

THE CATSITTERS

I see each house in a road as a tall hive in which many secrets, kept close, cannot help but hum softly like bees.

I wrote something like that sentence when I was fourteen. I think it had gradually dawned on me by then what lay behind the whispers, weird noises and shouts which came from my parents' bedroom when they thought we were both asleep. In front of us since the end of our infancy their jolliness had faded and they had gradually become largely silent and inscrutable, except when they growled about such things as the mess in our rooms or the mud we brought in. They imagined their secrets were safe. From my sister Emily they were. She was barely ten with a head full of notes, scales and tunes to practise for Miss Beamish, who had very prominent eyes which Mother said could be put right by an operation (I wondered if her ever-gaping mouth and Brussels sprout breath could be too.) Noisy Emily was destined to become a musician. I was quiet and painted and wrote stories and thrived on solitude and silence. I painted and wrote best in my head late at night when the prowling wind supplied me with a steady stream of images and words.

When our mother said one Sunday morning in early spring "We have something to tell you girls, sit down." I knew what it would be. Eight years later when Mother lay dying, she asked me how I had known that Dad was leaving and I lied to her and answered her that I had not.

"But you didn't cry like Emily" she whispered.

Emily had rushed to her bedroom and sobbed for hours until I began to hate her - and my mother for comforting her - which made me feel more guilty. It was a very strange day, a day without the piano. And when Emily could cry no longer, even though I could tell she thought she should, the house was filled with a silence which allowed all the background noises of the house - the ticking of the clocks, the good-natured burring of the fridge and the tapping of the central heating pipes - to come to the fore. *They* had gone to sit in separate rooms - there were plenty to spare in that exclusive, tense and soulless "executive dwelling" - and the last thing I remember of the day was a beautiful, slow, red sunset as if the blood of some great invisible creature, dying, was filling the whole sky and earth and spelling the end of innocence and childhood. The next day I secretly cheered because Mother came to tell us (we had slept in the same double bed that night like Ealinor and Marianne Dashwood) that we needed not go to school. This was almost as good as announcing that they had changed their minds, or that it had been an April Fool's trick (it was March 29th). Like figurines, though both equally dismal, on a weather-house, first she retreated and then he shuffled in to kiss us good-bye. He would see us soon; he was sorry, he said; when the dust had settled (his favourite saying) he would treat us to a lovely surprise; when we were older he would tell us his side of the story. He kissed first Emily then came around and bent over me to give me his blessing. He smelt of tobacco and coffee. Beyond his dark eyes lay all his secrets I would never know. He stared a while at me, his eyes flicking between my eyes, as if to plumb them for anger, hatred or misery - or knowledge? - went to whisper something, gulped and then just went. I had lain perfectly still and silent like an actress in a film pretending to be a dead body. While Emily buried her head in the pillow again I watched him carry a couple of suitcases and a suit in a polythene wrapper to his car and drive away without a backward glance. I never saw him again.

It was a day or two later that Mother began to speak of it. Emily wanted to know why her daddy had gone. At first she replied that she did not know. She went about her kitchen chores quickly and noisily as she always did when infuriated, slamming bowls down and making plates do a drum roll on the work surface. And then, as if she could hold it back no longer she began to mutter “that tart of a pee - ay” under her breath. It turned out he had done various things with her (“gone off with her” - “gone behind (her) back with her” - “had given the tart one”) and I could not decide which disgusted her most. She began to drink wine at dinner and this made her add things like “well, we’re better off without him” and “I hope he’s proud of himself”. Emily, who was still creeping into my bed, asked me what a pee-ay was and I said I thought it was a woman who worked for a boss.

“But what do you think that dad gave her?” she asked. I decided not to tell her.

“It must be very bad and so must she be,” she concluded as she turned over.

I found it harder than ever to fall asleep that night. Mixed in with the sighs of the wind was the sound of Mother weeping and cursing, and for a while I thought that Dad had crept back home. Emily cried out in her sleep. She missed him. I had decided to hate him for preferring his pee-ay to us.

Unlike the other two - and his pee-ay I suppose - I was unable to shed a tear when we heard he had drowned in the Caribbean - his golden holiday dust with *her* which was meant to settle before our treat that never would be. Emily’s serious illness - she incubated a lung infection because, the doctor thought, her defences had been swept away by the shock and grief of it all - meant Mother had an even better excuse than his mere desertion to stay away from the funeral. His side of the family must have sensed her relief and never got in contact again. Granddad and Grandma Dyer had always been impatient for us to be gone. Adults think that children are too stupid to tell. Granddad Dyer had amazingly huge red ears and would keep looking at his watch and sniffing.

Such were, I reflected much, much later, the unforeseen consequences of betrayal. But Mother pulled herself together. Over the next weeks and months she eliminated every trace of him from the house and when she introduced her new friend Matthew to us in the run-up to Christmas I could almost persuade myself that Harry Dyer had never really existed. My infant love for him sank down like some festering globule deep within me.

By January the change in our lives was even more dramatic. Matthew and Mother announced on Christmas Day that they had bought a brand new house in Dadlingcote, a very pretty village outside Earlstone. We moved in and I left all the memories of those late-at-night noises behind. I listened hard in the dark silence and was rewarded by gentle laughter and a sleep-inducing peace.

I moved to an even more exclusive school in the little town of Twyford on the Warwickshire border. Emily stayed put in her state junior school and would transfer later to be with me. The school was worthy but dull and I kept as usual to myself.

It was after Easter that Jessica Lilley arrived from the south of England. She was blonde, astonishingly pretty and shapely beyond what her fourteen years should have allowed. She was an immediate sensation and every girl wanted to be her friend. Our uniform was drab and staid, consisting of a stiff woollen skirt of large navy and sky blue check, and a saintly white blouse. Jessica rendered its asexual purpose ironic as its ugliness seemed to emphasize her beauty rather than subdue it.

A few days after her arrival I was dying to see how Mr Boyd, our sole male teacher, a

man of about forty, would react to her. Although he taught us RE, I expected him to find her irresistible. His hobby was orchids. How well would he fight off the temptation to look at this specimen? Jessica had the kind of legs that did not attract but demanded attention. The thick black stockings we were forced to wear were no deterrent, in fact in her case they were the very opposite. Jessica sat in a diagonal line between me and his desk, giving a perfect angle for me to spot any crafty downward sideways glances of his owlish eyes. Was she making her right leg jig up and down for him or was it an involuntary tic? She *seemed* as absorbed in her work as he was in his papers. I stopped glancing and began staring in case I was missing something. It was a shock when very slowly she turned to stare back at me, as if she had felt my eyes on her. She smiled briefly and actually blushed, then turned away. Her leg jiggled more quickly. I felt a strange inner glow. Old Boyd seemed utterly oblivious of the visual feast not three yards from his beaky nose. I glanced around and behind me and realised I was not the only one fascinated by Jessica Lilley. Katherine Paulley, a large, sporty girl with an acid tongue who frightened me, was looking with undisguised loathing straight at me. Why? What had I done? And what did Jessica's look mean? In the changing rooms on the second day back after Easter she had joined in with the general laughter when another girl, one of her early allies, had said something snide about "Sobersides." This was my nickname, via what - as I realised much later - was a well-intentioned, though misfiring effort by our jolly Maths teacher to pull my leg and persuade me to laugh at myself and the others to laugh *with* me rather than at me and about me. When Jessica enjoyed that whispered joke at my expense as we removed our hockey kit to hurry self-consciously into the shower, I was not upset or disappointed. I secretly liked being the outsider, the silent one. I preferred to wonder around at break and at lunchtime alone. I hated school. It bored me. It depressed me. Except for French, I already knew what I was being taught. I had my little library at home. I even had the internet because Matthew was a computer wizard. School was a legal requirement, a place for me to go while Mother ran her employment agency. I might have told her she was wasting her money on the fees for this overrated academy, had money been an issue. In a comprehensive, I suppose, for my strangeness, for my flat back and flatter front, for my height, my old-fashioned dark pageboy cut and my blank, almost anguished stare, I would have been mercilessly bullied - as opposed to the mainly wordless ostracising I received at The Rectory. Who knows what might have happened if I had been?

Anyway, when Jessica tittered in the changing room I wrote her off as just another shallow, conceited girl, a brainless - if extraordinarily gorgeous - bimbo. No one took any notice of me in the corner of the shower so I could look at her lovely body, her peachy breasts and shapely hips and thighs, and steal a glimpse of her golden, almost strawberry-blond triangle of hair - all the very opposite of my linear and meagre attributes. No-one took any notice of me because most were furtively taking notice of her.

At the end of RE I found an excuse to go to old Boydy's desk and saw he had been doing a crossword. I think, all these years later, that he must have been appointed because he was a eunuch or a self-confessed homosexual. Perhaps he had had to submit to castration to get the job. (If Dad had been that way inclined, he might have ignored his PA, nothing would have changed - and he would not have drowned full of rum and red wine.) Whatever Boydy's proclivities or affliction, how could he have possibly been impervious to the charms of Jessica Lilley? A Parisian art student would tell me one day in a brasserie after lectures "If you see something beau -ti- fool then just look! *Faut regarder!*"

After RE, as we walked down the old dark wooden staircase in the oldest part of the building to endure maths in a cramped mobile, Katherine Paulley whispered “Fucking lezzy” in my ear and pushed me so I stumbled. Jessica broke my fall. She helped me to my feet as the rest shrank back in silent horror. I said nothing as she made sure I was alright. I saw at once how kind she really was, kinder than she had so far been allowed to be in the starring role she had had no choice but to play. At the very foot of the stairs Katherine was staring back up crimson-faced. She had by accident brought about what she least desired - the sowing of a seed of friendship between me and Jessica Lilley. With this pedigree stamp of approval I was saved, and released from the taunts and snubs I had put up with since my arrival - and which I took for granted anyway, having ever played the victim. Girls began to smile at me, even to speak to me. I gradually felt emboldened to make comments - quick and quiet - about the eccentricities of the teachers and the absurdities of the silliest girls. I began to gain a reputation as a comic, a “sarky cow” and - scarcely could I credit it - to be popular. I still kept well to the edge of things and usually only spoke when invited to - “And what do you think, Sobersides?”

I wrote Katherine a note and slipped it into her desk.

Dear Katherine,

Please let us be friends. I am not a lezzy. I am not anything. I just look at things and people because I like to paint them. And photograph them. Honest.

Anna Dyer

Jess’s arrival that Easter coincided with that of Mrs Hamilton, our new French teacher. She brought to an end a succession of supply teachers of mixed quality after the sudden departure of Mrs Butcher “with her nerves” after I had been there a few weeks. I still wince when I think of that awful dialogue we had to read around the class, set in a hotel corridor after the fire alarm had been raised. I had taken the part of a guest shouting ridiculous things like “*Où est l’incendie?*” and “*Voilà de la fumée!*” Being new, I had wanted to impress and my French accent was pretty decent (my maternal grandmother was half-French). I had thus earned the hostility of the many in the room who hated Butcher’s “rubbish” lessons, and thereby enhanced my unpopularity. I was privately astonished that those girls - in a posh, fee-paying school - actually played Mrs Butcher up.

“Mrs Butcher?” Katherine Paulley had said in a wheedling manner.

“Yes Katie?” she had sighed.

“Would French people really hang around in a fire and say things like “Where is the fire?” and “Look, there’s some smoke”? Wouldn’t they just run out screaming like the English?”

A general titter had broken out. Katie was ever outwardly polite in her dealings with teachers and Mrs Butcher had no way of dealing with her subversive sarcasm.

Mrs Hamilton was sweet, duskily pretty and really French. She instantly won our affection with her good humour and zest. I thought she was in her twenties and I was really surprised when we found out she was thirty-seven. She brought in her own materials and put away for good that tattered textbook - with that idiotic bereted

Gallic stereotype, baguette under arm and chin beard, striding over a map of France on the cover. Using cue-cards, she got us talking in pairs and arranged for me and Jessica to be partners when her normal neighbour (who was hopeless at French) had had to go to the sick room. Partners we remained at Mrs Hamilton's insistence, as Jessica's jealous friend, recovered, was reassigned elsewhere.

Jessica was quite good but not as good as me. The teacher seemed to hover a lot in our vicinity listening to us, encouraging Jess and praising her even though I could hear her accent was sometimes poor. She stood us up to demonstrate to the others and gave us equal star-billing. It did not take long for it to dawn on me, however, which of us was the favourite. Sometimes I caught Miss staring unashamedly at Jess while the class wrote in silence. If she spotted me looking she would raise her wide eyes slowly to the ceiling as if she was in a daydream and had just happened to have her in her mindless line of sight.

The anniversary of my father's death passed without a mention. Emily played the piano all day and it did not seem to enter her head. By early May I was spending every fine evening out in the fields amongst the blossom trees, wondering how to paint them. I stood for ages under horse chestnuts, dotting with my imaginary thin-tipped paintbrush the pale cream flowers, pink at the centre, onto an imaginary canvas amongst clusters of leaves which reminded me of great lolling tongues. I stood by the brook, gazing at the waters and imagined building up an effect of silver and grey ripples over the flat russet and golden stones, those large coins which I fancied a careless ogre had dropped there. The fields and slopes were gaudy yellow with rape and the sky cast from an intense dark blue. How I wished I could spend all my spring days there instead of at school! Why could not the good and sensible children learn all they needed at a School Online, from just a few very good teachers, only when the weather was bad, and send in all their work to be marked by computer? Think of all the money and hours that could be saved for other things, if schools were abolished, torn down, built over and teachers trained for something else!

I did not think those thoughts precisely then but I might have done, as I climbed the pasture which overlooked the village. What a wonderful painting the view would make with the pale grey church spire at the centre of its cluster of tall red buildings, all surrounded by gold and green and blue! I decided to paint it as a Christmas gift for my mother and I hurried home to fetch my camera.

As I turned a corner by the bakery I ran straight into Mrs Hamilton carrying a wicker basket. Literally.

"Mon Dieu!" she shouted as she caught me. "Anna? C'est toi? Tu habites ici? Dans le village?"

"Oui, Madame. Dans la maison là-bas," I replied, pointing into the new close.

"Well, so do I!" she exclaimed with a laugh. "We 'ave a cottage in 'oneypot Lane, the corner one by the telephone box."

"Oh but it's a lovely house!"

She insisted I come with her to taste some real lemonade she had made. The ceilings were low and oaken beamed, the furniture antique and of deep, rich colours. The air was fragrant and warm. A shaft of gold from the lowering sun appeared to project a pattern of blue and red onto the large rug as if it was a cinema screen. On one wicker chair, on a green cushion, was curled up an enormous orange cat just waiting to be fondled. He snored, squeaked, opened one slitty eye and rolled onto his great back for his belly to be rubbed, with paws opening and closing. I giggled. I could not resist

putting my finger tip into one of his great pads and felt with delight his claws draw so tight that I could not extract it.

“Oh Napoleon adores to be stroked. And he is a big poof! Oh, I mean he pretends to be, the way he puts his paws up and down.” She had gone a little red and wanted to escape from her faux pas. “Do you ’ave a cat? Tu as un chat, chérie?”

I shook my head. I had never bothered with cats before. With this one I fell instantly in love. I watched her pick him up and cradle him like a baby. He meowed weakly in not too serious a protest and she rocked him to and fro until his eyes closed and he purred.

“Tu es un chat méchant!” she muttered in his ear. “N’est-ce pas? N’est-ce pas, Napoleon? Méchant!”

To my disbelief and delight he meowed in reply every time she spoke to him.

“He’s a talking cat!” I exclaimed. “Méchant.” Doesn’t that mean bad?”

“Yes. He is a bad, bad boy. I find him in the bedrooms, on the bed sometimes and orange cat ’airs everywhere! He is a bad Napoleon!”

We were in the kitchen. I looked around as I sipped my sweet, cloudy lemonade and saw on the wall a photograph of her, looking more girlish and even prettier, next to a beautiful young man. She was in a lace shawl and carried a bouquet of red roses. He wore a very dark suit and a proud smile. He had intense brown eyes, a noble air and a charming smile. She saw where I was looking.

“Is he not ’andsome my Raymond? Nearly as ’andsome a boy as Napoleon.”

“Your husband?”

She nodded but seemed eager to change the subject. She offered to refill my glass.

“Is he at work?” I dared to ask.

She sighed. “Yes, away on business. Again. He works for a big company. An important man. Now what about your family?”

I told her honestly of all that had befallen us until Matthew had come to the rescue. To my amazement and embarrassment tears welled up in her eyes. She looked at me with genuine concern, horror even.

“’Ow you suffer, you English children. And yet you bear it so well! How calm you are, Anna.”

I shrugged and told her how badly affected and ill my sister Emily had been.

“You are an interesting girl, Anna. You are not like the rest.”

I felt I was blushing. Did she mean under-developed, childlike?

She studied me and appeared to grasp that she might have said the wrong thing.

“I mean you are quiet, very calm, very sensible and grown-up...”

As soon as she said “grown-up” it was her turn to blush. I came to her rescue.

“They call me Sobersides. Miss McGovern pinned the name on me. I’m straight up and down - like a plank. That’s what my sister calls me - The Plank.”

“And...you don’t mind?”

“No.”

She herself was slightly built and small-breasted; but she had bright emerald eyes, the darkest brown hair - so lustrous in that evening light it looked almost navy blue - and such a quick, intelligent and attractive way of looking and smiling. Her beauty would age and fade very slowly and I fancied that I might even go the same way. My maternal grandmother had resembled me and had become pretty in her later teenage. I was in no hurry. My mother had cuddled me one day and said I should remain a girl as long as I could - being a woman was painful.

“There are too many, Anna, who lose their girlishness at twelve or thirteen. They wear make-up and spoil their skins. They put on weight and even have double chins. They

know too much. They get cynical before their time. They feel under pressure to do and think things they know deep down they don't want to do. They lose their precious.....freedom.”

She had said this to comfort me when I had had a particularly bad week of name-calling at my previous school, and it had got to me a little. The wisdom of what she had said was so clear that I never worried about myself again. I painted, wrote my stories, baked scones, knitted my animals and made my mind up to stay as I was until I was ready to change.

“You 'ave a French face if you don't mind me saying” said Mrs Hamilton. “Your face is quite long, your skin is almost olive and your hair is so dark. Your eyes are very brown.....and sad, like many French eyes.”

I smiled. I told her about my grandmother whose father had married a French nurse after World War 1, and settled with her in London.

“I knew it! Do you know where she came from? The south, I bet! Like me.”

I said I had heard Dijon mentioned.

“Where there is so much mustard! Like the fields out there!”

“That's rape, Mrs Hamilton.”

“Rape? But that is bad, Anna.”

“Not when it is a plant. It makes oil.”

“Not mustard?”

“No.”

The tiny glass clock on the mantle chimed. It was seven o'clock. I knew my tea would be ready. I got up to leave. She put down her cat and embraced me warmly. She kissed me on each cheek. It felt good to be cared for. But I did not dare or wish to return the embrace, and certainly not the kisses!

I felt a surge of cheerfulness inside all the way home. I told my mother and Matthew about my French teacher living in the village; about her lovely cottage near the church and her great, silly cat; and how she thought the rape was mustard. But I did tell them I had let on about our woes and definitely made a secret of our parting cuddle. At the time it had felt natural. It reminded me how cold and colourless people like Mr Boyd were, in contrast with her passionate concern for me; and of course, she was French! But as I lay in bed I began to realise that it was nice but not quite right for a teacher to show such concern for a pupil. And I knew for a certainty at last that I was not a lezzy.

On Monday morning as I walked towards the great school entrance a car door on my right opened and a flustered Mrs Hamilton got out. Could she have a quick word with me? I went over.

“Anna. I've been thinking. It was such a nice chat we had on Saturday and I felt so sad about your father. Please forgive me that I gave you a big squeeze at the end. I was upset for you.”

I smiled and told her that it did not matter a bit. Thinking that would be that, I turned to walk off. She caught my hand.

“Anna. Please. I beg of you. Say nothing of this. Did you tell anyone? Your mother?”

I shook my head and smiled again.

“Please, Anna. Promise me. Give me your word. It is our secret. Tell nobody please.”

She was verging on tears. Other girls were pausing to look.

“Mrs Hamilton. I talk to nobody very willingly. Even if I did I wouldn't mention it. It was nice and I didn't mind.”

“You will not even tell your best friend?”

“No. Even if I had one.”

In the courtyard girls began asking me what it had all been about.

“She lives in our village....She was asking me if I’d seen her big ginger cat. It’s gone missing. I told her I’d look out for him.”

A Voice I did not care to hear - the same one which had told me to hate my sister and my father - told me I had a power. I retorted then and there that I would never use it.

Over the next few days I began to realise that Jessica was gradually severing her early alliances and tending more and more towards me. I admit I felt flattered, although I was puzzled and uncertain how to respond. I was not fashionable and certainly not flamboyant; the very opposite of her. But her attentions had unforeseen consequences, like the betrayal my father had committed. Those of her allies who had warmed towards me now grew colder again and Katherine Paulley began to scowl and whisper under her breath. I was in a quandary. I really wished to remain neutral, of importance to no-one, and the butt of no-one’s animosity.

One break, just over a week after our talk, I whispered to Mrs Hamilton that I should like to stay and ask her for advice. She hesitated. Could I ask Jessica to stay behind as well? She flinched. Had she guessed what it was about? But no, of course she had not. She was going by the book and did not want to be left alone with me, with a pupil. I caught up with Jessica halfway down the stairs and she agreed to return with me to the classroom.

Looking at neither one nor the other, but steadily out of the window at the sheep-dotted hillside where I wished with all my heart I could be - away from all this tedious “relationship” nonsense - I explained quietly the dilemma I was in. To my dismay Jessica began to cry.

“Don’t you want to be my friend, Anna?”

“Of course I do. But the others are so nasty.”

She cried louder. Amidst her sobs she said that she loved me. Mrs Hamilton stiffened. I froze.

“Girls, I do not think I can deal with this. I think you should speak to the ‘eadmistress, or Nurse ... or perhaps Mr Boyd.”

I almost sniggered to hear Boyd mentioned and would have done had Jessica not been so upset. I thought it was the right thing to put my arm around her heaving shoulders and I let it hang there limply. Mrs Hamilton had gone very red. She got hurriedly to her feet and turned away. Was she about to cry too?

“Jessica,” I whispered, “I know what to do. Be friends with the others still and we will be secret best friends. I promise.”

I knew she lived a few country lanes away in Stapleford. By bicycle it would take twenty minutes at most to visit one another - or we could meet halfway. I told her my plan. She brightened like the sun on the edge of a cloudburst and laughed amongst her sobs. She agreed she would talk to Rose, to Gabrielle and the rest as much as she had - and even to tease me a little. We left a thoughtful Mrs Hamilton in peace and ran out into the sunshine.

As we were practising our cue cards in French later, I could not resist the urge to ask her “Pourquoi tu m’aimes, Jessica? Je suis ennuyeuse, sérieuse et laide....”

She objected. “Who told you you were ugly? You’re lovely...and not boring at all!”

Mrs Hamilton could not help but overhear, and knowing that our neighbours were expecting her to react - because a minute or two before she had laid into Katherine Paulley and her partner for lapsing into English - she announced she would separate

us if we did not do the task as she had stipulated. Katherine Paulley gave a gloating cough and snigger. I felt taken aback. I was used to the synthetic anger of Mrs Hamilton by now. This was definitely genuine.

In the hubbub of the corridor, as we waited to go into Science, I whispered to Jess that perhaps it would be a good idea if we did not work together any more in French.

“Why ever not?” she demanded.

“Because it would be part of our secret plan.”

I kept back my real reason; that Mrs Hamilton was jealous. Of me.

We met after tea that Friday evening. It was warm and sunny. We left our bikes by the canal bridge and climbed over the stile. We walked along the bank in the direction of Sharnstoke. She took me by the arm, pulled me close and I did not object. Her eyes beamed and she almost danced along, laughing with the mallards and stopping to point in silent delight whenever a water rat plopped into the water and paddled quickly across to the other bank. We came to a cool bridge where we stopped to make whooping noises to boom and echo against the vault, and she laughed helplessly at my impression of our ridiculous Games mistress - “Hit it with the flat side of the hockey stick, you silly girl!” - I shouted in the most stupid bass voice I could manage. Around the corner, set back from the bridge between the blue bricks and the lacy cream blossom of the hawthorn was a bench. We sat down. I peeled us an orange I had brought in my little rucksack and after we had licked our fingers clean of the sticky juice we ate some squares of chocolate. I asked her again to explain why she liked me when no-one else did. She took a deep breath and clasped her hand to mine and laid them both on her thigh. She was wearing tight jeans. She told me I was funny and a dope; and was old-fashioned, different from the rest, an individual.

“Only because they won’t have me as I am, and that makes me worse.” I replied darkly, throwing peel at the ducks.

“No. You’re clever and your own person. You have a mind of your own, I mean. Why do you like me, Anna?”

“Because you’re kind, and kinder to me than any other girl I know - including my horrible sister. Because you’re clever and beautiful. And because you like *me* and say nice things!”

I had exaggerated a little but she had no way to tell and so laughed in delight. It was the first time I had declared any affection for her or anyone. She kissed me on the cheek and I felt her thigh move towards mine. Our hands slipped down onto the spar of the bench. Her legs were quite parted, her breath came shorter and I felt alarm. I glanced across at her face; her bottom lip had dropped a little she was no longer smiling and I could see the white of her teeth. She was redder in the cheek. Like Mrs Hamilton. She raised up my tight fist, unpicked my fingers and slid my palm across the top of her right breast.

“Can you feel my heart?” she whispered. “Can you tell how much I care for you?”

I was more fascinated than aroused. Feeling this soft, giving flesh in a place where I had none was a very strange experience and I could not withdraw my hand. She lowered it and put it near the top of her thigh. Her left leg began to jig and she stared absent-mindedly at the woods beyond which were dense with bluebells.

The yapping of a dog to our distant left was a relief. The spell was broken. We got up and walked back. As we rounded a bend, we saw - walking very slowly away from us - a young woman with dark hair.

“Mrs Hamilton,” hissed Jessica like a goose in my ear. My instinct was to stand in to the side and wait until she had gone, but Jessica had already broken into a trot pulling

me helplessly along. Now she said her name out loud and our teacher turned in feigned surprise to hear her.

“Girls!” she exclaimed. “What a nice surprise. Are you out walking? Or fishing?”

She tried to be even-handed in the attentions and smiles she awarded us but could not help gradually giving my companion more. And when I began to tell her of the water rats and stuttered a little she could not mask her impatient, almost vexed stare, and cut me short. That Voice of mine whispered “jealous” and I remained silent for the rest of our encounter. She chose to walk next to Jessica and engaged her more and more in a tête-à-tête without, I think, being aware that she did. Had she somehow observed us on the bench? Had Jessica told her where we were meeting? We climbed the stile and she turned to bid us farewell. Her car was parked on the verge a few yards back. She was absolutely scrupulously fair in the allocation of her parting smiles for us and we waved her off enthusiastically, for contradictory reasons.

Jessica suspected no deliberateness in Mrs Hamilton showing up and felt neither shame about her own conduct on the bench, nor anxiety that we might have been spied on. I had slightly misjudged her. She was a kind girl but not terribly bright; she was physically mature and no doubt aware of what went on in bedrooms; but she was a small girl at heart who did not understand her own feelings. What my mother had said about girls and their girlishness was clearly demonstrated in that lovely spontaneous body.

“Did you tell her where we would be Jessica?”

“She asked me what my plans were for the weekend. I told her about our walk, that’s all. Why?”

“Oh, I just wondered. Perhaps she was driving round and just spotted our bikes by the fence.”

She hugged me close and kissed me. I got on my bike and without a backward glance peddled away as quickly as I could.

*

On Monday morning I woke with a sore throat and a headache. I felt hot and weak. By mid-morning at school I knew I could not continue and I was fetched by my mother, who was rather annoyed as she had been forced to cancel a meeting. It was rather an ordeal at the doctor’s. He thought it might just be tonsillitis but could not rule out glandular fever. Whatever it was I would be off school for a week or two. I could have kissed his kindly old face. I had no idea what was coming next.

“It’s called the kissing disease Anna,” he said with an avuncular smile. “Have you been playing kiss-chase with the boys?”

I was speechless with embarrassment and felt hotter than ever.

“Oh look!” he said. “I do believe she’s blushing.”

My mother stared at me, making me worse. Was I under some sort of medical obligation to tell the doctor everything, like you had to tell the police things or get into trouble? I had promised Mrs Hamilton not to tell anyone about her hugs and kisses and would have rather died than confess what I had done with Jessica - or rather what she had done to me. Had one of them given me this awful fever? I began to cry. I could not help it. The doctor seemed to realise his banter had badly misfired and he came rapidly to my assistance.

“Don’t be upset Anna. People carry the virus in their saliva and it might have got into you through a peck on the cheek from an aunt, or a girlfriend, even your mother. It would have happened over a month ago because it takes a few weeks to incubate it.”

I almost laughed in relief and said I did not have a boyfriend. My mother relaxed. He took some swabs of my throat and a couple of days later glandular fever was confirmed. What at first seemed like a dreadful curse turned out to be the best disease imaginable for me. Yes, I felt tired and heavy-limbed but I could sit and read, paint and write. Because I was fourteen and so “sensible” my mother could leave me on my own as long as I promised to phone her if I ever felt worse. At first she phoned me on the hour, then less and less often and finally hardly at all, as it became clear that all I needed was to rest until the virus was out of my system. The best thing - apart from that wonderful solitude and tranquility - was the respite from school - and from Jessica - and all that went with her. She phoned me once and I lied to her that she should stay away because I was infectious. How was she to know you could not catch the virus by breathing it in? But one evening that week, as I looked out of my bedroom window with some regret at the green slopes with their long steeple-shadows I was almost horrified to see her cycle from the lane onto the main road. I fully expected to see - and dreaded - her turning into our close but she pedalled on in the direction of the church. I was so relieved, that I did not wonder then where she might be going.

On the internet I saw that glandular fever was often succeeded by ME - a godsend for a school phobic - and my inner Voice whooped for joy. This was like having your favourite pudding after your favourite dinner and I could not resist the temptation to scoff of much of it as I could. I did not feel guilty. I reasoned that I took notice of that Voice very seldom and was well overdue for an exception. I almost blushed again when the doctor, taking account of the feebleness I exhibited, announcing that I might have ME, prescribed another two or three weeks off school, which would carry my delicious vacation into early June. Work was occasionally delivered for me to do but it never took me long, and if it was rubbish, I could always claim I was too poorly to do a good job.

I was supposed - seeing that I was so weak - to stay in home of course, but one lovely day I could not help going out to take that photograph I had not had time to do, and then I spent my days painting my mother's present, taking care to slide it under the bed when I heard Emily or her come home. Days passed much more quickly than was fair. I did silly experiments, sitting wholly inactive in front of the clock to try and slow time down. But this seemed so utterly pointless and absurd that I soon gave up and compromised by just glancing at the dial occasionally instead. The date of my return loomed like a great black cloud and I had to console myself that in four quick weeks the holidays would begin - but then I felt low again because they were only two weeks and a few days longer than my absence, and were bound to fly by just as rapidly.

Of course they did not put any flags out and there was no cheering corps of girls to welcome me back. I slipped unnoticed into the yard. I looked around for Jessica and finally spotted her in a corner gossiping with her court. I managed to catch her eye and waved. She waved back and came over arm in arm with a lovely, ebony-skinned girl who looked me over with her enormous chocolate and vanilla eyes.

“This is Mildred,” she said proudly. “She's new. From Kenya. I'm looking after her. Are you better?”

“Yes thank you. More or less.”

“Is it still catching?”

She took a step back. Should I lie? I decided not to answer. Mildred carried on looking me up and down, then whispered something into Jessica's ear which made her

laugh.

“See you later!” she said and they skipped off. She had a new sweetheart and I was relieved. I was free to regain my orbit at a far distance from her where nothing would perturb me.

Even Katherine Paulley gave up taunting me about losing my best friend “*to a wog*” when I only replied with a shrug. I could tell how jealous she was and I could have administered a stinging put-down but bit my lip. Poor Katherine - big and sporty and manly Katherine - how badly she must have wanted to have a go at Mildred - but she was as equally as popular as Jessica and equally unassailable.

I made it my mission to watch Mrs Hamilton carefully. She seemed genuinely pleased to see me and almost as friendly as that time at her cottage. I asked her how Napoleon was and she laughed - still *très méchant et indolent*. During my absence she had waved whenever she had spotted me at my window and I had fully expected her to call. But she never did. Why were people so fickle? I was making up my mind to remain a recluse and rely on nobody.

In French I found myself parked next to Christine - a worthy but dull girl, big and moon-faced, whose absentee father took her hot-air ballooning, canoeing, abseiling - stuff like that - and whenever he had, she was determined to go on and on about it all week. She was one of those people who have no notion of how boring they are and was impervious to yawns- stifled and unstifled - and glassy, rolling eyes. She was even less popular than me, and would have been cruelly bullied had Mrs Burton, our *look-lively-there!* colossus of a PE teacher not been her auntie. Someone spread a vicious rumour that her mother only paid half-fees.

Mrs Hamilton had explained to me as I came into the room earlier than the others that it was ever her policy to swap pupils around from time to time and that changes had taken place the previous week. She had a give-away habit of speaking more quickly than her norm when she was not being entirely honest - as if to spit the nasty words out of her mouth like peppery sweets - for she sounded exactly as she had when making excuses in the car park for hugging me. Although I racked my brains at that time to find the exact instance I could not recall the other occasion when she had sounded uncomfortable like that. Did I like her or not? On the whole, yes I did - certainly far more than the other staff who were generally dreary - but nowhere near as much as I first had. She had become yet another example of how disappointing people were - like my big, loveable Uncle Hamish who had got drunk one New Years Eve and turned rather nasty and spoilt the party when Aunt Eve had told him off - or Dad’s jolly golfing friend, Andrew, who had used the forbidden F word when he thought I was not there, and had gone redder than the vile beetroot Grandma Dyer used to insist was good for me, when he spotted me in the corner behind my story book. Did Mrs Hamilton really like me? I was so obviously no longer Jessica’s favourite – (and her rival???) - and that maybe explained why she seemed a little warmer.

As soon as she had primed us for the lesson and issued her instructions, I dared to look around and found, as I had half-expected, Jessica saddled with another dull girl in the opposite corner of the room to mine, by the door - and, looking very lost, three rows behind me, Mildred. Significantly Mrs Hamilton lingered more in Jessica’s quarter of the room than anywhere else and never went anywhere near Mildred at all, even though I could hear she was struggling. We were practising booking in at a campsite and asking about facilities. Christine was so hopeless that I virtually played both roles. I almost wept when I thought of the joy I had been forced to surrender for this tedium, this plodding routine, this airless classroom and the company of this girl

and her pudding-headedness which matched so perfectly her basin haircut. Time, which had rushed by so spitefully at home now deliberately sneered and dragged its feet. I took off my watch to avoid glancing at it. Why had we got life so wrong? There before me through the classroom window was the lovely world basking in the warm sunshine; rooks and magpies were pleasing themselves beyond anyone's second thought while I, a human child had to be dragged in here to be stuffed full of facts like a dead turkey, 99% of which I already knew and would forget anyway. WHAT FOR??? We would all die and be buried and be forgotten; if we were lucky we might be a little happy sometimes. It was all so absurd. We had watched a film in Mrs Turner's lesson about a tribe in the rain forest and everyone had squealed to see bare bottoms, penises in sharp tubes like fireworks, people eating fat grubs and skinning monkeys. But how I envied them their freedom!

That night I looked on the internet for another convenient disease but realised it would be hopeless to pretend having it without the bacteria or the viruses somewhere in my body. I would not fool Dr Sutton again. Where could you get hold of those not-so-nasty microbes - apart from those that lived in yoghurts (which the very thought of eating made me retch)?

The headmistress wanted to see me. What had I done? Was it so obvious that I hated the place? Since that day when Matthew and Mother had taken me to look around, Mrs Nourrish had not exchanged one word with me. She was a large lady who wore ample floral dresses and kept her desk flawlessly tidy with pens and pencils in round holders. As I went in, the smell of fustiness I had forgotten, hit me in the nose straightaway. It was the same strong smell as the lady at the post office exuded. If she ever went in to get a stamp would either notice anything? Would they say *snap!*? Would a third party have to go outside for fresh air? Would I smell as strong in my old age?

Adults, particularly teachers, take it for granted that their size and intellect, like dark chocolate, are too strong for children and pretend to be sweeter than they really are. They talk slowly to them and use simpler words, and in corridors taller ones bend their knees to talk down to them. Afterwards they wear a self-congratulatory grin because they are so wonderfully child-friendly. Mrs Nourrish was sickly sweet and really embarrassing.

"Are you feeling better now, Anna?"

"Yes thank you, Mrs Nourrish."

"Goo - ood. He was a nasty (*she said "narsty"*) old germ, wasn't he?"

"Actually it's caused by the Epstein-Barr virus, Miss."

"REALLY?"

"Yes, I looked it up on the internet."

"REALLY?"

I hoped that that would be the end of our interview. She tapped the table and gave me a soulful look. I sensed something really yucky on its way.

"Anna, are you happy here?"

"Yes, Miss."

"Only some of your teachers are worried that you don't fit in and don't have many friends. You aren't being bullied are you?"

"No, Miss."

"Who are your friends then?"

"Jessica Lilley and Christine Duffey, Mrs Burton's niece. I know some others. No-

one's really horrid to me. I do like it here."

She looked rather grave and pretended to feel sorry and concerned for me.

"Anna, please try to involve yourself a little more with others. Why not join the choir or the drama group? Mr Boyd runs a chess club, you know. Or there's gymnastics with Mrs Burton. Get involved and make a few more friends, there's a good girl."

I promised I would and soon I saw I would be on my way. Lying was so much easier and less time-consuming than telling the truth, and I was quite pleased to have worked this one out for myself as a few moments later I gratefully closed the door on a reassured Mrs Nourrish and her smell.

"Anna" said Mrs Hamilton one lunchtime as she passed me on the school lawn, about a week before the end of term " 'Ow would you like to earn yourself some extra pocket money this summer? When are you going away?"

"We go in July normally. I know we haven't booked anything yet. We never do until the last moment."

"Ah! A pity! We will be in July in France visiting family and poor Napoleon will 'ave nobody to take care of 'im. I shall 'ave to think of something else - a cats 'ome maybe."

When Mother came in I almost sprang on her. When were we going away? Did it have to be July?

"Goodness Anna! Why the sudden interest in holidays? You hate going anywhere with Emily and me, you know you do!"

I told her breathlessly of Mrs Hamilton's proposal and I promised that if we went away in August I would be nicer to Emily and agree to do whatever everybody else wanted to do in the hotel, at night, et cetera..

"All because of a cat? If it makes you a nicer girl we'll have to get one of our own! I'll speak to Matthew about it when he comes in."

As soon as he was in the hall I waylaid him and said I would not let go of his arm until he persuaded Mother to go in August. He tried to shake me off but I was determined.

"Well, Anna," he said as he slumped against the door post "Actually I think it might have to be September, my diary is so full. You might even have to miss a week of school, I'm afraid. Now give me my arm back please."

I danced out of the door and raced towards the church. I stopped dead. Leant against the cottage wall was a girl's bicycle. Jessica's. I hesitated, advanced and retreated a few times and then went home.

"A lady phoned here and asked to speak to a Jennifer ...no, Jessica Somebody, darling. Her mother."

"And what did you say?"

"Well, I told her she wasn't here, of course. She was really surprised....and sounded worried."

I needed to think quickly. My Voice came to the rescue.

"I've just been talking to her on the Green. We arranged to meet there."

"Well, can you phone her and put the poor woman's mind at rest?"

I told Jessica's mother the lie I had told mine and - oh no! - she wanted to speak to Jessica. I told her she had just started back home but...(but....but.....oh come on!)...but she was going to call in on another friend in Wolverley on the way back. No I didn't know the number or the address. Nor the surname of the people. As I put the phone down I understood for the first time from hot, flustered first-hand

experience the truth of the headmistress's assembly about how telling one little lie might have unforeseen terrible consequences (as my father's dishonesty had had) for the liar. I saw with mounting horror the awful tangle that Jessica was going to pedal home into and for which she had insufficient presence of mind to free herself from. How would she appreciate in a split second, what a cunning storyboard I had drawn up for her, and calmly sketch in a few details of her own? Jessica would hate me for getting her into trouble and her parents and my mother would see me for the liar I was. And what might happen to Mrs Hamilton when Jessica had to confess to her mother, Mrs Nourish or the police where she had really been, and that she was a lezzy? Would Napoleon be made homeless? What could I do to prevent disaster for all of us?

It was out of the question for me to go back to the cottage, knock the door and ask to speak to Jessica. I imagined a flurry of clothes and a frenzied rushing-round on hopping legs, with jeans and black stockings being pulled onto outstretched ones. And if I waited for her to cycle out onto the main road I would have to admit I was covering up for her and that I knew what had been going on. How I loathed the deviousness of people!

Emily was making such a din on the piano I could not think.

"Was your teacher Mrs What's-her-name pleased, Anna?"

"What about?"

"The cat, of course!"

"Oh, she wasn't in. I'll just pop round again."

"Well, don't be too long. She'll want to settle down for the evening, I expect."

The sky-blue bike was still there. I walked onto the main road and sat on a bench by the war memorial. There was silence. Eventually my Voice worked out what to say. The church clock was chiming nine when Jessica appeared looking quite flushed. I called out to her in delight and surprise. She did a double-take and stopped. She was not especially eager to come over.

"Been for a bike ride?"

Her dark eyes brightened and she nodded in relief. She told me where she had been and drew a circular route around her head with her hand. Was I blushing for her lying?

"Oh, your mother phoned. She must have got her wires crossed. She thought you were with me."

She went very pale and her eyes widened. Her nostrils flared.

"What did you tell her?"

"Well, I panicked for you. I thought you might have told her a white lie so I said I had seen you. On the Green."

She gasped a thank you. I took a deep breath.

"Jess, you sly thing. You haven't got a boyfriend in the village, have you?"

"A boyfriend? No, of course I haven't!"

I stared hard at her. There were red flecks at the corners of her eye sockets.

"I had to tell her another little fib because she wanted to speak to you."

"Oh no. What?"

I told her and she threw her arms around me. She smelt of Mrs Hamilton and her lounge. She said she would have to dash.

"Jessica. Can I say something?"

"What?"

"Please don't use me as an alibi again."

I watched her legs speed up like pistons until she was racing away from me, a small dot on the edge of the village.

The next day at break I told Mrs Hamilton that I could look after Napoleon after all. She was delighted. She asked me to come round on the Sunday - we would break up the following Wednesday. In French I watched for any signals or significant looks between her and Jessica. I saw none and I tried to convince myself that her visit had been an innocent one after all and that there was a simple explanation for Jess lying to her mother. Perhaps she would have disapproved of her daughter visiting a teacher, particularly at night. Had Mrs Hamilton asked her to feed the cat in my absence? As soon as Mildred had left the school bus which did the rounds of all the villages, I sat down in the place next to Jessica which her friend had vacated.

“Was your mum alright with you Jess?”

“Why shouldn’t she be?” she retorted. “I was just home a bit late that’s all.”

“So what will you tell her next time?”

“The next time what?”

“The next time you come to Dadlingcote?”

“I shan’t come again. I had to promise Dad. It’s too far and you don’t know who’s about.”

We were nearing the crossroads where she would get out to walk to the secluded mansion where she lived. She inched past my knees and slung her bag over her shoulder.

“By the way, has Mrs Hamilton asked you to feed her cat in July by any chance?”

She went red. “No. Why would she? I live nearly four miles away. How could I?”

I felt great relief. All I needed to do now was to drop an innocent hint to Mrs Hamilton that her secret life was not as secret as she supposed.

I recalled a conversation between Mother and Matthew I had half listened to months ago when they had been discussing my new school. They had tut-tutted about the goings-on in a girls school three counties away where a mistress had had an affair with a fifth-former.

“What happened to that lady teacher who fell in love with a schoolgirl, Mother?” I asked her as casually as I could. “Last year, I think.”

“Goodness. Why do you ask?”

“I just wondered. Did she get the sack?”

“I think she nearly went to prison darling.”

Nearly? Had she simply changed her name then and come to Twyford? The school must have been desperate to replace old Butcher. How carefully would they check up on her?

The next day I went into the toilet block and sat down. I stared at the green door. In black felt tip was scrawled *HAMILTON=LEZZY*. The name “Katherine Paulley” sprang straight to mind. She had asked to be excused that same lesson. I wetted pieces of toilet roll on my tongue and rubbed at it until it was a faint ghost and illegible. I checked the other cubicles and the washroom, saw no other comments and went back to RE. Boydy had drifted off, eyes half closed, to the Promised Land he had droned on about, before asking us - the idle man - to draw how it might look, so I tore out some paper from my notepad and carefully wrote a letter.

Dear Katherine Paulley,

I know it was you who wrote that awful lie about Mrs Hamilton on the toilet door. Lucky for you I found it and rubbed it off. If you ever do that again I swear I will say Christine Duffey and I saw you do it and you will be expelled. If you get me back, Christine will tell Mrs Burton you are a bully and you will be out of the hockey team. And I will tell Mrs Hamilton. I promise.

Anna Dyer

As she went past I dropped it into her plastic bag of ingredients for cookery, which we had next. There I watched her open it and when she stared at me I stared back until she went very red and looked away. I stood in front of her in the lunch queue. She never said a word and kept her distance. I felt rather pleased with myself.

But on the way home an awful thought struck me. What if Katherine decided to keep the note and could prove that I had known all the time what Mrs Hamilton was up to? She would be a hero and I would be in trouble with the law for withholding evidence! Why was life so unfair? Had I ever wanted or tried to find out anybody's business? I was not a snooper - in fact the opposite - I just wanted to be left to myself. It felt as if some busybody-fairy - a big, fat, supernatural version of Mrs Nourish was forcing me to get involved with other people and their private lives.

I definitely would be a recluse when I grew up.

Emily would insist on coming with me to Mrs Hamilton's and Mother got quite cross when I complained.

"Look, Anna. You're being unreasonable. If Emily wants to see the cat why shouldn't she?"

"Because she talks soft and will show me up. And she hates cats and Mrs Hamilton told me she doesn't like little girls."

"Nonsense! She's a teacher! If you won't be nice to Emily we'll change our minds about the holiday and you won't be allowed to feed that blessed cat."

So Emily as usual got her own way and smiled that disgusting smug smile and put out the tip of her tongue at me.

Mrs Hamilton made a big fuss of Emily which made her smugness worse. I pretended not to be bothered. She opened a large wall cupboard and showed us lots of tins and then, in the fridge, pots of long-life cream. Napoleon managed just to squeeze through the cat-flap and announced his arrival with a loud meow. Emily took to him immediately and walked round with her forearms under his shoulders. His body was nearly as long as hers.

"Put the dirty paper plates and plastic forks into black bags and if it is 'ot tie a knot and put them in the bin every two or three days."

"Are you really French?" asked Emily. To my surprise she looked flustered by the question.

"But of course *mon p'tit chou!* Can you not tell?"

"What does that mean - something shoe?"

She laughed and told her she was her "little cabbage" to Emily's delight and puzzlement.

"She means you're stupid," I could not help saying.

"*Mais non, Anna. C'est pas vrai!* Your sister is being cruel to you. Cabbage is kind in French."

She showed us plastic lids to put on the open tins and where to put them in the fridge.

“Give him half a tin in the morning and the rest in the evening. Mix in a few biscuits for the poor beast - and can you wash his saucer for cream every evening too?”

We nodded. She took five twenty pound notes from her purse and gave them to me.

“First meal on Thursday morning. Last meal on the 30th of July. Napoleon will be on his very best behaviour.”

To our amusement he meowed and it sounded like NO.

“But you must, *imbécile*, or the girls will not come and you will 'ave to catch voles.” She said voles like “vowels” and Emily laughed so much she could hardly get her breath.

“Make sure he cannot get out of the front door and that this door to the rest of the 'ouse is closed. He will come and go through the flap. Always close the front door before you open the kitchen.”

“What if he goes out of the garden and doesn't come back?” asked Emily, tugging at his ear which made him close one eye.

“Oh no, Napoleon is too fat to climb the wall. He will stay in 'is back garden and think about chasing the butterflies.”

I looked at the picture of Raymond whom I had never seen in the flesh, neither there nor with her as she strolled around the village. His eyes stared back at me and his gentle smile seemed very mysterious. Here was a house bursting with secrets whose occupier had no idea they were suspected. She had placed the front door key in my hand with a trusting smile and I felt a terrible surge of guilt and responsibility as the housekeeper.

As we went to leave my wicked Voice could not help but ask if Mr Hamilton spoke good French. She laughed in surprise and it could have been because she was taken aback by such a silly question.

“But of course! I am his teacher!” she gasped.

“Is he still at work?”

“No. It is Sunday, after all. He is....er.....visiting his brother in 'ampshire.”

On the way home we squabbled. Emily insisted I give her two notes for helping me and I insisted I would give her one then, and the other later if she did her bit. Mother settled the noisy argument by demanding I give her all the money to look after. She would add another sixty for our holiday pocket money, if we were both good girls all summer and did not argue. I agreed but while Emily was in the toilet I went into the dining room, grabbed her metronome which I so loathed and hid the clacking thing.

*

I awoke very early and groaned at the thought of school. It was Thursday - PE and RE - a killer combination for a white-knuckled school phobic. But then - oh what a relief - an indescribable delight flooded into me when I realised that this was the first day of the holidays! The whole world seemed to celebrate with me; the wood pigeons cooed non-stop and in a paddock a few streets and a lane away Mr Rowlinson's much hated cockerel was crowing. I could have got up and chased it round and round for joy to kiss it. The sun was casting the bold shadow of the window frame onto my flimsy curtains and every sound of the world seemed to be just outside the glass. It had the feel of a very special day and I felt the urge to get up. I looked at the clock. It was only quarter to five so I turned over, curled up and tried to get back to sleep but I was too excited. I reviewed the end of term celebrations, giggled at the tuneless orchestra playing Jerusalem and Christine Duffey's huge face like a cavern drowning out the

others in the choir, witnessed again the exaggerated emotions as warty-faced Mrs Bott, the retiring embroidery teacher, and the older girls said farewell to The Rectory, and I laughed helplessly, now I did not need to repress it, at Mrs Nourrish in her big-top of a dress, grandiosely presiding over the prize-giving in the church, borrowed for the day to squeeze in all the parents who could come. Matthew had, Mother had not. I had won the Lower School English prize and the Poetry Prize. Someone had jeered as I went up and I had a pretty good idea who it was. When Katherine went up - the great stony-faced galoot - to get her hockey colours, I looked at the crucifix and prayed with all my might that she would tumble down the step. She did not. Either God did not exist or He was not that kind of a God. Perhaps she would have to die before He made her suffer.

(I cringe now when I think of that poem. It was about famine in Africa and I had made "famine" rhyme with "women" and "babies" with "scabies" (which I thought was caused by a poor diet, not by skin mites) . At the time I was pretty proud of it and that causes me to wonder how valuable my present flashes of inspiration will seem to me when I am in my thirties. When I am ninety perhaps all my scribblings and verses will look pretty crappy.)

At eight I woke again. Emily was shaking me and telling me to get up. We had to feed Napoleon! Poor cat - he would be starving!

As soon as we opened the kitchen door he was around us, swishing our legs with his tail and making us giggle. Emily knelt and patted his back just in front of his tail, as Mrs Hamilton did, which sent him into a spasm and frenzy of purring and meowing - "a purry meow" as she had called it. His tail stiffened so much that I could not bend it and he lowered his head to nuzzle the floor with his cheek until he collapsed onto his side, pawing at the air, opening and closing his pads to show the pink skin between them and his yellow claws. As Emily continued to pat him at the end of his backbone, where he seemed to love and hate being rubbed, he turned his head and tried to reach her hand with his open mouth. What a beautiful animal he was! I rubbed his back with my fingertips from the neck downwards and he stretched out to an incredible length, almost as long as Emily.

"He's really a tiger!" she cried.

Now he had finished his entertaining and was up on his feet, and then on his hind legs, paws bent downwards, for the serious business of being fed, like a busker pleading for payment. His meows were so deafening and insistent that everything else would have to wait. He walked around in circles around my feet and more than once nearly tripped me over.

While I attended to him, Emily went to the toilet. Irritated by her customary self-centredness, I slammed the kitchen door which she had thoughtlessly left open in defiance of Mrs Hamilton's instructions. When, after nearly ten minutes she had not returned, I opened it and called out into the hall. There came no reply. I looked at the corridor properly for the first time. If the kitchen was rustic, here it was plain and modern. There were creamy flagstones with dots and dashes of slate grey and blue, like water-colour spills, and on the walls - of a very pale blue, almost white emulsion - were arranged at different heights strange paintings of dark blue and sandy yellow, like beaches and seascapes together, all beneath skies of varying depths and greys. They were signed *Botton*.

"Emily?"

I reached the foot of the stairs and looked up. To my left the downstairs toilet door was open and there was no sign of her.

“EMILY? Are you playing games with me?”

I placed one foot on the bottom riser and then my other on the next. I hesitated. My Voice told me I had a good reason to break the unspoken rule and go upstairs. So I did. On the landing I saw four doors all firmly and decidedly shut.

A cough from below told me where she must be and I scuttled back down. The lounge door was open and there in the old-fashioned chair sat my sister in Mrs Hamilton's black high heels and her long blue silk scarf - her *foulard* - as she had called it when revising the colours.

“EMILY! What are you doing in here?”

“I am making myself at 'ome.” she said in a very passable imitation of my mistress. I was angry but could not help giggling. She jiggled the shoes on her toes and kept shooting out her arms in a jerky fashion, cocking her head first to one side, then the other, and fluttering her eyelids, all mannerisms of Mrs. Hamilton's. I burst out laughing.

“ ‘Ere is one p'tit shoe,” she said, launching one spinning into the air. “And ‘ere is my uzza p'tit shoe!” This one went flying onto the sideboard and knocked over a picture frame. We held our hands to our mouths and then broke into helpless peals of laughter. I went over and stood the photo back up. It was a black and white one of a very young, old-fashioned version of her, probably her mother. She wore a black high collar and I decided it might even be her grandmother. I picked up the high-heels and told Emily to put them back. I followed her to a cupboard under the stairs. There must have been twenty pairs of shoes there neatly paired on the shelves, and many spaces for others which she had no doubt taken with her to France. They were all very stylish and obviously expensive. Mrs Hamilton dressed well - all the pupils remarked on it and admired her for it; our other teachers - as in most English schools I suspect - wore the most dowdy, shapeless clothes they could find in their wardrobes - and then were hurt and surprised that pupils seemed to find their presence so depressing. If presents were wrapped up like they were, no-one would want to open them.

Above the shelves, hanging on pegs, were her overcoats, slim and elegant, all reminding me of her flair. I could not help it. I took down a red woollen one with a dark collar and a stylish red belt and slipped it on. It smelt of lavender, of her. I admired myself in the long mirror. It fitted me really well and I even looked sophisticated.

“Blimey, Anna.” said Emily looking up from her kneeling position. “If you did something with your hair and grew some titties you'd be pretty!”

“Don't be crude!... Oh no! The door! I left the kitchen door open when I looked for you. That's your fault! If you'd come straight back....”

Napoleon was not in the kitchen. With the back door locked, I could not go into the garden to find him. Then I remembered with relief that all the doors upstairs were closed.

“Look well if he goes on a bed and does a big poo. You'll be in for it then!”

“If he did it would be YOUR FAULT.”

“It's always my fault.”

“Stop whining and help me look for him.”

He was not on the landing and not in the box window at the end, nor behind the curtains there. I looked out on the garden. There was a long lawn and three borders full of tall flowers. Of the cat there was no sign. I told Emily who had sidled up behind me to go back and look in the shoe cupboard. Perhaps he had crept into a warm, dark corner there. I hesitated. Mrs Hamilton had said something daft once about Napoleon being a magical cat who could turn into smoke and creep under doors

because she often found him in a room when the door had been closed. Should I make absolutely sure? Perhaps Emily had come up here exploring and had opened a door then closed it after he had sneaked in. If so, he would be trapped.

So, telling myself I was under an obligation to Napoleon, one after another I opened the doors and peaked in. The first was a storage room piled high with folders, books and bags. I whispered Napoleon's name to ease my conscience but there came no answer. The next was the bathroom. I examined the bottles of perfume and shampoos. The red one looked interesting. I undid the top and inhaled deeply. It smelt of sweet flowers and of her hair. The bedroom was large. There was a double bed and two pillows in the middle. I imagined her lying there with her beautiful Raymond and quickly closed the door behind me. I was about to open the fourth door when Emily called me. I found her kneeling half inside the cupboard with her hands inside a pair of red shoes, the ones Mrs Hamilton usually wore to school. I watched as she lifted one to her nose and sniffed it.

"Ugh!" she said, screwing up her nose. "It smells of snails and garlic!"

"Liar!"

I snatched it from her and smelt inside. There was no odour or scent at all. I threw it at her and she ducked. I ordered her to put everything back tidily. As I passed her to check for Napoleon in the lounge I could not resist the temptation to push her sharp rear with my foot into the cupboard. I quickly closed the door.

"Let me out! It's dark in here! It smells!"

She hammered and pushed. I leant against the door and laughed.

"Have you seen the ghost?"

"Ghost?"

"Yes. Mrs Hamilton told me it lives under the stairs."

She squealed loud, even louder and longer than the time when I had kept singing a song at her to put her off the tune she was trying to learn for Miss Beamish.

"If I let you out, will you give me one of your twenty pound notes?" I shouted half-seriously. I knew there was little chance of that happening.

"I won't." she sobbed. "Let me out. NOW. Or I'll tell Matthew."

I came away from the door and she tumbled out. Instantly I screamed at the face above her head smiling at me. She joined in and grabbed my legs in terror. A coat had fallen down. On the shelf behind it, amongst her gloves, was a sepia photograph of Raymond. I laughed with relief. She dared to look then and laughed too.

"That'll teach us not to snoop," she said.

"US? I wasn't snooping. You're the snooper!"

We searched the lounge and decided that Napoleon must have gone into the garden, but I still felt very reluctant to close the kitchen door. To leave it open would be wrong too. I was too young to keep having so many dilemmas! Would a recluse be immune from them? I decided to close it.

"Is that the same man? Her husband?" asked Emily in front of the photograph in the kitchen.

"Yes, Raymond. Isn't he lovely?"

"I think he looks a little bit like Dad, when he used to be kind, years ago."

She began to whimper a little and I stood behind her to snuggle her.

At half-past five Emily was far too busy practising her piece for Miss Beamish's evening visit, so I had the pleasure of going to look after Napoleon alone. I went into the kitchen relishing his attentions but he was not there. I bent down and opened his cat-flap to shout his name. I put his meat onto a plate expecting to hear the flap clatter

at any second, but still he did not come. As I looked out of the window I heard a scratting sound. I turned. I saw him in the tulip glass of the hall door stretching up, his full enormous length, to reach the handle. I rushed to let him in and he made his usual fuss off me, until he saw his plate.

“Where on earth were you hiding, Napoleon?”

I thought of the other upstairs room which I had not checked earlier, I had better look, I reasoned. If it was open, that would explain it. But it had been shut and, of course, it still was shut. I hesitated outside. I was superstitious. *Not* to look inside after I had checked the other rooms felt odd. What if Napoleon had been in there, just for a few seconds while my sister had been snooping upstairs, opening and shutting doors, and had done a big poo on the bed and then come out? This clinched it. I turned the handle. To my relief and then my disappointment it was locked.

That night I could not get to sleep as I wrote a story in my head about what might be in the forbidden room. Was it her office? How boring. Perhaps Raymond lay there in an open coffin. I shivered and looked around my shadowy bedroom, and as usual there was no figure standing there waiting to pounce. Even so I turned away from the wall to face the door.

Was that the room where she took Jessica? I saw images which both fascinated and revolted me. Was I a pervert to imagine such things? But how could I stop them coming into my head, especially when Jessica had deceived her mother - and after Mrs Hamilton had so clearly taken to her, and had followed us on the canal and had invited her round to her house in the evening - and she had stayed until nine o'clock - *and* she had looked so red when she came out? Did sex turn your face red? People would know when you had had it, unless you had sunburn. Black people were lucky not to blush. I thought again with horror of my first evening visit to sample that lemonade. What would I have done if she had asked me to go up to her forbidden room? I was so worried about having a bad dream that I decided to stay awake all night, but the next thing I knew it was light again, and I was hearing the stupid calls of the pigeons.

I need to mention that all through that summer term, Katherine Paulley was determined to keep boasting about a boy she called “Ickey”. He lived in the same village as her, Blascote Warren, the nearest village to Dadlingcote. He had a mate with a car. We were all meant to be green with envy but Gabrielle told everyone, when Katherine wasn’t there that he was a “shithead” with a pizza face. Her cousin Lisa had been to a party at Katherine’s “ranch.”

“Her parents quite fancy themselves as trendies. Her dad uses hair-gel and her mother’s into yoga and stuff; she wears weird clothes and rings little bells and burns joss sticks. Lisa said it was a real shit party - some weak cider and dead weak lager to drink and jacket potatoes that weren’t cooked. They were in the barn and her dad was the DJ. Most people fucked off by nine it was so crap.”

I pretended I had not heard Gabrielle (which was difficult). Her habitual overuse of bad language got on my nerves but I loved what I had heard.

Anyway, the last person I was thinking of that lovely Friday evening, the first Friday of the holiday, was big Katherine Paulley. I was playing swing ball with Emily on the village green – (after confessing to the theft of her metronome Matthew had given me what-for and I had promised to be kind to her from then onwards). I saw a car drive past the post office and turn towards the church. It was full of grotty youths and in the back sat Katherine, smoking and drinking from a beer can. She stared almost directly

at me but showed no sign of recognition. She had no idea of which village I lived in as far as I knew. Why would she expect to see me?

The next morning I left Emily in bed pretending to be asleep, turned the corner by the church and the word *LEZZY* in red leapt out at me from Mrs Hamilton's cottage wall. I felt utterly helpless and it made me cry. Matthew found me in the garage rooting about amongst the cans of paint.

"What on earth's the matter, Anna? Why have you been crying?"

I told him.

"Bloody little vandals! Even in a nice village they're never very far away. Like rats."

I took him and showed him and he shook his head in disbelief. He looked at his watch.

"Look, me and your mum have got an appointment at ten to keep. I'll paint over it tonight but once they start, there's no stopping them. They're sure to do it again. I'm going to call the police!"

"No, no!" I wailed.

"Why ever not?"

I shook my head.

"Why are you so upset, Anna?"

"What's the point?" I exclaimed, pulling myself together. "What can the police do? Who can tell who did it from just one word?"

After Matthew and Mother had gone and I had seen to Napoleon, I found some white emulsion and started to brush over the word. But it kept coming back through. One or two people stopped to watch me and someone tutted.

In the early afternoon, I tried more coats and it began to fade like the comment in the toilet. Another coat at four o'clock, after the warm sun had come round to face the wall, very nearly covered it over. I stood back to admire my handiwork and then realised what I should do next.

Dear Mr and Mrs Paulley,

Your daughter Katherine is having unprotected sex with a spotty boy called Icky and his friends. They drive a red Fiesta. She also smokes and drinks. Ask her. Last night I saw them taking turns with her in the back in the lay-by behind the hedge near Potter's farm.

A friend.

I printed the letter out and cycled out to Blascote and found the converted farmhouse which Gabrielle had described. I pulled up my anorak hood, posted it and made my escape. As I cycled back I thought of what had been said about her parents. Surely they were not so trendy as to approve of what I had made up? I thought with a laugh of the furious accusations and even more furious denials. Surely the car-full of Icky and his mates would be banned and Katherine grounded for the summer. The graffiti and the effect it might have on people's thinking would stop there.

But then King Canute came into my head and I saw him laughing and pointing at the sea.

On Saturday evening, after we had finished out dinner, Mother grabbed Matthew's

hand and said they had something to tell us. I felt an awful pang as I recalled the awful day when she and Dad had had something to tell us. But now she was smiling. "Are we going on holiday? Somewhere nice?" asked Emily very excited.

"Yes," said Matthew. "America. In September."

We cheered.

"But that's not what we want to tell you. You're going to have a little brother. That's what we found out about this morning in Leicester."

Emily stared at them and then at me.

"When?"

"In early January. A late Christmas present from Santa. Aren't you pleased girls?"

We both nodded but said nothing. I thought I ought to smile so I did. Emily seemed to be blushing. She asked them how they knew it would be a boy.

"They do clever tests."

"Wouldn't you have rather have had a surprise?" I asked.

"No, not really. We thought about it but it felt better to choose to know. It's hard to explain," said he. "It must be a bit of a shock. I'm sure when it's sunk in you'll be as pleased as we are."

I saw an awful image of them together in bed and my mother must have taken my grim face as a sign of something else because she got quite cross.

"Anna, it's usually the younger child who is the jealous one in these situations."

"I'm not jealous!" I retorted more indignantly than I intended. Matthew put his hand on Mother's to calm her.

"Anna will be a good sister to her baby brother. Won't you Anna?"

"Of course I will." For some reason I unexpectedly burst into tears and sobbed.

Mother threw her arms around me and Emily went off to play her piano.

I thought about all the things my little brother would have to go through at school and I did not envy him one bit.

"Anna," said Emily on Monday morning as we fed Napoleon. "What's a lezzy?"

I dropped the fork and made a greasy mess.

"Now look what you've made me do. Why do you want to know?"

"There's no need to shout! I heard Matthew mention it to Mum last night when they thought I was upstairs. You were here, I think."

"What did they say?"

"I couldn't quite hear - something about this cottage and Mrs Hodges at the post office."

I shuddered. Smelly Mrs Hodges was renowned as the village gas-bag. What had she been saying about Mrs Hamilton?

"What is one anyway?"

"Oh come on, surely you know. I knew when I was eleven. Who do you talk to at school?"

"Only Mabel. She wouldn't know because she goes to church. I *sort* of know. Is it a lady who has sex a lot?"

"No."

"Oh come on Anna. I'd tell you if I was the eldest one."

"Elder one, not eldest, numbskull. I'm comparative, not superlative....Alright. A lezzy is a lesbian. She doesn't like men. She likes women in bed."

I watched her face as she took this in. She screwed up her eyes as she always did when she was puzzled. I sensed that this was not the end of the matter.

“What?? She has - you know - sex with a woman?”

I must admit I was quite impressed with her - and told her so. “Well done you.”

But she still looked at me blankly. I took some paper-wipe and cleaned up the revolting yellow jelly I had dropped on the floor with the fork. Napoleon was slowing down his scoffing speed and turning his nose towards his cream.

“How?”

“How what?”

“How can she? What with? She hasn’t got a willy.”

I felt very hot. She was waiting for me to enlighten her. I tried to divert her to the cat but she would not let it pass. She asked me again to explain.

“I think they kiss and cuddle, that sort of thing.”

“As if they’re friends?”

“A bit more than friends.”

She still looked puzzled.

“I think they touch each other a bit as well - down there - like you do.”

“I DON’T!”

“LIAR! I’ve seen you, when you’re reading sometimes in bed - through the crack in the door.”

“You’ve been spying on me, Anna!”

“Have not. I just happened to notice one night. When I was passing.”

She was going very red like she still does when she is about to blow.

“Well, don’t you do that?”

“Do what?”

“WANK!”

“EMILY! That’s gross! Did Mabel teach you that?”

“Never you mind. Do you?”

I did not answer. I felt my cheeks burning in agony. Now she sensed she had gained the upper hand and was not about to let go.

“Oo, you’ve gone really red Anna, like you always do when you’re ashamed or lying. You do, don’t you?”

“I USED TO. Not any more. You grow out of it,” I said with a condescending leer.

“It’s disgusting. Now shut up about it or.....”

“Or what? Tell Mum? That you’re a wanker?”

I picked up the nearest thing - the carton of cream - and hurled it at her. Of course it missed and splattered the wall.

“NOW LOOK WHAT YOU’VE MADE ME DO.”

I found a cloth and cleaned it off but the grease had somehow stained the white emulsion paint. Emily could not contain her delight.

“ ‘Ow will you explain that to Madame? You really must learn to keep your temper under control, Anna.” she said in a schoolmarmly way.

“I hate you sometimes Emily. If you weren’t my sister and I wasn’t forced to live in the same house, I’d never have anything to do with you!”

“You promised Matthew you’d be nice to me. I’m *telling*.”

A noise like a key grating in a lock stopped us bickering instantly. At first it sounded as if someone was trying to get in through the back door and I felt really scared. Then I realised that the noise was coming from further away, from the garden. I looked out of the kitchen window. On the left a short path led from the lawn to a wooden gate in the brick wall. I watched it open. For a few seconds nothing happened and then very slowly and deliberately a solid looking man in a blue overall backed into the garden pulling a large lawnmower. His hair was short cropped and dyed an unnatural blonde

colour which made it look like the stubble of golden straw. He had the roundest head I had ever seen and it reminded me of the concrete spheres which topped the brick columns on either side of the gate in the vicarage wall around the corner.

“Who is it?” whispered Emily, who, a foot smaller than gawky me, could not see above the bottles in the window sill.

“It’s only Mrs Hamilton’s gardener. He’s come to do the

“Do the WHAT?”

I had stopped in mid-sentence because the man had just turned round to show me quite an ample bosom.

“What’s up, Anna?”

She pulled up a chair and stood on it to look.

“Is that a lezzy?”

“Shut up!” I hissed. “She’ll hear you.”

I yanked her down and away from the sink. We crept upstairs and watched from the box window. We saw the cat trot over to her. She knelt down, tickled him on his fat belly and in a clear, deep voice said “And how are we today then, Napoleon?”

“She must be Mrs Hamilton’s friend if she knows his name,” said Emily without any malice. This made me feel very cold. Surely she, a really pretty lady, could not possibly do “things” with that mannish woman? The word “butch” came into my head. Gabrielle, I recollected, had called Katherine butch once behind her back; I had laughed with the others but had not properly understood. Now its full meaning hit me and I felt shocked. Did Butches have willies as well as.....? What were they called – herm-something? My train of thought was interrupted by the splutter then roar of the petrol mower. Napoleon fled. I took Emily’s hand and we went downstairs and out through the front door.

As we rounded the corner we passed a white van and the open gate.

“Napoleon might get out,” said Emily.

I stopped and wondered what to do. The gardener came past and saw us. She left the lawnmower in spluttering mode and came over.

“Morning,” said she with a friendly grin which altered her face completely. She had lovely blue eyes. “Are you Annette? The girl who’s feeding Napoleon?”

“No, she’s Anna and I’m her sister, Emily. Are you here to do the garden?”

She laughed so cheerfully we could not help but warm to her.

“No!” she replied, pointing at the side of the van where the words **GardenTrim** and **EARLSTONE** were written. “I’m a hairdresser!”

Emily laughed until she hiccoughed.

“Are you Mrs Hamilton’s friend?” she asked.

“Yeah, sort of. I keep her garden tidy. Hold on.”

She reached into the large pocket at the front of her dungarees and fished out a business card and gave it to Emily.

“Ask your dad if he wants anything doing. I’m very reasonable.”

As she finished speaking she was looking over our heads and smiling.

“Good morning.”

I looked behind me. A lady who had seen me painting out the graffiti - I was pretty sure it was her, a long stick of a woman with grey hair and hook nose - had stopped to look at us. She said nothing in response to this pleasant greeting, did not smile, turned and walked on in the direction of the crossroads. Karen - for that was the gardener’s name - looked abashed, raised her eyebrows and put her palms on her head in mock terror.

“Natives aren’t very friendly in these parts, are they? Do they eat people?”

“No!” laughed Emily. “That’s daft. There are no cannibals here!”

“Hush, Emily. Don’t be rude.” I said.

Karen ruffled her hair and said she did not mind. She was daft as well, she said.

“So you’re looking after that nutty cat, are you?”

We nodded.

“Do you mind if I ask you something?” said Emily after a pause.

Oh no! What on earth was she going to say now?

“Emily! You mustn’t be NOSY.” I exclaimed almost in panic, putting my hand to her mouth.

“I’m not.” she protested. “I was going to ask her if she wouldn’t mind closing the gate so that Napoleon can’t get out..... STUPID!”

Karen laughed, slapped her own hand and promised she would. She looked at me, narrowed her eyes a little, cocked her head to one side and went to say something but thought better of it. I went hot. I’d been looking down at her dungarees. She seemed to have read what was on my mind. We took our leave and I felt relieved to be on my way.

“Well, if she is a lezzy,” said Emily “It can’t be that bad. She was really nice.”

“Listen. Don’t say anything about her to Mother, do you promise?”

“Why ever not?”

I tried to find an innocent reason but could not.

“Why not?”

I felt frustrated.

“Because she’s a bloody LEZZY, that’s why,” I shouted, to my immediate shame Emily stopped dead and stared at me in wonder. We heard the sound of the mower in full throttle again. In Emily’s face there was something like disillusion and she told me years later that although she teased me and wound me up for fun, she did admire me and could not believe I was capable of being so small-minded. We walked on in silence and within a few moments she was hammering away at her accursed piano.

*

“Anna,” said Mother one evening “Mrs Hamilton. What sort of a lady is she?”

I could feel Matthew watching me carefully. I glanced at him. He looked odd.

“How do you mean? She’s French.....”

“No. I mean...is she...tall? Is she big? Pretty? Plain? Or what?”

“Muscular?” added Matthew with a contrived laugh which I sensed was hiding something else. A few seconds’ more thought made me realise what they were fishing for. What *type* of woman was she? Was she a lesbian?

“She’s very pretty, dark brown hair, wears lovely clothes and nice perfume..... You were at the prize-giving, Matthew. You must have noticed her!”

“Ah,” he said. “You know I only have eyes for your mother!”

They both laughed but my Voice saw a chance to get some revenge.

“Well, Mother. *You* would have noticed her - *IF* you could have bothered to come!”

She slammed her wine glass down and glowered.

“Anna, that ...is ...so...unfair! You know I had to go to the hospital! You know I tried to change the appointment.”

I added nothing. I did not need to. There was a silence while they thought over what I had said.

“And when you went around that first time, was she...nice to you?” Matthew asked.

I was going hot and felt horrified and furious with them, but more horrified and

furious with myself, certain that I must be blushing. How imperfect we were, that we could not make our bodies give out the correct signals. My redness would convince them that I was hiding a really naughty secret!

“She gave me some lovely lemonade and I played with her cat. She showed me a picture of her wedding and her husband - Raymond - who’s gorgeous...”

“She’s married?” asked Mother, literally taken aback in her chair.

I could tell Emily was absolutely loving my discomfort. She had that gloating expression on her face and I was terrified she might say something about the gardener.

I gave her leg a gentle nudge under the table

“What?” she said in pretended innocence.

“WHAT?” I replied in fury.

“You kicked me!”

“NOT ON PURPOSE YOU IDIOT!”

“Emily.” interrupted Mother. “Go and practise your new piece, there’s a dear.”

She was really loving this so she protested, but Mother insisted; and when she protested again Mother almost blew. She scuttled off without another word. Once we were alone, Matthew sat back and placed his palms behind his head. His merry eyes which made his face look as if it was ever on the verge of laughter, were now very stern.

“While you were there, did she come close to you or anything? Touch you? Kiss you?”

“Just to say goodbye. But that’s what the French do, Matthew! You know that! Just a peck - on the cheek.”

“Just a peck?”

“YES! What are you trying to say? That she’s a LEZZY?”

Mother coughed on her wine and Matthew slapped her back.

“Anna. I never mentioned that word! *You* did. Whatever made you jump to that conclusion?”

I was really angry now. “What made you jump to yours?” I retorted. “I’ll tell you what! You saw that graffiti on the wall. I wish I’d never shown you! You promised to paint it over but *I* finished up doing it! Is that what you want to believe? Some filthy graffiti about a really brilliant teacher, because of a jealous FUCKING BITCH in my class who IS a lezzy?” I stood up. “I didn’t think you were like that, Matthew, like...like that DISGUSTING old woman.....and that nosy OLD BAG at the post office”

“ANNA! CALM DOWN!” he shouted.

I had never seen him angry before. I had never sworn. I sat down. He sat down. Emily stopped playing, the clock ticked and the fridge burred. I was determined not to cry and I just about held my tears back.

“Anna, I’m sorry if I angered you. Anna, you’re fifteen in a month. You know what the score is. In a little village people talk. It is probably just idle tittle-tattle but your mother and I needed to know. To put our minds at rest.”

Mother urged Matthew to tell me about what had happened in the pub.

“Go on” I said. “Tell me. I’m fifteen in a month.”

“It’s something and nothing really. I popped into The Pheasant the other night before dinner and that half-wit Billy Connor and his mates were in the bar. You know him - he’s the one they find drunk on the village green most Saturday mornings. Anyway, as soon as I walk in it goes really quiet - and I know it’s got to be down to me because you can hear them laughing and joking twenty yards away outside in the road. So after a while of tittering he starts on about frogs - he can’t hear his mate because he

might have a *frog* in his throat, really witty stuff like that - did anybody in the bar like *frog's* legs? - Could Terry put them on the bar menu, because he might fancy a nibble? Hilarious. Then it dawns on me. They're on about your Mrs Hamilton. So I say - as pleasantly as I can to that idiot - doesn't he like the French? This made them all laugh like drains. Not when they bat for the other side, he says. So I shut up. Anyhow, when they've changed the subject to the footy I go up and have a quiet word with Terry and ask him what it's all about. He tells me there's a rumour going about that she's a lesbian - and that you, Anna, and other girls had been seen going round there. That's it."

"That's it? That's all?"

God, how I despised people! What sewers their minds were.

"You are hiding something Anna, I can tell." said Mother in a terrible voice.

"NO! Look, if you don't believe me, come round now and see her wedding photo."

For some peculiar reason the two pillows on her double bed jumped into my head - and the thought that on Mother and Matthew's there were four. And I saw into the cupboard under the stairs where there were only *her* coats and *her* shoes. Where on earth were his? I got to my feet.

And where did I think I was going - ??? asked Mother

"I'm going to see Napoleon."

"But you've already fed him!"

"No," I lied. "He wasn't in his basket. So I decided to leave it and go back."

She looked at him. He looked at her.

"Look. If I stop going round to that *evil frog's* house, A- Napoleon will die of starvation...B - people will think that you believe all that rubbish and C - you will be as bad as Billy Connor and all the other people in the village who have nothing better to do than make up wicked stories about foreigners. Mrs Hamilton is in France, so she won't be able to abuse me from there."

Before they could react I had flown out of the door. As I hurried off I imagined Mother saying to Matthew how touchy I was and how difficult, and that I must be going through a "phase".

Once inside the cottage I resolved to find out the truth and clear Mrs Hamilton's name. I knew that I would have to speak to Jessica, if she was still around. I wished with all my heart that Mrs Hamilton would be proven entirely innocent and tried to discount all the many signs to the contrary. I thought of Katherine Paulley and wondered whether she had really found something out, or whether her malice was spun solely out of jealousy. Why did she fancy Jessica if she had a boyfriend? Perhaps she was just going through a "butch" phase! If Mrs Hamilton had her Raymond how could she possibly fancy females? Perhaps Jessica's calls here had an entirely straightforward explanation. Perhaps, like those louts in the pub, I had a really, nasty, dirty mind linked to that Voice of mine - a mind which flashed up pictures of stupid pillows and horrible pictures of people in bed together.

Napoleon was softly snoring in his wicker basket. I knelt beside him and sniffled.

How much better and simpler it was to be a cat. He stirred and stretched his paws, opened one slitty eye and seemed to smile. I bent over him and kissed his soft head.

He smelt earthy like the garden.

I looked up at Mrs Hamilton's photograph. I would borrow it to show my parents how impossible it was, when she had such a lovely man, to be what they said. They seemed utterly, blissfully in love with each other. It was so out of the question that they would have time for anybody else. But then my voice said "Mother and Father"

and I saw again the sad little Sunday morning scene from the previous year. This thought pushed me upstairs to the bedroom. I took a deep breath and slid back the doors on the mirror wardrobe. There were no suits, no ties, no shirts, no large black shiny shoes. Only her things. With a heavy heart I slid the doors back and when I saw my tired, long face again I burst into tears. I sat on the end of the bed and wept.

I felt forced to conclude that Raymond must have gone and she had pretended to everyone he was still around. How she must have struggled to keep it up! I remembered her crying about my sad story that first time I had come round. She must have been crying for herself too! How she must miss him! No wonder she embraced me. No wonder she worried about being misunderstood in this foul, stupid country with its lager louts, its dreary teachers like Boyd - who would not recognise Beauty if he fell over it - its fatsos who could not stop stuffing their great faces like Mrs Self-Nourish and Christine Duffey - and its dried-up old women who liked to think the worst of people.

I went slowly back downstairs and thought for the first time of all the letters I had been piling up in the kitchen, as she had asked me to do. I picked up the pile and sat on my haunches by Napoleon. With every new one I prayed that there would be one envelope addressed to Raymond but they were all to her. I could hardly bare to look up at his smiling face. Why, Raymond? What had she done to make you go? Couldn't you appreciate what a lovely woman she was?? Did she have an affair? Did you give your PA one, like Dad? I burst into tears again. I did not want to grow up. I would become a bulimic and starve myself to death. I did not want my heart broken.

*

"Anna. I think there's a policeman at the door."

I turned to Emily who had been dancing in the hall and saw in the belly-glass of the front door the unmistakable shape of a bobby's helmet. There came a loud rap. I stared hard at Emily and held my finger to my mouth. Another rap. Napoleon craned his neck and looked intelligently up at the source of the noise. He was cleverer than most people I knew.

"Come on. Open up. We know you're there."

I went past her and reached up to the door knob. The policeman and - woman looked quite surprised to see me.

"Is your mother in? Miss Button?"

Button?? I felt so relieved I could have kissed him.

They pushed their way in and looked around. The policewoman was very pimply.

The man took off his helmet and put it under his arm. He looked at his little notebook.

"Miss Chantal Button. This is number 2, Honeypot Lane is it not?"

He had said *Chantal* and my spirits, having soared, now took a nosedive; but he had pronounced her first name as in "chant" not "shan't" and I despised him for it.

"You've come to the wrong address. Mrs Hamilton lives here....and Mr Hamilton," I added quickly.

"And who might you two young ladies be then, if I may ask? Their daughters?"

"Anna and Emily Dyer."

"D-Y-E-R? You have a different surname from your mother?" asked the woman unpleasantly

"She's not our mother. We're feeding Napoleon"

The officers stared at my sister as if she was bonkers.

“Feeding Napoleon?”

He heard his name and came trotting into the hall meowing. I scooped him up and he pawed at the man’s sleeve and kept pulling at it with his claws. Both seemed fascinated.

“Meet Napoleon!” I said proudly.

The measles-faced woman did not even smile but the bobby reached up and scratched his ear.

“So I take it,” he said “That the lady of the house is away. Do you know where?”

Emily went to speak but I nudged her toe with mine.

“In America. All summer.”

“Whereabouts?”

“She’s touring. With Raymond.”

“Her husband?”

“Yes.”

“Is he French too?”

“French? They aren’t French! They’re Scottish!”

Emily gave the tiniest cry - a squeak - and looked at me in wonder. Napoleon noticed and so did the woman.

“You do know that if you lie to the police it is very serious. You could be in big trouble.” she warned.

“Hang on a minute,” said the man. He turned to his colleague and whispered something at which she nodded. She pressed a button on her walkie-talkie and went outside saying she wanted “a check“. All at once I had a brilliant brainwave. I went into the kitchen and brought out some envelopes to put into his hand. He looked at the name, raised an eyebrow, nodded and handed them back. He rolled his eyes and sighed. He went out to the lady and pulled the front door almost to. A second later she strode back in and thrust a police photo of Mrs Hamilton, looking very grim, under our noses. I went hot.

“Is this your Mrs Hamilton?” she demanded. I went to say yes when Emily took over.

“Nothing like her! *She’s* ugly! Clare - Mrs Hamilton - is really pretty!”

I looked at her in absolute admiration. She was growing up fast in the arts of deception.

When they had departed - reluctantly, with a final sceptical stare at us - we hugged each other and giggled. I opened a carton of orange juice to celebrate. Nosy Emily had already reconnoitred the kitchen cupboards to inspect her provisions and she stood on a stool to fetch down a bottle of champagne. Dare we? We dared! Just a little to make Buck’s Fizz which we were allowed on New Years Eve. The cork hit the ceiling and Napoleon went to flee. We laughed and grabbed him. Emily set him down on the kitchen table and looked at me.

“I think I’d better tell you what’s going on - as long as you swear on your life and Mother’s life not to tell.”

“You’d better. Or I’ll blackmail you for the whole £160. Or I’ll tell Mum the police were here and you told them so many lies your tongue should fall out!”

“So did you!”

“I’ll say you made me!”

I told her to shut up and listen. So I told her all I knew, all I suspected and all I could not make my mind up about. She thought it over and seemed confused.

“But Anna, if Mrs Hamilton is a lesbian and has been rude with your friend, shouldn’t you tell the police the truth and let them sort it out?”

Her commonsense unsettled me. Of course I should. So I told her I had a dilemma.

“A what?”

“I want to be loyal to Mrs Hamilton. I don’t believe what people are saying and thinking. She could lose her job for doing nothing. Anyway there are worse things than being a lesbian.”

I thought with disgust of the old woman and her suspicions, and of Billy Connor lying pissed on the village green.

“And what would happen to Napoleon if she was arrested!” she cried.

“Exactly!”

This was the clincher. He knelt on the table like a sphinx, purring and looking from me to her as we spoke. He loved to be talked to and looked as if he could make out some of what we were saying.

“But you know when they come back again we’ll be in big trouble, Emily.”

“Why? We didn’t tell them any big lies did we?”

“No? What about her being in America with Raymond?”

She thought about it and said “Well, just say that that’s what she told us. How are they to know she didn’t tell *us* a lie?”

“What about the photo?”

“It looked nothing like her real self!”

My God! If they had taken the trouble to nose around in the kitchen they would have seen her photo on the wall and that would have been that! Or would it? I went close to look at it. There was just no comparison between the two versions of her. But why had they got her name wrong and called her Button? My Voice supplied the answer as I sipped the Fizz. I went into the hall and looked at the first sea-scape picture. It was signed *Botton*. Of course. She was the artist. She had painted it before she was married. But how had the police known her maiden name? I said nothing to Emily; the less she knew the better. Now she was holding her hand to her mouth as if she had thought of something truly awful.

“Oh- oh...you said they were Scottish, Anna. Get out of that one!”

Mmm. She had a point. I racked my brains until I had it.

“I’ll just say that she speaks French all the time at school - which she does! - and with a Scottish accent at home. Like Uncle Hamish!”

She laughed and hiccupped. “That’s RUBBISH! You’ll be arrested for purging!”

“PERJURY, you DIMMO! They can’t prove I’m lying!” I swigged more Fizz. “I’ll just say that Mrs Pizza-Face frightened me, if I have to sign a confession!”

She kept hiccupping and laughing.

“She was PC Margherita!” I added, making her worse.

We both collapsed in a fit of helpless giggles. The cat sat up straight and looked first at her then at me as if trying to share the joke. Laughing so much had made me feel a little sick. While Emily laid her head on the table all swoony I poured the rest of the champagne away. It was a good job our parents were out at work. Suddenly I thought of the phone number. Mrs Hamilton had told me to phone her if there was an emergency. Perhaps she would know what to do. I looked in the drawer where she had shown me the number would be put but the paper was not there. I looked in all of them but could only find junk, cutlery and a set of keys.

*

“Jessica?” I said down the phone.

“No. It’s her mother. Is that Anna?”

Something in her severe tone warned me that to say yes would be a mistake so my Voice replied no. With a lilt I said I was Mildred. This did the trick and soon her

daughter had taken the phone and was chattering away.

“Jessica, just listen. It’s Anna. I have something really important to talk to you about, about Mrs Hamilton.”

I heard a catch in her breath. I told her that I would meet by the canal in an hour and that if she could, she should just say “ ‘Bye Mildred.’” I was so relieved when she did. I waited by the stile and almost gave her up. I had sensed she was in big trouble. I was about to go when I saw her cycling slowly over the brow of the hill. It was a warm day and she looked very flushed and pretty. Her golden hair had been crimped and she wore a pink T-shirt, which she amply filled, and navy blue shorts. I wondered if it would be a blessing or a curse to be so beautiful. She stopped and stepped out of her bike and barely nodded. She obviously had no wish to be there. We put on our padlocks, climbed the stile and walked in silence along the canal. To my surprise there was a chill breeze by the grassy bank and it ruffled the still water like an old lady’s skin. I shivered and her hair blew in wisps. She was waiting for me to speak but I could not decide how to begin. On the way to that secluded bench around the corner from the bridge, there was one in the open where we had caught up with Mrs Hamilton that day weeks ago. Here, without speaking, we sat down as if my prearrangement.

“I’m not allowed to come over your way,” she said at last, pulling the heads off the grasses next to her. “In fact, if you had been anybody else but Mildred I’d be grounded. Mum likes her.”

But not me. Never mind. Did I wish to be popular?

Three weeks of the holiday had nearly passed and I began to tell her about feeding Napoleon and his charming habits. I had not meant to trap her. Without thinking she said he had jumped on her lap once and scared her.

“So you admit you’ve been there, Jessica.”

She looked at me and she closed her eyes as if in resignation that she never would be clever enough to fool anyone. She stared at the water and crossed her ankles.

“She asked me one day if I wanted private tuition for free.” she muttered at last. “It was just after you were ill and away from school.”

Private lessons! That’s all there was to it! I could have shouted for joy! I asked her how many times she had been there.

“Six or seven. But I’m not supposed to talk about it.”

“Why ever not?”

“I had to promise.”

I thought of the promise I had had to make and was about to tell her when she carried on.

“Promise my mum as well as her. She found out about the lie you made up. A few days after she asked me who I knew in Wolverley and like an idiot I said I didn’t know anybody. I’m a rotten liar, Anna, as you just found out. I swore to Mrs Hamilton I would tell nobody. She said that the other girls might be jealous and bully me if they knew I was having private lessons. And if Mrs Nourrish and my parents found out then she would get into trouble for teaching a girl in her own home. So it should be our special secret.”

“So you had to make two promises.”

I glanced at her. Her eyes were filling as they had done in Mrs Hamilton’s classroom. “And broken both. I never meant to! I’m a stupid, wicked girl, Anna. Oh, it’s been so horrible at home!”

She threw her lovely arms around me and wept. This time I held her tight and laid my cheek on her head. What could I say?

“But if it was just French lessons, Jessica! Why should you be ashamed about that? All girls tell their mothers lies and break promises! I do!”

She broke away and wiped her tears with her forearm.

“That night when I saw you in the village I felt very confused, Anna. I felt guilty for one thing for using you as my alibi.”

“I could tell you were bothered about something. But I need to confess something. I’d seen your bike outside her cottage. When your mother phoned I had to lie for you....Now she thinks I’m a bad girl. ”

“I’m sorry. What did you think I was doing there?”

I shrugged and turned away to look along the canal where a red barge was slowly chugging towards us.

“She said I was very clever and making very good progress and would soon be nearly as good as you. She gave me a big hug. It felt lovely. I hugged her back. Then she kissed me.”

“That’s nothing to be ashamed of! She kissed me too! The French do that.”

“No!” she exclaimed with a new sob. “She kissed me on the lips and I kissed her back! Then....the next day...she sent for me and apologised. She said she was so pleased with me she had gotten a little carried away.”

“And how did you feel?”

“Very weird. A part of me liked it and a part of me didn’t. Anyway I didn’t go there again because my mum found out two days later that I had lied.”

I laughed. So that was it! Nothing really very much had happened! I thought with renewed contempt of all those horrid rumours spun out of almost nothing and with sheer hatred of Katherine Paulley. I was tempted to tell her of my clever revenge but stopped myself just in time. Jessica was a lovely girl but not reliable. Oh no, she was crying again.

“Jessica! Your mother grounded you. So what??”

Then a horrible thought struck me.

“You didn’t tell your mum you were having lessons with her, did you?”

“No. Not then. I said I’d been with you. But Dad was really mad because I’d promised not to bike out that far in the evening and Mum went ballistic because I told her a lie.”

She paused and looked over to woods on the other side. She found my hand and clasped it tight. “Anyway, the last two lessons we had down by the bridge....The first one we just held hands and cuddled a little when it got chilly. The last one was different.” She sat up very straight and sniffled. “S-she said she might be leaving because she had been offered a job in Staffordshire. French teachers could pick and choose because there was such a shortage, she said...And because I was leaving too, we should have a party...”

“You were leaving? *Are* you?”

She nodded. The tears in her classroom had not just been about me, she whispered. Her parents had told her they were getting divorced.

“I’m going back to Surrey with my mum in September.”

I told her I felt sorry for her and I knew how it felt, but I was anxious to hear about their party.

“What sort of party?”

“She said she would bring some champagne for me to try a little of... and some cakes. And we should put on our best party dresses. I was really excited. But wearing the dress was nothing to do with a party. It just made things easier....”

“What?”

“Oh, Anna! Don’t make me spell it out! Use your imagination. We just got carried away....”

She began to sob again and I felt empty and helpless. I saw everything. It was all horribly true.

“Then what?”

“My mother found my diary.”

“Oh no.”

“She called the police...”

“WHEN?”

“Last week.”

“Oh shit.”

“I had to promise the police I wouldn’t tell anyone. Now I’ll really be in trouble. And I’ve told them another lie. The police don’t know what to believe now.”

“What?”

“Well, they said I could give evidence against Mrs Hamilton by video-link. I never dreamt I’d have to go to court! I thought making a statement would be enough. So I said that my diary had all been a lie. I’ve never seen Dad so mad. And the policewoman threw a wobbly. She pretended to be nice till then but I could see she was horrible all the time, pimply bitch!”

Now she really broke her heart.

“I don’t want to get Chantal into trouble, Anna! She’s been much kinder to me than my boozy mother! I think I’m in love with her, Anna!”

I comforted her as best I could. What could I say? I was in a state of turmoil myself. I decided not to mention the visit of the police to the cottage - she was already upset enough. I left her by the stile and knew I never would see her again. Nor did I want to. I cycled back to Dadlingcote and let myself into the cottage. Napoleon was asleep. I sat and stared at their picture and they smiled back at me. Beautiful Raymond. Whatever would you say if you knew?

Emily came in and woke Napoleon up. She set him down on the table and patted his back. He was so pleased he turned on the table and lifted his tail to show us his puckered button and his balls. She tittered, turned faintly red and put her hand across her mouth.

“Oh, Napoleon, that’s really rude!”

She grabbed his tail and flicked it. It trembled.

“It won’t move look, it’s so stiff. Here, feel!”

She grabbed my hand but I snatched it away. Emily was in one of her silly moods and I felt low.

“Anna, do you think boys have ones as big as Napoleon’s tail?” she said slyly.

“Emily, why do you have to be so crude these days? I liked you much better when you weren’t.”

“I asked Mabel about her elder brother but she wouldn’t tell me. I wish I had a brother.”

“I wish I had one. He wouldn’t play the piano. He would just disappear all day and play football.”

“Rachel Lewin did it with her elder brother.”

“Emily! That’s disgusting! How do you know that?”

“I’m not telling. It’s called lechery, I think.”

“No. Incest.”

“No. That’s what the wise man brought Jesus.”

“That’s INCENSE, you spoon.”

“SPOON YOURSELF. You always know better, don’t you, BIG HEAD!”

“It’s not my fault if I’m cleverer than you.”

“Not cleverer. Older.”

Now she stood up and thrust her chest forward on which her two little titties had recently begun to swell. I pretended not to notice the intended insult.

In the middle of that night I woke screaming. My light went on and Mother rushed in. I told her I had had a terrible nightmare, but about what I could not bring myself to tell her, I was so ashamed. I lied that a lion was eating me alive.

*

Emily scratched Napoleon’s ear and cocked her head to one side. She asked me why I had been screaming in the night.

“Did I wake you up?”

“Wake me up? I thought you were dying!”

“I had a nightmare, that’s all.”

“What about?”

“I’m not telling you.”

“If you don’t, I’ll tell Mum one of our secrets.”

“You can. You’ll only get yourself in trouble too!”

“What do I care? I’m too little to go to jail. You aren’t. You’re nearly fifteen.”

Was she right?

“If I told you about it, you’d think I was mad.”

“I know you are already.”

“Clever-shit.”

“Ooo, I’m *telling*...”

“Shut up.”

I told her in my dream I was stroking Napoleon and he had started to talk to me and tell me things.”

“What things?”

“I can’t remember.”

He had heard his name and had meowed.

“Napoleon *does* talk,” she said. “That’s no nightmare.”

“No. This was weird. He told me his name was Raymond. His mistress was a witch who had turned him into a cat. Then when I stroked him he suddenly turned into a man.”

“And?”

I could see I would get no peace until I had told her the whole tale.

“He started toyou know.....”

“No, I don’t know.”

“Oh, Emily! Use your imagination!. Started to take my pyjamas off and things.”

“Things?”

“Oh, Emily. This is really embarrassing. Don’t be so disin....”

“Dis-what??”

I was so ashamed that I forgot the big new word I had half-learnt, disingenuous.

“What did he do? Don’t tell me he had *sex* with you?”

“Not quite. I woke up just in time.”

She thought this over a while and patted my hand sympathetically.

“Anna, I bet you were really...disappointed.”

I tried to grab her but she was up and dancing around the table.

“Why would he want to rape a PLANK anyway?” she chimed.

We chased round and round like clowns in a pantomime. She stopped to thrust out her bobbies again and I saw then how to get my revenge.

“You’re tubby! You’ll be just like Grandma Dyer with her chest around her waist! I’ll be like Nana Eliot when she was nineteen.”

“Or like Auntie Anne!”

My mother’s sister was a gaunt spinster as tall as a crane and straight as a rake with a face to match. Mother had been lucky enough not to inherit those genes from her French grandmother, the nurse, with her wide piano teeth and nothing else to soften them, who had somehow managed to beguile my great-grandfather, the sombre-looking soldier in their joyless brown wedding photo with the corner ripped off.

By my long face Emily guessed she had scored a bull’s eye. She had stumbled on one of the darkest of my secret adolescent fears.

“OH SHUT UP!” I yelled.

She had beaten me again. OH SHUT UP always signified defeat. She leant forward and stroked the cat whose head had whizzed round in pursuit of us.

“Anna, why don’t you pray to God for a pair? For your birthday?”

I expected to see more sarcasm in this stupid remark but there was genuine sisterly concern.

“I don’t believe in God.”

“Mabel says that when we have dreams God is whispering things to us. I think she’s right.”

“Ah! So you really think that Mrs Hamilton is a witch and Napoleon is Raymond?”

“Are you, Napoleon?” she said.

He meowed.

“Was that a yes or a no?”

*

I have tried to pin down recently how I felt back then about Chantal once Jessica Lilley had told me her story. I ought to have felt disgust but I could not. I realise now I envied Jessica, not because of the things she had done - no that was the least appealing aspect and made me feel slightly queasy - but because of the passion she felt. I felt none for anyone, and no attraction, except for a flat photograph of a man I did not know and never would, who was decades older than me. I thought I was odd, sexless and always would be.

But disgust? No. not at all. In my Venn diagram of the little world I inhabited I knew for sure that I could never be in the same set as those horrible, judgemental women and the bar-yobs at The Pheasant.

The truth is, I think, I was between sets and too young to know what to feel. In my later teens, as other cases of abuse hit the headlines, I began to appreciate what turbulence Chantal had selfishly created in Jessica’s womanly body but childish mind; how she had ended her childhood and exploited her naïve sexual impulses for her own pleasure. I was certainly not distressed, only disappointed that she had not deserved the benefit of the doubt I had given her. I could see no point then - nor to be honest now - in punishing her by imprisonment.

I knew only the following certainties; *that* when she came back to England she would be arrested; that there would be whoops of delight and I-told-you-so’s at The Pheasant

and a general tutting through false teeth as filthy mouths relished sinking them into a juicy scandal; dirty minds would look at my straight body and imagine her hands all over me; Matthew and Mother would be embarrassed. Perhaps we would have to move. These were the prospects which truly upset and revolted me.

I decided it would be best for Chantal – and me - if she stayed in France, but how could I warn her? It would be equally bad for the cat if she did or did not. For a fourteen, nearly fifteen year old, the wellbeing of Napoleon was paramount. I was fascinated more and more by the dilemmas in my books. I had begun to collect them in my head. Poor Napoleon's struck me as particularly intractable.

The phone number. It had to be there. I rummaged through all the kitchen drawers again and turned every item out onto the worktop. I even accused Emily of taking it out and she denied it with her customary indignation. As I put everything back my eyes fell on the set of keys. The two with tabs were obviously for a car; another, a silver one, was a spare Yale for the front door; two tiny ones fitted the window locks; leaving one, an old-looking backdoor key. I took the bunch and went upstairs to the forbidden room. The last key turned easily, as I knew it was bound to do, in the lock.

Along one long wall were all her books, over a hundred, only very few in English. My Voice had kept whispering that she was not really French but an Englishwoman pretending. The books answered it. I picked out many art books and a large volume of photographs of nude men and women. They were utterly beautiful and, for this inquisitive child, compulsive. When I heard Emily arrive I took it downstairs to show her. It was delicious for me to observe her gape and hear her gasp as she turned one page after another, to watch her eyes widen as each new page destroyed every new perfect icon she had formed of the male physique and its attributes. When she finally closed the book the smile she gave me was one I had never seen before. The vulgar-minded child was in retreat.

Chantal's books confirmed that she loved to look. Her downfall, I concluded, was that she could not resist the urge to touch. I was old enough to know what "frustrated" meant. And I blamed Raymond. I did not return his smile in the kitchen the next time I found myself looking at his photo. He would not smile if he knew what his absence had led to.

What else was in the room? A single bed stripped down to the blue mattress; a table at which she been painting in watercolours one of the nude females, a lovely slender-faced woman with long black hair. And a computer.

When we returned home that evening there was a squad car outside. We were in for it. The policewoman was unaccompanied. She had obviously briefed Matthew and Mother on our lying and all three looked very stern. Would I be arrested?

"This, young lady, is a photograph of Chantal Botton, the woman you know as Mrs Hamilton. I have shown it to a colleague of hers from The Rectory school and to a pupil in your class. You lied to me. Why?"

There was something in her manner which made further lying inconceivable but Emily jumped in.

"We didn't recognise her, did we Anna? Honest. She looks really different."

I stared at the floor.

"Right. For the moment let that pass. Just tell me where she is and when she is coming back, please. No-one else has a clue. You feed her cat. You must know."

“She’s in France,” I said. “She’s back a week on Thursday at the end of July.”

I sensed Emily’s disappointment.

“Then why did you tell us that she was in America? Had she asked you to lie for her? Why are you covering for her?”

“I have no excuse. It was a stupid lie. I don’t know why I said it. I’m really sorry.”

I waited in agony for her to mention my Scottish fantasy but she seemed to have forgotten it, or was saving it up. She reminded us again of the seriousness of lying to the police, but I could tell she knew that this time I was speaking the truth. Five minutes later, after a whispered word or two to my parents who sat together like something deep-frozen on the sofa, she was gone. Mother ordered Emily in a non-contradictable voice to her room, leaving me to face the music.

I was told in slow, terrible tones that they were amazed, disappointed and not a little ashamed of me. Was I the daughter who had been brought up to tell the truth; the daughter who had won prizes for her intelligence? Was I the daughter who ought to be a good example to her little sister? What excuses could I offer for lying so stupidly to the police?

My reply sounded very lame. I told them that I had not liked the WPC. She was so nasty I had not wanted to help her. That was all. I apologised.

“What did she say that Mrs Hamilton had done?” I ventured to ask, sensing the tension a little eased.

“She refused to say. But she needn’t have worried. It’s all over the village what she’s been up to. With a girl from Stapleford. Anna, we need to ask you again. Did she in any way abuse you?”

“If it’s all such common knowledge why don’t you ask in the bar at The Pheasant. You refuse to believe what I told you before! Ask them!”

“ANNA. If you can lie to the police then you’ll surely not scruple to lie to your own mother!”

In answer to her I got up and fetched the bible from the bookcase. I laid my right palm on it and swore that I had not been abused.

“And I’ll swear to something else. Jessica Lilley is a liar. She told me the other day that she told the police she had made it all up in her diary. Her mother found it, read it, panicked - she drinks a lot - and called the police. There.”

I put the bible back and observed the effect. They were looking at each other in bewilderment. What were they supposed to think?

I went up to my room and lay fully clothed on my bed. I reflected with satisfaction that not word I had just sworn on the bible was a falsehood, whatever God might think. I watched the light fade. The house fell gradually silent and in the lamplight it came to me what to do. I could hardly sleep in anticipation and I considered creeping out of the house then. When I opened my eyes the streetlamps had gone out, birds were singing and it was light. Before anyone in the house or village was stirring I was on my way.

In the gold of the early sun the greens of lawns, the village Green, the leafy plants and especially the trees glowed with a startling intensity. The great horse chestnut in the corner of the churchyard was rippling in the slow wind like a galleon in full sail. All around my feet were tiny pods which the tree could not afford and had discarded. The brightness of the world was surreal. How lucky we were to have such a straightforward, honest-to-goodness place to live, and yet how stupid to live such mad, complicated lives there.

I let myself in very quietly so as not to wake Puss. Softly, with my toes pressed into the right angles of the stairs, I made my way up to the forbidden room. I turned on the computer and waited an age until the screen asked me for a password. Confidently I typed in N-A-P-O-L-E-O-N - and saw it rejected. Perhaps a number was part of it. I tried 1 but it did not work, nor 2. My ingenuity began to look foolish. Did French cats, I wondered have nine lives like ours? I tried it with 9 and to my absolute delight I was allowed to proceed. I searched her Desktop patiently and found a promising icon. This led me to a window where luckily she had saved her screen name and (second?) password. With a tremble I clicked on CONNECT.

She had received four emails from English friends which were not very interesting. I clicked on OLD and looked for the most frequent address. It was someone called Colette. The last message from her had come in on the day before her departure. I opened it. It was of course in French and quite long. Fortunately we had done a letter in class in June where we pretended to look forward to the visit of a pen friend and had to discuss all the things we might do together. So key phrases in it, if not the detail, I could understand. There was a reference to Maman, reporting her to be well and looking forward to Chantal's arrival. Surely then, Colette was her sister, and the person to whom I should send my emergency message. As I read on, half understanding most sentences, a word pulled my eyes to the bottom. **Raymond.** I read his sentence over and over, and the ones before and after, but I could not work out any more than that he had come back to Paris. Was it a warning to her, to prepare her for the possibility that she might bump into her ex-husband? I read other emails from her and Chantal's replies but there were no other references to him. I took down her huge bilingual dictionary and began translating passages but the effort was so demanding and I was getting nowhere. So I gave up. But I saw enough to confirm that they were sisters. I entered Colette's address and clicked on COMPOSE.

I began in French but so much vocabulary was beyond me that I scrapped it and began again in English. I wanted to make certain that I was understood.

FOR CHANTAL HAMILTON / BOTTON

URGENT!!!

Dear Miss,

You said if there was an emergency I should phone but I couldn't find the number. This is an emergency so please forgive me hacking into your computer. It was not hard to guess your password. He is well and asleep in his basket as I write.

Miss, you must not come back here. The police have been here about Jessica. She told me what happened. Her mother found her diary. She told the police she had made it all up but they won't believe her. She told me she loves you and she's really sorry. You might get away with it but you will be arrested and lose your job. I'm sorry too.

Anna

I pressed SEND. I checked it had gone. It had. At 5:48. I slipped out of the house, tiptoed back to my room and fell asleep.

After Emily had left the cottage to meet Mabel that same morning, I went back upstairs and checked. There was no reply. Nor the rest of the day. I tried to imagine

the upheaval the message had caused and put the silence down to that. As Emily played with her whisky favourite downstairs that evening I checked the computer one last time. The window was blank and I switched off. I swivelled round and round on her office chair until I felt quite dizzy. I had forgotten how much I loved to do this, to watch the world whiz around until I, spinning and dancing, suddenly stood still. The bedroom slowed to a halt and I stared absently into her bookcases. One book was lying on its side below the others on a great atlas. It had a mottled texture and was a powder blue colour. The word ALBUM shot into my head.

She had deliberately locked the room. Everything here was therefore strictly out of bounds. I held in my hands her private history in pictures and I had no right to enter there. So I opened it with feelings of guilt and excitement. On the first page was a photo of two tiny girls sitting on cushions at an angle to each other. Their feet were bare and they wore lacy dresses. They had the same dark curly hair and the same joyous smile. They were twins. I turned the pages and saw them grow and their faces change together; in the garden, on the beach, by a river, in a park; always in matching clothes, supervised and admired by a variety of proud relatives, but primarily a dusky lady and a tall handsome man.

Then one sister disappeared and the one remaining, now older, around thirteen or fourteen posed in baptism robes, in various costumes, in a swimming costume holding a trophy and then in running kit with other athletes lying down or sitting up in the field behind. But which was which?

Then they were together again, linking arms, young women in a restaurant with a host of people behind toasting them. Chantal and Colette! Was this their coming of age party? I stared at the other guests and with a leap of the heart recognised Raymond. I turned the page and saw to my delight a very similar picture to the one downstairs. She carried the same bouquet of red roses and Raymond was smiling even more charmingly and looking more gallant. To her left stood her mother, still pretty and to his right her father, now looking bent and in some discomfort. But where was Colette amongst these wedding photos? I counted eight of them with various people in attendance but she was nowhere. I closed the book and put it back. How could I account for her absence? Had there been a family-fallout? Had Colette been away abroad? Had she been ill? In an accident? Had she died? Was Colette another sister, an elder one or younger one? I returned to the beginning but amongst the other children could find no other face which appeared regularly enough to warrant that conclusion.

I went downstairs and looked at the photograph on the wall. On an impulse I took it down and held it close to my face. Its untellable secrets became no clearer. It tried to put it back on the wall but could not match the nail with the ring. I turned it round. And saw a dedication.

Pour Chantal

De Colette et Raymond le 13 juin 1982

Que tu nous pardonnes un jour

I was so shocked that I dropped it and the glass shattered on the worktop. The rectangle became a kite and the photo came out as I picked it up. I put it into a drawer, swept up the mess and left.

Please forgive us one day. The sentence haunted my thoughts all night as I tried to understand what might have happened. Had Colette lured him away from her? Had they once been engaged or even married? In her distress she had not attended their wedding, but she had forgiven them. Otherwise the photograph would not have hung on her wall. Did she still really think of him as “my Raymond” and could she not bring herself to love another man? Did this explain everything else? Or did she use the photo as a camouflage for her real intentions; or to persuade everyone that she was the married woman she pretended to be?

After a sleepless night I went round early again to the cottage. I hardly dared to look to see if she had replied. It clicked on NEW and there it was, sent at 20:25. It said simply

Take care of Napoleon

Adieu

Not *au revoir*. I pressed on REPLY and wrote *How is Raymond?* But she never got back in touch.

Some days later, as I wandered out of the spinney where I had been daydreaming, onto the field which overlooked the main road, I saw a removal van drive away from the village towards Earlstone. Later, when I ran round to feed the cat, I found the house had been half-emptied. The kitchen was still more or less intact but upstairs the wardrobe doors were open and empty and the forbidden room, apart from the bed, was a shell. Downstairs it was like a gigantic spot-the-difference puzzle. The cupboard under the stairs was bare but the lounge was still as it was, apart from a vase or two. The antique chair where Emily had kicked off those high-heeled shoes was also gone. The kitchen drawers were full of jumble and cutlery, and the keys were there, but not the photograph. Had she come back in person? The cat basket was there but not the cat.

Oh no. Had she taken him?

I shouted his name around the house, opened the cat-flap and yelled and ran to the box window to look in the garden. I ran back downstairs and found to my relief that there were still five tins in the cupboard and two pots of cream in the fridge. This was a good omen. I imagined Emily’s despair if I had to tell her he had been taken to France. If I went through the routine perhaps it would be alright, so I dutifully scraped his disgusting food on a paper plate, set it down and waited. It was nearly six. He always came in before six. I waited until I could bear it no longer and ran upstairs to check for him in the rooms whose doors had been left open by the removal men. But every corner, every ledge, every space where he might have crept was empty. In my mind’s eye I kept seeing him in every next one and it was awful to find him nowhere. The junk room had not been cleared. Might he be underneath the mountain of files and documents? I began to remove bags, box files and ring binders and finally stumbled on a green one on which she had written in thick black felt-tip 4 HANSOM. That was my class. I realised with a leap of the heart that here was her record of marks for us and her assessments. She would not return. The folder was no longer private. It had been abandoned. With only a little pang of guilt I opened it.

To each of us was devoted an A4 page in her tiny, but clear handwriting. I turned first to mine. It was very complimentary - about my accent, my range of vocabulary, my skills - and it made me glow. Regarding my character she had written *réservee, calme, sage, timide, pas populaire*. Fair enough. I turned eagerly to Jessica's page and was surprised to see she had recorded very little. But she had slyly sketched her at her work and caught her aura and personality brilliantly. Who else was I interested in? I flicked back and it fell open at Christine Duffey. I read and threw back my head in helpless laughter.

Enfant sans talent, sans esprit, ennuyeuse, sans intelligence, nièce de Mrs Burton (!)

I remembered that *sans* meant without. (I looked up *esprit* at home and nearly choked when I saw it meant wit.) Who else? Of course! I turned to the Ps and found Katherine Paulley's page. I read with malicious delight the loathing which burned in her comments.

Enfant médiocre, arrogante, malevolente, sans esprit

Below, she had drawn a quick caricature of her, emphasizing the tired puffiness of her eyes and her thin, unpleasant mouth. I smiled at her and asked how she had enjoyed her summer. I scanned a few of the other girls, saw nothing remarkable and turned to the very back page. My eyes nearly popped out. She had hole-punched in a letter from no other than Mrs Nourrish, which Chantal had annotated with comments and queries of her own.

Dear Mrs Hamilton,

A pupil in 4 Hansom has made an allegation of professional impropriety against you which I am legally obliged to investigate.

It is alleged that

1 you regularly make physical contact with the arms, shoulders and backs of the girls as you walk around the room

2 furthermore, you are seen to favour certain girls, lavishing them with praise and attention, whilst having little or nothing to do with others who are less able at French.

These complaints have been made by a pupil in the latter grouping.

I would be obliged if you would report to my room at 4pm on Friday 2nd June to meet with me and a Governor, Reverend Bullock, where you will be shown a typed copy of the girl's statement and that of a second girl and a third girl who I chose at random to corroborate or contradict aforesaid complaints. The girls' identities must remain confidential, but I regret to tell you that their statements are in remarkably close agreement. You are entitled to bring a friend to the meeting and I urge you to contact your professional association.

Finally, Mrs Hamilton, may I reiterate to you what I said at our first meeting, when a

similar problem encountered by yourself at a previous establishment was discussed, The Rectory requires the very highest standard of conduct from its staff and I refer you again to our handbook, section B

2 *staff shall at all times maintain a **proper** distance between themselves and their charges*

6 *staff shall deal even-handedly and offer support, praise and constructive criticism to pupils regardless of class, creed, ethnic background or **ability***

Yours sincerely,

Ealiner Nourrish B.A., B. ED

Headmistress

In red Chantal had written *vache!* by Mrs Nourrish's signature. That was a cow! By the first paragraph she had written "Katherine?" But what surprised me was that by the longest she written three or four names including "Anna?" There *was* another Anna in the group. Surely she had not suspected me? I calculated. The date of the letter was 13th June, a week or so after my return to school. Had this coincided with Mrs Hamilton's cooling towards me? I felt keenly the injustice of her suspicion, particularly in light of my concern and effort on her behalf.

What a pompous letter it was! How I loathed that obese woman! I tore it out and was going to crumple it when my Voice suggested to me the best idea it had ever had. I had been handed a golden chance to revenge myself on her and play a great joke on Boydy and on any teacher I took against. I folded it and put it in the back pocket of my jeans.

I heard the cat-flap rattle! I rushed downstairs and saw him gobbling his supper. I lay down next to him and told him what a naughty boy he was to be so late. He looked at me, gulped, squinted good-naturedly and went back to his supper.

*

"Mother I have something to ask."

"Yes darling?"

"Mrs Hamilton phoned me this morning and said she would not be coming back."

She stopped mashing the potatoes and turned to look at me.

"Her mother has had a heart attack, so she's staying in Paris."

"Really?"

She did not need to add what she was thinking. I could sense her relief.

"And this afternoon I saw a van come. It took away a load of her stuff. But not Napoleon."

"Poor cat."

"So he'll have nowhere to live when the house is sold."

"And you thought we might adopt him."

I felt my heart fill with hope.

"Absolutely out of the question."

"BUT WHY?"

"Why? A cat and a baby in the same house?"

“So?”

“Cats smother babies. They smell the milk on their mouths and lie on them.”

“That’s RUBBISH Mother! Who told you that?”

She refused to answer and took out the casserole from the oven.

“I PROMISE I would keep my eye on him and not let him anywhere near the baby!”

“NO. NO. NO.....N - O...spells NO.”

“Well, can’t he just live here till it’s born? Then go to Auntie Ann’s? She likes cats.”

“What, and get under my feet and trip me over? A pregnant woman? NO! Now go into the garden and tell them the dinner’s ready.”

I sat and glowered at my stew, barely touching it. Mother decided to adopt an *I’m ignoring this* approach. Matthew decided to make a list of all the good reasons why a pet cat would be a bad idea. To my silent fury, Emily, revelling in my sulk, kept nodding and even adding some very sensible and grown-up reasons of her own with that vile, sly gloat on her face. In the end I shot up and stormed out, leaving her rocking and pealing in laughter like the Dadlingcote church bells.

I slammed my door. How I hated them all! Particularly my unborn baby half-brother. I reached under my bed to tear up my mother’s painting which I had nearly finished, thought better of it, and put it back. I sat on the end of the bed feeling about as miserable as I imagined I could be. Then I remembered the letter I had torn out of the ring binder and smiled. I was in the proper mood for revenge. I went into my mum’s office and ran off a photocopy with the content blanked out on blue paper, the nearest colour to the school’s, leaving the letterhead and the signature intact. I went back, opened my own computer and began to write, choosing as often as I could the pompous phrases she had used.

Dear Mr Boyd,

A pupil in 5 Hansom has made an allegation against you which I am legally obliged to investigate.

It is alleged that

1 your lessons are extremely boring

2 furthermore, you are seen to be doing crosswords, whilst having little or nothing to do with your charges, and offer no support, praise or constructive criticism

These complaints have been made by a very intelligent, though rather noisy pupil in the group.

I would be obliged if you would report to my room at 4pm today to meet with me and a Governor, Reverend Bullock, where you will be shown a typed copy of the girl’s statement and that of a second girl and a third girl who I chose at random to corroborate or contradict aforesaid complaint. The girls’ identities must remain confidential, but I regret to tell you that their statements are in remarkably close agreement. You are entitled to bring a friend to the meeting and I urge you to contact your professional association.

Finally, Mr Boyd,, may I reiterate to you that The Rectory requires the very highest

standard of teaching from its staff and I refer you again to our handbook.

Satisfied, I printed it off and after one or two failed efforts, managed to align it so perfectly on the glass pane of the printer, that the letter looked virtually identical in format to the master. I danced around for joy and then wrote another for Mrs Burton.

Dear Mrs Burton,

A pupil in 5 Hansom has made an allegation against you which I am legally obliged to investigate.

It is alleged that

- 1 you favour certain girls, in particular your niece Christine Duffey*
- 2 allow her to miss Games for hardly any reason at all, such as a graze or a slight headache, when she is so clearly in need of exercise.*

etc, etc, etc

For Mrs Nourish I cooked up a real special from Reverend Bullock. It took a bit longer but it was worth it.

Dear Mrs Nourish,

A member of staff has made an allegation against you which I am legally obliged to investigate. His identity must remain confidential.

(It **had** to come from Boydy, the *only* male member of staff!)

It is alleged that

- 1 you sit in your office all day and never visit classrooms*
- 2 talk to pupils as if they are idiots*
- 3 are rather too fat and not fit enough to do a rather demanding job*

As I was sealing my letters into some posh white envelopes I had stolen from Matthew's desk the most wicked idea of all came to me.

Dear Mr and Mrs Paulley,

I really must speak to you about your daughter Katherine's conduct.

I would be obliged if you report to my room at 4pm tomorrow to meet with me and a Governor, Reverend Bullock, where you will be shown a report of the girl's misdeeds. I regret to tell you that she has been smoking behind the bushes, and when we turned her bag out we found two condoms and an obscene magazine full of female nudes. She is also very cheeky to staff and it will not do. Just because she is the hockey captain does not mean she can do just as she pleases.

I made copies of them and put them in my box of secrets which I kept in my wardrobe with my diary.

I heard Emily go into her room and after a while I remembered what I had wanted to say to her. She said was a bit sorry for teatime - but only a bit, because I had been such a mardy bum.

"I didn't mean what I said about Napoleon, Anna, but you might as well face it, she's made her mind up. He can't come here."

"Never mind that. You know that card which Karen gave you - you know - the gardener? Did you keep it?"

"Hold on."

She looked through her drawers and handed it to me. She also showed me a card she had written out for Mrs Hodges' post office window.

I am napoleon from honey pot lane. I am a real cudley cat and need somebody kined to look after me. please phone me on I am free to a good home

"You can try it," I said "But who's going to want a cat that can't spell and punctuate?"

*

In the kitchen cupboard there was only one tin left. I was scraping a little onto his plate when I heard the front door open and slam. Had she come back after all? I turned to look and saw an old man with a very shiny bald head come in. I do not know which of us was the more surprised.

"And 'oo might you be?" he said looking very affronted.

"I'm Anna. I'm feeding Mrs Hamilton's cat."

"Well, Mrs 'amilton 'as ended 'er tenancy 'ere and you 'ave no right to be 'ere. It's my 'ouse. You'll 'ave to leave."

"But what about Napoleon?" I cried.

"Nor Napoleon, nor Wellington, nor 'itler either!"

I felt near to tears and he must have noticed because he softened his tone a little. He asked me how I had got in and I showed him the front door key, which he pocketed.

"But how will I get in to feed him?"

"You'll 'ave to tek him wi' yer, m'duck. I'm sorry. I'll 'ave new tenants in here in a couple of days."

He went upstairs and while I heard him bumping around and cursing I took the bunch of keys which I had put in the drawer. I picked up Napoleon and the tin and sat with him on my lap on the church wall opposite. He came out and over to me, purple with fury.

"Is she owt to do wi' you, that woman?"

I shook my head.

"I'm gooin' to 'ave to 'ire a bloody mini-skip to tek 'er rubbish away from upstairs. I don't call that very fair, bloody Frog. Quite a queer frog an' all if you can credit what folks are sayin'! Foreign pervert! Well, I 'ope you've took everythin', cuz I've locked up nah."

I nodded. He turned, got into his big car and, with a glare, drove away. As soon as he had disappeared, I let us both back in.

I knew where Mother kept her cash, in a cupboard in the kitchen. There was a wad of twenties and I took the five belonging to me. I phoned Karen.

“It’s Anna, from the cottage, feeding Napoleon. Did Mrs Hamilton pay you for doing the garden., Karen?”

“No. We were going to settle up when she got back. Why?”

“She isn’t coming back.”

“Ain’t she? Why?”

“Her mother had a heart attack. She died.”

“Oh dear.”

“She sent me the cash, a hundred pounds. Will that be enough?”

“As near as dammit. Hang on a minute....why did you ask if she’d paid me if you knew she hadn’t?”

I held my breath. My Voice was silent. She gave a little chuckle.

“Listen,” she said “I was coming round this afternoon anyway to do the lawn and other bits and pieces. I’ll see you there if you like.”

I caught the bus into Earlstone and drew a hundred pounds out of my Building Society account. Karen turned up at one o’clock. I went into the garden with her and pulled up a few weeds while she mowed the lawn. Napoleon hated the mower and scooted through his cat-flap as soon as she turned it on. As she walked back and forth I secretly admired her grace and power. The warm summer had bronzed her.

As soon as she had finished I told her about the nasty man who had wanted to throw us out. She said she knew him. He owned quite a few places in the villages.

“A multi-millionaire he is. A Mr Herrod, would you believe.”

“Sounds like horrid.”

I told him what he had said about Chantal and she smiled.

“That sounds like him. He looks straight through me if he sees me, as if I’m not there. This might be a lovely part of the world but there are some really nasty people in it.”

I told her about the front door key and she laughed.

“Would you like a cup of coffee, Karen? There’s still a pot of cream left.”

She followed me round to the front door. For some reason, as soon as we sat at the table, I could not help but tell her the truth.

“Chantal’s in trouble with the police. She’s supposed to have abused a girl at my school.”

Karen put her meaty arms around her head and shook it, eyes closed.

“I wondered. I told her to be careful. So her mother’s not dead?”

“No.”

“She’s one of the nicest people I’ve ever met. She just has one weakness.”

I took out the roll of notes in an elastic band and pushed it over to her. And then from my other pocket the other five twenties.

“Two hundred? That’s too much.”

She was tickling Napoleon under the chin and he was thrusting his nose forward, eyes tightly closed in ecstasy.

“Do you like Napoleon, Karen?”

“Only a little bit.”

I felt really disappointed and she saw this.

“Shush!” she whispered. “I don’t want to make him big-headed. He’s brill, really. Best cat I ever came across!”

I tittered. She smiled.

“Chantal wants someone to look after him. I would but I can’t. Mother’s having a baby.”

“So she asked you to ask me if I would have him? For another hundred?”

“I could put a little to it as well!”

“And how much did she pay you for looking after him?”

“Oh, a hundred.”

She put her palm on the table and pushed all ten notes back to me.

“Chantal emailed me after you called, Anna.”

She got up, went to one of the drawers and pulled it out. Taped to the bottom was an envelope. She took out three hundred pounds.

“She told me where it had been put. She just said things had turned out bad. She told me to give you this.”

She laid down another five notes in front of me and tucked the rest in the big pocket in her overall. Her smile broadened.

“I tell you what Anna. If Napoleon promises to be a good boy, I’ll take him for nothing.”

I could not stop myself. I leapt up and threw my arms around her, at least as far as they would reach. Napoleon meowed. *What about me?* - he seemed to be saying.

“Oh, you’ll be a good boy, won’t you Napoleon?” I said.

And of course, he said he would. Karen picked him up to give him a warning.

“But you’ll have to earn your keep! You’ll have to help me and Shirley!”

She told us that she lived with her “friend” on a smallholding just outside Wolverley with a paddock. They had turkeys, geese, ducks and even goats.

“You’ll have lose a bit of weight if you’re going to scare the birds off our strawberries and peas! And the rats’ll take one look at your fat belly and laugh!”

“Oh, can we come over and see him?”

“Of course you can. If you do a bit we might even pay you a little. And you can try our goat’s cheese with our cherry tomatoes and basil. But probably best not to go into too much detail about me, if your parents ask.”

I bit my lip. She winked. I smiled. But could we have him for just one more night, I pleaded? Emily would want to say goodbye to him. She said she would fetch him the next morning, ruffled my hair and was soon gone.

I rushed home and told Emily to stop playing her rotten piano and listen. When I had finished she embraced me and we danced around until we fell over. She got up and went into the kitchen to the freezer. She took out a tray of chicken breasts.

“Napoleon can have a treat tonight!

And so it was that Napoleon was saved from homelessness.

I lay on my bed sniffing after Napoleon had gone off in Karen’s van, thinking about what that horrid man had said about Chantal, and my Voice made a really bad suggestion as how to repay him.

In the garden we had a pond and there were frogs. I put three in a box and filled a plastic bag with wet soil. I let myself into the cottage, put the rest of the paper plates on the floor and tipped the soil, wriggling with worms onto them. What else did frogs eat besides worms and insects? Flies? There were a few lumps of meat left in the last tin and some yellow-looking cream, so I spread it all onto a plate and left it there to fester. I found some cellotape in the drawer, taped the cat-flap open for the benefit of the flies and wasps, opened the lid on my frog-box and left.

We had to cancel the holiday in America because Mother was not up to it. In her late

thirties she was classed as an elderly mother and the doctor thought she should take it easy. We soon got over it and Matthew promised us the best holiday ever the following autumn, and so it turned out. And I even grew to like my new brother Edward quite a lot.

The term began and every so often, like balloons, I released one of my letters, beginning with Katherine Paulley's. It might have been a sheer coincidence but by October she came no more, having been whisked off to a convent school in the wilds of the county, it was whispered. Of course I could only imagine the furore caused by Mrs Nourrish's letters to the staff (and even one to the Reverend Bullock, accusing him of drunkenness) and it occurred to me that she might have even thought it was somehow Chantal's doing, getting her own back. I was far too calm, reserved, sensible, good and unpopular ever to fall under suspicion. Just after I had sent Boydy his letter he stopped doing his crosswords and even got up a few times to amble round the room. And he looked mighty pleased to be on his feet when to his - and our astonishment - Mrs Nourrish paid his classroom a waddling visit; she did her very best to look interested in our work, distributed her odour fairly and squarely and then waddled out. Was it not weird, I reflected, that doing good things often led to bad results and doing bad things sometimes to good? Mrs Burton gave Christine a good telling-off when she showed her the cut on her finger, and I watched in silent glee as she tried to squeeze her fat buttocks into the gym knickers she had been tossed.

We biked out to Karen's many times that year and the spring of the next, but eventually grew out of it. I was nearly sixteen, pretty and proud of my shapely little chest, and there was a boy in the village I fancied. Emily joined the county orchestra. So we forgot about Napoleon.

*

I was in café on the Left Bank with Jean-Pierre trying to think of an easy way to tell him that I no longer cared for him, and that I never really had. The smoking ban was about to be brought in and the air was a desperate shade of blue with the smoke of Gitanes. I felt pretty low again. I was persuading myself that when he was history I would start to feel better. And he would not suffer long, if at all. I sensed that his moving declarations were more for audience effect than for me and that he would effortlessly transfer the rhetoric elsewhere. I had grown rather tired of this silly young man, as I had of others, and was resolving to keep myself to myself again, at least for a while.

Then I just looked through the wafting smoke and saw her. Chantal. Her gait was unmistakable: like a heron, slow and deliberate, and her head uplifted and focused on some distant point. I sprang up, as if stung, and rushed out. I caught up with her easily.

"Madame! C'est moi! Anna!"

I stood in front of her so that she had no choice but to stop.

"Je vous connais, Mademoiselle?"

Did she know me??

"Mais oui!"

Her hair had lost its lustre and was tousled. Her cheeks, once as firm and well defined as apples - the French call them *pommettes* - had sagged. She now looked her age which would surely be nearer fifty than forty. Thoroughly taken aback by me, she

looked disconsolate.

“Je suis Anna Dyer, du Leicestershire. Dadlingcote.”

Her eyes widened very slightly but she did not smile.

“Excusez-moi, chere Mademoiselle, mais vous vous trompez. Je suis pressée.”

I stood aside and she walked on more quickly as if to prove her hurry. Having been so sure I began to wonder if I had been mistaken after all - she had been so adamant that I was. I called out “NAPOLEON!”

She hesitated, turned and looked at me as if I were completely insane or drunk, then turned the corner and disappeared for ever.

I came back to the brasserie on several occasions and sat there often, even walking the streets roundabout but never saw her. It eventually dawned on me that even if I had not been wholly mistaken, nine years had doubtless erased dowdy, insignificant Anna Dyer from her memory. Perhaps she had even been the twin sister. I would never know.

Some time later, two or three months later, I had almost forgotten about the incident when something uncanny happened. I was standing on the platform of the Metro at Opéra. It was rush-hour and there were crowds of people waiting for the next tube. As the train slowed and passengers surged towards the doors, mingling with those fighting to get off, I stood wearily still, unable to join the battle.

For any student of human nature who might care to be watching me from the window I contrived the expression of insolent disdain and aloofness I had been cultivating since my break-up with Jean-Pierre. One particular face was interested in me. It was a man's face with dark, genial eyes, thinning brown hair and a generous smile; and it broke out in self-congratulatory glee as he saw my cool expression change to helpless longing and despair when the train sped off into the dark tunnel.

It was Raymond.

FINIS

