my notes, and all that time, I was unaware that I was being watched by you.

*

Later, you described this moment in great detail, from your point of view. At one point, apparently, I looked up and gazed around, as if someone had spoken my name, before returning to my notes. You wondered why I did that. A few minutes later, I scratched

my right leg. Then I rubbed at the underside of my nose with the back of my fingers, before picking up the paper napkin on the table next to my coffee and blowing my nose. All this you observed from your table a few feet away, safe in the knowledge that I wouldn't recognise you if I looked your way, because I didn't know you.

At 10.48 a.m., I closed my folder but didn't bother putting it back in my bag, so you knew I was on my way to a committee or meeting room nearby. Before I stood up, I folded my paper napkin and put it and the spoon into my coffee cup, a neat sort of person, you thought. I rose from my chair and smoothed my dress down, back and front, with a swift, brushing sort of gesture. I ran my fingers through my hair, either side of my face. I shouldered my bag and picked up the file. As I walked away from the table, I glanced back, just to check I hadn't left anything behind. Later, you tell me that this is how you guessed I had children. Children are always leaving things behind and once you have developed the habit of checking a table before you walk away, it's hard to break, even when yours have grown up and left home. You didn't guess how old my children were, though, you got that wrong. You assumed I had had them late, once my career was established, as opposed to early, before it got under way.

I strode away from the café table confidently, according to you, a woman who was on her way somewhere. You had the opportunity to watch me as I walked right the way across the wide, airy atrium and up the open staircase to the committee rooms. My stride was purposeful, my head up, I didn't look about me as I walked. I seemed to have no sense I might be being observed and you found this attractive, you said, because it made me seem both confident and a little naive.

Was there any inkling, for me, that day, as I sipped my coffee? You wanted to know that later, egged me on to say that I had sensed your presence, wanting me to have been aware of you. No, not in the café, I said, not a clue on my part. I was thinking about the easiest way to explain to a committee of lay people why

so many of our genes are non-functioning as opposed to protein-coding. I was thinking about the best way to explain how little we know.

Not a hint? None at all? You were a little hurt, or pretended to be. How could I not have sensed you? No, not there, I would say, but perhaps, maybe, I wasn't sure, I felt something in the committee room.

My presentation had gone according to plan and it was close to the end of my morning. I had just completed an answer to a question about the rapidity of developments in cloning technology – they are public, and reported, these enquiry committees, so they have to ask the questions that represent the public's concerns. There was a brief hiatus while Madam Chair asked to check her papers to make sure she had got the question order right. One of the MPs to her right – his name was Christopher something, the plastic plaque in front of him said – had been gesturing in frustration. I waited patiently. I poured a little more water into my glass from the jug in front of me, took a sip. And as I did, I became aware of an odd sensation, a prickle of tension in my shoulders and neck. I felt as though there was someone extra in the room, behind me – as if, all at once, the air was full. When Madam Chair looked up at me again, I saw her glance past me, at the row of chairs behind me. Then she returned to her papers, looking up again to say, 'I beg your pardon, Professor, I'll be right with you.' She leaned over to the clerk sitting on her left. I've never had a professorship in a British university – the only time I have ever had that title was when I was teaching in America for a year while my husband was part of the USCR Research Exchange Plan in Boston. She should have called me 'Doctor'.

I turned. In the seats behind me, in two rows, were the MPs' researchers with their notebooks and clipboards, the helpers, those there to learn something that might help them up the career ladder. Then, out of the periphery of my vision, I saw that the entrance door in the corner of the room was – softly, noiselessly – closing. Someone had just left the room.