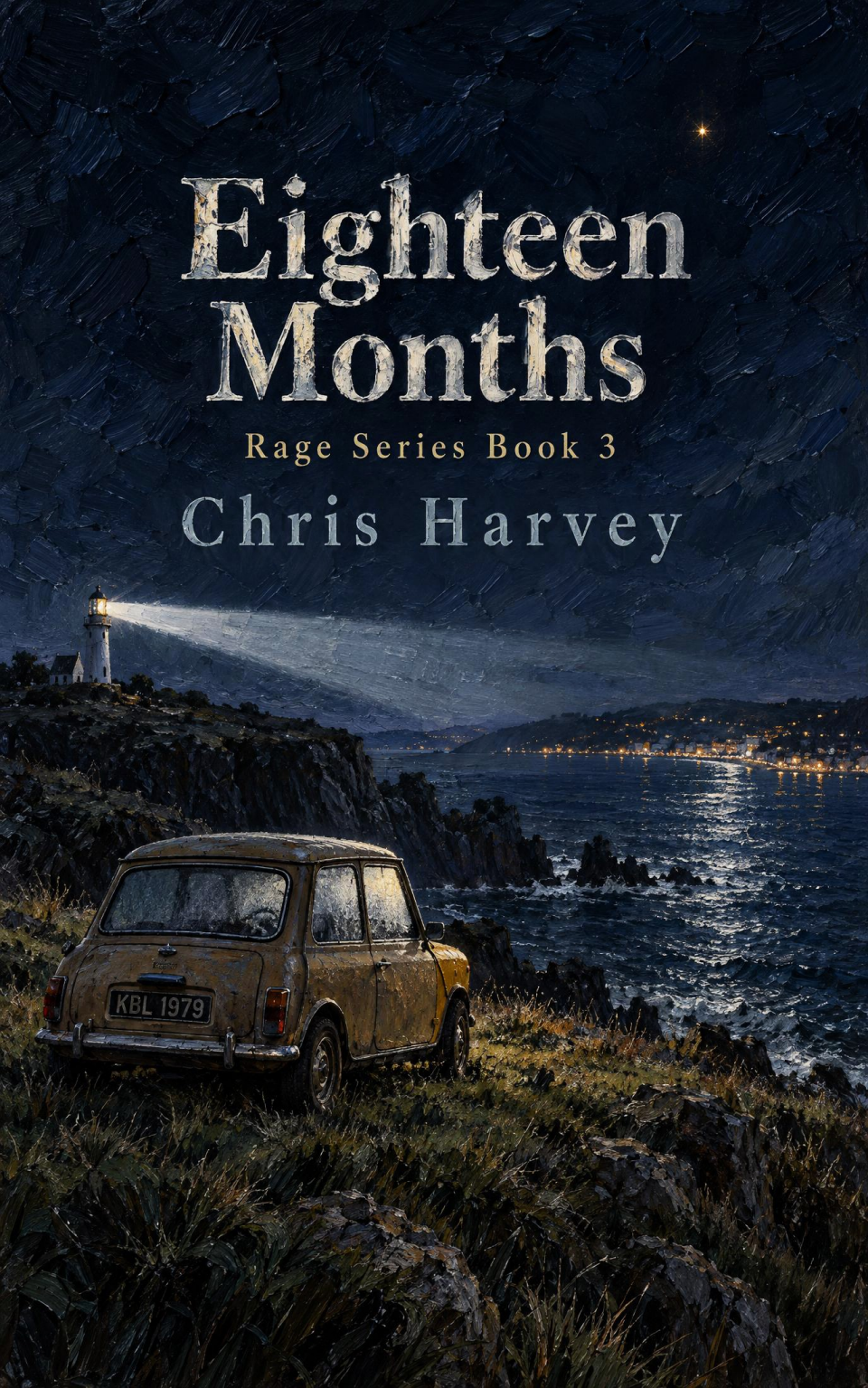
Eighteen Months

Rage Series Book 3

Chris Harvey



Eighteen Months

Chris Harvey



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Published by AniaAI

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Chapter 1 – *The Flat*

Mon. 17 Sept. 2018. Torquay, main post office, 11.20 a.m. Posted the 32nd to C.H., Singapore. Airmail, signed for. £38.50. Note inside. He will not open it until the packing is done. He never does.

It came on the Friday, in the afternoon rain.

I was on my knees on the floor of the back bedroom with a roll of parcel tape in my teeth when the bell went, and I thought it was the shipping company come early, and I went to the door with the tape still in my mouth. It was the postman, a thin Tamil boy with a waterproof over his uniform and rain running off the peak of his cap, holding out a padded envelope and a little screen for me to sign. I signed it with my finger. He looked at the boxes in the hall behind me, stacked to the height of my shoulder, and said, "Moving, uncle?" and I said, "Going home," and he said, "Where is home?" and I had to think about it, which I had not expected.

"England," I said. "Devon."

He nodded as if that were somewhere he had heard of, and went off down the stairs, and I shut the door and stood in the hall with the envelope in my hands.

I knew the writing. Big, square capitals in black biro, pressed in hard, the way a man writes who has filled in a great many forms

and has never once been allowed to make a mistake on one. *C. HARVEY.* And the address, all of it, every line, with the postcode underlined twice. There was a Torquay postmark and a customs sticker and, on the back, across the flap, a strip of brown tape with a signature written over the join, so that anybody who opened it and closed it again would have had to forge the signature to hide it.

Jono.

I put it on the kitchen table, unopened, and went back to the bedroom and finished taping the box.

* * *

I should say where I am, since I am going to be here for most of this, and since I will not be here much longer.

The flat is on the third floor of an old block in Tiong Bahru, one of the curved white ones they built in the thirties, with round corners and windows that open outwards on brass stays, and in the afternoons the light comes in sideways through the rain trees and lies on the floor in pieces. I have lived in it for twenty-one years.

A mile from here, south, there used to be a railway station. Tanjong Pagar. The last train went out of it in 2011, and I was on the platform with a camera when it did, and so was my son, and so was somebody else I will come to. They have kept the building. The tracks are gone. I walk past it sometimes on a Sunday.

I am fifty-six. I came here in 1993, at thirty-one, for two years. I have been here twenty-five.

On the eighth of October I fly to London, and on the ninth I take the train from Paddington to Torquay, and I do not come back. I have told people that so many times in the last month that it has stopped meaning anything when I say it. It means something when I look at the boxes.

There are forty-one of them, numbered in marker pen, with a list in a notebook of what is in every one, because I am an engineer and my father was an engineer and his father built boats, and none of us has ever put anything in a box without writing down what it was. Thirty are books and clothes and kitchen things. Eleven are something else.

Eleven are the archive.

* * *

I have written everything down since 1995.

Not a diary. I have never kept a diary; I do not have the temperament for it, and I do not think anybody should be trusted who writes down what they feel at night and reads it back in the morning. What I keep is the other thing. The date. The time. The weather. What I saw, and what I was told, and who told me. My mother taught me that, though she did not teach me it until I was thirty-three, and she had it from a woman who gave her a notebook for her ninth birthday in 1944, and that woman had it from somebody else, and so on back, I now know, a very long way.

So there are notebooks, small black ones with an elastic band, the same make every time, a hundred and sixty of them, in date

order, in three shoeboxes. And there are the photographs, which are my job, or were: sixty thousand pictures, near enough. Football grounds from Bangkok to Brisbane. Players' faces in the tunnel before a match, which is the only time a footballer's face tells you anything true. And in the backgrounds, if you know where to look, other faces. Men in good suits in the directors' boxes. A woman at a hotel window.

That was the other job. I will come to that too.

And there are the tapes, which are not here. They are in Torquay, at my mother's, where they have been since my father died: off-air recordings he made of the local news, every night, because, he said, somebody ought to, and nobody else was going to. When I get home I am going to put the tapes and the notebooks and the pictures together. I only know that if you put enough of what was written down in one place, sooner or later it starts to tell you things nobody meant it to.

Eleven boxes. I have taped them twice.

* * *

The rest of the box is not in a box. It is in a wardrobe.

At the back of it, behind my winter coat, which I have not worn since I came here, there is a cardboard carton that once held a dozen bottles of Tiger beer. I have moved it from flat to flat for twenty-three years, and never once put it in with the removals. I carry it myself. Today I got it out and opened it, for the first time in a long time, to make sure everything was still there.

My mother gave it to me in October 1995, in Torquay, in the back room at Widecombe Cot. I was alone. She had made sure of that. My son was eight weeks old and on the other side of the world with his mother, and my mother put the kettle on and shut the door and put the box on the long deal table between us, and said, "I said I'd give you this when you had a son of your own. You've got one. So here it is." And then she said one more thing, which I did not understand for thirteen years. She said: "It's for you, Chris. Not for your house. For you."

I said I did not know what she meant. She said, "No. Good," and poured the tea.

It is all still there. A school exercise book with a green cover, gone soft with handling, with *W. HARVEY, 1965* on the front in my mother's hand: her account of the war, written in a month at the long table in the back room of her mother's hotel. A blue airmail envelope with red and blue chevrons round the edge, and inside it four sheets of thin paper and a child's drawing of a lake. A Canadian cigar box of thin cedar, full of sweet wrappers, with pencil writing all over the inside of the lid. A brass compass on a ring, with a needle that still floats.

I opened the compass. The needle went round and settled, trembling, and pointed north, over the rain trees, towards Malaysia and Thailand and Burma, and somewhere a very long way beyond, at an angle I have never been able to work out properly, home.

I shut it, and put it back, and that was when I found the photograph.

* * *

It was not supposed to be in there. I do not know how it got in. It must have been in the bottom of the carton since one of the moves, slipped down between the cardboard and the flap, and today, when I lifted the cigar box out, it came up with it, and fell on the bed face down.

On the back, in blue biro, in a hand I almost did not recognise, a big loose hand that sloped forward as if it were in a hurry to get somewhere: *B.H. 14/7/79*.

I knew what it was before I turned it over. I think my hands knew.

It is a colour print, small and square, the colours already going orange at the edges. A Mini, in a colour they called Harvest Gold and everybody else called mustard, with one wing a slightly different mustard because I had bought it off a scrapyard in Newton Abbot. It is parked on short grass with its nose towards the sea. Behind it there is a small white lighthouse, and behind the lighthouse nothing, only a lot of blue that is half sea and half sky. It is evening. The passenger door is open.

There is nobody in it. I took it, so I am not in it, and she had got out of the car to stand at the edge with her arms out, which was a thing she did, at the top of every high place she had ever stood on, with the wind in her hair, as if she were going to fly off it, and I had said, "Hold still," and she had said, "You hold still," and run back to the car, and I had taken the picture of the open door, because she was laughing too much to be photographed.

Berry Head. The fourteenth of July, 1979. A Saturday. I was seventeen.

I sat on the edge of my bed in Singapore with the air conditioning rattling in the window and a forty-year-old photograph of an empty car in my hand, and I could not move for some time.

I have been in love six times. I have loved every one of them completely. None of them lasted longer than eighteen months, except one, and that one I would give a great deal never to have had, and I would not give up for anything in the world, because of what came of it. I did not know, for most of my life, why it was always eighteen months. I thought it was me. I know now why it was. I have known for ten years. I am going to tell it in order, the way it happened to me, and not the way I found out, because that is the only fair way.

The photograph is not going in a box. I put it in my shirt pocket.

* * *

Basil came at six.

He has a key. He lets himself in, the way he always has, since he was thirteen and his mother was not here any more and it was just the two of us in these four rooms, and he stood in the hall among the boxes and looked at them for a while before he said anything, which is a thing he does, and which he does not get from me.

He is twenty-three. He is taller than I am and wider in the shoulders, and he has his mother's colouring, fair, and her eyes, and her quickness, and nothing else of hers that I have ever been able to find. He plays in midfield for a club in the Premier League here, and two days a week he works for the office. I will not say what the office is. Not yet. I will only say that when I go, he is staying, and that I asked him to stay, and that it is the hardest thing I have ever asked anybody to do, and that he said yes before I had finished asking.

"You're really going," he said.

"I'm really going."

He went into the kitchen and got two beers out of the fridge, which was nearly empty, and opened them both on the edge of the counter, which he knows I hate, and gave me one, and we stood in the kitchen and drank them, not saying anything, with the rain coming down outside on the rain trees. Then he saw the envelope on the table.

"That's from Uncle Jono."

He has always called him that. They have met four times in his life. The first time, Basil was thirteen, and Jono had flown seven thousand miles to sit at this kitchen table with a brown file and tell me something about Basil's mother that I will write down in its place and not before. Basil was asleep in the next room. In the morning he found a big quiet man from Torquay making tea in our kitchen, who looked at him for a very long time and then held out his hand and said, "You'll be Basil. I'm Jono. I knew your great-

great-grandfather," which was not true, and was, as it turned out, not exactly a lie either.

"Aren't you going to open it?" said Basil.

"Not yet."

"Why not?"

"Because he's told me not to," I said, "until the packing's done. And because I know what it is."

He looked at me over the top of his bottle with his mother's eyes.

"What is it?"

"It's a book," I said. "A pocketbook. His family have kept them for a hundred and twenty years. He's got thirty-one of his great-great-grandfather's, from Victorian times. This is his own. The thirty-second." I looked at the envelope. "He started it in 1992. He's never shown it to anybody."

"What's in it?"

I did not answer that. After a while Basil put his bottle down and came and stood beside me and put his arm round my shoulders, which he has done since he was taller than me and not before, and we stood like that in the kitchen for a minute.

"You'll come out at Christmas," he said. It was not a question. It was the voice he uses on young players who have just been dropped.

"I'll come out at Christmas."

"And you'll ring Sundays."

"Seven o'clock," I said. "Your time."

He went at eight. He had training in the morning. At the door he stopped, the way he always does, as if he has forgotten something, and turned round, and looked at the boxes again, and then at me.

"Dad," he said. "When you get there. Will she be there?"

He did not mean his mother. He has asked me about his mother once in ten years, in a minibus, in the dark, and never again. He meant the other one. The lady on the platform at Tanjong Pagar, in the grey suit, whom he has seen exactly once in his life. I told him then that she was a friend of the family. A very old one.

"Yes," I said. "In October. She always is."

He nodded, as if that settled something, and went.

* * *

I finished the bedroom at eleven. Then I made a pot of tea, because there are some things twenty-five years in the tropics does not cure you of, and sat down at the kitchen table, and looked at the envelope for a long time.

Then I opened it. The packing was done. Most of it.

Inside the padded bag there was a small black pocketbook, the old kind, with an oilcloth cover and a pencil in a loop down the spine and an elastic band round it gone soft with use. The cover was worn pale at the corners and along the edge where a thumb had held it open, and there was a stain on the back, brown, like tea, or something that had been wiped off a long time ago. On the front, in

the same square capitals as the envelope, very small, in the top corner: *32.*

There was a sheet of lined paper folded round it, torn from the back of another book. Two lines.

> *Read this before you come home. All of it. Then we'll talk.*
>
> *J.*

I took the elastic off.

The first page had no heading. Jono does not do headings. It had a date, and a time, and a place, and the weather, in pencil, gone grey and slightly smudged, in a younger version of the square capitals, as if the boy who wrote it had been pressing very hard to keep his hand steady:

> *Sun. 5 April 1992. 6.10 a.m. Berry Head, below the north fort, foot of the cliff. Fine, cold, wind NE light. Called by coastguard. First on scene. Female, white, aged about 30, dark curly hair, dark coat. Deceased.*

I read it twice. Then I put the book down on the table, very carefully, square to the edge, the way my mother puts down her reading glasses, and the way her mother did before her.

I knew who it was. I had known for twenty-six years. I had stood at the back of the coroner's court in Torquay in June 1992 and heard a man in a grey suit say *misadventure*. I had known for ten years that the first person to see her had been a boy of nineteen in a

constable's uniform who had sat down on a rock beside her in the cold and taken out a new pocketbook. What I had not known, until tonight, in Singapore, with the rain on the window, was what he had written in it.

I took the photograph out of my shirt pocket and laid it on the table beside the pocketbook. The empty car. The open door. The lighthouse. The edge.

The same place. Thirteen years apart.

It was past midnight. I had a flight to catch in seventeen days, and forty-one boxes, and a son who was staying behind. I filled the pot again. Then I opened the pocketbook at the first page, and began to read, and I did not stop until it was light.

Chapter 2 – *Johnny's Funeral*

> *Sun. 7 Feb. 1999. Mum and Dad's, Preston, 1.30 p.m. Dad at the table after dinner. Twenty-five years today since Grandad Johnny was buried. Dad says I was ten months old and would not stop staring at the Harvey boy all through the funeral tea. Dad says I have not stopped since. Wrote it down because he asked me to.*

I found that on the ninth page, in among the rest, as if it belonged there. Then I understood that it did. A Hills pocketbook is not a diary either. It is everything that happened, in the order it happened, and a man's family happens to him the same as a body on a beach does.

So I am going to start where Jono's father started him. Not at Berry Head. At a graveside in Preston, in the cold, on the day Mr Heath called the election.

* * *

Johnny Hills died on Saturday the second of February, 1974, in his bungalow at Preston, in his chair by the window, with a cup of tea gone cold on the sill beside him and a book open on his knee. He was eighty-four. The whole country was on a three-day week, and the power was off in Preston that evening, so that the woman from next door who looked in on him found him by candlelight. She said

afterwards that he looked as if he had been reading and had simply stopped to think about something.

I was eleven, nearly twelve. I knew him the way a child knows an old man who has always been there: as a size and a voice and a smell of pipe tobacco and peppermints, and a pair of very large hands, and the feeling, whenever he was in the room, that somebody was keeping an eye on things.

He came to us at Widecombe Cot most Sundays after church, on the bus, with his stick, and sat in the back room at the long table with my grandmother and my mother and drank tea, and talked about nothing in particular, and when I was small he used to take me to Paignton on the bus afterwards to watch the trains.

That was our game. We would stand by the level crossing gates in the station square at Paignton, with the cars backed up on both sides and the bells going, and when the train came in he would put his big hand on my shoulder and say, "Right, Chris. What's on the platform?" And I would have to tell him. Not the train. Everybody looks at the train. The platform. The man with two suitcases and no ticket in his hand. The woman who got off and did not walk towards the exit but stood still and looked round. The porter who was watching the woman. And when the train had gone, Johnny would say, "Good," or, "You missed the boy with the dog," and we would go and have a cup of tea in the buffet and he would tell me which of them I had got right.

I did not know I was being taught anything. I thought it was a game for old men who liked trains. I found out later that his father had played it with him, at the same crossing, in about 1898.

* * *

The funeral was on the Thursday, the seventh, at St Paul's in Preston, at eleven.

I was not supposed to go. My mother said it was no place for a boy with exams in a fortnight, and my father, who almost never disagreed with her about anything, put down his paper at breakfast and said, "He'll come, Wendy," in a voice I had not heard him use before, and my mother did not argue. Later I worked out that my father had been ten years old, sweeping out the bilge of a boat at Galmpton, when Johnny Hills put a hand on his shoulder for the first time.

We went in the car, all of us. My father driving, in his black tie, with my mother beside him. In the back, my grandmother, Nance, upright in her good black coat, and my grandfather, Harold, who was eighty and had never once, in my hearing, said anything about the war. And me, squashed between them, with a black armband my mother had sewn on by candlelight.

It was a grey, still day, very cold, and the church was full. Men were standing along the side aisles, and a great many of them were old men with very short hair and very straight backs, who nodded to my grandmother as she passed.

"Police," my father said quietly, when I asked him. "Retired. Some of them from before the war." He looked along the rows. "Some of them from before the first one."

There were six of them at the front, by the coffin, in old uniforms gone too tight, with long dark capes and helmets under their arms. One of them was so old he had to be helped to stand up when the coffin came in. They did not salute. They simply stood, very straight, and looked at nothing, the way policemen look at nothing when they are seeing everything.

* * *

Douglas Hills read the lesson.

I knew who he was. He came down from London two or three times a year and stayed at Widecombe Cot, and was not written in the register, which I had noticed, and asked about, and been told to mind my own business in a way that made me mind it more. He was sixty-four, very thin, in a black suit made for him a long time ago, with a dry London voice that went to the back of the church without ever seeming to be raised. He read from Ecclesiastes. *A time to keep silence, and a time to speak.* When he had finished he closed the Bible and stood for a moment looking at the coffin, and then he took a small black notebook out of his inside pocket, and a silver pencil, and wrote something in it. Then he went back to his seat.

Nobody seemed to think it was odd. My grandmother, beside me, let out a breath through her nose that might have been a laugh.

Behind Douglas, in the second pew, there was a younger man of about thirty, tall and fair, with a nice tired face, and a young woman beside him with a baby on her knee. I did not know them. My mother told me in a whisper that he was Douglas's son, Michael, who taught geography at a school in Paignton, and his wife, Sandra, and that the baby was theirs, and was called John, after his great-grandfather, and that everybody already called him Jono.

The baby was looking at me.

I want to be accurate about this, because it is the kind of thing that grows in the telling. The baby was sitting on his mother's knee, facing backwards over her shoulder, in a knitted hat with a bobble on it, and he was looking at me, across the aisle and one pew back. Not at the candles, or the old policemen, or the coffin. At me. Steadily. With a sort of grave, thorough attention, as if I were something he had been sent to keep an eye on.

I looked away. When I looked back he was still looking.

I pulled a face at him, which I am ashamed of. He did not laugh. He did not cry either. He went on looking, very seriously, until his mother turned round and moved him onto her other shoulder. And then, I swear it, he twisted round in her arms until he could see me again.

* * *

They buried him in the churchyard beside his wife Edie, who had died in 1958. The ground was hard, and the men who had dug it had

had to use a pick. When the coffin went down, the oldest of the six old policemen took one step forward on his own and said, in a cracked voice that carried right across the churchyard, "Sergeant Hills. Off duty," and stepped back. Nobody had told him to. I think he was the last man alive who remembered how.

It was then that I saw her.

She was standing at the back of the churchyard, by the wall, under a yew tree, a long way from the grave. A young woman in a grey costume, with no coat, though it was cold enough that my breath was smoking, her dark hair pinned up, very still, looking at the grave.

I knew her. Everybody at Widecombe Cot knew her. She came every October, for a fortnight, and stayed in Room 3, and had her tea at the table in the bay window and did not eat the toast, and my mother walked her down to the station on the last Monday and came back up the hill very quiet. Miss Ania. I had known her all my life the way I had known Johnny Hills, as a fixed thing, like the monkey puzzle tree in the front garden or the noise of the sea at night.

But it was February.

I looked up at my mother. She had seen her too. She was standing with her hand through my father's arm, very straight, and she was looking at the yew tree, and her face had done something I did not understand, and then she looked down and saw me watching her, and her face undid itself, and she said, "Don't stare, Chris."

When I looked back, the place under the yew tree was empty.

* * *

The funeral tea was at Widecombe Cot, in the back room, because my grandmother said there was nowhere else it could possibly be, and nobody argued with her.

The power was off again, so it was all done on the gas and by the light from the window, with candles on the long deal table in saucers in the middle of the day. There were sandwiches and sausage rolls and a ham my grandmother had been keeping for Easter, and the big brown teapot, and the room was full of old policemen and their wives and men from the boatyard at Galmpton, all talking in the low voices people use after funerals.

My grandfather Harold sat in the corner by the range and did not talk to anybody. My grandfather Leonard came up from Galmpton with sawdust on his good black trousers, and every so often he and Harold looked at each other across the room in a way I would now describe as two men who had been in a war together and did not need to say so.

I was given the job of taking round the sausage rolls. I did it, as I had been told, round the room, clockwise, saying *would you like a sausage roll* to everybody, and when I got to the second pew from church, which was now a pair of chairs by the door to the passage, I found the baby.

His mother was trying to drink a cup of tea and eat a sandwich and hold him at the same time, and was not managing any of them. She saw me, with the plate, and looked at me in the desperate way young mothers look at anybody over the age of ten, and said, "Oh,

you're Wendy's boy. Chris, isn't it? Could you be an angel and hold him for one minute? Just one. I'll take the plate."

I did not know how to hold a baby. She took the plate out of my hands and put the baby into them, and showed me where my hands should go, and said, "There. He likes you. Look," and turned away to her sandwich.

He was heavier than I expected, and warmer, and he smelled of milk and wool. He sat in my arms, in his knitted hat with the bobble, and turned his head, and looked up into my face from about a foot away, with the same grave, thorough look he had given me in church. As if he were writing me down.

"He's a Hills," said a voice above me. "A Hills always notices."

It was Douglas. He had come up beside me without my hearing him, with a cup and saucer in his hand, and was looking down at the two of us over his spectacles. He did not smile. He looked at the baby for a long time, and then at me, for longer.

"You'll be Chris Harvey," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"I knew your mother when she was seven," said Douglas Hills. "And your father when he was ten. And your great-grandfather, Edward, when I was a boy, in a back room in Paignton." He put his cup down on the windowsill. "You'll want to remember today."

I said I would. I did not know why he said it. The baby reached up and took hold of the black armband on my sleeve, and held on.

* * *

Later, when most of them had gone, I was sent into the back room to collect cups. Douglas was still there, at the long table, with Michael and my grandmother, and on the table between them there was a black tin deed box with a brass handle and *J. HILLS* painted on the front in white letters gone yellow with age.

"His will," said Michael, to my grandmother, as I came in. "It was in the box. Just one line, about this." He put his hand flat on the lid. "*The books to my great-grandson, John, when he is old enough to read them. Until then, to his father to keep, and to nobody else to open.*" He looked at the tin. "I don't even know how many there are."

"Thirty-one," said Douglas.

"Thirty-one of Grandad Jack's," said Michael. "And Grandad Johnny's? He must have kept them too. He was a policeman for forty years."

"His were the Force's," said Douglas. "Official issue. They went back when he retired, as they should. The Force has them, somewhere in Exeter, in a basement." He took his spectacles off. "These are the other kind. Dad's father kept two sets. One for the Force, and one for himself. These are the ones for himself." He put his spectacles back on. "Thirty-one, from 1895. Nobody's added to them since. Dad never did. He said they were finished."

My grandmother said, "Johnny said that?"

"He said the next one would be started when it needed to be," said Douglas. "By the one who needed to start it. And not before." He looked up, then, and saw me in the doorway with a tray of dirty

cups, and did not tell me to go away. He looked at me for a long moment over his spectacles, as he had in the other room, as if he were checking me against a description.

"Thirty-one," he said again, to nobody in particular. "And room for one more."

My grandmother said, "Cups, Chris," quite sharply, and I put the tray down on the sideboard and went.

* * *

I went out into the front garden, because the house was too hot and too full. It was nearly dark. The monkey puzzle was a black shape against a sky going green over the sea. Down at the bottom of the hill the lamps were coming on along the front, one after another, as the power came back to each street.

She was at the gate.

She was standing on the pavement by the gatepost, in her grey costume, in the cold, looking up the path at the house. When she saw me she did not move, or smile. She only looked at me, the way the baby had, as if she were checking something.

"Miss Ania," I said. "It's February."

"Yes," she said. "I know."

"Aren't you coming in? There's ham."

Something happened at the corner of her mouth.

"Not today, Chris," she said. "Today is for him." She looked past me, up the path, at the window of the back room, where the light was on now and I could see the shapes of Douglas and Michael

and my grandmother bent over the long table. "Did they give you the baby to hold?"

I said yes. I said he wouldn't stop looking at me.

"No," said Ania. "He won't." She was quiet for a moment. "Be kind to him while he is small, Chris. He will spend a great deal of his life looking after you."

I did not know what to say to that. I was eleven. I said, "Will you be here in October?"

"I am always here in October," said Ania. And she turned and walked away down the hill, towards the harbour and the lights, not towards the station, without a coat, and did not look back.

* * *

That was the first conversation with her I can remember. I thought about it again last night, at four in the morning, with the thirty-second pocketbook open at the ninth page.

Dad says I have not stopped since.

He was ten months old. He held on to my armband. Eighteen years later he sat down on a rock at the bottom of Berry Head beside a woman I had loved, in the cold, at six in the morning, and took out a new book, the one Johnny Hills said would be started when it needed to be, by the one who needed to start it. And he wrote her down, carefully, the way he had once written me down from a pew in Preston.

I was kind to him while he was small. I hope I was. I taught him to ride a bike on the hill outside Widecombe Cot. I did not know what Ania meant. I did not know for a very long time.

I know now. He has been looking after me for forty-four years. He is doing it now, from seven thousand miles away, with a book in an envelope.

Chapter 3 – *Fleet House*

Tues. 11 March 2003. Fleet House, Torquay, 2.40 p.m. Building empty, up for sale. Caretaker let me in. Asked about the old operators' switchroom, top floor. Boards went for scrap in 1986, he says. Stood in the room anyway. C.H. started here, Sept. '78. She started the year before.

He went there, twenty-five years after, with nobody asking him to, because I had started work in it, and because she had. He did not write down why. He never does. He writes down where he stood and what he saw and leaves the why to whoever reads it, and that, I have come to understand, is the whole of the Hills method, and the reason it works.

So I will tell him why. It was the room where I fell in love for the first time. I do not think I ever told him that. I think he worked it out.

* * *

My father worked for the telephones all his life.

He went into the Post Office at sixteen, in 1949, and came out of it in 1993 as a senior engineer with a carriage clock and a bad back from forty-four years of climbing poles. He fixed things. When I was small I thought every house in Torquay had been wired by my father personally, because whenever we walked past one he would

look up at the wires and say, "I did that one in 'fifty-eight, in the snow."

So when I left school in the summer of 1978, with six O levels and no idea what I wanted, he put down his paper one evening and said, "There's an apprenticeship going. Technician. Telecommunications. Starts in September. I've put your name down." And my mother said nothing, which in our house was the same as a signature.

I said I didn't know anything about telephones. My father said, "Nobody does at sixteen. That's what the four years are for."

* * *

Fleet House was at the bottom of the town, a big flat-faced building of pale brick and metal windows put up in the sixties for the telephones, and never once in its life looked at by anybody with pleasure. The first three floors were the exchange: racks of grey steel from floor to ceiling in long aisles, with the selectors clattering inside them day and night like a room full of very fast knitting. The fourth floor was offices and the canteen. And on the fifth, under the roof, there was the switchroom.

I started on Monday the fourth of September, 1978, in new black trousers and a tie my mother had chosen, and for the first fortnight I did not go near the fifth floor. I swept the aisles. I held the end of a cable while a man called Stan, who had been in the Navy and had a swallow tattooed on each hand, did something to the other end of it, and I learned to make tea for eleven men in the

right order. Stan said you could hear a fault before you could find it, if you stood still long enough in the aisle with your eyes shut. I did not believe him. By Christmas I could.

On the third Monday, the eighteenth, Stan sent me up to the fifth floor with a test phone and a list.

"Operators' positions," he said. "Twelve of them. You plug the buttinski in at the jack under the desk and ring the position, and when she answers you say *test call, Position Four, thank you*, and tick it off. Ten minutes." He looked at me. "They'll have you on. They always have the new boys on. Don't let them see you go red."

I went red on the stairs, thinking about it.

* * *

The switchroom was the only room in Fleet House that anybody could have called beautiful, and I do not think anybody ever had.

It ran the whole length of the top floor, under a ceiling of skylights, with tall windows down one side that looked out over the harbour and the bay and the long line of the hills going away towards Berry Head, so that the whole room was full of sea light, grey and silver and moving, all day. And down the other side, along the inner wall, in a long row, were the boards.

They were the old kind even then. Cord boards. A long sloping desk with a panel rising behind it, covered with rows of little brass-rimmed jacks, each with a tiny lamp above it the size of a fingernail, and on the desk the cords, plugs on springy black flex that went back down when you let go of them. In front of each section there

was a high stool, and on each stool a girl in a headset, her hands moving all the time, quick and light, so that the whole long row of them, twelve girls with their backs to the room and the sea behind them, looked like a row of women playing harps.

Automatic dialling had done away with most of the operators by then. These were what was left: the hundred line, the reverse charges, calls to ships at sea, the hotels that booked their long-distance calls through the exchange, and the coin boxes all over the bay. All of Torbay that could not manage on its own came through that room. I did not understand that yet. I thought it was a room full of girls.

The supervisor was a tall grey woman called Mrs Pengelly, who sat on a raised platform at the end of the room like a schoolmistress and looked at me over her glasses as if I were something delivered to the wrong floor.

"Engineering," I said. "Test calls. From Stan."

"Then do them quietly," said Mrs Pengelly, "and don't touch anything else."

* * *

I did the first three without anything happening.

You crawled under the desk, between the stools and the girls' legs, which was the part I had been dreading, plugged the test phone in, crawled out backwards, stood at the end of the row, and rang the position. The girl three feet away answered as if she were a hundred miles off, "Operator, which number please?" and you said, "Test

call, Position One, thank you," and she said, "Thank you, caller," without turning round, and you ticked it off.

Position Four was at the end, by the window. The girl on Position Four had red-brown hair, a lot of it, tied back with a green ribbon, and freckles on the back of her neck. I could see that much. I could not see her face. I crawled under her desk, among the cords, and found the jack, and plugged in, and crawled out, and did not look at her legs, and stood up, and rang.

The lamp came on in front of her. Her hand went out to it without her looking, the way all their hands did, and plugged in a cord, and flipped a key.

"Operator," said a voice in my ear, "which number please?"

It was not the operator's voice. Or it was, but there was something under it, a sort of rough warm edge, like a Brixham fisherman's daughter who had been taught to talk like the BBC and had not quite forgotten how she talked before.

"Test call," I said. "Position Four. Thank you."

"Hold the line, caller," said the voice, "I'm putting you through."

"No, it's a test call, you don't need to..."

There was a click. And then a man's voice, very deep and very slow and very solemn, said in my ear:

At the third stroke, it will be ten forty-two and twenty seconds.

Pip. Pip. Pip.

I looked down the row. The girl on Position Four had not turned round. Her back was perfectly straight. Her hands were in her lap. But her shoulders were shaking.

At the third stroke, it will be ten forty-two and thirty seconds.

I started to laugh. I could not help it. I stood at the end of the row in the most serious room in Fleet House with Mrs Pengelly watching me and the speaking clock in my ear, and I laughed until I had to put my hand over the mouthpiece, and the girl on Position Four flipped her key, and the clock went away, and her voice came back, perfectly level.

"Thank you, caller," she said. "Test satisfactory."

And then, very quietly, in the other voice, the Brixham one, so that only I could hear it down the wire:

"I wanted to hear what you sounded like when you laughed. You'd gone so red under there."

Then the line went dead, and she flipped another key, and answered a call from a coin box in Paignton about a reverse-charge call to Birmingham, and did not turn round once.

I did the other eight positions. I do not remember any of them. I remember standing on the stairs, with the test phone in one hand, unable for some time to remember which way was down.

* * *

Her name was Karen Tozer. She was seventeen. She lived in Brixham, in one of the stepped streets above the harbour, with her mother and her nan and two brothers who went out on the trawlers;

her father had gone out on one too, and not come back, when she was nine. She was the youngest on the boards and the fastest, Mrs Pengelly said, and the worst behaved.

I found all this out over the next three weeks, in the canteen on the fourth floor, at the long table by the window, at ten past ten in the morning and twenty past three in the afternoon, which were her breaks, and which became, by an astonishing coincidence that Stan noticed on the first day and did not mention until the fourth, mine.

She was not beautiful, the way girls in films were. She had a wide mouth and a nose that had been broken once, falling off the harbour wall at Brixham when she was eleven, and too many freckles, and grey-green eyes that looked straight at you and did not look away. When she laughed, which was often, she put her head back and laughed with her whole throat, and the men at the other end of the canteen turned round. She ate a Wagon Wheel at ten past ten every day, and a packet of crisps at twenty past three, and she talked about everything: Brixham, and the boats, and the 400 in Torquay, where she went on Saturdays with the girls from the boards, and the books she was reading, which were all about women who went to sea disguised as men. She had never been further than Exeter. She was going to go everywhere.

And she talked about the boards.

* * *

"You don't know what it is up there, do you," she said, on the Friday of the third week. "You think it's just putting calls through."

I said I supposed it was.

She looked at me over her tea with those grey-green eyes.

"Come up after the shift," she said. "Half past five. Mrs Pengelly goes at five. Don't tell Stan."

I went up at half past five. There were only two girls on by then, at the far end, and they looked round at me and at Karen and looked back at their boards and said nothing, which I learned later meant a great deal. Karen sat me on the stool beside Position Four and put a spare headset on me, which was very much not allowed, and said, "Now. Don't talk. Just watch the lamps. And listen to me."

And for an hour, while the light went down over the bay, she showed me the town.

"That one," she said, very low, as a lamp came on. "The Imperial. Their board books a call to London every evening at ten to six. Same number. Hotel in Park Lane. The manager. Talks to the other manager. They're buying something together, I don't know what." Her hand went out, plugged, flipped. *Operator, which number please.* "That's the coin box at the bottom of Union Street. Ten past six every Friday. A woman. Reverse charges to a number in Bristol. Never gives her name. He always accepts." The hand again. "Councillor on the planning committee. Rings a builder in Paignton every Tuesday, two o'clock. Never from his own phone. Always from the box outside the Town Hall."

I stared at her.

"You listen in?"

"No," said Karen. "We're not allowed. We don't." She flipped a key. "We just see. Who rings who, and when, and from where, and how often. You don't need to hear a word. You only need to watch the lamps long enough." She turned on the stool and looked at me in the half-dark, with the board glowing behind her like a little city at night. "Everybody in this town thinks they're on their own when they pick up a phone. They're not. They're on my board. Whoever sits up here can see Torbay. All of it. Who's frightened, who's in love, who's cheating on his wife, who's in debt, who's lying to the council." She shrugged. "Most of the girls don't notice. They're just doing the calls. I notice."

I thought of Johnny Hills, at the level crossing in Paignton, with his big hand on my shoulder. *Right, Chris. What's on the platform?*

"It's like watching a train come in," I said.

She looked at me oddly.

"I mean, everybody looks at the train," I said. "Nobody looks at the platform. Who gets off. Who's waiting. Who's watching who's waiting." I was going red again. "An old man taught me. When I was little."

Karen Tozer did not laugh at that. She looked at me for a long moment in the light from the board.

"Yes," she said. "Like that."

A lamp came on. She plugged in.

"Operator, which number please?" she said, in the BBC voice. And then, after a moment, in an odd flat tone: "Thank you, caller.

Putting you through." Her hand went out and made the connection, and she sat back, and flipped her key off, and was quiet.

"What was that?"

"That one's funny," she said. "That one's every year. First week of October. A call booked from a box we can't trace, to a number in Torquay. A hotel. Widecombe Cot." She looked at me. "That's yours, isn't it? Your nan's place?"

I said it was.

"She asks for Mrs Harvey," said Karen. "Your mum. Just says, *tell her I'm coming on the Friday.* Every year. And her voice." She frowned. "It's like the speaking clock. Every word the same length. As if she'd learned English off a record." She shook her head. "Who is she?"

I knew who she was. I had known her all my life.

"A friend of the family," I said. "She comes every October."

"Well, she's a funny one," said Karen. "The girls call her the Clock." And then she turned on her stool and looked at me in the dark, and said, in the other voice, the Brixham one: "You're a funny one too, Chris Harvey. Platforms." And she smiled. "I like funny ones."

* * *

I asked her to come to the pictures with me on the Saturday. *Grease* was on at the Odeon, and everybody had seen it twice, and I had not seen it at all.

She said no.

She said it kindly, at ten past ten on the Monday, over her Wagon Wheel. There was a boy in Brixham, on her brother's boat, and it wasn't anything much, but it was something, and she didn't do two things at once. And then she said, looking out at the fishing boats coming round Berry Head in a long line in the grey morning, going home:

"Ask me again in the spring."

I said why the spring.

"Because he'll be off on the mackerel all winter," said Karen Tozer, "and I'll have had all winter to think about it." And she screwed up her Wagon Wheel wrapper into a ball and threw it at me, and went back up to the fifth floor, to the boards and the sea light, without looking back.

I sat at the long table in the canteen with the wrapper in my hand.

I was sixteen. I had been in love for exactly three weeks. I did not know there was any other way to be. And I did not know, sitting there with the bay in the window and a screwed-up wrapper in my fist, that it had already been decided how long it would last.

Eighteen months.

I still have the wrapper. It is in the fourth shoebox, in a plastic bag, with a ticket stub from the 400. I found it last night, packing, and put it in my pocket with the photograph of the car.

Chapter 4 – *The 400*

> *Thurs. 9 June 2016. Brixham, the fish quay, 11.15 a.m. Spoke to K. Lane (née Tozer), widow, about her great-grandfather Jory. Family story the same as Johnny's book: paid in gold in 1915 "by a gent from Paignton" to row a foreigner ashore. Two sovereigns never spent. Still in her nan's tin, she thinks. She asked after C.H. Did not say why I wanted to know. She did not ask.*

He went to see her. Two years before I came home, on the fish quay, he went and asked Karen Tozer about her great-grandfather, and wrote down that she asked after me, and that he did not tell her why he had come. He did not tell me either. I am reading it for the first time, and I have had to put the book down twice.

She did not ask. That is Karen all over. She never asked a question in her life that she thought you did not want to answer.

* * *

The winter of 1978 was the coldest anybody could remember. It snowed in January and went on snowing, and the lorry drivers went on strike, and then the dustmen and the gravediggers, and the papers called it the Winter of Discontent, and in Torbay the wind came round Berry Head and went straight through every coat in the town.

I was not discontented. I was waiting for the spring.

I worked. I learned the racks with Stan, and the cable chambers under the street, and how to find a fault by putting a tone down a

line and walking the route with a probe until the tone stopped. I did not ask Karen Tozer anything, because she had told me not to until the spring, and I believed her absolutely, the way you believe things at sixteen.

But I saw her every day. Ten past ten and twenty past three, at the long table in the canteen, with her Wagon Wheel and her tea. We talked. We talked about everything except the thing we were not talking about, and the not talking about it sat at the table between us like a third person, and we were both perfectly polite to it.

And on Saturday nights I went to the 400.

* * *

I should explain the 400, for anybody who was not young in Torquay in the seventies, which is nearly everybody now.

You went in through a door off the street that you would have walked past in daylight, down a flight of stairs with the paint coming off the walls, paid a big man in a dinner jacket who looked at you as if he were adding up what you were worth, and went through a pair of padded doors, and the noise hit you in the chest like a wave.

Inside it was dark and hot and red. The floor lit up from underneath, squares of coloured light coming on and going off in time to the music, and above it a glitter ball turned, throwing little white spots of light across all the faces, so that everybody looked as if they were standing in a snowstorm. At the far end, in a glass box, was the DJ, a thin man called Rocky in a satin jacket, whom I

believed, for most of 1979, to be the most glamorous human being in the West Country.

And it was always full. Girls from the shops and the hotels and the boards, in a cloud of Charlie and hairspray. Boys from the building sites and the boats and Fleet House, standing round the edge with their pints, pretending not to look. Rocky played the Bee Gees and Donna Summer and Chic, so loud you could feel the bass in your back teeth, and for three hours nobody in the room was a shop girl or an apprentice or a trawlerman's daughter. They were all something else.

I went with the lads from Fleet House. I stood at the edge of the floor with my half of lager and watched Karen Tozer dance.

She danced the way she laughed, with her whole body, with the girls from the boards in a ring round their handbags and her arms up, and every so often she looked across the floor to where I was standing, and did not smile, and looked away. The boy from her brother's boat was there sometimes, a big quiet lad with a beard, who stood at the bar and did not dance. When he was down round Falmouth after the mackerel, she looked across at me more often, and still did not smile.

Stan, who knew everything, said to me in the cable chamber one Monday, without looking up from what he was doing: "You know what you are, Chris? You're a man standing on a platform waiting for a train that hasn't been timetabled yet."

I said I didn't know what he meant.

"No," said Stan. "That's why you're still standing there."

* * *

The car was my father's idea.

I would be seventeen in March. I could learn to drive. And a boy with a car, my father said, in the voice he used for explaining why something was cheaper in the long run, was a boy who did not have to get the last bus back from Torquay on a Saturday night, which went at twenty past eleven and was always full of sailors being sick.

So in January, in the snow, he drove me out to a scrapyard on the Kingsteignton road outside Newton Abbot, and we walked round it in our wellingtons, between the stacks of dead cars with snow on their roofs, until my father stopped in front of one and said, "That."

It was a Mini. An Austin Mini, ten years old, in a colour the brochure had called Harvest Gold and everybody else in the world called mustard. It had no engine. It had one front wing hanging off, and the other one rusted through, and no back seat, and a family of mice in the glove box, and a crack across the windscreen that went from corner to corner like a river on a map.

"It's a wreck, Dad," I said.

"It's a shell," said my father. "Shells are the easy part. Your grandfather built shells for the Navy." He walked round it once, slowly, the way Leonard walked round a hull, and knocked on the sills with his knuckle and listened. "Sound," he said. "The rest is just parts."

It cost forty pounds. We towed it home behind his Cortina on a rope, with me steering it, in the snow, along the back lanes through Kingskerswell, with no windscreen wipers and my face a foot from the cracked glass, and I have never been so happy in a vehicle in my life, before or since.

We rebuilt it in his garage, in the evenings and at weekends, all through the rest of that winter. My father found an engine from a crashed van, and a front wing that we painted mustard ourselves and which never in its life matched the rest of the car. He did not do it for me. He made me do it. He stood beside me with his hands in his pockets and told me what to do next, and when I did it wrong he made me take it apart and do it again, and when I did it right he said nothing at all, which was how you knew.

I passed my test in May, first time. I did not tell anybody at Fleet House. I drove the Mini to work on the Monday, and parked it on the street outside, under the window of the fifth floor, and went in, and did not look up.

* * *

But that was after. The spring came first.

It came on the last Saturday in March, the thirty-first. A wild night, wet and warm, with the rain coming in sideways off the bay, and the 400 was packed, and steaming, and the floor was lit up red and gold.

The boy with the beard was not at the bar.

I noticed that as soon as I came through the padded doors. I noticed it the way you notice a tooth that has stopped aching, by the shape of the space where it was. I got my half of lager and went to stand in my place at the edge of the floor, and I looked for her, and she was not in the ring of girls round the handbags.

She was beside me.

She had come round the edge of the floor through the crowd while I was looking the other way, and was standing at my elbow in a green dress I had never seen, with her hair loose and wet from the rain at the ends, holding a glass of something orange with a cherry in it, and looking at me sideways.

"He's took up with a girl in Newlyn," she said. "Over the winter."

I did not know what to say. I said, "Oh. I'm sorry."

"No, you're not," said Karen Tozer. "And neither am I. She's welcome to him. He never once took me dancing." She drank her orange thing and looked at the floor, where the lights were going, and the glitter ball turning, and everybody in Torbay under twenty-five going round and round in the snowstorm. "It's spring," she said. "In case you hadn't noticed."

I looked at her. She looked at me. She did not smile.

"Well?" she said.

So I asked her. I do not remember what I said. I remember that I said it very badly, and that the music was so loud she had to put her ear up close to my mouth, and I had to say it again, with her hair against my face smelling of rain and Charlie, and that when I had

finished she pulled back and put her head back and laughed, and said:

"Yes, you daft article. I've been waiting since September."

* * *

We did not dance until the last one.

That was a rule of hers. She went back to the girls, and every so often she looked across at me, and now she smiled. And at a quarter to one, when Rocky said, *and now, ladies and gentlemen, for the last dance of the night, find somebody you love*, and only the glitter ball was left turning, she came across the floor through the snowstorm of light and held out her hand.

It was a slow one. It was always a slow one. That night it was 10cc. The one that goes on for ever, with the voices like a choir of ghosts, and the man saying, over and over, that he is not in love, when everybody listening knows that he is, and so does he.

I did not know how to dance. Nobody had ever taught me. She put my left hand on her waist and took my right in hers and held it against her shoulder, and put her head on my chest, and we went round, very slowly, in a small circle, among all the other couples going round in small circles, under the glitter ball, with the white spots of light going over us like snow, and the floor dark under our feet. She was warm, and her hair was damp, and I could feel her heart going through the green dress. Neither of us said anything at all. The song went on for six minutes. I would have stayed for six years.

When it finished, and the lights came up, the cruel white lights they put on at the end to get you out, and everybody blinked at each other and looked suddenly very young and very tired, she stepped back and looked up at me.

"Same time next week," she said. "And you can walk me to the bus."

"I'll have a car," I said, "soon. I'm doing it up. With my dad."

"What sort of car?"

"A Mini."

She looked at me with her grey-green eyes in the white light.

"What colour?"

"Mustard," I said. "Mostly."

She put her head back and laughed again, and took my hand, and we went up the stairs together past the man in the dinner jacket, who looked at us both and added us up and, for the first time, seemed to find the answer satisfactory.

* * *

I will put one more thing in this chapter, because it belongs here, and because I did not understand it at the time and did not try to.

In April, before I had the car, she took me home to Brixham for Sunday tea.

They lived in a narrow house in a stepped street above the harbour, so steep that the front door was on the third floor and the back door on the first. Her mother was a small sharp quiet woman who looked at me for a long time over the teapot and then gave me

the best cup. Her brothers were enormous and smelled of the sea and called me *the telephone boy*. And her nan sat in the corner by the fire in a black cardigan, very old and very upright, and watched me the whole time without saying anything, the way Douglas Hills had watched me at Johnny's funeral.

After tea, when the brothers had gone out to the pub and her mother was washing up, the nan beckoned to me with one finger.

"You're a Harvey," she said. "Widecombe Cot. Wendy Harvey's boy."

I said I was.

"Thought so," said the old woman. She looked at me with eyes that had once, I could see, been the same grey-green as Karen's, and had faded. "Your mother's people knew my Jory's people. Back along. The Hills lot too. The policeman." She reached down beside her chair and lifted up an old tin, a toffee tin with a Scottish terrier on the lid, and opened it on her knee, and took something out, and held it up between her finger and thumb in the light from the window.

It was a coin. A small gold coin, very bright, with a man's head on it, a king with a beard.

"Sovereign," said Karen's nan. "1915. Karen's great-grandad's. Jory Tozer. My husband's father. Gent from Paignton paid him four of 'em to row a foreigner ashore one night off a Dutch boat, in the first war." She turned it in the light. "He spent two. He never spent these two. He said they was paid for something he didn't understand, and he wasn't going to understand it any better by

spending them." She put it back in the tin with the other one and closed the lid. "We keep 'em for luck. Karen calls it Grandad's German gold. She thinks it's a joke." She looked at me. "It's not a joke."

Karen came in from the scullery with a tea towel over her shoulder.

"Nan, are you telling him about the German gold? He doesn't want to hear about that."

"I want to hear about it," I said.

"No, you don't," said Karen, and took my hand and pulled me up off the chair. "Come on. I'll show you the breakwater before it gets dark." And at the door she looked back at the old woman in the corner, and said, laughing, "She tells everybody. Every boy I bring home. It's Nan's party piece."

"Not every boy," said the nan.

* * *

I did not understand any of that. I was seventeen, and in love, walking out along Brixham breakwater in the April dusk with Karen Tozer's hand in mine and the lighthouse at the end coming on.

I understand it now. My mother wrote it down in 1965, in her green exercise book, from what Johnny Hills told her: a punt coming in under the old steps at Brixham at twenty past one in the morning, on the first of October, 1915; a short dark young man in a good coat getting out of it; and a boatman with a face like a walnut saying, *a gentleman from Paignton, very respectable, gave me two*

sovereigns in June. I read it again last night, after the pocketbook, and sat for a long time.

Karen calls it Grandad's German gold. She thinks it's a joke.

The gentleman from Paignton was George Petherick. The foreigner was a German naval officer whom Ania told the Hills to let go, because he would matter more than anybody in that war and the next. And the boatman's great-granddaughter put me through to the speaking clock, sixty-three years later, to hear me laugh.

I do not believe in coincidences. Not since 2008. I did then. I thought it was luck, and the spring, and a slow song by 10cc at a quarter to one in the morning, and a girl in a green dress who had been waiting since September.

It was all of those things. That is what I want to say, and what I want Jono to understand when he reads this, if he ever does. It was arranged. And it was also true. I have spent ten years learning that those are not opposites.

Chapter 5 – *Berry Head*

Thurs. 18 Oct. 2007. Brixham Heritage Museum, 3 p.m. Old coastguard watch book, Berry Head station, 1895, brought up from the store by the curator. Nov. 23rd, 4 a.m.: "Light observed low in S.E. Not a star. Does not move with the others. Watched two hours." Three more nights in the same hand. Asked to copy it. Refused. Wrote it down instead. Edward Harvey was right.

I had to look that one up. October 2007 was a year before Jono flew out here with his brown file, and I had no idea, then, that he was going round the museums of Torbay with a pencil, reading old watch books. I had no idea he knew about the star.

I knew about it before he did. Karen told me, on Berry Head, in 1979, with her feet on my dashboard. I did not think anything of it. That is the trouble with the things you are told when you are seventeen. You do not know which ones to keep.

* * *

She would not let me kiss her at a bus stop.

That was the other rule. I had walked her to the last Brixham bus every Saturday night since the end of March, and every Saturday, at the bus stop, I had tried, more or less, and every Saturday she had put her hand flat on my chest and pushed me back a step and said, "Not here." And once, when I asked her where, she had said, "Somewhere that's ours. Not a bus stop. Not my nan's

front room. Ours." And got on the bus, and did not wave, which she never did, and then waved, at the last moment, as it pulled out, which she always did.

So when I passed my test in May, the first thing I did, before I told my mother, before I told Stan, before I drove anywhere at all on my own, was ring the fifth floor from the box in the hall at home.

I asked for Position Four. The girl on the switchboard said, "Who's calling?" and I said, "Test call," and she laughed, and put me through.

"I've got it," I said. "The licence. I passed."

There was a silence on the line. I could hear the room behind her, the other girls' voices, *operator, which number please*, and the clatter of the cords.

"Saturday," said Karen Tozer. "Pick me up from the Strand at nine. Not the 400." Another pause. "Bring a blanket. And a flask."

"Where are we going?"

"You'll see," she said, and the line went dead.

* * *

I picked her up on the Strand at nine on the twenty-sixth of May, a Saturday, with a blanket on the back seat and a flask of tea my mother had made without asking what it was for, and a bag of chips. She got in beside me in jeans and one of her brothers' jumpers with the sleeves rolled up four times, and put her feet up on the dashboard, which nobody had ever done, and looked round the inside of the car.

"It's lovely," she said. And then: "Is that wing a different colour?"

"No," I said.

She laughed. "Brixham," she said. "Then I'll tell you."

So I drove her the way the bus went, round the bay through Paignton and Goodrington, with the sun going down red behind us and the bay going from blue to grey to silver, and the Mini's engine making the noise of a sewing machine trying very hard. And when we came down into Brixham she said, "Don't go down to the harbour. Straight on. Up," and I went on and up, past the last houses, until the road ran out into a car park on the top of the head, with nobody in it, and short grass all round, and the sky.

"Here," said Karen. "Stop here. Nose to the sea."

I stopped. I turned the engine off.

The silence was enormous. Berry Head sticks out into the Channel like the bow of a ship, flat on top, a mile of grass and gorse and old stone walls, and at night, with the engine off, there is no noise of the town at all, only the wind going over the grass and the sea a long way below. Behind us the old north fort, the long grey walls they built against Napoleon. In front of us, a hundred yards off, the lighthouse.

It is the smallest lighthouse in England, people say. It does not need to be tall; it stands on top of the head, two hundred feet up already, a little white tower like a toy somebody has put down on the edge of the world. And as we sat there the lamp came on, and began to turn, and a long white arm of light went out over the sea,

and came round, and went over the roof of the Mini, and went on round, and came back.

Karen took her feet off the dashboard.

"This is ours," she said. "Nobody comes up here at night except the coastguard and the courting couples, and the courting couples are all down the other end by the quarry." She looked out at the dark. "My dad used to bring me up here. When I was little. To watch the boats go out." She was quiet for a moment. "He went out from down there. That last time. I watched him go, from here. Me and Mum. We waved. You couldn't see us from the boat, but we waved."

I did not say anything. I did not know anything to say.

The light came round, and went over us, and lit her face for a second, white, and then she was dark again.

"So it's ours," said Karen Tozer. "Because it was his. Do you see?"

I said I saw.

She turned in the seat and looked at me in the dark. Then she took my face in her two hands, which were cold, and smelled of chips and the sea, and kissed me.

* * *

I am fifty-six years old and I have been kissed a good many times since, and I am not going to pretend that any of them was more than it was. But I have never since been kissed by anybody who did it as if they had been deciding to for eight months and had finally made

up their mind. Which she had. She told me so, afterwards, with her forehead against mine. *Since September. I had to be sure. I don't do things by halves.*

The windows misted up. I had not known they would. It happened very quickly, from the bottom up, the way frost comes on a pane, until the whole of the windscreen was white and soft and glowing, and the lighthouse beam came round and lit it up from outside, so that for a second each time the inside of the car was full of a white light like being inside a cloud, and then it went dark again, and then it came round again. I remember counting it, the way you count a heartbeat. Round, and light, and dark. Round, and light, and dark.

We drank the tea. We ate the chips, which were cold. We talked for hours, with the blanket over our knees and her feet up on the dashboard again, about her dad, and mine, and the boards, and the places she was going to go, which were all of them: Spain and Greece and America, and somewhere in the South Seas where the water was so clear you could see the fish forty feet down.

"And you," she said. "Where are you going to go?"

I said I didn't know. I said I thought I'd stay. Fleet House, and the apprenticeship, and the Mini, and her.

She did not answer that. She looked out through a clear patch in the misted windscreen at the lighthouse beam going round.

"No," she said, after a while. "You won't stay."

"Why not?"

"Because you look at platforms," said Karen. "People who look at platforms always end up getting on a train." And she pulled the blanket up to her chin and put her head on my shoulder, and did not say anything else for a long time.

* * *

It was after midnight when she sat up and wiped a patch clear on her side window with the sleeve of her brother's jumper, and looked out, up, at the sky over the sea.

The mist had cleared outside. It was a very clear night, very dark, the kind of dark you never get in a town, and the stars were out over the Channel, so many that the sky looked dusty with them.

"My nan says there was a star up here once that didn't belong," said Karen.

I said what did she mean.

"Before her time. Old Jory's wife told her. She was a young wife here, up at Higher Brixham, before the old Queen died." Karen looked up at the south-east. "She used to say there was a star over Berry Head one winter that wasn't a proper star. It didn't move round with the others. It just sat there. Low, over the sea, over the head. For months. And all the dogs in Brixham howled while it was there, and there were things on the moor. And then one morning it was gone, and the dogs stopped." She laughed, a little. "Nan says everybody's great-granny round here was a bit simple." She looked at me. "Do you believe that?"

"About the star?"

"About anything," said Karen. "Things that don't belong."

I looked up at the sky over the sea. The light came round from the lighthouse, and swept over us, and went on.

"I don't know," I said. "I've never seen one."

"No," said Karen. "Nor me." She lay down again with her head on my shoulder. "I'd like to, though. Just once. Something that doesn't belong." She yawned. "I'd know what to do. I'd stand right on the edge and put my arms out and say, *Go on, then. Take me with you*."

I laughed. She punched me in the arm, not hard.

There was no star that night. I looked, after she had gone to sleep against me, until the sky started going grey in the east. Every star I could see moved round, the way they are supposed to. Not then. Not for a long time yet.

I did not know that it was the first thing I was ever told about any of it. I thought it was a story about a simple old woman and some dogs.

* * *

That was the summer.

I cannot put it in order. It is a summer, the summer of 1979, and it is all one thing, the way a song is all one thing. It is Saturday nights at the 400, and the last dance, every week. It is Sundays at Brixham, and her brothers calling me the telephone boy. It is ten past ten and twenty past three in the Fleet House canteen. It is the cassette she made me, off the radio, with the DJ talking over the

starts of half the songs, which I played in the Mini until the tape stretched. It is Berry Head.

It is always Berry Head. Saturday nights, after the 400, and sometimes on a Wednesday if she could get away. The car park at the top. Nose to the sea. The engine off, the windows misting, the light going round. I knew every blade of grass on that head by August.

And it is one evening in July, the fourteenth, a Saturday, when we drove up in the daylight for once, because the evening was so clear you could see past Start Point to the long blue line of Cornwall, and Karen jumped out before I had the handbrake on and ran across the grass to the very edge of the cliff, where the fence was, and stood on the bottom rail of it, with her arms out, in the low gold light, with two hundred feet of nothing underneath.

"Karen!"

"Come and look!"

I got out with the camera, my father's old Instamatic, which I had brought because the light was so good. I said, "Hold still. I want to take you."

"You hold still," she shouted, and jumped down off the fence, and came running back across the grass towards me, laughing so much she could not stand up straight, and fell against the car, and against me, and I took the picture anyway, of the empty car with its door hanging open and the lighthouse behind it and the edge, because she was laughing too much to be photographed, and

because I wanted to have something of that evening, whatever it was.

That is the picture in my shirt pocket. I took it out again just now, and looked at it, at the open door and the fence and the light. The fence is still there. I do not know if it is the same fence. Jono would know. It is the fence that runs along the top of the cliff below the north fort.

I will come to that.

* * *

In October, on the second Sunday, the fourteenth, I took Karen to Widecombe Cot for Sunday dinner.

My grandmother still ran the place, with my mother doing the books, and my grandfather Harold, eighty-six, stood up for Karen, which took him some time, and shook her hand and said, "How do you do, Miss Tozer," and looked at her over his glasses for the rest of the afternoon in a way I did not understand until I had read my mother's exercise book, and knew what my grandfather had been trained to notice.

It was October. Room 3 was taken.

Miss Ania was at her table in the bay window of the dining room when we came in, with her cup of tea held in both hands, and a plate of toast she had not touched. I said hello to her, as I always did. She said, "Good afternoon, Chris," as she always did. And then she looked past me, at Karen.

She did not say anything. She only looked. She looked at Karen Tozer for a long time, with her clear, steady eyes, the way she looked at the sea out of the bay window, as if she were reading something written very small.

Karen went still beside me. I felt it. Her hand, in mine, went still.

"You are Miss Tozer," said Ania. "From Brixham."

"Yes," said Karen. Her voice had gone odd.

Ania nodded slowly.

"You stand on edges," she said. "With your arms out." It was not a question. "Be careful, Miss Tozer. Edges are not always where you think they are."

And she turned back to the window, and her tea, and the sea.

Karen did not say anything at dinner. She was polite to everybody and ate everything she was given. But when I drove her home afterwards, along the top road in the dark, she sat with her feet down on the floor of the Mini instead of up on the dashboard, and did not talk.

At the top of her street, when I had stopped, she sat for a while without getting out.

"That's her," she said at last. "Isn't it. The Clock. The one who rings every October."

I said yes.

"She knew about the edges," said Karen. "How did she know about the edges, Chris? I've never been to your nan's before. I've never seen her in my life."

I said I didn't know. I said perhaps my mother had told her. I said she was just like that; she was a friend of the family; she had always been like that, all my life; she said odd things.

Karen looked at me in the light from the street lamp. For a moment she looked as if she were going to say something else. Then she leaned across and kissed me, quickly, on the cheek, the way you kiss somebody at a station.

"I'll see you Monday," she said. "Ten past ten." And she got out, and went down the steps to her front door, which was on the third floor, and did not look back. And then, at the last moment, as she put her key in the lock, she did.

I sat in the Mini at the top of the street with the engine running for a long time.

I had six of the eighteen months behind me. I did not know I was counting. Somebody was.

Chapter 6 – *The Up Train*

> *Mon. 27 Oct. 2008. Torquay station, platform 2, 10.12 a.m. Saw Miss Ania off with Mrs H. (C.H. flew back Sat.) Waiting for the up train, A. said, to nobody: "He got on the train in 1980. Somebody always has to make them get on the train." Mrs H. did not answer. Nor did I.*

I did not know Jono had been on that platform. I had flown back to Singapore two days before, to a son who was thirteen and had stopped speaking to me, and left my mother to walk Ania down to the station on the last Monday in October, the way she had every year since 1950. I did not know he had stood there and heard that, and written it down, and kept it for ten years.

Somebody always has to make them get on the train.

I had been told that already, at seventeen, by a girl with her feet on my dashboard. I just had not known who else was saying it.

* * *

It began with an envelope in my locker.

That was in the March of 1980, a year into Karen. I opened my locker in the basement at Fleet House one Monday morning and there was a long brown envelope lying on my overalls, with nothing written on it. Inside it there was a form. *Post Office Telecommunications. Sponsored Student Scheme. Full sponsorship on a degree or diploma course in Computing at an approved*

institution, commencing September 1980. And a list of the approved institutions, with one of them underlined, very neatly, in pencil. *North Staffordshire Polytechnic.*

I asked Stan who had put it there. Stan looked at the form for a long time, and said he hadn't the faintest idea, and that if he had seen it he would have told me to fill it in by Friday, because the closing date was Friday. And then he went off down the aisle between the racks with his hands in his pockets, whistling.

I did not fill it in.

I put it in the glove box of the Mini and did not tell Karen about it, and on the Wednesday she found it, looking for a tissue, and read it under the street lamp at the top of her road with the engine running, while I sat beside her with my face going red in the dark.

"When were you going to tell me?"

I said I wasn't. I said I wasn't going. I said I was staying, at Fleet House, with her.

She folded the form up and put it back in the envelope, very carefully, and held it on her knee.

"Computing," she said. "That's the future, that is. It's in all the papers." She looked out through the windscreen at the dark street going down to the harbour. "They'll do the boards with computers soon, Mrs Pengelly says. Five years. Ten. There won't be a room up there any more. Just a machine in the basement doing what we do." She turned and looked at me. "And you want to stay and fix telephones."

"I want to stay with you."

"I know you do," said Karen Tozer. "That's why you have to go." And she put the envelope into my hands and closed my fingers round it with hers. "Friday," she said. "Fill it in. Or I'll fill it in for you, and you know what my writing's like."

* * *

I filled it in. In May there was an interview in Bristol, where three men asked me about logic gates and one woman asked me what I would do if I found out a colleague was listening in to customers' calls, and I said I would want to know why first, and she wrote something down. In June there was a letter. I had a place. September.

My father shook my hand. My mother kissed me, and then went into the scullery and did not come out for some time. My grandfather Harold read the letter twice in his chair by the front-room window, and looked up at me over his glasses and said, "North Staffordshire. Clay country. The Potteries." And then, in a voice I did not understand: "Keep your eyes open up there, Chris." I thought he meant the girls.

And that summer Karen and I did everything we had done the summer before, exactly the same, every Saturday, every Sunday, as if we could make it last longer by doing it all over again. We both knew. Neither of us said. I counted the weeks to September on the calendar in the garage. I did not know I was counting anything else.

* * *

I went on the twenty-eighth of September, a Sunday.

Eighteen months, almost to the week, from the night at the 400 in the green dress. I did not know that either.

My father drove me to Torquay station with my case and a carton my mother had packed with tea and a fruit cake and three tins of corned beef, as if Stafford were a siege. We had said goodbye the night before, on Berry Head, in the dark, with the light going round. Karen had said she did not want to do it on a platform. She had said platforms were for other people.

She came anyway.

I was on the platform with my father and the siege carton, and the up train was coming round the curve from Paignton with its horn going, and I was not looking for her, and then she was there, at the end of the platform by the footbridge steps, out of breath, in her brother's jumper, with her hair coming out of its ribbon. She had run from the bus.

My father looked at her, and at me, and picked up the box and the siege carton, and said, "I'll put these on," and went and got into the train with them and did not come out.

She did not say anything at first. She stood in front of me on the platform with her hands at her sides and looked at me with her grey-green eyes, as if she were writing me down. The train doors were banging all down the platform. A guard was walking along with his flag.

"You said you wouldn't come," I said.

"I know," said Karen. "I lied." She put up her hand and straightened the collar of my jacket, which did not need it, the way my grandmother straightened my grandfather's tie. "You've got to write. Every week. Proper letters, not postcards. And tell me everything. The computers and the girls and what the food's like." She tried to smile. "Especially the girls."

"There won't be any girls."

"There'll be girls," said Karen. "There's always girls. Just don't bring any of them up Berry Head." She looked down at her hands. "That's ours. Find your own."

The guard was nearly at us. He had his whistle in his mouth.

"Karen," I said.

"Go on, then," she said. And then she put both her arms round my neck and held on, very hard, for about three seconds, in the middle of the platform, with the guard standing beside us and the train breathing and the whole of Torquay station looking. And she let go, and stepped back, and pushed me, quite hard, in the chest, towards the open door.

"Go on, then," she said again. "Get on the train."

I got on the train.

My father was sitting by the window with the box on his knee. He did not say anything. I stood at the door, at the drop window, with my head out, as the guard blew his whistle and the train jerked and began to move, and she stood on the platform with her hands at her sides and did not wave.

She did not wave all the way down the platform. She did not wave as the carriage went past the end of it, and past the footbridge, and out into the cutting. I kept my head out of the window until she was very small, a jumper and a ribbon at the far end of the platform under the canopy.

And then, at the last moment, as the train went round the curve and the station began to slide out of sight behind the cutting wall, she put up both her arms. Straight up. Out. The way she stood on the edge at Berry Head.

And then the wall came across, and she was gone.

* * *

I wrote every week. Proper letters. I told her everything: the computers and the food and the hall of residence, which was a concrete block on a hill outside Stafford with a view of the M6, and the lecturers, and the terminal room, and Carole.

I did not tell her about Carole. Not at first. There was nothing to tell, at first.

She wrote back. Every week in October, long letters in her big round handwriting with the loops on the y's and g's, on blue Basildon Bond, four sides, sometimes six, full of Brixham and the boards and her brothers and her nan and the 400. Every week in October.

In November, every fortnight.

In December, once. Two sides. It came on the Friday before I came home for Christmas, and I read it on my bed with the rain on the window and the lorries going by on the motorway in the dark.

Dear Chris,

I don't know how to write this so I am just going to write it. I have been going out with Robbie Lane since half term. You don't know him. He's on the Provider with our Kevin. He's all right. He's not you. He doesn't look at platforms, he looks at the weather and the price of fish, and I think that's what I need, if I'm honest, because I'm not going anywhere, Chris, I never was, whatever I said in the car. I'm a Brixham girl. You're not a Brixham boy. You never were.

Don't come round at Christmas. I couldn't stand it.

You will always be the best thing. I mean it. You were the only one who ever got me up Berry Head and made me want to come down again.

Find your own place.

K.

P.S. Nan says to tell you to keep your eyes open. I don't know what she means either.

I read it four times. Then I folded it into the inside pocket of my jacket, and lay on the bed in my clothes with the light on, and listened to the lorries on the M6, going north and south, all night, until it was light.

* * *

I came home on the twenty-first of December on the train. My father met me at Torquay. We drove home past the end of the road that goes up to Berry Head, and I did not look at it.

I did not go round to Brixham. She had asked me not to. I had been brought up to do what women asked me.

On Boxing Day, in the evening, when my mother and father were at Widecombe Cot, I went out to the garage and took the dust sheet off the Mini and drove it up to Berry Head on my own.

It was a black night with no moon and a hard frost, and the car park on the top of the head was empty, and white with rime, and the grass crunched under the tyres. I stopped in the place. Nose to the sea. And turned the engine off.

The silence came down, the way it always did. And in front of me the little lighthouse on the edge of the world, turning, and the long arm of light coming round over the frost and over the roof of the Mini, and lighting up the inside of the car, white, for a second, and going on.

The windows did not mist up. There was nobody in the car to breathe but me.

I sat there for three hours. I did not cry. I want to be accurate. I sat with my hands on the wheel and the frost growing on the windscreen from the edges inwards, and watched the light come round, and counted it, the way I had counted it in May with her forehead against mine. Round, and light, and dark. There was a scuff on the dashboard from the heel of her shoe. I put my hand on it.

And I looked up at the sky over the sea, in the south-east, where she had said a star had been once, that did not belong. Every star I could see was moving round, the way they are supposed to.

I'd stand right on the edge and put my arms out and say, Go on, then. Take me with you.

She had stood on the platform with her arms out. She had pushed me onto the train.

At midnight I started the car and drove home very slowly on the frost, and put the dust sheet back on, and went to bed, and in the morning I told my mother I had been to see a friend.

My mother looked at me across the breakfast table for a long time, in the way she has. Then she said, "Yes," and poured my tea. She had learned in 1943 which questions not to ask.

* * *

I learned some things afterwards. They came a long time afterwards, and I will put them here, because this is where they belong.

Karen Tozer married Robbie Lane at All Saints in Brixham in June 1982. She had two daughters. She stayed on the boards at Fleet House until the boards went, in 1986. Robbie Lane was lost off a trawler in a winter gale in 2014, south of the Eddystone, and his body was never found, and she watched for him from the top of Berry Head for a week, the way she and her mother had watched for her father. Jono wrote all of that down, on the day he went to see her on the fish quay. I read it last night.

And this, which my mother copied out for me from her own notebook in 2008, after Room 3, and posted to me here, without a word of explanation, in an envelope I still have:

> *Fri. 17 Oct. 1980. Miss Ania arrived, Room 3, 4.10 p.m. At the desk, before she had put her bag down, she said: "Has he gone?" I said yes, to Stafford, three weeks ago. She said: "Good." Then: "And Miss Tozer?" I said I didn't know; he hadn't said. She said: "You will." She went up. She didn't have her tea.*

She didn't have her tea. I read that line more often than any of the others. In all the years I knew her, I never knew Ania not to have her tea.

* * *

I have wondered, since, whether Karen knew. I have decided that she did not. I have decided she was exactly what she seemed: a Brixham girl who fell for a boy who looked at platforms, and knew before he did that he would get on a train, and made him, because she loved him, and then let him go, because Brixham girls know about letting people go out past the breakwater.

I have decided that. It is the only one of them I have decided it about.

I did not go up Berry Head with anybody else. I kept my word, for twelve years. And then, in 1992, somebody went up it without me, and did not come down. I will come to that too.

Chapter 7 – *North Staffs*

Tues. 8 April 2008. Phoned the university at Stafford, formerly N. Staffs Poly, student records. Asked re a foreign student, Computing, Stoke site, c.1980–84, first name Karina. Told: Data Protection. Asked to speak to a supervisor. Told: Data Protection. Wrote down the clerk's name (Mrs D. Hollins) and the time (2.25 p.m.). Will go in person.

He went in person. Two pages later there is a train ticket stapled in, Newton Abbot to Stafford return. But I had stopped thinking about Stafford a long time before 2008. I am going to have to start again now, here, at this table, with the flat half empty round me.

The shipping men came at nine and took the boxes, all forty-one, and when they had gone the flat was a different shape, larger and stranger, with pale squares on the floor where things had stood for twenty-one years. My voice comes back off the walls now when I talk to myself, which I find I do more than I did.

The eleven archive boxes are on their way to Torquay by sea. The Tiger carton is in the wardrobe. The pocketbook is on the table. And I am in Stafford, in 1980, with a letter in my jacket pocket that I have read four times, and I have not yet met Carole.

* * *

North Staffordshire Polytechnic was two places pretending to be one. The main part was in Stoke-on-Trent, among the bottle kilns

and the marl holes. The part where they taught computing was outside Stafford, on a hill called Beaconside, in a set of flat-roofed sixties blocks that looked as if they were waiting for somebody to come and finish them, with a long low computer centre with no windows on one side, and all round it, on a road called Blackheath Lane. The Midlands: Flat fields. Pylons. And the M6, a quarter of a mile off, roaring day and night like the sea at the bottom of Berry Head, except that it never once stopped to breathe.

I hated it.

I want to be honest. I hated it for the whole of that first autumn. I hated the flatness; I had grown up where every corner showed you the sea, and here there was nothing but the next field and a sky so big and so grey it seemed to sit on your head. I hated the cold, dry and mean, that got into your hands. I hated the boys on my corridor, who played Motörhead through the walls until two in the morning. I hated being called *duck* by the woman in the bank, which I did not know was kind.

And I missed her. I missed her every hour of every day. I would be sitting in a lecture on Boolean algebra and look up at the window and see a gull, a single gull, blown in a hundred miles from any sea, going over the car park, and I would have to look down at my notes for a long time.

I wrote to her every week. I told her about the lectures and the food and the boys on my corridor. I did not tell her I hated it. I did not want her to think she had made me go for nothing.

Then the letters stopped coming, and then there was the one in December, and then there was Boxing Day, and Berry Head in the frost.

And then I went back.

* * *

What I did, that second term, was work.

I did not know what else to do. I had a hole in me the shape of a girl from Brixham, and I put the only thing I had into it, which was the work. I sat in the library until they turned the lights off. And I went to the computer centre, where the first-years were not supposed to go except in daylight, and began, very quietly, to find out how it worked.

I should say what a computer was, in 1981. Not what people think now.

It was a room. A big cold room behind the windowless wall, with a raised floor of grey tiles you could lift to get at the cables underneath, and air conditioning that roared like the motorway, and a smell of hot dust and ozone. In it there was the machine: an ICL 2900, a row of tall grey and orange cabinets as long as a bus, with lights on the front that flickered. Disc drives as big as washing machines. Tape decks jerking round like nervous animals. And in the corner the line printer, the size of a piano, making a noise like a machine gun firing into a mattress.

You did not touch it. Nobody touched it except the operators. The rest of us typed our programs onto punched cards, a line to a

card, and put a rubber band round the deck and pushed it through a hatch, and a day later the printout came back and told you whether your program had worked. It almost never had. You had left out a comma on card forty-seven.

And the terminal room was the future: twenty cream-coloured terminals with little screens of green letters, linked under the floor to the machine, so that you could type something and the machine would answer you back, there and then, without any cards or hatches. There were twenty terminals and four hundred students. You booked an hour a week, if you were lucky.

I found out, in January, that the terminal room was open all night. They locked the outside doors at ten, but the machine was too expensive to be allowed to sleep, and if you were already inside at ten, nobody threw you out. They just locked you in.

So I started being inside at ten.

* * *

That was how I met Carole. She was the night operator.

She was in her final year, and she worked three nights a week in the machine room for money, from ten until eight, on her own, with a flask of black coffee and a packet of Silk Cut, which you were not allowed to smoke in the machine room and which she smoked anyway, in the doorway to the fire escape with the door open on the frozen field. She was twenty-one. She was tall and very thin, with very short dark hair cut like a boy's and enormous round glasses that made her eyes look as if they were at the bottom of two

fishbowls, and she wore the same black polo-necked jumper every night. Her father worked at the GEC, the big works by the railway, where they made switchgear and, people said, other things that nobody talked about. She had a Staffordshire voice that she had flattened out at the grammar school, all except when she swore, which she did often and well.

She was the cleverest person I had ever met. I am fifty-six, and I have met a good many clever people since, in a good many countries, some of whom ran those countries, and I am not sure she has been beaten.

For the first three weeks she did not speak to me at all. She would come into the terminal room on her rounds, with her clipboard, and look at me alone at the end of the row, and at what was on my screen, and go out again. On the fourth week she stopped behind me, and read my screen over my shoulder for a long time, and said, in her flat Stafford voice:

"Line two hundred and twelve. You're comparing a string to an integer. It'll fall over."

I looked. She was right. I said thank you.

"You're the first-year," she said. "The Devon one. Who's here every night."

I said I supposed I was.

"Why?"

I did not know how to answer that. I said I liked it when it was quiet.

She looked at me through her fishbowl glasses for a while, the way you look at a program that has done something you did not expect.

"Nobody likes it when it's quiet," she said. "People who say they like it when it's quiet have usually had something noisy happen to them." And she went out again with her clipboard. But on the way out she stopped in the doorway, and said, without turning round, "There's coffee in the machine room. If you want it. Don't touch anything."

* * *

I went for coffee. I did not touch anything. Not for a month.

I stood in the doorway of the machine room with my cup, and watched her work, and asked questions, and she answered them as if they were the most interesting questions anybody had ever asked her, even when they were stupid. She showed me how the machine thought. How the jobs queued up, and how it decided which to run, and what to do when two of them wanted the same thing at once. How it talked, down the lines, to Stoke and Keele and, through a thing she called a packet-switched network, to places she did not name. How a fault in one part of it could show up somewhere completely different, an hour later, looking like something else.

"It's a system," she said. "That's all it is. Everybody thinks it's a machine. It's not. It's a system. Everything in it is talking to everything else, all the time, and if you know how to listen, you can hear what it's saying." She lit a Silk Cut in the fire-escape doorway

and blew the smoke out into the frozen field. "Most of the lecturers don't know that. They think it's arithmetic."

I said a man called Stan had told me something like that once, about telephone exchanges. That you could hear a fault before you could find it, if you stood still long enough in the aisle with your eyes shut.

She turned round in the doorway and looked at me.

"Who's Stan?"

I told her. Fleet House, and the racks, and the clatter of the selectors, and standing in the aisle with my eyes shut until I could hear which one was wrong. I did not tell her about the fifth floor.

She was quiet for a while.

"Your Stan's right," she said. "Same thing. Same exact thing." And then, for the first time, she smiled. It changed her whole face. It was like somebody switching a light on in a room you had thought was empty.

* * *

The machine went down on the twelfth of March, a Thursday, at twenty to two in the morning.

I was in the terminal room, alone, as I always was, and my screen froze, in the middle of a line, and then went blank, and then all twenty screens went blank together, and the roar of the air conditioning from the other end of the building changed its note. And then there was a noise I had never heard before, a long falling

electrical whine, like a lift going down a very long shaft, and then silence. Real silence. The first I had ever heard in that building.

I ran.

She was in the machine room, at the console, with the typewriter terminal hammering out a long string of capitals and numbers on its roll of paper, and every light on the front of the cabinets either out or flashing red, and the disc drives slowing down behind their smoked lids with a noise like somebody sighing. She did not look round.

"It's the comms," she said. "Something's come in down the line from Stoke and it's taken the front end out, and the front end's taken the main frame with it." She tore the paper off the typewriter and read it, very fast. "I can bring the main frame back. That's just restarting. But if I bring it back with the line still up, whatever it was will just come straight back down the line and do it again." She looked up at me through the fishbowls. "And I can't find the line. It's not on the diagrams. Somebody's moved it."

"Where do the lines come in?"

"Under the floor. Somewhere. There's about four hundred of them."

I put my coffee down on the console, which you were absolutely not allowed to do, and got down on my knees on the grey tiles, and lifted one up with the sucker, the way I had seen the engineers do it, and looked down into the dark space under the floor, full of cables, hundreds of them, in bundles, going in every

direction like the roots of a tree. And I put my head down into the hole, and shut my eyes, and listened.

I want to say I heard it. I do not know if that is true. I know that I lay on that floor for about ten minutes with my head under it and my eyes shut, while Carole stood over me and swore, steadily, in her real voice, the Staffordshire one. And I know that in the end I sat up and said, "There. Third bundle from the wall. It's humming wrong."

She looked at me as if I had gone mad. Then she got down beside me and put her head into the hole too.

We found it at a quarter past four: a modem, a little grey box no bigger than a shoebox, that somebody had put under the floor and not written down, on a line from Stoke, with a badly made joint letting in damp and sending garbage into the front end every time the main frame tried to talk. I knew about faults on lines. It was the only thing in that room I knew anything about. I could not fix it without tools, but I could disconnect it, which I did, with Carole's nail file.

At half past four she brought the main frame back.

I will never forget it. She typed a string of commands I did not understand, and pressed the key, and for a moment nothing happened. And then, down the whole length of the machine, the lights came on, one cabinet after another, like a town coming on at dusk, white and green and amber. The disc drives spun up, and the air conditioning changed its note back to the roar, and the line

printer in the corner cleared its throat and fired off one long burst and stopped.

And the console typewriter typed, on its own, in capitals:

SYSTEM READY.

Carole sat back in her chair and took her glasses off and put the heels of her hands in her eyes. When she took them away, her eyes, without the glasses, were very large and very dark and much younger than I had thought, and they were wet.

"I'd have lost my job," she said. "If it had stayed down till morning. I'd have been the operator who lost the whole machine for a day. They'd never have let me near it again." She looked at me. "Where did you learn that? With your head under the floor?"

"A telephone exchange," I said. "In Torquay."

She put her glasses back on, and looked at me through them for a long time, the way she had looked at line two hundred and twelve.

Then she got up and went to the fire-escape door and pushed it open, and the cold came in, and outside, over the flat black field and the pylons and the motorway, the sky was beginning to go grey in the east. Not pink. It never went pink in Stafford. Grey, and then a sort of pale yellow, low down, under the cloud.

"Come and look at this," said Carole.

I went and stood beside her in the doorway, in the cold, with the machine roaring safely behind us. She did not light a cigarette. She stood with her arms folded in her black jumper and watched the light come up over the Midlands.

"It's not the sea," she said, after a while. "I know it's not. You talk about it in your sleep, you know. In the terminal room. You put your head down on the keyboard about three and you say things about the sea." She did not look at me. "It's not the sea. But it's not nothing, either. Is it?"

I looked at it. A flat field, white with frost. A line of pylons going away into the grey. The motorway, a river of headlights, going north and south. And over it all the light coming, pale and slow, and very large.

"No," I said. "It's not nothing."

She turned and looked at me then, and took my hand, quite matter-of-factly, the way she would have picked up a printout, and held it.

"Good," she said.

* * *

That was the twelfth of March, 1981. Or the thirteenth. It was both. It was a night, and then it was a morning, and the hole in me the shape of a girl from Brixham was still there, and always would be, and there was something else beside it now, thin and dark and very clever, with its glasses steamed up from the cold.

I did not know you could fall in love with somebody without stopping being in love with somebody else. I thought it was one or the other. I was nineteen that month. Carole taught me that, too, without ever saying it, the way she taught me everything. She showed me that the system was bigger than any one part of it, and

that everything in it was still talking to everything else, all the time, and that nothing that had been connected was ever completely disconnected, however carefully you did it with a nail file.

I wrote to my mother that Sunday, as I did every Sunday. I told her I had helped to fix the computer. I did not tell her about Carole.

My mother wrote back the following week. Four sides, as always, about Widecombe Cot and my grandparents and my father's back and the weather in Torbay. And at the end, under her name, a line she had never added before:

> *Miss Ania was asking after you in the autumn. I said you were settling in. She said you would be, by the spring. I don't know how she knows these things. I never have.*

Chapter 8 – *Snow*

> *Sun. 10 Jan. 2010. Mum's loft, Preston. Going through Grandad Douglas's papers at last. Small black notebook, 1982. Jan. 4th: "Cheltenham. Miss C. Bayliss, Stafford, taken on. Recommended by A. A. says she has done what she was for." Did not understand it. Copied it. Showed nobody.*

I have read that line perhaps twenty times since four o'clock this morning. I have got up from the table and walked round the empty flat and come back and read it again, and it says the same thing every time.

She has done what she was for.

I knew, by 2010, that Ania had arranged things. I had known since Room 3. But I had not known it was written down, anywhere, in so many words, by anybody. And I had not known it was written down about Carole, in a dead man's notebook, in a loft in Preston, for twenty-eight years, while I was on the other side of the world believing that Carole Bayliss had left Stafford in the snow because she was the cleverest person in England and England had finally noticed.

Both things are true. I have to keep saying that, to myself, at this table. Both things are true.

* * *

That spring and summer, the spring and summer of 1981, I think I was as happy as I have ever been.

Not the way I had been happy with Karen. That had been like being out in weather: wind and sun and salt and the whole sky. This was like being indoors, in a warm room, at night, with the curtains drawn and somebody you love at the other end of the sofa reading, and the rain outside. I had not known there was that kind. I had not known you could be happy quietly.

Carole had a bedsit above a baker's on Greengate Street, in the middle of Stafford, up two flights of narrow stairs that smelled of oatcakes, which she bought hot in a paper bag on the way home from a night shift and ate with cheese, standing at her window, looking down at the street waking up. It was one room with a slope in the ceiling and a gas fire and books everywhere, in piles on the floor, so that you had to walk round the room in a particular path, like a maze. There was a record player and a stack of records, mostly German and mostly made by machines, which she said were the future, and which I came, in the end, to like.

She played me *Computer World* the week it came out, in May, sitting cross-legged on the floor with her eyes shut and her glasses pushed up on her head. A record about computers, made by men who sounded like computers, with a song on it about falling in love with somebody you had found through a machine. She played that one three times. Then she opened her eyes and said, "That's us, that is," and laughed, and was embarrassed, and went and made tea.

I do not know how to describe her to anybody who did not know her. She was all edges. She was rude to lecturers and right about it. She could not suffer fools and she was kind to them anyway, in a sideways way, by fixing their programs in the night and not telling them. She talked very fast in a flat voice and then suddenly stopped in the middle of a sentence and looked at you through the fishbowl glasses, and you realised she had been testing whether you were keeping up, and you had not been.

And she made me cleverer. I want that down. She did it on purpose, the way Stan had done it, and my father with the Mini: she made me do the thing and then made me do it again, properly. She would put her finger on line two hundred and twelve and say, *again*, and I would do it again. By the autumn, people came to me with their printouts.

She has done what she was for.

* * *

In August she came to Devon.

I was home for the summer, working at Fleet House on the racks, and she came down on the train for a week and stayed at Widecombe Cot, in Room 6. My grandmother liked her; I could tell, because she criticised her, which she only did to people she had decided to keep. My grandfather Harold talked to her for an hour in the front room about cryptography, which he seemed to know a surprising amount about for a grocer, and she came out looking thoughtful.

"Your grandad," she said, on the stairs. "What did he do? In the war?"

I said he had a grocer's shop in Hendon.

She looked at me through the fishbowls.

"No, he didn't," she said. "Or not only."

I showed her Torbay, in the Mini, which she called the Mustard Pot and complained about every mile. I took her on the steam train to Kingswear and the ferry to Dartmouth, and to the top of Haytor in the wind, and swimming at Anstey's Cove, where she screamed at the cold and then would not come out. I took her to the 400, once, and she stood at the edge of the floor with a pint of bitter and watched the glitter ball for half an hour, with her head on one side, like an engineer looking at a machine, and then said, "Can we go now?" and we went.

I did not take her to Berry Head.

She noticed. Of course she noticed. She noticed everything. On the Thursday, driving back from Brixham along the top road, she looked out of the window at the long flat head going out into the sea with the little lighthouse on the end, and said, "What's that?"

"Berry Head," I said.

"Can we go up?"

"No," I said. And then, because she was looking at me, and because I could not lie to her: "That's somebody else's."

She did not say anything for a long time. The Mini made its sewing-machine noise up the hill. Then she reached across and put her hand on my knee, very lightly, for a moment, and took it away.

"Fine," said Carole. "Show me yours, then. Not hers. Yours."

So I took her to Hope's Nose. The other end of the bay, the far point, where the land runs out in a long rocky finger with the sea on three sides, and nobody goes except fishermen. We sat on a rock at the very end at sunset and ate fish and chips out of the paper, and she put her head on my shoulder and said nothing at all for an hour, which for Carole was a declaration of love.

That was mine. It still is. I have been back there every time I have been home, for thirty-seven years, and I have taken only one other person there since, and I will come to her.

* * *

In October she had a visitor.

I did not meet her. I only heard about it, from Carole, afterwards, in the bedsit, with the gas fire on. A woman from London had come up to the Polytechnic and asked to see three of the final-year students, separately, in an empty office, for half an hour each. Carole was one of the three.

"What did she want?"

"She asked me questions," said Carole. She was sitting on the floor with her back to the bed and her knees up. "Not about computing. Well, some about computing. Mostly not. She asked what I'd do if I found something on the machine that somebody had hidden. She asked what I'd do if I found out a friend was lying to me. She asked if I liked working at night." She took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. "She asked about you."

"About me?"

"Whether I had a boyfriend. Whether he was on the course. What he was like." She put her glasses back on. "I said you had your head under the floor most of the time and you could hear faults in a line by listening to them. She wrote that down."

I said what did she look like.

Carole thought. "Grey," she said. "Grey hair, grey suit. Sixties, maybe. Very nice manners. Very ordinary. You'd walk past her in the street." She shrugged. "She had a voice like somebody's aunt. She said thank you very much and that was all."

I thought, for a second, of a woman in an office in Bristol with a view of a car park, the year before, asking me what I would do if I found out a colleague was listening in. I did not say anything. It was a different woman. I was nearly sure it was a different woman.

* * *

It snowed in December. Properly. The heaviest snow anybody in Stafford could remember, a foot of it on the level, so that the town went silent and white and the buses stopped and the motorway, for the first time since I had come there, went quiet. You could hear it not being there. It was like the sea going out.

The term had finished. I did not go home for Christmas. I telephoned my mother and told her I was staying in Stafford, and there was a long silence, and then my mother said, "Is she nice?" and I said yes, and she said, "Then bring her at Easter," and put the

phone down, and I stood in the phone box in the snow and loved my mother more than I had ever loved her.

We walked everywhere, because nothing else moved. We walked through the middle of Stafford in the snow at midnight, when the whole town was asleep and lit orange by the street lamps, past the Ancient High House, black and white, with snow on every ledge, like a picture on a Christmas card. We walked down to the river Sow, frozen at the edges, with the snow coming down again, very large and soft, settling on her black hair and her black coat, so that she looked like a negative of herself. We did not talk. She held my arm. Our feet made the only noise in the world.

I have walked through snow since, in other countries, in a good many places. I have never walked through any that was as quiet as that.

And on the Saturday before Christmas, the nineteenth, a big cardboard box was delivered to the bedsit. Inside, in polystyrene, there was a BBC Microcomputer, the new Model B, cream-coloured, with red keys at the top, that nobody could get, and she had got one, I never found out how. We plugged it into her little portable television and turned it on, and it went *beep*, very cheerfully, and put up a line of white letters on the black screen.

BBC Computer 32K

BASIC

>

"Now then," said Carole, and sat down cross-legged on the floor in front of it, and pulled me down beside her.

We wrote a program. It took us until two in the morning. It did not do anything useful, and I have the printout still, in one of the shoeboxes that went to sea yesterday. It made snow. Little white dots, falling down the black screen, slowly, at different speeds, drifting a little from side to side, and settling at the bottom, and piling up, until the bottom of the screen was white and the white began to climb.

We sat on the floor of the bedsit with the gas fire on, and the real snow coming down outside the window in the orange light, and the snow we had made coming down inside the screen, and watched them both, for a long time, side by side.

"That's the best program I've ever written," said Carole.

I said it was the worst.

"I know," she said, and leaned her head on my shoulder. "That's why."

* * *

She told me on New Year's Eve.

We were in the bedsit, with a bottle of something from the off-licence and the radio on, waiting for the bells, and she had been quiet all evening, which was not like her, and at about half past eleven she turned the radio down and said, "I've got to tell you something, and I don't want you to say anything till I've finished."

I said all right.

"The woman," said Carole. "In October. From London. She wrote to me. In November. There was an interview, in Cheltenham,

in an office, that I can't talk about. I went on a Tuesday when you thought I was at the dentist." She looked at her hands. "They've offered me a job. A computing job. For the government. I can't tell you what. I've signed something saying I can't tell you what, and I'm never going to be able to tell you what, Chris, not ever, not if we're married with six kids. That's the job."

I did not say anything. She had told me not to.

"It starts on the eleventh," she said. "Of January. This January. I'd have to leave the course. They'll give me the degree anyway, they've fixed it with the Poly somehow, I don't know how." She looked up at me at last, through the fishbowl glasses. Her eyes were wet. "It's the best computing in the country, Chris. Maybe the world. Machines nobody's ever heard of, doing things nobody's ever thought of. And they asked for me. Me. From Stafford. With my dad at the GEC and my mum on the tills at the Co-op." She took her glasses off. "I can't not go. You see that. You do see that."

I saw that. I said so.

"And you can't come," said Carole. "That's the other thing. It's not a place you can come. Not for a long time. Not ever, probably." She put her glasses back on. "So I'm finishing it. Now. Tonight. Properly. Before it goes wrong. Because if I don't finish it properly, it'll just go on, by letter, getting thinner and thinner, and one day there'll be a letter that says I've met somebody in Cheltenham, and I'm not doing that to you." She looked at me. "I know somebody did that to you already. You talk in your sleep."

Outside, all over Stafford, the bells began.

* * *

On the last night, the Wednesday, she worked her last shift in the machine room. I was there, in the terminal room, as I always was, and at about four in the morning she came and got me, and took me through to the machine, and sat me down at the console, and stood behind me with her hands on my shoulders, and told me what to type.

It was a banner. The line printer could do them: you gave it a word and it printed it out in letters a foot high across the fanfold paper, each giant letter made of hundreds of small ones. I typed what she told me, and pressed the key, and the line printer in the corner cleared its throat and began to fire, and the green-and-white paper came feeding out over the back of it.

When it stopped, she tore it off and spread it out along the floor of the machine room, between the cabinets, so that it went nearly the length of the room. Three words. Each letter as tall as my forearm. And underneath, smaller, in a line of its own:

IT'S NOT NOTHING

CAROLE BAYLISS 6/1/82

"There," said Carole. "Something to remember me by. Don't frame it. It's naff."

I have not framed it. It is folded up in the bottom of the second shoebox, the paper gone yellow and the ink gone brown, and I have unfolded it perhaps four times in thirty-six years, on the floor of whatever flat I was living in, and looked at it, and folded it up again.

* * *

She went on the Thursday, the seventh of January, from Stafford station, on the 10.40 to Birmingham, to change for Cheltenham.

It was snowing again. Small dry flakes, coming down out of a low yellow sky, settling on the platform and on her black coat. She had two suitcases and the BBC Micro in its own box, which she would not let anybody else carry. Her father had gone to park, and we had ten minutes on the platform, on our own, in the cold.

She did not cry. Neither did I. We had done that on New Year's Eve. She stood in front of me on the platform with her hands in her coat pockets and looked at me through the fishbowl glasses, with snow on the lenses, and said, "You'll be all right. You're the best they've got, after me. Don't let them make you lazy."

I said I wouldn't.

"And find somebody," she said. "Not straight away. But find somebody. Somebody who can keep up." She almost smiled. "That'll be difficult."

The train came in. Her father lifted her cases on, and shook my hand, quite hard, and said, "Look after yourself, son," in the voice of a man who had worked for forty years in a place where he could not talk about what he did, and had just watched his daughter go to another one. And then she got on, and the door shut, and she was at the window, with the snow sliding down the glass between us.

She did not wave. She put her hand flat on the inside of the window, and I put mine flat on the outside, against hers, through the glass, and the train began to move, and pulled her hand away.

I did not watch it go. I had done that once, at Torquay, and I knew what it did to you. I turned round and walked out of the station before the train had cleared the platform.

* * *

I walked back to Beaconside. Three miles, through the town and up the hill, in the snow. I could have got a bus. I walked.

It was the same snow. That was what I could not get past. The same quiet, the same orange light on the white, the same Ancient High House with snow on every ledge. My feet made the only noise in the world. It was exactly the same, and she was not there, and the snow kept coming down on the shoulder of my coat where her head had been.

I counted my steps, the way I had counted the lighthouse. I got to four thousand and something and lost count, on the hill, in the dark, with the motorway beyond the hall of residence silent and white, nothing moving on it, like a river that had stopped.

I did not go to my room. I went to the computer centre, and sat in the terminal room at the end of the row until it got light, and did not type anything. I sat and watched the cursor blink on the green screen, waiting for me to tell it something.

>

At about six I typed in the snow program. I typed it from memory, all of it. It took me an hour. And I ran it, and sat there, and watched the white dots fall down the black screen, slowly, at

different speeds, drifting a little from side to side, and settle at the bottom, and pile up, one on another, until the screen was white.

She has done what she was for.

I did not know, that morning, that she had been for anything. I thought she had been for me.

I still think that, at four in the morning. I have read the line in Douglas's notebook twenty times and I still think it. She was for me. Whatever else she was for, and whoever decided it, for ten months in Stafford she was for me, and I was for her, and we made snow on a BBC Micro on the floor of a bedsit above a baker's, and it was the worst program either of us ever wrote, and the best.

Both things are true. I am going to keep saying it until I believe it.

Chapter 9 – *Angie*

Mon. 6 April 1992. Torquay police station, 9.30 a.m. Coroner's officer. Deceased from Berry Head identified this morning by her father, flown down. ANGELA SHENTON, aged 30, of Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent. Telecoms engineer. Father says: "She went to Devon to see a friend. She didn't say who."

She did not say who.

I have had that line in my head for three days, through the packing and the empty rooms, and I cannot put it anywhere. Her father flew down. I did not know that either. He was a big gentle man who mixed clay in a slip house in Burslem for forty years, and I do not think he had ever been on an aeroplane in his life, and when they asked him why she had been in Devon he told them she had come to see a friend.

She had come to see me. I was the friend. I was forty minutes away, at my mother's, asleep.

I am going to write about Angie now, properly, from the beginning. I have been putting it off. This is the one I was going to marry.

* * *

The course was four years, with the third one out, in industry, and since the telephones were paying for me, the telephones decided where. In the summer of 1982 a letter came from British Telecom,

which was what the telephones were called by then, and told me to report on the sixth of September to the Network Operations Centre in Stoke-on-Trent, for twelve months, to work on PSS.

I did not know what PSS was. Nobody did. It was a year old. Packet SwitchStream: the first public data network in Britain, computers in a dozen cities talking to each other down the telephone lines in little parcels of information. They called the computers nodes. Like knots in a net. The node in Stoke was on the second floor of a telephone exchange in Hanley, in a room with no windows, and when I walked into it on the sixth of September, in my interview suit, there was a girl sitting cross-legged on top of a cabinet with a soldering iron in one hand and a sausage roll in the other, and she looked down at me and said:

"You'll be the student. From Devon. Mind the cable, duck, you're stood on the Glasgow link."

I moved my foot. She laughed.

That was Angie.

* * *

She was twenty; two months older than me, she told me later, as if that settled something. She had left school at sixteen in Burslem and gone straight into the telephones, the way I had in Torquay, and when PSS came she had put her name down for it before anybody else had heard of it. She was the only woman engineer in the building. She did not seem to have noticed.

She was small and round and quick, with a great deal of dark curly hair that she tied back with whatever came to hand, a bootlace, a cable tie, once a length of telephone wire. She had brown eyes that were always about to laugh and a Potteries voice so broad that for the first week I understood one word in three, and she called everybody *duck*. She ate all day, out of her overall pockets, and never put on an ounce.

And she knew the network the way Carole had known the machine. Better. Carole had known it like a mathematician. Angie knew it like a farmer knows his land. Every link, every node, every line out of the building and where it went and what was wrong with it and what had been wrong with it last Tuesday. She talked to it. Literally. She sat on top of the cabinets with her soldering iron and talked to the network the way you talk to an old dog. *Come on, then. Come on, Glasgow. What's up with you, duck. Don't you start.*

"Every bit of it's connected," she said to me, on the first afternoon, from the top of the cabinet, waving a sausage roll at the racks. "Every node. Every line. Stoke talks to Manchester and Manchester talks to Leeds and Leeds talks to Glasgow, and if Glasgow's poorly, by teatime Bristol's got a headache and nobody knows why." She bit the sausage roll. "That's what people don't get. It's not lines. It's a net. You pull on one corner, the whole thing moves."

I thought of Carole in the fire-escape doorway. *It's a system. Everything in it is talking to everything else.* I thought of Karen on the fifth floor at Fleet House, with the lamps of the whole town

going on and off in front of her. *Whoever sits up here can see Torbay.*

Three women. Three rooms. One lesson. I did not see it then. I was twenty, and I thought it was just what people said, in the trade.

* * *

It was slow. I want that understood.

With Karen it had been three weeks. With Carole it had been one night, under a floor, with a nail file. With Angie it was four months, and I did not know it was happening until it had happened, the way you do not notice the tide coming in until you look up and your rock is an island.

We worked together every day in the windowless room in Hanley, and ate our dinners on the fire escape, in the cold, looking out over the roofs at the bottle kilns. There were still dozens of them then, the old brick kilns shaped like milk bottles, black with a hundred years of smoke, most of them cold and waiting to be pulled down. She knew the name of every one. Her grandfather had fired one, in Burslem, when he was a boy. Her father still worked in a slip house, mixing clay.

"Best clay in the world comes from your end," she said to me once, on the fire escape. "Did you know that? Devon. Ball clay. From round Newton Abbot. Me dad says you can't make a decent bit of pottery without it. Comes up in lorries, every day, all the way up the M5 and the M6." She pointed with her oatcake. "There's one."

There was. On the road below, going past the end of the street towards Burslem, a big flatbed lorry, sheeted over, with dust on its wheels, the pale grey-white dust you see on every road round Kingsteignton. On the cab door, in faded letters, there was the name of a clay company and an address in Newton Abbot.

I watched it out of sight. I had towed a Mini past the pits it came from, in the snow, three years before.

"Me dad says the Germans are buying it all now," said Angie. "Some Hamburg firm. Buying up the Devon clay and selling it back to the potbanks dearer. He says it's a scandal." She screwed up her paper bag. "He says everything's a scandal. Come on, duck. Glasgow's poorly again."

I did not think anything of it. I thought it was a thing her dad said.

* * *

She took me to the football.

Port Vale. Her team, and her father's, and his father's. Vale Park, in Burslem, on a Saturday in October, in the rain, on the Bycars End, a great sloping bank of concrete terrace open to the sky, with four thousand people standing on it in anoraks, shouting. I had never been to a football match in my life.

She stood beside me on the terrace with her hood up and her curls coming out of it, and screamed at the referee in language I would not have believed of her, and jumped up and down when the Vale got a corner, and grabbed my arm with both hands whenever

anything happened near the goal, and I stood there, soaked to the skin, not understanding the rules, and was happier than I had been since the snow.

I had brought a camera, her father's old Praktica, and I took pictures. Not of the match. Of the crowd. An old man in a flat cap with his eyes shut and his lips moving, praying, as the other side took a penalty. A woman with a flask, pouring tea for the man beside her without looking. A big lad in a donkey jacket on the step below, not watching the game at all, watching a man across the terrace, steadily, for the whole of the second half.

Angie saw me doing it.

"You're watching the crowd," she said. "Not the match."

I said I didn't understand the match.

"No," she said, looking at me with her head on one side and the rain running off her hood. "That's not why. You just look at people. Don't you? You always have. I've seen you at work. You watch everybody who comes in the room before you look at what they've brought." She laughed. "It's a bit creepy, duck, if I'm honest."

"An old man taught me," I said. "When I was a kid. At a level crossing in Devon. What's on the platform."

She did not laugh at that. She looked at me for a long time, on the terrace, in the rain, while the crowd roared round us at something that had happened on the pitch that neither of us saw.

"I'd have liked him," she said.

"He'd have liked you."

I got the films developed in Hanley. Thirty-four of the thirty-six were faces. Angie went through them on the fire escape, very slowly, and when she got to the big lad in the donkey jacket she stopped, and held it up, and said, "That's a copper. Plain clothes. And that's who he's watching." She handed it back to me. "You've got a good eye, Chris Harvey. You want to do something with it."

I have that photograph still, in a box on a ship, somewhere off Sri Lanka by now. It is the first one I ever took of a man watching another man. I have taken a few thousand since.

* * *

The day I knew was the twenty-seventh of December, the Monday after Christmas, at Vale Park.

I had gone home for Christmas and come back on Boxing Day, a day early, and told my mother I had to be back for work, which was not true. And on the twenty-seventh it rained the way it only rains in the Potteries in winter, black and freezing and sideways, and the Vale were losing one nil with five minutes to go.

And then they scored. I did not see it. I was looking at Angie, who had her hair plastered flat by the rain and her eyes shut and her hands together under her chin, praying, like the old man in the flat cap. And the whole terrace went up like a wave going over, and Angie opened her eyes and screamed and threw herself at me, and I caught her, soaked through, in front of three thousand people, and she was shouting into my ear *we've scored, Chris, we've scored*, and then she stopped shouting and pulled her head back and looked at

me, from three inches away, with the rain running down both our faces, and did not say anything, and nor did I.

And then she kissed me. Or I kissed her. We have argued about it since. We argued about it for nine months. It does not matter. Somebody kissed somebody, on the Bycars End, in the rain, in the last five minutes, with the Vale drawing level and three thousand people singing round us, and I knew.

Not like Karen, which was like being knocked down by a wave. Not like Carole, which was like a light being switched on in a cold room. Like coming home. Like walking up a hill you have walked up a thousand times and getting to the top and seeing your own house, with the lamp on.

They drew. One all. Angie said afterwards it was the best draw in the history of the club.

* * *

Her father's name was Ron. He was a big, slow, gentle man with forearms like legs of lamb and hands grey to the wrist with fifty years of slip, which never came off however much he scrubbed, and he looked at me across the table in their front room in Burslem on New Year's Day, over a plate of oatcakes and bacon, for a very long time, and then said, "You're the one who watches people."

I said I supposed I was.

"She says you've got a good eye," said Ron Shenton. He picked up an oatcake and folded it in half, the way they do there, and bit it. "She's not said that about anybody before. Not anybody."

He chewed. "You treat her right, duck. That's all. Or I'll put you through the blunger."

I did not know what a blunger was. I found out later. It is a machine for mixing clay. It has blades.

* * *

I am going to put the rest of that winter and that spring very quickly, because if I put it slowly I will not be able to finish it.

We were together every day. At work, and on the fire escape at dinner, and in the evenings in her little flat over a shop in Burslem with a view of three bottle kilns. At the football on Saturdays, home and away, all that season, which was the season Port Vale got promoted, which Angie said was because of me. We went to Crewe and Hartlepool and Darlington on coaches full of men singing, with her asleep on my shoulder on the way home. I took pictures of crowds. She stuck the best ones on her kitchen wall with drawing pins.

I took her home to Devon at Easter, a year late and the wrong girl, and my mother looked at her across the table at Widecombe Cot for a long time and then gave her the best cup, and my grandfather Harold, very frail by then, held her hand for a long time in his chair by the window and said nothing at all, and when she had gone out of the room he looked at me over his glasses and said: "That one, Chris. That one."

I did not take her up Berry Head. I took her to Hope's Nose, at sunset, and we ate chips on the rock at the end. She said it was the

best place she had ever been in her life. She cried, a little, which she said was the wind.

And at the end of April, when we got back to Stoke, I went into a jeweller's in Hanley, in the arcade off the market square, on a Saturday morning when she thought I was at the launderette, and bought a ring.

It was not much of a ring. I was a student. A thin gold band with a small square garnet, dark red, the colour of the bottle kilns at sunset from the fire escape, which I thought was clever and the woman in the shop clearly thought was the most stupid reason for choosing a stone she had ever heard. It cost forty-one pounds. She put it in a little blue velvet box with a spring hinge, and I put the box in the inside pocket of my jacket, over my heart, and walked out into the market square with every nerve in my body ringing.

I did not ask her that day. I wanted to do it properly. I wanted to do it at the last match of the season, at Vale Park, on the Bycars End, in the place where we had kissed, when they had won promotion and the whole ground was singing. I had it all planned. The fourteenth of May. I had worked out where we would stand.

So I carried it about with me for two weeks, everywhere I went. In her flat at night, in the jacket over the back of a chair, while she slept beside me and I lay awake and looked at the shape of the box through the cloth.

* * *

They won promotion. The fourteenth of May came, sunny, and the whole of Burslem was at Vale Park, and at the end the crowd went onto the pitch, thousands of them, singing, and Angie went with them, pulling me by the hand, and I lost her in the crush and found her again by the centre circle, laughing, with somebody's scarf round her neck, and I put my hand inside my jacket, over the box.

And I did not ask her.

I do not know why. I have thought about it for thirty-five years. It was exactly the moment I had planned. She was standing in front of me in the sun with her curls everywhere, laughing, in the middle of four thousand people singing, and I had my hand on the box, and I opened my mouth.

And something stopped me. Not a thought. Not a doubt. I had no doubts. Something more like a hand on my arm. A feeling, very strong and very clear, as clear as a voice, that said: *not yet.*

So I said, "Well done, the Vale," instead, like an idiot, and she laughed and kissed me, and the moment went by, and I let it.

I thought there would be another. I thought there would be a hundred. I thought I would ask her in the summer, at Hope's Nose, at sunset, which would be better anyway.

I still have the box. It is in the Tiger carton, at the bottom, under my mother's exercise book. I took it out last night, after I read Jono's line about her father, and opened it, and looked for a long time at the white satin, and the little slot where the ring used to sit.

There is no ring in it. I should say that. The box is empty. I can still see the garnet when I shut my eyes, the colour of the kilns at

sunset, but the box is empty, and has been since 1992. I will come to why.

Chapter 10 – *Too Perfect*

> *Wed. 15 April 1992. Ron Shenton, by phone, from Burslem, 7.10 p.m. Asked about Aug. 1983. He says Angie went to Glasgow overnight, on a transfer, "after a lady came to see her." Young woman, he says. Dark hair. Grey suit, no coat, in the rain. "Spoke very proper. Like a clock." Angie never told him who she was. Not in nine years. Not once.*

Like a clock.

Karen's girls on the fifth floor at Fleet House had called her that, in 1978. Ron Shenton, who had never met Karen Tozer and never would, called her that too, fourteen years later, on the telephone to a young constable in Torquay. Jono underlined it. It is the only thing in the thirty-second pocketbook he has ever underlined.

I knew it was her. I have known since 1992. But I had not known that anybody had seen her do it.

* * *

The ninth of June, 1983, was a Thursday, and the day of the general election, and Mrs Thatcher won it by a mile, and in the windowless room on the second floor of the exchange in Hanley nobody noticed, because it was also the day of the student visit.

The Polytechnic sent a dozen second-years every summer, to see a real network working in a real building. Angie hated the

student visit. She said it was like having a coach party round your kitchen. She sat on top of her cabinet all that morning with a face like thunder and made me do the talking.

So I did the talking. I stood in front of the racks in my good shirt and told twelve students what a packet was and what a node was, and how if Glasgow was poorly, by teatime Bristol had a headache. I used all of Angie's lines. She sat on her cabinet and mouthed them along with me, rolling her eyes.

One of them did not.

She was at the back, at first. Then, as I went along the racks, she was at the front, without seeming to have moved, the way a cat is suddenly on the other side of a room. A tall fair girl of about my age, very neat, with her hair cut in a straight line at the jaw and grey eyes that did not blink very often. She did not write anything down. She listened. And when I asked whether there were any questions, which nobody ever had, she asked one.

"The routing tables," she said. "On each node. When a link fails, and the node finds another way round, how long before every other node in the network knows the new way? And while they are learning it, where do the packets go that are already on their way?"

It was a very good question. It was the question Angie and I had been arguing about for three months, on the fire escape, and had not yet answered.

I tried to answer it. I got about half way. And then, from the top of the cabinet behind me, Angie answered the rest, in her broad Potteries voice, without getting down, very fast and very exactly,

while still holding her soldering iron, and finished with: "And the ones already on their way get lost, duck. That's the honest answer. Some of them just get lost."

The fair girl looked up at her. She looked at Angie for a long moment, sitting on the cabinet with her curls tied back with a bootlace and a smear of flux on her cheek. And then she smiled. It was a very nice smile. It went all the way up to her eyes and stopped there.

"Thank you," she said. "That is what I thought. I wanted to hear somebody say it."

Then she stepped back, and was at the back of the group again, and the lecturer looked at his watch, and they went.

* * *

She was in the Coach and Horses in Hanley that evening, at a table by the window, on her own, with a glass of white wine and a book, when Angie and I came in after work.

I would not have noticed her. Angie did. Angie noticed everybody who came into a room, the same as I did; it was one of the things we had in common. She put her hand on my arm in the doorway and said, very low, "Your clever student's here."

The girl looked up and saw us, and smiled the same smile as in the morning, and lifted her glass an inch, and went back to her book. Twenty minutes later she came up beside me at the bar and said, "Thank you for this morning. It was the only interesting thing I

have done in two years in this country," in a voice that was low and pleasant and very, very clear.

I said she was welcome. I asked where she was from.

"Hamburg," she said. "I am here on an exchange. Two years. Computing, on the Stoke site." She held out her hand. "Karina."

I shook it. It was cool and dry and very firm.

"Chris," I said. "And this is Angie."

"Yes," said Karina, and shook Angie's hand too. "The one on the cabinet. Who knows the answers." She smiled at Angie, warmly. "I am very glad to meet you. I would like to learn from you, if you would let me."

Angie said something polite. I could not tell you what. I could feel her, beside me, gone very still.

Karina went back to her table and her book, and left at nine, alone, and on the way out she stopped by our table and said, "Good night, Chris. Good night, Angie. Perhaps I will see you at the Vale." And she said *the Vale* exactly the way they said it in Burslem, with the vowel flattened out, as if she had been born on the Bycars End.

When the door had shut behind her, Angie sat for a long time without saying anything, turning her glass round on the beer mat.

"What?" I said.

"Her English," said Angie.

"It's very good."

"It's too good," said Angie. She looked up at me. Her brown eyes were not about to laugh. "It's too perfect, Chris. Nobody talks like that. Nobody English talks like that. She said *the Vale* like me

dad. She's been here two years, she says. You know how long it took you to understand me dad?" She shook her head. "She's learned it. Somebody's taught her. Like an actress." She turned her glass again. "And she knew my name before you said it."

"She didn't."

"She did. You said *this is Angie* and she said *yes*. Not *hello*. *Yes.* Like she was ticking it off." Angie drank her half. "I don't like her, Chris. I'm sorry. I can't say why. I just don't."

I laughed at her. I want that down, plainly. I laughed, and said she was jealous, and she said she was a Shenton, and Shentons did not do jealous, and in the end she laughed too, and we went home to the flat in Burslem, and I did not think about it again.

She did.

* * *

Karina came to the Vale. Of course she did. Two or three times that summer, standing a little way along the Bycars End from us in a pale raincoat, never with us, cheering in the right places. Once she lent Angie an umbrella, and Angie gave it back at the end of the match without having opened it.

She was in the Coach and Horses most evenings, always on her own, always polite, never once pushing. She talked to me about networks. She talked to Angie about Burslem, and clay. She knew a great deal about clay.

"My grandmother's family were in it," she said, one evening, at our table, where Angie had finally, out of politeness, asked her to

sit. "In Hamburg. Shipping and clay. They bought the ball clay from Devon and shipped it to Germany, and here." She smiled at me. "Perhaps some of the clay your father mixes, Angie, came on my great-grandfather's ships."

Angie said, "Me dad says it's a Hamburg firm buying it all up now."

"Yes," said Karina. "That is us also. My grandmother started again, after the war, with nothing. She is a very remarkable woman. She has been to Devon, before the war. She was very fond of Torquay." She looked at me with her grey eyes. "You are from Torquay, Chris. Angie told me."

Angie had not told her. I knew she had not. I saw Angie know it too.

"Yes," I said.

"Then perhaps you know the old hotels," said Karina. "My grandmother remembers a hotel there, from before the war. With a monkey puzzle tree in the garden. She talks about it often. I do not know why." She laughed. "Old ladies. They remember the strangest things."

I did not say anything. My mother's exercise book was in a drawer at Widecombe Cot, unopened by me, and would stay there for another twelve years. There are a good many monkey puzzles in Torquay.

Angie stood up, very suddenly, and said she had a headache, and went to the ladies, and was a long time.

When she came back, Karina had gone.

* * *

We had our first row that night. Our only real one.

In the flat, at midnight, with the kilns black against the orange sky. Angie said she did not want Karina at our table again. I said she was lonely, she was a long way from home, she was harmless. Angie said she did not know how she knew, she just knew, the way you know a link is going to go before it goes. She said, *you of all people, Chris*. Why could I hear it in a cable and not in a person?

And then she said: "She knew about the monkey puzzle. She knew about your nan's hotel. She knew you were from Torquay. She knew my name. Chris, she knew *everything*, and she's been here two years in a Poly in Stoke, and she's never once asked a single question she didn't already know the answer to." Angie was crying, now, which she never did, standing in the middle of the room with her fists clenched. "I've watched her. I watch people. You taught me, with your bloody platforms. And that woman is watching you. She's not watching me. She's not watching the Vale. She's watching *you*. Like the copper in the donkey jacket in your photo. Every time."

I went to her and held her and said I was sorry. I said I would not talk to Karina again. I said it was nothing.

She stood very still in my arms for a long time.

"It's not nothing," she said. "It's not nothing, Chris."

I did not know who else had said that to me. I did not think of Carole at all.

* * *

On the nineteenth of August, a Friday, I went home to Devon for my grandfather Harold's ninetieth birthday. Angie could not come. There was a new link going into Glasgow on the Saturday, and she had to be there for it, and she kissed me at Stoke station and told me to give Harold a big one off her, and that she would see me Sunday night.

I had the ring in my pocket. I was going to ask her on the Sunday night. I had decided, on the train. No more planning, no more waiting for the right match and the right moment. I would walk into the flat in Burslem on Sunday night and put the box on the table and open it.

I came back on the Sunday night, the twenty-first, at nine o'clock, with the box in my pocket and a piece of Harold's birthday cake in a paper napkin for her, and let myself into the flat.

It was empty.

Not empty of her. Empty. The photographs were gone off the kitchen wall; the drawing pins were still there, in neat rows, with little torn corners of photograph under some of them. Her clothes were gone. Her soldering iron was gone from the shelf by the door. The bed had been stripped and the sheets folded on the end of it, very neatly, which was not like her. She had never folded anything in her life.

On the kitchen table, on its own, there was an envelope, with my name on the front, in her handwriting.

Chris,

I can't explain. I'm not allowed to and I wouldn't know how if I was. Please don't look for me. Please don't ask me dad, he doesn't know anything and it's not fair on him.

It's not you. It was never you. It's the best thing I ever had and I'm not going to say any more than that because if I do I won't be able to go.

Somebody told me something and I believe them. That's all.

Look after your eye. Keep watching people. Watch her.

I love you, duck. I'm sorry.

A.

* * *

I looked for her for a year.

I did everything she asked me not to do. I asked her dad, and Ron Shenton stood in the door of the house in Burslem with his grey forearms folded and said, "She's gone to work somewhere else, son. That's all she said. That's all I know. I'm not lying to you," and he was not, and I could see it was killing him. I asked at the exchange in Hanley, and they said Miss Shenton had been transferred at her own request, and the manager looked at his desk when he said it. I rang the Glasgow node every week for three

months, and a man with a Glasgow voice said there was nobody of that name there, and the last time he said it gently, and added, "Son. Leave it."

I went back to Stafford in September for my last year, and took the train to Stoke every weekend and stood on the Bycars End on my own in the rain, looking along the terrace for a head of dark curly hair tied up with a bootlace.

Karina was there, sometimes, a little way along, in her pale raincoat. She never came over. Once, in November, when I had been standing there for an hour after the final whistle, with the floodlights going off one by one, she came along the empty terrace and stood beside me for a moment, and put a hand on my arm, briefly, and took it away, and went.

I was grateful. I want that down too, because it is true, and because it is the worst thing in this book. I was grateful to her.

* * *

I carried the ring for a year, in its box, over my heart, every day. I think I thought that if I had it on me when I found her, I could ask her there and then, wherever it was, before she could go again.

I did not find her. Not for nine years. And when I did, I was not the one who found her.

Watch her, she wrote.

I did not. I did not watch anybody, that year. I stood on a terrace in the rain and looked for somebody who was not there, and let somebody else watch me.

Chapter 11 – *The Pits*

> *Fri. 3 Aug. 2007. Paignton, the level crossing, 4.15 p.m. Old gates gone, barriers now. Stood where C.H. stood me in Aug. 1984. "What's on the platform, Jono?" First lesson I ever had. Train in from Exeter. Counted: 3 who looked round instead of walking out. 1 watching them. Still works.*

Still works.

He was thirty-four when he wrote that, and a sergeant, and he went and stood at the level crossing at Paignton and played a game I taught him when he was eleven, and wrote down the score. I hardly remembered it myself until I read that. And then I remembered all of it: the heat and the bells and the tar on the road, and a small boy with a notebook standing on the step of the crossing-keeper's hut so that he could see over the gates.

But that was August. I have to get through the spring first. The spring of 1984 was when I learned what a network is really for.

* * *

I went back to Stafford in the September of 1983 for my last year. By Christmas I had stopped going to Stoke. By February I had stopped carrying the ring and put it in a drawer, in its box, under my socks, where I could see the corner of it every morning when I got dressed. That was as far as I could get.

What saved me, that winter, was a network. Not PSS. A new one.

It was called JANET, the Joint Academic Network: the first network to join the universities and the polytechnics together, so that a student at one could send a message to another, or log on to a machine two hundred miles away as if it were in the next room. It was to be switched on in April 1984, and in the months before they needed people who knew packet switching and could hear a fault under a floor, and there were not many of those in Stafford, and one of them was me.

So I spent that winter with my head under the floor again, and on the roof, and in the cable ducts, and did not think about anything else for whole hours at a time, which was what I needed. And on the second of April the node went live, and I sat at a terminal in the empty terminal room at midnight and typed a message to a computer in Edinburgh, and four seconds later a line of green letters came up on the screen from a student I would never meet, who had been sitting up waiting for somebody to say something.

HELLO STAFFORD. WELCOME TO THE NET.

I sat and looked at it for a long time. I thought of Angie on top of her cabinet. *It's not lines. It's a net.* She should have been the one to type it. And then I thought: wherever she is, if she is anywhere with a terminal, she will know this has happened. That was the thing about a net. Everybody on it knew.

I typed back: *HELLO EDINBURGH. IS ANYBODY ELSE THERE?*

Nobody answered. It was one in the morning. But it was a strange thing to type, and I have never forgotten typing it.

* * *

The miners came out in March.

I did not understand it at first. I was from Devon. We had china clay and ball clay and fishing and hotels. I had never thought about coal in my life.

But the Potteries sat on coal. All round Stoke, under the bottle kilns and the terraced streets, there were pits, with their winding towers sticking up over the houses like the masts of ships. Angie's uncles had gone down the pit. Half the men on the Bycars End on a Saturday had been underground on the Friday. And in March 1984 the Coal Board said it was going to close twenty pits, and the miners said they would strike, and in North Staffordshire the two halves of every town turned to face each other across the road.

I saw it from the train, every weekend that spring. Men at pit gates in the early morning round braziers, with placards. Police vans in lines along the verges, with numbers from counties a long way from home. And once, near Trentham, at seven in the morning, a line of police holding round shields and a line of men in donkey jackets facing them across a road, and nobody moving, and steam coming off both lines of them in the cold, like horses.

And I saw the roadblocks.

I did not know about the roadblocks until I was stopped at one, driving back from Stoke in a borrowed car on a Sunday night in

May, on the A34. A police car across the road with its blue light going, two policemen in yellow coats with torches. They shone a torch in my face and asked me where I was going.

I said Stafford. I said I was a student. I said I had been to see a friend.

"Where've you come from?"

I said Stoke.

"Where in Stoke?"

I told him. He wrote it down. Then he walked round the car with his torch and looked in the back and wrote down the number plate, and came back, and leaned in at the window, and looked at me for a long time.

"Got any family in the pits, son?"

I said no. I said I was from Devon.

"Devon," said the policeman. He wrote that down too. Then he stood back and waved me on.

I drove about a mile, and then I pulled into a lay-by and sat with my hands on the wheel, shaking. I had done nothing. I had been asked six questions by a man with a torch. But I had seen him write the answers down, every one, on a clipboard, and the clipboard had been thick, and every page of it full.

* * *

It was Ian who told me the rest. I am going to give him that name. He has a different one, and he is still alive, and he would not thank me.

He was an engineer at the exchange in Hanley, an older man, who had known Angie and had liked me because of it, and never once mentioned her, which I was grateful for. In June, a week before my finals, I met him in the Coach and Horses, and he was drunk, which he never was, and he took me into the corner by the fruit machine and told me that there had been men in the exchange at night.

"Not ours," he said. "Not BT. London. Suits. Since April. They've got a key to the back door and their own room on the third floor, and nobody's allowed in it, not even the manager. Cables going in. New ones. Pairs from the main frame." He looked at his pint. "You know what a pair from the main frame is, Chris. You know what you can do with it."

I knew. I knew what Karen had shown me on the fifth floor at Fleet House when I was sixteen. *Whoever sits up here can see Torbay.* You did not even need to listen. You only needed to watch the lamps.

"Whose lines?" I said.

"Union offices," said Ian. "Miners' welfare. Some of the lads' houses. I know because I was told to label them." He drank. "And they've got a computer. In there. Hooked up to a line that goes to London, to a place they call the National Reporting Centre. Every roadblock in the country rings in to it, every night. Every car number. Every name. Every *where've you come from*." He put his glass down. "They know who drove where, Chris, every night, all over the country, since March. They know who rang who. They can

put it all together." He looked at me. "You're the network man. You tell me what that is."

I thought about it. I thought about Angie on her cabinet. *You pull on one corner, the whole thing moves.* I thought about Carole in the doorway of the machine room. *Everything in it is talking to everything else, and if you know how to listen, you can hear what it's saying.* I thought about the clipboard, thick, every page full.

"It's a net," I said.

"It's a bloody net," said Ian. "And it's not for catching fish."

* * *

I have thought a great deal about that conversation since. I have been on the other side of it, in more than one country. I have put things together myself, and watched what it does to people who find out it has been done to them.

But that was the first time. That was when I understood what everything I had been taught was for. Not the telephones. Not the computers. What they could be used to *see*.

Karen had shown me the lamps. Carole had shown me the system. Angie had shown me the net. And the miners' strike showed me who else was watching.

I did not know, that spring, that I was going to spend the rest of my life on the watching side. I would have been horrified. I went back to Stafford that night and sat my finals the next week and I do not remember any of them.

* * *

There was one more thing, that spring. It is small. I am putting it in because I said I would put in everything.

On that Sunday night at the roadblock I had to wait while they dealt with the car in front, a big dark Mercedes with German plates. The policeman bent to the driver's window, and there was a short conversation, and then he did something I did not see him do to any other car. He stood back and touched his cap. A salute. And waved it through without writing anything down.

As it went past my headlights, I saw the passenger. A woman, in the back, on the near side, with fair hair cut in a straight line at the jaw. She was not looking at the policeman. She was looking out of the side window, at my car, as it went by. At me.

I told myself I was mistaken. There must have been a thousand fair women with that haircut in the Midlands in 1984. It was dark. I was tired.

Watch her, Angie had written.

I did not tell anybody. I did not write it down. I did not keep notebooks then. That is the only reason I am not sure, even now.

* * *

I got a first. I do not say that to boast. I say it because of what came with it.

There was a ceremony in July, in the big hall in Hanley, with gowns and a man in a gold chain, and my mother cried and my father shook my hand and said nothing, which was how you knew.

Afterwards, on the steps, in the sun, a man I did not know came up and shook my father's hand, and then mine.

He was in his sixties, grey, in a good grey suit, with a BT badge on his lapel that I am now fairly sure he had borrowed. He said he was from International Networks, in London. He said the French were building a thing called Minitel, a terminal in every home in France, on their own packet network, and BT wanted somebody in Paris for a year or two, working alongside the French, learning how they did it.

"Paris?" said my mother.

"Paris," said the grey man. "From October. It's all arranged, if he wants it." He looked at me. "Do you speak French, Mr Harvey?"

I said I had an O level.

"Then you'll learn," he said, quite kindly, and gave me a card with a London number on it, and shook my father's hand again, and went off down the steps into the crowd, and was gone.

My father looked at the card for a long time, and then at my mother, and something went between them that I did not understand, the kind of quiet there had been in 1978 when the apprenticeship had been put down in my name.

"Paris," said my father at last. "Well. Nobody in this family's ever been further than Plymouth on purpose." And he gave me back the card.

* * *

So I went home to Devon for the summer of 1984, before Paris, and that is where the small boy with the notebook comes in.

He was eleven. He had been ten months old in a knitted hat at Johnny Hills's funeral, and now he was thin and brown from the summer, with a habit of turning up wherever I was. At the back door at Widecombe Cot, at breakfast. On the harbour wall in Torquay. He did not say much. He followed, a few yards behind, and when I turned round he stopped, and looked at me with that grave thorough look, as if he were writing me down.

He had a notebook. A small one, from Woolworths, with a picture of a footballer on the front. He wrote things in it. When I asked him what, he went red and put it in his pocket.

On a Saturday in August, the eleventh, a hot still day with the tar soft on the road, I took him to Paignton on the bus, the way Johnny Hills had taken me. I did not plan it. He was at the back door at ten o'clock, as usual, and I was going to Paignton anyway, and I said, "Coming?" and he came.

And at the level crossing, with the bells going and the gates swinging shut, I stood him on the step of the crossing-keeper's hut so that he could see over the gates, and put my hand on his shoulder, the way Johnny Hills had put his on mine, in this exact spot, when I was six.

The train came in from Exeter. Doors opened all down it.

"Right, Jono," I said. "What's on the platform?"

He looked at me. Then he looked at the train.

"Not the train," I said. "Everybody looks at the train. The platform. Who gets off. Who doesn't walk out. Who's waiting. Who's watching who's waiting."

He looked at the platform. He looked for a long time. He took out his notebook with the footballer on it and a stub of pencil, and wrote, very slowly, with his tongue between his teeth, and when the train had gone and the gates had swung open and the cars had started moving again, he showed me.

man 2 cases no ticket
lady didnt walk out, looked round
man by the machine watching the lady
dog

I looked at it for a long time.

"You missed the boy with the kite," I said. And then, because he had gone red: "That's good, Jono. That's very good. That's better than I did the first time."

He looked up at me from the step of the crossing-keeper's hut, in the heat, with the notebook in his hand.

"Grandad Douglas says it's what the Hills do," he said. "Writing it down. He says we've done it for ever. He says there's thirty-one books in a tin box at our house that I can't open till I'm big, and they're all full of it." He looked at the notebook. "This is my first one."

"Then keep it," I said.

"I will," said Jono. And he did. He told me last year that he still has it, the Woolworths one with the footballer, in the tin box with the thirty-one. He has never numbered it. He says the first one that counts is the one he started on a rock at the bottom of Berry Head, eight years after that, in the cold, at six in the morning.

Still works, he wrote, in 2007, at the crossing.

It does. It is the only thing I was ever taught that has never once let me down.

I went to Paris in October. I will come to that. Somebody was waiting for me there.

Chapter 12 – *Minitel*

> *Thurs. 24 July 2008. Paris, 11th, rue de la Roquette, no. 74. Concierge, Mme Ferreira, aged 71, same building since 1979. Remembers "l'Anglais du troisième", 1984–88. Remembers "la blonde". Says the blonde had a key to the third floor before the Englishman ever came. Says she let herself in the week before he arrived, with a man, and they were up there two hours. Asked how she knew it was the same woman. "Monsieur. I am a concierge."*

I put the book down when I read that, and went and stood at the window, and looked out at the rain trees for a long time.

The week before I arrived. With a man. Two hours.

I lived in that flat for four years. I loved it. I loved her in it. I sat at the little table under the window in the mornings looking down at the market stalls and the bicycles and thought I was the luckiest man in Europe. And somebody had been in it before me, for two hours, with a key, getting it ready.

I knew, by 2008, roughly what Karina had been. I did not know about the key. Jono found the concierge and wrote it down, and then flew to Singapore with his brown file and sat at my kitchen table and did not mention it, because he could see what the rest of it was doing to me and decided I had enough. He has always known exactly how much to tell me, and when, and it has taken me until this week to understand that that is a kind of love.

* * *

Before I went, my grandfather Harold asked to see me on my own.

He was ninety-one. He had not been out of Widecombe Cot for a year. He sat in his chair by the front-room window with a rug over his knees, and my grandmother brought me in and went out again and shut the door, which she did not do, and he looked at me over his glasses for a long time before he said anything.

"Paris," he said.

I said yes.

"Minitel. Transpac. The French PTT." He said the letters as if he had been saying them all his life, which he could not have been. "And a grey man on the steps at your graduation with a borrowed badge."

I said I had not told him about the badge.

"No," said my grandfather. "You didn't." He reached down beside his chair, very slowly, and picked up a small brown envelope, and held it out to me. His hand was shaking. It had shaken since 1975. "There's a name in there. And an address. In Paris. He's an old man now, older than me in some ways, though he's younger in years. He was a friend of a friend of mine, a long time ago, in the war." He looked at the envelope. "If you ever need anything in Paris, anything at all, that's where you go. You knock, and you say Mallyon's sent you, and you ask him for a quarter of Darjeeling."

I looked at him. I thought he was wandering. He was ninety-one.

"A quarter of Darjeeling," said my grandfather again, very clearly, and looked at me over his glasses with his mild grocer's eyes, and they were not wandering at all. "And then you listen to whatever he tells you. Do you understand me, Chris?"

I said I did. I did not.

I put the envelope in my case. I did not open it until I had been in Paris for three months. I did not use it until I had been there for three years. And when I did, I understood why my grandfather's hand had been shaking, and that it had not been the age.

* * *

I arrived on the first of October 1984, a Monday, at the Gare du Nord, with two suitcases and a French dictionary and an O level, and the noise of Paris hit me in the chest the way the 400 had, the first time, through the padded doors.

I cannot describe Paris to anybody who was not young in it. It was grey and gold and enormous and loud and smelled of coffee and Gauloises and drains and bread, and the river went through the middle of it under thirty bridges, slow and green-brown, and at night every one of them was lit. I had seen Exeter and Bristol and Stoke. Paris was not a city. It was a whole country, folded up and stacked very high on both banks of a river.

They had found me a flat. I was given a key in an envelope at the office on my first morning, and nobody said who had arranged it. It was in the eleventh, off the Bastille, on the rue de la Roquette, on the third floor of an old building with a courtyard and a

concierge in a glass box at the bottom of the stairs, who looked at me as if she already knew everything there was to know about me and was not impressed by most of it. Two rooms and a kitchen like a cupboard. Tall windows onto the street. On the wall, a print of the Seine at night, very bad, which I took down on the first day and put back on the second, because the room looked wrong without it.

I lived there four years. It was the happiest place I have ever lived, and the most watched. I did not know that either.

* * *

The work was at the DGT, the French telecoms administration, in the fifteenth, near the river: long corridors full of engineers in short-sleeved shirts who smoked at their desks and argued about everything, all day, and then went out to lunch together for two hours and argued about something else. For the first month I sat in a corner with a terminal and a manual in French and a dictionary and understood nothing.

And then I understood Minitel, and it was the most extraordinary thing I had ever seen.

It was a box. A little beige box with a small black-and-white screen and a keyboard that folded up over it like a lid, and the French government gave it away, free, to anybody with a telephone. You plugged it into your phone socket and it put you onto Transpac, and through Transpac onto thousands of services. You could look up a phone number, book a train, check your bank account. In 1984 a farmer in the Auvergne could sit at his kitchen table and type into a

beige box and get answers back from a machine in Paris, while in England my father was still fixing the wires so that people could ring the speaking clock.

It was the future, done ten years too early, by a country that had decided it wanted it and paid for it. Carole would have loved it. Angie would have loved it more.

But it was not the trains or the banks that the French loved. It was the *messageries*. The chat services. You typed a name, any name you liked, and went into a room made of nothing, of words on a small grey screen, and talked to strangers. Thousands of them, all over France, at night, alone at their kitchen tables in the light of the beige box. Lonely people. People looking for love, and people looking for something that was not love but used its name. By 1985 the network groaned under the weight of them every night after ten.

"*C'est pas pour l'information*," one of them said to me, an old engineer called Lefèvre with a moustache like a yard brush, at the monitoring screen at midnight, watching the line go up. "*C'est pour la solitude*. It's not for information. It's for loneliness." He shrugged. "*On a construit un réseau pour les trains et les banques, et la France s'en sert pour se parler la nuit.*" We built a network for trains and banks, and France uses it to talk to itself at night.

I thought of Kraftwerk, on a floor in Stafford. I thought of a song about falling in love with somebody you had found through a machine. I thought, that's us, that is.

* * *

I was lonely. I want to be accurate.

I had been lonely since Angie, and I was lonelier in Paris than I had been anywhere, because in Paris everybody else was not. Everybody else was in pairs, at café tables, on bridges. I went to work and came home and ate bread and cheese at my table under the window, and on Sundays I walked, for miles, along the river and up to Montmartre, and spoke to nobody but waiters.

And at night, sometimes, I went to the office in the fifteenth, which was open all night because the network never slept, and sat at a terminal in the empty monitoring room with the traffic lines climbing on the screens, and went into the messageries.

I did not talk to anybody. I want that understood. I watched. I sat in the rooms made of nothing and watched the words go by, people telling each other things at two in the morning that they would never have said to a face. It was the switchboard at Fleet House again. *Whoever sits up here can see Torbay.* Whoever sat there could see France.

And on the fourteenth of December, a Friday, at about half past one in the morning, in a slow hour, a new name came into one of the rooms.

HAMBOURG.

I noticed it because it was a city, and German. It did not say anything for a long time. It sat in the room, watching, the way I did. And then it sent a message. Not to the room. To me. Privately.

IS ANYBODY ELSE THERE?

* * *

I sat in front of the screen in the monitoring room in the fifteenth for a long time.

Then I typed: *WHO IS THIS?*

There was a pause. The cursor blinked.

SOMEBODY WHO WAS SITTING AT A TERMINAL IN STOKE-ON-TRENT ON THE NIGHT OF THE 2ND OF APRIL, WHEN THE NETWORK SWITCHED ON. AND SAW A MESSAGE FROM STAFFORD. AND NOBODY ANSWERED IT.

Another pause.

I SHOULD HAVE ANSWERED IT. I HAVE BEEN SORRY EVER SINCE.

And then:

CAFE DES PHARES. PLACE DE LA BASTILLE. TOMORROW. ELEVEN. I WILL BE BY THE WINDOW. IF YOU DO NOT COME, I WILL UNDERSTAND.

HAMBOURG left the room.

I sat there until it got light.

* * *

I went. Of course I went.

I nearly did not. I walked to the Place de la Bastille on the Saturday morning, under a white sky, and walked round the square three times, in the crowd, with my hands in my pockets, telling myself I was not going to go in. I thought about Angie's note on the kitchen table in Burslem. *Watch her.* I thought about a Mercedes at a roadblock in the dark, and a policeman saluting.

And then I thought about the first night of JANET, at one in the morning, in the empty terminal room at Stafford, with the green letters on the screen, typing *IS ANYBODY ELSE THERE?* to nobody, and nobody answering. And I thought: somebody saw it. Somebody saw it, and remembered it, for eight months, and came and found me in a room made of nothing in Paris to say they were sorry they had not answered.

Nobody had ever done anything like that for me in my life.

I went in.

She was by the window, at a small round table, with a coffee and a book, in a dark grey coat with the collar turned up, her fair hair cut in a straight line at the jaw. She looked up when I came in and did not smile at first. She looked at me for a long moment, very seriously, as if she were not sure I was real. Then she closed the book.

"You came," said Karina.

I sat down. I did not know what to say. I said, "You were at the Poly. In Stoke. That night."

"Yes. In the terminal room. Alone. I often was, at night." She turned her cup in its saucer. "I saw your message come up. *Is anybody else there.* And I wanted to answer, and I did not, because I thought you would not want it to be me. After Angie. I knew she did not like me." She looked at me. "So I let somebody ask that question into the dark, and I was there, and I said nothing."

I said, "How did you know it was me? On the Minitel?"

She almost laughed. "Chris. There is one Englishman in the whole of the DGT. Everybody in my office knows about him. And he goes into the messageries at night and never says anything." She shrugged. "I work with networks now. For my grandmother's company. We have an office here, by the Gare du Nord. Shipping." She smiled, very slightly. "It is not difficult to see who is in a room, if you are watching. You taught me that, a little, in Stoke. Watching you watch people."

I did not say anything. I thought of Angie. *That woman is watching you.*

"I was very sorry," said Karina, "when Angie went. I want you to know that. She did not like me, and I think she was right not to trust me, because I was not very honest with anybody in those days, about anything. I was very young and very far from home and very frightened and I pretended to be clever, all the time, so that nobody would see." She looked down at her cup. "But I was sorry. For you. I saw you on the terrace, afterwards. In the rain. Every week."

"You put your hand on my arm," I said.

"Yes."

"I was grateful."

"I know," said Karina. "I saw." Her eyes were very clear, and very grey, and, I thought, wet. "I am not asking for anything, Chris. I only wanted to answer the question. Eight months late." She turned the book over on the table and pushed it towards me. An English children's book. *The Wind in the Willows.* "I am reading this

to improve my English," she said. "It is very difficult. All the animals talk like Englishmen at a club."

I laughed. I could not help it. It was the first time I had laughed, properly, since Burslem.

"Your English," I said, "is already very good."

"Yes," said Karina, quite simply. "Too good. Angie said that. I heard her, in the Coach and Horses, the first night. I have been trying to make it worse ever since." She smiled. "It is not working."

* * *

That was all, that day. Coffee. An hour. She paid. At the door of the café she shook my hand, the cool dry firm hand from the Coach and Horses, and said, "If you would like to walk, one Sunday, I walk every Sunday. Along the river. From the Pont Neuf. At ten." And she went off across the Place de la Bastille through the traffic, and I stood in the doorway and watched her go, until she went down into the Métro.

She did not look back. I noticed that. I noticed that I had been waiting for her to, at the last moment, the way Karen always had.

I did not go to the Pont Neuf the next Sunday, or the one after. I went home for Christmas and did not tell anybody about her, not my mother, not my grandfather, who asked me over his glasses whether I had found my way about Paris yet, and looked at me for a long time when I said yes, and did not ask anything else.

I went back to Paris on the second of January. On the third Sunday in January, the twentieth, in the cold, with ice on the edges of the river, I walked to the Pont Neuf at ten.

She was there. On the bridge, by the statue of the king on his horse, in her grey coat, looking down at the water. She did not look surprised. She looked as if she had been there every Sunday since December, and would have been there every Sunday after, for as long as it took.

"Good morning, Chris," she said.

And we walked.

* * *

I am going to stop there, at the start. The rest is the next chapter, and it is the hardest one in this book to write, because it was the happiest, and because I know now what it was.

But one thing more, because Jono's line about the concierge is on the table in front of me. The flat on the rue de la Roquette was arranged by *somebody*. Nobody ever told me who. I assumed it was BT. Then, after Room 3, I assumed it was Ania, the way the envelope in my locker had been Ania, and the grey man on the steps.

I was wrong. Or I was half right. I do not know which half.

She let herself in the week before he arrived, with a man, and they were up there two hours.

Two people had a key to my life in Paris before I did. One of them was not Ania.

And in a brown envelope in my suitcase, unopened, there was an old man's name and a quarter of Darjeeling, from my grandfather, who had known something, or guessed something, or been told something, and had sat in his chair by the window at ninety-one with his hand shaking, trying to give me a way out of a room I did not yet know I was in.

Chapter 13 – *The Bridges*

> *Fri. 25 July 2008. Paris, Pont des Arts, 11.40 p.m.*
> *Walked it end to end twice. C.H. said once, years ago, drunk, this was the one. Padlocks on the railings now, hundreds, lovers' names on them in marker pen. New thing, the man selling them says. Looked anyway. Did not find theirs. Did not expect to. Stood in the middle for ten minutes.*
> *Understood it, a bit.*

Understood it, a bit.

I do not remember telling him. I must have, at some Christmas in the back room at Widecombe Cot with too much of my father's whisky in me. *That bridge in Paris. The wooden one. That was the one.* And he kept it. And in 2008, the week after he heard about a key, he went and stood on the bridge at midnight, and looked for our names, and did not find them, and stood there anyway for ten minutes, and wrote down that he understood.

He does not use words like that. I have read the whole of the thirty-second now, twice, and that is the only place in it where he says he understood something he could not have proved.

I am going to try to write this chapter honestly, because this is the one where I am most tempted to lie. Not about what happened. About how it felt. I know what she was now. And the easiest thing in the world would be to write the next two years as if every kiss had been a trick and every word a lie and I had been a fool from the first morning on the Pont Neuf.

I was a fool. But it was not a trick. Or it was not only a trick. I was there, and I am the only witness left who is willing to say so, and I am going to say it.

It was the happiest I have ever been.

* * *

We walked, that first Sunday, from the Pont Neuf to the Île Saint-Louis and back, along both banks, in the cold, with the ice on the edges of the river. She talked. About Hamburg, and her grandmother, who was very old and very strict and had brought her up, because her mother had died when she was small and she had never known her father. About the Poly, and a teapot she had bought from a factory shop in Burslem that she still used every day. About Paris, which she said was like a very beautiful woman who did not like you very much.

She asked me nothing. That was what I noticed first. Karen had asked about everything; Carole had asked how things worked; Angie had asked about people. Karina asked nothing at all. She listened, and when I said something she nodded, as if she were filing it somewhere, and went on.

I thought it was tact. I thought she did not want to pry, after Angie. I thought it was the most restful thing I had ever known.

I know now why she did not need to ask.

* * *

We walked every Sunday after that, through the end of the winter and into the spring. We learned all the bridges. I could name them for you now, all thirty-seven, in order, and tell you which ones were good at night and which ones the wind came across, and I have not set foot on any of them for thirty years.

She did not touch me. Not once, all that spring. She walked beside me, close, with her hands in the pockets of her grey coat, and when we crossed a road she would sometimes put her hand on my sleeve for a moment, the way she had on the Bycars End in the rain, and take it away again. That was all.

I did not touch her either. I think now I was frightened of Angie's note, which I still had, in my wallet, folded very small. *Watch her.* I took it out sometimes at night, and read it, and put it back.

I did not stop watching her. All that spring I watched her, the way Johnny Hills had taught me. Who looked at her. Whether anybody followed us. Whether she ever looked round to see.

Nobody followed us. She never looked round. She looked at the river, and the bridges, and the light on the water, and at me.

By May I had stopped taking the note out of my wallet.

* * *

The twenty-first of June is the longest day of the year, and in Paris it is the Fête de la Musique, when everybody who can play anything goes out into the street and plays it, all night, everywhere, until the whole of Paris is one enormous concert with nobody in charge.

I had never heard of it. She took me.

We went out at eight in the evening, in the warm, and the city was music. A jazz band on the steps of a church in the Marais. A choir of old women in black on a corner, singing something in Portuguese that made Karina stop and stand still for a long time. Drums in the Place de la République, and a crowd dancing round them in the dusk. A boy with a violin under a street lamp on the Île Saint-Louis, alone, playing Bach to nobody, very badly and very seriously, and Karina gave him ten francs and he did not stop playing to thank her.

And at midnight we were on the Pont des Arts.

It was the footbridge, with iron arches and wooden planks you could see the river through, between the Louvre and the Institut, and that night it was full of people sitting along the edges with their legs through the railings, with bottles of wine and candles in jars, the whole length of the bridge, and somebody in the middle with an accordion, playing old French songs I did not know, and everybody singing, and the river going by underneath black and gold with all the lights of the city in it.

We found a gap and sat down in it, with our legs through the railings over the water. Somebody passed us a bottle of wine. Somebody else passed us a candle. The accordion started a new song, and everybody round us knew it, and sang it, and Karina sang it too, very quietly, in French, beside me, in a voice I had never heard her use, a low rough voice with nothing perfect about it at all.

I asked her what it was.

"It is about a bridge," she said. "Of course. Everything in Paris is about a bridge. A man and a woman on a bridge, and the river going under, and the days going under with it, and nothing coming back, and he stays." She looked down at the water through the planks. "The days go, and I remain. That is the line. Everybody in France knows it. They learn it at school."

She was quiet for a while.

"I would like that," she said. "To remain. Just once. Somewhere. With somebody." She looked at me. "I have never remained anywhere, Chris. Not in my whole life. Not Hamburg, not Stoke, not here. My grandmother moves me. Like a piece on a board."

And then she put her hand on mine, on the plank between us, in the candlelight, with the accordion playing and the river going under, and left it there.

I turned my hand over, and held hers. And then I kissed her, on the Pont des Arts, at midnight on the longest day of the year, with five hundred strangers singing about a bridge and the days going under.

She tasted of red wine. She was shaking. I did not know, then, why.

I know now that it was the only time in four years I ever felt her shake, and I have thought, for ten years, about what it might have meant. That she was frightened. That she was cold. That she had been told to, and did not want to. Or that she did.

I do not know. I am the only witness, and I do not know.

* * *

She moved into the rue de la Roquette in August.

Not all at once. A toothbrush. A dressing gown. The teapot from Burslem, which she put on the shelf over the gas ring as if it had always lived there. Her books, in German and French and English, on the floor by the bed. And one evening in the middle of August, a Saturday, I gave her a key.

I had had it cut that morning on the rue de Charonne, and I gave it to her at the table under the window, in a twist of paper, and she unwrapped it and looked at it for a long moment, very still.

Then she took out her own key ring, and threaded it on.

There were five keys on her ring. I noticed that. I always noticed things. I noticed that two of them were the same shape: the key to the street door of a Paris building, the big old-fashioned kind with a long shank and a heavy bow, and that one of them was new and bright, the one I had just given her, and the other was older, and worn, and exactly the same.

I said, "Is that your grandmother's office?"

"Yes," said Karina, without looking up. "They are all the same, these old doors. One locksmith made them all, in 1890." And she put the ring in her pocket, and came round the table, and sat on my knee, and kissed me, and I did not think about it again for twenty-three years.

She had a key to the third floor before the Englishman ever came.

I am going to stop for a while.

* * *

I have been out. I walked down to the old railway station at Tanjong Pagar, in the heat, and stood outside it, and walked back. It did not help, but it passed the time.

I am going to go on now. I said I would write it as it was.

That autumn and winter, and the spring after, and the summer, were the happiest of my life. I am not going to take that back. In the mornings she made coffee in a little aluminium pot and tea in the Burslem teapot, both, because she said she could not decide what she was. In the evenings she read to me, in bed, from *The Wind in the Willows*, doing the voices, and was so bad at them, Toad like a Prussian general and Ratty like a BBC announcer, that I laughed until I could not breathe, and she threw the book at me. We went to the cinema in the Latin Quarter and she whispered the French subtitles into my ear, half a sentence behind, in the dark.

And at night, in the dark, she talked.

That was the thing I have never been able to get past. In the dark, with the shutters closed, she talked to me in English, very close, with her head on my chest, and it was not the perfect English of the Coach and Horses. It was slower and rougher and full of mistakes, a voice feeling for words the way you feel for a light switch in a strange room. She said things in that voice that she never said in daylight. About being small, in a big cold house in Hamburg, with an old woman who did not touch her. About not knowing who her father was. About Angie, once, and how she had envied her, the

curls and the laugh, and how she had known from the first day that Angie could see straight through her.

"*Tell me something true*," she used to say, in the dark. That was our game. One true thing each, every night, before we slept. And I told her true things, every night, for two years. About Karen. About Carole. About Angie and the ring. About my father and the Mini and my grandfather and his envelope. About Fleet House and the lamps and Johnny Hills at the crossing. About my work. Everything. The DGT, and Transpac, and what the British wanted to know, and what the French would not tell them, and who I reported to in London and how often and what I said.

Everything.

She told me true things back. I believe that. I have spent ten years deciding what I believe, and I believe that. Some of what she told me in the dark, in that rough slow English, was the truest thing anybody has ever said to me.

And some of it was going to a man in an office by the Gare du Nord on Monday mornings, typed up.

Both things are true. I have to keep saying it.

* * *

There were the trains, too. I have not said about the trains.

She travelled for her grandmother's firm, a few days at a time, every month or so. Hamburg, Rotterdam, Brussels, Antwerp, once Lisbon. She came back with presents: chocolate, a blue-and-white tile with a ship on it, a jar of pickled herrings I could not eat and she

ate in one sitting with her fingers. And sometimes, at weekends, she took me with her, on the night trains from the Gare du Nord.

I loved the night trains more than anything in Europe. The Gare du Nord at ten at night, with the long blue trains waiting with their windows lit. Lying in the top bunk of a couchette in the dark with her, with the curtain open a crack, watching France go by, and Belgium, and Holland: little stations under single lamps with nobody on them, level crossings with one car waiting with its headlights on, and the wheels going over the joints, *da-dum*, *da-dum*, like a heart.

I played the platform game from the bunk, at every station we stopped at in the night, out of habit. I told her about it, the old man at the level crossing in Paignton, and she laughed and said, "You English. Even your games are about watching." And then she lay with her chin on my chest and watched the platforms with me, all night, and told me what she saw, and she saw more than I did, every time. She saw everything.

I thought she was good at it because I had taught her.

* * *

In July, on the twentieth, we came back from Antwerp on the night train and walked home from the Gare du Nord at six in the morning with the sun coming up over the Canal Saint-Martin, and she stopped on one of the little iron footbridges and leaned on the rail and looked down at the water, and said:

"It has been a long time, Chris. You and me."

I said it had. I said it had been eighteen months since the Pont Neuf, nearly. I said it as a joke.

She did not laugh. She looked down at the green water of the canal, very still, for a long time.

"Eighteen months," she said. "Yes." And then, very quietly, in the rough voice, the night voice, not the perfect one: "I thought it would be over by now. I thought somebody would come and stop it."

I asked her what she meant.

She looked up at me, and smiled, the smile from the Coach and Horses, the one that went all the way to her eyes and stopped there.

"Nothing," said Karina. "English is a difficult language. I meant I thought you would be tired of me." And she took my arm and we walked on, along the canal, in the early sun, home to the rue de la Roquette, and I did not think about it again.

Nobody came to stop it.

Ania did not come. In October 1986 she arrived at Widecombe Cot on the Friday, at ten past four, and went up to Room 3, and had her tea, and my mother wrote in her notebook, which she copied out for me in 2008 with the other one:

> *Fri. 17 Oct. 1986. Miss Ania, Room 3. Did not ask after Chris. First time she has not, since he went away. Asked instead whether I had heard from his grandfather's friend in Paris. I said I didn't know he had one. She said: "No. You wouldn't."*

I did not know any of that. I was in Paris, on a bridge, in love, with the eighteen months gone by under me like the river, and nobody coming to stop it.

That was the tell. The only one. A thing that did not happen. I had been taught by an old man at a level crossing to watch for what is on the platform, and nobody had ever taught me to watch for what is not.

Chapter 14 – *Hamburg at Christmas*

> *Sat. 26 July 2008. Hamburg, Elbchaussee, 3.30 p.m. The house. White, big, behind a wall and gates, cameras on both posts. Brass plate on the pillar: PETRICK. Rang. No answer. Stood across the road twenty minutes. Upstairs window, left: a woman, fair, watching me. Could not see her age. Could not see her face properly. She did not move away. Neither did I. Then the curtain.*

He did not know who it was at the window. He wrote down that he could not see her age. I think that is the most frightening sentence in the whole of the thirty-second pocketbook, and I do not think he meant it to be.

I know who it was, or who it might have been, and either answer is bad. And I know the house, because I spent Christmas in it, in 1986, and ate carp on Christmas Eve at a long table under a chandelier, and was given a present by an old woman who should have been eighty-one and was not.

I did not know who she was. That is the truth. I sat across a table from her for four days and I did not know. I had never read my mother's exercise book. It was in a drawer at Widecombe Cot, and would be for another nine years.

I have read it now. I read it again last night. Chapter seventeen. *A tall, fair, handsome woman of about forty, in a good grey coat.* 1943.

I met her in 1986. She was a tall, fair, handsome woman of about forty.

* * *

Karina asked me in November.

"My grandmother would like to meet you," she said, at the table under the window, over the coffee and the tea. "At Christmas. In Hamburg." She did not look at me while she said it. She looked at the Burslem teapot. "She does not often ask to meet anybody. You should be honoured." She smiled, very slightly. "I am not sure I am."

I asked what she meant.

"She is difficult," said Karina. "She is very old and very rich and very clever, and she has never in her life been wrong about anything, and she will look at you as if you were a piece of clay she was thinking of buying." She turned the teapot round by the handle. "Do not let her frighten you. She frightens everybody. She frightened my mother to death."

She said it lightly. I did not know, then, that she meant it.

I said I would like to come. I rang my mother from the box on the corner of the rue de la Roquette on a Sunday evening to explain, and my mother was quiet on the line for a long time, and then said, "Hamburg."

"Yes."

"Her family. In Hamburg." Another silence. "What's the name, Chris? The family name?"

I told her.

There was a silence on the line so long that I thought we had been cut off. I said *Mum?* twice. And then my mother said, in a voice I had never heard her use, very level and very careful, like somebody walking across a frozen pond:

"Is your grandfather's envelope still in your case?"

I said it was.

"Good," said my mother. "Keep it there." And then, in her ordinary voice: "Have a lovely Christmas, love. Ring us on the day." And she put the phone down.

I stood in the box with the receiver in my hand for a long time. I thought she was upset about Christmas, or about a girl she had never met in a country she had grown up being told was the enemy. None of it was right.

My mother knew the name. She had written it in a green exercise book in 1965. She knew it the way you know the name of the thing that tried to drown you.

And she let me go. I asked her why, in 2008, after Room 3. She looked at me across the long table for a long time and said, "Because she told me to let you." I did not have to ask who *she* was.

* * *

We went on the night train from the Gare du Nord on the twenty-third, the Tuesday.

It was the same as all the other night trains, and it was not. The same platforms going by in the dark under single lamps, with snow

beginning somewhere after Cologne. But Karina did not play the platform game. She lay in the bunk with her face to the wall and did not sleep, and when I asked what was wrong she said, "Nothing. I am always like this, going home." And after a long time, in the dark, in the rough night voice: "Whatever she says to you, Chris, it is not about you. Remember that. It is always about something else."

I said I would remember.

"Tell me something true," she said.

I told her something true. I remember that she did not tell me one back, that night, for the first time, and that I lay awake listening to the wheels on the joints all the way to Hamburg, and thought it was because she was tired.

* * *

Hamburg in the snow, on Christmas Eve, was the most beautiful city I had ever seen, and I had lived in Paris for two years.

It was all water. A great port on a great river, the Elbe, wide and grey and full of ships, with cranes like iron giraffes along the docks, and in the middle of the city two lakes, frozen at the edges that winter with the swans standing on the ice. Canals, and old brick warehouses going straight down into them, and bridges, more than Paris, she said, every one of them that night with snow on its railings and lamps lit along it. The Christmas market in front of the town hall was full of people in fur hats drinking hot wine, and the whole city smelled of roasted almonds and woodsmoke and the river.

I said it was beautiful. Karina said, "It was burned, you know. All of this. In one week, in July 1943. Everything you can see was built again, after. Especially the old things. They are copies." She did not look at me. "My grandmother says Hamburg is a city that has learned how to pretend it was never destroyed."

I did not know that my grandfather had told my mother, in 1965, about a ledger with a line in it in a bold black hand: *Hamburg house destroyed. Account closed.* I did not know who had written it.

* * *

The house was on the Elbchaussee, the long road that runs west along the top of the bank above the river, past the white villas of the shipowners in gardens behind walls. A car met us at the station, a dark Mercedes with a driver who did not speak. I looked at the back of his head and tried to remember where I had seen a dark Mercedes with German plates before, and could not, and then could, and did not say anything.

It was a white house, very big, very plain, behind a high wall with iron gates that opened as we came up the drive without anybody touching them. Karina said it had been built in 1949, a copy of the old family house by the docks, which had burned in the war, built again from photographs on a new site above the river. Her grandmother had stood in the garden in a coat and watched every brick go up.

A maid opened the door. A woman of sixty in black with a white apron, who took our coats and our cases and said nothing at all in any language.

And in the hall, at the foot of a wide curving staircase, under a chandelier, with a Christmas tree behind her lit with real candles, a woman was standing waiting for us.

* * *

I want to describe her exactly. I have read my mother's description of her, and Douglas Hills's, and the Canadian's, and I am going to put mine beside theirs.

She was tall, nearly as tall as me, and very straight. Her hair was fair, not grey, a dark gold, put up at the back in a way I had only seen in old photographs. A handsome face, not pretty, strong, with a mouth that did not smile very much. Her eyes were grey, the same grey as Karina's, and she did not blink very often. She wore a long dark grey dress, very plain, and no jewellery except, at her throat, on a fine black chain, a small flat black object about the size of a penny.

She looked about forty. Perhaps forty-five. If I had passed her in the street I would have said she was Karina's mother, or her older sister.

Karina said, "*Großmutter*. This is Chris."

The woman held out her hand. It was cool and dry and very firm, and it was not an old woman's hand. It was the hand of a woman of forty.

"Mr Harvey," she said. "Welcome. I am Ingrid Petrick."

Her English was perfect. Not like Karina's. Karina's was too perfect, but it was the perfection of somebody who had worked very hard. This was something else. It was English with nothing in it at all, no accent, no country, no age, the way a voice sounds on a recording made a long time ago, very clear and very far away.

"Thank you for having me," I said.

"Not at all," said Ingrid Petrick. She looked at me. She looked at me for a long time, very steadily, the way Karina had said she would, as if I were a piece of clay she was thinking of buying. And then she said: "You have your mother's eyes. Wendy's. And your grandfather's mouth. Harold's." She let go of my hand. "How is your mother, Mr Harvey? And your grandmother, Nancy? Does she still keep the hotel? With the monkey puzzle?"

* * *

I have stood in a good many rooms since, in front of people who were trying to frighten me, some of them with guns, and I have never been as frightened as I was in that hall, in that second, without knowing why.

I said my mother was very well. I said my grandmother still kept the hotel. I said I had not known she knew them.

"I knew them a long time ago," said Ingrid Petrick. "During the war. I was in England then." She smiled, very slightly, for the first time, and it was Karina's smile, the one that went all the way up to the eyes and stopped there. "I saw your mother once. In a shelter. In

a raid. She was very small, in her nightdress. She will not remember me. Come in, Mr Harvey. You are cold. There is a fire."

I looked at Karina. Karina was looking at the floor.

I worked it out, in the drawing room, by the fire, with a glass of something hot in my hands. During the war. Forty-three years ago. If she had been in England in the war, as a grown woman, she must be at least sixty-five. More. Karina had told me, in Paris, that her grandmother was eighty-one.

I looked at her across the fire. She was sitting very straight in a high-backed chair, with her hands folded in her lap, and the firelight on her face, and she looked forty.

I thought: money. I thought: good bones, and surgery, and the best doctors in Europe. I thought: old ladies lie about their ages. I thought every reasonable thing a reasonable man could think, in a warm room, with a drink in his hand, on Christmas Eve.

I did not think the true thing. I did not have the means to think it. Nobody had ever given them to me.

* * *

We had Christmas Eve the German way: the tree with real candles, and a bucket of water beside it which the maid watched all evening like a sentry, and presents on the evening of the twenty-fourth, and carp for dinner at a long table under the chandelier, with the three of us at one end, and a man.

The man was introduced as Herr Brandt, my grandmother's manager. About fifty, grey, in a grey suit, with a face you would not

remember five minutes after you had seen it. He said almost nothing all evening. Once, when I was telling Ingrid Petrick about Minitel, and Transpac, and what the British wanted to know about it, which she had asked me about with great interest, I looked up and saw him watching me across the table, steadily, the way the lad in the donkey jacket on the Bycars End had watched the man across the terrace. When he saw me see him, he looked down at his carp.

I have met his face once since, in 2008, in Jono's handwriting, in a brown file on my kitchen table: a concierge's description of the man who had come up the stairs on the rue de la Roquette with the blonde, the week before I arrived. *Grey. About fifty. A face you would not remember.* She remembered it.

* * *

On the wall of the drawing room, over the fireplace, there was a portrait that did not belong. Everything else in that house was German and plain, rebuilt from photographs, and this was old and English and dark: an old gentleman of about seventy, very upright, in a black frock coat, with grey side-whiskers and a gold-headed stick, in front of a painted bay with red cliffs and a pier.

On Christmas Day, after lunch, Karina saw me looking at it.

"That is my great-great-grandfather," she said. "An Englishman. From Devon. My grandmother's grandfather." She stood beside me and looked up at it. "He was a merchant. He had a house in a place called Paignton. Do you know it?"

I laughed. I could not help it. I said I had been born four miles from it. I said I had grown up going there on the bus to watch the trains. I said it was a small world.

"Yes," said Karina, still looking at the portrait. "It is a very small world. My grandmother says that too." She looked at me sideways. "He was very important in Paignton, she says. Everybody knew him. He rode on the top of a tram every morning to his office, for twenty years. And he sent lilies to people's funerals."

I said that sounded like Paignton.

From her chair by the fire, without looking up from her book, Ingrid Petrick said, "His name was George Petherick. They still remember him there, I think. In certain families."

I did not know the name. I said I had never heard it.

"No," said Ingrid Petrick, and turned a page. "You wouldn't."

* * *

She gave me a present.

On Christmas Eve, under the tree, with the candles lit and the maid watching the bucket, there was a parcel for me, wrapped in dark green paper with a black ribbon, and a card on it in a bold black upright hand: *For Mr Harvey. Who watches the platform.*

I looked up. I had not told her about the platform game. I had not told anybody in that house about the platform game. I looked at Karina. Karina was looking at the tree.

Inside the paper there was a book. An old one, a first edition, bound in red cloth with gold letters on the spine, gone soft and brown at the corners. *The Hound of the Baskervilles.* London, 1902.

"An English story," said Ingrid Petrick, from her chair. "About Devon. A great dog on the moor, and a detective who sees what nobody else sees." She looked at me over the candles with her grey eyes that did not blink. "My grandfather knew the author's friend, I believe. A long time ago. They did not get on."

I thanked her. I said it was very generous. I said I had never read it.

"Then you should," said Ingrid Petrick. "Everybody in your family should read it, I think. It is about people who think they can see everything." She smiled the smile that stopped at the eyes. "They are always wrong about something."

I have it still. It went to sea three days ago in box nine. I have never read it. I have opened it a hundred times and never got past the first page, because on the inside of the front cover, under the card, there is a bookplate, very old, engraved, with a name I did not know then.

G. Petherick. Paignton. 1902.

And under it, in pencil, very faint, in a different hand, an old upright copperplate, a man's hand, the hand of a man who has written a great many letters he did not sign:

Regards to the constable.

* * *

We went back to Paris on the twenty-seventh. Karina slept on the train, all the way, with her head on my shoulder. At the Gare du Nord, on the platform, she put her arms round me and held on, very hard, the way Karen had on the platform at Torquay, and said into my coat, in the night voice:

"I am sorry. I am sorry. I am sorry."

I asked what for.

She let go and stepped back and looked at me. And she smiled, the smile that went all the way to the eyes, and stopped, and I saw, for the first time, that there was something on the other side of the stop. Something trying to get through.

"For my grandmother," she said. "She frightens everybody."

That evening, when she had gone to bed, I took my grandfather's envelope out of my case and looked at it. I had opened it once, in my first winter, and read the name and the address, and put it back. I had never used it.

I should have used it that night. I know that. I used it six months later, and it was nearly too late.

Chapter 15 – *Rendezvous*

> *Wed. 23 July 2008. Paris, 4th, rue Vieille-du-Temple. The tea shop has gone. Shoes now. Old man in the tabac next door, M. Rocard, 80: remembers "le père Achard", died 1994, "un vieux de la Résistance, des PTT". Asked if an Englishman ever came to see him. He laughed. "Monsieur, des Anglais venaient tout le temps. Il vendait du bon thé."*

Englishmen came all the time. He sold good tea.

I was one of them. Once. On a Monday morning in June 1987, with my grandfather's envelope in my pocket, I walked into a shop on the rue Vieille-du-Temple and asked an old man for a quarter of Darjeeling, and he looked at me over the counter for a long time, and turned the sign on the door round to *Fermé*, and took me into the back.

* * *

It was May 1987, the sixteenth, a Saturday, and we were on the night train to Amsterdam.

We had done it a dozen times. Karina had business in Amsterdam on the Monday; we would have the weekend first. She was asleep before we left Paris, with her head on my chest, and I lay awake as I always did, with my eye to the crack in the curtain, watching the platforms go by. The game. I could not stop playing it. I never have.

We stopped at Brussels Midi at about half past one in the morning. A long stop; the train stood for twenty minutes under the station roof in the yellow light with everybody asleep.

Karina sat up.

She did it very quietly. She lifted her head and listened, and looked at me for quite a long time, and I lay still with my eyes almost shut. Then she slid down from the bunk in her stockinged feet, and put on her coat over her nightdress, and went out into the corridor, and shut the door behind her.

I thought she had gone to the lavatory. I lay there and waited.

Then, through the crack in the curtain, I saw her on the platform.

She was standing under a lamp, ten yards down, by a pillar, in her grey coat, with her bare ankles showing under the hem. And a man was standing with her, his back to the train, in a dark hat with a brim and a dark overcoat with the collar up. They were talking, very close, very low. I could see her face over his shoulder in the lamplight. It was a face I had never seen her wear. Not the smile that stopped at the eyes. Not the night face. A third face. Flat and still and very attentive, like a clerk taking down a dictation.

He gave her something. Small. An envelope, or a packet. She put it inside her coat without looking at it.

She gave him something back. I could not see what.

Then he walked off down the platform with his head down, and I never saw his face. And she stood under the lamp for a

moment, looking after him. Then she turned and looked at the train. At our window.

I shut my eye.

I heard the compartment door open, very softly, and felt her climb back into the bunk, cold from the platform, smelling of the night air and the diesel, and settle down with her head on my chest, the way she had been. After a while I felt her sleep.

I did not sleep. I lay there all the way to Amsterdam, with her asleep on top of me and the platforms going by in the dark, Antwerp and Roosendaal and Rotterdam, and I did not look at any of them.

Watch her, Angie had written. *Who's watching who's waiting*, Johnny Hills used to say.

I had watched. And this time the person on the platform was mine.

* * *

I did not say anything. Not in Amsterdam, not in Paris. It was not because I was clever. It was because I was frightened that if I asked, she would tell me. And then it would be over.

So I went to work, and came home, and in the dark we played *tell me something true*, and I lay awake afterwards turning her true things over, looking for the join. And I watched her. Not the way I had watched her on the bridges, hoping to find nothing. The other way.

And there was a great deal to find, once you were looking. That was the terrible part. It had been there all along.

The telephone in the flat, which rang sometimes when I was in the bath, and which she always answered, and always said *wrong number*, in French. The Monday mornings, when she left at half past seven for her grandmother's office with a folder in her bag, and came back without it. The way she listened when I talked about work. Not like a lover. Like Lefèvre at the monitoring screen at midnight, watching the line go up.

The way she had never once, in two and a half years, asked me a question she did not already know the answer to.

Angie had said that. In the flat in Burslem, crying, in 1983. I had forgotten it until then.

* * *

On the first of June, a Monday, I followed her.

I took the day off work. I told her I was going in. I stood in the doorway of a bakery at the end of the rue de la Roquette with a newspaper, like a man in a bad film, and at half past seven she came out of our courtyard and walked off towards the Bastille, and I followed her.

I had Ron Shenton's old Praktica, with a long lens I had bought for photographing the river, I had told her. I followed her onto the Métro, two carriages down, and off at the Gare du Nord, and out into the streets behind, full of shipping agents and bars where men stood drinking Calvados at eight in the morning. And she went into a big old street door between two shops, the long-shanked heavy kind, one locksmith, 1890. She opened it with a key.

A brass plate on the wall beside it. *PETRICK & CIE. Transports Maritimes.*

I stood across the street in the doorway of a bar for two hours. At half past nine a man came out: grey, about fifty, an ordinary face. Herr Brandt, from the long table under the chandelier. He stood on the step and lit a cigarette and looked up and down the street, and his eyes went across my doorway and did not stop.

I took his photograph. Three frames. And one of the brass plate. And one, at eleven, when she came out again, of Karina on the step, without the folder, turning her collar up against the wind, looking up and down the street the same way Brandt had, the same exact way, as if somebody had taught them both.

Her eyes went across my doorway, and did not stop.

I went home and put the film in the drawer of the table under the window, to take to the developer on the Wednesday.

On the Wednesday it was gone.

* * *

Nothing else was gone. That was how I knew. The flat had not even been searched, as far as I could see. The drawer of the table was shut, as I had left it. My pens were in it, and my keys, and my passport, and a hundred francs in notes.

The film was not.

I sat at the table under the window for an hour, with the drawer open, looking at the place where it had been.

Then I went to my case, under the bed, and took out my grandfather's envelope.

* * *

The shop was on the rue Vieille-du-Temple, in the Marais: gold letters on the glass, *ACHARD. Thés et Cafés. Depuis 1946*, and inside, a long dark room that smelled of coffee and tar, with wooden drawers up to the ceiling with brass labels, and a counter with brass scales, and an old man behind it in a brown apron.

He was small and bald and very old, with a face like a walnut and bright black eyes behind steel spectacles, and a cigarette in the corner of his mouth that he did not take out to talk. He looked up when the bell over the door rang.

"*Monsieur?*"

I said it in English. I could not have said it in French. My French was good by then, but I could not have said it.

"Mallyon's sent me," I said. "I'd like a quarter of Darjeeling, please."

He did not move. He looked at me over the counter for a long time, the way my grandfather looked at people over his glasses. I had begun, by then, to know that look. It was the look of somebody checking you against a description.

Then he took his cigarette out of his mouth and put it in a saucer on the counter.

"*Le petit-fils*," he said. "Harold's girl's boy." His English was slow and full of gravel. "He wrote to me in 1984 that you would

come. I have been waiting three years." He took off his apron, and went to the door, and turned the sign round to *Fermé*, and bolted it. "Come in the back. I will make you tea. Real tea. Not French tea."

* * *

His name was Raymond Achard. He was seventy-four. He had been an engineer on the PTT trunk lines before the war, and in the war, after the Germans came, they had used the French cables to talk to Berlin, and Raymond Achard and men like him had used them too.

He did not tell me much. He told me enough.

"Your grandfather," he said, in the back room, among sacks of coffee beans, with a pot of Darjeeling between us on an upturned packing case, "was a grocer in Hendon. Yes. Also, he was a friend of a friend of mine. An Englishman called Talland. In the war, Talland had friends in the PTT in Paris, and I was one." He poured the tea. "After the war, every year, a quarter of Darjeeling came from your grandfather's shop, with a card. *Compliments of Mallyon's.* For forty years. Your grandfather never once wrote a word on the card. Only the name. It meant: we are still here. Somebody is still watching."

I asked him what he knew about the Petricks.

He was quiet for a long time.

"I know the name," he said at last. "From the war. A firm in Hamburg, in shipping and clay, with a London office in Wapping. In 1943 it was destroyed, in the bombing. Everybody thought that was the end." He drank his tea. "In 1950, a firm opened in Paris, by the

Gare du Nord. Petrick et Compagnie. And the same people who had been interested in the old one became interested in the new one. I was one of those people. For a while. Then I got old and sold tea."

"There's a woman," I said.

"Yes," said Raymond Achard. "There is always a woman. In that family, it is always a woman." He put his cup down. "Tell me."

I told him. Not all of it. The platform at Brussels at half past one in the morning. The man in the hat. The Monday mornings and the folder. The brass plate. Brandt on the step. The film in the drawer, and the drawer shut, and the film gone.

When I had finished he sat for a long time without saying anything, looking at the packing case between us.

"*Mon petit*," he said at last, quite gently. "You are very nearly too late."

* * *

He told me what he thought was going to happen. He said he had been wrong about the Petricks before and been glad of it.

He said that I was an Englishman inside the French telecoms administration, who reported to London every month, and that if a parcel of DGT documents marked *confidentiel* were to be found in my flat by the French security service, after an anonymous telephone call, I would go to prison in France for a long time, or be sent home in disgrace, and either way would never work in telecommunications again.

"Unless," said Raymond Achard, "somebody with friends were to make the whole thing go away. And then the English engineer would owe that somebody a very great deal, for the rest of his life." He lit a new cigarette. "That is how they do it, that family. They do not kill you. Not if you are useful. They own you."

I said Karina would not do that.

He looked at me with great kindness, over his spectacles, and did not say anything.

"She loves me," I said.

"Perhaps," said Raymond Achard. "I have known people who loved the person they were sent to. It does not always stop them." He tapped his ash into the saucer. "Sometimes it only makes them sad."

* * *

He told me what to do. Go home and say nothing. Behave exactly as I always had. Look every evening, when she was out of the room, in the three places in the flat where a parcel might be put, and he told me the three places, and he was right about one of them. And when London called, go, at once, with one case, and not come back to Paris for a long time.

"London will call?" I said.

"London will call," said Raymond Achard. "I will see to it. I still have one or two friends." He stood up, slowly, and weighed out a quarter of Darjeeling on the brass scales and tipped it into a paper bag and folded the top over twice and gave it to me. "And you will

take this to your grandfather, *mon petit*, when you see him. And tell him the tea is still good, and somebody is still watching."

* * *

I found the parcel on the twenty-ninth of February, 1988, in the second of the three places, behind the panel at the back of the cupboard under the sink, in a DGT internal envelope. I did not open it. I took it to the rue Vieille-du-Temple that evening and gave it to Raymond Achard across his counter, and he took it into the back room without a word and came out without it, and sold me a quarter of Darjeeling.

London called on the fourth of March, the Friday. Not BT. A man with a dry London voice I did not recognise, very old, very precise, who said he was speaking for my grandfather's friends and that my secondment was ended, with immediate effect, with the thanks of all concerned, and that a ticket would be at the Gare du Nord for the Sunday boat train, and that he would see me in London. He said his name was Hills.

And then he said: "I'm afraid there's something else, Chris. Your grandfather died this morning. At Widecombe Cot, in his chair, by the window. He was ninety-four. Your mother asked me to tell you, since I was ringing anyway." A pause. "I knew him for forty-five years. He was the bravest man I ever met who never once fired a gun."

I stood in the box on the corner with the receiver in my hand, and a quarter of Darjeeling in my pocket that I had been carrying for nine months to take home to him.

* * *

I told Karina that night.

Not about the parcel. Not about Achard. Not about the film, or Brussels, or the brass plate. I told her my grandfather had died, and that BT had recalled me to London, and that I was going on Sunday.

She sat on the end of the bed very still for a long time.

"Come with me," I said.

I meant it. That is the worst truth in this chapter. I knew, by then, nearly everything: the platform at Brussels, the Monday folders, the parcel behind the panel under the sink. And I sat on the bed and said, *come with me*, and meant it, with my whole heart, because some stupid part of me thought that if I took her away from Paris, from the brass plate and the grandmother with young hands, she would be the woman in the dark telling me something true, and nothing else.

She looked at me with her grey eyes for a long time.

"I cannot," said Karina.

"Why not?"

"Because she would not let me," she said, in the night voice, the rough one, though the light was on. "And because if I came, Chris, I would still be what I am. In London. In Devon. Anywhere. I would bring it with me. I would bring her." She looked at her hands.

"You are going home. Go home. Be safe. That is the only true thing I have left to give you."

I asked her if she had ever loved me.

She did not answer that. She took her keys out of her bag and took one off the ring and put it in my hand. The new one, the bright one I had had cut for her in 1985.

The other one, the old worn one, exactly the same, she put back in her bag.

"Tell me something true," I said.

She looked down at me on the bed. And for the first time in three years, in the full light of the lamp, the smile that went all the way up to her eyes went past them. Whatever was on the other side of the stop came through, for perhaps a second, and it was somebody very young and very frightened and very tired, who had been somebody else's piece on a board her whole life and had just, for one second, put herself down.

"Yes," she said. "I did. I do. That is the true thing." And then the smile came back and stopped where it always stopped, and she said, in the perfect English, the Coach and Horses English: "Go to sleep, Chris. You have a train."

* * *

She was gone in the morning. Not gone like Angie; her books were still by the bed, the teapot on the shelf. Gone out. A note on the table under the window:

I do not do platforms. You know that. K.

I went on the Sunday, the sixth of March, 1988, on the boat train from the Gare du Nord, with one case and a quarter of Darjeeling and a key I did not need any more. I stood at the window as it pulled out and looked down the platform, all the way to the end, out of habit.

She was not on it. I had known she would not be.

I felt it then. Both things at once. The grief, which was like being hit, and under it something quieter and worse. I know the name now. It was relief. I was being taken away from something I could not have walked away from on my own, and some part of me, the part that had lain on the night train with its eyes shut, was glad.

I have never forgiven myself for that. I have forgiven nearly everything else.

Three years and six weeks. Twice the term. Nobody came to stop it. In the end, it was not stopped. It was only interrupted. I did not know that either.

Chapter 16 – *Douglas*

Tues. 12 March 1996. Grandad Douglas, his flat, Pimlico, 4 p.m. He is very ill. He asked me to write something down for him, because his hand won't. Wrote it as he said it: "Chris Harvey. March 1988. Took him in. Best I've had since his mother. Didn't tell him about the girl. Right or wrong, I couldn't. Tell him that, Jono, one day. Not yet."

Didn't tell him about the girl.

He died in April of that year. I was in Singapore and did not come home for the funeral. Jono was there. He was twenty-two, a constable in Torquay, and he sat with his grandfather in a flat in Pimlico and wrote down what the old man could not write any more, and kept it for twenty-two years, and posted it to me with *Not yet* still on the page.

It is yet now. I am going to put Douglas down as he was, as near as I can, because he deserves it, and because he decided, in March 1988, what I would be allowed to know about the woman I had just left in Paris. I have read his reasons, in Jono's hand, and I still cannot tell whether he decided right. I only know that he decided it for me, out of something that I think was love.

* * *

We buried my grandfather on the eleventh of March, 1988, at St Marychurch, in the church they had rebuilt after the bombing. My

grandmother sat in the front pew in her good black coat, very straight, with her handbag on her knees, and did not cry, and when the coffin went past her she put out one hand, very quickly, and touched the wood, and took her hand away, and that was all.

The church was full. My grandfather had been a grocer in Hendon for fifty years and had sat in his chair at Widecombe Cot reading the *Observer* and talking to almost nobody, and the church was full. Old men in good coats from London, who did not sit with each other. A row of old women who had worked in the shop in Brent Street during the war, and had come down on the train together. And at the back, by the door, in the corner of the last pew, alone, a young woman in a grey costume with no coat, though it was March and raw, who did not sing the hymns.

It was not October. I looked at my mother. My mother was not looking at the back of the church. She was looking straight ahead at the coffin, and her face was perfectly steady, and her hand was holding my father's very hard.

I had a paper bag in my coat pocket. A quarter of Darjeeling, from a shop in the Marais, folded over twice at the top. I had been carrying it since June.

At the graveside, in the wind, on the hill above the town with the sea grey below, when the first handful of earth had gone down, I took it out of my pocket. I did not know I was going to. I stood at the edge of the grave with the paper bag in my hand, and did not know what to do with it.

Douglas Hills was beside me. I had not seen him come up. He was seventy-nine, very thin and very straight, in a black overcoat, with his hat in his hand and the wind lifting his white hair.

He looked at the paper bag. He looked at it for a long time.

"From Raymond?" he said, very quietly.

I said yes.

"Then leave your grandfather the Darjeeling," said Douglas Hills.

So I did. I dropped it in, onto the lid of the coffin, the paper bag folded over twice, beside the earth. It made a small soft sound. Douglas put his hat back on.

"He'd have liked that," he said. "He'd have said it was a waste of good tea." And he turned and walked away down the path between the graves with his hands behind his back, and did not look back, and I stood at the edge of the grave with the wind in my face and understood, for the first time in my life, that my grandfather had been somebody I had never met.

* * *

There was a boy at the funeral, too. I have to put him in.

He was fourteen, and tall for it, in a school blazer with a black armband, standing at the back of the crowd beside his father and mother. Jono. With his hands in his pockets and his face very still, watching everything. My grandmother. The old men from London. The young woman in grey under the yew, a long way off, alone. Douglas, walking away.

And me. He was watching me, the way he had watched me from his mother's knee in a pew in Preston fourteen years before. Writing me down.

When I looked at him, he did not look away. He nodded, once, very slightly, the way a man nods to another man across a room when there is nothing that needs to be said. He was fourteen. He nodded like a sergeant.

Then he took a small notebook out of his blazer pocket, with a footballer on the cover, worn soft at the corners, and a stub of pencil, and wrote something down. I did not see what. I asked him, years later. He said he did not remember. I do not believe him.

* * *

Douglas came back to Widecombe Cot after the funeral, and stood in the corner of the back room by the range for an hour with a cup of tea, talking to nobody. Then he caught my eye, and put his cup down, and went out into the passage, and I followed him.

He was standing by the back door, by the scullery, looking out at the yard and the monkey puzzle.

"Monday," he said. "Eleven o'clock. My flat. Pimlico." He gave me a card. Not a business card. A plain white card with an address on it in pencil, in small neat capitals. "You'll be offered a job at BT. In London. At the headquarters. Something in international networks, a good salary, a flat. Take it." He looked at me over his spectacles. "And then come and see me, and I'll tell you what the job is."

I asked him what he meant.

"Not here," said Douglas. "Not today. Today's for Harold." He looked out at the yard again. "He was very proud of you, you know. He never told you. He never told anybody anything. But he wrote to me about you every Christmas, for twenty-six years. Every Christmas. One line. *Chris is well.* And in 1984, one more. *Chris is going to Paris. Raymond should know.*" He was quiet. "That was the last time he ever asked anybody for anything. He asked for you."

* * *

The flat in Pimlico was on the top floor of a tall white house behind Victoria Station, up seventy-two stairs, which Douglas climbed every day, at seventy-nine, without stopping. It was full of books, in shelves, floor to ceiling, in every room, with little typed labels. History. Languages. Codes. Cricket. And one shelf, by the window, with no label at all, on which there were about forty small black notebooks, exactly alike, in a row.

He made tea. Darjeeling. He sat opposite me in a hard chair by the window with the light behind him, so that I could not see his face very well, which I think was deliberate, and he talked.

He talked for three hours. Some of it is not mine to put down, and some of it I still do not understand. But I will put down the shape of it.

He told me about Rage.

He told me that in October 1895, in the public bar of a hotel on the station square in Paignton, my great-grandfather, Edward

Harvey, a tram conductor, and his grandfather, Jack Hills, a police constable, and two or three others had made a sort of club. A club for watching. For noticing what nobody else noticed, and writing it down, and doing something about it when they could. He told me it had gone on, through two wars and after. In back rooms. In pocketbooks. In a tea shop in Paris and a grocer's in Hendon and a hotel with a monkey puzzle in the garden. Never more than a handful of people.

"Your grandfather," said Douglas, "was Rage. Your grandmother is Rage. Your mother is Rage, though she'd never call it that. Your father is Rage, because he married her, and because when he was ten years old he found something in the bottom of a boat that nobody else would have found." He drank his tea. "And you've been Rage since you were six, standing at a level crossing in Paignton with my father's hand on your shoulder. You just didn't know."

I asked what Rage was *for*. What it watched.

He did not answer that for a long time.

"There's a family," he said at last. "Or a firm. Or a name. My grandfather called it the hand behind the hand. It's been in Torbay since before 1895, and in London, and in Hamburg, and in Paris, and it wants what that sort of thing always wants. To decide what a place will be, and who'll own it, and who'll be quietly put somewhere else." He put his cup down. "It doesn't kill people very often. It doesn't need to. It owns them. It's very patient. And it's always, always, a little bit ahead."

I thought of Raymond Achard, among the coffee sacks. *They do not kill you. Not if you are useful. They own you.*

"Petrick," I said.

Douglas looked at me from the window, with the light behind him.

"Petrick is one of its names," he said. "Yes."

* * *

I asked him about Karina.

I had to. I asked him whether she was one of them. Whether she had been sent. Whether the woman who had held on to me on the platform at the Gare du Nord at Christmas, saying *I am sorry*, had known.

He did not answer at once. He got up, and went to the shelf with no label, and stood looking at the row of black notebooks for a long time, with his back to me. Then he came back and sat down.

"I'll tell you what I know," he said. "The grandmother is what you think she is. Worse. I have known about her since 1943, and I have never once been able to touch her. The firm by the Gare du Nord is what you think it is. The parcel was what Raymond thought it was."

"And Karina?"

"The girl," said Douglas Hills, "we don't know about."

I looked at him.

"We don't," he said. "Not for certain. She grew up in that house, with that woman, being moved about like a piece on a board.

Whether she was sent to *you*, or sent near you and something else happened that nobody had planned, I can't tell you." He looked at his hands. "She let you go. She didn't come to the station. She gave you back the key. If she'd been doing what she was told, all the way through, you'd be in a French prison this morning, or owned. Whatever she was, she sent you home. That's worth something."

I wanted to believe him. I want to be honest about that. I sat in that chair with the light behind him and wanted to believe him more than I have ever wanted to believe anything, and so I did.

He knew more than he said, that afternoon. *Didn't tell him about the girl. Right or wrong, I couldn't.* Not everything; nobody knew everything about Karina Petrick, I think, including Karina. But he knew about Angie, and why she had gone to Glasgow in the night. And he looked at a young man of twenty-six in his hard chair, with a cold cup of tea and a broken heart, and decided I had had enough.

He was a Hills. They always know how much to tell you, and when.

He was wrong. I think he was wrong. Because six years later, in Singapore, she came back, and I believed what Douglas had let me believe, and I let her in.

And I would not be without my son.

Both things are true.

* * *

At the end, at about two in the afternoon, when the light had moved off the window and I could see his face at last, he told me what the job was.

"You'll go to BT," he said. "To the job they offer you. You'll be in international networks, which means you'll see everything that goes in and out of this country down a wire, and you'll know how it works better than anybody else in the building, because you've been taught by the three best engineers in Britain, and two of them were women and one of them's at Cheltenham." He saw my face. "Yes. We know about Miss Bayliss. She's doing very well."

I did not say anything.

"And once a month," said Douglas, "you'll come here, on a Tuesday, at a quarter past three, and ask me for a quarter of Darjeeling, and tell me it's too dear. And you'll tell me what you've seen." He looked into his cold cup. "I'm not asking you to steal anything. I'm asking you to *notice*. That's all Rage ever is. Noticing. And writing it down. And every so often, very quietly, doing something about it."

I asked him why me.

"Because you can hear a fault in a line before you can find it," said Douglas Hills. "Somebody told me that, years ago, about you. A girl in Stafford, with very big glasses, to a woman in a grey suit who wrote it down." He almost smiled. "And because your grandfather asked me to. In 1984. *Raymond should know.* He never asked for anything. I owed him that."

He stood up. It took him a moment. He went to the shelf with no label and took down one of the black notebooks, a new one, unused, with an elastic band round it, and gave it to me.

"And because you need one of these," he said. "You've never kept one, have you? Not properly."

I said no. I said I had always meant to.

"Start now," said Douglas. "Today. The date. The time. The weather. What you saw, and what you were told, and who told you. Not what you felt." He looked at me over his spectacles. "My father's rule. And his father's. And your mother's, though she had it from somebody else."

* * *

I did not start it.

I want that down, because it matters later. I took the notebook home to the flat BT gave me, in Highbury, and put it in a drawer. I told myself I would start on the Monday, and then the next Monday. I remembered things, and I watched, and I thought that was enough.

I did not start writing everything down until 1995, in the back room at Widecombe Cot, with my mother's exercise book on the table in front of me and my son eight weeks old on the other side of the world.

If I had started it when he told me to, on that Tuesday in March 1988, there would be a page in it for the fifth of April, 1992, and I would know where I was at six in the morning, and who rang my mother's house the night before, and whether I heard the phone.

I do not know. I did not write it down. That is the whole of it.

That is why I have the thirty-second pocketbook on this table, and not one of my own. Because a boy of nineteen did what I would not.

Chapter 17 – *Sue*

Sun. 10 Jan. 2010 (cont.). Grandad Douglas's book for 1989. Nov. 10th: "Wall down. S. to Berlin Monday. A. agrees. He has learned how to leave. Now he must be left, so that he knows what it costs." Underneath, in a different pen, later: "Hard on both. Necessary. D.H."

I knew Sue's name was not Sue. I knew that from the first week. I never knew what it was instead, and I have stopped trying. Jono did not find it either. *S.*, Douglas wrote. That is all there is of her, in all the paper in the world that I know of. One letter.

It is more than she left me.

Everybody else is in the archive somewhere. Karen is a Wagon Wheel wrapper and a ticket stub from the 400 and a photograph of an empty car. Carole is a line-printer banner, folded small. Angie is a blue velvet box with nothing in it. Karina is a first edition with somebody else's name inside the cover, and a key I did not need, and a son.

Sue is nothing. There is not a photograph. There is not a note, or a hair, or a button, or a page with her handwriting on it. I have been through the eleven boxes in my head these last two nights, looking, and there is nothing.

That was the point. That was what she taught me. And that was the wound, and she knew it would be, and she did it anyway, because it was the lesson, and she was the best teacher I ever had.

* * *

It began with Douglas, on a Tuesday in April, at a quarter past three, over a quarter of Darjeeling.

I had been going to Pimlico every month for a year by then, up the seventy-two stairs, to tell him what I had seen. Not secrets. What I had noticed. Which lines from where to where had grown busy, and when. Which firms in the City had started renting private circuits to Zurich, or Hamburg. Which engineers in the building had bought new cars. It was the lamps on the fifth floor at Fleet House again. Douglas listened, and wrote it in his black notebook with his silver pencil, and gave me a second cup.

On the eleventh of April, a Tuesday, he did not write anything. He sat with his hands folded and looked at me from the window, and said:

"You're being followed."

I laughed. He did not.

"You have been for nine days," he said. "Home to work and work to home, and on Saturday to the market, and on Sunday to Hampstead Heath. One person. On foot, and on the Underground, and once on a bus." He picked up his cup. "You haven't noticed."

I said nobody was following me. I said I watched people; I always had; I would have seen.

"You'd have seen a man in a donkey jacket on the Bycars End, watching another man across a terrace," said Douglas. "You'd have seen a fair girl on a platform in Brussels. You see people who are watching *other* people. You don't see people who are watching *you*.

Nobody does, until they're taught. That's what you're going to be taught next."

I asked who by.

"By whoever's following you," said Douglas Hills. "Find them. You've got till next Tuesday. If you can't, I'll introduce you, and you'll be embarrassed, and so will I."

* * *

I found her on the Saturday. The fifteenth. It took me four days just to start seeing.

That was the first thing I learned, before she ever said a word to me: that I had not been looking at all. I had thought, all my life, since Johnny Hills and the level crossing, that I was good at it. And on the Friday night I sat in the flat in Highbury with the lights off, looking out at the street, and understood that I had never once in my life looked behind me.

On the Saturday I went to the market at Camden Lock, because it was crowded, and then I went into a café on the canal and sat with my back to the wall and a cup of tea, and stopped trying, and just looked. The way I looked at a rack at Fleet House, waiting to hear the fault. I let it all come to me.

And there was a pair of shoes.

Brown, flat, lace-up, scuffed at the toe. On a woman at a table by the door, with a scarf over her hair and dark glasses, reading a newspaper. I had seen those shoes. Not that woman. Those shoes. On the Thursday, on the Victoria line, on a woman with fair hair and

a raincoat. On the Friday, on the escalator at Highbury, on a woman in a long green coat with a briefcase.

Three women. One pair of shoes.

I finished my tea. I got up and went to the door, and stopped by her table, and looked down at her newspaper, which was the *Financial Times*, upside down.

"You've worn the same shoes for four days," I said.

She lowered the newspaper and took off the dark glasses. Underneath them she had brown eyes, very bright, and a face that was not pretty and not plain and not anything at all, a face you would have forgotten before you got to the end of the street. And then she smiled, and it was not that face any more. It was the most alive face I had ever seen.

"Douglas said you'd get it eventually," she said. "He had a fiver on Tuesday. I had a fiver on never. The shoes. Damn. Nobody's ever spotted the shoes." She held out her hand. "Sue."

I shook it. I knew, as soon as she said it, that it was not her name. I do not know how. Something in the way she said it, as if she were handing me a coat to hold.

"Sit down," said Sue. "You've got a lot to learn and I've only got six months to teach you."

* * *

She taught me everything I know about not being seen, and about seeing people who did not want to be. Some of it I still use. Some of it other people still use, and would not thank me for writing down.

But I will put down the shape of it, because it was the shape of that year.

She taught me to walk through London and see the people. Who was standing still when everybody else was moving. Who looked at their watch and did not read it. That every shop window in London is a mirror if you stand at the right angle, and that a man reading a newspaper on a platform turns the page every minute and a half, and a man pretending to read one does not.

She taught me that when you think you are being followed, you are probably wrong, and when you are sure you are not, you are probably being followed by two.

She taught me to go out of a building by a different door from the one I came in by. To never sit with my back to a room. To know where the exits were in every room I ever went into, which I still do, and once, God help me, did at my own son's school concert in Singapore.

And she taught me to leave.

"Nothing," she said. We were in a hotel room in Bloomsbury, booked under a name that was not hers either, for an afternoon, as an exercise. "When you go, you leave nothing. Not a hair. Not a fingerprint on a glass. Not a dent in the pillow." She was going round the room with a handkerchief, wiping the taps, the door handle, the water glass, very fast, very thoroughly. "A room should look, when you've gone, as if nobody was ever in it. As if you were never there. That's the hardest thing anybody ever learns. Most people always leave something. They want to be remembered."

I asked her if she ever wanted to be remembered.

She stopped wiping, and looked at me, for a long time.

"Every day," said Sue. "That's why I'm good at it."

* * *

I do not know when it changed. I think it changed for both of us on the same night, and that neither of us noticed until the morning.

It was in May, the twentieth, a Saturday. It was a game; she had invented it. We would part outside a Tube station at eight in the evening, and each of us would go anywhere in London we liked, and the other one would follow. Except that both of us were following, and both of us were being followed, at the same time, and the one who saw the other first won.

We parted outside Leicester Square. I went everywhere. Down to the river and over Waterloo Bridge and back over Blackfriars and up through the City, empty on a Saturday night, doubling back, changing buses, going into a pub by the front and out by the back, using every single thing she had taught me. By three in the morning I was certain that I had lost her, and that she had lost me.

So I went somewhere I thought nobody would ever think of. I went north, through Camden, in the dark, and up Primrose Hill, to the bench at the top, where you can see the whole of London laid out below you, all the lights, from the Post Office Tower to St Paul's.

It was four in the morning. The sky was beginning to go grey over the city. The bench at the top of the hill was empty.

I sat down on it.

And a voice behind me said, "You took your time."

She was standing under the trees at the edge of the hill, in the dark, ten yards away. She had been there, she told me afterwards, since twenty past three.

I asked how she had known.

"I didn't," said Sue. "I lost you at Blackfriars." She came out of the trees and stood in front of me, with the grey light coming up behind her over London. "I came up here because it's where *I* go. When I've lost somebody." She looked down at me. "I didn't follow you here. You didn't follow me here. We both just came."

We looked at each other.

"That's not the game," I said.

"No," said Sue. "It isn't." And she sat down beside me on the bench, quite close, and we watched the sun come up over London together, red, behind St Paul's, without saying anything at all, until the first dog-walkers came up the hill with their dogs, and looked at us, and looked away.

* * *

That summer, and that autumn.

She had a flat in Kentish Town, at the top of a house, and there was nothing in it. A bed and a table and two chairs and a kettle and one cup, which became two. Clothes in one bag in the wardrobe, ready. No pictures, no photographs, no letters. The first time I went

there I thought she had just moved in. She had been there three years.

"Everything I own fits in one bag," she said. "In case."

In case of what, I asked.

"In case I have to go," said Sue. "In this job, you always have to go, sooner or later, at a day's notice. So you don't keep things. You don't make anywhere home." She plugged in the kettle. "You don't let anybody make *you* home either. If you can help it."

She looked at me across the kitchen.

"I'm not helping it very well," she said.

* * *

She never asked me about Karina. Not once.

That was how I knew she knew. Everybody else who had loved me had asked about the ones before, sooner or later. Sue never asked, and the not asking was so careful that it was a kind of question all on its own.

So one night in October, in the dark, I told her all of it. The Coach and Horses and the bridges and the platform at Brussels and the parcel behind the panel under the sink and the boat train. I told her I did not love Karina any more.

Sue lay beside me in the dark for a long time.

"Liar," she said, quite gently.

I did not say anything.

"That's all right," said Sue. "I'd rather have a liar who knows it than an honest man who doesn't." She put her head on my shoulder.

"You'll always love her a bit. You'll love all of us a bit. The one in Brixham and the one with the glasses and the one with the cabinet. And me." She was quiet for a while. "It's the people who leave you who stay. The ones who stay with you, you sort of stop seeing, after a while. It's the ones who go that you carry about."

I said she was not going anywhere.

She did not answer that.

* * *

On the ninth of November 1989, a Thursday, at about eleven at night, we were in the flat in Highbury with the television on, and the Berlin Wall came down.

Everybody who was alive then saw it. The crowds on the Wall at the Brandenburg Gate in the floodlights, hacking at it with hammers. People pouring through the checkpoints in their little cars, crying, with their arms out of the windows. A whole city that had been cut in half for twenty-eight years putting itself back together in one night, on the television, live, while I sat on the sofa with my mouth open.

I said it was the most wonderful thing I had ever seen.

Sue did not say anything. She was sitting on the floor in front of the television with her arms round her knees, very still, watching. Not the crowds on the Wall. The edges of the picture. The men standing at the back, in coats, not cheering.

"Everything's going to move now," she said at last. "Berlin. Leipzig. Prague. Hamburg. Every file in the East is going to be on

the market by Christmas. Every name. Every informer. And everybody who's ever wanted to buy any of it is going to be there, with a suitcase." She was quiet. "Your girl's family will be very busy."

I looked at her.

"Hamburg's two hours from Berlin," said Sue. "Shipping. Things that need to be moved quietly from one country to another." She turned round and looked up at me, and her face, in the light from the television, was crying. "And they're going to need people who can go in and come out and leave nothing."

I understood, then. I should have understood an hour before.

"When?" I said.

"Monday," said Sue.

* * *

She would not tell me where. I knew where. The television had told me. She would not tell me for how long. I knew that too. It was in the way she said *Monday*, as if it were the name of somebody who had died.

She did not ask me to wait for her. She did not ask me to come. She said, very clearly, on the Friday night, in the bare room with the one bag already packed, that she would not write, that it would not be safe, and that if I ever saw her again, anywhere, in any crowd, I was to look straight through her and walk on, the way she had taught me.

"That's the last lesson," she said. "That's the hardest one. Seeing somebody and not seeing them."

I said I could not do it.

"You'll have to," said Sue. "One day you'll have to do it to somebody you love. In a station, or a market, or a hotel lobby, with people watching. And you'll do it, because you'll know that if you don't, they'll die." She put her hand flat on my chest. "Practise on me."

* * *

On the Monday morning, the thirteenth, I went to Kentish Town at seven, before work, because I could not not go.

The street door was on the latch. I went up the stairs to the top of the house and the door of her flat was open.

It was empty.

I mean empty. Not like Angie's flat in Burslem, with the drawing pins still in the wall. Empty the way she had taught me. The mattress bare. The wardrobe open, with nothing in it, not a hanger. The two chairs pushed in, square. The two cups on the draining board, upside down, washed and dried.

I picked one of them up, and looked at it in the light from the window.

There was not a fingerprint on it. Not one. Not a smear. She had wiped it. She had wiped them both.

I stood in the middle of the carpet in the empty room and looked round, the way she had looked round the hotel room in

Bloomsbury in the spring, with her handkerchief in her hand. *A room should look, when you've gone, as if nobody was ever in it. As if you were never there.*

It did. It looked exactly as if nobody had ever been there. Not her, and not me, and not the two of us, all that summer and that autumn, with her head on my shoulder, telling me that it was the ones who go that you carry about.

I looked for something. Anything. I went round that flat for an hour, on my hands and knees, under the bed and along the skirting boards, looking for one hair, one button, one corner of one bus ticket. I was very good at looking by then. She had taught me.

There was nothing.

She had left me nothing to carry. Nothing at all. So that I would carry her anyway, without anything to carry her in. I understood that, kneeling on the floor in Kentish Town at eight in the morning, with the traffic starting outside. It was the last lesson after the last lesson. It was what it costs.

I went to work. I was late. Nobody noticed.

* * *

I saw her once more. I will put it here, because it belongs here, and because I promised her, and I kept the promise.

It was in 1997, in Bangkok, in the lobby of a hotel on the river, at the height of the crash, when half of Asia was in hotel lobbies with suitcases. She came through the revolving door with a man in a good suit, talking, in a language I did not know, in a pale linen

dress, with her hair cut short and grey at the sides, older, thinner, with the same bright brown eyes, and walked past me, two yards away, to the lifts.

She saw me. I know she saw me. Her eyes went across me, and did not stop, and went on.

I did not stop either. I looked straight through her, and turned the page of my newspaper, which I was actually reading, and the lift doors closed.

It was the hardest thing I have ever done. Harder than the boat train. Harder than Room 3.

I did it. She taught me.

She would have been proud of me. I would give a great deal to know that she was.

Chapter 18 – *Debbie*

Fri. 8 Dec. 2017. Studio Ania, Torquay, 5.30 p.m. In the control room, on the wall above the desk, framed: an old quarter-inch reel box, felt pen on the spine: "6 SONGS. C. HARVEY. CAMDEN 1991. ENG: D.M." Asked Ania about it. She said: "Debbie made it. It is the best thing she ever made." Asked who Debbie was. She said: "Somebody I asked to do something very hard, who did it." She did not say anything else. She looked at the box for a long time.

I did not know it was there. I did not know Ania had it. Debbie held the tape out to me on the last day, in the doorway, and told me to keep it or burn it, whichever I could bear, and I would not take it, and for twenty-seven years I assumed she had burned it.

She did not. She gave it to Ania, and Ania framed it and put it on the wall of a studio in Torquay, above the desk, where Jono saw it a year before I came home.

Somebody I asked to do something very hard, who did it.

That is the truest thing anybody has ever said about Debbie, and Ania said it to Jono and not to me. I am going to try to write about Debbie now, and to be as true as that.

* * *

By the spring of 1990, I believed I was cursed.

I want to say that plainly, because I was an engineer, and I did not believe in curses, or stars, or things that did not belong. But I had sat in the flat in Highbury every night for three months since Sue went, and counted, and I could not make the numbers come out any other way.

Karen. Eighteen months, to the week, from the 400 to the platform at Torquay.

Carole. Ten months, and gone in the snow.

Angie. Eight, and gone in the night, with the drawing pins left in the wall.

Karina. Longer. Three years and six weeks. But on the bridge over the Canal Saint-Martin, at six in the morning, at eighteen months exactly, she had said, *I thought it would be over by now. I thought somebody would come and stop it.* And when it ended, I had gone home on a boat train, and been glad.

Sue. Six months, and a wiped cup.

Nobody stayed. I would fall in love, completely, all at once, over my head. And then, never longer than eighteen months, something would come. A letter. A job. A note on a table. A train. And they would go.

I thought it was me. I lay awake in Highbury and went through all of them, one by one, the way you go through a program line by line looking for the comma. I could not find it. So I decided it was not a comma. I decided it was the whole program.

I decided I would not fall in love again.

I lasted until March.

* * *

I had bought a guitar in Paris, a cheap one, second-hand, from a shop in Pigalle, because Karina said every Englishman she had ever met played the guitar badly and she wanted to see whether I was the exception. I was not. I learned anyway, from a book, and played her things, badly.

After the boat train I did not touch it for nearly two years. Then, in the winter after Sue, I took it out one night and sat on the end of the bed and played, and something came out that was not anything from the book. A tune. And then words. About a Mini with its nose to the sea and a lighthouse going round.

I did not know I could write songs. But that winter they came out of me, one after another, at night, like water out of a cracked pipe. One for each of them. Karen, and the lighthouse. Carole, and the snow on a screen. Angie, and a terrace in the rain. Karina, and a bridge. Sue, and an empty room.

Five songs. Words on the backs of BT circuit diagrams, in pencil, with chords over the top.

An engineer at work called Tony, who played drums in a pub band, heard me humming one in the lift, and said there was a studio in Camden, cheap, run by a girl he knew, where you could make a proper tape for fifty quid on a Saturday afternoon. He said she was the best engineer in North London and she would not let me sound worse than I was.

He gave me the number. I rang it.

A woman's voice answered. Cheerful, London, quick. "Studio."

I asked if I could book an afternoon.

"Who's this?"

I told her my name.

There was a pause on the line. Not a long one. A second. But it was a second I noticed, because I had been taught by then to notice seconds.

"Saturday," said the voice. "Two o'clock. Bring your guitar. Don't bring anybody else."

* * *

The studio was in a basement under a shop that sold motorbike parts, behind Camden High Street, down a flight of iron steps with a red door at the bottom. Two rooms: one with egg boxes on the walls and microphones on stands, and one, through a window, with the desk, a long sloping board covered in knobs and faders and little lights, like the switchboard at Fleet House, and a tape machine the size of a fridge.

And at the desk, with her back to the door and a pair of headphones round her neck, a girl was sitting on a high stool with her feet on the rung, eating a bacon sandwich.

She turned round.

She was about my age. Small, square, solid, in a black T-shirt and jeans, with short red hair cut close like a boy's and a lot of silver rings in one ear and none in the other, and freckles, and green eyes,

and a wide mouth with bacon fat on it, which she wiped off with the back of her hand. She looked at me for a long time.

"You'll be Chris," she said.

I said I was.

"Debbie," she said, and did not get up, and did not hold out her hand, and went on looking. "Tony says you've written some songs about girls." She took another bite of the sandwich. "Go on, then. Get in there. Let's hear how bad it is."

* * *

It was not bad. She said so. Afterwards, at six o'clock, with the five songs on the big reels and the red light off and the two of us sitting in the control room with mugs of tea, she said, "It's not bad, Chris. It's not good either. Your voice is all right if you stop trying to sound like somebody else and your guitar's terrible. But the songs." She looked at the reels going round on rewind. "The songs are true. Every one of them. You can hear it. That's the only thing that matters, and nobody can teach it, and you've got it." She drank her tea. "Who's the one in the snow?"

I told her.

"And the one on the bridge?"

I told her that too. I had not told anybody, except Sue, and Sue had been trained to listen. Debbie just listened, with her mug in both hands and her green eyes on my face, until I had finished, and then she said, "Christ. No wonder." And then: "Come back next Saturday. Your guitar's still terrible. I'll show you how to fix it."

I went back the next Saturday. And the one after that.

* * *

It was the third of March, 1990, the first time. I know because she wrote the date on the box of the tape, and because, much later, I counted from it.

By the end of March I was at the studio every Saturday and most evenings. By April I was in love with her. I did not want to be. I had decided not to be. I fought it the way you fight sleep at the wheel, slapping my own face, opening the window, and it made no difference at all.

She was the kindest person I have ever known. I want that down first. Not soft; she swore like a docker and threw a guitarist out once, bodily, up the iron steps, for being rude to the girl who made the tea. But kind, the way some people are clever and some are beautiful. She noticed when people were hurting, the way I noticed when people were watching, and did something about it, quietly. She fixed my guitar. She taught me to sing in my own voice. She sat in the control room on Saturday nights with her feet on the rung and listened to me talk about all of them, one after another, for hours, and never once said anything about herself.

And she let me count.

* * *

That was the thing. That was the thing that is in the song, the sixth one, which I wrote after.

I told her, in May, in her flat above the studio, three rooms full of records and plants she forgot to water. I told her about the curse. Eighteen months. I told her I loved her, and that I was frightened, because if it was going to end it would be eighteen months, and I could not bear it, and I could not stop it.

She did not laugh at me. She looked at me for a long time across her kitchen table, very serious, and then she got up and took the calendar down off the wall by the fridge, a free one from a guitar shop, with a picture of a Stratocaster for every month, and put it on the table between us.

"Right," said Debbie. "Then we'll count."

I did not understand.

"We'll count," she said. "Together. Out loud. Every month. We'll put a cross on the day." She drew a small circle round the third of March. "That's where we started. If you're going to be frightened of a number, Chris, better to look at it every day, and know exactly where it is, than have it creeping up behind you in the dark."

And she drew a cross on the third of April, and another on the third of May. "Two," she said. "Look at that. Still here."

I loved her so much at that moment that I could not speak.

I know now that she knew. Exactly. To the day. She had known before I ever walked through the red door with my guitar case. She had known when I rang, and there was a second's pause on the line. She sat at her kitchen table and drew crosses on a free calendar from a guitar shop and said *still here*, and every cross she drew was one closer to the one she had been told about, and she drew them

anyway, and smiled at me, and said *still here*, every month, for eighteen months.

I cannot think of anything braver. I have tried.

* * *

She never told me anything about herself, and I did not mind; it was a rest. I knew she was from Deptford. I knew her mother was dead and her father drove a cab. I knew she had learned the desk from a man who had worked with famous bands in the seventies and drunk himself to death in the eighties.

I did not know who owned it.

I asked once. She said, "A lady. She lets me run it. She doesn't come in much." And then she changed the subject, which she never did, and I noticed that too, and let it go.

There was one thing on the wall of the control room that was not a band poster. A small photograph, very old, black and white, gone brown: a group of people round a long table in a back room, with tea cups, the men with moustaches and the women in long skirts. I could not make out any of the faces except one, at the end of the table, a young woman with dark hair, holding her cup in both hands.

I thought it looked like somebody. I did not let myself think who.

* * *

We counted. All that year and into the next. A cross on the third of every month on the Stratocaster calendar, and then on the next year's calendar, which was a Gibson one. *Seven. Still here. Twelve. Still here. Fifteen.*

The months were the best of my life. Paris was happiest; these were the best. In Paris I was happy because I did not know what was coming. With Debbie I knew exactly what was coming, to the day, and I was happy anyway. That is the kind you have to earn.

We made the songs properly. She made me do them again and again, until my voice was my own. She put the drums under them herself, and the bass, on a battered old Fender with a cracked scratchplate, and found a girl from the Royal College to put a cello on the one about the bridge. We did not play them to anybody. They were ours.

At sixteen, in July 1991, I asked her to marry me.

I did not have a ring. I had learned that much. I asked her at the kitchen table, at midnight, with fifteen crosses behind us and three in front, and said that if she married me the number would not matter any more, because people who were married did not count.

She cried. It was the only time I ever saw her cry.

"I can't," said Debbie. "Chris. I can't."

I asked why. I asked what was wrong with me. I asked what I had done.

She came round the table and knelt on the floor in front of my chair and took both my hands, and looked up at me with her eyes full of tears and her face very white.

"Nothing," she said. "You've done nothing. There's nothing wrong with you. There never was. It's not you, Chris. It's never been you. It's not a curse." She held my hands harder. "Will you believe that? Whatever else happens. Will you believe me that it was never, ever you?"

I said I would try.

"Try hard," said Debbie. And she got up off the floor and wiped her face with the back of her hand, the way she had wiped the bacon fat off on the first day, and went to the calendar, and drew a cross on the third of July, and said, very quietly, "Sixteen. Still here."

* * *

Eighteen was the third of September, 1991. A Tuesday.

I went to work on the Tuesday as usual, because she had asked me to, because she did not want to spend the day watching the clock, and I sat at my desk at BT and watched the clock all day, and at six I went to Camden.

The red door was open. She was in the control room, on her stool, not eating anything. On the desk in front of her there was a quarter-inch tape box, white cardboard, and on the spine, in her felt pen: *6 SONGS. C. HARVEY. CAMDEN 1991. ENG: D.M.*

"Six?" I said. "There are only five."

"There's six," said Debbie. "You'll write the other one. Tonight, or next week, or next year. I've left room on the reel." She did not get up. "It goes at the end."

I asked what it was called.

"You know what it's called," she said.

I stood in the doorway of the control room. She sat at the desk. Neither of us moved.

"Who are you?" I said.

She looked at me for a long time. And then she told me. Not everything. Not the name. She never said the name, then or ever. But enough.

She said that somebody she owed everything to had asked her, a long time ago, to look after me for a while. She said she had been told how long, and a little of why, and that it was not anything bad, it was the opposite of bad. She said she had agreed before she ever met me, when I was just a name in a phone call. She had not known, when she agreed, that she would love me.

"I asked for longer," said Debbie. "In July. When you asked me to marry you. I went and begged. She said no. She said it had to be eighteen, for reasons I couldn't see and she couldn't tell me, and she was sorry." Debbie looked up at me. "She *was* sorry. I've never seen her sorry before."

I asked who *she* was.

Debbie did not answer. She looked past me, through the open red door, up the iron steps, at the street.

I turned round.

* * *

On the other side of the street, in the window of a café, at a table by the glass, a woman was sitting with a cup of tea held in both hands. A young woman. Dark hair. A grey costume. She was looking across the street at the iron steps and the red door.

When I turned, she put the cup down.

She did not come across. She got up, and put some money on the table, and went out by the side door, and walked away down the street, quickly, with her head down, not looking back, the way I had walked out of Stafford station in 1982 so that I would not have to watch the train go.

She could not watch. That was what it was. Whoever she was, she could arrange it, and ask for it, and sit across the street and wait for it to be done. But when it came to the moment, she could not watch it.

I did not follow her. I did not let myself think who she was. I want to be honest: I knew. Somewhere under the floor, where the faults hum, I knew. And I put a tile back over it, and stood on the tile, for seventeen years.

When I turned back, Debbie had got off her stool and was standing in front of me, very close, with the tape box in her hands.

"Keep it," she said. "Or burn it. Whichever you can bear." She held it out.

I did not take it. I said she should keep it. I said she had made it.

She looked at me for a long time with her green eyes. Then she nodded, and held the box against her chest, the way Karina had held the Burslem teapot.

"It was never you," she said. "Try hard."

And she kissed me, once, in the doorway, and turned and went back into the control room and sat down on her stool with her back to me and her feet on the rung and put her headphones on, and did not turn round again.

I went up the iron steps into Camden and walked home to Highbury, four miles, and sat on the end of the bed with the guitar, and wrote the sixth song. It took all night. I have never played it to anybody.

It is called *Eighteen Months*.

I did not count anything, ever again, until a boy was born in Singapore in August 1995, and then I counted his fingers, and there were ten, and I stopped.

Chapter 19 – *The Fence Post*

Sun. 5 April 1992. 6.10 a.m. Berry Head, below the north fort, foot of the cliff. Fine, cold, wind NE light. Called by coastguard. First on scene. Female, white, aged about 30, dark curly hair, dark coat. Deceased.

This chapter is mostly his. I was not there. I was forty minutes away, asleep. He was there. He was nineteen, four months out of training school, and on his own, and he wrote it all down.

So I am going to copy it here, the way my mother copied the Canadian's letter into her exercise book in 1965, because it is part of what happened. The first nine pages of the thirty-second pocketbook, as he wrote them. And in between, where I have to, I will say what I know. Which is less than he does.

* * *

Sun. 5 April 1992. 5.48 a.m. Paignton station (police). Phone: Brixham coastguard. Lookout on the head reports a person at foot of cliff below N. fort, not moving. Sgt sent me. Only one on. Took the Escort.

6.04. Berry Head car park. Coastguard met me (Mr K. Tozer, auxiliary). Showed me the path down the N. side. Climbers' path. Steep. Took torch, first-aid bag, this book.

I stopped there, the first time I read it, and sat for a long time.

Mr K. Tozer. Kevin Tozer. Karen's brother, the big one, who smelled of the sea and called me *the telephone boy*. He was an auxiliary coastguard, on the lookout on Berry Head that morning with a pair of binoculars, the way the coastguard had been on that head in 1895 watching a star that did not move. He saw her. He rang it in. He met the boy constable in the car park and showed him the way down.

He never told me. I never asked him. I did not know, until three nights ago, that he was there.

> *6.10. Foot of the cliff, on the ledge above the tide line, approx. 60 ft below the top. Female. Lying on her right side, on the rocks, facing the sea. Dark coat (navy duffel), jeans, walking boots. Dark curly hair, long, tied back with a bootlace (brown leather). Approx. 30. No pulse. Cold. Eyes open.*
>
> *Did not move her.*
>
> *Sat down on the rock beside her. Started this book. Hands not steady.*

* * *

He has told me about that, once, in 2008, at my kitchen table in Singapore, at three in the morning. He said he had bought the pocketbook a year before, on the day he was eighteen, the same make as Jack's, black oilcloth with a pencil in a loop down the spine, and had been given the thirty-one on the same day, out of the

tin box, by his father. And he said he had carried the new one in his pocket every day for a year, empty, because of what Johnny had said, that the next one would be started when it needed to be, by the one who needed to start it.

"And then I was sitting on a rock," Jono said, "at six in the morning, beside a girl I'd never seen, with her eyes open, and the sea coming in. And I thought, this is when it's needed." He looked at his hands on my table. "I wrote the first line and my hand was shaking so much I couldn't read it back. So I wrote it again. And by the bottom of the page it was all right. Writing it down's what you do, Chris. When you can't do anything else. It's what stops your hands."

> *6.25. Searched pockets for ID, did not move her. R. coat pocket: return train ticket, Stoke-on-Trent to Paignton, out 4 April. Purse: £12.40, bank card in name A. SHENTON. L. coat pocket: folded paper, torn from a notebook, a phone number in pencil, Paignton code. Below it, in the same hand: "C. Ring after 9. Not before." Nothing else. No bag. No camera.*
>
> *Knew the number.*

He knew the number. It was my parents' house in Paignton, where he had come to the back door every morning in the summer of 1984 with a notebook with a footballer on it.

And he knew who *C.* was.

6.40. Looked up at the top. Fence along the cliff edge, posts and wire. Directly above her, one post leaning out. Wire slack. Will go up when CID come.

Ledge is wet. Tide coming. Sea calm. Put my coat over her.

Sat with her.

* * *

On the Saturday night, the fourth, at twenty to twelve, the telephone rang in the hall of my parents' house in Paignton.

I was asleep. I had come home from London on the Friday for a week's leave, and on the Saturday I had driven to Hope's Nose and sat on the rock at the end on my own for the afternoon, and then gone to bed early with a book. I did not hear the phone. My room was at the top of the house at the back, and I slept, in those years, like the dead.

My mother answered it.

She told me the next day, in the afternoon, at the kitchen table with her hands round a cup of tea she did not drink, word for word, the way Johnny Hills had taught her to report a conversation.

A young woman. A voice from up north somewhere, my mother said. Breathless, as if she had been running. Calling from a phone box; my mother heard the pips. She asked for Chris. My mother said he was asleep, could she take a message. The girl said, *please, Mrs Harvey, it's about somebody he knew in Paris, and*

somebody he knew in Stoke, and they're the same person, and she's here, in Brixham, I've seen her, I've been following her since Exeter. My mother said would she like to come round in the morning. The girl said, *I'll ring at nine. Don't wake him. Let him sleep.* And then the pips went, and the line went dead.

My mother did not wake me. The girl had asked her not to.

My mother has never forgiven herself. I have told her a hundred times that there was nothing she could have done, that if she had woken me I would have driven round the bay at midnight looking for a phone box in Brixham, and not found it. She has nodded every time, and not believed me once.

At nine o'clock on the Sunday morning the phone did not ring.

* * *

> *7.35. CID arrived by the path. DS from Torquay (P.) and DC. DS looked at her. Asked me what I'd done. Told him. He looked at my book. Said: "You writing a novel, son?" Said no, sarge. Writing it down. He looked at me a bit. Said: "Good. Carry on."*

That was the DS, who has been Jono's friend inside the police, quietly, ever since, and who opened a proper file when nobody else would. I will not write his name.

> *8.10. Went up to the top with the DC. The fence. Post directly above her: leaning out over the edge approx. 20 degrees. Ground at its foot scuffed.*

Grass flattened in a patch approx. 6 ft by 4 on the landward side. One heel mark, deep, small (woman's?), sliding towards the edge. Wire between that post and next: top strand broken. Old break or new, can't tell. DC says old.

Then I saw the mark.

* * *

On the post. The leaning one. On the seaward face, the side nobody would see unless they leaned over the wire. Low down, about a foot above the grass. Scratched into the wood. Fresh: the wood under it pale, not weathered. Small. Size of a 2p piece.

A face. Like a cat's. Two little eyes close together. Two curved teeth coming up out of the bottom jaw either side, like tusks. A long thin tail going all the way round the outside and crossing over where it started.

Drew it. Below.

And below, on the page, in pencil, very carefully, there is a drawing, the size of a two-pence piece.

I knew it three nights ago, because I had read my mother's exercise book four times, and Leonard Harvey, my grandfather, had drawn it in the air for her with one finger in his shed at Galmpton in 1965. *No bigger than a penny. And very well done. Whoever did it had done it a great many times before.*

It had been cut on a farm gate at Preston in February 1896, above two dead ponies. On the brass rail of a tram. On the frame of a boat in the bilge at Galmpton in 1943, above six cut fastenings. It hung at a woman's throat in a tunnel in Torquay, in an air raid. It hung at another woman's throat, in a hall in Hamburg, at Christmas, under a chandelier.

And somebody had cut it into a fence post at the top of Berry Head, low down, on the side nobody would see, on the night of the fourth of April, 1992, above a woman with curly hair tied back with a bootlace.

Knew it. From Jack's book. 18 Feb. 1896: cut on Billy Narracott's gate at Preston, over his ponies. 10 Mar. 1896: in black wax, on a letter to Rage: "Seal: taowu, carved in the Chinese manner." The mark: a flat head, close eyes, tusks, a long tail coiled round. And Johnny's: the drawing Leonard Harvey made, 1943. Taowu. That's the name.

Told the DS. Showed him the post. He looked at it a long time. Said: "Kids, probably." Then: "Probably." Then he looked at me again and didn't say anything else.

* * *

9.05. DI arrived from Torquay. DI Robinson. Did not go down to her. Stood at the top by the cars. Asked the DS for a summary. Asked me nothing. Looked at the post. Said: "Kids." Said to the DS:

"Misadventure, by the look. Walking at night, went too near, fence gave. Tragic." Said to have the post replaced by the Parks people Monday. Said to me: "Thank you, constable. That'll be all." Looked at my book in my hand. Said: "You can put that away now."

Put it in my pocket.

Did not put it away.

I have to say a word about the name. Jono did not need to underline *Robinson*. Anybody in either of our families would have stopped at it.

There was an Inspector Robinson in Torquay in 1895. Charming. He carried envelopes. He made files vanish. Jack Hills wrote about him in the thirty-one, often, and never once with a full stop at the end of the sentence. *Will be a superintendent in ten years*, Jack wrote, in 1896. He was.

I do not know if this one was his blood. Jono told me in 2008 that he had looked, and that there was a family of Robinsons in the Devon force going back further than the Hills, and that nobody had ever been able to prove anything about any of them, and that they had all done very well.

You can put that away now.

He did not put it away.

* * *

10.40. Ambulance crew by boat, from Brixham. Took her round by sea. DS went with them. DI left. DC left. Told to go back to the station and write it up.

Did not go back to the station.

Walked the top. The whole fence line from the fort to the lighthouse and back. Then the gorse, landward side, behind the flattened patch. On my hands and knees. Why: she had a train ticket and a purse and a phone number but no bag. Women carry bags. And: she came to see C. at nine to tell him something. What do you bring when you've come to tell somebody something? Proof.

2.40 p.m. Found it. In the gorse, 15 yards in from the fence, 30 yards towards the lighthouse from the post. Deep in. As if thrown, from the top. A camera. Small, black, Olympus, the automatic kind. Wet with dew. Case cracked. Counter on top says 23.

Twenty-three pictures taken, and nobody had found the camera, and nobody had looked.

* * *

What he did next he has never written down. It is the only gap in the thirty-second pocketbook.

He told me, in Singapore, at three in the morning. He knelt in the gorse with the camera in his hand and thought about the DI at the top by the cars, who had not gone down to her, who had said

kids, who had said *you can put that away now*. And he thought about Jack's thirty-one, and an inspector who carried envelopes and made files vanish.

And he wound the film back into its cassette until he felt it go slack, and opened the back, and put the cassette in the inside pocket of his tunic, beside the pocketbook. And he closed the camera, and took it back to the station, and logged it.

One camera, Olympus, black, damaged. Found in gorse, Berry Head, 2.40 p.m. No film.

> *4.15 p.m. Paignton station. Logged property: one camera. Wrote it up for the DS.*
>
> *I have done something I should not have done. I will answer for it, if I have to. I do not know why I did it. I do know.*

* * *

He never developed it.

I asked him why, in Singapore. It was the only thing I asked him all that night. Why, if he had kept it, had he not taken it to a chemist's the next day, or the next year, and found out?

He was quiet for a long time.

"Because I was nineteen," he said, "and I'd broken the rules for the first time in my life, and if it was twenty-three pictures of seagulls, I'd have nothing. The DI would've been right, and it would've been misadventure." He looked at his hands. "As long as it

was in the tin, undeveloped, it could be what I thought it was. As long as I didn't look, I still had it. Does that make sense?"

I said it made more sense than anything anybody had ever said to me.

"And after a while," said Jono, "it got so I couldn't. It was like the thirty-one. Like the tin box. Some things you keep closed until it's time. Until the one who needs to open it is the one who opens it." He shrugged. "I didn't know who that was. I thought maybe it was you. I just knew it wasn't me, yet."

It stayed in the tin box in his parents' house in Preston, with the thirty-one and the Woolworths notebook with the footballer on it, for sixteen years. Undeveloped. In its cassette. In a sandwich bag.

* * *

Mon. 6 April 1992. 9.30 a.m. Coroner's officer. Deceased identified this morning by her father, down overnight. ANGELA SHENTON, aged 30, of Burslem, Stoke-on-Trent. Telecoms engineer. Father says: "She went to Devon to see a friend. She didn't say who."

I know who.

11.50 a.m. Asked the DS if I could go to the address on the paper. The phone number. Tell them. DS looked at me a long time. Said: "You know them." Said yes, sarge. Said: "Go on, then. In your own time. Not on duty. And you didn't hear it from me."

12.40 p.m. Took my own car.

* * *

I was in the back garden, in Paignton, on the Monday, at about one o'clock, mending the gate, which had come off its hinge in the winter. It was a bright cold day with the wind in the north-east. I had a screwdriver in my hand.

I heard a car stop in the road outside the front. Then the side gate. And Jono came round the corner of the house into the garden.

He was nineteen, in jeans and a jacket, not his uniform, with his hands in his pockets and his face white. He stopped on the path, ten yards away, and looked at me, the way he had looked at me from his mother's knee at Johnny's funeral.

I put the screwdriver down on the gatepost.

"Chris," he said. "Do you know a woman called Angela Shenton?"

I do not remember what I said. I remember the screwdriver on the gatepost, and a seagull on the roof next door. I remember that my mother had come to the kitchen window behind me and was standing very still with a tea towel in her hands, and that she had put one hand flat against the glass, the way Carole had on the train at Stafford.

I remember that Jono told me, standing on the path, in about six sentences, the way a policeman is taught to tell people, short and clear, and that he did not take his hands out of his pockets, and that I understood afterwards that this was because they were shaking.

And I remember that when he had finished, and I had said whatever I said, he took one hand out of his pocket, very slowly,

and held something out to me, on the palm of it. A brown leather bootlace. Coiled. The kind you tie back curly hair with.

"They let me have it," he said. "From her property. The DS did. I said I knew somebody who'd want it." He did not look away. "I thought it should be you, Chris. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

I took it.

It is not in the archive. It is not in the shoeboxes, or the Tiger carton. It is in my wallet, where it has been for twenty-six years, folded small, beside a note in Angie's handwriting that says *Watch her*, which I had stopped taking out in 1985, and started taking out again that afternoon, and have never stopped.

* * *

1.10 p.m. Told him. He knew her. He knew her very well. He went white and sat down on the step.

Gave him the lace.

Mrs Harvey came out and sat with him. I went and stood by the car.

Did not tell him about the post. Or the camera. Or the film.

Not yet.

Chapter 20 – *Inquest*

Thurs. 18 June 1992. Coroner's court, Torquay. Verdict: misadventure. DI R. gave evidence 11 minutes. Self 4 minutes. Was not asked about the post. Said it anyway. Coroner: "Thank you, constable. Noted." It was not noted. Checked the transcript after. Not there.

Not there.

He checked. He went to the coroner's office afterwards, on his own time, and read the transcript of an inquest he had given evidence at, and found that the four minutes he had spoken were there, all except one sentence. The sentence about the mark.

It was the first time he had seen a file made to vanish. Jack Hills saw it in 1896. Jono saw it in 1992, and wrote down *Not there* and underlined nothing, because underlining was for things you had not expected.

I was at that inquest. I sat at the back. I heard him say the sentence. I heard the coroner say *noted*. I believed it would be.

That is what this chapter is about. What I believed, that year, and what it cost, and what I kept believing anyway.

* * *

But first there was Burslem.

They buried her on the seventeenth of April, from St John's in Burslem, at the bottom of the town. Most of the bottle kilns were

gone by then, pulled down in the eighties while I was in Paris and London. Three were left that you could see from the churchyard. I stood at the graveside and looked at them and thought of the fire escape at Hanley, and a girl with an oatcake pointing at a lorry full of Devon clay.

The church had been full of Burslem. Men from the exchange, and women from the potbanks in their best coats, and half the Bycars End in black armbands, and a row of telephone engineers in the second pew who had driven through the night from Glasgow and Manchester and Bristol and Leeds, who had worked on the net with her, and who did not know me, and nodded to me anyway.

Ron Shenton stood at the front of the graveside with his grey hands folded in front of him, in a suit that did not fit, and did not move once, from the first word to the last.

Afterwards, when the people were going back up the path between the graves to the cars, he came and stood beside me.

He did not say anything for a long time. We stood side by side and looked down at the earth on the coffin.

"She was coming to see you," he said at last.

I said yes. I said I had been asleep.

"She told me," said Ron. "On the Friday night, on the phone. She said she'd seen somebody in the market in Hanley. Somebody from before. She said she'd followed her to the station and seen her get a ticket for Devon." He did not look at me. "She said, *Dad, I've got to tell Chris before it's too late. I should've told him properly in*

'83. I said, can't you just ring him? She said, *No. He has to see. I've got to show him.*"

"Show me what?"

"She didn't say," said Ron Shenton. "She took her camera."

I did not say anything. I did not know, then, that a constable in Paignton had found a camera in the gorse with no film in it. Nobody had told me. Nobody would, for sixteen years.

Then Ron lifted his head and looked past me, up the path, towards the churchyard gate, and his face changed.

"That's her," he said.

I turned round.

* * *

She was standing by the gate. At the top of the path, by the wall, under a lime tree with its new leaves just coming. A young woman in a grey costume, with dark hair, and no coat, and her hands at her sides, looking down the path at the grave. At us.

"That's the lady," said Ron Shenton, very quietly. "That come to see Angie in '83. In the rain. In the grey suit. Spoke like a clock." He did not take his eyes off her. "She hasn't changed. Not one hair. Nine years." He turned and looked at me, and his big grey face had gone a colour I had not seen on a living man. "Who is she, son?"

I said I did not know.

I knew.

I had known since a café window in Camden the September before. Since a photograph on the wall of a control room, of a

young woman at the end of a long table holding her cup in both hands. Since a level crossing at Paignton, and a woman who came to Widecombe Cot every October for as long as I could remember and sat at the table in the bay window and did not eat the toast.

I had put a tile over it in Camden and stood on the tile. I stood on it at the graveside in Burslem with Ron Shenton looking at me, and said *I don't know*, and the tile held.

Then I left Ron at the grave, and walked up the path between the stones, towards the gate.

* * *

She did not move. She watched me come, all the way up the path, with her clear steady eyes, the way she had watched me come up the path at Widecombe Cot every October since I was born. When I got to her I stopped, a yard away, under the lime tree.

"Miss Ania," I said.

"Chris."

Her voice was the same as it always was. Every word the same length, like the speaking clock. It had never once been anything but kind.

"Ron Shenton says you came to see her," I said. "In 1983. In Burslem. The night she went to Glasgow."

"Yes," said Ania.

I had expected her to say something odd, or nothing, the way she always did when anybody asked her a direct question.

"Why?"

"Because she had seen something she should not have seen," said Ania. "A young woman from Hamburg, whose English was too perfect. And because she had said so, out loud, and people had heard her say it who do not like to be seen." She did not look away. "I took her away to keep her. I told her that if she stayed, she would be hurt. She did not want to go. She went because she believed it would keep you safe too. I let her believe that. It was not quite true."

"You took her away," I said. My voice was doing something I could not stop. "You took her away from me, in the night, with a note on the table, and I looked for her for a year. A *year*. I rang Glasgow every week."

"Yes," said Ania. "I know. I am sorry."

"And then she came back."

"Yes."

"And you didn't stop her."

Ania was silent for a long time. The wind moved in the lime tree over our heads and the new leaves turned over, pale side up.

"I could not keep her," she said.

* * *

I had heard that before. Not from her. I know now where: my mother's exercise book, chapter eighteen. Room 3, October 1955, my mother aged twenty, asking about twenty-one children under a church in St Marychurch. *You knew they were coming.* And Ania, on

the edge of the bed, looking at her own hands. *I knew that I could keep you. I could not keep them.*

I did not know that then. I stood under the lime tree in Burslem with Angie's bootlace folded in my wallet and the sentence went into me like a nail.

"Why not?" I said.

"Because she chose to come back," said Ania. "She saw somebody in the market at Hanley, and she knew what it meant, and she chose. Nobody could have stopped her. I could not have stopped her without becoming the thing I am trying to stop." She looked at me, and for the first time in my life I saw something in her eyes that was not steady. "There are things that must be chosen, Chris, by the people who choose them. Even when they are terrible. I have known that for a very long time. I have never once been able to make it hurt less."

I wanted to hit her. I want that down, because it is the truth and because I have never wanted to hit anybody else in my life. I stood under a lime tree in a churchyard in Burslem with my fists clenched and my eyes full and looked at a woman who had not changed in the thirty years I had been alive, and said nothing.

"You may stop," said Ania quietly. "Trusting me. If you wish. You would be right to."

I did not answer.

She waited. Then she nodded, slowly, the way she always did, as if I had said the right thing. And she turned and went out through

the churchyard gate into the street, and walked away down the hill towards the town, without a coat, and did not look back.

Ron Shenton was standing beside me. I had not heard him come up the path.

"Did she tell you?" he said. "Who she is?"

"No," I said.

It was true. She had not told me who she was. She had told me everything else.

* * *

I did not stop trusting her.

I want to be honest about that, because it is the thing in this whole account that I understand least. She as good as told me that she had taken Angie away from me in 1983, and had known Angie would come back and had not stopped her, and that Angie was dead. And she offered me the door. *You may stop. You would be right to.*

And I did not walk through it.

I did not understand why. I went back to London and sat in the flat in Highbury and did not understand it for a month. I thought I was a coward. I thought it was habit, the way you go on loving a house you grew up in after it has been sold.

It was not any of those things. I know that now. I did not know it until Room 3, sixteen years later, and I will come to that.

But I will say this much here. At the graveside, when Ron said *that's her*, and I turned round, and she was standing by the gate under the lime tree, the first thing I saw in her face, before anything

else, before I had walked a step up the path, was that she had been crying.

Her eyes were dry by the time I got to her. But I had seen it. From the grave, before she knew I had turned. I had been taught by a woman with brown shoes to see people before they saw me, and I saw Ania, for one second, with her guard down, by a churchyard gate in the Potteries, crying for a girl with a bootlace in her hair.

You do not stop believing in somebody who cries like that. Not if you have seen it. Whatever else they have done.

* * *

The inquest was in June, the eighteenth, in Torquay.

I came down from London and sat at the back. My mother sat beside me and held my hand the whole time, which she had not done since I was small. Ron Shenton sat at the front, on his own, in the same suit, and did not look round.

DI Robinson gave evidence for eleven minutes. A tall man with a pleasant face and a good suit, who stood with his hands behind his back as if he owned the room, and said that the deceased had been walking on Berry Head at night, alone, close to an unstable section of fence; that the post had been found to be rotten at the base; that there was no evidence of the involvement of any other person; and that it was, in his view, a tragic accident. He said it very kindly. He looked at Ron Shenton when he said it.

Jono gave evidence for four minutes, in uniform, in short sentences, the way he wrote. And at the end, when the coroner

thanked him and he should have sat down, he did not. He stood there, nineteen, with his helmet under his arm, in a room full of men who outranked him, and said:

"Sir. There was a mark on the fence post. On the seaward side. Freshly cut. I drew it at the time. I think it should be recorded."

There was a silence. I saw DI Robinson, in the front row, not turn his head.

"Thank you, constable," said the coroner, after a moment, not looking up. "Noted."

Misadventure. It took him five minutes to say it.

* * *

Afterwards, outside, on the steps, in the sun, Jono came and found me. He did not say anything about the inquest. He said, "Come to Preston. Now. I want to show you something."

We drove to his parents' house in Preston, in his car, a rusty Fiesta, without talking. He took me round the back, to the garage, and unlocked it, and switched on the light.

It was leaning against the back wall, among the bicycles and the lawnmower. A fence post, grey with weather, rotten at the bottom, with a rusty staple near the top where the wire had been.

"Parks replaced it on the Monday," said Jono. "Like he said. They took the old one back to their yard in Brixham to burn. I went and got it out of the pile on the Tuesday night. Nobody saw." He did not look at me. "That's two things I've done I shouldn't."

He turned the post round, carefully, so that the light from the bulb fell on the side that had faced the sea.

Low down, about a foot from where the grass had been, cut into the grey wood, very small and very neat, the size of a two-pence piece. The wood inside the cuts still pale.

A face like a cat's. Two close little eyes. Two tusks, curving up. A tail, going all the way round and crossing over where it started.

I looked at it for a long time.

I had seen it before. Not in Jack's books. Not in my mother's. I had seen it hanging on a fine black chain at the throat of a woman in a long grey dress, in a hall in Hamburg, under a chandelier, with a Christmas tree behind her lit with real candles.

I did not say so. I stood in the garage in Preston and saw Ingrid Petrick's throat, and said nothing to Jono at all. I thought: the grandmother. Her people. Brandt, with his ordinary face. I did not think the other thing. I did not let myself. I had Douglas's voice in my head: *The girl, we don't know about. Whatever she was, she sent you home.*

I put a tile over it. I stood on it. It held.

"What is it?" I said. "The mark?"

Jono told me. The name. *Taowu*. Jack's book, February 1896. Johnny's, 1943. A thing from an old Chinese story that somebody had told in the back room at Bailey's and somebody else had taken and made theirs. The mark of the hand behind the hand.

"Nobody believes me," he said. "The DS half does. The coroner noted it and it's not in the transcript. The DI said kids." He looked at the post. "I'm keeping it. In here. Until somebody does."

I said I believed him.

"I know," said Jono. "That's why I showed you."

He did not show me the film. He had a cassette of undeveloped film in a sandwich bag in a tin box twenty feet away in the house, and he did not say a word. I have asked him why, since. He said, *Because you'd have opened it. And it wasn't time.*

* * *

I drove out to Berry Head that evening. In a hire car, because the Mini had been sold in 1988, when I went to London. I parked in the place. Nose to the sea.

It was a long June evening, warm, with the light going gold behind me and the sea very still. There was nobody else up there. I walked along the cliff top to the north fort and found the place. A new post, pale, raw, with new wire, very tight. Below it, a long way below, the ledge, and the sea coming in over it, gently, and going out.

I took the box out of my pocket. Dark blue velvet, with a spring hinge. I had brought it from London in my inside pocket, over my heart, without deciding why.

I opened it. The garnet, in the gold, the colour of the bottle kilns at sunset from the fire escape at Hanley.

I had been going to ask her on the halfway line at Vale Park, and something had said *not yet*. And she had come all the way from Burslem to Berry Head, on a Saturday night, following somebody, to show me something, and had stood at this fence, and I had been asleep.

I took the ring out of the box. I held it in my hand for a long time, at the fence, with the sea below.

Then I threw it.

I am not going to describe it. It went out over the edge into the gold light and I did not see it fall, and I did not hear it, and the sea came in over the ledge and went out again, and that was all.

I closed the empty box. The hinge snapped shut. I put it back in my inside pocket.

I lost her twice. Once in 1983, with a note on a kitchen table, and once on Berry Head, in 1992, with a ring. I have never been sure which was worse. The first was not knowing. The second was knowing exactly.

The lighthouse came on behind me, as I stood there, and began to turn. The long white arm of light went out over the sea, and came round, and went over the new fence post and the old place, and over me, and went on.

I counted it. Round, and light, and dark. I had not counted it since Boxing Day 1980.

I went home in October to Widecombe Cot, for Ania's week, as I always did. She was at her table in the bay window. I brought her toast. I had never done that; it was my mother's job. I put it on the

table beside her cup, and she looked up at me with her clear steady eyes.

"Thank you, Chris," she said.

She did not eat it. I had not expected her to. I sat down at the table, across from her, without being asked, and looked out of the window at the bay, and we sat there together, the two of us, for a long time, not saying anything at all.

Chapter 21 – *East*

> *Sat. 11 Sept. 1993. Berry Head car park, 11.30 p.m. With C.H. in my car. His last night. Flies Monday, Singapore, two years he says. Nose to the sea. Lighthouse. Near the end he said: "Keep the Torbay end, Jono." Said I would. He said it the way Jack would have said it to Edward, or Edward to Jack. He doesn't know that. I do.*

He doesn't know that. I do.

I did not. He was right. I had not read my mother's exercise book yet, or Jack's thirty-one, or anything about a constable and a tram conductor in 1895 who had divided Torbay between them, and said to each other, I have no doubt, something very like *keep your end*. I said it because I was frightened, and because he was twenty and the only person in Torbay I could say it to.

He wrote it down and kept it twenty-five years, and posted it to me seven thousand miles, so that I would read it before I came home and know that I had said it, and what it meant.

I am nearly at the end of the part of this that happened in England. The flat is very empty now. I have a bed and a table and two chairs and a kettle, and nine days.

* * *

Ania told me in October 1992. At the table in the bay window at Widecombe Cot, on the last day of her week, the Monday.

I had sat with her every morning that week, which I had never done before. I brought her toast, which she did not eat, and sat across from her at the little table with my own cup, and we did not talk. My grandmother, seventy-seven, watched us over her reading glasses from the table by the door where the Canadian used to sit, and did not say anything.

On the Monday, at about half past nine, with her carpet bag already packed and standing by the door of the dining room, Ania put down her cup, square to the edge of the saucer, and looked at me.

"You are going to go east, Chris," she said.

I did not understand. I said I was not going anywhere. I said I was going back to London on Wednesday.

"Not on Wednesday," said Ania. "Next year. In the autumn. They will ask you. A man from BT will ask you, and Douglas will ask you, and you will say yes." She looked out at the bay. "Singapore."

I laughed. I could not help it. I said I had never been further east than Hamburg.

"No," said Ania. "Nor had a great many people who are there now. The British left Singapore in 1971, and said it was too expensive to stay. And Singapore did not fall into the sea. It grew. It is growing now, faster than anywhere in the world." She looked back at me. "Everything is going east, Chris. The money, the ships, the cables. In five years Hong Kong goes back to China, and everybody who has anything in Hong Kong they do not want China

to see is moving it, quietly, to Singapore. And the people who move things quietly are always the first to go."

I thought of Sue on the floor in Highbury, watching the men at the edges of the picture. *Hamburg's two hours from Berlin.*

"Somebody from Rage should be there first," said Ania. "Before them. Not after." She picked up her cup again, in both hands. "Somebody who can hear a fault in a line before he can find it."

I asked why me. I asked why not somebody who wanted to go.

She looked at me for a long time across the little table, with the sea behind her, the way she had looked at Karen in 1979, as if she were reading something written very small.

"Because there is something there," she said, "that only you can do."

I asked what.

"I cannot tell you," said Ania. "If I tell you, you will do it differently." She almost smiled. "I am still learning when to be quiet. I have been learning for a very long time. I am still not very good at it."

"How long?" I said. "Out there. How long would I have to go for?"

"They will say two years," said Ania.

"And?"

She did not answer that. She stood up and picked up her carpet bag, and my mother came out of the kitchen in her coat to walk her down to the station, the way she had every year since 1950.

At the door Ania turned round, which she never did.

"You will see a great deal of rain there," she said. "Warm rain. Every afternoon. You will like it." And then: "Take the compass, Chris. When your mother gives it to you. Wherever you are, it points home."

I did not know what she meant. My mother had never shown me any compass. I said so, to my mother, that evening, when she came back up the hill from the station.

My mother looked at me for a long time across the kitchen table.

"No," she said. "Not yet."

* * *

It happened exactly as she said. I have stopped being surprised by that. I was surprised for the first thirty years. I am not surprised now.

In June 1993 a man from BT International asked me to lunch near St Paul's and told me that Singapore Telecom was being floated in the autumn, the biggest share sale in the history of South-East Asia, and that BT had a contract to advise them on their international network, and needed engineers who knew packet switching. He said I had been recommended. He said it was two years. He did not say who had recommended me.

The next Tuesday, at a quarter past three, I went up the seventy-two stairs in Pimlico and asked Douglas Hills for a quarter of Darjeeling and told him it was too dear.

He was eighty-four. He did not get up from his chair by the window any more; he had a stick now, and a rug over his knees. But his voice was the same, dry and London and precise, and he listened to me tell him about the lunch and did not say anything until I had finished.

"Go," he said.

I said I had not decided.

"Yes, you have," said Douglas. "You decided in October, at the table in the bay window. She told me." He picked up his tea with a hand that shook. "Go. Watch the ships. Watch the money. Watch who comes from Hong Kong with suitcases, and who meets them. And watch for Hamburg. Petrick and Company have had an office in Singapore since 1971, on the river, by the old godowns. The year we left. They were there before the paint was dry on our going."

I asked him if he would still be here when I came back.

He looked at me for a long time with the light behind him.

"Probably not," said Douglas Hills. "Jono will be. Write to Jono."

* * *

I went to see my grandmother before I went.

I drove down from London on the Friday and found my grandmother in the back room at Widecombe Cot, at the long deal table, with the accounts ledger open in front of her, doing the figures for the quarter. She was seventy-eight. She looked at me over her glasses.

"Singapore," she said.

I said yes.

"Your grandfather would have liked that," said my grandmother. "He always wanted to go somewhere hot. He never went further than Torquay." She closed the ledger. "Sit down."

I sat down. She looked at me across the long table for a long time, the way she had looked at me all my life, as if she were adding me up and not entirely sure of the total.

"There was a Canadian," she said. "In the war. In this house. In Room 5." She did not take her eyes off me. "He wanted to take your mother away to the other side of the world. To keep her safe, he said. I wouldn't let him." She folded her hands on the ledger. "Your mother will tell you about it one day. It's not mine to tell. I only want to say this." She paused. "Whatever's waiting for you out there, Chris, it isn't the other side of the world. There isn't another side. It's all one place. It's all this place." She put her hand flat on the ledger. "You'll find that out."

I did not know what she meant. I said I would write.

"Write to your mother," said my grandmother. "She'll want it. And she'll keep it." She opened the ledger again and picked up her pencil. "Go on. I've got the quarter to finish."

At the door I looked back. She was not doing the figures. She was sitting with the pencil in her hand, not moving, looking at the chair by the range where my grandfather used to sit. I went out quietly.

* * *

On the Saturday I drove through Brixham on my way to nowhere in particular, which was the way I drove through Brixham, and in the harbour, by the fish market, on the quay, I saw Karen.

She was standing by the railings at the edge of the quay, in a big jumper with the sleeves rolled up four times, her red-brown hair tied back with a green ribbon. Two little girls were with her, one holding each hand, pulling in opposite directions, and she was laughing, with her head back, the whole-throated laugh.

I slowed the car down. I did not stop.

She looked up. Across the quay, at the road, at the car going by. At me, through the windscreen. And she stopped laughing.

We looked at each other for about two seconds, through the glass, across thirty yards of quay and fourteen years.

Then she took one hand out of her daughter's, and lifted it, not a wave, just lifted it, the palm towards me, the way you put your hand up to stop a bus or to say *I see you*.

I lifted mine off the wheel.

And the road went round the corner by the harbour master's office, and she was gone.

I had kept my word. I had not been up Berry Head with anybody else. Only on my own, on Boxing Day in 1980 in the frost, and in June the year before with a ring in my pocket.

That night I went up it with Jono.

* * *

He drove, the rusty Fiesta. We went up through Brixham in the dark at eleven and out onto the head, and he parked in the place, nose to the sea, without my telling him which place, and turned the engine off.

The silence came down. In front of us, the little lighthouse, turning, and the long white arm of light coming round over us and going on.

I asked him how he had known which place.

"You told me," said Jono. "When I was eleven. On the bus home from the level crossing. A Mini with its nose to the sea, and a lighthouse, and a girl from Brixham who stood on edges." He looked out through the windscreen. "You were looking out of the bus window. I wrote it down. In the footballer book."

I did not remember. I said so.

"No," said Jono. "That's why we write it down."

We sat there a long time. He had brought a flask of tea his mother had made, and two cups from the set at Widecombe Cot, with the green band round the rim, which I had not known his mother had.

He was twenty, nearly two years in the force, and he had already made himself the kind of enemy a constable should not have, in a DI with a pleasant face, by asking to see a transcript. He knew it. He did not seem to mind.

"They'll never make me a detective," he said. "Not while he's there. The DS says I should keep my head down." He drank his tea. "I'm not going to keep my head down."

I asked him what he was going to do.

"Watch," said Jono. "Write it down. Wait." He looked at the lighthouse. "Somebody's got to keep the books. Grandad Douglas is eighty-four. Dad doesn't want them. They're mine now." He was quiet. "I've started the thirty-second. You know that. On the rock. I'm going to keep it till it's full." He looked at me. "It might take a long time."

* * *

I did not tell him about Hamburg, or the pendant, or Ingrid Petrick's throat. I had put a tile over it, and I did not take my foot off the tile even for Jono, even on my last night.

He did not tell me about the film.

We sat there, the two of us, in a rusty Fiesta on top of Berry Head at midnight, each with something in his pocket that he was not telling the other, both knowing the other had something, and neither of us asking. I think it was the most Hills thing I have ever done, and the most Harvey thing he ever did, and that it was exactly right, and exactly wrong.

At about half past twelve I said it. I do not know why. It came out of me the way the songs had in Highbury, like water out of a pipe.

"Keep the Torbay end, Jono."

He did not answer at once. He looked at the lighthouse beam going round.

"I will," he said.

And then he took out the thirty-second and opened it on his knee, and wrote something down by the light of the lighthouse coming round, a word with each sweep of the beam. I did not ask him what. I have it now.

* * *

I flew on the Monday, the thirteenth of September 1993, from Heathrow, at nine at night.

I did not sleep. I sat by the window and looked down at Europe going by in the dark, all the lights of all the towns, scattered like the lamps on the switchboard at Fleet House, and then nothing for a long time. Somewhere over Iran, at about three in the morning, I put my hand in my jacket pocket and found something I had not put there.

An envelope. Small and white and square, the kind you put a card in. Sealed.

I opened it. Inside there was a card, plain, white, with nothing printed on it. And on it, in a small regular hand, perfectly neat, every letter the same height, like print:

> *There is no other side. It is all one place. Watch the platform. A.*

I sat with it in my hand in the dark at thirty-five thousand feet over the middle of Asia for a long time.

Then I put it back in my pocket and looked out of the window. Far out ahead of us, low down, the sun was coming up over

somewhere I had never been, red, enormous, the way it comes up over the sea below Widecombe Cot in June.

I had not been given the compass yet. I did not know it existed. But I know which way I was facing. I have known ever since.

East. And then, for twenty-five years, east. And now, in nine days, the other way.

Chapter 22 – *Press Pass*

> *Thurs. 22 Sept. 1994. Letter from C.H., Singapore, airmail, came this morning. Football. Heat. Rain at four every day. Last line: "Somebody from before is here." Did not say who. Wrote back by return: Who? Never got an answer. Should have gone out. Didn't. My fault.*

My fault.

It was not his fault. He was twenty-one, a constable with a DI who hated him, and no money and no passport, and I had written one line at the bottom of a letter and then not answered the question. I did not answer because I did not want to say her name on paper. I knew what Jono would write back. And I did not want to read it.

So I did not answer, and he wrote *my fault* in the thirty-second, and carried it fourteen years, until he got on a plane with a brown file and came to tell me who it was I had let in.

* * *

Singapore hit me the way Paris had, in the chest, but from the other side. Paris had been grey and gold and old. Singapore in 1993 was green and white and new and wet. The heat came at you off the tarmac at Changi at six in the morning like the door of an oven, and did not go away for twenty-five years. Everything was growing: the rain trees with roots like the buttresses of a cathedral, the towers, the money. And at four o'clock every afternoon, exactly as Ania had

said, the sky went black over the Strait and the rain came down, warm, so hard it bounced off the pavements, and then stopped, and the steam came up off everything, and the city went on.

I liked it. She had said I would.

BT gave me a flat off Orchard Road with a doorman and a pool, and I lived in it for two months and hated it, and then moved into a room above a shophouse in Joo Chiat, among the old Peranakan terraces with their painted tiles, over a shop that sold incense and paper offerings for the dead. It smelled of durian and joss sticks. The old couple who owned the shop fed me laksa on Sundays, and I would not have changed it for the Ritz.

And I worked, at Singapore Telecom, on the international network, through the autumn of the flotation. Cables under the sea to Malaysia and Indonesia and Hong Kong. Switching centres full of the same grey racks I had swept between at Fleet House at sixteen, only very cold, with the air conditioning roaring.

It was what I knew. I was good at it. I could hear a fault in a line in Singapore the same as in Torquay.

That was the day job.

* * *

The other one began at a football match.

I went to the Kallang in November, because a man at work had a spare ticket. The National Stadium, a great open bowl of concrete, fifty thousand people in it, in the heat, under the floodlights, Singapore against somebody in the Malaysia Cup. I knew nothing

about it. I knew that the noise, when Singapore scored, came up out of the concrete and went straight through the soles of my shoes into my chest, and that I had not heard anything like it since the Bycars End in the rain with Angie's arms round my neck.

I had brought Ron Shenton's old Praktica, of course. And I took pictures of the crowd, the way I had on the Bycars End. An old Chinese man in a singlet with his eyes shut. Three Malay boys with their arms round each other. And, high up in the stand behind the goal, a row of men in good suits who were not watching the match at all, but each other, and their telephones.

I sold one of them, the next week, to a newspaper: the old man with his eyes shut. The sports editor, whom I had met in a bar on Boat Quay, said, *You've got an eye. We need a crowd man for the Cup. Fifty dollars a picture.* A week later I had a press pass, a laminated card on a cord round my neck with *PHOTOGRAPHER* on it in red capitals.

I wrote to Douglas that night. I told him about the pass.

He wrote back in a fortnight. One line, in his small neat capitals.

> *EXCELLENT. NOBODY SEARCHES A PHOTOGRAPHER'S BAG. D.*

* * *

He was right. Nobody did. Not once, in twenty-five years.

I went everywhere with that pass, that first season, the Malaysia Cup of 1994. Kuala Lumpur and Penang and Ipoh and Johor Bahru, every other week, over the Causeway, with two cameras round my neck and a bag full of lenses and, in the bottom, in a pocket I had sewn in myself, a small black notebook.

I had started it. Not properly, not every day, not yet. But at night, in hotel rooms in Ipoh and Penang, I wrote down what I had seen in the stands. Who sat with who. Who arrived in a car with darkened windows and left before the end. Which shipping agents in Johor had box seats, and which bankers from Hong Kong were their guests.

It was the switchboard on the fifth floor at Fleet House. It was the platform at Paignton. It was everything Sue had taught me, in a country where nobody knew me, with a laminated card round my neck that said I was allowed to be there and look at everybody.

And it was the beginning of Rage in Asia, though nobody called it that for years. It was one man with a press pass and a notebook in the bottom of a camera bag, and a weekly letter to an old man in Pimlico.

* * *

I went down to the river in the spring of 1994, on my own, on a Sunday, to find the godowns.

Douglas had said they were on the river: the old warehouses along the Singapore River, where the lighters used to unload rice and rubber and tin for a hundred years, until the government

cleaned the river up and the godowns were turned into restaurants and bars.

But further up, past Clarke Quay, round the bend, some were still warehouses. And on one of them, an old two-storey godown with green shutters and a tiled roof, there was a brass plate by a heavy wooden door.

PETRICK & CO. (S) PTE LTD. Shipping Agents. Est. 1971.

I stood on the other side of the river under a rain tree for an hour with the long lens and photographed the door. Nobody went in or out. It was Sunday.

I had the film developed in Chinatown and posted the prints to Pimlico, and kept the negatives in the sewn pocket, under the notebook. I had learned that much in Paris.

* * *

She found me in June.

The sixteenth, a Thursday, in the evening, at the Kallang, at a Cup match against Selangor, under the floodlights, in the heat, with fifty thousand people roaring.

I was on the track behind the goal, with my back to the pitch, as usual, working along the stand with the long lens, a row at a time. A man with two children on his shoulders. A row of men in good suits, not watching.

And, at the end of the row, alone, in a pale linen dress, with her fair hair cut in a straight line at the jaw, sitting very still among fifty

thousand people who were not still at all, looking straight down the barrel of my lens. At me.

I took the picture. I could not help it. My finger did it.

Then I lowered the camera.

She did not wave. She sat and looked at me across forty yards of floodlit air, and then she stood up and went along the row towards the exit, and I did the thing I had been taught never to do. I left my post. I left the cameras with another photographer and ran up the tunnel and round the outside of the stadium, through the crowds at the food stalls, to the gate she would have to come out of.

She was there. Standing under a lamp by the gate, by a stall selling satay, with her arms folded.

"Hello, Chris," said Karina.

* * *

I am going to put down what she told me as nearly as I can, because I believed it, and because I want whoever reads this to know exactly what I believed, and why.

She said she had left her grandmother. She said she had left in 1992, in April, after Berry Head.

She said she had been in Torbay that weekend. Yes. She had been sent, by her grandmother, with Brandt, to see what I was doing, home on leave, whether I was talking to anybody, whether I had told anybody about Paris. She said she had not wanted to go. She said she had gone because she always went.

She said Angie had seen her in Hanley, in the market, on the Friday, where she had stopped on the way with Brandt to see the Petrick clay agent, and had followed them. She said Brandt had noticed, on the train. She said that on the Saturday night Brandt had gone out alone, late, and come back at two in the morning with mud on his shoes and gorse in the turn-ups of his trousers, and had said nothing, and in the morning had driven them both to Exeter for the first train to London.

She said she had read about it in the *Western Morning News* on the train. A woman from Stoke. Berry Head. Misadventure.

She said she had known. She had sat on the train with the newspaper on her knee and Brandt beside her reading the *Financial Times*, and known, and said nothing, all the way to Hamburg. And when she got to the house on the Elbchaussee she had packed one bag and gone out of the back door in the night and never gone back.

"Two years," she said. "Lisbon. Then Bangkok. Then here. Translating, for shipping firms. Not Petrick." She looked at me under the lamp, with the satay smoke going up between us and the Kallang Roar coming over the wall behind her like the sea. "I knew you were here. I have watched you for eight months, in the stands. I did not come near you. I did not think I had the right."

I asked why she had come near me now.

"Because I am tired," said Karina. "Because I have nobody. Because I wanted to tell you, once, to your face, that I did not do it, and that I have never forgiven myself for not stopping it, and that I

left." She looked up. "That is all. That is the true thing. Then I will go, if you want."

* * *

I did not want.

I want to be honest. I stood under that lamp with my press pass round my neck, and I thought of Angie's bootlace in my wallet, and her note beside it, *watch her*, and the fence post with the mark on it, and Ingrid Petrick's throat. I thought of Raymond Achard among the coffee sacks: *I have known people who loved the person they were sent to. It does not always stop them.*

And I thought of Douglas, in Pimlico, with the light behind him. *The girl, we don't know about. Whatever she was, she sent you home.*

And I looked at her, under the lamp, alone, in a pale dress, with her arms folded and her eyes wet, looking at me as if she were not sure I was real, the way she had looked at me in the Café des Phares in 1984, and I believed her.

Brandt. With mud on his shoes. Of course. It made sense of everything, the mark on the post and the camera in the gorse. Everything except the one thing I would not look at, and I did not look at it.

I put a tile over it. I stood on it. It held.

"Don't go," I said.

She did not move for a long time. Then she unfolded her arms.

* * *

She moved into Joo Chiat in August. One bag. She put the Burslem teapot on the shelf over the gas ring, which she had carried, she said, from Hamburg to Lisbon to Bangkok to Singapore, wrapped in a jumper, and never once used anywhere else.

The old couple downstairs looked at her for a long time when she came in with her bag, and then the old woman gave her a bowl of laksa, and called her *anak*, child, the way she called me nothing at all, and Karina put her hand over her mouth and went upstairs very fast.

Ania came to Widecombe Cot that October, my mother wrote to me, on the Friday, at ten past four. She did not ask after me. My mother said she sat at her table in the bay window for the whole of her stay and did not drink her tea. Not once.

I did not know what that meant. I did not let myself.

Two months. Then four. Then six, and it was the new year, and she was still there, in the room above the incense shop, making coffee and tea, both, in the mornings, because she still could not decide what she was. Then a year.

Nobody came to stop it. Nothing came. No letter, no job, no train.

I thought the curse was broken. I thought, lying awake in the heat in Joo Chiat with her head on my chest and the rain on the roof, that it had only ever been the distance. That here, on the other side of the world, it could last.

There is no other side, Ania had written on a card in my pocket. *It is all one place.*

I had the card. It was in my wallet, with the bootlace and the note. I did not take it out.

Chapter 23 – *The Box*

> *Sun. 22 Oct. 1995. Widecombe Cot, the kitchen, 2.15 a.m. Mrs H. gave C.H. the box in the back room at 9 last night. Asked me to wait in the kitchen, "in case". Heard nothing through the door for five hours. At 2.10 a.m. he came out and asked me for a pen. Gave him mine. Did not get it back. Do not want it back.*

He did not get it back. I still have it. A black Parker ballpoint, police issue, with *DEVON & CORNWALL CONSTABULARY* on the clip in worn gold letters. I wrote the first line in the first notebook with it at twenty past two in the morning in the back room at Widecombe Cot, and it has lived in my top pocket for twenty-three years. It is there now.

I did not know he had written it down. *Do not want it back.* I have read that line more times than any other in the thirty-second, except one.

* * *

Basil was born on the twenty-sixth of August, 1995, a Saturday, at twenty past four in the morning, at the Kandang Kerbau hospital, in the rain.

I am not going to write much about it. It was the longest night of my life and then, at twenty past four, it was not night any more. A nurse put him in my arms in a white blanket, red and furious and

very small, and I counted his fingers, the way I had told myself I would never count anything again, and there were ten, and I stopped.

Karina lay in the bed with her hair dark with sweat and her eyes shut. When she opened them, she looked at me holding him for a long time, without saying anything. And then she said, very quietly, in the night voice, the rough one, "He looks like you." And then she shut her eyes again and turned her face to the wall.

I did not know what that meant. I thought she was tired.

She chose the name. It meant *king*, in Greek, she said, and she wanted him to have a name that nobody in either family had ever had. I thought it was a good reason. I still do.

* * *

I wrote to my mother that week: the name, the weight, the time, and that his mother was Karina.

I had told my mother about Karina the year before, in a letter. Not much. That she was here. That she had left her family. That I was happy. My mother had written back four sides about Widecombe Cot and the weather, and at the end one line: *Bring him home to see us, when you can. Just you and him, the first time.*

This time she wrote back in three days, by airmail, express. One side.

> *Dear Chris,*
>
> *I am so happy for you. Your father is beside himself.*

Come home in October, for Miss Ania's week. On your own. I have something to give you. I said in 1965 that I would give it to you when you had a son of your own, and you have one. Leave Basil with his mother. He is too small to travel. This is for you.

Your loving Mum.

I read it in the room above the incense shop, with Basil asleep in a drawer lined with towels, because we had not bought a cot yet. *On your own.* My mother had underlined it.

I did not tell Karina what the letter said. I said my mother wanted to see me in October. Karina looked at me for a long time, and at the letter in my hand, and said, "Of course. You must go," and did not ask anything else.

She never asked. I have said that.

* * *

I flew home and came up the hill to Widecombe Cot on the Friday afternoon, the twentieth, in the rain.

At ten past four the gate went behind me, and I turned round, and Ania was coming up the path with her carpet bag.

She stopped when she saw me, in the rain, without a coat. And then something happened at the corner of her mouth, and she said:

"Congratulations, Chris."

I had not told her. I had not told anybody in England except my mother and father.

"Thank you," I said.

She came up the path and put her hand on my arm, very lightly, for a moment. She had never done that before.

"Basil," she said. "It is a good name. It means king." And she went past me, up the steps, into the hall, and my mother came out of the office and took her bag, and she went up to Room 3.

* * *

My mother gave me the box the next night, the Saturday, at nine o'clock, in the back room.

She had sent everybody away. My father to the Yacht Club with Leonard, who was eighty-four and still went down every Saturday for one pint. My grandmother to bed early. The one guest to the pictures. Ania was in Room 3; nobody sent Ania anywhere. And Jono, twenty-two, who had come round at eight with a bottle of wine, had been told by my mother that he could stay if he sat in the kitchen with the door shut and did not come out unless she called.

She made the tea on the range, the way her mother had, and shut the door. Then she took a cardboard carton out of the bottom cupboard of the dresser, an old one that had once held a dozen bottles of brown sauce, and put it on the long deal table between us.

"I said I'd give you this when you had a son of your own," said my mother. "You've got one. So here it is."

I looked at the box. I did not open it.

"It's for you, Chris," she said. "Not for your house. For you."

I said I did not know what she meant.

My mother looked at me across the long table for a long time, with her grey eyes, which she has from her mother, and which I have, and which Basil does not.

"No," she said. "Good." And she poured the tea.

Then she put her hand on my shoulder for a moment, and went out, and left me alone with the box.

* * *

I have said what was in it already, in the first chapter, on a bed in Tiong Bahru. But I did not say what it did.

A school exercise book with a green cover. *W. HARVEY, 1965.*

A blue airmail envelope, with red and blue chevrons round the edge, and inside it four sheets of thin paper, and a child's drawing of a lake.

A Canadian cigar box, full of sweet wrappers, with pencil writing on the inside of the lid.

A brass compass.

And a small black notebook with a perished elastic band, the first page of which said, in my mother's hand: *Sunday, 31st October 1965. 12.50 a.m. Widecombe Cot. Fine after rain. Wind SW, dropping. Chris asleep upstairs. Opened the letter. Have written it all down.*

I read the exercise book first. All of it, twenty-eight chapters, written in a month when I was three and a half, at this same table.

It took me five hours.

* * *

I cannot tell you what it was like. I can only tell you what I found.

I found my great-grandfather, Edward Harvey, a tram conductor, and Jack Hills, a constable, in a back room in 1895, and a woman who came off the four o'clock from Newton Abbot with no ticket and held her tea with both hands.

I found a German naval officer coming ashore in Jory Tozer's punt, and a gentleman from Paignton who sent lilies to funerals. George Petherick. Whose face I had looked at over a fireplace in Hamburg on Christmas Day.

I found my grandfather Harold, the grocer in Hendon, in the back of his shop with a man called Talland and a quarter of Darjeeling. I found Raymond Achard's friend. I found where the code came from.

I found my mother, at seven, at the reception desk, dotting the i's of a Canadian's name in the register. I found a car at the gate before it was light, and my mother at eight years old shouting the house awake.

I found my father, ten years old, at the bottom of a boat at Galmpton, finding a mark on a frame. A face like a cat's. Two tusks. A tail curling round.

And I found, in chapter seventeen, a woman in a good grey coat walking up the steps of a house in Bayswater in 1943, with something small and dark at her throat that was not a cross. *Her name was Ingrid Petrick.*

I sat at the long table with the exercise book open in front of me and my hand flat on the page.

I had known since Hamburg that the woman with young hands was not what she seemed. But I had not known *this*. That she had been forty in 1943. That she had stood in a tunnel under Torquay in an air raid and looked down at my mother in her nightdress. That she had sat on the Canadian's verandah in Toronto in 1963 and *had not changed at all*.

And that she was the grandmother of the woman asleep in a room above an incense shop in Joo Chiat, with my son in a drawer lined with towels beside her.

I sat there for a long time.

And then I did the thing I had been doing since Burslem. I thought: *she left*. Karina went out of the back door of that house in the night with one bag and never went back. She ran from *this*. Of course she ran. Who would not?

I put the tile back. It held better than ever, that night, because now I knew what Karina had run *from*, and that made her braver.

I want that down. I want whoever reads this to see exactly how it worked. Every true thing I learned about Ingrid Petrick, I turned into a reason to trust her granddaughter. It is the cleverest trap I have ever seen, and nobody set it. I built it myself, a tile at a time, and stood on it.

* * *

I read the letter last. The Canadian's. Four sheets of blue airmail paper.

When I got to the end, I read one line three times.

Keep the boy away from the station square.

The boy. Me. Three and a half, in 1965, on the floor with a wooden engine. My mother had decided, that same night, not to keep me away from it. I had grown up going to the level crossing in the station square with Johnny Hills to watch the platform, and taught Jono the same game in the same place.

And now there was another boy. Eight weeks old. Seven thousand miles away. In a drawer.

She came to see me in Toronto last year … and asked me about you, and about your boy, and what I knew.

I put the letter down and put both hands flat on the table, and sat like that for a long time, at two in the morning, with the rain on the window and the range ticking as it cooled.

Then I went down the passage to the kitchen, where Jono was sitting at the table in the dark with a cold cup of tea, wide awake, as if he had been waiting five hours for somebody to need him, which he had.

"Have you got a pen?" I said.

* * *

He gave me his. He did not ask what for.

I went back to the back room. In the inside pocket of my jacket, where I had put it on the morning I left Joo Chiat without knowing why, there was a small black notebook with an elastic band round it, unused. Douglas's. Seven years in a drawer, and then seven thousand miles in my pocket.

I took the elastic off. I opened it at the first page.

And I wrote, with Jono's pen, in the hand I had then, which was smaller than my mother's and less steady:

> *Sun. 22 Oct. 1995. 2.20 a.m. Widecombe Cot, back room. Rain. Wind SW. Read Mum's book. All of it. Read the letter. Basil is eight weeks old. Have written it down.*

That was all. Two lines. I looked at them for a long time.

Then I turned the page and began. Not about how I felt. About what I knew. Everything I had seen since a level crossing in Paignton that I could remember, in order. Fleet House. The Clock on the switchboard. An envelope in a locker. A Mercedes at a roadblock. A key on a ring. A platform at Brussels. A brass plate. A parcel behind a panel. A fence post in a garage in Preston.

I filled eleven pages before it got light.

When it got light I went to the kitchen. Jono was asleep at the table with his head on his arms. I put a cup of tea beside him and took mine out into the back garden, under the monkey puzzle, with the sun coming up red over the sea at the bottom of the hill.

There was somebody at the window of Room 3, looking down at me. I did not look up. I did not need to.

* * *

That was the beginning of the notebooks. A hundred and sixty of them, by this autumn, on a ship. Of the archive. Of the thing I am

going to build in Torquay with my father's tapes and sixty thousand photographs and the notebooks and the box.

My father came home from the Yacht Club at midnight and went to bed without coming into the back room. He told me afterwards that he had seen the light under the door and known what my mother was giving me, because he had stood in the same passage in 1965 and seen the same light under the same door.

On the Monday I went down to the station with my mother and Ania. On the platform, waiting for the up train, Ania looked at me, and at the notebook in my top pocket, with Jono's pen clipped to it.

"Good," she said.

That was all. *Good.* The way Carole had said it on the fire escape at Stafford, at dawn. The way Ania had said it to my mother in 1944, when she was told that a girl of eight had shouted.

Then the train came in, and she got on, and sat at the window, and did not wave.

Chapter 24 – *Tiger Cup*

Sun. 16 Jan. 2005. Pub on Paignton seafront, 1.15 p.m. Tiger Cup final on the satellite, Singapore v. Indonesia, from the Kallang. Only six of us watching. Saw C.H. on the screen for two seconds, after the third goal, behind the goal on the track, back to the pitch, camera up. Shooting the crowd. Only man in 55,000 not watching the ball. Same as ever.

He went to a pub in Paignton to watch a football match between two countries he had never been to, because I was at it, and he saw me, for two seconds, in a crowd of fifty-five thousand, and wrote it down.

I did not know anybody in England was watching. I was working.

This chapter is eleven years, and I am going to do it quickly, because that is how it went. Basil went from a drawer lined with towels to a boy of twelve who could put a ball in the top corner from thirty yards with his left foot. I went from thirty-three to forty-five. And I watched everybody in South-East Asia, in every stadium from Bangkok to Jakarta, everybody except one.

* * *

The two years ended in 1995. BT wrote and asked me to come home. I wrote back and said no.

I said I had a son. I said I had been offered other work. Both were true. The other work was three press passes by then, and a photo agency in Hong Kong that paid me very well for pictures of crowds at football matches and did not ask why the crowds had so many men in good suits in them.

And there was the S.League, Singapore's own, from 1996, and I was there every week, at Jalan Besar and Bishan and Jurong, on the touchline in the heat, with my back to the pitch.

And that September, the first Tiger Cup. The whole of South-East Asia, in Singapore, for a fortnight, playing for a trophy paid for by a brewery. And every team brought officials, and every official brought businessmen, and they all sat in the same box at the Kallang, side by side, watching each other.

I photographed every one of them, and wrote down every name I could get, every night, with Basil asleep in his cot and Karina asleep beside me.

Tiger economies, the newspapers called them that year. And the trophy was the Tiger Cup. I wrote that in my notebook, with a question mark after it. I think I thought it was a joke.

* * *

In 1997 the tigers fell.

It started in Bangkok, in July, when the baht went, and then it went everywhere, Malaysia and Indonesia and Korea, like a fault going down a line from node to node. *You pull on one corner, the whole thing moves.*

I was in Bangkok in the autumn, at the height of it. I have said what happened in the lobby of a hotel by the river, and I am not going to say it again.

What I have not said is what else I saw in that lobby, that week. Men with suitcases, from Hong Kong and Hamburg and Zurich, buying banks and factories and land for nothing from people who had lost everything in a month. I sat in hotel lobbies all over South-East Asia that winter and watched them do it.

Once, in Jakarta, in December, I saw a man I knew. Grey, about sixty by then. Grey suit. An ordinary face. Coming out of a lift with two Indonesian bankers, shaking hands, getting into a car.

I did not take his photograph. I did not need to. I had taken it once already, in 1987, on a step by the Gare du Nord, and somebody had stolen the film.

I wrote it down. *Jakarta, Hotel Indonesia, 11 Dec. 1997, 4.40 p.m. Brandt.* I posted the page to Jono, because Douglas had died the year before and there was nobody else. Jono wrote back in a fortnight. One line. *Noted. And noted where.*

I did not tell Karina. I told myself it was to protect her, that if she knew Brandt was so close she would be frightened. I lay beside her and did not tell her, and that was the closest I came, in eleven years, to the tile cracking.

It did not crack. I stood on it.

* * *

Basil was three in 1998, and the Tiger Cup was in Vietnam, and Singapore won it, in Hanoi, one nil, and I missed the goal, because I was photographing a man in the VIP box who had just turned to the man next to him and smiled.

I rang home from a phone box outside the stadium afterwards. Karina answered. Behind her I could hear the television, and the commentator screaming, and a small voice screaming with him.

"He watched the whole match," said Karina. "Sitting on the floor. He would not go to bed. When they scored he stood up and fell over." She was laughing. "He says he is going to play for Singapore. He says, *Daddy will take the picture.*"

I stood in a phone box in Hanoi with the crowd going past outside, singing, and could not say anything for a while.

That was the year he started. At three, with a ball as big as he was, on the padang at Tiong Bahru, kicking it against the wall of the block until an old man came out and shouted at him. By seven he was in a junior team in a kit that came down to his knees, and the coach, Rahim, who had played for the national side in the eighties, came up to me on the touchline after his second match and said, "Your boy. His left foot. Who taught him that?"

I said nobody. I said I had never kicked a ball in my life.

"Then God taught him," said Rahim, "and God should be paying me." And laughed, and went off down the touchline to shout at a goalkeeper.

* * *

I met Raymond Ong at the Kallang in 1999, in the sponsors' box, at a Singapore international against somebody, I forget who.

I was not supposed to be there. I had gone up at half time to photograph the box from inside for once, and a steward had stopped me, and a man in the front row had turned round and said, "Let him in. I want to see what he's been photographing."

He was about forty. Round and cheerful, in a batik shirt, with a loud laugh and very sharp eyes behind heavy black glasses. He shook my hand and said his name was Raymond Ong, that his family had a printing firm, books and newspapers and football programmes, and that he had been watching me for two seasons.

"You are the photographer who does not photograph the football," he said. "I have seen your pictures in the papers. Always the crowd. Always the boxes." He looked at me over his glasses. "Always us."

I said I liked faces.

"Yes," said Ong. "So do I. It is the only thing in business worth reading." He handed me a glass of something. "Sit. Watch the second half with me. Tell me what you see."

So I sat with a glass of champagne I did not drink and told him, quietly, through the whole of the second half, what I saw. Who was watching who. Which banker had left at half time and come back with his tie different. Ong listened, and did not look at the pitch once either.

At the final whistle he said, "My grandfather had a press in Penang before the war. The Japanese shut it, and afterwards he tried

to buy the building back, and it had been sold, through London, to a shipping firm in Hamburg that wanted the godown next door. He spent the rest of his life trying to find out who." He cleaned his glasses. "So we print things, Mr Harvey. That is all a printer is. Somebody who makes sure that what was said cannot be taken back."

I wrote it down that night. *Ong. Penang. A shipping firm in Hamburg.* I underlined *Hamburg*, and then crossed the underlining out, because Hills do not underline.

It has been lunch, every few weeks, for nineteen years. He is the best friend I have in Asia. He says he is going to come to Torquay one day. I believe him.

* * *

In 2003 the stadiums went quiet.

SARS came in the spring of 2003, and Singapore shut itself up like a house in a storm, schools and football and everything. For three months I had no work. I sat in the flat in Tiong Bahru, where we had moved in 1997, with Basil, who was seven and off school, and taught him the platform game out of the window, with the street below empty, and three people in it, and a dog.

"Man in a mask, no shopping," said Basil, with his chin on the windowsill. "Lady going the wrong way. Dog."

I said that was very good.

"Daddy," said Basil, "why do we always watch people?"

I said it was what our family did. I said his great-great-grandfather had done it on the trams, and got muddled about the Hills, and he laughed at me.

Karina was in the doorway behind us. I had not heard her come. She was standing very still with a cup of tea in her hand, watching us at the window, and her face was the third face. The one from the platform at Brussels. Flat, and still, and taking dictation.

When she saw me see her, it went. She smiled. She came and knelt down beside Basil and put her arm round him and looked out of the window with him.

"Lady with an umbrella," she said. "But it is not raining. Why?"

Basil looked at her with enormous respect.

I did not write that down. I want to be honest. It is not in the notebook for 2003. I had the notebook open on the table, and I did not write it down.

* * *

I met Clifford in 2007. In Bangkok, in February, at the Tiger Cup final, which Singapore won again, in the press box, where he was not supposed to be either.

He was American, about thirty, big and fair and cheerful, with a crew cut and a baseball cap, and a press card for an American sports website which he admitted in the first five minutes was not his main job. His main job was something to do with computers at

the naval base at Changi, and he could not say more, and I did not ask.

He talked through the second half. About the Tiger Cup, which he had fallen in love with, and about his grandfather, who had been in the war, and had died the year before, at eighty-four, in Dayton, Ohio.

"Normandy," said Clifford. "Utah Beach. He got shot in the shoulder in the first hour, in the water, and swore all his life that somebody grabbed his collar and pulled him up the sand. A woman, he said. In a grey suit. On Utah Beach, on D-Day." He laughed. "He was billeted in England before, at some hotel by the sea. He used to talk about the lady who ran it, and her little girl, who he taught to play gin rummy. And he said, when I was born, I had to be Clifford. After him. He said somebody told him to. He never said who."

I had put my camera down. I do not remember putting it down.

"What's your name?" I said. "Your whole name?"

"Clifford," he said. "Clifford Dawes. Why?"

I did not answer for a long time. I was thinking of a letter in pencil from a hospital in Southampton in July 1944, and my grandmother at breakfast reading it out to a woman at a table in the bay window. *Tell him to call his first grandson Clifford, after himself. It will matter.*

"My grandmother ran that hotel," I said. "Widecombe Cot. In Torquay. My mother was the little girl."

Clifford Dawes looked at me for a long time, with his beer halfway to his mouth, in the press box in Bangkok, with the crowd roaring.

"No," he said.

"Yes."

"No *way*," said Clifford.

We have been friends ever since. He is the other person I am leaving behind. He says he will come to Torquay too. He says he wants to see the beach.

* * *

Eleven years. I am fifty-six and I have done them in an evening.

By the end of 2007 I had ninety notebooks, and three agencies, and a column. I had a friend who printed things so that they could not be taken back, and another whose grandfather had been pulled up a beach by a woman in a grey suit. I had a son of twelve with a left foot that God should have been paying his coach for.

And I had Karina. Thirteen years this time, and three in Paris before that. The longest anybody had ever stayed.

Nobody had come to stop it. No letter. No job. No train.

I thought the curse was broken. I want to say it once more, here, so that it is the last thing on the page before the next one.

I thought it was broken.

Chapter 25 – *The Photograph*

> *Thurs. 20 March 2008. Exeter, specialist photo lab, 2.30 p.m. Angie's film. Sixteen years in the tin. Developed today. 23 frames. Frames 1–9: Hanley market, a fair woman and a grey man. 10–16: a train. 17–21: Brixham harbour, evening. 22: Berry Head car park, dark. 23: the fence, by flash. A woman at the post. Fair. Turning. Face to camera. Same face as C.H.'s picture from Johor. Sat in the car in the lab car park for an hour. Then drove home.*

Same face.

He had my picture beside him in the car. I had sent it to him myself, a fortnight before, by email, from Tiong Bahru, at two in the morning, with one line under it. *Jono. Is this who I think it is?*

I knew who it was. I had known for sixteen years. I had stood on a tile in a garage in Preston, and in a churchyard in Burslem, and under a lamp by a satay stall at the Kallang, and every time it held, because I put my whole weight on it.

And then, on a Saturday in March, in Johor Bahru, at a football match, I took a photograph, and the tile went.

* * *

It was the first of March, 2008, a Saturday, a Malaysian league match at the Larkin Stadium in Johor. Karina was in Bangkok for

the week, translating for a shipping firm, as she had been, a week at a time, three or four times a year, for fourteen years.

I was on the track behind the goal, shooting the VIP box, a long glass room above the main stand that you could see straight into under the lights. Men in good suits. A Datuk with a gold watch. And at the end of the row, a grey man, about seventy now, with an ordinary face, leaning to say something to the person beside him.

Brandt.

I had seen him four times in eleven years, always in boxes and lobbies. I took three frames, the way I always did, and then moved the lens along to see who he was talking to.

She was in a dark suit, with her fair hair up. She was laughing at something he had said. Her hand was on his arm.

I took the picture. My finger did it. Then I lowered the camera and stood on the track at the Larkin with fifteen thousand people roaring behind me at something on the pitch, and I could not lift it again.

She was in Bangkok. She had rung me from Bangkok that morning, from the hotel, at seven, and asked about Basil's match and told me it was raining there.

* * *

I did not say anything when she came home on the Thursday. It was not cleverness. It was that I had a son of twelve asleep in the next room, and I was more frightened than I had ever been, and I did not know what she would do if I asked.

She came in with her bag at seven and kissed me, and went and sat on the end of Basil's bed while he told her about his match, which they had won four nil, with two from his left foot. I stood in the kitchen and listened to her laugh through the wall. I had heard that laugh for twenty-five years. It sounded exactly the same.

I went into the spare room and looked at the photograph on the screen. I enlarged it until her face filled the screen, laughing, with her hand on Brandt's arm.

Then I sent it to Jono. *Is this who I think it is?*

He did not answer for a fortnight. I know why now. He was getting a cassette of film out of a sandwich bag in a tin box in Preston, and driving it to Exeter, to a lab that could still develop it after sixteen years.

* * *

The lab did good work. I have the prints. He brought them.

Twenty-three frames. Angie took pictures the way I had taught her on the Bycars End, of people. The market in Hanley, and in the crowd at a stall, a tall fair woman in a pale raincoat and a grey man with an ordinary face. Nine frames of them, following. Then a train: the backs of two heads three rows in front. Then Brixham harbour, evening, a woman alone on the quay looking up at Berry Head. Then the car park on the head, in the dark, the shape of a car.

And then twenty-three.

The flash had gone off. Angie had taken it from very close, in the dark, at the fence. The flash lit everything flat and white: the

post, leaning; the grass flattened in front of it; and a woman, at the post, caught in the moment of turning, with her fair hair across her face and something small and dark in her hand, low down, near the post.

Her face was turned full into the flash. Her eyes were wide open. It was not the smile that stopped at the eyes, or the night face, or the third face. It was a face I had never seen her wear. It was surprised.

That was the last picture. There is nothing after twenty-three.

* * *

He flew out on the twenty-eighth of August. He had been to Stafford by then, and Paris, and Hamburg, and been watched from an upstairs window on the Elbchaussee. He had a brown file.

I met him at Changi at six in the morning. He was thirty-five, a sergeant, grey at the sides already, and he came through the gate with one bag and the file under his arm and stopped when he saw me, and looked at me for a long time.

"Is she here?" he said.

I said no. I said she was in Bangkok again. Since Tuesday.

He nodded slowly, as if that settled something.

We went back to Tiong Bahru. Basil was at school. Jono sat down at the kitchen table and took out the prints from Exeter and laid them in a row, one to twenty-three, and the one from Johor at the end, and sat back.

I looked at them. I had seen them already, by email. It was different on the table.

"There's more," said Jono. "I'm sorry, Chris."

* * *

There was more. I am going to put it down short, because he told it short, sitting at my kitchen table with his big hands flat on the file, in the voice he uses for giving evidence.

The Polytechnic had no record of a student called Karina, of any surname, in any year. There had been a German exchange student on the computing course, but her name was something else, and she had gone home after one term with glandular fever. The student visit to the Hanley exchange on the ninth of June, 1983, had had twelve names on it. None of them was Karina.

The flat on the rue de la Roquette had been rented in August 1984, a month before I arrived, by a company called Petrick et Compagnie. Not by BT. Not by the French. Madame Ferreira had the receipt book still. She had shown him.

The translating firm in Bangkok did not exist. There was an address, a flat above a massage parlour. Nobody there had heard of her.

And the company register in Singapore, which anybody could look at for a few dollars, which I had never once thought to, listed three directors of Petrick & Co. (S) Pte Ltd. One was Brandt. And one, appointed in July 1994, a month after a woman in a pale linen

dress had stood under a lamp by a satay stall and told me she had left her grandmother for ever, was *Petrick, Karina*.

Jono closed the file.

"Her papers," he said. "The ones she gave you. The ones she gave the school, for Basil. The ones she used to get her residence here." He looked at me across the table. "These are no good, Chris."

I had read that line. In my mother's exercise book. Johnny Hills, in the road outside Widecombe Cot at a quarter to five in the morning in June 1944, with a lantern, reading a Canadian's papers one by one and folding them into his own shirt. *These are no good, sir.*

I put my head in my hands.

* * *

Jono did not touch me. He sat at my kitchen table with his hands flat on the closed file and did not say anything, for a long time, the way he had sat on a rock beside Angie in 1992. He has told me since that when a Hills does not know what to do, he waits, and writes it down later.

After a while I said, "Did she do it? Angie?"

"I don't know," said Jono. "I can't prove it. Twenty-three's the only thing there is. She's at the post, in the dark, and Angie's taking her picture, and then there's nothing." He looked at the print at the end of the row. "But she was there, Chris. Not Brandt. Brandt's not on that film after Brixham. Her."

"She told me it was Brandt," I said. "She told me he came back at two in the morning with gorse in his trousers."

Jono did not say anything to that.

I looked at twenty-three for a long time. The face in the flash. Surprised.

Let him sleep, Angie had said to my mother, on the phone, from a box in Brixham, at twenty to twelve at night, with the pips going. *I'll ring at nine.*

* * *

Karina did not come back from Bangkok.

I rang the hotel on the Sunday, and they had never heard of her. I rang her mobile, and it was dead. Not off. Dead.

On the Monday morning I went into our bedroom and looked properly, the way Sue had taught me.

Her clothes were still there. Her books. Her dressing gown on the back of the door. She had taken one bag to Bangkok, the same as always.

The Burslem teapot was gone from the shelf in the kitchen.

She must have taken it in her bag, wrapped in a jumper, the way she had carried it from Hamburg to Singapore. I noticed everything, and I had not noticed that.

That was how I knew she was not coming back. Not the phone. Not the hotel. The teapot.

* * *

I told Basil on the Monday night. He was thirteen. He had been thirteen for a week.

I do not know what I said. Something about his mother having to go away, and it not being his fault, it was never his fault. Debbie's words, I realised afterwards. *It was never you. Try hard.*

He sat on the end of his bed and looked at me, with his mother's eyes, and her colouring, and her quickness, and did not cry. He said, "Is it because of Uncle Jono?"

I said no. I said Uncle Jono had come because he was a friend.

"He's a policeman," said Basil. "I heard him on the phone. To England. He said *the subject*." He looked at me. "Is Mama the subject?"

I could not answer him. He looked at me for a long time. Then he lay down on his bed with his face to the wall, the way his mother had in the hospital the morning he was born, and did not speak to me again for eleven days.

* * *

I went out that night, late, after Jono had gone to sleep. I took a taxi, and then I was at Jalan Besar, the old stadium, where there had been a match that night and the crowd had gone home.

I went in through the press gate. The steward knew me. He let me in without a word, the way stewards let photographers in.

I sat in the press seats, high up, in the empty stand, with the pitch below me bright and green under the floodlights. And the floodlights began to go off, one bank at a time, each with a long

electrical sigh like the main frame at Stafford dying in 1981, until there was only one bank left, over the halfway line, and the pitch was a pool of white in the dark.

I did not cry. I sat and tried to grieve her, and found that I could not. Not the way I had grieved the others, in the frost at Berry Head, or in the snow in Stafford, or on the floor in Kentish Town. There was nobody to grieve. The woman on the bridge, singing. The woman in the dark, telling me something true. The woman under the lamp by the satay stall who had run from a monster. None of them had ever existed. I had been in love, for twenty-five years, on and off, with somebody who had never been there.

You can't grieve someone who never existed. I wrote that down, the next day. *I tried.*

The last bank of floodlights went off.

And in the dark, behind me, a few rows up, somebody said, "Chris."

I did not turn round. I knew the voice. Every word the same length.

"Come home in October," said Ania.

When the steward turned the working lights on, ten minutes later, to lock up, the stand behind me was empty. She never came to Singapore. She had never once, in fifteen years, come to Singapore.

I went home and lay down on the sofa and did not sleep, and in the morning I booked a flight to London for the middle of October.

Chapter 26 – *Room 3*

Thurs. 23 Oct. 2008. Widecombe Cot, 9.10 a.m. Called in on the way to work. Mrs H. at the desk. Said C.H. had gone up to Room 3 at half past eight. Said: "Sit down, Jono. We're waiting." Sat with her. Neither of us spoke. 9.35 he came down the stairs. Went into the dining room. Ate his breakfast. All of it. Mrs H. wrote something in her book. Did not ask what. Went to work.

He sat with my mother. I did not know that. I came down the stairs at twenty-five to ten and went straight into the dining room without looking at the desk, and sat down at the table by the door, the one the Canadian used to sit at, and ate my breakfast. I had not eaten properly for eight weeks. I ate all of it.

I did not know that two people had been sitting in the hall for an hour, side by side, not speaking, waiting to see what I would do when I came down.

My mother wrote it in her book. She copied it out for me afterwards, with the two from 1980 and 1986. Hers is one line.

Thurs. 23 Oct. Chris and Ania, Room 3, an hour. He came down and ate his breakfast.

That is all she wrote. It is the most important line in any of the notebooks, mine or hers or anybody's, and she wrote it the way she would write the number of breakfasts.

This is the hour.

* * *

I had been at Widecombe Cot a week, alone. Basil was with the Ongs in Singapore. He had started speaking to me again on the eleventh day, to ask me to pass the milk, but he had not asked me anything about his mother, and I had not told him anything, and we both knew that it was going to have to be done, one day, and not yet.

My mother met me at Torquay station. She was seventy-three. She stood on the platform under the canopy in her good coat, and when I got off she looked at me for a long time, and then put up her hand and straightened my collar, which did not need it.

"Petrick," she said. Not a question.

I said yes.

"I knew the name," said my mother. "In 1986. When you rang from Paris." She took my arm. "I've known since 1965 what that name was. I let you go to Hamburg anyway."

I asked her why she had not told me then, on the phone from Paris.

My mother walked me down the platform to the taxi rank with her hand through my arm, and did not answer until we were at the barrier.

"Later," she said. "Not on a platform."

She told me, in the end, in the back room, after Room 3. I have put it where it belongs, in Hamburg.

* * *

Ania arrived the next day, the Friday, at ten past four, with her carpet bag. I watched her come up the path through the glass of the front door, and she looked up and saw me, and came in, and said, "Good afternoon, Chris," the way she always had, and went up to Room 3.

I did not go up. All that week she sat at her table in the bay window in the mornings, and I did not bring her toast. I sat in the back room with my notebook and did not write anything in it.

On the Wednesday night I sat up in the back room until four, with my wallet open on the table in front of me. Angie's bootlace, coiled. Angie's note. *Watch her.* And a small white card. *There is no other side. It is all one place. Watch the platform. A.*

At half past eight the next morning I heard her door, on the landing above. And then her feet on the stairs, coming down to breakfast.

I went out into the hall and stood at the bottom of the stairs.

She stopped, halfway down. She looked at me for a long time. Then she turned round, without a word, and went back up, and I followed her.

* * *

Room 3 is at the front of the house, over the dining room, with a window over the garden and the gate and the hill going down to the bay. A small room. A bed with a white candlewick cover, a wardrobe, a chair by the window. My grandmother had kept it for

Ania since 1945, and nobody else had slept in it, ever, even in August, even when people were being turned away at the door.

Ania sat down on the edge of the bed. Her carpet bag was at her feet, packed, as it always was, the whole of her stay, in case. She folded her hands in her lap.

I stood by the window. I did not sit down. I did not trust myself to sit down.

And I said it. What my mother had said to her in this room in 1955, about twenty-one children under a church at St Marychurch. I had not planned to say the same words. They came out the same.

"You knew."

Ania looked up at me.

"Yes," she said.

"You knew. About Karina. All the time. From the start. From Stoke."

"Yes."

"You knew what she was. You knew who sent her. You knew about the key in Paris and the parcel under the sink and the platform at Brussels and the brass plate. You knew she was at Berry Head." My voice was doing what it had done under the lime tree in Burslem. I could not stop it. "You knew she killed Angie."

"Yes," said Ania.

"And you let her come back. In 1994. To Singapore. You let her walk up to me under a lamp at the Kallang and tell me she'd left, and you let me believe it, and you let me—" I could not finish it.

"I knew he had to be born," said Ania.

* * *

I turned round from the window and looked at her.

She was sitting on the edge of the bed with her hands in her lap, very still, exactly as my mother had described her in 1955, in the same room, with the same bag at her feet. She did not look away.

"Basil," I said.

"Yes."

"Why?"

She did not answer for a long time. The light lay on the white candlewick cover in a long square, and I watched it move while she did not answer.

"I cannot tell you," she said at last. "Not all of it. If I tell you, you will do it differently. You will be different with him. You will watch him the way you watched her." She looked down at her hands. "He has to be what he is. Not what you are afraid he might be. That is the only thing I can tell you. He has to be here. For what comes after him."

For what comes after you. Room 3, 1955, my mother aged twenty. *I kept you because you have to be here. For what comes after you.*

"Did you put her there?" I said. "Karina. Did you send her to me?"

"No," said Ania.

"Then who—"

"Her grandmother sent her," said Ania. "To Stoke. To the Coach and Horses. To Paris, with a key. To Torbay, with Brandt, in 1992. To the Kallang, in 1994, with a story about gorse." She looked up. "I did not send her. I did not put her there."

She was quiet for a moment.

"I let her stay," she said.

* * *

I sat down then. On the chair by the window. I had to.

"And the others?" I said. "Karen. Carole. Angie. Sue. Debbie." I made myself say every name. "Did you send *them*?"

Ania looked at me for a long time. And I saw her decide, a very small jolt, the way you see a train decide to move.

"Yes," she said.

I had known. Since a café window in Camden in 1991. Since a girl in a basement paused for one second at my name. I had put a tile over it and stood on the tile for seventeen years. And she said *yes*, and the tile was not there any more, and there was nothing under it but the truth, and I found that I could stand on that too.

"Why?" I said.

"Because you had to be taught," said Ania. "And they were the best teachers there were. Because you had to keep moving, so that nothing could take root round you that they could use. Because each one gave you something you would need, and needed you to need it. And because eighteen months is as long as a cover holds, before it

turns into something else." She looked at her hands. "I learned that in this house. From a man in Room 5."

"Debbie," I said. "Debbie begged you. For longer."

"Yes."

"And you said no."

"Yes."

"And you sat in a café across the street and couldn't watch."

Ania was silent.

"Who told you to do it?" I said. "Who decided the names and the places and the eighteen months? You didn't decide it yourself. I've watched you for forty-six years. Somebody gave you a list."

She looked at me for a very long time.

"Somebody I trust," she said, "more than I trust myself."

She did not say anything else. I asked her again, and she shook her head, once, very slightly, and looked out of the window at the bay.

I have never asked her since. I do not know who it was. I have stopped trying to guess.

* * *

"You may stop now," said Ania quietly. "Trusting me. You would be right to. I took Angie away from you, and I could not keep her. I gave you Debbie and took her back. I let a woman who killed somebody you loved sleep beside you for fourteen years and bear your son." She did not look away from me. "It would be easier, Chris. For both of us. If you stopped. I would understand. I would

still come in October, if your mother would keep the room. But you would not have to bring me toast."

I did not say anything for a long time.

I thought of all of it. The Clock on the switchboard at Fleet House. A girl in Stafford with very big glasses, and a woman in a grey suit who wrote down what she said. A girl on top of a cabinet in Hanley, and a bootlace in my wallet. A woman in a café window in Camden going out by the side door, quickly, because she could not watch.

And I thought of a churchyard gate in Burslem, under a lime tree, and a woman crying before she knew I had turned round.

And then I thought of something I had read at the long table downstairs, in October 1995, in my mother's hand. That this woman had stepped off the four o'clock from Newton Abbot in 1895 with no ticket and held her tea with both hands. That she had been in the back room in 1915, and in the tunnels in 1943, and at the gate in 1944 with salt on her shoes. That she had been at Johnny's funeral, and my grandfather's, and Angie's, at the back, by the wall, alone. That she had come up the hill to this house every October since 1945 and not eaten the toast.

She had never once, in a hundred and thirteen years, walked away from this family. Whatever she was, and whoever she answered to, and whatever she had done.

"No," I said.

Ania looked at me.

"My mother chose who her father was," I said. "In the back room downstairs. In 1965. With a letter in her hand that could have meant anything. She chose." I stood up. "I'm choosing who you are."

* * *

She did not say anything. She sat on the edge of the bed in Room 3, with her hands in her lap and her carpet bag at her feet, and looked up at me.

And something happened at the corner of her mouth. The smile from a long way off, that I had seen all my life across the bay-window table. But it did not stop where it usually stopped. It went on, up, into her eyes. And her eyes, which were perfectly steady and perfectly dry, blinked.

Once. Slowly. The way you blink when something has gone into your eye.

Then she looked down at her hands.

"Thank you, Chris," she said.

I went to the door. At the door I stopped, without turning round, the way she always did, and said, "I'll bring your toast."

"I will not eat it," said Ania.

"I know," I said.

And I went down the stairs, past my mother and Jono sitting side by side in the hall, not speaking, without seeing them, and into the dining room, and sat down at the table by the door, and the girl brought me a plate, and I ate all of it.

Chapter 27 – *The Women's Team*

> *Tues. 9 Feb. 2010. Union St, Torquay, the flat over the shoe repairer's, 6.20 p.m. Ai Li's mum at the door. Ai Li flies to Singapore Thursday, physio to C.H.'s women's team. Her mum asked me was C.H. a good man. Said yes. She said: "So was your great-grandad. Sergeant Hills. My dad said everybody on Union Street knew that." She gave me a cup of tea on the step. Did not ask me in. Did not need to.*

Everybody on Union Street knew that.

Johnny Hills walked the beat on Union Street in the twenties and thirties, in his cape and helmet, trying the doors at night. Ai Li's grandfather had grown up in one of the flats over the shops there, the son of a Hong Kong seaman who had come ashore at Torquay in 1931 and never gone back to sea. Johnny Hills had known him. Johnny Hills knew everybody.

Seventy years later his great-grandson stood on the same step and was given a cup of tea by the seaman's granddaughter, and asked if I was a good man. And said yes.

I do not know if it was true. I know he said it. I know he wrote it down.

* * *

Basil was thirteen in the spring of 2009, and in the youth academy of a club in the east, and very good, and very angry.

He had started speaking to me again after the eleven days, but the way you speak to somebody at a bus stop: politely, about the weather and the timetable. He went to school. He went to training. He came home and went to his room and shut the door and played music I did not understand very loudly. He did not ask about his mother. Not once, in all of 2009.

And on the pitch he was magnificent, and furious. He played as if he wanted to kick a hole in the world. He got sent off three times that year, and Rahim, his old coach, came and stood beside me on the touchline after the third time and said, "Your boy is very sad, Chris."

I said I knew.

"Sad boys either stop," said Rahim, "or they get better than anybody. Which is he going to do?"

I did not know. I said so.

"Then you had better find out," said Rahim, "before he does."

* * *

I found the women by accident. The way I have found most of the things that mattered.

It was a Sunday evening in October 2009, after the rain, on the padang at Tiong Bahru, where the old men play chess under the trees. Eleven women, Malay and Chinese and Indian and one Filipina, in old T-shirts and borrowed boots, with two piles of shopping bags for goalposts, playing seven-a-side in the mud, with nobody watching but the chess players and me.

They were good. Three of them were very good. And one, a tall Chinese girl of about twenty-three with her hair in a long plait, in the centre of midfield, was better than that. She played the ball before she had it, the way the great ones do, and when she lost it she did not shout; she looked round, very calmly, and worked out why.

I watched them for an hour without taking a picture. When they had finished, the girl with the plait came over to my bench.

"You're the photographer," she said. "The one who doesn't photograph the football. My uncle has your pictures on his office wall." She held out a hand, muddy. "Grace. Grace Tay."

I asked who her uncle was.

"Raymond Ong," said Grace. "The printer. I'm a trainee quantity surveyor." She looked at the shopping-bag goals. "There's no women's league that means anything. Nobody pays for pitches. So we play here, on Sundays, in the mud, with bags."

I asked if they wanted a team. A proper one. Kit and a pitch and a coach and fixtures.

She looked at me for a long time, with her calm eyes, the way she had looked round after losing the ball.

"Why would you do that?" she said.

I did not have a good answer. I said I liked watching people who were better than anybody expected.

"That's not a reason," said Grace Tay.

"No," I said. "But it's true."

* * *

Raymond Ong paid for it. I asked him at lunch on the Tuesday, and he cleaned his glasses, and said, "Grace? My Grace? The one who measures concrete?" and laughed, and said yes before I had finished. He said he had been looking for twenty years for a reason to spend money on football that was not his own vanity.

So by January there was a club. Kit, in green and white. A school pitch in Queenstown two evenings a week and Sundays. A coach, a retired schoolteacher from Malacca called Mrs Devi who had played for Malaysia in the seventies and swore in four languages. Fixtures, in Singapore and, if we were good enough, in Malaysia and Thailand and Vietnam.

And a physio. Which was where Jono came in.

* * *

I had asked him, on the phone, at Christmas, if he knew a sports physio who could come out to Singapore, cheaply, for a year. Somebody I could trust. After Karina, there were not many people I could say that about, and none of them were physios.

Jono was quiet on the line for a while.

"There's a girl," he said. "From Union Street. Her granddad knew my great-grandad, on the beat. She was going to be a golfer, junior champion for Devon, then she did her wrist at nineteen. She went to Loughborough and did sports science instead. She's back in Torquay at a gym on the harbour, hating it." A pause. "She's very good. And she watches people, Chris. The way you do. She'll walk

into a room and tell you who's carrying an injury before they've sat down."

I asked her name.

"Ai Li," said Jono. "Her mum's side were Hong Kong, way back. A seaman, in the thirties. Her dad's from Paignton. She sings, too. In a pub band on Saturdays. You'd like her."

* * *

She came off the plane at Changi on the twelfth of February, 2010, into the heat, and I watched it hit her in the chest, the way it had hit me in 1993.

She was small and quick and very straight, with a lot of black hair cut short, and dark eyes that went round the arrivals hall the moment she came through the gate. All the way round. Every person. Before she looked for me.

When she found me she came across, pulling a case, and stopped, and looked at me for a long moment, the way Jono did.

"You're Chris," she said, in a voice with Torquay underneath and something else on top. "Jono said you'd be the one not looking at the gate."

I said I was looking at the gate.

"No, you weren't," said Ai Li. "You were looking at the man by the pillar with the newspaper. So was I." She looked over her shoulder at him. "He's waiting for somebody he doesn't want to meet. Look at his shoulders." She turned back. "Where's the team?"

* * *

She was twenty-four. I want there to be one place where she is written down as she was then, just off a plane.

She was the best physio I have ever seen. She could put her hands on a hamstring and tell you not just that it was going but when, to the week. She could watch a girl run fifty yards and tell you about an ankle she had turned at school ten years before. She was stern with the players about their bodies and kind about everything else, and inside a month every one of them would have walked through a wall for her.

And she watched, from the bench, from the minibus, from the corner of a hotel lobby in Kuala Lumpur, and she wrote it down, at night, in a notebook, which she did not know I had seen.

She sang on the minibus, on the long drives up into Malaysia at night, when the players were asleep, sitting at the back with her knees up, very quietly, not knowing anybody could hear. A low, rough, true voice. I sat in the front and listened, and thought: one day somebody is going to put that voice on a record.

I did not know it would be me.

* * *

And Basil came.

I did not ask him. He came on his own, on a Sunday in March, to the school pitch in Queenstown, in his academy tracksuit, and stood at the fence with his hands in his pockets and watched the women train for an hour.

At the end Grace Tay went over to the fence with a ball under her arm.

"You're Chris's boy," she said. "The left foot. Everybody's heard of you." She looked at him. "Come and show me."

He came over the fence. He was fourteen, and taller than her, and angry, and he took the ball off her and went past three of the team as if they were not there and put it in the top corner from twenty-five yards, and turned round, breathing hard, with his face like thunder.

Grace Tay did not clap. She looked at him very calmly, the way she had looked round after losing the ball on the padang.

"Very good," she said. "Now do it with them, not past them."

Basil stared at her.

"Football's not about you," said Grace. "It's about the other ten. Haven't you worked that out yet? You're fourteen. Grow up." She threw him a bib. "Wednesday. Half six. You can help Mrs Devi with the drills."

He came on the Wednesday. And every Wednesday and Sunday after that. He learned to play the ball to a girl who would not be where he expected and to find her anyway. He learned to look round when he lost it. Ai Li told him he was carrying an injury from the academy that he had not reported, and he went red, and admitted it, and rested it.

And in the minibus home, one Sunday evening in May, with the women asleep and Ai Li singing very quietly at the back, he sat

beside me in the front, which he had not done since he was thirteen, and said, without turning his head:

"Was any of it true? Mama?"

* * *

I did not think, in the minibus. I said what came.

"Some of it," I said. "I think some of it was."

He did not say anything.

"She loved you," I said. "I'm sure of that. That was true. Whatever else she was. I saw her with you, every day, for thirteen years, and I watch people, Basil, it's what I do, and that was true." I looked at the road. "The rest I don't know. I don't think anybody does. I don't think she did."

He was quiet for a long time.

"Uncle Jono says I've got her eyes," he said.

"Yes."

"Is that bad?"

"No," I said. "It's just eyes. What you do with them is yours."

He did not answer. At the back of the minibus Ai Li had stopped singing, and I knew she had been listening.

When we got to Tiong Bahru, and the women had got off, and Basil was getting out, he stopped with his hand on the door and looked back at me.

"Dad," he said. "Can I come to Bangkok? For the tournament? I'll carry the bags."

It was the first time he had called me *Dad* in nearly two years.

* * *

We went to Bangkok in November for a tournament and lost in the semi-final, to Vietnam, on penalties. Grace Tay missed the last one and walked back to the halfway line very straight, very calm, and then sat down on the grass with her face in her hands, and Basil put the bags down and went and sat beside her and did not say anything, and after a while she put her head on his shoulder, and after another while she laughed.

Ai Li, on the bench beside me, wrote something in her notebook.

I took a photograph, the only one I took of the team that year that was not of the crowd: a girl in green and white with her head on the shoulder of a boy of fifteen who was carrying the bags. It is in box six, on a ship, somewhere off Sri Lanka by now.

It is the only one I have ever framed.

I wrote down that night, in the hotel, *Bangkok. Lost on penalties. B. was kind.* And then I sat on the end of the bed and thought about a level crossing in Paignton and a big hand on my shoulder, and a girl on a cabinet in Hanley saying you pull on one corner and the whole thing moves.

And I thought: nobody sent these. I found eleven women playing in the mud, and asked a friend to pay, and another for a physio, and my son came over a fence on his own.

I did not know, that night, that I was wrong about that too. Nearly right. But Grace Tay was Ong's niece before she was mine, and Ai Li was Jono's before she was mine, and Jono's great-

grandfather walked the beat on Union Street, and all of it was a net, and somebody, a very long time ago, had pulled on a corner.

It is all one place. There is no other side.

Chapter 28 – *Tanjong Pagar*

Fri. 1 July 2011. Home, Preston, 7.30 a.m. BBC website: last train out of Tanjong Pagar station, Singapore, last night. Photo with the story, crowd on the platform under the lights. Credit: C. Harvey. Far left, edge of the frame, by a pillar: a woman in grey. The only person on the platform not looking at the train. Looking up the line. Printed it. Put it in the tin.

He saw her before I did.

That is not true. I saw her first, on the platform. But I did not see her in the picture. I took four hundred pictures that night, and the agency chose that one for the wire, and I looked at it at four in the morning and saw the crowd and the train and the lights, and did not see the edge of the frame.

Jono saw it at half past seven in the morning in Preston. He printed it and put it in the tin with the thirty-one, and did not tell me for seven years.

I have the print now. She is very small, by the pillar, at the far left, in grey. You would not see her if you did not know.

I knew. I was there.

* * *

Tanjong Pagar was the last piece of Malaya in Singapore.

That is what the old men said, that night, on the platform. When Singapore left Malaysia in 1965, the railway stayed

Malaysian: the track, the stations, the land under them, all the way from the Causeway down through the middle of the island to the terminus at Tanjong Pagar, by the docks. You could stand on that platform and be in Malaysia without ever having left Singapore.

And on the thirtieth of June, 2011, it stopped. The trains would end at Woodlands, at the Causeway, and never come down any more.

I had walked past the station a hundred times. A big pale building from 1932, a mile from the flat, with four tall white figures along the top of it, Agriculture and Commerce and Transport and Industry, and inside a great vaulted hall with murals of Malaya in coloured tiles, rubber tappers and tin mines and ships. There were always, at any hour, a few people on the platforms, waiting, looking up the line.

I had photographed it a dozen times. I had never caught a train from it. I always meant to.

* * *

The agency wanted the last train. Everybody did. People came from all over the island to see it go, people whose grandparents had come down from Malaya on it in the forties, people who just wanted to say they had been there.

Basil asked to come. He was fifteen, nearly sixteen. He had grown three inches carrying the women's team's bags, and had started, sometimes, at dinner, to talk to me about things that were

not football. He said he wanted to see a train go somewhere and not come back.

I did not ask him what he meant by that. I said he could carry the bags.

* * *

We went down at eight in the evening, in the heat, with two camera bags and a stepladder, which is the most important thing a press photographer owns. The road outside was solid with people: families, teenagers with phones held up, old men in Malaysian railway uniforms with medals on, standing very straight. The forecourt under the four white figures was so full you could not see the ground.

I stood on the edge of the square with my stepladder and Basil beside me, and looked out over all those heads at the station, lit up white, and something went through me that I did not understand at first.

It will all come back to the station square. It always does, in that bay.

A woman on a verandah in Toronto, in 1963, smiling. My mother at the long table in 1965, deciding not to keep me away from it.

It was not Paignton. It was not that bay. It was seven thousand miles away. But I stood at the edge of a station square with my son beside me and the crowd roaring and could not, for a moment, breathe.

"Dad?" said Basil.

I said I was fine. I said it was the heat.

There is no other side. It is all one place.

* * *

We went in through the press gate, through the great vaulted hall, past the canteen, closed for the first time anybody could remember, and out onto the platform.

The train was in. A long line of blue and yellow Malaysian carriages, with a big diesel at the front, its engine muttering so deep you felt it in your chest. The platform was packed from end to end. People leaning out of the windows. Children on their fathers' shoulders. And everybody looking at the train, and the cab, where somebody had said the Sultan of Johor himself was going to drive the last train out.

I put the stepladder up by a pillar, two-thirds of the way down the platform, and climbed it, and Basil held it, and I began to work.

I did it the way I always did. Not the train. The platform. An old Malay railwayman with tears running down his face into his moustache. A Chinese grandmother holding up a black-and-white photograph of herself, as a girl, on this same platform, for her granddaughter to see. A man in a good suit by the ticket barrier, watching the crowd instead of the train, who turned out to be a policeman.

And at the far end of the platform, by the last pillar, under the edge of the iron roof, where the lights gave out and the line went away north into the dark, a woman in grey.

* * *

I lowered the camera.

She was standing very still, with her hands at her sides, in a grey costume, with her dark hair up. She was not looking at the train. She had her back to all of it. She was looking up the line, north, into the dark, towards the Causeway and Johor, the way you look down a road for somebody who is late.

Basil, holding the stepladder, felt me go still. He looked up at me, and then where I was looking.

"Who's that?" he said.

I did not answer. I came down the stepladder and gave him the camera and said, "Stay here. Hold the ladder." And I went down the platform, through the crowd, the way I had gone round the Kallang in 1994 to a gate where a woman was waiting by a satay stall. Except that I was not frightened, this time.

She did not turn round when I came up beside her. She knew I was there. She always knew.

"Miss Ania," I said.

"Chris."

"You never come to Singapore."

"No," said Ania. "Twice now." She did not take her eyes off the line. "Your son is very like you. He held the ladder very well."

I looked back. Basil was at the foot of the stepladder, sixty yards away, with my camera round his neck, looking at us over the heads of the crowd. Watching. The way he had been taught.

"What are you looking at?" I said.

She did not answer for a long time. The crowd round us was singing an old Malay song that the railwaymen knew. Up the line, north, there was nothing. Two rails, catching the light for a few hundred yards and then going away into the dark.

"Not yet," said Ania.

* * *

I had read her say it before, in my mother's exercise book, about a woman in a grey coat who came out of a fire door in a tunnel under Torquay in 1943 and was let go. *Not her. Not yet.* And about the same woman going across to the E-boats in the smoke. *She will come back.*

I did not know what she was looking up the line for. I did not ask. I think I did not want to know, and she knew I did not, and we stood side by side at the end of the platform for perhaps five minutes, with our backs to the last train, looking north into the dark along a railway that would be torn up within the year, and both of us knew there was something up there, years off, waiting.

I know now what she was looking for. Or I know a part of it. I am not going to write it here. It has not happened yet. It may not. She said *not yet*, and she has been right about *not yet* for a hundred and twenty-three years.

But I will say this much. Karina loved trains. She loved the night trains from the Gare du Nord more than anything in Europe. She played the platform game with me from the top bunk, at every station between Paris and Amsterdam, and saw more than I did, every time.

I have forgiven Ania once. In Room 3. For what she let happen.

Standing on the platform at Tanjong Pagar with my back to the last train, I knew, without knowing how, that I was going to have to do it again. And that it was going to be worse. And that I would.

* * *

The Sultan did drive it. At a few minutes before eleven the horn went, long, three times, and the crowd roared like the Kallang, and the train began to move, out from under the iron roofs, into the dark, north, with people running alongside it waving and the old railwaymen saluting, crying.

I was not on the stepladder. I was standing at the end of the platform beside Ania. I did not take a single picture of it going. I have never minded.

When I looked round, after the last carriage had gone past us and its red lamp was getting smaller up the line, she was not there. The space by the last pillar was empty. Nobody had seen her go. Nobody ever does.

I walked back up the platform to Basil. He was still holding the ladder, and he had used my camera. Thirty pictures. Not of the train.

Of the platform. And six, from sixty yards, through the crowd, of a man in a white shirt standing beside a woman in grey, looking up the line, with their backs to the last train.

* * *

We walked home, a mile, in the heat, with the stepladder and the bags, among people walking quietly, the way people walk home from a funeral.

Halfway home, at the corner by the market in Tiong Bahru, Basil said, "Who was the lady, Dad?"

I had not been sure he would ask. I had been sure he would.

"A friend of the family," I said. "A very old one."

He walked beside me for a while, carrying the ladder.

"How old?" he said.

I did not answer that. He did not ask again. We went up to the flat, and I put the kettle on, and he went and stood at the window and looked out over the rain trees in the dark, towards the station, which you could not see from there.

"She was looking up the line," he said, without turning round. "Like she was waiting for somebody to come back."

I did not say anything.

He is twenty-three now. He has not seen her since. He asked me, at the door, the night Jono's parcel came, whether she would be there when I got home.

In October, I said. *She always is.*

The print of his six pictures from the end of the platform is not framed. It is in the Tiger carton, in the wardrobe, under my mother's exercise book. I am not leaving it on a ship.

£

Chapter 29 – *Heard You're Coming Home*

> *Sun. 16 Sept. 2018. Preston, kitchen table, 11.10 p.m. Read it through tonight. All of it, from the rock. Twenty-six years. Posting it to C.H. in the morning. Claire said once, the night she went, that I was married to a tin box. She was right. Would do it again. Would not change a page.*

That is the last entry before the parcel. I found it on the last written page, under a line drawn across the width of the book, as if he had closed something.

Claire said once, the night she went.

I did not know about Claire. I knew he had married, in 2000, a nurse from the hospital in Torquay, with dark hair and a good laugh, because his mother sent me a photograph of the wedding. I did not know she had gone. It is in the thirty-second, in 2009, four lines, between a burglary in Preston and the DS retiring. *Claire gone. Says she cannot live with a man who keeps a tin box he will not open and a case nobody else believes in. Says I chose. She is right. I chose.*

And the career. That is in there too, all the way through. An inspector's exam passed in 2004 and a promotion that went to somebody else. A transfer to CID in 2006, refused, with no reason given, by a superintendent called Robinson. A note in 2016: *Twenty-four years. Still a sergeant. DS says it is because of the post in the*

garage and the transcript I asked for in '92. Told him I had never once in my life kept my head down. He laughed. Said that was why he had never kept his down either.

He gave up a marriage and a career for a fence post and a roll of film. For a girl from Burslem he had never met alive, and for me. He did it at nineteen, on a rock, in the cold, and he never once, in twenty-six years, in all the thirty-second pocketbook, wrote down that it had been a mistake.

Would do it again.

I have read the whole of it now, twice. I finished the second time at four o'clock this morning, and closed it, and sat with my hand flat on the cover for a long time.

I understand now why my grandfather sent tea to Paris for forty years with nothing on the card but a name, and why Jack Hills carried thirty-one books for half a century. I understand what *keep the Torbay end* cost the man I said it to, on top of Berry Head in 1993, without knowing what I was asking.

That is why we stand side by side. When people in Torquay ask why the Harvey boy who went to Singapore and the Hills boy who stayed are always together, I will not tell them about the tin box. I will say we were at school together, which is not true, and they will believe it.

* * *

Basil came on the Saturday morning, the sixth, to help me with the last of it.

There was not much left. The bed and the table and two chairs and the kettle, which the landlord was having. The Tiger carton, which was going on the plane on my knee. And the thirty-second pocketbook, in my inside pocket, over my heart, where I had once carried a blue velvet box.

He stood in the middle of the empty sitting room and looked round it. The pale squares on the floor. The hook by the door where his school bag used to go.

"It looks like Sue's flat," he said.

I looked at him.

"In your book," said Basil. "You've been talking in your sleep, Dad. On the sofa. About Kentish Town and wiped cups." He looked at the floor. "I worked it out."

I did not say anything for a while.

"It's not like Sue's flat," I said. "Sue's flat had nothing left in it. This has you."

He looked at me with his mother's eyes. Then he put his arm round my shoulders, and we stood in the empty room together.

He is staying. He plays in midfield here, and two days a week he works for the office, in a set of rooms above a shophouse in Joo Chiat, two doors down from where the incense shop used to be, with Ai Li, who is thirty-three now and runs it, and does not sing any more, except sometimes, late, when she thinks nobody is listening. She has started, on the side, to commentate on video-game tournaments, in arenas full of screaming teenagers; she says it is the best cover anybody in Rage has ever had, a booth high above a

crowd, paid to watch it. Grace Tay comes in on Fridays with whatever needs printing that should not be printed anywhere else. Clifford comes in on Tuesdays. Raymond Ong pays the rent and pretends not to know what it is for.

Rage in Asia. Four people and a room above a shop. My great-grandfather started it with no more, in a public bar on a station square in Paignton.

When the football is done, in a few years, Basil says he wants to go into management. A football club. *Under cover*, he said, at dinner last week, and laughed, and then did not laugh, and looked at me, and I knew that he knew exactly what he was saying.

He is twenty-three. He has his mother's eyes and her quickness and a left foot God taught him, and nothing else of hers that I have ever been able to find.

He watches people. He does it the way I do, and Jono does, and my mother. He does not do it the way she did. I have looked for that too. It is not there.

What you do with them is yours.

* * *

The last post came at eleven, while Basil was making tea for the last time. The thin Tamil boy with the waterproof, in the rain. He held out a single envelope and said, "Last one, uncle?"

I said I thought so.

"Safe journey," he said, and went off down the stairs.

A plain white envelope with a Brixham postmark and a second-class stamp, and my name in big round handwriting with loops on the y's and g's.

I knew the handwriting. I had last seen it on blue Basildon Bond, on the bed in a hall of residence in Stafford, with the lorries going by on the M6, in December 1980.

I sat down on one of the two chairs and opened it.

Dear Chris,

Heard you're coming home. Jono let it slip at the fish quay, he didn't mean to, you know what he's like, he went the colour of a lobster.

Robbie's been gone four years now. The girls are grown and gone. I'm on my own in Mum's old house on the steps, with Nan's tin on the mantelpiece, still with Great-grandad Jory's German gold in it. I've never spent it either.

I still go up the head. Most nights, when it's fine. I park in the place. I've never taken anybody else up there. I don't know why I'm telling you that. I suppose I wanted you to know.

I'm not asking for anything. I'm too old to ask for things and so are you. But if you want to come and look at the boats one evening, I'll be on the quay. You know where.

Karen

P.S. I'm sorry about the letter in 1980. I was nineteen and frightened. I've been sorry for thirty-

eight years. That's a long time to be sorry about a letter.

Basil came in with two cups of tea and found me sitting on the chair in the empty room with the letter on my knee.

"Who's it from?" he said.

I did not answer for a moment.

"A friend," I said. "From before."

He looked at me, and at the letter, for a long time. Then he put the tea down beside me and went back into the kitchen, and did not ask anything else. He is his father's son, too.

* * *

I flew on the Monday, the eighth, with the Tiger carton on the seat beside me, and slept, for the first time on a long-haul flight in twenty-five years, all the way to Heathrow.

On the Tuesday I took the train from Paddington.

It was the same line. The line a stranger came down on, to Paignton, on a wet October afternoon in 1895, while a young tram conductor watched him from the window of a public bar. The line I went up on, in September 1980, with a girl from Brixham on the platform with her arms out.

Through Taunton and down off the Blackdowns into Devon, with the red earth and the light going long and gold, and the sea wall at Dawlish so close to the water that the spray came over the windows, and Newton Abbot, where the ball clay comes from, and then over the hill and down, and there was the bay.

Tor Bay, grey and silver and blue, with Berry Head going out into it at the far end, like the bow of a ship. I had the compass in my pocket. I did not need to take it out.

* * *

The train came into Torquay at ten past four.

I got down onto the platform, under the canopy, where I had stood in 1980 with a siege carton of corned beef, and been pushed onto a train.

Jono was on the platform.

He was standing by the footbridge steps, where Karen had come running from the bus in 1980, big and grey and forty-five, with his hands in his pockets, watching me get off the train the way he had watched me from his mother's knee in 1974.

He did not come forward. He nodded, once, the way he had at my grandfather's funeral, like a sergeant.

I went towards him.

And then I saw, behind him, by the ticket office, at the end of the platform, under the canopy, a woman.

She was standing very straight, in a big jumper with the sleeves rolled up four times, with her hands in the pockets of her jeans. Her hair was grey now, mostly, and short. She was fifty-seven. She was standing at the end of a platform, which she did not do. She had said, in 1980, that platforms were for other people.

She did not wave. She did not smile. She looked at me down the length of the platform with her grey-green eyes, as if she were writing me down.

Jono looked round at her, and back at me, and very slowly, very carefully, stepped to one side.

I walked down the platform. It was not far. It felt further than the snow in Stafford and the bridges of Paris.

I stopped in front of her.

We did not kiss. We stood at the end of the platform at a quarter past four on a Tuesday in October, two people of fifty-six and fifty-seven, and looked at each other.

"How long are you home for?" said Karen Tozer.

"For good," I said.

She did not say anything. Then she took one hand out of her pocket and straightened the collar of my coat, which did not need it.

The train behind me blew its horn and pulled out, towards Paignton, towards the station square.

I did not count anything.

For the first time since a kitchen table in Camden in 1990, I did not count anything at all. Not the months. Not the lighthouse. I stood on the platform at Torquay with Karen Tozer's hand on my collar and Jono a few yards behind pretending to read the timetable, and I did not count.

* * *

I am writing this last part at the long table in the back room at Widecombe Cot, with my mother asleep upstairs and the range ticking as it cools. My father's tapes are in a stack on the dresser, waiting. The eleven boxes are somewhere off Suez.

The book is finished. I have written it all down.

Except one thing. Jono came round at nine this evening and put the thirty-second down in front of me, and opened it at a page after the line across the width of the book. After *would do it again*. A new entry. He waited while I read it, and then he took the book back and went home.

I am copying it here, because it belongs here, and because it is the last page.

> *Sun. 14 Oct. 2018. Paignton, Station Square, 4.10 p.m. The four o'clock in from Newton Abbot. Woman off the train, crossed the square towards the old hotel. About forty, fair, good grey coat. Same face as the film. Same face as Johor. Has not changed.*
>
> *Case open.*

* * *

Coda: Room 3

October 2018.

The house is asleep. Rain on the window. The sea at the bottom of the hill, breathing.

In Room 3, a young woman in a grey costume sits on the edge of the bed, with her carpet bag at her feet, packed, as it always is.

She has a sheet of paper on her knee.

She has carried it since 1895, folded small, inside the lining of the bag. It is not quite like any paper anybody in 1895 would have known how to make. It has not yellowed. It has not worn at the folds.

It is a list. Names, and places, and dates, in a column, and beside each one, a term.

The hand is upright, and careful, and a little shaky, the hand of a very old man who is taking great trouble to write clearly, because he knows it will have to be read for a long time.

> *Karen Tozer. Torquay. March 1979. 18 months.*
>
> *Carole Bayliss. Stafford. March 1981. 10 months. (Cheltenham will want her. Let her go.)*
>
> *Angela Shenton. Stoke. Dec. 1982. 18 months. (Take her away early. You will not be able to keep her. I am sorry.)*
>
> *Karina Petrick. Stoke, June 1983, and after. Do not stop it. Let her stay.*
>
> *Sue. London. April 1989. 6 months. (Berlin will need her. She will tell him so on the first day.)*

Deborah M. Camden. March 1990. 18 months.
(She will ask for longer. Say no.)

Every line is crossed through, once, neatly, in a different ink. A small regular hand, every letter the same height, like print.

She sits and looks at it for a long time, by the light of the lamp, with the rain on the window.

Then she takes a pen from the pocket of her grey jacket. A black Parker ballpoint, police issue, with worn gold letters on the clip, that a man downstairs will not be able to find in the morning, and will not mind.

And under the last line, in her own small regular hand, she writes a name. A name that is on the list already, at the top, crossed through.

Karen Tozer.

And beside it, where the term should be, one word.

His.