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Signed,

Katie Craig
Sweetness And Light

Katie Craig

PHD in Creative Writing,

The University of Edinburgh
To Mairi and Iain Craig, my parents, for their assistance, in the last year of my PHD especially. John Bunyan famously said that you have not lived “until you have done something for someone who cannot repay you” and if Bunyan was right, then my parents have most certainly lived - literal repayment is surely not an option in the near future. Most heartfelt gratitude for both the financial and emotional support you have given me - in this endeavour and in life more generally. I love you both very much.
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Abstracts


Judi lives in a nice, clean house with her seventeen year old stepson, who won’t talk to her in anything but monosyllables. His father, Nelson, and she are struggling to relate to each other, since they fell out over Judi’s continued desire to have a baby, despite many miscarriages. She’s forty-one. Her relationship has lost its spark, she doesn’t know how to talk to the man that she lives with anymore. To make matters worse, he is her boss too.

Judi needs answers, what she discovers instead is The Secret, Rhonda Byrne’s internationally bestselling guide to shaping the world around you with the power of your mind. Judi soon discovers she’s pretty good at it. Uncanny things start to happen.

A wine-do with literary pretentions leads to an unexpectedly spiritual interlude, during which Judi is led, by a cosmic vision, to discover the sinister happenings at her work place. Hope, a schizophrenic woman in their care, has been raped, and is pregnant. Worse, Judi has strong reason to suspect that her abuser is the man she has shared her life with. With The Secret as her moral compass, Judi decides to kidnap Hope and raise the baby as her own.

2: Making Light Of The Holocaust: Modelling Calvino’s concept of lightness as an appropriate literary response to the Shoah in Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*.

In *Six Memos For The New Millenium*, Italo Calvino proposes that lightness is a literary value which can act against cultural and creative paralysis. Given the ongoing cultural obligation to bear witness to the events of The Holocaust, might lightness be a necessary approach to post-holocaust literature? Calvino’s concept of lightness is deconstructed and examined in relation to the *Memorial to The Murdered Jews Of Europe*. The understandable critical hesitancy surrounding a light approach to the atrocities is examined, with special reference to Benigni’s *La vita è bella*.

Finally, taking Anne Michaels’ novel *Fugitive Pieces* as an exemplar of the lightness Calvino advocated at work in the field of holocaust literature, the case is made for the appropriateness, and potential necessity, of this approach in works that address The Holocaust, in the specific context of Michaels’ work and more generally.
Sweetness and Light
The jolt, when he freezes to determine whether she’s woken, is what wakes her. Some men do this “behind your back” but Nelson does it right up against hers, so that mornings, these last weeks, she’s bed-ridden by proxy, pinned to lavender-scented Egyptian cotton by sheer awkwardness. She snorts snore-like, permission to resume the rhythmic pitch of his body against hers. Judi pushes down a wee flare of anger, and they lie together. How did this become normal? Just turn around, she thinks, but doesn’t, again.

Back to back, book-ends with nothing between them, it’s hardly the tangle of heat that marked their beginning. Nelson has taken to staying late recently, the home office won’t do, home isn’t where he wants to be. Judi goes to bed alone, after nearly two decades. He creeps into bed late, back out early for his run.

“You need more sleep.”

"Margaret Thatcher only had four hours a night."

“Well then, Godsake come back to bed, before it’s too late."

You can’t nag someone back into your arms. He has his reasons, they both do. They used to have sex, they used to have each other, but now they have their reasons.

In January, Jason, Judi’s stepson brought home a weather clock he’d made in Tech, a little Judi for sunshine, a little Nelson for rain, the figurines popped out according to the weather. Judi was glad she was sunshine.
“Affy clever. How does it work?” Judi peered into the wee house the
figurines shared, but never cohabited.

“Cat gut. Humidity” shrugged Jason. It didn’t sound like an explanation. It
sounded like the beginning of a terrible poem. They hung it in the living-room.

Judi wonders if her husband is cheating on her but with who? When?
How? They work together. They live together. There’s no time. So unfounded, so
unfair, so she kept it to herself. Would she blame him, really, if he were? Judi
would swap herself for someone else, sometimes, if she could.

The repetitive nudge of Nelson’s elbow these last mornings is a
comforting addition. He’s back, or the back of him’s back at least. He rocks
against her, surf lapping shore. It’s a shame, all the things in the way of their sex.
She likes, has always liked, to lay her hands on the candle-pale, sun starved
parts of him that are uniquely hers: the ghost-outline of his running shorts,
moon-white chest. She places her hand, for a second, against the rasp of blonde
stubble on his still unshaven cheek. How can she sit next to him in their own bed
and miss him? Nelson takes her chin between his fingers, firmly, like before, and
for a second she thinks he’s heard.

“Better get going.”

“Right-o. Your run won’t run itself.”

They smile, sheepishly acknowledging the lack of further things to say.
Easier if language went. To say her whole self just with her eyes. That’s what
she’d like, if he could really look and see it. To explain, to speak at all, that
wouldn’t be the thing she wanted. She waves him off and wills her eyes to say
what she can’t: Kiss me. Properly. Often. Again.
The February morning is deceptively sunny; it will pinch their noses red. Her best friend Marina’s neon push-bike is still chained to their gate, bringing down the tone of Lanark Street in a way Judi finds most agreeable. So good to have folk come round unexpected, especially ones that bring homemade booze and juicy details about their personal lives. Sad not to be one of the popper-rounders more often, but it’s something to do with children. Everyone has kids now, everyone but Marina, and doors feel more firmly closed. “Come, anytime” and “see you soon” are just noises people make as they leave. The thought clutters her brain. She decides to clean something.

Mornings are the best time to eradicate mess. The living-room cupboard spills messy, dusty, mementos. Photographs of people from college whose surnames she can’t remember, of babies that might have belonged to anybody. Judi sneaks up on the top shelf with a yawning black bag and begins her attack.

She considers a stack of dusty paintings, the carefully rounded black felt-tip lettering on their sugar-paper frames: “Daddy, Judi and Me. Jason Urquhart, aged 7.” His skies are all a blue line at the top of the page, the ground beneath a solid scrawl of green. In between, nothing. It takes years of schooling and parental goading to convince a wee one that the ground meets the sky. Every wean going, without conferring on the matter, sees that it doesn’t. We unlearn what was apparent: things do not cohere. She sweeps the whole lot into a black bag and runs straight out in her nightie to the wheelie bin. It looks good like that, the shelf, with nothing on it. “I need the space” she imagines saying, practicing in case anyone asks. She needs the space to be empty.
Judi and Nelson live in one of the “Homes for the Future” next to Glasgow Green, built over the flattened slums of *No Mean City* fame. Once the epicentre of razor wars, the area is now nicknamed “fairy glen” by those for whom gentrification isn’t working. Now Jason’s nearly grown, and Nelson’s made it perfectly clear they won’t be trying for another child, Judi is going to see that their stylish house finally achieves its minimalist potential. It started when they refitted the kitchen: the newness of the white, the unmarked page of it. When Marina turned up last night in a day-glo cagoule that’d challenge even Anneka, she was overawed by the new decor. She suggested they all wear sunglasses indoors to “avoid snow blindness,” asked “however do you get it all to match?” with a raised eyebrow.

“We can’t all be as colourful as you Marina, there’s not enough pigment” Judi smiled sweetly.

Marina ran a finger over an immaculate white shelf: “Where’s the girl who said “free pets” when we found mice in our flat?”

“She grew up. You make it sound like I was abducted. People change, Marina.”

“No, they don’t.” Marina insisted, giving Nelson a black look.

Judi is unrepentant. Her home looks like heaven in the Philadelphia ads. Like an uncut wedding cake, a Dettol-ed maternity ward. Aside from the lurid green walls of her stepson’s room -designed to offend, to offend Judi, specifically- everything is white, pure and brilliant.
Marina had no interest in bringing children up, but lived to bring them safely to those who would take it from there. She was a midwife, and had never felt the need to be any other kind of wife: wives were for doing, not being. No marriage was safe, rather it was a safe, something for Marina to crack in the night. Hearing Marina’s tales of Sapphic conquest, Nelson is generally torn between titillation and wariness. Historically, Marina hasn’t been the greatest fan of his either.

“I’m surprised you have the energy,” he said, “after a day at the coal face, to attend to the same thing recreationally.”

“You do heads, I do tails,” Marina shrugged, “both endlessly occupying occupations.”

Judi bites the tongue that wants to say Nelson doesn’t seem particularly interested in either end of her.

Marina says this time is different, “We’re in love.”

“That is different.” Judi can think of no time, since the time, when Marina has said such a thing. “Usually the wives go back to their husbands. That’s the attraction. They aren’t looking for someone to clear the drains or entertain their children. But “love” wants to meet the kids and take them to the zoo, love drives you to Homebase and makes encouraging noises about paint samples. She and Nelson have it in spades, that stuff. It’s not nothing.

“Be careful,” Judi tells her friend.

“It’s fine. Her husband hasn’y touched her for years.”

“Nelson’s hand found Judi’s, gave it a squeeze that said “see, we touch each other, we’re not like that,”
“So you’re cutting his grass for him.” Judi giggles.

“Well...” Marina chewed her nail, “no.”

“Haud the bus,” Judi was genuinely confused. “An affair, without sex?”

Marina narrowed her turquoise painted eyes. “An extra-marital affair, by the sounds of it.”

“Touché!” Nelson said to Marina, smiling devilishly in Judi’s direction.

Of course Nelson knew Marina knew -your husband and your best pal, you tell them both everything- but everyone’s meant to pretend otherwise. Judi wondered fleetingly how she might be punished - the sharp bite of clamps, a riding crop? Then remembered. Her punishment would be his indifference. No different.

“So what do you do?”

Marina grinned dopily; “we nap, read books, talk,” in the sort of love that feels like a solution. Odd, though, that Marina refused to tell them this magical woman’s name, or job. Was she someone famous, of national significance, what?

And the more Judi had tried to wheedle it out of her the more Marina squealed “I canny!”

“But... we tell each other everything.” Judi said, stating the obviously untrue.

“Hoy: Jason! Up! Now!”

No reply. Rude. But that’s what he is now, rude. He used to be lovely. He’ll no longer look her in the eyes, scared she’ll see his last wank there. Spends all his time in that fuggy misery of a bedroom, better for growing mushrooms than
a growing boy. Maybe one day she’ll just breeze in, say: “Jeeso: canny care Jace: go mad, paste the walls in jizz and then paper them with those magazines under your mattress. Only have a proper conversation with me? About anything, please?”

She hammers at the space beneath a sign that used to say “grown-ups keep out” but now says “Judi: keep out!”

"Hello-o? Ja-son?"

She tries, as ever, to sound casual, bright, as though waking her stepson is a delightful frolic. It works at work, that forced sunshine. On the ward, starched and utilitarian in her nurse’s tunic, the confident clack of her sensible shoes against parquet flooring: it’s easy to feel capable, But this? She can’t face it, it uglies the day.

“Jason?”

It opens noisily. Good! The only light is the screensaver from his laptop, a fluctuating fog of colour cast against the various mounds of discarded possessions.

“Hullo?”

Navigating the black-walled vista of dirty laundry, used crockery and hidden, breakable, technology; she loses her footing. Judi topples strategically into the laundry-mound at the foot of his bed, guitaring herself painfully in the knee. The heap in the bed is just a pile of duvet. He’s gone. In a bid to lift herself up and out of the midden, her right palm locates a long lost bowl of soggy cornflakes. “Sake!”
Just then she hears the whine of the shower next door. The laptop screen pulses through the murk, Hypnotic. She runs her finger across the mouse pad and the screen comes to life. Like Magic. Hardly her fault.

The shower hums. Judi hums. She is staring at his Facebook page. She has never seen it before, not any of it. She would never be stupid enough to ask to be his “friend.” The last time he told her he was her friend he was nine. Now, the fact that Judi even exists is mortifying.

His profile picture is really nice. He’s not smiling, not exactly. More a bashful smirk. His eyes rung with black. Where, when, does he put the eyeliner on? Who took the photo? Who gave him the necklace? Does he get bullied for wearing it? A whole other life behind those panda-eyes she can’t begin to guess at.

His status update: **Jay Urquhart:** is pretty sure that when a girl signs off an email “best” there is no hope of romance. *sighs dramatically miserable sigh of a man who knew there was no hope anyway*

“A man?” Since when? He’s seventeen, just. Too sweet. He’s never brought a girl, or anyone, home. Would never dream of mentioning such a thing to Judi, but he’ll tell the internet. Judi tries to imagine the situation in which a teenage girl signs anything “best.” Jason’s right. No chance.

The shower stops. Judi propels herself from the chair as though it was sun-scorched rock. He’ll know. Just as she makes it out of his room, Jason emerges from the shower wearing Judi’s dressing gown and matching pink towel turban. She stands guiltily by the still open door. He stands guiltily in her good bath-things.
“You’re up early,” If he’s even been to sleep.

Jason rolls his eyes, commenting on the time or nature of the day is pathetic. Commenting on any aspect of his being is invasive. Judi has considered asking for a list of acceptable conversational topics, but is sure he would hand her a blank sheet.

“Do you want pancakes for breakfast?”

“Whatever” Jason says.

“Whatever” should sound casual, easy-going, right? And those are good things. But “I don’t care” is how it sounds.
Nelson is back from his run, holding something. “Judi! Look what the cat dragged in!” Heat steaming from him, face skelpt by the cold. He has a tiny rabbit in his hands. Maybe two weeks old, eyes glued shut. Three crimson dots in its soft baby fur. Otherwise unscathed. Judi lays a finger against its back, which shakes so fast it vibrates.

“What shall we do?” Nelson looks straight at her. Why is it her job to know that? She misses their old way of being, where choosing wasn’t an option. Why has Nelson decided this decision is hers? Passing the buck. “Buck Bunny” she says.

“What?” Nelson looks as if he’s about to section her. He could, too. Judi has nightmares about that, going in to work one day and suddenly she’s a patient, not a nurse. Maybe that’d be nice. Easier. Three meals a day, no shopping, no laundry. “The rabbit will die. It needs its mum. The kindest thing is to kill it,” Jason says, but sadly.

The bunny’s nose twitches minutely and Judi’s heart melts. She thinks of the day Nelson brought Jason to her. “No. We can save it.” She says.

Judi washes the pipette from her forty-eight pound beauty serum in the sink. By the millilitre, it’s probably the most expensive substance in their house. What on Earth to put in the pipette now she has it? For want of a better idea, she fills it with pancake batter. Bingley, their cat, comes into the kitchen, ginger tail jittery with excitement, and winds himself around Nelson’s legs.
“Fuck off Bingley.” Her husband pushes the cat away with his foot. Bingley looks up at his name, in case there are biscuits involved, narrows his eyes in Buddha-like serenity, then threads himself purringly around Nelson’s feet again. Judi tips the last, burnt, pancake into the bin, considering asking why it hasn’t occurred to Nelson to turn it. Until recently, Judi took personal pride, in never, verbally, questioning her husband’s behaviour, and now that she could, she hasn’t the energy. She puts her hands out and Nelson slides the tiny rabbit into them. Its heart whirs like a stuck CD.

“Jace, see us that slipper!” She feels competent. As Nelson slips the towel-wrapped hot water bottle under the bundle in Judi’s arms, the three of them course in to keek at the swaddled baby bunny, forming a bizarre nativity.

The car rolls out the driveway. Baby rabbits, it turns out, really do like pancake batter. She turns to smile, but Jason’s head is buried in Loaded. For want of an expression to read, she inspects the cover of the magazine: Is that really sexy? Drug induced malnutrition, a neon bikini and...

“Didn’t she used to present Blue Peter?”

“Mum, I’m trying to read.”

“Right...Sorry.” As if you buy Loaded to read it. She turns the radio on.

Nelson pulls the car into the yellow box you can’t park in by the school gates and Jason hops out. Judi glances at the empty back seat and thinks how in a few months it’ll always be empty. No more Art folder in the... “Shite.”

“What?” Nelson is swinging out of the yellow box:
“Art folder!”

He swings back in to the yellow box. Several cars beep. “I’ll circle,” he says, meaning: Judi, run into the playground, past the other-people’s-parents, towards my son, knowing full well how unhappy it’ll make him to acknowledge you in public. Meanwhile, I’ll drive about a bit.’

“Ta.” She puts the rabbit on his lap, pulls the folder from the back and runs, flying past irritatingly perfect Andrea Blair whose yoga-body exudes calm, who seems to exist maliciously, to make sure everyone else feels inept. When Jason was a baby, Judi had all sorts of plans, but then there he was, and despite being so disarmingly small, he left little room for anything else. For the first five years them both making it out the house clean -and not crying- was success.

Then there was Andrea: at the centre of something Judi didn’t know existed before she’d found herself on its outskirts. Whilst Judi -like a normal person- went back to work, Andrea was “inspired” by the “humbling” response to her home-baking to start a business called “Cupcakes“ selling “bespoke underwear” that made yummy mummy breasts look like children’s party food, bras replete with red satin glacé nipples, sparkling with beaded sprinkles; frilly knickers in Mr Kipling colours called “french fancies;” retro aprons, so modern housewives could dress up as fifties housewives for ironic/erotic purposes.

Their lives are different. Judi tries to tell herself that her own is meaningful, necessary, while Andrea’s is vacuous, if enviably so. To compound matters, despite Judi’s repeated, demoralising hints, Andrea has never asked Judi to join her book club, or “literary soiree” as Andrea calls it without so much as her
tongue in her cheek. Sure, Judi hates the woman, but that doesn’t mean she
doesn’t want to drink nice wine and talk about Jane Austen novels.

Judi read *Emma* over and over in her teens. Highbury, where Emma “*had
lived twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her,*” was a
wonderful place to escape to. Judi doesn’t have the time, energy or aptitude to
host the kind of dinner parties where she crystallises her own rose petals for
syllabub. She’s not spending her free afternoon trying to locate, let alone cook
with, galangal. No thanks. Often, in Judi’s house, they eat dinner in front of
cookery TV shows, the family equivalent of those couples who watch porn while
they fuck- just don’t look away from the screen, and you can pretend you’re
having something more palatable, like Nigella. But a Jane Austen book club? She
could do that. Painfully aware of her bra’s inadequacy, breasts thudding like
loose grapefruits, stitch notwithstanding, Judi propels herself around the corner
so Andrea doesn’t think she’s out of breath.

She is so out of breath. Fortunately Jason is walking at an inconceivably slow
pace by a girl with turquoise dreadlocks, both encased in headphones.

“Jason! Jason!”

Everyone else in the playground has noticed Judi. Finally, the turquoise
haired girl turns. Her nails, turquoise also, tap Jason’s shoulder. Seeing Judi,
Jason pulls his blond fringe over his face, shutter-like. Judi flaps the Perspex
envelope at him. “You forgot this.”
Was it turquoise girl who ‘Best’ed Jason? She has wee pink bows in her hair with skulls in the middle. Judi waves shyly at her, the girl waves back, and Jason visibly wills the ground to swallow him up.

“Okbye, Judi.” Jason shouts over his headphones as they turn away.

“You can’t call your mum that,” Turquoise shouts back.

“What? Judi? It’s her name.”

They sound like an old married couple who’ve forgotten to put their hearing aids in. She slows her step slightly to keep listening.

Turquoise bellows back at him: “But she’s your mum.”

“No she’s not!”

Of course. It’s true. It shouldn’t be hurtful to hear. Hamish Coulter cringes sympathetically from the door of the Drama department. Receding red hair sprouts around his ruddy cheeks, his general demeanour suggesting he’s just stepped from an RAF fighter that took off in WW2 and is bemused to have landed in a Glasgow High School.

“A delight, your boy,” Hamish isn’t being sarcastic, that’s the amazing thing about him, he never is.

“Try living with him for a week.” Judi feels insensitive immediately. He’s impotent, Hamish Coulter, that’s old gossip. How dare she be ungrateful for her family in front of him?

“Gladly,” says Hamish, “I mean, not...”

Judi swats away any offence she might have taken. Judi’d have thought Hamish was just odd, as most folk do, if she hadn’t witnessed him head the school Eco group, and seen that he was the sort of man who not only wouldn’t
hurt a fly, but who went out of his way to propagate insect populations. She’d thought they might be pals, after six months of soggy Saturdays together, but it never really happened.

She last saw him when he played Rochester in the local Am Dram’s Jane Eyre. Judi is mortified at the memory. Jason had painted the sets, but much as she tried to focus on her stepson’s Trompe L’oeil, after Marina pointed it out—“is there a sock down there, d’ye think?”—Judi found her eye drawn, all too often, to Mr Coulter’s arresting presence in his tight-fitting period breeches. Judi just can’t look him in the eye now. Doesn’t know where to look, really.

“’Well… Nose to the grindstone’, says Hamish. An unfortunate choice of phrase for a man with such a bulbous neb. He could be describing an accident that recently happened to him. How can it be, Judi wonders, that Hamish is so conventionally unattractive, yet pleasing to look at? She waves back as she rounds the corner and walks into,

“’Andrea!’” Judi tries for warmth. “’How are you?’” Not dead yet, Judi adds mentally. She has no reason to believe Nelson slept with anyone, especially Andrea. Just, she does.

“’Busy. Toby is winning some public speaking thing, apparently. Awkward, really, trying to coordinate it with the chess finals.’”

Judi nods as if she is familiar with such problems, trying not to stare as Andrea bounces the papoose strapped to her. The baby, Evie, smiles up beatifically and envy floods Judi. Hard to see children that age and not pick them up. Harder to hold them, smell them, feel the weight of them, and give them back. Judi bets Andrea’s husband sleeps with her, Judi imagines them high-fiving
at the moment of mutual climax. What she can’t imagine is Andrea waking up, yet again, to blood and disappointment. Different things happen to different people. Andrea is still speaking.

“What about you?” Andrea asks though tastefully glossed lips, the “you” sounding especially artificial, as though she is going down a slide with a toddler on her lap as she says it: “Yooooooooo!”

“Oh, you know,” Judi trails off vaguely. Andrea nods, but she doesn’t know. How could she? Judi would never dream of telling her.

“I went to see your little garden,” Andrea says, gesticulating in the direction of the Eco Garden. (Why say little? Judi wonders, why not go all out and say unimportant.) “I was thinking, I might use it for a shoot.”

“What?” Is she hunting and skinning urban foxes now, for fascinators?


Last year, The school picked Judi’s idea for the new Eco Garden. Judi doesn’t know if there were other entries. A huge bright teapot which splashed into giant teacups, then a frog-pond. That was all she was going to do. But she liked the thermos flasks of Heinz soup, soggy sandwiches and scheming. Hamish and his charmingly asocial adolescent conservationists did well to adapt as their wilderness came more and more to look like a psychedelic pottery barn. She dotted the flowerbeds with ceramic playing cards, populated the conservation garden with dodos, a Cheshire cat, and various other rare species. The frogs, butterflies and wildflowers seem unabashed by the jolly décor.
“Sure,” Judi tells Andrea vaguely. “Great.”

Nelson doesn’t tell her off for taking so long, they don’t do that anymore. Instead, his fingers drum the steering wheel and he turns the radio up to avoid further conversation. Someone-Langley tells the nation they should have a Coronation renewal every ten years “to remind ourselves who we are as people.” Judi says “Nels, should we have a coronation renewal ceremony, to remind us who we are as people?”

“What?” he asks, in that way meaning not, ‘could you please repeat yourself,’ rather ‘is this utterance necessary?’ He winces, sort of at the sun, sort of at Judi. Judi bets Andrea Blair never gets winced at when she’s out in her perfect Lycra, running, tits not at all like grapefruits.

“I saw Andrea Blair.”

“Poor squirrel.”

“Pretty though, isn’t she?”

He stops to consider it. His eyes are still on the road, but his mind is on the image of Andrea Blair. “She’s not my type.”

“The pretty type? No. I don’t suppose it can be.” Judi tries to laugh in a sort of bubbly way but it comes out bitter. “She still didn’t ask me.”

Nelson is stuck for what to say. He’s heard it already. Why will no one talk to her about this? Even Marina, last night, just shrugged. “Why get so het up about not being invited somewhere by someone you don’t even like?” She said. It wasn’t the support Judi was looking for.

“Why won’t she ask me?” Judi whined.
“How would I know?” Marina sounded exasperated. “Have I even met the woman? Anyway, Jane Austen books are pointless. Daft lasses trying to marry soldiers. You're best off off of it.”

Judi did something she'd never done before then, and she does it again now. Manifesting. The mums at the school gate talk about it, cosmic ordering. Jacqui Brooks claims that just reading *The Secret* is the sole reason she got a 5,000 pound tax return and finally learned to orgasm. Surely Judi can manifest an invite to a book club. She spends the last few minutes of the journey feeling thankful for the invitation she doesn't doubt she will shortly receive. If that can happen, anything can.

There is a tiny fragment of morning, after the car stops, before they start being their work-day selves. She smoothes the skirt of her nurse’s tunic, checks her attitude and her teeth for lipstick. She watches Nelson become her boss, the boss,

“What’s up, Doc?” she grins, gesturing down at the tiny bunny still on her lap.
"Hope!"

Judi’s voice is bright, a call across a sunny field. Recognition flickers behind Hope’s papery eyelids. This is Judi’s fifth appointment today, a good day so far, with no time to think. Hope was fifty five last month - if she recognised the ritual of cake, candle and song that day, she sure couldn’t be bothered to blow. Catatonia had her. She’s moved little and had spoken not at all for months. Judi loves hearing from her after so long.

“Ah was born on the day they launched Sputnik. Ah tell y’that? Dawn. Momma picked ma name offa paper. Dawn of The Space Age. Geez, Mom, if I’da been born December ‘41 wouldya gone call me Pearl?” Hope nods happily at the memory. It isn’t hers. She’s not *Dawn of The Space Age*, Not American, doesn’t approve of American accents, as a rule, but does one perfectly.

Hope looks just the same as always. Elf-beautiful, gaunt, and spookily like Judi’s mother used to, but old, like she must be now. Years of catatonia have left Hope stiff and crooked, washed out, she could be seventy, easily. But her pixie face is stunning, her bright smile a guileless beam.

“I missed you!” Judi smiles, meaning it.

“I missed you,” Hope replies, Judi’s giggle bounces back too, seconds later. Hope can be a mirror, a reflection of whomever she’s with.

"Hello, Echo!” Judi says, enjoying the game of it.

“Hello, Echo!”
Does Judi’s voice really sound so childish and high pitched? Must. Hope’s an exceptionally good mimic. Gifted. Hope’s jaw drops, open then shut, around the three tablets. A bulge appears in her cheek.

“Hope Dalloway? Swallow!”

Hope’s eyes roll, petulant and teenage, a look too familiar. “Don’t you want to get better?” Judi asks her.

“Don’t you want to? Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t…”

Judi shooshes away all the “don’ts.” Alogia gets Hope stuck like a record. “Don’t, don’t, don’t…” Her arms lash out. Judi lays her hand gently along Hope’s face, runs a thumb along her cheek. “Shhhh.” The static crashes over the ‘don’ts,’ still in Judi’s voice. It’s like silencing herself, a nice thing. Calming her patient, she calms that mad, nasty suspicion still floating in her head.

“Don’t. Don’t…”

“Ok, I won’t. Good advice.” Judi starts brushing Hope’s hair, and then says it. “I’m sure he’s slept with her.”

Hope looks thoughtful, “Not her.”

More and more, all the months of Hope’s catatonia, Judi came to fill the silence as she changed and washed Hope, by offloading her problems on this pretty vacant doll, who’d smile, sometimes, hold her hand, like a mother might. Not that Hope was listening, Judi was sure of that, or sort of sure. Judi needs to stop now. But she hasn’t, quite.

“But if not Andrea, who?” The question makes Hope’s face screw up, like a bad taste or a nasty memory. Judi strokes her head then cradles it in against her while she does the blood test, so Hope doesn’t see the needle.
There's a new nervousness in Nelson as Hope re-emerges. It doesn't make sense to Judi. Nelson says that “she’s too emotionally involved” with Hope. She’s missed her hugely, does that mean he’s right?

Hope’s past is something Nelson refuses to discuss, but the nurses and cleaners do. Nelson says it doesn’t matter who Hope was, or what folk used to believe. That she’s schizophrenic, not physic. Judi is convinced she was both, once. Nelson says Hope had a gift for reading body language, for impersonations, for seeing what people needed and becoming it.

Hope was admitted to Lotus Garden in her thirties, which is when schizophrenia generally surfaces in women. All that life lived first! There are warning signs you only see in retrospect, useless for anything but feeding guilt later. One thing that often alerts families, finally, is a fixation with the idea of thoughts being broadcast, transmitted, or intercepted. But Hope didn’t have paranoid delusions of her thoughts being broadcast, she knew they were, as did all of those who tuned into Radio Tay’s “Stay in Touch, with Hope,” each Sunday, the station’s most popular show for years.

Hope had always behaved extraordinarily, by most people’s standards. When you're a psychic medium hearing voices isn’t abnormal, it's your job. When her recently deceased mother started talking to her, what about it? Hope’s mother, the leader of a spiritualist congregation, had always managed Hope’s home-schooling, religious education, career, finances and daily schedule. Why should a trifle like her death get in the way? Hope has toured churches, revivals and auditoriums, spoke to crowds since her early girlhood. She had a mission, but few friends.
Judi grew up listening to *Stay in Touch, With Hope* every Sunday afternoon with her mother, believing. They went to the tent revivals, once got a “message” from Granny. Things were more settled after. Hope gave people just that, Hope. Hundreds of people.

She has just one visitor now. Wendy Kruer. When the tabloid’s found out - “Famous Psychic in Loony-bin”- Wendy was there within days. She wanted to see for herself. Judi recognised Wendy the second she saw her in reception. The Kruer boys are one version of a story the news tells us frequently.
Wendy called in her twins. They didn’t come. She wasn’t worried that much. They’d been playing football on the front drive just a minute before, then the sky opened. They’d have come inside then, they were wee wide-os, daft for hiding.

The Kruers had a nice house. Big. Plenty of good hidey-holes for jammy nine year olds. Wendy Kruer was laughing as she looked, for the first ten minutes. Then she got mad. They usually came out when she shouted like she meant it. Another five minutes and she worried. Really shouted. Really meant it. In twenty, she’d searched every cranny.

Maybe if it’d have been sunny she’d have looked outside earlier. Maybe if it hadn’t been all for the rain she’d have heard them calling. Maybe if her husband had told her his car boot wasn’t locking right she’d have looked there first. “It seemed so trivial,” he said later. “Didn’t think to worry you with it.”

Neighbours got involved, police. It got dark. Chilly. Chains of folk, linking arms, clasping torches, snaked up the streets. They swathed the woods and burn like strings of fairy lights. The cold air was cluttered with the boys’ names.

Wendy Kruer sat at her kitchen table, waiting. Put on talk-radio. People made her tea. She made people tea. Hope came on. Wendy always listened, that evening she called.

“They’re waiting for you, Wendy. They’re wondering why you haven’t found them.”

“Please, where are they?”

“They’re sorry they couldn’t come in for tea. They say don’t be cross.”
Hope’s voice still as a lake. Wendy’s wrung with hysteria.

“Where? Please?”

“Like all lost things. Where you left them.”

The receiver slammed into its cradle. Hope’s voice rose above the dial tone.

“Wendy. You are in our prayers. You’ll find the boys soon.”

Wendy went back to the garden, seething at that Radio bitch for suggesting there could be a square inch of her own property she hadn’t torn up looking. "Where you left them." Cheek of her. Wendy stared at the drive. At the car. At the boot.

They would have suffocated in around fifteen minutes, right on Wendy’s doorstep, just where she left them. Wendy lost her family at around the same age Hope lost her mother. Wendy’s marriage did not survive, she marvels that anyone’s can. At first, Judi thinks, Wendy came to see Hope as though she might be a way back. But what Wendy found was a woman more bereft than she, who had lost not only her purpose and family, but her mind.

In the last ten years, since Alan and she got together, Wendy visits Hope less, and more in the manner of a dutiful relative. She and Alan are still at the hospital plenty though, and even did a special care certificate, to have Hope in their home these last two Christmases. They've been very good to her.

“Just because you’re barking, doesn’t mean you’re always barking up the wrong tree,” was the blow-up quote of Hope’s in the piece that made The Times. The voices in her head were not to be trusted, an illness. Nelson’s article made a lot of people talk. Made him known and made him money. It made Judi sad.
Hope is ill, no question, but Judi cannot let go of the idea that she is also magical.

Solve a mystery and you destroy it. Hope stares impassively at the wall, still as a fairground fortune-telling mannequin, inanimate between engagements, lights out until next time.
In the staff room, folk huddle round the kettle of the kitchenette, watching it boil. There is chatter all around her, but she can’t seem to find her place in it. Judi stares at the “humorous” sticker Nelson put by the clock: *You don’t have to be mad to be sectioned here, but it helps!* What sort of callous individual finds that funny? Her kind, apparently. Judi uses one of the spare computers to find out what baby rabbits are meant to eat. A formula of \( \frac{1}{2} \) cup evaporated milk, \( \frac{1}{2} \) cup water, 1 egg yolk, and 1 tbsp corn syrup.” Baby rabbits are called “kits.” She goes down to the main kitchen with the recipe.

Judi loves the kitchens at work. Conversation is bright, easy, loud and masculine. The chef is unimpressed by her request, “What’s this, some fad diet?”

Judi shakes her head: “Baby rabbit milk.” He shrugs, and gets to it, curiosity won’t kill this cat. He blends it, then pours it all into a lidded storage jar. She takes a sniff and puts the top on. It looks and smells just like pancake batter.

Judi knocks on Nelson’s door. He’s by himself, hair-mop flopping, frowning over some research.

“This is for the kit.” She wants him to ask what a kit is, or how do you know a baby rabbit is called that? Or tell her she’s a clever little thing and pat her head. He just nods. Judi peers in. At first she hopes the wee bunny is sleeping, but no. A minute ago she felt like Snow White and now she is basically an animal abuser with a slipperful of dead bunny to dispose of.

“We’ve got a meeting about a new patient.”
“Did you notice the bunny die?”

“I haven’t been hovering over it, waiting for it to die, no.” He looks irritated. “Perhaps, we should have taken it in an ambulance to the Western General?”

“No. Sorry.”

“You’ll get the shopping after your home visits?” He says it like a question, but it isn’t.

“Sure.” Judi takes a deep breath, “Nels…Hope’s picking up. I think we could reduce her Clozaril.”

The letter in his hands is put down in a way most deliberate. “Oh do you? Doctor.” It’s so cold, his look.

She hangs her head. “Sorry.”

He doesn’t say “that’s ok,” or anything. Times like now, Judi feels overwhelmed by the things he must know that she doesn’t. Before, she was his simple little creature, and he knew best. Now, she’s just stupid, a drag for them both.

“Righto then.” She goes about her day, escaping into other people’s problems.

If Judi had her own child, would she love them more than Jason? If she had three? Parents aren’t supposed to have favourites, but a lot do, you can see it. Nurses aren’t supposed to have favourite patients, but Alan is Judi’s.

They started out together: Judi as nurse, Alan as patient.

Things got out of hand at Alan’s work. He was a fairly senior computer programmer, and he’d been able to hide his condition claiming ‘tinnitus’ and
camouflaged by the wider social awkwardness of that sphere. But he was turning to answer empty space, ignoring colleagues. He’d always imagined things, but they’d been friendlier. He smashed his computer, “full of spyware,” spying. Panicked. Pushed a girl over, ran off. Couldn’t phone anyone, Bugged. Couldn’t go back to the flat, didn’t know who was “in on it.”

“In on what?”

“Don’t know.” His face flinched as though bugs crawled it. Alan was convinced he’d killed the girl he pushed. *Murderer.* “Shut up, shut up!” He banged at his temples, trying to dislodge thoughts he did not recognise as his own. When police made enquiries at his old work about the girl, nobody recalled him pushing anyone.

Alan admitted himself. He was ill. Alan thought Lotus Gardens would reprogram him, like the faulty computers he used to fix. Maybe that’s why it worked. If you’ve to do something, believing it to be possible is a definite advantage.

“Welcome to the jungle” Wendy grins from the door of their immaculate home. Judi can smell scones baking. As ever, his study is immaculate; a bit dingy for Judi’s taste, but that’s men. Judi and he settle down to the near mandatory tea-drinking and mandatory questions.

“Any strange noises bothering you?”

Through the door, in the conservatory, an African Grey parrot spits machine-gun fire. Alan laughs over the ever-present cacophony of bird-noise.

“Define bothering.”

“No change.”
Tick. On they go. Pages of paperwork, then blood-testing and urine sampling. The embarrassing warmth of those wee pots.

Out-patients do voluntary work. It creates a constant, some structure, community. Alan chose an animal sanctuary. When Elvis was brought in, he had Bumble-foot, the cockatoo’s feet were so painfully deformed he couldn’t grip to perch or feed. Elvis was nearly featherless, his chest like a plucked chicken. Unhappy parrots, like people, will willingly destroy themselves as a distraction. The vet said it wasn’t worth the treatment cost.

"I’ll pay."

“He has a month at most.”

Alan shrugged, and smiled “Ok.”

Other birds have come and gone, but Elvis is still in the building, eighteen years later. Alan gave him something to live for, and that thing was attention. Human mortality is a bigger concern for parrots than their own. Cockatoos, macaws and African greys frequently live to be over one hundred. People, as a general rule, don’t. When a black, shrivelled, slug-like tongue asks a just-bereaved son, “Who’s a pretty boy then?” in a voice so exactly his mum’s, perhaps doing an accompanying dance, it can be unsettling.

Not for Alan. “Hear a voice in an empty room? You’re mad. Hear a voice in a room with a parrot? Probably the parrot.” The blow-up quote, under the picture of Alan with Elvis, on the cover of the local paper, says as much. One of Nelson’s better stories. Alan’s recovery was a massive boost for Nelson’s therapeutic animal research theories, especially after the Britain’s Got Talent thing.
Elvis fans his quiff, head-bangs: if cockatoos were kids they'd be put on Ritalin. Parrots swoop and swing, ringing like telephones at each other. Parrot mistakes say a lot about human mistakes.

“Aren't they fabulous?” Wendy smiles proudly. It takes a certain kind of women to take a chance on a schizophrenic small-time parrot trainer, an excellent kind. These days, the birds make serious money: Variety shows, corporate events, films. “The performers,” he jokes, are still paid peanuts.

Is it any wonder Alan couldn’t give up on Elvis, ill with neglect, screaming for love, left? Both Wendy and him know what it is to lose the plot, they realise the importance of a narrative. He gives these birds what Wendy gives him, and he her; a new story, something better to be.
"Judi!" Andrea Blair. Again! As though a rush hour shopping centre wasn’t shitty enough.

"Hello, there!" Judi says, with all the forced jollity she can muster at the end of a working day. “You’ll think I’m following you.”

Andrea laughs awkwardly. “Not at all! Two for joy!”

Judi wants to tell her that that’s magpies, not people. And how many magpies there are in any given instance, not overall magpie occurrences. So if Judi was a magpie, she’d be one for sorrow; twice. And Andrea Blair would have to salute her, twice. Instead Judi says “three for a girl.” And smiles daftly.

“What?” Andrea squeaks.

“One for sorrow, two for joy, three for a girl...” Judi shrugs. She started it: “Magpies.”

“Right.” Andrea narrows her eyes.

Judi spends a lot of her time relating to insane people, and even by her standards, this woman is behaving strangely. Andrea Blair’s face is doing too many things, sounding Judi out. What is going on? Does Andrea think she’s flirting with her. Maybe she did sleep with Nelson. Maybe she thinks Judi knows, and wants a threesome. No thanks! Judi may have lived the majority of her adult life in a sadomasochistic relationship, but she’s not some sort of pervert. Looking Andrea Blair in the eye is bad, but crying into her vagina would be worse.
“Tesco.” Andrea shrugs ‘regretfully.’ Waving her off, Judi guestimates how long she’ll have to camp out in M&S before she can sneak back to Tesco and be a safe number of aisles behind Andrea. She decides that Andrea Blair will be an efficient shopper. Twenty minutes should be a suitable kick-start for her and her perfect trolley of health. She probably bypasses the biscuit aisle altogether.

Two vest-tops she doesn’t need, a pasta bake for tea, and a jumper -that Jason will almost certainly refuse to wear- later, and yet Andrea Blair is only on aisle five, her basket almost empty. Maybe that’s why she’s so thin, maybe she just looks at food. Judi is now right behind Andrea, swithering over whether to loiter there, which is an odd thing to do, or over-take and have Andrea Blair behind her, judging her trolley. Andrea’s on the phone, Judi can hear her, saying:

“I know I said M&S, but I could hardly go in with her!”

It would be nice, Judi thinks, watching Andrea’s tiny waist, to escape this strip-lit hell. But an onslaught of toddler-filled trolleys press her onwards. It’s supermarket gridlock. She can’t overtake, can’t reverse.

Andrea Blair is still coyishly murmuring down her Nokia: “Of course she matters to you.” Judi feels slapped. Nelson sneaks off and eats Marks and Spencer’s ready meals with her? Sends Judi off to Tesco so that he can bitch about her on his office phone with Andrea Blair, plan their next exchange of body fluids? That’s why Judi hasn’t been invited to the “Jane Austen” book group. They don’t talk about the novels, no, they swap husband-stealing stories. Maybe Marina should join it instead. Stop, stop, stop! She pushes her shoulders back into place. Nelson isn’t having an affair with Andrea Blair. It rhymes. Must
be true. She sneaks closer, trying to overhear something reassuring, like a stranger’s name, or...

“Oh what, and compare make-up tips with her son?”

Everything seems to lurch. She clutches the trolley, glued to Andrea’s back now, not caring. Jason’s facebook picture wasn’t a one-off then. She tries to decide, in the middle of all this what she thinks about that. She thinks, for definite, that is none of this woman’s business what her stepson does with his skin.

“Oh shut up! She does not *like me really.*” Andrea giggles and cries, “No, Marina!”

What? Judi has misheard; she’s hearing things now. They’re spilling out her head into...

“Oh, ok. I love you too. Ok,” Andrea giggle. “See you soon, Yup. Yup. I'll be around in, like, half an hour,”

Judi is just staring.

Andrea giggles: “Yes, I did get *those.*” Her hands rest playfully against the spotty pink box of apple-cream donuts in her basket. Marina’s favourite!

“You are too, Reenie.” Her voice is all honey and musk. “Reenie?” What’s *that*? Judi ducks behind a “promotional” cardboard crisp-island, immersing herself in the copy on the back of a Quavers bumper-pack until Andrea’s out of sight. Judi feels an inept spy from a seventies sit-com.

Contemplating the world around her, Judi wonders if anything is knowable. It seems, really seems, to be the case that Andrea is having an affair with her best friend. Not sex, according to Marina, but cuddles and cream-cakes.
This woman has stolen her friend, which feels worse than Andrea stealing her husband.

Still, Andrea’s perfect life isn’t so perfect after all. “Hasn’t touched her for years” Marina said. But what about the papoose-full of Evie? They had sex... a year and five months ago at the longest. That is long, but not as long as Marina would like it to be. Life is getting stranger.

Judi heads back to look at DVD’s, buy something with lots of explosions and fast-cutting, a movie for Nelson and Jason “She’s not my mum” Urquhart. The day has had too much in it. Too much. She stares at a selection of films about expensive cars and martial arts and cannot begin to guess which they might not have seen. Next to her a woman picks up “The Secret” and puts it in her basket, with no seeming embarrassment. How do you film a self-help book? Very earnestly, she imagines. The mums at the school gate are always talking about how they’ve taken up pole-dancing classes and started a small business and had a divorce because of it. If they are to be believed, the book is a mind-bending-hypno-word-drug guaranteed to change the life of each and every reader – it is messed up. There are a pile of ‘The Secret’ books, reduced, next to the DVDs. On the cover, rays of divine light spilled onto Da Vinci-esque manuscripts from a raised, faux-wax seal. What if she is “manifesting” her shitty luck? It’s ridiculous, but so’s Marina cooing over cream cakes with Andrea Blair.

She opens a page at random, “Thoughts become things” it says. Judi examines the facts. She fantasises about Andrea stealing the love of her life, and it turns out she has. Only, Judi forgot that the greatest love doesn’t tend to be the love of a lover, it’s something much more enduring and less dependent on body
odour. And now Andrea Blair is close to Marina in the one way Judi can’t be. And for how long?

Maybe it’s all her fault. She wakes up every morning and tells herself: I’m lonely, my marriage is failing, I will never be Jason’s mother, things die in me. And so the babies die. Jason will leave home without ever calling her Mum, her marriage fails, and she’s lonely. Believe in the future, Judi, stop missing wee people that never were born, stop tripping over what if’s. Hope told Judi once, “we’re all haunted by something.” But Hope is schizophrenic, and the very actual ghosts she felt were haunting her went quiet again when Nelson upped her medication. What’s Judi’s excuse?
When Judi gets home “the boys” are arguing about the computer game they're playing, whether the Devil is “unlockable” or not. Judi thinks that if there has to be a Devil at all, she’s pretty glad he’s locked up. If they make any effort to acknowledge her, it’s undetectable, and she enjoys even the irritation of that: so normal.

“Short meeting?” Judi says accusatorily.

Nelson shrugs and grins.

Judi puts the pasta-bake in the oven and dumps the rest of the shopping on the kitchen floor experimentally. He wants equal? Equal puts the groceries away. Or Jason might do it. Stranger things happen: Marina is currently eating donuts in a sexual way with Andrea Blair. She catches herself laughing, glad it’s starting to be funny.

Judi flicks through the foreword of The Secret. Rhonda Bryne’s daughters “illuminate every breath I take through their very existence”. Yuk, Judi thinks. But maybe that’s what open-hearted people are like. Maybe Judi’s is all closed up.

“We have received thousands of accounts of The Secret being used to bring about large sums of money and unexpected cheques.” If these cheques are so “unexpected” the followers of The Secret can’t really have willed them into existence with unflickering faith. Things are not unexpected, if you know they’re coming. What’s an unexpected cheque going to fix anything, anyway? They've never had to worry about money, never wanted. Until Judi wanted IVF, of course, then they “couldn’t afford” it, according to Nelson, and so here they are.
In eighteen years, Judi had never before felt the need for her own bank account. Judi has a bankcard for housekeeping, but hasn’t seen the inside of a household bill since she was twenty-three. Every dress, meal out, or trip they’ve taken, every new pair of earrings, or knickers, has been a gift. And Nelson was generous, too. When she had to ask it was generally because he was in the mood to have her beg, something Judi also enjoyed. Now they’re planning separate accounts. Not separating, just separate. It has seemed nothing but grim, stepping into this world of finance, a whole new set of things to get wrong at the tender age of forty-one. So, an unexpected cheque? Money she wouldn’t have to account for, just hers? Universe, I’d like that, Judi thinks. Judi tries to visualise the money going, where? A bank account? Don’t you need some money to open one in the first place?

Why do you think that one percent of the population earns around 96 percent of the money that’s being earned? Do you think it’s an accident? It’s designed that way.’

What kind of universal consciousness would “design it” so most people live without clean water, basic healthcare or enough to eat, while a pocket of mega-rich have private hydrotherapy to remove their excess fat? Why doesn’t this book make everyone cross?

What if Judi’s failure to believe in all this stuff is the reason it won’t work, though? The book is a horrible endurance test. Brain-achingly meaningless advice like “if you’re not sure how you’re feeling, just ask yourself: how are you feeling,” and cruel seeming statements like, “food cannot cause you to put on
weight, unless you think it can,” make common sense sound like a hurdle to happiness.

“Have you found out The Secret yet?” Nelson turns out the light.

“It’s a secret.” She doesn’t want to talk about the book. She wants to dissect it herself, keep all her ideas just for her a little longer. “How was your meeting?” she asks instead.

“Oh, you know…”

No, Judi thinks: I don’t. She likes that now she has something he doesn’t know. It feels good, something just for herself.
“...As I get out of bed, when one foot touches the ground, I say “thank,” and “you” as my second foot touches the ground.”

Judi stomps to the bathroom thank-stomp, you-stomp, like a child pretending to be a dinosaur. Hopping from foot to foot on the freezing bathroom tiles, foaming toothpaste at the mouth.

Do we really create our own reality? Choose the day ahead of us? Rhonda Byrne says so. Says, “I do not get out of bed until I have felt the gratitude for this brand new day.” Judi underlined it. If Judi waited to feel grateful for the day ahead before she got up, she wouldn’t.

Down the stairs: thank-stomp, you-stomp.

“Judi! You’re up early!” Nelson is making coffee.

“Thank you,” she stomps involuntarily.

“You’re welcome,” he kisses her forehead, “what for?”

“Ach, just being you,” Judi improvises. She nuzzles against the softness of his worn t-shirt and takes an unashamed sniff of him. Judi hopes she’ll do better at “cosmic ordering” than ordering in restaurants. Jason and Nelson make her choose first so they can pick something else, Judi’s food will inevitably arrive late, burned, raw, or bogging. If The Secret is right, she orders that disgusting stuff as surely as a coleslaw side, believing it to be what she deserves, apart from the coleslaw side, which accordingly does not come.

Judi does the ironing, something she can smooth out easily.

“I’m off.” Jason comes in to tell them,
Judi is enjoying the fact that he’s come to say bye, but trying to figure out why. “Do you want a packed lunch?”

“Greggs.”

“Will Greg not mind?”

“Greggs the bakers.” Jason refuses to acknowledge Judi’s joke.

“We get a buffet at the conference,” Nelson grins. He’s presenting his new research today.

Judi pretends to be indignant. “What do I get?”

On his way out Jason mumbles something incomprehensible about having “Rocks for dinner. Will you be in?”

“Sure.” When aren’t they?

Rounding the corner to work there’s a pound coin shining on the pavement. She looks around before she lifts it, in case it’s glued down or on string. But no. Judi pockets it. Maybe she manifested it.
Hope isn’t in her room. Judi feels a sort of dull panic and walks back into the hallway. Where is everyone? The only person in the staffroom is Bryony, hunched miserably over her lunchox. She’s perpetually nervy, afraid Judi will catch her at something, entering late youth with the same unease many single women that age have. Judi can empathise. Perhaps, when Mother Nature settles the matter indefinitely, it’ll be nice to give up properly. If at first you don’t succeed, to try and try again is trying indeed. When do you say “enough”?

Judi follows Bryony’s eyes down to a half-dunked Sweetness and Light.

“They’re making those again?” Judi stares vacantly at the “Low fat spongelet.”

“Yeah. Thought they were a thing of the past. Want one?”

“No ta.” There are few things Judi wants less.

“My mum used to love these things.” Bryony says.

Judi neglects to mention that her own mother used to advertise them.

“Where’s Hope?”

“She was sick all morning. She’s in the ward.”

“Ta.”

Hope was sick last week too. Twice. Both mornings. Fifty-five, could it be Hope’s emerging from catatonia just in time for the menopause? Risperidone boosts Hopes Prolactin levels, giving her tiny body those obscene boobs. In
theory, it should stop her from menstruating, so when she does it’s a useful red flag that she’s cheating her meds. Hasn’t happened in a while.

If Judi’s right, will Hope understand what’s happening to her? Will she care? Judi’s mum took the menopause badly. Despite having been forty when she had Judi, not wanting another child in the least, it was a sign of her mortality. Isabel was physically sick most mornings for a while, worse than pregnancy, she said. Ginger tea helped. Judi’ll get some for Hope.

Further up the corridor, Gary’s rolling about the corridor, banging his fists into the worn carpet. Andy’s with him, making soothing noises. Gary takes panicky gulps.

“Plenty of air,” Andy says, like he’s commenting on the weather. “Youse ok?” Judi slows her pace.

Gary buries his face in the floor and screams. Andy mime-pats the pocket where he has all the chemical restraint he might need, and smiles. “We’re cool.”

Judi turns the corner and tries the stomp of gratitude that worked so well before, feeling the shiny gold coin in her tunic pocket.

Hope is perched up in bed. Drinking tea from her favourite china cup, she looks a damn sight better than Judi does. Rosy cheeks. Maybe all this extra oestrogen will give her a new kick of life.

There are six beds on the bright ward, waxed floorboards, massive potted plants. Judi thought, when she first saw it, of a doll hospital from a children’s book. Anyone requiring “serious” physical attention goes straight to the Western. Hope takes a languorous suck from one end of her pen, flicks
imaginary ash in Judi’s general direction, then returns to the crossword where she is very neatly colouring the white squares black.

“T’im being kept here against my will. I wish to change my will: I’m disinheriting you!”

“Oh aye?” Judi smiles, sadly. “Whatever you like, Hope.”

“Ah like Hope,” she parrots back in Judi’s exact voice, all big eyes. Hope clasps Judi’s thumb with her fairy-like hand.

“I like Hope too,” she says, and realises it’s not true. She loves Hope. Exactly like family. Why, after all these years, isn’t that alright to say?

Hope has a cat-like sensuality when that bit of her wakes up, generally at the most inappropriate times. She rubs her cheek against the soft headboard behind her.

“Enough’ve that.” Judi feels like a fuddy-duddy.

Hope thinks so too. “Mnnnn, I love you, Judi.” Her breathing is soft and feminine, but the voice is all Nelson’s. That’s new. Genuinely unsettling feeling to hear his words displaced in her mouth. Judi has her nervous feeling, the one that creeps up like a pantomime baddy then ducks out of sight whenever she turns to face it.

“Have you finished your puzzle?” she asks Hope as she colours-in the last couple of white squares.

“Have you finished your puzzle?” Hope is back in Judi’s voice again. “There! All the cross words gone.”

She beams up at Judi. Until recently Hope’s body seemed something cruel, something she was battling to get out of, or had given up inside. But now,
happy, her body radiates fun. It's hard to think of her as ill when she looks this
good.

Alisha comes over. She wears ballet pumps and almost skates across the
floor, blond curls bobbing with general American-ness.

“Hope was throwing up for, like, an hour this morning?”
Hope grimaces and mimics Alisha's gum chewing. Judi asks if Hope has been
giving them a hard time.

“Nah, she's been having a hard time.” Alisha's supportive hand is swatted
away.

“But you're fine now, eh?”

“Define fine.” Hope shoots Judi an accusatory look.

“Well enough to eat two jelly donuts fifteen minutes ago.” Alisha
confirms.

“Hmmph!” Hope says, tapping her pen against the solid square of black,
and then, as an afterthought, “Jam.”

Judi wants to tell Alisha her pet theory, but doesn't. Nelson gets angry
when she plays doctor.
Judi decides to walk home. She likes the city on late winter nights, the colourfully lit bridges across The Clyde. Judi ponders the return of Sweetness and Light. It amazes her that people want so badly to eat “guilt-free” cake that the fact that the things were taken off the market five years ago for their proven carcinogenic qualities is no deterrent. Well, let them eat fake-cake.

For Judi’s Da, food was edible love. A full cupboard meant things were ok. “Tae cook guid, y’ hafty love food.” They’d pat the sunshine-yellow courgettes in the greenhouse as he watered them, whisper words of inspiration to neat rows of kale seed as they buried them. If Judi’s soup was too hot, her Da would run it round the garden to cool it, a wobbly pantomime.

For Isabel, Judi’s mother, the world sang with the possibility of beauty. When she saw it in herself, she saw it everywhere: pictures, ideas, light on water, the sounds of words (lemony, soliloquy, scintilla), the ladybird she transferred to Judi’s cheek, then showed her in the mirror, “beautiful,” so Judi felt she’d always like to wear a ladybird. Isabel made things sparkle just engaging with them, by pointing them out, by adding herself. But food was a reluctant means of survival; picking at whatever was put in front of her like a sulky child.

“Fat adds flavour,” Judi said once, trying to be useful.

“No, Judi, fat adds fat! You are what you eat: do you want to be fat?”
Judi said she was sorry, but she wasn’t, she was eight. She didn’t care if she got fat. Auntie Helen was fat. And beautiful, and cuddlier. If you are what you eat, why eat anything but fairy-cakes?

Isabel’s modelling career was long past its Carnaby Street heyday by the time Judi was born. Soon even catalogue work dried up. Isabel held her daughter personally responsible for the ageing process, tutting as she examined the ghost of stretch marks in the mirror, as though Judi’d been a malicious foetus.

“My breasts used to be perfect, before I had you.”

What do you say, a dumpy seventeen year old, to that? Nothing of Judi’s had ever been perfect. Most folk are never so beautiful that people will pay just to take pictures of them. Her mother seemed offended that she should ever have to do anything else, took the office job she began when Judi started High School as indicative of her husband’s failure to provide.

Then Isabel got a job. She was to be the face of a new range of diet biscuits, “Sweetness and Light.” On TV, and on billboards all over the UK. Judi remembers the night they heard. Her Da bought champagne.

Everything changed after that. Suddenly, after a childhood covert chippy trips with Da, a lifetime of her Mother behaving like the sweetie-police to keep Judi’s weight and husband’s diabetes in check, Isabel brought biscuits, boxes of them, back to the cottage, Judi and Ray stuffed themselves with them. Sweetness and Light themselves were disgusting, dry and saccharine, but Isabel brought home big bags of chunky chocolate wafer things, pink marshmallowy jammy
things. When they asked “Are you the biscuit lady?” in the street, and Isabel had said “I am, indeed,” with pride.

Weekend after weekend she’d be off, touring Britain’s supermarkets, “promotions,” Isabel gushed excitedly. Their bathroom became cluttered with exponentially more fantastic wee bottles of hotel room toiletries. Their swankiness, Judi supposed later, increased in line with the interest of her soon to be second husband.

“Can you blame a girl for wanting a little security in her old age?” Her mother’s easy shrug, then, was what hurt Judi most. There were three days of crying and shouting, her packing bags and his unpacking them.

“Don’t you place any value on us?”

Isabel closed her eyes, like she was praying, or doing hard maths. Weighing up whatever her family were worth against the more solid worth of Peter’s Biscuit Empire. “We’ve done us.”

“Just go.” It was Judi that said it. She felt guilty for growing up. Seventeen, “done.”
Isabel’s fancy man’s fancy car was in the driveway an hour after that. He didn’t come in. Judi watched from the window. He was wearing massive aviators. He was neckless. He looked like a boiled ham in a ginger toupee.

Judi is nearly home, the building society window is lit up as she passes, a massive plastic pound coin in the window. “All it takes to save!” sparkly pink letters advise her. Judi thumbs the golden coin in her pocket.

Jason stares intently at a saucepan of boiling water. “Is that a rolling boil?”

“Sure. Where’s Dad?”

“Not here?” Jason says casually.

“Great.” Is Jason making dinner? He’s got a girl pregnant, probably. Or been expelled. When was the last time Jason made a meal without being asked? It comes to her.

“D’ye mind when you were wee and made us that breakfast?”

“What one?”

Judi can only remember one. That doesn’t seem prudent to mention.

“Rainbows on toast.”

Jason grunts.

Judi smiles, “aw, your wee chef’s hat in your face.”
He made them mashed banana, in a variety of colours, arranged across two bits of toast, topped with sherbet. Simultaneously the loveliest and most disgusting breakfast ever.

“So: what’s for tea?”

“Curry.”

“Brill. How did school go?”

“It went.”

Judi waits for a “well” or “badly.” Nope.

“Go... have a bath?” Jason says.

“Sure?”

“Sure.”

Judi wonders why, generally, men find it impossible to complete any task whatsoever when a woman is watching them do it.

This should be nice, Judi thinks, lying in the bath. She feels redundant. Imagine the house empty, Jason away at uni. There’ll be no real reason to eat nutritiously or get up at the weekend.

She leans back in the water and re-opens *The Secret*. People in this book get very excited about “manifesting” white feathers, imagining a feather, finding one “exactly” as you imagined it, and then taking it as a sign from the universe. Blah Blah: so what, a feather? How many feathers do you see in a day? Pillows leak, the cat mauls a variety of feathery things. Judi will need something a little more convincing than a feather.
She stares out the skylight above the bath, imagining it is a cosmic delivery hatch, a door in the sky, opening to blinding white light. It will take a sign of biblical proportions to make her believe in this, so ok. Show me that universe. Judi tries her best to believe a glimpse into heaven is on its way, and be grateful. She feels ridiculous, but quite excited too.

“The Secret to Health” talks about the placebo effect, as proof that, in medicine too, you get what you think you have coming to you. Judi thinks it proves, more, that a lot of people aren't as sick as they think they are.

We all come with a built-in basic programme, it’s called self-healing. You get a wound, it grows back together. You get a bacterial infection, and the immune system comes and takes care of those bacteria.”

Do we know instinctively how to make ourselves better? No. That’s why medicine evolved and that’s why everyone lives longer now. People can die of almost anything. Of AIDS, of peanuts.

“Illness cannot exist in a body that has harmonious thoughts.” Would it be nice to believe that? Could Judi stay safe from harm if all it took was a state of dumb faith in everything being alright in the end?

“You’re going to immediately say, “I didn’t attract the car accident, I didn’t attract this particular client who gives me a hard time. I didn’t particularly attract the debt.” And I’m here to be a little in your face and say, yes you did attract it.”

Judi doesn’t believe this stuff. But what if she’s wrong?

The bath has gone cold maybe, she’s shivering. What if not believing it is the reason everything is so messy? What else has she caused? Will she cause? Her brain feels like a loaded gun. Did she really believe her babies would live?
Did she kill those tiny wee people before they even had a chance? Poison... unless it's true.

"A baby," she smiles her hardest, thinking of all the life left to live, and how grateful she is to have it. She tries her best to believe that a child is on its way to them, that she doesn't have to worry about the details. A baby. No trying not to cry when people paw at her still swollen body and ask when it's due, no having to tell them it isn't.

"Judi."

She doesn't know how long he has been there. Judi feels the sting and rawness of her skin, sees the thick red scratches her nails have left, realises what ugly little noises she's making.

Nelson leans in and pulls the plug, wets his shirt sleeve as he helps her out, Pats her dry as she babbles, hardly knowing what she's saying.

"It's not your fault, Judi."

"I know." Judi says, but she knows the opposite. Can't have one side of the coin without the other. She has broken things. She has to accept responsibility for the effects of her negative thinking.

"Get dressed: Jason has a friend coming over for dinner." He loads the word "friend" with such import that it jolts Judi out of herself.

"A girlfriend?" Such a thing has never happened before.

"A friend who is a girl, we know that much."

Judi feels, as always when things are sweet with Nelson, that she has stepped into a more genteel world.
“Shall I?”

Judi nods gratefully. He pulls a soft cotton wrap-dress, long sleeves, no need to talk about why, and a new set of satin underwear so pretty Judi feels intimidated to wear it.

“I might,” Nelson is so casual, “have heard someone on their phone the other day saying, and I quote: Stop it: you’re making me like you more.”

“How could you not tell me?”

“You’d have asked him about it.”

She realises he’s totally right. Sooner or later she’d have had a gin and asked. She kisses Nelson. He kisses her back. He knows best. Everything is easier this way.

“Stop it,” he whispers, “you’re making me like you more.”

Judi feels a sudden rush of alrightness. He tells her what make-up and jewellery to put on, for the first time in months, and Judi watches the mirror as she becomes almost attractive, presentable.

The doorbell goes, Nelson straightens his tie. Are they too dressed up, have they dressed up enough? Judi fusses at herself in the mirror. Nelson gives her the tiniest slap, kisses her cheek, catches her smile at the corners of her mouth and bids it stay. This is the sort of thing they’re not supposed to be doing. It’s so nice.

This boy, who always loved his oldest, scruffiest bear to the exclusion of all others, who’d wail, head circling, as he watched it whizz around the washing machine, terrified, right up until the moment she unpegged its ears from the
washing-line, that his ‘realness’ would be washed out. Even now, it is what the cat dragged in, quite literally, that Jason has chosen to love. Judi has always wondered what sort of person he might bring home.

“This is Roxy.”

“Pleased to meet you Mrs Urquhart,” Roxy looks up at her, eyes impossibly wide, a Japanese cartoon. Now is no time for Judi to explain that she’s not “Mrs Urquhart.”

“Call me Judi.”

Roxy smiles, nods slightly under a neat bun composed of unmistakably turquoise dreadlocks. Roxy - did her mother give her that prostitutey sort of name, do you think?

“Shall we have some wine?”

Judi wonders do they drink too much. What if they get a letter from Roxy’s mother? No, the sort of folk who call their daughter Roxy aren’t the letter-writing type, Judi decides. Is she pregnant? I bet he gets her pregnant.

Judi wonders how Jason looks to this Roxy. He looks about four years younger than her for a start. But then that’s pretty standard. A few years ago was hilarious; the boys wheeling out of discos, shouting, playing. Girls already looking like women, being women: having so much less fun.

They sit down to eat. Nelson has dimmed lights, Jason has turned down everyone’s repeated offers of help. At one point, instead of laughing, Roxy actually says “lol,” just like Jason. Maybe Jason should get her pregnant.
When Jason comes through to the dining room with a bowl of something steaming in each hand Judi imagines a hot rainbow of banana. What they get is a familiar looking curry. She has taught Jason to cook, somehow, by osmosis.
“The only reason a person does not have enough money is because they are blocking it coming to them with their thoughts.”

The Secret

The bank clerk gives Judi a strange look, opening her account with just one shiny pound, but given the giant golden coin of the same denomination in his front window, there’s not much he can do.

“I’m expecting unexpected cheques.” Judi asks for a printed statement. The clerk’s smile gets even thinner. Judi sits, tippexing the balance out, as recommended in The Secret, and trying to think what her ideal bank balance would be. She doesn’t want to be greedy. Two hundred thousand? Four? How much does she dare to believe she deserves?

A painfully young, heroin-vacant girl has taken up residence in the doorway, Judi steps over her on the way out, being careful not to disrupt her chewed up Starbucks cup full of change.

Judi’s new bank-card arrives in the post a few days later, she hides it her wallet, a silver lining for a rainy day. Every morning, when Nelson goes out on his run, Judi looks at her future balance and practises gratitude. She takes out the card and imagines it as a shiny key to all that money, just waiting in her account for her. All she has to do is know it’s on its way. Thank You.
“Many of us were taught to put ourselves last, as a consequence we attracted feelings of being unworthy and undeserving. As those feelings lodged within us, we continued to attract more life situations that had us feel more unworthy.”

*The Secret*

Judi didn’t talk about her parents, other than to say that they were both dead. If people asked how, Judi generally said “in a car crash,” it felt true on a metaphorical level.

They weren’t sparkling company after Isabel left. Ray spent most of his time asleep, or drunk, crooning Elvis songs into his guitar.

“Maybe I didn’t treat you quite as good as I should have.” He sobbed into endless photo albums, mourning Judi’s mother to the point where it seemed rude to point out that she wasn’t dead. Folk stopped coming round. Who could blame them? The college cancelled his photography class -he’d turned up drunk, or not at all- too often.

“You taking your insulin?”

“Course”.

They both knew it was crap. His breath smelt like syrupy metal.

“Fair enough: fuck it all,” Judi said, making a big show of indifference. Judi hated that he’d let Isabel make him human.

At the weekends, they’d spend all day in the garden, Da, barefoot as usual, swigging gin from his hip flask whenever he thought Judi wasn’t looking,
thumbing peppermint crèmes into his mouth to “hide” the smell. What might have been described as “tumbledown bohemian charm” once, was now just tumbling down. Charm is luck and theirs has run out. The cat had her kittens in the leaking outhouse rather than with them. They were no sort of start in life.

After a month of that, Judi needed a break. The night it happened, Judi said she was going to watch a film, stay the night with Joanna Burgess. Really, she was going to see The Wedding Present at The Barrowlands with Joanna Burgess’ big brother Steve, who played bass and had a van.

“Aye. Great.” Her father looked put out.

Judi was seething in the shower as she got ready. Wasn’t he going to ask what time she’d be back, tell her to call?

“Owww owwwwow.” By the time she’d wrapped a towel around herself and come to see what the shouting was about, Ray had hopped inside. Deep in his foot, a rusty nail, some rotting timber still attached.

“Sit down!” They walked, three legged, to a chair. Judi set his foot on her lap. He was meant to look after her. He was meant to look after her.

“Stay still.”

Her father howled as she took nail out. Poor lion, she thought, where’s your pride? Judi said she wouldn’t go, not meaning it. He “insisted,” not meaning it. But she went. She left him.

That night, the Barrowlands was so overcrowded their collective sweat dripped back on them. After, Judi listened to Steve talking about how life was “all about collecting experiences.” Was that better than collecting things?
Judi had to peel her skin from Steve's when she woke. So that was sex. Judi wondered if she liked it. She took one of Steve’s jumpers from a pile by the mattress, sniffing his smell. By day, the flat didn’t look like a trendy escape: it seemed like another shambolic trap. It smelled of trainers, fried bread, and stale weedsmoke.

“Can I use your phone?”

Steve’s flatmate snorted good-naturedly, said “sure” and gestured through the open window to the other side of the street where the callbox was.

“Hullo?

“Da. I just phoned to say I’m fine and,”

“Are you oan fire n’aw? His words were so slurred.

“What d’ye mean? Has there been a fire in the house?

“Is there a fire?”

“No, but…”

“Ok, listen, I’ll be there soon.”

“I love you, Isabel.”

“Da!”

“Judi! Where are you?” He sounded totally surprised to hear Judi’s voice, unaware that he’d just called his daughter by her mother’s name. Yuk.

Judi was gathering her things to go when Steve said “breakfast?” She reasoned that Ray would be sleeping heavy as stone by the time she got back anyway, letting Steve put his leather jacket round her shoulders, feeling pretty. As Steve walked back to Central Station, Judi wondered if he was her boyfriend.
It was nearly four by the time she stepped on to the platform at Cauldhame, Judi ran home. “Da!” she shouted to the empty living room.

Her father was upstairs, in the “Jungle Room,” (her parent’s bedroom, green and full of plants, a tribute to Graceland.) Ray was wet with sweat, shivering, but hot to touch. When he finally responded to Judi he spoke feverish rubbish. She made sweet tea, got him to sit up and drink it and even take his insulin. How could she have thought he was just drunk? He so obviously had a virus. She went to make soup. That’s what she knew to do when someone was ill. When Judi got back to the bedroom Ray was so soundly asleep it seemed mean to wake him. Dead on her feet, she put an extra blanket over him, curled up and slept against him.

The steuch woke her. Not sweat, not anything she’d smelled before, just... death. Judi peeled back the blanket a bit, not knowing what she was looking for, really. The sheet was stuck to his foot by the seep that’d oozed from it overnight. Swollen, yellow and blackening at his toenails, the hole left by the nail mottled red and purple, wide, fleshy. The reek was so foul Judi’s mouth filled with spit. She shook her father awake. Confused, he burst into childlike tears. Judi phoned an ambulance.

By the time they got to the big hospital, the swelling in his foot had ensured sepsis. Given another few hours all of his major organs would have begun to close down, and the blood transfusion would have had very little chance of saving his life. Given a few hours less -say, the time she’d spent dancing, fucking, or drinking, her Da might still have had his foot, and there
wouldn’t have been at such a high risk of the wet gangrene recurring. Judi saw Steve once after that. She wanted to smash his face in.

People came back to the house after Da lost his foot. Judi got sick of telling other people how she understood, that it wasn’t their fault. They wanted her forgiveness for something she’d done.

The only person that truly helped was Michael, a nurse that called twice a week and gave Judi and Ray two hours of everything being genuinely ok. He was so efficient, radiant with understanding. His rain-battered Hebridean upbringing had left him a voice that settled over them like holiday sunshine.

“Nice work, Nurse Judi.” He’d beam, surveying the dressings she’d changed in his absence. Judi liked the nickname, it made her sound like someone who knew what she was about.

“You don’t have to be here all the time, you know?” Michael said, but they both knew she did. Judi had stopped going to school. Knew she was missing exams and deadlines. Knew it didn’t matter. “Art School’ll be there next year” she said briskly to the mirror, practicing for when anyone asked. No one ever did.

The second to last time Judi saw Isabel, everything about her presence was offensive. The deep tan, the wellness of her, the coconut smell of her hair. Ray went out to pick roses in the garden and the two women sat in the disinfected house.

“Why didn’t you come earlier?” Judi hissed.

“I didn't know about this.”
“If you’d called,” Judi told her, “you would have known.”

Isabel buried her face in the bloom of roses.

“They’re beautiful.”

“I knew you would come back.” Ray beamed.

“I’m only here for an hour or two.”

“What,” said Judi, “is the use in that?”

Not once, since the day he met her, had Ray considered life without Isabel. After her last visit he stopped getting up. Then that reddish discoloration. His right hand. They knew all about lesions by then, got to hospital straight away, but it had to go. First his heart, then his foot, then his hand: he was dying piece by piece.

No denying, then, who was looking after who. They lived it out, quietly, fondly. Nurse Judi and her first patient.
“To make a relationship work, focus on what you appreciate about the other person.”

_The Secret_

A month into “lightworking” with cosmic ordering, Judi understands that ill will is only going to come back to you. _The Secret_ suggests that sitting down every day for a month and writing a list of positive things about that person can be transformative. So, Judi resolves to add one thing to the list each day.

1 She lives abroad.

Judi crosses it out. She doesn’t actually know that’s true anymore. Isabel and Peter were travelling a lot, around the time of Ray’s illness, but she phoned Judi every week for an update, and offered them money she must have known they would never take. When Ray died, Judi told her that she didn’t think her presence at the funeral was appropriate. Isabel didn’t seem unduly bothered, she sent a condolence card and contacted a lawyer to transfer the deeds to the cottage to Judi’s name.

“I don’t want it.”

“Then sell it. I’ll never go back. Your father’s dead. Get yourself a degree or a motorbike: something fun, something better.”
Judi already had a grant to attend nursing college, and a full-time job to pay her bills. She’d scraped the grades in her resits. She couldn’t bear to sell the house. How could she profit from the death of her father, who she had basically killed? And how could she take anything from her mother? Laughably enough, Isabel was still her legal guardian, so Judi had very little say in the matter. The house and its contents were hers. She hated it and them.

Judi packed a bag, dug a deep hole, buried the key in a biscuit-tin under the tree, topped up with compost, her father’s ashes, and a new strain of yellow rose bush, Graceland.

The housing deeds have gone with her from flat to flat, are currently in a shoe box at the back of her wardrobe. Even a glimpse of the shoebox reminds her of her incompetence, what a terrible person she is.

The last time she saw Isabel was about four years ago. They met in a café. Isabel told Judi that Peter had died. Heart Attack. She wanted to come and live in Glasgow, be near Judi, be a part of her family.

“I told my partner, my step-son, and anyone who’s asked in the last twenty years,” Judi paused, there was no gentle way to say it, “that my parents died in a car crash when I was seventeen.”

“Why?” Isabel looks as fascinated as she does appalled.

“Because the other stuff didn’t bear explaining,”

Isabel opened her mouth to object.

“You don’t know. You weren’t there.”

Isabel closed her mouth, it settled into a slightly wavering line.
“As far as anyone I love in concerned, you and Da died in a car crash, together, shortly before my seventeenth birthday. So, it might be quite awkward, if you showed up now.”
“Your job is you,” The Secret says. When you are a mum, a carer, a nurse, or a submissive, you, at very best, is a hobby. In The Secret, a woman called Lisa Nichols says that it wasn't until she fell in love with herself that “the rest of the world was able to fall in love with me as well.”

Well, I’m not in love with you, Lisa, Judi thinks. And the vast majority of the world’s inhabitants are indifferent to your existence.

Learning to love herself is going to be a massive challenge, not least because if she succeeds, she will become the sort of person she hates. Better Lisa Nichols happy, or Morrissey unhappy?

“Thoughts become things”

Judi is half-heartedly supervising a decoupage workshop; making sure no one pockets scissors, or drinks glue, and making the occasional interested noise. She is also making herself a key-ring that says “Thoughts Become Things” in Fimo, to remind herself to watch what she is thinking.

Usually, Judi would be more involved, but she has just heard, not from Nelson individually, but via a letter rammed in everyone’s pigeon-hole by Stacey, Nelson’s secretary, that they are taking on a qualified art therapist.

“Someone proper,” Nelson said with a smile, coming in to a staff-room bubbling with chatter about it, “to reflect the growing reputation of Lotus Gardens as an Art Therapy facility.” Nelson says this with a great deal of pride in his voice, as though it is everyone’s accomplishment, and his in particular.

“Anyway,” he concludes, “all hands on deck: visiting day at the zoo.”
Everyone laughs whenever he makes that joke, because it’s The Nelson Show, he’s “the funny one,” But he’s not. Apart from being cruel, it’s stupid. Everyday is visiting day at the Zoo, ergo: there is no such thing as “Visiting Day” at a zoo. Also, people like visiting the Zoo. At the Zoo, the visitors stare willingly, it’s easy to look at what they came to see. There’s no need to tell the bearded dragons it’s been too long. No, he means that they’re animals. His patients.

When Judi first arrived the art room was another bad joke. She argued for every pound of their budget. The kiln was her greatest victory, but now that Art Therapy is trendy, and he sees it’s worth, suddenly she’s worthless.

“What is it you call it when you’re so used to seeing an object as a certain thing you can’t imagine another use for it?” she says, opening the door to Nelson’s office without knocking.

“Excuse me?”

“Like how children will happily answer a shoe as though it’s a telephone, or paint with gravy, or but an adult puts some wax in a teacup and apparently it’s very clever, some sort of creative miracle.”

“It’s called functional fixedness.” Says Nelson, his desire to demonstrate his intellectual superiority for a moment overcoming his irritation.

“Did you just make that up?”

“No,” Nelson says with faux-patience “Karl Duncker did. A psychologist. His term for when things become so familiar to us that it’s hard to see them in a new way.

Judi glares at him pointedly.
Lotus Gardens has been a high security private residential care home for the mentally ill ever since Bungo, a school friend of Nelson’s, decided that turning his parents failed hotel in the Glasgow suburbs into “some sort of cash asylum” would be a fitting tribute to his “odious parents,” and in particular the father who’d so savagely beaten him for bedwetting. Bungo the Bedwetter was a plastic surgeon in Los Angeles these days. Nelson and Judi had met his wife. “Isn’t she beautiful?” Bungo asked. “Certainly,” Nelson replied, Judi felt unsure if they were complementing Bungo’s wife or Bungo’s handiwork. Bungo was a silent partner, which suited Nelson fine.

Inside Lotus Gardens, everything was softened, sleepy. Residents moved, if they moved, slowly as erosion. At the craft table, gluey lines of Pritt-stick crossed sugar-paper like snail trails. Drugs slow things, drugs and a total lack of purpose. The staff moved faster in there than out, light on their feet, as if should they slow too they might not speed up again.

She met Nelson -Dr Urquhart then- at her interview. Implausibly handsome, still distinctly boyish around his clean-shaven face, tall, thick curtains of hair falling from behind his ears. Yes I want you to be my boss. Yes, I want to do, always, absolutely, what you tell me. The idea was delicious.

In her first few weeks of work, the corridors crackled with the possibility of his presence. He could pull off a bowler hat and had an antique coat-stand in his office.

“He’s like, a Victorian gentleman,” Judi bubbled at Marina.

“Archaic? Misogynistic?”
“Both. In a nice way.”

If Ray McGovan had had a son, then Nelson might never have noticed Judi. But it was Judi into whom Ray ploughed his passion for cricket,

“What a catch,” Nelson shouted during the tryouts, and Judi blushed, hoping he might be talking about her too. They played in a mini league against other care homes in the area. He was her captain. They had something to talk about. Over pints, they discussed strategy, and idealistic times in the gardens of their childhood.

“Just do your best: do it for me” he told her before she went up to bowl. How delicious to have someone else on behalf of which to do things, rather than just her lousy old self.

“Good girl, well done.” He told her when she struck out. Judi felt like a well-loved dog wagging its tail.

One evening he told her about Urquhart. He told her as if it was a venereal disease he was pretending to be totally cool about having caught. Judi thought how much she’d have preferred if he did have Chlamydia or something, Boss, doctor, nearly fifteen years her senior, these were bad enough. This being titled was the final impossible thing.

“Careful Judi, gentry don’t marry wee girls from Cauldhame,” was how Marina put it.
A man’s home is his castle, and this is particularly true if, like Nelson’s father, your family home is ancestral, an actual castle, yours since fifteen-canteen. The Urquhart’s are old money, which is to say: they have property, but not the inordinate amount of cash it takes to maintain it, and walls cannot be shored with willpower alone. Urquharts are local celebrities, the sight of one in a Greggs is just hilarious. Locals have visited on open day, kept from rooms the mildew has reached. They’ve seen the grounds, still beautiful for all they’re increasingly rhododendron choked; scoffed at the tweeded Americans shipped over to shoot clay-pigeons or deer, not realising that yes, those tweedy pheasant-culls are ridiculous, but the Americans are the real game.

“What do you think of the place?”

Like every girl brought up on a steady diet of Disney and BBC Jane Austen adaptations, Judi has always sort of expected it of love; the ‘castle moment.’

“It’s what a lot of girls fantasise about, I suppose.”

“And you?”

“I fantasise about double-glazing.”

He kissed her, then, cradling her head in a way so tender, so convincingly, as though she was something delicate and precious and treasured. She was his. And as such she was safe, no longer her own concern. The sky was grey, raindrops ran from his nose to hers as they kissed hungry gulps of each other. It poured. They both shivered, as much from the cold, probably, as from excitement.
“Is that what you’re wearing this weekend?” Nelson asked, shortly before their second trip to Urquhart, this time to meet his family. His tone was carefully neutral.

“It appears to be.” She grinned, folding the dress into weekend bag, “it suits me.”

“No, it’s what you think you deserve. Let’s buy you a new one.”

How dare he? No one had ever seen through her decision to be unpretty, not to have people notice her, before him. They’d just not noticed her before him.

Cecily didn’t like Judi much, she liked an idea she had about Scotland, dressed up like Brigadoon to recite “A Man’s a Man for A’ That?” on Burn’s night, but flinched at Judi’s Glasgow accent.

“Judi McGovan,” Nelson introduced Judi with a flourish, Judi blushed, excited about the ball that evening, the new dress waiting for her upstairs. She smiled winningly at Cecily.

“But Nelson, darling,” Cecily cooed, looking straight through Judi, haven’t you already bagged your Royal MacNab this season?”

Judi didn’t have a clue what Cecily was talking about, not then. Just knew it was nasty.

“I see.” Said Nelson coldly. “See you at the ceiligh, Sis. He turned to Judi as they walked away. We won’t come back here, Judi,” he said as they got ready that evening, “so let’s have some fun.”
Judi put her lipstick on. She didn’t know if she could do it, but she absolutely knew she would try to do this and then whatever else the beautiful man told her to. He was so firm, so sure. Judi listened, poised as a border collie, for instruction, ready to obey. They went to dinner, arm in arm.

Whenever Nelson found something “fascinating,” and he often did, Judi found herself almost unbelievably ignorant on the subject. He’d smile into the boiled face of his sister’s crony, shiny from a reel they’d just danced. It was always a reel. Posh Scots dance reels, not ceilidh dances. Their Scottish country dancing is a different, more refined sort, their Scotland a different, more refined country. Nelson’s fingers twitched, conducting her conduct, eyes twinkling.

“Oh, you lead the hunt now?” He grinned wolfishly, “How thrilling for you, how completely fascinating.”

“In’t it no, Nelson? Now, tell me this Tayday, are blood sports strictly speakin’ sports? Ah mean, in the same way as how tennis is one? Really? Great! So does the wee fox ever win, for example?”

“Good girl,” he stroked her hair, “I’m so proud of you.” They had gone from the dance into the woods, sick of everything but each other. The heat of their bodies, the nip of the whisky and the night, the miracle of finding, in each, exactly what the other needed, lit them up. Laughing, sucking white clouds of each other’s hard breath from the dark night. It was unimaginable to Judi that she’d ever want anything more than to be his.

“Would you like to be my little pet, have me take care of you, always?”
“Oh…” Judi felt brimfull of joy. “Yes please.” That was the funny thing she had wanted, and not known how ask for. She was twenty, she didn’t know such a life was possible.

Marina was already horrified by so much about Nelson: fifteen years older, Judi’s boss, from such a different world. And their walls were like paper in that dingy little flat they shared. She heard enough to know what else they were up to.

“What are you playing at, Judi?”

Judi tried to explain how happy it made her. How cathartic it was, when she’d done something wrong, to take the punishment she believed she deserved, and let go of guilt, of shame, of everything but the fall into euphoria, under his steady hand. How her bruises were badges of honour. How unlike the dirty student bedrooms, shared frozen pizza, and indifference of the twenty-something men she’d known. How everyday was full of certainty, order, stability. How if she only did what she was told she was guaranteed to meet with his approval. How very wonderful that approval was.

“But who is he to decide how you should behave?”

“My master.” Judi sighed happily, still enjoying the newness of the word on her tongue.

“Give me strength.”

Judi wonders if it’s easier now, that sort of discussion, in the wake of the popularity of certain poorly written (but nevertheless, she’ll admit, titillating) works of erotic fiction. Most people are familiar with the paradoxical rhetoric of BDSM by now; how freeing it is to be your lover’s slave, how safe and secure a
submissive feels in ropes and chains. Even the most ‘vanilla’ of couples might buy some furry love-cuffs “for a laugh” and have a convert read of Fifty Shades.

If Candy ball-gags, and pink satin blindfolds with SEXY written across them are the Korma of kink, the way that Judi and Nelson have conducted themselves until recently is the naga: it’s not to everyone’s taste, a lot of people find it outright disgusting, in fact, and it is so ruinous to the body that too much might hospitalise you, but it’s seriously, undeniably hot. So hot it will make everything afterwards unbearably bland by comparison.

Even at the outset Judi knew she would want no other kind of relationship, no other kind of sex.

“Don’t you want to make your own decisions, live your own life?” Marina has asked her.

“Absolutely not.”

Marina was horrified, cried about it, but all the same, it wonderful to tell someone, it made it all real.
Then he didn't phone one night. His phone was engaged. He didn't call the flat that morning either, to tell her what to wear.

He called Judi into his office. He motioned at the chair.

"Tell me." She smiled. He didn't smile. And then she didn't smile.

"Judi... Rebecca called."

"Who the hell's Rebecca?" And then she remembered. "The Royal McNab?"

Nelson winced.

If Judi didn't know what a Royal McNab was the first time Cecily made mention of one, she'd found out quickly enough. The "classic" McNab, involved "bagging" a salmon, a deer and a grouse in one day. The Royal McNab is the above, with the addition of "bagging" a local. Rebecca had been the local.

While the Urquharts were busy poaching oil dollars from Americans, Rebecca had something else in her sights. The same thing she's sighted out of her council estate window since she was a little girl: A castle, all that lovely money.

The good thing about being American is that you can naff off back to America with your lovely money, or most of it. The bad thing about being Nelson was that you had to stay and pick up the pieces. The bad thing about being Rebecca was the revelation that there was no money anyway, just debt. The bad thing about being Judi in this situation was fairly obvious.

"What's she doing?" Judi palmed her face.

"She insists on keeping it."
“What are you doing?”

“I have to behave honourably. But it doesn’t mean we can’t still...”

“I need to go home. I feel sick” Judi said.

He nodded his head, “I understand. It was too much to ask of you.”

Too much: Judi was shocked. Meatloaf’s “I would do anything for love, but I won’t do that,” was in the charts at this time. Judi hated the song, but it made her cry nevertheless.

She went back to work, lowered her eyes in the corridors, avoided the staffroom. A lot of their patients then had Dementia. Judi read about it obsessively. It seemed like the worst kind of time travel, its victims rocketed indiscriminately from treasured places to those she wished to revisit least. One patient would wake from the Blitz in an hospital bed, suddenly old and alone. Judi, too, felt she was staggering about in the ruins of life.

Marina was supportive at first, and then, increasingly, at her wits end. “He’s a horrible, dangerous, man. A lucky escape.” she told Judi, with less conviction as the days went on. Not when her mother left, not when her father died, never had Judi cried like this. She felt demented. It felt like a flood bank breaking.

Judi avoided the phone.

When Nelson called Marina said “she’s busy” then hung up. “Busy getting fat and stoned.” Marina snapped at Judi. “What’s that on your head?”

“I’ve had a statement haircut.”

“The statement being what? Help me?”

In the corridor, Nelson tried to be nice about it: “That’s a striking look Judi.”
“Strikingly ugly?” she said, instantly angry that her need to self-depreciate got the better of her determination not to talk to him.

“You could never be ugly.”

Judi liked being swept up again. in the fast flow of their conversation, it’s dangerous undercurrents.

“Stop it. I told you. I can’t.”

“I heard you.”

The next day Nelson called her into his office. He’d been to see Rebecca, told her he wouldn’t marry her, but would provide for the child.

“What did she say?”

“She’s threatened to press charges”

“What charges?”

“Rape.” The ugly word hung in the air.

“How could she say that about you? How could anyone say that.”

“She’s poor, and pregnant.”

How could he be so matter of fact about it? “But why is she so angry?”

How could anyone ...

“What are you suggesting Judi?”

For just a second his face looked so ugly with rage Judi was scared. Nelson slid his thumb under her chin and pulled her eyes up to meet his: “She’s angry with me for not wanting her; she’s angry with you, because you are the thing I want.”
“The thing that I want.” Judi repeated it on a loop, it pulsed in her brain, through the night, drew her like the slow strobe of a lighthouse. She was wanted. It was impossible, but true. Magical, then.

That ugly time was a test, but could Judi have believed in his love for her, without obstacles? The beam that shines on you, guiding you home, does so by illuminating the treacherous rocks.

He told her he wouldn’t be in “any kind of relationship” with her. Judi struggled to see how fathering someone’s child could be no kind of relationship, but kept quiet. As Rebecca’s due date got nearer and realer, as the baby grew in size and importance, Judi found herself, increasingly, nursing resentment. She had stopped taking her pill, and not having gotten round to telling Nelson about this decision, she couldn’t begin to explain why her period was suddenly having such a depressing effect on her.

Judi met Rebecca once. It wasn’t pleasant. Red nails rested casually against the rounded belly that jutted from her lithe little body. Her, tight high ponytail, sculptural cheekbones and general demeanour suggested someone a lot harder than Judi, but no older. Judi hadn’t known that. Hadn’t thought to ask. The whole thing was enough to make Judi hope, irrationally, impossibly, that they didn’t ever have to meet again.

Thoughts are things. Jason was almost four weeks premature. Rebecca had an episiotomy, a cut to help ease the baby out when his worryingly low heart rate suggested he needed help. Jason was born blue from lack of oxygen. Apnea, they said, it’s common in premature babies. The bit of their brain that reminds them to breathe isn’t properly developed yet. Jason would have to
remain in those sick-baby Tupperware things for at least forty-eight hours. Rebecca would have to take a special monitor home with her, watch him carefully, rub his back or tap his feet when an attack came, to remind him to breathe. Exhausted from the birth, recovering from an operation, Rebecca would have to do all that alone, because of Judi.

But Rebecca never took Jason home. She woke in agony, swollen. Judi had never felt more helpless than she did then, on the other side of the phone, juggling fractions. One in five pregnant women have Strep-B bacteria in their vagina. Rebecca was one of two in a million for whom strep develops into necrotizing fasciitis. One in four people who contract necrotizing fasciitis die.

"Is there anything I can do? Can I come and..."

"No. They might have to amputate, Judi. You can’t imagine what her family are feeling now.”

Judi felt a flash of anger, she knew all too well. Rebecca’s family, making sense of those hideously fluctuating odds, watched the sweating, chills, fever and nausea, the bruises rapidly developing across her body as it turned on itself. They cut her stomach to relieve pressure from fluid build-up, but doctors told her family further operations weren’t worth the discomfort.

One in ten babies with a strep B infection will die, but Jason wasn’t one of them. He was declared fit to leave the neonatal unit after four days, missing Rebecca by a few hours. Judi is convinced that he has missed her ever since.

A Moses basket established itself overnight in the corner of their horrible little basement room and at the centre of the world. Jason was a very small baby. Still on caffeine for the Apnea, he didn’t sleep much and so neither did Judi. A
stern midwife, a social worker, encouraged her to document all his bowel movements and feeding times and vomiting in a joyless jog book, then came and tutted at whatever she’d written. They took the beet-red bawling boy from her and soothed him with professional disinterest, shooting her look that said, “see: not that hard, is it?”

Turning from the bottle, again, again. Screaming. Judi was scared he’d starve. Sometimes she was scared that he was trying to, he certainly didn’t want to be there, with her. Judi cried along with him, murmuring:

“I know. I’m sorry. But I’m what you have.”

She looked at the small, screaming face and tried to feel like Jason had anything, really, to do with her. At night, having worn himself out with the day’s sadness and rage, Jason slept soundly on his father’s stomach. Judi listened to the two of them snore contentedly, and tried not to move or sob loudly enough to wake them.

Marina came. She nodded down at the painful shrieking thing in her arms, “born in mourning, puir wean.”

Judi tried to be grateful as Marina comforted him; swallowing the bitterness of watching yet another woman do what she couldn’t. Marina squinted at Judi, assessing her:

“Judi? He’s already got one cold mother: dinny give him two, eh?”

She told Judi that Jason’s unearthly noises were normal—gripe or colic, “testing his lungs.” It was testing, full stop. This child was not hers. She knew it, he knew it.
Judi bounced the bawling child from their horrible bedroom to their horrible living-room. If she strained up at the windows, she could just see the trendily-shod feet of people above her, going places.

Nelson left her, daily, went out into the world, to their work, and came back with groceries and stories and Judi struggled to find anything about her and Jason’s day to tell him that was remotely interesting. Sometimes she made things up: a Jehovah’s witness, a happy bath time. Sometimes she tried to explain that she felt that what they were doing was very wrong. Nelson said it was “ridiculous to feel guilty for not being a dead woman.” He told Judi her sure knowledge that Rebecca would have been better able to deal with this boy, her boy, than any amount of Judi’s reading *New Contented Baby* could compensate for, was “paranoia.”

Rebecca stared out of Jason’s eyes, right at Judi. Even now, Jason’s whole presence screams her name. His beautiful cheekbones are hers. It’s her pale skin that stretches across them. Rebecca is the ghost in his blood.

They bred ghosts. Judi got better at being pregnant, but terrible at staying that way. When those tiny people unstuck so did she. Around the time she would have had her, the first, Judi felt the absence, the empty space so much that she could see and feel where her own child wasn’t. Her breasts ached, underdrunk. Jason was just onto solids.

She knew, of course, she knew, that her Nelson loved her very much. But it didn’t affect him in the same way. The business was doing well, they’d built an extension, they’d started a home-care project. He was wearing better suits and talking excitedly about the fact that his new research has been picked up by the
media, he was going to write a column. Judi didn’t blame him for escaping into his other life. She would have loved to go too.

Jason was nearly three when Judi had her second miscarriage. Judi stared at walls a lot, yet failed to notice when Jason drew on them with crayon. They moved to Lanark Street, and Jason went to Nursery, and Judi went back to work, reclaiming her life in small increments, as Jason’s continued existence became steadily more likely seeming. When Jason finally called her “Judi” and stopped simply shouting “Jew” when he wanted something, Judi felt a lot better about things.

They showed him pictures of his mum, went to see Rebecca’s family, and her grave. Jason played in his Granny’s garden, Urquhart castle glowering down on them, Rebecca’s mum glowering at Judi.

Once, on a walk through Vikky Park on the way to see Marina, Jason and Judi found a blackbirds’ egg, fallen whole, a drop of blue sky misplaced in the dewy grass. Eight, Jason lit up with his Daddy’s smile. That easy glow of love she saw on Jason’s wee face then, it was all Nelson’s, nothing to do with Rebecca. She remembers the shock she felt at her own relief. How wonderful it was, for a moment to look at his face, and not see her.

“Is it for me, Judi?”

“Oh, yes Jason! That’s why it was put there. For you.”

They put tiny holes in the eggs’ top and bottom and blew it hollow so he could keep it. “Careful” she’d whispered. She didn’t need to. He handled it with adorable solemnity.
It goes on. Life does. Unless it doesn’t. And sometimes, now, Judi will try to imagine what it was like for Nelson, all of that, but what it was like for her gets in the way.
Most nurses are not expected to get up and traipse into work, off-duty, at the least sign of a problem. But then, Judi is not just any off-duty nurse, is she? She’s the mug that married the manager. It’s only really Nelson who’s meant to sign off on the alarm, but it happens too often. They take turns.

Judi brings in a box of donuts, and no one bats an eyelid, or thinks to say “thanks” or “that was nice of you.” Why would they? Judi’s just an appendage of Nelson, the boss minus his authority. Judi pockets the contents of her pigeon-hole. It’s half five, she starts work at eight. There’s no point going home. Judi decides to go eat cake.

Only three blocks away from Lotus Gardens, Café Insomnia suits its name. Worn out and jittery, like it’s beautiful young, permanently stoned and caffeinated, staff. The whole place a temple to sleep deprivation. Judi loves being on her own here, not being anyone’s anything. In the afternoon it’s awful: toddlers terrorising the goldfish, music she can only describe in terms like “loud” or “bad.” But at three or four in the morning, half dead, it’s heavenly.

Judi goes through the contents of her inbox. Jenny-Anne Litovner: 0800 34284 37. Please call back ASAP. The note says, in Stacey’s writing. Judi tries to think who Jenny-Anne might be, and why on earth she’d be contacting Judi at work.
“Jenner and Litovner, Solicitors” says a smart sounding voice at the end of the line. Judi is shivering in the grounds of work, exhausted, it’s nine, only an hour into her shift and she feels ready for bed. This is worse than whoever Jenny-Anne would have been. Why are her mother’s solicitors calling?

“Judi?” Mr Jenner has a warm, headteachery kind of voice.

“Yes.”

“I’m Lenzie Jenner, solicitor to,”

“You were Peter’s solicitor. I remember. Does she want the cottage back? She’s welcome to it.” Judi is surprised by the hostility in her voice. Obviously two weeks of daily appreciation have not quite purged her ill will.

“Isabel McGovan died, three days ago, in Nepal.”

“What?”

“She fell, hill walking. I’m afraid that due to the distance from home, and the nature of her death, bringing the body back to the UK was not an option. Your mother’s being cremated. I can give you the details for our contact at the British Consul there. You can let him, or me, know if you wish to be there, or where you wish the ashes returned to. Your mother’s life-insurance covers the funeral costs.

“Nepal? Who was with her?”

“She was travelling alone.”

“Oh God.”

Judi tries to imagine that that might have been a happy life. After all, her mother and Peter had spent their years, and his son’s inheritance, together, travelling the world. But could that be much fun without someone to point and
stare with? Judi can’t kid herself that “it’s what she would have wanted”. No one wants to die alone.

“As her sole beneficiary, it is my duty to inform you that you have also been left a substantial sum of money.”

“Oh God.”

“All of this is so unexpected, I understand. You’ll receive full details, and a cheque, in the mail. Have a read through the documents, and contact me if you have any questions at all, or require further assistance.”

“Thank you,” says Judi, because she feels like she should, and then she hears it all crash round her again: “unexpected”… “cheque in the mail”… Thank-stomp-you-stomp.

The rest of the day has an unreal quality to it. Judi wants to go tell Nelson “my mother’s dead,” but he’s known that for years, like Marina, like everyone. Judi marvels at herself: in all those years of telling that terrible lie, it never really occurred to her that it would happen for real one day, or what on Earth she’d do then. Judi’s mum won’t have an obituary, is not “dearly beloved.”

Judi goes back to see Hope, who has stopped being sick, mostly, since she started drinking the ginger tea in the mornings. It is Judi’s quiet little victory, managing Hope’s sickness. A little experiment to herself to prove her interfering isn’t always useless.

“I was stopped like a clock.” Hope says, chattily enough.

“Yeah. You were gone a while this time.”

“First time was the cereal aisle. Couldn’t choose then couldn’t move. Then couldn’t move still. Still, a woman still.”
Judi nods. It is almost unbearable, listening to this pretty little woman babble, that she sent her real mother away when she came to her, and instead chose to love, a lookalike. A parrot.
This is going to be terrible. She should have said she was busy, not interested, but who'd believe that? Not Nelson or Marina, not Andrea, who has been told God-even-knows what about her.

Marina and Judi walk through The West End terraces slipping on the disintegrated remains of autumn. The vivid sunset brings a fiery glow to the red sandstone. "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" Judi mutters, trying to remember what the poem is, or what it's about. Her Mother's ashes arrived at the house today. Judi had the day off in any case. She took the little pot out and tried to get herself to accept the fact that what remained of her mother was in there. Eventually, for want of anything else to do with it, she put the pot back into the box it had been delivered in, wrapped it in a thick shopping bag, and put it with the other skeletons in her closet. Judi laughs, probably because she shouldn't.

"What?"

"Oh. Nothing."

Marina's hair is brushed and plaited into domesticity. Andrea will have her sprawled provocatively by the Eco-pond in candy-floss knickers and a custard crème fascinator before she knows what's hit her. Judi has seen Marina four or five times since Tesco-gate, and each time wants to say, 'I know, Marina: I heard it all, I saw the cream cakes.' but no. It'll all come out, however and whenever it does.
The doorbell jingles cheerily. "Judi!" Andrea cries like bright bird-song. It's good, it really is. "So glad you could make it." Judi struggles to endure the false kiss, not to wipe sticky gloss from her face with her jacket sleeve like a bratty child. They all know why Judi's here. Because, only, of Marina. "Do bring a pal", she'd trilled down the phone, then whatdy'know, hadn't Marina called just two hours later, asking what she was doing this very evening? What are they playing at?

"Ooh, this must be..." Andrea's eyes dart up and right, "mortified" to have "forgotten" the name of the friend Judi has brought along.

"Marina. It's a pleasure."

Please! And why is Judi the pawn in their ridiculous lovegame? Pride. She wanted to be part of things, wanted to show off. Well, here you are, Judi. This is what you get with your bloody "manifesting" isn't it? Judi has come to see, more and more that "the cause is always your thoughts." Marina and Andrea disentangle palms and unlock eyes, it's easier, to believe in this pantomime of implausibility as the work of Judi's twisted psyche than a conclusion two such disparate people could have come to by themselves.

"Remind me why we are here?" Judi hisses

"You wanted to go to the Jane Austen thing: We're at the Jane Austen thing." Marina shrugs, there's nothing to discuss. Thoughts become things.

"But you hate Jane Austen."

"Noadont! Forerunning feminist thinker," Marina says, loudly. "But this isn't about me, is it?" Marina whispers encouragingly in Judi's ear, "I'm here for yo-ou, moral support, isn't it?"
“You’re a pal in a million.”

They walk down the hall of Andrea’s lovely house. They squeeze past an elegant blonde thirty-something, pinned to a wall by a tweedy looking academic talking about the “essential paradox of the Tilneys.” This isn’t a book group, it’s some sort of literary wee-ing competition. There are a lot of people here, all of whom know exactly who wrote the “dying of the light” thing. Dillon something? Welsh? It gnaws at her, as though, if she can only remember, she’ll have earned her right to be there.

Everyone else looks not genuinely relaxed or informal, but an expensive, careful imitation of relaxed informality. What they call ”smart dressing” on the television.

“Judi, you know Jim.”

Jim Blair smiles vaguely, as if his wife has for some reason taken it upon herself to introduce him to the woman serving at the supermarket checkout. Judi smiles dutifully back, as if she is, in fact, the woman at the supermarket check-out. Judi looks around to introduce Marina, but Marina is nowhere to be seen, clearly she’s “here for” Judi in a more metaphorical sense than literal one.

This is why you are so lonely, Judi tells herself, it is because, deep down, you are a nasty human being with no real interest in your fellow man. “Thoughts become things,” Judi remembers, and in her new positive inner voice thinks, How lucky I am to be here, what a wonderful opportunity to shine. It sounds a little sarcastic. Judi doesn’t belong here. “I belong here.” She tells herself in the new voice. It sounds delusional. Andrea apologises to Judi, says there’s
something she “must” do. Whilst Andrea’s departure is normally an immense relief, this time Judi longs to grip her hostesses’ skirt.

Jim casts an eye around the gathering and smiles: “what do you think?” He’s talking to Judi.

“About what?” Judi isn’t going to be caught out that easily.

“Andie's book thing. She likes to keep her hand in.”

Judi struggles not to giggle. “I’m sorry, hand in what?” Does he know something, what’s he trying to tell her?

“The academic world, I suppose. Austen scholar.”

Judi never considered what Andrea might have done before smug motherhood and tit cupcakes, but of course she would be highly educated, and of course her field would be Judi’s private passion.

“I had no idea.”

“Mmm, St Andrews: we met in during her Doctorate.”

“Great. That’s great.” That sucks: another reason to feel inferior. She is both impressed and surprised that a woman like Andrea should get a PHD and not be all Dr this and Dr that all the time, Judi knows she would.

“And you...?”

“Nursing.”

“Well.” Jim Blair looks around for help, “there’s plenty to eat: help yourself.”

Relieved to be dismissed, Judi does as she’s told, shoulder-nudging her way through little self-contained huddles of people she half recognises towards
the low table of food at the back wall. She spies Hamish at the other side of the buffet table and joins him in demolishing it.

"Nice place, eh?" Hamish grins.

Judi nods grudgingly. "It’s pretty brilliant. I didn’t know Andrea used to be a lecturer."

"Who told you that?" Hamish gobbles another crostini. "My god these are good, so, woody, mushroomy,"

"Sooo good," Judi concurs.

"But no, thanks to Jim she wasn’t." Hamish whispers.

"Oh aye?" Why does the whole bloody world revolve around Andrea Blair, eh?

"She got to the last year of a PHD, dropped out when she was expecting."

Says Hamish, as if the academic contribution that wasn’t is some great loss to humanity. Judi bites her lip, she finds it hard to feel sorry for people who have children "get in the way" of their plans.

"Eat another of these, they’re so chewy!" she says.

"Are we pigs?" Hamish smiles, taking two.

"Yes, we are absolutely."

Judi likes when they say we. Oh be careful. It doesn’t do to look too long at what’s on the other side of the fence. It probably doesn’t do either to think of your relationship as a fence.

"These are the mushroomiest thing I have ever eaten." Judi thinks as long as they stick to the crostini they’ll be safe.
“Mushroomiest, that’s the cutest abuse of the English language I’ve heard today.”

“Thanks,” Judi says awkwardly.

“Is it inappropriate to call a married woman cute?” It sounds like a line, but Hamish is probably just actually checking.

“I don’t know, ask a married woman.” Judi is shocked. She’s flirting with him! She might not be married woman, but she’s been living as one for the past seventeen years. “Ask your wife.” Judi says, and then immediately regrets it.

Judi has only ever met Stella once, years ago at a school fundraiser. She was ridiculously attractive, then. At the wine tasting, Stella got drunk almost instantly, making brassy jokes about spit or swallow. It was tedious quickly. When Hamish suggested it was maybe time for them to go home she got nasty. “And do what, eh?” she’d shouted at him. Judi remembers being mortified just to witness it, and also she and Nelson laughing about it in the car home. “Can you imagine?” They’d said. Judi doesn’t have to imagine, these days. She knows how your body’s failure can make you feel a failure over all.

Judi and Hamish hoover up at least half the platter of mushroom crostini. She cannot remember eating, or drinking, with such unashamed greed in front of so many people, but somehow having Hamish there as an accomplice makes it ok. They talk about the eco-garden, primarily the fact that their little project is going to be used to flog pants, soon, because neither of them have the guts to say no to Andrea.

“Why is our teapot garden not art, but Andrea’s putting some wax in a teacup, or making a bra look like an Eccles cake, is?” Judi says, too loudly.
“Confidence, maybe?” Hamish’s face is kind.

Judi sees people unstacking seats into rows of four and goes off to do something useful, anxious that Hamish wants rid of her and doesn’t know how to say as much. The babysitting community must be grateful for these soirees. She takes a seat, and smiles at the people around her in the hope that they will not realise she’s an interloper.

First, two folk from the Amateur Dramatics society ham-up one of the sillier passages in the novel. Isabella, a neurotic mother, dandles a rubber-doll as she becomes increasingly hysterical about the imagined perils that might befall her child or father.

“The sea is rarely of any use to anybody. I am sure it nearly killed me once,” says Mr Woodhouse, when his daughter suggests the coastal air might improve his health. Judi is caught and held in the shared laughter of the crowd. By the end of their scene, Isabella is waving her “baby” by the ankle for emphasis. Not something Judi remembers from the book, but reassuringly low-brow. Judi feels guilty about flirting with Hamish, but what did she really do?

After the first “reading,” people venture fairly safe opinions about Emma, many of which Judi recognises from the online study guide. She’s not the only one to have cribbed.

“The word competence, in Austen, is synonymous with having the financial means to live comfortably,” someone behind Judi says. People make vague thoughtful noises. Judi, sitting in the house of a woman who has always made her feel incompetent, isn’t sure word has quite shaken the meaning.
Perhaps, we are just less honest these days about precisely what competency entails.

Hamish does a reading next. Sitting at roughly groin-height, only metres from the man, Judi is glad he’s chosen a more contemporary trouser style, but all the same, struggles to look away. It actually feels like magnetic pull.

During the discussion Judi wants to join in, but knowing when isn’t easy, and by the time there’s a gap to say what she’s thought of, someone has already said it. She doesn’t belong here, the room’s wood panelling seems to lurch and keel, the overall effect is that she’s on the Titanic, let out on the wrong deck, and someone will haul her back to steerage soon.

Andrea announces their special guest speaker, American Austen specialist, Arnie Perlstein, will present his theory of “Shadow Stories in Austen” after a break. People “Oooh.” What’s a shadow story?

As the smokers make a dash for exit she scans the room for Marina, no luck. How do all these people know each other and have things to discuss other than their jobs, the television, or their children. Judi can’t blame anyone for not having much to say to her: she can’t think of a thing to say to them. She finds Hamish and tells him how good he was, and listens to some other people tell him how good he was, feeling oddly proud, as though it had anything to do with her. Judi thinks how nice it would be to marry him and live in a cottage somewhere, have a hedgehog sanctuary or something. She could make jam out of the sort of countryside things you find on woodland hedges, maybe.

“Do you like hedges?” she asks Hamish, a little slurrily.

“Yes,” he replies without guile. “A lot: you can find all sorts.”
Judi’s mind goes to liquorice, and she giggles. Hamish giggles back although he can’t possibly know what she’s laughing at.

Where’s Marina? Has Jim caught them snogging and booted her out, locked her in an attic somewhere, or... Before she can give it much more thought a fifty-something in slacks, a seventies moustache and a thick wool suit-jacket strolls out. Arnie Perlstien doesn’t ask for people to stop talking, or even wait for them to do so, they just migrate obediently back to their seats. Judi is really noticing things, a lot. She feels, like someone turned up the reality dial. Everything is just the same, but more so.

The Am Dram actress from the first reading takes the empty seat that would be Marina’s had Judi not been abandoned. The main lights flick off, and the room is pitch dark, then a sudden brightness. Judi’s eyes smart at the intensity of it. An overhead projector pools a square of blinding light onto the wood panelling behind him, but to Judi, that patch of blinding white light, it feels, looks, like a hole cut through the canvas of the night into the pure white of heaven, just above her, so exactly as she imagined it: her sign, she can sort of hear harps.

The woman who played Isabella murmurs something beside Judi, who nods vaguely, not trusting herself to speak or to take in any additional information. The white light. My baby! “Whatever you conceive and believe, you can achieve” Judi tries to remind herself that just because something rhymes doesn’t mean it is true. But it might be: mightn’t it? “Thank you, thank you!” she says to herself, to the universe on the off-chance, and excited, actually excited. The tiny logical part of her brain is at war with the jubilant remainder, shouting
“Shut up, you’re drunk: this is not some sort of celestial phenomenon: it’s an overhead projector.” Oh yeah, just a... Judi looks around forty-ish faces stare expectantly at the white screen, nothing much is happening, but she... Judi closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, and just then feels a weight placed in her arms. She looks down and jolts.
A baby! Babydoll. Just a doll! Its hinged eyelids are tilted back and it stares glassily back at her. The actress whispers “thanks,” and having removed her sweater, grabs the doll from Judi’s lap and shunts it roughly under her own seat.

The light, the baby. Her very presence here! Her mum, the... No. Someone has just used her lap as a temporary prop-shelf, nothing else is happening. Why does it feel like really important things just have?

Forever has passed when Arnie Perlstein walks into the light, but it can’t have been more than a few seconds. The screen fills with the words “It must be Borne.” Judi feels her eyes widen.

Coincidence. But then again, what if her belief is all that’s required for it not to be one? She tries to focus on the words this man is saying, and stop seeing him as a cosmic herald of an unlikely pregnancy.

"I must warn the more," Arnie pauses “... traditional, Austenites in the room that you may find some of what I have to say, uh... challenging.”

There is a satisfying communal inhalation of breath around the room, as if Mr Perlstein explains his theory, that Jane Fairfax, in addition to her secret engagement, is secretly pregnant, and that her child is subsequently adopted by Emma’s old governess, Mrs Weston.

Judi tries to get her head round the idea. She’s read Emma, oh, maybe five times in her life, and this has never occurred to her. Judi had always thought it weird that Jane’s “cold” went on so long, for so much of the novel, but thought of it as lovesickness or depression: she’s secretly engaged to a fickle young man of
a higher social station, with nothing more to look forward to than an indefinite stint as the governess of someone else's brats until his benefactors die, at which point they can finally marry. Judi would never have believed, on first reading, quite how she’d come to relate to that. Who wouldn’t be depressed?

“….A birth or a miscarriage or even an abortion…” Arnie Perlstein is saying. Some folk gasp, as if abortions didn’t happen in Jane Austen’s time. There have always been abortions, because there have always been worse things than abortion.

Arnie tracks Jane’s “pregnancy,” from increased fatigue to the height of her illness - around nine months from her first catching the “cold”. When Jane arrives in Highbury she is “somewhere between thin and fat” and “a slight appearance of ill health” yet a complexion “which really needed no fuller bloom.”

The crackle of pages as folk attempt to check the quotations for themselves against the too fast slides in the too dark room is like distant thunder. People make the kind of noises normally reserved for fireworks as Perlstein pulls quotes with the flourish of a magician pulling rabbits from hats.

But Judi wonders why Jane Austen would go to the bother of inventing a whole convoluted sub-plot just to obscure it. Surely, Ploughing through, picking things out, you could twist them to mean whatever other thing you wanted.

Concealing such a thing would surely be impossible? No matter how delicate the sensibilities of Regency England, pregnancy attests to itself, bodies swell, stretch, leak.
What else could you think pregnancy was? The menopause, Judi answers herself, thinking not of Jane - Fairfax or Austen- but of Hope, whose skirt is too tight at the waist this week, whose nauseous mornings have been quelled with ginger tea. Is Hope pregnant? Judi feels the absence in her arms where so recently a “baby” was placed in them. The “baby” was a doll, it’s under the chair beside her, Judi knows this. So why does it feel equally true that Judi has placed that child within Hope’s body?

“If Jane is pregnant, Pearlstein continues, “who got her pregnant.”

Don’t ask that. Arnie talks of “bluebeard husbands” and “serial miscarriages,” and Judi feels the weight of the wine in her stomach, suddenly very sick indeed. She remembers the many occasions when Hope’s voice has so perfectly mirrored her own, and how perfectly, earlier this week, it mirrored her husband’s. It can’t be true, but if it is, then what on Earth happens next?

“Frank,” Arnie smiles, shepherding them towards his conclusion, “really Frank Weston, becomes Frank Churchill and is given back to the grandparents when his mother dies, so there is a precedent for such baby swapping antics.”

“To give up one’s child! I really never could think well of anybody who proposed such a thing to anybody else” reads the slide above.

But how do you propose such a thing to someone with such a slender grasp on reality? Could it ever be consensual? Could it have been consensual? She thinks of her sexually charged patient and sexually deprived partner and shudders. She tries to remember that, as far as she knows, the intense desire she has to be sick - to be sick and then find her sick husband and cause him some sort of sickening damage- is evidenced purely in her imagination, but everything
external seems to answer her internal thoughts, as though the universe were in discussion with her, showing her the way.

Why, Perlstein asks, if Mrs Weston is really pregnant, does no one know, or say, a thing until the seventh month of her pregnancy?

Judi knows why women do not say, still, now. Fear. Terrified their body will not support the new life long enough for it to meet the world. It makes Judi mad, this hushing, wouldn’t it be better to tell everyone right away, have people’s support and love and warm wishes right away? To have those very same things, still, if you do miscarry? If it is nerve wracking to announce a pregnancy, then to announce a miscarriage is impossible, it is a silence you carry in the place of the child.

"Mrs Weston is thirty-seven, a mature mother by our standards: let alone Austen’s: she would be terrified of losing the child," Judi is surprised to find that she is heckling the guest speaker. There are tuts, definitely, but there are murmurs of what sounds like approval from some places.

Arnie smiles broadly, “I’m sorry Miss…?

“Judi” Judi says, feeling, suddenly, like a kid onstage at the magic show.

“Well, Miss Judi” (Several people laugh,) “How then do you explain why Mrs Weston never mentioned her pregnancy to Emma until Chapter 42. Emma: not only her neighbour but, in fact, her closest female friend in Highbury, almost a sister?”

“Maybe Mrs Weston doesn’t trust Emma not to gossip”
“Or perhaps terrified that people will discover she herself is infertile, that the child is none other than Jane Fairfax’s baby!” Folk murmur agreement. Judi feels overpowered by it all.

“How could Mr. Weston keep such a secret?” Pearlstein asks Judi, asks the crowd, who hum and haw intellectually. “This is a serious objection, in my opinion.”

“But the story is not really about Jane Fairfax, or Mrs Weston is it?” Judi shouts in exasperation, irritated to find herself heckling him again. Why is she doing this? She shakes her head to overcome the physical sensation that they are turning, that Pearlstein is the axis around whom the room shifts.

“I do not find satisfactory the response that this was tangential to the story,” Perlstein replies.

Everyone is looking at her as though she is an amusing baby, believing her senseless burbling to be sufficient reply to the grown-up’s questions. Judi starts to hiccup: great painful heaves, her mouth fills with saliva, in seconds, she knows, she will be sick. She pushes past “Isabella” and runs out of the room, all eyes following, her mouth now full of spit she daren’t swallow. Judi runs up some stairs, stomach lurching with every now automatic “thank” “you”. Bedroom. Wait, there’s an ensuite.

She reaches the ceramic basin just before the bitter flood of wine, mushroom and stomach acid would surely have jumped ship in any case, and half-kneels against the toilet bowl, feeling it’s coolness against her face, feeling her hot tears sting the skin of her face and neck. In between the waves of
nausea she notices that the bathroom has a door on two sides, interconnected.

What happens next?

There is a soft tap on the door, "Judi?" And Marina is in the room, her soft sweet hand on Judi’s back: “what’ve you done to yourself?”

"Something, dunno. I’ve," Judi opens her mouth to say “manifested” but her mouth just manifests another slew of bile. She gulps, turning to her friend, noticing she’s wearing only a slip. It’s extremely lacy.

“I’ve done this to us all,” Judi says, noticing Andrea Blair hovering in the doorway behind Marina, buttoning her blouse and looking irritated. Clearly, things have gone beyond cream cakes. Judi turns her head to vomit again. It feels like her head is exploding paint.

“What on Earth is going on here?” says a stern male voice immediately behind her.

“Oh, Jim, baby, can you deal with this poor woman? Phone her a taxi or something?” Andrea doesn’t miss a beat. “Oh, I know, I know: it was rude of me to sneak off, terribly: but have you seen Marina? Look at these curves? I’ve decided she’s the perfect. The “real woman” model I’ve been looking for, for my larger lady boudoir-collection.”

Judi squints up at the two women. Marina smiles nervously, and extends her hand to Jim, giving him her usual blokey shake, which looks pleasingly innocuous, delivered from a woman dressed in a small, satin, pudding-themed negligee.

“I’ve been a fan of your wife’s work for a while now,” Marina says casually.
Jim drives Judi home with a kitchen basin on her lap. Watered down Dettol sloshes reproachfully from side to side each time he breaks or turns a corner. Jim seems alarming, grotesque, sucking air though his teeth at his fellow motorist’s driving:

“Less haste, more speed, that’s what I say: of course not everyone can pace themselves,”

Judi hangs her head so low it nearly hits the basin.

“Did you have a nice evening, before, ah: your sudden illness?”

Judi mumbles her assent, her mind keeps going off on tangents, imagining scenarios so powerfully that staying anchored in the present, hearing what’s being said, seeing what’s in front of her above whatever fancy has overtaken her mind at that point is almost impossible, and she’s totally at a loss as to how to change it.

“It would have been nice,” Jim continued “to have asked Mr Pearlstein some questions myself.”

If Jim is always so unpleasant then no wonder Andrea wanted some comfort elsewhere.

“It’s just as well, really,” Jim quips glibly, “that you didn’t wait until the end of the talk, like everyone else, to make your voice heard, isn’t it? Or we all might have missed your lively interruptions?” Judi lets it wash over her like the slop of the shame-bucket.
Semi-tropical heat hits her in the face as soon as she opens the door, every light in the house is on. Judi flicks each as she passes, turns the thermostat off, wondering how many hours the hot water has been “emergency on” for.

“What time d’ye call this, eh?” Jason is barefooted, wearing boxer shorts and a band t-shirt so old and thin it’s semi-transparent. Judi lacks the energy or moral high ground to tell anyone else how to behave this evening. He is sunk in an armchair, Bingley on his lap, fire blazing, a plate of pizza slices on one arm, a can of fizzy juice in the other. She feels the massiveness of her love for him roar like a lion, like a hearth-fire. Home. It is only about ten. “Wanna Bru?”

Judi nods meekly and sits down next to the too-loud television and too hot fire, enjoying both. Jason hands her the can: the painful coldness of the neon orange bubblegummy liquid, in contrast to the room, is very pleasant. Judi pretends to disdain the stuff. One of those Scottish foods which seem to flaunt their nutritional deficit, that become consumed almost like edible badges of honour by Scotland’s poor folk, and are worn round the waist, and in a certain grayish pallor in the face, every day of too-short lives. Closest he got to an Irn Bru in his early years was apple juice, and even that she’d diluted with water to stop it being too fun. Unfortunately, there comes a time when you cannot dictate each dietary decision, or sadly any decision that they make, and Judi supposes that if Irn Bru in his boxers is Jason’s idea of hedonism, then she and Nelson haven’t done too badly with him.

“D’you have a nice night, Judi?”

“Awful actually.” She gives Jason a brief summary of events, minus the revelatory part of the evening. After all he’s the one that’ll have to hear it all in
school tomorrow. Jason’s kind about the whole thing, tutting good naturedly when she says “they just kept filling it up,” as if at the heady age of seventeen a seasoned drinker like Jason would never fall victim of the top-up trap. “Toby’s dad gave me a lift home,” she finishes, grimacing an apology at Jason, “he made me sit with a basin of disinfectant on my knee.”

“Aye, bucket of shame. He did that to Roxie too, a couple of weeks ago:. Massive knobber, eh?”

Judi shivers a little despite the massive heat, and Jason noticing, magnanimously transfers Bingley from his lap to hers, then takes a blanket from behind his chair and dumps it over them both. Bingley kneads happily away, Jason, with mock seriousness, tucks the blanket in around them both at the sides, as if he was crimping the edges of a pie he was baking them into. Judi is enjoying this rare dose of parenting from her step-son. He is still watching her, half concerned, half amused, and Judi tries to imagine growing up in a house where an outlandishly drunk parent is some kind of novelty.

“You did know already, right?

“Right!” Jason says, “obviously.”

Judi’s darkly psychedelic sensation of earlier, where her inside and outside worlds seemed to spill, to collate and answer each other, has not quite left her. Everything is swimming. She cannot begin to gauge what people might have seen, looking at her tonight.

“Where’s your father?”

“In bed.”

“Does he know about, uh...”
The last thing she wants to do is explain herself to Nelson, now. The horror is there, waiting, but this cozy fire and uncharacteristically chatty Jason, both are keeping it at bay.

Jason grins massively, enjoying the role reversal. “Naw, he’s been upstairs for about an hour. Craig messaged ten minutes ‘fore you got in: said you were the only interesting thing that happened.”

Craig! She knew she recognised that wine-boy. Judi thinks how, if she hadn’t been where she had, Jim Blair could well have walked upstairs and found a lot more than Judi groaning in that bedroom. Drunk and obnoxious in front of all the sort of people Judi generally wants to get on with in spite of herself. She would normally be in floods of tears, there would be weeks of self-recrimination, a horror of leaving the house; God, she’d probably beg to move, but it all seems... Just too small waste shame on, really. If she’s right, when will there ever be another night like this? Nelson sleeping obliviously upstairs, her wee boy and she sharing heat and company. On the muted screen, some grotesque tree-like creature blinks one disgusting eye above subtitles. “Whatye watching?”

“Little Otek. Finnish animation thing. Will I put it back to the start?”

“Aye, sure” Judi wishes life was a stop frame animation, where you could pause, between each second’s frozen action, and gently nudge things into perfection. Where scenes could be skipped and deleted.

“Wannacuppa?” Jason seems actually excited to stay up late watching a movie with her. Judi hugs herself, looks around the room: this house she’s spent the last few years grafting into an unmarked sheet, untrodden snow, and
wonders: is the universe infinitely wise, or infinitely infantile? Perhaps unmarked pages call out to be scrawled on, surely as a pristine sheet of ice calls little feet to smash it.

Following her true path will take some serious lying, Judi thinks, shutting the door behind her in tiny increments, stepping soundlessly out into harsh slap of one a.m. winter air. Judi supposes that staying up until half twelve with your son on a school night, watching bizarre animated horror, drinking sugary caffeinated drinks together, and secretly researching the vehicle you’re going buy the next day – in order to leave- with money you’ve neglected to inform your family that you’ve inherited in the first place: a lot of people would consider that bad parenting. How drunk is she still? It’s hard to know what’s adrenaline and what’s alcohol, caffeine, sugar, fear. She can feel herself illuminated, still, with the glow of earlier, can still feel the trace of the weight of that warm, living, future baby in her hands. Judi has never felt more connected, more aligned with the universe, each step a step towards her future. Beneath the thin leather of red ballet shoes, the frosty paving-slabs sting as they meet her feet.

These shoes. They’ve survived her many wardrobe culls, waited patiently, to grant her the opportunity to creep noiselessly from the house. A different person’s shoes: they are perfect for now, meant. Swaddled in Jason’s black hoodie, Judi feels the slightly-too-tightness of her white tunic beneath – the one she never wears because of how big it makes her belly look. Everything is practical in the right circumstances. Moving from the house, strides increasing,
becoming leaps, the rhythm of her “thanks” still beating in her chest with every step of her ballet feet, she cannot resist a twirl. It's the red shoes: they can’t stop dancing. It’s adventure. Life is certainly interesting now. She could wake up tomorrow in a police cell, or on her own pillow in their marital bed with tears of relief or apology salt-crusted to her face. She doesn’t think so.
Round the corner, waiting, the taxi. She’s going to need to get her own getaway vehicle if she’s going to get away with this. Meanwhile, the shininess of the black cab, the warmth of its orange light. It’s all exactly as it should be. In flow, in the zone.

Judi straightens herself to sobriety, lifting the straps of her handbag from her shoulders for a second to ease the weight of the three, most perfect skimming stones, liberated from her collection in the bathroom.

She refuses, she will refuse, to listen to those niggly, self-critical, little voices in her head, those hangovers of her old self, the relic of that counterproductive pessimistic programming that’s held her back for so long and is whining, “isn’t this a bit evil?” and screaming “stop,” and other unhelpful stuff like that. Well, it’s easy to be cynical. What good does it do? Given the far-fetched nature of her life lately, Judi prides herself on the fact that she’s remaining pretty realistic.

“Miss Austen?” the driver asks,

“Aye, That’s me!” and they speed into the night. “Night Shift?” the driver shouts above the Country and Western that blares, now and always, from late night Glasgow commercial radio.

“Yeah.” Judi has already asked to be dropped off at a nursing home two blocks away from Lotus Gardens.

“Emergency call-out?”
“Something like that.” Trying to be as vague as possible just seems to spark the cabbie’s interest.

“S’pose, there’s nae guid news, nursin, wi the auld folk,” he says, “spose it’s dying mainly,”

Jeso: why did she have to get some big conversationalist? The taxi driver sucks air through his teeth and continues: “S’pose it’s pretty bleak, that place?”

“Depends.” Judi shrugs. The driver waits for her to elaborate and when she doesn’t the silence hangs between them. The Eagles come on the radio and he sings along. Judi is uncomfortably aware of the little red lights that indicate that the doors are locked on either side of her, as the cabby croons “You can check out any time, but you can never leave...” in faux-American. “Ah mean, what’s that meant tae mean?” he asks her.

“You can kill yourself.” Judi snaps.

“Whit?” He sounds offended.

“It means,” she says, trying to sound bright and patient, “the only way you can leave the hotel’s if you kill yourself.”

“Bleak!” says the cabby, as though he’s proven something.

“Aye, bleak.” Judi agrees, tapping the hard white crescents of her nails against the hard white plastic of the pregnancy test in her tight, white tunic pocket.

“We at Lotus Garden’s pride ourselves on our state of the art security system,” Judi recites internally, from rote, walking towards the building that has been the hub of her life now for nineteen years. She’s said it endless times, steering
families round the grounds, the day-rooms. “Of course,” she tells the guests, “our staff are highly screened, and regularly subjected to full enhanced disclosure checks. A rigid infrastructure (an excel doc) ensures ultimate compliance to the Mental Health Act Code of Practice at all times.” At Lotus Gardens, clients would never have to fear being unduly concerned that their rellies might experience the further indignation of being felt up or bumped off by some jumped-up nurse who’s skeleton keys have gone to her head. There’ll be no pocketing of pocket watches, checking up on check books, no jeopardizing precious inheritances. At the end of each shift, all security fobs, keys and swipe cards are signed out (more paperwork) and stripped from the care team, rendering them mortal once more. Off duty, they are spat out of the high-security gates into a less malleable world, where the uncooperative cannot be sedated, and “compassionate physical restraint” becomes plain old assault. So no, not just any old off-duty nurse has twenty-four hour access to the building, obviously! But then, Judi is not just any old off-duty nurse, is she?

“For our highest risk patients, visits occur only within the secure perimeter, which includes barrier system, sterile area, patient-free lobby and associated CCTV, alarm and lighting systems,” Judi reels off, as the red shoes skip towards Lotus Gardens, in the practiced chipper manner of an air-hostess pointing out exits. It mitigates against the truth: what she’s really demonstrating to families, partners and carers at their wits end with their “loved ones” is the reassuring lack of exits.

Judi has recited this spiel about the “State of the Art” CCTV systems, monitored 24 hours a day, for the last, oh, sixteen years? Never once mentioning
that at no point in the last sixteen years have they been updated, and so whatever art they are the state of is pretty retro now. When they’re inspected, inevitably, she’ll be there looking over the VHS tapes, making sure they’re still fully labelled and operational, filling in the blanks in the paperwork which inevitably occur when bored night-watchmen find more interesting things to do than fill in a log book.

All doors operate on controlled access systems -which allow freedom of movement controlled by electronic fobs, just like these: Judi gives Nelson’s lanyard, heavy with keys, a demonstrative jingle. All doors also deadlock, meaning staff can immediately cater the level of patient-access to their individual safety needs at any given time,” Every item of furniture in the high-risk area of Lotus Gardens is designed to be too heavy, too attached, too solid, unsnappable, rounded at the edges, and blunt to allow anyone to “check out” by themselves. It’s a disheartening aesthetic, but then so is venereal blood.

Yes, a formidable degree of security, all geared to keep their “formal” patients (formal, as in sectioned, as opposed to wearing dinner-jackets or something,) from getting out. And so far, broadly, it was worked.

The only “escapee” issue is from the all-female, rehabilitation ward at the back of the grounds. “The Winehouse,” Nelson took to calling the unit sometime before the singer most famous for the song “Rehab,” died alone, (watching You Tube videos of herself in her bedroom, having drunk so much she couldn’t breathe.) Exclusive, just six places, and a 14 month waiting list, not one of these women has ever been “sectioned.” These guests voluntarily revoke their own freedom: debilitating addictions –often to less regulated forms of the same
substances synthesised and served up in little rattling cups just a couple of walls away- are what they’re trying to escape from. When “the Winehouse girls” shimmy out of their first floor, unalarmed windows, they are generally found in tears by the tall grey security gates. No one has ever asked Judi about how someone might break in to the facility.

Should a common criminal ever succeed in scaling the 12 foot, smooth red sandstone perimeter wall, they would find themselves quickly recorded by the infra-red cameras trained to follow their every move. They might, conceivably, employ a vaulting pole and grapple-hook to leap from the only section of wall that comes even close to nudging any of the buildings: and leap from there to the second floor of the women's recreation lounge, but the area is heavily alarmed to compensate for that very weakness. A strong breeze has been known to set off the entire system. And whilst the duty-nurse, or night watchman: whoever gets there first, can type in the requisite code to cease the alarm's painful caterwauling, in order to insure minimum disturbance for the residents, (who, let's face it, are pretty disturbed already,) the message has by that time been electronically submitted to the local constabulary. The Police are then contractually obliged to turn up and walk about futility, for the next hour. Additionally, whilst the caterwaul of the alarm can be deactivated, the system itself cannot be taken off “high alert” and fully reset by anyone but the general manager... technically. In recent years, in practice, the task has frequently fallen to his ever-obliging partner, who now roots in her handbag for the first of the skimming stones.
Standing in the middle of the road, half an ear turned to the quiet semi-residential street for any sign of traffic, Judi sets her fingertips into a siteline before her, and throws. The stone sails off into the darkness and makes no reply. Even as she throws the second she catches herself thinking “third-time lucky” and knows it is the next one, not this, that will hit. The third stone feels perfect in her hand, meant, and she feels some part of her sail through the air with it, whoosh, bounce off the pane and smash. The siren bursts into ugly, brilliant song. Judi, wild heart racing, turns and runs with increasing speed towards Insomnia.

Propelled by the events she’s set in motion, there’s another urge: one just sit down on the street and stay there. It feels tempting in a way that she doesn’t really understand, so that actually, it’s a guilty relief to walk past the painfully young and heroin-vacant homeless girl outside the coffee shop, as if the young girl is doing that so that Judi doesn’t have to, as if to go inside is to differentiate between them.

Seeing her reflection in the shiny counter-top, still in the hoodie, the dowdy mossy skirt, Judi notices that, visually, the divide between the girl outside and her is pretty thin today. Judi too looks like human street furniture right now: hair everywhere, eyes like voids, circles of sweat from her chin to chest.

Insomnia, is as dead as Judi hoped it would be: completely save for some ratty haired, haunted-looking girl in a tatty grey Afghan, scribbling into a notebook. There is no music at this time, because silence is what people come here to listen to at night, if they come, which typically they don’t. In the café, the
boy with the fluffy blue hair behind the counter is lost between the pages of a
gory-looking comic book.

Her fizzing excitement is dying now, replaced by a metallic dread. Mainly,
what she feels is worry: why hasn't anyone rung yet? What if they've called the
house, and what if, for some reason, Jason or Nelson have got up in the night,
realised that their landline telephone -who's existence no-one generally
acknowledges but her- is pulled out at the wall, and plugged it back, potentially
damning her? No. Her cosmic timing, will be perfect. She slides herself into the
space nearest the radiator--; pulls a plastic bag with her work shoes from her
handbag, eases off the cold wet red ones, and wraps them to be binned.

Stanley Grieg, a night watchman so predisposed to deferential grovelling
where Nelson's concerned, that being around the two of them always makes
Judi feels she's stepped into a Dickensian period Drama, isn't entirely
comfortable with waking the big chief. Totally fine with phoning his wife and
getting her to do it though. Perfect, she thinks: not at all sarcastically.

"H'lo?" Judi tries to sound as much as possible like someone who has just
woken from a deep sleep, beside their husband, in their marital bed:
monosyllabic.

"Oh, aye. Judi is that you?"

"Aye s'me. ...I take it you're not phonin' to ask me tae elope with you?"

"Heh." Stanley pauses awkwardly, probably shuddering internally at the
idea "Naw." He concludes.
“Alarm?”

“Aye. S’ Mister Urquhart there?”

“It’s 4;30 am: if he’s not with you, where else would he be?” Judi snaps, catching the uncharacteristic prudishness of it, inwardly scolding herself: too much! “But he was at some running club thing the night, had a bit tae drink. I don’t imagine he can drive yet. Will I do?”

“Aye. Course!” Stanley sounds relieved. “How long’ll you be?”

“Half an hour maybe? I’m sure you can keep the polis entertained in the meantime.”

The odd girl in the kaftan has been joined by a greasy but kind-looking boy. The girl looks bored, but then the boy makes a joke. Judi can’t hear the words, just the tone of it, the lightness as the girl’s bubbles of laughter rise to meet it. She uncrosses her legs and leans in towards him, suddenly aware of her body and its power.

Sucking a syrupy, frothy gulp from the oversized mug, Judi finds she does feel a little better. It’s what you do, isn’t it? So you can’t have a faithful husband, or the baby you want, or an attractive body: never mind: have this “pumpkin-spice latte,” have a some chocolate-ya crap. Have something the sad girl on the steps outside can’t, and, as Bob Geldolf and his celebrity chums
somewhat callously sang on Live Aid, “tonight, thank God it’s them instead of you.”
On the way out, as she re-passes the streetgirl. What set of circumstances led her to sit down on the stone slabs and stay there in this freezing weather? Now, having brushed her own hair into place as best as she can, put a bit of slap and having swapped the hoodie for her good coat, the divide seems firmly back in place. She walks past the girl, with a large cake-box full of dime-bar topped cheesecake, the kind of food that’s nothing to do with nutrition. Judi meant to get her a sandwich or something. Then she remembers Jason’s hoodie, still warm from the café radiator, and hands it to her: feeling vaguely embarrassed when the girl smiles in silent, distant gratitude, recollecting the extent to which it probably smells of her own sweat.

Judi hesitates before turning on the light, but skittering about in the dark is the thing most likely to draw attention. Normalcy, that’s what she needs: to hide in plain sight. There’s no cameras in the staffroom, and besides, what could they see? Just Judi, setting a cake box down, putting the kettle on, checking the rota to see who’s sleeping over, who’s here in the morning. Her reasons may be untoward, but no camera can catch those.

Next, Judi goes into Nelson’s office. She has to. After all that’s where the folder with the codes for resetting, and disabling, the alarms is. She tucks a set of release forms neatly into the back of the folder. She tips the entire contents of the plastic bag: skirt, wet, dirty-red shoes; and two remaining skimming stones,
into the wastepaper basket where he’s sure to see them. It’s true that she hates him, right now but more, perhaps more than ever, she wants him to know she’s clever.

Handily, the pharmaceutical storeroom has two doors, one heavily alarmed, the other inside Nelson’s office. Judi gathers what she needs, and a fair bit more, into the now empty plastic bag, parcels it up neatly. “SuperDrug,” the bundle reads from the bottom of her handbag. She tucks the manilla folder beneath her arm and re-locks the office. Typing the code in, she notes how easily someone could disable the entire building by mistake. That, she supposes, is why not just anyone is allowed to reset it.

“Allright? Where’s the bobbies? On the beat? Will I round us all up for a chat?”

Stanley and Otis nod vaguely, watch the screens flick from camera to camera. Judi stares too, counts the time between the monitors changing from one camera to another in “thank-you”s. 84. The distance from the staffroom to Hopes’ room is easy. One hundred and eighty: a bulls-eye. The distance from the staffroom to here, she’s just walked it, is 92. She calculates that if she leaves exactly at the beginning of the loop, and stops for around 12 thank-you’s outside the low-security resident’s lounge, she can get to Hope without making an on-screen appearance once. Thank you! Gratitude mathematics!

The night sounds that usually reach her ears in the same way a car alarm might in the city centre, it’s too common, too constant a problem, too much someone else’s problem, to register, make her jump, tonight.
“Sorry to bother you, sweetie, but we forgot to do your wee test. The van’s coming first thing. Will you be a love? Then you can go straight back to sleep? Hope shuffles obligingly to the bathroom with the little plastic pot.

In the staffroom toilet, the light plinks and hums accusationally, two blue lines fatten and darken in tandem. She puts two biggish slices of cake onto paper plates, accessories with plastic forks, and goes to find the police. As she suspects they are back in the monitoring suite.

“Awrite chaps? We keep you busy, don’t we? Any idea what’s goin on?”

“A window broken is all. We’ve taken the liberty of the 24hr glazier, and one of your two night nurses, Andy, is posted there, for the time being: in case it poses a risk from either side.”

“Great” says Judi. Now she doesn’t have to suggest as much herself. One down, one to go.

“But who do you think did it? What did they want?”

“Ach, some demented girl in a hoodie, dancing about the place.” The older man reassures her, “I wouldn’t fret too much.”

Judi nods, it’s easy to look genuinely relieved.

“We only caught a couple of seconds,” Otis nods toward the screen on the furthest left, and they all watch as the murky clip plays. Judi has trouble recognising herself beneath the shadowy hood, the night vision camera renders a blurry white chin and little else.
“Probably on meth,” Stanley chips in, sounding pretty happy about the idea.

“I thought that was an American thing?” asks Judi.

As he takes the cake, the oldest officer sucks air through his teeth, in a way designed indicate to Judi that she’s being quite stupid. Stanley and Otis snigger: they enjoy a bit of gentle misogyny, they also eye up the cake sulkily.

“Oh, it’s a TV thing now,” says the younger officer, taking his cake with a slight bow, “In other words, it’s everywhere.”

“Everywhere?” Judi is sort of enjoying this. “Where do they get it fae?”

“They make it in bathtubs,” the young ginger policeman says.

“Jeso! Where d’ they wash?” Judi is definitely overplaying it now.

“We’ve seen things you couldn’t imagine, Mrs Urquhart. It’s amazing what the dregs of society will do to get wasted.”

“If you’re the dregs, you get drunk.” The young officer confirms. Judi looks to see if he is making a socialist point, but no.

“We’ve picked this young girl up off the street round here before. We’ll take her in for questioning as soon as we leave.”

Oh no, the hoodie! For a second she’s terrified the girl will give her away. But no one listens to dregs. Anyway, it’s seriously cold out there. Maybe a cell isn’t the worst thing,

“What will you do with her?

“What can we do? Nothing on tape, nothing stolen… Charge her with criminal damage, but how would she pay? Maybe we can contact her family.”

Yes! Something else that hadn’t occurred to her: the universe is so smart!
Judi smiles internally, imagining a worried family reunited, the girl emerging from some suburban bathroom, washed of the street, her frail body wrapped in one thick pink bath towel, and her hair in another. She wills it to be so, and ignores the ugly, unenlightened little facts popping into her head that suggest this girl’s family picture is statistically unlikely to be that one.

The young officer shakes his head “A rock through a window’s the homeless equivalent of you or me doing a “tweet” or updating our Facebook status. More often than not it doesn’t signify anything. You’re just alerting the world to your continued existence.”

Judi smiles, this young, respectful, ginger policeman has a poetic soul, she thinks. She turns to see the other men all throwing “what a fanny” looks at each other.

“How’s everyone doing? Judi asks, back with the two security men.

“Aye, fine: Mr. Balentine was pretty sure the FBI were involved; but when isn’t he?” Stanley says almost fondly, and the two men chuckle.

The reality is that most of the time these men are just watching empty corridors, trying hard to stay awake. Most of this information comes via she and Nelson, the doctors, nurses, carers and cleaners that come in to pass a little time.
The night-watchmen piece together the lives of the residents from snippets, the essentially fragmented nature of so many of their residents minds seems to make it easier to mash the bits they find most interesting together to form caricatures. Mental illness is pretty entertaining, from a distance.

"And how's Bryony been handling tonight?"

"Sure, aye, braw" Stanley says vaguely.

Otis nods along.

"I'll pop up with a wee cuppa for her in a minute, tell her to get some sleep, or she'll be no use in the morning."

The nightwatchmen nod sagely: they know what it is to be no use in the morning.

Judi has always been nice about and to Bryony, in direct counter-balance to how obvious she feels it must be that she dislikes her. Nice-ing. The same old dirty discomfort, and an additional one: she realises part of her is seriously looking forward to the next bit.

"How you doin, Bryony? Thought I'd bring you some chamomile tea and a wee bit of this cake someone's brung in. How's it going?"

Judi nods and smiles and tries not to obsessively watch Bryony eat cake, or sip tea, there's four valium between the two. She'd thought Bryony would leave the cake, trough in secret when Judi left, but tonight's freyed her nerves, her diet defences are down.
“Now you just get in your jammies, your paperwork’ll still be there in the morning.”

Judi stays as Bryony slumps towards the bathroom, deselecting both alarms on her mobile phone, worried she might not make it back and into bed before the drugs kick in.

“Thanks, Judi. You’re right.”

Judi waits, until Bryony’s getting into bed, then kisses her goodnight on the cheek, feeling like an Italian mobster. She highly doubts Bryony will be filling out that paperwork in the morning. And she certainly won’t be checking up on Hope, because all trace of Hope will be gone.

Judi makes her way back to the security room and gives them an update “sound asleep, wee pet.” The Guards nod sympathetically.

“Any sign of the glazier?” They shake their heads. She sighs irritably. Thank goodness for that. “Is Alan still at the window?” they nod. She knows full well Alan is still at the window, he’s reliable, he’s not an idiot that would leave broken glass unattended in a mental hospital. Judi ignores the negative inner critic that points out she has created that glass he now has to spend a sleepless night attending to.

Back in Hope’s bedroom, Judi eases a healthy dose of Haloperidol into her arm, she doesn’t flinch. Working quickly, she gathers some of Hope’s things into the laundry holdall she’d already taken from the linen cupboard with two sets of hospital sheets, a few towels, and even a spare pair of curtains: familiar is going to be really helpful in the next few days. She gives Hope a gentle shake, she’s all soft and pliant, totally out. Judi spends a couple of minutes filling out
the release form, signing it, “Wendy Krueer” and leaves a biro on top, next to the space where Nelson’s signature will go. She writes “lapsed standard of care” with her right (and thus, in Judi’s case wrong,) hand. Not that anyone will look too hard. Why would they? Who’d steal a schizophrenic?

Judi doesn’t need to wonder, forking a big piece of chocolate cheesecake into her mouth on the way back to the nightwatchmen, how she will make their escape. The taxi will be by the hotel at the end of the block in five minutes.

“Oh Jesus: have yous had this cake yet?”

The men shake their heads with feigned disinterest.

“It’s amazing: go! There’s hardly any left already. I’ll hold down the fort!” Judi makes a sailor salute at Stanley, and he visibly swells. She struggles to remember the last time she’s been so wilfully cute. Sweetness and light.

She can make it back to the security room before the men are back at the cameras to know she’s left them. This is a serious business, she is abducting a person, but God, it’s thrilling. Even with the bulky laundry sack over her shoulder, she can still carry Hope. Judi feels it in her shoulder and her knees, they burn so hard she wants to cry, but her arms are stronger than she knew.

The taxi pulls up to the hotel drive just after Judi.

“Had a bit to drink, have they?” the cabby grins, as she sets Hope down like a dolly on the backseat and belts her in. “It’s thirty quid if she vomits.”

“You’re no gonny get much sense out of her, I’m afraid. She’s under general anaesthetic: going for an operation, and terrified of hospitals and all. So...” Judi looks down at Hope as Christ might on a leper, “this is the only way we can do it.”
The glow of Florence’s lamp warms Judi’s cheeks as she smiles up at the cabbie. She has always respected Nelson’s ability to get on with life and people, but this evening has proven conclusively that getting what you want with consistent lying is not only easy but massively exhilarating.

“I’ll just go get our things, one minute,? She won’t be a pest.”

The cabbie laughs warmly. You can be a good person, or you can be a good liar. Perhaps, if you are very good at lying to yourself too, you can think yourself both.

She gets back in time to switch ‘Monday One’ for ‘Monday Two’ in the VCR slot. If anyone does watch the tape, Alan won’t be stuck at the window all night, which, if this was an action film, would be the glitch that gave the game away, but those officers aren’t CSI, they watch CSI, and sometimes they like using words from it. The only person she deems capable of figuring it out will know damn well soon enough, and she’s confident he won’t spill. When the boys come back she is finishing off her piece of cake.

“My taxi’s here. Can you let the glazier in when he comes? Tell him to invoice, eh?”

The taxi drops them off at the front entrance of the Western General. Judi transfers Hope into a wheelchair from the hospital foyer, and the driver helps Judi load herself like a pack-horse with everything else.

“Thank you,” she waves him out of sight cheerily, then sets off, wheeling Hope towards the Travelodge next door. Rivulets fall from her stinging scalp onto her numb, windskelped face She breathes out, and takes from her wallet its virginal silver lining. It is most certainly a rainy day.
Hope’s breathing is deep and regular, her body limber and absented, still, as Judi dries her hair and tucks her up in the double bed.

“I’m going to take care of you, Hope.” Judi says softly, brightly, gathers her handbag, and switches off the light as she leaves. She puts a “do not disturb sign” on the door too, though she’ll be back long before any humane chambermaid would think of disrupting her.
Judi jumps from terror-sleep at his footsteps on the landing. Head thumping, stomach clenching, she remembers. It takes a second to place herself in the spare room, alone. She's been asleep for maybe an hour, two at most?

Nelson is back from his run, singing in the shower. Morning people are always so irritatingly superior about it, as though being better at mornings is morally better, too. But perhaps all that jogging, whistling, healthy eating: is another sort of denial, a denial of death: more lies. Judi would take death lying down, today. It's living that's terrifying, now.

She grips the band of duvet across her chest, as though it were the crash bar on a rollercoaster, and her life were being turned upside-down in a safe and temporary way. There is no crash bar available for day to day living. That's why we need to restrain ourselves, isn't it? Or each other. Judi fishes in her handbag for her diary, adding the word “restraint” to the bizarre to-do-list amassing there.

Normal, boring people commit unforgivable acts. Rape and murder, get on and get away with it, while everyone else watches TV and worries what’s for dinner. They are a friend laughing, a lover holding your hand, Dad correcting your maths homework. Warm in bed, a sleepy persuasive voice says she'd better just duck back down, stay inside, watch the light move across the walls and fade, wait for someone else to start steering again.

Judi considers catatonia, something she remembers being painfully difficult to watch at first: people so tragically broken. Now, at work, catatonia is
simply mundane, inconvenient. It can be difficult to keep remembering that those people are human, sometimes, when their bodies fail to acknowledge as much. They become less so, with catheters, tubes, drips performing the basic functions. But now she thinks of it all in a new way: wistfully. Oh, or better, a coma. Judi tastes the word, “coma” on her lips, light and moist as a chaste kiss. With detached curiosity she notices she doesn’t want to kill herself, just a nice gentle holiday coma. No one can blame you in a coma.

This banging about downstairs is designed not to assist in making breakfast - Jason isn’t planning to cook any breakfast item that requires a saucepan - he is creating noise to summon her.

Well, assuming they don’t eat breakfast at all, so what? Judi has spent seventeen years behaving as though whether Jason eats a nutritionally balanced breakfast is a life or death matter. Now she remembers what life or death matters really look like. They look... they look directly at you, vulnerable and trusting and terrified; they look like a golden opportunity, a dream come true; the niggling suspicion that there may be a God, and that you’re damned. Breakfast isn’t even a thing.

Judi scrambles in her handbag for her phone, rings Jason: “Listen. I’m no feeling well, Will you bring me up whatever you’re making? I’m no getting up. I canny.”

“Are your legs ok?”

Judi supposes it’s a reasonable question. “Yeah, my legs are ok.” She presses “play” on the CD machine. “Supreme Self Confidence” can’t hurt. “This
mind altering process is not the same as sleep...” Paul McKenna assures her from the stereo, “but there will be changes.”

Nelson will most certainly not come into the room while it’s on. He bought her the damn thing, then teased her relentlessly when she used it. She’s always done it in the spare room.

There is nothing to do in this brief little window of time but wait. “For now, you can just let go,” Paul reassures her. Judi’s felt “run off her feet” for years, had “so much to do,” but struggles to remember what she felt she needed to accomplish. Like most folk, she is utterly replaceable, disposable. It’s amazingly easy to sack stuff off once you reconsider the “have” in “have to do.”

The problem with letting go is that it leaves you with nothing to hold on to.

Judi remembers to be grateful. This baby is making its –admittedly weird- way to her, all Judi has to do is pave that way. So she’ll break some laws. Laws are just rules someone else made up: they could change any time. The only demonstrably true, unchangeable law is the law of attraction, and as long as she lives according to its principles, she can’t fail. It’s a good thing to finally know.

Jason scuffs in, balancing breakfast, pyjamas still on. “You can notice words, notice noticing words” the stereo murmurs.

Jason smirks, “what’s this?”.

“I’m developing Supreme Self-Confidence.”

On the tray Jason’s carrying is a boiled egg, tea, toast, juice: all totally edible looking.
“Great!” Judi smiles, and doesn’t cry. He will be able to feed himself, whatever happens next. “Hey Jason, whatever you can believe, and conceive, you can achieve.”

“Are you still drunk?” Jason scoffs, but he looks edgy, wears the onset of his adulthood like an ill-fitting suit.

It’s too soon to go, it’s always too soon to let go. We bring children up all wrong, domesticating these wee animals, only to release them into the wilds of the world to fend for themselves. Without… well, who will he even be with? It horrifies her that she does not know. The tray jangles as he sets it down, and keeps doing so: how long has she been shaking for? Jason looks genuinely concerned. “Will I get the thermometer?” he says.

“Why?”

Jason’s eyes roll up, as if searching his brain for an answer to this: “It’s what you do, isn’t it.”

“Normally.” She smiles. “Not today.” Judi wonders if Jason knows that thermometers have no inherent medicinal qualities. “Go get ready for school, Jason.” Judi beheads her egg with a teaspoon and sprinkles salt into the gooey gash. The toast is cut into soldiers, for dipping. It makes her feel safe for a minute, to dunk the buttery strips and chew and think nothing.

The sound of gravel crunching under the wheels floods her with the knowledge that she is no longer sharing a building with her husband, she feels both relief and sorrow.

She can do this, she will do this, she has already done this.
“Whether you think you can, or think you can’t: either way, you are right.”

Henry Ford, The Secret

Judi smiles. Her first attempt to open the book at random for guidance, like the Waltons did with The Bible, makes her laugh despite the day. There is a Ford Dealership just a block away. Judi can feel the universe urging her onwards in playful nudges.

Looking round the kitchen for anything she might want to take, Judi thinks of her childhood pal, Roberta: thrown off a horse, dismounting in stables just round the corner from her house. She was thirteen: lying alone, terrified to move incase she’d broken her neck or her spine. There was no point in shouting; no one to shout for. She’d stared for twenty minutes at the big green arrow on the side of a feed box. “This way up,” it said underneath. The two-minute walk to the roadside was a thirty seven minute belly drag. Roberta’d come back to school in a wheelchair at first. Three years later she got a big green arrow tattooed on the back of her calf. Her mother had been less than delighted. But what could she say? The big green arrow is always right. For as long as we are alive, there is nothing to do but get up and get on with things. Which things? That's the thing.

The kitchen is so meticulously ordered that every knife or plate is part of a larger set-piece, the set where they've played out their lives to date. Well
those lives are played out. All she wants to take is Jason, Jason, who is less hers than the blender, and who she cannot simply stash in a hold-all. This will at least make packing quick. Judi pulls the unlikely list from her handbag again, begins quickly to gather things. She opens the living-room cupboard, ordered as an army store-room, and takes the pictures she wants from the tin. So this was what her super-organisation was for, all the time? Paving. All the paperwork she needs is filed, and ready to go, in the bag at the back of her wardrobe she’d known, instinctively, for years, to hide.

Guaranteed safe from Nelson behind it’s defensive wall of camping equipment, it’s hard not to get nostalgic about bell-tents and forget that the mentally ill person she has smuggled into a Travelodge might well start waking up in a few hours’ time. The camping cookware, she’ll take those. Kettle. Coffee brick, stove. Because of Nelson’s dislike of the outdoors, the camping gear is a clean-feeling for all its residual muddiness, it has nothing to do with him.

Outside, the obnoxious blue skies have gone, replaced with that shiny-grey that gives her a headache at the best of times. Is it time to call now? No, he won’t even have dropped Jason off yet. A text? Ha, it seems appropriately inappropriate.

“I know what you did. Hope’s pregnant. Also, she’s gone. Call me when you get this, eh?”

Judi smiles. She likes this new her. She resists a mad urge to type LOL before she sends. She feels something unfamiliar. Yes. Power. Something she never thought she wanted. Or maybe just accepted she couldn’t have. Judi fingers the little key that opens the box containing the gags, cuffs, chains and
rope that have formed such a part of their life: such a part of her. Spit wells in her mouth and she feels her throat tighten. She won’t use them if she doesn’t have to, but all those drugs: they won’t do her baby any good.

You can buy a car very quickly. Judi tells herself jollily on the block’s walk to the dealership. It’s an extremely straightforward process.

“Can we help?” Says a man with a salmon pink tie and a greasy moustache of the kind her Da used to call a soup strainer.

“Yes please.” Judi grins, “I just got my bonus, my first day off. What I want, more than anything, is to buy a car, right now, and drive it out of here, like, immediately. I packed before I left, I have everything I need for a road-trip to the countryside but the car I’m going to drive it there in. I have absolute faith that we can make this happen, right?”

The man’s eyes light up like a fruit machine. He honks out his laughter, big fat hands clapping at his chest. “You want to drive out of here in a new car...”

“A big car,” Judi clarifies, “with a really big boot” she gestures toward the heap of stuff by the showroom door.

“You want to drive out of here, in a new,” he meets her eyes “big car, in the next half an hour?” He wants some theatre, so she’s a little more grateful to him for making his own, actual, bonus from her fictional one. Fine. She looks up at him and bats her eyelids, “Oh, could you?”

The sealion honks again, reanimating his fleshy front. “Step this way Mademoiselle, and I will make your dreams come true.”
Judi imagines him leading his younger, thicker, wife into the bedroom with the very same expression. She wishes, for the wife she has just imagined into being, the sort of GP who puts out, Prozac-wise.

“I want that one.” Judi says, pointing to a cherry-red beast: a million miles from anything she’d ever drive.

“Ah,” he nods like she's a wise old monk, and he’s bowled over by the zenny profundity of her interest in this particular car. “The All-new Focus” wagon The Geneva, no less”

“Like the convention?” Judi smiles.

“I beg to differ: this car is not conventional in the least. With the exception of safety conventions: which are standard across the Ford range.”

Don't waste my time, sealface, Judi thinks, smiling broadly. “Great: I’ll take it!” And so it is that she is driving toward Hope.
The phone rings. Nelson. Judi pulls over by a too-familiar row of shops, crushingly aware that at this rate, her average get-away speed is around a kilometre an hour.

“Judi. What have you done?”

Judi’s mouth gapes open in unseen incredulity. What has she done? The sternness in that voice has shamed her into compliance most days of her adult life; that corrective force that stroked her head and held her while she cried hot angry tears on his behalf, on hers, back when Rebecca threatened to tell the village she’d been raped if Nelson did not agree to publically announce their engagement, to set a date for the wedding, to legitimise her baby, legitimise her. Judi shudders, that young woman was probably telling the truth.

“Judi?” Nelson asks down the static of the line.

“Let’s try and do this a little differently. There’s no reasoning with me in this mood, you say so all the time. So don’t bother. I’m going to tell you what to do, and you do it, and then maybe you don’t get picked up from work by a police-car.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about, Judi, but...”

“No? I’m finally having your baby, Nelson,” she coos, aspartimine sweet, “Just like we always wanted.”

“What?”
“Keep up!” It’s too much fun to terrify him in her most playful little sub-
voice. “You got Hope pregnant, and now she’s having our baby. So, I’m going to
look after her in the meantime.”

“Where are you?”

“You don’t need to know that. The truth is Nels, I’m having some trust
issues with you right now. Just know that we are doing this, and that if you can’t
agree that this is the happy-ever-after we’ve been waiting for, I will completely
fuck your life up. And maybe, in a couple of years, it’s possible that looking at
your face won’t make me feel sick.”

“This is insane, Judi.”

“So is the woman you raped and impregnated. Actually, darling, it’s the
only reasonable solution. I could bring her back right now, but she’ll still be
carrying the baby that I still have the urine sample and pregnancy test and
blood tests I took this morning that show that she, specifically, is carrying. I’m
not going to let you abort my baby, Nelson, I’m just about to do that. So, how
else are you going to explain how our baby got in her tummy? Don’t you think,
in balance, it’s better if everybody thinks it came out of my tummy?”

“Judi…” His voice is pleading, but what? What is it he’s asking of her? She
can’t undo it.

“Yes? Good. So make it conversationally known that I’m four months
pregnant. I will turn up and corroborate as soon as I can bear to be in a room
with you.” Nelson continues to be uncharacteristically silent.

“It’s not like you to phone with nothing to say, Sweetie.”

“I don’t know what to say.”
“Say thank you.” Judi suggests.

“What?” his outrage, that anger: she hates it, but it’s exciting, sexy.

“I could be in a police station right now Nelson, and I’m not. Say thank you. Do it.”

“Thank you” he says. Quietly.

“You’re welcome. Meanwhile, tell Jason we have had a fight and I’ve gone to a health spa. In a few days I will see him, at Marina’s. He can phone me anytime he likes. Are you still with me?”

“Uh huh.”

“Say it?”

“Thank you."

“Good. Now, Bryony is still asleep upstairs, because I drugged her. Leave her there. Shake up Mr Peterson – that’ll keep Dave busy, make a fuss about the state of the residents lounge at Alisha, send Tracy out for something.

“What?”

“Anything baby. Oh and there’s some cake in the staffroom: send Stacy from reception to get herself some, and while they’re gone, go up to Hope’s room. There is a release form on the side table. Sign it, I did the rest. Say Wendy came to see her, but there was no one on the reception desk, no one around. And Hope was on her bed, half dressed: no one had got her up or adequately tended to her in the night. Insufficient care. She’d taken her straight off, elsewhere”

“Where?”

“Who knows, Nelson. Surely you can make that little tiny thing up for me? You’re an excellent liar.”
“You’re blackmailing your husband, Judi”

“You’re a rapist.” Judi lets the dead air lie between them. “And you’re running out of time.” It sounds like a bad line from a terrible film. Quite enjoyably tacky, fun and horrific all at once.

“We are going to do this together,” Judi says brightly “or I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure that yours is truly shitty. It’s a lot to ask a man, that he bring up a rapist’s child, but arguably it’s fair enough when that rapist is him, and at the end of the day, we won’t either of us be doing anything we haven’t done before, will we? Except this will be my child, who’ll call me mummy: because I am. Not some dead woman. And, by the way what is it about raping that you can’t use a condom, ever? Yet you manage with me?”

She realises that she’s screaming a bit. Negative energy: so not good for the baby. “Well...” she breathes, smiles, continues, “we’re following our destiny now, so... I just don’t think it’s nice, is all. Don’t do it again.”

“No.”

“Advertise for two new staff this afternoon. Bryony has to go. You’ll need someone to replace me too.
Judi puts the phone away and stares from the windscreen at “Urban Funk,” a local “beauty boutique” that Nelson would routinely “misread” the name of. Judi goes in. Yes, they have two walk-in appointments. What’s Judi looking for? A complete makeover, “but it’s complicated.”

Judi pulls the most recent picture of her mother from her handbag. Expecting drama, the marginally brighter-seeming of the two blonde girls offers her a tissue.

“I’m Hannah.”

“Thanks,” Judi says, surprised to find that she is genuinely welling up, “See, I’m going to pick my mum up from hospital. She’s been in hospital for a while, but… Its incurable, now. She hasn’t got much time left. We’re taking her to the country.”

“Aww, in’t that lovely. She’s a lucky women.”

“That’s just it, she’s on a lot of painkillers, the disease has really taken its toll. I want to make her feel beautiful again. The blonde pulls two more hankies from, the packet, passing one to a plumper and orange-er, but otherwise identical colleague, who blows her nose in sympathy. Judi is genuinely touched.

“Anyway: this is a picture of her when she was, you know, before things went…awry. I know you can’t work magic, but if you could make her feel as much as possible like her old self.

“Oh my goodness! Hannah stares again at the photo. “I remember her! The biscuit lady: Sweetness and Light. It just goes to show you, doesn’t it?”
Judi does not ask what it just goes to show: that it’s better to be obscure and mediocre, she imagines. That’s usually what these things go to show.

Hope doesn’t seem phased to be waking up in a hotel room. Judi hands her a cup of proper tea in a proper china cup, laced lightly with compliance aids.

“Today is a pampering day for you. You've earned it.”

Hope nods vaguely, “Is that what I was? Earning?”

“Definitely. Well done!” Judi reassures her, pulling away from the Travelodge, feeling that bizarre sense, like on the phone to Nelson, of being the star of her own terrible chick flick. Maybe this is her flow state: badly scripted, authentically inauthentic-seeming. She would never have believed in a million years, two days ago, that she’d be doing any of this. But the intensity of living this way: it’s so all-encompassing. It is more potent than love. And Hope and she are on their way have what cinema has taught all wronged women is a crucial therapeutic step in the recovery of their self-respect: a makeover.

When she re-enters with Hope, she watches Hannah hide her horror, seeing the former face of “Sweetness and Light” in this skeletal state.

Hannah takes one hand of Judi’s and Hope’s each, makes shlock-sincere eye contact with them both. “Judi says you’ve been ill, and we’re gonna return you to your former glory, yeah?”
Judi sees Hope sniff at Hannah’s use of “yeah?” as a question, but also notices her attention turn towards the sparkling sound of “former glory.”

“I very much doubt that, but you’re welcome to try.” There’s nothing but sincerity in her words. Hope doesn’t flinch, but turns to Judi saying, “are you having them gas me?” in perfect serenity.

“Deadpan. Aren’t you?” Hannah laughs gently. “Let’s get you started then.”

“Candys,” The second woman says, holding out her hand.

Judi looks down into it, expecting to see sweeties that aren’t there, and realises Candice has introduced herself.

“I suppose we’re not your usual clientele,” Judi says affably, although, they are the only clientele, so far. Maybe the other orange people aren't up this early. Candice smiles neutrally in answer, her green eyes blissfully clear of thought.

“So, what do you want, love?”

“A complete change.”

“Will I just do what’ll suit you most?” Candice believes herself to suit fushia lipstick on a Tuesday morning, so Judi feels brave nodding in agreement.

“First, while Mum’s having the treatment, I want to nip out for a shop: would that be alright?”

Twice As Nice, three doors down, is a shop which caters exclusively to the later-middle-aged lady who dares to walk the tightrope between bohemia and elegance. It is exactly the sort of place Judi’s Mum used to lap up before she
had real money. Judi buys armfuls of stuff: she know Hope’s shoe size, knickers; everything. She’s been dressing her for years. Judi’s heart sings a little: even the most mundane of acts today feels like a scavenger hunt: life has so much more meaning when you know its purpose, and Judi knows, absolutely, that her purpose is to protect this child, her child. She loads the car boot. It shuts with a satisfying clunk.

Back inside, Candice starts to coo about colour and curls. Judi has never had curls. Glossy bouncy curls aren’t for women at all, curly hair is for kooky, quirky, crazy girls whose silky curls bounce as they lurch their clumsy way from one hilarious disaster to the next. The sad people have frizzy hair: train-wreaked women with broken homes and split ends. People like Judi has been. The frizz around their heads marks them out as slovenly middens, out of control on a follicular level. Candice’s surprisingly strong hands clamp her back to face herself in the mirror.

“A complete change, yeh?”

Judi tries to nod, but her head is held between fuchia polished nails. A drastic amount of hair forms a nest at her feet. Soon, Judi’s hair is becoming a “Macchiato wave” with “caramel lowlights.” It sounds like sugary coffee.

The scent of synthetic tropical fruit and cat piss wafts from Judi’s hair she sees Hope: head wrapped in a thick white towel, new clothes shining from her, her slender wrists thick with Indian bangles, being seated in the chair opposite. She looks happy. Appreciated.

The sacrifice Hope is making, albeit an involuntary one, is a fabulous gift. Judi is deeply grateful. Now that Judi truly understands the power of positive
thought, she sees how confused she’s been, held back, making excuses about being a “good” person. Good for what?

Judi applies lip-gloss. She pouts, noticing that it makes her feel younger, remembering how it made her feel older when she was young. This is all we have to battle the inevitable tide of life with? Like the pumpkin spice latte, it’s not the baby you want, but it’s a distraction. All gloss.

There’s no point dwelling on the negative: bad creates bad, sad creates sad. Sod that whiny little voice saying what’s the point of life if it dies inside you -for all your supplements and pelvic floor exercises- and lives instead inside a woman who looks old enough to be, very specifically, Judi’s mother: whose miraculous womb clearly still thinks it’s in its teens. Judi’s inner critic can go hang herself; what good did she ever do? Judi is done apologising for herself. I am never, she decides, going to wear a bra again. Everyone can just deal with these grapefruits.

Judi watches, watches Hope watching, as Hannah lifts the cloud-grey hair, section by section, and paints it dark vivid red. Ruby. Judi bought, just a week ago, a bottle of “Ruby-Jasmine” fabric softener, part of a new range that claims to smell of different precious stones. Even whilst acknowledging that precious stones do not have a scent, and that even if they did, it’s hardly like they’d put diamonds in detergent, Judi bought this stuff, and used more than the recommended amount, just to see if Jason or Nelson would notice their clothes smelling different, and maybe that it would occur to them that someone cleans them, that that person is her. How could she have allowed her life to become so small?
Being angry with Hope is disgusting, she won’t feel it. It’s like blaming a baby for shitting itself. Don’t do it, clean the mess up, that’s all. Judi has spent her whole life cleaning up other people’s mess. So, fine. Equipped. Gratitude.

Watching Hope, radiant with the attention, looking eerily, but satisfyingly, like her mum, Judi wonders if Nelson’s day is going anything like as successfully. He’s an excellent liar, but his tears of frustration and panic, Judi imagines, would have been quite convincing in any case.

“Oh Mum,” Judi grins at Hope, “you look beautiful! Let’s go,” she says cheerily, handing Hope a coffee loaded with the Ol’ good stuff.

“What did she just call me?” Hope asks Hannah conspiratorially,

“You are a hoot, Isabel!”

Judi smiles, and Hope’s head moves from side to side between them, again, again, with such keen interest, that it reminds Judi of a Wimbledon crowd shot.

“You look more like yourself than I’ve seen you in years,” Judi hugs Hope’s stiff little birdlike body, taking her frail hand, gesturing toward the All New Focus, “your carriage awaits!”

Hope sips the sweet coffee dozily, happily, and it is only with the most minimal of hesitation that she lets Judi lead her into the new car. Hope tips a little of her coffee past her mouth on the way, but not enough to concern Judi, from a meds point of view.

“Damn spot,” she tuts, sponging the stain from Hope’s new dress, with a hanky.
This is the future and she is driving it. "CD" she says, stripping the accent from her voice. First time lucky! Kate Bush floats through the new car speakers.

"Volume," she says, then “down, down, down...” Even though she knows, logically, Hope won’t be regaining consciousness for hours, she looks so rosy cheeked, lost to slumber, that loud music seems an insult.

“Thoughts become things,” her key-ring swings like furry dice. Looking down at the slight bump that protrudes from Hope’s tiny frame - noticeable only because Judi thought to look for it there- those swirly purple words are undeniably true.

The thing, really, is to focus on the positive thoughts in your head: the ones that say “I can do this” in the new, improved voice. If you don’t quite believe it, say it again, again: say it until that knowledge is as true as the breath in your body. Driving back towards her destiny, Judi vows to give no credence to the doubts that that would erode the shining bright future that will be hers if only she can act on the power of her intention. No space for the niggling little voices that make unhelpful comments like, “might this not be quite evil?” or “isn’t this all a bit... made up.”

Voice command: all she needs, inside and out: something surer, less old-her. Slightly uncomfortable to change your internal voice too, your old limiting beliefs, morals, or whatever you want to call them. Judi hums along to The Red Shoes. Her course is set.
“Phone” says Judi, in her new impressive voice, and the song is muted by the nice calming dial-tone. “Marina!” Judi commands.

“Hullo?” Marina sounds wary on the other end of the phone.

“Judi! Where’ve you been? You ok?”

Judi hesitates. Where has she been? Tricky question, but the second: “you ok?” means she doesn’t really have to answer it.

“Sure: fine. Do you know what OK actually means?” Nelson said it was short for “oll korrect” a joke misspelling that become so popular it stopped being a funny mistake, with repetition, and became the truth of the thing.

“Means…” Marina pauses, “better than shitty.”

“Are you ok, then?”

“Eh…” Judi knows Marina’s shrug so well she can almost hear it down the line.

“I’m so sorry, Marina, about last night. Shouting at the Jane Austen man, What on Earth?”

“Oh, us too,” Says Marina. Oh. There’s an “us.” Do you get to be “us” if you’re the mistress?

“I was such a mess,” Judi wails.

“You were nothing: believe me!” Marina places such stress on the word "believe" that it gives Judi a surge of guilt: what massive lies she is about to tell her friend, tell everyone, forever. ”You were escorted home before the drama started!”

“I thought I was the drama.” Judi laughs. “What did I miss?”
"Jeso: you don’t know," Marina pauses. "How was the rest of your night, Judi?" Marina has her professional voice on, why?

"Know what?" Judi asks.

"How are you feeling?"

"Fine." Judi doesn’t know where to begin, or want to begin, to explain herself. “A bit hungover, maybe?”

"You’re not just hung-over. Have you not spoken to Jason this morning?"

Judi, who knows only too well the measured, professional voice Marina is using, feels terror:

"Has something happened at school?" It is her parental responsibility to be in constant contact in case anything ever happens, otherwise, it happens. "Ohmigod, is he ok?"

“What? I just thought he might have phoned to mention the - unfortunately true- rumour going round school today that Andrea’s do, several guests were spiked with psychedelic drugs.”

Judi exhales, Jason’s ok. She laughs. “Aye, very good.”

“How can you not know this yet?" Marina sounds incredulous, exhausted,

“Don’t worry too much about what folk might be thinking of you right now. You, as far as anyone’s aware, got a bit shouty and ran out a room.”

Judi feels her face burn at the memory.

“That’s nothing. The mushrooms had mushrooms in them.” Marina babbles. “Real ones, magic ones.”

Judi makes a vague “oh really?” noise, not listening.
“Janet Cho, did an exotic dance, sang some jazz, was sick in a vase.”

Something about the rhyme: jazz, vase, alerts Judi to the meaning of the words. Janet Cho is on the PTA, Janet Cho dresses exclusively from Hobbes and, if Janet Cho has really been found publically vomiting into anything, let alone singing or - doing anything that could be described as “erotic.” Hallucinogens are the only possible explanation.

“Thank goodness!” Judi feels sort of euphoric. “There was... I thought I was going mad.” It feels good to say that out loud, until Judi turns to the passenger seat.

“You missed the fireworks,” Marina is saying.

“There were fireworks?” Suddenly Judi feels cheated: fireworks, the way she was feeling last night, would have been... she smiles imagining Hamish’s eyes sparkling with the reflected colours and light. “Jeso: she’s got style, that Andrea, I’ll give her that.”

“Not actual fireworks.”

“So there weren’t fireworks?” Multi-coloured sparkles fade and die in Judi’s imagination.

“Not the in-the-sky sort.”

It turns out that Judi is not the only living person who has wished smug Andrea ill, the catering was drugged. Andrea Blair’s posh book party descended, after Judi left, into an unwitting drugs orgy, full grown adults running riot, dressing up in Andrea’s clothes, dancing, drinking the place dry, playing games in the garden, generally larking.
“Several folk got a bit, touchy-feely with people that maybe weren’t their spouses, necessarily.”

“Like you.” Judi laughs. She can’t help herself.

“Well... I can’t blame the mushroom crostini for that.”

“And the police, at half one this morning, found the head of the Drama department romping in a fishpond with a seventeen year old girl!”

“Oh, my God. Were they? Is he a...?” Judi can’t bring herself to ask it. Amid all the weirdness, Judi is bamboozled to note that Hamish’s indiscretions are more shocking to her than her own husband’s. Because he was a daydream, an ideal, how could he be some horrific sex offender? Is that her type? Is that how low her self-esteem is?

“Not, that dodgy.” Marina laughs, “but dodgy enough.” Marina doesn’t know him. It’s just something outlandish happening to a stranger, funny like the Darwin awards.

“Half of the folk there, at least, can’t have had a bite of the bad stuff, just got caught up in the madness of it all. Jim had to throw everyone out the house. Folk were in no fit state to go home to the babysitters. So, whatist,”

“Mr Coulter?”

“Aye, he led everyone off for a tea-party at...”

“The Eco Pond.” Judi grins.

“Oh, had I said? Funny wee chap, not even a vest on top.” Despite the damage she knows it will do Mr Gardner’s career, the image of his furry paunch in the moonlight is pleasant.
“Everyone was wearing Andrea’s wedding hats, or one of Jim’s helmets or something. And we were all to take a tea cup, and what booze there was or whatever, and he had everyone shouting for Alice.” Judi glows. He wanted her.

“Then everyone started stripping off, jumping in the water.”

“Then everyone started stripping off, jumping in the water.”

“It’s not even waist-deep.” Judi laughs.

And then Alice Waits from the upper sixth jumped in with him, in this big pink hat of Andrea’s, and just her bra and pants. And everyone was laughing, cheering “Alice” And she flung her arms round him and tried to kiss him.

“No! That’s all wrong.” Judi says, as though, somehow in Marina’s telling, she’d might have found herself written into the happy ending.

“Weird. That’s what he said. “Wrong Alice,” and pushed her off him. But he had to pick her up again immediately just to get her out, she kept slipping - I think on purpose. And that’s when the police came. When they fished them out the girl was still clinging to him, all wet and crying. It didn’t look good, I suppose.”

“Geez.!” Judi says.

“And someone filmed the whole thing on their phone. Emailed the school. The local paper."

No wonder Hamish lost it: between them they *shovelled* those mushroom crostinis away. She’d forgotten that last night had nice bits, much as a lot of it sounds mortifying, how she wishes she’d been carried along in his drama, so light, so silly, and not got caught up in her own darker story.
“Did you have any strange dreams? Hallucinations? Any odd behaviour... odder than normal, I mean?” Marina laughs.

“No,” Judi says, a little too defensively, “Nothing. You?”

“I almost wish I had. I’d never deliberately, but a bit of legitimate spiking? That’s no one’s fault.”

“It bloody well is. Who did it?”

“Oh, who you think?”

Judi goes to the least likely explanation first. If you’re wrong, people laugh, and if you’re right they’re really impressed.

“Angus Blair” they both say at the same time.

“Bloody hell!”

Their lives! When did their lives become so... traumatically interesting?

“Andrea must be raging.”

“It’s not wholly peachy at this end, I can tell you that. Angus saw a message on his mum's phone: read the others: knows all about us. Told his dad, just after Jim got back from dropping you home, at which point the holes in the frankly ludicrous cover story where I’d be modelling anything were...”

“As gaping as a pair of chocolate éclair themed crotchless knickers?” Judi says, loving this bit of the story more than she perhaps should.

“He called his own mother a “filthy dyke,” said she “disgusted him”... this was all at about one the morning?”

“Uggh, so he sabotaged her wee literary drinks party: how middleclass is that?” Judi’s feeling something she never thought possible: sympathy for Andrea Blair.
“It was certainly a little...” Marina tries to find a tactful way to describe her partner’s son’s behaviour, “inappropriate” she concludes.

“Inappropriate! Doing inappropriate things in inappropriate places, with inappropriate people, wearing inappropriate clothes: that’s a summary of most folk’s teens. What Angus did was poison people,” Judi checks nervously for the sound of Hope’s breathing beside her, and swallows her hypocrisy. “What did Jim say?”

“Ach, he called it a proportional response. Then made this big pack your bags speech. Fine, she was going anyway.”

“So, you won’t have to sneak about fibbing to your best pal, anymore?” Judi tries to sound light, but there’s an ugly bitterness to her voice, how dare she chastise Marina, afterall, for something she’s doing herself.

“C’mon, Judi. It’s been a funny time. You’re not exactly the founder of her fan club. On our second date, we went swimming. I knew there was a baby but I hadn’t seen Evie, she was with a sitter. Andy was talking in the shower about this running club. I wasn’t really listening: it was the first time I’d seen her with no top on. Her breasts...

“Marina, do I need to know this?”

“Just there was a baby crying, someone else’s, and they started leaking. She was so embarrassed. But I just thought, that’s so hot.”

“This all sounds a bit pornographic” says Judi dismissively, desperately jealous, of the love, of the milk-filled breasts -so much it bruises.

“It was. I only started listening because she said “partner” and I freaked: a husband and a partner: that’s... I didn’t want to be one in a collection of lovers.
“No, a _monogamous_ extra-marital affair,”

“Shut up, Judi. Then I realise that she means running partner, which was a relief, and then she’s easing her massive boobs into a cupcake-themed maternity bra, and I hear the name “Nelson,” and well…”

“Ha!” Judi snorts with laughter. Life is ridiculous. Maybe there are only a finite number of active players, most of the folk you see are just extras, fleshing out the pavements, fooling you into thinking you have options.

“Toby’ll come around,” Judi says to Marina, hoping it’s true, thinking it’s unlikely.

“I can’t see him popping over to my wee flat any time soon. Jim is sending him to Glen Almond, to keep him out of harm’s way”

“Oh aye” Judi smiles, “private boarding schools are well known fortresses against gayness.”

“Anyway, I wouldn’t worry about being gossip. You’re lucky you got so pissed you boked up those mushrooms, Judi, or you might have ended up in the fishpond with the drama teacher!”

“Yeah, lucky.”

“How did Nelson take your social disgrace?”

“We’ve had a bit of a falling out. I decided to head out of town for a few days: I’m going to…” Judi panics, what can she possibly say, “a spa… I just, felt the need to flee, you know?”

“Oh? I thought things with you and Nelson were seeming better.”

“Well. things can seem all sorts of ways, can’t they? I don’t want him to know where I am, right now.”
“If he’s hurt you, Judi, i’ll...”

“Nothing like that,” Is it nothing like that?

“What’s happening?”

Can I see Jason at yours, in a few days time?

“Tell me.”

“I'll tell you it all when I see you.” Judi knows she's lying. No one will think this is ok. Not ever. She’s driving towards a big lie.

“I'll phone for updates, ok? I hope things go well with Andrea.”

“Aye, sure you do”

“Truly.”

Since Andrea's perfect life turned out to be a perfect sham, , Andrea is easier to like.
Judi’s baby has manifested itself, no doubt, in a most unusual way, but now they are on their way, and all Judi has to do is follow the positive energy taking her, taking them, towards their happy ending. Keep going. Judi’s thought, Judi’s baby, has become a thing inside Hope’s body. A miracle, which is lovely, and what’s left now is to create the perfect environment, the perfect circumstances, for this baby to be born into. Undeniably, that the things she saw last night were, magical-seeming, supernatural, unlike anything she’s ever experienced or felt. It is uncomfortably coincidental that her "vision" coincided with the fact of her being drugged. Fine But the revelations were real, weren’t they? She got it right. The “reality” she stripped away, the one where she had a loving, moral man at her side, that was the real hallucination. Most people want to find a partner they trust not to hurt them, but to completely trust someone, Judi has found, means trusting them to hurt you as well. Oh my god, it felt good, but heroin, that other type of smack, probably feels good too: addictive behaviours are the most marvellous fun, at least to start with, or people wouldn’t end up doing them to the exclusion of everything else.

“You are the designer of your destiny. You are the author, you write the story. The pen is in your hand, and the outcome is whatever you choose.”
The best part of her adult life has been a supporting role in someone else’s lie. One night’s accidental dabble with mind-altering substances, however, and she’s uncovered more truth than she knew was out there. Life changing, last night was, whether she likes it or not.

The story of her life then, will be as follows. Judi is having a baby. It’s not ground-breaking, plot wise, but it is everything that she wants. There are going to have to be some radical changes in back-plot. Cuts are going to be made. The editorial process is a painful one.

Hope’s pregnancy might not register with her at all. Psychotic denial is fairly standard in schizophrenic pregnancies. These women typically refuse prenatal care, fail to recognise signs of delivery. The chances of Hope being able to calmly and happily bond with a baby, are slim. What kind of mother could Hope be? Her negative symptoms make it near impossible for her to reach out to anyone, emotionally or literally, to pick them up when they fell, assuming she noticed they’d fallen. What sort of life is that? Early maternal rejection significantly increases the risk for serious criminal or violent behaviour in adulthood.

Judi could help. She could reduce Hope’s delusional interpretation of the changes her body was going through, help her to identify herself as a mother. Ensure that she and her child were housed and cared for somewhere there would be someone to do what Hope couldn’t. There is no way of knowing if that would work, but then there’s no way of knowing that anything will work. These are things she could do, if the truth, the old truth, was a story she was interested
in telling. But Judi is the author of both their destinies now, and she is plotting something different.

If Judi is to become this child's mother, then Hope has to become hers.
“When you listen to someone talking about their illness, you are certainly not helping them, you are adding energy to their illness.” The Secret tells us.

As you make arrangements for your funeral are you also, metaphorically, banging the nails into your coffin lid? When her Da talked about the fact that he knew he was dying, because he was, and he needed to, was Judi killing him with kindness by even listening? The Secret says joy, laughter and faith can cure any illness. Medicinal laughter is hard to administer, bad taste is a concern.

Hope’s mental illness, Nelson’s actions, the anxiety gnashing at her stomach more when she considers her own actions: all these, if she can come to understand them as negative energy, can be swept away with gaiety.

Driving up the brae, the car feels heavy, what with the hospital stuff, the clothes and things, the telly, the shovel handle sticking out of it all at a jaunty angle, like a flake off a ninetynine cone, and all the stuff she nipped out to get from big supermarket on the way.

That was awful. Hope might have woken up, or some conscientious citizen might wonder who’s left that unconscious woman in that car. Was it better or worse to park in the disabled bit, she didn’t know. It is a massive TV though, Hope will love it.

“You’ve got the big TV, Hope, no one can take that away from you,” Judi tells sleeping beauty in the passenger seat. The car coasts up the increasingly windy road, the suspension bouncy with newness but awkward to steer.
Without all the stops and things, it would only have been a forty minute drive. Twenty-two minutes on the train and she’d be back into Glasgow: just a minute’s run to the station at the bottom of the brae. She hasn’t come very far. Still, the light of noon feels wrong, glaring. The countryside, with its space and silence, cannot shroud you like a city busy with people busy with their own concerns.

Leaving Hope to her deep chemical sleep, Judi takes the shovel from the boot and pitches it into the soil, uprooting a dormant rosebush that may still contain traces of her father’s ashes. She walks the circumference of the house, stumbling on memories, choked roses, overgrown tangles of brambles, stung by nettles. She tries the doors, still tight, and marvels at the windows, blacked out with grime, cracked by time, by temperature, but unanimously unsmashed. What were the delinquents of Cauldhame up to, if not panning them in and venturing inward to write “RedRum” on the walls, smoke pot and sick up cider in its corners?

Genuinely astonished by the lock’s turning, Judi jumps as the front door, swollen on its hinges, opens with a crack like gunshot. She’s home.

Decay has made itself at home. Damp lounges against the floral wallpaper. The ceiling rose has cracked and split and, through moss thicker than velvet, a spouting of buddleia bobs slightly, like a child’s-head from a bunk-bed. She flicks a light switch to no avail.

In the kitchen, formica countertops have blistered and burst; swollen,. One kitchen cupboard bottom sags like fat spilling over a tight waistband.
Rotted pulses have composting themselves against mystery cans. There is a scrape and scurry in the walls.

Judi stares at an oversized ghetto-blaster. The things of her childhood seem jarringly modern. The atmosphere of abandonment has made this house older than itself, and she flicks the switch by the socket with a playful curiosity she feels instantly guilty about. How now, can anything, even for a second, be fun? Judi presses play and Tania Donnelly’s voice fills the room, the last tape still in the deck, right where she left it, only slightly more garbled with warp than her playing it for months on near continuous repeat would’ve left it anyway. The tinny music coming from the one working speaker is eerily odd, at first. “I send a light to shine on you. I send a light to shine around you. I send a light to blind you.” Tania sings through the murk. For a second Judi is confused by the message of light, where everything is so dingy. Then realises: the light! The sign! This baby, this baby is her light in the darkness. The familiar music lights up the house like a cine-lamp, projecting the comings and goings of the first two decades of her life against the walls around her.

Judi moves from room to room, feeling triumphant each time she pushes the plug into a new socket and hears Tania sing out, marking each working socket with a smiley face. Positivity. It’s about fifty fifty: a pass. She’ll take it.
Upstairs, the ivy's tendrils have pushed their way in through the skylight, a slow invasion. Two or three nests nestle in the beams of what used to be her parents' bedroom. The jungle room.

Opposite, the room that was hers is, but for a blanket of dust, intact. Robert Plant's thickly lined eyes still stare plaintively from the walls, paintbrushes still jut from the desktidy. There is something horrific about it, like a room “just as they left it” years after a child is filed Missing.

“When you breathe, you breathe for two. And if you think you’ve finally found the perfect light, I hope it’s true.” sings Tania Donelly, a socket works upstairs too! Judi sings along. How can those words not be for she and Hope? When the muse speaks, how totally appropriate that it should do so via one of Throwing Muses, in the room where she first memorised each word of these songs. Back at the car, Hope's only movement is still the steady rhythm of her breathing. Judi will need to let her wake, to drink and to eat in the next two or three hours at the most.

First she drags the one of the storage heaters, into what was her father's room. The remains of the thick dark curtains, bottles of pills and moth-eaten pyjamas, the knock-off Pringle golf jumpers that used to cause her such acute embarrassment, socks and pants and endless books, all are piled into thick black bags with no time to get bogged down in whose they were.

The bereavement counsellor told Judi that it wasn’t her fault, that there was nothing she could have done. He said this because that is what they always
say. Because that is their job, their only job. But even if it were true, what about bringing someone else, two people, really, here to care for when she had so spectacularly failed to care for the first? What would he say about fault if he could see her now?

Judi drags the old bed to the spot where the rotted remains of its burnt-out mattress has clearly become a mini dumping ground over the years.

The sky-blue, wipe-clean paint does almost that when Judi sponges the first kettleful of bleachy, soapy water over it. “Wipe clean: hygienic” her father observed cheerily as she painted those walls, and neither of them mentioned how hospitaly it looked. Judi shudders, as she cleans the little room her father died in, surprised by how easily the hot bleachy water cuts through to the laminate flooring underneath. This is what will be left in the end times; cockroaches, laminate flooring, plastic bottles: these are the things that aliens will have to judge us on when we are gone. Her Da’d liked it though, the lammy. “Brings the light” he’d said. New lamps are lit, the room newly familiar with details from Lotus Garden’s earlier, a freshly dusted picture of Isabel and Ray grins out from the bedside table.

The thick leather buckle wrist and ankle restraints tuck easily enough beneath the sturdy little camp bed. Perhaps they will never need them. I wouldn’t do anything to you I hadn’t tried on myself first, Judi remembers Nelson telling her the first time the little locks had shut around her wrists, the strange thrill of it. Judi bashes a nail into the Mother Mary-blue wall, gets the full-length mirror from the hall, scrubs, polishes and hangs it opposite the wee window, and smiles, seeing how it brings the light. In the en-suite, the shower safety-rail
clutters her mind with memories of her father clutching it, wincing, as Michael showed Judi how to change Da’s dressings, how to remove them in the warm water so that the hardened seepage from his wound didn’t tear at the remaining skin. New fluffy towels, nice soapy things, she has done enough scrubbing and bleaching, surely, that the sickening smell of gangrene is something she can only be imagining. Home from hospital, to a new room, new life, new name, the women in her arms sleeps on: is one, two, three people, oblivious. Judi gets her into her pajamas, tucks her into her new bed and leaves the door ajar, turning down the radio so she’ll hear Hope if she cries out, which she will, when she wakes.

Judi pokes the broom-handle up the chimney-flue as far as she can, dislodging armfuls of leaves, a small, long dead, chick. Lifting the carpet feels like peeling back the bad, getting back to a past where mistakes could be made and met with kindness. It has been easy to forget that Isabel McGovan was happy here. She can be again, Judi is sure of it.

Judi has a hunt for her mother’s scrapbooks. She brings them downstairs to the light and pours over them. One marked “Celebrity Book” the other she called her “wish-list.” Judi used to think this scrapbook was a documentation of all their life together failed to live up to. Now she sees that mother truly understood the law of attraction, looked unrelentingly towards a golden future, and got it. What is her mother’s wish list, curated in pritt-stick, but a version of the “vision board” The Secret recommends for “placing your order with the universe?”
What strikes her most is the modesty of Isabel’s aspirations. She feels closer to her mother, looking through this book, now, than she can remember feeling for a long time in her actual presence. She wants to reach across the divide and tell the dissatisfied lady whose dreams were fading with her youth, that a nice sofa isn’t the point, that you can’t ever get it how you want it, because the “it” that really matters has nothing to do with home furnishings. Judi knows.

Perhaps the Isabel McGovan that fell, alone, over the edge of the world and was gone, knew that too. It’s nice to think of that life as some triumphant learning curve, a flow state journey towards her best self, going out, literally, on a high. A problem with that is that when Isabel ploughed her energy into a brighter future, one that did not include them, it made living life around her, in her unsatisfactory present, fraught and dispiriting. She and Da were always standing in the way, in the place where really a much better daughter and husband should have been.

Judi turns to the “celebrity book,” flicking from page to page, “Best Wishes” on a postcard from Cilla Black, Lulu, a Christmas card “love” from Twiggy, little connections. It always seemed such a waste of time to Judi, but now this book is more valuable than she ever imagined it could be. There, only slightly mildewed, twelve pages in, is the letter. Hope’s signature hasn’t changed, although, of course, it will do, quite radically, soon. “Stay In Touch, with Hope Dalloway” is printed across the A5 page in bold cursive script. Judi wonders how many of these letters there still are in the world.

The family albums are just where she hid them from her father: under the wee bed in her room. His missing foot made upstairs her domain, a space to
bathe that did not reek of detergent. He was crying too much, too often, drunk on Bells and self-pity. It was too much to watch him watch those pictures, so she took the albums, one by one, reasoning that he could just ask for them back... he was a grown man, it should have been true.

Judi longed for the life of her old school friends, living in shambolic flats of drunken revels and ill-advised romances, living so incompetently that they contracted conjunctivitis from a failure to launder bed-sheets from one week, month or sexual partner to the next. Life was elsewhere, happening without her. She knew that her father was in every imaginable kind of pain, but it was depressing to be around, his depression.

Clutching the books together, it strikes her for the first time how similar the volumes are. Da had been entirely satisfied with their lives as they were, there had been no shortage of gratitude on her father's part, if it failed to "bring abundance" that's because he felt he had it. It must have seemed a massive obligation for Isabel, to be the greatest source of someone else's joy - when her own life with them came to give her comparatively little in return. The hidden order of things, as revealed by The Secret, is neither moral nor merit based, but true, nevertheless. How else could it be that her mother gazing covetously at one set of photos, an act of faith only in her own entitlement, had heralded in that life; whilst her father's deep devotion, his unflailing love for what was, and later what had been, only compounded the pain of his loss? The vast, inaccessible past cannot keep you moving forwards, is all the more absent for having been there, once.
The fireplace crackles merrily, fuelled by logs Judi cut herself, in unwitting preparation, the best part of two decades ago. Judi wraps potatoes in foil and tucks them in at the grate. The kitchen is beyond use, for now. Tin foil packages of salmon, green beans and garlic butter, are ready to go on the fire at the first sign of Hope’s waking. Jason’s favourite campfire meal - she wonders how he’s doing, what on Earth Nelson will tell him is going on. The smoke is stretches up the chimney like a string of pulled chewing-gum, up into the dying light of the grey afternoon. By evening, it will be an unbroken rope of silver, tethering them to the world, a smoke signal, flagging their presence. Fine.

Judi feels delirious, as though everything that ever has, ever will, happen to her is happening in that moment. She prunes the sapling from the ceiling, drags most of the furniture, which gives new meaning to the term “lived in,” to the growing heap outside. The human world is making its way back to the forgotten house. The big old Chesterfield she has probed with the Hoover, sprayed it with polish, hidden it under throws. The afternoon sun casts a soft cool light through newly washed windows. Judi is surprised to find herself reacting fondly to the faded bohemian garishness of it all.
The crying isn't as she expected when it comes, a soft keening. At the doorway to the little room, Judi is struck by just how much already, it *is* her mother in that wee bed.

"Judi? Where is he?" Her voice is anxious.

"Have you been having weird dreams, Mum?" Judi had always wanted to call Isabel “Mum” when she was little, but that was “too common,” as if they were anything but. Hope nods, fat tears spill soundlessly from her eyes. Judi cradles the worried little face softly in the flat of her hand and strokes her cheek with her thumb. “Shhh. We’re home now.”

"I’m not your mother."

"That’s not very nice, Mum."

In the front room she smiles vaguely, as if in recognition, sits and watches the fire intently. Hope eats wordlessly, but enthusiastically.

After dinner, Judi finds a nice picture of the two of them at the beach, one year. Judi's wee arms flung wide, looking straight to the camera, “showcasing” that year’s sandcastle with a milktoothy grin. Isabel is in the foreground, arrestingly beautiful, facing away from the lens -and from her daughter- into the distance. Her hair whipped into flames by the wind.

"You look so beautiful in that one. That was his favourite foatie of us."

"Photograph."
“I stand corrected,” Judi concedes, happily. It's all weirdly normal. “Do you want to see some more old photos for yourself?”

Judi watches her hesitant nod and smiles. “I’ll make us a cup of tea.” Judi wraps a light blanket around the little bird-like shoulders made frail by three decades of catatonic episodes, and places one of her Da’s albums in Hope’s lap.

Outside, the heap she has carted outside forms ominous shapes against the darkening sky. She’ll need a skip, a whole new kitchen, proper beds, a plasterer, someone about the damp: who do you even call about damp? Or about the possibility of the ceiling falling in on them, or the roof? How can it be that she not only does not know how to fix these things herself, but even who to call and give money to do it? From the outside, the little house looks cheery, chimney puffing away, windows all lit up, like a doll’s house, Judi thinks, although doll’s houses don’t generally have working lights or chimneys. Maybe it’s just comforting to think of it as less real.

“Where is he?”

“Oh,” Judi smiles gently at the plaintive little face, “you must miss him so much.”

Hope’s head snaps up, her eyes gazing sharply at Judi, her head cocked stiffly, a little wren. She nods minutely, cautiously.

The sooner she tells their story, the sooner they can start the next chapter together.
“Of course you miss him, Mum, of course you do. But he’s been dead a long time now, remember?”

Hope stares wildly at Judi, but doesn’t argue. That’s good. Is that good? “Where is he?” a string of sing-song syllables, begin to loop, “Where?” her shoulders nudge into a rhythmic rock, “is he?” Hope’s clenches fists in her hair, pulling her head down into a foetal seize. Judi goes to the bag of drugs, and is surprised to feel herself shaking a little, lost.

“Oh do you, Doctor?” she can almost hear Nelson jeer. She tidies them away, for now, upstairs, traipsing thank you determinedly, but lightfootedly, on each, not so sure, step.

When Judi started at Lotus Gardens, catatonic symptoms looked so horror-films to her.

“They have much greater reason to fear us than we do them.” Nelson told her reassuringly, noticing her discomfort. Jeez, she’d thought that was reassuring and clever. Thought it was a lot of things. “Thoughts become things.”

There is a mighty ‘whumph’ and big chunks of cloudy, acrid black stuff fall from the grate. They both jump. Apparently it takes more than a fiddle about with a broom handle to service a blocked chimney.

The shock of it stills Hope, who just stares until Judi leads her back to the wee room. Tucking her in, planting a kiss on her cheek, turning the lights out, “I’m just next door,” Judi says. It’s meant to sound reassuring, but Judi shudders at her own words, they strike her more as Kathy Bates in Misery than Florence Nightingale.
Back by the fire, Judi flips her laptop open, she can make the list now, so it stops playing on anxious loop in her head, and go order stuff tomorrow. Oh but she’s online. How can that be? There are no other houses for miles. The network is called “Blessed Be” It feels like a sign. A good one.

Judi begins looking up tradesfolk, making a list of numbers for the morning, ordering stuff from Tesco 24. To pay for things, lots of things, without any sort of worry over what that might mean financially, without consulting anyone, it’s a thing she hasn’t known before, it feels good. “Plenitude.” Says Judi. “Abundance. Thank you.” Cosmic ordering made easy, as everything is, by money.

Back in the little blue room next door, Hope is sound asleep. Judi nestles down into the blankety sofa and finishes her massive shop. The delivery options include “Next Day.” All that stuff, here tomorrow: it seems outlandish. Judi has spent all day hacking into the past, waded back through decades to come to this place and moment, but the almighty Tesco can be here at between three-fifteen and ten-forty tomorrow, bringing taramasalata and a working fridge to put it in.

Judi finds herself on Facebook. It’s like that. Put in front of a computer, even a minute, there she is, stalking the people you love, commenting on holiday photos of people you are broadly indifferent to yet feel compelled to try and convince you are funny.

There is a “chat” message across the bottom. From Nelson “I’ve heard about your hallucinogenic disgrace.”

Does he really think he can ever make her feel shame again? The word “disgrace” makes her wince.
"You are my only disgrace." She writes, and blocks him. Her husband.

Quite an odd thing to do.

Judi has blocked people before. Old friends with unexpected right-wing views, heterosexual idiots with ugly opinions on gay marriage. Wouldn’t it be good if you could block folk for real so easily. A sort of willed string-theory where at the push of a virtual button your universes could swing imperceptibly and irreconcilably apart. Judi could live in a world without Nelson, and leave one of the other infinite Judi’s in another infinite universe to deal with him. Not murder. She doesn’t want to kill him, just for him not to exist anymore. She stares back at Facebook, where recent “news” includes the fact that seven of her “friends” “like” a video of a puppet advertising a telephone. This is how she has spent her time. No wonder she has been so unhappy.
Tea, toast -made on a toasting fork - eggs boiled inside the camping kettle: Judi feels resourceful this morning. It’s the dynamic and stylish sort of making-do she admires in the characters from Jason’s zombie movies. And her patient seems fine. Not crying, or rocking, just staring and eating. Together, they watch a bluetit bob into a seemingly non-existent crack in the wall; nature will find a way.

Judi sees absolutely why she did not stay pregnant herself. She was terrified: she didn’t believe for a second, not even the first time, that her body was capable of supporting a new life, and so was made murderess by her own negative thought. But this baby? Judi knows the baby inside Hope is hers, and that she, Judi, will be an excellent mother. And Hope? Hope couldn’t be further from the stressed out wreck that Judi was - Hope doesn’t have a clue what’s happening to her body, and Judi will keep it that way for as long as possible.

Hope’s eyes never leave her reflection in the mirror as Judi does her hair, the new makeup. Sometimes she looks fascinated, sometimes vacant. Judi chats away but if Hope hears she has no interest in it, that’s for sure. When she’s ready, Hope stays by the mirror, watching herself shyly.

“You look so young,” Judi tells her as she leaves the room. For a woman of Judi’s mother’s age, she really does.

Sometimes storytelling requires props, Judi is nervously excited to see the first arrive. Her moon belly, delivered in an unmarked brown cardboard box: packaging so unassuming as to feel quite incriminating.
Judi tries the belly in the mirror. Tries different clothes, seeing what’ll flatter it. It feels wonderful to be expecting, really expecting, a baby.

As the days go on, Judi sends Jason little emails “from the spa.” Asking after school and Roxy, mentioning flotation tanks or mud-baths, writing a humorous account of a Military-style exercise class. He says little in his replies, broadly normal. She’d called him a couple of times, got his usual mumbly self, but in emails he’d described his wee girlfriend as “totes amazeballs.” It made Judi laugh out loud.

Nelson sends emails. Judi deletes them, unread, and imagines instead feelings of encouragement and love flowing between them. Not actual words, because she can’t think what words could make her feel better about it all, but just the idea of positivity. In every situation, Rhonda Byrne says, we must look for the gift. The coming baby, her baby, makes it is easy to be grateful.

It’s sort of wonderful to be a homemaker when you don’t have to worry about money or what anyone else wants, easy to create bohemian chic when you can order it out of a catalogue with no-one to make a funny face over your shoulder.

The days pass, Hope is fairly pliant, gives Judi a sharp look when she calls her “Mum,” but says nothing, “Isabel,” generates little fuss. Baby steps. She eats enthusiastically, vomits occasionally, cries copiously: typical pregnant lady stuff.

Their little pockets of shared reality pass in amity. She and Hope have done some harvest-loaf making, stain-glass painting, flower-arranging: she likes a churchy sort of activity. They’ve both been doing a lot of painting.
The Secret talks about painting pictures in your mind, how you’d like your world to be, to “call it into existence through the law of attraction,” but much as Judi tries, she can’t quite hold a picture of their happy future; Nelson, the baby and she, together, so Judi tries to paint it, a perfect picture of their perfect future lives. Judi is surprised at what she can still do, how easily she can Judi paints the wee cottage back to its former glory, roses trailing, their lives in bloom. A happy Hope/Isabel is easy to picture, especially when she has a live model, and Hope seems to like being painted, too:

“Do you think it looks like you, Mum?” asks Judi.

Hope looks back, uncertain, but flattered by the likeness, the wellness and certainty of the lady in the pictures. Judi paints herself, in one, with “Isabel” out for a walk in the woods. In another she paints herself grinning and cradling the baby, in another stooping to lift a toddler (always putting the kid in carefully unisex clothes, facing away from the viewer, for truly, any child she is sent is welcome, she doesn’t want to presuppose anything but their health.) Judi looks carefully, for the first time in a long time, at her own face in the mirror, to get it right: sees that it’s not so bad. She paints Nelson last, side by side, arm around her. She grins convincingly up at him, but his face, she can’t get it. All her attempts are ugly caricatures, misshapen, unconvincing. Judi loses her enthusiasm for the project. Maybe when she’s calmed down. For now she paints just blue sky and fluffy white clouds above the neck. It’s sort of funny, is that awful?

Back on the other side of the sliding door, in Lanark Street, where Nelson will be busy spinning his own version of events to Jason, she doubts that her
husband is happily anticipating a new life with her either. Was he ever really “with her?” How close can you get with such lies in the way?
Coming back to Cauldhame has felt like asking the world back in, one sugary-tea cup at a time. In the telling, Judi’s story has become as refined as the three heaped spoonfuls of sugar that seem to be industry standard. Various people arrive as the days go on and ask her to “sign please.” They suck air between their teeth as they prod the floorboards, test the electrics with devices that for all Judi knows may have as much practical value as the e-meters the scientologists wheel out in shopping centres.

At first, she’s concerned about their leaving the front door open, but Hope shows no interest in the open door, or the “workies” as she calls them disdainfully.

“Yes. They work. Those people work: what’s your point?”

Judi felt bad after she snapped; this woman is mentally ill, if Judi gets upset with her opinions, whose fault is that? Hope drinks tea, watches television carefully. As far as Judi can tell, Hope no more notices the sudden seeming change in Judi’s body than the slow, as yet fairly undetectable, one in her own.

The Sky TV man came first, and Hope likes the African-American Christian Preacher ladies so much it was worth it for them alone. Judi must have got a faraway look in her eye, because the Sky man asked if she was feeling ok; offered to get her a seat and a cup of tea. The man from Sky was Polish, he looked a little like an overfed Ryan Gosling, not her type at all, but God, to be noticed. The comically sombre way he noticed her undone shoelace, and stooped to fasten it. She’d imagined him clasping her knees gently then, parting
them, his head slipping between her as blamelessly as a book from her lap. She didn’t dare leave the chair until he was out of the room for the diamond of condensation she knew was imprinted on the dark waxed leather of the seat.

High school, maybe, when she’d last felt this sort of heat, Geography, the seismic shift of puberty, the sticky plastic chair.

Foxes scream out from the woods in the early morning, and the trees begin to blossom, and Judi takes cold showers and wonders at herself.

By the end of their first week Judi is flooding her face with rosy brushfulls of blush every morning before she answers the door to this or that work-man. She’s never looked so radiant: everyone says so. The story becomes stronger with every new face of casual belief.

She keeps the ornate old key to Hope’s room nestled between her breasts.

“You’ve got the key, you’ve got the Secret” a plasterer sings to her on Tuesday, as she bends to deliver tea and cake at his feet, and the key dangles from her cleavage. Judi giggles, notices her nipples press out from the silk of her floaty top. Her eyes dart back to notice him noticing the same thing.

The fifth day Judi spends in heels. The plasterer is treating the wall at the foot of the stairs, and, after carefully securing her prosthetic belly beneath granny pants, Judi walks up and down them in her shortest skirt. That night she feels tiny tremors, imagining him watching her walk the stairs, wanting to fuck her on them, imagining him going home and masturbating over her. It feels sort of predatory, she thinks, coming hard and guiltily at that idea. But there is no denying that the young men are enjoying her attentions too. At least one of them
has surely done the same, thinking of her. Surely one. Judi is obsessed. Not so much with sex itself, but with being wanted.

Judi couldn’t imagine how she’d do a thing without Nelson, but his influence had stayed miraculously small in the last week, a flame starved of oxygen his presence spat and dwindled. It turns out the easiest thing in the world is to withhold her attention from him.

Judi has fallen into a pattern of putting Hope away before her guests arrive, sitting with one hand against the pretty little shoulder bag full of chemical restraint -classed C for use in pregnancy. It rests just by Judi’s pretty new bump. Judi is avoiding all of Hope’s regular medications, unless it looks like Hope is going to seriously harm herself, or harm the baby, or harm Judi’s plan. How much of a threat Hope would pose to any of these three before she involved the handbag, Judi doesn’t know, it hasn’t had to happen, yet.

Hope has really slowed down, and stiffened, which obviously was awful for her but, did make her look, oh so much, like an infirm old lady. Those drugs were just too dangerous for baby: respiratory conditions, cleft palates, a link to floppy baby syndrome, which sounds cute, and even looks it: little rag-doll babies who loll like tree sloths, but the recovery process is long and painful and offers no guarantees. And Hope has done everything she can to avoid taking the damn things for years, after all.
The chimney-man is coming today. Judi put the fire out last night and cleaned
the grate as best she could this morning. This is the first day they haven’t had it
lit, so the electric heater is on in Hope’s room, a bit dodgy to leave her with it,
but they’re family now: it’s allowed to be a little slap-dash with family: what you
lose in health and safety you gain in love, in theory.

Right now, Judi admits, it is incredibly useful of her mother to be dead,
but she feels, in the last few days, really very angry with Isabel all the same for
not being alive any more.

TV helps. Judi’s also started singing along with the radio - quite loudly-
when there’s folk in. Between Judi and the radio, any odd noise or movement
Hope might make is masked, and whilst this is the primary objective for
behaving like what she imagines from the outside makes her look like some
desperately lonely Pop-Idol-ising tragedy, it is immensely enjoyable, actually,
having folk listen, with the comfort of a wall between them. It made her feel
light, free, as if everything that was happening was a game, one she might be
winning. But was it all a little too good to be true, too “whistle while you work”,
too “spoonful of sugar”, to be swallowed? Her bright, girlish demeanour, was it
suspiciously above suspicion? Judi worries that with every laugh at a
tradesman’s joke, she is making herself more ludicrous, more visible, more
vulnerable.

And she had been flirting with the men, true. The belly, not immediately
noticeable but that she stroked it in a way she’d initially practiced doing
“absentmindedly”, and now did absentmindedly, drew their attention to the child she was having. It made it all safe, for her, for the men: a little sexual attention didn’t mean anyone was going to get involved in this mess. Judi enjoyed the looks of scorn and sadness that passed like the fast grey Ayrshire clouds across the men’s faces when she smiled bravely and told them that her husband had run off with another woman, that her mother was dying and wished to return home to do so where she’d been happiest.

Judi hadn’t, she told them, sighing, known where else to turn. When her husband left her she’d felt like her own life too was ending. “We saved each other.” she told them all, winfully, “Me and Mum. I’m trying to make the house nice,” she stroked her little belly, “ for her, and the baby, when they come.” So far she’d found the men to be very reasonable, and so attentive, they worked quickly, did so many little extra things for her: fixed up wee bits and bobs, brought bits for the baby from their wives. And all the while Judi baked and sang and expressed her gratitude for seeing to her drainage system, sorting her oven out. Judi learned that the wives around here do not appreciate husbands bringing home other women’s cupcakes. What was it with those cute little cakes that they got everyone into such trouble?

Judi knew news of her return would be getting ’round town soon enough. That poor girl: always so strange, who nursed her dying father while her mother, and all their smart set, flew the nest. Where was that fancy man now she was old and ill, eh? Just went to show! They’d talk about Judi too: was she not awful old to be having her first? The husband that left her then: what sort of
man could he be? Judi imagines little strings dangling from her fingertips, down the brae and into the village, tugging there, yanking here: heartstrings.

The chimney man turns out to be a familiar-looking woman with a bright pink van and a small dog in a sweater whose name, if Judi heard it correctly, is Asbo. The pink woman, whose name Judi doesn't quite catch and then is too flustered to say so, shines a torch up the chimney and scratches the back of her cropped head meditatively. The chimney girl doesn't want anything, so Judi goes and sits with Hope in her wee room with a plate of biscuits: “these are new,” Hope peers skeptically at them. They watch Pastor Joel Osteen explain how to “turn negativity around.” Hope has taken to nodding and saying “Amen” quite loudly in the lulls between buzz phrases. It's reassuring to hear her make such agreeable noise.

“You've got to go through your closed doors to get to your open ones,” Pastor Joel tells Oprah.

“Amen” Hope says, and Judi feels a tug of anxiety: will Hope take this advice too literally? Nah: the woman by her side has grown too used to being locked in, too often, to notice, really.

“You've got to go through your closed doors to get to your open ones,” Oprah parrots back, an eyebrow raised at the audience, imbuing each word with more significance than it can sensibly contain. Shut it, Opera, Judi thinks.

“That's a nice way of putting it, isn't it?” Judi says, cautiously.

“Who knows?” Hope’s face seems to say as it turns and surveys her, as though she’s just become aware of Judi’s presence, which may very well be the case. As far as Judi can make out, apart from the few times when she’s got really
quite frightened, Hope seemed to like this new location as much as her last, and seems unfazed by the lack of other nurses, or patients for that matter. How does she assess her situation? Why did Judi, or anybody, ever lock her in or knock her out? Hope has always found her own behaviour reasonable, sometimes she is told that is not. Things happen accordingly. That has been her life for a while now. Hope picks up a biscuit and examines it like a senior archaeologist, then hands it to Judi. "Not new: just like the last ones."

"Different name" Judi says, enjoying the conversationally volley.

But Hope’s eyes are back on the TV: “Amen.”

The chimney woman, whose name she still doesn’t know, but who knows Judi’s, and her mum’s and her dads: everything she left behind embedded in the collective knowledge of this town, is in this woman. She stands opposite her in the kitchen, palming a scone into her mouth and asking questions, and Judi feels scrutinised. It’s not just her being female, it is more that her face is so familiar that Judi can’t stop looking. She’s a real person, with a story about everything. Oh my goodness; Bert, nee Roberta, who went to the same school as her, and has a big green arrow tattoo, still.

Roberta, who never left Cauldhame for more than a visit or a holiday in her life. People made so many Dick-van-dyke jokes when she started professionally chimney-sweeping that she has “almost forgotten there was a Roberta,” Bert says.

“Oh there was,” Judi smiles “I remember her well, she was very cool, me and her used to be pals, actually.”

"Folk always come back in the end?” Bert smiles.
“Really? Do you think it’s the landscape?” Judi doesn’t know why she says that. Cauldhame is not noted for its natural beauty, or for anything, it is a town that never happened.

“You kidding? S’like you. They all come back when to have kids. To be near their mums, eh?”

Judi frowns, having grown up in this nowhere place, she struggles to imagine why anybody would inflict the same on their offspring.

“Shit, sorry.”

“What?” Judi asks distractedly, too busy realising she has inadvertently become one of the very people she’s judging so harshly.

Bert wrinkles up her nose: “About your mum, I’m sorry. I’ve got big feet.”

Judi looks down at her sooty boots, then realises Bert is talking metaphorically. About putting her feet in it. Judi laughs.

“You’re a bit slow.” says the adult lady version of Roberta, Judi is happy to nod in agreement. She has bought Judi’s story, why wouldn’t she?

“It’s ok, “ Judi smiles, and talks a little about how Isabel McGovan – the one alive next door, now- has dissociative personality disorder. “Mum can’t remember who she is, herself, a lot of the time, let alone me.”

Yes, it’s difficult, Judi concedes, modestly, but seeing her through her last few years is “the least I can do.” Her mother grew so confused that she believed herself to be one of the other patients in the hospital. They had to leave.

“Everything is a sign, to them.” Explains Judi, “they see all kinds of unlikely connections and codes, that kind of thing.” Judi dismisses the thought
that says The Secret sounds like “that kind of thing.” She is too busy rewriting her destiny to question it all like that.

Judi pours Bert a second cup of tea. The girl is completely enthralled. Judi wonders if she really likes her as much as she feels she does, or simply enjoys the presence of someone who wants to listen. She feels interesting— it’s a novel sensation.

Judi tells the story of how celebrity obsessed Isabel, after her husband’s death, had come to believe that she an 80’s radio psychic whose show she’d listened to obsessively when Judi was a girl.

“Hope Dalloway? From Clyde FM? We went together Judi, to that revival thingy, with your mum and mine. Funny eh? We were all there: you me, my mum, yours... and Hope too, obviously. I’ve got a photo, I can bring round a copy.”

“Really?” Judi smiles. “That could be... useful.”

“Aye.” Roberta says sadly, then “And where’s he?” Chimney girl says, indicating Judi’s belly.

“Oh... we’re on a break” Judi doesn’t know what else to say.

“Not much of a break for you”.

Judi enjoys that she’s telling the truth to a greater degree than she expected, in amongst all the lying.

“To be honest it’s sort of creepy seeing your house all lit up again. All the weans are sure it’s haunted. Teenagers were daring each other to run and knock the front door, last winter, or spend a night inside. I don’t think anyone ever did it.”
“I don’t think they did either.” Judi smiles. Ghosts.
Bert is “shoring up” the chimney. The second day of a three day job. Judi is due back in work in two days time.

“You should come to see what they’ve done to the old kirk.”

“Who’s they?”

“Enlightenment.”

“What’s that?”

“Bunch of generic hippies. Come to a dance. Get back to your hippy roots.”

“I can’t leave Mum.”

“You’re going to have to, sometime.”

She is going to have to leave her sometime, it’s true, but leave her where?

In the old real-world Hope is schizophrenic, broadly catatonic without her medication. Catatonia and dementia can look very similar though, and new-world Isabel is reaching an age where dementia might feasibly set in. Whatever you call those symptoms it’s certain to say they are not nice; the slowing down to a stop, rocking, delusions. The woman in the bed next door, should her symptoms become unmanageable, will have a great difficulty getting anywhere, or communicating to anyone what is happening to her. And if she did tell, her condition would tend to automatically discredit her. There really is so much stigma surrounding aging and mental illness. Judi’s mother, having unfortunate delusions of moderate grandeur about being an abducted celebrity psychic is believable, much more so than the truth. Judi, orchestrating their destiny, has to
make sure the various realities are in concord, like different sections of an orchestra, in order that they all might conduct themselves appropriately, play their part. There is nothing Judi won’t do for her family.

This woman and her, their lives are intertwined right up until the baby is born. But then, a single mother with a new baby couldn’t really be blamed, could she, if after a while it was all too much, and her crazy old mum had to go into a home. Best place for her, they’ll say.

“Do you want to go for another walk later? See some more of the woods while it’s still light?”

“Really?” Hope squints her eyes suspiciously. It is the first thing she’s said since yesterday.

“How are you going to get better if we don’t get you out in the fresh air?”

“I’m not allowed.” She states simply.

“Says who? Let’s go this afternoon.”

If this place feels like a trap for Hope it will most certainly be one for Judi.

Judi brushes Hope’s bright red hair up into a back-combed bun, just the way her mum did it. “You haven’t looked so like yourself in ages.”

Hope smiles uncertainly. “What are you doing this for?” Her voice has the sort of friendly curiosity you find at a wedding. Her eyes though, are birdlike and keen.

“Because I love you, Mum. Family have to look out for each other.”

“I’m not your mother.”
“I wish,” -Judi pulls the piece of hair she’s pinning up too quickly and Hope smarts at the tug - “that you would stop saying that.”

They take a walk in the woods around the house. Their footsteps are almost silent, the damp thick moss is springy beneath them, polka-dotted with the dewy lace exoskeletons of birch leaves. Smooth and slender trunks stretch up, tall silver bars that surround them on all sides. Judi treads the rich earth, marvelling at the woman by her side who manages to be ethereal even in her new wellies. Judi wonders when Hope last had need for waterproofs.

They reach the ancient pines, Judi can feel her heart thump remembering the thrill of the torch-lit hide and seek she and her Da would play in those gnarly trunks. She tells Hope it all, “remember when…” as if she was there, because wouldn’t it be nice if Mum *had* been, the first time around? “God’s here as much as in that church” Da said, and Judi had loved the idea of it, but her unshakeable faith was in fairies, in vindictive winds that would change suddenly and “stick you like that” if you dared to scowl. He gave her faith in life in magic and in him. Judi weaves their new story from fragments of the old, drawing together loose ends, redrawing the lines.

Judi steers her to the nearest treestump, where they sit, facing into the woods. “This is the grove, where on the coldest, darkest nights, when the wind was up, you could hear the Djin, a lost soul calling you out here. He could climb in your body and live in it.”

Hope’s shoulders drift up and in, she doesn’t like the sound of the Djin. “If you want to spot if someone’s been possessed by a Djin, just take a look at their
feet: they'll be on the wrong way round.” Hope glances down at her new wellies and seems reassured. “Let's go home.”

Judi takes out her paintings, that evening and tries again to fit Nelson's face to the vacant space she has left, waiting for him. She sketches in and rubs out her husband's face so many times she is glad the painting is on canvas, she’d have rubbed straight through paper by now, left a gaping hole where her ideal partner should be. Right now, he is just missing. She sends Nelson an email “I am missing you,” it is true, in a sense, and asking to meet tomorrow.

That night, Hope's screams bring Judi to her bedside.


“He... remembered me,” Hope wrinkles her face, baffled, touched. She smiles, and looks up at Judi, her big eyes biggest: “he so loved me, he said... I felt it, he did.”

She can see Hope wanting to believe it, as everyone wants to believe that they are loved, that they are loveable. Hope had known awe, fame: but sexual love... or sex, even? How much of that had she had?

“Oh, yes, he loved you.” She tells Hope, “You were his life.”

“He thought I was the one that left him, Judi,” Judi jumps a little to hear this. It has not featured in Judi’s retelling of their story, Isabel McGovan v2.0 was faithful till the end.

“I left him to die! Here!”

Judi’s stomach lurches. She also thought it best to spare Hope the information that it was this room Ray had died in.
“I tried to tell him, but…” She shivers, Judi takes the shawl from her own shoulders and places it around Hope’s. She perches next to her at the side of her bed.

Hope shakes. “Why can’t I remember? Why can’t I remember my husband?”

“You can: you are doing: you’re just not very well yet, is all.”

“It was his spirit.” Hope imbues those words “his spirit” with such showmanship Judi remembers the grass floor of the canvas church, the adults who’d shake, filled with the Holy Ghost who made them so odd. Hope, at the centre, the cosmic telephone everyone was hoping would ring true for them.

“No Mum.” She says softly, patiently, “not a ghost. That was Hope, not you…”

“but I am, I am, I…” Hope looks bereft, an outline that needs filled, “I remember!” her pretty face is full of determination.

“Oh, me too. We went to those tent revivals all the time. We listened to the show religiously, almost. You were a big fan of Hope Dalloway, she was brilliant.”

Again, Judi takes out the photos, of Ray and Isabel ’s meeting, their wedding -“weren’t you a beautiful bride? Look at your hair! Sooo Seventies!”

“Hope is dead?” Hope asks. She is now, thinks Judi. Of course. She has to be, doesn’t she?


Hope is sobbing now, on her shoulder.

“Yes,” Judi says, stroking her hair. “It was very sad. But she was so sick.”
“But then...?”

“You were remembering him, that’s all, you’re starting to remember things. It’s good. It means you’re getting better.”

In amongst all the lies, this seems the cruellest, because listening to her now how can Judi not believe that Hope Dalloway had a great gift, that Judi has been part of a world that crushed it, and is continuing to crush it, to crush her, into a shape that fits her purposes.

“What did he mean, I left him? Why would he say that?” Hope looks frantic. She’s living Judi’s story, they are on the same page.

“Because the day it happened...” the words struggle to make their way through Judi’s guilty tears, “the day he went, we weren’t there. I was at college, you...” Judi searches for the truest thing, “you hadn’’t come back from work.”

“Alone.”

“Yes.”

“Thank you for bringing me back here, to him.”

Judi nods. Shouldn’t it feel good? Getting what you asked for?
Today Hope dressed herself. Does it mean she's happy here?

Hope chose a loose green linen smock. You can't make out even the basic shape of her underneath it. Judi watches their own relative seeming ages and body shapes in the mirror as she stands behind Hope, sorting her hair, doing her makeup. They look just the part, both of them.

Bert, when she does arrive, is sporting a too tight t-shirt with a perforated line across the breasts, and an arrow pointing to it, which says "I’ve had it up to here with midgets."

“What do you think of the picture-gallery red, Mum?” Judi asks, showing Hope a dulux colour swatch.

“Ideal, for a picture gallery.”

Judi laughs. In these moments of seeming clarity, it’s very hard indeed to remember how ill, how fragile this woman is. How impossible such an exchange normally is.

Bert laughs, “she’s got a sharp tongue, your mum.”

Judi nods, “cutting,” and is about to tell Bert about some of Hope’s better put downs at Lotus Gardens, but then remembers, no, that person, those times: they’ve got to be gone, now.

“Amen” says Hope, who is watching the Christian Network on mute, with the subtitles. Lunch seems to go well, but Hope throws up not long afterwards. Morning sickness, meds withdrawal or both? Judi hates not knowing, and not knowing in any case how to help. She gives her some ginger tea to settle her
stomach, but nothing to ease the tension in her muscles, which she knows will be painful. “Dr Judi,” it’s true. She doesn’t know what she’s doing. But Dr Nelson knew full well that what he was doing, he just didn’t think he’d be caught out. wonders if there have been others, wonders how many.

Judi asks how Bert is getting on, not understanding the answer. She’s certainly using a lot of tools, and making a lot of noise and mess, so Judi feels like she’s getting her money’s worth. Even when you’re deceiving other people, you have to trust that they aren’t deceiving you, because we all need people we can trust, even if we aren’t one of those people personally.

“So, who looks after you when you’re sick?” Bert asks, her voice light and curious as she puts her tools away.

“I’m not sick,” Judi says.

“You will be, at some point. And you’re not a young mum, really,” Bert continues. Judi chooses not to be offended. “Have you even registered with the doctor up here yet? The health worker?”

Judi has done neither of these things. For obvious reasons. “We have private healthcare.” Very private, thinks Judi, “and my best pal’s a midwife, she’ll help out.” Might Marina help, if she knew? Of course not. Judi is just going to have to do it herself.

“It’s not so much the birth I mean, it’s now. You need to get out.”

Judi can get out the house, as she will tomorrow, only by drugging and incarcerating the innocent women she’s currently being applauded for her excellent care of.

“You need some time to yourself: it’s good for the baby.”
Time to herself is not good for the baby. It’s time in which Hope could do God knows what to herself, and the baby by association, or time when Judi has to dope her up at who knows what risk. Judi has wished there was someone in her life to take an interest. Now here that person is, getting in the way.

"We went for a walk yesterday," Judi says defensively.

"I’m sure that was a riot."

Judi laughs, but the anxiety of being caught, and morality of what she is doing aside, Judi can’t remember a time when she felt more full of optimism. She is enjoying making this house -which after all is hers- truly hers, excited about the baby on the way, and in some ways the new situation is a blessing: only one patient and no paperwork.

“You need some fun. Get out the house.”

Judi laughs. “Where to?” Judi hasn’t been into the high street for as much as a pint of milk -everything comes in a van these days- but she doesn’t feel like she’s missing out. It’s not like Cauldhame is a cultural hub.

“Five rhythms, tomorrow.” Bert says with authority. “Dancing, for folk who can’t dance. Perfect for pregnant ladies. Bring your mum, she’ll fit right in.”

Judi panics, what if there are folk there who knew her mum from before. I mean, she does look alike, but how alike?

“Oh, I don’t want to go too far from the house, you know.”

“It’s just a ten minute walk from here.”

"Nothing is a ten minute walk from here."

“In the kirk”

"Pagan’s dancing in a ruined church? Sounds a bit too Tam O'Shanter."
“Ach, it’s not a ruin anymore, you’ll see.”

Judi shrugs evasively.
Judi is listening to the audiobook of The Secret and lazily tracing chalk lines where Nelson’s face should be, willing him there. She looks down at the canvas, and laughs sadly, the face she has sketched there is Hamish’s, not Nelson’s. She gets her paints and fills it in anyway, a treat to distract herself from the horror of tomorrow.

“When people start focusing on what they want, what they don’t want falls away. What they want expands, and the other part disappears.”

Maybe the mention of expanding parts gives her a schoolgirl giggle. No not schoolgirl: he’s had enough of those, lately! An adult woman’s giggle, that’s what he gives her. Judi tries to start focusing on what she really wants - a harmonious reunion with her husband - but Hamish’s weathered smile beams out from the canvas, accurate and stunning. The picture is finished, it looks so perfect, that life, with him. Hamish is a married man, Judi is trapped in another thing.

In the darkening evening, the round mound on top the jutting edges of the skip forms a shape Judi can’t help but think is sort of cup-cake like. As a last, slightly whimsical, thought, she clambers up to put the picture of she and Hamish right at the top, the decorative cherry.
Judi nods off, dreaming Bert really was the one from Mary Poppins, and could pop Judi into the picture on the skip, to stay there, always. How can she focus on what she wants when she can't stop thinking about him?
It is unbelievable to her that this bag had, until recently, an ability to make her go weak at the knees, or kneel on them and wait attentively, not let on she had cramp. What was that attentive waiting for? As it turns out, what she was waiting for was this. If she’d been more attentive in other areas of her life, and spent less time lost to recreational persecution, maybe she’d have cottoned on to the reality of her situation a little quicker. This bagful of kinky stuff annoys her now. How very real it wasn’t. Judi recoils at having been taken in by it all, having swapped the opportunity for genuine intimacy for some sort of sexual pantomime. “Role-play” seems all the cheaper in light of the realisation that the role which required these - she looks down and the various restraints and spreaders: props- was just one of the many parts her husband has played. How important such stuff had seemed, how powerfully it kept her distracted from what was actually going on. Just how much she’d enjoyed that abuse, how lucky she’d thought herself to be called a worthless whore by her life partner, to have met someone that understood her “needs.”

There are many things she feels she needs right now: a firmer grasp of midwifery would be useful, a soul in the world she felt she could trust to help. But to be talked down to, have her face spat in, or taken over someone’s knee and spanked until she cries: these just aren’t on the list. It sounds like a massive hassle, an irritating waste of time. She stares into the depths of what they playfully called the “bag of tricks.” Yes, she has indeed been tricked.
Props are called that because they prop us up, bolster a flagging personality like an outrageous hat. She struggles to locate any certain knowledge to go with the name, Nelson, or say for sure anything about him, now. He is a person she has never really known. Who it is that she will see again in three hours?

Judi looks back into the old leather doctor's bag, contemplates the ball gag. The sensation of having it fitted to her mouth in particular, was part of her marital ritual she especially enjoyed. It had felt like... a wash of calm, a treat, to have no say, and no way of saying no. The possibility that she might use it on someone else had never even occurred to her, certainly not Nelson, and who else would there be? With one of these fitted, you can scream all you want, all you will produce is drool. Even with the window locked, even with the curtain drawn, if people hear screams from the house, and her car isn't there: mightn't they be drawn to help? Mightn't they worry? Call the police? Then again, Hope's a little more with it, trusting Judi more and more, Judi feels. She seems to be settling here, to be happy. And, Judi can't kid herself, to gag and restrain someone to their bed, in a locked room... that would make her a torturer. Abductress, for now, will do.

A class C sedative straight after breakfast isn't ideal but it's the most compassionate option she feels she has. Judi leaves Hope behind drawn curtains, the television on the Christian channel, a tray with fizzy water and plenty of little bits and pieces of her favourite foods for when she wakes, the new double-glazed window securely locked, the door to her room shut over with the old beautiful key that lies between Judi's cleavage. It isn't nice to lock
someone in a room, but it is something that doesn’t have the novelty to distress
Hope much.

Glasgow has chugged away in her absence, beating relentlessly against the tide
of itself. Judi stops at the Park and Ride, to get the underground, then a bus. She
doesn’t want anyone asking questions about the car.

Can she really do it? Steal a baby and raise the dead? Anything is
possible, says the bright little voice that still sings in her. A lot of things are not
very likely, though. Alone, really alone, for the first time in what feels like a very
long time, she finds herself shaking with the shock of what she has done.

Maybe Frieda won’t see her. The bus is half empty, maybe she’ll sit
somewhere else. Maybe, Judi thinks, Freida will leave Judi alone. No. Of course
not: she has never left anyone alone. She will pick Judi over like an otter tossing
a fish before supper.

“Judi!” Her grin is the shape of a plastic coat hanger, “Long time no see.”
Freida Mountford uses her bottom to push Judi right against the hard plastic
body of the bus’s side, to make more space for herself. The seats opposite are
both free. She puts her hand on Judi’s thigh, more to clamp than reassure. Frieda
Mountford thinks personal space is a concept that need only concern men.

“Where have you been hiding?”

“A retreat” Judi says.

“Anyone retreat there with you?” Frieda is really into eye contact: like a
magician, or a con-man, eye contact is essential in her business - to find out
yours.
“Bit of soul searching, was it?” Freida digs.

If Judi does have a soul, then she would not go hunting for it now, now is not the time to dwell on its location.

Secrets are tricky to keep, that’s what makes them precious. Judi is generally beneath the notice of women like Frieda, who look her up and down and feel sure she is too dull to have anything to conceal. But Frieda knows something, can smell it.

“Bit of charity work then?” Frieda Mountford says, a shark sensing blood. Throw her off. Get out the water. Five stops and she’s safe, from Frieda at least. Say anything:

“I went to the bum place.” Says Judi “For my… bowels.”

There is a pause then Frieda starts “Oh. Andrea…”

“Blair?” Judi says. Everything is always about Andrea.

“She’s a big fan of the… what d’ye call it?” Frieda prods her arm.

“Colonic Irrigation.”

“Well, You’re looking…” Freida surveys her new curly top deck “…well. We’ve been worried.” Frieda Mountford’s gaze follows Judi’s hand to her belly, finally, and perceives that she is pregnant, again. Such a hawkish woman, you’d think, would have noticed the wool Judi was pulling over her eyes a little earlier, she probably assumed it was fat.

“Oh.” Frieda retracts her hand from Judi’s thigh, as one might spring back on the discovery of an occupied nest: “you take care of yourself, pet.” The cautious note of warmth makes Judi almost want to hug her. “Just you take it easy.” Frieda, has, after all, seen Judi pregnant before.
“Thanks.” Said Judi. “Will do. Putting my notice in at work today; I’m just no taking any chances this time.” A minute passes between the two in a silence that is almost companionable, The traffic inches forwards, as though by peristalsis.

“Did you hear about Mr Coulter form the drama department?”

Judi shakes her head.

"Went off to a retreat, full of bohemians." Frieda lends the last word the weight of “Communist” at the height of McCarthyism.

“Swanned off to some yoghurt weaver’s club to smoke marijuana and feel sorry for himself.” Frieda sounds so morally outraged about this that one might think she was jealous. Judi implores the universe to let Hamish be ok.

“ “He was suspended from school for wild conduct in the Eco-school diversity pond.” Frieda says in one great rush.

Judi knew that bit. “Frieda, the man was drugged”

“Uh huh. With that loose Alice Waits from the upper sixth.”

“Not with her, by her. Drugged by her, and Andrea Blair’s son, Angus.”

“That boy has a lot of his plate.”

Judi rolls her eyes “I can’t believe they sacked him, Mr Coulter.”

“They say “resigned,” but he had to, after the drugs. And her.” Frieda takes a breath and then drops the bomb: “And then his wife left him.”

“Oh?” Why would anyone leave him?

“She says it’s about the drugs, the girl in the pond,” Freida’s face beams with joyful disdain, “but she’s already taken up with her personal trainer. They’ve been having an affair for months. Everyone knew.”
“Everyone?” Judi knows that the “everyone” Frieda is discussing is a pool, more limited than the one Hamish cavorted in. But still: awful.

“Everyone.” Frieda confirms, aglee with the horror of it. So he is gone. That’s that. There’s nothing to say about it, and certainly nothing she’d say aloud, not ever, to anyone.

“Jason!” Judi buries her stepson’s head in her bosom unashamedly and sort of rocks him about a bit.

His funny girlfriend Roxy is here, holding Andrea’s baby Evie on her lap with nervous care. Roxy looks almost sensible in Marina’s bright flat: her hair in soft woolly dreadlocks of muted woodland hues; a dark baggy dress in place of her usual enjoyable clown/prostitute style. Noone in the room seems to know what to do with their faces, Judi thinks, apart from Andrea, who looks like a therapist, even with her new Tintin haircut. “Statement hair,” the statement being “I’m a lesbian, now, ok?”

Judi takes her in: Andrea looks less glossy, poorer, tougher, happier: much more likeable. Judi, by contrast has never felt so “done.”

“Y’alright Jason?”

“Aye, you?

“Aye.” They nod at each other good-naturedly in the pink living room.

“I miss you, a lot,” Judi says.

Jason nods. “I’ve...” for a second Jason looks like he’s going to cry, “missed you too. Are you coming back home?”

Judi shrugs: “At some point. All my stuff’s there.”
Jason’s face flashes real worry.

“Sorry: I’m being insensitive, Jason. This is happening to you too. If you mean, am I coming back to live with you and your father?”

Jason nods.

She moves her lips to say “of course,” but can't quite, in case the part of her screaming ‘absolutely not, no, never’ is what falls out her mouth when she opens it.

“I’m still too angry with your dad to do that just yet... How’s home?”

Judi expects blame, complaints maybe, or a grunt, but Jason tells her that “whatever Dad’s done he’s obviously very sorry” in a very grown up, quiet way.

It’s never nice, having your character built. She is surprised that Jason is still speaking to her. Surprised Nelson hasn't spun something. But what would he say? What could he? Judi feels it: he can't touch her now.

“Your dad and me need a chat, then we’ll see.” She cringes to hear it, she sounds like she’s negotiating “ice cream later” with a toddler.

For the first time, Judi stops to consider the cake on the table. Battenburg -her favorite- but no normal battenburg. This is a cute Japanese cartoon of a cake. The squares are lilac and turquoise, the marzipan sparkles not only with sugar crystals, but edible glitter. Who makes a battenburg by hand? Andrea Blair. Who makes a cake look like a discotheque? Roxy.

“Did you two make this together?” Judi is weirdly jealous.

“Oh, Roxy did most of it,” Andrea says, probably more to disown the glitter than to be modest.

“It’s... spectacular” Judi looks at Roxy.
Roxy is tomato red and biting her lip so hard it may burst.

“Well, this is a car crash,” Marina says affably. “Tell her, Jason.”

“Ok: What?”

The thing is, Roxy’s lovely, and life happens. It’s happening right now in her womb, and soon their new he or she will be happening all over their lives. Roxy and Jason: parenthood, all being well, and Roxy does look well. They want to get married and go live in a static caravan in an Auntie of Roxy’s garden, until they can get a flat. Judi winces when she hears the area she lives in. There is no place on the planet you could put a caravan, she thinks, that would make it the ideal location for a new family, but Auntie Lynne lives in the sort of place where the shops sell tinfoil by the 50p square.

“It just needs cleaned a bit first,” says Roxy, cause of having the dogs in.”

Judi tries very hard to keep the horror from her face.

“She’s very nice, my Auntie Lynne: laidback. Nothing like mum.”

Mums are always the bad guys, Judi thinks. Just you wait, Roxy, and see if you think your mum did such a bad job when motherhood isn’t a theoretical thing, but something that’s happening at you. Judi imagines laidback Auntie Lynne dispensing wisdom, reclined over some dirty mattress with a needle still sticking out her arm. Is that judgemental? Fine! Judi’ll judge the woman more harshly if she’s not full of drugs, because if she isn’t, and truly thinks offering these vulnerable, closeted young people a tin can saturated in dog-urine -on an estate so dodgy the police won’t go into it by foot, where the kids throw rocks at
even fire engines and ambulances- is helpful, then she deserves to be put down along with the dogs Judi is sure are rabid, child-mauling monstrosities.

"What did your Dad say, Jason?" Judi says, her tone of voice an exercise in neutrality.

Jason shrugs. "He's pretty pissed off. Marina says we can keep staying here for a bit."

"Keep staying here?" Judi asks. "How long have you been here?"

"Just since last night." Jason says, wincing.

"What does your mum say, Roxy?"

Roxy narrows her eyes. "She says, "get out ma house, I canny stomach tae look at you, ruinin' your life." She shrugs and returns to her own sweet voice: "She wanted me to kill it."

Judi knows that at least some of this is the hyperbole of a hormonal, dramatic, and genuinely terrified young woman, but the hurt is so loud in it. Judi leaps to the girl then, nestles her, strokes her hair. Roxy flops into her but then jumps back a bit, uncertain. Oh! the bump. Then everyone sees it.

"Jeso: You too?" Marina looks incredulous.

Judi clowns out 'looks like it'. Roxy and Judi hold each other at arm's length, not in a bad way, rather to look and to nervously laugh. Looking at Roxy's tummy, even knowing, it's hard to tell what's puppy fat and what's pregnancy. She tries to remind herself what Marina has said often about teen pregnancies, that biologically, it's the perfect time, but oh, she's so young, and I'm so old thinks Judi, and Hope's even older. Judi's child will be the niece or nephew of Jason's, despite being the same age as them. Her head spins.
“Andrea says I can model her maternity collection,” says Roxy.

“Great.” It’s ridiculous, why not? “What else?”

“I’m going to design matching accessories,” Roxy says dreamily.

“Perfect” says Judi. Designing accessories! She’ll be lucky if she finds time to wash herself, or eat.

“They’ll be staying here then?” Marina says with a sharp edge.

Clearly, Judi should take them in. It must seem weird that she isn’t doing that.

“Roxy,” Judi says, in her “firm but fair” voice, “you are not going to raise my grandchild in a static caravan on bit of scrubland between the high flats: What sort of person do want to bring them up to be, a stab victim?”

Roxy wails.

Judi is unabashed. She looks at Marina. “How long do they have?”

“Have for what?” Roxy sobs. She is not as clever as usual. Oh, but how could her mind be in the room when so much is going on inside her?

“Seven months she’s due,” Marina tells Judi.

“Ok,” Judi says in her staff-training voice, “you have just over half a year to learn to be adults, then. Do you know how to clean things, Roxy?”

Roxy is shocked out of herself by the question and looks hard at Judi.

“That’s not sexist, Roxy. The world is sexist. Saying “can you clean?” is not sexist. It’s an important question, because it’s what you’re going to be doing for the next... ever. Jason, here, I can tell you for a fact, has never personally encountered a hoover, except probably to try and get it to suck his penis.”

Roxy laughs.
“I’m serious, Roxy. It’s my fault for tolerating it, and his father’s for never lifting his finger, but it’s Jason’s too, for not once thinking to himself,” Judi looks straight at Jason and does a goofy impression of him as she does it: “maybe I shouldn’t expect my stepmother to scrape the skid-marked underwear off my bedroom floor and bring it back clean and folded. Or at least fucking put it in a drawer when I do.” Wow: this is cathartic.

Jason is looking outraged. “I help,” he whines, lamely.

“Pfft. Sometimes he sets the table, Roxy, I’ll give him that. Have you ever used the washing machine, Jason?”

“Yeah” he says. “Obviously.” His eyes implore her to stop. Not just yet, no:

“What? What have you ever laundered?”

He looks bashful again: “sheets.”

“All the wanky sheets.” Judi has the decency to feel a little hypocritical as she throws that at him, given her own late-onset onanism. Andrea Blair is protectively cupping Evie’s ears as she bounces her on her knee, but looks quite amused.

Roxy is shocked, through her tears, into laughter.

Judi is enjoying the cheek of herself. She feels great right now, actually.

“I’ll talk to your father, I’ll make him give you money. It’s my money too.”

Whoever the money in their shared bank account belongs to, really, she doesn’t need it. The only reason she’ll ask Nelson for help is that doesn’t suit her for him to know she has means. She needs him to believe she needs him. Otherwise how can he trust her?
Roxy is having some unrelated sobbing to herself. After a bit, Andrea asks Roxy to “come help in the kitchen,” Judi wonders if they will make something to wear or eat or both simultaneously. Judi is sure whatever it is will end up on Pinterest. Maybe Andrea and Roxy, both thrown from one family to another, can glue-gun their lives into stylish cohesion. It is a convenient thing for Judi to believe, that here is a sensible place for Roxy and Jason to be, useful for everyone, until a better one is found. She listens to Jason reassuring her that everything is fine. She wants to believe him.

“Happy? Really?” Judi asks. Marina has stayed, but is keeping quiet.

“You’re really honest-to-god reaction was “great” was it?”

“Yeah.” Jason grins shyly and sheepishly. He is happy, it’s obvious.

“Because you get to keep dating Roxy?”

“Yeah. Well, that’s definitely…” Jason searches for the right words: “a massive plus.” He views becoming a teenage father as a romantic gesture, it is romantic, sort of.

“You know that might not work?”

“The alternative” Jason says calmly, “is a definite fail.” He sounds so wry, so like his father. There are good things about Nelson, he brought her Jason, after all.

“Does Roxy know what she’s signing up for? They don’t dole out council houses like sweeties anymore.”

“Just stop it.” Jason says calmly. “Roxy’s lovely, you know she is.”

“What if…” Judi doesn’t know how to finish the sentence.
“What if?” Jason looks at her plaintively. “This is happening. Let’s just be nice to each other.”

“Well, you’re going to be a daddy, then.” Judi throws her hands up in resignation. “Try to be better parents than we were.”

Jason looks at his trainers, “You’re ok.”

“You’ll be fine, you will.” Judi says.

No empty words, but something she will do everything in her power to make sure of. Everything in her power, while she’s somewhere else.

They talk about Jason’s upcoming prelims, about the pets, about food, and nothing upsetting. Then Jason goes down to Roxy, to the little sun trap, pleasingly overgrown, in Marina’s back close.

Judi goes to the kitchen to switch on the kettle, and looks out the window to see Roxy weeping under the willow. Andrea and Evie are spread out on a rug in the sunshine, making mother-and-babyhood look effortless and stylish, as usual.

“How was the spa?” Marina asks, coming into the kitchen. They are alone.

“I had colonic irrigation.” Why is her go-to ‘alibi of the day’ a pipe-full of warm water up the bottom?

“No, you didny” says Marina.

“Huh?” Says Judi, buying time.

“Some people are spontaneous: not you.” Marina sighs with the faux patience of one who knows they are being lied to, “You don’t just go off to a spa. Judi. You just don’t.”
“I’m full of surprises,” says Judi, lamely.

“You’re full of something,” says Marina, opening up the oven and looking to see what Andrea and Roxy have concocted this time.

“Nelson has not been faithful.”

Marina nods, as though that’s just a given. “And you’ve left him?” she asks, very much in the tone of “how was the spa?” It is another thing that she just doesn’t believe Judi has it in her to do.

“I don’t know, I might need him for…”

“You don’t need anyone who’s going to do that to you. Not again.”

“Well, but I might, for practical reasons.” Marina looks down to the bump. Please let her not want to touch it. Oh, but she knows better: all Judi’s irrational behaviours, everything she did back in the bad times to push Marina away, all the behaviour that had seemed so odd, so cruel: it all seems to have had a purpose, now. It feels like her whole life is falling into place in moments like this, it’s exhilarating, and she wishes she could tell her friend about it. That so much past nastiness seems to have been -has been- paving the path towards now.

“He wanted me to get rid of it.” Judi sounds no less wounded than Roxy.

“So get rid of him,” Marina shrugs.

“I think…”

“That’s right. You think: you don’t act. That’s you! And you tell me things. You don’t run off to imaginary spas. You don’t leave your wee boy alone in the middle of this terrifying time. You don’t just leave me to sort it all out when I don’t know what I’m doing.” Marina is shouting now. Fair enough, it’s her turn.
They both glance out the kitchen window, down to the garden, where Jason is pushing Roxy gently about on the rope swing, an advert for young love.

"It’s a bother, I know, but I’m so grateful for your help, and I’m going to take it. I need it."

"What are you doing for money?" Marina asks.

"Pounds still."

Marina shoots her a black look. "We need to know where you are, Judi: what if something happens to you?"

Something has already happened to her. It has happened to all of them.

"I can’t be here for a while. I need... not to be."

"Why all the mystery?"

"Not mystery, just privacy."

Marina looks insulted. "Who are you staying with?"

"I told you: an old family friend."

"You don't have any friends I don't know."

"You're wrong." Judi says, with as much self-assurance as she can muster:

is Hope her friend? Is Bert? She shrugs.

"This just isn’t you, all this."

"People change."

"No. No they don’t."

The two spend the next wee while talking about the practicalities of Jason and Roxy’s staying there. Of Angus’s refusal to meet when Andrea went to visit him at his new boarding school; what it’s like to live with a baby after years of delivering them.
“They’re both so amazing” Marina says, brilliant with love, looking down at Andrea and Evie. Judi has observed, sometimes, the sort of love that makes simple things: shared presence, held hands, a wealth. She doesn’t think that sort of love is a thing most people have, or is often mutually felt. It’s not something, she realises, that she’s had. Sometimes it feels like a lie told by TV and films to make most folk feel inadequate, a story people tell themselves about their lives to feel special. But she can see it in these two.
Nelson arrives, prompt as ever, beeps once and waits. Judi peers down at the car, her husband inside it, tiny from Marina’s window. Judi’s head spins as she clatters her way down three flights of Marina’s close, wondering what on Earth she is doing wearing clogs, which she knows he finds ridiculous. How will she be with him? Who will she be with him? This is the longest she has gone without seeing Nelson, oh, since just before Jason. Spiralling down to him, she thinks maybe Marina is right, we don’t change, just go in circles, always coming back to our same selves, same people and things.

Judi nips out to the back court, says goodbye to the mother of her future grandchild, to Evie and Andrea. Lastly, she says goodbye to Jason, a tight squeeze her arms don’t want to release him from. She wonders what they will say once she’s gone. No doubt they all have their pet theories. Judi, who like most people, has spent much of her life craving understanding, now desperately wishes that the people she loves the most will never know the truth of her.

“The law of attraction is always working, whether you believe in it, or understand it or not.”

Before The Secret, the doubt she is feeling now might have made a reconciliation with her husband impossible, but now she knows nothing is impossible, doubt is a counter-productive emotion.

If they can behave with kindness towards each other, now, what a miracle! She tries to still her shaking hands as she opens the passenger door,
tries to feel grateful tries a nervous smile. Thank you she thinks loudly, and I wonder what new shape our relationship will take? But the voice that says such things sounds like a sap, someone slap-able. Stamp out the doubt! The bright voice rallies her.

When she forces her eyes to meet Nelson’s, she sees nothing miraculous, or even bearable, there. It’s hard to concentrate on him, to look for the good in him, when the rage in her is so much louder.

“Well, you’ve made quite a mess, haven’t you?” Nelson actually tuts. It can’t be that way anymore. Surely he sees that? But Nelson has always been an outrageous optimist. He believes things will go his way, and so they do.

She watches him closely, that stern expression on his face has been genuinely thrilling thing, before now. Maybe not that ideal love, but a good enough distraction that it has kept her occupied, enthralled -in his thrall- most of her adult life.

It was the rules, the structure of it all, she thinks, that appealed. But now Judi feels giddy for quite the opposite sort of reason. She has genuinely no idea what will happen next, her only certainly is that it won’t be that: no collar, none of that. Her body, however, is a traitor, responding to his authority in the same way as ever, and the uncomfortable slime of her involuntary arousal makes her feel ill. She shifts on the leather seat, wanting desperately to be in a bath, alone.

“You’ve left Hope, what? With a ball gag in her mouth, chained to a Travelodge radiator?”

“Travelodge?” Judi repeats vaguely.

“You’re leaving tracks, Judi. I’ll find you.”
He’s clueless. She feels deep relief. Judi has been worried, constantly. What if he’d long ago found the locked box at the back of her wardrobe, that little key in her jewellery chest, unlocked her past?

She worried about the contents of that box every day for years, felt too, the illicit kick of keeping that scrap of identity not caught up in him. Sometimes she imagined that he had found it all, days months, even years ago: that he knew all her secrets by heart, that he was waiting until it best suited him to show his hand.

It’s highly unlikely that there could be a drawer, a pocket, a hidey-space of any kind in the Lanark Street house she doesn’t know of, because she cleans it, because she pours obsessively over the porno mags she finds under Jason’s mattress, trying to decide if their depravity is normal for a boy of his age, or she should phone an advice-line of some sort. She knows all about the old camera film spool in the toe of his football boots which Jason occasionally keeps a small amount of cannabis resin in, which, when, Judi monitored she deduced stayed largely untouched and, surmised that he only really had it for showing off with at parties, so kept quiet.

She knows about the dusty box-file marked TAX STUFF containing a jumble of photos, letters and mementoes from Nelson’s prior relationships, most of whom he has never mentioned, so that she knows their names and thoughts, faces and anatomies, but which lace-knickered bottom or toothy young smile pairs with whose thoughts, whose handwriting, what trip where. It used to be a fascinating, jealousy steeped, guessing game. Judi has felt constant
guilt about this intrusion over the years, but the compulsion to know, to feel close, to have the questions she couldn’t ask answered was too great.

So, what kept her secrets safe? Perhaps the truth is that her husband was never that interested, took her at face value and never considered she might have any other sort.

“Hope will be perfectly safe,” she tells him, as if it is her safely he is concerned about.

“Where is she, Judi?”

“Being well looked after.” It’s not true right this second, but might it be, broadly? Hope seems to be doing well, to be happier as Isabel McGovan than she was as herself, mostly.

“And no, I didn’t use… any of that stuff.” She is so glad, as she says it, that it is true, ashamed that it so nearly wasn’t that he breaks into nervous laughter.

“I don’t find this funny in the least.”

“Well… I always have had the better sense of humour, Nelson. I’ve needed it.” Judi checks her seatbelt is secure.

As long as he doesn’t know where she’s staying or who she’s told, as long as Hope is pregnant with a child a simple swab test available from any neighbourhood pharmacy would confirm is his, he will help her, because if Judi gets caught, so does he. There it is again, that lovely, funny, overwhelming feeling. Not love, not that, but power.

“Trust me,” Judi says with her biggest, most reassuring grin, “I’m going to make this good.” Judi puts her hand over his on the steering wheel, and
notices that it is damp, clammy. She wonders if he might be a little scared of her, now.

"Who else knows, Judi?" He doesn't sound afraid.

"That I’m pregnant? Oh, lots of people! I think it’s really going to work out this time, Nels!"

He looks her up and down, frowns at the little belly, then gives her a stern glare of disapproval. "What a clever little pantomime," is what he says to her. He's driving too fast.

"Thanks" says Judi, pretending to think she’s being paid a compliment. "It’s called a moon-belly: the internet is amazing."

"I checked our joint account, to help me locate you." She is amazed at the lack of emotion is his voice as he says it, "but nothing. Not even a withdrawal. Smart," he acknowledges. "So I cancelled your card. I thought a lack of funds would cut your little adventure short. But no. Someone’s bankrolling you. Someone knows what’s going on. Who?"

"I can’t tell you everything, Nels." Part of her is enjoying this. "After all, you’ve been keeping secrets from me."

"Don’t be like that, Judi."

"Like what? Non-compliant?" she goads. She sees the distance between them is insurmountable.

"Can we discuss this sensibly, please?"

"I don’t know," Judi says as coolly as possible, "Is that really what you want? A reliable conversationalist? You seem to prefer beautiful mutes."

"Judi, this has to stop."
“No, not fair. You didn’t stop yourself. You got what you wanted. It’s my turn, Nels. My turn to have what I want.”

“Where are you staying, Judi? Who with?”

“Darlin,” she coddles him, Stepford-voiced. “There’s no need for this fuss. I’m coming back to you. I promise.” She knows, absolutely, as she says it that she will not. “Just as soon as I’m certain you won’t hurt my baby.”

"Your baby?"

“Yes, Nels: Keep up. My little child of the universe. My miracle. Mine. You have been an agent of change, and for that, thank you.” Nelson keeps his eyes on the road. Judi is back on script. She has rehearsed this bit often. He would hold her hand, they would kiss. It wouldn’t disgust her. But really, even if she could forgive what he has done to her, what about Hope, what about Rebecca? She cannot forgive the wrongs he has done them any more than they can. She wants to ask if he knows he is beyond forgiveness. Or that he hasn’t said sorry. Not once.

“You think this is all part of some grand plan?” How idiotic, says his tone.

“Sure.” Judi forces a smile. “My plan.” Judi feels the cosmic path that felt so sure, so recently, slipping beneath her.

“And when the child looks just like Hope?”

“Then that’ll be nice for granny, when we visit her.”

“What,” he pauses to catch up with himself. “Judi, you...?”

"Will do this,” she interrupts. “With your help.”

“Resisting me,” Judi says, “that’s as stupid as, if you don’t help out, actually resisting arrest when the police come to get you. They’ll come to the
house, you know." Judi pictures it, and smiles. "I’m going to have that baby, Nels. And you’re going to help. Because, after all, you’re the daddy, and you won’t be much use to our little baby in prison, will you? Wouldn’t want them to grow up without their daddy?"

"Are you trying to blackmail me?."

"No. Not “trying”. It’s what I am doing. I was hoping you’d be nice. But you’re not nice, are you?

Nelson thinks she has an accomplice, someone who knows what he has done, what she has done, and is helping her. Well, wouldn’t that be lovely? That’s what she should be visualising, not a reconciliation with this horrible man.

"Judi, you’ll be jailed for a long time if you get caught."

"I’m certain of that. I’m certain that you would be too. I guess now that we’ve betrayed each other’s trust so utterly, we’re really going to have to trust each other. Sort of funny, dontcha think?"

"What I think is that you’re mentally unstable."

"Oh? I’ll have to watch myself around you then. That’s just your type."

Judi spits. She thinks of all the times he pushed her away from him, of what he chose to do instead. “How can you live with yourself?"

"Judi, what happened with Hope. It was nothing she didn’t want."

Judi checks his face to see if he is serious. He actually is.

"Why shouldn’t a sexually mature woman enjoy an active sex life?” he asks, like he’s reading something aloud from The Guardian. So cool.

"Enjoy it?"
“Yes, she did enjoy it.” He wants to hurt her. Well, Nelson, Judi thinks: you’ve taught me to take a lot more than that.

“That’s irrelevant. She was in no position to consent to it.”

“Because of her illness? Is that fair? Isn’t that… limiting”

“Yes. It’s good to limit massive abuses of power.” Does Nelson really think he has given that woman some amazing gift? What if it were true? What if... she remembers Hope’s moaning and writhing, and feels herself gagging, struggling to breathe.

“I think she responded well.” Nelson shrugs.

Judi’s nostrils flare. She hates, actually hates, him, “You think you can cure catatonia with your penis now?”

“It might have been a factor in her recovery,” he says, seriously, modestly. Maybe it was a misguided act of compassion. Maybe to Hope, they were lovers? Maybe she can understand? No.

“No, because you didn’t want to reduce her medication, did you? When she started to respond again? You wanted her to stay schtum.”

Nelson has the decency to look a little embarrassed, for a second, then a wicked grin lights up his face. “You think I’m beyond redemption Judi, is that it? Because I used that woman’s body? Because I took what I wanted, and then cast her aside?” He sounds so mean, so sarcastic, as if that’s such a stupid opinion.

“Yes,” she screams, watching specks of her spit land on his face. He blinks, but his eyes stay on the road. They are a minute at the most from their work, “that’s exactly what I think.”
“But isn’t that just what you intend to do too?” His voice sounds so very reasonable.

She feels sick with shame.

And now he smiles, that boyish beam. He knows he has shaken her. “And what about being removed from her care facility, her delicate body put through pregnancy, through labour, which we both know can kill a healthy young woman, let alone a frail, mature mother. What about bringing a baby into this world who will almost certainly have birth defects due to Hope’s medication?”

Judi flinches.

“Or aren’t you giving her that medication? Are you denying, instead, an ill women the drugs she needs? Tell me, is she in any position to consent to that?”

Where is the power she felt now? He is cleverer, she knows that, he is meaner, and he is better at arguing. He has had a lifetime’s practice at being sure he is right, whereas Judi is clutching steadfastly to the tiny new idea that she might not always necessarily be wrong. She can’t afford to let go of it, she can’t. Any argument she makes in her defence he will knock down, leaving her defenceless.

“Nothing to say?” he peers down his nose at her.

“What you resist, Judi says, persists. We are just going to have to agree to disagree, Nelson.”

When you catch yourself thinking negative thoughts or feeling bad, you need to “change your frequency,” so Judi changes to Radio One and sings Cheryl Cole as obnoxiously as possible.
The rest of the journey Judi finds it increasingly easy not to react, and seeing how much that bothers him helps. He makes snide little comments about Roxy being “common” and Judi pretends not to understand, saying

“Common? Who’s like her? She’s not common, she’s totally unique. Oh, you mean poor? Well, that’s ok, we’ve got money. I’ve told Jason we’ll help them buy a flat, and by help them buy I mean buy, Nelson, because we can afford it, and as you say, poor Roxie, her family can’t.

“They’re too young.”

“I agree. Absolutely too young to do it without our support. Is Andrea Blair still the secretary at the running club?”

“She hasn’t shown her face, of late.”

“Hmmn.” Judi says. “Probably doesn’t need to obsess over her own body, now she has someone else’s to obsess over. I guess mine was never so distracting to you”

“I guess not.” Oh, ouch: they’re sparring.

“So what, we just buy them a flat?” This is the first part of their discussion he seems genuinely passionate about. “And what kind of lesson will that teach them?”

“Lesson? Who are we to be doling out the morals, but ok. Kindness, Forgiveness. The importance of family.”

Judi and Nelson walk side by side into work, his first lady as of old, and says, “I’ll get myself ready for tomorrow, then.”

Nelson nods carefully: “would you like a lift home?”

“Oh, don’t bother yourself, Darling.”
“It’s no bother. Really.” Nelson smiles a broad smile and nods in greeting as staff pass.

“I’ll pop in when I’ve done my bits, yeah? Then we’ll see.” She feels it again. The ball in her court.

Judi does the rounds and talks to all the staff, praising and complimenting anything she can think to. She chats with every patient that’s up, able and not busy with other staff. She holds the hand of, whispers soothing words to, those that cannot speak back. She walks the bright corridors of the facility, noticing the many beautiful paintings of patients deck the walls. She goes to the Art Room, such a beautiful bright space, busy now, and with the new Art Therapist, who is talking animatedly, tugging absentmindedly at his fluffy nest of hair, listening intensely, his kind, sad fragile face and otherworldliness making it difficult to identify him as either staff or patient, but for his lanyard. And that’s good, thinks Judi. He knows what it is, the battle inside.

She writes the leaving letter on her knees in a staff toilet cubicle. It is short. It is apologetic. Sorry for not giving notice: “I know it’s going to cause a lot of problems, but my relationship with my husband had deteriorated to the point that I cannot behave professionally around him, or be around him at all.” Sorry, “deeply sorry” she will not see many of them again, and wishes them “all good things for the future.” The photocopy room is pleasingly empty and Judi watches her letter replicate itself page by page in a neat warm pile.

A couple of nurses and cleaners come and go as she pops sheets of folded A4 in their boxes, but no one is in a mad rush to read whatever Judi’s putting there. Judi, feels real shame, for her usage of Bryony. Such ugly behaviour must
have consequences. Should have. Judi almost enjoys the wee flash of fatalism, it feels homely, relaxing to be glum, like taking off tight heels.
At home, Hope is still asleep, an opportunity for a quick check up. All seems fine, good even, as far as Judi can tell, which is quite far actually, even if she’s no Doctor Suchandsuch. It’s not like Hope and she can just pop along to the hospital for a scan like other mums-to-be, so Judi tries to listen for the baby’s heartbeat with a stethoscope. Even though it is weeks too early, really, she’s sure she can hear the little life growing in there.

In the kitchen, Judi unpeels the shrink-wrap from her new chopping board and dices vegetables, fugging the show-home gleam with soup steam. She goes to forage for rosemary in the ruins of the garden.

Her skip’s been got at by someone. They’ve taken a lot, most of it broken. Her picture too she realises. Well, maybe it’s good that the picture has been taken. Somewhere her little dream lives on.

The house is still. A fire crackles in the grate, and the volume of the day washes over Judi. Life has been constant care and domesticity, and till so recently none of it was for her, not really. Now all of it is for her. What she’s doing for Hope is not “for” Hope, however it might look to the casual observer, not at all.

At half seven that evening Bert knocks on the door.

“You need to get some loose fitting clothes on” she says.

Judi and Hope both just stare.
"Hello Bert. Why on Earth do you imagine we need to do that?" Today is not a “tell me what to do, please” sort of a day.

"We're going dancing!" Bert announces, with the sort of mindless flourish normally associated with the professional reading of lottery numbers.

"In that ruined church?" Judi, shakes her head, not having thought the vague noise about a dance class would amount to anything.

"Oh come on! It's not ruined anymore. Well, not in that way, if you know what I mean: It's like a... community centre, now."

The phrase “like a community centre” adds no glamour to the proposition. “I can't leave mum,” Judi shrugs sadly.

“No, you can bring her.”

“To a dance class? She can't move a lot of the time. She gets stuck.” And people might recognise Hope, or not recognise Isabel. There might be folk who knew her, here.

“I've told them.”

“Told what who?” Judi panics.

“Who what.”

“What?”

Hope frowns intensely at them both.

“You mean told who what.” Bert says. “I told Yolanda, she's the facilitator”

“The what?”

“Facilitator's a teacher who doesn’t teach anything. I told Yolanda how your mum has special needs. She says everyone will be mindful.”
“What does that mean? What if she has a fit?”

“They'll ignore it, let you deal with it. I'll help.

“What if she screams? What if she doesn’t move at all?” says Judi. What if she's perfectly sentient and quietly explains her situation to one of the others?

“That’s normal there- weirdness. There’s a woman who just curls up next to the radiator and rocks and cries, and when I asked her if she was ok everyone tutted at me -you’re not meant to speak- and when I brought her some orange diluting juice and a hanky, she was really annoyed with me about it. Because it’s normal, it’s “following your personal energy” Yolanda says. That's the unspoken deal of Five Rhythms: everyone pretends to think it's normal, or beautiful, or just not to see when you do weird stuff.”

“It sounds awful.”

“Awful” Hope echoes.

“You're going to die of boredom if you sit about here all day, every day.”

Judi thinks she wouldn't mind sitting about here all day. It was certainly what she happily anticipated doing this evening.

“Would you like to come dancing, Mrs McGovan?”

“Hope.”

“I hope you can too, Mrs McGovan,” says Bert, winking at Judi. Complicit.

“What do you say? Can she, Judi?”

“You want to come?” Judi doesn’t bother bringing names to it, just looks to the lady in the chair for an answer. Hope nods cautiously.

“And it's ... calming?” Judi asks Bert.

“Absolutely.”
“Sure.” Judi puts her arm out to help Hope up. She takes it very lightly, keen. “Shall we get ready then?” Hope nods, shy and excited, a child allowed to stay up late or try champagne.

Judi must be like those men that cheat on their wives: They want caught, that’s what they say after, so they can be punished. Yet, Judi doesn’t feel like she wants to be caught or punished, she feels like she wants to get away with it all audaciously. As she helps Hope change into a long sleeved, long legged playsuit that Isabel would have adored, and ties a bright headscarf around her fiery hair, seeing the obvious pleasure Hope takes in her reflection, she feels like making this woman’s life as pleasurable as possible, within the circumstances.

It is alright at first, Five Rhythms. There is slow movements and breathing exercises and the sort of music with whales in. “Really let it overtake you now. Arms and legs are miraculous bridges to a world of feeling” Yolanda simpers florally, and Judi lets her own arms branch out a little, into an approximation of the graceful Bolly-movements she admires in films. No one says anything, because at Five Rhythms no one is allowed to speak; only to make odd noises.

Swiftly, things become more challenging. The ethnic cloth-strewn walls of the kirk resonate to trippy music that goes wub-wub nightmarishly. People flail around in their various parodies of self-expression. Hope has placed herself at the centre of the room, her hands push out slowly, as though deflecting sun from her eyes, her one shrieking “Amen” rendered positively conservative by the others who howl and birl, yet somehow also maintain a respectful distance. Hope is totally unfazed, bats her eyelashes just once, in derision, at a man in his
thirties wearing black lycra cycling shorts that leave as much to the imagination as he might have done had he simply vacuum packed his genitals and gone out like that. Hope meets his eye in scandalised disapproval, and he has the good grace to look a little ashamed of himself. The music becomes tribal, feral, “Entering Chaos: remember staccato.” Says Yolanda, and the participants, about twelve all in, aged from twenty something to sixty something collectively respond to this almost wilfully nonsensical suggestion by screeching and gyrating, arms clasping oddly at the air. Inhibitions, Judi thinks, are under-rated: they shape us and support us, hold us together attractively: like a good corset. Wild abandon is not something Judi fancies. It scares her, actually.

Hope is used to people flapping their arms and making bear-like noises. Judi is used to sedating them or restraining them, putting them somewhere quiet with a locked door: stopping it. Do people need this? They certainly seem to want it.

The next bit is worse, they move slowly to the sort of music that accompanies long-shots of swimming pools on holiday programmes. Participants loll on the floor, a little colony of sweaty seals.

Just when Judi thinks the ordeal is over, Yolanda says “circle-time” and before Judi can steer them towards the door, Hope is helped seamlessly into a seat by Bert. Judi has no time to do anything but smile with gratitude.

Most say things about “channelling energy” and “feeling it.” One girl talks about her mother’s recent death, and Judi can feel herself welling up. These are good people, Judi thinks, although most of them have never seen an iron.
Hope clears her throat. “Who I was is dead.”

Judi can hear the confusion and lament in it. Several people mutter concurrence. Bert gives Judi’s hand a little squeeze, and Judi tries to give the appearance of casual listening while her clammy hands seep out guilt.

“They say I’m someone else,” Hope continues.

“Amen,” says a chubby man in a kaftan, which pleases Hope immensely.

“But I can hear,” Hope waves her hand into the ether “…everything.”

Several people nod thoughtfully.

An American talks about “transformative relationships.” Judi wonders what relationships aren’t. Hope snatches Judi’s hand away from the clipboard going round where everyone is putting their contact details “That’s how they get you.”

Judi nods, “you may well be right.”

A young woman clasps Judi’s hand and says “Judi?” uncertainly. Her tawny dreadlocks which remind Judi of Bingley’s coughed up fur-balls, are so alike owl pellets in colour and texture, that were she to cut one open she is quite sure there would be tiny little mouse bones inside. Overbearingly patcholiscented, this girl has so much happening in her favour that the ugliness of that headful of secreted rope cannot diminish her. It shows the world, in fact, that her beauty is irrelevant, worn more lightly than her fragrance.

“Yes.” Judi says.

The girl hugs her as though she is trying to communicate a message directly through their collarbones. Her hold is not sexual, just intense.
“Namaste” the girl, says, bowing slightly, and pressing her hands together, as though in prayer, with a sincerity Judi finds challenging.

“Hello, Namaste.”

The girl laughs. “No! Nell. I’m Nell. Namaste is... doesn’t matter” Judi knows what Namaste means, she just thought it was this girl’s name, because she looks like the sort of person that calls herself something ridiculous.

“Nice to meet you, that’s the point. Lovely.” Nell kisses her on both cheeks and quite literally skips away. Jings. Judi decides not even to bother trying to make sense of her.

A middle-aged woman is talking to Hope. There are a few older women around her too, listening. Judi is sick with nerves that the Isabel McGovan in front of them will jar with the woman they remember.

“Your husband was such a talented man, Isabel, We’ve got some of his work up in the centre. You’ll have to come see.”

Hope nods and smiles. Her dad’s work is up on walls in Cauldhame? Well... that’s great.

“You must miss him very much.” Says Nell, joining them.

Hope looks the young girl up and down. "Miss him? Yes." Hope pauses and winces at something painful her brain is doing. Or that I am, thinks Judi. Judi finds there are hot tears on her own face.

“Ugh. Bloody big feet in everything,” says the tiny graceful Nell, with the big boorish voice. The only ungainly thing about her, Judi thinks a little meanly, is her massive sense of privilege.
“Judi!” interrupts a middle aged lady whose “Global hyper-colour” t-shirt illuminates her sweaty armpits. “I was just reminding your Mum about those lovely parties, all the musicians!”

Hope’s condition is emotionally flat, deeply agoraphobic, antisocial. But as others recall her past on her behalf Hope laughs a little, her eyes meet the faces of others in obvious pleasure.

Judi tucks Hope in with a gentle smile on her glowing fairy face, and remembers a bit in The Secret about a woman who slept neatly on one side of the bed, the covers turned down on the other, to make way in her life for her perfect partner. And so he came.

Judi considers a move away from the safety of her childhood bedroom. The master bedroom is beautiful, now, a hideaway of warm pine, cosy rugs, wool blankets, patchwork throws, The furniture: the cupboards, the mirror, her mother’s dressing table, everything but the beautiful new bed has been salvaged from around the house and painted egg-shell blue to match it. Too sleepy to sleep, Judi drags the little stereo upstairs, fills the room with Joni Mitchell and, with hesitant pencil marks, sketches gypsy–caravan roses, spilling all over the dressing table mirror and onto the cabinet attached, then everywhere: the bed, the wardrobe, the door frame, the doors.

She makes tea, brings her acrylics up, and sings along with Joni as she paints the roses yellow for friendship, pink for the beauty and softness, but mainly red, because this is a room for a love, she thinks, a room for lovers to lie
together, hold hands and stare up through the skylight at the glitter of stars above.

Judi prints off pictures of Jason and Roxy, Andrea and Marina: people who are getting love right, to pin up on the walls. She finds a picture of Wendy and Brian taking a sunny stroll, attesting to all that love can conquer, and her heart swells with pride to know these people, and sadness that they can never visit, can never see their picture on the wall here.

Happy with her work, she gets between the new sheets of the new bed, still smelling of fresh paint and good intentions, and carefully turns down the other side. She looks at the waiting emptiness. Her extra awareness of it just makes it more felt, the bed is too big. She gets out, carefully restores it to an unruffled state, and goes back to spend the night in her single bedroom with Robert Plant.
The doorbell. Judi pats around the bed, looking for her moon-bump to shove under her pyjamas. She starts squinting around for it, trying to let the light in bit by bit, rubbing at the thick crust of sleep still clinging to her eyelids. It's eleven. When did she last sleep till eleven? Her twenties? The bell rings again. 

The bump isn't here. Where? In the rosey-room? No. What if it's an emergency? She can't go down not pregnant. Front room? Shit: did she leave the curtains open?

The doorbell rings again, twice. She hears movement in the room below. Have they somehow got in? Who is the they? Nelson? The Police? For a second she is frozen. The bell goes again. Ok, so no one from outside is inside. Hope’s up, is all. No. Not all: Hope has spent years being woken up and put to bed, she can’t have got up and wandered through a still-dark room in a long time. Hope, rosy cheeked, good tempered and growing accustomed to their lives in the little house, hasn’t vomited in a couple of days, either. If what Judi’s doing is so terrible, why does it seem to be doing her so much good?

Judi goes to the head of the stairs and keeks down. The curtains are drawn, mostly. The plastic belly is on the sofa.

Hope looks apprehensively at Judi, no wonder. Judi’s on edge, the house is in darkness. Judi scoops the moonbump up in a throw and sneaks it from the room. “Just coming” Judi shouts, walking to the kitchen to strap her belly on.

Judi runs back to the door. No one there. There is, however, a basket, with a note inside that says: “Back at three, come spooting, ladies?”
Judi runs to the road to see if there's anyone still there. Nobody.

"What on Earth is spooting?" Judi asks aloud.

"Russian?" Hope suggests.

They have bacon and scrambled eggs and good butter, and Judi looks up 'spooting’ on the internet. Urban dictionary defines it as: “The act of a dog dragging its butt across the ground by pulling itself forward with its front paws.”

Well, they’re certainly not going anywhere with anyone to do that, although after last night she wouldn’t be entirely surprised if those odd folk in the woods run a workshop on it. She looks carefully at Hope, who is putting scrambled eggs away like a champion.

"Do you want to go spooting, Mum? If it turns out to be something nice?"

"If it’s something nice." Hope repeats in Judi’s voice.

This Bert, what can Judi offer her? Emotional distance, a dark and mysterious past- a proposition more suited to the brooding hero of a gothic novel than a friend. Bert has identified her as the very pal she's been waiting for, and who wouldn’t like the Judi that Judi is pretending to be right now: that selfless, forlorn but chipper soul?

Not knowing what “spooting” might mean, she hasn’t really known how to pack, but the everlasting grey means waterproofs are in order. “You’ve got to fake it to make it, Mum,” she tells Hope. “That’s what you always told me.”

“How dare you!” says Hope, clasping her palm over her heart, scandalised. “I am no fraud. No, No. No...”
By the time the doorbell rings Judi is no clearer in her mind about whether to go with Bert. Judi swings open the door with the most genuine smile available.

Both Nell and Bert, grin up at her. Funny coupling. She wouldn’t have had these two pegged as pals. But then, it’s a small town. Only one pub, only one shop selling only one kind of cheese (orange) and even then only if it hasn’t run out. You’ve got to get on with things, and people, in a way you don’t in a city. Country folk get pegged as intolerant, but goodness knows they sometimes stretch themselves just tolerating each other.

“You ready?” Nell grins up at them.

Hope still bent over rocking and “no”ing. Judi tries to imagine what they might conceivably appear equipped for.

“Sorry. What for?”

“Low tide at the coast. Spoots.” Bert says, as if these words help.

“Yolanda’s in the landy. You’ll need wellies. Are you fine in the back? Are you ok with labs?” Nell says, keeping it nonsensical.

“With labs?” A science thing? A drug thing?

“Labradors.”

Nelson took Judi to see a Samuel Beckett play once. She left after the first half, maddened by the calculated impenetrability of the thing. Judi is not stupid, she knew that even then, but she isn’t intelligent enough to comfortably enjoy things that set out to make her feel stupid either. Right now she feels like she is a character in that god-awful play.
“Girls. I have no idea what’s going on.”

“That’s why we gave you the basket,” Nell says.

Judi looks the girls up and down, takes in their practical outdoorsiness, the baskets, and surmises that spoots are something you collect: like mushrooms or berries.

“Do these two need salt?” Bert asks Nell, casting a thumb towards Hope, who distracted by their guests, is now just staring.

“God no, I’ve a heap.” Nell says, and Judi is lost again: salt?

“Just yourselves and some wellingtons, then, Ladies.” Bert says a little more bossily than Judi’s comfortable with liking.

Hope has come over to Judi’s side and watches with vague interest, as though the two were street performers, which is maybe the right approach.

“For Godsake,” Judi says, taking a deep breath and trying to restore something like normality, “What’s spooting?”

“Razor-clam!”

They have been only a minute on the shore when Nell points a walking stick she carries for eccentricity rather than balance. Props. Judi, Hope, Bert, Nell and Yolanda peer at the burrow-end the spoot has left, a tiny pile of coiled rope made in sand, and then to the small dark hole beside it. The Labrador, Jess, pads over, ears askew, wondering what there is to be so interested in. Before now she has been occupied barking at the ocean, telling the tide to get back, a canine King Canute. They all laugh bar Yolanda, who despite being pretty
laughable herself, doesn’t seem to find things funny as a general rule, she’s too busy being serene.

She talked in the car, all the way, about the burden she faces, being psychic. How difficult it is dealing with people when you can always sense the truth of what they’re thinking, what an unfair advantage she has.

“Must be terrible,” Bert said, clapping the dog and rolling her eyes at Judi.

Judi is worried what Yolanda’s ideas might spark in Hope, but Hope, so interested in the others, seems broadly oblivious to such a “spiritual” soul. Judi starts to feel a little silly, they must look like a coven, this ring of women staring intently into the sands. Then the wee hole begins to foam like a mouthful of sherbet and the razor-clam leaps fourth. Bert pinches it firmly and pulls it from the sand. The yellow, leechy sort of creature which lives sandwiched between these two cut-throat razor shaped shells has an odd movement, lurching out into air, moving back into its shell, a process like dripping in reverse. Hope shrieks a little, not alarmed but in a brilliantly girlish, happy way. Judi stares at the thing in delighted, revolted fascination, too.

There are oystercatchers on the beach too, their shockingly orange legs and clown-shoe massive feet strut past, unconcerned by the new rivals. There is plenty to go around, Judi realises, when her eye attunes to the little curls of sand. Judi watches Hope carefully to see if she’s coping, but they’re moving slowly, she’s engaged, in the moment. Bert and Hope have paired off and walk a metre or two closer to the shore. Yolanda is by the shoreline, doing something which may be yoga or dragon summoning for all Judi knows or cares. Nell is full of funny stories of her travels. She tells Judi about a hotel in Bengal where the
female proprietress stuck her tongue between her teeth and fanned the air when they first met.

I assumed that she meant I smelled, and went to wash, but she kept doing it whenever I passed. Every time. I started washing twice a day, coating myself in deodorant. Then my yoga teacher told me it meant ‘beautiful.’ She was complimenting me, that lady, and I could have thumped her for it!”

Judi smiles, plucks another clam from the shoreline, liking Nell so much the more for making herself the butt of her stories.

“Have you been to India?” Nell asks.

“No.” says Judi. “I haven’t really been anywhere. Mum was the big traveller.”

“You think your husband will… follow you?”

Judi Jumps. Follow? What does she know?

Nell sees the look on her face. “I’m sorry, not my business.”

“Oh? To live?” Judi laughs. “It seems unlikely, I don’t want him to, and he certainly doesn’t want to,” Judi finds she is crying again.

“I truly didn’t come into your life to make you cry, Judi,” in a smaller voice, as if it is a source of personal sorrow, Nell adds “You must still love him.”

“No.” Judi says quite definitely. “Well… Not like that.”

“Really?” And now Nell looks weirdly hopeful. Maybe she just enjoys other people’s lives as a sort of soap opera.

“I honestly don’t.” Judi smiles a little, this see-saw of feelings. “I feel like… how can I love him or miss him, I don’t even know him.”
“You've grown apart.” Nell smiles beatifically, as if this is heartening news. “But there's no hard feelings?”

Judi hoots, despite herself: “There has been nothing harder than these feelings.”

Nell asks Judi if there was ever anyone else. Judi says, “no” but blushes. Nell waits “no-one?”

“Well...I never cheated on my husband. It really never occurred to me. But there was a man...”

“Ye-es?” Nell’s engagement in Judi’s love-life is so genuine seeming Judi can’t quite believe in it.

“He was an actor. And a teacher. And...” Judi shrugs, where can this lead, “And he’s gone. That’s it.”

“Did you love him?” Nell asks, with great urgency.

“Oh.” Judi hasn’t given herself the luxury of considering the answer to that question. “In another life, we might have been very happy together, or... you know, not. It was a fantasy, so, of course it was good.”

“You never know Judi. When you fall, the ground is always there to catch you.” A cynical little voice in Judi comments that this doesn’t do you much good if you fall from the tenth story of a tower block, or off a mountain, but she nods at Nell, who is kind and young and harmless.

“The universe is listening,” whispers Nell dramatically, and Judi nods, watching the dog battle the rising tide.
“Judi? What do you feel about seafood?” Nell turns from the driver’s seat to ask Judi, who is fastening Hope’s seatbelt.

“Right now?” Judi watches the creatures ebb slimily from the shell and pull back, like snot re-sucked by a dripping nose. “Apprehensive!”

“I understand” Nell, who doesn’t, says. “But the waters round here are pretty good. It’s only half five: we can put them in some salted water from the tap for a few hours, give them a chance to clear nasties out. And I’ll test one now.”

Nell takes a horn handled fold-away knife from her pocket and runs it along the side of the shell. It is still a bit wriggly going into Bert’s mouth.

“I’m vegan,” Yolanda says to Hope, who doesn’t notice.

“Don’t you cook them?” Judi thinks, out their shell, they look like something from a specimen jar.

“I do. At yours, eight tonight: assuming I don’t have food poisoning.”

“Great.” Says Judi. “See you all then, then?”

“I’ll eat at the centre” says Yolanda, much to Judi’s relief.

“What should I cook for with them?” Judi asks.

“We’ll bring the rest: you have some rest” says Bert, settling Hope in her chair, turning the radio on, lighting the fire. “It’s looking bonnie in here.”

“Thanks.” It is a nice bright little room now, Judi thinks.

Clouds of garlic and white wine and chilli fragrance fill the kitchen as the spoots steam, each shell bursting back so far and fast it looks as though their shells are a door they are throwing open and flinging themselves out of. Nell and Bert
drink fizzy white wine and Judi and Hope drink sparkling grape juice, and Spinach and cream is added, and minutes later there is a big bowl of something Judi is surprised to find herself actually wanting to eat, scallop-like meat to be scooped onto bread and eaten with handfuls of salad. Judi had worried, watching the spoots in their saltwater holding cells, if eating them was a good idea for Hope. But there was so much cleaning and cooking, she reasoned it would be ok. Judi needn't have worried, when the dish is placed on the table Hope takes a tiny amount, pushes a little of the stuff around her plate with some bread, then goes back to bread and butter. She says nothing, but smiles cautiously, enjoying the company. Judi cannot believe the things they have done together.

The young women leave, fairly tipsy, fairly late. Both hug Judi, pull head-torches from their handbags as they leave, and bob into the blackness of the night. Nell will come and pick up her Sloane-mobile tomorrow.

Judi checks her messages from earlier: Marina asking, again, who she’s with and reminding her to take folic acid. Jason’s sent her a link to a –no doubt illegal- download of some Japanese animation he thinks she’ll like. There is a bottle of the Cava Nell brought round left behind. Is she going to stay up watching cartoons and drinking an entire bottle of Cava? Yes, absolutely, from the bottle. Judi curls up and watches the movie on her headphones. With bubbles, cartoons, the pride she feels in the beauty of the little house, and the pleasure of solitude after good company, it’s hard to feel anything but happy.
Nell arrives at midday. Judi has a cherry pound cake and the old good plates of her mum’s ready, pours boiling water into the waiting cafetiere on her way to answer the door, and is generally behaving in the sort of way she’d have sneered at Andrea for only a week or two ago.

“Coffee?” Judi smiles from the door frame.

“I can’t stay.”

The cava-headache makes it tough not to look crestfallen. Where is the sparkling, encouraging girl of last night? Why can’t she stay, what sort of schedule does this wander-fairy keep?

“Are you sure?”

Nell looks at the plateful of dense sticky slices almost whimsically, as though she’d love to but just can’t. She is surely not a creature who diets.

“What did you do after we left last night?” Nell says, trying to sound casual, but achieving something more “where were you at the time of...”.

“Sat by the fire, watched a film,” Judi answers truthfully. Odd that she’s asking. It was oneish when they left: what would Judi have done, in Cauldhame on a Thursday night? Maybe she’s hungover too: that can put a dent in anyone’s bounce.

“Are you ok?” Judi asks Nell, who nods but doesn’t look it.

Judi feels the way aging relatives probably do when teenage grandchildren visit: desperate to make a connection, painfully aware that all conversation is fuelled by obligation, devoid of genuine interest.
When Judi waves the “Landy” off, it is completely different to the feeling of waving the girls off last night. That had felt like something starting, this feels like waving goodbye.

Hope naps that morning, and between coffees and Alka-seltzers, Judi works her way through her emails from Glasgow. Nelson has suggested that with only one of them working, buying a property for Jason and Roxy may be out of the question, Judi has suggested they sell Lanark Street and move somewhere smaller, or live “the four of us: three generations under one roof: like a sit-com, which it is already, basically.” This is a suggestion Judi thinks she might quite like for real, minus Nelson. Nelson’s last response was “over my dead body” and Judi’s “so be it.”

He has spent the best part of two decades making sure Judi knows, beyond a shadow of a doubt that he is cleverer than her, and while she is beginning to suspect that the truth of this may have been grossly overstated, he is a more practised manipulator, certainly. The topic of the day on Bible-basher TV, which Hope drifts in and out of, is Genesis, and Judi finds herself sympathising with Adam and Eve in a whole new way. Knowledge can be crippling, can taint the past, present, future: just one bite of it can sit like a boulder in your stomach, impossibly weighty, sickening. But you go on. However unbelievably, everything does.

The permanent exhaustion that characterised her life, trying to maintain her home and workplace, was a hollow farce in more ways even than the glaring ones. She was broadly unnecessary the whole time, “helping” as a child “helps” their mother to bake, indispensable as the wobbly little hand that halves Glacé
cherries with a butter knife and places them falteringly on top of mummy’s fairy-cakes.

Marina’s emails are an open critique of Judi’s “abdication,” reasonably enough, but also argue against all prospective living arrangements that would take the pair of love-struck teenagers from her spare room speedily. Marina has always been a second mother to Jason—well: third, technically Roxy is still under the impression that this baby of hers is going to be a constant source of joy, apparently, not to mention an extremely stylish accessory. The wider world feels unreal, something Judi can put to sleep with the click of the computer mouse, whereas her web of lies here feels solid and ever present.

They go a little walk that afternoon, she and Hope just metres from the house. Hope hums what sounds like a hymn, tells Judi “He is coming” with conviction, her nose tasting the wind like a sniffer dog for divine presence. Judi’s eyes dart to Hope’s as yet diminutive belly regularly, as though in the space of five minutes it might have grown spherical. How can Judi open this woman’s world so wide, only to close it again? It is both a moral question and a practical one.

Hope taps Judi on the elbow and points to the path ahead, where he is.

“Hamish!”
"What are you doing here?" He runs to her like the finish line. That’s what’s attractive about Hamish, she remembers, seeing it again: he is happy in a way so few adults manage. Oh, she shines, feels pretty as his eyes move down her body, taking her in, reach her middle and falter. Oh. That. The smile flickers, just for a moment, is swiftly reset to something a little cooler but warm, still.

“Judi… and?” he turns to Hope, waiting for an introduction. For one crazy, optimistic moment Judi imagines telling the truth. Could she? Right now? To imagine it is to feel the weight pour from her. No. Impossible: “This is my mother, Isabel McGovan.”

Hamish holds his hand out to Hope, who frowns in consternation, as though it contained a large unfamiliar insect, and nods hesitantly.

“A pleasure to meet you.” The obvious delight he takes in her off-kilter response makes the pleasantry genuinely pleasing. “I heard about your mum, about you, in the pub. I didn’t know it was you-you, though… Congratulations.” He says, smiling at her bump.

“Join us for a walk?”

“Nothing would give me more pleasure," he says, in the old-fashioned way that he does, that he is. Judi’s mind plays a reel of all the things she’d like to do to and with him that she’s pretty sure would give him more pleasure than a walk in the woods with “mother.” Having been so sure they’d never see each other again, she wants to press herself against every part of his body to make sure he’s real.
“You have time?” Why does she say that? He’s already agreed.

“Absolutely. The one resource I have in no scarcity.”

Judi had forgotten the roundabout way of his talking. She could kiss him for it. She could kiss him anyway, not kissing him: that’s the hard thing. The picture comes back to her again, and she looks from Hamish to Hope, and back to the house, feeling the vast unlikelihood of it. Can it really be that the strength of her desire has brought all this to her side? Yes. All the ingredients of her happy ending are here, just metres from each other. But what’s the recipe? What if she gets it wrong now? What if she ruins everything?

The teacher’s union is fighting his corner, Hamish says, but “there’s no recovering from such epic buffoonery. He’ll have to move schools, once they “rule out the funny-business” as he dubs the, now dropped, sexual harassment allegations. Why is Hamish under suspicion for being some terrible miscreant while Nelson goes about his daily business as though nothing has happened? Because of her, Judi thinks, she is an accessory. The word sounds relatively inoffensive, one of Andrea or Roxy’s polka-dot fripperies, rather than someone who has allowed, no facilitated, her husband’s abuse. She is a monster, basically. Judi shudders, and Hamish, assuming she’s cold, wordlessly puts his coat over her shoulders.

“It looks like you’ve had your hand’s full” says Hamish, indicating Hope with a tilt of his nose.

She’d love it if this man thought she was good, knowing the truth of her, but that’s impossible. The fact that he, like everyone, will coo what a good sweet person she is for looking after this frail woman makes her ill.
The three veer towards the burn in wordless concurrence, neither led nor leading. Not classically good looking, like her husband, Hamish’s face, nevertheless is like a book you can’t put down: eyes that seem to look into you and say that whatever you’ve done, it’s ok.

"Just a short walk, I think?” he says, and Judi smiles gratefully: her anxiety that they will go further than Hope can manage must tell. She feels heard without having to open her mouth.

A scattering of early lambs, impossibly white fleeced, frivol on the invisible springs attached to their hooves. By the side of the dirt path Hope stops to stare at another blindingly white object.

"Hello, what’s this?” Hamish says affably.

"Hello.” Hope parrots in Hamish’s voice, then “halo” in a happy whisper, as if she is telling herself a secret.

“It does look like a halo.” Hamish agrees. Judi looks down at the remnants of the salt-lick, the big tablet having been rubbed to nothing, hollowed down to a zero by the course tongues of departed ewes.

“It looks like a sculpture.” says Judi, “a conveniently mantelpiece sized, inoffensively minimalist sort of a one: Ikeart.”

"Who’s Ikeart?”

"Not a who a what: the kind of art you get in Ikea.” Says Judi, Hamish laughs, and Judi feels bad, passing a snide comment of Nelson’s off as her own. Judi diminishes things, with stolen words, with cynicism. But when she looks over at him he’s laughing.
“What do you think it means?” Hamish grins playfully, contemplating it as though it were a piece of modernist pottery.

Judi feels a vomit-inducing pressure to say something clever.

“Oh, it’s about absence.” Trying to sound like a TV art critic. “It’s what isn’t there that really speaks to you.”

“So true.” Says Hamish, mock earnest. “so inspiring,”

Hope looks the pair of them up and down and snorts like a horse, unimpressed with the lack of attention she’s receiving.

By the burn, snowdrops are pushing their way through the thawing soil, “harbingers of spring” Hamish says, and Judi nods, although she has always thought the pretty white flowers have an innate sadness, austere little tears. Today the little blossoms, tussled lightly by the breeze, wave gently back and forth on their delicate stalks, making her think, more than anything, of flags of surrender.

When they get back, Judi asks Hamish in for tea. He smiles awkwardly and says “actually, there’s somewhere I have to be.”

Isn’t it truer that he has nowhere to be? Judi’s completely misread the situation, he’s trying to be nice, but she just flings herself again and again, like middle-aged ladies’ knickers at a Tom Jones concert. It’s not like anything could happen anyway. She wants to die a bit.

“Would you like to come for dinner later?”

“Yes. Sure. I like eating. I mean, obviously.” She says, clutching the roll of fat around her belly to illustrate her point.
Hamish laughs awkwardly, probably trying not to actively demonstrate his disgust. He’d already changed his mind about asking her. Now she’s just imposing herself on him, and flagging up how very unattractive she is while she’s at it: great!

“Great,” he says, and manages to sound like he means it, because he’s a brilliant actor, that’s why. “See you at eightish?”

"Eightish." Says Judi, nodding dumbly. I mean, clearly it’s not a date.

“Can you look after Hope this evening, Bert? I’ll pay you.”

“Sure.” She sounds pleased, “and no you won’t, but how come?”

“I met an old friend today. Catching up. It’s definitely not a date.”

“You have a date?”

“Definitely not, no, not at all.” Judi blurts down the phone. She knows logically that the room is not actually spinning. “How should I do my hair?”

“Sounds like a date if you’re doing hair.”

“Ok. I’ll just leave it then, probably. Can you come?”

“What time?”

“Half-seven, can you come then? We’re going out at eightish.”

“You’re going out? Ooh: I thought you weren’t even dating yet. Who is this lucky man?”

“Never mind, ... half seven? Please?”
Judi puts on a little make-up, then more, then so much she looks like a transsexual clown, washes it all off, cries at her horrific plainness.

She’s picked up the phone to call Marina, the Police, even Nelson. She doesn’t miss him, but a time where she did not have to make her own decisions? Yes. She misses that badly.

She’s living the new truth that old stuff doesn’t matter, even if it stings. Things will all slot into place on a cosmic level. Everything she wanted is coming to her: all she needs to do is be grateful, to receive. But *The Secret* has also taught her that it’s impossible to receive if you believe yourself to be undeserving. And Judi doesn’t think she is undeserving: she knows she is. The shining good of Hamish, who has never tried to bend the universe, or anything, to his will, is like a disclosing tablet: highlighting her own moral decay. Maybe she’ll turn all the lights out and stay away from the door. The door at which Bert is knocking now, waving at Judi in through the little window of, and going “coo-ee!”

Judi uses Bert’s presence as a luxurious opportunity to have someone else make her decisions for her.

"Wear jeans, because you can “go anywhere” in jeans, “they can be smart, or they can be casual,” says Bert, “depending on where you are."

“The chameleon of the clothing world.”

“Right.” Judi puts her hair up with her favourite scarf, one that predates Nelson, and which she wears infrequently now, rationing it, as the silk is so thin to touch she fears one day it will simply dissipate in the rain.

“What makeup?”
'Smoky aubergine?' Bert suggests, reading from the back of the little pot. "Like babaganoush,"

"Yeah, just like her." Bert smiles back, obviously Turkish cuisine has not reached Cauldhame yet.

Judi looks in the mirror. I look like a tarty old tramp, Judi thinks, the sort that reeks of cheap perfume and cheaper whiskey and twice-smoked fags and her own wee.

"Lovely," says Bert, as the doorbell goes.

“You look lovely.” Hamish says, grinning from underneath his thinning bird’s nest. He is wearing slightly balding corduroys, a tweedy sort of jacket, no tie, some brogue-ish shoes, what he always wears, basically.

“I thought an exhibition, then dinner?” Hamish offers her his arm, flicking a good heavy torch on in the other to light their way through the woods.

“In this cultural capital?” She laughs.

“I love that laugh” Hamish says, again managing to sound like he means it.

“It’s like a horse”

"What’s wrong with horses?"
They’re not sexy, thinks Judi, except maybe to prepubescent girls of a certain class background, but she doesn’t mention sexiness. They are not on a date, after all.

Enlightenment suits this hobbity man, looking as it does so much like “The Shire” that the place is surely some sort of copyright breach. Little Eco-homes built into the hilly landscape, twee paths and gardens woven between the buildings.

“There’s about twenty permanent residents,” Hamish says “and up to thirty Woofers.”

“That’s a lot of dogs,” says Judi, wondering why “up to” thirty? Maybe it’s hard to keep them still long enough to count them.

“No.” Hamish laughs.

Judi feels stupid. “It seems like a lot: one point five per person” What is it with hippies and their tatty unneutered dogs on old bits of rope?

“No. Woofer. Not dogs, it’s an acronym: “Workers On Organic Farms. I’m a woofer right now. I stay for free, or nearly free, help out around the place instead of paying rent.”

Spoots and woofers: her vocabulary is increasing exponentially. “I’m glad you told me what it was before you told me you were one: I might have imagined something much more challenging.”

“Like what?”

Suddenly Judi is too embarrassed to say what. In case. She quite likes not knowing what he thinks or feels about BDSM. And certainly now isn’t the time to discuss her sexual history. He might be intrigued, might be disgusted, neither
appeal to her. In any case, if this man came to her and said he liked to dress up as a puppy, be taken for walks and eat out a bowl, and he wanted to do that with her, the “with her” bit would make that the “what” would be sort of “so what?”

“Like what?” He repeats.

Ugh. “I said I could imagine, not that I had done.” Judi finds that her hand is in his. Oh, it crackles in her, his pulse in her palm, the thick blanket of stars above, just some tatty trainers and mismatched sports socks between her and the ancient earth below. She giggles with the fullness of it.

“What? What are you thinking?”

“Oh.”

“Tell me”

“I’m just: enjoying your hand, and ... it’s silly. I’m picturing the Earth all of it, the whole globe curving around and down, and here we are, wherever we are, all of it beneath us. We’re on top of the world, we really are. Me and you, right now. Is that mad?”

“It’s lovely.”

“Oh.” Her blush ripples through her body, a blossoming heat, illuminated: glowing.

Judi is impressed with the atmosphere of semi-industrious earthiness, the air heavy with good cooking smells, peaty smoke, traces of incense and hashish, and distant conversation.

Hamish explains the straw-bale walls, clay cladding, and way the thick, charmingly irregular, stripped branches that support the roofs of the buildings are constructed, one post lashed to the next, so that when the support-struts are
taken away each beam dips and supports the branch above it. Hamish, has spent the last three days working in a group of folk building the skeletal foundation of what will be another of these houses.

“We’re creating a mutually supportive circle,” he says proudly. “They say the chosen shape of the building reflects the community here.”

Judi thinks this comment is kind of beautiful, and kind of lame, there are many “mutually supportive communities” Etonians, AA groups, paedophile rings: why do hippies always think they invented the notion of looking after each other?

Still, it's impressive, the energy, the scope the swirling ammonite ceiling. She gives his hand a wee squish and he squeezes it back.

In the main building, which has been built upwards from the shell of a barn, Judi can identify stones she used to clamber up to be “King of the Castle,” with her Da. It’s such a pleasure to tell Hamish the stories behind the photos here, to stare at others she’s never seen before.

“This is wonderful” Judi gushes.

“You’re a cheap date.” Hamish replies. Judi is his date. She takes the information and hugs it to her heart.

Hamish, points to wide framed black and white picture where Isabel throws her hands out in song. Things seem richly interconnected, as though they were not only at the top of the world, but at its centre too, as though everything spun out from her core.
“Are you hungry?”

Judi isn’t hungry at all, because she comfort-ate a whole packet of chocolate digestives through nerves in the manic time before Bert came, and because the sweaty prosthetic lump leaves her pretty much at maximum capacity, what if a seam busts and her dirty lie spills out, like polystyrene from a burst beanbag? But she nods enthusiastically all the same, because what if she said no, and went home instead?

“Hey: a little more here please?” Hamish asks the woman with the ladle aimed at her bowl, its cracks no doubt teeming with bacteria -if Judi really was pregnant, she would most certainly refuse to eat out of it.

“She’s eating for two” he sounds proud, as if it has anything to do with him.

“Thanks.” She says to Hamish, and tries to smile enthusiastically as the scoop of hippy-slop lands on the mound already amassed before her.

“Hold on” says Hamish, and pulls a napkin containing something shrivelled, brown and unearthly looking from his inner pocket. “Want a hedgehog?”

Judi checks his face to make sure he’s joking.

“Hedgehog mushroom: guaranteed 100% non-hallucinogenic.” He grins, “not mushroomiest but still pretty mushroomy.” he crumbles some above both their bowls.

"Now try.” The difference in the food is immeasurable. “Mmmmn” Judi says too loudly, several heads turn their way, “I’ll have what she’s having,” Judi imagines one of them saying, a la When Harry met Sally.
“What are you laughing at?” asks Hamish, who thinks the inside of her head is an amusing and fascinating place. At least, when this relationship fails to happen, she'll be saved from watching his slow-dawning disappointment in the truth: the scrapheap of movie fragments, TV shows and books she can’t remember the name or author of; the wastelands of dread and shame and regret; the empty plains where tumbleweed rolls freely.

“I didn't know I was laughing! This is a lot to take in: This being here, you being here …”

He reaches across the table and strokes the top of her hand. When she can bring herself to look up at his face he is blushing as hard as she is.

“Dinner with Mr Rochester!” Judi grins.

“I quite envied Mr Rochester: at least his mad wife was in an attic: mine was in the pub two blocks from the house, telling all our mutual acquaintances how sexually inept I was.”

Judi wants to tell him that just his hand around hers, or his breath at her neck when he took her coat, gave her goosebumps, left her legs shaky. But where would that leave them?

“Sex is so boring in any case.” She says instead. “Even when it’s great, even when it’s thrilling, even when you manage to shove your bodies at each other, or otherwise titillate each other so successfully it feels like you’re generating some sort of meaning, it’s all bullshit… ultimately just…” she shrugs: “slotting meat together.”
Flecks of unidentifiable pulse spray across her cleavage, and Hamish chokes on air. When he looks at her again, his face is bright red and his eyes are streaming. "You have such a way with words, my dear."

My dear. She is his dear! A deer, caught in headlights, paralysed with the dazzle.

After dinner, they walk to the pub. It is almost exactly the same as Judi remembers it being when she sat on her Da’s knee and drank the sort of drinks that guarantee temporary behavioural disorders in anyone under twelve. A tatty stag’s head - sporting a dusty paper party-hat at a rakish angle, juts from the dark stone walls.

Keith is holding court amongst a small crowd big enough to make the little bar seem quite lively.


“Charming as ever, Keith” Is that a little note of irritation in Hamish’s voice. The “quiet drink” he had proposed will almost certainly now be several obnoxiously loud ones with Keith and his croneys. Still, Judi gladly joins the daftness to sit beside him. What wouldn’t she do to just to keep doing that?

The others bring her ever more ridiculously named alcohol-free cocktails concocted from the bar’s limited range of soft drinks. Hamish’s is a mock-tequila sunrise: “Tequila Mockingbird."

When it’s her round Hamish says, “lemme: I’m drinking for two.”

They trudge home up a narrow path through the woods: it’s wet, dark, late, and the trees drip fat and cold down the back of her jacket.
“Give me your hand,” says Hamish.

“No.” Judi says. She’s tired, the path is slippy, and Hamish, through nerves, and for an excuse, she’s sure, to have stayed there, together, has become staggeringly drunk.

“I won’t let you fall,” he says, stumbling over a tree root.

“I’m fine, thanks.”

“But I want to protect you,” he whines.

“That’s… sort of patronising. From what, exactly?”

“Dunno.” he says like a sulky teen, “from unpleasant people, generic danger.” His voice softens, plaintive: “from yourself, from the consequences of your own actions, or mine…” he waves his hands out to demonstrate the scope of his chivalry, so that the torch beam shines away from the path, out into the woods, and he is just a small voice in the dark saying “From whatever. From everything. Forever.”

“That sounds like a full-time job” she says, melting.

“That’s ok.” He shines the light right into his grin back up at her, his buoyancy lifting her up and getting her all carried away with him: “I just recently became unemployed.”

“How alluring.”

“You’re alluring.” He is too close. She has let him get too close. Because she’s selfish, wanted to know what she could have.

“You’re sure of yourself, aren’t you?”
“For the longest time I was sure. Thought if I just loved Angie hard enough, made her feel properly loved, then she wouldn’t need to lash out or destroy herself. That’s what I thought.”

“I’m so sorry, Hamish,” says Judi.

“Alcoholism’s a disease, I believe that, and I believed in love as this... absolute cure all.” Hamish shakes his head at himself. “If you understand her behaviour, however terrible, as a symptom of being unwell... In sickness and health, isn’t it?”

“We’ve mistaken life for an endurance test, me and you.”

Hamish nods. “Since she left me, even in the middle of this thing with the school, I’ve felt so wonderfully free. So light. Angie seems happier too. All that time she was pushing me away... I really should just have gone.”

“Is she seeing anyone?

“You heard?”

“Freida.” Judi says by way of explanation.

“Personal trainer: what a cliché, eh? So, no. I’m not feeling “full of myself” as you put it. I know I’m not an attractive man, although the way you look at me sometimes makes me feel otherwise. What’s your secret?”

“My secret? The Secret. A technique called “cosmic ordering.”

“Let this be a joke, eh? Otherwise I have to revise my opinion of you.”

“I live my life by its principles,” Judi says, super-earnest.

Hamish is still uncertain as to whether she’s joking. Judi doesn’t quite know either - she’s joking about, but telling, the truth. The full scale
ridiculousness of her situation hits her. She clutches her synthetic sides, laughing belly laughs, and Hamish hoots along.

"Thank God you’re not serious."

"I’m entirely serious: that’s the real joke of it, you know. Take you."

"Take me!"

"Hamish, I dialled you up like a cosmic pizza. I summoned you here, essentially: snapped my fingers and kaboom! These days, that’s how I get things done. Everything."

"Everything?"

"Everything: the baby: kaboom! Being here now? I did it all with the power of my mind."

Hamish snorts.

"It’s no joke, Hamish: I’ve got someone sacked, I’ve willed someone dead: I’ve inherited a bunch of money, all with my mind. You should quake before me, essentially."

"I do. Always."

"No you don’t! You want to protect me. Listen. I’m not meek, I’m not. And I only pretend to be nice. I’m a truly horrible person"

"Then you can spend from now on teaching me how to be as good an actor as you are."

She spreads her arms skyward, out like wings into the dark. Tripping along those three words, toes arching in her cold squelchy trainers at the pleasure of them: from now on. It is how she imagines a ballerina feels in the moment of the perfect lift: flight.
“You’re already a fabulous actor: Mr Rochester. You will always be him for me.”

“I’ll always be me for you,” he says, falling forwards, hitting the ground and saying, “doosh.”

“I assume you’d be being you anyway, no? Not really ‘for me,’ then, is it?”

“I’ll do it better for you.”

“I’m pregnant, Hamish,” Judi wants him to hear the -we’re closed, as in closed for business, closed forever, closed conversation, snap of the lid-impossibility in it.

“Thas slovely,” He says, really quite stumbly and slurry now: grasping her upper waist and swinging in more to use her as a sort of banister than for any romantic purpose. She grasps his hand firmly, keeping him away from the plasticy belly lest he takes it upon himself to grope it affectionately

“Thas loveluy a baby, Judi.”

“I think it is.” She says quietly, with a gulp of air.

“So he no thinkso? Wan’ me to hit him? Amma do it.”

“Pfft. Have you ever hit anyone?”

“No” Hamish admits. “but I will gladly lamp him to defend you.”

Judi, grins ear to ear in the dark at the thought of Hamish smacking Nelson in the face. “No thanks.”

“But I wanny woo you,” he stalls, “I like you.”

“You’re drunk, Hamish.”

“Your sober: that’s the real issue.”

“You don't even know me”
“I can spend from now on getting to: you make me happier than anybody else. S’just funner with you.”

“It’s more complicated than that”

“Actually, s’no”

“Snow?”

“It’s no. It’s not.”

“I’m neurotic, I’m possessive.

“So possess me.”

“I’m a liar.”

That makes him stop and frown: this person has been lied to enough.

“Stoppit then: the truth will set you free” he says grandly; shining the torchlight directly in her face, suddenly an inquisitor: “tell me it!”

Judi opens her mouth to quip that truth will, in fact, almost certainly send her to prison, but before anything can come out of it, his tongue is where her words would have been, boozy and urgent, and hers in his and –despite her violent level of guilt- the kiss is beyond anything she has ever known. Oh, heavenly: to lick his lips and teeth, explosive, addictive and anything but moderate. To tell each their truth but to speak it in tongues, in the language of touch which communicates so much, but only so much; where she can give herself to him, but not give herself away. They kiss for a very long time, collapsing into each other, waves of. Yes. Thank you. Judi moans with the pleasure, Hamish collapses spluttering laughter, into her mouth.

“What? What?”

“Heh.” He heaves with laughter. “Slotting meat together.”
Judi kisses Hamish on the forehead and pats him on the head: “Bedtime for drunko.”

“Heh!” Hamish is still doubled with laughter. “Drunko. That’s what I used to call my wife.”

“How perfectly charming of you to bring that up now” Judi says, haughtily governessy, and only mainly joking.

Hamish’s laugh turns to a barking choke, though which he wheezes, “Oh God, hold this,” and passes Judi the torch, just in time for her to illuminate him doubling over and vomiting profusely. She moves the torch beam a respectful distance from the gush.

“As I said.” Judi laughs: “how perfectly charming of you to bring this up now.” She hears a gurgle of acknowledgement between his wretches. “When I imagined you kneeling at my feet, it wasn’t quite like this, Hamish.”

“Oh god, Judi,” he says theatrically: “what have I done?”

“A little bit of vomming, that’s all. Babies do it all the time, and everyone thinks they’re cute.”

“How are you so lovely?”

“Hamish, I’m a nurse, we’re pretty blasé about bodily fluids: I mean, as a response to our first kiss it’s not ideal, but...”

Hamish moans in sorrow, and perhaps with stomach pain, as he straightens himself up: “I am wretched: I’ve messed everything up.”

“Not everything. Your shirt sleeves, yes, but not everything.”

In truth, Judi is bizarrely glad he was sick. It’s bought her a little time, where she doesn’t have to say yes or no, where she can just look after someone,
which is the one thing she knows she can do, and who knows, then maybe she'll find a way.

"I've ruined our friendship." He wails, not especially fetchingly.

Judi sinks. Their friendship, is it, still?

"Oh. That old thing." She tries to sound upbeat: "I'm sure it's recoverable: I still think you're..." –hilarious, weirdly achingly beautiful, perhaps my other half in this world- "pretty much ok." she says.

Whilst Hamish is otherwise engaged reviewing the last- or logically, the first- of the evening's festivities, Judi unwinds the soft scarf from her hair and opens it out into something plausibly handkerchief-like so he can clean himself up a bit when he’s done. "Come on then, great protector, are you going to walk me home or not?"

“You'd still let me?” Hamish says, taking the scarf she has handed him and towelling his face off gratefully.

“Sure." She slips her arm through his, and hands him back the maglight.

“You're the only one with a torch.”

Bert is sound asleep on the living-room sofabed, Hope is snoring in her wee room downstairs.

“C'mon,” Judi whispers and Hamish follows her upstairs with cartoonish tiptoeing. “You'd have made a terrible spy." She hisses, pulling him over the landing.

“How do you know I'm not currently an excellent one?” Hamish stage-whispers so loudly Bert snorts half awake.
“Because MI5 have a minimum height requirement.” Judi says,

“Do you have a minimum height requirement?” Hamish says, and she laughs, thinking that his stature, in comparison to Nelson, highlights the difference in the way the two men treat her: she is sick of being looked down on.

“Are you taking me to bed, Judi?”

“Yup, shoes off.” Judi helps him into the lovely brass bed in the lovely rosy bedroom: her first guest!

“Night night, Hamish” she says, closing the door behind her and going back to the little room next door. So near and yet so far.
Judi, having lain up most of the night aching with the awareness of him so nearby, cannot believe she didn’t hear him leave. She makes coffee and brings Bert one.

“I saw your not-a-date slip out in the early hours of this morning. Hamish is lovely! How did it go?”

“Nothing too exciting, I put him to bed drunk. Nothing happened. Well... almost nothing.” Judi giggles, fortysomething-teen.

“You totally snogged!”

“We totally did.” Judi says, embracing the girliness.

“Oooh! Does Nell know?”

“Nell?” Judi doesn’t get the connection. “Why should she?”

“Oh. No reason, I suppose. I won’t say a word, promise.”

Judi shrugs, “How was Mum last night?”

“Oh, a bunch of ways. She had all her albums out to show me. Dementia is totally fascinating. She’d say “this is me” or “here’s Ray” but hesitant: like she wants confirmation? Textbook stuff.”

“It really is, isn’t it?”

“Sometimes she looks like she’s remembering, sometimes marvelling: this was my life, wow.”

Judi smiles to hear this. “Then sometimes she looks terrified like all of it has nothing to do with her; as if she’s trapped in someone else’s life”

“Uh huh.” Says Judi, smile fading.
Some of her ideas are quite spooky too: there was one picture of her hill-climbing?

Judi’s skin prickles.

"The one where she’s at the top of one of the Bens. Did she have a fall?"

"Not that I know of."

“She looks happy enough in the photo: grinning out. But she stared at it, super-quiet for the longest time, then said ‘I died then, but I’m fine now’ so matter of fact, which was the really creepy thing. Funny, right?"

"Yeah, funny." Says Judi, feeling the colour drain from her face. “I dunno where she gets her ideas from.”

Bert gives Judi a hug.

“It must be so hard to watch her go through this.”

“It’s awful.” Judi says quietly, tears running down her cheeks. “It’s awful.”

“But is it awful for Isabel?” Bert asks gently: “I can’t decide. On the one hand she can see” Bert casts her hands towards the albums “this wonderful love affair. I was telling her my memories of this house: the parties, her glamorous friends back then. Just gone. Might as well be a movie, or... some massive con.”

Judi nods.

“But on the other...’ Bert pauses tactfully, trying to figure out how best to proceed, “she doesn’t remember her leaving him at all, does she?"

“No. I haven’t encouraged it, either.” Says Judi, how stupid that she hadn’t said as much to Bert before she left.

“She’s spared that knowledge then, at least, by her illness. And by you.”

"Do you think that’s wrong, editing the truth?"
“It’s in her best interests.”

“Sometimes I’m not sure.” Judi shouts on her way back to the coffee pot. Is it bad that she brings the mentally ill, pregnant woman in her care coffee and cake for breakfast? Hope certainly doesn’t think so.

“It’s the really good cherry cake: with butter on it, and a green apple cut in horizontal slices.” Judi tells Hope, wanting her to taste the love in it.

“Horizontal?” Hope parrots conversationally.

Judi wonders how it can be that she can still never tell, when Hope does it, if she’s genuinely engaging with Judi, or that the words are just bouncing back like a ball off the wall you’ve thrown it at.

“Yeh: horizontal. Apple’s are like people, Da, -your husband Ray- used to say. Each has a star inside it, waiting to be discovered.”

“That’s nice.” Hope says, in the Southern Belle voice Judi hasn’t heard for a while. Judi puts on the wee telly for her.

“Breakfast in bed’s ok, right?”

“Nice” Hope says, still gone with the wind.

“Want a bath later?”

“Nice.”

Hope nods happily, more at the cake than Judi. She’s been going to the loo for herself, every time, these last few days. It’s brilliant. And sort of terrifying: she’s so aware.

“Do you know at one point your Mum almost had me convinced she was a TV psychic being held in some sort of hostage situation?”

Judi’s mouth is full of coffee. She struggles to keep it there. “Hope?”
Bert nods.

Here goes, let’s see how close to the truth she can skate without falling down through one of the cracks in the supporting lie. Judi opens her mum’s old celebrity book, pulls out Hope’s letter, shows Bert the pictures of Judi and Isabel at one of Hope’s shows, explains about the tent revivals, her mother’s search for religion, her affair, the death of the biscuit billionaire and her subsequent metal collapse, leading to a stay at Judi and Nelson’s hospital. “I thought being around Hope would be good for her, but.” Judi shrugs in a “the rest is history” way.

“Yeah. I was confused by this one, though.” Bert, almost ashamedly, holds up the receipt-copy of Hope’s prescription.

“Hope’s medication. Judi says mildly, in her nurses practiced “voice that understands,” willing bert not to understand. Heart pounding. “I can see why that could be confusing.”

“But I suppose…” Bert hesitates,

“Yes? Asks Judi, in a -no, it’s not too silly to ask about- type of a way, as one is trained to do, for example, when discussing cancer with a child. “What do you think?”

“She must just have been so desperate to... be her.”

“Yes!” Judi realises she has been holding her breath. “That was part of the problem, copying her voice, memorising her movements, stealing her things: doing anything she could to add weight to idea that she was Hope. Mum’s idea of herself is so weak.”

Bert nods sympathetically and pats Judi’s shoulder reassuringly.
“It compromised our positions, livelihood, the hospital: which I miss like crazy. And then we had the same problem: where to put Mum. Nelson was less keen than ever on living with her, and I wouldn’t make the mistake of doing anything else twice.”

“That’s why you broke up?”

“A large part.”

There is a truth here, Judi realises, after everything they’ve been through together, whatever happens with the baby, Judi would never put Hope into a home, or hospital: not as long as she’s as healthy and happy, and she seems to be both.

“Shit.” says Bert.

Judi smiles. “Yeah, it’s shit.”

“From where I’m standing, Judi, it looks like you’re doing what you’ve always done: the best you can.”

“It’s so good that you think so...” Judi hunts for a change of topic. “Did I tell you my teenage step-son just got a girl pregnant?”

“You haven’t mentioned him.”

Judi feels, instantly, like a terrible person. She’s been trying to keep her two lives separate, she supposes, but the thing is that there isn’t two, just one, and trying to impose some sort of divide is futile.

“You’ll meet him soon enough. Right now it’s by no means certain whether I’ll be a mum or a granny first.”

Bert hoots: “You never have a dull moment, do you?”

“Not these days.”
As Judi hands Bert the spare key to the front door and waves her off, it occurs to her that agreeing to let Bert help with Hope is not just skating on thin ice but doing triple pirouettes at crazy Olympic angles.

At some point soon she’ll be visibly pregnant: then what? Take her away, again? Come up with a lie explaining why her “mum” is suddenly confined to her bed for a third of year? Why Judi, despite being severely pregnant, doesn’t need or want help or visitors, having so recently, gratefully, accepted both. What had she been thinking? There wasn’t time for thinking, was there? She’d thought Nelson could help, when the time came, but now she realises she would never put Hope in a situation where she had to be anywhere near that man.

It’s Judi’s dear wish that she never has to talk to him again.

But who else? The many wonderful people nearby are far too good, too trustworthy, to be trusted with this. So, let’s make the most of now, Judi thinks.

“Marina, remember not believing I was on a retreat, or that I had any other friends but you?” Judi says, ensuing hello.

“When you say it that way it sounds quite harsh, but essentially, that is still what I think,” Marina sounds quite pleased of the additional opportunity to tell her as much.

“Get to Cauldhame station for half twelve, I’ll prove you wrong on both counts,”
“Cauldhame: where is that?“

“Train from central every hour”

“Why’ve I never heard of it?”

“There’s no reason you would have. I’ll pick you up.”

“Sounds great!” Marina says, with not a trace but a lead-heavy dose of sarcasm. “Pick me up in what?”


“You don’t have a car.”

“Three counts! There’s someone I’d like you to meet.”

“Is it the new reformed Nelson?” Marina says cattily.

“Is there one?”

“No.” Marina says gently.

“It’s not Nelson.” Judi says happily. “I promise. It never will be again.”

“Are you going to tell me, on this leisure jaunt, or tell your son, at some convenient point, where your husband’s disappeared to? Or will you both be keeping this Marie-Celeste parenting model up indefinitely?”

“The French queen?” Judi says to give her a while to consider all that Marina’s just said.

“The abandoned ship. Aka, 14 Lanark Street. If Nelson’s there at all. He’s not answering the door, or his phone, or replying to emails. “We thought he was with you.”

“I told you I wasn’t seeing him.”

“You’ve told me that before.” Her words are weighted with the past.
“I haven’t spoken to him for days” Judi defends herself, even though this, too, is surely irresponsible. Did she even notice his silence? Perhaps it was too welcome to question much. Retreat can be one of two things. A Process, or a place. Both are lies, Judi decides, life is everywhere and always advancing. The more you try to wriggle out of stuff, the more caught up in it all you get.

Marina has heard plenty about Hope, but has never met her, what with her having lived in a high security mental health facility until so recently. Judi has mentioned her mother never, in contrast, but that doesn't stop Marina saying “What a pleasure to meet you, Mrs McGovan, I've heard so much about you” when Judi introduces them. Because she's nice, Marina, just understandably fed up with Judi right now.

Marina surveys the little cottage, seething, incredulous and reluctantly enthusiastic about the place. Desperate to show Marina things are ok, even as she feels that they’re lying in tatters, she bucks herself up, talks enthusiastically, and lunch goes well. Hope follows the conversation with her eyes, makes empathic listening noises, and stays mercifully quiet.

Marina talks about Jason, mainly. They're looking at flats and Roxy and Andrea have taken to each other massively: she just doesn’t understand why Judi is doing all this, she says: why she had to leave her work, why she had to leave her house?

“I don’t buy it’s just that he’s just slept with someone, Judi. I’m sorry to say this, but I think, if that was all, you’d have stayed, you’d have forgiven him. I
know you, I do: whatever he’s done it’s something much shittier than putting his dick somewhere careless.”

“It really isn’t. Careless is my exact issue.”

“And when did your mum turn up in the middle of all this? Why didn’t you say anything before now? Why here? It all just feels...” Marina shrugs “unlikely.”

“Our house is here.”

“No, your house is in Glasgow, you put your life into it. Whatever he’s done, he can’t drive you out your home.”

“I drove myself. I won’t live there again.” Saying it, Judi knows it is true.

“You can’t do all this,” Marina gestures to Judi’s bulge, to Hope, “on your own.”

“I might not have to.”

Once she starts, it all comes flooding out. How his arms -not especially muscular or toned under their blanket of perpetual tweed - feel, nevertheless like a fortress; of his slurred declarations; his wanting to look after her, that he thought the pregnancy was “lovely.”

“Lovely!” Marina, who cannot resist a love story, coos back, then, almost apologetically; “They couldn’t have kids, could they?”

Judi shakes her head sadly. Poor Hamish, everyone knew.

“Maybe this is a last chance to put that right, as much for him as it is for you, Judi.”
Could it be true, Judi thinks, that she truly is doing this terrible thing for both of them, for all of them? That if everyone gets a loving family out of this, that the end might justify the meanness?

Judi drives them back to the station, Hope too, and the three have a wee walk up the high street and back.

“Nell!” Judi waves her over gladly, keen to show Marina that not all her pals are imaginary, or mentally ill. “How’s it going.”

“Sure. Fine.” The all-encompassing hug of old conspicuously absent.

“This is my friend Ma...”

“I’m just leaving, actually,” Nell butts in.

“Oh right, well... I guess I’ll see you...”

“I guess.” Nell answers curtly, walking on. Then turns back. “Actually, can I have a word?”

Judi nods and scuttles after her. Nell smiles like schoolteachers do at parents, before giving an unfavourable report. “Sorry, really, I just can’t be polite right now.”

Judi smiles as if this is a reasonable way to feel,

“I’m... maybe it’s unfair, or... but I’m just so disappointed.”

“In what?”

“I saw you Judi. Just stay away from Hamish.”

“What? But I didn’t...”

“I don’t want to hear it.”

“Nell... But...” she’s already walking off, hands by her ears as though to save herself from anything Judi might have to say.
“I see why you’re so keen to stay,” Marina’s voice is catty, but her eyes are full of concern, “with friends like that who needs enemies?”

Judi can feel her face glowing as hot as if she’d been slapped in it literally as well as metaphorically. Stay away from Hamish. What’s it to her? Who’s she to say that?

Judi waves Marina off and they drive home along the high street.

On the drive home Judi sees Nell’s distinctive dreads bounce down the pavement, metres ahead. Should Judi stop, say something? What? While watching her, wondering, a man rugby tackles into Nell and puts her over his shoulder. Seeing her hang from him, laughing and kicking, Judi laughs along, despite herself. The scene funnier for their comparative sizes; Nell so tall, he short and stocky, almost like Hamish. Not almost! It is Hamish.

Dumbly, Judi stares as Nell wriggles and screams, a happy captive in broad daylight. Judi’s envy is so all encompassing that for a second she has to remind herself of her body, of the steering wheel, and that there are reasons to retain control.

No wonder Nell hates her now, no wonder. And Judi bragging to Marina about a potential partner, idiot!
At home, she reviews last night in light of it all having been his drunken mistake. He really was worried about “ruining their friendship,” just as he said, not ruining anything else that might have happened between them. “I like you” he’d told her, that’s all, and if he was a little sheepish about that, then no wonder, he was trying to let her down gently. One stupid, brilliant, kiss that became so quickly the foundations of a castle in the clouds: an inebriated pity snog, that made him, literally, sick. Was he going to sweep in, take care of her, another man’s baby, her senile “mother”? Was he fuck.

He got up and snuck out with the dawn. Not exactly hanging around, was he?

There are nine missed calls on her phone, two from Jason, all the rest from Lotus Gardens and its assorted employees. She calls Jason first.

“How are you?”

“In school, still. Like I do, remember?”

“What you answering your phone for then?”

“Free period. Thought you might know about Dad.”

“Nah. Thought you might. When d’you last see him?”

“Four days, maybe. He was pretty rude about Roxy. I was... pretty rude generally. He hasn’t spoken to me since.”

“I’m sorry Jason. He’ll come round.”

“Think I care what he thinks?”
“Yeah: I think you do, or you wouldn’t sound so pissed off.”

“You’re as bad, sneering at her auntie”

“Give me a break: it’s big news. I just worry. All I want is to make sure you have a nice house to bring them up in, and we’ll do that, whatever your father says: I’ve looked at things: I can afford to help. That doesn’t make me a fascist, does it?”

“No.”

“I know what it’s like to be skint in the city. You and Roxy, no matter her accent, or where her auntie lives, neither of you have a clue. You’ve had enough to eat, always, enough money to go on school trips and holidays and have new clothes. Dad has ideas about certain people being better than others, but.”

“He thinks he’s better than you”

“Yes, and I did too, for the longest time. Jason.”

“It’s the other way around, Mum. It’s the things you say, not your pronunciation. And what you say is kind, and what he says is... hateful.”

“When did you last see Dad?”

“Wednesday. He told me to show him some respect, and I told him I didn’t have any to show him, that if he wanted deference he should just go back to work, where everyone was paid to give him it.”

“You don’t pull your punches.”

“I do so. I didn’t hit him once.”

“It’s an expression, Jason.”

“I know, and I know what it means, and I mean what I say.” Was that swaggering bravado what he had hidden behind that fringe the whole time?
“Everyone's threatening to beat him up all of a sudden.”

“Maybe we can form a lynch mob.”

Judi doesn’t think now’s the time to mention that “everyone” is one man, to whom she, outside of her dreams, is no one.

“Don’t defend him Judi. I understand why you’re not here. I applaud it: I was there, remember, every time you lost a baby I lost... you, for a bit. I know why you’d want to get away: from him. I heard...” Jason pauses, “I’ve heard, sometimes, when you think I’m not in, the way he talks to you. And,” he pauses then says the next bit in a rush, “I heard him hit you, a lot, and you’d just...”

Jason’s voice is filled with a shaken mix of pity and revulsion, “take it.”

“Jason, wait, it’s not...” Judi stalls, how can she begin to explain all this to her son: she thought they’d been so careful.

“No, it doesn’t matter what you say: it’s never ok for a man to hit a woman.”

Unless the woman really wants him to, Judi nearly adds, as she has done in the past, at a liberal drinks party or two, assured of the right reception. Or as she claimed in earnest, to Marina, back when a slap in the face first made her feel truly special. But what does that have to do with now?

She tries to open her mouth to tell Jason that there could be all kinds of reasons for anyone to want to be hurt, or to hurt, to give their power away or to take someone else’s, for a while. That ok, those reasons are not all as healthy as the websites and books and magazines and conventions and pornography, created for the titillation and reassurance of people who like that sort of thing anyway, make out. But not everyone who can’t buy clothes-pegs without
blushing is damaged beyond repair, surely? Those who can only achieve orgasm tied and blindfolded and so thoroughly gagged they have literally no say in the matter might, if they were being honest, admit to some mild self-esteem issues. Judi certainly can’t bring herself to defend, or even to discuss, BDSM with her stepson.

Not when he has just called her “Mum” for the first time.

In any case, their kink has been a massive confidence trick. If a partner abuses your trust to the extent he has, aren’t they an abusive partner? Does the when and the where of it even matter? Who knows where Nelson is? What if the police come to her door and it’s necessary to defend Judi’s abduction of Hope? Could Judi claim she did it to protect her? That was at least part of the reason, probably. And might be useful that her son can testify to her father’s persistent domestic abuse.

“No. It’s never ok for anyone to hit anyone.” Judi concludes.

“You’re someone.” Jason says softly, reassuring her how worthwhile a human being she is in the sweetest way imaginable while she rats out on her ratty husband in a way so immoral she thinks Nelson might actually be impressed with her. Yuck.

“Me and your dad won’t get back together, Jay.”

“Really?”

Why is she telling him this now? As though he doesn’t have enough to deal with.

“Yeah. Really.”
She hears her stepson heave a sigh of relief. Extraordinary. Judi wonders if she has had anything right.

“I hope you mean that, Judi.”

Phones are awful those times when you can’t see what a face is doing. Jason is telling her how sorry he is to have stood by and “let it happen,” how ashamed it made him, how he “couldn’t even look at” her. Judi’s makes “shh” noises and tries to think how she can interrupt, put him right, admit that what he’s heard was consensual.

“Do you know what it’s like to go to school, be bullied here, and then come home and watch you get bullied there?” Jason shouts down the phone, she imagines his words bouncing around the school corridors, where the walls have ears that belong to guidance teachers.

“And did you ask if I wanted to stay with you? No, because I’m Dad’s son, isn’t it? Not yours so much.”

“You are mine, so much” she feels weirdly shy, unsure of what she can ask, “Just as much as you want to be, Jay. How’s Roxy?”

“Amazing. Amazing, and pretty bokey. The entire school are telling her the whole thing’s wrong. I’m meant to be in a Catholic School, right?”

“Your dad’s an atheist, I haven’t managed to make up my mind in my four decades on this Earth if there’s one god, lots or none, let alone whether they support Celtic or Rangers. You only went to the Catholic school so you could carry on your saxophone lessons, which you dropped at fourteen anyway, so…”

“Yeah, I dropped sax, and you never will drop that,”
“You were very gifted, Jason. You could have been on TV by now, that’s all a mother wants for her child. You’ll understand when you’re a parent, in a few months. That’s ridiculous, isn’t it? Shouldn’t be a granny in your only just forties: I’m young, still.”

“Sure, whatever.”

“Don’t whatever me. I’m your mother”

“When it suits you”

“It always suits me.”

“Point is, yeah? There’s a big statue of the blessed virgin in the corridor mum. There’s a school priest, and Roxy’s guidance teacher told her to get an abortion.”

“That’s,” Judi is thinking that’s generally reassuring about the school, but shuts herself up. “That’s… got to be tricky.”

“Come back. Roxy’s going mad. The best mothering model she has is Andrea, stressing her out trying to be perfect at pointless things.”

“She’s really good at all that stuff.”

“I want Roxy to know that she doesn’t have to be good at all that stuff, that she can be more, uh”

“Inept? Like me?”

“Yeah, and it’s all ok. Andrea’s making her do baby yoga and walk around the block with tiny pink weights.”

“I’ll be around a lot more, soon. I promise.” Judi says, unless I’m prison, which I probably will be, she adds, silently.
Jason lists the various attempts he has made, in the last few days to contact his father, by phone, by email and by knocking on the door of his own family home, his keys of which Nelson confiscated during their fight.

“Where do you think he is, Judi?”

Judi again. That’s fine. She can be both. That’s ideal, actually.

“No idea.” Judi says. “And if he’s not there, who’s feeding Bingley? I’ll come back tomorrow with my keys. We can have lunch, and look about flats, think about money and stuff, and I’ll take the cat to the cottage, ok.”

“Wow that’s… Cottage? You’re living in a cottage?”

Ugh. Ok, here goes. “In the house I grew up in. You can come see everything that’s been going on for yourself soon enough, I just didn’t want…”

“Me to know where you were? In case I told Dad?”

“Yeah, Sorry.”

“I understand.”

Poor Jason, bravely taking on the chin the fact that she walked out of the family home with little or no explanation, the fact that he now believes his father to be the sort of man that beats women, which he is, of course, but not her, like that, so… Sod it, she feels shitty enough already.

“Look, I’m going to transfer you some money right now: go get Roxy and take her shopping for some nice maternity clothes, and buy yourself some new sneakers on something, and go eat dinner somewhere fancy, ok?”


“Thank your granny when you see her, it’s her money.” Judi says, once she’s sure Jason’s hung up. One thing at a time.
Judi calls Nelson’s mobile from her old phone: no answer. She calls the landline, imagining it ringing out to an empty house, Bingley frantically weaving himself around the telephone stand, half-starved and choking on a tangle of spiralling telephone cord. But at least two other families on the street have a soft spot for Bingley and he’s not above begging.

"Judi, thank God." Says Stacey, when she phones Lotus Garden

“I have a few missed calls, Stacey.”

“Oh yeah: missed calls about our missing person, no doubt?”

“Huh?” Judi says, light and vague, rigid with terror.

“Don’t get me wrong Mrs Urquhart: we’re missing you too, more, obvs.”

Judi does not miss Stacey and her grating ‘abbreviays’ one bit.

“ Heard from your hubby?” she asks, denoting the sensitivity of the question by pitching of her like a fork skidding across porcelain tableware.

“I haven’t. Is there a problem?”

“Apart at the seams is one way of putting it, Judi. Mr Urquhart didn’t show up to unalarm, hasn’t been contactable, you weren’t contactable, we called, left messages, everything: just couldn’t get in contact!”

“Right.” Says Judi. Not at home is one thing, but not at work?

“They had to disable the whole system, and when Mr Bruno turned up.”

“Bruno Souter?”

“Yeah: nice inny? All posh, and made Andy temporary manager.”

“Andy the nurse?’ Judi asks, just to make some noise, really,
“Black Andy, yeah.” Stacey says, “and if they don’t hear from Mr Urquhart, or yourself, I suppose, in a couple of hours, they’ll need to get an engineer out to reset the whole system: and whenever he gets back to the centre his code won’t even open the door.

“Oh God, I’ll come in now.”

“You could, thing is, you’ve technically resigned, isn’t it? So legally you sort of can’t?” Stacey is doing her usual trick of saying everything like a question, but it is absolutely a command.

“Thing is, since you’ve been gone, there’s been well... not a coo, because it’s not the military, is it? But noone’s very happy about Bryony getting sacked, because you know me, Judi, I’m with you, hate the bitch: But maybe it wasn’t fair to blame her, you know? And, thing is, this “spa” thing of yours... you’re kind and useful, you don’t sit about in Jacuzzis, do you?”

“It’s not that simple” Judi finds herself saying, for the second time that day.

“We all miss you lots Judi, but what’s going on, that’s the thing? He’s been sacking anyone off that got close to the truth, isn’t it? Because my Vikki goes to school with your Jason, so, we know he’s thrown you out the house too, Darlin’. We know. Mr Souter told us about the funny business.”

“I don’t know...”

“Oh, you don’t know a thing about it, I’m sure,” says Stacey, who isn’t. “But it’s a bit dodgy, fake research, and you know, it jeopardises things, Mr Souter says.”

“Jeopardises? What things?”
“Mr Urquhart could lose his licence, thing is. So, they've put in their notice.”

“Who has?”

“Care team: I mean ninety percent of them, because Mr Souter says…”

“Mr Souter the silent partner?”

“Well no, he's not silent, see: he's talking about... wants Lotus Gardens to join his “care portfolio.” He owns a lot of these places, and there's brochures for staff, lots of benefits. Looks lovely basically, and he'll keep us all on, he says.”

“Bruno Souter owns a chain of private hospitals?”

“Yeah, but less of the anklebiters, more the sort of girls in The Winehouse, type of thing. Thing is, what with all the doctors and nurses unavailable, what with them all happening to hand in their immediate notice, and the security system down, Mr Souter figured we needed to call the families and let them know how technically we were running without a manager, an effective security system or the minimum staff requirement to meet the patient’s needs?

“They're leaving?”

“They've left, or most of them. It's been a very busy day, paperwork wise, for me, put it that way.

“How many patients have been discharged?”

“More than half? You’ve been away less than a month and it's all fallen apart. Serves him right.”

“And Nelson knows this?”

“If he checks his email, Judi, I reckon he must do, or his phone messages.”
“And still nothing?”

“We haven’t heard a peep. Oh and Wendy was asking after you. She must have still been on the families mailing list from when Brian was here?”

“You sent out details of this to everyone on the mailing list?”

“Well it’s the law, Mr Souter said, so, yeah, is the thing.”

“Oh God, Nelson’ll be ruined.”

“I think he already is? So Wendy came because apparently she’s Hope’s next of kin, so I said how she already has her, according to the paperwork. She says no.”

“What?”

“I know, right? I’m like: are you sure? And she’s all: I think I’d notice if she was living with me. I was like, wow, ok. So, I went to get her transfer record, but the thing is, there’s no transfer record. Odd right? So that’s still, where’s Hope? Who took her?”

“Where’s Wendy now?”

“She’s coming back tomorrow. Wants answers or she’s going to go to the police. Pretty dramatic, basically.”

“How come you’re still there?”

“I wouldn’t miss this for the world, this is about the most interesting day of my life. Just think: lotus gardens, affordable celebrity-style rehab, “total abstinence:” It won’t matter about losing the drugs licence.”

”Judi has a mad urge to get into the car and go there and try to sort things out, but what could or do? What has been done to Nelson is sneaky and manipulative, but then he’s a manipulative sneak himself, with a bad habit of
underestimating people: he’s been outmanoeuvred, and by someone he was so sure was an idiot. This, Judi thinks, will be absolutely killing him right now.

“What time is Wendy coming back tomorrow?”

“I made her an appointment to see Mr Urquhart at two,” Stacey laughs, “whatever good that does her.”

“Ok, well. I’ll deal with Wendy. You make an extra special effort to find those transfer details, please? They have to be somewhere, and I’ll come sort things out.”

“Aww, thanks Judi. Appreciate it.”

“It’s the least I can do.” Judi says, feeling terrible for making someone make an “extra special effort” to find something she knows doesn't exist, and wondering what on Earth she can do to “sort things out.”

Judi chops and blends and whisks to the radio, missing the days where it was Hope’s wailings she was keeping from the anonymous workies, now that it is her wailings she’s keeping from Hope, a woman she loves and is doing atrocious things to.
"Just go. Please? Go away?" However misplaced and over-ambitious her longing for him, the thought of braving it out, laughing with him at her ‘silly misunderstanding,’ makes her fume. Hamish looks wretched: well, good.

“I’m so, so sorry about last night, Judi.” He says, contrite and sensitive and shamefaced and she could slap him for it.

“Of course you’re sorry, obviously you are: I make you, literally, sick.”

“That’s…” He hangs his head, but he can’t dispute it. “Please. Don’t,”

“What: mind? You’re such a mouse.” She sees his shame, and it’s so awful to make him feel it, but her wrath is so massive.

“Why couldn’t you just tell me?”

“I tried to.” Ugh, the meekness, awful to see.

“Right. Well, for future purposes, your sensitive rejection sounds -a lot, actually- as though you really quite like that person,”


“Just not in that way, eh? I had no idea you and Nell were seeing each other.”

“Seeing each... No, Judi. I thought you knew, Nell and me ...”

“Save it. I saw you earlier, Hamish: throwing her all about the place: I mean: she’s beautiful, why wouldn’t you?”

“There’s a very good reason why I wouldn’t”

“The age thing? Well it didn’t stop you did it? Look, its ok, I get it. You’re just leaving a marriage: you’re a very attractive man, still...” Judi looks at his
“Dying of embarrassment?”

“May I join you?

“Sure. You like food?”

“Guilty as charged”

“Great: I made a bunch of it.”
Judi wears her big cardigan with pockets, so she can keep her phone on one side and her car keys on the other, ready for whatever’s coming next. “Shoot,” she says to the mirror, feeling a bit pistols at dawn-y. “Shoot” she says into the phone, not even bothering to check who’s called first. Whoever it is, she can take it.

“Judi?”

“Nell.” Judi says in the most neutral way she can manage.

“I’m sorry about earlier.”

“What have I ever done to you?”

“It’s what you might do to Hamish.”

“Kiss him, is that so terrible?”

“I saw you Judi: you’re meant to be pregnant.” Oh no: Nell must have somehow got sight of her without the belly on, but when?

“I thought I’d been so careful.” It’s almost a relief to be caught, is what Judi feels. Suddenly exhausted, glad this difficult game is over, that she doesn’t have to play anymore. The next time she wears handcuffs will be very different from previously, but perhaps just as relaxing, just as safe feeling, to surrender. Fine.

Will Nell call the police? Judi is about to ask her but then realises, impersonating a pregnant lady, in and of itself, is not a crime. How much does she know?

“The last thing Hamish needs,” Nell says “is another alcoholic.”
“Alcoholic?” Judi doesn’t follow.

“I saw you. I left my scarf and gloves in your house, and when I came back to get them, you didn’t answer.”

“I had headphones on.”

“I know, I saw you Judi. I was waving at the window, trying to get your attention, watching you swill cava from the bottle! A pregnant woman!”

“You stood outside the window that whole time?”

“Long enough to see you pour the last third of the bottle down your throat. Judi, Hamish has been messed around enough.”

“Have you spoken to him about this?”

“No. I couldn’t bring myself to. He likes you so much. Doing that stupid garden together: I’ve heard it all. To think I was actually trying to set you up! You need to tell him you have a problem yourself, Judi, let him make an informed decision.”

Judi doesn’t know what to say. She lied. It’s true. She does have a problem: A different problem. She has lied: a bigger lie. She really doesn’t want to get into any of that with Nell.

“Right. An informed decision.” Judi tries to imagine what happens when Hamish comes back, in an hour or two, and Judi sits them down and tells him she is an alcoholic. Nell’s right, he’s had enough of that. If she really likes this person, Judi realises, she needs to help him stay away from her. Maybe this is the one thing that can do that. Can she do that?

“Promise you’ll talk to him about this?”
“Yes. I promise,” says Judi, who has no idea what she’ll say, but absolutely no desire, in any case, to talk to Nell about it anymore.

How ruined is Nelson? I mean, ruined, obviously, but, going to jail ruined, or where if he just slopes off quietly he’ll be alright? Will he take her down with him? Well, Judi is glad she made a lot of food now: it’s good to eat well at what may be your last supper.
Sleet batters the windows hard, rain beats down relentlessly. To venture the footpaths turned rivulets through the dark of these woods tonight, buffeted by howling wind... no-one could blame him for staying away. But he is at her door, rain dripping from his waxed jacket, and gleefully she wraps her arms around him, pulls him into the house, soaking the front of her dress as she presses against him. She takes his coat, and wellies to dry, ruffles his hair with a towel, lends him her largest pair of socks, which are fluffy and pink and purple striped. He is delighted with them: “Cheshire cat feet” he says, and they both wear matching smiles. As long as Hope is there, safe in bed, everything seems possible. Judi plays a game of house, this evening a stolen slice from an impossible shared future.

Watching Hamish eat her food, being paid in praise and stories, she can see how this simple daily exchange could be enough to sustain many years of love, how home is a plateful of something comforting and familiar, much more than it is a bed. When, a couple of times, Hamish says “I’ll have to take you girls to” or “we’ll watch the” or “I’ll show you,” Judi feels sadness encroaching. But mostly, in those moments, if she can focus on his face, it brings her back to the perfect present. All that may happen soon, or has happened already, is on the other side of this sweet little bubble.

Judi comes back from checking on Hope, and finds Haimish’s face unambiguously close to hers, leaning in. Judi takes both his hands in hers, giggling with the unfamiliar fission of control, pins them by the wall above his
head and kisses him, for a very long time. He tastes of wine and weightlessness. But his hands creep from underneath hers.

"Please Hamish, no."

Her massive plastic lie is between them, no way around it.

Hamish follows her gaze, “Don’t be embarrassed by your bump: It’s a brilliant, beautiful thing.” He tries to touch her stomach reassuringly, and her hand leaps out to push him away. She looks up, at his shock and rejection, how can she explain?

“I just... I think given everything else that’s going on, friendship is all we can reasonably hope for;” she says, hating herself and the words.

“Since when has hope been reasonable?”

“Oh, more and more lately,” says Judi, smiling towards the door where Hope sleeps. “I’ve given up on the idea of a romantic relationship: I just can’t see how to make it work.”

“I don’t think that’s true. I think you should have one with me.” Hamish smiles, his determined terrier optimism bouncing back, ball in mouth, dropping it at her feet.

She closes her eyes to better feel the pleasure of the moment and his words. So good, his hand on her lap and she has to prize it from her, push him away.

“I don’t see it working.”

“I know that’s not true. I’ve seen the big picture, Judi.”

Judi looks at him blankly. Yuk, another man with “vision.” As soon as she hears the rhetoric of cosmic ordering in Hamish’s mouth she realises why he so
hated it in hers. It is wishful thinking, plus entitlement, and neither are specialist skills. If you believe, before you start to “follow your dreams” that you are guaranteed to succeed then perhaps you’re surely more likely to see opportunities: if you believe failure is impossible you’ll take greater risks. If you believe success is your birthright then you’ll go after what you want with confidence. Fine, but Judi knows the secret to The Secret. People are impressionable, not just people like her who buy, read and internalise self-help books, but those they encounter. Con-artistry is only a valid career for so long as it is a specialist one: the fraudster relies, ironically, on the fact that most people are not shysters, and so largely, as a society, we can afford to be trustful. What a boon if you actually believe your own hype.

Entitlement: why the success Nelson felt he “deserved” outweighed the importance of accurate research, or truth; why people are raped- because the predator sets the value of what they want to do to the body they are preying on over the right of their target to choose.

She’s spent the last few months working hard to convince herself that believing in something hard enough will make it so, but she doesn’t want Hamish to believe this thing, she realises, because he is better than that.

“I saw it, Judi,” he says, taking her hand.

She’s gone from wondering how she’ll ever leave his side to feeling a burning urge to run.

“I saw the picture you painted, of you, me, the baby. Nell, saw it hanging at some guys room in the centre, couldn’t get over how much it looked like me. By this time everyone was talking about the Judi she’d heard about, so. I came.
She took me to see and there you were. We were. You dialled me up like a cosmic pizza, just like you said, you’re right. Here I am. All yours.” He reaches out to scoop her waist to him.

“Hamish. No!”

“What are you afraid of?”

“I’m an alcoholic.” She screams, panicking. Shoving him away again.

“No” Hamish he looks hurt and confused. He frowns, his lip petted like a rejected child, “No, you’re not.”

“Ask Nell. I drank a whole bottle of wine the other night. A pregnant woman! She saw me. I just... couldn’t help myself.” There is no way for things to be fine now. “Go ask her now.” Judi weeps. “She saw me and she, made me promise to tell you.”

“Well...” Hamish sighs the sort of sigh you hear about coming from corpses a minute or two after death: the body emptying itself, past the point of return. He puts a hand on her shoulder: “Obviously I have a type.”

What has she done? Judi loses it then, a snotty, howling mess: today has been relentless, and Nell has furnished her with the one thing that’s guaranteed to send this lovely man away. And now he will go.

“Judi. You have such a powerful reason to stop.” Judi has drawn her knees up to her belly as far as they’ll go, but his hand on her back is so welcome. “And honestly, admitting your problem. That is the first, the biggest step, and you’ve just taken it. You can do this. Let me help you.”

“You would stay, knowing this?”
“Yes, and help you with the baby, and with your mum too. If you’ll let me.”

“You’ve not even divorced the last alcoholic: you want another one?”

“You’ve told me the truth.” He says, his voice determined, but seeming to come from far away, crossing his objections back to her through sheer effort of will. “Lying is like hiding in the dark, bringing things to light is, painful. I’m impressed. Not thrilled,” he laughs nervously and checks her face, “but proud you decided I was worth being honest with.”

Judi collapses into herself, her body a clenched fist, screeching heat and pain.

“I want you. I’m in love with you.” Hamish says to the howling animal. “Look at me?” He is trying to dismantles the tight ball of limbs she has become.

“Hello?” He knocks on the crown of her head like a front door, “look at me. What’s going on? That should be a nice thing.”

“If you knew me,” she spits, “what I’d done, you’d run a mile, you wouldn’t want anything to do with me.”

“I know enough to know I want to spend the rest of my life with you, whatever you tell me.” He says, and she’s mad. Because he doesn’t know that, because he doesn’t know. Because life is not a romantic novel, where someone loves you for your quirky ineptitude, and Judi is not in any case quirky or inept, she’s a monster. Crying louder now, a tantrum, she supposes, really, his hand on her shoulder feels, impossible, stifling. He is offering her something she wants but cannot take.
“Stop it, just stop it: stop being so bloody perfect: it just makes it harder.”

“Why should be hard? You’re good Judi, you’re kind, you’re honest: everything else will fall into place.”

“You want to bet?” Judi says,

“Yeah. I do. I think you’re a good bet.”

In the white noise of the water and the steam, Judi tries to order things in her mind. To go downstairs and tell him this, she realises, is to do something she has not done once in her adult life. Tell the truth. All of it. Her lungs expand in the fragrant steam, she is coming clean.

Judi pads downstairs barefoot, her hair wrapped in a thick towel, swaddled in her dressing gown, the long silk nightdress she bought on a whim beneath it cool against her heat-scorched skin, She might be at a spa after all.

She starts with Cauldhame, right up to where she was when her father died. Hamish holds her hand and makes her cups of tea, and as the storm whistles down the chimney, says “shhh,” so the calming static of it crashes over her and she can tell the next bit.

“It wasn’t your fault, Judi”

“He died alone.”

“We all do that.”

She tells him about meeting Nelson and the odd shape of their relationship. He frowns, hearing how she has lived.

“How do you need things to be that way?”

“I need them not to be now, I think.”
“I won’t, don’t want ever, to control you.”

“Don’t talk about what you will or won’t do, Hamish, until you know who it is you’re speaking to.” She feels powerful and horrific.

“There’s nothing you can tell me to change how I feel.”

"Wait.” It goes on. Rebecca: what Judi thought of that woman, and what she now suspects was the truth of it.

“That’s an awful big stone to cast, Judi, what makes you so sure?”

“Wait.” He nods, but frowning. He knows what it’s like to be falsely accused of sexual harassment.

He holds her, and he cries, when she talks about the miscarriages. She thinks how Nelson never once cried, not once, over the children that died inside her. She thought that was because he was strong, but now she thinks to sit with someone’s pain and truly empathise, that feels, Hamish feels, strong. Talking about it now, Nelson’s lack of feeling seems just that: a lack, a deficiency, a weakness.

“I killed them. My body, it...”

“Were you drinking then? Was that a part of it?” He says very softly, and with careful neutrality, Judi thinks, all things considered.

“I didn’t drink even caffeine after the first.”

“But were you drinking?” Hamish isn’t up for the prattle.

Fat tears run down her cheeks, “the first time, people said a glass is fine, all the French women do it, and I thought, ok then.” She wails. “But is wasn’t ok.”

“Just a glass is easier said than done, eh?”
Again, she is amazed at the empathy of this man, holding her hand and trying to understand how difficult it might have been for her to avoid poisoning her child.

“No, that was all I ever had. One glass, some nights, and when I lost the baby,” Judi hears her voice start to go again, “Nelson brought me a new set of wine glasses, because “at least you can have a drink again,” and he swears he didn't mean it nastily, but I threw one at him.”

“I think, I can see why that wasn’t a useful gift” Hamish says with gentle diplomacy. And the others? Do you think drinking was a factor in the later pregnancies?”

Judi shakes her head: “I didn't have one drink pregnant, not once, not ever.”

Hamish frowns. “You need to tell the whole truth Judi.”

“I didn’t drink once”

“Until now.” He reminds her.

Still not ready to come to the meat of things nods, defeated.

“It sounds like you’re drinking emotionally, Judi. It has to stop, but I don’t think you’re an alcoholic”

“No. I’m not. I’m something much worse, Hamish.”

“Nothing you’ve told me makes you a bad person. In absolute honesty the whips and chains stuff…”

“Is creepy and disgusting?”

“Is,” Hamish suddenly can’t meet her eye. “Intimidating: because I couldn’t do that, and if you need it to be happy.”
“Shoosh. Keep listening. You won’t be worried about how to make me happy, you’ll only be concerned over how fast you can get away.”

Judi tells Hamish about her suspicions: that Nelson was having an affair, the daily drudge of their lives. She tells him about her mother trying to get in touch after Peter’s death, wanting a place in her life again, and Judi saying no.

“It’s understandable that you were mad, Judi, but you came through for her in the end, look at this lovely life you’ve made for the pair of you.”

“Hamish, stop trying to make everything reasonable and acceptable, and just listen, we’re nearly there.”

She tells him about The Secret, and how it’d changed her way of thinking about things. She is aware that she’s drawing out the moment at hand, when he will certainly leave her.

“I thought you were joking about that”

“At first, it was sort of a joke, or more, a dare to myself, but then I became, obsessed, I suppose you’d say. She tells him about her mum dying and being left the money, and never having helped her.

“Judi, your mum’s next door....”

“That woman is not my mother.”

Hamish opens his mouth to say something, and then stops, he knows better than to interrupt, but the set of his mouth suggests that he is finding all this a little unlikely, a little dramatic. Judi agrees: it is the unlikely dramatic truth.

She stands up shakily and lets the dressing gown fall from her shoulders and drop, slipping easily over the midnight-blue satin to the floor. Hamish looks at her, perplexed, not having spotted what’s missing. Men, Judi thinks, can be
quite stupid, especially when an unfamiliar body is stripping for them. She takes
the thin spaghetti shoulder straps off the new dress, one then the other, and
tugs them so they rip. The shift falls, weightlessly, from her body, over her
stomach, flat but for the usual soft curves.

"You’re not?"

“She is.”

"Your mum?"

"My mum died five weeks ago. You’re the first person I’ve told that to,
actually. "Judi’s vice is shaking and so is she, but to stand naked before him,
exposed and uncovered, to watch him watch her, it feels necessary.

“On mushroom night, while you were,“

“Ruining my career,” he quips.

Judi smiles, amazed that he is joking now. “We both did that, but no
before.”

“When you became a literary-crit heckler?”

“Around then,” She blushes at the memory" I was…”

“Tripping, I believe the youth call it.”

Judi sits down next to him, eyes meeting his in urgency, maybe he can
understand this. “I thought the universe, or even: Hamish, I thought God was
talking to me. It was…” Judi rolls her eyes at herself “amazing.”

“Yeah, funny how Christians are so down on drug abuse when God talks
most frequently to people on drugs.”

“I think, if you knew what was going on, if you didn’t think you were
going insane, that stuff might be, brilliant. But I thought... divine intervention or
madness. I had a,” she stops to correct herself, “it felt like I had a revelation, that Hope was pregnant, that Nelson had,” she winces and he pulls her down beside him, smoothes her hair, “Oh Judi...”
Whatever the justifications were, there are none now. No little signs, no path clearly lit, cosmically ordained. Judi leans against his soft chest, feels the thick wiriness of its hair through the soft cotton of the shirt, and softly strokes it. His arms circle her waist, and she feels the sweetness of that. How long he will stay here with her. Minutes, hours? How long is polite?

She pushes away all thoughts of an end to this time, listening instead to his heartbeat in his chest, feeling the rise and fall of his breathing, sharing an exhausted, but somehow easy silence.

"We have to go to the police," Hamish’s words resonate in his chest, buzz against her jaw, she smiles, too caught up in the sensation of hearing his voice from there, the closeness of it, to really worry what it might be saying. “We must go to the police in the morning, Judi.”

“Ok,” she says, noticing her indifference. What she feels is relief, safety. But he’s not telling her what to do, more pointing out an obvious thing she has failed to see.

She nods. “In the morning,” mindlessly parroting the words; hearing them then, really, for the first time. “We” will, “in the morning” it dawns on her that there will still be a “we” with the dawn, he will still be here. She stares, wondering at him.

"Its... a lot” she says, meaning his presence, her catalogue of atrocity.

“I don’t know what I’d have done either. But that’s what has to happen, Judi.”
Judi snuggles into him, suddenly aware of the nakedness of her body, the lateness of the night, his arms around her, a hand resting on her waist, stroking her belly, the chill of the air and the warmth of the fire. She looks up at Hamish, who is still here.

“You look quite lovely naked.”

“Really?” Judi chuckles, looking down at herself in the flickering glow. She feels slender next to him, and empty of deceit, and oddly unconcerned with her own nudity.

“Really!”

“So your biggest drinking problem was Nell catching you at it?”

“I probably do drink too much sometimes” Judi says, because she wants to be absolutely honest with this man now.

“Do you think you might make now one of these times?”

“We could take a bottle of whiskey to bed with us?”

“I think that might be useful.”

Judi drags herself out of bed after three hours, gets herself and Hope washed and dressed. Is Hope’s little bump really more noticeable, as much more there than it seemed yesterday, today? Judi supposes that doesn’t matter now. She installs Hope in front of the television, wondering what’s next for this lady, and how on Earth she will face Wendy.

Judi goes back into the rosy room, to find that Hamish has kicked the covers from his body in his sleep, and lies flat on his back, absolutely, wonderfully naked. She puts down the tray and creeps to the dressing room table, revelling in the luxury of watching him uninterrupted. The narrow strip of
morning light from the crack in the curtains falls across him, casting a thick bright stripe from his shoulder to belly like a mayoral sash sewn in bright light. She watches the silhouette of his chest rise and fall, the ceaseless regularity of this warm machine who lives and lives and lives, for now, and she flushes with pleasure. At one point his fingers, which must still smell and taste of her, curve around the memory of her breasts, his cock tremors minutely in perfect time with the movement in his fingertips, the ghost of their kisses play on his lips between soft smiles. Soon he will wake, and everything will be difficult. The ugly truth of her life will sit between them in the sober day. This fierce longing, that he may still see someone in her who is redeemable, and worthy of redemption, it feels like a fairy story next to the real life crime drama of what she has done. So, she puts all that away and curls back up by his side.

Later, he brings juice and coffee to bed for them both, not the “thought that counts” but the quiet, solid evidence of it. It’s hard to feel less than loved when someone presents you with something nice on a tray. Judi drinks juice and wiggles her toes contentedly.

“What will happen to me?”
“I don’t know, Judi.”
“I can’t go to prison today, I need to meet my son for lunch.”

As Hamish dresses, Judi pours over a laptop, trying to figure out what kind of sentence her crime might carry. The closest thing she can find is “fetal abduction” A woman fakes a pregnancy, “befriends” a genuinely pregnant woman, and then cuts the baby out of her and takes it for her own, often leaving
the mother dead. Reading down the list of sentences, Judi is struck by the brutality of the perpetrators, and by the resilience of the newborns, one baby surviving “unscathed” from a caesarean performed by a nineteen year old, with her car keys. Surely Judi is no Tiffany Hall, who left the body of the mother whose baby she stole in the washing machine? Judi hasn’t killed Hope. Wouldn’t have killed Hope, unless facilitating birth in the frail body of a woman unable to comprehend, let alone consent to such a thing happening to them, and then that woman not surviving, is killing? Had Judi ever stopped seriously to consider how wrongly things might have gone? What Hope would have understood of the birth, or what she will.

Judi has no idea what will happen to the baby now. Is she too pregnant for an abortion? Will they give her an abortion? Who are “they,” now, for Hope? What will she say when the police ask her what she would have done when it came to the birth? What will she tell them? That she was doing her best? That she was making it up as she went along, that she had had faith something would come to her?

Judi tries looking up “abduction,” and it doesn’t make her feel much better. Most people abduct people for awful reasons: they keep them in a shed for eleven years, or manipulate them into believing them to be their dead mother and then live with them as such, indefinitely? Oh.

“Am I evil, or am I mad?” Judi asks Hamish when he comes back down the stairs. “I used to really hope I wasn’t mad, but now I think I’d quite like to be mental, if the alternative is that I’m,” her eyes scan back to the newspaper report in front of her “profoundly immoral.”
“I don’t know what will happen Judi.”

“I’m going to get a life sentence, that’s what. That’s what you get for kidnap.”

“You had good intentions.”

“Did I? No one’s going to say No harm done, never mind, are they? Search “bungled kidnap” on the internet. Life in prison, that’s what it says here: and mine wasn’t bungled, was it?”

“Judi, you have to put this right.”

“What’s right? An abortion for Hope, and back to God knows what place where nobody knows or cares about her? Some love story, eh, us: finally getting it together for one night, and then I go to prison until we both die, and we can see each other on either side of a bit of plate glass until you get bored of that? Sounds brilliant!”

“Why can’t Hope go back to the hospital, Judi”

In the busyness of last night’s confessions, and the welcome distraction of what came next, Judi had sort of forgotten about the imminent collapse of Lotus Gardens, and Nelson’s career. “I’m meant to be meeting Wendy to explain to her why according to our patient release forms, she removed Hope from Lotus Gardens several weeks ago.” Judi concludes her explanation.

“I think,” Hamish says, “it’s best if we bring Wendy here to see how Hope’s doing, and maybe we can decide together, from there, what’s best.”

“So, going to the police this morning doesn’t have to be this morning, then?”
Hamish shrugs. “It’s already ten to twelve, and I hadn’t really considered the fact that you might be incarcerated immediately.”

“I thought you said the truth was going to set me free, Hamish.”

“That doesn’t really seem very likely, on closer examination.”
The trouble with the truth setting you free is that some people just really don’t want to hear it. Truth is a shaky and frail, it needs somewhere safe to survive. For a gay woman in Russia or Africa, Judi knows, the truth has unbearable consequences. Andrea’s last few weeks may have titillated the bored housewives of Shawlands like a racier Maeve Binchy novel, but the broader social response to Andrea’s love life was indifference, as it should have been. Glasgow may be a touch rough around the edges, but the intolerant themselves are the most glaring minority, these days. When the Scottish Defence League – usually fifty or so brave bigots- try marching anywhere they’re immediately swamped with hundreds of anti-fascist counter-campaigners.

Increasingly, the intolerant are beached by the changing tide. Bigots are not always even able to find kindred spirits within their religious institutions anymore, with proud mums cooing in the isles over the civil partnership photos of handsome sons. Opinions which seemed statements of fact so recently, shored up in sanctified stone, have had all the solidity pulled from them. Truth changes. Our English Prime Minister, who rules over us as part of the Conservative government the people of Scotland did not vote for, and gets ultimate veto over who the head of the church will be, compares the way his own faith “comes and goes” to a weak radio signal.

Whether you’re a homophobe or a Islamophobe or any other person with the unshakable belief that your deep-seated unhappiness is the fault of someone else, traditionalists are nervously aware that their perception of the world has
become distasteful and ludicrous, somehow. Poor old rightists, you might think, an endangered species, then you might remember that that minority, when they are the majority, do worse than throw an uncharitable look.

This is the sort of thing that Judi and Hamish talk about over lunch, to remind themselves that they are on the same team, that they are “good people” with a shared moral code. And it helps. Truth is subjective, my word against yours, my guess as good as any. Truth is the great unknown. Even true love is a truth that changes. In 2010, Scotland had almost exactly the same number of marriages as divorces: a one in, one out policy, fifty-fifty then, whether it’s till death, or till the divorce court: truth changes.

Say Wendy had turned up yesterday and found Hope still there, and Hope agreed that she wanted to go with her, who would have hesitated to make that placement in those circumstances? The one piece of paperwork that says otherwise is in a blue manila folder on the second shelf of Nelson’s office. As disappearing acts go, it’s hardly Houdini stuff. The care commission would do a home check or two before making the move permanent, but it’s unlikely that they’d find any problems: Wendy’s a nice lady, nice ladies like that don’t do bad things, do they?

If Wendy were to hear all this from another source, it might be upsetting.

“Where truth is concerned, perhaps seeing is believing,”

“And maybe if she came here and saw it for herself?” They plot and plan, almost as an aside of some larger, entirely philosophical, conversation they are having.
They agree that Judi will go meet Wendy at two, and drive her to see Hope explaining the reality of the situation as gently as possible in the car on the way, making it clear that she is welcome to call the police at any time she wishes, that Judi will not resist arrest, but also letting Wendy know what the likely consequences of that would be.

Explaining that, if they want to they can easily forge all the relevant paperwork, and in the confusion of what’s happening at Lotus Gardens it feels very unlikely that anyone will pay close attention.

In a roundabout way the baby is discussed “it might be my last chance to have a child...” Judi pauses, and says, bravely she thinks, “yours too.”

“No, not ours.” He roots for a gentle way forward, “and that is not a child yet.” The words sting. Hamish can be cold in a way Judi cannot. “But that foetus is concrete, growing evidence that Nelson abused Hope, and that is a truth I think we do have to share. Why shouldn’t he be brought to account for that? If Hope were somewhere safe, where getting her professional medical help wasn’t a problem, that could happen: that should happen, Judi.”

“Why should my crime be covered up and his exposed? Who are we to decide?”

Judi drives to Lanark Street, to meet Jason and pick up the cat as arranged. Except Bingley isn’t there. Nelson clearly hasn’t been for days, and the ginger tom has probably found someone else to feed him for now.

“Do you think he’ll come back?”
Judi feels terrible for this young man, a child really, on the brink of fatherhood, and rejected by his father, abandoned by them both. Then she realises it is Bingley’s bowl he is looking at wainfully: the cat whose abandonment he fears, not Nelson’s.

“I’m sure, if you start keeping his bowl full again, and generally slouch around the house until it feels lived in, he’ll come back. I’m sure he’s really missing you too.” Judi chucks Jason the keys, before she changes her mind.

“I’m giving you these, ok? This is your family home, raise your family in it, Jason. I’d maybe use some of that money I sent you the other day to get the Yale lock at the front and back changed, and get a set for Roxy too. The mortgage is paid, but you still need to pay repairs and bills and council tax... oh, unless you’re both students, which would be ideal, wouldn’t it?”

Jason stares at Judi blankly

“I’m giving you this house to live in, and for God’s sake paint it some cheery colours, and throw almost everything in your room out, and... she grabs him and hugs him very hard, trying to impart in the firmness of her arms, how very proud of him she is, how much she loves Roxy, all the sort of stuff that if she says it out loud she’ll start crying and he’ll ask too many questions.

“What about Dad?”

“I don’t think he’ll be coming back, but you should probably change the locks to be on the safe side.”

"Mum?"

Her heart swells. “Think of it as an early inheritance, no sense waiting around till we’re dead, that might be ages.”
“Look, the truth is, you can get it wrong many times over. Know that. You can build the life of your dreams, mess it up completely, bail out and make yourselves a new one, and that isn’t even failure: that’s smart.”

“What’s happened to you?”

“Not enough, and then too much all at once.”

“We’re never happy, are we?” Jason laughs.

Judi gives him another squeeze: “I dunno.” She turns them to face their reflection in the big plate glass windows of Lanark Street, “we look pretty chipper right now.

Hamish is on his way to get Marina. Judi can’t bring herself to think of Marina’s reaction when Hamish turns up instead of her, or when he sits down and tells her what it is that they want her to do.
Wendy is waiting in reception for Judi when she arrives. So is Stacey, who is chewing gum in a way Hope would find especially abhorrent.

"Did you find the relevant paperwork, Stacey?"

Stacy smirks, “Nothing any different from what I said earlier, I’ve been telling her, I said: it’s just chaos around here!”

“Mrs Krue r is a valued customer of ours, and as a member of our secretarial team unable to find a patient’s release form, you better hope that she doesn’t decide to file a criminal negligence suit against us on Mrs Dalloway’s behalf, because you would most certainly be implicated in that.”

“Oh ... I wouldn’t have the first idea what was meant to be in those things, let alone what was and wasn’t there, it’s all so... confusing”

“Did you hear that, Stacey? Can you please bring us a complete blank set of the official release papers, and papers for temporary release too, so that I can show Mrs Krue r exactly what should be here, and she can make her own decisions about how she wishes to proceed.”

Stacy swallows, nods, and then makes her way, with a thin smile, to the blue manila folder. That was easy.

"Wendy." Judi says in a low voice. “I transferred Hope myself, to a care home about half an hour’s drive from here. There are good reasons, which I can’t discuss in this building, why I didn’t want just anybody knowing where she was. They are the reasons I resigned. Will you let me drive you to her now? I think she’d be very happy to see you.”
Wendy is the antidote to Judi’s terror and drama. Judi was expecting the unreasonable hysterical Stacey had described on the phone, but now she realises that whatever frustration Wendy exhibited was the frustration of talking to Stacey.

Judi takes the thick wad of papers, checks through to see everything’s there. “Thank you so much for your help Stacey. You’re a lifesaver.”

“I have to be back for Alan by six. Is that ok?”

“Sure,” says Judi, turning them onto the bypass. “It’s ten past two, so, we’ll be back before three, a couple of hours, then we’ll get you home. Maybe we can arrange longer visit sometime soon?”

“Sounds good!” Wendy says, cheery and trusting, getting into a car with a good friend she hasn’t seen in a while. “How’s everything with you and Nelson?”

“I’ll tell you it all on the drive.”
By the time they get back Marina has been there for a while, established all that she can about Hope’s condition. Marina is wearing the expression of someone trying very hard to quell their rage. One Judi’s seen quite a lot of, lately.

Wendy, who has remained unbelievably polite and positive throughout this experience, immediately goes to the fire and sits by Hope,

“Wendy! I had my hair done.”

“You look well, Hope.”

“That’s nice. How do you look?”

There is tea, of course, many cups, and cake, and Hope is about fourteen weeks pregnant, as far as Marina can make out from the outside, and in good health generally.

“Again, that’s as far as we can know without all the proper medical examination that any pregnant woman should have had by now, let alone someone so frail and mature.” Marina says with a calm voice, and cheeks red with anger and eyes that scorch Judi, who wonders if she will ever be forgiven.

“She’ll need to be at mine really, all official and such, won’t she, before we can do that?” Wendy knows full well, Judi has made it quite clear in the car, that what they’re doing is not “official and such,” that she is asking Wendy to tell lies that could potentially land her in prison. You just tell me what to say and what to sign, she’s said. Now she’s beaming up at Marina with the same optimism and determination.
“If we do that” Marina says. Given her age and physical condition, a premature birth is, Marina looks over to the wee woman “very likely, I’d say.” There’s a very high likelihood of downs syndrome, or any one of a myriad of fetal abnormalities. How well do you think this woman will relate to a baby with downs?”

“I think we’d,” Wendy pauses to find something true. “make the best of it.”

“Wendy you are a lovely seeming lady, but you’re what, fifty?”

“Forty nine. Some people say I look young for my age.” Wendy smiles as though it’s a joke but she’s clearly not comfortable with any of this.

“And your husband is?”

“Fine, he’s fine. Well... they say schizophrenic, but he takes his pills regularly and that’s that.”

“This is the same medication you, Judi, have taken it upon herself to take this woman off?”

“She seems to be doing very well.” Wendy says brightly: “You’re ok, aren’t you Hope?”

“I’m Isabel now, the mad cow, they took me away to pastures new to have my wee calf” Hope says giddily, creepily and not very usefully. “Amen.”

“So... a severely handicapped child, one who might well need 24 hour care, and... that, in your house, all the time, on top of your husband, and a selection of exotic birds won’t be a bit much, ever?”

“It’s good living with Hope.” Judi offers.
“I don’t want to hear your voice too much right now, Judi. I’m happy to tell you that I’m pretty disgusted with you.”

“Steady on” Hamish says, coming to her defence in the manner of a WW1 fighter pilot.

“Oh I am steadying. She’s not the worst human being in the world, not the most disgusting: we all know who that is, some of us have known that for a while, so don’t even talk to me about him.”

Marina is right up in Hamish’s face now, and blazing with fury so vivid he flinches.

“So, Mother Goose here’ll be a walk in the park for you, Wendy, according to Judi, the woman responsible for her -is there a term other than- kidnap? And assuming that you’re not sent to prison at some point for your cooperation in all this, do you really want two, let’s say ‘challenging’ adults to look after, for the rest of your life?”

“Yes,”

“And then some poor wee boy with downs, or...” Marina shudders “worse: do you really want him?”

“Yes, I want him,” says Wendy with zealous conviction, she would never turn a little boy from her door.

“But it isn’t “him.” Remember that, all of you. This isn’t a he or a she or an anything yet, and most of all, it doesn’t matter how much any of you want this child, because it is not your child to want. Giving birth might well kill a body like Hope’s. That’s an acceptable risk, is it?”

Everyone hangs their heads.
"No? Well, that’s something."

Hope takes the silence at this point as cue for a hummed rendition of Mac the Knife, which is something Judi hasn’t heard out of her for a while. It makes an uncomfortable soundtrack for what Marina goes on to say:

"Mifepristone and Prostaglandin, which is the medicine they use for early abortions, works for later ones too: anything up to twenty weeks, but the sooner the less nasty, in all respects. The results look broadly the same as a late natural miscarriage, there is no reason why anyone would suppose anything else. She might need two lots to do it. But... unlikely. It might be quite distressing, for her, for whoever’s there. But she’d only really have to go into the hospital if the placenta or afterbirth doesn’t come out of its own accord. Then they’d give her a tiny, really quite safe, operation."

It’s all very sensible, and for a while the room is still, but for Mac, who is back, in town.

"If you Judi, as a conscientious ex-member of staff, were concerned about the welfare of a former patient, I see no reason why you might not call the care standards agency yourself, and stress a couple of especially vulnerable patients. Do you not think that might ensure Wendy a speedy visit under relatively unsuspicious circumstances?"

Judi, who had no idea her friend was so good at master-planning, nods dumbly.

“And Wendy, you’d hardly be held under suspicion if Hope, who you could have had no way of knowing was pregnant, suffered a miscarriage in her
sleep, a week or so later, could you? And in fact, mightn't, given Hope's delicate mental state, call me, a family friend and a midwife, before the ambulance?"

"I might" says Wendy, neutral as milk.

"Right. Then I'll call my folk at the maternity unit, explain the situation, our suspicions over who might have had access to Hope, bring in the foetus, and call the police."

"Does it really have to be this way?" Wendy's eyes are glassy thinking of this unborn child, who Marina made male. Judi hates it too, but Marina's right: it's not their child to want.

"No" says Marina sharply, "It doesn't have to. You can call out a care team and say you suspect Hope is pregnant, and we could voice our suspicions about the father. Maybe they'll do some pretty invasive DNA testing while the baby is still in the womb, or maybe they'll wait until it's out. They'll certainly not terminate the baby, because they'd be terrified of the news stories, terrified of a law suit, so, Hope will have the child, and as I said before, maybe die, and certainly be made severely ill by the process of birthing a baby it is very likely will be very sick too, in some way or another, if it lives."

"Oh." Says Wendy. "Yes."

"I have no idea what made Judi think of it in any other way."

"I think I have some idea. Dear." Wendy says, and pats Judi's shaking shoulder.

Judi cannot believe she has friends, help and love after the atrociously selfish things she has done.
“Anyway,” Wendy continues “I don’t suppose we need to decide all that
today, do we?”

“No. Not today.”

“There needs to be a, whatsit, a home visit thingy first, doesn’t there?”

Judi nods.

“Ok.” Wendy straightens up, “So if you pack enough of Hope’s things for
tonight, Judi, she can come and stay in her own wee room at ours, like
Christmas, eh Hope? And Judi, bring over whatever else you think she would like
of her things, and whatever I need to sign, sometime tomorrow?”

Judi nods. She feels wrung out. Everything for nothing, that’s what it’s been.

“So maybe go pack a wee bag for Hope, Judi?” Marina urges her, her voice
softer.

“Judi tries a tired smile, but all there are is tears. When she gets to Hope’s
wee room, and opens the door to a wardrobe full of, whose clothes? Hopes?
Isabel’s? Her mother is dead, and soon the baby will be too. Trying to decide
which of Hope’s belongings to pack for the night and next day, what might be a
comfort, Hope comes through.

“Popping to Wendy’s: my own wee room, again” The second part so
perfectly in Wendy’s voice. Hope packs her slippers and a nighty and the picture
of Judi, Da and Isabel looking happy together: “S’ok to take this?”

“Yeah. Of course.”

“I’m staying Mum” Hope says. “Secret. It’s ok.”
“Ok.” Judi says, marvelling at the kaleidoscope she makes of reality, wondering at how it looks from the inside. The fairy-like creature totters out with Wendy and Marina into the darkening evening.
The little house, without Hope, feels especially empty. They sit and watch the fire and don’t say much. Judi is grateful to Hamish for all that he has done, all that he is doing, and for holding her now. It’s enough.

There is a firm, authoritative knock at the door, Judi assumes Nell, and shakes her head at Hamish. She can’t do it. She can’t be a normal person. She just wants to sit in the wreckage of her life enjoy his company for as long as he is kind enough to stay.

“I’ll tell whoever it is you’re not in.”

“Yes, save me from the tyranny of the doorbell.” She sounds like something: a Morrissey lyric, or Hope on a good day. But today is not a good day. And Hope isn’t here anymore.

“Judi. It’s the Police.”
Dear Jason.

My councillor, Mrs Jenkins, is making me do a letter writing exercise. We can write letters to anybody, to send or - as the lady to my left is- to cry at, and apparently they'll even post them for us, assuming that there's no inappropriate content - and assuming they don't crack the code. (Dear Warden - There is no code, Mrs Jenkins says I'm using humour as a defence mechanism, and not very effectively.)

Whenever you visit you always want to hear what it’s like here, and I can tell you're both hoping for and dreading something bloody, but the truth is that on an average day it's considerably less scary in here than walking down Sauchihall Street at two in the morning on a weeknight.

What's bad about this place isn't that I'm constantly scared for my life. I'm not. Women in this prison, and in prison generally from what I've been reading, aren't what's called 'career criminals' - like bare knuckle boxers, or mobsters, or any of the exciting sort - folk that maybe accept the possibility of a prison sentence somewhere down the line, like a smoker knows they'll get cancer, a risk of the job. Don’t get me wrong, a lot of these women are tough and scary seeming. You have to keep what you say simple here, because a lot of people aren’t very clever, and a lot of people are very paranoid. In my first few days I was actually relieved when they locked me up: it was the only time I felt
certain I wasn’t going to be attacked or lady-raped. When I said as much in this
group, a few folk said they felt the same. And that was nice, sort of.

Most of the women I talk to are in here for the first time, most only stay
for about six months, they’re in here because of shoplifting, mostly. The lady I
share my room with killed her husband when he turned on their child. Now the
child is growing up in care, but what was she to do, stand by and let him hit her
wee man? She says she didn’t mean to kill him, she just wanted to make it stop.
She stabbed him a lot of times, though. I understand why she didn’t want to
speak to me, when I first arrived, I think. How many folk like me have drifted in
and out while she stays, stays, stays? There are lots of people in here who have
done terrible things, I’m sure, but I’m not sure they’re all terrible people, or that
even the terrible people are 100% terrible. They feel like ordinary women
placed in extraordinary situations. The bad sort of extraordinary.

The security doors here are the same as the ones we had in Lotus
Gardens. Sometimes I go to put my fob against the reader and then remember,
and that’s weird. I spend as much of my time as I can in the prison library.
Reading helps.

I’m glad you think you’re “well ghetto” cause your mum’s “doing time,”
as you put it, but that cop-show phrase doesn’t cover it. You’re doing time
whatever you do, wherever you are, aren’t you? There is a magazine in here
called “Inside Time,” a sort of creative writing thing they have for prisoners, and
I like that phrase better. Inside time, as oppose to outside time. It reminds me of
being at school, waiting for the bell so I could run out into the playground;
waiting until the slow minute hand clicked into place on the half hour and the big bell rang and it was playtime again.

People say “I can't wait,” but in here you are under no illusions. That's all you can do.

Freedom is the luxury of leaving. For as long as I'm still inside time I have a lot of time to think. Prison dramatically reduces your choices. I used to think I didn't like to choose, I thought it was great, having your father tell me what to do. Don’t be mad at him for that, it's hard to believe, but I was... it was what I wanted. And I can tell you right now, as if you didn't know already, that I was an idiot. I used to like hearing someone say “do it for me,” but Jason, don’t do anything for anyone. Do things to help people, be kind, love folk, but do those things for yourself, not them.

Congratulations on your course! Oooh, Art School!

You guys have freedom: the liberty to go, and you still stand by me... I’m being cheesy, but what I’m saying is I appreciate it. Truly. You, Marina, Roxy, even Andrea, although while I note the effort that went into however she made those little slices of peppermint rock that had “jailhouse” written in the pink lettering, it’s maybe the sort of thing that’s funnier afterwards? I was disappointed that there wasn’t a cute little mental file in those cute little cupcakes.

Please be nice to Hamish: he doesn't want to be your new daddy and you’re about to become one yourself in any case, so maybe grow up about it? He's staying too, he’s chosen to be with me, even though that means being on his
own, a lot of the time. I don't want to hear any more shit about “family” visits and him not being family. Moronic.

Did Hamish tell you about when the police turned up at the cottage? Pretty much the first thing the police lady did was ask if they might have some tea, then she sat down beside me: you know -the lady, with her big brown eyes and soft hair, and looked so nice. I thought, oh, police people probably aren’t this nice when they’ve come to arrest you. My world went black. You are the most precious thing I know and my first thought was that they had come to tell me you were dead.

I know you say you’re not going for any counselling or anything, and I won’t argue with you about it, I never fancied that sort of thing either, but we get it here and I really quite like it, this group. I think it might be quite nice, when I’m out of here, to pay someone enough money that they’ll listen to me for an hour or two every week, and I don’t have to feel guilty or worry that I’m whining, because that’s their job, just listening.

I’m so mad with your father, Jason. I’m mad because he made me feel I could never be your mum, and so I don’t think I looked after you as well as I might have done. I’m so sorry that I didn’t get some sense and realise I could have changed it.

Ha ha at Wendy’s knitting – you should never have told her you were having a boy. That kid will drown in knitwear now-and good to hear that Auntie Hope is doing fine, send so much love to all of them, keep more for yourself. Or whatever. It doesn’t run out, does it?
Obviously I am also mad with your father for getting us into such crazy financial trouble, and lying to all those people about his research, and leaving the hospital in such a state. And I’m not chuffed to bits about spending time here for “negligent practice,” or my job prospects when I get out.

I am mad that he doesn’t have to go to prison, or face up to anything, and that he’s not around to help you right now, when you need him the most, and that I’m not either.

I can’t wait to meet the wee one. Actually, I can wait. It helps so much, all that we have to look forward to.

Lots of Love,

Mum. Xxxx
Nelson shot himself in the pantry of his father's stately home with a hunting rifle, the one he used to “bag” his royal McNab, Judi imagines, because it seems somehow right that it should have been.

His father, whose heart was perhaps already strained by the return of his prodigal son, heard the shot and found him there. The shock caused him a fatal heart attack. The two were found days later by Cecily. Judi imagines Cecily finding her father face down in the remains of an Eve pudding, getting his “just desserts.” It's a thing she’s made up, but Judi sees it so vividly it's acquired a nightmarish truth.

“He couldn't face what he'd done” was a thing she heard people say about his falsified findings, his unwillingness to let facts stand in the way of proving a good hypothesis. The truth, Judi thinks, is much worse. Nelson got up every morning, looked himself in the face and felt fine about what he was doing. Then he did some more. What Nelson couldn't face was people knowing who he was.

So Jason, whose plate, by any standard, was fairly full already, has had to deal with the death of his father, a grandfather he didn't know, and the screaming legal missives of Cecily, who was very upset by Jason's declaration that he'd give the house over to the National Trust, all of it, everything, rather than attempt a lifetime of holding fetes in a wildly optimistic bid to replace the guttering.
Cecily writes him letters about the seven-hundred years of tradition he’s throwing away. Jason counters by mentioning the seven-hundred years of men who were happy to discount and silence a woman’s claims to her family’s money or land, were also part of that same noble tradition. Judi is glad he has a big project to get angry about. Given that he’s likely to lose, it’s good that anything he stands to gain by winning he wants to give away, anyway.

Last time she saw Hamish she told him. At first she wasn’t sure, how was it possible? Judi didn’t want to believe in impossible things anymore. But she is, she’s pregnant. When she didn’t bleed she assumed menopause, but no, her boobs are swelling, she’s throwing up. She gets given extra vitamins and fruit, since she told them. It was weird that folk in the prison knew, but not Hamish, so she told him too, terrified.

Judi is allowing herself to believe that things might be fine, but she doesn’t want to worry Jason, or anybody else. She’ll go to a regular hospital for the birth, and Hamish can be there, and with good behaviour, and she can’t really imagine behaving any other way, they might reduce her sentence and let her out straight afterwards. If she does have to go back though, Hamish will be left to care for the child by himself, for the first month.

She was nervous telling Hamish: what if he didn’t believe her? How could it be his child, he’s infertile. He was just as uncertain as her. It has been his unpleasant discovery that his ex-wife had a IUV coil fitted throughout their entire marriage.
“She didn’t want to have a baby, she preferred to be one” was how Hamish put it, clearly hurt, after days of angry conversation.

Judi thinks again how mean a kind person can sound, when they’ve been wronged, how nobody is just good.

“If it’s a girl, what shall we call her?

“Which two letters spell perfection?” Hamish says, his happiness beaming through the crackle of the old Bakelite receiver of the one working telephone in the dirty beige corridor.

“Hope?”

“Yes. Of course.”

On his next visit the two hold hands across the visitation table, much to Jason’s visible discomfort, and Judi thinks that few things extend the frisson of sexual tension in a new relationship like a prison stay.

Hamish shows her photographs of the garden, of the house, proud to take over nest-building for a while.

“I’ve installed a small piece of found art on our mantelpiece” he says, handing her a photo. She smiles.

“The casual observer might deride it, label it Iheart, if you will.”

Judi claps her hands and giggles, and several people turn to stare. Jason rolls his eyes, mortified by the pair of them.

“It has minimalist charm, I think.” Judi is grateful for a little bit of silliness. This is what she misses the most, here. Bright bubbles of conversation which do not turn from discomfort, do not look away from darkness, but rise up in spite of it, and so survive it.
Making Light Of The Holocaust: Modelling Calvino’s concept of lightness as an appropriate literary response to the Shoah, in Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*.
Art, in discourse with the Holocaust, cannot help but contribute to history’s living place in our collective consciousness, and so the artist is accountable, too, for the shape this collective memory takes. “Art inscribes,” Shoshana Felman writes. It “artistically bears witness to what we do not yet know of our lived historical relation to events of our times”1.

Looking to the near future where no first generation survivors remain, this paper asks, with reference to Anne Michaels’ *Fugitive Pieces*, if Italo Calvino’s notion of literary lightness might become an increasingly appropriate blueprint for post-Holocaust, post-memory literature.

How can what is heavy be dealt with lightly? Linguistically, consequence is often synonymous with weight. Serious subjects are “weighty matters,” we stress the “gravity” of a situation, our concerns are “pressing.” Responsibility is a “burden” yet we “carry” on, and talk later of these trying times in terms of their “impact”.

The metaphorical weight of hardship is felt similarly in many languages. In Finnish just one word, *tärkeä*, is used to denote both weight and importance, similarly *vakavuus* signifies not only seriousness but, quite literally, gravity. Finns even talk of *painoarvo*, weight-value, when determining consequentiality. In Mandarin the word important, *重要* (*zhong yao*), literally translates as “a heavy must”.

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1 Felman/Laub, xx
The Jewish tradition of “bearing witness” is one such heavy must. The Hebrew “mir zeinen lebedike eidim”, most often translated as ‘we bear living testimony’, is in etymological accord with this idea. As well as conveying “to live,” and “to move”, “lebedike” can also be translated as “to carry”: so steeped is Judaic thought in the notion that to live is to bear your story, always. For the Jew who feels, as Elie Wiesel, that “he has no right to deprive future generations of a past that belongs to our collective memory. To forget would be not only dangerous but offensive; to forget the dead would be akin to killing them a second time.” Arthur A Cohen comments in The Tremendum that “it is mandatory that this real presence of all Israel in the death camps, experiencing the tremendum enter the liturgy as surely as it entered the narration of the Exodus”. The Shoah is a burden that must be borne and borne indefinitely, carrying its truth into the next generation is not simply a case of recounting, or of becoming familiar with the accounts of others, but of placing oneself within the event, experiencing it as a personal reality. How does one testify to the memory of an event that ended long before your birth? The witnessing of Exodus through Passover provides a model for how the Shoah may, in time, through festival and tradition, be culturally subsumed in Judaic life, ever present, yet not oppressive. “History” is not consigned to the past, but is the shared, lived and constant experience of all Jewish peoples who choose to accept the task of witnessing.

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2 Cohen, 23
Given our cultural anxiety to appropriately register the weight of what is still the most targeted and sustained atrocity in living memory, it is unsurprising that many find it audacious when a creator deems lightness a suitable lens through which to view the Holocaust.

The critical response to Roberto Benigni’s 1997 comedy, La Vita è Bella, set in Auschwitz, illustrates the concern that “comedy turns the Holocaust into kitsch” as Critic Charles Taylor, in his tellingly named “The Unbearable Lightness of Benigni,” suggests: though the “anaesthetizing powers of film,” cinema’s power to “reshape collective memory.” Comedy, poetry, and melodrama, those lightest of literary devices, come under the greatest scrutiny. Taylor bemoans the “sheer callous inappropriateness of comedy within the physical reality of the camps,” implying that comedy, as a mode of discourse, necessarily cheapens its subject. Gerald Peary called the film “unforgivably obscene” and went as far as to accuse Benigni, in bringing both comedy and melodrama to bear on the Shoah, of practicing a kind of Holocaust denial or revisionism. Peary felt, like many, that the film’s ability to produce a cathartic release for its audiences was akin to sanitising the trauma. “Life Is Beautiful offers a feel-good Final Solution,” he claimed, “a smiley-face Holocaust.”

Taylor’s criticism was uncomfortably reminiscent of Theodore Adorno’s 1951 Statement, in Cultural Criticism and Society: “nach Auschwitz ein Gedicht

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3 Haskins, 373
4 ibid
5 ibid
6 Taylor, n.pag.
7 Peary, n.pag.
8 ibid
zu schreiben, ist barbarisch:” “writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric” and accordingly: “Es unmöglich ward, heute Gedichte zu schreiben”: “there can be no poetry after Auschwitz”9.

Yet, Abraham Foxman, Chairman of the Anti-Defamation League, experienced no such anxiety, giving the film his “wholehearted endorsement,” calling it “sensitive”, “poignant”, and rich with “creative genius”10.

Such polarity of critical opinion can be partially accounted for by the distaste – of those who set themselves up as the guardians of high culture – for lightness more generally. The response to Life Is Beautiful, suggests Maurizo Viano, typifies a tendency for genres with mass cultural appeal to find a corresponding unpopularity with those who wish to distinguish themselves as critics. “Taking Life Is Beautiful seriously goes against high cultural taste”11, Viano suggests, seeing the critical response to Benigni’s film as indicative of a culturally elitist form of reaction for effect.

The critical assumption that ‘light’ entertainment must necessarily ‘make light’ of its subject matter confuses aesthetic distaste with moral objection, and allows no possibility for thoughtful lightness within light entertainment. Guido, the film’s protagonist, whose very name declares him a fool, exemplifies thoughtful lightness. His playful creativity ensures his son’s survival, allows him to manipulate reality, presenting the oppressive and hopeless truth of

9 Adorno, Prisms, 34
10 Viano, 28
11 ibid
Auschwitz as something bearable: a game. In so doing, Guido offers others the same escape. Escape into art, imagination, laughter.

"Laughter," Benigni claims, "can save us"\(^{12}\).

Taylor deplored the film’s – admittedly unlikely – device whereby the central character manages to appropriate Auschwitz’s tannoy system, not once but – however fleetingly – twice, to communicate his continued love and survival. It is, of course, improbable, but does it necessarily follow that Beigni uses that improbability unthinkingly? The tannoy called people to death, carried “victory announcements” communicating failed attempts on Hitler’s life, and presented the Nazi’s own distorted reality, designed to crush hope. Guido’s broadcasts re-appropriate the tannoy as a means to broadcast love, and to undermine authority. Taylor, then, is erroneous in arguing “the only possible explanation for this scene is that it exists solely to affect us,"\(^{13}\) but if sentimentality were Benigni’s sole aim, why should it be terrible for art to elicit that emotion?

It is undeniable that melodrama and mass appeal were tools the Nazi propaganda machine used to best advantage, as in Mein Kampf, where Hitler forged his Nazi rhetoric, a linguistic schema to stir the emotions rather than the intellect, knowing that, The great masses of a nation will always and only succumb to the force of the spoken word."\(^{14}\) It is understandable that holocaust literature might wish to distance itself from such tendencies, and

\(^{12}\) Benigni, 29
\(^{13}\) Taylor, n.pag.
\(^{14}\) Hitler
understandable that it might seem more socially responsible to produce literature that allows holocaust facts to speak for themselves, rather than seeking to manipulate an emotive response. Yet, engaging with lighter forms in our cultural telling of the holocaust is perhaps, like Guido’s use of the tannoy, a sincere attempt to best broadcast holocaust truth. A related problem with lightness, and melodrama especially, in relation to the Shoah, is that given the weight inherent in this subject matter, adding further emotional gravity might suggest that it isn’t already grave enough. The issue is thorny, but consider disengagement, boredom: these are surely the most worrying responses to representations of the Holocaust. In order to bear witness, one must first care to look.

Whilst critics like J. Hoberman denounce even Schindler’s List for making “mass extermination safe for mass consumption”\textsuperscript{15}, Walter Metz finds that, “in my own classroom-screenings of even short selections from Shoah,” [Claude Lanzmann’s critically lauded 1985 documentary with many witness testimonies from several of the camps] “initial student response is inevitably that it is boring”\textsuperscript{16}. It appears that a lack of lightness, a failure to make Holocaust narrative accessible to contemporary audiences, can result in a perceived dullness and so cultural disengagement.

The continued critical preference for biographical, first generation testimony, the continued insistence by many on the facts, the “numbers” of the Shoah, whilst obviously intended to honour the truth of events, has become a

\textsuperscript{15} Hoberman, quoted in Viano, 29
\textsuperscript{16} Metz, 2
corrosive force in critical debate, arguably already partially responsible for consigning the events of the Holocaust to the generic past for many. “Six million Jews,” Michael J Salvo writes, “is no more real a phrase to some than “knights of the round table.””

In a 1995 review of *Fugitive Pieces*, Norma Rosen noted that it “avoids dwelling on Holocaust facts” and proposed that this might be because “Holocaust words, like Holocaust numbers, no longer have the power to seize and crush us”.

“The texts that testify,” as Shoshona Felman explains, “do not simply report facts, but in different ways encounter, and make us encounter, strangeness.” Given a need to ensure the continued encountering of strangeness in our reading of the Holocaust, we must welcome otherness, and perhaps too a degree of discomfort. Lightness may be an unsettling approach, but this very unease may generate the strangeness necessary to ensure we consider events and responses anew. In order to avoid what Calvino termed “the inertia of the world,” the artist must continually find new ways of approaching that world.

Adorno’s infamous claim about the possibility of writing poetry “after Auschwitz” reflects a larger reactionary hostility towards the fluidity and

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17 Salvo, 294  
18 Rosen, 83  
19 Felman, 7  
20 Calvino, 4
irreverence of innovative art more generally. Who has the right to write the
holocaust, and how: these are the questions at the heart of that discomfort.
There is a critical fear that a genuinely creative - and so necessarily original -
response of any kind is an immoral diminution of the human, and more
specifically Jewish, suffering of the Holocaust.

How to engage with the subject without seeming to court controversy?
Whilst Jewish writers may feel an obligation to testify, many non-jews instantly
open themselves to allegations that they cheapening the Shoah and themselves,
resorting to shock tactics. Susan Gubar noted in 2002 that all efforts to bring
gender issues to bear on the Holocaust had met “considerable opposition...
sometimes outright hostility”, and surmised that “this recalcitrance springs
from many people’s wariness about deflecting attention away from the Nazi’s
determination to exterminate all of Europe’s Jews.”

This understandable nervousness surrounding the preservation of Holocaust truth may come, by
proxy, and with the help of overzealous critics, to enforce literary stagnation. To
prohibit any linguistic mode is to enforce a meta-narrative on the telling of
history that ironically, and uncomfortably, echoes the Nazi obsession with
prescriptive historical interpretation. Clearly, history as “written by the victors”
is a deeply inappropriate concept, but having it written exclusively, obligatorily,
and eternally by its “victims,” through genetic inheritance of one’s place in
liturgy, might be equally problematic: an oppressive and unsought
responsibility to some, a closed door to others. Certainly, such unadulterated re-
telling, without freedom to reinterpret, leaves history ‘set in stone,’ running the

21 Gubar, 249
risk of becoming immobile, too heavy to carry, and accordingly, of being left behind.

In “Lightness,” the first of his *Six Memos for The New Millennium*, Calvino asserts that a writer’s failure to bring lightness to her work will result in its “slow petrification”. In this, his final unfinished work, Calvino stresses that lightness must be a key requirement for the literature of our times. Calvino writes of “literature as an existential function, the search for lightness as a reaction to the weight of living.” “Bearing witness” must be examined in this light, and in light of its true potential, as a productive, socially therapeutic and corrective force: otherwise what are our Holocaust texts but another round of meta-narrative imposed by the very communities who have seen just how damaging the absolutism of meta-narrative can be? What is that but a never-ending cycle of oppressive, paralysing weightiness, or as Calvino would have it, “the inexorable stare of Medusa”.

Key to understanding what it is Calvino means by “lightness” is his example of Perseus, the chthonic monster-slayer from Greek myth, who avoids the literal petrification that is the fate of all who look directly into Medusa’s eyes by battling her with only the gorgon’s reflection in his shield as a guide. One cannot help but think, in this context, of the catatonic state that affects many of those who have “seen too much,” to concede that in addressing the site of trauma some remove may be necessary. It is Perseus’ indirect approach then,

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22 Calvino, 4  
23 Calvino, 26  
24 Calvino, 4
the fact that he “fixes his gaze on what can be revealed only by indirect vision” that so appeals to Calvino. It is only by “keeping [the paralysing trauma] hidden”\(^{25}\) that it can be mastered. Like Perseus, the victim cannot address the site of trauma itself: they must access it piece by piece, through the guise of metaphor, until it is a thing in the past – a historical fact rather than a horrific experience one is dammed to continually relive.

Crucially, for Calvino, the indirect approach made possible by lightness in no way denies the seriousness of the task undertaken. Calvino was quick to distinguish lightness from more postmodern formalist play or escapism: “I don’t mean escaping into dreams, or the irrational. I mean that I have to change my approach: look at the word from a different perspective: with a different logic.”\(^{26}\) Perseus’ lightness is, “not a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live. He carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden”\(^{27}\).

Calvino came to see the common thread in his own work as an attempt to “remove weight from the structure of stories and from language.”\(^{28}\) In considering how this concept of lightness might be brought to bear on Holocaust literature, we might take a cautionary look at its effects on his own work. For Jenny Webb, “serious thematic concerns undergird his textuality”\(^{29}\), but the lightness of his “playful, fanciful, and even fantastic stories belie”\(^{30}\) this depth.¹ Might Calvino, in his unwavering focus on the stylistic concerns of the...

\(^{25}\) ibid
\(^{26}\) Calvino, 8
\(^{27}\) ibid
\(^{28}\) Calvino. 3
\(^{29}\) Webb, 214
\(^{30}\) ibid
work (the mirror, within the Perseus analogy) be eschewing an ethically responsible engagement with social realities? Carla Bernedetti believes that Calvino came increasingly to be “confined in an intertextual labyrinth,” unable to “respond to contemporary life in its most negative and alienating aspects”\textsuperscript{31}. Were these criticisms just, Calvino’s lightness would make a very poor model for post-holocaust literature. Yet Calvino’s fiction does not bear this out. In the short story “All at One Point” Calvino gets straight to the emotional heart of oppression in a few sentences: “Naturally, we were all there – old Qfwfq said – where else could we have been? Nobody knew then that there could be space. Or time either: what use did we have for time, packed in there like sardines?” The humour in those incongruous sardines and the colloquial litotes of the passage are both so humanising that we come, anew, to bear imaginative witness to a lack of space, the impossibility of movement, the meaninglessness of time. And there, through lightness, through being made to “encounter strangeness”, as Felman claims literary representations of the Holocaust \textit{must} do, we might begin to understand how apt a model for Holocaust narrative Calvino’s lightness is.

Once we permit lightness a place in Holocaust literature, how do we keep it there? How can we be sure not to do irreparable damage to our collective memory of the Shoah, not to bear false witness? Popular culture retroactively shapes the past: one need only look at the influence of a sit-com like “Happy Days” on public perception of Fifties America, or the extent to which \textit{Gone with

\textsuperscript{31} Bernadetti, quoted in -and translated by- Ricciardi, 1063
the Wind continues to inform popular beliefs about the American Civil War and Reconstruction Era to see this effect at work.

Contemporary African novelist Teju Cole is very aware of the power to shape cultural “truth” in, and politics of, narrative: “I deeply respect American sentimentality, the way one respects a wounded hippo. You must keep an eye on it, for you know it is deadly”\(^{32}\). Cole’s concern that “Africa serves as a backdrop for white fantasies of conquest and heroism” is understandable given the many insidious ways in which colonial literature normalised, justified, and promoted oppression. Calvino, aware of this critical tendency, maintained that “there is such a thing as a lightness of thoughtfulness, just as we all know that there is a lightness of frivolity. In fact, thoughtful lightness can make frivolity seem dull and heavy”\(^{33}\).

As narratives shape history they shape our future: no wonder we express concern. Fiction is a slippery medium through which to preserve truth, yet it must try.

Thomas C. Fox talks about not only postmodern, but “post-Holocaust”\(^{23}\) thought, as if all thought processes are necessarily altered in the wake of the Shoah. In this reading, the deep wound of the Holocaust has necessarily left our collective psyche in a state of profound and enduring trauma. The role of metaphor in the memory of trauma, then, becomes key to our understanding of Holocaust literature. J Anker’s fascinating psychoanalytical approach to literature has been inspiring and informative in this respect. Anker works with

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\(^{32}\) Cole, 8  
\(^{33}\) Calvino, 10
reference to Jung’s premise that in cases of extreme trauma, “the real traumatic events might disappear from the mind and be held only in the unconscious in the form of complexes.” Because traumatic events are suppressed and ‘forgotten’ by the conscious mind entirely, they must be lived again, piece by piece, as the metaphors in which they have been buried are unpacked.

The imperative to remember is one felt in our tendency to memorialise in material space – to create large public physical metaphors through which to engage with history, and in the case of Holocaust memorials, the trauma of genocide. The question of what such an appropriate memorial might be, is a question which haunts the protagonists of Anne Michael’s *Fugitive Pieces*. Michaels’ characters largely ignore aggrandised architectural forms, privileging instead wastelands, concrete factories, spaces of neglect, damage and destruction. Meredith Criglington read this as a way of “critiquing monolithic, teleological modes of history that are premised on the purity of decent, as exemplified by the perverted racial ideologies of Nazism.” Realism, seeking as it does to reinforce grand-narrative comes to be increasingly unfit for purpose. Or, as Calvino would have it, symptomatic of the “entire world turning into stone,” cultural catatonia. “Language”, writes Meira Cook, is “potent only insofar as it escapes the boundaries of received meaning.” What was true, for architectural and geographical structures is, Michaels and Calvino suggest, true for literary structures too.

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34 Anker, 51  
35 Criglington, 87  
36 Calvino, 4  
37 Cook, 28
Calvino’s notes on lightness may be a platform for exploration, but do not form a tidy checklist of formal elements that comprise lightness in art. The example of Eisenman’s *Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe* may be illuminating in this respect. A public art-form which concretises several of the ways in which lightness can serve cultural treatments of the Holocaust.

Eisenman’s field of 2,711, undulating, grey stelae may not be an obvious model when considering lightness in the art of the Holocaust - the looming concrete grid at the heart of Berlin is certainly weighty in the most literal of senses – but his lightness of approach, with regards to the functionality of the work, is perfectly in tune with Calvino and Michaels’ literary lightness. Eisenman’s memorial responds to a deep need to break away from representational models that no longer fit, a willingness to embrace controversy and challenge conventionality. Eisenman and his engineer partner Buro Happold “didn’t want to use any materials that came out of the soil because “Blood and Soil” was the ideological moment that separated the Jews from the Germans.”38 By reimagining civic, memorial space in a way which does not shy from social unease, which addresses the broken past, Eisenman produced a work which bears continual witness not only to the event, but to the discomfort surrounding it. “I don’t want people to weep and then walk away with a clear conscience,”39 he said at the time of its opening. Treblinka, now a museum to its own horrific past, is surrounded by a ‘forest’ of 17000 stones, one for each

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38 Eisenman

39 Eisenman, cited by Nicolai Ouroussoff, New York Times
person murdered per day when the camp was operating at capacity. Eisenman’s memorial, in contrast, offers no such clear correlation or trigger for grief, is not an exercise in holocaust numbers, but a thought exercise. How to “walk away” when it is so hard to establish exactly where this sea of monoliths begins or ends? The pillars at the outskirts rise only centimetres above the pavement. Visitors may initially stand on them accidentally, or tentatively - wondering if they should. As the blocks rise, given what they represent, to stride atop of the sculpture can seem horrifically inappropriate. Enter the memorial by remaining respectfully at ground level, however, and you are soon lost from sight, moving from one dizzyingly claustrophobic corridor to the next, quickly cut off from the light above. Couples and commuters cut thoughtlessly though the memorial field: repetition breeds indifference. To some eyes, it will seem shockingly irreverent to watch those who jump from stone to stone, overhead. “Were I to choose an auspicious image for the new millennium,” Calvino wrote, “I would choose that one: the sudden agile leap of the poet philosopher who raises himself about the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness.”

Eisenman knew that children would play in and on the sculpture, that it would become part of the fabric of the city, an unavoidable fixture of daily life. He was “sure skateboarders will use it” knew that drunks would dance on top of its stones, and this lightness of function, this freedom to reinterpret, is what allows the presence of the memorial such effective integration within Berlin. “The quiet abstraction of the memorial - its haunting silence and stark physical presence,” said Nicolai Ouroussoff at the time of its

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40 Calvino, 12
41 Eisenman, ibid
unveiling, “physically weaves the Holocaust into our daily existence in a way that the painstaking lists at the information centre cannot.”\textsuperscript{42} Crucially, both are available, and the memorial, (the metaphor,) refers us back to the truth of the trauma, sometimes in unexpected ways. Through lightness, might Holocaust fiction similarly refer us back to Holocaust fact?

Anne Michaels \textit{Fugitive Pieces} provides an interesting platform from which to examine the possibilities of Calvino’s concept of literary lightness in operation within a holocaust novel.

Protagonist Jakob Beer spends much of his early life in exile. Nazis invade the Polish ghetto where he lives, killing his parents, taking his sister, murdering or abducting all of the village but him. Jakob, a child hiding in a safe-hole behind the wall as it happens, cannot hope to bear witness to these events in biographical testimony: he does not see them, he cannot begin to comprehend them, but rather waits until the noises die, then flees, stepping over his father’s corpse as he does so. He hides by day in a hole he has dug with his bare hands in the forest floor, eats whatever he can find, and when his ears become so clogged with peat that he becomes deaf, risks walking into the nearby water of Biskupin to regain his hearing. This is when Greek Athos Rousso, Archaeologist, returns to the (real-life) site of Biskupin, where the Polish bronze-age settlement he has devoted the last few years of his life to excavating has been ransacked as surely as Jakob’s own world, as part of the Nazis’ ongoing falsification of the past.

\textsuperscript{42} Ouroussoff, ibid
These excavations were shortly to resume under the patronage of Himmler, when, as Athos later rages, “they found swastikas in every handful of dirt”\textsuperscript{43}. Athos, already risking his life in returning to the site to try and reclaim some proof of what was uncovered, instead unearths starving, orphaned Jakob, and smuggles him across the borders and all the way back to his home on the Greek island of Zakynthos, to live in hiding until the war is over. The novel follows Jakob’s life and legacy, as poet, historian and survivor. \textit{Fugitive Pieces} can be read as a direct controversion of Adorno’s claim that poetry is an unsuitable medium for holocaust testimony, indeed Susan Gubar summarised the novel just so: “a retort to Theodor Adorno’s famous injunction\textsuperscript{44}.

In Ackler’s illuminating study of trauma narrative within \textit{Fugitive Pieces} she writes that “finding words and forming a narrative is a way of encoding trauma within the structure of language to bring order into the fragmented and splintered existence”\textsuperscript{45}. Michaels’ novel follows the growth of a child survivor, as across a lifetime he struggles to access, and eventually to reconcile himself to, his past, using poetry as his psychological shield. “Write to save yourself,” Athos, young Jakob’s aging guardian tells him, “and one day you will write because you have been saved. You will feel terrible shame for this. Let your humility grow larger than your shame.”\textsuperscript{46} Jakob’s shame is that of doing something so trivial in the face of something so massive. Humility teaches Jakob that no worthier form

\textsuperscript{43} \textit{Fugitive Pieces}, 104  
\textsuperscript{44} Guber, 251  
\textsuperscript{45} Anker, 53  
\textsuperscript{46} \textit{Fugitive Pieces}, 165
of art, or life, than that of the poet could ever lead to a contribution great enough to undo the atrocity.

Whilst Michaels’ novel does not seek to crush its reader under the heavy horror of the Holocaust, the Shoah is ever-present in the text and the lives of its protagonists. Yet Michaels’ work is obsessed with lightness of style and with light itself; a work which perfectly exemplifies the indirect gaze Calvino advocated, and employs lightness in the manner he suggests; as a necessary tool in looking anew, and in bringing us something we are prepared to truly look at.

*Fugitive Pieces* has often been dubbed a “reclamation narrative”\(^47\), but what, exactly, does it seek to reclaim? Most crucially, it would seem to be the right for a lightness of form, of tone and of spirit to be valued in our telling of the Holocaust.

Michaels is, first and foremost a poet, and she uses the novel to argue the worth of poetry as a response to the Holocaust. Calvino could be perfectly describing Michael’s central protagonist Jakob when he talks of his hero of literary lightness: “the poet-philosopher who raises himself above the weight of the world, showing that with all his gravity he has the secret of lightness.”

One of the most eminent literary critics in the emerging field of post-Holocaust studies, Robert Eaglestone, typifies the residual concern with poetry as a response to the holocaust when he says that “if there is a simple opposition

\(^{47}\) Braun, 159
between clarifying and bringing light to an issue on one hand, and complicating it on the other, it would seem that poetry would tend to the latter”48. But this “complication” might well be an inevitable side-effect of polyphony, may lead us to encounter the strangeness that Feldman advocates. In short, this post-Adorno hangover in post-Holocaust literary thought, is one with a disabling influence on its literature. And so it is fitting that Michaels has written, to counter these ideas, a book which demonstrates just how effectual a poetic response can be, what Susan Guber calls a “portrait of the poet as survivor.”49

*Fugitive Pieces* presents poetry as a redemptive force, an effective weapon throughout - and against - history. It seems odd to claim that poet Anne Michaels would choose to defend poetry as an effective medium for Holocaust representation by switching representational mode and authoring this, her first novel, but these seeming inconsistencies are answered when we refer ourselves back to Calvino’s hero of literary lightness, Persius, and his shield of deflection. The novel form sets Michaels’ argument at a remove. Using her new representational mode, she is able to defend poetry from a safe distance. Likewise, while the novel most certainly engages with Adorno’s condemnation of post-Holocaust poetry, the casual reader need never be knowingly troubled with this thematic concern. They could hardly fail to notice how steeped in poetic reference the text is though, or how redemptive, how socially useful, a poetic response to atrocity is presented as being.

48 Eaglestone, 19
49 Guber, 265
In *Holocaust Poetry*, Anthony Rowland defines Holocaust writing as that written by “those who were there;” the writing of their children, or now of third generation survivors as “post-memory;” and the writing of those with no direct link to the Shoah as “post-Holocaust.” Through Jakob’s situation, Michaels succinctly problematises such distinctions. “I did not witness the most important events of my life,” bemoans the adult poet Jakob. “My deepest story must be told by a blind man, by a prisoner of sound. From behind a wall, from underground.” By opening the novel in Biskupin, Michaels draws our attention to Holocaust fact – the obliteration of the Polish ghetto, Himmler’s falsification of history – while furnishing the reader with a first generation character whose need to testify through poetry emerges in response to his lack of reliable first-hand narrative. Jakob has only scraps of traumatised childhood memory with which to work. Like many child survivors he “did not witness” his own tragedy, but feels an imperative to scrape a story from fleeting memories, hidden fragments, fugitive pieces. In this respect Jakob has more in common with emerging “post-Holocaust” writers such as Anne Michaels than the conventional “Holocaust” testimonialists such as Primo Levi.

“Zakynthos, mentioned with affection by Homer, Strabo, Pliny.” becomes Jakob’s place of safety, an island home which speaks not only to the idea of isolation, but a poetic association dating back to ancient times. As Athos teaches Jakob Greek and English he immerses him in poetry, and Jakob learns that “Zakynthos was the island birthplace of no less than three beloved poets -

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50 Rowland, 3  
51 Fugitive Pieces, 17  
52 Fugitive Pieces, 26
Foscolo, Kalvos, and Solomos, who wrote the words to the national anthem there. A statue of Solomos presides over the square.” Jakob is transported from a place of death and fear to an environment that seems intrinsically poetic, where poetry is so culturally significant that it is Solomos, and not a politician, who “presides.” Michaels’ setting makes explicit poetry’s intimate and influential relationship with history.

Whilst in hiding on the island, Jakob becomes obsessed with the Arctic explorers Scott and Wilson, and the detail that “proved Wilson’s nobility” for the child was not a tale of daring-do, but the fact that Wilson “persisted” in carrying back a borrowed book of Tennyson’s poetry in his backpack, even as “every ounce tore at his back.” The novel lauds the small act that reasserts the larger value. The poem as the small literary act that celebrates, and re-instates our larger social values. Poetry is an essential part of life within the novel, not clouding or obscuring meaning, but attesting to it.

After the war, in a private service for the Jews of Crete, Athos reads not from a religious text, but from Seferis’s Mythistorisma. As Athos says goodbye to his lifelong friends Kostas and Daphne for what he knows may be the last time they exchange favourite editions of poetry. Sikelianos’s war time poems are exchanged, reminding us that poetry can bring meaning to horrific events, and in its lightness of touch can form a more enduring account of those events in popular consciousness than historical records or personal history. When Daphne hands the departing Athos and Jakob a basket containing both food and

53 Fugitive Pieces, 38
poetry it underscores the point that these are gifts of sustenance, equally. In this, the characters actions mirror the words of Adrienne Rich, who said of poetry: “I do not think it is more, or less, necessary than food, shelter, health, education, decent living conditions. It is necessary.”

Poets, within the novel, are not those who muddy the water of meaning, but people with, amongst other things, the power to unify war torn nations. “No one but Palamas could so rouse and unite us” Says Costas, recounting Sikelianos’ famous reading of Palamas’ work, which so roused the crowd that the event became a landmark in the Greek resistance, culminating in a 100,000 strong demonstration against the Nazi occupation of Greece. Poets are often those who best summarise the present, the past, those who articulate public feeling, make sense of things, and are often turned to for the “last word” in the novel: “It is as Theotokas says: “time was cut by a knife.” Poetry is not seen as frippery by the novel’s protagonists, but as something one comes to with wisdom: “war can turn even an ordinary man into a poet.” Why? Because the experience of war cannot be communicated in everyday language. To articulate the horrific, the everyday man, taken so far beyond the bounds of his everyday situation, finds everyday language an insufficient means by which to articulate his experience.

Poets are respected figures in this world, with the power to shape society for the better, so that when Athos says “Jakob writes poems” of his adopted

54 Rich, xvi.
55 Fugitive Pieces, 68
56 Fugitive Pieces, 63
57 Fugitive Pieces, 68
child, his friends are delighted, saying “then you have the power to make people marry.” Poets bring people together: create commonality.

We are also reminded that poets are not “just” poets. When, in hiding on the Greek island during the war, Athos is faced with the task of secretly feeding a growing boy at a time of great scarcity, he takes it upon himself to learn which of the island’s plants have edible roots, which berries and leaves can provide additional nutrition, and how to prepare them accordingly: “he used Pliny’s natural history as a cookbook.” The past nourishes them, and we see that poets can be practically useful too. The Arctic explorers who spark Jakob’s imagination record their findings not just in measured scientific fact, photography, diaries and records, but in poems and watercolours. Why do both? Michaels’ novel reminds us that poetry is a way of interpreting and recording the unquantifiable: “the poet moves from life to language... like the immigrant [they] try to identify the invisible.” The parallel between Jakob’s status as poet and status as immigrant is an interesting one: the “invisible” is the connection between personal history and history at large, as it’s happening. The immigrant is severed from a cultural heritage they must yet find a place within. In response both poet and immigrant must try to find meaning in spaces of absence. The process Jakob describes echoes that of Marco Polo in Calvino’s Invisible Cities; “you advance always, with your head turned back,” For Jakob – and by association, the poets, the itinerants, the Holocaust survivors – progression

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58 Fugitive Pieces, 57
59 Fugitive Pieces, 108
60 Calvino, Invisible Cities, 24
must stem from an examination, an attempt through imaginative force to assimilate what is no longer present.

Calvino could be talking to Michaels’ character directly when he writes that the traveller’s past is inescapable, even when intangible: “the foreignness of what you no longer are or no longer possess lies in wait for you in foreign, unpossessed places.” For Jakob, the poet refugee, the unknowable foreignness of his own severed culture, the ungraspable facts of his sister’s fate, make the burden of life close to unbearable, and it remains so until he learns to look back through the medium – the shield, in both senses – of poetry.

Calvino equates his light approach, which enables the writer to progress by creative association, to the bucket Kafka’s Der Kübelreiter uses when begging unsuccessfully for coal. Absence becomes not a force of loss, but of lightness, of anti-weight. Accordingly this empty bucket becomes so light that its owner is now able to sit astride it and fly. Literary lightness, Calvino argues, can make a blessing of what is missing, in fact “the fuller it is, the less able it will be to fly,” so that our lack of facts, our lack of detail, absence itself, can inform the poetic work. Surely, literary forms that allow the writer to work with absence are suited to those like the our poet-narrator Jakob, struggling to articulate a missing past.

Within the novel, those who dwell on holocaust fact lead lives of painful paranoia. A child is not called “Benjamin”, but simply “Ben” -Hebrew for son- in

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61 ibid
62 Memos, 29
one mother's attempt to avoid drawing attention to her family. Characters wrestle wordlessly with the legacy of deprivation – “For who could answer my father’s question: knowing what he knew, better to stuff himself, or starve?”

Poetry, in Michaels' novel, stands in direct opposition to historical fact: “A poem is as neutral as love:” A poem is an act of active intense involvement, a struggle to render truth absolutely. “You want to be like Zuexis, master of light,” Maurice taunts the young Jakob. The reference also reminds us that it is an understanding of light which allows the painter to render things so vividly. Zuexis's understanding of light reputedly allowed him to achieve such realism that birds swooped to eat the grapes from his frescoes. Having supposedly died laughing himself to death, Zuexis is a surely hero of light. Jakob’s response too, is laughter: “I couldn’t stop laughing.” As Jakob tilts back laughing in his chair, the lemon in his hand, the fruit that had so recently meant life for Jakob (Athos and he shared those rare fruits carefully whenever possible, to keep away scurvy in war-depleted Greece) escapes his grasp and rolls down the hill towards town, a symbolic death. Jakob is letting go of the scarcity of his own past, laughing that element of himself to death, letting go of the need to hold on, dying and being reborn simultaneously though lightness.

Poetry within the novel is presented as a redemptive force. Yet the notion of redemption within the context of the Shoah is extremely problematic, seen by some as a trivialisation – how can irredeemable acts be the subject of

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63 Fugitive pieces, 214
64 Fugitive Pieces, 163
65 ibid
66 Fugitive Pieces, 164
redemptive art? Anthony Rowland calls the literature that stems from this mindset the “non-cathartic artistry of disaster.” Believing the inherent condition of the subject matter is quintessentially non-redemptive, early Holocaust writers sought only to communicate the darkness of the death camps, and believed that darkness, once entered into, was an inescapable state of being. Anyone who has been tortured remains tortured. Anyone who has suffered torture will never again be at ease in the world” wrote Jean Amery, exemplifying a long dominant literary response to the Holocaust, which seeks to communicate only atrocity and pain, to force the reader to look directly at the horror, and feel the full weight of guilt and culpability. Primo Levi is one such poet. In “If this is a Man” he addresses the reader: “You who live safe/ In your warm houses,” then goes on to paint a picture of the full horror of the death camps: men “who die by a yes or no,” Women “without hair, without name.” Finally he curses those who fail to bear witness: “may your houses be destroyed/May illness strike you down.”

It is a hyperbolic and bitter read, a poem which presents Holocaust fact and so avoids the dangers inherent in converting the Holocaust into art that Wiesel saw. Not all poetry is light.

To return to Seferis’ Mythistorema, the poem Athos quotes from in his Memorial to the Jews of Crete, where we see an equally galling depiction of victimhood in certain respects – “We returned to our homes broken/limbs

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67 Rowland, 11
68 Amery, quoted in Levi, 25
69 All from Levi’s “Survival in Auschwitz”
incapable, mouths cracked“70 – there are also images of enduring beauty which pull the reader back and ensure that the work finds continued cultural relevance. It is the subtlety, the lightness of touch in lines like, “silence falls under footsteps of men”, for example, that places us truly within the horror, recalling the black boot of oppression, to the modern reader, much more effectively than Levi’s acerbic damnation of those who do not continually remember. Serafis’ is the poetry of light.

Holocaust poetry often finds itself in a condition where the literature of process itself, or “working through” as Robert Eaglestone terms it, is preferred, and even this is problematic in Eaglestone’s eyes as so often it is “unclear... who is working through what.”71 Accordingly, the real life June 1944 massacre of Zakynthos’ Jews is told, in Fugitive Pieces, in present tense, so that we get the sense that it’s still happening: “the tallah and candlesticks are being buried in the earth under the kitchen floor” and to further stress the constancy of these actions we are reminded that these people have “centuries of practice” and that for them this is “a ritual as familiar as Sabbath”72.

The book itself walks a tightrope between poetry and prose, as many have been quick to point out. Stylistically, Meredith Criglington notes, Michaels has a “proclivity for aphoristic, fragmentary and meditative expression”73 more commonly associated with poetry than the novel. In Fugitive Pieces, Coffey

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70 Seferis, n.pag.
71 Eaglestone, 18
72 Fugitive Pieces, 39
73 Criglington, 86
concurs, she “blurs the boundaries between poetry and fiction.” Michaels’ work is highly stylised and dense with metaphor, a lyrical novel which, as Cook points out, “requires us to read laterally,” to search as one would in a poem for a truth as much in the imagery, or in allusions, as in the plot. This is no coincidence of this being a “poet’s novel” – but it forces the reader to ape the process each character within the novel, whether Holocaust survivor, archaeologist or academic, undergoes, to try to pull together an overall picture of events from the fragments presented, dipping back into the past of the novel to make sense of its present.

A metaphorical suggestiveness dominates *Fugitive Pieces*, readers arrive at meaning slowly, and narrative is not its sole delivery system. *Fugitive Pieces* might have equally been called, like Jakob’s first collection, “Groundwork,” forcing us as it does to enter into this tugging out and bringing together of the “fugitive pieces” of the characters’ lives, in such a way that that the novel’s very structure apes the process of post-traumatic recovery. The circle of recovery is represented most strikingly through the continuity between Bella’s, and later Petra’s hair. Jakob is haunted by the memory of his abducted sister, and especially her hair, which he dreams of again and again obsessively across decades. It is “magnificent hair like black syrup,” “shiny as black lacquer under the lamplight.” When Jakob marries, to see his wife’s hairbrush in his home is to be crippled with anxiety as to his sister’s unknown fate: “Every moment is

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74 Coffey, 28  
75 Cook, 26  
76 Fugitive Pieces, 6  
77 Fugitive Pieces, 106
two moments: Alex’s hairbrush popped up on the sink: Bella’s brush.”  

After Jakob’s death, in the second half of the narrative, Ben, a scholar of Jakob’s work, returns to Greece to try and find Jakob’s lost journals – and enters into a love affair with Petra, whose very name recalls the poet Petrarch, and whose hair is described by Ben as a “sleek curve,” a “black mass,” “black hair splashed on the sheets.” It is Petra, with her playful and irreverent curiosity, not the earnest Ben, who finally unearths the journals. Her black hair creates an insistent imagistic link back to Bella, and so Petra’s presence forges a metaphorical completion the narrative journey cannot. Jakob’s sister, like many who were taken, is untraceable, but even as the novel refers the reader back to Holocaust facts, the thick black shining hair stands in defiant contrast to the shaved heads of camp inmates, the 15,400 pounds of human hair found packed into paper bags in Birkenau.

Many such arcs of metaphorical meaning within the novel provide a sense of cohesion that is not afforded to its protagonists. Chapter titles, for example, are recycled, showing the cyclical, but reduced, nature of the second generation experience. Crucially, both protagonists experience moments of catharsis during their respective chapters entitled “Phosphorous,” from the Greek, meaning “bringer of light”. In this way Michaels thematically unifies the two protagonists, also drawing attention to the cyclical nature of testimony. In these instances the subtlety of these poetic techniques, their lightness of touch,

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78 Fugitive Pieces, 140  
79 Fugitive Pieces, 27  
80 Fugitive Pieces, 290  
81 Fugitive Pieces, 281
the polysemy of metaphor attest to the value of Poetry in response to the Holocaust as much as the shining exemplar of the poet-philosopher in action, Jakob.

It is not just poetic lightness, but lightness of form that lays Michaels open to allegations of muddying the waters of holocaust truth, of crass oversimplification, or yet again, of working with generic tropes and forms now inherently inappropriate. “There are some unsettling affinities between Athos’s and Michaels’ revised pastoral and the Nazi pastoral”\textsuperscript{82}, worries Donna Coffey. Within the novel, the poetic tendency towards the pastoral is evidenced everywhere – rock, ocean, earth and blood are infused with anthropomorphic yearning. Even as Athos, the “lyrical geologist”, sweeps the Nazi propaganda of “blood ties” aside with so much disgust on one hand, he implores Jakob to be “buried in earth that will remember you”\textsuperscript{83} on the other, and pours wine into soil that “the dead may drink.” The idea is uncomfortably in keeping with Nazi ideas of genealogy. “Who can separate fear from the body?” character Ben asks, confusing things further, “My parents’ past is mine molecularly.”\textsuperscript{84} This second generation survivor seeming to bemoan that certain personality attributes, emotional states and so on, have been conferred inescapably through his blood is uncomfortable reading, but it is worth noting that Ben remains an extremely misguided character throughout. It is also worth remembering that the Nazi

\textsuperscript{82} Coffey, 41
\textsuperscript{83} Fugitive Pieces, 75
\textsuperscript{84} Fugitive Pieces, 280
mythos of a “volk” in harmony with the land, used so extensively to underscore the rhetoric of “Blut und Boden,” was itself an appropriation. Such pastoral rhetoric was previously pagan, and reached the apex of its popularity in Romantic poetry.

Peter Sacks defines the pastoral elegy as “a passage through grief and darkness to consolation and renewal.” It is fear of such narrative renewal that leads Coffey to find the eulogistic quality of the book especially “jarring and inappropriate.” In pastoral elegy, the very structure of the work intends to provide solace. How can it be appropriate to imply, even indirectly, that the horror of the Shoah could be a basis for any kind of rebirth? Is this lightness treading where it should not, the same freedom and playfulness with form that Alessa Riccardi saw as ethically irresponsible in Calvino at work in Michaels? Perhaps pastoral imagery, which forges intimate connection between people and soil in a way that realist texts cannot, has been so damaged, and so damaging, that pastoral ideology must be abandoned altogether.

Yet Ben, a second generation survivor, articulates the consequences of finding one’s place in a family history that offers no such transformative prospects: the inertia Calvino feared. “There was no energy of a narrative in my family, not even the fervour of elegy,” Ben laments.

Michaels uses the pastoral in a playful and subversive fashion, drawing our attention to forgotten, destroyed or foreign landscapes. The pastoral, more

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85 Peter Sacks, quoted in Coffey, 31
86 Coffey, 32
87 Fugitive Pieces, 204
used to celebrating plenitude, nationality, and the beauty of peasant life instead works to “privilege what is left of a city, a settlement, a home, after an act of violence has occurred.”

In *Fugitive Pieces*, “freshly ploughed fields” turn out, on closer expectation, to be decimated towns, now only marked by hand-painted signs, bearing witness to what has gone. The countryside is generally presented as decimated, the one apparent exception to this being “a peaceful old forest” by the village where Ben’s parents have been brought up. Yet this pastoral idyll quickly becomes a murder site: “they killed in that little grove.” It is hard to read the switch from pastoral innocence to horror and back, in the now insufferably saccharine “little grove”, in Jakob's forest, a tree has “the face above the uniform.”

Nature, within *Fugitive Pieces*, as in life, is entirely ambivalent: it presents as much beauty as it does horror. Athos’ advice to be buried in “soil which will remember you” is hard to reconcile with the argument that Michaels is deliberately subverting the pastoral form, but can be seen as pointing to the insidious and emotive pull of such nationalist fantasies: even as people lament the destruction inherent in these ideas they cling to aspects of the same poisonous ideology.

In this respect, the novel’s allusions to *The Wasteland*, T.S. Eliot’s broken pastoral, chime perfectly: Jakob Beer is akin to the Fisher-King, walking through

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88 Cook, 23
89 Fugitive Pieces, 279
90 Fugitive Pieces, 12
91 Fugitive Pieces, 76
his decimated land trying to create cohesion and meaning from “these fragments I have shored against my ruins”\textsuperscript{92} but able to “connect nothing to nothing.”\textsuperscript{93} “Having given up on grand narratives,” Jakob writes, “I was instead searching for my own, smaller, bits of knowledge.”\textsuperscript{94} While \textit{The Wasteland}'s Fisher-King threatens to “show you fear in a handful of dust,”\textsuperscript{95} the novel's repeated allusions to a handful of earth allow for a more optimistic reading. Something may yet grow from “the compost of history.”\textsuperscript{96} Referring to the setting of the novel, Donna Coffey writes that “within the wasteland, acts of empathy and compassion enable the transmission of memory.”\textsuperscript{97}

Ultimately, Michaels evokes the pastoral not to bring an end to mourning but to facilitate its proper continuation: not to repair ties to the land, but so as to acknowledge the degree to which they have been severed.

The playful approach to form characteristic of Calvino’s lightness serves well, overall, in her use of the pastoral. Magical realism, however, that most famously “unbearably light” school of modernism, of which Calvino himself is such a master, at times jars with rest of the novel.

The idea that when the Jews go into hiding “they slip into the hills, where they wait like coral; half flesh, half stone”\textsuperscript{98} is, to Meira Cook, “disturbingly inaccurate.” It is hard to argue that such a metaphor can slip past the reader,
gives a consoling image, something altogether cleaner than the dirty truth of ethnic cleansing.

Similarly, what Jakob sees in “Paraselena on McMurdo Sound” – Wilson’s watercolour of that spectacle of light, he sees, in place of a circle of skis “a sparse and ghostly forest.”99 This certainly has an ethereal quality to it, but Wilson’s skis look very much like skis rendered in lines of quick black paint. The forest is Jakob’s own night forest, projected onto the picture. The paraselena itself looks like Jakob’s memory of visually witnessing the departing dead in the night sky: “it was as if Wilson had painted my memory of the spirit world.”100 Is this a boy’s active imagination, a genuine magical “reality” within the larger novel, or the trauma victim’s tendency to impose suppressed memory onto the present?

J. Ankler argues that the richly metaphorical language of Fugitive Pieces cannot be read simply from the perspective of the literary critic, but that the metaphorical language must rather be interpreted from a physiological perspective, as “metaphor is seen as one possible way of saying the inexpressible” and that, given this, “the reader could also interpret the metaphors from the perspective of the process of trauma.”101

Magical realism offers the reader an imaginative escape with an almost mythical dimension later in the novel. “When the prisoners were forced to dig up the mass graves, the dead entered them through their pores and were carried through their bloodstreams to their brains and hearts, and through the

99 Fugitive Pieces, 38
100 Ibid
101 Ankler, 49-50
blood into another generation.”

What is Michaels’ novel trying to achieve at this point? Is the text subverting the image of “Blut and Boden” to somehow reclaim the bodies of the murdered Jews? If this is a purely symbolic exercise it is uncertain what, exactly, it serves to symbolise. She goes on to say that as “the diggers begged forgiveness... those lives made molecular passage into their hands.”

On one level this could be seen as an extended metaphor for the burden of bearing witness, the huge pressure to do so being a physical, inescapable pressure. It still reads badly. The description is at once gory and schmaltzy. Is this lightness? No. Whilst magical realism can bring levity to a text, this lapse into fantasy is just confusing.

The problem with Michaels’ use of magical realism is not that she answers history with art – she does this successfully with her exploration of the lyrical and pastoral models – but simply that her attempts can be overwritten, and this carries its own heaviness. Michaels finds a fan of her use of magical realism in Michaela Estrin, who writes that “the liquid of her maternal grief somehow soothes the throats of the parents who could not save their children.” This image, of a gentile weeping for lost Jews and somehow healing them with her compassion, is deeply problematic, and hard to substantiate in the book, in fairness. But even to court such interpretations is deeply undesirable, and both the lyrical form and magical realism, encouraging free association as they do, must be handled skilfully.

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102 Fugitive Pieces, 52
103 ibid
104 Estrin, 291
Shoshana Feldman sees the trend towards literary critique of any Holocaust novels as literally counterproductive, claiming that a deconstructivist reading of such texts “reduces the momentous stakes of trauma to the triviality of academic conflict.”

But the novel-world of *Fugitive Pieces* presents us with a model culture for the reception of literary lightness.

This is a novel that reminds us that the literature of dissent is frequently a matter of life or death. A single letter can be enough to testify, or to get you killed. In Athens after the war, Jakob and Athos pass the mark left from the time when Greek Graffitos risked death to scrawl a single letter onto the walls: M for Mussolini Merda. “A single letter was exhilarating: it was a spit in the eye of the oppressors.”

A cook “feeds” his customers poetry in order to stay open and provide a meeting place for dissidents, long after the food is gone: Words matter.

Every character within the novel is engaged with the act of recording, apart from Alex, Jakob’s first love and the wife of their doomed marriage, who attends rallies, listens to music, but brings nothing to the literary meta-dialogue within the novel: she bears no burden of testimony and has nothing to say. Even the novel’s children are seized with a constant need to communicate experience. Maurice’s and Irina’s sons, post drawings of wavy lines, long before they can write themselves, and drawing us back to the novel’s constant burials and

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105 Felman, 175
106 Fugitive Pieces, 78
unearthings, send envelopes of sand from holiday. Ben’s wife Naomi is a professional collector of lullabies: bearing witness, as a historian, to the lives of women who chose to bear witness, through poetry, to the lives of their children.

Most characters write, all read, and all exist intertextually, responding to each other’s works. Recurringly, this intertextuality brings revelation. Michaels provides a working model for a healthy literary culture, a culture which responds to criticism with persistent faith in its own values.

We might wonder, however, of this literary world: where are the detractors? No one, at any point, suggests the boy Jakob should not become a poet. Athos’s unconventional, “lyrical geology” is lauded within his academic communities. The characters are free to interpret and represent the world around them through any mode of expression they see fit. All the novels significant characters dedicate a large portion of their endeavours to understanding atrocity and bearing witness to suffering. Though not, it must be noted, a suffering that is uniquely Jewish, giving us a model for “making beauty necessary,” in works of testimony, she shows that literature defends, consoles, preserves, engages and brings meaning.

There is also a correlation within the novel between the act of interpretation as it applies to language and applies to art: both offer a more palatable access point for experience and ideas. Jakob watches Anastasimi mass from the roof of the Greek island home where he lives in hiding “I watched, and was in my own village,” Jakob recounts, of the Greek Orthodox Easter service.
Through this imaginative effort we are born. His old and new lives are connected through light.

Like Benigni’s Guido, through imaginative work Jakob is able to achieve levity and escape his situation mentally. From Zakynthos, he is oblivious to the fate of the Jews, but as Jews in concentration camps dug holes in the ghettos, dug to hide their family’s valuables, dug tunnels in a desperate bid to escape, dug mass graves for their own people in a desperate bid to remain, and dug railroads to remain living, as they all dug down, Jakob digs upwards: “I dug a hole in the night sky, I inhaled the sea until I was light-headed, and floated above the island.” 107

*Fugitive Pieces* exemplifies the many ways in which another sense of the lightness of which Calvino spoke can be brought usefully to bear on the Holocaust. “Light” is referenced fifty six times in the novel. Characters literally ‘see the light’ at key points of their journey to wellness: their restorative engagement with literature and the Shoah pronounced in pathetic fallacy and objective correlatives, from sun-dappled leaves and glistening waters, to bleached white sands, flickering storm lanterns, lightning, paraselenae, aurora borealis, stars. Light, within the novel, can act against chaos, is understanding, acceptance, and so to peace. Jakob is “stilled by light”108 after meeting Michaela and coming, through her, to an acceptance of himself.

107 *Fugitive Pieces*, 36  
108 *Fugitive Pieces*, 194
Jakob’s “deepest story,” the moment that defines and shapes the rest of his existence like no other, allowed him no memory to access. In his ‘blind panic,’ running from his decimated home, the child Jakob’s world is “dark as the inside of a box.” What is dark, within the novel, may often have been buried or hidden underground: children, valuables, archaeological truth, the corpses of the murdered. The whole book is a process of unearthing suppressed memory. Darkness, and the symbolic state of being “in the dark,” of struggling to comprehend, plagues every character. This fear is communicated generationally to Ben, who, in childhood: “could not bear the darkness of my own room.”

Eventually it is lightness that saves Ben. Lighting up Jakob’s long-empty house on Idhra, Ben comes to an awareness of the greater community: “for the first time in almost two decades added their light to those of the village below.” In this same house that Jakob becomes a poet, in safety, in light, in his koumbaros’ home: “I lost myself... in the blush of the lamp, in the purity of the white pages.” In reference to this time of revelation and becoming, Jakob quotes Psalm 49: “I will speak a dark language with the music of a harp.” The psalm, which concerns death and the legacy of life, shows that the apparent contradiction between the lightness of the harp and the weight of unpleasant truths has long seemed oxymoronic to the human mind, the Psalm sets a Jewish precedent for using the levity of art to bear witness in a way that ensures the listener can bear to hear.

109 Fugitive Pieces, 92
110 Fugitive Pieces, 157
111 ibid
But universality, and openness of meaning, both inherent to a light approach, are troubling to the many Jewish people who see the “comparison of the Holocaust with any other form of genocide as "blasphemous, as well as dishonest." A light approach seeks to illuminate, generate understanding, lessen differences, and make lived experience universal. “In that lamplight,” the childhood Jakob marvels from his new Greek home, “we might have belonged to any century.”

Light is strongly related to innocence and good, so that a friend’s child playing piano in the background is “beautiful as light.” When Jakob finally lets genuine love into his life, the world becomes a “theatre of lightness” with leaves “dripping silver.” With Michaela, Jakob camps in the forest, a therapeutic revisitation of his earlier horror. Rather than the dark woods, they camp on white sands, and rather than being buried by his circumstances he feels, for the first time, “lifted into the world.” What is lost in terms of claiming unique experience, for Jakob, is gained in understanding and acceptance: “I slip free the knot and float, suspended in the present.” He becomes “irrevocably unmoored” and we see that his over-identification with the past has been a huge limitation, a weight which has slowed his progression. In contrast, lightness, love, “letting go” all are freeing, and “he is held safely in the present.

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112 Lilienthal, quoted in Finkelstein, 44
113 Fugitive Pieces, 35
114 Fugitive Pieces, 174
115 Fugitive Pieces, 179
116 Fugitive Pieces, 180
117 Fugitive Pieces, 188
118 Fugitive Pieces, 188
There is a real, felt relationship between the lightness that counterpoints weight and the light that illuminates in the book, Michaels having thoroughly integrated the two. We see through Ben how the Holocaust “moment” of his parents came to be his defining one, so overwhelming that his own experiences seem hopelessly trivial comparatively. He feels somehow lacking for not having personally lived the atrocity. Only on return, looking down from the altitude of an aeroplane, “from thousands of feet in the air, I see something else.”119

Again and again it is when the characters find either geographic or imagined levity that they are able to transcend their circumstances. Jakob is amazed to discover that Arctic explorers Wright and Taylor rode rollercoasters together at the Canadian National Exhibition, a moment which exemplifies such levity. These men are poets, serious academics, also joyfulness, whimsical: there is no contradiction. If we are to live with the sense of obligation to remember the victims of the Holocaust of which Primo Levi speaks, “At home, in the street/ Going to bed, rising”120, then we must also make time to appreciate ongoing life. Jakob is so consumed by the task of testimony that he seldom leaves the house, neglects his first marriage and sinks into insufferable depression. An enjoyable life is a great deal easier to “survive”, and as we move further from the event, the need to bear witness may be a perpetually ongoing process, but life must also go on.

Susan Guber believes that Michaels' novel, by replacing the problematic and at times patronising use of sympathy, “which supposes an affinity among

119 Fugivive Pieces, 294
120 Levi, If This Is Man, as before.
people” with “empathy, with its recognition of disparity,”\textsuperscript{121} provides a more appropriate response for those who seek to write Holocaust literature, and yet, like Michaels, have no direct link to the events. This is a recognition that while we cannot experience, or “feel” this trauma, we can certainly feel for its victims. Through imaginative empathy Jakob experiences a state of elation and through this lightness can progress. Michaela, whose name itself is surely a nod to the author’s own, is the character with no direct link to the Holocaust whatsoever, yet she is also the character who models empathy most convincingly within the novel. Again and again, her empathy is equated to light: “the light and heat of her tears” heal Jakob as she cries for his dead sister, Bella. As he talks and she listens, questions, and seeks to understand he can finally “lie in sunlight.”\textsuperscript{122}

Some read this empathic understanding as a worrying and reductive tendency, however. Criglington is sceptical about the ways in which empathy is presented within the novel. While noting that Toronto is the ideal setting for the book, a city of immigrants where alienation can paradoxically bring together people in shared understanding, what Criglington calls an “emphatic kinship”\textsuperscript{123} she also worries that “Fugitive Pieces suggests that feeling for the other is a way of becoming the other.” Clearly this is exactly the sort of reading that causes many to baulk at the use of literary lightness or artistic metaphor in Holocaust fiction. The greater the distance from which a subject is viewed, in time, space and emotional distance, the less certain it must appear, leading to the concept of authorial lightness. Are some writers intrinsically inappropriate?

\textsuperscript{121} Guber, 253
\textsuperscript{122} Fugitive Pieces, 182
\textsuperscript{123} Criglington, 92
The question of how those who do not possess a direct link to the events can contribute to keeping the Holocaust present in contemporary culture and its fiction is a tricky one. Michaels herself has an indirect link to the Shoah, first having encountered those Holocaust survivors who moved, like Jakob and Athos, to Canada after the war when she herself was a child in Toronto. She is not Jewish, and the mass murder did not touch her family. Of course, as writers, if we do not engage with stories of other cultures we find ourselves inadvertently following Himmler’s injunction to be “Honest, decent, loyal and comradely to members of our blood… and to nobody else.” Yet, in holding up a rejection of Himmler’s race loyalty as an argument for Holocaust testimony being a global enterprise, we risk “bearing false witness,” as Himmler’s own SS did, repurposing history to our own ends, and so insulting the memories of the dead.

The concern that the wrong people may bear witness, and that Anne Michaels was one of them, that she might have in some way damaged Holocaust fact with her Holocaust fiction, was felt by several at the time of the book’s publication. Meira Cook worried that “Fugitive Pieces might be perceived as an attempt to metaphorize history.” Criglington went further, claiming that “it seems to naturalise and hence redeem historical crimes by obscuring questions of agency.” I think the latter reading in particular misses the point. This is a novel that states repeatedly that, “No act of violence is ever resolved.”

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124 Himmler, n.pag
125 Cook, 16
126 Criglington, 88
127 Fugitive Pieces, 161
Jewish tradition of carrying your ancestry's history into the present can be a model for a wider social approach to atrocity: one can never escape the evil deed, but equally, one cannot erase the good. *Fugitive Pieces* addresses not the idea that the Holocaust could ever be diminished, or the perpetrators forgiven, but just that the pain of memory, the societal incohesion, are things that may go, and that is as much redemption as can be hoped for.

Our writers and artists shape culture, it is not just the job of each cultural group to shape its own distinct story, but for society collectively to form narratives of inclusivity.

The blood-ties argument that endorsed such global cruelty is the same pervasive cultural myth that leads adoptees, Barbara L. Estrin argues, to talk in terms of “real” or adoptive parents. She views the process of adoption within *Fugitive Pieces* as a metaphor for taking on the cultural or historical issues that could be seen as an inauthentic concern from someone who was not “real”-y Jewish, or “real”-y there. Estrin sees the novel’s repeated adoptions as a "pro-adaptive position," a process whereby the fertility motif so corrupted by 'Blut und Boden' is transformed into an “adoption motif.” It’s not just Jakob: a variety of stories of abandoned children punctuate the novel as they are hidden,

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128 Estrin, 276
129 Coffey, 38
protected, and adopted in cases when their parents cannot return. This is a metaphor, even a blueprint, for a cultural response to the Holocaust.

Holocaust narratives have often seemed incomplete and irresolvable, due to the way the Nazis’ extermination programme left so many families fragmented. Children are left parentless, an irreversible state which offers no hope of narrative redemption. Clearly, indulging the established foundling narrative arc, one of happy reconciliation, would be totally inappropriate within the novel – the parents are dead, the society from which Jakob has emerged is destroyed. Instead Michaels, Estrin argues, has created a new version of the foundling story where “adoption becomes a satisfying end in itself.”\textsuperscript{130} Athos, she argues, most actively models this in the book: “intellectually he adopts the Jewish cause, emotionally, he adopts a Jewish child.”\textsuperscript{131}

If Estrin’s reading of \textit{Fugitive Pieces} is worth giving consideration at all, it hinges on adoptive parents working to preserve the culture of those they take on, otherwise the reading risks reproducing the “white saviour” sentimentality that Cole warned us against. Yet in the case of Athos and Jakob, the adoption model offers a defence against the criticism that in any attempt to join the Jewish effort to bear testimony on the part of the non-Jew questions or undermines the strength, or worth, of Jewish testimony. As Jakob grows in age and strength, their roles reverse. It is Jakob that completes his Koumbaros’s account of falsified digs and sees it to publication after his death. As the two men age, it becomes harder to tell who is supporting whom: “We were a vine

\textsuperscript{130} Estrin, 280
\textsuperscript{131} Estrin 280
and a fence, but who was the vine? We would both have answered differently.\textsuperscript{132} Jakob’s continuation of Athos’ work is an intellectual adoption which repays Athos’ original.

Not all intellectual adoptions are so successful. Ben is not an ideal editor. He misreads, for example, the copy of Pliny’s Natural History in Jakob’s kitchen as an “obviously mislaid copy”. Ben’s lack of lightness, of childlike curiosity, means many opportunities are missed. Michaels shows, through the incomplete reflections of Jakob Ben draws, that she is far from insensitive to the dangers of what may be lost when interpretation happens at a remove, and yet, she implies: if not Ben then who would have told Jakob’s story? Surely, he is the best qualified in at least in one respect: he has the desire to do so. We worry that a light approach will degrade Holocaust stories, but it is his crippling awareness of the weight of the past, coupled with an excessively serious approach to one’s place in one’s field, and an over-emphasis on the importance of what you are writing, can make a man sound laughably ridiculous. “While I travelled across Russia in leg irons” or “While I fell to my knees with hunger in the snow at Tombol’sk,”\textsuperscript{133} he recounts, of the time spent researching his academic papers on the subject. This is a jarring and pretentious kind of empathy, in just the way that “when we left Israel” is not. These events did not happen to him, those are not his people, because he is, for all his second-generation status, a modern Canadian citizen free from persecution, warm and safe, reminiscent of those Primo Levi commanded never to lose sight of as much.

\textsuperscript{132} Fugitive Pieces, 108
\textsuperscript{133} Fugitive Pieces, 212
All in all, Ben is a problematic figure in the novel, clawingly over-earnest: he has no humour, and is hard to like. He cannot make the imaginative leaps of those who dwell in lightness, cannot empathise, and so misses crucial facts. He thereby exemplifies Michaels’ corollary to the concept that lightness may be an appropriate response to tragedy, showing us that inappropriate weightiness can be so much worse. Lightness, as Guber writes, in its free admission of fictitiousness, can compose “for and with the other - without entering the delusion of becoming the other.”134 Guber’s notion of creative adoption, chimes with Jakob’s realisation that “to remain with the dead is to abandon them.”135 Disallowing creative interpretation is to ensure these stories become obsolete. Sympathy would see us seek to identify with, or pity, the victims, which, as discussed, is both problematic and arguably insulting, but empathy allows us to better understand their pain whilst recognising that we must necessarily talk about these experiences in new and different ways.

There is an understandable concern that if the Jewish story is “adopted” by others they may not be good guardians, but rather subvert it to their own ends. The East German government from 1949 to 1990 is one example of just how realistic that fear can be. East German school books, beginning shortly after the Holocaust, bore false witness, expropriating history once again, imposing a socialist meta-narrative on the Holocaust. “The Nazis twisted class conflicts into

134 Gubar, 260
135 Fugitive Pieces, 284
non-existent racial conflicts,” one school book told East German students, “The persecution of Jews had primarily economic causes.” 136

Subsumed, post-war, into the Socialist ‘family’, the Jewish people of East Germany experienced an acute and shocking form of Holocaust denial, where their past was once again rewritten, and those Jews who had survived bodily found their Jewish history was now under attack. “GDR socialism was a melting pot,” Fox writes, “that would render their Jewish “difference,” their Jewishness, irrelevant.”137 One social narrative – Nazism – had been replaced with another – Communism, which sought not to eradicate, but subsume.

No wonder that an impulse to guard the right to tell these narratives persists, given the damage done by others in the past. Petra should be the worst guardian of Jakob’s work, the worst kind of witness. American, historically ambivalent, she goes through the house Ben has been treating as a “shrine”138 and desecrates it for her own amusement, pulling books from shelves, moving ornaments: what she calls “just looking around”139 and Ben interprets as “rampage” and “pillage.”140 Yet Petra’s presence on Ihdra, her refusal to treat the past as a museum, is what unearths the journals, and “finds” Jakob/Bella. Her playfulness, curiosity and irreverence, her youth and inexperience make her a supreme agent of change, albeit a sometimes destructive one. She refuses to remain with the dead. Such acts of seeming serendipity inform Coffey’s concerns

136 Both from “Lehrbuch,” quoted in Fox, 31
137 Fox, 2
138 Fugitive Pieces, 278
139 Fugitive Pieces, 281
140 Fugitive Pieces, 283
that Michaels “aesthetizes the Shoah”\textsuperscript{141} in her adoption of Holocaust narrative. Some disruption, some damage, is inevitable when we cease to view the past as a closed book, but as in the novel, the larger truths of history will only become more apparent under further scrutiny. “Don’t worry, a rock that’s survived so much won’t be hurt by a boy’s curiosity,”\textsuperscript{142} Athos tells the young Jakob when he becomes scared on hearing that the stone he so casually picked up to examine is “bark from a thirty five million year old tree”.

We might feel that she is reassuring herself too. Some things “survive so much” that they become almost impossible to destroy. The reality of the Holocaust is now so established, recorded and documented, that in a way it is an insult to the event to suggest that incautious fiction could “break” it. “Every moment is two moments,” Michaels argues in \textit{Fugitive Pieces}: the present insists on the past, and art, likewise, refers us back to knowledge, just as Berlin’s \textit{Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe} refers the viewer continually back to the information centre beneath it.

\textit{Fugitive Pieces}, for all its acts of creative interpretation, is a novel which also attests to Holocaust fact: “They burned records and relics, they demolished ancient fortifications and houses that has withstood millennia.”\textsuperscript{143} Michaels reminds us that the Nazi movement sought a triumph of their own meaning by destroying opposing fact, and those who opposed them. It was reductive in the most literal and unethical way: an attempt to edit history and to control the

\textsuperscript{141} Coffey, 28
\textsuperscript{142} Fugitive Pieces, 23
\textsuperscript{143} Fugitive Pieces, 51
right to tell it. Is this of itself not a powerful argument for making the Holocaust story everybody's to tell?

"What is stronger than fear; Athos, who is stronger than fear?" Jakob asks his mentor, who answers with education, a form of faith for Jakob's adoptive guardian. His studies are a “private trinity of peat, limestone and archaeological wood,” his research is an act of devotion. Athos understands that Jakob must bear witness, and so must study his ancestral past: “He made me review my Hebrew alphabet: he said pretty much the same thing every day: it’s your future you are remembering.” The generational connection severed by the events of the Shoah, forcing those who testify into the position of “remembering” lives unknown, passing on knowledge that had not been passed to them. Remembering what you have never known requires effort, and study. It is knowledge that feeds the imaginative release – the lightness, that allows one to escape the mental bounds of one's own circumstances, and knowledge that gives the creative ingenuity to escape mentally, if not physically: “I was confined to small rooms, but Athos gave me another realm to inhabit, as big as the globe and as expansive as time.” Jakob, unable to leave his attic room, watches on as glaciers dredged their “awful trails” leaving “elephant fossils in the Antarctic.” Palaeontologists discover musk ox in New York. Everything is travelling and transitory, and this knowledge helps connect a young refugee to a global pattern of displacement.

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144 Fugitive Pieces, 19
145 Fugitive Pieces, 21
146 Fugitive Pieces, 29
147 Fugitive Pieces, 30
Education can be reductive, prescriptive; or it can attest to wonder, create expansive thinking. “We can assert the largest order, the large human values daily, the only order large enough to see.”148 This is Athos’ rejection of the meta-narrative, of imposed meaning. How does one talk about the “largest order” some higher universal truth, after the barbarism of the Shoah?

“We come after,” wrote George Steiner, “we know now that a man can read Goethe or Rilke in the evening, that he can play Bach and Schubert, and go to his day’s work in Auschwitz in the morning.”149 In reality, the average German was probably no more likely to read Goethe of an evening than the average Briton today. But the sense at the heart of the statement, that we cannot point to the beauty of human cultural achievements as evidence of an intrinsic goodness in mankind, is chilling. If, after Goethe, we are capable of the Holocaust, then literature can never redeem us. What use is all this culture if it does not better mankind? Where does its value lie?

In *Fugitive Pieces*, the apple, generally seen as the fruit from the tree of knowledge, becomes a symbol of the ways in which Holocaust fact, Holocaust knowledge, can corrupt our present, is not “stronger than fear” but the root of fear. Ben’s father, after years of starvation in the death camp, finds an apple, half eaten, because it was rotten, in the wastepaper basket and confronts his son with it.

“What is this?”

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148 Fugitive Pieces, 22
149 Steiner, 15
“It’s an apple.”

“Well, my smart son: is an apple food?”

Ben’s father pushes the rotten apple into his face, forcing it down his throat. The scene is an ugly and violent metaphor for the way that Holocaust knowledge can be forced upon second and third generation survivors. Ben is given terrifying and unpalatable scraps of truth with which to bear witness. His father, unable to find testimonial expression for his terror, can only, in fact, terrify. The relationship between the two becomes as rotten as the apple. “Eat, eat,” Ben’s father urges as he chokes him. Cook forms an interesting link between this and the mother’s pronunciation – “the Ess Ess on their collars, Ben” – Ess Ess, in Yiddish is “eat eat.” The connection between his father’s violent words and actions and the terror of the Nazi regime suggests that the violence of the Shoah is communicated down as well.

"When you have conversed with death

It’s hard to come back again

And speak to the living”\(^{150}\)

Charlotte Delba writes, about a difficulty exemplified in the novel by Ben’s parents, and by Jakob’s experience. For many, silence may be the only possible response, or at least the only morally appropriate one. There is a drive towards memory, and a pushing against it. Paul Celan, in his Bremen Prize acceptance speech, claimed that Holocaust literature has had to “pass through

\(^{150}\) Delbo, 256
its own answerlessness” to “come to light again, enriched by all this.”\textsuperscript{151} “I felt this was my truth,” writes Jakob after undergoing a similar process, “that my life could not be stored in any language, but only silence.”\textsuperscript{152}

The generational rupture, silence as a traumatic response to grief, to loss, is heavily present in the lives of the novel’s Jewish characters: Jakob even describes Yiddish as “a melody gradually eaten away by silence.”\textsuperscript{153} When he comes to hear it again in the Jewish markets after the war, it is at once foreign and homely, beautiful and terrifying. The idea that he has lost, and failed to bear witness to, the linguistic part of his cultural identity is one that bothers him, “the English language was food... with each mouthful the past was further silenced.”\textsuperscript{154}

Silence is not only a response to trauma for Jakob, but stands as an metaphor for trauma within the novel, so that the two are necessarily equated: the novel is not only a movement from darkness to light but also from silence to sound, the redemptive journey of the traumatised psyche towards a place of testimony, echoed in the extended metaphor of burial. The book equates darkness to the suppression of speech, the paralysis of being buried under the heavy inertia of trauma. The bringing to light – the unearthing – of testimony is the journey towards articulating experience.

\textsuperscript{151} Celan, quoted in Silbergleid
\textsuperscript{152} Fugitive Pieces, 111
\textsuperscript{153} Fugitive Pieces, 28
\textsuperscript{154} Fugitive Pieces, 92
Letting the silence speak: a lightness of touch

At the very outset of the novel when he is, as Susan Guber notes, “buried alive in a place that was buried alive.” Jakob Beer is a traumatised little boy. Silence stands in place of that which cannot be articulated. Jakob comes to Athos not only “a blind man” but deaf, his ears clogged with peat, and emerging from under water, underground, into his new parent’s life: a “rebirth of earth.” The novel’s opening pages, documenting his time alone in the woods, are marked by silence: to make a sound could kill him. His entire community, his family, have disappeared, fallen silent. Jakob cannot bear testimony at this stage: it is a matter of life and death that he remain silent, and in any case there is no-one to whom he can tell his story. In order to live he kills his voice, inner and outer: unable to truly contemplate what has befallen him, he can simply survive. “I had my duties. Walk by night, in the morning dig my bed. Eat anything.”

“Athos could speak about it, he needed to speak of it, but I couldn’t.”

Long after the site of trauma is left, things cannot be brought to light. Jakob’s silence is reminiscent of that of Wiesel or Celan, a necessary time of stillness before the upheaval of testimony can take place. The very structure of the novel mimics upheaval, the second half of the book narrating the discovery of the first, it is a narrative constantly concerned with unearthing.

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155 Guber, 257
156 Fugitive Pieces, 9
157 Fugitive Pieces, 118
Trauma forces silence on an individual, the traumatised mind becomes its own censor: some memories so painful that the brain will not immediately allow us access. Ankler cites Borbelly’s belief that “trauma reduces the polysemy of images of experience... leads to a fixed meaning of the experience.”\(^{158}\) Some of Jakob’s experiences therefore simply cannot be spoken of, as he has placed them on “an inner shelf too high to reach.”\(^{159}\)

The potential to be overwhelmed by memory, is always lurking: “every moment is two moments” is a phrase that recurs in the novel. For Jakob this means that all encounters, until silence can be overcome and testimony achieved, are fearful, and daily life becomes waiting jaws: “Any given moment, no matter how casual, no matter how ordinary is poised, full of gaping life.” Grief and trauma together ensure that what he has lost “crowds every moment.”\(^{160}\)

Jakob understands it as his duty to remain alive, and so, as Williams states, “he has paradoxically dug his own grave in order to survive.”\(^{161}\) Later, when Jakob can testify, he writes in his own book that “they [the Jewish people] buried themselves in strange graves, in any space that would fit their bodies, absorbing more room than was allotted them in the world.”\(^{162}\) It is one of the more striking lines in the novel, reminding us as it does of Jakob’s own self-burial, but also that the Holocaust itself was censorship on the most grotesque

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\(^{158}\) Borbelly, in Ankler, 56
\(^{159}\) Fugitive Pieces, 111
\(^{160}\) Rauch, 36
\(^{161}\) Williams/ Polatinsky, 6
\(^{162}\) Fugitive Pieces, 45
scale, an attempt to silence, to edit out, an entire race of people from past, present and future. By killing his own voice Jakob lives to testify.

Ben too finds a way to access his responsibility to testify, by equating it in his childhood mind with the preserved bog people he sees in a copy of National Geographic: “they stared and waited, mute. It was my responsibility to imagine who they might be.” Persius’ shield of imaginative response, allows Ben to arrive at a broader understanding of bearing witness, a “responsibility” also true of the process of unearthing his parents’ past. He must penetrate their silence with imagination, and empathise with that imagined past. The task is too vast for the boy to comprehend, his parents less accessible to him than the Tolland man, yet knowledge, and the imaginative leap of lightness, points him to a place of bearing witness.

The silence of trauma can be so strong that often, intermediaries are necessary. For example, Ben’s mother tells his wife, Naomi, another empathic listener from outside the Jewish community, rather than Ben, her son, about his dead siblings – the children they lost in the death camps. She does this to ensure that “the truth would one day be passed on.” While the fact of his wife and parents keeping this knowledge from him is incredibly hurtful for Ben, it is essential that there is someone outside of the community capable of emphatic listening. Naomi ensures that the truth eventually reaches Ben, and allows his parents to articulate, via her, that which was simply too painful to communicate directly, another echo of the shield of Perseus. I think this is one example of the

163 Fugitive Pieces, 252
theme Estrin detects in the novel of a “communal sustenance of memory”\textsuperscript{164}: Collective memory, at work within the novel, is certainly effective for the characters involved.

Lightness of outlook is modelled in the novel as necessary to meaningful long term survival. Michaels also shows us the limitations of fact, and critiques a weighty approach to testimony which can paralyse. In his research, Athos “descends” so far that he reaches a place where “redemption is possible, but it is only the redemption of tragedy.”\textsuperscript{165} A more factual account of the Holocaust – death camp records alone, for example – can give a greater understanding, and, perhaps, it can allow whatever release mourning can, but it cannot take you beyond that point. The word “only” is telling here, emphasising that what tragedy can offer us is not enough to live by.

Athos, and later Jakob, wrestle with the fragmented scraps of knowledge they can come by, trying to wrestle “truth” from them. Why do it, if this act cannot redeem humanity, the Holocaust, or even the individual involved? Athos says this: “murder steals from a man his future. It steals from him his own death, but it must not be allowed to steal from him his life.”\textsuperscript{166} In bearing witness to those that perished we ensure that they are not erased.

\textsuperscript{164} Estrin, 289
\textsuperscript{165} Fugitive Pieces, 120
\textsuperscript{166} Fugitive Pieces, 150
To complicate matters further, Sampson argues that the “identity of the Second Generation Survivor” includes the component of “the successful.” It is hard to imagine the societal pressure associated with the tendency she describes for Second Generation Survivors to be seen as “symbol[s] of Jewish resilience and victory in the face of massive death.” It is not surprising that, in struggling against the opposing, and imposing, identities of “victim” and “fighter”, the children and grandchildren of the Shoah might be left unsure as to how to approach the act of testimony. Fackenheim “regarded this obligation to survive as the commanding voice of Auschwitz” because “after Auschwitz, even the most secular of Jews bears witness, by mere affirmation of his Jewishness.” This gives them, Krell says, a “holy obligation to survive as Jews.” Fackenheim also cites the Midrash Rabbah Psalms, in which God, according to Krell, makes the radical statement that the “very appearance of the divine presence depends on Israel’s ability to be a witness for God.” For those called to bear witness, the pressure is immense.

Jakob’s reality, trying to bear witness to his sister’s fate, is such a painful task that at times he comes near to insanity, it forces the Bella of his mind through the horrific torments of the camp. “I blaspheme by imagining.” This sinister discomfiture, leads us all too readily to wish Jakob an escape. Athos grants him as much: “We both understood that Athos must search so that I could

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167 ibid, 2  
168 Krell, n.pag  
169 Fackenheim, 82  
170 Krell, ibid  
171 Krell, ibid  
172 Fugitive Pieces, 167
give up: I found his faith unbearable."173 For a number of years, until his death, Athos searches for Bella. Meanwhile Jakob continues his work, bearing witness, telling the stories of many Jewish people. Lightening his burden of responsibility allows Jakob to bring his creative powers to bear meaningfully, on behalf of others. In regard to his own sister, the pain is simply too great.

The “memorial candle” notion of testimony, a burden passed down through the family, also falls short due to the huge numbers of families who were obliterated entirely. “What each one says cannot speak for all who were there,”174 as Salvo puts it, advocating a turn from both fiction and individual testimony towards mass user-ordered representations, such as those available at the Wexner Learning Centre. For Salvo, the printed book will necessarily “fail to provide a sense of the scope, the vastness of the atrocities.”175 Yet, paradoxically, he writes that “until experiencing the witness database in Washington, I could never feel the immediate reality and enormity of the Holocaust... but there I was connected to people and individual histories.”176 It was then that the “individual histories,” those he dismisses in their written form, personalised the Holocaust, and led him to an appreciation of the scale of the atrocity.

I disagree with Salvo greatly in his opinion that literature is not an appropriate means with which to bear witness to the Holocaust. People who show no inclination to visit the Memorial Centre, people who have never heard

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173 Fugitive Pieces, 58
174 Salvo, 284
175 ibid
176 Salvo, 289
of such things as testimony databases, surely they are much more likely to access the Holocaust via a film play or novel.

Marc A Krell points out that: “the cosmic rupture of the Holocaust engulfs both Jews and Christians as they find themselves shorn of their ontological affirmations and attempting to repair their fragmented world.”177 Bearing witness is a cultural act that must be entered into by all peoples. While some doubt the validity of post-memory, or post-Holocaust witnessing, others, such as Fakenheim, believe that “the Christian world fails to recognise the danger of a second Holocaust, for it still cannot face the fact of the first.”178 Surely, if this danger is real, it must be represented in accessible engaging forms.

Anxiety surrounding lightness, and light entertainment is a factor in this reluctance. The idea of release at all within a novel or movie is frowned upon. To provide any solace may be to soothe the horror of the Holocaust into “neutral historical fact.”179

Whereas initially the book seems in concurrence with Charlotte Delbo’s experience of trauma after her time in Auschwitz, that “deep memory cannot be verbalised because language has been torn apart by trauma,”180 ultimately, if sites of trauma are not uncovered and brought to light, then they overtake the characters within the novel. Even those memories trauma has silenced

177 Krell, 71
178 Krell, 74
179 Ankler, 58
180 Delbo, quoted in Ankler, 53
internally are discussed in terms of the absence of light: “the memories we elude catch up to us: overtake us like a shadow.”

“My parents and I waded through a damp silence, of not hearing and not speaking.” No wonder, then, that Ben idealises Jakob. “What a gift you had, for making one feel clear, for making one feel clean: as if talk could actually heal.” It is interesting that Ben, when able to speak clearly and be heard, notes this “cleansing” function: an attribute often associated with light, yet this man-child so wounded by inter-generational silence cannot, quite, put his faith in the ‘talking cure.’ “As if...” language could heal, says Ben, and we sense that to a large extent, it still seems a whimsical notion to him.

The idea that in conversation with an empathic listener Ben should feel “clean” is consistent with the larger thematic correlation between trauma and silence, and reminiscent of terminology in the field of Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, where Bach and Moran use the terms “clean discomfort” and “dirty discomfort” to designate response to “unwanted experience.” “Clean discomfort” is the genuine emotional response to an original painful event, while “dirty discomfort” describes the unwanted feelings and states that occur in trying to control or suppress that first state of feeling. This process can be seen in Ben, whose legitimate need for parental closeness and approval is so desperate and painful - clean discomfort – that he suppresses it, instead rejecting his father's company, the small scraps of affection, information and

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181 Fugitive Pieces, 213
182 Fugitive Pieces, 204
183 Fugitive Pieces, 208
184 paraphrased from 268, ACT in Practice.
companionship his mother is able to share with him, feeling the “dirty discomfort” of his guilt and ingratitude and left without any means of explaining his behaviour to himself.

Yet there is something saccharine in the implication, through Ben, through Jakob, that communication, testimony, might be a universal salve. “Some amount of clean discomfort is inevitable in any life,” Bach and Moran note, and the therapeutic process encourages the patient to work towards living with this discomfort, experiencing it authentically, rather than transmuting genuine response into buried pain and manifesting instead those emotions which have come to mask or “clean” pain. But the pain of the Holocaust was not some discomfort, but a site of massive trauma for each individual directly involved. Perhaps then, a period of silence, a period of burial is inevitable. This is what the child Jakob seems to understand when he says: “I knew what to do, I took a stick and began to dig my own bed.”

The metaphor of “clean” versus “dirty” discomfort is also jarring here, recalling as it does one of the most common ethnic slurs against the Jewish people. When found, Jakob speaks the “only phrase I knew in more than one language. I screamed it in Polish and German and Yiddish, thumping my fists on my chest: “dirty Jew, dirty Jew, dirty Jew.”” The scene is powerful precisely because the slur in the boy’s own mouth is so saddening, because this is the only way he has heard himself be referred to in any language but his mother-tongue.

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185 ibid
186 Fugitive Pieces, 9
187 Fugitive Pieces, 13
Of course, the child is also literally “dirty” at this point, covered in the muck of his self-imposed burial, lending the moment a bleak and uncomfortable irony, a dirty discomfort for the reader to bear witness to. Given the historical associations of terms like “dirty” and “clean” when writing about the Holocaust, or perhaps any aspect of Jewish experience, are these metaphors simply best avoided? Certainly, there is something distasteful about Ben’s assertion that Jakob’s emphatic listening has left him feeling “clean.” The imagery, and perhaps the psychology, is too reductive, carrying with it the weight of too much history: its inclusion represents a failure of lightness within the novel.

If sometimes the novel risks the accusation that it is propagating articulation as a universal salve for trauma, or worse, that it might “clean” the “dirty” Jewish psyche, is does illustrate effectively the notion that a move from silence to language may be a useful tool for some, and more, that for some of those individuals a creative or poetic interpretation may be the only way to sensibly work with the fragmented and confused scraps available to them.

As Rosen points out, Jakob is a “child locked into trauma to which the only key is poetry.” In this way, working through silence to language, and struggling to somehow articulate that which (like the signposted absence of the Greek villages) is forever silenced, Jakob’s job equates to that of the post-memory writer of Holocaust literature. “Those who did not experience suffering but attempt to articulate it through language seek to embody the tension

188 Rosen, n.pag.
between silence and language,”¹⁸⁹ as Braun writes. Michaels does not always get this right in *Fugitive Pieces*. The character of Ben seems to serve as an acknowledgement that mistakes will necessarily be made when telling a story that is not your own, yet that it is better to accept the possibility of error and to continue than for the literary dialogue of the Shoah to suffer the paralysis of analysis and fall silent.

Memory in Michaels’ work is an essential response to the Holocaust, set radically at odds with history itself. The idea that one must live with the memory of the Holocaust includes necessarily an acknowledgement that life goes on, and accordingly that pain lessens. The story of the Holocaust is not just the story of the dead, but the story of survival, and of how successive generations may practically live with the knowledge of the Holocaust.

Marienne Hirsch, amongst others, has examined “post-memory” as a “powerful and very particular form of memory...[whose] connection to its source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation,”¹⁹⁰ and it is in this way that Michaels is able to access her own Holocaust truth. Events become meaningful as they become personal, for Michaels: “We recognise death and love when we start calling them names: each other’s.”¹⁹¹ Our understanding of events, our coming to empathy, are dependant on a close personal relationship with the traumatic event, one that

¹⁸⁹ Braun, 161
¹⁹⁰ Hirsch, 22
¹⁹¹ Michaels, The Weight of Oranges
moves us beyond the fear of looking and towards an empathic desire to do just that:

"Your voice in my head reminds me
what the light teaches.
Slowly you translate fear into love."\textsuperscript{192}

Again, in Michaels poetry, it is light that allows, instructs, this creative empathy. The process of ‘coming to light’ happens “slowly,” and “love” allows us to look again at the site of atrocity, to bear witness to the pain of our collective past, to carry it into our present, and not see it consigned to history, something unalterable and impossible to find a place within.

"History chokes on the little bones of meaning,
The little bones of love."\textsuperscript{193}

In the lines from Michaels’ poem, “Hooded Hawk,” above history is presented as unable to communicate meaning, merely events. Michaels sees history as the oligarchic meta-narrative in its tendency to record only the large, bloody, and

\textsuperscript{192} Michaels, What the Light Teaches
\textsuperscript{193} Michaels, Hooded Hawk. All from Miner’s Pond.
destructive. History, for Michaels, deals in facts, not feelings, countries not individuals. Memory however celebrates the everyday, and values the individual over the collective.

Michaels herself described the novel as a result of “an obligation to establish some relationship” with “the largest and most devastating reality in living memory.”¹⁹⁴ For Michaels it is a creative empathy with the victims of atrocity that brings us to a meaningful understanding of their circumstances. Milosz states that the job of the poet is to “make present what has gone by,”¹⁹⁵ and Michaels seeks to do this primarily through empathy, a deeply individualistic take on post-memory which allows us to re-humanise history. After all, it is with individual humans, and not lists of numbers, however shocking, that we empathise. To imagine the lives of those who were dehumanised, whose lives were taken, is Michaels’ creative act of cultural atonement.

Is “remembering” in this way a crass misrepresentation, or a necessary emphatic act designed to pay tribute to these people’s lives as lives, to the lost potential beyond the horror of historical numbers attached to the Holocaust: the number killed, the numbers on their arm, the details in the Totembuch. Michaels reminds us that one of the things that made this atrocity so uniquely monstrous was the attempt to dehumanise an entire race, and so tries to reclaim individuality and remind us of the lost potential of each separate human.

¹⁹⁴ Michaels, in interview with Harrison, 2
¹⁹⁵ Milosz, 114
Memory in Michaels' work, states Eaglestone, is both “unbearably precious and painful beyond measure.” 196

“History’s source is event”, wrote Michaels in Cleopatra’s Love, “but memory’s source is meaning…often what we consciously remember is what our conscience remembers” 197. But how do you remember what you haven’t known?

“Vertical Time,” a chapter title in both Jakob and Ben’s narrative, offers a clue. As a child Ben digs in the mud of the river Humber and finds generations of silverware and plates in the sediment, lost to earthquake and storm. Athos and Jakob struggle desperately to make sense of the vast and modern city of Toronto, whilst visiting “prehistoric lakes so long gone they could never be taken from us.” 198 Athos’s has the ability to wave a hand and bisect a landscape, showing Jakob “Toronto cross-sectioned,” 199 many eras stacked one on top of the other, all simultaneously there. Still visible, still happening, and sometimes a great deal easier to grasp than the modern world. “To go back a year or two was impossible, absurd. To go back millennia, ah: that was nothing.” 200 says Jakob of the time immediately after Athos rescues him, where he finds escape and fascination in Athos’s books full of pictures of ancient artefacts.

Vertical Time also points us back to the Hebrew tradition of referring to ancestors as “we” not “they,” which “collapses time” Jakob tells us, meaning that

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196 Eaglestone, 25
197 Micheals, Cleopatra’s Love, 14
198 Fugitive Pieces, 120
199 Fugitive Pieces, 98
200 Fugitive Pieces, 30
“the Jew is forever leaving Egypt.” Similarly, as Jakob points out: “the painted clock in Treblinka will always read three o’clock.” The past is carried into the present in the Kaddish prayer, an established part of Jewish culture treating history as deeply personal.

This ancestral identification also means that “moral choices are eternal,” a concept which may be quite stifling. Can making a decision with “eternal” consequences ever be done lightly? Certainly Jonathan Safran Foer chooses to make light of it in Everything is Illuminated: “for Jews no memory is less primary than the prick of a pin.” He quips that the Jewish people are so obsessed with memory that memory becomes a sixth sense, that Jewish people can ask “what does it remember like” in the way a gentile can ask about smell or taste. Foer's book is very funny, and uses the lightness of comedy to dismiss, or contextualise at least, the idea of a collective ancestral Jewish past always, through memory, being maintained.

But in Michaels’ (gentile) narrative, any criticism of this cultural practice is necessarily more problematic. “We look for the spirit precisely in the place of greatest degradation. It’s from there that the new Adam must raise himself, must begin again.” Eaglestone criticises the book for even suggesting this level of redemption, as it advocates “bringing to the present an engagement

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201 Fugitive Pieces, 159
202 Fugitive Pieces, 161
203 ibid
204 Foer, 198
205 ibid
206 Fugitive Pieces, 167
with the past which lays ghosts.” But Susan Guber sees quite the reverse: “Whereas history relegates the past to the past,” she writes “Jakob’s art and Michaela’s receptivity replenish ongoing memories.”

It is diversity of both creative and critical interpretation that are required to build rich historical understanding, to ensure that the events of the Shoah, and legacy of it’s trauma, continues to be discussed in a way that never allows us to forget the humanity of the individuals involved. “History is immoral, events occurred. But memory is moral,” Michaels argues. “Memory dies unless it’s given a use,” says Jakob: in other words it is the social obligation of the artist to generate continual cultural relevance.

*Fugitive Pieces* is quick to point us back to the moral imperative to remember, always, the individuality of those involved. “The German language annihilated metaphor, turning humans into objects.” And so the job which Jakob devotes his life to, and other post-memory work by extension, becomes a powerful medium for good. “Words must be recovered from the language which has destroyed truth,” writes Braun. One of the most chilling passages in the novel, for this reason, is a simple list:

“figuren,” “stuke,” “dolls,” “wood,” “merchandise,” “rags.”

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207 Eaglestone, 20
208 Guber, 264
209 Fugitive Pieces, 138
210 Fugitive Pieces, 193
211 Fugitive Pieces, 143
212 Braun, 171
213 Fugitive Pieces, 163
The punctuation here is worth noting, the quotation marks re-emphasise each individual word, and remind us too that these were spoken, that this is the manner in which a whole race of human beings were referred to, within living memory. The speech marks also distance the words from their narrative voice, the lightest touch, a silent reflection of the distaste with which he handles the words. The inventory underscores the holocaust fact that people became commodities, were placed on inventories.

Katz opens his 1992 book, *The Ethics of Expediency* with a copy of an SS officer’s memo which refers to the Jews being transported as “pieces.” This linguistic dehumanisation process allowed the Nazis to nurture the state of denial, which in turn allowed people to forget that those being persecuted were every bit as human as them. The inappropriateness of believing that, as a writer, artist, philosopher or politician, you might be able to arrive at any universally applicable truth is made manifest in the novel. Meta-narratives are necessarily dangerous. Humility, for post-memory writers comes also from the idea that those insights we do receive are due not to any creative genius but the happenstance of our circumstances; “it’s not due to any ability of ours to pierce the darkness: it’s the world’s brief bestowal.”

Therefore, to say something worthwhile is necessarily to say something new, with a healthy knowledge of its basic inconsequentiality. To shed light then, the writer must ensure that their own ego is a small burden, if any.

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214 Fugitive Pieces, 174
The novel, which is quick to celebrate “the instinctive humanity of those who never lost sight of the common bond”\textsuperscript{215} is criticised by Adrienne Kertzer who believes Michaels stands “to distract and console many readers with the beauty of her story”\textsuperscript{216} privileging rare acts of compassion and so distorting, and reducing, the atrocity. Michaels novel is populated with heroic deeds, great and small: the local greengrocer who “tried to save extra fruit and oil for the families hiding young children” is dubbed the “patron saint of groceries”\textsuperscript{217} by Jakob. At once we realise both how prosaic the effort might be that made the difference between life and death, and are reminded that many, risking death themselves, did hide these children, and that many such small acts of heroism did occur.

Likewise, the novel recounts the story of the Archbishop in Crete who stayed with the Jews in the square as they were rounded up and even “tried to get in the truck with them, but the soldiers wouldn’t let him.”\textsuperscript{218} The story is reminiscent of that of Bernhard Lichtenburg, the priest from St Hedwig in Berlin, who encouraged his flock to help the Jewish people where they could, and who petitioned the Nazi government on behalf of the Jews until he was himself deported to Dachau.

Perhaps statements in the novel such as “there’s nothing a man will not do to another, nothing a man will not do for another”\textsuperscript{219} risk suggesting that Holocaust incidents of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ were in balance, which, quite obviously, is far from the case. Yet Michaels is surely right to argue that “If the evil act can’t

\textsuperscript{215} Fugitive Pieces, 149  
\textsuperscript{216} Kertzer, quoted in Cringlington, 86  
\textsuperscript{217} Fugitive Pieces, 45  
\textsuperscript{218} Fugitive Pieces, 41  
\textsuperscript{219} Fugitive Pieces, 114
be erased, then neither can the good.”\textsuperscript{220} This is the crux of her justification for these moments of lightness, these affirmations of continuing humanity. We must attest to the fact that some individuals did do a good job of “remaining in the human mire”\textsuperscript{221} Michaels’ novel, in its own way, tries to ameliorate the fact that such acts, so trivial in the face of such horror, seem so pathetic, so little worthy of notice. “To be proved true, violence need only occur once,” Jakob notes, “but good is proved by repetition.”\textsuperscript{222}

If lightness is jarring in this respect – that is, if to mention that valour existed, to assert that it does exist at all – seems to lessen, to refute even, the great evil we know to have occurred; is a challenging concept for readers, then they find themselves in accord with Jakob, struggling in vain to equate the hope and happiness he is being offered with the sum of his experience. His first wife Alex, in her playfulness and love of life, is almost insufferable to him. “Though no fault of Alex’s the finger of light poked down, cold as bone, illuminating nothing”\textsuperscript{223}; her frivolity is too great a contrast to all that has come before. It serves only to highlight the darkness.

Alex is “constantly turning on lights”\textsuperscript{224} whilst Jakob can spend “half my day gnawing through misery” to remember a moment of his past, only to have the intrusion of light see it “vanish under a bulb.” “Here Michaels acknowledges the limitations of lightness, which concur with Calvino’s. Alex exemplifies the “lightness of frivolity”, that “thoughtful lightness can make seem dull and

\textsuperscript{220} Fugitive Pieces, 161
\textsuperscript{221} Fugitive Pieces, 162
\textsuperscript{222} ibid
\textsuperscript{223} Fugitive Pieces, 139
\textsuperscript{224} Fugitive Pieces, 144
Alex is a lover of word-play and, in particular, palindromes: amusing little conceits that go exactly nowhere.

There is a literary place for subordinating meaning to the simple joy found in playing with form – as Dr Zeuss does, for example – but it is not Holocaust narrative, and Alex therefore has no permanent place in the narrative of Ben’s life. Alex’s linguistic playfulness is so intensely laboured that it obscures meaning, and her “making light” rapidly comes to feel dull and heavy. Alex doesn’t say goodbye, she says: “Ceylon, Abyssinia Samoa. Can’t Romania: Tibet. Moscow.” Her lightness may be clever and amusing, fun and zany, but it is an inadequate response to trauma. She is more interested with the mode of communication than whether she is communicating anything of any real value.

We see how Alex and her friends’ lightness misses the point: “how could I discuss their upper-class communism with them, those who shone with certainty and had never had the misfortune of witnessing theory refuted by fact” Jakob asks. Alex’s friends are much more confident discussing politics and war than Jakob, who has lived through it. “A character in a screwball comedy searching in vain for a serious moment,” sounds fairly affectionate, but is damning when considered in the light of the serious moments all around her; Alex, in her frivolity, is unable to engage with the realities of testimony.

Even Michaela’s thoughtful lightness is difficult to cope with: “she was blunt and sweet, a crayon, where everything before had been written in

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225 Memos, 10
226 Fugitive Pieces, 148
227 Fugitive pieces, 133
228 Fugitive Pieces, 131
blood.” Here Ben’s problem has more to do with his difficulty in accepting lightness as an appropriate response than any actual fault in Michaela. His hyperbolic statement that his life before her had been “written in blood” laughably overstates his upbringing, it is cringingly overearnest. Ben fails to understand that lightness can address that dark, and so he feels a confusion that must surely be guilt when Naomi tries to show Ben that her lullabies, perhaps the gentlest and lightest of musical genres, can cope with testimony in a way that he cannot. “These little lullabies were overheard and passed along and generations later, that song is all that’s left to tell us of that child.” In their lightness, the ghetto lullabies endured.

Ben exemplifies, more, that being brought up with the rhetoric of weight makes lightness and love difficult to accept. The difficulty, when working with and responding to literary lightness, is knowing these things: how much of the discomfort lightness generates is an authentic critical response to an inappropriate interpretive mode; how much of our own levels of Holocaust discomfort, external to the text, are we bringing into our reading; and how much of our desire to censor literary lightness in relation to the Holocaust is born from a genuine concern for the future of Holocaust representation, rather than a kneejerk response to experiencing the shock of the new?

“We would be unable to appreciate the lightness of language,” states Calvino, “if we could not appreciate that language has some weight to it.”

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229 Fugitive Pieces, 238  
230 ibid  
231 Memos, 15
\textit{Fugitive Pieces} is full of potentially humorous scenarios, almost slapstick occurrences, drained of all humour by the atrocity. A boy staying stock still in the woods all night believing himself to be meters from a soldier, who, with the dawning of light, transpires to be the trunk of a fallen tree, might be the humorous punch-line of a boys’ adventure comic or a light comedy, were not that he is under a very real threat of death. What should be a ridiculous imaginative flight of fancy for any boy is a practical, if in this instance incorrect, hunch. Athos hamming up the symptoms of his phoney illness so as to avoid detection as he smuggles the boy across the borders might have been amusing, if, again, we did not know the penalty of his failure to pull off the “prank”. There is a very uncomfortable irony, in the fact that all a filthy Jakob can communicate to Athos is that he is a “dirty Jew.” He literally is. Structurally, it should be funny. Practically, it is manifestly distasteful. Jakob is the butt of a racist joke still too awful to ever be forgivably made. Lightness here is appropriately inappropriate too. Michaels calls this the “laughter of the damned.”\footnote{Fugitive Pieces,118} She recounts how the photos of the SS guards were not sadistic or horrified, but “contorted with laughter.”\footnote{Fugitive Pieces,166} It is right that we approach humour cautiously in post-Holocaust representations.

\textit{Fugitive Pieces} testifies to the horror of mass genocide, but also to this: happiness happens too. Ben’s mother works unsuccessfully to impress on her son the “the absolute, inviolate necessity of pleasure,”\footnote{Fugitive Pieces,223} and the novel shows us that this choice, to live life with a healthy sense of appreciation, to turn towards
lightness in the creative interpretation of your own existence, is in no way contradictory to survival, but may even be essential to it. Just as Daphne and Kostas do not hide the fact that there is “rubble where the front steps [of their house] had been” but rather, to attest to their good fortune and continued existence “set a pot of flowers in the pile.”235 The application of beauty - making beauty necessary – stands as a gentle defiance of hardship, a light touch.

It is not just the characters that exemplify lightness but the novel itself. During the war, “a patriot decided to liberate the cargo” of food stolen from the Greeks by the Nazis. “The train exploded as it pulled out of the station. Oranges and lemons flew, raining into the streets... balconies glistened, lemon juice dripped in the sunlight. For days after people found an orange in the crook of a statue, in the pocket of a shirt hanging to dry.”236 There is no denying the levity in the image of exploding citrus, the glistening sunlight, the happenstance of an orange in the pocket on your washing line. Yet the moment also highlights the importance, the “good fortune” the people felt in acquiring a single piece of the fruit they had grown for themselves, how robbed and how hungry the people were.

The moment of lightness draws us in, and then forces us to bear witness to the weighty circumstances surrounding it. The image of the “black marketers [who] pulled raw fish out of their briefcases, eggs from their pockets, apricots from their hats, potatoes from their sleeves”237 serves a similar function: the

235 Fugitive Pieces, 59
236 Fugitive Pieces, 66
237 ibid
criminal’s acquisitions are so unlikely as to appear magical, confirming again the scarcity of food. Elrud Ibsch is wrong to say that these incidences of spectacle create a novel world which is “overwhelming, alluring and comforting”\textsuperscript{238}; they create moments of lightness which draw us back to look, their levity allows us, again, to turn and face reality, in all its cruelty and splendour.

Michaels borrows the magician to create an image of lightness, and specifically, the example of Jasper Maskelyne, to illustrate redemptive heroic lightness. His use of magic, storytelling and creativity saves lives and creates meaning, using what is customarily thought of as “light” entertainment.

Again and again Michaels attests to the wonder of the world, even in times of both natural and man-made atrocity. The islanders of Zakynthos, for example, escape the earthquake that engulfs their town because they trust the prescience of their animals: “pigs bite off each other’s tails... fish leap out of water, rats stagger as if drunk.”\textsuperscript{239} The language here seems appropriately hyperbolic, the facts astonishing. The novels is full of curiosities that remind us of the wonder in life Clumsy slapstick botanists, with their outrageous good and bad fortune remind us that while there must be poetry, there is no “poetic justice”, we do not get what we deserve: we get what we get.

As long as our critical culture questions the ethics surrounding Holocaust representation we can be fairly sure that the import of the event has not been forgotten. Weisel, for all his caution, also, in response to the atrocity asserted

\textsuperscript{238} Ibsch, 206
\textsuperscript{239} Fugitive Pieces, 83
that “neutrality is a sin.”\textsuperscript{240} If we do not allow a polyphony of literary forms and voices to bear witness – and in so doing draw attention back to first generation testimonies and Holocaust facts – then these narratives lose their urgency, become the “neutral historical fact” Ankler warned of. “An engagement with the unreal,” says Melitia Shaum, “makes up a central part of all social, economic, religious and political thinking.”\textsuperscript{241}: why should the literature of the Holocaust be any different?

Meira Cook, believes that Michaels “unwittingly conceals the decidedly un-poetic nature of genocide.”\textsuperscript{242} Cook’s criticism typifies the anxiety that if we attest to what is light, to what is joyous, to what is playful in the world, then we necessarily undercut the reality of its horror. Hopefully this work goes somewhere towards demonstrating that this critique of lightness in Holocaust literature is at least not always true, that the use of lightness often serves to point our attention back to the atrocity, that the only sense of release through art, in \textit{Fugitive Pieces} at least, is exclusively the release from trauma through authentic articulation of experience, with all the difficulties inherent in that.

Although it is important to maintain an open dialogue surrounding Holocaust literature, we must be careful not to allow testimony to stagnate in a misguided, reactionary attempt to protect it, but rather, as Calvino notes, “we

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\textsuperscript{240} Weisel, 173
\textsuperscript{241} Shaum, quoted in Estrin, 277
\textsuperscript{242} Cook, 16
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shall face the new millennium, without hoping to find anything more in it than what we ourselves are able to bring to it. Lightness, for example."\textsuperscript{243}

"We like to think language is nothing without us, but in the end, it’s we who beg it back,"\textsuperscript{244} Michaels points out in \textit{Cleopatra’s Love}. As readers, according to Ibsch, the tension between the all-too human drive towards “healing comfort” and the “scandal of knowledge” is an essential “contradiction in writing the Holocaust” which readers must simply “live with.”\textsuperscript{245} “Live” is a key word here. Terrence Des Pres wrote in that “the survivor’s special grace [is] the simplest of all knowledge – that life is what counts."\textsuperscript{246} And \textit{Fugitive Pieces} is a book which attests to living, and in so doing living \textit{with} the contradictions between the drive towards personal redemption and knowledge of events too awful to ever be redeemed. \textit{Fugitive Pieces} leans towards life, and finds reasons to make life liveable: that is what lightness seeks to do.

Czeslaw Milosz, a Polish Jew and an exile poet, just like fictional Jakob Beer, believed that the poet’s job was to champion the “side of being” and to stand “against nothingness.”\textsuperscript{247} In attesting to the beauty of living – in rising above his circumstances whilst giving testimony to them – It could be argued that Jakob Beer is indeed this kind of Holocaust poet, and that Anne Michaels by extension, is a Holocaust novelist on the side of being. She presents a lightness that, far from being unbearable, respects the atrocity of the Shoah and yet presents hope for social recovery.

\textsuperscript{243} Memos, 29
\textsuperscript{244} Cleopatra’s Love.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibsch, 211
\textsuperscript{246} Des Pres, 169
\textsuperscript{247} Milosz, 24


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