Prose

by JACK**GARDNER**

Roads Home

Heron coloured smoke drifts away down the valley and hangs lifeless over the now spent meadow. Suddenly, tiny flames run around the edge of a crisp oak leaf and the billowing bonfire smoke is shot through with a yellow glow. The sharp snaps of burning twigs send roosting pigeons on a short looping flight to the limes that edge the harvested orchard. The first star shimmers in the purple glow. A field gate is slammed. Far away a dog barks. Hard shapes begin to melt into the blue gloom. In the city where there is no night, car tail lights draw and redraw the curves of the roads home.

Treachery

A simple scene. Rain against a window, winter. The yellow light of the room made bright by the intense blue of dusk outside. A black suite and white shirt reflected from the glass. A hand pressed against its own reflection. An exile from a country which no longer exists. A longing for a lawn, the brush of willow branches on a shoulder, a longing for a sadness that can end. A hand against a scene not much different from this but an endless sense of belonging to it, not an object in it. But once a birthright has been sold it can never be bought back, the selling of it is not trade, it is treachery.

The Wave

His threat had been made without emotion, his voice level as if he had been talking on the telephone. But it had been deliberately made and I did not have to wait long to find out what he had meant by fear. The last few unlit streets had been empty but for a women whose footsteps gave away her haste long before she rounded the corner and disappeared into a doorway. High above, but unfelt on the ground, a wind rushed the shredded the clouds behind the rooftops. I pushed open the familiar, paint peeling door and stepped into the corridor. The door ahead of me was closed and solid but I could hear the wind, rushing through the room behind it. There was no choice but I had hardly touched the handle before it was wrenched from my grasp and I was sucked into the room. The few objects in the room had been ordered when I had left them a few hours ago, but now they were being carelessly

flung around like autumn leaves in a doorway. The French windows burst open as I crawled towards them and revealed the towering cathedral of sky. A storm. But once I had managed to crawl to the windows and put my head around the bottom of the wall I saw not clouds, as I had expected, but towering above the houses and trees, a wave, a giant tidal wave. Its huge white lip curling as it engulfed the streets around. It shone with intense blue until it blocked out the sky where it became the colour of school ink. The lip dropped onto its front surface and boiled to vapour in an instant. And the noise of it, a low thunder laced with lightening. I could not look away. Right up until the moment when I was staring vertically up at the drooping lip, a sky height above me, I could not look away. The bushes across the lawn suddenly burst forward and jets of water sprang through them. In an instant the water was across the little lawn, bubbling

and hissing. Behind it a foot high wave and then the wall. Great stems of spume clinging to the surface and climbing into infinity. I heard the tiles on the roof move, all of them at once, then a jet of water sprayed up from the doorstep. An arch of water across the room. I heard the creaking of metal, huge, bulkhead plates, splitting apart. I rushed from the room and down the corridor, but as I opened the front door the water was already crashing down before me, the doors upstairs burst open and the deluge came tumbling down the stairs. The carpet flew up and waved like a flag on the fountain. Spiders webs were blown to pieces. The water rebounded off the wall and swirled around my waist. I tried to call out but the wind had taken my breath away. Then the blackness. All light extinguished and the cold, cold water, rising, lifting me as if on men's shoulders up and up.

The Voices

My father finally decided that the extreme tinatus, from which he suffered since trapping his head between the water tank and a roof timber, was in fact a voice from the spirit world trying to communicate with him. It took him five years before he was able to decipher the message. Hours of sitting at the kitchen table twisting his head this way and that, like a bird watcher, catching the first twitter of a rare species. Early one spring morning, whilst cleaning the cooker, he discovered that if he put his head just in front of the open oven, the imagined echo brought the garbled sounds into sharp focus. He acted upon the instruction immediately and shot my mother. Some weeks later I visited him in the secure unit. We sat facing each other across an institutionally functional table, in a pale green room, that smelt of Sanilav and cigarette smoke. In the corner a short, shaven headed, warder sat silently picking bits of paint from the iron radiator, his moist lips moving noiselessly as he ploughed his way through the Daily Mirror. Through the

window behind him I watched the bright sunshine falling on a patient who was fumbling his way along the path outside. He glanced furtively about him before pushing lumps of stodgy matter into his mouth. My father's eyes twitched skyward as his psychic switchboard patched another call through to him. He tipped me a suspicious gaze before mouthing his silent reply, sideways. At last I mustered the courage to ask him what my mother's last words had been, mildly wondering if, for only the second time in her life, she had acknowledged any affection for me. He stared at me, distracted by the endless list of instructions suddenly coming to him. I asked again, a little more firmly. The warder moved his arse absentmindedly backwards and forwards across his chair. My father spoke quickly wanting any distraction disposed of as soon as possible lest he should miss a vital message. 'She said, don't sh.' He looked blankly across the table at me. I was struck by how the straight jacket caused him to appear to be giving himself a loving hug, something that he never did to anyone, not even himself, in his whole

life. I was half way to my next thought which would have been about my mother's use of the word 'sh,' when he suddenly stood bolt upright. The warder in the corner did the same but was unable to match his speed as he rolled onto the table, whipped his legs around my neck and pulled me into his crotch in a fearsome grip. The breath went out of me in one gasp. I saw out of the corner of my eye the warder draw a truncheon, he stood back a little, taking aim, and viscously struck me across the head. 'Shit!' He screamed, angry at me for getting in the way. Indecision flickered across his face which now came to me blurred as the edges of my vision began to blacken. He eventually reacted with the instinct of his profession and went into an uncontrolled, frenzy of aggression, beating my father across the head until he was unconscious, and then some. We stood in silence listening to the skin creaking as it stretched over the rising lump on the back of my head. 'Lucky we 'ad 'im in the romper suit', the male warder whined in a surprisingly feminine voice.

Significant Dead

Laura walked to the cemetery, joined the scatter of people gathered by the yew hedge, outside the chapel. The sun was a bright coin in the haze, a lawn mower came and went. It would be a fine day later, when the mist burned off. Steve, whom she hadn't seen for over a year now, embraced her rather formally and introduced his wife who was doing her best to behave as she should at such an alien event. Pip's friends, Mark, Phil, Dave, who had been with him when the accident happened were there with their partners, but clearly hardly knew each other now that their lives had taken them in many different directions. A decision had clearly been agreed that the occasion should be as light hearted as possible although it wasn't working very well. The nurses, who had taken care of him over the months, but had never known him conscious, stood in a little group, still in their uniforms, straight from the hospital. And then into the ugly little chapel. A short service, a poem, awkwardly adapted and read by Phil, about Pip just being in the next room, which

Laura thought ridiculous. Then the burial, the JCB outrageously close as they threw handfuls of earth into the hole, and it was over. Each had organised their own wake but they mercifully accepted her excuses . The rather uncomfortable shaking of hands and with the empty promises to stay in touch over, she walked away, remembering only one tiny thing. It was a look given to her by Mike, a quiet composed half smile that told her that he was content, that he was where he wanted to be. Yet there was also in that look a question, one that would never be asked or answered. That was all she took with her as she set off down the drive past all the head stones, marble angels and wilting flowers in jam jars, that stretched as far as the eye could see in every direction. The names and dates, a few wasted words, some in gold lettering, others chiselled out of the marble, in various states of weathering. Some she recognised, Andrew Turner, Susie Muggeridge, Janet Taplow and there, barely readable now beneath the creeping, cabbage green stain, Nadia Pellow. The others would be there somewhere, she didn't have to see them with her own eyes, if they were her own eyes, to know that.

The Vision

She let her hands lie flat on the table and looked around the room. Nothing had changed since she had moved there. A room for someone passing through, although they never did move on. Someone without the anchors of possession or affection. Someone who would remain a statistic up until and beyond the point in twenty years time when that front door, the one she was staring at, right up until the police battered it down and found her, already badly decomposed on the kitchen floor. She saw her drab little flat for what it was but, at the same time, could see the front door burst open onto an even more dilapidated scene. The uniformed officers rushing in. She could see her own putrefied corpse on the kitchen floor. She lent to her side, pushed open the kitchen door and touched the light switch. Strip lights flickered on, one faster than the other, and there she was, the Woolly cardigan she already possessed, threads of wool pulled out from the sleeves by rats, above a blackened hand half dissolved in the juices it lay in. She looked back

to the door. The policemen had stopped just inside to pull his tunic collars about their faces, one steadying himself against the wall his back heaving. But her imagination could go beyond that, to a stain on the kitchen floor, now heavily scented with bleach and lavender. A couple, both male, stand close to each other, one casually allowing his hand to rest on his partners wrist, smiling, already pulling at bits of wood and plaster that very soon they would renew. The gruesome nature of her death and decomposition, the knowledge that they were standing on tiles, still squelching with her juice, made no difference to their resolve to have a life here. That was the difference between visions and imagination. One, you project onto the screen, the other is projected onto your screen. She owned her imagination, the visions owned her. She could let her mind drift back to the entrance hall of an advertising agency and falling asleep there on a settee. She could see the roof all mock gothic carving and blue plaster. She could hear a telephone unanswered ringing in the future.

Massage

The boy is about ten, he wears a grey, short-sleeved shirt and grey school trousers. His socks are rolled down. He sits with his back against a roughcast wall on bare, sun baked, earth, flecked with green clay the colour of a birds egg. Ahead of him the garden is bordered by a fence made up of three strands of wire. The boy has enticed a cat to lie between his legs. He is surprised by the heat of the cats coat. He runs his hand over and over its black fur until the cat falls into a shallow sleep. The boy continues stroking the animal with his left hand whilst carefully removing a tiny strip of paper from his pocket with his right. A thread of cotton has been carefully cellotaped to the corner of the paper. The boy, with the infinite care of a mother tying a babies bonnet, attaches the cotton, with surgical knots, to a tuft of the cats fur. Slowly the boy lifts a leg over the cat and withdraws a few yards where he crouches and waits. The cat senses the change and rolls onto its feet. A light breeze lifts the strip of paper and the cat takes fright. The boy glimpses the few words, neatly drawn on the paper, as the cat disappears.

Foretold

Just because something is foretold doesn't make it special. The accurate prediction of events is of no importance, why should it be? Every event is foretold is some way or another, it isn't special. If time suddenly started moving backwards we could all predict the onset of innocence, the disappearance of things. The decent of love into acquaintance. The approach of a particular piece of ignorance. We would return our children with acts of supreme selfishness and forget that we ever loved them. Shrapnel would reform into bombs. Fossils would moisten and wriggle. Jade would melt and release its fly. No, to make something from a simple piece of foretelling into something special is a very different thing - very different.

Dead to the World

The statue impersonator stands on her home made plinth in the Cathedral Square. She appears dead to the world, as dead as the marble she feigns to be made of. Grey strata wind around the stiffened sheets and pass as a chiselled and polished toga. A coin rattles down into the fake urn that is the statue impressionist's collecting box, then another and another, this time two pound sounding donations are dropped, one hits the edge of the urn and runs around the lip twice before losing momentum and falling. The tourists, some dressed in African safari clothes, step back ready to record their reward. Slowly, as if the coins had been inserted into an activating slot on a mechanical device, the statue's eyes open. A murmur runs through the knot of people around her. It is a 'her' despite the fact that the statue is a representation of a male figure. The eyes say 'her' as does the enfolding drapes around the chest and hips. Heavily powdered limbs begin to move

and the statue is transformed into a motor driven marionette. She makes a little growling sound in her throat of labouring clockwork motors. A foot is placed on the ground and the people in front of the emulsion painted, white sandal, withdraw a yard in case there is more to this than meets the eye. Some glance over their shoulders as if expecting a statue's accomplice to be lurking, waiting to deliver the unforeseen humiliation that would climax the performance. The marionette now becomes an early film version of Frankenstien's monster, taking awkward, faltering, steps. The few children in the crowd who cling to their parent's hands begin to sense that things are out of their control. They move this way and that, testing the grip, weighing things up, assessing the options, should flight become necessary. The statue suddenly achieves full human animation and darts into the crowd. With astonishing speed she strikes a pose with this little group but

in a second is amongst the next and the next. A shoulder lightly touched here a hand held there, a pose between two girls. A child screams but the statue is about its business, and then before anyone, except those who have experience of the statue impressionist's tableau before, realise, the plinth has been remounted. The flesh stiffens, the marble solidifies, the hands freeze in imperial gesture, the head tilts to survey a conquered multitude, life flickers its invisible clues but soon even they are extinguished. There is a spattering of applause, the child that screamed runs towards the statue shaking its fist in real anger. It had been made to look foolish by a girl dressed up in starched cloth. He shouts unintelligible sounds of threatened violence, his imitation of his parents. He stops before her, unable to continue because she has gone, the statue before him did not humiliate him, it's the girl inside and she is hiding in bafflingly, plain sight.

Before Their Eyes

The venue for the show was a huge mill converted into a community centre. Crude posters were strung across the front of the building proclaiming that Cyril Day would be giving a one off performance of his famous magic show, as seen on television. The car park was full but Helen managed to manoeuvre the car skilfully into a small space next to a tree. He marvelled at her constant, seemingly endless, patience, in everything she did. She turned off the engine and turned to him. In the sideways light falling from the front of the building he saw that she had a broad smile on her face. 'You are going to be amazed, it's much better in real life than on the television'. She already had tickets and waved him away when he took out his wallet. A grown up Scout with a slight haze of downy hair on his face showed them to their seats at the front. The hall was already full of families and the high pitched screams of excited children pierced and echoed in the air. Although old the building had the smell of newly sawn wood and paint. A stage had been built across the whole of one end of the building and

yellow tape marked out a Badminton Court beneath their feet. Helen sat next to him her hands folded neatly on her lap. The calm surrounded her as it always did, a calm that allowed a silence to be natural rather than a gap waiting to be filled with conversation. He looked at the side of her face, a tiny, almost imperceptible, smile turned the corner of her lips up. He had known the tell tell signs, the growing excitement when he was to see her, the sense of awkwardness in his conversation, a sense of loss when he left her and the desperate search for a next meeting. This was not desire driven, when making love would be the steps through which the discoveries that deepen and deepen are made. No, this was a cool drifting into a sense of the pure rightness of something. She was ten years older than him and when he had first seen her at the hospital he had thought her not old, but beyond his concern. Now he saw only the girl that was so strong that it ignored all physical evidence. She turned her face to him and the lights dimmed to darkness and the children screamed with delight. Light suddenly flooded the stage. The curtains had gone. Cyril stood in

the centre of the stage his arms outstretched either side of him. Loud applause and cheering filled the hall. Simon recognised him at once the years seeming to have passed him by unscathed. His trademark check jacket and bow tie, his hair smoothed back, although he did look smaller than he'd imagined him to be. The applause died and he pulled a bright fluorescent, red ball from his pocket. He showed it to the audience and then tossed it into the air, four or five times, higher and higher. Suddenly the ball froze in mid air about ten feet above him. The audience gasped in amazement. Cyril pointed to the ball and slowly moved his finger, the ball followed his pointing. Then he beckoned the ball to him until it hovered just before his face and the lights went out leaving just the glowing ball, there was a puff of smoke and the ball became a Dove that flapped away behind the curtain. Helen had been right, even that rather tired opening trick had been impressive and you really couldn't see how it had been done. Cyril went on with his routine, Doves and rabbits appeared, ropes hung in the air unsupported, light bulbs lit up without a visible power source.

Only once or twice did Cyril falter, ending an illusion rather too quickly or very obviously adjusting a piece of equipment. Every time it happened Helen would let out a little laugh and would say, 'Oh Cyril, you old fraud'. The act was building to its finale and Cyril led his assistant on stage. Helen held a hand to her mouth and whispered, 'That's Jane, his wife'. Although not young, the woman was still attractive and Simon wondered if she really needed the heavy make up that caked her face. She wore a simple, white, sparkling dress. The audience hushed as Cyril pulled a circular piece of equipment that looked like a shower curtain, to the front of the stage. He drew the curtain back to reveal the empty interior. He took Jane by the hand as she stepped into the circle. He turned the frame around and around faster and faster, Jane raised her hands to her face in mock terror. Suddenly he stopped it dead and the curtain flew closed. Cyril stepped away from the curtain and addressed the audience. 'I shall now make the Mrs completely disappear. Yes, I am available for private work lads, at the right price of course'. He returned to the cubicle and as the drum roll ended he wrenched the

curtain back. Jane appeared exactly where she had been but now she was dressed only in her underwear. She screamed and covered herself as Cyril quickly pulled the curtain closed. The audience broke into loud applause. 'I'm sorry about that ladies and gentlemen, I'm afraid the powers aren't what they used to be, are they lads? Ah, I feel the powers returning'. Once again the drum rose to a crescendo and Cyril ripped the curtain back. Jane had vanished, just her dress hung in the air for a second and then fell to the floor. The audience roared with delight but were suddenly silenced as Jane ran screaming from the back of the hall, down the centre isle in her underwear, mounted the stage and grabbed her dress that Cyril was now holding. She slapped him across the face and rushed from the stage. The audience stood clapped and clapped all the way through the several curtain calls, Cyril and Jane took, but eventually the stage dimmed and the harsh strip lights came on. Helen and Simon remained seated as the crowd shuffled slowly to the exit. He stared up at the faces parading past him. Occasionally someone would risk a glance at his face and he

thought he saw a flicker of recognition in the eyes. He remembered just how long it had been since he'd been out, been with a crowd of people. 'Well?' He turned, Helen was beaming at him. 'Oh, amazing, just amazing, thank you so much Helen. I'd never, well never…' 'He's such a professional.' He caught something out of the corner of his eye and turned. A boy of about seven or eight was staring intently at him. His mother pushed him roughly forward and they were gone. He wasn't sure if it had been the illusions he had just witnessed or the sense of unreality created by all theatre, but for a brief second he sensed another reality, a world running alongside his into which he was catching fleeting glimpses. As he had already thought, it had been a long time, a very long time.

A Word

They went to stay for the summer with her parents in the little, run down, farmhouse her mother had inherited. They were welcomed at first, but were soon resented for upsetting the delicate balance of rules and traditions, that marked out the boundaries of the endless war, that raged between her mother and father. Little cruelties had to be more subtle, hurts inflicted over the breakfast table with a smile, silences had to be broken. They resented the intimacy that their hatred gave them being tested, fearing that once their daughter had departed the long established patterns of engagement, might not return to quite their old positions. He really wanted to say what a shame it was that, what could be quite idyllic, was so hellish, but he said nothing. One evening as they sat around the

picnic table outside the back door in a silence broken only by Sarah's father reading extracts from the newsletter distributed at his work, her mother suddenly said, 'I feel rather guilty Sarah'. 'Why Mother?' 'Well we're getting all of your time and attention, how must Simon's parents feel?' Her father sealed the eviction order. 'The North Road car park is to be locked at ten o'clock every evening to prevent, what has been described as, unauthorised parking, taking place late at night.' He chuckled to himself, an empty, spiteful sound. He often thought, in the years that followed, as their marriage careered into the void, how well Sarah had learnt the craft of hurt so skilfully wielded by her parents, but he said nothing.

A Blow on a Bruise

Her telephone call had been short, flat voiced, weary almost, just said to come to dinner at Limewood House, about seven. High winds had been forecast and as he walked over the bridge to the bus station, above him, thin wisps of cloud were already weaving themselves into long pigtails. He knew the route and stood in the cue behind the statue impersonator, also awaiting the bus, feeling slightly more conspicuous in his crumpled dinner suite than she in her marble painted toga. She smelt of beer and greasepaint and he wondered if that was a sign that she'd had a good day. He was surprised that no one took more notice of her, but perhaps she was a regular. The bus was crowded and Simon was pressed close to the window by a fat man who had squeezed his way into the seat next to him. The bus stopped and started its way through the one way system. He stared out of the window in the failing light. One moment a shop window full of dummies dressed in the latest fashions, frozen in dance poses, the next a giant Swiss Army Knife, powered by unseen motors, menacingly, opening and closing

its numerous blades and tools, one after another. Then a window full of TV screens slid into view every one showing the same images. It was a of woman's face in tight close up, silently, shouting and screaming. It cut to a mans face twisted in anguish at whatever it was the woman was saying. It faded to a shot of a beach at dawn and, as the shot tightened, he saw a mans body being washed in and out of the shore by the waves. Soon the bus's engine locked itself into a continuous scream as it started up the long hill to the ridge where Limewood House had sat for three hundred years. Simon was the only passenger to disembark in the deeply rutted, dirt lay-by, at the top of the hill. By now the wind had reached gale force and he snatched his coat around him as the door hissed closed. He watched as the faces of the passengers sped by, the statue impersonator was the only one that watched him, she had a wry smile on her face. He crossed the road through a thin haze of burnt diesel, then headed back towards the drive entrance, guarded by the two statues on high brick columns, that sat either side of the overgrown road that led, a half a mile

later, to the House. The statues were made of carved stone. One was of an unidentifiable, four legged, creature with wings. The other was of a glove from a suite of armour drawn into a tight fist. He passed between them and on down the drive beneath the high rhododendron bushes that, in the last of the light, glowed a vivid blue. They tossed to the limits of their tolerance this way and that on the wind that held no moisture. He remembered the drive being quite short when he had driven there with Helen, but now as he rounded each bend he saw before him another long straight of wildly lashing branches. By the time he emerged from the foliage, into the open it was dark, but he could see the lawns stretching away either side of him, shining in the light falling from the mullioned windows of the house. Once he was inside the huge, stone pillared, porch he plucked the twigs and leaves from his hair and clothes before yanking the black, iron, bell pull. A young man, who Simon had never seen before, swung open the studded door. 'Go on through, they're expecting you.' He said, as he pulled his coat around him and pushed past out into the

howling gale. As it had on his last visit, the hall struck him as a stage set. Draped curtains that seemed to cover nothing, doors that didn't feel as if they had rooms behind them. He could hear voices, it was Cyril, he was sure. He hung his anorak on the hat stand and recognised Jane's vivid yellow coat already there. Then he walked the length of the half wood panelled, corridor and paused, before pushing open the already ajar, door, into the sitting room. Cyril, Jane, Leonard Oakwood and Helen all stopped talking and stared at him from their positions on settees and chairs around the room in their evening dress finery. The last time he had been in the room was for Cyril's charity performance when it had been cleared of most of the furniture. Now it was rather like a larger version of Helen's sitting room, a clutter of settees, low tables and high backed chairs and a grand piano in one corner. A dozen or so table lamps of different intensities cast shadows up onto the walls. The wind howled in the chimney. Again the sense of it being a stage set struck him. He imagined the room with one whole wall missing, the back of a curtain that split in the centre, slowly revealing an audience

disappearing into darkness as the house lights dimmed. The performance had to begin. Cyril broke the silence after first scanning him up and down. 'Hello Simon, good to see you again, you know everyone, of course.' Helen darted to him and touched her lips to his cheek. Her chiffon scarf clinging momentarily to his chin. Jane raised a hand and looked uncomfortable. 'Leonard Oakwood, we met at Cyril's, what shall we call it, performance?' Gentle laughter rippled the room and Cyril took his prompt. 'You haven't got a drink, heavens what's the matter with me, Champaign?' Helen was already at the ice bucket filling a long glass which she took to him. 'Is it a celebration?' He noticed that his question caused eyes to flick to Helen who spoke quickly. 'A toast.' and everyone raised their glass, 'To all our friends who can't be with us tonight.' 'And those who can.' Jane added darkly. But Helen hadn't quite finished. 'And to Mark, I hope you don't mind me saying that Simon, but we all pray for his recovery. I just know that sometime soon it will happen, we must all hold onto that thought.' 'No, it's good of you to think of him.'

He said without much conviction and tiny sips were taken, smiles exchanged. He looked at them and wondered who they were and what he was doing there. It wasn't just this persistent feeling that he was just out of place but that they were not being themselves. If he felt like this they must also know, and yet they persisted as if driven by an unseen code of conduct. He did love Helen, he knew it, but even that was not without a sense of an impenetrable barrier between them, not of age or feelings, but almost of species. Nature itself was the thing that stood between them. 'We're having the Rose garden restored.' He had been staring out of the window watching the wisteria being ripped from the wall opposite in an onslaught of gusts. He hadn't seen Oakwood approaching. 'Should have done it years ago, Sheila was always on at me to get on with it. One of the last things she said before she, she passed into the next world. That's where her ashes will go eventually, once I can part with them' 'I am sorry, Helen told me about her.' 'Helen, she's been wonderful, says that Sheila knows about the garden and wants all white flowers. Saved my sanity that woman, saved my

sanity.' Oakwood shook his head and took a long drink from his glass. Helen was between them an arm through each of theirs. 'Let me take my favourite men through to dinner.' The wisteria suddenly gave way and a great tangle of it rolled off across the lawn and into the darkness beyond. Dinner had been laid on a small table in a sweeping window bay. The huge table running down the middle of the room was bare and in darkness. A housekeeper stood, in full Victorian costume, next to the shining white plates and silver cutlery. Candle flames flickered and bent in the air disturbed by the storm outside. Wine was poured and Oakwood told another anecdote about his ancestors who had built the house. Simon secretly watched Helen's face bathed in the soft light, her eyes smiling in toleration of Oakwoods flat rendition. 'The dogs still won't go down there, not to this day, not even Archie, who's afraid of nothing.' The conversation tentatively picked its way across the familiar territory of those who possess certainty. Simon noticed that each of them took turns to orchestrate a topic or opinion. He was drawn in to pronounce

on the state of education. References made by Jane and Helen to their knowledge acquired from their contact with the 'other side' were accepted without question, much as any anecdotal source would be treated. He had grown used to this absolute belief that they all shared in the two woman's genuine supernatural abilities. And so a mention of Mrs Hunter's continued reluctance to depart or Sheila's help in identifying the place where a long lost letter would be found, gave no discomfort as the conversation meandered on. Mark was casually mentioned once or twice in the context of how he had found the health service, but then came the bombshell. It was Helen who smoothly, effortlessly came to the point. 'It's strange how I've come to feel so much for Mark. It's partly through you Simon telling me so much about him, but I feel as if I really know him rather as I do some of my darlings on the other side.' Simon's antenna where electric but he continued sipping from his glass although the wine refused to enter his throat. 'Feel strangely protective of him, wouldn't let any harm come to him, not ever.' And Helen had finished saying what she had to, what this whole evening had

been built around, what they had all colluded in doing. In that second Simon knew that they knew. Knew what he was planning. He smirked at his own naivety, of course they would know. The call had come from Helen barely hours after he had made up his mind to do it. Her toast from earlier in the evening came back to him, 'And to Mark, I hope you don't mind me saying that Simon, but we all pray for his recovery. I just know that sometime soon it will happen, we must all hold onto that thought.' He should have seen it then, where this whole evening was going, but he had not. There was a short silence but Jane was instantly there. 'Rather the way I feel about Cyril really, don't know him but wouldn't let any harm come to the old fellow.' Their laughter was a little too loud, a little too long, to be a response to a humorous remark made by a person who he had never before heard make a joke of any sort. Seemingly on cue the housekeeper entered pushing aloft a silver plater on which sat a side of Beef. Oakwood stood holding the carving knife and fork as she placed it before him. But Helen's eyes were on him, questioning, interrogating. He did nothing, was nothing he could do, to hide his

resolve from her, a resolve unchanged by their threats. 'Hope you all like it rare.' He said as he slide the razor sharp knife across the trussed joint, releasing a flood of juices and they all clapped and the wind howled again. At last, just before midnight he was allowed to call for a taxi, which he arranged to meet at the twin pillars, where the drive met the main road. He wanted to walk, to think, needed the gale to slap him awake to this new dimension. He left them at the front door with handshakes and kisses and stepped out onto the gravel drive. Much to his surprise the storm had stopped and it was completely still. He could smell new mown grass and log smoke. The door banged closed behind him and a bolt was slid into place. His steps crunching on the gravel drive was the only sound he could hear as he entered the pitch black, tunnel of rhododendrons. Only by following the edged path of stars that pricked the sky above him was he able to know where the drive was, and all the time he wondered how they would try to stop him. He didn't have to wait long. Either side of him, invisible in the night, twigs snapped, leaves rustled and the occasional flapping of

wings, were the only clues to the presence of creatures. His eyes had grown accustomed to the darkness and he could see more into the rich undergrowth that surrounded him. His feet slid forward, one step at a time on the uneven, disintegrating, tarmac surface, but suddenly he felt the soft spring of grass. He stared up at the path of stars that told him he was going in the right direction and yet as he felt around there was only grass. The drive had simply ended abruptly, the grass growing back over the tarmac like the end of an abandoned airfield. He had not had to wait long. Indecision gripped him, the taxi would be there in ten minutes, how long would it wait? He thought of going back but knew that the road would probably disappear again in that direction too if he took it. What would they expect him to do, silly question. What did they already know he would do. He pushed on into the thicket with a blind faith in the fact that he had memorised the stars above him that had marked out the drive. The Plough had been at the centre of the path and the two brightest stars had just intruded from the left. On he pushed as the thorns tore at his

hands and leaves dragged across his face. At every clearing he stopped and looked at his terrestrial map but was keenly aware that they too were moving through their own cycle. Rough judgements and guesses took over as he abandoned the stars map. Now it was just to push forward, to judge a straight line and hold it, down mossy slopes and up muddy banks, through streams and across open ground. On he pressed, despair always whispering from his shoulder, give up, admit defeat, you can have peace. But what was peace? The idea no longer existed, there was no peace, he had only this endless struggle. Helen, Jane and Cyril, they had their own struggles. They weren't sitting in a circle, hands joined, willing evil on him. They were asleep, minds free, trying to get on terms with their own demons. The blackness of the night had lessened and ahead of him was a small field of ripe corn, heads hung low with the weight of seed. He trod his way through the stalks, pushing some aside treading others under foot. The wood beyond had once been a stand of trees planted by Oakwoods ancestors to make the shape they had achieved over two hundred years before. Now they had run to the anarchy that was

the English countryside, beyond the fruition of plans made by the long dead, year zero had come and gone for this landscape. He touched the trunk of a tree to steady himself as he climbed into the grove and as he raised his gaze she was there, Nadia, beside a tree, her long coat pulled tight about her with a belt. He tried to speak but there were no words there. She took his arm and led him, child like, out of the copse. The taxi driver sat at the wheel blowing cigarette smoke into the still air from the window. As soon as he saw Simon he opened the passenger side door. He obviously expected him to sit in the front of the car. Perhaps a precaution at this late hour. Simon slid, exhausted into the seat and breathed a long relieved breath. 'I didn't expect you to still be here.' He said with obvious gratitude. 'Only just got here mate, did you expect me earlier?' Simon held his watch to his face. Of course, it was only half past twelve. 'I see, sorry I thought the walk had taken me rather longer than that.' 'Still looks like you've had a good night from the state of you.' He looked down at his mud caked knees and torn jacket, the scratches on his hands. He dreaded to think what his face looked like. 'Yes, bit

of an accident actually.' 'I see mate, I see, don't worry the things I've seen in this job, oh yes, nothing surprises me.' They fell silent and he watched the headlights as they swept across hedges and fields. He felt that something was wrong, that something obvious was staring him in the face, that the story was incomplete. He had a sense of being let off, allowed to leave. He had at least one certainty and it was that he would never see Nadia again. The taxi started to drop down the long hill into the city. There were few other cars on the road and those that were crept along under the glow of the street lamps. He had almost allowed himself to relax when he suddenly sprang forward transfixed by the road ahead, he shouted, 'Stop, stop now!' The driver stamped on the brakes and the tyres squealed. 'What the.. mate, are you pissed, what is it?' 'That women there, I thought she was going to step out.' 'She'd seen us, I saw her clock us.' Simon's voice lowered to a whisper. 'I know she'd seen us.' The taxi gathered speed again with the driver cursing and banging the wheel with his palm. Simon stared at the back of the woman wearing the bright yellow coat as she turned away from them and walked purposefully down a side road.