

BENBARROW

NOVEL & PROCESS COMMENTARY

ANGELA CAROL HOLDEN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
the Manchester Metropolitan University
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

Department of Contemporary Arts, MMUC

March 2017

BENBARROW

PROCESS COMMENTARY
AND APPENDICES

CONTENTS

Abstract

Process Commentary

Bibliography

Acknowledgements

Appendices:

1.Chapter Headings

2.Teaching Practice:

2.1 Teaching Experience 2011-2016

2.2 Undergraduate Workshop: Scenes

2.3 Undergraduate Workshop: Food

2.4 Ladies of Puglia: Flower Workshop

3.Courses, Workshops & Conferences

4.Publications

5.Transfer Submission

6.Review Summary 2016

Abstract: Benbarrow, a novel and supporting commentary

Benbarrow was initially conceived as a dual-perspective narrative, set in the period immediately preceding WWII.

The main apparatus of study is a coming-of-age prose novel set in a rural inter-war context, for which the complementary research forms an integral part of the writing process.

With a specific focus on 'middlebrow' fiction for women set in a period of history that broadly qualifies as being 'within living memory', the PhD thesis will articulate the insight this offers into the craft of creating a fiction text and will contribute to an understanding of the process of, and relationship between, research and creative writing.

Following my MPhil-PhD transfer (Oct 2013) I explored the areas discussed in the profile of enquiry, guided by the advice of the transfer panel.

My research was subsequently interrupted by personal factors, including family illness and bereavement, and the resignation by my DoS of his MMU post. These impacted on my studies, and I elected to suspend for twelve months.

My return to studies enabled me to thoroughly review my enquiries to date, and to reconsider methodology and direction. Supported by my new DoS, Dr Paul Evans, I reconsidered my focus, developing previously 'secondary' characters and addressing the interactions and influences between a group of women of differing age, background and experience.

I have also been encouraged to reflect on the 'source' potential of my wider writing interests, which include poetry and non-fiction and the 'output' impact of my learning on my teaching

As a result, there have been significant changes in both the narrative and the "*methodology, scale and parameters of study*". With revised emphasis on process and the way in which personal circumstances can influence the text, my thesis explores "*the craft of creating a fiction text*" and as discussed in my original proposal contributes to an understanding of the "*relationship between research and creative writing*".

BENBARROW

PROCESS COMMENTARY

Introduction and Rationale – Discovering What’s Inside

“The world neatly divides into people who have peeled the rubbery rind off a golf ball in order to find out what it’s made of, and those who haven’t” assert Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts in their exploration of Edgelands¹. I am one of the former, both literally and metaphorically. I want to know how things work. This desire informs the decisions I have made in presenting this commentary. As I have written *Benbarrow* I have continuously reflected on the processes involved. In particular I’ve been aware of external factors – life events, ordinary and exceptional experiences, chance encounters which influence the drawing together of a sustained narrative over a long period.

I recognise the importance of the research enquiries I’ve undertaken in support of my praxis, and will explore these in my commentary. However, while I have read widely on topics relevant to my writing I do not claim expertise on the subject of Memory, or The Landscape of Oxfordshire, or Politics 1918-1939. Likewise, in my MPhil-PhD transfer documentation² I discuss academic publications by writers including Nicola Beauman, Nicola Humble and Alison Light that explore inter-war women’s fiction and provide a literary context to my writing, but literature of the period is not the primary focus of my PhD research.

In *Practice as Research in the Arts* Robin Nelson provides a multi-mode epistemological model³ which identifies three ‘modes of knowing’ in relation to Practice as Research (PaR):

- *Know How* – procedural knowledge, including prior educational experience and specialist knowledge, and which in this context would include elements of craft technique
- *Know That* – knowledge in the traditionally academic sense, gleaned from study of a specific area and articulated in words/numbers drawn from reading of relevant texts.
- *Know What* – knowledge gleaned through the processes of making, and which include critical reflection

Nelson describes the *Know How* that an advanced student engaging in PaR may bring with them as ‘baggage’. This may suggest, depending on one’s

perspective, a burdensome encumbrance (and certainly personal circumstances have had an impact on my research, requiring me to suspend studies for a period) or a collection of portable skills. As a mature student I brought with me certain 'procedural knowledge' which has provided a structure for my writing. And as a former student of the MMU Creative Writing BA (Hons) course on which I now teach, I came to the PaR PhD with a toolkit of writers' craft techniques.

Among this toolkit are curiosity and the ability to research a topic in order to generate the *Know That* strand of Nelson's model. I would argue, however, that the concept of *Know That* is ill-served by a definition limited to knowledge gleaned from study in the purely academic sense. Any arts practitioner draws on a wide range of knowledge, beyond that acquired through applied study. A writer in particular brings a range of experiences and interests to bear on their professional practice. I know of no writer who is not constantly observing and taking note, who is not continuously adding to their portfolio of *Know That*.

Which brings us to the *Know What*, to the knowledge acquired by thinking-doing. As a teacher I always emphasise the value of critical reflection; it is embedded in all aspects of our undergraduate degree course. This *Knowing What* is not simply an assessment requirement but a means of exploring what is working in a student's writing and what kind of writer they are or might become. When I wrote the final reflection⁴ of my Creative Writing BA course I recognised this importance of reviewing and articulating the process of writing. However as I've developed as a writer I have come to place even greater value on critical reflection as a process tool. Robert Graham describes reflective writing as that which "enables you to record, order and shape your thoughts into useful insights and meanings"⁵. 'Useful' is the key word here. The reflective writing which constitutes this commentary is of course an assessment requirement, but its value as a process tool for my writing practice, both current and future, is fundamental.

The shape of both my novel and the complementary discourse has changed significantly over the period of my study. When I began this project my intention was to write a coming-of-age novel, with a supporting commentary focussed on my research into middlebrow fiction.

During the period of my writing and research I have experienced a number of events which have had a profound effect on me, both as an individual and as a writing practitioner. These include the serious illness of my son, the death of my mother after many years of senile dementia and a change in my supervisory arrangements as a result of my former DoS taking up a position at another university⁶.

Some of the impacts have been evident on the development of the novel, others on the methodology of my research, still others on the focus of my research. As a reflective practitioner and a teacher of creative writing, I would find it very strange, disturbing even, if they had not.

In our undergraduate course we introduce a number of prompts to the reflective process:

*What is your literary context? Which fiction/memoir writers do you admire and want to emulate? At the start of the unit, what kind of writer were you interested in being? What kind of writer do you now want to be?*⁷

There is an emphasis on change, on the expectation that a student's writing style and aspirations will be influenced by their growing knowledge of craft techniques and their developing awareness of their writing context. This approach to reflective writing is as valid at post-graduate level as undergraduate.

A greater awareness of mortality has made me increasingly interested in the way that memory has shaped my novel. This is not memoir; the events predate my birth. But it has parallels in memoir writing in that it is nourished by both my memories and experience, and the memories and experiences that have been passed down to me through oral and written elements of my family history research. The sources of family memories may be extinguished by the mental destruction wrought by Alzheimer's disease or by the death of family members; the triggers of memory may also be lost as artefacts – clothes, furniture, letters, photographs – are dispersed or discarded.

Additionally, as in memoir, there is a responsibility to be true to the characters to whom I give voices in my writing and to the village in which it is set. As a forced child I grew up against a background of not just different houses and schools, but of different towns, counties and even countries. The

single fixed point of my childhood was Oxfordshire, the location of the homes of both my maternal and paternal grandmothers. These imperfect memories, and my sense of belonging, are rooted in the landscape of *Benbarrow*. As a young student I regularly wrote home to my paternal grandmother, screeds of connectedness. I owe her my love of books and reading, my love of gardens and gardening. Some of the rooms in *Benbarrow* are scaled down versions of her kitchen, her bedroom; others are scaled up versions. The pots and pans are hers; the trowels and spades and seed-packets are hers. I have dedicated my novel to her.

If my grandmother made me a reader, my undergraduate course made me a reader-writer. We emphasise to our students the importance of reading as a writer, by which I mean not reading with specific consideration of themes, but with an awareness of craft. Does this text work, and if so how? What has the writer done to bring this constructed, imaginary world – whether through poetry or prose – to life?⁸ As a reflective writer practitioner I'm interested in how I bring the world of *Benbarrow* to the page.

My reading of inter-war fiction – whether fiction written during the period and about the period, or written more recently but set in the period – has influenced my understanding of the time and my approach to writing about it. The same is true of the poetry I have read. How is my writing influenced by my choice of literature? How are my characters influenced by their choice of literature?

Robin Nelson further describes a PaR project as one in which the “practice is a key method of enquiry and is submitted as substantial evidence of a research enquiry”⁹. He discusses the “relationship between theoretical knowledge and practical knowing and the distinction between professional practice and research”¹⁰ describing this articulation as an “iterative, dialogic engagement of doing-thinking”¹¹.

In this commentary I shall explore the tensions of these relationships and distinctions as they apply to the development of my novel *Benbarrow*. The three threads of memory, place and literature, and the manner in which they have influenced the development of my writing, form the basis of my research enquiry. I shall consider these in relation to the ‘source’ potential of my wider writing

interests, which include poetry, fiction and non-fiction, and the 'output' impact of my learning on my teaching.

There are a number of research questions to be addressed:

- How do we write from memories, when those memories are not our own?
- How do we write about periods that occur between major historical events, given the hindsight that our characters would not possess?
- How is my writing influenced by my personal context, by my life events?
- How is my writing influenced by my context as a reader and as a teacher?

In applying the writing techniques that I learned as an undergraduate and have since refined through continuous and varied writing, I have developed a range of different methodologies for writing from and about memory. From the perspective of a teacher of creative writing, I see the potential for further expansion of this commentary.

As a portfolio of skills, it could form the basis of a craft text, with its range of approaches supported by specific writing exercises and exemplar material drawn from appropriate fiction, non-fiction and poetry sources. Equally, it could be the foundation for an MA course unit on *Writing from Memory*. It is important therefore that the material it contains is accessible as well as erudite and articulate.

This raises the challenge of writing academic material in a creative manner. My intention in this commentary is to address the research questions in a manner that is compatible with academic expectations. In her article *Creative Writing Research Degrees: Range and Rigour*¹² Maggie Butt discusses the 1997 UK Council for Graduate Education report¹³ on practice-based doctorates, in which candidates are required to document "the process of origination in a way that is communicable to peers".

Butt proposes that "each critical element of a dissertation must be as unique as its writer, and as unique as the original work" and that in addition to literary theory it may draw on "sociology, psychology, history, physics, anthropology, fine art, performance arts, philosophy and so on". This approach supports a

philosophy within which creative writing is itself a legitimate academic language. In particular Butt emphasises the validity of the creative discourse which “takes its own path, reading widely from different creative and theoretical work”.

The framework I have chosen for presenting my research owes much to a specific text: *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness*. In their study of the ‘wild places on our doorsteps’¹⁴ Paul Farley & Michael Symonns Roberts provide an approach which is both factual and informative, whilst still allowing space for personal reflection and creativity. Inspired by their model, I propose a commentary which enables me to record and explore the PaR experience in a style that is both scholarly and creative.

The commentary will provide a record of my experience and of the writing process, a critical reflection exploring the original intention of the project, how that has changed and the influences that have brought about those changes. But it is important to me that it isn't simply the conclusion of a project, the matching bookend to the proposal that I submitted in 2011.

For this commentary to be of lasting value to me within the broader context of my roles as a writer of prose and poetry, as a family history researcher and as a teacher, it also needs to be a benchmark of my professional practice and crucially a resource to which I will return.

1. Connections: Inspiration and the Vulnerability of Creativity.

Early summer, and we're in Scotland. A gap between my husband's jobs and the end of my teaching commitment have coincided, allowing us some rare family time. We hire a cottage near Edinburgh for a week, and then another in The Cairngorns, taking the opportunity to visit National Trust for Scotland and Historic Scotland properties – Tantallon and Dirleton Castles, Stirling Castle, Corgarff and Urquhart Castles – before they become busy with seasonal tourists. After a fortnight we declare ourselves cultured-out.

One visit in particular sticks in my mind as we head home. Kellie Castle had become almost derelict towards the end of the nineteenth century when James Lorimer, a law professor at Edinburgh University, reached a 'peppercorn lease' agreement whereby the owners would repair the fabric of the building while Lorimer would renovate the interior. In the 1920s the house fell into disrepair again, but in 1937 another generation of Lorimers took over the lease and once again restored the property¹⁵. The history of the house resonates with me; I have heard a similar story before. When I reach home I pull a biography from my shelf: Robert Becker's life of Nancy Lancaster¹⁶.

Nancy Perkins was born in 1897, a Virginian heiress and niece of Nancy Astor. She married Henry Field, grandson of the Chicago department store magnate Marshall Field; within a year she was widowed. Through family friends she met Ronald Tree, a British cousin of Henry's and also a descendant of Marshall Field. They were married in 1920; seven years later Tree returned to the UK, bringing his family to live in Northamptonshire. They made their home at Kelmarsh House; designed by James Gibb, it belonged to Lt-Col Claude Lancaster. The Trees rented it on a renovation lease, refurbishing the property over a number of years. In 1933 Tree was elected MP for Harborough.

By that time my maternal grandfather was employed as Ronald Tree's chauffeur. My grandparents, mother and aunt lived in a small cottage in the village. My grandmother kept chickens in the back yard, selling the eggs to supplement the family income. My mother and aunt attended Kelmarsh village school. In later letters my mother describes the time as a happy one for the small family; photographs from the newspaper show her dressed up for village

fêtes and school plays. She paints a picture of rural tranquillity, of a childhood played out after The Great War, with no awareness of forthcoming conflicts.

Shortly after Roland Tree's election he and Nancy bought Ditchley Park in Oxfordshire. Their relocation brought changes not only for the Tree family, but also for mine. My grandfather chose to remain in the Trees' service and my grandparents settled in nearby Charlbury, where they lived for the remainder of their lives.

Ditchley was the product of Nancy's creative imagination. Described as a "vast Palladian pile"¹⁷, it was run down and in need of massive refurbishment when the Trees purchased the property and many of its contents from Viscount Dillon. Deborah Devonshire recalls having seen the house "before the Trees bought it, empty and desolate, the park full of rabbits and sad white grass in the time of the agricultural depression of the early 1930s"¹⁸.

The essence of a story begins to form. An old house, in need of restoration. Let's call it Benbarrow, with its echoes of ancient landscapes and hidden histories. The arrival in a quiet rural location of 'outsiders' with modern ideas. I wonder how they would be perceived by local people, in particular by a girl on the cusp of adulthood, a girl whose reading has introduced her to the possibility of a world beyond her sheltered upbringing.



When former Children's Laureate Michael Morpurgo judges the 2008 *Cheshire Prize for Literature* he delivers an address at the awards ceremony¹⁹ in which he describes the inspiration for his best-selling novel *Kensuke's Kingdom*.

The initial idea of a child alone – a staple of 'adventure' fiction – is becoming increasingly difficult to envisage in the light of modern communications and social media. With the exception of notorious (and usually tragic) stories, there are few circumstances in which a child can go missing, and even fewer in which one could survive alone and undetected.

Morpurgo describes how a newspaper article about a family who sell their possessions and sail around the world seemed to offer a solution. A small

boy could tumble overboard from a yacht and be washed up on a remote island. It might be hours before his absence is discovered; lack of accurate time and tide data would make a search hopeless. The germ of a story emerges.

Another article attracts Morpurgo's attention. A Japanese soldier lives alone on an island for many years, unaware that WWII has concluded²⁰. Might the boy meet him? The story develops.

Every 'lost boy' needs a faithful dog; every dog needs a name. A school workshop in which a child tells Morpurgo that his dog's name is Stella Artois provides his. A book launch for the newly published *The Wreck of the Zanzibar* provides a name for the soldier, when a Japanese schoolboy brings his copy to be signed. The scaffolding of the story is gradually bolted together.

This process of story building resonates with me. In response to the perennial question "Where do you get your ideas from?" Morpurgo answers "I always find that there's something out there, something someone's told me, a story someone's told me, a place that I've visited."²¹

I would argue that it's usually the intersection between the trajectory of one idea and another that provides the most fertile ground for the development of narrative. These meeting points generate connections, which in turn generate further connections. Visually these might appear as 'ideas webs', although my ideas are less regular, more tangled than the exquisitely constructed structures suggested by the term. The concept of an 'ideas map' also suggests a subtext, as though the route is already there and needs only to be followed, when in my experience it's the charting of the landscape, the construction of the map itself, which often generates the story.

Occasionally it is the border of the map, the edgeland, which provides the inspiration. While we are concentrating on what we think is the essence of a narrative, constructing a landscape, peopling it with characters and relationships, we discover that something else, equally interesting, is happening at the edge our peripheral vision. This may be different story entirely, the germ of a new project to explore another day. Or it may be a development of the existing narrative, a trigger to the introduction of subplots and subtexts which add contrast and texture to the physical and emotional landscape of our characters.

Sometimes the map is more like the territory of a sleepwalker. Dorothea Brande catalogues the attributes of the unconscious mind that may find their way into story formation: “all the treasures of memory, all the emotions, incidents, scenes, intimations of character and relationship which it has stored away in its depths”²².



It's 3am and I can't sleep. The opening lines from *Kubla Khan*²³ are drifting through my mind. I keep reaching the “incense-bearing tree” and getting stuck. I have to get up and find a copy.

There is an aptness to my memory failure. The creation of *Kubla Khan* exemplifies the process of forgetting which comes from interruption mid-inspiration. In the preface to his collection *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep*²⁴ Coleridge describes how waking from a vivid dream he recalls images and their “correspondent expressions” and begins to write them down, but after eight or ten lines is “called out by a person on business from Porlock”. Returning, he has only the vaguest sense of the remaining images and text. The rest has all but evaporated.

Curious then, that this is the point where my memory stumbles.



In his story *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency*²⁵ Douglas Adams has the temerity to go back in time, his mission to prevent Coleridge from being interrupted. He stands by the door as the poet sleeps, determined to repel any visitors. Overcome with concern for Coleridge's welfare he knocks at the door, only to realise that he is himself ‘The Person from Porlock’.

Creativity is indeed an elusive and vulnerable aspect of writing.



It is a cold November afternoon, one of those days when the last of the autumn leaves cling tenaciously to the branches of oak and lime and sycamore, when the early mist across the fields still shrouds every hollow, despite the watery sunlight.

Marbury Park is popular with families and dog-walkers alike, and most take the footpaths towards the arboretum and the community orchard, or the mere with its views across to Great Budworth Church. The lime avenue harks back to a time when Marbury was a large estate, with a house modelled on Fontainebleau Chateau²⁶.

Its history is similar to many English estates of its time; a large house that has become too difficult to maintain during and after The Great War, combined with fortunes that decline as the economic depression takes hold. In 1933 Marbury was converted into a country club, with its own pool and golf course. During WWII the park became a garrison for British and Polish servicemen; later it would accommodate POWs, later still foreign workers at nearby ICI.

In 1968 the hall was demolished. Several attempts to gain planning permission for an exclusive housing estate were denied and finally the estate was bought by the local authority and, with further acres of parkland leased from a property business, developed into Marbury Park.

The sun is breaking through as we wander across to the site of the old hall. A few traces of the original hall remain, reminding me of the ruins of Grizedale Hall²⁷ where we camped as children and played on the stone staircases leading from the former terraces onto the grassed areas below. The future of so many of these houses hung in the balance during the inter-war years, and an awareness of their possible destruction pervades my thoughts. I want Benbarrow to be one of the houses that survives; I want my protagonists to have a commitment to the fabric of the building and to its place in the landscape. I want a sense of idealism to be tempered by a touch of realism – two sides of the same coin.

Idealistic Henry is beginning to form in my mind, pragmatic Frances at his side. I must get these ideas down on paper, before they fade away like Coleridge's dream, like the mist which is just beginning to clear across the parkland.

2. Connections: Etymology and the Art of Finding the Right Words

Words are the building blocks of the writer's craft. It sounds so obvious. As Margaret Atwood points out: "Writing – the setting down of words – is an ordinary enough activity... Anyone literate can take an implement in hand and make marks on a flat surface."²⁸

Being a Writer however is something different. It involves inspiration and a knowledge of craft. It involves the ability to tell a story and to connect with the reader. It involves choosing words suitable for the text, so that the reader isn't jettisoned from the author's imaginary world by inappropriate description and dialogue. I would argue that a writer needs to have a love of language. And it helps to have a fascination with the words themselves – where they come from, what they mean, what might be conveyed by their subtext.



My daughter and I visit The Natural History Museum. She has been awarded a Winston Churchill Travelling Scholarship and we are doing some research for her expedition. On our way to meet one of the curators we pass a display board which asks 'What's in a name?' and shows an image of an invasive weed I know as Sticky-bud. Its binomial name is *Galium aparine*, its polynomial name *Aparine folis lanceolatis acuminatis scaberrimus corollis fructu minoribus*.

Beneath the picture is a list of regional variations: Goosegrass, Cleavers, Clivers, Stickywilly, Stickyweed, Catchweed, Robin-run-the-hedge, Coachweed, Bedstraw, Cleaverwort, Scarthgrass, White hedge, Barweed, Cleaver, Eriffe, Everlasting friendship, Goosebill, Grateron, Grip grass, Hayruff, Hedge clivers, Hedgeheriff, Loveman, Muttonchops, Robin-run-in-the-grass, Scratweed, Gosling weed, Hedge-burs, Scratchweed, Stick-a-back, Sweethearts, Beggarlice, Clithe cliders.

My Sticky-bud, familiar from childhood, is not amongst them. The list feels incomplete.



Among the many documents I have accumulated during my research is one listing 'useful words'. There is a vocabulary for communication: I have addressed, corresponded, introduced, lectured, presented, reviewed, specified and summarised. I have also started (conceived, developed and planned) and made changes (combined, eliminated, expanded, modified and reorganised). I have studied (discovered, examined, explored, researched and unearthed) and finally submitted. Along the way I have been positive – competent and enthusiastic; imaginative, resourceful and thoughtful.

I am reminded of a poem I wrote when participating in the 52 Poetry Project²⁹ in 2014:

Etymology

While Thomas hunts the sun-washed fields
with nets and killing jars, she hides in the dimlight
of the attic bedroom, captures strange new words,
pins them into leather journals, labels each:
date, location, source. She spots connections,
researches roots, draws complex maps and patterns
across the smudged white paper. Ponders
ancient trade routes: silk and spice, sugar, gold and slaves.
In winter's long school terms, she creeps
into her brother's room, surveys his mounting cabinets:
Fritillaries, Skippers, Hairstreaks, all caught mid flight,
each tagged by date and classified by genus, species.
Summer colours caught beneath the polished glass.
She opens wide his window, sets free her words:
cerulean and cinnabar, ebony and ecru,
vermillion, jade and lapis lazuli.

This lexicon for the PhD student has an entomological resonance: search out and collect your words, classify them by type. Pin them carefully.



I have several small notebooks in which I collect interesting words and phrases, and lists of vocabulary associated with specific topics. The technical language of engineers and biologists, clinicians and cooks, gardeners, mariners and sportsmen – all have their own history of derivation and meaning. Lists can

often provide interesting stimuli for writing, for a short writing burst, for a poem, for a short story.

In the 1990s *You* magazine ran a column called *Journalist*, compiled by John Koski and Mitchell Symons. Every week *The Sunday Mail* published a list of ten offerings defined as 'Factual, Fictional or Funny'; each year a selection was compiled into popular paperbacks of the sort that find their way into the Christmas stockings of difficult-to-buy-for friends and relatives of either gender, but more often than not brothers, fathers and sons. The column titles ranged from *Are You Insecure – Ten Tell-Tale Signs* to *Ten Quotes From Rock Stars*, from *The Queen's Ten Best Friends* to *The World's Ten Oldest Punchlines*.

John Koski continues to write for the *Mail*, snappy interview-articles about celebrity bloggers, actors, musicians, presenters, under the collective banner *Quickfire*, as well as guides to the latest Reading Group choice. Interesting, that credibility gap: the fragile veneer of the currently famous on one hand, and the insightful guide designed to stimulate thoughtful discussion of Patrick Gale's *A Place Called Winter*, on the other.

Koski and Symons can hardly have anticipated - or be blamed for - the popularity of internet lists two decades later. The web is saturated with lists as diverse as *Twelve Ways to Fool the Masses*; *Fourteen Punctuation Marks Used in English – Can You Name Them All?* and *Twelve Child Stars You Won't Recognise Today*. There is even a list of *Twenty Reasons to Stay and One to Leave*. The first twenty sound like an introduction; one suspects the reader who gets as far as number twenty is probably already of the mindset that the final reason might be the crucial one.

There is even a website called The Top Tens³⁰, (currently describing itself as: *92,845 top ten lists for everything under (& including) the sun*) offering a menu divided into categories of movies, books, restaurants, people. If you want to find the *Ten Greatest People of All Time*, look no further. But be warned: the list of American Presidents suggests that such qualitative descriptors are open to debate – Barack Obama appears as #1 on 'Worst Presidents' and at #16 as a contender for the 'Best President'.



For writers, the list is a blessing and a curse. We all have To Do lists – whether actual or virtual. Mine is a regular update – tasks carried forward on an A4 pad from one month to the next, usually motivated more by the current list having become messy and unreadable than by the turning of a page on the calendar. Including a few items that are nearing completion maybe a psychological cheat, but we all need a little encouragement.

A project needs its own To Do list: topics to research, ideas to explore, reminders to return books to the library. These are sometimes helpful *aides memoire*, ways of ordering our thoughts or frameworks for process. Often they are diversionary activities, tasks to convince ourselves that we are writing, when we are not. I frequently recall Heather Leach’s cautionary reminder: *Only writing is writing*.



Heather Leach was among my first teachers at MMU. Coming late to full time writing herself, she was particularly encouraging to mature students. We got away with nothing – she was a stickler for ‘language skills’ with all “the stink of grammar about it: all those dry, complicated rules, structures and formalities that make the heart shrivel”³¹. Drawing a comparison with a motor mechanic who knows the parts of a car, she insisted that we were able to “name the parts of language, to understand the way it works, to know when something isn’t right and to have ideas about how (we) could make it better.”³²

Syntax. Vocabulary. Etymology.



I follow a number of online blogs. Some are writerly, for example written by a poet or novelist who provides a particularly interesting or thought-provoking take on the writing process. Some are readers’ blogs, offering book reviews and author interviews. Some are written by friends, and describe their experience of renovating a derelict cottage, exploring the Australian rainforest in search of unrecorded phasmids or simply their day-to-day life as an American domiciled

in the UK. My favourites have a foot (if we can allow our bloggers three feet) in each camp.

Jo Bell is a poet and a narrowboater. She blogs about her work, usually about an event she is planning or has recently attended. She blogs about poetry and politics. She blogs about her life on the canals and the people who have become her community. There are no boundaries; her life, her work, her politics are intertwined, without borders.

I like the idea that while we might be conscious of 'edges' in our lives and in our work, we are allowed to blur the boundaries. The same goes for the people with whom we share our lives; some are family but not friends, others are friends but not family. The best are both, dear friends who happen to be relatives by blood, or marriage, or by absorption into our family networks. The sister-in-law I instinctively call 'sister'; the surrogate and unrelated 'grandmother' my children simply knew as Nanna Rose; the friend whose daughter I consider as much a niece as any on my family tree. My kith and kin.

It is no accident that Jo Bell's second collection is called Kith³³. "Your kith... are the people you are related to by choice; your friends, your peers, your chosen clan."³⁴ They are the people who help make your chosen lifestyle possible, who keep you grounded, who are there for you. Being a writer, she is interested in the etymology of the word which "comes from the same root as 'couth/ uncouth'. Literally it means the known, or those who know you. For me it encompasses the boating community I am part of, the poetry clan in which I work and move – and the shifting group of friends who make up an elective family for me."³⁵

My notebook is filling up with the profiles of characters who will become the community of *Benbarrow*. There are kin in both the big house and the vicarage settings: brother and sister Henry and Frances; Helena and her aunt and uncle; Kitty and her sister Annie. Kith plays an increasingly important role in the novel, as the community of friends settles into Benbarrow: Kendall and Eric, Vronnie and Elsa. As the relationship develops between the house and the vicarage, the interconnections of kith become catalysts for change, for the 'shifting' dynamic of the group.

In July 2016 Jo Bell takes possession of her new boat. Like Heather Leach's sofa³⁶ it will 'see her out'. But the delivery of a new boat is itself the beginning of

a new relationship, and since boats are designed to travel, a new adventure. She revisits an old blog about moving on³⁷ and once again searches for a word. Something that means “the sudden rush of love you feel for a place you’re about to leave, and the people in it. A word for missing a place, before you’ve even left it.” A companion for hiraeth, that Welsh word which embodies homesickness, longing, yearning, nostalgia³⁸.

Sometimes there isn’t a word. Sometimes you have to make one up.



In 1988 the government initiates the biggest single change to education since the Butler Education Act of 1944 established the Ministry of Education, replaced all-age schools with a model of primary and secondary schools and abolished fees on parents. *The Education Reform Act 1988* introduces The National Curriculum; it also begins the process of Local Management of Schools, handing budget responsibility to headteachers and governors.

There is a flurry of activity as Local Authorities implement the changes, and attempt to establish protocols. There are reconstructed governing bodies, with inexperienced governors trying to understand the responsibilities of governance and the implications of the legislation for their individual schools. There are meetings, presentations, handouts.

The details of most are long forgotten, but I remember one session in particular. Not the name of the presenter, nor the location or even the particular purpose. Just one thread of discussion. Trying to explain the ramifications of ‘accountability’, the speaker urges us to consider the etymology of the term. Our role as governors is to oversee the activities of our schools and to deliver an ‘account’, a narrative of events. To be able to say ‘we used this evidence to inform this decision’.

As a qualified accountant this is a new approach for me, a different perspective. Accountability as explanation, rationale, insight. Accountability not as a series of columns on a balance sheet, but as a narrative.

This is my account of my PhD process. This is the evidence I used to inform my decisions. This is my narrative.



Coming back from London, late at night, the car headlights sweep the roadside banks. We are nearly home. This is a relatively new bypass, where the traffic has been diverted around a small village, formerly a bottleneck. There is no footpath; each side a wide swathe of meadow grass slips from the periphery of the beams, shadowing into slender trunks of immature birch. It is high summer, the wide verges are knee-deep in snow. Except, of course, they are not. The lights have picked out the wild daisies which have populated the sides of the bypass since before the tarmac was cold. Opportunistic, invasive, a ready coloniser of disturbed land, railway banks, waste ground.

Ox-eye daisy, Moon daisy, Dog daisy. Once known as *Chrysanthemum leucanthemum*, now *Leucanthemum vulgare*. Summer snowdrifts, by any name.

3. Connections: Finding the Right Place

Late May, and the windows are flung open to allow a breeze through the classroom. We are gathered, a tutor and six students, to discuss Place Writing. We introduce ourselves – poets, novelists and a journalist – and share our interpretations of terminology: Place, Space, Landscape, Geography, Edgelands. What indeed, do we mean by Place Writing?

Place has connotations of belonging (my place) and not belonging (out of place), of meaningful location and identity. The term *topophilia*³⁹ is offered as a 'love of place'. The concept of space feels less defined, expressing an ambiguity of borders. It seems to fall between 'places', as somewhere to pass through. We speak of personal space, thinking space, social space.

When we discuss landscape, we explore aesthetics: the concept of landscape in art; the idea of wildness and rugged beauty; a sense of landscape as rural and pastoral, specifically needing the adjunct of 'urban' to be otherwise. There is also an awareness of human intervention, whether the landscape is transformed by agriculture or forestry, or by rewilding of industrial spaces.

We groan at the mention of Geography (with a capital 'G'), that analysis of physical and economic development that filled our Thursday afternoons and was delivered by PE's second-in-department. Maps and cartography are greeted with more enthusiasm as we discuss the detail of OS maps: roads, towns, rivers, mountains. We revel in the terminology: ox-bow, ribbon settlement, hamlet, tarn, fjord, Munro. We challenge the artificiality of borders and boundaries.

From borders we segue into a discussion of edgelands. We each know undefined, liminal spaces which qualify as edgelands, that are 'other'. Places that may be defined by being adjacent – paths along canals and railway lines, wasteland which was once the site of factories or retail parks. Places that are beyond, outside, elsewhere.

Soon the wall is covered with Post-It notes. These are personal responses, made in the moment. Later we will revisit them, reconsider our initial understandings in the light of our adjusted perceptions.



Place can be somewhere to come back to. Home. As the mother of two RAF sons, my grandmother was a firm believer in migration patterns. Children will leave, but if treated lovingly, will always return. Following WWII my father was posted to UK stations in Norfolk, Northumberland, and London and abroad to Aden and Cyprus, but home was always this corner of Oxfordshire. Like the swallows that clung to the telephone lines criss-crossing the village street, for the rest of his life he was drawn back to the Evenlode Valley and the Wychwoods.

These were the tracks he had cycled as a boy, a sandwich and a bottle of homemade ginger beer in one pannier, binoculars and a book in the other. No need for a map; these byways were etched in his memory, they were part of who he was.

I look up the Parish of St James, where my grandmother lived, and find it is now part of a circuit: Ramsden, Finstock, Leafield and Wilcote. Finstock was home to novelist Barbara Pym, who worshipped at Holy Trinity; TS Eliot was baptised here. Collectively the parishes are known as The Forest Edge Benefice.

That 'edge' again, between historic woodland and encroaching agriculture, but also between the idyll of rural villages and the pressures of the commuters of the M4 corridor, between tradition and progress.



A midweek afternoon in a small market town, and I stumble across a charity shop bookcase. My shelves are sagging under the weight of books. *I don't need to buy any more*, I tell myself. But there's an eclectic and tempting array, so I carry home another interesting find: *The Atlas of Experience*⁴⁰ by Louise Van Swaaij and Jean Klare. The authors introduce their concept with a foreword: "An atlas never just shows you where you are, where you want to go to and how to get there. It also fires the imagination."

We are used to maps of the imagination in our fiction, not only in fantasy fiction such as *The Lord of the Rings*⁴¹ with its maps of Middle Earth, or *The Chronicles of Narnia*⁴², with its world beyond the wardrobe, but also in contemporary fiction such as Rebecca Shaw's⁴³ *Turnham Malpas* and

Barleybridge series. These are maps to aid the reader in their understanding of the topography of an imagined space.

Using a map as a starting point for writing is a completely different concept, one exploited commercially by Shaun Levin in his *Writing Maps*⁴⁴. In the format of a traditional fold-out map, Levin has devised a series of topic-based prompts in the context of journeys, exploring the way in which writing “enriches and intensifies our engagement with the world”. His maps extend beyond the geographical, to encompass the concept of mind-mapping with its visual approach to organising information.

A traditional map⁴⁵ was the one of the inspirations for *Benbarrow*. It was an old map of somewhere familiar, a map where the lines between what are, and what were, and what might have been are blurred. A map where the edges between what was, and what has been retold, and what has been interpreted are ambiguous. A map of possibilities.

“An atlas combines reality and fantasy”, say Van Swaaij and Klare. It’s a beguiling idea.



I am travelling south, speeding through the countryside on an intercity train. Having been frustrated by lack of place-awareness on a previous journey, I am following highlighter-stained rail tracks on a map I’ve created by taping together sheets from an old road atlas of my father’s. Crewe, Stoke, Stafford, Lichfield, Rugby, Milton Keynes, Euston.

The town and the city stations are largely unchanged, Victorian edifices which hark back to the heyday of rail transport. But Milton Keynes station isn’t on my map. I can find Milton Keynes, but it’s only a cluster of houses. A hamlet, a village at most. Maybe a halt for local trains. There is no town, in the sense that we know Milton Keynes today, not a roundabout in sight. The atlas from which I’ve torn these pages predates 1967, the year in which Milton Keynes was designated by the government as a ‘new town’, absorbing nearby Bletchley, Wolverton and Stony Stratford, as well as a number of villages and outlying farms. A similar pattern can be seen elsewhere, in the earlier garden cities of Letchworth and Welwyn, in the later Warrington & Birchwood and in the

controversial flooding of Capel Celyn in the Tryweryn Valley to provide a reservoir for Liverpool.

The geology of the landmass may remain largely undisturbed, but over a period of time maps chart the impact of human interaction with the landscape. The map of my childhood, the map of my father's childhood and of his father's before him – these are very different from the maps by which my daughter will navigate, and her children after her.



On one of my sagging bookshelves is an old copy of *Collins Illustrated School Atlas*, its covers bound in deep red bookcloth, its spine black buckram. At the front and back are photographs of famous landmarks: The Houses of Parliament; Manchester Town Hall, The Eddystone Lighthouse and further afield The Pyramids and The Temple of Luxor. Coloured maps show the physical geography of the England and Wales, from the South Downs to the Cheviots, and the counties, from Cornwall to Northumberland. Tucked to the south of Lincolnshire is Rutland, to the north-west of Yorkshire lie Westmoreland and Cumberland. Curiously Scotland, with all the castles I have recently visited and the historic houses which have fed my ideas for *Benbarrow*, remains blank white.

The world of my childhood was pink. The pink of The British Empire, its dominions, colonies, protectorates, mandates and other territories resolutely coloured, even though the Empire had long been superseded by The Commonwealth of Nations⁴⁶. Now Empire is part of our past; the only shade of pink remaining is the embarrassment of acknowledging our colonial past.



Beyond the *Collins*, tucked into a corner of my bookcase are a number of pop-up maps: Glasgow, London, Amsterdam. They fascinate me as an exercise in origami, the way in which the paper can be unfolded to reveal, folded to conceal. I love the idea of travelling with a map that disappears between glossy covers,

like a beetle withdrawing its wings beneath iridescent elytra. It is small enough to secrete in my pocket.

‘Imagine,’ I say. ‘I can hold London in the palm of my hand.’ My son laughs.

‘Look,’ he says, taking his phone from his pocket. ‘I can hold the world in mine.’



Later I take out my taped-together intercity map to retrace the journey. The railway line is still there of course, but I have to search for it. It is only a matter of weeks, but the fluorescent yellow has already begun to fade. All that remains is a slight discolouration. Crewe, Stoke, Stafford, Lichfield, Rugby, Milton Keynes, Euston.

And the return journey, to the place I now call home.

Winsford

Afternoon tea:

scones and jam and clotted cream.

He turns over the paper napkin

and draws a teapot.

Spout to the left – Chester, he says –

handle to the right:

Macclesfield, Congleton.

A knobbed lid on the top:

Warrington.

He marks the centre with a single cross.

That’s Winsford. Where I come from.

Thirty years later I am asked the same question.

I turn over the paper napkin

and draw my Cheshire teapot.

The single cross.

There, I say,
That's where I come from.



I am sitting in a beer garden, enjoying a glass of cloudy cider on one of the few dry days of early summer. My husband has a glass of Hobgoblin, a rich ruby malt brewed by Wychwoods of Witney. Nowadays the name Wychwood is most likely recognised in this capacity, as a brewer of hand-crafted beers. To me Wychwood is a forest, near the market town of Charlbury. Its footprint has fluctuated over the centuries; parts cleared for Roman settlements became reforested, only to be felled again in Medieval times for wool production. Later clearances created more agricultural land; yet later replantings by The Woodland Trust created Shillbrook and Eynsham Woods.

Etymology or landscape: the edges are always moving, the boundaries shifting.

4. Connections: Characters Glimpsed Across a Crowded Room

In response to my transfer documentation from MPhil to PhD study, Dr David Cooper questioned the methodology of NT and other site visits. 'How are these to be recorded?' he asked. The process-driven corollary to this question might be 'What affect are these visits going to have on the praxis?'

The most obvious impact of site visits may be on the development of 'place' in the novel, the piecing together of elements of real settings – a hillside, with its cluster of wind-blown trees; a room, a ceramic bowl artfully placed on a sideboard – to become the landscape of the imagined world. I will return to Wittenham Clumps and Sissinghurst elsewhere, but for the moment let's take a stroll through The Tate Modern. It is a hot June afternoon and the South Bank is busy with visitors, many of them young children in high-vis jacketed school crocodiles. The gallery is cool, and in a familiar meditative ritual I head towards the Rothko. Last time I was here I was alone and the space was silent. The colours swam into focus as my eyes adjusted to the dark. Today the room is crowded. People shuffle and chatter; A couple pause between me and *Red on Maroon*, kiss, move on. I have to step around another couple of entwined lovers as I exit the room. And another. There is something in the air, I think.

As I leave through a gallery themed *In the Studio*, I notice a painting by Meredith Frampton⁴⁷. A young woman stands beside a cello. Her body is turned slightly; her distant gaze skims the viewer, her expression dispassionate. A silk dress clings over her slender hips, tumbles in soft folds to the floor. Her skin is ivory, her hair auburn, cut in short permanent waves. One arm is folded, upright against her breast, the other is horizontal across her waist. She appears self-contained, quite literally composed.



In the gallery shop I buy a card of the image, which I pin above my desk when I get home. 'Hello Frances,' I say.



I feel that I 'know' Helena and Kitty. I have lived with them for some time, developing their 'viewpoint' chapters with my peer group at regular post-graduate workshop sessions. I know their trajectory; I may not be sure of the exact path each will take, but I know in which direction they are headed. My writing style is not plot-driven; I do not have a chapter-by-chapter plan for my novel. The Snowflake Method⁴⁸ and its many derivatives are impractical for me. My characters evolve as I write and I continuously redraft their narratives to accommodate their development.

My secondary characters have become more important; I've found they have their own stories to tell. These are viable as threads of plot and sub-plot. Is it possible that they might become more than that? Is it possible that *Benbarrow*, with its dual point of view, might develop into a multi-viewpoint polyphonic novel?



In his paper *Writing the Polyphonic Novel*⁴⁹ Dr Paul Williams explores the resurgence of writing which plays with “simultaneity, contradiction, and the empty space between voices, echoing our post-modern, multi-tasking reading practice”. I have no intention of pushing at these polyphonic boundaries; my task is to interweave the various narratives using individual voices that reflect the various points of view.

I have long admired Leslie Schwartz’s novel *Angel’s Crest*⁵⁰, in which the events surrounding the disappearance of a three year old boy are explored through seven different voices, male and female. I make a decision to restrict my viewpoint to five characters, all female. The latter is based largely on my greater confidence in handling female perspectives, but it increases the challenge of making the voices distinctive.

I already have two characters, Helena and Kitty, of a similar age. Their experience and background mark them apart. Helena is naïve, bookish, little more than a schoolgirl, while Kitty’s working life has made her more mature and knowing. I introduce Annie, Kitty’s sister. She is several years older than Kitty, struggling to make ends meet in a difficult marriage. Frances may be a similar age to Annie, but her life is a complete contrast, one of wealth and privilege. Vronnie is older again, one of the two million women that Virginia Nicholson writes about in *Singled Out*⁵¹. The life Vronnie imagined for herself at twenty died alongside her lover on the battlefields of The Great War; she is a single woman of moderate means, Bohemian by nature and dependent on the hospitality of friends and family.

As their voices develop, so do their personalities. I have a visual impression of each of them. I would know them in the street; I would be able to pick them out of a crowd. I fill my notebook with scribbings: a turn of phrase, a hairstyle, a garment, a recipe. Books pile up on my desk: fashion, art, literature, furniture, cookery, gardening, first-aid. I trawl through my albums of photographs from National Trust outings and look through guidebooks of properties I’ve visited.

My bookshelves sigh with relief. There is an audible groan from my desk.



Over a period of a few weeks, I build up a portfolio of images, gathered from portraiture of the period. I am wary of using historical portraits to reference costume and artefacts, aware that it has been fashionable to be portrayed in the elaborate dress of a former age, against a backdrop of antiquity. How better to display one's lineage, one's ancestry, than to emphasise the significance of old money?

The invention of photography in the mid nineteenth century had an impact on the style and composition of portrait painting. The emergence of the new industrial technologies made an asset of 'modernism' from the sitter's perspective. In addition to the many portraits of 'suited gentlemen' in its collection, the National Portrait Gallery for instance holds a substantial number of intimate, relaxed portraits, which capture male and female sitters in more informal situations and attire.

I trawl the internet, accumulating images which I print out and scatter across the carpet. I have my Frances, but what about Helena? Could that work-worn woman be Annie? Could these be the embittered features of Aunt Celia? Does that questioning glance belong to Kendall?



I continue to build up the personality profiles in my notebook. Its once pristine pages become messy with notes, wrinkled by glue. It travels with me, its covers getting scuffed, its edges soften by use.

5. Connections: Messages from an Earlier Time

My Director of Studies is telling me about his recent trip to Lodge Hill and his encounter with nightingales.

Have I heard the recording of cellist Beatrice Harrison, he asks. I haven't. In fact I've not heard of Beatrice Harrison, so he tells me about the 1924 performance recorded at her Oxted home⁵². Accompanied by the nightingales that frequented her garden, it is thought to be the first live wildlife broadcast. I look it up online and transfixed, I listen to the interaction of strings and birdsong. I say interaction, for surely this is a two-way process? What artist could remain unmoved, uninfluenced, by the experience?

I'm unfamiliar with the song of nightingales, having lived for most of my adult life north of Severn-Wash line which broadly delineates their breeding territory⁵³. I search Youtube for recordings and am struck by the similarity of their song to that of robins, still a regular feature of our northern gardens, and to which they are closely related. The distribution of nightingales is shrinking. How long before the familiar song of the robin is lost? In the future, will recordings be our only way of listening to birdsong?

A Poem in Which Emily Visits the Museum

Whilst the other children learn about android technology,
handle a Galaxy, are bewildered by its size and weight,
Emily discovers the inter-level transporter that leads
to a basement crammed with twentieth century archives.
The dim lighting reveals artefacts long abandoned:
beneath a draped cloth an outline she recognises as 'car';
shelves of paper that crumble at the slightest touch;
a Perspex box labelled 'Interactive Display: Birdsong'.

She presses the button, steps back as the room is filled
with sounds that will haunt her until the day she dies.
She stumbles back to her classmates, eardrums vibrating
with unfamiliar sound, doesn't hear her teacher's tense rebuke.
That night, suspended between dreams, she touches the feathers
sprouting across her shoulder blades, feels the warble in her throat.

Perhaps it is because of their shrinking territory that I associate nightingales in particular with an earlier age, with an era which, if not lost, is at least fading from our memories. More likely it's because the bird has older cultural resonances: Philomel of Greek mythology; Hans Christian Anderson's fairy tale; Florence Nightingale, celebrated as the founder of modern nursing; poems by John Keats (*An Ode to a Nightingale*) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (*The Nightingale*) among many others; lyrics in opera and operetta (Igor Stravinsky and WS Gilbert). In particular, I think of *A Nightingale Sang in Berkley Square*, the romantic melody made popular during WWII by singers such as Vera Lynn and played by bands during my parents' dancing years.

A Nightingale Sang

'It's usual to have two pieces,' he says.
'One for the arrival, one for the retirement.
Something with associations.'
I trawl the songbanks testing snatches,
choose a couple of wartime favourites.
I can recall no specific tunes,
just the flavour of her voice drifting
from the small and steamy kitchen

as she rolled pastries, rough and puff and shortcrust,
baked tea-loaves and Victoria sponges,
always singing, singing.

My search of Youtube leads me to stumble across another Oxted recording from the BBC⁵⁴, this time from May 19th 1942. No cello this time, but in the background the sound of Wellingtons and Lancasters, setting off for Germany on an evening bombing raid on Mannheim. Further research tells me that 11 aircraft were lost; four Halifax, four Stirlings and three Wellingtons⁵⁵.

I think of Henry. My novel ends before the outbreak of the Second World War, but I know that he and Eric will become 'Brylcreem Boys'. I wonder if he survived until 1942. I wonder if he was on the Mannheim raid and if so, whether he made it back. No matter that he is a fictional character. To me he is simply another airman on a mission. Just like my father.



My father was one of many who, having survived the Second World War, chose not to speak of his experiences until much later in life. Growing up, I knew only that he'd been in the Air Force, but that was hardly a matter of curiosity for me since I'd lived on RAF stations all my life. Wasn't everyone's dad in the RAF? Certainly all my friends' dads were.

I do however remember being fascinated by one of his ties. It was plain black, with a small goldfish motif; the goldfish had wings and hovered over stylised waves. This, in the days before Carnaby Street and Flower Power had made their impact on men's fashion, seemed somewhat surprising. That he wore it with the pride of one belonging to an exclusive club seemed extraordinary.

The Goldfish Club⁵⁶ was established shortly after WWII by C. A. Robertson, chief draftsman at PB Cow & Co., a manufacturer of air-sea rescue equipment. It celebrates the survival of aircraft personnel whose lives were saved by life-jackets or inflatable dinghies after their planes had ditched in water.

My father was one such.



Christmas Day 1941

They take turns in the raft,
share air-dropped sardines and bottled water,
talk of families gathered around rationed tables
and try not to think of circling sharks
or the possibility of Kawasaki.
Some are burned: the pilot who steered
the Catalina away from his crew,
the navigator caught in blazing fuel.
Others have flesh torn by bullets,
flayed by shrapnel and broken glass.
They sing softly through the night,
welcome that other sun with hymn and prayer.
They are the lucky few,
the ones who make it home.
Amongst them a young air-gunner, just twenty one,
whose hand, raised to indicate chest pain,
shows up on x-ray a fragment of shell

embedded in the wrist.
Deeper still those other wounds:
a gentle man nursing an aversion to Geisha,
Bonsai, the crested waves of Hokusai,
the soft pink of cherry blossom.



In 1975 my Grandmother dies. She has been in robust health and her sudden death is a shock to us all. We sort out her belongings in preparation for the sale of her home, that one still-point of my childhood. In her roll-top bureau my father finds a bundle of correspondence. The handwriting is his; letters home from a young airman. He gives them to me; he has no desire to read them. One describes the flight out from Selatar; the ditching of the burning Catalina; the struggle of nine injured airmen to remain afloat in the one undamaged life-raft. Their rescue by a Dutch submarine and the hospitality of the submariners.

Out over the sea, twenty-four hours floating 300 miles from land, back to safety under the sea. Commemorated by little more than a small winged goldfish on a black tie. No wonder then that he raises a glass of gin – Dutch of course, Bols if available – each Christmas.



E-mail correspondence is unlikely to survive in a way that letters have. Novels with an epistolary structure may continue to be popular – e-mail and text messaging is no bar to the development of relationships by correspondence in fiction. But given the speed with which electronic communications have replaced postal ones, it may soon become difficult to imagine novels set in the recent past which could have plotlines or denouements concerning the discovery of lost or secret family letters. A.S. Byatt's *Possession*⁵⁷, Mary Ann Shaffer's *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society*⁵⁸ and Kate Morton's *The Distant Hours*⁵⁹ are all examples of popular novels in which the discovery of an old letter initiates a 'quest' to resolve a family mystery.

How long before these plotlines segue from stories set in a remembered time, to strictly 'historical' fiction?



Other letters surface as we clear my Grandmother's house. Letters from America, tied with faded pink treasury tape. My father opens them and starts reading. Suddenly he sits down, as though the breath has been punched out of him.

'Well I never,' he says. He passes the letter to me and opens another. I read each one in turn. They are thank you letters, posted shortly after the war by grateful parents who have seen their sons return safely from the European conflict. All families have their secrets. Some, it seems, are less dark than others.

Other mothers' sons and the publican's wife

We found the letters tied in bundles in her roll-top desk, each one dated nineteen forty-five or six, each postmarked from a US state: Nevada, California, Texas, Idaho. For six long war-torn years she'd pulled the pints behind the Marlborough's bars, dispensing beer and sympathy to soldiers, sailors, airmen, destined for the training camps and battlefields of Europe, Asia, Africa. The carapace of uniform made men of boys; beneath the khaki fabric lurked their adolescent fears, the pain of being torn from kith and kin. And thinking of her son in distant Singapore she offered comfort, friendship, love; encouraged them to talk of New York streets, of ranches, mountains, prairies, creeks, of hunting, skinny-dipping, carting, fishing. They spoke of fathers playing baseball, of mothers baking cookies, cornbread; of shared Thanksgiving dinners, lobster chowder, of barbeques with brothers, sisters, cousins, aunts. She taught them crib

and dominoes; they taught her poker, three-card brag.
And when her son came home whole despite a body pocked
with shrapnel – she wondered how those other boys had fared,
how many made it back. And then the precious letters came
from grateful mothers, who hearing of her kindness
thanked her for being there, when they could not; thanked her
for cherishing those Stateside boys, those other mothers' sons.



The decline in letter writing may also result in a reduction of the kind of intimate social details that persist, long after the demise of the writers and the recipients. Blogs may be saved in some e-repository, to become historical documents in decades to come, but the minutiae of personal material never intended for public consumption will surely be lost. Exchanges of the type we read in the Mitford sisters' correspondence⁶⁰ - if one could imagine such an exchange happening today - would not end up in the public domain.

Throwaway details of a car, or a dress, or a cocktail. The reference to current books, or films, or music. The social etiquette, the turn of phrase.

*"Oh I am so sorry how beastly for you poor darling. Never mind I expect you'll be rewarded by marrying someone millions of times nicer....."*⁶¹

All would most likely disappear with the scrubbing of a hard drive.



Another generation; another house clearance. My sister and I are sorting through our mother's things: keep, charity shop, skip. There is a necessity to remain objective, otherwise we would throw nothing away. We would become overwhelmed with 'stuff', as if we haven't already got enough of our own.

Occasionally however, it's impossible to avoid the curved ball, the in-swinger, the bouncer that catches you beneath the ribs.

I open a bag of letters. They are relatively modern, nothing older than thirty years, nothing, I imagine, of any particular value. Most are cards: postcards, birthday cards, notelets. Many have letters folded inside them. I tip them out on the carpet, a cascade of words and pictures. They are all written by me, sent to my mother. If I harbour any sense of guilt about being a geographically-distant daughter, these assuage the pain. Week after week I have written to her, continuing long after her ability to process detail has been eroded by Alzheimers.

I read a few. A postcard from a weekend on Anglesey. Several notelets that start 'It was good to see you on Saturday...' and reference return journeys across the Pennines, undertaken in all weathers. Letters with news of the children and reprints of family snaps. The minutiae of my life: a day spent in the garden; the difficulty of shopping with small children; the delights and disasters of new recipes.

I put them back in the bag with rather more care than I tipped them out. There is a limit to the magnitude of nostalgia that is permissible when undertaking a house clearance; I take them home to read another day. They may not be of the literary merit of the Mitford letters, but they are mine. Besides, they are the social history of my era.

One day they might be the inspiration for a story, or the resource material for social detail. Meanwhile they are a personal record of our lives: my family's, my children's, mine.

A message from another time.

6. Memory: Retrieving Memories and Taking Flight

It's Saturday morning and I'm at our local Child Contact Centre, completing a colleague's DBS application. It's all a formality, but an important formality. Since Soham⁶² nobody questions the need.

'How long have you lived at that address?' I ask her as I hand back the bank statement she has provided as residential evidence.

'Now, let me see.' She tips her head to one side, considers. 'Since July 1995. Daniel was able to do his last week at his primary school before we moved. He started at the high school that autumn.'

This is how autobiographical memory works: we form mental networks between events and personal experiences. "Autobiographical memories are not just a random collection but are grouped into related sets, organised and indexed so that they can be retrieved on demand"⁶³ Some of our memories are supported by a script, a "general knowledge structure that represents the knowledge abstracted from a class of similar events, rather than knowledge of any one specific episode"⁶⁴. We can describe a visit to the dentist, a commuter journey, a shopping expedition for example, by reference to a script derived from a composite of such experiences.

But real life isn't always routine and it stands to reason that memories may be specific. Intuitively we recognise that it's the non-routine, atypical event that is likely to be the most memorable, whether personal or global. A friend remembers 9/11 in the context of a hospital emergency room: waiting for assessment of what turned out to be a broken leg, he saw the events unfold on the overhead TV screen, initially thinking that he was watching a movie. For him, it is the juxtaposition of two atypical events. I remember picking my daughter up, sitting outside the school gates, listening to the horrified voices on the car radio. For me it is an atypical event, recalled in the context of typical script.



In the late 1960's the then GPO launched their new telephone receiver, the Tone Ring Illuminator Model, better known as the Trimphone. The iconic dual

coloured receivers (available in grey-white, grey-green and two-tone blue) swiftly became the model of choice for modern homes and by 1980 there were over 1.6 million Trimphones in use. A novel or play set in the period almost has a requirement for a Trimphone to appear authentic.

Its electronic warble, which replaced its predecessor's bell, was mimicked by starlings across the country. If you were in the garden on a sunny June afternoon and heard the distinctive sound of a Trimphone, it was worth checking for a small black bird with a glossy sheen of purples and greens perched on your TV aerial before rushing indoors to catch a call.

Starlings are sociable birds, gathering in large winter flocks to form impressive twilight murmurations above roosting sites. The sound of Trimphones, along with other electronic tones including doorbells and dial-up modems, enriched their vocal repertoire. Birdsong is copied by offspring and immature birds, so the electronic warble was passed on and remained part of the suburban soundscape long after the real thing had ceased to be fashionable. Parent to offspring, not through genes but through social interaction and verbal narrative.

As a child I spent happy afternoons with my Grandmother in her vegetable garden, fashioning birdscarers out of milk-bottle tops, threading the clattery silver foil discs onto strands of coarse black cotton. Fat lazy pigeons sat in the elm trees and watched us, unperturbed by our efforts. I remember those afternoons, my Grandmother and the elms – now both long-gone. Milk bottles with foil tops are also a thing of the past.

I describe these moments to my children and perhaps in time I will describe them to my grandchildren. Maybe they will remember my stories and tell their children, or grandchildren.



Shortly after my paternal grandfather's death in 1953, my grandmother gave up the licence on the Charlbury pub they had run together for over a decade and retired to neighbouring Ramsden. For the rest of her life she lived in The Old School House, close to where the crossing of the High Street by the Roman

Akeman Street formed the hub of the village: a war memorial, a pub, a church and a school. She became an active participant in village life, a stalwart of the WI and a regular worshipper at St James Church, where she helped organise church events and served on flower arranging and cleaning rotas.



Times may have been a-changing in the world of Bob Dylan, but in English rural villages the old ways persisted. My grandmother was always known as Mrs Smith, and her closest friend, the retired village school teacher, was always Miss Beames, never the Ada I discovered her to be many years later. I remember her talking about other villagers: Major Butler, Captain Bayliss and Dr Rogers, each known by their formal title.

My grandmother was, however, no respecter of status for its own sake and didn't suffer fools gladly. She believed that respect must be earned, even by the incumbents of St James. The verger who wanted to keep the porch door shut in order to avoid the guano of nesting swallows was shamed into capitulation. Indiscretions were seldom forgotten; the vicar who regularly warmed himself at her open hearth found himself the object of her mirth when he burned his backside so badly he had to stand through the following Sunday services.

These were the stories we loved to hear; 'Did I ever tell you about...' was the familiar prelude to the 'Granecdotes' of our childhood. *Are you sitting comfortably? Then I will begin...*⁶⁵



Another weekday stroll down the high street of a small town. I trawl the bookshelves of the charity shops. It's a good haul: A copy of Rebecca West's *Sunflower* (begun in 1925, suppressed in her lifetime and only published after her death in 1983) and A *Beaux Arts Guide to Decorative Arts, 1889-1914*. And among a pile of magazines, a foxed edition of the *Weetabix Wonder Book of Birds*, a copy of which I owned as a child, having diligently saved up the requisite number of Weetabix tokens and the pocket money to buy the postal order to cover the cost of its despatch.

I was fascinated by British birds. Maybe I would have become interested anyway, but my curiosity was most likely stimulated by returning to the UK at the age of eight. After living in Nicosia, the Wiltshire countryside, richly verdant and easily accessible from the RAF station, was a box of delights. Beyond the large gardens of the OMQs – the officers' married quarters – lay mushroomed fields grazed by wide-eyed Friesians, sheltered copses, streams and brooks that drained towards the River Avon. The varied environments supported a diversity of wildlife, including many bird species.

This was a time long before Soham, long before the murder of Sarah Payne, even before the Moors Murder Trial had forever tainted the concept of children playing beyond earshot⁶⁶. This was a time when children were encouraged to 'go outside', to disappear with their friends for the day, leaving their parents confident in the knowledge they would return when hungry. Not quite *Swallows and Amazons*⁶⁷, but close.

Now the internet provides easy access to information about British wildlife, offering a wide range of resources and apps for identifying flora and fauna. Instead of smartphones, our childhood pockets were stuffed with Observer Guides, in my case *Wild Animals of the British Isles*; *Wild Flowers*; *Moths and Butterflies*. The wrinkled pages of my copy of *Pondlife* indicates that it was particularly well used, but my favourite was always *The Observer Book of British Birds*.

My Observer Guides sit on my bookshelf; my name written inside each one in neatly-childlike writing provides a link back to another time, to a younger self. They rub shoulders with other guides: hardback copies of Collins Guides and the DK Guides which gave my children identification photographs that were

so much clearer than the watercolour images of my childhood. Now these books are joined by the *Weetabix Wonder Book of Birds*.

Maybe not 'my' copy, but close enough to provide that link back to the child, playing in the fields and woods, oblivious of any dangers.



Winter has enveloped the Oxfordshire countryside. The bitter cold of January and February are still to come, but the short days are having an impact. After four years of shared accommodation at a city university followed by all the celebrations of graduation, our daughter is finding the experience of village life a challenge. The countryside around the Vale of the White Horse may be beautiful, but it's no substitute for company. Bearing cartons of turkey and sprouts, fruit cake, chocolate and mince pies, we head down to stay with her over Christmas.

By Boxing Day we have exhausted our repertoire of gossip, have played more hands of cards and games of Scrabble than in the previous twelve months and are full-to-busting with rich food. In need of fresh air and exercise we pile in the car and head to Wittenham Clumps, where my daughter tells us there is a Poem Tree⁶⁸. At the top of Castle Hill we find the old beech tree where in 1844 poet Joseph Tubb engraved his tribute to the landscape.

Wittenham Clumps

Boxing Day, and overfull with sweet roast turkey
sherry trifle, fruited cake, we craved the open sky
and ventured out to Wittenham, its grassy Clumps
still frosted in the afternoon. Hand-held we stumped
up Castle Hill, to find the ancient Poem Tree -
Tubb's tribute to his landscape: Augustine's monastery;
remains of Roman villas cradled by the winding Thames;
Cwichelm's grave; the distant Ridgeway; Mercia's bounds.
We traced his pen-knifed stanzas, gnarled and worn,

distorted by a century's growth. Before we turned
for home, we took a photograph, just us, the tree, the sky,
where over-wheeled by rare Red Kites we paused awhile.
Unseen, beneath its bark, a beetled core. A summer storm
has swept it all away; now even words are gone.

Kites were indeed rare at one time. Thirty years ago they were all but extinct in the UK, with the only remaining colony surviving in ancient oak woodlands in mid-Wales⁶⁹. They have been successfully re-established in groups across England and Scotland; there is a programme of reintroduction in Northern Ireland.

The sight of these birds circling in the air currents around the crest of a hill, flashing their rust underbellies and distinctive forked tails, is still a privilege. We balance a camera on a tree stump and arrange ourselves against the skyline as the timer counts down. A kite wheels across behind us as the shutter closes. It feels like a gift: from the landscape to our family; from our daughter to us; from Billy to Kitty.



Weddings, it seems, are like buses: none at all and then several, close together. Our younger daughter is married in August; a month later our nephew follows suit. Our elder daughter no sooner sets off on honeymoon, before we're travelling down to a family friend's wedding in Cornwall. It's a long drive and we take the opportunity to break the journeys with stopovers and National Trust visits. Attingham Park and Castle Drogo on the way down, and partially-restored Croombe Court on the way back.

Attingham is an old favourite, although we seldom venture into the house. The weather is obliging and we stroll between the trees towards a grassed area where we can sit on the wrought iron benches to enjoy our packed lunch in the sunshine. Beyond is the walled garden, which we have watched develop over a number of years. In 2008 the land was quartered and the first section ploughed over with a vintage tractor by a local farmer. Since then the restored area has

been extended; ground has been planted and harvested, fertilised and replanted.

The final quarter is ready for cultivation and lean red pigs are busily turning over the soil, grubbing though upturned clumps for succulent roots and juicy grubs. We walk past the neat rows of onions and potatoes, beetroot, lettuce and courgettes, past the bamboo frames of scarlet runner beans, past the terracotta forcing bells and through the archway into a smaller walled garden. This is the flower garden, although the area away from the glasshouses is currently being used as a children's playground.



I already know this is the walled garden at Hanbury vicarage. It is the right size. In the corner is a bothy; a glass lean-to greenhouse runs along much of one wall. It is slightly larger than my grandmother's garden, but unshaded by neighbouring elms. A healthy young man would manage the plot with occasional help. I am redesigning the layout to include a potting shed and an outside privy. Some of the espaliered fruit trees will do very nicely along that south-facing wall. I can already see rows of peas and broad beans supported by twigs cut from the hedgerows, strips of carrot tops and cabbage. Few flowers, except for the occasional marigold and lavender, strategically planted to ward off insect pests.

Yes, I think, *Billy will be very comfortable here.*



We have time for tea and scones before we press on. We walk back through the walled vegetable garden – big enough to be the walled garden at Benbarrow, given a slightly larger bothy – and I pause to read the labels on the fruit trees. Greengage: *Carly Transparent*; Apricot: *Moorpark*; Peach: *Duke of York*.

A couple have walked into the garden. I wouldn't have noticed, only they have disturbed a blackbird and it flies across the garden, shrieking. Later I will place Vronnie in a garden just like this one, and Billy's arrival will send a blackbird into flight, its shrill cry echoing around the walls.



The wedding season is over at last, for us at least. I travel across to Wakefield and visit my mother, a batch of photographs in my hand. No matter that she will be unable to process the detail, will not recognise her grandchildren. She will like the pictures, pick out the brides in their flowing gowns.

She is asleep when I arrive. Above her bed is a cross-stitched picture that I made for her and my father for their anniversary. It is a stylised walled garden, the date 1992 sewn either side of the wooden door. Like Attingham's walled garden, it is quartered with a pond in the middle, and espalier fruit trees grow around its perimeter. There are flowers, birds, squirrels, even a caterpillar and a pair of beetles.

Above and below the garden are the words I grew up with. A phrase of my grandmother's, on a picture belonging to my parents, stitched by me.

One is Nearer to God in a Garden than Anywhere Else on Earth.

7. Memory: People, Perspectives and Putting Down Roots

It's early September and I'm visiting my mother. The summer is drawing to a close, as is the millennium. Change is in the air. My mother has managed reasonably well since my father's death, but the time has come for a move closer to family support. We have found a dormer bungalow near my sister; while workmen are rewiring and decorating, I am helping Mum prepare. She is downsizing and there is a lot to clear out. We both need a break; time for tea and digestives on the wooden bench.

The garden has evolved over the thirty years since my parents bought the house. The long garden – nearly a hundred feet, my father claimed, though I never thought to measure it – backs onto a row of small shops. Most mornings there is the smell of fresh bread from the village bakery. The *leylandii*, that most abhorred species of territorial gardening, cast shade across the greenhouses and shed. The fruit trees are still heavy with apples and pears. The borders either side of the step are overrun with lemon balsam, lavender, roses in need of a prune.

I remember when the lawn carried on that far, when it was a rectangle of grass where I danced in the moonlight, secure in the knowledge that the garden was private, not overlooked. There is only a square of grass now; the far end was turned over for vegetables shortly after my father retired. I think of him digging the soil, constructing frames for runner beans, throwing grubs to a half-tame robin, just as my grandmother had when I was a child.

On one side a wooden fence runs the length of the garden; behind the seat where we sit is a high privet hedge that mirrors it. The privet needs trimming. I think about getting the step-ladder out of the garage. I will need to be careful of the cyclamen which nestle in the shadows. Originally from my grandmother's Oxfordshire garden, my father lifted and replanted them over the years so that they now form a soft pink ribbon between the hedge and the grass. The flowers are tiny, like little Chinese lanterns hanging above the tracks of woodmice.

I brush the crumbs from my jumper. No time for reminiscing; there is work to be done. There are enough memories to deal with indoors.



My earliest memory is of waking in the afternoon, and from my bedroom window watching my parents and sister in the garden. When, as an adult, I describe the scene, drawing a rough plan of path, lawn and borders, my mother identifies the house. I must have been quite young as we moved from the quarters at Acklington when I was about four, certainly before I started Infant School. The memory isn't specific or traumatic (although I think I had been ill), so falls into the broad category of non-contextual memories described by Bruce et al⁷⁰ as 'fragment memories', those which mark the end of deficient recall known as the 'childhood amnesia' of our very early years.

As cognition and language develop memory becomes clearer and more specific⁷¹. Many of my other early memories come from the period between six and eight years old when I lived in Cyprus, or just after, when we returned to find the UK in the grip of one of the fiercest winters for decades. Although some memories involve a sense of place, most reflect my relationship with my parents and sister.

When I write about Cyprus, I recall the absence of my sister and my longing for her to return from boarding school.

Nicosia Airport, June '62

Tarmac softens, sticking to the soles
of my best sandals. An announcer's voice
apologises for the delay. Mother settles
in the square of shade, shakes out
her lace handkerchief, dabs her top lip.
A blush of powder blooms on white cotton
a scarlet kiss caught on the border.
Father rattles towards us with a tray of tall glasses,
ice bouncing in the bubbles.
Not long now, he says. And I stare
through the mirage into middle distance,
hold my breath, listen for the rumble of jet engines.

My sister is coming home for the holidays.

You remember it differently, of course.

The cramped aircraft cabin, the hours
folded into scratchy seats.

A parcel despatched from an overcast
June afternoon, with the promise of rain.

An airmail delivery, BFPO 53.

A summer feeling like a guest in your own home,
sunburn and prickly heat and expectations
piled up like the books left beside your dormitory bed,
the empty windows gazing across Essex fields.

Cyprus has different connotations for my sister and I; our experiences were unlike and our memories have been overlaid and coloured by subsequent events in our lives. I think about Robert Graham's introduction to memoir writing: "Everything we write exposes who we are but, even more than other forms of writing, memoir strips us to the skin"⁷². Whether life writing is generated purely in the form of memoir pieces, or whether it finds its way to the surface through poetry or fragments of fiction, there is still exposure of the self. There is still exposure of one's experience, of one's history.

And that history, although shared, may be viewed from entirely different perspectives.



On our return from a family holiday in France we stop at Sissinghurst. Home of Vita Sackville West and Harold Nicolson, it has long been on my wishlist of places to visit. So too is nearby Charleston, home of artists Vanessa Bell and Duncan Grant, but it involves a detour and will have to wait for another day.

It is early April and the Sissinghurst gardens are carpeted with daffodils. Forsythia hangs in elegant curves over a brick wall, its arches of yellow flowers reflected in the moat-water below. Hellebores linger in the shaded borders;

aconites and fritillaries bloom in the grass around the feet of a slender stone figure.

The long library feels as much part of the garden as part of the house. The light is soft and I peer at the collection of books on the shelves. This isn't a library of matched sets, leather spines, glassined illustrations. It's a library of favourites, of books that have been eclectically chosen, and although they have been carefully preserved they give the impression of being used. They are a writer's collection, books to be pulled from the shelf and browsed through, books to be consulted, referenced, quoted. Books to be inspired by.

I imagine Vita in this room. And then I imagine Kendall and Henry and Helena. This is the sort of library they will create, once the restoration work on Benbarrow is complete.



I have thrown a pile of books into a box and I tip them out across the table at the caravan. It is perhaps inevitable that I pick up a memoir called *Deceived with Kindness*⁷³. It may be a coincidence that a friend has just posted on facebook that she is relaxing on a poolside lounge in Croatia with the self-same memoir, but it is hardly a surprise that that I am reading about the Bloomsburys.

Angelica Garnett was brought up as the daughter of Vanessa and Clive Bell, although it was an open secret that her father was Duncan Grant. Her memoir tells of the experience of growing up in the heart of this intensely artistic community. I have just finished reading Cressida Connolly's *The Rare and the Beautiful*⁷⁴, a biography of the Garman sisters, one of whom had an affair with Vita Sackville West, as did Virginia Woolf. I have also brought with me copies of Frances Partridge's *Memories*⁷⁵, Woolf's diaries, Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage*⁷⁶.

The stories overlap. I read one extract and then turn to another volume for an alternative viewpoint on events. This resonates with me; doesn't my own experience show how differently we can remember shared occurrences? As I read on I become more convinced that *Benbarrow* is best told from a variety of angles. What has started as research into bohemian lifestyles has become an exercise in awareness of perspective.



2014 sees the hundredth anniversary of the outbreak of The Great War. There are numerous events to commemorate the event: art installations such as *Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red*⁷⁷, the cascade of ceramic poppies which floods the moat of the Tower of London; stage and film adaptations of Michael Morpugo's *War Horse*⁷⁸; concerts and performances featuring music of the period.

At Dunham Massey the National Trust recreates the Stamford Military Hospital that was established there by The Red Cross between 1917 and 1919. We walk through the house greeted with the sounds and smells of a working hospital. The main ward, operating theatre and activity rooms have been meticulously recreated. Patient registers and letters are on display. Around us actors recreate scenes from the lives of the residents: injured soldiers stumble from their beds in a haze of shell-shocked psychosis; nursing staff carry trays of bandages and administer medications; domestic staff strip beds and lay fires.

Many large houses and stately homes were offered or requisitioned for the treatment and rehabilitation of injured servicemen. It seems inevitable that Benbarrow would be one such. Annie is older than Kitty and Helena; it is entirely possible that she worked as a domestic servant, emptying bedpans and washing soiled bedding. It would give her a familiarity with the property, and a nostalgic connection to her younger, more innocent, self.

A younger version of Annie, of whom Kitty is barely aware.

Kitty wants to have a good relationship with her sister; they are after all the only remaining family members in the area, their parents dead and their brothers having left Oxfordshire years earlier. There is a touch of animosity; Annie isn't proud of her situation and resists any hint of judgement. She is in need of Kitty's generosity but finds it hard to accept. Kitty is tentative in her offering.

So often the history of sisters is marked by sibling rivalry and distrust.

Roadside Picnic, Troodos Mountains

My mother's face, livid, blotched with anger.
And my father, blood dripping from his knees
where he'd scrambled up the bank.
And the tears streaming down my face,
not sure whether I was relieved
it hadn't got her, or disappointed.
And my sister, smirking as the wrath
fell searing around me, saying:
It was only a snake, I was fine.
And in my mind's eye the serpent
slithering away into the undergrowth.



A break in the weather is forecast, with the promise of a few consecutive rain-free days. At last the chance to build the arbour, the panels of which have been leaning up against the garage wall since they were delivered a fortnight ago. We dig over the soil, the bare earth left by the felling of a beautiful acer. The loss of a specimen tree in excellent condition is a sad event for any gardener, but I had reluctantly accepted that it was too big for the space. One of my

grandmother's mantras was that there was no such thing as a weed, only a plant that was in the wrong place. By that definition my much-loved tree was a very big weed, and had to go.

The arbour is less an indulgence, more act of recompense, to me and to my garden. The physical effort of turning over and levelling the soil, laying flags, building the structure, will exhaust me. It will quiet my anger.

I run my thumb over the initials burned into the handle of the fork. FS. Fred Smith. This too helps, this act of using tools that were my grandfather's, my grandmother's, my father's. Now mine.

It's only when I've finished writing that I notice that several of my characters have, like me, lost that continuity of bloodline. Before the story opens Kitty and Annie have lost their mother and more recently their father, a man broken by grief. Helena is an orphan, brought up by her aunt and uncle. For Henry and Frances the bereavement is more recent; it is Henry's inheritance of Benbarrow which brings them to Hanbury.

For Frances and Annie the death of parents carries an additional ache: the inability to repair a damaged relationship. Both have borne the strain of estrangement. I wonder where this concept has come from; I have my suspicions, knowing friends and family who have experienced parental disapproval. The only rift I have known is that caused by the gradual erosion of the parent-child relationship typical of senile dementia.

I can only be grateful for the bond of trust which exemplified my relationship with my parents.

Trust

It was summer then and hot, July perhaps –
the sky bright and cloudless blue,
the tarmac sticky-soft beneath our feet.
And I was young, eight or maybe nine,
my hair not thick, no, never thick,
but densely black and loose about my shoulders.
No wonder then, that separated from their queen

the sun-dazed bees should be confused
and swarming round my head should settle.
'Be still,' my father said. 'Be still and calm
and they'll not sting.'
Even now I feel their tiny feet against my scalp,
the motor of their hum, the rhythm of their wings;
my father's fingers firm and sure, gently parting
strands of hair and lifting free each bee.
Even now I hear the soothing cadence of his voice:
'Be still and calm. Be still and calm.
Be still. Be calm.'



At home again I return to my Bloomsbury books. I take them into the garden and browse through their pages. I am absorbed in the stories, in the images of Charleston. I have a plan for Vronnie's painting which was inspired by a visit to Basildon Park, with its octagonal drawing room, but while I've been away I have visited Plas Newydd, with its Rex Whistler mural and the idea has grown in my mind.

Books and National Trust visits. Can it possibly be reasonable, I ask myself, to find research so pleasurable?

I stretch out in the sunshine on my tartan rug, my eye-level a little above the grass. There is a gentle breeze; it runs ripples through the scattering of cyclamen that break through the shadows at the base of the silver birch. The cyclamen that came from my father's garden, and his mother's before him.

The same cyclamen that Vronnie will point out to Helena, growing in an emerald and pink ribbon along the foot of the box hedge at Benbarrow.



8. Memory: A Good Plain Cook and The Art of Losing

It is a sunny afternoon, in the summer of 2002 and I have just driven my mother back to Yorkshire; her house has a closed-up stuffiness about it and the grass needs cutting. I carry her bags in from the car, put the fresh food in the fridge and boil the kettle. After the drive I need a brew before I tackle the mowing. As I take the tray into the lounge I pick up the small pile of accumulated post and hand it to her. Among it is a hand-written note from a neighbour.

‘I called on Thursday, but there was no answer. Then I remembered you were at your daughter’s,’ she reads aloud. She looks up from the note, her expression puzzled. ‘Daughter?’ she says. ‘I don’t have any daughters.’

The progress of Alzheimer’s Disease is non-linear. There are step-functions of change, plateaux, more step-functions. She’s been staying with my family for the last week; I stayed with her the week before that. This feels like a particularly large step.



As my mother’s identity as a parent is gradually being eroded, I ponder the connection between memory and identity. A significant area of study, it is also a topic of fierce philosophical debate. In her paper *Memory and Identity*⁷⁹ for example Marya Schechtman pays tribute to the contribution made by Sven Bernecker’s *Memory: a Philosophical Study*⁸⁰ describing it as an “exciting new philosophical account” but takes strong issue with some of his findings.

To the non-expert writer however, the link between memory and identity may be sufficiently summed up by Israel Rosenfield’s statement⁸¹: “Our “identity”, our personality, is the brain’s abstraction of the totality of our “memories” and our “experiences.””

Indeed, it is difficult to envisage a character, fictional or real, who is not a product – directly or indirectly – of their experiences and their memories of both key events and personal context. In *Benbarrow* the vicar attempts to rationalise his wife’s characteristics to Helena in terms of Aunt Celia’s life experiences. For his own sake he takes a notebook and records his own memories of happier

times. Having previously been excluded from these recollections by Aunt Celia's reluctance to discuss the past, these may be for Helena the equivalent of the stories that my parents and grandparents passed on to me.



Late January, and the Writing Room is full of students. Colleague Joanne Selley and I have devised a series of workshops in response to an MMUC Interdisciplinary Studies project⁸² and we begin with Food and Memory. We have chosen exemplar material across a range of genres – fiction, memoir, poetry, script – and taken from the film *The Hundred-Foot Journey*⁸³, our title for this first session is *Every Bite Takes You Home*.

Smell and taste have always been effective in evoking memories of time and place. We share extracts from Joanne Harris's *Chocolat*⁸⁴, poems from Henry Shukman, Ian McMillan and Edwin Morgan⁸⁵, and the title short story from Madeleine Thein's collection *Simple Recipes*⁸⁶.

We smell pots of herbs and spices, and we devour cupcakes. We talk about food: favourite foods, recipes our mothers used to make, school dinners, foods that turn our stomachs. We talk about the process of making food: children climbing on chairs to mix bowls of cake batter; teenagers taking ingredients to food technology lessons; mothers decorating birthday cakes.

And we write.

Memories of a Good Plain Cook

'There's a bottle in the pantry, near the back' she'd said,
her slender fingers spread across the open page

of Delia, or Marguerite, or Graham Kerr. And so there was.
We found it when we cleared the shelves: hot Mexican Tabasco

lodged like a single thought amongst the jumbled gelatine
and Maraschino cherries, the olives stuffed with garlic cloves,

the Lee & Perrins past its sell-by date
(who would have guessed it might go off?)

sea salt, cane sugar, angelica and pots of herbs that once
held promises of fennel, bay and tarragon. Strange then

that we remember Shepherd's Pie and Golden Syrup Sponge,
the nursery food she now consumes, spoon fed.



It's mid August when I spot my first display of Christmas cards for this year. I groan. Children haven't broken up for the summer holidays when back-to-school sections appear in supermarkets and stationery shops. And they haven't gone back to school before the first Christmas goods begin to fill the shelves. For many of us, the first of December is plenty early enough.

For a cook, however, Christmas needs to be approached stealthily, around the end of October. Xanthe Clay⁸⁷ refers to the last Sunday before Advent as 'Stir-up Sunday', the day to make your puddings and cakes in time for them to mature for Christmas.

When I was a child, making Christmas puddings involved a series of white ceramic bowls, their surfaces crazed and stained by decades of use, and saucepans large enough to hold them. There was greaseproof paper, and aluminium foil, and finally a square of cotton pulled over the top, tied under the rim and pulled back up into a knotted handle on top. Despite the deliciousness of the ingredients and the outcome, my memories making Christmas puddings involve not the stirring, nor the lucky sixpences thrown into the mix, but the smell of boiling cloth.

Christmas cakes were a different matter, needing even more serious preparation. Chairs were pulled up to the kitchen table for small children to stand or kneel upon; ingredients were assembled for weighing-out; cake tins were first lined with greaseproof paper which jutted above their tops and then

wrapped in layers of brown paper tied with string. As the cakes baked slowly in the oven, the house filled with the tantalising smell of Christmas.

If making the cakes was an event, feeding them was a ritual: taking the lids off the tins, stabbing the cakes with a knitting needle, pouring over the tots of brandy. Every week, until it was time for marzipan and royal icing.

August may be too soon for Christmas cards, but it's not too early to consult my recipe books: Delia, Nigella, Nigel – they sound like friends. Mrs Beeton, on the other hand sounds entirely instructional.

I set Kitty to work. It's time she taught Helena about the importance of feeding cakes.



My sister and I take Mum to Cyprus, hoping that the sights and smells will jog a few memories of her time there as an Air Force wife. Much has changed; the small island, unified when we lived there, is now divided. But there is still plenty that is familiar: the ruins at Amathous, the mosaics at Curium, Ladies Mile beach, picturesque villages. Sugared almonds and sweet, sticky Cypriot Delight.

On our first night in Limassol we are offered an 'Introduction to Cyprus'. We settle down with our brandy sours while our guide Joan tells us a little of her background. As a holiday rep she was regularly collected from the airport by a taxi, usually by the same driver. When she remarked to a colleague that his command of English was improving she was met with laughter. It was an open secret that he was studying in every spare moment, listening to Linguaphone tapes in his taxi. And swapping rotas to meet her flight. He had 'intentions' and eventually plucked up the courage to ask her out. When her daughter visited Cyprus he took both women to meet his family.

It is then Joan tells of a cultural misunderstanding: she and her daughter politely eating everything they were offered, while his family, waiting at table, worried how they were going to keep replenishing the plates, as was the custom when guests cleared them. There is amusement among the assembled holiday makers.

Suddenly a strident voice cuts through the laughter. 'Nonsense,' says Mum. 'What rubbish. It isn't like that at all.'

I blush to the roots and wish for a large hole to swallow us up, but Joan smiles and carries on. She knows Mum suffers from Alzheimer's and isn't about to take offence. She displays some local costumes and passes around photographs of elderly Cypriots in traditional black garb. The moment passes.

Later she comes over to chat. Her life as a British expatriate in post-separation Cyprus is very different from my mother's experience as an officer's wife in the early 1960s. Joan, married to her now-retired Cypriot taxi-driver and living in a hillside village outside Limassol, has nursed her own mother. She is aware of the issues. I have been mulling over the idea of writing about life in 'living memory'. The responsibility of creating a believable fictional world when individual reality differs so markedly seems immense.

We help Mum to her feet. She is a little unsteady, tired after the long flight.

'I have my mother's walking stick,' Joan tells us. 'I'll bring it tomorrow. It might help.'

On all sorts of levels, it does.



I go upstairs to fetch an album of photographs. I am conscious that my memories are becoming increasingly interwoven with the process of writing *Benbarrow*. I have no desire to compile a memoir, but my writing frequently references my personal experience, and this commentary in particular is a fusion of memoir and semi-autobiographical poetry with non-fiction text. I wonder how much of my storytelling – the characters in *Benbarrow*, their experiences, their sense of place – is an attempt to fictionalise my memories, and those that have been passed down to me, before they are lost.

I am conscious that there may be a link between Alzheimer's disease and heredity, although the information on the Alzheimer's Society website⁸⁸ offers some reassurance. "If you have a close relative (parent or sibling) who has been diagnosed with late-onset Alzheimer's disease, your chances of developing the disease rise slightly compared to someone with no family history

of the disease”, it says, before suggesting that “everyone can reduce their overall risk by adopting a healthy lifestyle”. Not smoking, tick. Alcohol only in moderation, tick. Good diet, tick. Regular physical exercise. I am a writer. It is generally a fairly sedentary occupation. I console myself that three out of four isn’t too bad.

I get to the landing and can’t remember what I’ve come upstairs to fetch. When I return to the living room, I immediately remember. We all do that, I tell myself. It doesn’t mean anything. I turn round and go back upstairs.

The exercise at least will do me good.



9. Process: Workshops, Teaching and Networking

One of the research methodologies of my original proposal was regular involvement in post-graduate workshops based at MMU Manchester. This is not the time or place to indulge in a debate about the pros and cons of workshop practice; enough has been said elsewhere⁸⁹. As both a teacher of creative writing and a practicing writer, I find the benefits of workshopping by far outweigh the disadvantages. John Gardner⁹⁰ points out that even writers such as Ernest Hemingway, who was reported to have said that ‘the best way to become a writer is just to go off and write’, were themselves part of a writers’ community commenting on each other’s work and encouraging one another in the belief that writing was a legitimate endeavour.

Mid-way through my research studies the post-graduate group to which I belong ceases to operate. This is partly due to the departure of the group’s facilitator, my Director of Studies, to take up a post at another university and partly through the withdrawal of participants who have completed their own post-graduate studies.

The opportunity to be involved in a writing community, to have one’s work read and commented upon by other practicing writers, is, I believe, rare and valuable. That is not to say that the writer has to acquiesce to every suggestion made by their peer group. Far from it; maintaining an individual writing style is vital and in the most effective groups actively encouraged. I am unable, despite several attempts, to re-establish a post-graduate writing group.

I feel the loss of the workshops keenly.



Just as my writing encompasses a range of genres, so does my interaction with other writers. I have been fortunate over a number of years to be able to participate in several privately organised workshops: residential, non-residential and virtual. Some have provided the stimulus for new work, others the constructive criticism so helpful to the reconsideration and recrafting of early

drafts. All have provided an opportunity to engage in ‘writerly dialogue’, to discuss the problems and breakthroughs of the writing process, to celebrate our publication successes and to commiserate over our rejections.

I have found these immensely encouraging and beneficial.



The 52 project⁹¹ launches at a good time for me. I’m ready for some writing stimulus and the promise of a weekly prompt sounds ideal. There is no compulsion to ‘keep up’; the mantra may be ‘Write a poem a week. Start now. Keep going.’ but there is also recognition that writers have other lives, other commitments, other opportunities and distractions. Fall off? Then get back on.

The prompts may be designed for an audience of poets, each week’s theme being accompanied by exemplar material, but even those with a focus on particular poetic forms have something in their content to offer the prose writer. Several take me off into the realms of flash fiction, for example.

When I start in the New Year I imagine that the prompts, including one each month by a guest writer, will be the most useful element. By Easter I think it’s the generous and robust critiquing. By the end I know that it has been the networking opportunity 52 has provided. Now I have a few poetry contacts who I knew before 52, most of whom are local and attendees of the Chester open mic event *Zest!* But I also I have a network of newer contacts from The Isle of Islay to Brighton, from Newcastle to South Wales; from Italy and Spain to America. Published and unpublished poets, short story writers and novelists; booksellers, binders and publishers. All directly or indirectly from my involvement in an online poetry group.



In August an e-mail drops into my inbox. It’s a status update to the 52 group from Louise, one of its members. She has, she tells everyone, a *trullo* near Locorotondo in Southern Italy which she is planning to visit the following month. Is anyone interested in joining her for a writing retreat? Our son has been ill

since Easter. It's nearly a year since my mother died; the emotional aftermath and the practicalities of probate and preparing the house for sale has been exhausting. I am about to resume my research studies but I feel drained of creative energy. My husband tells me to go. It will do me good. I reply to Louise's e-mail and we start to make plans.

I have little idea whereabouts Locorotondo is located. I have even less idea what a *trullo* might be.

It's an interesting approach to setting up a workshop group. Take six articulate, well-educated, self-motivated women of a certain age who don't know one another. Confine them to a rural foreign environment for a week. *What*, a friend asks me, a wry grin playing around her lips, *could possibly go wrong?*



The answer is that nothing does go wrong. We each prepare a workshop exercise to share, providing a fundamental structure to the week. Around these sessions we find time to venture out for walks in the countryside, to shop at local markets and eat out in the local town, to swim in the Adriatic. We cook together, talk into the small hours and dance at the village festival. We share our personal stories: the sorrow of bereavement; the comfort of family; the trauma of divorce; the unexpected blessings of ageing. We create moments of quiet in which to think, to reflect.

We cry a little; we write a lot.



Early in my undergraduate course, the creative writing team engage author Joanne Harris to deliver a talk to students. Local groups are invited and there are notices in the county libraries. *Chocolat*⁹² has been made into a movie and has proved extremely popular; the venue is packed. Harris is an accomplished speaker, both interesting and engaging. Her anecdotes are amusing. But as apprentice writers we all want to hear her advice, to learn the tricks of her trade. We want to know about her process.

When she discusses *Chocolat* she makes observations that may seem obvious to a seasoned writer, but at the time feel to me like small gifts. Chief among these are the advice to create a small community and then disturb it. A conservative village, for example, into which the arrival of an eccentric chocolatier might have a substantial, seemingly disproportionate, impact.

On reflection it is a recognisable trope in both short stories and longer fictions. The new girl at a boarding school. The outsider at a country house weekend. The replacement actor in a theatre company. As a part-time undergraduate I am constantly moving between academic teaching groups, between peer groups where relationships have already formed. It is an idea that I return to in my writing.

When I start to imagine *Benbarrow* I have a setting in mind, based on my memories of grandmother's Oxfordshire village. It makes sense that new arrivals might provide a catalyst for change in a rural community of this type; equally it is possible that the introduction of a young woman into a group of established friends might alter the dynamics.

Time to give the village a little shake.



52 as an ongoing project is at an end. The year of prompts has finished. There are expressions of concern that the online community might disintegrate, that we might lose touch. One member offers a short series of weekly prompts to ease the withdrawal symptoms. Another sets up a post-52 group for critiquing

work and offering feedback. The network gradually evolves, leaving the core members with a forum for sharing news, opportunities and written work. We continue to stimulate and support one another, to commiserate over our rejections and to celebrate our publishing successes. Many of us become friends.

John posts news of a music event. In his spare time he plays in a band and one of his gigs is to be held in a small market town in Oxfordshire. Charlbury. It is the town where my mother and father both grew up; it is the town where all four of my grandparents are buried. I tell John. It seems an unlikely coincidence, but that is all. John and I exchange messages. I tell him that my paternal grandparents were the landlords of The Marlborough Arms.

He replies to ask if I knew that it was no longer a public house, but a private home. He does their garden, he tells me. He was there planting bulbs a few hours ago.

Later he posts a picture of Sheep Street where my maternal grandmother lived, and of Market Street where she took us to buy sweets at the newsagents.

I can almost smell the Parma Violets.

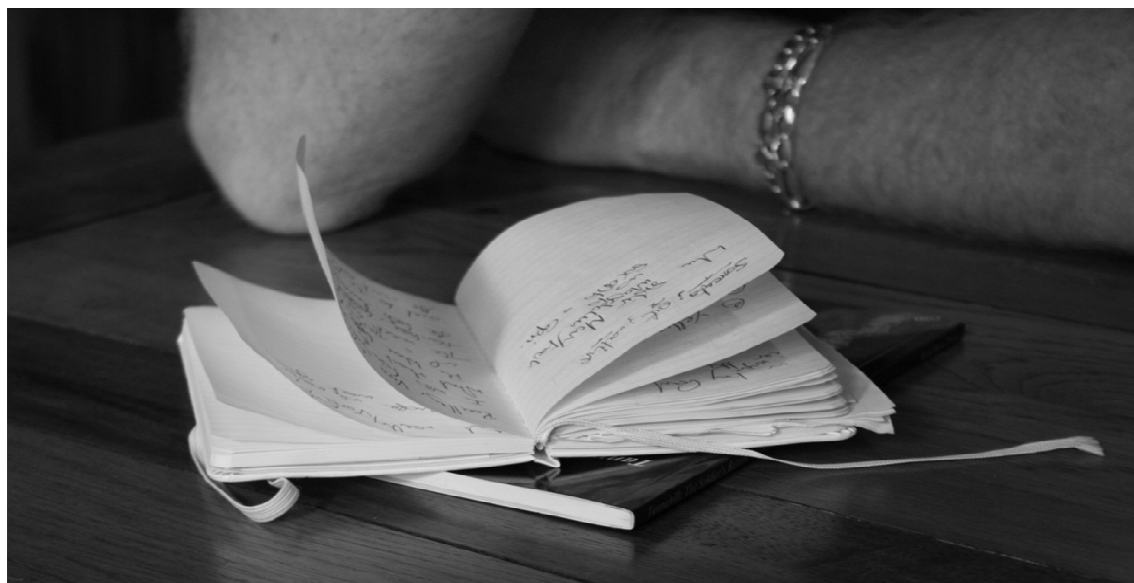


Several of the pieces I wrote in Italy, and redrafted when I got home, have been published, both online and in print anthologies. So have those written by other members of the group, who I now refer to as *The Ladies of Puglia*.

We meet up again the following summer, a long weekend in East Sussex which includes a visit to Bateman's, a National Trust property and the home of Rudyard Kipling. Again we prepare workshops – flowers, the impact of war, our working lives - and we write ferociously, challenging one another to develop and submit work.

It's been a busy few weeks. I have recently attended an MMU Writing School course on the topic of Place Writing and I will shortly drive up to County Durham for a writing weekend with friends from 52. Set in a large family house on the edge of Barnard Castle, *Nestival* offers an opportunity to meet with a number of writers who I have only 'met' online, as well as some old friends and new faces.

Again we share a selection of workshops to stimulate creativity: deconstructing and reconstructing text; things we have lost; the people on our street. *It's the poet's job to notice things*, suggests one workshop leader. Of course it is. But not just the poet's job; the novelist's too.



Before I leave Barnard Castle I call at The Bowes Museum⁹³. There is a temporary exhibition from the V&A, one I had hoped to catch on a visit to London earlier in the year but had unfortunately missed. It is a matter of chance that its touring display coincides with *Nestival*. The exhibition features shoes from both the V&A and Bowes collections. I identify styles that I wore as a teenager, and styles my mother or grandmother might have worn. I identify shoes that Frances or Elsa might have worn. I admire shoes that are more works of art than functional footwear. I buy postcards to bring home; I shall use them for workshops with students. I sketch, I make notes, I take photographs.

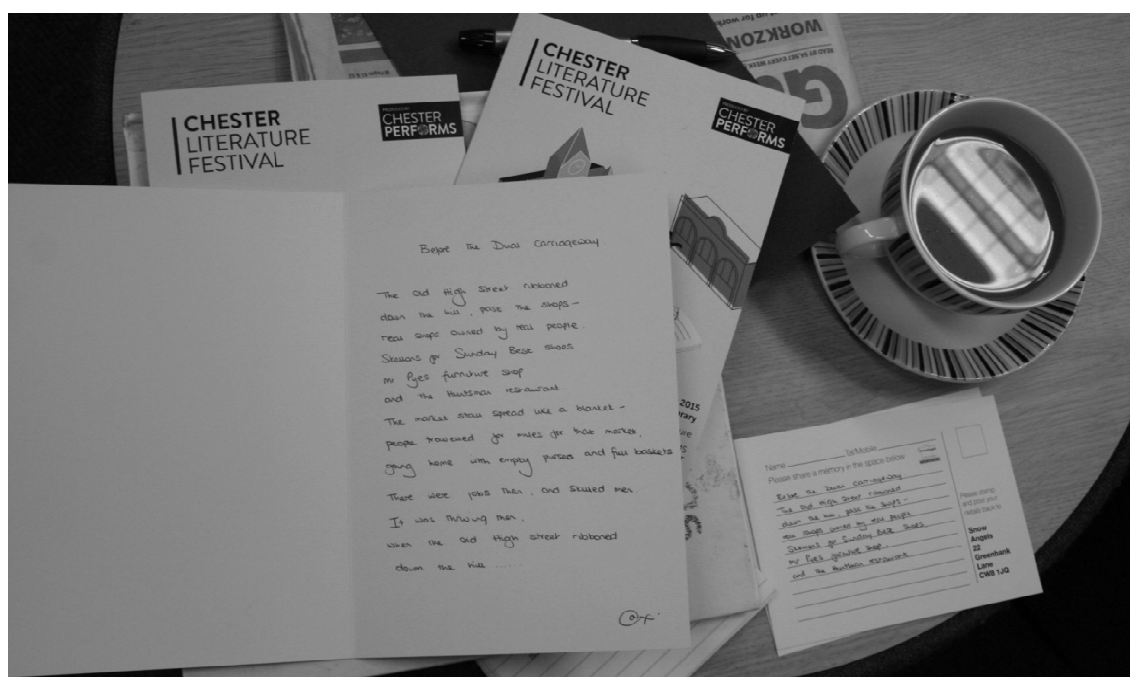
My journals are filling up with details.



A Saturday morning in early October finds me sitting in the local library, writing 'poetry on demand'. The session is part of Chester Literature Festival and is billed as *New Poems for Old Memories*. The plan is that my Litfest partner and I

will chat to library users and I will write poems for them based on the memories they share. It is the first time I've done anything like this and my appearance of confidence masks a touch of trepidation. I need not have worried; once people get over their initial hesitation, most willingly share their memories. They talk; I listen and scribble.

My 'customers' speak about childhood, about young adult life and marriage, about new towns and homesickness, about parents and grandparents. They start with disclaimers: *Oh, I've not got anything interesting to tell you*" and then provide enough information for four, five, six poems. There is little chronology as they describe key events, dipping in and out of memories, one thought leading to another, almost without pause. My task as curator is to select an incident or occasion; my task as a writer is to give them a text which represents their experience.



This is outreach work, not cutting edge literature. It is intended to show ordinary people, going about their daily lives, that poetry is accessible. Something they can relate to. That their memories are valuable and worth preserving.

A month later I receive a card, forwarded from the library. A note of thanks from one of my customers. Glenys remarks that she was inspired to write her own poem when on holiday in Amsterdam and Bruges. Shortly afterwards I receive a copy of her poem, by e-mail.

Positive feedback, I reflect, comes in all manner of guises.



In her guide to writing historical fiction⁹⁴ Rhona Martin refers to writing that “covers anything dealing with a period outside the present day but still within living memory” as ‘nostalgia’ fiction. This initially appears somewhat dismissive, since nostalgia is most often used in a deprecatory manner to suggest something saccharine and sentimental. However, here Martin is simply distinguishing between different categories of historical novels: the historical romance; the bodice-ripper; the family saga and so on.

Within each sub-genre she identifies specific pitfalls for the writer. She points out that the writer of ‘nostalgic’ fiction faces the danger of feeling too confident in their ability to remember details, whether directly experienced or passed on. She stresses the importance of researching the period as carefully as any other historical era and only using recollections to embellish the narrative once the accuracy of the facts has been verified.

It is good advice. Even though inter-war fiction is less likely to be read now by those who have first hand memories than was the case when Martin wrote her guide nearly thirty years ago, there remains the responsibility to be accurate to the period. Apparently minor slips of research can destroy the illusion that an author has spent the greater part of their time and energy creating.

Rhona Martin’s advice for the author provides a robust framework for structuring a course on writing historical fiction. As she points out, many of the techniques are no different from those applicable to contemporary fiction: building distinct characters; creating evocative settings; developing believable plotlines. Elements of craft such as viewpoint and dialogue are similarly important;

additionally they may require specialist advice if ‘gadzookery’ clichés are to be avoided.

The key difference for the writer of historical fiction is the consideration of purpose: why has this particular period been selected as the timeframe for this novel? It may be that there is currently a trend for such novels, which the student wishes to follow. The key word here is ‘follow’; the length of time between writing a novel and it reaching its target audience may well coincide with the demise of that particular reading vogue.

Martin contends that there is only one reason for setting a novel in a period other than the present day, being that “the situation springs from the period and could not possibly have happened at any other time”⁹⁵. It is a compelling argument; in the case of *Benbarrow* I would assert that the narrative belongs in a timeframe defined by the impact of the WWI and its aftermath and foreshadowed in the reader’s awareness of the events of WWII.

The question ‘why then?’ provides a useful challenge to the student writer; once answered, the question ‘how?’ may be the next consideration. Research is fundamental to any historical fiction, nostalgic or otherwise. Initially there is a requirement to explore the political and social context of the period. Rosie Garland⁹⁶ describes research as the novel’s ‘petticoat’: it needs to be there to support the fabric of the story, but the reader doesn’t particularly want to see it. However, although much of the information unearthed may not show, it is still important that the author has a firm grasp of historical facts.

For the writer-researcher there are many resources from which to glean details of daily life in the past, including costume books; guides to arts and crafts; herbals, recipe books and travelogues. There are artefacts to investigate and historical homes to explore. There is a wealth of information available on the internet (and not a little misinformation too) which wasn’t available when Martin’s guide was published and for many students this might be their first port of call.

The internet also provides an opportunity for students to build up a portfolio of resources for their own use. In particular I would advocate the use of Pinterest⁹⁷. Billed as ‘the world’s catalogue of ideas’, it offers virtual scrapbook space called boards, on which to store images and text. Writing *Benbarrow* I found it invaluable for gathering images of people, places and artwork, either

'pinned' from other websites, 'repinned' from other Pinterest boards or uploaded from my own collection of photographs.

I start a new Pinterest board: *Resources for 'Writing from Memory' Unit.*



It is a Saturday morning, sometime in autumn. The stall holders at Bwlch car boot sale glance nervously at the sky; there is a threat of rain in the air, but mercifully it has so far remained dry. Still, there is a sense of urgency: *make me a reasonable offer, I need to start packing away.* There is a pile of Kodak envelopes on the end of the stall, their orange covers worn and soft as blotting paper. I think the photographs they contain might make an interesting prompt for a writing workshop.

I glance briefly through the images, not wishing to appear too keen, and make an offer. The man grunts, but accepts. Later, sitting at the caravan table waiting for the kettle to come to its whistling boil, I shuffle through the images. A family on holiday, late 1950s. Already the stories are forming.

Weeks later I am at Beeston auction rooms. For a few months I regularly attend sales, admiring the Fine Art & Collectibles on display, rootling through the General Household lots. There are narratives here, too. In my imagination, a young woman sits at this polished dressing table, pouting into the mirror as she applies Max Factor *Luscious Cherry*. An old man winds this tallcase clock, checking the time against his wristwatch and carefully adjusting the minute hand. Over in Victoriana, a woman inspects the seal on a Kilner jar as she prepares to make jam, and a boy checks for damaged feathers on a fishing tie. I make notes in my journal before the images evaporate, before I forget.

As the bidding starts I spot an old album. The traders aren't interested; the covers are badly damaged, the spine torn. Inside are a handful of photographs, a dozen, maybe more. Worth a punt. As I carry my bounty home, the characters are coming to life. A woman wears a gold brooch on her lapel, but it wasn't given to her by the stern and unyielding man at her side. A man fondly holds the hand of his son, despite knowing he did not father the child. A

young girl smiles weakly towards the camera, the blood-stained handkerchief hidden deep in her pocket.

At home I find the photographs have names written on the back: Amy and Albert; George and Edward; Amelia. Once they were real people. Now they are characters in a story. How easy to take a pen and change the course of their lives.



The word 'ekphrasis' is derived from the Greek *ékphrasis*, meaning to describe, and was conceived as a "vivid description of a thing"⁹⁸ such as Homer's detailed account in *The Illiad* of the blacksmith forging The Shield of Achilles. From the raw material:

*In hissing flames huge silver bars are roll'd,
And stubborn brass, and tin, and solid gold;*

we see the shield evolve through decorative metalwork:

*Next this, the eye the art of Vulcan leads
Deep through fair forests, and a length of meads,*

to become the finished article:

*Thus the broad shield complete the artist crown'd
With his last hand, and pour'd the ocean round*⁹⁹

It seems appropriate that this early example, while adhering to the original idea of a descriptive passage, foreshadows the modern interpretation of ekphrasis, with its focus on a writer's response to an artwork. Now the term is less concerned with lengthy description and more about the writer's ability to "interpret, inhabit, confront, and speak to"¹⁰⁰ artworks.

As a teacher I usually introduce ekphrasis by reference to WH Auden's *Musee des Beaux Arts*¹⁰¹ and the painting which inspired it: Pieter Brueghel's *The Fall of Icarus*. To complement this, and emphasise the two-way process, I also share an image of Kate McDowell's *Icarus*¹⁰², a ceramic response to the original Greek myth and in itself a fertile writing stimulus.

I occasionally use ekphrasis as a starting point for poems or short stories, and for many years have worked with primary school children on writing

projects in art galleries. In a less conscious sense however, ekphrasis is embedded in my writing process. A family photograph may be the starting point for memoir writing or the catalyst for a 'family' poem:

"Hey, look at this." I slide the photograph across the walnut table. "Didn't you just love those dresses?"

My sister picks up the picture and scrutinises it. "No. I loathed them."

The sharpness in her voice makes me look up from sifting through the pile of photographs. I am surprised.

"Really? I adored them." I can't help smiling at the memory. "I felt like a princess."

"Well, precisely." She snaps the offending photograph down on the table, and fixes me with hard, dark eyes. "You were seven. Eight, maybe. I was twelve. Can you imagine? Can you imagine being twelve and being made to wear the same frock as your kid sister?"

I never thought about it like that.¹⁰³



I am struck by how often writing and image are more subtly and inextricably linked than the one simply being a description of the other. Even when we are not writing memoir I believe we are tapping into our accumulated memories, into the stories and histories that we have inherited, into the stories and histories we have read.



I am not a speed-reader. I tend to read slowly, gradually absorbing the atmosphere created by a novelist, building my own pictures of the characters and their settings. I will reread a poem, often several times, before feeling ready to move on to another. Reading for pleasure is one of my favourite pastimes; it is a privilege and not to be hurried. But I am also committed to the concept of reading as a writer.

I am a passionate advocate of reading as a means of developing creative writing skills. As Heather Leach says “reading is a process of self-development, of learning. Learning – real learning – is not a passive business”¹⁰⁴. Students new to higher education writing courses are often fearful of being ‘influenced’ by their reading, to which I reply ‘Good’. I suggest they read more widely, across multiple genres, across a variety of styles and forms. It is ‘narrow’ reading which is most likely to turn a writer’s voice into a pastiche of others; reading beyond the comfort zone exposes us to new approaches and enriches our own writing.

Each year we take our first year students to The Potteries Museum and Art Gallery¹⁰⁵ during Freshers’ Week. It is an opportunity for staff and students to get to know one another, but it is also an exercise in ekphrasis. We briefly introduce them to the Museum, make a few suggestions of particular exhibits that might interest them. Before we set them loose we ask them to introduce themselves: a one-liner and the title of the book they are currently reading or have just finished. This is not a test; we are genuinely interested. I often make a point of asking students what they are reading; I am constantly looking for recommendations and am often surprised and impressed by their choices.

One Friday afternoon I pick up the book on a final-year students' desk. He is reading *JR* by William Gaddis¹⁰⁶, a novel written almost exclusively in dialogue. He tells me is experimenting with the form, seeing if he can adapt the technique to create a short story in a similar manner. I can't recall what he said he was reading in his first-year introduction, but I'm pretty certain it wasn't anything as challenging. I smile and do a mental 'air-punch' as I walk away.



Gloucester is bathed in sunshine. Along the edge of the dock stallholders are setting up, getting ready for the opening of the weekend's food and drink festival. We stroll round the precincts of the cathedral, enjoying the cool subdued lighting inside its buttermilk-yellow walls. The roof of the cloisters are some of the earliest surviving examples of fan-vaults; their intricate construction reminds me of wasp nests.

In a small chapel I find some recently installed stained-glass panels by artist Tom Denny¹⁰⁷. They depict scenes from the life of Ivor Gurney, a musician and poet who was a chorister at the cathedral. Gurney referenced the county's landscape in much of his work and Denny has captured this and Gurney's harrowing First World War experience in his artwork.



In the cathedral shop I find a book about Gurney's life¹⁰⁸ which I buy and later browse through as we enjoy lunch in a nearby pub, called The Water Poet. No

matter that the pub is named for John Taylor, a Gloucester man who made his living in London as a Thames boatman.

In Ivor Gurney I have found a passionate spokesman for the local landscape and now the inspiration for my chapter headings. I will find more extracts in anthologies devoted to the poetry of the nineteen-thirties, in the writings of Isabella Beeton and in guides to Oxford and Oxfordshire.

My reading, my choice of literature, is not simply influencing the development of my novel. It is becoming embedded in my writing.



A friend has recommended Naomi Wood's *Mrs Hemingway*¹⁰⁹. The context of rural England in the 1920s and 1930s is very different from that of Paris, with its café society and writers' community, but since the timeframe is close enough and it's written in multiple viewpoints, I claim it as 'research'.

I have been reading a number of modern fictions set in the inter-war period and much of it has been dual time-frame: stories that start in the here-and-now but involve additional narratives of other characters from an earlier era. There is often a 'device' to enable the author to step back in time – a diary secreted in the back of a bureau, a trunk of clothes and letters discovered in a loft, an unexpected bequest. *Mrs Hemingway* is different, a sequenced narrative of the four marriages, with elements reimagined from subsequent viewpoints as the relationships overlap.

I thoroughly enjoy Wood's book and have just finished it when I have to go for a hospital appointment. I mean to pick up another from my shelf as I go out, but I am hurried and forget. Never mind, there will be magazines to while away the time.

It is barely eleven months since my mother died and too many hours of those we have spent in wards and waiting rooms in this very hospital, supporting our son. Now an apparently trivial observation has sent me to my GP. Concern has escalated; there has been talk of surgery in the language of 'when' rather than 'if'.

The atmosphere in the room is grimly tense. Nobody talks. Husbands, partners, sisters have been left behind in previous rooms, previous corridors.

We are a group of women, dressed in cotton gowns, awaiting examination. I leaf through magazines. The woman next to me puts down her book to go to the toilet. When she returns I catch a glimpse of the cover: Martha Gellhorn's *Travels with Myself and Another*¹¹⁰. 'Another' in this context is Ernest Hemingway; Gellhorn was his third wife. I tell the woman I have just finished reading *Mrs Hemingway*, and we fall into conversation.

She hasn't read *Mrs Hemingway* yet, but she tells me it's on her shelf at home. We compare notes. I describe the passage where Ernest and Martha take a flight and are caught in turbulence. Their light aircraft suddenly loses height. The passengers are, like us, understandably anxious. Ernest grips his glass of whisky. The plane levels out. *Didn't spill a drop*, he says.

The woman has just read the same episode in Gellhorn's memoir; she finds it and reads it to me. The match is excellent; Naomi Wood has clearly done her research. We carry on discussing books until my name is called.

When I emerge, the woman is gone.



I fill my car with books and pads and writing implements. With laptop and netbook and printer. With a ream of paper and a new printer cartridge. With a bag of clothes and enough food to last a week before I need to venture out. I check my pockets to make sure I've packed the keys and set off for Anglesey, to a caravan nestled in an abandoned millstone quarry.

After the stimulation of courses and festivals, after the company of writers and the inspiration of workshop prompts, it's time for quiet. It's time for solitude. It's time to put pen to paper, to put fingers to keyboard. To recall Heather Leach's cautionary reminder: *Only writing is writing*.

Now it's time to write.

10. Process: Curation and The Order of Things

Another day, another e-mail drops into my inbox, this one inviting me to a poetry reading at Kenilworth. An evening of readings, curated by David Morley. The use of the word ‘curated’ in this context intrigues me.

I know the term ‘curator’ in the context of museums and galleries, as a term for someone who has responsibility for the care and management of artefacts, or for selection and interpretation of material for exhibition. I am less familiar with its use as a term for someone who selects content for performance. I consult online and print resources to determine the etymology and discover an older legal meaning from the Latin *curare*, to take care of: one in charge of lunatics and incompetents.

It is probably not what David Morley intended.



Jane Linden and Patrick Campbell in their introduction to *Expanded Practice and Curation as a Creative Process*¹¹¹ reference Paul O'Neill's description of a ‘Curatorial Turn’ as the “ideological shift of emphasis from the spectacle of the product towards greater visibility of the modes of production”. In the context of arts practice this suggests the role of arts-researcher-as-curator as a “creative agent who... consciously determines the cultural meaning and value of his/her practice”¹¹².

This concept of ‘curation’ resonates with my approach to PaR in general and my commentary in particular. My primary motivation in this commentary is to explore the modes of production of *Benbarrow*, but in doing so I have gathered and selected material from my memory, and my parents’ and grandparents’ storytelling filtered through my memory, which illustrates the process of creating this inter-war narrative.



In 2009 I attend a poetry course delivered by Linda Chase¹¹³. It is one of a series organised under the auspices of Poetry School¹¹⁴ in what is termed 'The Village Hall' at Didsbury. The venue is far from the standard interpretation of a 'village hall'. For a start, Didsbury is hardly a village. Rather, it is part of the Manchester/North Cheshire sprawl, one of the urban edgelands between the city and the suburb. Although it has a sense of community, often missing in such areas and exemplified by a row of independent retailers and a thriving biennial arts festival¹¹⁵, the presence of the MMU Didsbury campus¹¹⁶ make the description 'village' somewhat incongruous.

More significantly however, The Village Hall isn't actually a public venue but a privately owned building, situated in the gardens behind Linda's house. Here she hosts a range of t'ai chi and writing activities, including *Poets & Players*, a regular word and music event, and a selection of Poetry School courses. The course I'm attending is titled Ekphrasis, and offers participants a variety of approaches for responding in text to artwork. Early in the course, and using Mark Wallinger as an example, Linda focusses on the concept of curation.

Absent Presence: Manchester Art Gallery (extract)

The gallery is open late on Thursday evenings, the café too.
They climb stone steps towards the heavy oak doors.
There's a new exhibition, an installation, grouping artwork
only a curator with an eye for surprise would put together.
A contemporary abstract, its blocks of colour at once
concealing and revealing, and a merchant's deathbed portrait.
They span four centuries across as many white-washed walls.

Later Linda returns once more to the concept of curation, inviting participants to create an imaginary 'exhibition catalogue', combining artworks of their choice with their own responses, in poetry or prose. We share the results.

For one night only, the Village Hall becomes the Didsbury MOMA.



My *Benbarrow* journals fill with images: 1930s portraits from international art galleries and museums; street maps of the city of Oxford and road maps of the county; room layouts from stately homes. Real and virtual, notebooks of all kinds are crammed with notes and jottings, with pieces of prose and poetry, with fiction, non-fiction and memoir, with character sketches in word and image.

I am pulling them together into a process commentary. Curating. In doing so I am fashioning not just a reflective analysis but also another piece of creative writing.



My Bloomsbury reading has accidentally provided a solution to a problem. Frances has been married before, or is still married and appears to have been deserted. A section of Angelica Garnett's memoir¹¹⁷ refers to Julian, her half brother. A poet and a pacifist, he edited an anthology of memoirs of conscientious objectors called *We Did Not Fight*¹¹⁸ and subsequently became an ambulance driver in the Spanish Civil War.

Although Julian was killed in 1937, his story gives me an idea for Jonathan. The situation in Spain also raises the spectre of fascism, and foreshadows the outbreak of the Second World War. So far, so good. I research some more details and find that the International Brigade was disbanded in the autumn of 1938 and the remaining British volunteers arrived back in London on December 7th where they were met by dignitaries including Clement Attlee¹¹⁹. This fits my story timeline perfectly.

Of course as a writer, no sooner do you solve one problem than you create another. Deciding that it would be a good idea to check whether 1938 was a White Christmas, I find my characters hurtling towards the worst winter for decades.

Having returned from Cyprus to England in a similarly spectacular – and memorable – winter, this seems a touch apposite. I apologise to Frances and Elsa, and despatch them into blizzard conditions. The meteorological chart I

have pasted into my journal indicates that the weather eases¹²⁰ as they approach Oxfordshire.

Lucky for them.



One autumn afternoon, when he is sixty, my cousin Mike suddenly dies. It is an unexpected death. He has collapsed at work, his brother tells me. It was instant.

Work for Mike was as much pleasure as toil. For the last couple of years his job as Visitor Services Manager has involved organising the volunteers at a motorsport and aviation heritage centre. He loved their enthusiasm, their dedication, their willingness to do what was needed to preserve the history of the racing track. He spent hours talking to visitors and volunteers; he put people in touch with one another. Always a 'people person', he gathered their memories of the track and wrote articles for the charity's magazine and website.

A curator, of sorts.

The Funeral

A week ago we marvelled
at the weather; mid October
but leaves still summer-green,
rhododendrons blooming in mistake
of spring, a second flush of roses.

But while we made our plans
- *of course we'll come, what time
and where?* -
the evenings closed their sullen ranks
and huddled, damp and chilling,
against our puckered skin.

And people came, and more

and more, filled pews and aisles,
piled in amongst the flurried
autumn leaves that fell in sudden swirls
around our black and polished shoes.

Driving home, your face before me
in the rain-drenched, head-lit sky,
I wonder if you knew.

My uncle is distraught. The loss of a son is hard to bear for anyone, especially a frail man in his nineties. He weeps throughout the service and afterwards, despite all attempts to comfort him, he can only keep repeating: *It should have been me. It's not in the natural order of things.*



It is New Year's Eve and I am standing at the sink, washing out a decorative jam jar. In the night-black window I can see my reflection. I look tired. It's been a tough year. I hope the next one will be better. A friend has extolled the virtues of counting one's blessings. Another has mentioned keeping a 'Good Things Jar', a receptacle for accumulating small notes of positivity. The idea is attractive. Upstairs I have prepared a pile of paper, cut into squares large enough to accommodate a few lines of text, small enough not to look too empty if I only write a single word. Just a few many to start with. I can cut more if I need them.

The Good Things Jar

She cradles the jar in her palm,
as gently as a hand grenade.
Best to start small, she thinks,
to avoid disappointment.
She feels the indentations,
the relief of leaves and blossom
pressed around its shoulders.

The lid retains a hint of summer,
the lingering scent of soft fruits
and alcohol, oddly incongruous
on this drab January afternoon.

The folded paper rattles in the jar.

Black Cherries in Kirsch

she has written, afterwards adding:

Served warm with vanilla ice-cream.

She places the jar on her shelf,

considers the poverty

of counting one's blessings,

the paucity of saving memories

for a winter's day as dull as this.

Smiles, anyway.



I can't wait for this year to end. I can remember saying it twelve months ago. I can also remember my friend's curt response. *Be careful what you wish for.*

Now the year has turned full circle. If last year was tough, in many ways this year has been tougher. Less obviously traumatic, but more continuously draining. It is New Year's Eve once again and I take my Good Things Jar from the shelf and tip out the contents. I need to be reminded of the better moments. The blessings I find recorded vary in significance; major life events brush shoulders with simple pleasures. I have forgotten many of smaller delights: the sweetness of a vine-ripened tomato; a letter from abroad; afternoon tea with a friend.

The chronology is at first random; the beauty of an autumn leaf is followed by a bright spring afternoon and I sort them into some kind of order. Then I shuffle them again and like sorting a deck of cards into suits, I look for patterns.

The Good Things Jar (Reprise)

I resist the temptation to hurl it at the floor,
to watch the splinters spin and skitter across the tiles.
Instead I unscrew the lid, shake the folded papers
onto a tray, sort them into a chronology of sorts.
Plenty to celebrate in the Spring and early Summer
before the equinox split the year asunder. After,
was there little happiness, or just a reluctance
to acknowledge The Good Things?
I shuffle the papers, identify themes: family;
the simple pleasures of a sunny day, wind tugging
on freshly laundered sheets; an unexpected gift;
good food shared with old friends; poetry; wine.
Every year will be like this, I think. A mix
of butterscotch and bitter aloes, ice cream
and vinegar, pain and comfort, strawberries.
I place the empty jar on the shelf, a fresh pile
of coloured papers at its side. A pen, ready.

Oscar Wilde is quoted as describing marriage as the “triumph of imagination over intelligence” and second marriage as the “triumph of hope over experience”. Perhaps a Good Things Jar is the triumph of imagination over intelligence and a second is the triumph of hope over experience.

I carry on hoping.



A friend comments that she has woken at 3am, suddenly remembering something important that she's omitted to do. She describes lying awake, her mind flitting from one thing to another, from the distress of realising her error to all manner of other mistakes and indiscretions. It happens to us all, I tell her, directing her to Fleur Adcock's poem *Things*¹²¹.

'Flitting' seems an appropriate word. Sometimes, as when we follow a train of thought such as 'things I've forgotten to do', our memories have a connectedness. One leads seamlessly to another; even when we 'jump rails' there's a reason for the lateral movement, for the rerouting of our thought processes. Sometimes it's possible to track back, to work out how we arrived at a particular point.

Occasionally however, memories seem to come unbidden, like the apparently random appearance of stones working up to the surface of a ploughed field. These involuntary autobiographical memories are often "peculiarly vivid and emotional and have a strong feeling of immediacy"¹²². They are often initiated by a cue, such as a thought or an overheard conversation, a particular smell or sound, or even by a current experience that has similarities. They may have origins in text, such as a phrase from a book or newspaper, or in image, such as a childhood photograph. Often they are unconnected to the activity, for example the memories that spring to mind when you are driving, or ironing, or painting a fence.

These involuntary memories do not have an obvious chronology; they may be linked but they seldom occur ordered on some recognisable timeline. A memory elicited by dunking a Rich Tea biscuit into your cuppa may involve an elderly parent; the following moment the phrase in the book you are reading may take you back to a childhood holiday.

The narrative arc of *Benbarrow* follows a natural chronology. The pace at which time passes may vary but – other than characters occasionally remembering autobiographical incidents – there are no flashbacks. There are no scenes or chapters told in a different timeframe.

The writing of the text was also a chronological process, with the exception of a substantial rewrite when the introduction of additional points of view necessitated the insertion of supplementary chapters early in the novel and the redrafting of existing ones. Essentially, the order of writing follows the order of the narrative, beginning in September and concluding on New Year's Eve.

The original timeframe of memories however followed a very different pattern, more suggestive of the involuntary nature of recall than the order of the writing process. A scene in an early chapter may have been influenced by an

event in the recent past, while one in a later chapter has its origins in a memory of childhood, or in a story handed down from my grandmother. Similarly the influence of external factors has had a non-chronological impact; The layout for the outbuildings at *Benbarrow* which would become Vronnie's studio and Annie's new home, were defined long before my visit to Wittenham Clumps which provided the model for The Crest.

In contrast, the ordering of this commentary has been defined, as far as possible, by thematic groups; I have approached the task with a similar intention to a curator faced with arranging artwork across a number of connected gallery spaces. Some gallery visitors may suggest that a particular artwork belongs in another display room, since it has links – perhaps stronger links – with others already hanging there. Often artworks can be placed very effectively in a number of different contexts, and the curator has to make the choice that best serves their narrative.

Like the contents of The Good Things Jar, other arrangements, other patterns, might offer a different insight. The question remains: has the curator arranged their collection to facilitate or to obfuscate? Or, like the curator at the Manchester Art Gallery, with 'an eye for surprise'?

Conclusion

I began this commentary with a quotation from Paul Farley and Michael Symmons Roberts, taken from their exploration of Edgelands¹²³: “The world neatly divides into people who have peeled the rubbery rind off a golf ball in order to find out what it’s made of, and those who haven’t.” The purpose of my research has been to examine the process of writing a novel set in a period that is ‘within living memory’. In peeling off the layers I have explored what might be learned about the practice of writing from memory and have reached a greater understanding of how that informs my creative practice and teaching.

My particular objective in this commentary has been to reflect on the process of writing *Benbarrow* within the context of my complementary roles as a practicing artist, as a researcher and as a teacher. In doing so my intention has been to generate a critical reflection that not only documents and illuminates my findings but also serves as a resource to inform my future practice.

In my rationale I posed a number of research questions.

- How do we write from memories, when those memories are not our own?
- How do we write about periods that occur between major historical events, given the hindsight that our characters would not possess?
- How is my writing influenced by my personal context, by my life events?
- How is my writing influenced by my context as a reader and as a teacher?

With regard to the first, it is also necessary to question the origins of the memories and in writing *Benbarrow* I have used elements drawn from the experience of my parents and grandparents, as handed down to me through family story-telling and reminiscence. I have supplemented these with material drawn from a number of memoirs of the period.

This begs the question of ‘accuracy’, on a number of levels. The specific memories are selected: by the individual who had the original experience; by the circumstances of the retelling and by my interpretation and remembering. The memories are also shaped by personal perspective. This is true of the originator; I have provided an example of memoir writing illustrating the significance of perspective from my own experience in Section 7¹²⁴. But it is also true of the re-teller; as an author I may be more sympathetic to a ‘Granecdote’ than to a tale from a Bloomsbury memoirist, for example.

As a teacher of life writing I stress the importance of ‘truth’ over ‘accuracy’. By this I mean that the details of an event, or a setting, or even a character do not have to be rendered with absolute precision, but rather with integrity and honesty, an avoidance of disingenuity.

By ongoing reference to my source material, during the writing of both *Benbarrow* and this reflective commentary, and by complementary research into the social, economic and political history of the inter-war period, I have endeavoured to remain ‘true’ to the spirit of the memories on which I have drawn.

Beyond the issue of ‘accuracy’, there is a greater question regarding the ‘how’ of writing from memories: the means by which the memories are incorporated into the text. I have shown in a number of places in this commentary how a memory, or wider research around a topic, has lead directly into the novel: a site visit provides the model for the bothy; a gallery visit provides an image for Frances; a winter walk inspires a scene on The Crest, watching red kites.

However, the influence of the act of remembering runs much deeper and is more universal in its impact. Throughout the process my writing has been informed by memories that keep the novel anchored in its time. The gardens at Benbarrow and the vicarage are inspired by those of my childhood, and those my Grandmother described to me. The process of cooking, whether simmering mussels in one kitchen or feeding Christmas cakes in another, is derived from my experience, and my mother’s. My characters walk through country lanes where I have walked, and my father before me, and his mother before him.

I believe that writing a historical novel, and in particular one set ‘within living memory’, requires the author to become immersed in the time period. Only by ensuring that the point of view is always consistent with the era, will the

writer maintain the illusion of the 'imaginary' world they have curated from different 'real' worlds.

This brings us to the second research question, and the difficulty of writing about periods that occur between major historical events, given the hindsight that our characters would not possess. While the longer-term implications of The Great War may not be apparent to the characters in *Benbarrow*, my novel lies in its shadow. The history of the property is mentioned from the first chapter, when Helena, arriving at the steps leading up to the main entrance, imagines "the tramp of soldiers' boots" and its role as a military hospital is later discussed by Annie. The characterisation of Vronnie is influenced by knowledge of the two million single women of the post-war generation.

I have included some suggestion of the unease preceding the Second World War, and the events of the Spanish Civil War are key to Frances and Jonathan's storyline, but I have deliberately avoided excessive foreshadowing of military conflict in the characters' dialogue. The risk for the author is to create a two-dimensional stereotype: either the 'denial' character who induces the 'it's behind you' response from the reader or the 'prediction' character who knows as much as any modern history book. Neither is believable. I prefer to let the reader bring their knowledge to the text in order to interpret the signals of social change.

My third research question involved a reflection on how my writing is influenced by my personal context, and by my life events. This requires consideration on two levels, the one event-related and the other ongoing. In this commentary I have focussed on life-events by including pieces of memoir in the form of prose and poetry, and by providing links to both the writing process and the finished text. My discussion of some incidents and experiences does not need to be so explicitly linked to my practice; for example, it will be clear to anyone with similar experience that the final hours spent with my mother have coloured my description of Helena's vigil at Aunt Celia's bedside.

I have also indicated the manner in which some aspects of life-events that occurred to me whilst writing *Benbarrow* have impacted on the development of the novel. Personal circumstances, such as my son's medical condition and my mother's death, unavoidably interrupted the continuity of my

research. The causes may have been regrettable, but the interruption itself was in many ways a positive consequence. My return to writing, following a twelve month break and with a new Director of Studies, gave me the opportunity to review my work and after critical reflection reconsider its direction in a manner that might not otherwise have been possible.

The ongoing aspects of my personal context – my experience as a wife and mother, my interest in craft and cookery and gardening, my family history research – suffuse both the novel and its commentary. I was acutely aware of some of these aspects whilst I was writing *Benbarrow* but there are some elements of my context and identity that function on a subconscious level and became more apparent on its completion. Highlighting these is one of the attributes of the revision process, and something I will encourage students of narrative memory and life-writing to focus on when redrafting work.

Annotating an early draft of *Benbarrow*, a workshopper commented on the number of cups of tea that had been drunk. I cut back on the tea, but there remains a ‘food’ theme throughout the novel. Kitchens and cooking are not just functional parts of my life. They are part of my experience of nurturing – as a child, a parent, a wife, a lover. In addition, there is a link between food and memory, one which my colleague Joanne Selley and I exploited in our *Women and Girls of Crewe* workshop¹²⁵ and which I have found to be a fertile area for writing prompts for students across a wide range of ages, abilities and cultural backgrounds. Given its emotional resonance, it seems entirely appropriate that food should figure so significantly in the text of *Benbarrow*.

Similarly, I have highlighted in this commentary the importance of plants and animals – wild and cultivated – at various stages of my childhood and adult life and I have indicated direct links between my experience and my writing. Just as the clinkered paths of my Grandmother’s garden delineated the contours of her vegetable and flower beds, so the boundaries of the gardens I have encountered provide a shape for the novel, with key scenes occurring in the gardens at both the vicarage and Benbarrow. The produce of the gardens provides a further link into the topic of food, while instances of propagation, replanting and regrowth in both the narrative and the commentary reference the continuity of family bloodlines and the passing on of family and cultural history.

Other ongoing aspects of my personal context include my experience as a reader and as a teacher, and addressing the impact of these was the focus of my fourth and final research question. My selection of reading matter, and in particular the shelf of grey Persephone¹²⁶ paperbacks that have pride of place in my study, was a significant factor in the development of my narrative and my subsequent choice of period in which to set my novel.

I discussed the context of middlebrow women's writing of the inter-war period in my transfer documentation¹²⁷ and in particular considered the academic writing of Nicola Beauman¹²⁸, Nicola Humble¹²⁹ and Kate Fullbrook¹³⁰. Whilst their analyses informed my early research, it became apparent through supervision and review that the emphasis of my PhD research would be more effectively redirected towards an intimate examination of the writing process, specifically the impact of personal context and experience on the development of the text.

In addition to my choice of fiction material, I have read and consulted a wide range of non-fiction, as indicated by my bibliography. In addressing the question regarding the impact that this reading has had on my writing, I need to look beyond the acquisition of appropriate knowledge: the political and social situation; the details of dress, furniture, kitchenalia; aspects of the Oxfordshire landscape and environs. Many of my reference books are embedded in the fabric of my life, with their origins on my grandmother's and parents' bookshelves or on those of my childhood. As such they are part of my identity, both as a reader and as a writer.

During my studies I have also engaged in the close-reading of an eclectic mix of poetry. Involvement in the 52 project in particular encouraged wide reading and experimentation with form and content, and I found myself in challenging and unfamiliar territory as a writer. The poems I have included in this commentary tend to be closer to my 'comfort zone' in terms of style as this has proved appropriate to the subject matter: family, memory and identity. However, the range of poetry I have read and written during my research studies has informed my writing across form and genre.

Specifically, research into the work of Ivor Gurney has made a significant contribution to my writing about place, and I have chosen to acknowledge his influence in my selection of chapter headings. Before undertaking the study I was aware of Gurney as a musician and First World War poet, but my research

for *Benbarrow* provided an opportunity to consider his writing in greater detail and to appreciate this work as an expression of his identity and as a dialogue between poetry and place.

The second element of this research question refers to my role as a teacher. In the process of examining the development of this commentary I have become increasingly alert to its educational applications. Among these is the potential to develop specific sections into teaching materials for a course exploring the particular challenges of writing the 'historical novel set in a time of living memory'. Further, the commentary provides a foundation from which to develop a text on 'writing from memory', which in addition to addressing the topic of memoir writing would consider the process and responsibilities of writing using the memories of others as source material.

As stated in my review document¹³¹, following the resumption of my studies I have chosen to reflect on two specific areas. One of these was the impact of my writing on my teaching, discussed above. In addition to the academic and publishing potential arising directly from the commentary however, I believe that my research has had an effect on my face-to-face teaching of fiction, memoir and poetry. My increased experience in dealing with the challenges of 'writing from memory', whether our own memories or those handed on, has enabled me to design and deliver workshops targeted at groups including undergraduate creative writing students, adult non-writers and widely published adult writers.

Part of my remit as a PhD researcher is to cascade this new knowledge, the new insights and understandings evolving from my praxis, and in so doing contribute to the body of creative writing expertise. To this end, I have delivered a conference paper addressing the difficulties of writing believable period dialogue¹³² and have been invited to contribute a written paper to an anthology resulting from the conference. I will also be co-delivering a session on Food and Memory at a forthcoming MMU conference¹³³.

The second of these areas for critical reflection was the potential of my wider writing interests, which include poetry, memoir and creative non-fiction. In this conclusion I have already referred to my reading across these areas, but this review focus is specific to writing.

During my undergraduate course I wrote across a wide variety of forms and genres, in response to units across the spectrum of the programme. These included prose and poetry, memoir, script and writing for the media. Following graduation I continued to write short stories, flash fiction and poetry, and have built up a portfolio of published work, both online and in print¹³⁴. I welcomed the opportunity to undertake post-graduate study and in particular the challenge it provided to write an extended, structured fiction.

This commentary has further enabled me to explore the academic potential of memoir and creative non-fiction. The discovery of Farley and Symmons Robert's *Edgelands* provided the inspiration for its structure, in that they demonstrated a technique by which creative non-fiction could be developed as both an analytical device for investigative writing and as a vehicle for a narrative of time and place.

This approach endorsed my view that creative writing can be engaging and accessible, whilst also being a legitimate tool of academic discourse. It is tempting to embark on an analysis of the process of writing the process commentary, but this has mark of a snake swallowing its own tail. Suffice to say that I consider the development of the process commentary to be not only an academic undertaking but also an exercise in creative non-fiction. Both of these are entirely compatible with my intention to generate a resource to which I can return as a practicing writer and which could also form the basis for creating a resource to share with other teachers and life-writers interested in exploring the potential of writing in living memory.

Endnotes

-
- ¹ Farley, Paul & Symmons Roberts, Michael (2012) *Edgelands* London: Vintage p250
- ² See Appendix 5 Transfer Proposal October 2013
- ³ Nelson, Robin (Ed) (2013) *Practice as Research in the arts (Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances)* Basingstoke: Palgrave p37
- ⁴ Holden, Angi (2010) *Example of a Reflection (with annotated bibliography)* published in Graham, R, Newall, H, Leach, H & Singleton, J (Eds) (2005) *The Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* Basingstoke: Palgrave p75
- ⁵ *ibid* p67
- ⁶ See Appendix 6: Review June 2016
- ⁷ MMU Creative Writing BA Reflection Handbook.
- ⁸ See Appendix 2.2 Writing Two Session Plan
- ⁹ Nelson, Robin (Ed) (2013) *Practice as Research in the arts (Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances)* Basingstoke: Palgrave p8
- ¹⁰ *ibid* p17
- ¹¹ *ibid* p19
- ¹² Butt, Maggie (2009) *Creative Writing Research Degrees: Range and Rigour* published in *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* V6 No1
- ¹³ 1997 UK Council for Graduate Education report on practice-based doctorates in the Creative and Performing Arts
- ¹⁴ Book jacket description of Farley, Paul & Symmons Roberts, Michael (2012) *Edgelands* London: Vintage
- ¹⁵ <http://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/pittenweem/kelliecastle/>
- ¹⁶ Becker, Robert (1996) Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art New York: Knopf
- ¹⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/culture-obituaries/6021150/Nancy-Lancaster.html>
- ¹⁸ *ibid*
- ¹⁹ 9 October 2008: Molloy Lecture Theatre, University of Chester
- ²⁰ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/17/hiroo-onoda-japanese-soldier-dies> Accessed 21.06.16
- ²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-MV9WqzT3TM> Accessed 21.06.16
- ²² Brande, Dorothea (1934, republished 1983) *Becoming a Writer* London: Macmillan p45
- ²³ <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/43991> Accessed 24.07.16
- ²⁴ Coleridge, Samuel Taylor (1816) *Christabel, Kubla Khan, and the Pains of Sleep* in *The Examiner* 02.06.1816
- ²⁵ Adams, Douglas (1988) *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* London: Pan Macmillan
- ²⁶ <http://www.marburyhall.com/> Accessed 11.08.16
- ²⁷ <http://www.satterthwaitepc.org.uk/history.html> Accessed 11.08.16 Grizedale Hall is situated near Hawkshead, Cumbria.
- ²⁸ Atwood, Margaret (2003) *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* London: Virago p4
- ²⁹ <https://fiftytwopoetry.wordpress.com/> Accessed 07.07.16
- ³⁰ <http://www.thetoptens.com/> Accessed 07.07.16
- ³¹ Graham, R, Leach, H & Newall, H (Eds) (2005, reissued 2014) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave p11
- ³² Graham, R, Leach, H & Newall, H (Eds) (2005, reissued 2014) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave p12
- ³³ Bell, Jo (2015) *Kith* Rugby: Nine Arches Press
- ³⁴ <https://belljarblog.wordpress.com/2014/11/20/an-announcement/> Accessed 18.07.16
- ³⁵ *ibid*
- ³⁶ <https://www.timeshighereducation.com/features/crossing-the-line-stories-on-mapping-the-maze/192235.article> Accessed 18.07.16
- ³⁷ <https://belljarblog.wordpress.com/2013/06/20/new-word-required/> Accessed 18.07.16
- ³⁸ <http://www.geiriadur.net/index.php?page=ateb&term=Hiraeth&direction=we&type=all&whichpart=exact> Accessed 18.07.16
- ³⁹ Coined by WH Auden in his introduction to John Betjeman's *Slick but Not Streamlined*
- ⁴⁰ Van Swaaij, Louise and Klare, Jean, translated by Winner, David (2000) *The Atlas of Experience* London: Bloomsbury Publishing
- ⁴¹ Tolkein, JRR (1954/55) *The Lord of the Rings Trilogy* London: George Allen & Unwin
- ⁴² Lewis, CS (1950-56) *The Chronicles of Narnia* London: Harper Collins

-
- ⁴³ <http://www.rebeccashaw.me/> Accessed 23.07.16 A map of Barleybridge may be accessed from the dropdown menu; they are also printed inside each volume.
- ⁴⁴ <http://www.writingmaps.com/> Accessed 23.07.16
- ⁴⁵ Ordnance Survey (1936) *OS Map of England & Wales, 5th edition: Sheet 94 Oxford* Southampton: Ordnance Survey Office
- ⁴⁶ The British Empire was superceded by The Commonwealth of Nations following WWII.
- ⁴⁷ <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/frampton-portrait-of-a-young-woman-n04820>
- ⁴⁸ <http://www.nownovel.com/blog/understanding-snowflake-method/> Accessed 11.08.16
- ⁴⁹ <http://www.nawe.co.uk/DB/current-wip-edition-2/articles/writing-the-polyphonic-novel.html> Accessed 10.05.16
- ⁵⁰ Schwartz, Leslie (2005) *Angel's Crest* London: Vintage
- ⁵¹ Nicholson, Virginia (2007) *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* London: Penguin
- ⁵² <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-35874256> Accessed 11.07.16
- ⁵³ <http://www.rspb.org.uk/discoverandenjoynature/discoverandlearn/birdguide/name/n/nightingale/> accessed 11.07.16
- ⁵⁴ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H_MHqW5KVds Accessed 11.07.16
- ⁵⁵ <http://www.lancaster-ed559.co.uk/blog/nightingales-and-bombers-bbc-recording-19-may-1942> Accessed 11.07.16
- ⁵⁶ <http://www.thegoldfishclub.co.uk/index.php/history-of-the-goldfishclub> Accessed 16.09.16
- ⁵⁷ Byatt, A.S. (1990) *Possession* London: Chatto & Windus
- ⁵⁸ Shaffer, Mary Ann (2008) *The Guernsey Literary and Potato Peel Pie Society* London: Bloomsbury
- ⁵⁹ Morton, Kate (2011) *The Distant Hours* London: Pan Macmillan
- ⁶⁰ Mosley, Charlotte (Ed) (2008) *The Mitfords: Letters Between Six Sisters* London: Harper Collins
- ⁶¹ Ibid p17
- ⁶² <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/17/soham.ukcrime1> Accessed 09.07.16
- ⁶³ Williams, Helen L, Conway, Martin A. & Cohen, Gillian *Chapter 2 Autobiographical Memory* in Cohen, Gillian & Conway, Martin A. (eds) 2008 *Memory in the Real World* Hove: Psychology Press p 27
- ⁶⁴ Ibid
- ⁶⁵ The regular opening lines of *Listen with Mother*, broadcast on BBC radio between 1950 and 1982. The phrase was originally an ad lib from presenter Julia Lang.
- ⁶⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2003/dec/17/soham.ukcrime1>;
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/england/1703534.stm>; <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/659266.stm> Accessed 09.07.16
- ⁶⁷ Ransome, Arthur (1930) *Swallows and Amazons* London: Jonathan Cape
- ⁶⁸ <http://www.earthtrust.org.uk/Our-work/livinghistory/ThePoemTree.aspx> Accessed 13.08.16
- ⁶⁹ <http://www.rspb.org.uk/discoverandenjoynature/discoverandlearn/birdguide/name/r/redkite/> Accessed 13.08.16
- ⁷⁰ Bruce, D., Wilcox-O'Hearn, L.A. Robinson, J.A., Philips Grant, K., Francis, L. & Smith, MC (2005) *Fragment memories mark the end of childhood amnesia* in *Memory & Cognition* v33 p267-276
- ⁷¹ Pillemer, D.b. (1998) *Momentous Events, Vivid Memories* Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press
- ⁷² Graham, R, Newall, H, Leach, H & Singleton, J (Eds) (2005) *The Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* Basingstoke: Palgrave p169
- ⁷³ Garnett, Angelica (1984) *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood* Oxford: Oxford
- ⁷⁴ Connolly, Cressida (2005) *The Rare and the Beautiful: The Lives of the Garmans* London; Harper Collins
- ⁷⁵ Partridge, Frances (1981) *Memories* London: Victor Gollancz
- ⁷⁶ Nicolson, Nigel (1973) *Portrait of a Marriage: Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson* London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson
- ⁷⁷ <http://www.hrp.org.uk/tower-of-london/history-and-stories/tower-of-london-remembers/about-the-installation/#gs.gEP6Qpc> Accessed 16.09.16
- ⁷⁸ Morpurgo, Michael (1982) *War Horse* London: Kaye & Ward
- ⁷⁹ Schechtman, Marya (2010) *Memory and Identity* published in *Philosophical Studies: An International Journal for Philosophy in the Analytic Tradition*, Vol. 153, No. 1, Selected Papers from the American Philosophical Association, Pacific Division, 2012 (March 2011), pp. 65-79

- ⁸⁰ Bernecker, S. (2010). *Memory: A Philosophical Study*. New York: Oxford University Press
- ⁸¹ Rosenfield, Israel (1995) *Memory and Identity* published in *New Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Narratives of Literature, the Arts, and Memory (Winter, 1995), pp. 197-203
- ⁸² Devised by Dr Kirsty Bunting and Orlagh McCabe of Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire: 'The Women and Girls of Crewe, the North of England and Beyond, 1830 to 2016' Wednesday 7th December 2016
- ⁸³ *The Hundred Foot Journey* (2014) Directed by Lasse Hallström. Screenplay by Steven Knight based on the novel Morais, Richard C. (2010) *The Hundred-Foot Journey* London: Simon & Schuster
- ⁸⁴ Harris, Joanne (1999) *Chocolat* London: Black Swan
- ⁸⁵ Henry Shukman's *A Glass of Guinness* from Mann, Jules (ed) (2006) *Poetry on a Plate* Cambridge: Salt
- Yorkshire *Pudding Rules* from McMillan, Ian (2016) *To Fold the Evening Star* Manchester: Carcanet
- Edwin Morgan's *Strawberries* from
http://www.edwinmorgan.com/pop_carcanet_strawberries.html Accessed 16.08.16
- ⁸⁶ Thein, Madeleine (2003) *Simple Recipes* New York: Back Bay Books
- ⁸⁷ <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/topics/christmas/christmas-food-and-drink/9688444/The-best-Christmas-pudding-recipe.html> Accessed 16.08.16
- ⁸⁸ https://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=168 Accessed 28.09.16
- ⁸⁹ For example: Graham, R, Leach, H & Newall, H (Eds) (2005, reissued 2014) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave Chapter 10 *Writing Together: Groups and Workshops*
- ⁹⁰ Gardner, John (1999) *On Becoming a Novelist* London: WW Norton p77
- ⁹¹ <https://fiftytwopoetry.wordpress.com/> Accessed 07.07.16
- ⁹² Harris, Joanne (1999) *Chocolat* London: Black Swan
- ⁹³ <http://www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk/> Accessed 17.08.16
- ⁹⁴ Martin, Rhona (1988) *Writing Historical Fiction* London A&C Black p70
- ⁹⁵ *ibid* p3
- ⁹⁶ Rosie Garland, speaking at a workshop *Postcards from the Past* Manchester 22.05.13
- ⁹⁷ <https://uk.pinterest.com/> Accessed 20.09.16
- ⁹⁸ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/ekphrasis-poetry-confronting-art> Accessed 19.07.16
- ⁹⁹ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/iliad-book-xviii-shield-achilles> Accessed 19.07.16
- ¹⁰⁰ <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/text/ekphrasis-poetry-confronting-art> Accessed 19.07.16
- ¹⁰¹ <http://english.emory.edu/classes/paintings&poems/auden.html> Accessed 19.07.16
- ¹⁰² <http://www.katemacdowell.com/icarus.html> Accessed 19.07.16
- ¹⁰³ Memoir piece written for undergraduate assignment, 2008.
- ¹⁰⁴ Graham, R, Leach, H & Newall, H (Eds) (2005, reissued 2014) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave p50
- ¹⁰⁵ <http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/visit/pmag/> Accessed 23.09.16
- ¹⁰⁶ Gaddis, William (1975) *JR* New York: Alfred A. Knopf
- ¹⁰⁷ <https://heavenhappens.me/2014/09/04/stained-glass-window-in-memory-of-ivor-gurney-ww1-composer-and-poet-of-gloucestershire/> Accessed 16.08.16
- ¹⁰⁸ Rawling, Eleanor M (2011) *Ivor Gurney's Gloucestershire: Exploring Poetry and Place* Stroud: The History Press
- ¹⁰⁹ Wood, Naomi (2015) *Mrs Hemingway* London: Picador
- ¹¹⁰ Gellhorn, Martha (2002) *Travels with Myself and Another* London: Eland Books
- ¹¹¹ *Expanded Practice and Curation as Creative Process: An International Symposium* 26th-27th February 2016, MMU Cheshire. Organised by Dr Jane Linden & Dr Patrick Campbell
- ¹¹² *ibid*
- ¹¹³ <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2011/may/01/linda-chase-obituary> Accessed 15.07.16
- ¹¹⁴ <https://poetryschool.com/> Accessed 15.07.16
- ¹¹⁵ <http://didsburyartsfestival.org/> Accessed 15.07.16
- ¹¹⁶ MMU Didsbury campus closed in 2014: www2.mmu.ac.uk/didsbury/ Accessed 19.09.16
- ¹¹⁷ Garnett, Angelica (1984) *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood* Oxford: Oxford
- ¹¹⁸ Bell, Julian (1935) *We Did Not Fight: 1914-1918 Experiences of War Resisters* London: Cobden-Sanderson
- ¹¹⁹ Baxell, Richard (2012). *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War and the Struggle Against Fascism* London: Aurum Press Limited.
- ¹²⁰ <https://www.netweather.tv/forum/topic/57920-december-1938-easterly/> Accessed 14.08.16
- ¹²¹ <https://www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/poems/things> Accessed 24.09.16

-
- ¹²² Cohen, Gillian & Conway, Martin (2008) *Memory in the Real World* New York: Psychology Press p48
- ¹²³ Farley, Paul & Symmons Roberts, Michael (2012) *Edgelands* London: Vintage p250
- ¹²⁴ Poem: *Nicosia Airport, June '62*
- ¹²⁵ See Appendix 2.2 Undergraduate Workshop: Food
- ¹²⁶ <http://www.persephonebooks.co.uk/> Accessed 28.09.16
- ¹²⁷ See Appendix 5
- ¹²⁸ Beaman, Nicola (1983) *A Very Great Profession* London: Virago
- ¹²⁹ Humble, Nicola (2001) *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s* Oxford: OUP
- ¹³⁰ Fullbrook, Kate (1990) *Free Women: Ethics & Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century Women's Fiction* London: Simon & Schuster
- ¹³¹ See Appendix 6
- ¹³² See Appendix 3
- ¹³³ 'The Women and Girls of Crewe, the North of England and Beyond, 1830 to 2016' Manchester Metropolitan University, Cheshire. Wednesday 7th December 2016
- ¹³⁴ See Appendix 4

Annotated Bibliography

In my teaching I emphasise the importance of annotating a bibliography, both as a method of indicating and recording the relevance of individual texts and as a process of reflection on the craft of writing. In this bibliography I have provided an indicative list of material that has contributed to my research, and have highlighted specific texts in the summary annotations.

Social Research, Biographies, Memoirs & Diaries

These texts contributed to my understanding of the period in which Benbarrow is set and in particular its social context. Several of the biographies document the Bloomsbury group but also provide a wider insight into bohemian lifestyles. The Harper biography, while not directly contributing to the text, offers a compelling record of the life of Nancy Lancaster who, as my maternal Grandfather's employer and the restorer of both Kelmarsh Hall and Ditchley Park, inspired the initial research for this novel.

Becker, Robert (1996) *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* New York: Knopf

Bell, Anne Olivier (Ed) (1982) *The Diary of Virginia Woolf: Volume 4 1931-35* London: Penguin

Bell, Quentin & Nicholson Virginia (1997) *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House* London: Francis Lincoln

Connolly, Cressida (2005) *The Rare and the Beautiful: The Lives of the Garmans* London: Harper Collins

Gardiner, Juliet (2010) *The Thirties: An Intimate History* London: Harper Collins

Garnett, Angelica (1984) *Deceived with Kindness: A Bloomsbury Childhood* Oxford: Oxford

Horwood, Catherine (2005) *Keeping Up Appearances: Fashion & Class Between the Wars* Stroud: Sutton Publishing

Marnham, Patrick (2007) *Wild Mary: A Life of Mary Wesley* London: Vintage

Mosley, Charlotte (Ed) (2008) *The Mitfords: Letters Between Six Sisters* London: Harper Collins

Moynahan, Brian (2010) *1930s: The Depression Years* London: Readers' Digest Association

Mulroy, K & Agnone, J (eds) (1998) *Eyewitness to the 20th Century* Washington: National Geographic

Nicolson, Nigel (1973) *Portrait of a Marriage: Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson* London: Weidendfeld & Nicolson

Nicholson, Virginia (2002) *Among the Bohemians: Experiments in Living 1900-1939* London: Penguin

Nicholson, Virginia (2007) *Singled Out: How Two Million Women Survived Without Men after the First World War* London: Penguin

Opie, Robert (1999) *The 1930s Scrapbook* London: New Cavendish

Opie, Robert (1999) *Remember When* London: Octopus

Partridge, Frances (1981) *Memories* London: Victor Gollancz

Pugh, Martin (2008) *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* London: Vintage

Rawling, Eleanor M (2011) *Ivor Gurney's Gloucestershire: Exploring Poetry and Place* Stroud: The History Press

Stevenson, Greg (2000) *The 1930s Home* Oxford: Shire Publications

Taylor, AJP (1965) *English History 1914-1945* London: Oxford University Press

University Press

Yates, Lucy H (1934) *The Country Housewife's Book* Reissued London: Persephone

Local History Research

A variety of texts have informed my depiction of the landscape in which *Benbarrow* is set. Of these the most useful have been my Grandmother's maps and books about the Wychwood Forest and Historic Oxfordshire. The information they provide is key to the novel; in addition their approach and language is a useful stylistic indicator.

AA (1953) *The Road Book of England & Wales* London: The Automobile Association

Alden, Edward C, revised by Alden, Henry JC (1938) *Alden's Oxford Guide*
Oxford: Alden Press

Allport, DH (1961) *Ramsden: The Story of a Wychwood Village* Witney: Allport

Briercliffe, Harold (1950) *Cycling Touring Guide to Southern England* Reprinted
2012 by London: Batsford

Hoskins, WG & Stokes, HG (1951) *About Britain No 5: Chilterns to Black
Country* London: Wm Collins

Kibble, John (1928) *Historical & Other Notes on Wychwood Forest* Kibble:
Charlbury

Kibble, John (1930) *Charming Charlbury: A Wychwood Gem* Kibble: Charlbury

Ordnance Survey (1936) *OS Map of England & Wales, 5th edition: Sheet 94
Oxford* Southampton: Ordnance Survey Office

Ordnance Survey (1983) *OS Pathfinder Series of Great Britain, 5th edition:
Sheet SP 21/31 Burford & Witney (North)* Southampton: Ordnance Survey
Office

Oxford Rural Community Council (1951) *Historic Oxfordshire* Oxford: ORCC

Ward Lock in assoc with Massingham HJ and Williams-Ellis, Clough (c.1948)
The Cotswolds London: Ward Lock

Other Historical Research

Baxell, Richard (2012). *Unlikely Warriors: The British in the Spanish Civil War
and the Struggle Against Fascism* London: Aurum Press Limited.

Bell, Julian (1935) *We Did Not Fight: 1914-1918 Experiences of War Resisters*
London: Cobden-Sanderson

Heath, Ambrose (1933) *Good Food on the Aga* Reissued London: Persephone

Humble, Nicola (2005) *Culinary Pleasures: Cook Books and the Transformation
of British Food* London: Faber & Faber

Jekyll, Agnes (1922) *Kitchen Essays* Reissued London: Persephone

Landsdell, Avril (1999) *Everyday Fashions of the 20th Century* Princes
Risborough: Shire

Taylor, AJP (1965) *English History 1914-1945* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Complementary Research

- Berger, John (2009) *Ways of Seeing* London: Penguin
- Bernard, Miriam, Phillips, Judith, Machin, Linda & Harding Davies, Val (Eds) (2000) *Women Ageing: Challenging Identities, Challenging Myths* London: Routledge
- Bruce, D., Wilcox-O'Hearn, L.A. Robinson, J.A., Philips Grant, K., Francis, L. & Smith, MC (2005) *Fragment memories mark the end of childhood amnesia* in *Memory & Cognition* v33
- Cohen, Gillian & Conway, Martin A. (eds) 2008 *Memory in the Real World* Hove: Psychology Press
- Kearney, Richard (2002) *On Stories* London: Routledge
- Rosenfield, Israel (1995) *Memory and Identity* published in *New Literary History*, Vol. 26, No. 1, Narratives of Literature, the Arts, and Memory (Winter, 1995)
- Schama, Simon (1995) *Landscape & Memory* London: Harper Collins

Practice as Research

- Barrett, Estelle & Bolt, Barbara (2007) *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* New York: Tauris
- Butt, Maggie (2009) *Creative Writing Research Degrees: Range and Rigour* published in *The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing* V6 No1
- Callery, Dymphna (2004) Appendix B: *Writing from Research* as published in: Newnam, J, Cusick, E & La Tourette, A (eds) (2004) *The Writer's Workbook*, 2nd Edition London: Arnold
- Hecq, Dominique (2009) *Interactive Narrative Pedagogy as a Heuristic for Understanding Supervision in Practice-led Research* from *New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice & Theory of Creative Writing*, Vol 6 Iss1
- Nelson, Robin (Ed) (2013) *Practice as Research in The Arts (Principles, Protocols, Pedagogies, Resistances)* Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Smith, Hazel & Dean, Robert (2009) *Practice-Led Research, Research-Led Practice in The Creative Arts* Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press

Environmental, Natural History & Garden Texts

The landscape and natural history of the Cotwolds are central to the novel. The following are a selection of texts used to inform the descriptions of its rural setting and the imagined gardens of both Benbarrow and the vicarage. In addition *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* provided the inspiration for my approach to writing the process commentary.

Blunden, Edward (1941) *English Villages* London: William Collins

Carters (1938) *The Blue Book of Gardening 1938* Raynes Park: Carters Tested Seeds Ltd

Cowen, Robert (2015) *Common Ground* London: Penguin Random House

Cracknell, Linda (2014) *Doubling Back: Ten Paths Trodden in Memory* Glasgow: Freight Books

Farley, Paul & Symmons Roberts, Michael (2012) *Edgelands: Journeys into England's True Wilderness* London: Vintage

Jamie, Kathleen (2005) *Findings* London: Sort of Books

Jamie, Kathleen (2012) *Sightlines* London: Sort of Books

MacFarlane, Robert (2015) *Landmarks* London: Penguin Random House

Petherick, Tom & Eclare, Melanie (2006) *The Kitchen Gardens at Heligan* London: Orion

Rignall, John (1962?) *The Weetabix Wonder Book of Birds* Kettering: Weetabix Ltd

Smit, Tim (1999) *Heligan: Secrets Locked in Silence* London: Macmillan for C4 Books

The National Trust (2013) *Attingham Park Walled Garden Restoration* Milton Keynes: Modestine Press

Van Swaaij, Louise & Klare, Jean (1999) *The Atlas of Experience* London: Bloomsbury

Literary Texts, Commentaries & Criticisms (inc sources for chapter headers)

These texts supported the contextual study presented in my transfer documentation, Appendix 5 and the process commentary. In addition, they provided the sources for my selection of chapter headings, Appendix 1.

Abrams, MH & Greenblatt, Stephen (Eds) (1999) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Seventh Edition* New York: WW Norton & Co

Atwood, Margaret (2003) *Negotiating with the Dead: A Writer on Writing* London: Virago

Beauman, Nicola (1983) *A Very Great Profession: The Woman's Novel 1914-39* London: Virago

Bell, Jo (2015) *Kith* Rugby: Nine Arches Press

Booth, Wayne C (1961) *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Culler, Jonathan (1983) *A Very Short Introduction to Barthes* Oxford: OUP

Dowson, Jane (Ed) (1996) *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* London: Routledge

Du Maurier, Daphne (2004) *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories* London: Virago

Fullbrook, Kate (1990) *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in 20th Century Women's Fiction* London: Simon & Schuster

Haryment, Christina (2000) *Literary Trails: Writers in their Landscapes* London: National Trust

Humble, Nicola (2001) *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s: Class, Domesticity & Bohemianism* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press

Light, Alison (1991) *Forever England: Femininity, Literature & Conservatism Between the Wars* London: Routledge

Mann, Jules (ed) (2006) *Poetry on a Plate* Cambridge: Salt

Quindlen, Anna (2004) *Imagined London* Washington: National Geographic

Rawling, Eleanor M (2011) *Ivor Gurney's Gloucestershire: Exploring Poetry and Place* Stroud: The History Press

Skelton, Robin (1964) *Poetry of the Thirties: Introduced & Edited by Robin Skelton* London: Penguin

Stoddart, Laura (1999) *Up the Garden Path: A Little Anthology* London: Orion

Taplin, Kim (1989) *Tongues in Trees: Studies in Literature & Ecology* Bideford: Green Books

Craft Texts

Craft texts offer advice to the aspiring and practicing writer. This selection includes books that address the ‘nuts and bolts’ of writing craft – point of view, narrative tension, setting, characterisation etc – and the spiritual and psychological aspects of writing, such as enabling creativity and overcoming uncertainty. In addition it includes texts that explore the concept of teaching creative writing.

Brande, Dorothea (1934, republished 1983) *Becoming a Writer* London: Macmillan

Butt, Maggie (2007) *Story: The Heart of the Matter* London: Greenwich Exchange

Gardner, John (1999) *On Becoming a Novelist* London: WW Norton

Goldsberg, Natalie (1986) *Writing Down the Bones* Boston: Shambhala

Goldsberg, Natalie (1990) *Wild Mind* New York: Random Press

Goldsberg, Natalie (2000) *Thunder and Lightning* Boston: Shambhala

Graham, R, Newall, H, Leach, H & Singleton, J (Eds) (2005) *The Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Graham, Robert (2007) *How To Write Fiction (And Think About It)* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Harper, Graeme (Ed) (2006) *Teaching Creative Writing* London: Continuum

King, Stephen (2000) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* New York: Scribner

Leach, H & Graham, R (2007) *Everything You Need to Know About Creative Writing* London: Continuum

Lodge, David (1996) *The Practice of Writing* London: Secker & Warburg

Magrs, P & Bell, J (Eds) (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook* London: Macmillan

McClanahan, Rebecca (1999) *Word Painting* Ohio: Writer's Digest Books
 Martin, Rhona (1988) *Writing Historical Fiction* London: A&C Black
 Newman, J, Cusick, E & La Tourette, A (2000) *The Writer's Workbook* London:
 Hodder Headline
 Singleton, J & Luckhurst, M (Eds) (1996) *The Creative Writing Handbook*
 Basingstoke: Palgrave
 Steel, Jayne (Ed) (2007) *Wordsmithery: The Writer's Craft & Practice*
 Basingstoke: Palgrave

Fiction Texts: Inter-War context, written in the early 20th Century

The novels in this section were written in and about the inter-war years, although some were published a little later. Whilst some titles are well-known and have remained popular, many were until recently 'lost' books. That is, they were out of print and unlikely to be reissued. The development of the Virago and Persephone publishing houses in particular has led to an increasing awareness of these authors and their works.

Cambridge, Elizabeth (1933) *Hostages to Fortune* London: Persephone
 Cooper, Lettice (1936) *The New House* Reissued London: Persephone
 Crompton, Richmal (1948) *Family Roundabout* Reissued London: Persephone
 Delafield, E M (1919) *Consequences* London: Persephone
 Delafield, E M (1930) *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* Reissued London: Virago
 Delafield, E M (1932) *A Provincial Lady Goes Further* Reissued London: Virago
 Dickens, Monica (1940) *Mariana* Reissued London: Persephone
 Lehmann, Rosamund (1936) *The Weather in the Streets* Reissued London:
 Virago
 Miller, Betty (1935) *Farewell Leicester Square* Reissued London: Persephone
 Sherriff, RC (1931) *The Fortnight in September* Reissued London: Persephone
 Strachey, Julia (1932) *Cheerful Weather for a Wedding* Reissued London:
 Persephone
 Watson, Winifred (1938) *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* Reissued London:
 Persephone
 Whipple, Dorothy (1930) *High Wages* Reissued London: Persephone

Fiction Texts: Inter-War context, written in the late 20th & early 21st Century

The novels in this section have an inter-war setting written with a retrospective view. Several have dual time-frames, reflecting the current popularity of this approach as a fictional device. With the exception of Elizabeth Jane Howard and Mary Wesley, their authors were born post WWII.

Hore, Rachel (2012) *The Dream House* London: Simon & Schuster

Howard, Elizabeth Jane (1988) *The Light Years* London: Pan

Howard, Elizabeth Jane (1991) *Marking Time* London: Pan

Lively, Penelope (2008) *Consequences* London: Penguin

Morton, Kate (2006) *The House at Riveton* London: Pan

Morton, Kate (2011) *The Distant Hours* London: Pan

Morton, Kate (2013) *The Secret Keeper* London: Pan

Riley, Lucinda (2010) *Hothouse Flower* London: Penguin

Roberts, Bethan (2008) *The Good Plain Cook* London: Serpent's Tail

Solomons, Natasha (2011) *The Novel in the Viola* London: Hodder & Stoughton

Webb, Katherine (2012) *A Half Forgotten Song* London: Orion

Wesley, Mary (1984) *The Camomile Lawn* London: Vintage

Other Fiction

Beyond that set in the inter-war period, other fiction has been influential in writing the novel or has been referenced in the transfer documentation or process commentary.

Adams, Douglas (1988) *Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency* London: Pan Macmillan

Byatt, A.S. (1990) *Possession* London: Chatto & Windus

Cather, Willa (1918) *My Antonia* London: Virago

Clay, Daniel (2008) *Broken* London: Harper

Drabble, Margaret (1965) *The Millstone* London: Penguin

Harris, Joanne (1999) *Chocolat* London: Black Swan

Harrison, Melissa (2015) *At Hawthorn Time* London: Bloomsbury

O'Farrell, Maggie (2010) *The Hand That First Held Mine* London: Headline

Schwartz, Leslie (2005) *Angel's Crest* London: Vintage
Thein, Madeleine (2003) *Simple Recipes* New York: Back Bay Books
Wood, Naomi (2015) *Mrs Hemingway* London: Picador

Additional Sources for Chapter Headings

The following are sources for chapter headings, not cited elsewhere in this bibliography.

Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition*
London: Ward Lock

Beningfield, Gordon (1987) *Poems of the Countryside* London: Viking

Culpeper, Nicholas (1653, reprinted circa 1955) *Culpeper's Complete Herbal*
London: W. Foulsham & Co

Cryer, Bob HC Deb 19 June 1974 vol 875 cc489-92 *Abolition of Tied Cottages Bill*

Lalique, Lady L'endell (1971) *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* London:
Arlington Books

Spark, Muriel (1961) *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* London: Macmillan

Stoddart, Laura (1999) *Up The Garden Path: A Little Anthology* London: Orion
The Countryman Vol XI (1935) Oxford: The Countryman Ltd Press

Vincent, Charles E.H. (1924) *Vincent's Police Code: Sixteenth Edition* London:
Butterworth

Wharmby, Luther T. (1888) *Come, ye thankful People Come. Harvest Hymn, words by Dean Alford* London: Novello, Ewer & Co

Woolf, Virginia (1928, republished 1992) *Orlando* London: Vintage

Websites

The websites referenced in the transfer documentation and process commentary are cited in the relevant footnotes/endnotes, with individual page and access dates. This selection indicates the range of sources.

Websites: Middlebrow Literature Research

www.poetryschool.com/courses-workshops
www.literaturewales.org/ty-newydd/
www.guardian.co.uk/books
www.terribleminds.com
www.nanowrimo.org

Websites: Process Commentary

www.telegraph.co.uk
www.theguardian.com
<http://news.bbc.co.uk>
<https://www.theguardian.com>
<https://www.timeshighereducation.com>

<https://www.poets.org>
www.poetryfoundation.org
www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk
<https://fiftytwopoetry.wordpress.com/>
<https://belljarblog.wordpress.com>
www.earthtrust.org.uk/Our-work/livinghistory/ThePoemTree.aspx
<https://poetryschool.com>
www.stokemuseums.org.uk
www.tate.org.uk
didsburyartsfestival.org

www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk

www.thebowesmuseum.org.uk

www.marburyhall.com/

www.satterthwaitepc.org.uk/

www.youtube.com

<http://www.rspb.org.uk>

www.netweather.tv/forum/topic/57920-december-1938-easterly/

www.thetoptens.com/

www.nownovel.com/blog/understanding-snowflake-method/

www.nawe.co.uk

www.thegoldfishclub.co.uk

www.writingmaps.com

www.hrp.org.uk

www.katemacdowell.com

www.edwinmorgan.com

www.alzheimers.org.uk/

<https://uk.pinterest.com/>

Acknowledgements

Firstly I would like to acknowledge the support of my MMU Cheshire colleagues past and present: in particular my Directors of Studies: Dr Robert Graham and Dr Paul Evans; from the Creative Writing Team: Dr Julie Armstrong, Dr Heather Leach, Dr Meriel Lland and Joanne Selley; from the Postgraduate Team: Dr Martin Blain, Dr David Cooper, Rachel Huddleston, Claire Garrett & Kathy Clarke and from the Postgraduate Workshop Group: Dr Diana Bradley, Dr Nick Corder, Dr Jan Freeman, Dr Ursula Hurley & Dr Adam Irving.

My complementary writing references my role as a teacher-writer; it would be an oversight to omit the part played by my students in my development as an academic researcher. In addition, my constant reminders to them to build up a portfolio of published work, and a continuous supply of online and print opportunities from Cathy Bryant-Thomas, have been a spur to my own submissions.

As a writer I am grateful for the continuous encouragement of writing friends, both 'real-life' and virtual. In particular I would like to acknowledge the support of Dr Jo Bell and the many and diverse poets of the 52 project; Gill McEvoy and members of Zest!; Angela Topping and members of Northwich Stanza; the Deadliners and the Ladies of Puglia.

My interest in researching my family history owes much to the stories passed down to me by my parents Peter & Kathleen Smith. Granecdotes came from my paternal grandmother Annie Ethel Elizabeth Smith, née Gloster and are as much part of my narrative as my novel's. I hand these stories on, as they were handed to me.

Most of all, my ability to complete both my novel and my complementary research is in no small measure due to the love and support of my dear friend Joanne Selley and of my family: Alan, Jo, Chris and Beth.

Thank you.

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Chapter Headings

BENBARROW

What is literature compared to cooking?

The one is shadow, the other substance.

EV Lucas^j

CHAPTER ONE: HELENA

Something in the air or light cannot or will not forget

The past ages of her, and the toil that made her.

Ivor Gurney: Time to Comeⁱⁱ

CHAPTER TWO: KITTY

It is a thousand times tested truth that without early rising and punctuality good work is almost impossible. A cook who loses an hour in the morning is likely to be toiling all day to overtake tasks that would otherwise have been easy.

Mrs Beeton's Household Managementⁱⁱⁱ

CHAPTER THREE: FRANCES

I am a wisdom that no man will heed,

I am a garden that no hand will weed,

*I am a ruined house, a disused way,
Silence, forgetfulness and dull decay .*

Sylvia Lynd: The Solitary^{iv}

CHAPTER FOUR: HELENA

*Near the top of the main street one comes across a relic of the days
when the market was of wide importance – the Butter Cross, built in
1863 and deserving of a site where its lichened, brown-grey stone roof
could be better appreciated.*

Ward Lock's Guide to the Cotswolds^v

CHAPTER FIVE: KITTY

*Whether in the bringing of the flowers or the food
She offers plenty, and is part of plenty.*

Bernard Spencer: Part of Plenty^{vi}

CHAPTER SIX: HELENA

*Come, ye thankful people, come,
Raise the song of harvest-home:
All be safely gathered in,
Ere the winter storms begin*

Henry Alford: Come, Ye Thankful People, Come^{vii}

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANNIE

Police should not interfere in domestic quarrels, unless there is reason to fear that violence is likely to result..... Beware of being overzealous or meddlesome.”

The Police Code (1924)^{viii}

CHAPTER EIGHT: VRONNIE

The garden had been neglected, but contained a fine collection of shrubs. In the corner of the vast kitchen garden I noticed sages with pale pink flowers and finely pointed leaves. The bushes were nearly smothered in weeds....

Eleanor Sinclair Rohde: How I Made My Herb Garden^{ix}

CHAPTER NINE: KITTY

*... high Cotswold noon-air,
And the earth smell, turning brambles, and half-cirrus moving,
Mixed with the love of body and travel of good turf there.*

Ivor Gurney: Old Thought^x

CHAPTER TEN: HELENA

*...unassuming as the
Cowslips, celendines, buglewort and daisies
That trinket out the green swerves like a child's game.*

Ivor Gurney: Larches^{xi}

CHAPTER ELEVEN: FRANCES

The sun shone, of course, but it was so girt about with clouds and the air so saturated with water, that its beams were discoloured and purples, oranges and reds of a dull sort took the place of the more positive landscapes...

Virginia Woolf: Orlando^{xii}

CHAPTER TWELVE: KITTY

The laundry-maid should begin her labours on a Monday morning by careful examination of the articles committed to her care. Every article should be examined for ink or grease spots, or for fruit or wine stains, which must be removed before washing.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management^{xiii}

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ANNIE

Rabbits were the thing! And a good dog was half the battle. I think we'd have starved it if hadn't been for the dog. Away he'd go and back with a rabbit. They always had the gamekeepers out and they were watching to make sure you didn't get any of the game. So on a moonlit night...

George Bestford, Durham Miner^{xiv}

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: HELENA

*Certain people would not clean their buttons,
Nor polish buckles after latest fashions,
Preferred their hair long...*

Ivor Gurney: The Bohemians^{xv}

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: VRONNIE

*The Hotel, situated in one of the quietest positions in the city, is within
easy walking distance of all the Colleges and Public Buildings.
Spacious Lounges offer rest to the weary... an ideal meeting place for
friends... the standard of its service and cuisine being well known.*

Alden's Guide to Oxford 1937: The Randolph Hotel^{xvi}

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: KITTY

*The causes of vomiting are very various. Vomiting is a very distressing
affection, and when it proves obstinate or severe, calls for the
immediate assistance of art in order to its being relieved.*

Mrs Beeton's Household Management^{xvii}

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: HELENA

*When boiling mussels, put a small onion with them. If there is any
poison in the mussels the onion will go quite black. If good, the onion
will retain its natural colour, and will not taint the mussels in any way.*

Mrs Beeton's Household Management^{xviii}

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: VRONNIE

*Out of the complicated house, come I
To walk beneath the sky.
Here mud and stones and turf, here everything
Is mutely comforting.*

Frances Cornford: The Hills^{xix}

CHAPTER NINETEEN: KITTY

If you live in the country have your vegetables gathered from the garden at an early hour, so there is ample time to get rid of caterpillars etc, an easy task if greens are allowed to soak in salt and water for an hour or two.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management^{xx}

CHAPTER TWENTY: HELENA

Solomon's Seal: Saturn owns the plant. The root is available for wounds, hurts and outward sores, to heal and close up those that are green, and to dry restrain the flux of humours of old ones.

Nicholas Culpeper: Culpeper's Complete Herbal^{xxi}

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: ANNIE

*I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees
Till the child growing hidden in your body
Should become a living presence in the light*

Frances Cornford: A Peasant Woman^{xxii}

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: VRONNIE

There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion....

Muriel Spark: The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie^{xxiii}

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: HELENA

*The message is merely the speaking wind amplified:
That draught from a vacant space flutters the leaves
In the octave of assent, a murmured acceptance.
But of late, observers with sensitive ears report
Recalcitrant undertones, rushles of defiance.*

Geoffrey Parsons: Europe A Wood^{xxiv}

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: KITTY

The evils of the tied cottage system must be remedied, and it is hoped that the Government will be able to provide time within a heavy legislative programme for this modest measure.

Mr. Bob Cryer: Abolition of Tied Cottages Bill^{xxv}

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: VRONNIE

She went to the stair-foot door, opened it, listening. Then she went out, locking the door behind her.

Something scuffled in the yard, and she started....

D.H.Lawrence: Odour of Crysanthemums^{xxvi}

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: KITTY

Full many a blessing wears a guise

Of worry or of trouble;

Far seeing is the soul and wise,

Who knows the mask is double.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox: Thanksgiving^{xxvii}

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: HELENA

... a common suffering

Whitens the air with breath and makes both one

Stephen Spender: Two Armies^{xxviii}

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: FRANCES

*...the snow falling through the universe and faintly falling, like the
descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.*

James Joyce: The Dubliners^{xxix}

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE: VRONNIE

Note nothing of why or how, enquire

no deeper than you need

Into what sets these veins on fire

Valentine Ackland: Instructions from England^{xxx}

CHAPTER THIRTY: KITTY

Between the boughs the stars showed numberless

And the leaves were

As wonderful in blackness as those brightnesses

Hung in high air.

Ivor Gurney: Between the Boughs^{xxxi}

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: HELENA

Her body had grown small as suddenly

And strangely as a dream dissolved in morning.

Crying through blankets, it seemed to those who had known her a woman

Not perished but returned to infancy.

E J Scovell: Death from Cancer^{xxxii}

-
- ⁱ Stoddart, Laura (1999) *Up The Garden Path: A Little Anthology* London: Orion p13
- ⁱⁱ Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press p58
- ⁱⁱⁱ Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition* London: Ward Lock p47
- ^{iv} Dowson, Jane (Ed) (1996) *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* London: Routledge p 70
- ^v Ward Lock in assoc with Massingham HJ and Williams-Ellis, Clough (***) *The Cotswolds* London: Ward Lock
- ^{vi} Skelton, Robin (1964) *Poetry of the Thirties: Introduced & Edited by Robin Skelton* London: Penguin p123
- ^{vii} Wharmby, Luther T. (1888) *Come, ye thankful People Come. Harvest Hymn, words by Dean Alford* London: Novello, Ewer & Co
- ^{viii} Vincent, Charles E.H. (1924) *Vincent's Police Code: Sixteenth Edition* London: Butterworth
- ^{ix} Rohde, Eleanor Sinclair *How I Made My Herb Garden* published in *The Countryman Vol XI* (1935) Oxford: The Countryman Ltd Press
- ^x Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press p72
- ^{xi} Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press p79
- ^{xii} Woolf, Virginia (1928, republished 1992) *Orlando* London: Vintage p146
- ^{xiii} Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition* London: Ward Lock p1489
- ^{xiv} Gardner, Juliet (2010) *The Thirties: An Intimate History* London: Harper Collins p121
- ^{xv} Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press p112
- ^{xvi} Alden, Edward C, revised by Alden, Henry JC (1938) *Alden's Oxford Guide* Oxford: Alden Press Advertising page.
- ^{xvii} Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition* London: Ward Lock p1614
- ^{xviii} Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition* London: Ward Lock p100
- ^{xix} Benington, Gordon (1987) *Poems of the Countryside* London: Viking
- ^{xx} Beeton, Isabella (1861) *Mrs Beeton's Household Management: New Edition* London: Ward Lock p50
- ^{xxi} Culpeper, Nicholas (1653, reprinted circa 1955) *Culpeper's Complete Herbal* London: W. Foulsham & Co
- ^{xxii} Dowson, Jane (Ed) (1996) *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* London: Routledge p 49
- ^{xxiii} Spark, Muriel (1961) *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* London: Macmillan p52
- ^{xxiv} Skelton, Robin (1964) *Poetry of the Thirties: Introduced & Edited by Robin Skelton* London: Penguin p99
- ^{xxv} Mr. Bob Cryer HC Deb 19 June 1974 vol 875 cc489-92 *Abolition of Tied Cottages Bill*
- ^{xxvi} Originally published in *The English Review* (1911) and included in collection *The Prussian Officer & Other Stories* (1914) Quoted from: Abrams, MH & Greenblatt, Stephen (Eds) (1999) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Seventh Edition* New York: WW Norton & Co p 2322
- ^{xxvii} Lalique, Lady L'endell (1971) *The Best of Ella Wheeler Wilcox* London: Arlington Books p87
- ^{xxviii} Skelton, Robin (1964) *Poetry of the Thirties: Introduced & Edited by Robin Skelton* London: Penguin p144
- ^{xxix} Originally published in Joyce, James (1914) *The Dubliners* Quoted from: Abrams, MH & Greenblatt, Stephen (Eds) (1999) *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Seventh Edition* New York: WW Norton & Co p 2368
- ^{xxx} Dowson, Jane (Ed) (1996) *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* London: Routledge p 33
- ^{xxxi} Kavanagh, PJ (1990) *Selected Poems of Ivor Gurney: Selected & Introduced by PJ Kavanagh* Oxford: Oxford University Press p52
- ^{xxxii} Dowson, Jane (Ed) (1996) *Women's Poetry of the 1930s: A Critical Anthology* London: Routledge p127

Appendix 2.1 Teaching Experience 2011-2016

2010-2011

Writing Two	Poetry Block
Writing Craft	Tutor
Key Practices	Reading as a Writer Block

2011-2012

Key Practices Two	Tutor
Key Practices Three	Tutor
Historical Perspectives	Tutor Cover

2012-2013

Key Practices Three	Tutor
---------------------	-------

2013-2014

Context One	Tutor
Writing Two	Tutor Cover
Media Three	Tutor Cover
Placements Three	Tutor

2014-2015

Contexts One	Tutor
Writing Two	Tutor
Placements Three	Tutor

2015-2016

Placements Three	Tutor
------------------	-------

Appendix 2.2 Writing Two, Week Three Session Plan: Scenes

1. **Writing Burst:** The atmosphere changed when he/she walked into the room.
2. **Notices:** Creative writing Plus – Weds 15th John Lindley
Cathy's Comps & Calls page – submissions
3. **Recap:** Last two weeks – Viewpoint & Character
4. **HTWF:** p78-82 Showing & telling
 - a. **Pairs:** Why is it important to write in scenes?
 - b. **Pairs:** What is the difference between showing and telling?
 - c. **Whole Class:** How can you ensure your writing is showing?
5. **Writing Exercise:** HTWF p 79 Beginnings.
6. **Hempel:** *The Cemetery Where Al Jolson Is Buried* Coursebook p37
 - a. Response to story – what worked for you?
 - b. How much of the story is told in scenes? (Examples)
7. **Small Groups:** Discussion & feedback
 - a. How does Hempel avoid direct discussion of the 'elephant in the corner'?
 - b. Examine page layout/design & white space. What do you notice?
 - c. Plant and payoff. How do these work? Are they obvious/flagged?
 - d. Cultural signifiers: What are their value here? What are their value generally?
 - e. Diagram: Can you make a diagram of the relationship between show & tell in making a scene? (Ref HTWF)
8. **Writing Exercise: HTWF p 85 Making a scene.**
 - a. Take time to prepare – use diagram?
 - b. Write
 - c. Share & feedback
9. **Next Week:** Preparation
 - a. Read and annotate p42. Hemingway: Hills Like White Elephants
 - b. Read and annotate HTWF: Dialogue & Plot
10. **Reminder:** Peer Appraisal is in **THREE WEEKS**. 1000 words, redrafted.

Appendix 2.3 Undergraduate Student Workshop: Sample Plan

Angi Holden & Joanne Selley

Women & Girls of Crewe Session: Food (2hrs)

20th January 2016

1. Any with participants: any food allergies?
2. Distribute resource packs
3. Writing Burst – triple chocolate cupcakes (10 mins)
4. Introduction to workshop series, plan for anthology, initiative from Women and Girls of Crewe Conference, emphasis is on quality writing. Today's framework is food, additional resources. (10 mins)
5. "A Poem is never about what a poem is about" Jo Bell:
 - Food and Relationships: *Lettuces* Selima Hill (relationship gone wrong);
 - Family Relationships: *Simple Recipes* Madeleine Thein (father)
 - Intimate Relationships: *Strawberries* Edwin Morgan; *Comfort Me with Apples* Ruth Reichl; play *Chocolat* clip 2, chocolate image; word cloud.
 - Food as a device: *Chocolat* Joanne Harris and film clip 3 (a meal is being used as a mechanism to bring a group of people together – allows author to develop relationships); (30 mins)Time to write. (15 mins)
6. Indian food:
 - Moniza Alvi poem *Indian Cooking* + Image of curries (simultaneously)
 - Extracts from novel: *The Hundred Foot Journey*, Richard Morais and film clips
 - Mention the Bourdain resource
 - Spices and rice - Scent and touch (table) (25 mins)
7. Time to write. (15)
8. Food and Parents: *Yorkshire Pudding Rules* Ian MacMillan, *Glass of Guinness* Henry Shukman, *Mother's Empty Fridge* Margaret Drabble. (10 mins)
9. Summary: Links to parental and sibling relationships for next workshop.
10. Actions: Read resource materials in pack; consider list of publication opportunities (Anthology & Submissions sheet); **WRITE!** (5 mins)

Appendix 2.4 Ladies of Puglia: Flower Workshop

Think of a character:

from a novel, or short story or film
someone you know, or from your family history
someone from an article you've read
someone in the news, or in a 'news' situation

Attribute a plant or flower name to them, something which has a resonance with their character:

Ivy	Rowan	Primrose
Rose	Ash	Jasmine
Daisy	Joshua	Violet
Heather	Linden	Holly
Marigold	Forrest	Iris
Poppy	Lennox	

Think about where they live. Be specific, or include specific detail:

Ribchester, where the flooded Ribble swallows the old stone bridge
The third house along Tregorran Terrace
Witney High Street, overlooking the Butter Cross.

What time of year is it? What time of day?

What is he/she wearing? What is their hair like? Again, include specific detail.

What are they doing? Is it something odd, or unusual?

What are they holding?

Listen for sounds in the background:

cars passing
birdsong
industrial equipment
voices – chatter, or argument, or one side of a phone conversation
or the absence of sound

Bring someone else into the scene. Or maybe nobody else, a significant absence.

Finally, keeping the original thought of a plant or flower in mind - WRITE!!

Appendix 3. Workshops, Courses and Conferences

The process of writing *Benbarrow* has been inextricably linked to my life as a creative arts practitioner and teacher. This appendix records a few of the more significant events I've participated in during the period of my PhD research.

Workshops

I have been fortunate to attend a variety of themed prose and poetry workshops. I value these as the stimulus for new material and as an opportunity to engage in constructively critical dialogue with other writers. Topics have included Music (Jo Bell 06/11), Love (Jo Bell 01/12), Postcards from the Past (Rosie Garland 05/13), Writing for Wellbeing (Lisa Rossetti 02/14), The Sea (Paul Henry 04/14), Waterways (Jo Bell 11/15), Natural Magic & Bird Song (David Morley 02/16) and Flowers (Joy Winkler 04/16).

In addition I have attended regular workshops with *Poemcatchers*, facilitated by Hawthornden Fellow Gill McEvoy. Stimuli have included Seeds, Shoes, Doors, Love, Scent and Light. My local Poetry Society *Stanza*, facilitated by Angela Topping, runs on a workshop basis. Some of these are genre-specific eg Flash Fiction or involve response to specific authors' work eg Robert Frost, The Brontes, but most are based on subjects such as Photographs, Journeys and Lost Things. I both participate in and occasionally lead workshops.

A writers' retreat in Puglia (09/15) and a follow-up in East Sussex (06/16) provided the opportunity to deliver and participate in a variety of workshops. Topics as diverse as Food & Memory, Ekphrasis, Time, Clothes, Ageing, Work and War stimulated responses in fiction, poetry and memoir.

Each of the workshops I have mentioned, and many of those I haven't, have threads that lead back into the text of *Benbarrow*, whether through consideration of such period details as food, clothes and letters, or the influence of love, memory and ageing.

Courses

MMU Writing School runs a series of three-day intensive courses. I have attended three of these, each of which have had an influence on my novel. A *Many-Splendoured Thing: Writing (Well) about Relationships* (Catherine Fox 05/15) included presentations by a partnership professional and a sociologist, and encouraged exploration of traditional and unconventional relationships. *Historical Fact into Contemporary Fiction* (Livi Michael 06/15) addressed approaches to research and provided participants with the opportunity to write in the historical settings of Chetham's Library and Elizabeth Gaskell's House.

Place Writing (David Cooper & Jean Sprackland 06/16) has had an influence on both *Benbarrow* and its commentary. The three sessions – *Mapping the City; Edgelands and Nature Writing* – questioned what is meant by 'place', how it might differ from location and setting, and what links exist between place and memory, and place and identity. The particular impact of the *Edgelands* session is discussed in the commentary.

Conferences: Sharing Knowledge

I have attended a number of conferences. These have ranged across a spectrum from general (*MMU Post-graduate Conferences* 09/12 & 11/15), through those specific to the arts (*Contested Spaces: Shared Places* 07/15) or the humanities (*Teaching Landscape Writing MMU/HEA* 04/14 and *Women in*

the First World War: People's History Museum 05/16) to writing-specific events (*A Sense of Place: Goldsmith's Poetry Conference* 05/15, *Northern Lights Writers' Conference: Creative Industries Trafford* 10/15 and *British Women Writers 1930-1960: Hull University* 06/16).

During the MMU Postgraduate Conference 2012 I participated in a panel discussion focussed on *The Novel as PAR*. An attendee at the Goldsmith's 2015 Poetry Conference I was asked at short notice, to co-deliver with Cathy Dryer a presentation on the 52 Poetry Project, with which I'd been involved throughout 2014. In June 2016 I presented a session at the British Women Writers Conference titled "*Splendid!*" *A consideration of dialogue for the 21st Century author Re-Imagining inter-war culture*.

The proposal for the MMUC conference '*The Women and Girls of Crewe, the North of England and Beyond, 1830-2016*' provided the stimulus for a series of workshops. I co-ran these with colleague Joanne Selley in Spring 2016 and in April 2016 I delivered a presentation to the Post-graduate Research Group, reflecting on the objectives, design and outcome of our project. In December 2016 Joanne Selley and I will facilitate a workshop derived from the series for conference delegates.

In early 2016 I was contacted by MMU CELT (*Centre for Excellence in Learning & Teaching*) following identification of positive feedback from the External Examiner on the Placements Unit that I teach. I was invited to record a short film to discuss the rationale and process of the unit as part of the Good Practice Exchange.

Appendix 4. Publications

The following is a selection of my published work including fiction, poetry and non-fiction, both online and in print.

Flash Fiction (accessed 30.09.16)

A Match Made in Manhattan

<http://gumbopress.co.uk/wordgumbo/wordgumbo1.pdf>

This Extra Day

<http://gumbopress.co.uk/wordgumbo/wordgumbo6.pdf>

The Writing Course

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/the-writing-course-by-angi-holden.html>

Scar

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2012/10/scar-by-angi-holden.html>

Sour Grapes

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2012/05/sour-grapes-by-angi-holden.html>

Snowglobe

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2013/04/snowglobe-by-angi-holden.html>

Meeting the Family

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/meeting-family-by-angi-holden.html>

Reinvention

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2013/06/reinvention-by-angi-holden.html>

Do You Come Here Often?

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2015/04/do-you-come-here-often-by-angi-holden.html>

Threads

<http://flashfloodjournal.blogspot.co.uk/2015/06/threads-by-angi-holden.html>

Travels in Ink

Holden, Angi & Kerr, Callum (eds) (2015) *Landmarks: National Flash Fiction Day Anthology 2015* Scotts Valley: Createspace

Non-Fiction

The Experience of Silence

Poetry

Other Mothers' Sons and the Publican's Wife, published in

White, Peter (2016) *Half-Moon: Poems about Pubs* Otley: OWF Press

I'm Afraid

Tell Him We Love Him

What They Don't Tell You

Absent Father

<http://verbatimpoetry.blogspot.co.uk/search/label/byAngiHolden> Accessed 30.09.16

That Summer

http://ratsassreview.net/?page_id=1070#Holden Accessed 30.09.16

Kneading

The Office Book Club

After 'The Dinner Party'

http://ratsassreview.net/?page_id=1070#Holden2 Accessed 30.09.16

Night Terrors

Old Technology

Reports of a Body Beneath a Motorway Bridge

<http://nutshellsandnuggets.tumblr.com/search/angi+holden> Accessed 30.09.16

Montana

Corporation Gardens

<https://thehighwindowpress.com/2016/09/01/the-high-window-journal-issue-3-autumn-2016/#AngiHolden> Accessed 30.09.16

Half-Life

Bilkau, Rebecca (ed) 2015 *My Dear Watson: The Very Elements of Poetry* Wolfenbüttel: Beautiful Dragons Press

I Am Meltwater

Short Story

Continental Drift, published in

Graham, Robert (2010) *8x8* Manchester: MMU

Small Accommodations, published in

Rees, Emma (2013) *Lost and Found: Short Stories from the Cheshire Prize for Literature* Chester: University of Chester Press

Bernadette, published in

Bellamy, Teika (2015) *The Story of Us: The Mother's Milk Writing Prize 2015 Anthology*
Nottingham: Mother's Milk Books

Vulnerable, published in

Bell, Jo & Calcutt, David (Eds) (2010) *Bugged: Writings from Overhearings* Brighton:
CompletelyNovel.com

Appendix 5. Benbarrow: A Novel and Supporting Commentary

MPhil to PhD Transfer Proposal

Introduction

This project was inspired by my interest in fiction set in a period that broadly qualifies as being 'within living memory', that is fiction that has a historical or nostalgic aspect to it, but in which the setting does not pre-date the twentieth century. In particular I was interested in popular writing for and by women, rather than writing that is overtly 'literary' and/or aimed at a non gender-specific readership.

As a reader I had observed a marked difference in style and content between novels written in a given period, and novels written at a later date about that period. Whether I was reading Winifred Watson¹ and Bethan Roberts² (both writing about the 1930s) or Margaret Drabble³ and Maggie O'Farrell⁴ (both writing about the 1950/60s) elements of style, such as the proportion of dialogue, narrative pace, 'white space' etc, appeared to go beyond the individuality of authors in that they were characteristic of the period in which they were written, rather than the period about which they were written.

This generated a number of questions that I wanted to explore, both in my own writing and in my associated research. To what extent are styles determined by the social and cultural context of the writer? Was the commercial success of a novel due to its satisfaction of reader expectations at the time of publication, and if so would an older novel still have commercial appeal to today's readership? Indeed, would it even be published today? As further questions emerged, it became clear that I would have to focus on a specific period and social context to enable me to reach anything other than the most superficial conclusions through my research and writing.

¹ For example: Watson, Winifred (1938) *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* London: Persephone

² For example: Roberts, Bethan (2008) *The Good Plain Cook* London: Serpent's Tail

³ For example: Drabble, Margaret (1965) *The Millstone* London: Penguin

⁴ For example: O'Farrell, Maggie (2010) *The Hand That First Held Mine* London: Headline

The Novel

Benbarrow is a coming of age story set in rural Oxfordshire in the 1930s. The inter-war years are characterised by significant shifts in social and cultural frameworks. Such change tends to be slower to take effect in rural communities than in urban, which provides the writer with an opportunity to develop conflict and narrative tension when individuals from differing contexts come into contact.

There are two point-of-view characters in *Benbarrow*. The more naïve is Helena, the orphaned niece of a vicar, who has been brought up in an austere rural household. When Helena meets the Ruffords, new owners of the ‘big house’, she meets with their circle of friends and her sheltered perceptions of life are challenged. The second point of view character is Kitty, cook and maid-of-all-work at the vicarage; although little different in age from Helena, she has greater maturity. Her role as an observer is complemented by her own narrative thread.

PhD Programme

This programme was originally conceived as a PhD study. It was apparent that it required documentation to include:

- Working notebooks, journals and drafts
- A fiction text of 60,000 – 90,000 words
- Complementary writing of 20,000 – 30,000 words, examining fiction set in the inter-war period.

This study is more substantial than would normally be accommodated by an MPhil programme.

The PhD programme offers the space in which to explore specific aspects that differentiate between the styles and approaches of authors of the period and those of more recent writers. Further, it provides the opportunity to examine ways in which my research findings have influenced my personal writing style, and to comment on and draw conclusions from the processes involved in the writing of a fiction text.

Contemporary Research on Women Writers

The methodology of this project – discussed in greater detail below – involves a spectrum of library-based research which encompasses both inter-war texts and academic responses to inter-war fiction. I found that a number of writers, each an expert in their particular field of twentieth century women's literature, have informed my early research and have contributed to defining the parameters of my study.

Nicola Beauman's *A Very Great Profession*⁵ is subtitled *The Women's Novel 1914-39*; published in 1983, it provides a historical, sociological insight into the portrayal of middle-class English women in the inter-war years. Beauman remarks that "novels being largely a middle-class art form, tend to reflect middle-class aspirations and expectations.... such as conforming to a way of life." Her analysis of the changing roles of women following the outbreak of WWI, as reflected in the writing of the day, is rich with detail of women: Aunt Ellen, who "would sit in the draughty chair and eat burnt toast, thrusting selfishness upon you against your will"⁶; Queenie, who "dispenses favours... with chilly, composed sweetness" but is pronounced as being 'not-altogether'⁷ and Catherine who devotes herself to "the hundred and one odd jobs that fell to her" as wife and mother.⁸ Using fiction written during the period by authors as diverse as Elinor Glyn and Virginia Woolf, she offers a perspective on women's domestic lives, their romances and their attitudes to war, as recorded in the fiction of the day which is invaluable to the writer-researcher.

In contrast, Nicola Humble's study *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel, 1920s to 1950s*⁹, considers the impact of impact of fiction on defining the role of women in the inter-war years and beyond. In her introduction, Humble recognises that the term 'middlebrow' is applied "disparagingly to the sort of cultural products thought to be too easy, too insular, too smug". However, she points out that fiction which matches her title description, fiction that is "largely written by and consumed by women", enjoyed widespread commercial success in the first half of the twentieth century. This 'middlebrow' fiction "made the Book

⁵ Beauman, Nicola (1983) *A Very Great Profession* London: Virago

⁶ Cooper, Lettice (1936) *The New House* London: Persephone

⁷ Delafield, E M (1919) *Consequences* London: Persephone

⁸ Cambridge, Elizabeth (1933) *Hostages to Fortune* London: Persephone

⁹ Humble, Nicola (2001) *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s* Oxford: OUP

of the Month lists in the newspapers, sold in their tens of thousands in book club editions and packed the shelves of lending libraries.” She argues that ‘middlebrow’ fiction became a powerful force in establishing, consolidating and challenging class and gender identities rather than simply being a reflection of the mores of the day.

Kate Fullbrook’s *Free Women*¹⁰ considers the ethics and aesthetics of twentieth century women’s fiction. There is some overlap with the studies of both Beauman and Humble in that her scope includes the inter-war period, but Fullbrook opts to use an author-specific focus to explore the impact of eleven individual novelists with specific analysis of ‘the connection between feminism and ethics’. Her choice of writers who not only “report on the conditions in which they live” but also “invent ethical perspectives which do not yet prevail” suggests a more literary aesthetic than applies to the majority of novels I will consider.

Fullbrook discusses the ‘sweep of women’s literary achievement’, analysing the work of her selected novelists within the context of a developing tradition of women’s writing. She states that the “ethical inflections in women’s fiction... cannot be considered without a sense of the connection between feminism and ethics”. Likewise, Alison Light in her study *Forever England*¹¹ argues that “we cannot make sense of Englishness between the wars, or understand the changes within literary culture, unless we recognise how much ideas of national identity were bound up with notions of femininity and private life”. She offers an intimate glimpse into English middle-class lives and suggests that feminist literary inquiries should deal with conservative as well as radical philosophies.

¹⁰ Fullbrook, Kate (1990) *Free Women: Ethics & Aesthetics in Twentieth-Century Women’s Fiction* London: Simon & Schuster

¹¹ Light, Alison (1991) *Forever England: Femininity, Literature & Conservatism between the Wars* London: Routledge

Defining the Context of Study

Each of these writers – Beaman, Humble, Fullbrook and Light – has informed my early research, providing thought-provoking analyses and a wealth of further material to consider in their extensive bibliographies. However, even given the opportunity offered by a PhD rather than an MPhil programme, it is important to retain focus on the objective of this complementary study. In this respect, Fullbrook's work has been particularly useful in defining the scope of my enquiry. Her choice of novelists include Edith Wharton and Willa Cather and later in the century Doris Lessing and Margaret Atwood, a selection which is appropriate to her literary research. My study however is not intended to be 'literary research' per se; I am undertaking research into the writing of, and about, a specific period as a contextual framework for my creative practice.

I am a writer who has been largely, although not exclusively, raised in the UK, and who has subsequently lived and worked in the UK. Whilst my reading tastes may be eclectic and frequently non-gender specific, the novels that inform my own writing style tend to be English – English characters, in an English landscape, created by an English author.

There is, of course, much to be learned from international writers, men and women. It would be particularly disingenuous to suggest that contemporary female writers such as Alice Hoffman, Anita Shreve and Alice Munro, whose work I have enjoyed and admired, have not had an effect on my writing. Similarly, male writers, both English and otherwise, have featured in my recent reading logs – Keith Maillard, Daniel Clay, Owen Sheers. However, the American prairies of Cather's *My Antonia*¹² and the dysfunctional Oswald family of Clay's *Broken*¹³ are far removed from my subject matter, and place them beyond the framework appropriate to this study.

The context I have chosen for my study is defined by women novelists whose narratives are set in England during the inter-war period. There will be a particular focus on those writing during the period and those writing in the twenty-first century, which will address specific elements of style and approach and enable a qualitative comparison of work.

¹² Cather, Willa (1918) *My Antonia* London: Virago

¹³ Clay, Daniel (2008) *Broken* London: Harper

Methodology

The methodology detailed in my proposal involves library-based and practice-based enquiries. For the library-based research, I will examine a range of relevant fictions as described above. My selection of texts will evolve organically during the study, as it is inevitable that one choice of author or book will suggest another. As a starting point my indicative reading list includes several texts from The Persephone Catalogue, which now extends to over 100 reissued fiction and non-fiction titles.

Persephone Publications was established by Nicola Beauman in 1999, with the remit to “publish a handful of ‘lost’ or out-of-print books every year, most of them inter-war novels by women”¹⁴. Beauman recognised the achievement of Virago in publishing ‘lost women’s classics’ but had developed an “inconvenient attachment to all these other books that they wouldn’t publish”. The word-of-mouth success of *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* by Winifred Watson¹⁵ fuelled growth in a niche market. Many of the inter-war texts I will consider are drawn from the Persephone and Virago lists. My examination of these novels will be informed by a variety of texts which analyse literature of the period, such as the Beauman and Humble studies discussed.

My selection of novels published with a retrospective view of the inter-war period will be drawn from a wide range of writers and publishing houses. Some, such as the Cazelets¹⁶, may be considered ‘modern classics’ but the majority may be regarded as ‘general women’s fiction’ and are targeted at a market equivalent to the earlier novels’ readership. My choice of prose fiction will be determined solely by the inter-war context of the narratives, although some may have a ‘dual time frame’ since this plot device is popular with modern readers. Online reviews such as those available on broadsheet newspaper websites will provide additional material in respect of more recent publications.

Alongside the two fiction components of my library-based research I will explore two non-fiction strands. In the first I will undertake research into the prevailing political and social context, using book-based and online resources to

¹⁴ www.guardian.co.uk/books/2012/nov/25/nicola-beauman-persephone-books-founder-interview accessed 16.06.13

¹⁵ Watson, Winifred (1938) *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* London: Persephone

¹⁶ Howard, Elizabeth Jane (1990) *The Light Years* London: Macmillan (First of four novels in the Cazalet saga)

inform the characterisation, timeframe and setting of my novel. As a fiction writer, my task is to create a believable and engaging lie; historical inaccuracies, whether in events, dress or dialogue, will cause the discerning reader to disengage from the narrative. This attention to detail is a key part of the writer's craft; the second non-fiction research strand will examine elements of this craft to identify differences between the styles of the inter-war and modern narratives studied.

My examination of writing techniques will be informed by an analysis of a selection of the many craft texts available as a result of the growth of Creative Writing as an academic discipline. Whilst there are a few guides to writing that survive from the interwar period (the most well known perhaps being Dorothea Brande's *Becoming a Writer*¹⁷, first published in 1934 and still referenced on many undergraduate creative writing booklists) the majority are modern. One aspect to consider is the degree to which success criteria for today's writers, as suggested by Goldberg, Graham, Magrs¹⁸ et al, are realised in fiction which enjoyed commercial popularity in the inter-war years.

Significantly, the integration of this research into the writing process will support the development of the personal toolkit of craft skills which I apply across my writing practice. This practice encompasses a range of forms including short-stories, flash fiction and poetry, as well as extended fiction for adult and young readers. In most of these fields I benefit from the support, encouragement and constructive criticism of fellow writers, whether through participation in workshops run by The Poetry School¹⁹, residential courses at venues such as Ty Newydd²⁰, or through participation in privately organised face-to-face and online writing groups.

For the purposes of this project my practice-based research is primarily composed of a prose fiction text of novel length, for which a somewhat more formal and robust methodology is appropriate. The framework of ongoing supervision is central to the MPhil/PhD philosophy of such research, as it supports and directs a sustained process of reflective writing. An enabling relationship between supervisor and supervised is key, providing a way to "help

¹⁷ Brande, Dorothea (1934) *Becoming a Writer* London: Macmillan

¹⁸ Authors of craft texts: Natalie Goldberg, Robert Graham, Paul Magrs. See indicative bibliography.

¹⁹ www.poetryschool.com/courses-workshops Accessed 16.06.13

²⁰ www.literaturewales.org/ty-newydd/ Accessed 16.06.13

candidates become more effective writers as they come to know and trust their own unconscious processes..... finding their own voice, taking risks.....”²¹

Supervision offers the postgraduate creative writing student the opportunity to discuss the progress of their work. Avenues for further research and the development of both the primary text and the complementary writing may be explored. Most importantly, regular supervision functions as an imperative for thorough and reflective self review.

This supervision is complemented by post-graduate writers’ workshops, at which participants provide regular feedback on each other’s works-in-progress. These regular meetings are fundamental to the PhD Practice as Research process. They form the developmental cycle of academic inquiry, writing, supervision and workshop that Graeme Harper describes as the ‘distinctive, discernible and for those of us who value the writing arts, significant’²² activities that comprise creative writing research.

The Creative Writing Workshop

Most undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing courses extol the virtues of a structured workshop as an “opportunity to gain from the skill and experience of other writers”²³. Heather Leach points out that whilst there is no avoiding the long periods of writing alone, the image of the ‘solitary writer’ is an unrealistic construct: “Even the most unashamed romantics, Keats, Coleridge and Wordsworth, spent plenty of time talking to others; reading each others’ drafts; discussing ideas in person and by letter.”²⁴

One of the risks, Leach points out, is the possibility that engaging in discussion about writing becomes a substitute for the writing itself: “Only writing is writing”. However, a creative writing workshop gives participants the space in which to stretch their writing muscles, the motivation to do so (the impending deadline!) and the forum in which to discuss the nuts and bolts of process.

²¹ Hecq, Dominique (2009) *Interactive Narrative Pedagogy as a Heuristic for Understanding Supervision in Practice-led Research from New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice & Theory of Creative Writing*, Vol 6 Iss1

²² Harper, Graeme (2006) *Teaching Creative Writing* London: Continuum

²³ Heather Leach in Graham, R; Newall, H; Leach, H; Singleton, J (eds) (2205) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave

²⁴ *ibid* Chapter 10 p 89

David Lodge²⁵ maintains that “anyone’s expressive and communicative skills can be improved by practice and criticism” and argues that the aspirant writer can “acquire a descriptive vocabulary for and explicit awareness of technical matters”. Amongst these he cites point of view, narrative voice and time shifting as areas that a writer might, within the context of an academic approach to their developing novel, explore a wider range of possibilities than they might have considered, had they been working independently. Participation in regular workshopping of work-in-progress also offers the opportunity to “appreciate how important are the choices made in these categories to the final effect of the narrative text”²⁶.

Beyond the feedback on their own writing, a workshop participant gains immensely from the discussion of others’ texts. As part of the essential process of ‘reading as a writer’, which Heather Leach describes as the ability to “step back, to refocus and let the detail of the writing, its patterns and shapes, come into view”²⁷, critiquing the work of other participants provides an opportunity to exercise the vocabulary and awareness that Lodge mentions. Liz Almond²⁸ points out that the benefits of talking to other writers about the writing process include “learning how to evaluate what works and what does not, as well as being able to identify strengths and weaknesses”, leading to “more focussed critical attention” to one’s own writing.

This approach may however be one of the limitations to the workshop process. Robert Graham²⁹ points out that the mindset of the worshopper is inherently critical, asking “*What’s wrong with this piece and How can we make it better*”. He suggests that we would seldom approach a published work in the same manner as we approach a stapled sheaf of A4 pages. Describing the glee of a student surviving a Frank Conroy MFA workshop at the University of Iowa, Graham points to the value of rigour in the process but raises some concerns for this reader about writing for a specific audience, whether tutor, supervisor or fellow students.

²⁵ Lodge, David (1996) *The Practice of Writing* London: Secker & Warburg

²⁶ Lodge, *ibid*.

²⁷ Heather Leach in Graham, R; Newall, H; Leach, H; Singleton, J (eds) (2205) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave

²⁸ Singleton, J & Luckhurst, M (1996) *The Creative Writing Handbook* Basingstoke: Palgrave

²⁹ Graham, Robert (2007) *How to Write Fiction (And Think About It)* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Style and Taste

Leach points out that only the best workshops “allow for a range of forms and genres, and.. help writers to develop the best that they can do in the form they choose”³⁰. This lack of ‘literary snobbery’ (inverted or otherwise) is essential if writers are to avoid some kind of homogenous, group-specific output. Participants need to understand the difference between supportive suggestions for the resolution of problems, such as inconsistencies in characterisation or point of view, and an ‘I would do it this way’ approach which simply expresses personal stylistic preference.

Journalist and author Anna Quindlen illustrates this difference in taste when describing her mother’s commiserations on being faced with

“the rigors of reading Dickens. ‘He describes every leaf on every tree in every street in every town,’ she said.

This is a pretty fair assessment of the sort of detail the writer piles on.... but it so happened that I was a leaf-tree-street-town sort of person, and, later, the same sort of writer.”³¹

Such differences in taste are not confined to the discussion of workshopped texts. Indeed, the issue of readers’ tastes is fundamental to making a qualitative comparison of texts written and published in separate periods, and will be one of the areas that I will explore. A reader’s cultural experience is a factor in determining both selection of and response to texts and consequently in determining the commercial success of a novel; the fact that our cultural (and social) experience is very different from that of an inter-war reader must be taken into consideration when making any comparisons. Authors writing for a commercial market need to be particularly sensitive to their readership. Jonathan Culler states that “literary works achieve their effects by resisting or complying with readers’ expectations”³²; this concept is not only relevant to the interpretation of the selected fiction texts but also to the creative process of writing for an audience, and emphasises the synergy between research and practice.

³⁰ Heather Leach in Graham, R; Newall, H; Leach, H; Singleton, J (eds) (2205) *The Road to Somewhere* Basingstoke: Palgrave

³¹ Quindlen, Anna (2004) *Imagined London* Washington: National Geographic Society

³² Culler, Jonathan (1983) *Barthes: A Very Short Introduction* Oxford: Oxford University Press

The Relationship between Research and Practice

The research element of the proposed study was designed to satisfy two main criteria: to provide contextual material for the narrative and to facilitate an insight into the process of creating that written prose.

For *Benbarrow* the first involves examination of the inter-war years to ensure historical and political accuracy. This requires extensive reading of non-fiction texts, such as social histories and biographies, supported by visits to appropriate venues such as National Trust properties that exemplify the period. The research will be recorded and evaluated, and will primarily be used to inform the content of the prose fiction submission.

Dymphna Callery³³ asserts that “finding out what you do not know broadens your horizons and liberates your fiction” and passion for the subject will “not only drive your investigations but colour your writing, making it more gripping for the reader”. She quotes Hemingway’s remark that “a writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing”. Whilst this is a powerful argument for detailed and appropriate research, it is important to remember that the objective is to create an engaging narrative rather than a fictionalised expression of non-fiction detail. Author Rosie Garland uses the metaphor of a petticoat to describe a novelist’s background research. ‘It should provide the framework to support the fabric,’ she says. ‘But it shouldn’t show beneath the hem.’³⁴

The ways in which this ‘trick’ might be achieved are embedded in the second strand of the research purpose: an examination and assessment of craft texts, both ‘paper-published’ and online, and of observations by writers, generally referred to as ‘writers on writing’. By considering the advice such texts offer to aspiring writers I will reflect both on my own writing practice, and on the styles and voices of a selection of fictional narratives set in the inter-war context.

Graeme Harper provides the creative writing student with examples of the research that might be involved in post-graduate study:

³³ Callery, Dymphna (2004) Appendix B: *Writing from Research* as published in: Newnam, J, Cusick, E & La Tourette, A (eds) (2004) *The Writer’s Workbook*, 2nd Edition London: Arnold

³⁴ Rosie Garland Workshop: *Postcards from the Past* 11.05.13 Midland Hotel Manchester.

“It can, indeed, be experiential, the result of drawing down on personal experiences, the personally historical, the biographical, the more or less ordinary or adventurous undertaking of the writer in the world. (it) also often involves books or other evidence of a writer’s practice, but also books in relation to foundations of knowledge in a vast range of fields, (and) formal, structural and stylistic research into the tools at hand, the mechanism, the craft of creative writing.”³⁵

Harper’s emphasis on the range of possible enquiry indicates that a broad spectrum of research may be brought to bear on the practice of writing. That the research isn’t stand-alone is self-evident from the juxtaposition of information and craft resources. To be purposeful research must also be appropriate and applicable. It must inform the writing if it is to have value, and the medium through which this evaluation is made is reflection.

This reflection is a – maybe ‘the’ – key element of the MPhil/PhD Creative Writing programme: researching the writing process, exploring how this applies to writing practice, and developing the confidence to articulate a personal writing philosophy. During the first phase of my research I have, as Quindlen suggested, reflected on the type of writer I am and have reached the interim conclusion that I am a redrafter and a researcher-writer, someone for whom the research into and the practice of writing are inextricably bound through reflection.

Progress to Date

Amongst the wealth of advice for aspiring and practicing writers, there are regular patterns and repeated themes: ‘write what you know’; ‘don’t talk about writing – write!’; ‘wake up an hour earlier and do your writing in the morning’ and many more. The Guardian’s *Ten Rules for Writing Fiction*³⁶ demonstrates a spectrum of such writing philosophies.

³⁵ Harper, Graeme (2006) *Teaching Creative Writing* London: Continuum

³⁶ www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/20/ten-rules-for-writing-fiction-part-one Accessed 16.06.13

Much of the available advice is contradictory, or suited to one writer's personal approach but not to another's. For example, author Chuck Wendig, discussing the process of maximising word-count, points out that "editing as you go is a perfectly viable way to write (but) is recursive..... You're treading the same ground. Walking in the same footprints."³⁷

Whilst I recognise that there are better ways of maximising word count, constantly 'gagging the internal editor' isn't compatible with my writing process. I believe that when I present work for feedback, it is important that the text is the best it can be at that point. To have other writers willing to provide detailed feedback on drafts is invaluable and I feel that anything less is disrespectful of the time gifted by supervisor or other workshop participants. However, this has two major disadvantages. Firstly that later revisions may involve destruction of text that has many hours of work invested in it, and secondly that the work-in-progress, whilst being more 'polished', suffers from a shorter word-count than might otherwise be the case.

To date the word-count of my novel extends to approximately 30,000 words – significantly less than the expected output of a Nanowrimo³⁸ participant and somewhat less than I had intended at this stage. However, the text has been partially edited and extensively redrafted and is supported by relevant research, complementary writing and forward planning, in addition to reflective writing in the form of notebooks and journals.

A developing bibliography (annotated and attached) provides examples of reading, both fiction and non-fiction, associated with this research. At this stage it is indicative rather than definitive.

The scale of further work involved suggests that as a practicing, reflective writer the supervisory structure and ongoing post-graduate workshop support of a PhD programme as described will provide me an appropriate space and framework for the completion of *Benbarrow* plus complementary writing, as originally conceived.

³⁷ www.terribleminds.com/ramble/2013/05/07 Accessed 16.06.13

³⁸ www.nanowrimo.org Accessed 16.06.13

Developing Bibliography

This bibliography is both indicative and organic. It is indicative in the sense that it gives an indication of the scope and type of books that I have been and will be using in my research. It is organic in the sense that as I read one text another tends to suggest itself, either by association or by direct suggestion from another writer's bibliography. It is intended to be a working document, rather than a definitive – and limiting – statement, and to that end I have included annotations to illustrate how the choice of texts might inform my research.

Non-Fiction Texts, Literary Research

These texts were initially chosen to provide a literary context for the inter-war novel. On reflection they have done more than that; they have enabled me to more clearly define the parameters of my study.

Beauman, Nicola (1983) *A Very Great Profession: The Women's Novel 1914-39*
London: Virago

Booth, Wayne C (1961) *The Rhetoric of Fiction* Chicago: University of Chicago Press

Culler, Jonathan (1983) *A Very Short Introduction to Barthes* Oxford: OUP

Du Maurier, Daphne (2004) *The Rebecca Notebook and Other Memories*
London: Virago

Fullbrook, Kate (1990) *Free Women: Ethics and Aesthetics in 20th Century Women's Fiction* London: Simon & Schuster

Humble, Nicola (2001) *The Feminine Middlebrow Novel 1920s to 1950s* Oxford: OUP

Light, Alison (1991) *Forever England: Femininity, Literature & Conservatism Between the Wars* London: Routledge

Quindlen, Anna (2004) *Imagined London* Washington: National Geographic

Non-Fiction Texts, Social & Political Research

These resources were chosen to provide a social and political framework for my novel and include biography and memoir as well as historical studies. There is a

tendency for some texts to provide a particularly affluent and prosperous view of the era, since that is the perspective that is more liable to be recorded, particularly in memoir, biography and 'country house' research.

Bell, Quentin & Nicholson Virginia (1997) *Charleston: A Bloomsbury House*

London: Francis Lincoln

Becker, Robert (1996) *Nancy Lancaster: Her Life, Her World, Her Art* New York:

Knopf

Gardiner, Juliet (2010) *The Thirties: An Intimate History* London: Harper Press

Heath, Ambrose (1933) *Good Food on the Aga* Reissued London: Persephone

Humble, Nicola (2005) *Culinary Pleasures* London: Faber & Faber

Jekyll, Agnes (1922) *Kitchen Essays* Reissued London: Persephone

Landsdell, Avril (1999) *Everyday Fashions of the 20th Century* Princes

Risborough: Shire

Moynahan, Brian (2010) *1930s: The Depression Years* London: Readers'

Digest Association

Mulroy, K & Agnone, J (eds) (1998) *Eyewitness to the 20th Century* Washington:

National Geographic

Nicholson, Virginia (2002) *Among the Bohemians; Experiments in Living 1900-*

1939 London: Penguin

Nicholson, Virginia (2007) *Singled Out* London: Penguin

Opie, Robert (1999) *The 1930s Scrapbook* London: New Cavendish

Opie, Robert (1999) *Remember When* London: Octopus

Pugh, Martin (2009) *We Danced All Night: A Social History of Britain Between the Wars* London: Vintage

Yates, Lucy H (1934) *The Country Housewife's Book* Reissued London:

Persephone

Non-Fiction Texts, Creative Writing Craft Research

This selection provides a sample of the many published texts that offer advice to the aspiring and practicing writer. At one extreme it includes books that address the 'nuts and bolts' of writing craft – point of view, narrative tension, setting, characterisation etc. At the other extreme, it includes books that are more concerned with the spiritual and psychological aspects of writing, such as

enabling creativity and overcoming uncertainty. In addition the selection includes texts that explore the concept of teaching creative writing.

- Brande, Dorothea (1934/1983) *Becoming a Writer* London: Macmillan
- Goldsberg, Natalie (1986) *Writing Down the Bones* Boston: Shambhala
- Goldsberg, Natalie (1990) *Wild Mind* New York: Random Press
- Goldsberg, Natalie (2000) *Thunder and Lightning* Boston: Shambhala
- Graham, R, Newall, H, Leach, H & Singleton, J (Eds) (2005) *The Road to Somewhere: A Creative Writing Companion* Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Graham, Robert (2007) *How To Write Fiction (And Think About It)* Basingstoke: Palgrave
- Harper, Graeme (Ed) (2006) *Teaching Creative Writing* London: Continuum
- King, Stephen (2000) *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft* New York: Scribner
- Leach, H & Graham, R (2007) *Everything You Need to Know About Creative Writing* London: Continuum
- Lodge, David (1996) *The Practice of Writing* London: Secker & Warburg
- Magrs, P & Bell, J (Eds) (2001) *The Creative Writing Coursebook* London: Macmillan
- McClanahan, Rebecca (1999) *Word Painting* Ohio: Writer's Digest Books
- Newman, J, Cusick, E & La Tourette, A (2000) *The Writer's Workbook* London: Hodder Headline
- Singleton, J & Luckhurst, M (Eds) (1996) *The Creative Writing Handbook* Basingstoke: Palgrave

Fiction Texts - Inter war, written in the period

The novels that I have included in this section were written in and about the inter-war years, although some were published a little later. Whilst some titles are well-known and have remained popular, many were until recently 'lost' books. That is, they were out of print and unlikely to be reissued. The development of the Virago and Persephone publishing houses in particular has led to an increasing awareness of these authors and their works.

- Cooper, Lettice (1936) *The New House* Reissued London: Persephone
- Crompton, Richmal (1948) *Family Roundabout* Reissued London: Persephone

Delafield, E M (1930) *The Diary of a Provincial Lady* Reissued London: Virago
 Delafield, E M (1932) *A Provincial Lady Goes Further* Reissued London: Virago
 Dickens, Monica (1940) *Mariana* Reissued London: Persephone
 Lehmann, Rosamund (1936) *The Weather in the Streets* Reissued London: Virago
 Miller, Betty (1935) *Farewell Leicester Square* Reissued London: Persephone
 Sherriff, RC (1931) *The Fortnight in September* Reissued London: Persephone
 Strachey, Julia (1932) *Cheerful Weather for a Wedding* Reissued London: Persephone
 Watson, Winifred (1938) *Miss Pettigrew Lives for a Day* Reissued London: Persephone
 Whipple, Dorothy (1930) *High Wages* Reissued London: Persephone

Fiction Texts - Inter war, written retrospectively

The novels in this section have an inter-war setting written with a retrospective view; several have dual time-frames, currently a popular fictional device. Most of their authors were born post WWII.

Roberts, Bethan (2008) *The Good Plain Cook* London: Serpent's Tail
 Hore, Rachel (2012) *The Dream House* London: Simon & Schuster
 Howard, Elizabeth Jane (1988) *The Light Years* London: Pan
 Howard, Elizabeth Jane (1991) *Marking Time* London: Pan
 Lively, Penelope (2008) *Consequences* London: Penguin
 Morton, Kate (2013) *The House at Riveton* London: Pan
 Morton, Kate (2013) *The Secret Keeper* London: Pan
 Riley, Lucinda (2010) *Hothouse Flower* London: Penguin
 Solomons, Natasha (2011) *The Novel in the Viola* London: Hodder & Stoughton
 Webb, Katherine (2012) *A Half Forgotten Song* London: Orion
 Wesley, Mary (1984) *The Camomile Lawn* London: Vintage

Appendix 6. Benbarrow: A Novel and Supporting Commentary

Review June 2016

Benbarrow was initially conceived as a coming of age narrative, set in the period immediately preceding the Second World War and told from two points of view. At the time of transfer from MPhil to PhD the proposal read as follows:

This proposal supports an application to transfer between MPhil and PhD research programmes. The main apparatus of study is a coming-of-age prose novel set in a rural inter-war context, for which the complementary research forms an integral part of the writing process. The proposal discusses the methodology, scale and parameters of study, outlining the rationale behind their selection. It examines the developing praxis, including progress to date and intended future profile of enquiry.

The PhD research programme provides the opportunity to explore aspects of craft that differentiate between the styles and approaches of writers of the inter-war period and those writing retrospectively about the period. With a specific focus on 'middlebrow' fiction for women set in a period of history that broadly qualifies as being 'within living memory', the PhD thesis will articulate the insight this offers into the craft of creating a fiction text and will contribute to an understanding of the process of, and relationship between, research and creative writing.

Progress to date includes a fiction text of approximately 30,000 words supported by appropriate contextual research plus enquiry into aspects of creative writing craft.

Following my transfer (Oct 2013) I explored the areas discussed in the profile of enquiry, guided by the advice of the transfer panel.

My research was subsequently interrupted by a number of factors: two consecutive years of illness for my ASD son, for whom I am primary carer; the death of my mother and my DoS's resignation of his MMU post. Each impacted on my studies, and I elected to suspend for twelve months.

My return to studies in Nov 2015 enabled me to review my enquiries to date, and to reconsider my methodology and direction. Supported by my new DoS, Dr Paul Evans, I am in the process of rewriting the novel. I have reconsidered its focus, developing previously 'secondary' characters and addressing the interactions and influences between a group of women of different ages and experiences.

I have also been encouraged to reflect on two specific areas:

- the 'source' potential of my wider writing interests, which include poetry and non-fiction
- the 'output' impact of my learning on my teaching

As a result, there have been significant changes in both the narrative and the "*methodology, scale and parameters of study*". My PhD thesis will still explore "*the craft of creating a fiction text and contribute to an understanding of the process of, and relationship between, research and creative writing*". However there is now a greater emphasis on process, and in particular on the way in which personal circumstances can influence both the writer's experience and the text.

A. Holden

June 2016

BENBARROW

Angi Holden

Angela Carol Holden 04983842

Dept. of Contemporary Arts MMU Cheshire

Submission for PhD Creative Writing: Practice as Research

Benbarrow: A novel and process commentary

October 2016

BENBARROW

a novel by

Angi Holden

In memory of
Annie Ethel Elizabeth Gloster
1896-1975

CHAPTER ONE: HELENA

Something in the air or light cannot or will not forget

The past ages of her, and the toil that made her.

Ivor Gurney: Time to Come

Helena skidded to a dusty halt, the toes of her old shoes scuffing tracks across the gravelled driveway. Away from her aunt's critical gaze she felt carefree, uninhibited, able to enjoy the unseasonable warmth. She dropped the battered Raleigh beside the low stone wall. The spokes continued turning in the dappled sunlight beneath the trees, tugging blades of grass from the unkempt lawn. On either side of a gap in the wall squatted stone creatures, each moss covered, guarding an overgrown pathway that had once led between birch and ash and oak. Close to the house the trail was now a tangle of bramble; further on she could see it was choked with rhododendron, the dark glossy leaves shining damply beneath the amber canopy.

She looked up at the front of Benbarrow. Seen from the distance of the village, or the woodland and riverside walks that bordered the estate, the building seemed like something from a storybook, rising out of the surrounding pastures and meadows. Up close its solid Cotswold stone looked altogether more substantial, as if the history she'd studied for her exams had, in a moment, become real and meaningful.

At first she hesitated, unsure whether to knock at the huge oak door or go in search of a tradesman's entrance. The slender white envelope she had come to deliver was addressed in her aunt's extravagant handwriting, all loops and curlicues. I'm representing the Vicar's Wife, she thought. And knowing

beyond a shadow of a doubt that Aunt Celia would stride imperiously up to the front door, she took the letter from her saddlebag, and walked with as much confidence as she could muster towards the house.

The shallow steps dipped slightly at the centre, the distant legacy of visitors worn into each sandstone tread. Helena picked her way cautiously between the fragments of broken glass and pebbles. At the edges clusters of pennywort clung to the steps, tumbling from moist crannies like an emerald waterfall, before puddling at the foot of the balustrade. She imagined the centuries of footfall leading up the imposing façade: buckled riding boots and kid shoes, embroidered slippers and silk pumps, spats and brogues and more recently of course the tramp of soldiers' boots.

Realising that the door was hanging slightly open, she rapped lightly with her knuckles, and listened to the echo rumbling around the hallway. There was no reply. She pushed gently on the door; it hardly moved. Cracked varnish came away on her fingertips in tawny curls; she glanced at them briefly before dusting them off on the serge of her pleated skirt.

'Hello,' she called, peering through the narrow gap between the door and its frame. 'Hello. Is anyone there?'

'Drawing Room.' The voice was male and, thought Helena, quite young. 'The Drawing Room. On your right.' She leant her weight against the oak panel, which shuddered open far enough for her to slip into the cool of the shadows. As she stepped forward her eyes gradually became accustomed to the gloom. A diffuse light filtered down from the landing, faintly illuminating an austere stone hall. A pair of doors led to rooms on each side; between dark passageways, a sweeping staircase drew her eyes up to a small landing above which a pale patch suggested the absence of a large framed painting.

'In here. On your right,' the voice repeated, a little tetchily. 'Hurry up.'

Helena opened the door into the Drawing Room. At the top of a folding ladder, a man was wobbling precariously as he dismantled a complex light fitting, which hung from an ornate plaster rose. He paused briefly to look in her direction, before returning his attention to the brass fitting.

'Oh,' he said. 'I thought you were my sister. Well, could you take this, anyway?' And he reached down to pass her a glass globe. Helena dropped her letter on the floor, and stretched up to grasp the translucent shade. She inspected the intertwined ivy leaves around the rim, running her fingers over the engraved pattern as the man clambered down with another, slightly larger, in his hand. 'Not too bad, these,' he said. 'I think we might be able to salvage enough for the front rooms, at least.'

He took the shade from her hand and put both on the window-seat, where the wreckage of another lay on a folded sheet of newspaper.

'Henry Rufford,' he said, wiping the palms of his hands down beige cord trousers. Helena suddenly remembered her aunt's letter, and stooped to pick it up. The once pristine white envelope was now streaked with dust. She blew across it and rubbed at one of the more persistent marks before stuffing it into his outstretched hand.

'And you are?' he asked.

'Helena,' she said.

'Ah yes, we were expecting you.' He gave her back the letter. 'Could you put this on the hall table? And then I could do with some help measuring the rooms.'

It didn't occur to Helena to ask this self-assured young man how he could have been expecting her to call, since she hadn't known herself until just after

lunch, when Aunt Celia had asked her to deliver the invitation. Nor did she question why he should expect her to assist him in his task, or indeed why she should comply. Instead she simply placed the letter on the half-moon table that stood against the wall to one side of the main entrance and followed Henry as he set off with a clipboard and a small leather drum. The latter, she soon discovered, held a retractable linen tape with which Henry proposed to measure the rooms.

‘This way. Let’s start here,’ said Henry.

The large room to the left of the main door was a mirror image of the one they’d just left. But where the Drawing Room had been light and airy, a pleasant room despite its dilapidated air, this - the Library, Henry informed her - was dark and oppressive. The proportions were the same, but it was lined from floor to ceiling with heavy shelving, on which piles of mildewed books were heaped, their leather bindings peeling and torn. A leather-topped desk and matching chair dominated the bay window and the centre of the floor was covered with a large square of rug, on which stood a deeply-buttoned Chesterfield and a small bamboo table. Apart from that the room was empty.

She picked up one of the books, and leafed through it whilst Henry sketched and scribbled notes on a sheet of paper. *The Natural History of Oxfordshire*, she read, immediately wishing she could take the book outside to study the pen and ink drawings at her leisure. The sun had broken through the early mist, and it would soon be dry enough to sit on the daisied grass.

‘We’ll go through the books later,’ said Henry, glancing up at her. ‘The priority is to get a floorplan drawn up. Then we can get the materials ordered.’ He handed one end of the tape to Helena and walked backwards across the room, allowing the tape to billow from the drum as he waved his hand in the

general direction of the door. She closed the book and made her way towards the back wall of the library. Where she held the tape against the skirting board the paint was yellowing; the wall above felt damp to the touch.

‘Twenty-seven, six,’ he said, making a note on his sketched plan. ‘And into the bay it’s....’

As they worked their way around the main rooms, Henry recorded the measurements on his sketched plan, marking the position of doors and window frames, their height and width, even the depth of the reveals. He took the pencil from behind his ear, and touched the lead to the tip of his tongue before jotting the notes on his page. As he inspected each room he added details about the condition of the paintwork and wallpaper, running his fingers over the skirting boards searching for signs of decay. When he found a patch of soft wood, or blown plaster, he frowned and released a low sigh through pursed lips. It was the mannerism of a far older man, and as Helena watched him, fascinated, she remembered the caretaker who used to look after the school buildings. She felt a momentary pang of nostalgia for St Bert’s, for the familiarity of the school community and the kindnesses of teachers and students.

Henry looked up from his notes and saw the intent look on her face. A faint smile began to flicker around his lips. Helena glanced away, feeling the colour flood into her cheeks.

‘Tea, I think,’ he said. ‘You should find everything you need on the kitchen table. We haven’t had time to put anything away yet.’ He gathered up his clipboard, papers and measuring tape. ‘Library. I’ll be in the library,’ he added.

Helena, far from being offended, took this as an opportunity to explore the rest of the ground floor. A door led from the hall to the large dining room

behind the library. They had already measured this and the octagonal sitting room beyond it that nestled behind the staircase. To the right, a wide corridor led to a series of smaller rooms behind the drawing room. She tried to commit the layout to memory, certain that Aunt Celia would grill her for details on her return. The kitchen, when she eventually found it, was in an annexe to the side of the main house, concealed from the front and back views of the house.

Helena stepped across to the table, her shoes clattering on the tiled floor. There were no windows looking out onto the gardens as there were from the vicarage kitchen. Instead light filtered through vast grimy skylights, showing up the years of neglect. The walls were lined with cabinets in which the remains of an extensive dinner service were stacked in untidy piles, serving dishes balanced on top of dinner plates and soup tureens. One glass door was hanging from its hinges; another was cracked across its centre. The only surface that wasn't covered in layers of dust was the table, on which stood a small primus stove and a box of matches, a tin kettle and a teapot. In a cardboard box she found tea and sugar, and a paper bag containing half a dozen shortbread biscuits.

Helena tried the taps. A small, but miraculously clean trickle of water ran into the huge Belfast sink.

'Everything I need,' she said softly and began filling the kettle.

'Henry!' A door slammed in the distance, and a woman's voice trilled through the corridor from the back of the house. 'Henry!' A second time, more sing-song and closer.

'In the Library,' Henry called back.

‘Righty-ho. Just taking my boots off first – those lanes are incredibly muddy.’

‘I thought you’d taken the car.’

‘I had, but then I needed to go and see about this girl. She can’t come, apparently.’

‘What girl?’

Sitting on the floor beside the fireplace, surrounded by the detritus of paperwork Henry had removed from the desk, Helena listened to the conversation, as it bounced back and forth between the library and the hall. She leaned back and stretched out her legs.

Emptying out the cupboards beneath the bookshelves had taken up most of the last hour and she was stiff from kneeling on the panelled floor. She kicked off a shoe and wiggled her toes, grasping the instep in her hands to ease the cramp.

‘That girl, Ellen. It seems she’s got another job, and can’t come after all.’ The door swung open, and a slender woman, several years older than Henry, came into the room. She pushed long fingers into a cascade of auburn hair, and her permanent waves snapped back into place. ‘You simply can’t get the bloody staff these days.’ She stared at Henry, who was rooted to the floor on the other side of the fireplace. ‘What’s the matter?’

Henry turned slowly, and stared at Helena, who quickly straightened her leg, suddenly aware that she was the focus of attention.

‘So who are you?’ he asked.

‘Helena,’ she said, hastily standing up and pushing her foot back into her shoe. The worn leather heel crumpled beneath her, and instantly she felt gauche, little more than a gawky schoolgirl. She stuffed her hands into the

pockets of her skirt and looked at Henry. 'I told you. I'm Helena. Helena Armstrong.'

'Oh bloody hell.' Henry glanced at his sister, and then looked back at Helena, a slight smile wavering around his lips. 'I'm so sorry. I thought you were the hired help.'

'I live with my aunt and uncle,' Helena explained, reaching across the kitchen table for another sugar lump. 'My mother and father...' She paused briefly, unsure even now how to say the words without them catching in her throat. She looked up at the brother and sister, and smiled cheerfully. In her experience nobody really wanted to know about other people's pain and loss. Better by far to wear a carapace of brightness, and pretend that all was well. Best foot forward, her father would have said. Chin up.

'I suppose I'm what you'd call an orphan,' she said instead.

'Oh, us too,' replied Frances.

'I know,' said Helena, and then felt awkward. 'I mean, we all read about it in the papers,' she continued, making it far worse and blushing to the roots. She was suddenly aware of how provincial she must sound, a country bumpkin reading about the local squire in papers sent down from London on the morning train.

'Yes, well. Everyone did. We found out far more about it from the papers.' Henry swallowed the last mouthful of tea and reached for another biscuit. 'Nobody wanted to tell us the gory details. They seemed to think it was better that way.'

‘When in fact you just want to know,’ said Helena. There was a silence as they each became absorbed in their thoughts. For Henry and Frances, their grief was only months old, far more raw than her own.

Helena recalled Mrs Berrington arriving at the vicarage a week before Christmas, her fur collar turned up against the chill. Under one arm she clutched her husband’s daily paper. Aunt Celia had taken her into the best sitting room, where the two women had pored over the account of the crash. No-one had survived. There were photographs of passengers who’d died: a famous engineer and his actress wife; an obscure European Duke, distantly related to the Royal family; a former cabinet minister and the Ruffords. The blurred image showed a stylish couple in evening dress stepping out of a London hotel, the woman wearing an elaborate corsage on her jacket. Helena knew the photograph must have been taken earlier in the year, not on the freezing winter night that the small aircraft had ploughed into a wooded hillside, its pilot lost and its wings crusted with ice. But later, seeing the newspaper roughly folded to show a picture of the wreckage, she could only think of the tender orchids, crushed in the snow.

‘So what happened to your parents?’ asked Frances, breaking into her thoughts. Helena found her directness disconcerting, for all that she craved a candour that wasn’t available at the vicarage.

‘I don’t know too much about it,’ Helena said. ‘Only that they died in a car crash when I was ten.’ Aunt Celia could be blunt and forthright when it came to expressing her opinions, but the events surrounding her younger sister’s death had been deemed inappropriate for sharing with her orphaned niece. Although Helena had been told how and where her parents had died, her aunt was adamant that any further details were too distressing for discussion.

‘And you’ve lived here ever since?’ asked Henry. ‘In Hanbury?’

‘Not at first,’ Helena explained. ‘My uncle was the vicar of a parish in Derbyshire, and I lived there for a couple of years. But then he was offered St Luke’s and my aunt wanted to come back, so we moved.’

‘Come back?’

‘Oh yes. She was brought up in Hanbury. My mother too, of course. My grandfather was a tenant farmer. I don’t remember him, though.’ A framed black and white photograph of her grandparents hung in the hallway of the vicarage, an elderly couple posed against an incongruous stagecloth background of Roman pillars. Her grandfather’s gimlet eyes stared out of the picture, a stern imposing figure whose severe features had been inherited by his older daughter. In front of him, seated stiffly on an upright chair, sat his wife. Like her mother, Helena resembled her grandmother; all three were of medium build, their heart-shaped faces dominated by thick curls of dark hair.

‘So Hanbury is your home now?’ asked Frances. Helena nodded.

‘That’s useful. Really useful,’ said Henry, glancing up from his open notebook, in which he’d been sketching a rough plan of the hall as they talked. ‘I mean, if you didn’t mind helping out. You see, Frances and I don’t know the area very well. It would be a Godsend to have some local knowledge.’

‘I don’t know...’

‘He means it would be useful to have someone who knows people,’ Frances interrupted. ‘We’ll commission builders and craftsmen for all the main jobs and we’ve got friends coming to help out with the decoration and furnishing and so forth. But it would really helpful if we had someone who knew their way round the place.’

‘Aunt Celia might be more help than me,’ Helena said, unable to see quite how she could help the Ruffords. They seemed confident and assertive, more than able to manage the renovation of the estate. What could she offer, besides an ability to hold one end of a measuring tape and maybe catalogue the books? ‘She knows everyone in the village.’

‘Well perhaps we can ask her advice next week,’ said Frances, resting a hand on the invitation to Sunday Luncheon at the Vicarage. ‘Will you give her our thanks? I’ll drop her a line to confirm – my writing’s so much tidier than his!’

‘And in the meantime, would you be able to lend a hand with the paperwork? It’s been such a help having you here this afternoon.’ Henry grimaced. ‘I won’t expect you to make the tea, I promise. I’m very sorry about all that.’

Helena laughed as she gathered together the cups and saucers and took them to the sink.

‘Don’t worry, we’ll clear up,’ said Frances, but she didn’t move from her seat and Henry went back to his notebook, absorbed in some calculation that involved much crossing out and rewriting. Helena carried on washing the crocks, placing them carefully on the ridged wooden drainer.

‘I really ought to go. My aunt will be wondering where I’ve got to.’

‘Of course,’ said Henry, stirring from his reverie. ‘I’ll walk you back to the vicarage.’

‘Oh no,’ said Helena, aware of the wagging tongues that would be only too pleased to misconstrue the sight of the vicar’s niece walking through the village with the new occupant of Benbarrow. ‘No need. I came on my bicycle. I’ll be home in two shakes.’

Before either of the Ruffords had a chance to move, Helena slipped through the kitchen door with a cheery wave. Finding her way through the staff passage, back into the main hall, she stepped through the still-open door, pausing briefly at the top of the steps. The long drive reached out before her to the metal railings, beyond which spread the acres of parkland. In the distance she could see rain-clouds gathering, their deep purple shadows bruising the hills. The Indian summer would soon be at an end, she thought. She ran down the steps, gathered up her bicycle from where it lay in the grass beside the stone wall and peddled hurriedly towards the vicarage.

CHAPTER TWO: KITTY

It is a thousand times tested truth that without early rising and punctuality good work is almost impossible. A cook who loses an hour in the morning is likely to be toiling all day to overtake tasks that would otherwise have been easy.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management p47

Kitty held the lid for a moment, letting the water dribble from its rim, before leaning it against the jug on the drainer. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other, stretched her back, and then reached once more into the sudsy water. As she mauled out the cast iron pot, she caught sight of Helena pushing her bike along the back path towards the shed.

‘At last,’ she thought. For a moment her expression hardened, her lips thinning as she clenched her teeth. Helena’s time was her own, in a way that Kitty, barely twelve months her senior, could hardly imagine. Kitty’s resentment didn’t last long. It had been a good day, warm and breezy, and she’d managed to clean the upstairs rooms whilst the sheets were pegged on the line. Despite the forecast of a thunderstorm which had threatened all day, the bedding was now neatly folded over the airer, filling the laundry room with the scent of summer and fresh linen. She was tired, ‘bone-weary’ her mother would have called it, but she was content.

Kitty tipped out the residue of water and inspected the inside of the pot. Satisfied, she set it down to drain and glanced through the kitchen window as she felt around amongst the remaining suds. ‘And just look at that skirt. She’ll cop it with the missus.’

The Vicar's wife was concentrating on a pile of household bills at her bureau in the sitting room. It was not a good moment for interruptions. Kitty waited until Helena emerged from the shed, before rapping her knuckles against the window pane and gesticulating towards the back door. The glass rattled in the frame, and a small sliver of putty fell onto the tiled sill.

'This way,' Kitty mouthed, as she dried off her hands on the front of her apron. She watched Helena change direction, deftly veering away from the open French windows. Moments later Helena peered hesitantly around the kitchen door.

'Where have you been? Your Aunt's been asking for you for the last hour or more.'

'Benbarrow,' Helena replied. 'Aunt Celia sent me across with an invitation.'

'But that was after lunch.' Kitty looked up at the plain white face of the kitchen clock. 'Four hours ago. It's what, half a mile away? I could have walked it there and back a dozen times. And just look at the state of that skirt!'

They both peered at the smudges of dust and threads of cobweb. Helena rubbed at them ineffectively. Kitty shook her head.

'Go and get changed. Your Aunt's doing the accounts. I've just taken her a tray of tea and biscuits and she's not in a good humour. Best tidy up before she catches you.' She poured tea into a small china cup and two brown pottery mugs. 'I'll leave yours here. I'm off down the patch with this before it goes cold.'

Carrying the two mugs she hurried out of the kitchen and along the path beside the herbaceous border. The gravel track turned behind the wooden shed and passed through an arched gateway, beyond which the land opened up into a walled garden. Kitty stepped carefully; here the path was rougher underfoot, a

solid ridge of ash and clinker from the Vicarage fires built up by generations of housemaids and gardeners. The soil on either side was rich and loamy, and heavily planted with autumn vegetables.

At one end of the garden was an ageing chestnut; underneath there was a scattering of spiky cases, like tiny green hedgehogs. Kitty headed for the wooden bench.

'Tea, Billy,' she called, putting one mug on a stump of wood which Billy had placed there for the purpose. She sat down, took a sip of her tea and eased her feet tentatively out of her shoes.

'You'll regret that later,' Billy said, laughing as he came out of the bothy. 'When you can't get the blighters back on again.' His sleeves were rolled up above his elbows, his forearms covered in a fine dusting of soil caught in the auburn hairs above his wrists. Kitty sat still, her hands clasped around her mug. It would be so easy to reach out, touch his muscled arms and brush the compost from his weathered skin. She had done that once before and he'd grasped her shoulders, kissed her hard on the lips, never mind that they'd been in the Vicarage garden. She'd pushed him off, scared they might be seen. He'd called her a tease.

Billy picked up his tea, and wrapped his sturdy hands around the mug as if it were a tankard.

'Cheers!' he said, drinking most of it in a single draught.

Kitty felt in the pocket of her apron and pulled out two lemon shortcake biscuits. She passed the larger one across to Billy and took a bite from the other.

'My favourite,' he said. 'But mind you don't get into trouble.'

‘Misshapen, they were,’ said Kitty, holding up the remnants of hers for him to see. ‘I couldn’t serve them up on a tea tray, now could I?’ She grinned. She could produce batch after batch of perfect biscuits with her eyes shut, but the Vicar’s wife wasn’t to know that.

She leaned back on the seat. The last of the sunshine had gone, but it was sheltered in the corner and the rough brick walls reflected back the warmth of the day. She would have liked to stay where she was, a mug in her hand, the weight off her feet, Billy at her side. But there was a meal to be served, and more washing up to be done and put away before she’d get a chance to relax.

‘Has the girl come back?’ asked Billy. He shifted his weight on the bench. He wasn’t a tall man, but he was stockily built and Kitty could feel the timbers of the seat bow beneath her buttocks as he moved.

‘The girl? She’s got a name you know,’ said Kitty.

‘Maybe. She’s just a girl to me. A slip of a girl, just out of school.’ He swallowed the last of his tea, and shook the dregs out over the soil. ‘Not like you. You’re a proper woman.’

‘What are you saying? That I’m getting on?’

‘Now you know I wasn’t saying that.’ Billy put down his mug and wrapped an arm around Kitty’s shoulders. ‘I’m saying what I’ve said before. You’re old enough to get married. I’ve asked you often enough.’ He leaned across to kiss her, but Kitty pushed the last of her biscuit into his mouth.

‘And you can stop that William Griffiths,’ she said, wincing as she thrust her feet back into her shoes. She gathered up the empty mugs and without a backward glance set off towards the kitchen, not letting Billy see the smile creasing her face.

By the time Kitty got back Helena was sitting at the scrubbed oak table, immersed in a novel that was propped up against a jar of pickled onions. Her elbows rested on the table top, her chin wedged in between her fists. She looked up briefly as Kitty opened the back door.

‘Mind your book on that table. I’ve not long since been making biscuits.’

Helena inspected the dustjacket, brushed her hand across the table and carried on reading.

‘What’s the book?’

‘Jane Eyre,’ Helena replied. She absently reached out for her cup, realised it was empty and withdrew her hand. All without glancing away from her page.

‘Do you want another?’

‘No, not really.’

Kitty checked the clock. Time to put on the potatoes. She dragged the saucepan across the top of the Rayburn, spilling a little water over the edge. There was a faint spit and sizzle as the wet pan came into contact with the hotplate. She dug her fingertips into the pot on the shelf and sprinkled some salt on top of the potatoes.

‘Is that the one about that Mr Rochester?’ she asked, pointing at Helena’s book. ‘I thought you read that at Easter.’

‘I did, said Helena. Closing it with a show of reluctance, she pushed both the book and the jar of pickles out of the way to create some space, folded her arms on the table in front of her and lay her head down. ‘There’s just nothing else besides Bronte and Austen. And Uncle Peter’s copy of Pilgrim’s Progress.’

Kitty knew many of the stories by heart. During the holidays Helena spent most afternoons in the vicarage kitchen, talking about Jane Eyre and

Rochester, the Bennetts and Mr Darcy, whilst Kitty taught her how to make bread and cakes and biscuits. Helena was exaggerating, of course; there were plenty of other novels in the library. Dickens and Trollope and Hardy. Kitty dusted them all daily, and could have recited the titles in order if asked, although she'd read none of them. Her idea of reading was sneaking an old copy of Good Housekeeping up to her attic bedroom at the end of a long day, but she knew better than to suggest Helena did the same.

'There's just nothing new,' grumbled Helena. She let out a huge sigh. 'I'm so bored. I wish I was back at St Bert's.'

The autumn term had already begun, and as she cooked the evening meal Kitty would usually imagine Helena at school, settled in her dormitory doing homework or chatting with the other girls. Or writing home perhaps, letters that Kitty occasionally managed to read, full of hockey matches and choir practice, study trips and midnight feasts and exam revision.

Instead, here she was, sitting in the Vicarage kitchen, a picture of weariness, thought Kitty.

'Well, you know that's not going to happen, so you might as well forget about it.' Kitty reached up to the saucepan rack that hung above the kitchen table. It swung gently, scattering reflections from the copper-bottomed pans across the tabletop. She selected a small pan, filled it with water and began scraping and chopping carrots from the bunch of that lay on the counter.

'You'll just have to come into town with me tomorrow and try the Municipal Library. It's market day mind, so I'll be catching the early bus.' She dropped a pile of chopped carrots into the pan. 'You'll have to wait a bit for it to open, but they might have something you haven't read.'

‘That’s a good idea,’ said Helena, brightening up. The library had recently begun to open on a Saturday morning, and in an attempt to encourage some of the local workers to continue their education had even advertised some study classes in the afternoon. Helena picked up her book and headed out to the garden.

‘Maybe they’ll have South Riding,’ she added, as she headed out into the garden.

‘Don’t be long,’ Kitty called after her. South Riding. Not one she’d heard of before. She wondered if Helena was developing an interest in horses after all. ‘I’ll be serving up soon,’ she added, but the door had already swung to.

The day had turned out rather warm for a pot-roast, but that’s what Mrs Harding had requested, and if the Vicar’s wife requested pot-roast, that’s what she got. Kitty carried the heavy carving dish into the dining room and placed it in front of the vicar.

‘A little hot today for a roast, wouldn’t you say my dear?’ he said, addressing his wife as he stood to carve the joint. He inspected the blade of the knife, judged it sharp enough to cope with the tender slab of beef, and set to work.

‘Indeed,’ Mrs Harding said as Kitty was leaving the room. ‘But you can’t get the staff these days.’

Kitty swore softly under her breath. It was true of course, now that so many of the estate workers had found better jobs in the towns. That was the thing about Mrs Harding, Kitty thought. She was seldom untruthful, just unfair.

She returned with the dishes of vegetables: boiled potatoes, carrots and peas, fresh from their own gardens – thanks to Billy’s hard work – and glistening with melted butter.

‘So what took you so long?’ asked Mrs Harding. For a moment Kitty thought the Vicar’s wife was speaking to her, complaining about the length of time it had taken her to fetch the vegetables.

‘I stopped to help the Ruffords,’ said Helena. ‘They were measuring up the rooms. It’s going to be a mammoth task, from what Henry – Mr Rufford – said.’

‘Measuring up? But why? The decorators will do that.’

‘Oh no, they’re going to do it all themselves,’ said Helena. ‘As much as they can, anyway. They’ve got friends coming to help, and there’s a man who wants to restore the gardens.’

‘Goodness, have they any idea what they’re taking on?’ asked Mr Harding, passing Kitty a plate of beef to set before his niece. ‘That’s a mammoth task.’

‘Well, I’m sure you can put them right next Sunday my dear.’ Mrs Harding scooped two small potatoes onto her plate and a spoonful each of peas and carrots. ‘They’re coming to luncheon, don’t forget,’ she added, as she passed the gravy boat to her husband.

‘Will that be all, Mrs Harding?’ Kitty asked. She lifted the carving dish from the table and paused before leaving them to their meal.

‘Yes, Kitty. Helena will clear the plates and call you when we’ve finished.’

‘Goodnight, Kitty,’ said the Vicar. It was his habit to retire to his study with a cigarette at the end of dinner. ‘Thank you, it looks – and smells – quite delicious.’

Kitty nodded, and shuffled out of the room, pushing the door open with her backside simply because she knew it would infuriate Mrs Harding. As she turned into the kitchen she could hear the Vicar saying grace.

‘For what we are about to receive, may the Lord make us truly thankful.’

‘Amen,’ she said, setting the platter down on the kitchen table and tearing a strip of beef from the joint with her fingers.

CHAPTER THREE: FRANCES

I am a wisdom that no man will heed,

I am a garden that no hand will weed,

I am a ruined house, a disused way,

Silence, forgetfulness and dull decay .

Sylvia Lynd: The Solitary

‘Have you any idea what’s involved?’ Frances looked up from her magazine and gave Henry a long cool stare. ‘It’s not as if you’ve done anything like this before. Run a project, organised people, kept accounts. You’ve no experience, for God’s sake.’

‘No,’ he replied. He paused a moment, his brow puckered as if he were considering some great conundrum. Then his face relaxed into a grin. ‘But you have.’

Frances tried to keep the chill in her expression, but it was impossible. It had always been the same with Henry, from when he was little. She could never stay cross with him for long. She listened to her friends talking about their younger brothers, what an absolute pain they were, and she could only feel sorry for them. Of course he’d been a nuisance when she was growing up, sneaking into her room when she’d explicitly told him it was out of bounds, rifling through her books and letters, spilling face powder across her dressing table. But when she’d left home she had missed him bitterly.

She closed the magazine and tossed it across the Chesterfield. Reaching for her glass she found it nearly empty and topped it up with one of the Burgundies she’d bought in Oxford that afternoon. The remnants of their

supper lay scattered across the bamboo table: bread, late tomatoes, a selection of cheeses. She cut a slice from the remains of the white Stilton; it crumbed beneath the blade and she picked the pieces up one by one, savouring their delicate flavour.

‘Look,’ she said, her voice softer now, more thoughtful. ‘It’s not going to be easy. Or cheap.’ She took a sip of the wine. ‘There’s so much that needs doing, and the compensation alone won’t cover it.’ She looked around the library, assessing the amount of work that would need doing in this room alone. It seemed such a mammoth task. She doubted Henry had even the remotest idea of the expense involved.

‘I know,’ he answered, guessing at her concerns. ‘And I’ll be honest with you Frances, I really don’t know how much it’ll cost. But now my trust fund has matured I need to do something with the money. I need to do something with my life. And this just feels right. It feels like I could make this my home.’ He looked across at her, waiting until she looked up from her glass, until he was certain he held her attention. ‘Your home too, if you want it.’

She remembered when he’d first suggested the idea of renovating Benbarrow. She’d thought he was crazy and she’d told him so. The house had stood empty for years. Already damaged beyond recognition during the war years and during its occupation as an officers’ treatment and recovery centre for some years afterwards, it had gradually deteriorated ever since. She’d only agreed to come down for a week or so in the hope of discouraging any plans Henry had for its renovation. But now she was here, his enthusiasm, his idealism, were beguiling.

‘What do you think?’ Henry asked, breaking through her musings. ‘Will you at least consider the idea? Help me draw up a schedule and cost it out?’

You're so much better at these things than I am. I know what I want to achieve, but you're always the one who gets things done.' Frances smiled.

'No Henry, that's not true. You're the one who gets things done, because you surround yourself with people who can do it.' She poured more wine for them both. 'So who, apart from your gullible sister, have you roped in to help you this time?' she asked, as though the outcome of the conversation had already been settled.

By the time Frances and Henry finished the Stilton, the second bottle of Burgundy was empty and the small table and most of the floor around it were littered in sheets of paper covered in scribbled descriptions and columns of figures. Her head was spinning, but more from the wealth of information than from the alcohol. She was surprised by the amount of thought Henry had already put into the project. She'd seen the rough sketches he had accumulated on the clipboard, and the proliferation of jottings filling page after page of his leather notebook, but the extent of his sketches and annotations startled her.

As the evening unfolded he showed her what he had in mind, and seeing the fascination in her expression he dared to share a little more and then a little more again of his dreams for Benbarrow. As she asked questions his confidence grew and Frances became aware that his plan might have real substance, might be more than the wild designs of an active imagination.

'I don't want to just repair the damage and clean the house up,' he explained. 'I want to make it beautiful again. I want people to walk up the steps and feel embraced by the atmosphere. I want there to be a sense that every piece of wood, or wallpaper or material belongs here, in this very spot. I want

every room to feel cherished, as though only the best craftsmanship is good enough.'

'That's a long list of 'wants' Henry.'

'I know, but that's how I feel.' He lifted up one of the sheets of paper, and ran his finger around the outline he'd sketched of the ground floor. 'This is going to sound silly, I know, but when I came up here on the train I was simply wondering if the house could be recovered. Whether it was worth even trying to make it habitable. But now it's become more than that, much more. I'm responsible for it. No, don't laugh.' He shook his head, and then tried again. 'If I don't give Benbarrow my very best, it will be gone in a few years.'

It was true, Frances could see that. Most wealthy families were selling off their country piles, getting rid of the difficulty and expense of maintaining the fabric of the buildings, not spending thousands, throwing good money after bad. Their cousin had converted his landscaped parks into farming land. A distant uncle had demolished a rambling Georgian mansion on the outskirts of Manchester and was building houses on the site. And wasn't that a good thing, in its way? So many people living in the cities in run down housing, with hardly enough food to put on the table, wasn't that what Jonathan always said? So much poverty in the world, and yet they could afford to live like this.

She shook away the memories. Too much red wine and she became maudlin. Better to think about saving Benbarrow, if that's what Henry was determined to do.

The papers were still strewn across the table and library floor when Frances came down in the morning, nursing a thick head.

'Henry?' she called. 'Are you about? Henry?' There was no reply. She wandered around the ground floor, assessing each room afresh after their discussions. Where yesterday she had only seen a ramshackle collection of mildewed books piled on oppressively dark shelves, she could now imagine a light, bright reading room, a welcoming fire in the grate, comfortable chairs and settees. Even the leather-topped desk would look less overpowering once the ceilings were cleaned and painted and the walls were papered in something less dull.

She picked up one of the pads from the floor and walked through to the dining room, and the sitting room beyond, making notes about colours and patterns. She scribbled Colefax in a corner of the page, already planning a visit to London for samples of furnishing fabrics and curtaining. Lady Sybil had an eye for these things, she would ask her advice. And wasn't that American woman living nearby, the one whose country house style everyone was talking about? She would ring Debs and see if she could engineer an invitation.

She reached the kitchen just as Henry stumbled through the back door, clasping a bundle of sacking and rags.

'What in heaven's name have you got there?' she asked, glancing over her notepad. 'Oh God, it reeks to high heaven.' She clapped her hand across her mouth and spluttered through her fingers. 'What in God's name is it?'

Henry moved towards the kitchen table but stopped abruptly when he saw the look of disgust on Frances's face. He bent down and put the bundle on the floor. A corner of the sack fell open and a pair of dark eyes peered out.

'Kittens,' he said. 'One of the farmers was having a pint at the Oak before he drowned them. I couldn't....' Henry looked up at Frances. 'Well, I couldn't,

could I?' Frances put her pad and pen on the table and knelt down by the side of the filthy bundle.

'It really does stink,' she said. She looked at her brother and shrivelled her nose. 'Come to that, so do you. It'll need a good wash.'

'They. They need a wash.'

Henry opened the cloth a little further. Two tabby faces emerged from the folds, followed by a third, eyes blinking in the morning light.

CHAPTER FOUR: HELENA

Near the top of the main street one comes across a relic of the days when the market was of wide importance – the Butter Cross, built in 1863 and deserving of a site where its lichened, brown-grey stone roof could be better appreciated.

Ward Lock's Guide to the Cotswolds

'Not long now,' said Kitty, glancing down the road. Helena kicked at a tussock of grass.

I could have had a few more minutes in bed, she thought. She was used to rising early for chapel at school, but since the end of the summer term she'd got into the habit of staying under the worn patchwork quilt until she heard her aunt up and about. Her room at the back of the vicarage only caught the last of the afternoon sun; on a day like today, with the barometer already rising, it would stay cool all day. She wondered why she hadn't stayed there.

'Is that it?' Helena asked. They stood still for a moment, listening for the sounds filtering through the trees along the roadside. A pair of magpies tumbled squawking from a nearby copse; the beech and sycamore leaves were already beginning to turn copper and gold, and rustled even in the lightest breeze. From the distance came the faint hum of an engine.

'Doesn't sound right to me,' said Kitty. 'More like a car. Maybe the doctor's out and about.' The sound grew louder as it gradually came closer, but it lacked the distinctive rumble of a heavy engine. 'Whatever it is, it's not our bus.'

A small grey car appeared around the bend in the road, and slowed to a halt beside the bus stop.

‘Can I offer you a lift?’ said Frances, leaning across the passenger seat towards the open window, and smiling at Helena. ‘I’m going into Whitmore, if that’s any help.’ She slid her sunglasses onto the top of her head, pushing her bobbed hair behind her ears.

‘That would be lovely. Thank you,’ said Helena. ‘We’re going to the market.’ She gesticulated vaguely at Kitty, who stood on the grass verge behind her, clutching a wicker basket. ‘And I want to get some books from the library while we’re in town.’

‘Oh, yes, of course,’ Frances replied, glancing in Kitty’s direction as she realised they were together. ‘Well, if you don’t mind sitting amongst the packages. There should be enough room.’

Helena opened the door and peered into back of the car. Parcels of various sizes and shapes were strewn haphazardly across the back seat, but she could see there would be plenty of space once they were heaped up. Frances leant down and pulled a small lever, and the front seat slipped forward on unseen runners.

‘Shall I get in the back, Kitty?’ Helena said.

‘Oh no, Miss. I’ll sit in the back,’ Kitty replied, but Helena was already shifting one of the smaller parcels and climbing in. Kitty pushed the seat back tentatively until it clicked into place, and got into the car, cradling her basket on her lap.

Frances glanced at her wing mirror, flicked on her indicator and pulled off from the verge. She laughed as she drew her sunglasses back down onto the

bridge of her nose. 'I'm so used to driving in town,' she said. 'I keep expecting there to be more traffic.'

'None of these are fragile, I take it?' Helena asked as she moved a square carton to make more space. Most of the parcels were wrapped in thick brown paper and tied with string; a couple were heavily knotted and secured with buttons of sealing wax. All had postage labels, the addresses made out in a flowing script that Helena immediately recognised.

'No, they're mostly samples that Henry is sending off for matching. Fabric and timber and so on. He has a plan to use original materials, as much as he can.' At the end of the road Frances turned south, on the road towards Whitmore and Oxford. Kitty flinched as the indicator spat its orange tongue from beside her shoulder, and then clattered back into the car frame as they turned onto the main road.

'He's got a couple of friends who are going to help with the restoration,' Frances continued. 'I'm picking one of them up from the station today. I expect you'll meet the rest of them next week.'

'Oh, I'm sorry, I haven't introduced you.' Helena leant forward between the front seats and gestured towards Frances. 'Kitty, this is Frances, Miss Rufford,' she said. 'And this is Kitty.' She hesitated for a moment, before finding what she hoped was an adequate description. 'Our housekeeper.'

'How do you do?' said Kitty, a little awkwardly.

'You're a little young,' said Frances, glancing briefly at Kitty. 'For a housekeeper, I mean.'

'Yes Miss, I suppose I am.' Kitty shuffled her basket on her knee, took out her purse and her shopping list and then put them both back again. 'But it's

a small house, not like Benbarrow. And there's only me, so that's what I do. Keep house.'

'And she does it wonderfully, don't you Kitty?' Helena's enthusiasm filled the small car like a burst of organ music. She turned to Frances. 'I don't know how we'd manage without her, I really don't.'

Frances turned the small car beneath an archway at the side of The Fleece. The yard at the rear of the inn was stacked along one wall with casks. She parked by the opposite wall, beside the old tackroom, and pulled on the handbrake.

'Right,' she said, in the tone of someone mustering troops. 'I've got these parcels to take to the post office first, and a fitting at Palfrey's at ten.' She glanced at her watch. 'Then some shopping, I think. Kendall's train is due in just before noon. Shall we say lunch at The Fleece at half past?'

'Oh, I'm not sure I can,' Helena said. She had only ever been into a public house when her uncle had taken her out for a meal during a school exeat, and suddenly she felt very young and inexperienced compared to her sophisticated companion. Besides which, she had no idea how much lunch would cost and she had little enough in her purse to start with. She sensed the brightness which had begun to infuse her day collapse around her.

'Nonsense,' said Frances, demolishing any concerns Helena might have. 'My shout. Now, would you mind giving me a hand with these?' She piled a selection of parcels into Helena's arms. Kitty took a couple and waited until Frances was out of earshot.

'I'll help you with these. And then I'll go to my sister's when I've finished at the market.' They watched Frances lock up the car and teeter towards them

with the remaining parcels. 'The bus home is at two, don't forget,' said Kitty, steadying a small package as it slithered from Helena's pile.

'Don't worry about the bus,' said Frances. 'It's a long walk from the stop and we go right past the Vicarage.'

Helena spent an enjoyable hour pottering around the market and the shops surrounding the old square, as she waited for the library to open. She chose a length of machine lace and a card of pearl buttons from the haberdasher's to decorate a rose-pink sweater that her aunt had bought for her birthday. In the window of a confectionary shop near the Butter Cross she noticed a small tray of her uncle's favourite Brazil nut toffee; the shopkeeper wrapped it up in greaseproof paper and tied a tiny toffee-hammer to the top. As an afterthought Helena bought a quarter of barley sugar twists for herself and a bar of dark chocolate for her aunt.

In the old bookshop near the church she found a second-hand book of poems by Thomas Hardy. Many of them she had read before in a worn copy in the school library, and some half-remembered rhythm of phrases sprang into her mind as she leafed through the pages. She recalled Saturday afternoons spent reading in the pavilion as she waited for her more sporty roommates to finish whatever match they were playing. She looked at the price inside the front cover. It was more than she had left of her birthday money, so she asked the whiskered old man behind the desk if she could place a deposit and pay the balance another week.

By the time Helena returned to the square the library doors were wide open. The day was becoming unbearably close again, and a sour smell was beginning to drift along the street from the market. Many of the stall holders had

already packed up, their farmhouse produce of meats and cheeses, breads and cakes sold to the early shoppers. She watched a young woman with a small child trail from trader to trader, haggling over the cost of a broken loaf at one stall, the price of a wedge of drying cheese at another.

On her way across to the library Helena paused for a moment and gave the child one of her barley twists. The mother looked around, her face drawn and suspicious.

‘I think you dropped this,’ said Helena, pressing a sixpence into the woman’s hand as she hurried on.

Her heart was pounding as she stepped into the dark vestibule of the library. She wondered if she had done the right thing. How could she not give the woman her loose change, when she had money to spare for books and sweets? And yet she was scared of offending, of seeming to patronise someone less well off. She pressed her face against a marbled pillar, soothed by its chill.

‘Are you alright?’ a young man asked as he emerged from one of the reading rooms. He put out a hand ready to support her, but withdrew it quickly when he saw the look of alarm on her face.

‘Oh, yes. Sorry,’ she said, feeling the colour rush back into her cheeks. ‘Thank you,’ she added, briefly acknowledging his concern as she carried on, hoping he wouldn’t follow her.

The public lending library was housed in the old cloth hall, where traders had once gathered to sell their wares to travelling merchants. The names of the Stewards were hand painted in gold lettering on a varnished plaque mounted on one wall. Either side were leaded glass windows that seemed to flood the room with light on even the most dismal winter days. Facing it across the shelves of

books was another plaque, more recent, listing the men and boys who had died in Ypres, Verdun, Arras, Gallipoli.

‘Can I help you?’ asked the lady at the desk. ‘Are you a member?’

‘Yes,’ Helena replied. ‘I haven’t been for a while though.’

‘Well, I don’t think you’ll find much has changed, my dear. Fiction on this side, non-fiction over there, reference material across the back.’ She waved a hand towards each section in turn. ‘Newspapers and journals in the reading room, and just ask if you can’t find what you want.’

Helena thanked her and moved off towards the fiction section. Near the entrance she found a separate bookshelf, labelled ‘New Acquisitions’. Amongst them she found several books she hadn’t read, including two by Christopher Isherwood and Evelyn Waugh’s *A Handful of Dust*, which a school friend had read at Easter and assured her was ‘simply wonderful’. She read the descriptions on the dust-jackets, and selected Virginia Woolf’s *The Years* and a collection of short stories by Katherine Mansfield as being the titles most likely to be permitted by the librarian. She was, after all, only seventeen; in theory she was only allowed children’s books and classics for another nine months.

By the time she had added a couple of poetry books and a history of Wychwood Forest and stepped out into the sunshine, it was nearly twelve-thirty. She walked hesitantly towards The Fleece, unsure whether the publican would allow her in, and was relieved to see Frances coming out to meet her.

‘Here you are at last! We’ve been watching out for you,’ said Frances. ‘Kendall caught an earlier train. He’s been here half the morning!’ Helena blinked as she stepped inside the entrance to The Fleece. A number of doors led off the dark panelled hallway with its stained wooden floorboards, each with a hand painted inscription: Ladies, Gentlemen, Tap Room, Saloon Bar.

Frances took her up a narrow staircase to a private dining room that looked out over the market square. A familiar figure was seated by the window. He stood up as she walked in, and offered his hand.

‘Kendall Marchant,’ he said, a slight smile creeping around his eyes at her obvious discomfort. ‘I do hope you’re feeling better than when we met earlier.’

‘So I’m not entirely convinced he knows what he’s taking on,’ said Frances as she pushed her empty dessert plate to one side. ‘I mean, he’s genuinely passionate about the whole Arts and Crafts concept. But he hasn’t got any experience and yet manages to have some outdated image of himself as an artisan.’

‘I wouldn’t be too disparaging, Helena. He sent me some preliminary sketches and he seems to have some very good design ideas.’ Kendall took two wheat biscuits from the wicker basket on the table and cut himself another slice of Camembert. ‘Are you sure you won’t have some? It’s delicious, not at all bad for a country pub.’

‘No, no.’ Frances waved her hand at him. ‘Concentrate, Kendall. I need you to talk to him, persuade him to take on some workers. He’s such an idealist. You know what he’s like.’ She put her elbows squarely on the table and resting her chin on the bridge of her interlaced fingers, locked her gaze on him across the table.

‘So what do you think?’ Kendall turned to Helena. ‘You’re being very quiet. Should I interfere, or leave Henry to his own devices?’

‘Oh, I’ve no idea,’ said Helena, appalled at being drawn into the debate. It had been fascinating to listen to Frances talk about her brother’s plans for

Benbarrow, but she had no wish to take part in the discussion. 'I really don't know the house very well, and I've no experience of these things, so it wouldn't be at all appropriate for me to comment.' For a moment, she felt pleased with her deft side-stepping of the question, but her relief was short-lived.

'Excellent!' Kendall roared with laughter, causing the waitress to turn towards the diners. 'You're the perfect person to get involved. You've no axe to grind, and you've no personal history with Frances or Henry or any of the others. I hereby appoint you Independent Arbiter!'

'Which others?' asked Helena, doing her best to deflect attention by ignoring his suggestion.

'Well, there's a good question Frances.' Kendall allowed himself to slide back into the orbit of her gaze. 'Who else have you and Henry invited down? Eric Daniels I assume, and Robert and Elsa.'

'And Vronnie, of course.'

'Ah, yes. Vronnie.' Kendall dabbed his napkin at the corners of his mouth before dropping it on his side-plate. He turned to Helena and smiled. 'You'll love Vronnie. Everyone does.'

CHAPTER FIVE: KITTY

Whether in the bringing of the flowers or the food

She offers plenty, and is part of plenty.

Bernard Spencer: Part of Plenty

Kitty cleared space amongst the debris of unwashed dishes on her sister's kitchen table, enough to put down her string bag, and pulled out one of the bentwood chairs. It felt greasy under her fingertips.

'Well, park yourself then,' said Annie, not getting up. She shifted the weight of the child asleep on her lap. A slight breeze drifted from the open door, ruffling the edge of the knitted shawl. 'If you're stopping, that is.'

'I bought some things for lunch.' Kitty resisted the temptation to wipe the seat before sitting down. 'Since you weren't to know I was coming.' It was a politeness; most Saturdays Kitty shopped at the market in Whitmore, and usually she called at her sister's before catching the bus home. Eddie had a job at least, so Annie wasn't destitute, but extra groceries always helped. After paying for his lodgings near the Cowley factory and the rent on the cottage, there wasn't a lot of money left.

'I couldn't fetch any cake today or anything from the garden,' she added. 'Helena decided to come along.'

'What have you done with her?' asked Annie, looking around as if she expected the girl to appear from the shadows beside the dresser.

'She's gone to the library. Then she's meeting up with friends. The new people from Benbarrow.' Kitty watched Annie's face brighten, the weariness

slipping for a moment from her eyes at the prospect of some news from the village. 'Let's get the kettle on shall we, and I'll tell you what I know.'

'Here, I'll do it. You hold the baby,' said Annie. She thrust her onto Kitty's lap and shook the stiffness from her arms. 'She's getting a bit big now but I didn't want to disturb her.'

Kitty cradled her niece, watching the dreaming eyes move under closed lids. She was indeed getting quite heavy, was hardly a baby any more, but as the youngest of five and the only girl to have survived, she would be 'the baby' until the next came along. Kitty inhaled the infant scent, a mixture of sweetness and sweat and breast milk.

Annie cleared the plates and cups from the table, brushing the morsels of food onto the floor. The old dog, which hadn't moved from the rug by the Rayburn since Kitty arrived, lumbered slowly to his feet and lapped up the crumbs, slathering a trail of spittle across the flagstones.

'There's bread and cheese,' said Kitty, reaching out with her free arm to loosen the drawstring on the bag. 'And I bought some apples and plums; they were nearly giving them away at Foster's.' The shopping spilled across the table, carrots and eggs and greaseproof-wrapped packages of bacon. She was reminded of a sketch Helena had once drawn of fruit and vegetables pouring from a conical basket. A cornucopia, she'd called it. 'And I didn't know if you'd have enough butter.' Kitty was aware that she was prattling, and felt her face redden.

'Kitty,' Annie said, her tone gentle but firm. She put a hand on Kitty's shoulder. 'Thank you.' The sisters smiled at one another, before Kitty looked away. One time Annie had turned on her, calling her Lady Bountiful and sending

her away with the proffered basket of produce from the vicarage garden untouched. But that was years before, when there were fewer mouths to feed.

‘So, the new people,’ said Annie, changing the subject back to Benbarrow as she sorted through the groceries. ‘Who’s bought the old place?’

‘It hasn’t been sold. The younger Ruffords, Henry and Frances, they’ve come back. They’re planning to restore the place and live there.’

‘It’ll take some restoring, won’t it? I thought you said it was pretty near derelict after the hospital closed.’ Annie put a pot of tea on the table, and a wistful look came over her face. ‘I remember some of those officers. One of them kissed me, did I ever tell you that?’

‘No!’ Kitty was shocked. Kitty had only been a child when Annie married and moved away to Whitmore, to live with her in-laws. The sisters seldom shared such intimacies. ‘You never said. When was that?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. A year or so before I met Eddie, so I suppose I must have been about fourteen. He was so sweet. The officer I mean. He caught me on my own, when I was on my way back from the laundry block, with my arms full of sheets.’ She laughed. ‘I was more scared of what Matron would say if I dropped the linen than I was of him.’

Kitty tried imagining the scene, closing her eyes to the tired woman in front of her, and seeing instead the pretty girl she could remember from her childhood. For Annie had been pretty then, she thought, far prettier than me.

‘But you were only young, and they were so....’

‘Old. I know. But some of them weren’t, you know. Some of them weren’t much more than children themselves, even when the war ended.’ Annie cut two large slices of bread, and put them on plates, each with a chunk of cheese and a spoonful of Kitty’s homemade chutney. ‘And then, they were wounded of

course. They'd been looked after and nursed for so long, they hadn't really grown up.'

Kitty gazed across the table. There was so much about her sister's life that she didn't really know, didn't really understand. She wondered how things might have turned out for her if Eddie, so full of himself and carefree, hadn't stumbled drunkenly into Annie's life one summer's evening.

'So, what happened? With the officer?'

'Oh, nothing much. He kissed me, and then apologised. And I ran back to the house, feeling like my face was on fire. I thought everyone would be able to tell I'd been kissed and I'd get into trouble.' Annie relaxed into her chair and smiled. 'But he was very sweet.'

'You said that.' Kitty glanced across at her sister, adopting a coy expression and fluttering her eyelashes. 'Very sweet.' Annie laughed, and then looked anxiously towards the door.

'It was a long time ago, and I was very young.' Annie sat quietly for a moment before adding 'It was before I met Eddie.' Kitty didn't like to point out that she'd said that before too.

The baby, disturbed from its sleep, began to whimper and clutch at Kitty's blouse. 'That won't do you any good, little one,' she said, relieved by the distraction. She smiled down at the baby and traced the curve of her fat cheek with a forefinger. 'Go to your Mamma.'

'So, tell me about the Ruffords then.' Annie undid the ribbon at the neckline of her blouse and settled the baby at her breast. 'What are they like?'

'Well, I haven't met Mr Rufford yet, but his sister was passing in her car and gave me and Helena a lift into Whitmore this morning,' said Kitty. Leaning

back into her chair, she clasped her hands around her mug of tea and she told Annie what little she knew of the Ruffords and their plans for Benbarrow.

It was nearly two by the time Kitty looked at the clock on the mantle. She felt the familiar tug of her life at the Vicarage, pulling her away from Whitmore and her sister's cramped cottage. Each week it was the same: a few moments of awkwardness between them, and then a tentative step towards a closer friendship and too soon it was time to leave and catch the bus.

'I must go,' she said. She crumpled the string bag in her fist and dropped it into the corner of her basket. 'Where are the boys? You didn't say.'

'They've taken off somewhere, rabbiting. They promised they'd be back before Eddie comes in.' Annie put the baby on the floor, where she looked around as if considering whether it was worth objecting before she crawled towards the old dog. 'A couple of rabbits for the pot wouldn't go amiss.'

'Is the pup shaping up then? I thought you said it was more likely to scare rabbits away.' Kitty watched as the baby stretched out a hand towards the rope of tail, but the canny old dog had seen her and shifted out of reach. I doubt the lads will have much joy, she thought. That baby's got more chance of catching an old dog than they've got of catching rabbits.

'It's getting better. Still a bit young for hunting, but it'll learn.' Annie lowered her voice; with the door still open you could never be too sure who was listening. 'They've set some traps. They take the pup so they can say he killed them if anyone sees them with rabbits.'

Kitty frowned. Any countryman worth the name could tell the difference between a snared rabbit and one caught by a dog. Annie knew that as well as she did.

'I know, I know,' Annie said. 'But we need the meat, with another on the way.' She pressed a hand to her belly and with the fabric pressed under her sister's fingers Kitty saw the faintest outline of a swelling beneath her sister's pinafore.

'Oh, Annie,' she said, too disappointed to dissemble. 'Look, I must go.' Kitty squeezed her sister gently and turned for the door. 'Look after yourself, won't you? I'll see you next Saturday, alright?'

As she hurried down the street towards Market Square she thought about her life, and her sister's. For all she resented Mrs Harding's peevishness, she knew she was fortunate. She was sometimes cold and often tired, but at the Vicarage there was always a roof over her head and food on the table. And a little money to spare from her wages.

CHAPTER SIX: HELENA

Come, ye thankful people, come,

Raise the song of harvest-home:

All be safely gathered in,

Ere the winter storms begin

Henry Alford: Come, Ye Thankful People, Come

Helena stood at the back of the church, a prayerbook and hymnal in each hand, ready to offer congregants. She knew who would need copies and who wouldn't. She had long ago managed to convince her aunt that it would be pointless joining the choir just for the holidays. Instead, it had become her job to help the Verger, handing out orders of service and helping visitors find a pew without offending the regular occupants. Nobody seemed to have noticed that now that she wasn't returning to St Bertram's she could easily become a chorister and she wasn't about to remind them. Like a small child past its bedtime, she continued to be quiet and useful, avoiding unnecessary attention.

Uncle Peter walked slowly down the aisle towards her, his black cassock brushing the tops of his shoes. The bright white of his surplice emphasised his slight stoop, his rounded shoulders. Her friends had mistaken him for a grandparent on the rare occasions that he had visited her at school, and Helena suddenly understood why. She was struck by how old he looked, bathed in the blue and green light filtering through the stained glass windows, his once thick hair receding and grey. He paused here and there to exchange a few words with some of his parishioners. A baby reached out to grasp his stole in tiny

hands; he gently stroked the back of her hand until she loosened her grip. He glanced at his watch, and approached the Verger.

‘Everything alright, Edward?’ he asked. The Verger nodded. ‘Good. Well, five minutes, then.’ He opened the door to the choir vestry and the faint hum of voices - some warming up, others simply chatting - seeped into the church. The Verger frowned, as he did every Sunday when the little church filled with people. He always seemed much more relaxed once the service was over and the aisles settled once more into dust-mote calm. As Helena turned away, unable to suppress her smile, she saw a group of people coming through the church gates.

The Ruffords she recognised. The tall figure in a tweed jacket and dark brown trousers was Kendall Marchant. She’d caught sight of him a couple of times since he’d arrived in the village a week ago, once when he was driving past the vicarage in the little grey car with Frances, but she hadn’t seen him to speak to since the lunch in Whitmore.

The others were new faces, unfamiliar. There was a couple, an older man dwarfing the slight, blonde woman whose hand was tucked into the crook of his arm. Beside them was a brightly dressed woman, her hair caught up in an extravagant turban, her skirts swirling around her ankles as she strode up the pathway towards the porch. A pace or two behind was another man, much younger, who Helena guessed to be closer in age to Henry.

‘We’re not late are we?’ asked Henry, taking off his hat as he entered the porch. He added his rolled umbrella to the others in the brass stand.

‘No, not quite. The service is about to start.’ Helena handed him a prayerbook and hymnal. ‘Can you share? I don’t think we’ve got enough for everyone.’

‘Unexpected visitors.’ He gestured towards his companions with a wave of his hand. ‘They weren’t coming till mid-week, but there was a change in plans.’ He glanced towards the Verger. ‘Will over here do?’ he asked.

The Verger nodded, his expression wrinkling into its customary frown as Henry shepherded his friends towards an empty pew at the back of the church. Kendall took off his trilby, and pinching the crown between his thumb and finger held it momentarily in front of his face.

‘Oh dear, looks like that pew’s reserved for late-comers,’ he whispered to Helena. ‘Are we in The Naughty Corner?’ He took the leather-bound books she offered him, as the organ wheezed out the opening bars of the first hymn.

‘Number two hundred and fifty-four,’ she said. ‘*Come, Ye Thankful People, Come.*’

‘Well, we’ve come,’ he replied with a smile. ‘Not quite early enough and perhaps not as thankful as we ought to be.’

Helena spluttered, grateful that her laughter was smothered by voices raised in a loud, if not particularly tuneful, rendition of her uncle’s favourite hymn.

‘Only if you’re absolutely certain, Mrs Harding.’ The blonde woman rested her gloved hand on top of Aunt Celia’s as they stood in the shadows of the trees lining the church drive. Her voice was soft and her accent unfamiliar. ‘I do feel it’s a most awful imposition.’

‘It’s no trouble, I assure you. You are all more than welcome at the Vicarage.’

‘Indeed you are,’ said Uncle Peter, wandering over to the small group gathered just outside the porch. ‘If you’ll excuse me I have a few things to finish off before I can join you. Perhaps we can do the formal introductions later?’

Helena watched her uncle slip back inside the church, where the Verger was waiting to lock away the silver plate and collection. The last of the choristers emerged from the side door of the choir vestry, the youngsters racing towards the chestnut trees by the gate in a rush to be first to gather up the newly fallen conkers. One of the ladies glanced towards Kendall, who was reading the names on the headstones beside the path. He tipped his hat and smiled; she blushed.

‘Who are your visitors?’ asked Helena.

‘Not my visitors,’ Kendall said. ‘Henry’s. The couple are Robert and Elsa Locke. He owns a gallery in London and she is – was – one of his clients.’

‘She’s very pretty.’ Helena was no connoisseur of fashion, but she was aware that Elsa Locke was dressed in the latest style, her fitted jacket emphasising her trim figure. She wore emerald green shoes and carried a small clutch purse in exactly the same shade. Beside her Aunt Celia looked dowdy, despite wearing her Sunday best coat and hat.

‘Oh yes. Very pretty. And wealthy. Fabulously wealthy.’ Kendall laughed. ‘Unlike some of us.’

Helena looked at him, her expression betraying her confusion and surprise. On both occasions that she had met him, Kendall had been smartly and fashionably dressed. He spoke with an accent her aunt would describe as cut-glass and was a close friend of the Ruffords. Frances had told her he’d attended Rugby at the same time as Henry. And yet he seemed to be

suggesting that he was, at the very least, short of funds. Besides, wasn't it impolite to allude to one's lack of money, even obliquely?

'Don't be deceived by appearances,' Kendall said. Helena followed his gaze back to the group Aunt Celia was now leading towards the vicarage. 'No, don't be deceived by any of us.'

Such an odd thing to say, she thought. But before she could ask what he meant, Frances called out to them to come along. Henry waited for them by the gate, anxiously watching two small boys as they attempted to dislodge the largest conkers.

'Steady on, lads,' he shouted at them, but the boys continued to hurl sticks up into the chestnut trees. 'Are they the same boys who sang so angelically in church, by any chance?'

'They are, indeed.' Helena told him. 'But as the saying goes, don't be deceived by appearances.' She turned towards Kendall, expecting him to be amused by her reference to his comment, but his face was expressionless. He gave a slight, almost imperceptible shake of his head and changed the subject.

'So where did you disappear to during the service?' Kendall asked.

'Aunt Celia asked me to nip back to the vicarage and warn Kitty that there would be an extra four for lunch,' she said. She neglected to mention that it had been an instruction issued through pursed lips, rather than a request. .

'What a nuisance we all are,' remarked Henry. He took a packet of Woodbine from his pocket and loosened the paper folded around its end. He shook it gently until a couple of cigarettes protruded from its creased inner foil and offered her one.

'Oh gosh, no,' she said.

'No, we're not a nuisance? Or no, you don't want a cigarette?'

‘Both. I mean neither.’ They laughed at her discomfort. For a moment she felt ill at ease, awkward. These were two sophisticated young men, sensing her lack of polish and making her the butt of their joke, just as the richer, more experienced girls had done at school. But she remembered them using the same slightly hectoring tone towards Frances when they met for lunch in The Fleece, and wondered if this was just how they spoke to one another, nothing more.

‘Come on,’ she said. ‘We’d better catch up with the others.’

‘Well, that was delicious, Mrs Harding.’ Henry rubbed his stomach in appreciation and leaned back in the deeply buttoned sofa. ‘I’m afraid we might have to steal your wonderful cook.’

Aunt Celia looked alarmed. She took her cotton handkerchief from the sleeve of her cardigan and dabbed tentatively at the sides of her mouth.

‘I’m delighted,’ she began, glancing around her guests. She tucked the handkerchief back into her cuff. ‘Yes, delighted. You’ll be more used to city dining of course. Our cook is a little....’ She paused, searching for the right word. ‘Domestic.’ She shook her head, and then smiled. ‘A little provincial for your tastes.’

‘Henry, behave!’ commanded Frances. ‘He’s only joking, Mrs Harding. He knows it is most ill-mannered to pilfer one’s hosts’ staff.’ She put her coffee cup on the small table beside the sofa. ‘We’ll need permanent staff once the house is properly organised of course but our kitchen is in no fit state at the moment. We’ll eat out, at least whilst the main restoration work is going on.’ She took a finger of shortbread from the plate Kitty had placed temptingly within her reach. It crumbled, light and buttery, in her mouth.

‘We were going to ask your advice about staff actually,’ said Henry, turning his attention towards the Vicar. ‘Well, workmen, at least. We’ll need carpenters and plasterers initially; an electrician, builders. I wonder if you could recommend some local craftsmen.’

Robert Locke raised an eyebrow. ‘Local men, Henry? Aren’t you going to bring down a team from London? You won’t do any better than the boys who worked on our apartment. Isn’t that right, Elsa?’

‘Certainly, my dear.’ Elsa looked up at her husband and smiled. Standing by the mantle piece, Robert continued to inspect the ornaments as he spoke, picking up each one, turning a dish over to inspect the base for a maker’s mark, running a finger around the neck of a vase to feel for cracks.

‘That’s not the point,’ said Henry, sitting forward on the sofa. ‘We’re not trying to recreate Chelsea in Oxfordshire. The house has been here for centuries, and I want it to be here for another few hundred. I want it to belong here.’ He pointed to the floor, and Helena stared at the old Persian carpet as though she expected a restored Benbarrow to appear through the cobalt and burgundy pile. ‘I want it to look and feel like it’s rooted here, part of the landscape. And that must involve local people, local craftsman.’

‘Oh sorry, I forgot,’ said Robert. He pushed his glasses onto the top of his head and peered closely at the signature on a small canvas beside the chimney breast, before swinging around to meet Henry’s glower. ‘Landed gentry, not new money, eh?’ Elsa laughed nervously.

‘Darling,’ she said, her voice soft despite its warning tone.

‘My apologies, Vicar, Mrs Harding.’ Robert nodded to each in turn. ‘Neither the time nor the place.’ He didn’t look apologetic, Helena noted. He appeared smug. He’d had a point to make and had managed to make it.

‘No need, my dear chap. Now if you’ll excuse me ladies, gentlemen, I have a sermon to prepare for evensong.’ Helena watched her uncle push himself with difficulty out of the low chair usually occupied by his wife. ‘I’ll jot down some names and send a list across with my niece, if that suits you,’ he added, as he left the room.

Helena lay back against her pillows, and watched the patterns of the clouds move across her curtains. There was a full moon, so bright that she’d hardly needed the lamp to browse through a poetry book. Now it was nearly one and her eyes were too weary for reading or for copying odd lines in the small notebook she kept on her bedside table.

Her legs ached from dashing back to the Vicarage to tell Kitty of the extra guests, from rushing down to the walled garden to ask William for extra vegetables, from running back to the church to catch the end of the service. But as she listened to the familiar night-time creaks and groans of the house settling around her, she still felt wide awake.

She thought back across her day, trying to recall every detail so that she wouldn’t forget. The blonde woman and her overbearing husband; the brightly dressed woman who she’d expected to be loud and exuberant, but who turned out to be quiet and thoughtful; the pale young man who had hardly said a word as he watched and listened to the others; Frances and Henry and Kendall. Even her aunt and uncle had seemed like different people today.

Finally she drifted off to sleep. Her last thought was to recall a detail of conversation from the churchyard, to realise that Kendall had noticed her absence.

CHAPTER SEVEN: ANNIE

Police should not interfere in domestic quarrels, unless there is reason to fear that violence is likely to result..... Beware of being overzealous or meddlesome."

The Police Code (1924)

Annie put her fingers to her cheekbone and trying not to wince, tentatively felt around the edges of the swollen skin. There didn't appear to be a split and although her face was damp she thought it was probably tears rather than blood. That was a relief; it would heal faster, maybe even before Kitty came at the weekend. She could count that as a blessing at least, even though it didn't seem possible that so much pain could come without more obvious injury.

She felt her way across the kitchen, reluctant to risk disturbing the children by lighting the brass lamp on the dresser but wary of tripping over the old dog. Her eyes gradually adjusted to the dark. She'd managed to fumble her way downstairs without a problem, but here in the kitchen the wooden shutters were closed and there was little of the dawn light penetrating from the hall. The bulk of the table solidified in the margins of her vision; she grasped its edge to steady herself and let out the breath she hadn't even been aware of holding.

Matches. Where were the matches? She tried to think back to the previous afternoon. She remembered Eddie taking them from the shelf beside the Rayburn to light one of his roll-ups, and then tossing the box on the table. He'd glared at her, as if to dare her to tidy them up, to put them back on the shelf where they belonged. Now she could see that he'd been spoiling for a fight from the moment he'd come through the door, tired and hungry after his journey

from Cowley, but engrossed in preparing his tea she'd overlooked the signs. She cursed softly under her breath. She knew what he was like when he'd missed the bus and had to hitch a lift to Whitmore, especially when he'd had a drink or two with his mates before he'd set out. How could she have been so thoughtless?

Tucked under the folds of a discarded towel her fingertips found the corner of the box and the rough surface of its striker. She pushed out the paper-covered tray and withdrew a single match. Her movements were quick and neat and the head flared in a sudden and vivid phosphorescence. She held the light between cupped palms as she stepped towards the heavy wax candle on the windowsill. The unexpected brightness of the match – or perhaps the scrape of its striking – disturbed the dog. He lifted his head and watched Annie put the light to the wick.

'There boy,' she whispered. 'It's only me.' His heavy tail thudded against the flags but comfortable in his usual spot by the hearth he made no effort to get to his feet. She hunkered down beside him and scratched beneath his chin. 'There, there,' she said, trying to soothe him, but he had heard something else and pushed her hand aside as he pricked his ears, alert now and listening. She stayed still. Crouched at his side she peered though the half-light towards the door onto the yard. The handle twisted slowly and the door swung open.

'Bloody Hell Mother. What are you doing?' Roy's voice emerged in a strangled whisper. 'You frightened the damned life out of me.' As his young dog slithered into the house behind him he shut the door softly, turning the handle to ensure the latch didn't make a sound as it engaged.

'I needed a drink,' Annie said as she stood up, her heart pounding once again. 'I didn't want to wake everyone with the lamp.' She took a glass from the

drainer and ran it under the tap, turning away from the soft glow of the candle light as she tilted the water to her lips. For a moment she was torn between hoping Roy would go upstairs quickly without noticing her cheek, and wanting him to explain where he'd been. In the end, curiosity won.

'Where have you been? You went up to bed before me – I thought you were sound asleep.'

'I needed to set some traps down by the woods.' Roy saw the frown cloud her face. 'See?' he said. 'I knew if I told you where I was going you'd try and stop me.'

Annie sat down in the chair by the Rayburn. He was right, of course. She hated the thought of her son out poaching at night. One of these days he was sure to be caught. She would have told him not to go and if Eddie had got involved who knows what might have happened. Roy must have been long gone, miles away across the fields when Eddie had lost his temper, she realised. She had thought he had slept though it, as the little ones had.

She was grateful for the faint trace of warmth coming from the firebox. She hadn't taken her dressing gown from the hook behind the door. She'd been in too much of a hurry to leave the bedroom as soon as she'd heard Eddie rasping breath settle into a snoring rhythm. The nights had begun to turn chilly and she shuddered, although she was unsure whether it was a shiver of cold or a delayed reaction to the sudden eruption of violence.

'You're freezing Mum.' Roy looked round for something to keep her warm. A basket of neatly folded nappies stood by the dresser and he shook a couple out to drape across her shoulders. Glad of his thoughtfulness, she looked up at him, and saw shock cloud his expression.

'What's happened to your face?' Roy reached down to her chin and tipped it up so that the candle light washed across her cheekbone. 'What's the bastard done?'

It took Annie a while to calm her son down, to persuade him that his father wasn't responsible for the state of her face. She'd come downstairs for a drink, she told him, and tripped over the old dog. That's why she'd been sitting on the floor when he'd opened the door. She wasn't even sure what she'd struck her cheek on as she fell. The chair perhaps. or maybe the brass drying rail that ran the length of the Rayburn.

Roy bent down to look at the bruise before running a cloth under the tap. He squeezed out the excess water and held the damp cold of it against his mother's face. The story didn't sound very plausible she knew, but then accidents often weren't, were they? More likely than walking into a cupboard door, anyway. She could tell her son wasn't entirely convinced, but he seemed to accept her version of events, for the time being at least. He took his jacket off and sat down opposite her.

Annie watched him as he undid the laces on his boots. They were damp and the knots had become tangled with bracken and sticky-bud. She wanted to lift his foot into her lap as she had done when he was a child, to pick out the debris of his expedition and unravel the laces with her deft fingers but she knew he wouldn't let her now. Barely a dozen summers old and yet he was already a young man in his own mind. So unlike his father: serious beyond his years, determined to do his best for his mother, his brother, his baby sister. Wasn't that why he took these risks, prowling the country lanes with his dog at his heel when most lads of his age would be tucked up in their beds?

She wiped a tear from the corner of her eye, determined that he wouldn't see her cry. As she turned away she caught sight of his hessian bag, dropped on the floor when she had startled him.

'What have you got there?' she asked, hoping that he hadn't got into thieving, half fearing the answer.

'Something for the pot.' He grinned, aware that despite her reservations Annie would be glad of his night's haul. He reached for the drawstring and hefted it towards him. There was weight and bulk to the bag. A bundle of fur and feathers tumbled out onto the floor: a fat rabbit and a brace of pheasants, one male, one female.

Annie stroked the smooth underbelly of the cock pheasant. His long tail feathers were smooth and unbroken, worth a few pence if she could find someone who would take them without asking where they'd come from. The rabbit pelt would come in handy for the baby's crib.

'Hang them in the cellar before you go up,' she said. 'I can do without any questions.'

She noticed the young dog, sitting patiently at Roy's side, his muscles quivering as he watched her handle the kill. She saw how he didn't move, how he kept glancing up at his young master for approval. She'd been angry when Roy had turned up with a pup, shouting at him about another mouth when they'd barely got enough to eat themselves. Even then she had suspicions that she'd been caught; the irony didn't escape her even as she bawled him out. But Roy had been adamant; he would train the dog and would earn its keep.

'Looks like the pup's coming on,' she commented. She wasn't ready to admit she had been wrong, not straight out anyway. Roy grinned, the temptation to say *I told you so* written across his face.

‘Not bad,’ he said. ‘A way to go yet, but not bad for a young one.’

No, thought Annie. He’s not bad for a young one. And neither are you son. Neither are you.

Annie was stiff when she woke up, stiff and for a moment disorientated. She could tell from the light spilling into the kitchen from the hallway that it was morning, though still early. There was a pillow under her head and her dressing gown was drawn across her lap. Roy, she thought, imagining him creeping into her room and fetching the pillow without disturbing his father. She allowed herself a half smile, comparing his furtive unhooking of the dressing gown with his stealthy explorations of the local woodlands.

She rolled her neck, easing out the cricks and stiffness, massaging the ache which threatened to engulf her shoulders. She listened to the movement of the house around her, the clicks and taps as the brick and slate gradually warmed up, as the doors and windows settled into their frames after the night’s chill. She stood up and stretched her back, kneading the base of her spine until it became a little looser, more flexible.

She opened the door and let the dogs out into the yard. The old dog lumbered out, in the wake of the pup. She knew they couldn’t afford to keep him much longer. The time would come when they’d have to pay someone who had a gun and a spare cartridge to do the job, but she didn’t like to picture it. Almost as old as Roy, he’d been a loyal dog and a constant companion as she’d sat by the fire night-feeding babies. Maybe when winter comes, she thought. Not yet.

She riddled the grate and remade the fire, warming her hands as the stove heated up. The kettle was full; it would take a while to boil. While she waited she peered into the foxed glass of her mother’s mirror. Hung by the door,

it usually gave her an opportunity to tidy her hairpins and rearrange her hat before she ventured out. She looked at the blue ring around her cheekbone, the scuffed redness at its centre. There would be no going out for a day or two looking like this.

Annie turned away from her reflection, determined not to think about it. She focussed on preparing breakfast. The terracotta pot was half full of oats, enough for porridge for them all for a few more days. There was a heel of bread left, so toast for Eddie at least, and she thought there might even be a scraping of honey of one if the boys hadn't already dipped his fingers into the jar.

The nappies Roy had shaken out during the night lay on the floor, where they had fallen from the back of her chair. She bent to pick them up, folded and dropped them back onto the laundry basket. As she straightened up she heard Eddie's footsteps on the stairs. He ambled into the kitchen, pushing his fingers through his mop of unruly hair.

'Morning,' he said. 'Sleep well?' He opened the yard door to let the dogs back in, and stood for a while leaning against the door jamb, watching Annie stir the porridge on the hob. 'You were well away when I came down for a leak, but you was cold. Better when I'd fetched your dressing gown and pillow though.'

He stepped towards her and turning her face in his palm inspected her bruising. He bent forward and placed a kiss on its centre.

Deep inside Annie shook, though whether it was from the touch of his lips or the thought of him standing over her while she slept in the chair, she wasn't sure.

CHAPTER EIGHT: VRONNIE

The garden had been neglected, but contained a fine collection of shrubs. In the corner of the vast kitchen garden I noticed sages with pale pink flowers and finely pointed leaves. The bushes were nearly smothered in weeds....

Eleanor Sinclair Rohde: How I Made My Herb Garden

Vronnie gathered together the essential items, without which an exploration of the grounds would be rendered pointless: a leather-covered notebook, bound with a scarlet cord of Chinese silk; a slim buttoned bag containing her fountain pen and several pencils of varying hardness; sharpener and eraser; a flask of black tea and finally her book and an old plaid throw. She considered a book of wild flowers that she'd seen in the library, but decided against it on the grounds of weight. At last minute she detoured via the kitchen and cut herself a large wedge of Wensleydale and a slice of fruit cake which she folded into a sheet of greaseproof paper. It didn't matter to her that the cheese would have crumbs and dried fruit attached by the time she came to eat it; she had every intention of eating both in one sitting, in the manner of a Yorkshire grandparent.

'I'm off to explore,' she called to nobody in particular.

'Ok darling, see you later.' Frances wandered into the kitchen, brushing her hair from her face. She looked half-asleep, despite it being mid-morning. Vronnie raised an eyebrow.

'Late night?' she asked.

‘Elsa and Robert,’ Frances replied, as if that explained everything. It did of course. The Lockes had taken rooms in Whitmore, refusing to stay overnight at Benbarrow until it was more habitable. Elsa’s distaste for spiders was legendary; Henry’s adoption of a trio of flea-infested kittens had sealed the decision to search out more appealing accommodation.

The advantage of the arrangement was that they had all enjoyed several very good meals, which Elsa had insisted on adding to their tab. Nobody demurred, since she could easily afford the expense. The disadvantage was that having consumed a copious volume of food and alcohol, the Benbarrow contingent then had to drive home. More than once it had proved to be an experience that Vronnie hadn’t enjoyed, so last night she had pleaded a headache and retired early with a well-worn copy of Orlando.

‘There’s coffee in the cupboard,’ Vronnie said, as she lifted the coffee-pot from the drainer and put it on the table. She wasn’t going to be drawn into conversation or she knew she would end up making the coffee and probably washing up afterwards. Frances, for all of her kindness and generosity, had a way of encouraging others to wait on her which although it appeared entirely unconscious was highly effective. As a guest at Benbarrow, Vronnie felt a sense of obligation to contribute to the task of housekeeping, but today she had other things planned, and the afternoon forecast was for rain.

She patted her bag to check that she’d picked up everything she needed and breezed out of the kitchen with a cheery farewell, leaving Frances sitting at the table in her shantung robe, gazing wistfully at the empty coffee-pot.

Beyond the terraces Vronnie had discovered a walled garden. ‘Found’ seemed too strong a word, for it had hardly been lost. Besides being too large

for anyone to mislay, she was aware that she wasn't alone in knowing of its existence. In fact someone had turned over a patch in one corner to grow fruit and vegetables, and had even begun the slow task of recovering some of the espaliered pear and peach trees on the south-facing wall. The bothy nestled into the corner had been used too. On her first visit she had noticed a pair of recently oiled secateurs on what had probably once been the head gardener's desk. Later they had been moved onto a potting table. And there had been the distinctive scent of linseed indicating fresh putty where a window had been repaired.

Vronnie let herself into the garden through the arched gate midway along the north wall, shutting it carefully behind her. She had been careful not to disturb anything, determined not to betray her previous visits. This time she had come prepared to wait in the hope that she might catch sight of the elusive gardener. She spread the plaid rug out on a patch of grass and wild flowers, which being tucked into the shelter of the bothy wall was out of direct view from the gate. Mercifully it was also free of thistles and nettles, the perfect spot to kill time. She poured some of the steaming tea into the flask lid and while it cooled she settled down with her notebook and began to write.

Later she wasn't certain what caught her attention. It wasn't the noise he made, for he was almost entirely silent. More likely she thought it was the change in the birdsong. A blackbird which had previously been rootling for grubs among the cabbage stalks suddenly took flight and landed on an untethered branch of a pear tree, its shrill alarm call echoing around the garden.

Whatever it was, she looked up from her writing and watched him walk across the garden with the freedom of one who owned the land. Only he didn't.

This was nobody Vronnie knew, and for a moment she realised how vulnerable she was: a lone woman bounded by high walls and a strong young man between her and the only way out. She shuffled back into the lea of the bothy, but the movement of her emerald skirt gave her away. The man stopped in his tracks, looked round and then walked towards her.

‘Hello,’ he said, sizing her up from a few feet away. He brushed the palm of his hand against his waistcoat and thrust his hand out awkwardly. ‘Billy Griffiths. And you are?’

Vronnie got to her feet, unsure whether a handshake was wise until she’d assessed his motives. Too easy for him to twist her arm, to overwhelm her before she had a chance to get free.

‘Miss Curbridge,’ she said. ‘A guest of the Ruffords. The owners of Benbarrow.’ Billy let his hand drop.

‘Yes, I know who the Ruffords are. And you needn’t tell me they own this garden too. I know that.’ There was no defiance in his voice, no aggression, just a tone of resignation. His head dropped as he swung the canvas bag from his shoulder and thumbed in the direction of the bothy. ‘May as well have a last brew before I go, now the game’s up. I’ve only the one beaker, but you’re welcome to join me.’

Veronica laughed and pointed to her own flask, wedged amongst the jumble of books and pens on the crumpled plaid rug.

‘I’ve got my own, thanks. Look, we seem to have got off on the wrong foot. My fault.’ She stretched out her hand. ‘Veronica Curbridge,’ she said. ‘Better known as Vronnie.’

'I'd better go. I don't usually stay long as I don't want to be missed.' Billy glanced up to the darkening sky. 'And you shouldn't be long either. That looks like it's got a bucketful of wet in it. The garden will be glad of it, but your books might spoil.'

The morning had rushed by, and Vronnie was conscious that if she was hungry this young man must feel as though his throat had been cut. A chunk of cheese and a slice of cake didn't do much to fend off hunger when shared between two. They'd spent most of their time surveying the walled garden and identifying which of the trees were worth saving and which it would be better to replace. He'd pointed out where infestations of woolly bug had damaged the young shoots and where leaves were speckled with blight. But it wasn't all bad news. The walls were in good condition and most of the pear trees were heavy with fruit.

Billy showed Vronnie where the soil was best, the earth rich and loamy from the manure dug in over many years, and which part of the garden got the best light and shelter. He pointed out how robust the bothy was, its slate roof watertight and the chimney clean. He was proud of the repair he'd made to the broken downspout and the cracked window that he'd replaced the previous week. Vronnie didn't tell him that it was the smell of putty that had given him away.

Later, over their lukewarm tea they'd talked about what could be done to recover the garden, what might be practical given the shortage of manpower. Billy saw potential in offering villagers a strip of land to cultivate. In Whitmore there was an allotment scheme, where locals could grow produce, share their surplus and swap produce. There was nothing like that in the village. Some cottages had a vegetable patch and others had room for a few chickens to

scratch around in the bare earth, but it was only the bigger houses that had their own vegetable plots and only the vicarage that kept a gardener and were for the most part self-sufficient.

Vronnie liked the idea. She remembered her brother talking about allotments and village halls. He'd been a passionate advocate of community ownership, with no time for wealthy families rattling around in big houses. More wonder that he'd married into money, but that was love for you. She closed her notebook, shook away the memories, and gathered up her things. Billy folded up her throw and passed it to her.

'Most Mondays I make an hour or two to come down,' he said. 'Wash day at the vicarage, so nobody notices I'm missing.' Vronnie laughed.

'Lovely to know that someone might miss you,' she said wistfully, as they left the walled garden and set off in opposite directions.

CHAPTER NINE: KITTY

*..... high Cotswold noon-air,
And the earth smell, turning brambles, and half-cirrus moving,
Mixed with the love of body and travel of good turf there.*

Ivor Gurney: Old Thought

Kitty opened her eyes. It was still quite dark, but whether that was the time, the thickness of her curtains or the inclement weather she wasn't at first certain. She rolled over and peered at the clock; half past five. Somewhere in the vicarage a cistern refilled, water splashed against a sink, a towel was drawn down across a wooden roller. She pulled the pillow over her head, shutting out the sounds of gurgling pipework. The sharp spikes of the feathers protruded through the worn ticking and scratched her face, waking her even more. How unfair, she thought. Wednesday, her day off, and she was awake as usual. Giving up on the idea of any more sleep, she sat up, swung her legs over the edge of the bed and fumbled around the plaited cloth rug for her slippers.

Wrapped in the thick plaid dressing gown that had once been her father's, she felt her way to the attic window. She pulled open the curtains. Grey cloud hung over the village, as far as she could see, casting a pall across the vicarage gardens, the churchyard, the tiled roof of the church. A squirrel was digging a hole in the middle of the lawn, an acorn clamped in its teeth, its fur glistening with damp. A slight puff of smoke rose from the bothy chimney; Billy was up and about. She imagined him sitting with his mug of tea beside the fire, still sleep tousled, chewing on a chunk of the bread she had given him yesterday.

Once dressed, she made her way down to the kitchen. It might be her day off, but the range would still need stoking, the ash would still need clearing. She opened the door of the Rayburn, and riddled the coals with the poker. There was still a faint glow; she dropped on a handful of firewood and a shovelful of coal. Happy that the fire was beginning to draw, she removed the ashpan and stood up to carry it outside.

‘Good morning, Kitty.’ The voice startled her; a few grains of ash slid off the end of the pan onto the kitchen tiles.

‘Morning, Vicar,’ she said. ‘I didn’t hear you come in.’

‘No. Sorry. I didn’t mean to make you jump.’ He looked at the grey fragments on the floor. ‘Let me take that, my dear. You go and get the brush.’ He took the ashpan from her and went outside.

‘Would you like some tea, Vicar?’ Kitty asked when he came back in. ‘The kettle will be a few minutes yet. I could bring it through to your study if you like.’ She watched him stoop down to replace the ashpan.

‘Very kind, my dear. But it’s Wednesday and we ask enough of you without encroaching on your day off.’ He sat down at the kitchen table. ‘But if you would be kind enough to make the tea I’ll take a cup up to Mrs Harding before I go to Matins.’

Kitty nodded, and carried on. There were a couple of cups by the sink, left by the Vicar or maybe Helena before they went to bed. White porcelain, with pale blue floral garlands on the outside, pale beige cocoa rings on the inside. She rinsed them under the tap; she would wash them with the breakfast things before she went out. She fetched the milk and butter from the refrigerator. She wouldn’t be without it now, she thought as she closed the door, but she’d been quite sceptical when Mrs Harding had ordered one from Boswell’s department

store in Oxford. There was still a cool marble shelf inside the pantry, which Kitty now used for storing eggs, or for chilling pastry. Beside it was the bread bin, from which she took the remaining loaves she had baked yesterday. She placed them on the wooden breadboard in the centre of the table.

‘Lovely, my dear,’ said the Vicar, cutting a thick slice from the wholemeal loaf and slathering it with butter and strawberry jam. He took a large bite and chewed contentedly. Kitty smiled, knowing that if Mrs Harding had been in evidence the slice would have been daintier, the butter spread thinner and the jam spooned onto the plate rather than knifed directly from jam pot to bread.

The kettle whistled. Kitty made the tea.

The drizzle had finally stopped and there was even a trace of sun filtering through the patchy clouds, but Kitty still took her waterproof coat from the peg in the lobby before she set out. The weather was too changeable to trust, bright and warm one moment, cold and damp the next. She shut the door as quietly as she could, hoping that Mrs Harding wouldn’t hear her, and call her back with ‘Just before you go’ as she so often did. Kitty made her way to the walled garden, where Billy was waiting for her.

‘Took your time, didn’t you?’ he said, in mock gruffness.

‘Kept you waiting, did I?’ She reached up and touched his cheek. ‘Well, I’m worth waiting for.’

‘Aye. You are that.’ His expression became serious, as though he was considering whether to say something more.

‘So come along then,’ said Kitty briskly. ‘Best foot forward.’ She was afraid he might ask her again, or that he might simply say he was leaving; either way she was anxious he would say he was tired of waiting. ‘I’ve a picnic in this

basket: sandwiches and treacle tart and a jar of pressed apple juice.' She passed him the basket to carry and slipped her arm through his.

The bottom gate of the Vicarage garden opened onto a narrow path, a shortcut to the church. It was not quite wide enough for them to walk together, and Billy went ahead, clearing stray brambles with a branch which he'd broken off one of the elders that overhung the path. Most of the blackberries had already gone, but the hedgerows were still heavy with bunches of ripening elderberries and clusters of sloes and damsons. In a few weeks they would be bare, stripped for jams and jellies, and for the lucky few, sloe gin and damson wine.

'Just a moment, Billy,' Kitty said as she followed him into the churchyard. Near the main entrance the memorials were imposing and the headstones ornate, decorated with lilies and doves and watched over by sombre-faced angels. But at the rear of the church the gravestones were plainer, bearing only the simple details of names and dates and sometimes a line of scripture. In places the grass was high; families had moved away to towns and cities, leaving nobody to care for the graves. Of Kitty's family, only she remained in Henbury.

The family grave was near the perimeter wall. Anne Cooper, wife of Herbert Cooper. Also their infant son. In his grief her father hadn't thought to name the weak and mewling baby; within a day he too was gone. Below was carved in newer lettering: Also of Herbert Cooper and the single word: Reunited. Kitty gathered up the petals shed by one of the purple dahlias that she'd placed in the stone vase on Sunday, and rearranged the remaining flowers to cover the gap. She muttered a short prayer, wanting to say something yet unwilling to appear mawkish and sentimental.

Billy waited for her by the path, carefully inspecting the surface of a fat round conker before polishing it on a small piece of yellow cloth. His concentration didn't fool her; she knew he was looking out for her. Wordlessly he gathered her into his embrace and dropped a soft kiss onto the top of her head. As he let her go he pressed the burnished conker into her hand.

'Come on,' he said. 'We need to move along if we're going to reach The Crest by midday.'

By noon they were sitting on Henbury Crest, the rolling farmland spread out before them. To the south they could pick out Whitmore, its buildings solid and grey on the horizon; nearer and to the west lay Henbury, much smaller and squat with the Benbarrow estate easy to pick out on the edge of the village.

'Look, there she is,' said Billy, pointing into the sky. Kitty followed the line of shoulder, arm, wrist, index finger, until she picked out the bird, wheeling above them, gradually gaining height.

'What did you say it was?' she asked, squinting as she watched the strange flight, the bird's forked tail twisting suddenly as it changed direction. Against the dull clouds its belly was a distinctive rust, its spread wings banded black and white, as if wearing an overcoat that didn't quite match.

'A Red Kite,' Billy told her. He had seen it over the village twice before, but never when Kitty was with him. His face brightened with the pleasure of showing her the bird, just as hers did when she found an unusual snail's shell or discovered a hidden patch of violets.

'Thank you,' she said, as if he'd given her a gift.

As they ate their picnic, they watched people come and go below them: a farmhand mending a broken gate, the doctor's black Bentley turning onto the

drive beside the surgery, a figure cycling towards Benbarrow, her gabardine coat tied tightly at her waist.

Finally light patters of rain drove them from The Crest, and they walked back through the woodland that bordered Melrose's farm. They picked their trails cautiously, careful to stay on the public side of the ditch that marked out the perimeter of the property. The dour old Scotsman claimed to be firm but fair, but he was known to shoot first and ask questions afterwards. Local people respected his boundaries; that much was obvious by the fat blackberries that still graced the brambles on his side of the ditch.

Billy pulled Kitty to a sharp halt, and nodded towards the woodland on the far side of the ditch. Through the thicket they could see the slender figure of a boy slipping between the trees, a young dog at his heels and a rabbit slung limply across his shoulders.

'Bet that's one of the gypsies,' he whispered. 'He'd better be quick. There'll be trouble if Melrose catches him.' They stood watching silently until the boy had disappeared from view, and then strolled back to the vicarage. Neither of them was in a hurry, knowing that, day off or not, they would both start work on their return.

Kitty lay in bed, listening to the rain beat down on the window pane. She turned the conker over and over between her fingers, slowly, slowly, again and again. She knew it was shiny. She couldn't see it in the dark, but she could remember Billy's hands, the yellow cloth, its mirrored surface. She thought of the Red Kite and Billy's excitement at showing her, his boyish apprehension that it might not appear while they were on The Crest.

And she thought of his stillness as he'd watched the young lad slip through the trees, a slight figure with a rabbit dangled across his shoulders, a figure that Billy had not recognised, even though she would have known him anywhere.

CHAPTER TEN: HELENA

*...unassuming as the
Cowslips, celendines, buglewort and daisies
That trinket out the green swerves like a child's game.*

Ivor Gurney: Larches

Helena paused as she turned into the drive. Somehow Benbarrow looked different today. The façade still dominated the rolling parkland, making a statement about the wealth and influence of its owners. But today the walls seemed to glow, the Cotswold stone slabs radiating a yellow warmth against the backdrop of a dull grey sky. The house seemed less intimidating, more approachable.

She had done little but think about Benbarrow in the days since she'd called with her aunt's invitation. She had replayed the visit in her mind, so that now the layout had developed a sense of the familiar, as though by measuring out the spaces she had acquired an intimacy with each room. She had a prodigious memory for detail and could recall their specific features: the pattern of wear on a carpet; the egg-shell blue of a faded wallpaper, brighter where a picture had once hung; the view from a bedroom window across the once formal, but now overgrown, gardens.

As she pedalled up the drive, head down, her gabardine raincoat cinched tightly around her waist, she thought about Benbarrow's new occupants, and tried to guess which room each would be staying in. The master bedroom she knew was empty. A bucket had been placed on an old kitchen chair to catch the intermittent drips and Henry had pointed out the tell-tale stain on the library

ceiling below. He and Frances had taken smaller rooms, one either side of what once had been a nursery but had since been used as an office. A desk and a pair of filing cabinets stood against the poorly painted wall.

As she pedalled, the front wheel of the Raleigh caught in a rut in the drive, sending a splatter of cold muddy water across her shins.

'Blast,' she muttered, glancing down at her stained stockings. They were her last pair, and although they were hardly as glamorous as Elsa Locke's silk stockings, they did at least make her feel slightly less childlike than her ankle socks. Besides which, the weather was beginning to turn cold. She would have to ask Aunt Celia for the money to buy some more, a task she didn't relish.

Elsa Locke, she thought, wouldn't worry about a ruined pair of stockings. Fabulously wealthy, wasn't that what Kendall had said? She couldn't even imagine the Lockes staying in Benbarrow, with its leaking roof and peeling wallpaper. Kendall she knew was staying, but what about Eric Daniels, she wondered.

Conscious of her muddy stockings and shoes, Helena pushed her bicycle around the side of the building, rather than go in through the main hall. She followed the flagged path that wound through smaller knot gardens, stepping carefully over the puddles that had gathered in patches along the gravel path. When she reached the broad flagged terrace she propped her bike up against the wall. She guessed that if she crossed behind the house she would ultimately reach the passageway that lead into the kitchen.

'Hello there!' called a female voice from the garden. Helena peered over the stone balustrade and scanned the garden. Narrow terraces dropped away behind the house, towards broad sweeping grassland bordered by tall copper hedges.

‘Over here!’ Vronnie waved to her. She was sitting in a wrought-iron seat beneath an old tree, two tabby kittens curled on her ample lap. A third played with a dried leaf at her feet, pouncing as it tumbled in the light breeze. On a low table at Vronnie’s side stood a jug and a tray of glasses. ‘Come and join me,’ she called, pointing at the jug.

‘I was looking for Henry.’ Helena explained, once she had got close enough to speak without shouting. ‘Mr Rufford, I mean. I was looking for Mr Rufford.’

‘No need to be formal, my dear.’ Vronnie laughed as she poured a glass and offered it to Helena. ‘Nothing alcoholic. Not till the sun’s over the yardarm, at least. Cheers.’ She took a swig of her own drink as Helena sipped tentatively at hers. It turned out to be lemonade. Cool, cloudy, delicious.

‘I’ve brought the list of craftsmen,’ said Helena. Vronnie looked puzzled. ‘The one my uncle promised?’

‘Ah yes, local men, as recommended by a local man. Fair of temperament and fit of bone and brawn.’ Vronnie chuckled. ‘I expect they’ll be exactly what Henry wants. Not necessarily what he needs, but certainly what he wants.’

‘He did ask my uncle.’ Helena frowned. ‘On Sunday. He asked him to recommend some people for the restoration work.’

‘Yes, yes, my dear. Don’t mind me.’ Vronnie paused a moment, appraising Helena. ‘Henry is a little, shall we say, idealistic? I’m not sure how practical his plans are.’

Helena glanced at Vronnie, unsure if a reply was required. She reached down to feel the grass. In places, where sun had filtered through breaks in the cloud, it was only slightly damp to the touch. She took off her coat, folded it up

neatly and sat down on it. Frances too had called Henry an idealist. And hadn't Robert Locke questioned his ideas? So many people surround him, she thought, and yet so few who share his vision.

'I've been doing an inventory of the garden,' Vronnie said, pointing at a sheaf of papers on the grass, weighed down by a large white shell. 'Kendall is drawing up some ideas for replanting, but it's always a good idea to see what's growing well in each spot before you start pulling things out to replace them.'

Helena tried to imagine how the grounds might have looked with the grass a properly tended lawn and the hedges neatly trimmed. Smarter, perhaps, but she rather liked the gardens as they were: unkempt, slightly wild and disorderly.

'I know nothing about gardens,' she said. 'I have no idea what grows where.'

'Gardens are like people, my dear.' Vronnie fixed Helena with her piercing gaze. 'Different people thrive in different environments. A place may suit one particular person, yet stifle another. You see those little pink flowers?' She pointed across the garden to a ribbon of pale pink and emerald green threaded along the foot of a low box hedge. 'Cyclamen. Flourishing there. But plant them over there, where the ground dips away towards the trees, and they'd rot off. Too wet.'

'They're pretty. Will Kendall leave them?'

'Possibly, though they clash terribly with the copper beech, of course. It will depend on whether he thinks the hedging is worth keeping. It's riddled with honeysuckle. Spread by the birds I shouldn't wonder.' Vronnie took a biscuit from the tray and snapped it in two. She gesticulated as she spoke, stabbing the air with a fragment of biscuit to emphasise each point as a teacher might

with a stick of chalk. 'That's another thing you have to watch. You have to take care you don't plant something invasive. Some plants will dominate, just like, I don't know.....a school bully. Squeeze out more delicate plants.'

That Helena could relate to. She had often taken her books up to the attic rooms at St Bert's, eager to stay out of the way of the louder, more extrovert girls. She wondered if that was why she preferred the muted pinks and blues of the vicarage garden to the scarlet and burnt orange borders of its neighbours. She might admire the flamboyant blooms, but she preferred the more subtle flowers.

'We have a gardener at the Vicarage, Billy. He's very good I think. I love our garden, it's very peaceful. Maybe I could ask if he could help out?'

'Excellent,' said Vronnie, picking up the papers and leafing through them. 'Local men, as recommended.....' She chuckled. 'Is he young of body and fit of limb, too?'

Helena left the note from her uncle in the hall. It seemed an age since she'd placed her aunt's invitation on the same small table.

'Milk in your tea?' Vronnie called from the kitchen.

'Please,' answered Helena. She started as her voice appeared to echo back across the hall towards her.

'Please.' Kendall emerged from the library. 'Oh sorry, didn't see you there.'

'I've brought the list up from my uncle.' Helena gestured towards the note. 'Vronnie's just come in from the garden. She's making tea.' There was a clatter of cups and saucers from the kitchen as if to confirm her statement.

‘Shall we, then? I’m parched.’ Kendall followed Helena down the corridor towards the kitchen. ‘I’ve been hunting for some useful gardening books. I’ve only found these so far.’ He handed her a battered copy of *The Cyclopaedia of Gardening*.

‘What have you got there?’ Vronnie looked up from pouring the tea as Helena and Kendall came into the kitchen. She put the fat round pot down on the table and covered it with a teatowel. ‘They look a bit shabby to me.’

‘This one must have been pretty good in its time, Vronnie. Trouble is, lots of the plates have been torn out.’ Kendall leafed through the pages, stopping every now and then to read the text opposite a blank white page. He ran his fingers over the yellowed residue of glue. ‘What a pity.’

Helena skimmed through the cyclopaedia and looked up cyclamen in the index. She showed the page with its pen and ink illustrations to Kendall.

‘There are lots of these, under a little hedge near the terrace. Will you keep them? I think they’re lovely.’

‘I’m not sure. I’ve not drawn up the complete plan yet. But if you like them, then we must certainly keep them.’ Kendall frowned and shook a finger at Helena. ‘But only if you promise to catalogue every single book in that library. It’s a total mess.’

‘What a wonderful idea,’ said Vronnie. ‘If you can spare the time my dear. It’s a job that needs doing, and frankly I don’t want to be the only woman around here capable of making a pot of tea. Frances can hardly boil water without burning it.’

Helena laughed. She wondered what had happened to Elsa Locke. There had been no mention of her. She guessed that someone so wealthy and fashionable wouldn’t want to stay in Benbarrow in its current state, but she

hadn't thought that the Lockes might have left altogether. Still, it wasn't her place to ask.

'I'd love to sort the books out,' she said, recalling happy hours spent in the library at St Bert's. 'That's if it's alright with Mr Rufford.'

'Henry? He'll be delighted,' said Kendall, closing up the depleted volume. 'He and Frances have gone into Whitmore to collect some parcels from the station and buy groceries. You can ask him when he gets back, but really, if you've finished your tea, you could start straight away. I'm using the desk for sketching out my plans at the moment, but if you can manage with a clipboard, I'm sure I saw one earlier.'

By the time the little grey Austin pattered up the drive Helena and Kendall had worked out a strategy for dealing with the books. They'd found a bag of clean cotton rags and a feather duster in the tall broom cupboard near the kitchen, and between them had cleared the library shelves, after which Kendall had settled down with his plans whilst Helena turned her attention to sorting the books. Leather bound volumes of travel books now stood in one stack, philosophical and religious tomes in another, political treatises in yet another. As she carefully dusted each one Helena arranged the novels into alphabetical piles, stopping every now and then to read a few lines as she came across an unfamiliar title.

Every time she paused Kendall looked up from his sketching and asked what particular book had caught her eye. He pronounced judgement on each author: droll (Trollope); self-absorbed (James); variable (Thackeray); underrated (Gaskell).

‘Oh, well done.’ Henry appeared at the door of the library, his arms full of parcels, and surveyed the heaps of books. ‘This looks like progress. Anything interesting?’

‘I’m not sure really,’ said Helena, closing *King Solomon’s Mines* (exciting, according to Kendall) and hovering between the ‘R’ pile and the ‘H’ before putting it down on the desk instead. ‘I haven’t started listing them yet. There aren’t many modern novels.’

‘Well no, I wouldn’t expect there to be. Benbarrow was requisitioned sometime during The War. It hasn’t been a family home for years. Ask Frances – she’s been doing some research.’ Henry shuffled the packages in his grip. ‘Look, back in a mo. I just need to put these down somewhere before I drop the lot.’ He left the library, his footsteps chiming across the hall, his voice echoing down the corridor. ‘Eric! Where are you? Give me a hand with these will you?’

The quiet of the library settled around Kendall and Helena once more, but the atmosphere had changed. There was a sense of movement about the house: distant voices, doors opening and closing, footsteps on the stairs. Helena glanced at her wristwatch and decided it was time she ought to be heading back to the vicarage.

‘I really should be going now,’ she announced. ‘It’s Kitty’s day off and I need to help Aunt Celia with the evening meal. I could come again tomorrow afternoon, if that’s alright.’

‘Perfect. But just have a look at these before you go.’ Kendall beckoned her over to the desk, and stood aside to allow the light from the bay window to spill across his sketches. He described his plans for the small formal gardens at the side of the house, explaining how one archway would lead the eye into the next. Beside each border were scribbled notes: suggestions of height and

colour, ideas for specific plants. He pointed out specimen trees dotted around the gardens that might need felling and others that he would like to save.

‘Here’s the terrace, and the steps down towards the lake.’ Kendall traced the path Helena had taken earlier, walking down to where Vronnie had been sitting on the bench. He tapped the sketch with his index finger. ‘This central part, and here close to the house, that needs to be lawn again. But not all of it. I’d like to keep swathes of meadowgrass beneath the copper beech, and sow it with wild flowers.’ He took a folded handkerchief from his jacket pocket and shook it out.

‘I like my gardens tidy but not too tidy,’ he said, brushing a smut of dirt from the side of Helena’s nose.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: FRANCES

The sun shone, of course, but it was so girt about with clouds and the air so saturated with water, that its beams were discoloured and purples, oranges and reds of a dull sort took the place of the more positive landscapes.....

Virginia Woolf: Orlando

Frances leaned back and flung the *Vogue* to the far end of the Chesterfield, where it slithered off to join the heap of other magazines and newspapers on the floor. She shuffled the cushion under her head and closed her eyes.

‘Oyster silk with matching kitten heels,’ she said languidly. ‘Oyster! What woman over the age of twenty-five looks good in oyster for heaven’s sake?’

Kendall looked up from his page and smiled.

‘I suspect that it might be a little ungallant of me to suggest that you’re over twenty-five, dear heart, but I’ve seen you looking very fine in oyster silk.’ He closed the book and pushed it across the desk. ‘Kitten heels might be the issue, if you plan to wear them in deepest Oxfordshire.’

Frances opened one eye and gave him a disparaging look.

‘Whereas oyster silk would be perfect for this freezing, godforsaken pile?’

The question of keeping warm had been debated long and with increasing fervour as the autumn nights closed in. The library and kitchen had become hubs of activity during the day and as such were the Benbarrow’s warm spots in the evening. The range kept the kitchen warm whatever the weather, and whoever was in residence usually congregated there to eat. If Vronnie or Kendall were about there was usually a fire lit in the library, but neither of the

Ruffords nor Eric had quite mastered the art of laying firewood and coals in such a way as would generate much more than a vivid flare of burning paper, a puff of smoke and a barrage of swearing.

‘Come on, chin up. There’s London to look forward to at Christmas. Didn’t you say that you were going up to town for the festivities?’

Frances swung her feet to the floor and searched around with her toes until she found her fur-lined slippers. She straightened her skirt over her knees and smoothed the fabric, damping a fingertip to lift off a strand of hair.

‘That’s my plan. Elsa has invited me to stay with them in Chelsea. I can’t bear the thought of being down here on the anniversary. It would be just too depressing, don’t you think?’

It was the first time Frances had alluded to her parents’ death since Kendall arrived at Benbarrow. He’d sent his condolences at the time, and attended the funeral of course. He recalled the awfulness of that drab January morning, Frances head to toe in black which had never suited her and drained the last of the colour from her already pallid complexion. And beside her, looking more like a boy than a man, Henry stumbling along after the flower-decked coffins as if he were a supporting actor in a badly written play.

‘And Henry? Is he going with you?’

‘I don’t think so,’ Frances replied. ‘He’s never particularly enjoyed the hoo-ha of Christmas. He always used to turn down invitations to dances and parties, and heaven knows there were plenty of those. The eligible bachelor syndrome; every girl’s mother wanted him on their invitation list, and the more he turned them down, the more they wanted him.’

Kendall laughed. He was familiar with the circuit of aspiring mothers and daughters: the summer season with its garden parties and coming-out balls and

the winter season with its masquerades and tinsel. His days as an eligible bachelor had ended abruptly when his childless, widowed uncle had suddenly decided, despite his advancing years, to remarry and subsequently produce an heir to his extensive portfolio of properties in London and New York and his thriving trans-Atlantic business.

‘I can imagine, not his preferred habitat. So will he stay here, do you think?’

Frances gathered her magazines into a bundle and put them on the table.

‘I expect so. He wants to keep an eye on the progress of *The Great Project*.’

Frances had taken to calling the restoration of Benbarrow *The Great Project*, her tone changing, dependent on who was in earshot at the time. Often her approach was light-hearted and humorous, a gentle joshing of her brother’s commitment to the mammoth task he’d taken on. It suited her to tease Henry, to remind him that she’d pointed out many of the pitfalls he might encounter along the way. The role of ‘big sister’ came easily to her, and she made a point of the advantages derived from her age and experience over his enthusiasm and idealism. Occasionally, in quiet conversation with Kendall or Vronnie, she admitted to her concern that Henry was using the project as a distraction from grief he had yet to come to terms with and said she wished he’d simply sold the property and moved on.

But nobody was fooled. Everyone was well aware that she was both surprised and impressed by his application to the project. She might refer to Benbarrow as a godforsaken pile, but in truth she was growing to love it, just as

Henry did. She just hoped that unlike most of her love affairs, this one might have a happy ending.

Frances rummaged in the bottom of her bag, located her cigarette case and shook out a slender black Sobranie. She turned the lighter in the palm of her hand and ran her fingers over its surface. She didn't need to look down; she knew the outline as if it had been engraved on her skin: on one side *J&F*, on the other *Always*.

She unhooked the sheepskin jacket from the row of pegs beside the kitchen door, shrugged it over her shoulders and stowed cigarettes and lighter in the pockets. She turned the collar up around her ears, tucking the strands of her bob around her neck, and shoved her feet into a pair of Wellingtons. The afternoon was bright, the atmosphere chilly and dry, but underfoot the ground was wet after several nights of heavy rain. She walked down the drive, the low sun casting deep shadows from the woodland across the grass that flanked the gravel. At the end she turned and looked back at Benbarrow.

She tried to appraise the building from a dispassionate perspective, as if she were a perhaps viewing it as a potential purchaser. It seemed to her that it might have potential as a country retreat for a wealthy city businessman, or one of the growing number of MPs who kept *pieds-à-terre* in London but preferred to escape with their families to a rural location for weekends and recesses. She could envisage the house full of children and dogs, the stables accommodating a variety of horses for hacking and hunting. All the grounds needed, she thought with a smile, was a stock of pheasant and grouse, efficiently managed by a dour Scottish gamekeeper.

She had been to houses like that when she'd been much younger, rambling country homes where everyone who was anyone congregated for weekend parties. For a few years there had been a post-war bravado, a sense that celebrating life was a debt owed to those who had made the ultimate sacrifice. She remembered waking in vast four-poster beds under the best linen sheets; the huge breakfasts laid out on linen-draped side tables; the hunting, shooting and fishing organised for those who were so inclined; the spirits and cocktails long before the sun was over the yardarm and of course the dancing until sun-up. Who ended up in which bedroom had been eagerly discussed in whispered tones the following morning, before the whole cycle began again.

Few people she knew could afford such extravagance these days. There would always be the stupendously wealthy like Robert and Elsa, but so many family estates decimated by the Great War had succumbed to the difficulty of sustaining large properties as the economy declined. She wondered if country house parties were indeed a thing of the past.

She lit another cigarette and considered Henry's plans. He lacked the gregarious nature of their parents, preferring instead a small coterie of close friends. He had no desire to party till dawn with well-connected acquaintances. Still, he needed to be surrounded by people he trusted if the estate was to work in the way he imagined; it was far too big for him to live in alone and he would need help to manage it long term. She wondered who those people might be and what they would contribute to Benbarrow. Kendall and Vronnie were a given, if they chose to stay. Eric too; she had only seen him as a schoolboy, one of Henry's friends who occasionally came to stay during holidays and exeats, but his support for her brother during those darkest days had changed

that. When she had been falling apart and barely able to offer support, Eric had been his buttress.

But could she too live here, as Henry had suggested she might? She certainly struggled to live in London, despite her fondness for bright lights and elegant restaurants. She loved the Grosvenor house where they'd grown up, the garden in the middle of the square where Nanny had taken her to play and where later she had strolled with a succession of beaux and admirers. But just as the gardens were haunted by that last conversation with Jonathan before he left for Catalonia, so her parents' house was infused with memories and sorrow. Twice she had returned, determined to throw open the windows and remove the dustcovers from the furniture; twice she had walked into her parents' bedroom and been overwhelmed by the task of sorting through her mother's perfume bottles and fine clothes. It would be a long time before she could live there, if indeed she ever could.

The flat she'd shared with Jonathan was out of the question too. For months after he left she had found the space comforting. The things they'd chosen together – a picture they'd found in an East London flea market, an over-priced sculpture they'd been unable to leave in a fashionable gallery in the Third Arrondissement, a tasselled silk throw he thought was Chinese – these things had confirmed his existence. To open the lacquered front door and find a letter on the mat, postmarked Calais, Paris, Marseilles, reminded her that, despite his determination to join his comrades, he loved her and thought of her often.

When she wrote to tell him of her parents' death and he failed to reply, she had felt this as the bitterest betrayal. At her lowest ebb, she had needed his support. No matter that he was a man of deep convictions, fighting for beliefs

that he held dearer than his own life. If he'd felt for her as she did for him, she told their friends, there would have been no question; he would have dropped everything to be at her side. Nobody had the heart to point out to her that there might be an altogether more tragic reason for his absence. It was only later, during their Easter break in Hastings when she'd stumbled across Vronnie weeping, that she'd discovered that not even his adored cousin had heard from him.

She stubbed out her cigarette on the fence post and dropped the filter into the long grass beside her feet. In the distance she could see Kendall shrugging his arms into a waterproof jacket, and hastily doing up the toggles against the chill air. The temperature had fallen suddenly as the sun began to drop behind the ridge of hills to the west. The clouds looked ominous. He headed towards her, his stride long and purposeful through the overgrown grass. He called her name as he got closer, and she waved back.

'Vronnie and the boys are back,' he said when he finally reached her. 'Vronnie has bought enough food to feed the five thousand. They've hatched some plan to get the meadows scythed, some help from the village I gather. I'm not convinced the weather will hold out though. The forecast is for overnight rain'

'Not if Vronnie has anything to do with the plan,' she laughed. 'It wouldn't dare.'

Frances tucked her arm into the crook of his elbow as they wandered back to the house.

'You're looking very thoughtful,' Kendall remarked. 'What's going on in that busy head of yours?'

‘Oh, I was just thinking about Benbarrow. And about Jonathan.’ She hesitated when he didn’t comment. ‘He would have loved this place. I sometimes wonder what he’d have made of it all, what ideas he might have had for restoring it. I wish I’d brought him down when, you know, when he was around.’

‘Why didn’t you?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. He hated the whole idea of wealth and privilege. Inheritance was an anathema to him, of course. And Benbarrow had been empty and disused for so long, I suppose I was just embarrassed to have a property like this in the family.’

They skirted around the side of the buildings, in unspoken agreement choosing to retrace their footsteps alongside the stone wall towards the kitchen entrance. They stopped by the pathway cutting through the woodland, pausing for a last cigarette before going inside. Frances perched on the stone wall, her hand resting on the brow of one of the moss-headed creatures. The trees rustled as the wind picked up, and a shower of leaves in vibrant oranges and golds tumbled from the birch and ash and oak behind them.

‘It’s odd how our circumstances are dictated by birthright,’ Kendall observed. He turned his face away from Frances and exhaled a long stream of cigarette smoke.

And like his own birthright, the smoke dissipated into the evening air.

CHAPTER TWELVE: KITTY

The laundry-maid should begin her labours on a Monday morning by careful examination of the articles committed to her care. Every article should be examined for ink or grease spots, or for fruit or wine stains, which must be removed before washing.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management

The last Monday in October dawned bright and cold. The forecast was dry and windy, perfect weather for a washday, thought Kitty. She hurried downstairs, arms full of sheets and pillowcases, but then hesitated at the bottom of the stairs, hearing Mrs Harding's raised voice from the dining room.

'I don't see why you have to go up there again today. You were at Benbarrow virtually every day last week. The week before too.'

There was a mumbled reply that Kitty took to be Helena's petulant response.

'If you want something to do, I'm sure Kitty can find you a job. You can clear the table for a start.'

The clatter of dishes from behind the door sent Kitty scurrying towards the kitchen, reluctant to be caught eavesdropping by whoever might emerge with their hands full of breakfast dishes. She carried on to the laundry room and dropped the bundle of linen by the steaming washtub. The air was dense with steam and the scent of soap flakes. In the tub, a selection of underwear bounced back and forth amongst a swell of bubbles. Kitty reached down for the wooden tongs and hauled out a cotton camisole for inspection; having deemed

it clean enough to pass muster, she fed it through the wringer and plunged it into the sink of clean, cold water. She grabbed at the next garment. She knew her task would be far easier if she turned off the rotating paddle but ever since the electric washer had been installed she'd enjoyed the challenge of chasing down each vest and brassiere, each pair of underpants, as though she were netting crayfish.

'Kitty?' Helena called from the kitchen.

'In here.' Reluctantly Kitty turned off the machine and gathered the remaining garments with the tongs. She fed them between the rubber rollers and watched the soapy water trickle back into the tub.

'Aunt Celia told me to ask if there was anything I could do to help.' Her voice didn't sound as though she had any desire to help, whatever Aunt Celia might have suggested. Helena reached out to catch the first garment as it reappeared, damp and crumpled. She shook it out, unimpressed to recognise it as a pair of her uncle's combinations.

'In the sink,' said Kitty, indicating the clear water with a nod of her head. 'You could give me a hand pegging these out once I've rinsed them. The sheets can be washing while we're doing that and then I'm stopping for breakfast.'

'Haven't you eaten yet?' asked Helena, a little crestfallen. 'I hadn't realised.'

No, thought Kitty. Nobody does.

Once the washing was all on the line, the washtub emptied and dried out, the beds remade with fresh linen from the airing cupboard and the breakfast pots returned to their places, it was almost time to begin again with preparing food.

By Kitty's standards it had been an easier Monday than most; with Helena to help, many of the jobs had taken less time than usual.

Still, she was glad to have the kitchen to herself once again. She'd missed the opportunity to slip down to the garden with a mug of tea for Billy. There was no need to of course - he had a stove and the wherewithal for a brew in the bothy - but the prospect of his company brightened her days. A tap at the door broke her reverie.

'Come in Billy,' she said, automatically.

'It's me Aunt Kitty.' Annie's eldest, Roy, pushed his head around the door. 'Is it okay for me to come in?'

'Of course it is, lad.' Kitty dragged the kettle back onto the hotplate. 'What have you got there?'

Roy carried a brace of pheasant by their necks. With a deft flick of his wrists he swung them up onto the table. A few downy feathers floated down to the floor as he brushed his hands together. The brilliant chestnut and gold birds lay like scars across the pale oak.

'And where did you get those from?'

By the time Roy finished his second mug of tea, Kitty had hung the pheasants out of sight at the back of the larder, caught up with the family news and told him about her trip up to the Crest the previous month, and the Red Kites she and Billy had seen.

'On our way back we came past the Melrose place,' she said. The boy caught her glance and looked away, his lively chatter silenced for a moment. He circled his finger inside the bowl of his teaspoon, forcing the handle to slide

through a dribble of tea, dragging damp loops across the surface of the table.

‘There was a boy in the woods. Billy thought he was a gypsy.’

Roy looked up at Kitty, the changing expressions flickering across his face like woodland shadows. He didn’t reply. Kitty pulled out the chair on the other side of the table and sat down. The boy had a slight look of Eddie about him, a gritty determination that showed in the set of his jaw, and his bright eyes hinted at his father’s charm. But mostly he reminded Kitty of her own mother. His build was slight and his movements graceful, a characteristic that Annie had inherited and handed on, although it seemed to have sidestepped Kitty. She took after her father’s family, the women buxom, the men brawny. A good build for a baker, she thought, glancing at the bag of flour she’d put ready for tomorrow morning’s bread-making.

‘I told Billy I’d not seen any gypsy wagons about for a while,’ Kitty said. She choose her words with caution, wanting to avoid confrontation yet needing to warn the boy to be more careful. ‘But if their kids are poaching for game, they’ll do well to steer clear of those woods. You know what Old Man Melrose is like – he’ll loose off a cartridge at anything that moves.’

‘If I see any, I’ll let them know,’ said Roy. Kitty saw relief spread across his face as his story of finding the birds injured on the roadside had gone unchallenged. He gathered up his tweed cap and shoved it on his head as he got up. ‘Best be on my way.’

‘Don’t forget that parcel,’ Kitty said, nodding at the wrap of ham shank and carrots she’d put ready for him to take. Fair exchange for the birds hanging in the larder, and Vicar’s wife or not, Mrs Harding was too partial to a roast pheasant to question where they’d come from.

‘Thanks.’ Roy swung open the kitchen door. ‘You know, these gypsy boys. They know how to look after themselves.’ He glanced back with a grin as he slipped out into the garden, whistling for his dog.

Kitty reached up to unpeg the white bath towels and pressed a handful of the sweet smelling fabric against her cheek. They were still damp; they could stay out for a while longer. She folded the last couple of pillow cases loosely, dropped them on top of the sheets and tossed the wooden pegs into the basket. She looked back at the Vicarage and judged that it would be a good moment to slip into the walled garden. If anyone happened to spot her and ask what she was doing, then she’d got her excuse ready. She needed to remind Billy to bring up extra root vegetables tomorrow morning, ready for the mutton casserole.

‘Billy,’ she called softly. There was no reply. He wasn’t in the back garden, she would have seen him from the kitchen garden. She knew he’d tidied the front garden to within an inch of its life just before the weekend, and she struggled to think where else he might be. ‘Billy?’

She gathered up the laundry basket as she headed back towards the kitchen. She was irritated with Billy for going off without a word. What if she’d brought down mugs of tea? And then she became even more irritated with herself. She wasn’t his keeper; he didn’t have to report his comings and goings to her after all. Billy might call her ‘my girl’ but it wasn’t like they were promised or anything.

Helena was warming her hands, palms spread out towards the Rayburn, when Kitty stepped into the kitchen.

‘Back early, aren’t you?’ she commented. Helena turned towards her, and Kitty saw the puzzled look on her face. ‘Sorry. None of my business. I could

fall out with my fingertips this afternoon.’ Kitty dumped the basket onto the floor and kicked it into the laundry room.

‘What’s wrong?’ asked Helena

‘Nothing. Just one of those days when everything feels like an effort.’ Kitty tried a tentative smile. To her surprise it didn’t hurt, her face didn’t crack; she remembered her mother teasing her out of sulks as a child and she chuckled at the thought. ‘And after all that help you gave me this morning, too.’

Helena pulled the kettle back onto the hotplate. She turned to face Kitty, leaning back against the polished rail. The teatowels swung back and forth, bright gingham against the enamelled black of the oven doors.

‘Aunt Celia’s right. I should help about the house more often. Only I never know what to do,’ she said. She shifted her weight onto one leg and rubbed the toe of her shoe up and down the back of her calf. ‘When I’m up at Benbarrow, well, there are lots of jobs and everyone just mucks in and gets on with things. And nobody grumbles if something isn’t quite perfect.’

Not like here, thought Kitty. She’d had more complaints from Mrs Harding in the last month than in the previous twelve. She didn’t answer the door quickly enough. She used too much coal. She didn’t use enough coal. The meat was tough, or overdone, or underdone. Kitty could see the attraction of working in a situation where her efforts were appreciated.

‘Well, if you could set the table while I see to the food,’ Kitty said. ‘There’s not a lot to do tonight. It’s steak and kidney pie again. And baked apples for afters.’ She usually planned easy meals for Mondays: salads with cold meats during the summer; second servings of casseroles and pies during the winter. Anything that would take the pressure off the washday workload.

She checked the temperature on the oven, gently tapping the cracked glass over the dial. A few degrees more, she thought and she riddled the stove, listening for the clinker to fall though into the ashpan. She adjusted the damper just enough to draw the fire a little. On the hotplate, the kettle began to bubble.

There wasn't much left of the steak and kidney pie by the time Kitty carried the dishes back out to the kitchen. A good job she wasn't really hungry. She took the tray of apples out of the oven and placed one in each of the china dishes she had put ready on the serving tray, along with the jug of warm custard. The last two apples she covered with a small casserole lid; she rested another lid on top of the remaining pie and left them on the back of the Rayburn to keep warm whilst she served pudding.

'Baked apples and custard for pudding,' she announced as she pushed open the door to the dining room. The Vicar beamed as she put a dish on his placemat. Already he had his spoon in his hand; it was, she knew, one of his favourites.

'Dessert, Kitty,' said Mrs Harding. 'At the Vicarage we have dessert, not pudding, if you please.'

Too surprised to respond even with a 'Yes, Ma'am', Kitty picked up the last empty vegetable dish and scurried from the room.

'And please make sure to clear the entrée dishes before serving dessert.' Kitty's imitation of Mrs Harding was flawless. Besides the intonation, she had captured each little gesture and exaggerated it just enough to make it comical. Billy laughed, coughing on his cider.

'What did you say?'

'I didn't say anything, I was that dumbstruck. How long have I been working here, and mains and puddings have always been good enough before.' She sat down on the stool in front of Billy's fire and stretched her feet towards the coals.

'Well that baked apple was certainly good enough for me.' The gingham towel that Kitty had wrapped around the apples lay crumpled in a heap on the table; all that remained of its contents were a couple of fat sultanas that had rolled across the worn timber surface, and a few sticky sugar crystals stuck to the bottom of the bowls.

A quiet calm settled in the bothy as they sat together, watching the flames shift in the draught from the door. Both were absorbed in thought, companionable, neither appearing to feel the need to talk. Kitty was, however, struggling to keep quiet. She wanted to tell Billy about her conversation with Roy, about her concern that he would get himself into the sort of trouble that couldn't be sorted out by a swift smack or a gentle hug. He was young enough to be oblivious to danger, but old enough to have to live with the consequences. And she still hadn't told Billy that it wasn't some gypsy lad they saw slipping between the trees, a rabbit flung over his shoulder. Would he be sympathetic, or tell her to let the boy take his chances? And if she started to tell Billy about that, would she be able to say she'd come down to the garden this afternoon, without sounding as if she'd been checking up on him?

Billy reached out and covered her hand with one of his.

'What's the matter, girl?'

'Matter?' Kitty looked across at him. 'What do you mean?'

Billy nodded in the direction of her hands. She looked down at the edge of her pinafore, the fabric clenched in her palm, the creases radiating out from her fingertips.

‘You’ve been worrying that pinny like a terrier with a bone. For the last five minutes, at least.’ He smiled at her, laughter lines appearing between the smears of dirt by his temples.

‘Tell your William all about it,’ he said.

And so she did.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: ANNIE

Rabbits were the thing! And a good dog was half the battle. I think we'd have starved it if hadn't been for the dog. Away he'd go and back with a rabbit. They always had the gamekeepers out and they were watching to make sure you didn't get any of the game. So on a moonlit night.....

George Bestford, Durham Miner

Annie was dreaming. Even as she ran, she knew it was a dream. The streets were closing in on her; there seemed no escape. She spotted an alleyway between some cottages and plunged into the darkness, only to find herself tangled in thorny undergrowth beneath a canopy of huge trees. She broke free of the bramble, feeling it tear her skin. There were animals in the scrub beside the path and voices behind her. One she recognised as Eddie, another as Roy. *Not that way*, her son called, but it was too late. As she scuttled between the bushes the trap sprung up around her ankle and she was caught fast.

She woke, gasping for air. Her heart was pounding; she could hear its pulse in her ears. She lay still, as the familiar bedroom settled around her. Oak became wardrobe, tree canopy became curtain, bramble became twisted sheets. The creature in the scrub stared at her; as she blinked away the image it transformed into Lizzie, stirring from sleep in her bedside cot. Annie smiled and reached out to touch her baby's face, but found her legs still pinned. For a moment her mind was drawn back to her dream, the claws of the trap closing round her ankle. She looked down the length of the bed, half expecting to see

flesh and blood held by rusted iron. Instead she saw a huddle of bodies, two small boys curled together under the patchwork quilt. She pressed her heels into the soft mattress and slithered her legs from under them. Michael and Richie slept on. She gathered Lizzie into her arms and headed towards the stairs, hushing her daughter's hungry mutterings.

In the kitchen the old dog slumbered on in front of the range. There was no sign of the pup, and Annie wished she'd checked the boys' room to see if Roy was in his bed. Alerted now to his nocturnal hunting, there had been several nights recently when she'd heard him pull back the latch on the yard door and patter softly into the night. It worried her, but thankfully he hadn't gone out again on a Saturday night when Eddie was at home and his father didn't appear aware of his poaching.

She put Lizzie into the highchair, tied the strap across her pudgy waist and gave her a crust of bread to chew on while she made porridge. The oat pot was half full and would last for a few days, there were two rabbits and a pheasant hanging in the cellar and enough root vegetables from the vicarage garden to make a good stew. With luck she would finish the quilt she was stitching for one of Mr Martin's customers midweek; a few more shillings would be useful before the coalman called again on Friday. She hoped to have a full coal bucket standing by the range when Kitty called on Saturday.

She riddled the fire and tossed a shovelful of coals into the firebox.

'Come on, old man,' she said to the dog, heading towards the yard with the ash pan. 'Out you go.' She opened the door and, looking back over her shoulder, nearly fell headlong over the pup, asleep across the threshold. 'Whoa! Where have you come from?' The pup stood up and wagged his tail. In the

kitchen Lizzie squealed and waved in delight ; the pup took that as an invitation to share her breakfast, and took the crust from her outstretched hand.

‘Where’s Roy?’ she demanded, as if the dog could answer her anxious query. She dumped the contents of the pan into the ash bucket, rammed it hastily back into the base of the range and ran upstairs calling his name. The youngsters peered bleary eyed from her bed as she passed the door. In the boys’ room Jimmy emerged from under the covers. It was clear that he’d been stretched out, taking the advantage of the rare opportunity to have the double bed to himself.

‘Where is he?’ she asked again. Jimmy shrugged his shoulders.

‘Dunno,’ he said. ‘I didn’t think he was going out last night. He said he’d taken enough chances to be going on with.’

‘Oh God.’ Annie sank to the floor beside the bed. ‘The dog’s come back without him.’

Jimmy threw back the quilt. He was instantly awake and throwing on his clothes, fumbling with shirt buttons and not bothering to turn his discarded socks the right way out. Annie noticed the hole in one heel and automatically made a note to mend it.

‘It’ll be fine Mum. I’ll take the dog and we’ll find him.’ Jimmy paused and took a deep breath. ‘The dog? Is the dog alright?’ Annie nodded.

‘He was asleep in the yard, by the door.’

Jimmy pulled his sweater over his head and gave her shoulder a squeeze. The younger boys huddled by the door.

‘Look after our Mum,’ Jimmy said as he pushed past them. They nodded solemnly and continued to stare at Annie, hunched on the rag rug. She struggled to her feet, her legs leaden.

‘Come on boys,’ she said, reaching a hand out to each of the frightened children. A long damp patch ran down the front of Richie’s pyjama legs. She gathered herself together and spoke to her sons in the brightest tone she could muster. ‘Let’s get you out of those things and make some breakfast, eh?’ Before they’d reached the kitchen Jimmy and the young dog were gone, out of the yard, down the lane and probably fields away. She cut another slice of bread and shared it between the children.

As she stirred the porridge on the Rayburn her mind strayed back to her dream. She imagined the claws of the trap closed around Roy’s bloody leg and she began to cry.

The windows were all firmly shut, despite the heat in the kitchen. Condensation ran down the panes and puddled on the sills. Annie mopped at the slate and wrung out the cloth over the deep Belfast sink. Lizzie lay in her cot, arms thrown out to her sides in the soundest of sleep. The two youngest boys had struggled to keep their eyes open, playing endless games of Pairs, Snap and Beggar My Neighbour before finally being carried up to bed, exhausted.

Annie cleared away the remaining dishes. She couldn’t remember the last time she had eaten so much. There was a row of empty beer bottles by the yard door; normally she would only allow Roy and Jimmy half a glass of ale each, but how could she deny them tonight? She’d have liked to save some for Christmas, but then she would have needed to explain to Eddie where they came from, so instead she had joined the boys at the table drinking straight from their bottles. Tomorrow reality would settle around them again, but for now they could enjoy their bounty and she could savour her relief.

When Jimmy had returned alone mid-morning she had been petrified, certain it could only be bad news. Even when he'd reassured her that all was well, she didn't really understand what had happened, and simply complied with his requests for canvas bags and a couple of sharp knives. He'd called briefly next door before setting out again with their neighbours' son Walter, a brawny lad of Roy's age.

'Sorry Mum,' said Roy, reaching across to squeeze Annie's arm. 'I didn't mean to worry you, but I didn't know what else to do.'

'I just thought the worst, Son. When I opened the door and there was the pup.....'

'You'll have to stop calling him the 'pup' now,' said Jimmy. 'He did well, coming straight home, like Roy had told him.'

'I knew you'd set out with him Jim.' Roy slapped his brother on the back, a gesture older than his years. 'I knew he'd lead you straight to me.'

The boys were well into their stride now, retelling the events of the morning. Annie had heard it all at least twice, first in fragments when they'd arrived back as dusk fell, and then in more detail once they'd settled in the warmth of the kitchen while she prepared the food. The deer had been quite young, most likely one of this year's fawns, and they'd shared the carcass in exchange for Walter's help bringing it home. But there was still plenty of meat hung in the cellar, even after their feast.

'I hope Walter's dad can keep quiet,' said Annie. 'He's a braggart at the best of times.'

'Stop worrying Mum. He's not going to tell anyone, not with Walter being involved, is he?'

‘I suppose not. Only you know what he’s like when he’s got an ale or two inside him.’

Roy tipped his head back, up-ending his bottle over his open his mouth. The last dregs dripped onto his tongue.

‘Well, that’s another of his ales that won’t be inside him,’ he laughed. ‘He was only too happy to give us some bottles for counting them in.’ He stood the empty back down on the table and ran his finger thoughtfully over the printed lettering. ‘I’d still like to thump the bastard who knocked it down, mind.’

‘He must have known he’d hit something,’ added Jimmy. ‘It’s not right to have left it to die, is it Mum?’ Annie heard the outrage in his voice. After the excitement of the day and a bottle of beer he no longer seemed a young boy.

‘Well Roy did the right thing, putting it out of its misery.’ Annie turned to her eldest son. ‘Though I still don’t understand why you had to send the dog home while you stayed with it.’

‘I couldn’t have slung it across my shoulders and carried it through the streets could I? And I couldn’t have left it either. Anyone passing in a car would have seen it and stopped to pick it up. And once I’d dragged it into the scrub it was fair game for foxes. There are a couple of dens in those woods; it would have been torn to shreds by morning.’

Annie wasn’t entirely convinced, but she didn’t argue.

‘I’m happier to have shared it with our neighbours, than with a hungry vixen. That’s for sure.’

‘The vixen got her share too, Mum. Walter and Roy gave me the innards in a bag and I took them to the copse by Melrose’s farm. There’s an earth there, me and Roy saw some cubs playing there back in the summer.’

Annie winced at the thought of her sons being on Melrose land. Even Jimmy knew the dangers. The first question he'd asked this morning was whether the dog was alright when it returned. Had he imagined it peppered with lead shot, she wondered. Was he expecting to find his brother collapsed in the undergrowth, wounded or maybe even dead? She shook away the thought.

'Time you went up,' she said, shooing them from the kitchen. 'You'll have fat heads in the morning, the pair of you.' She listened to their exaggerated care as they struggled up the stairs, suppressing their laughter as they stumbled in the dark.

She peeled back the blanket covering Lizzie and chided herself for not checking earlier. She was wet through. Carefully Annie undid the pins and changed the nappy, dropping the soiled one into the chipped enamel bucket in the corner of the room. The baby stirred briefly, but settled back to sleep, sucking rhythmically on her thumb, two fingers hooked over the end of her nose.

For a while Annie was content to sit in the sudden quiet of the kitchen. Her four sons slept above her, her daughter slumbered in her arms. All had full bellies and there was food in the cellar. The rent was paid until the end of the month and there was coal in the bucket. She felt guilty at her relief that Eddie wasn't home. It couldn't be much of a life for him, after all: working in a factory all day, returning to lodgings each night, only coming back to Whitmore once a week. But then she pictured the day, had he been home. He would have eaten the food, but been resentful that Roy had provided it. He would have drunk the neighbour's ale, but denied the boys a bottle, even to share.

She turned down the wick on the lamp and gave her eyes time to adjust to the dark before she climbed the stairs. She hadn't the strength to carry the

crib upstairs; with Eddie away, Lizzie could sleep with her instead. She paused to look in the boys' room. The sky was clear and moonlight shone through the gap in the curtains, picking out the four figures top and tailed in the bed. It was a good night for rabbiting and she spared a thought for other sleepless wives and mothers, worrying about their menfolk out poaching.

As she curled around the soft fat body of her daughter and drifted off to sleep, she realised how content she felt surrounded by her family, and how little she missed Eddie's presence.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: HELENA

*Certain people would not clean their buttons,
Nor polish buckles after latest fashions,
Preferred their hair long.....*

Ivor Gurney: The Bohemians

‘Lean forward and hold your hair in a bundle, like this,’ Frances instructed, grasping a handful of her own hair and scrunching it up on top of her head to demonstrate. Helena did as she was told. In the speckled mirror above the dressing table, she could see the older girl’s reflection. Deft and confident, Frances shook out a folded headscarf and flicked it into a neat triangle. She tied it around Helena’s head and knotted it tightly above her forehead. ‘Now let go, and I’ll tuck this bit through here and – voila! – the perfect housemaid!’

Helena shifted along the bed and took a look at herself. She did indeed look like a housemaid, with only a few wisps of hair escaping around the edges of the knotted headscarf. At least, she would have looked like a housemaid had the scarf not been silk, and brand new, and still sporting the Harrods label stitched into the seam.

‘Two little maids are we..’ sang Frances, as she covered her sleek bob in a second silk square from the pile on the bed, ignoring the fact that Mikado’s maids were far from the lowly housemaids the two girls now resembled. ‘That should keep the dust out of our hair, shouldn’t it? These will stop it slipping,’ she added, as she took a handful of Kirby grips from a ceramic dish on the dressing table, and secured the folds of her vermillion scarf. She held out the remaining grips in her hand.

Helena took them, leaning close to the mirror, anxious not to tear the fabric. In the reflection she could see the bedroom behind her: the unmade bed, an empty wineglass abandoned on a window sill, clothes strewn carelessly across a velvet chair. Somehow gazing at the reflection appeared less obvious than looking around the room.

‘It’s a mess, isn’t it?’ said Frances, catching her eye. Helena blushed.

‘I’m sorry,’ she stammered. ‘I didn’t mean to...’ But she seemed unable to think what she didn’t mean to do. Stare perhaps, or intrude. The truth was that she couldn’t help being fascinated by the Ruffords, by the contrast between their wealth and grand connections and the disorganised way in which they seemed to live. Even at the Vicarage there was Kitty to cook and do the laundry, to light the fires and sweep the carpets.

At Benbarrow they seemed to ‘get by’. Cups and plates were washed when the supply of clean ones ran out. Lunchtime meals were chunks of crumbly cheese and freshly-baked bread from one of the nearby farmhouses, ham and fresh fruit and sometimes cake bought from Whitmore market. Sometimes Veronica cooked in the evenings, but mostly they ate at the local pub, meals of steak and ale pie or fish and chips, which they grumbled about the following day. Once in a while Frances would disappear off to Oxford in her little grey Austin, the back seat full of laundry bags. In the evening she would return, a little flushed from her luncheon, the car full of department store shopping bags and brown paper parcels packed with freshly-starched linen.

Helena dropped the remaining Kirby grips into the dish and replaced the lid.

‘I think the others have already gone up,’ she said.

As Helena and Frances made their way along the back corridor and up the narrow staircase, they could hear the scrape of furniture being dragged across the floor of the loft.

‘Pick the bloody thing up you two, don’t drag it!’ Henry complained. ‘The plaster will come off the sodding ceilings.’

Frances put her head around the door and cleared her throat pointedly.

‘Ladies present. Is it safe to come in?’ she asked.

‘Oh yes. Sorry.’ Henry had the grace to look a little shame-faced. ‘I hadn’t realised you were there.’

‘Don’t worry. We’ve heard worse, haven’t we?’

Helena nodded. She had indeed heard worse at boarding school, but it was the first time she’d heard ‘that kind of language’, as her aunt would have called it, at Benbarrow. She looked around, her eyes gradually becoming accustomed to the gloom. A little light filtered through filthy windows at the gable end of the loft where Kendall still supported one end of an ornate wooden bed, only his eyes visible above the carved headboard. Eric Daniels stood at the other end, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

‘Right. One, two, three, lift!’ said Kendall. With a lot of effort the bed was relocated against the bare wall on one side of the loft space. ‘God, that was heavier than I expected.’

‘I think it’s designed to come apart,’ said Helena. She pointed to the patterned brass caps which covered a row of bolts along the side of the bedframe. ‘I don’t think they would have been able to get it up here otherwise.’ Henry looked at the bed, and then the doorway into the loft and then back at the bed.

‘You’ve not come a moment too soon.’ Laughing, he threw an arm around Helena, and hugged her against his shoulder, pulling her off-balance. She felt his warmth through his shirt, through her cotton jumper. She sensed the thumping of a heart; unable to tell if the rhythm was his or hers she stepped out of his embrace.

‘Shall we appoint you Director of Operations?’ Kendall said. ‘You can see how totally clueless we all are.’

‘What are you actually trying to do?’ Helena moved towards the bedhead and ran her fingers over the wooden relief, tracing the smooth outlines of fruit and flowers that nestled between twists of ivy. The bed was old. Not ‘old’ like her old-fashioned bed back at the Vicarage. No, this was ‘old’ like an antique, something that had been made by a real craftsman with skill and care. For a moment the image of Robert Locke turning over the ornaments on the vicarage mantelshelf sprang to mind. She imagined him examining the carving on the bedhead, checking for blemishes, assessing its worth. She shuddered and turned away.

‘Two things really,’ said Henry. ‘We need to clear this side so that we can repair the leak in the roof. Some of the tiles need replacing before the winter weather sets in. Look, up there.’ He pointed to a patch of felting; with tiles broken or missing it looked almost transparent, even against the dull autumn sky. ‘That can all be done from outside. But some of the rafters need replacing too, where they’ve become wet and rotten. The roofers need to be able to get at them from here.’ He pinched a length of timber between his fingers and the edges crumbled to the floor.

‘And the other thing?’ asked Frances.

‘Well I thought it might be worth going through some of the packing cases, just to get an idea what’s up here. I think it was mostly family stuff that Grandfather stashed up here when the house was used as a hospital. I doubt there’s anything valuable left – most of the decent paintings and furniture went up to Hampstead. But you never know. We might find something interesting.’

Near the windows at the far end of the loft, where fortunately the roof had remained watertight, a number of tea-chests were stacked. Each one was lashed with rope, the knots stiff with sealing wax. Beside them a pair of dark olive cabin trunks jutted out into the loft space, their fabric coverings worn, their brass bands and locks tarnished. Eric ambled across towards them and rattled the locks.

‘And I suppose you know where the keys are?’ he asked, although Helena had already guessed that was unlikely. Henry ignored him.

Frances shuffled the papers into a neat pile. As she and Helena had opened each tea-chest they’d made a brief list of the contents. It wasn’t a difficult task; once they’d brushed off the thick layer of dust they could see that whoever had sealed up the chests had also written on the lids in Indian ink: *Aunt Maud’s Dinner Service; Deerpark Glass; Sheffield Plate; Beswick Figurines.*

A brief inspection had verified the accuracy of each description. Aunt Maud’s dinner service turned out to be an uncompromisingly plain porcelain affair that Frances said was entirely consistent with her reputation for frugality and thrift. The Deerpark glass was a collection of finely cut lead crystal, tumblers and wineglasses carefully wrapped in several sheets of tissue paper and each as clear and sparkling as the day it had been packed into the chest. The Beswick was treated to no more than a superficial assessment. Frances

inspected the first layer; declared that the figurines had greater financial value than aesthetic appeal and left them for another day. She wrote simply “Beswick figures, variously ghastly” on her list, and slid the chest to one side.

The task of clearing furniture from around the damaged roof tiles complete, Eric headed off in search of food. Kendall sat down on one of the trunks and rattled the lock.

‘I wonder what’s inside these,’ he said. ‘Precious gold from the Valley of the Kings, do you think?’

‘Hardly,’ said Henry, wiping the sweat from his forehead as he sat down on the other trunk. Helena glanced across at them and smiled. Henry frowned. ‘What’s so funny?’

‘Oh, nothing. It’s just that you look like the photographs of the wolf statues, one each end, guarding the tomb.’ She adopted a stern expression and perched on the edge of a tea chest, imitating their poses. Kendall laughed.

‘What do you know about Tutankhamun?’ he asked. ‘You must have been little more than a baby when the treasures were dug out.’

Helena turned away, suddenly reminded of the chasm between herself and the others. Only Eric was near her age and he came from a similar background. Whatever made her imagine that she could think of these people as friends?

‘I’ve seen the pictures, haven’t I?’ she mumbled, aware that she sounded as young as she felt. She headed for the door. ‘Didn’t we say we were going to break for a cup of tea? It’s pretty chilly up here once you stop work.’

Veronica, a check tea-towel tucked into the waistband of her long purple skirt, was stirring a big pan when Helena walked in. The smell of cooking vegetables

filled the kitchen, onions and carrots, potatoes, sweet parsnips and swede. Eric sat at the table, spoon in one hand, chunk of bread in the other. Steam curled from a large bowl of soup in front of him.

‘Get yourself a bowlful before the others come down,’ he said, pushing a chair out from under the table with his foot. ‘It’s good.’

‘It smells lovely,’ Helena said. She thanked Vronnie and sat down heavily. ‘I hadn’t realised how cold it was up there till I stopped.’ She wrapped her hands around the bowl, cradling it in her palms. The surface of the thick soup wrinkled as she blew across its surface.

‘Salt and pepper if you want it,’ said Veronica, as she joined them at the table. ‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, looking across at Helena.

‘Nothing. Just a bit chilly.’

Veronica cocked her head on one side and raised an eyebrow. She seemed about to say something, but then Henry and Kendall came into the kitchen, closely followed by Frances and the moment was gone.

‘So while Elsa’s in Germany, Robert has gone on a bit of a buying trip. He said he might call in here while he’s out and about,’ Henry was explaining over his shoulder to his sister. Helena looked up from her soup at the mention of Robert’s name. Odd that she had only been thinking about him a few hours earlier.

‘He doesn’t plan to stay I hope?’ said Frances as she reached for the loaf and tore off a chunk. Henry laughed.

‘Not after last time, no!’ he said. ‘Even without Elsa and her aversion to spiders! He said he’d stay at The Fleece. I think he’s become rather too accustomed to his comforts and Benbarrow doesn’t quite deliver.’ He paused a moment. ‘But it will one day. Just wait. It will.’

Even though Helena left earlier than usual, the remnants of daylight were beginning to fade by the time she reached the village. She snuggled her knitted scarf around her neck and shoved her hands deep into her pockets, cursing the Raleigh's flat tyre. The walk across to Benbarrow had been pleasant in the winter sunshine, but now the air was damp, little pearls of moisture forming on her gabardine coat. Nearing the vicarage she saw a large car pull out of the drive, its lights sweeping the hedgerow. She stepped onto the grass verge, the heels of her lace-ups sinking into the muddy grass. Even pressed against the hawthorn there wasn't much space between Helena and the car's wing mirror as it powered past her, the driver peering out from under an oversized Homburg without acknowledging her.

She went into the vicarage through the back door, kicking her mud-caked shoes off as she stepped into the kitchen. The steamy warmth greeted her, making her eyes water and her nose tingle. She found a folded newspaper, dropped her shoes onto it and tugged off her gloves. She was digging in the depths of her pocket for a handkerchief when Kitty came in from the hall, carrying a large package wrapped in brown paper and coated in a thick layer of dust.

'Perfect timing,' said Kitty, as she saw Helena. 'Open the back door for me, will you?'

Helena held the door open for her to slip through, out into the chill evening air. Moments later, when the sound of Kitty tearing off the paper and crumpling it into the waste bin had stopped, Helena opened it again, just enough for her to step back into the kitchen.

‘Hell’s teeth, it’s cold out there,’ said Kitty, as she leaned an old gilt frame against the wall and rubbed her hands together. Helena tipped the frame forward so that she could see the picture. It was an uninspiring watercolour of a cottage garden in full bloom, far removed from the bare winter garden that lay beyond the steamed-up windows. It wouldn’t have looked out of place on cheap box of chocolates. She pulled a face.

‘It’s going in the lounge,’ Kitty said, by way of explanation. ‘Your aunt said she thought it was more cheerful than the one of the moors. I’m to hang it before dinner.’

‘I’ll give you a hand, if you like,’ said Helena, shaking off her coat and hanging it on one of the hooks by the back door. ‘So where’s the moorland one going? I rather like that one. Is it too big for my bedroom, do you think?’ Kitty gathered up the picture and headed towards the hall.

‘That Mr Locke’s taken it. Your aunt said it needed cleaning and he’d be able to arrange for it to be done properly, up in London.’

‘Oh, so that was who it was,’ thought Helena, recalling the heavy figure hunched over the steering wheel. ‘I might have guessed.’

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: VRONNIE

The Hotel, situated in one of the quietest positions in the city, is within easy walking distance of all the Colleges and Public Buildings. Spacious Lounges offer rest to the weary.... an ideal meeting place for friends.....the standard of its service and cuisine being well known.

Alden's Guide to Oxford 1937: The Randolph Hotel

Henry called a meeting. Since the surveyor had submitted his report in early November and Frances had been persuaded to help plan and manage the restorations, there had been regular gatherings, during which roles had been allocated, or assumed, by tacit agreement. Henry, as owner of Benbarrow, had become the project's principal director, with Frances installed as his chief advisor and accountant.

Kendall's passion for the gardens made him the obvious person to oversee the work on the grounds, although with the weather closing in and outside work becoming difficult, he assisted with tasks in the house whenever he could. In the evenings he spent hours poring over sketches for the estate, designing a series of smaller gardens with herbaceous borders to complement the formal terraces which he had cleared for Spring planting.

Vronnie referred to herself as Head Cook and Bottlewasher, alluding to the fact that without her daily exertions they would have either starved, or been engulfed by a mountain of unwashed dishes. It was a role she enjoyed and, assured of a valued place in the team, she produced a constant supply of cakes

and biscuits from the unreliable oven and created delicious hot meals from limited ingredients.

She arrived in the Octagon bearing a large tray containing cups and saucers, sugar and milk, and a plate of small cakes. Eric followed her, carrying a large pot of tea covered in an appliquéd teacosy.

‘Madeleines!’ Frances picked up one of the dainty cakes and bit into the soft sponge. ‘How on earth did you manage to make these? They’re delicious.’

‘I found a box of baking trays in the Butler’s Pantry. I thought I’d give them a try.’

It was no secret that Vronnie was gradually working her way through the kitchen and the neighbouring Butler’s and Housekeeper’s pantries, sorting through the many crates and boxes which had been put into storage when Benbarrow became a hospital. She had arranged for a local carpenter to repair the broken shelves and doors of the kitchen cabinets and they were now stacked with gleaming crockery and glassware. As she discovered pans in one crate and baking trays in another, the cupboards filled with equipment and the kitchen filled with the aromas of cooking.

Most of the linens however had been beyond recovery, either stained by foxing or chewed by generations of mice. It was clear they’d been packed away hurriedly, with no expectation that their storage would last more than a matter of months. It seemed to Vronnie that it symbolised how naïve they’d all been at the beginning, when waving off brothers and lovers had been touched with more excitement and pride than anxiety.

‘Look Kendall,’ Frances demanded as he walked in. ‘Madeleines! The beginnings of civilisation, surely?’ Kendall laughed and deposited a folder of drawings on the floor beside one of the chairs.

‘You’re a wonder, Vronnie.’ He flung an arm around her shoulders. ‘What would we do without you?’ She smiled but inside she was beaming, knowing the others were totally unaware how important this sense of belonging was to her. The future is so precarious and yet they are all so sure of themselves, she thought. So confident of their place in the world. She shrugged his arm away.

‘Get away with you, boy.’

‘Order, troops,’ said Henry as he took a cup of tea from Vronnie. ‘The damp-proofing at the back of the house is finished now, and the plaster has needed minimal repair. So the plan is to move everything in this direction while the workmen set to on the front. There’s a lot of damp there and the plaster is particularly bad in the library and drawing room. There’s too much to get it finished before Christmas, so I suggest we prepare everything but leave the building work until the New Year.’

‘That makes sense,’ said Frances. ‘We all need a bit of breathing space, I think.’

‘Agreed. Is that alright with you Kendall?’

‘Yes. What about decorating? Have you decided what you’re doing with each room? And when?’

‘I was coming to that,’ said Henry, opening his notebook and flicking through the pages until he came to a plan of the Octagon. The sketch showed a rough layout of the room, nestled behind the grand staircase which swept up from the main hallway to the balustraded landing on the first floor. It was an unusual room, with doors to other rooms on two walls and a disguised door opening onto a corridor beneath the stairs on a third. Windows on the three bay walls filled the Octagon with light on even the dullest day, which made it a favourite with everyone.

'We had an idea about this room the other day. These two walls would look wonderful covered in murals.' Eric, Vronnie and Kendall turned to look at the walls on either side of the concealed door. They did indeed look like vast canvasses, waiting for an artist's touch. Frances produced a fold of newspaper from her bag.

'You've probably all seen the pictures of PlasNewydd,' she said as she gave the cutting to Kendall, who nodded and passed it to Vronnie and Eric. Eric unfolded the paper and read the text of an article. The Marquess of Anglesey had remodelled the North wing of his ancestral mansion overlooking the Menai Straits, and had commissioned Rex Whistler to paint a *trompe l'œil* mural for the long wall of the dining room. The image of water and mountains, viewed through an Italianate quayside, had caused a sensation when photographs had appeared in the newspapers the previous year, prompting much discussion in the art world.

'It's on a much smaller scale, of course,' said Henry. 'And it won't be a Whistler. But I'd love to leave an individual mark on Benbarrow.'

'What do you have in mind?' asked Eric. 'A nautical theme is fine for Anglesey, but doesn't really suit Oxfordshire.'

Henry turned a few more pages in his notebook. Thumbnail sketches and scribbled notes covered the pages.

'I'm not really sure what I want. It needs to be rural.' He turned to his friend. 'And no, no ships, Eric. Or mountains. I'd like some local landmarks – the Crest perhaps. I'd appreciate any suggestions.'

Vronnie went out to the kitchen, where she refilled the teapot and cut some slices of fruit cake. This was clearly going to be a long discussion and they would need further sustenance.

The debate continued over dinner and on into the evening.

‘Vronnie!’ Kendall’s voice echoed along the corridor beside the kitchen.

‘Vronnie! Are you about?’

Vronnie hastily wrapped her brush in oilskin, pulled off her pinafore and, pushing strands of hair back into her plait, emerged from the Butler’s pantry.

‘Coming!’ She turned into the kitchen and collided with Kendall.

‘Whoa!’ he said. ‘Where’s the fire? I was only going to ask if you fancied a trip into Oxford tomorrow. Henry wants to meet with some chap who specialises in repairing historic roofs and I need to collect some packages from the Post Office.’

‘Is everybody going?’ asked Vronnie, as she filled the kettle.

‘I think so. Anyone who wants to anyway, so long as nobody minds sitting under a pile of parcels on the way home.’

‘That sounds like a great idea. I’ve not been beyond Whitmore for over a month. A change of scenery will do us all good.’

‘And a day off cooking duties will do you a power of good. Frances has suggested we have lunch at the Randolph.’ Kendall pulled out a chair, lifted the sleeping kitten from its seat and guided Vronnie towards it. ‘You’re looking very tired. I’ve heard you on the stairs at night. Are you having a problem sleeping?’

Vronnie watched him prepare tea, fetching cups and saucers from the cupboard, rinsing out the pot with hot water, spooning in tealeaves from the caddy. She didn’t attempt to take over the task as she might have done the previous week. Tiredness was indeed engulfing her.

‘What is it, Vronnie? If there’s something wrong.....’ Kendall paused. He sat down next to her. ‘Promise you’d tell me if there was anything I could do.’

Vronnie hesitated, and then made her decision.

‘I’ve been painting.’ Immediately she felt the relief of telling someone wash across her. Kendall smiled.

‘I know Vronnie. We all know.’ He reached across the table and wiped a smear of oil paint from her wrist. He held up his finger so that she could see the verdant green smudge on his fingertip. ‘We were just waiting until you were ready to tell us.’

Vronnie pulled the folded sheet from her pocket and added a few more items to the paper. In the back of the car, bouncing over the rutted road, she saw that her writing was barely legible, but knew the scribbles would be sufficient reminder. As soon as they arrived in Oxford Henry was taking her to Alden’s to open an account. Vronnie was free to buy whatever art materials she needed while he went to his meeting.

Her mind ranged over the previous night’s discussion. After she had shown him the rough sketches she’d done for the panels, Kendall gathered everyone in the library. Vronnie wasn’t sure why she’d settled on the story of Persephone, but they all seemed to like the concept of twin panels depicting Benbarrow in Winter and Summer. Maybe it reflected the process of bringing the house back to life again, after decades of disrepair. She wasn’t sure. She only knew that their enthusiastic response was more than she dared hope for.

‘I’ve got some shopping to do in Elliston’s and I’ve booked a midday appointment to get my hair trimmed in their salon,’ said Frances, leaning forward in her seat to tap Henry on the shoulder. ‘I’ve booked a table for one. Does that suit everybody?’

‘Suits me,’ Henry replied, his attention on the road. ‘I’m expecting to be finished by about eleven and then I’m having a coffee with Eric before he catches his train. I’ll see you at the Randolph.’

‘Kendall? What about you?’

‘I’m off to The Ashmoleum. I’ve got some parcels to pick up, so I’ll detour to pick those up before I meet you. Anybody need anything from the Post Office while I’m there?’ Vronnie looked up from her shopping list.

‘Please,’ she said. ‘Could you check my *poste restante* while you’re there? It’ll save me carrying all my painting materials.’

‘Just how much are you planning to buy?’ asked Henry. ‘One less on the way home, but remember they’ve still got to fit in the car. And so have we!’

Vronnie thoroughly enjoyed her expedition. She had been restrained when planning her purchases and composing her list, but once she arrived at Alden’s she was like a child in a sweetshop. Henry ordered the made to measure canvasses and arranged for the larger items to be delivered with them, after which he went to his meeting, leaving Vronnie to make her selection. By late morning she had accumulated an assortment of sketch pads and pencils, oils, brushes and linseed. The assistant packed the most urgently needed materials into a box, which she tied with string before passing it across the counter.

Vronnie signed the chit. Printed across its letterhead was the slogan *Every Requisite for The Artist*. She couldn’t help smiling. *Veronica Curbridge, Artist*, she thought.

Lunch too had been wonderful. Frances was, as ever, generous. The Ruffords might not have been as wealthy as the Lockes, but there was an ease about their giving, without any sense that it was a debt that one day might be

called in. Vronnie even thought Frances appeared a little too open-handed on occasion, carelessly generous, if that were possible. But at Randolph she was in good form, buoyed up by her visit to the stylist and her purchases in the dress department. She had, Frances exclaimed, been spoilt for choice and several large carrier bags emblazoned *Elliston & Cavell* suggested that the choice had proved too difficult.

Fortified by Beef Wellington, a delicious lemon syllabub and several glasses of Sauvignon, a meal that had extended into the afternoon, Vronnie wondered when she had ever enjoyed a happier day. Never mind that she was squashed beneath parcels in the back of the car.

‘Let me carry that,’ offered Kendall when they finally reached Benbarrow. He took the box of art supplies through to the Butler’s pantry and put them beside the sink, ready for Vronnie to unpack. She followed him in and was surprised by his look of concern.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked.

‘I picked up another letter when I was at the Post Office,’ he said, taking a creased white envelope from his jacket pocket. ‘I didn’t want to give it to you while we were at The Randolph.’ He turned it over and handed it to her.

Scribbled across the surface were a number of address. It had been forwarded from one address to another, from one post office to the next, as she had stayed with friends and family over the summer. Only when she had been at Benbarrow for several weeks had it finally caught up with her.

It was months old. And it had originally been posted in Catalonia.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: KITTY

The causes of vomiting are very various. Vomiting is a very distressing affection, and when it proves obstinate or severe, calls for the immediate assistance of art in order to its being relieved.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management

'What on earth is the matter?' asked Annie, pulling out a chair for Kitty. 'You look like death warmed up.'

Kitty put her basket on the table and sank gratefully onto the seat. She slowly pulled off her grey hat and gloves, tugging at the end of each knitted finger as if the very effort of removing them took more energy than she could muster. She tucked the gloves inside the hat and laid them beside her basket.

'I'm exhausted,' she said as she started to unwind her scarf. 'I hardly slept last night.' Her weariness was expressed in every lethargic movement, every languid gesture.

'Because of the thunder?' asked Annie. 'As soon as it started I thought of you. I remember when you were little, climbing into my bed whenever there was a storm.' She shook the kettle briefly, decided it was full enough and placed it on the hot plate. 'There, that shouldn't take a moment.' She sat down opposite Kitty and waited. The sisters were gradually learning one another's ways, growing into an adult understanding; each knew not to hurry the other.

'Well, the storm didn't help of course,' said Kitty. 'I'd only just dropped off again when it started. I'd already been up half the night with Mrs Harding. Proper poorly she was – we thought we'd have to call the doctor out. I'm glad

we didn't though, not with that downpour and everything. The poor man would have been driving home through the worst of it.'

Kitty undid her coat, her cold fingers fumbling with each button. She shrugged its shoulders onto the back of the chair, continuing to sit on the thick tweed of its skirt. It was an old coat, one she'd picked up at a village jumble a couple of years previously, but it was warm and serviceable even if it had been a little worn around the buttonholes and the pockets had needed mending.

"What was the matter with her? Must have been serious if you thought of calling Doctor Berrington from his bed.'

'It was. She said she didn't feel well before supper and was going for a lay-down. I went up to see if she wanted me to bring her something on a tray and she said no, she'd got a sick headache. So I left her to rest and got on with serving the vicar and Helena. I didn't think much of it; she's had a few migraines lately.' Kitty didn't add that Mrs Harding seemed very anxious about the vicarage budget and often complained of a headache after she'd spent an afternoon examining the ledgers. To Annie, whose financial concerns were more about whether she could be out when the rentman called, it would seem ludicrous. There was always plenty of food at the vicarage, and never the worry of another small mouth to feed.

'And it wasn't just a headache?' prompted Annie.

'Well, I'm not sure. Helena went in to see how she was before she went to bed, and called me to help. She'd found Mrs Harding sitting on the floor, shivering and clutching the guzzunder. She'd been sick in the bed, so we stripped the sheets off and washed her down and put her in a clean nightgown. She wouldn't have the doctor called; said she just wanted to sit in her chair until the nausea passed.'

The kettle built up steam as it came to the boil. Annie got up to lift it from the hob before its shrill whistle woke baby Lizzie, asleep in the crib next to the stove. The old dog lifted his head and watched as she bustled around the kitchen making the tea and emptying the bag of groceries that Kitty had put by the drainer.

‘Helena fetched the vicar and he sat with her for a time, while Helena and I put the sheets in to soak and remade the bed. I felt awful.’ Kitty leaned forward with her elbows on the table and rested her chin on her hands. ‘I kept wondering if it was something she’d eaten.’

‘That’s ridiculous,’ said Annie. ‘If it had been, then you would all have been ill.’

‘That’s what the vicar said.’ Kitty remembered his kindness when she’d mentioned her concerns the night before. He had been adamant that she wasn’t to blame. ‘Anyway, she seemed a bit better after a while and we put her to bed. And after I’d finished in the kitchen I went up too.’

‘Sounds like that wasn’t the end of it,’ said Annie, putting a cup of tea and a cheese sandwich in front of Kitty. She checked briefly on Lizzie, tucking the tattered blankets around her. The baby sucked furiously on her thumb for a moment and then relaxed back into her dreaming sleep.

‘No, it wasn’t. Around two o’clock she woke all of us, screaming that her head was going to split open. The vicar told me to call the doctor, but the wind had got up by then and it must have brought the phone lines down. She wouldn’t let him leave her side. And the vicar wouldn’t have me or Helena go out to fetch the doctor either. The weather was getting worse by the moment.’ Kitty took a sip of her tea and looked towards the crib. ‘And then suddenly she was asleep, as calm as your Lizzie.’

‘Just like that?’

‘Yes. She even slept through the thunder and lightning, which is more than I did.’ Kitty laughed, feeling foolish now that she thought of herself buried under the blankets as the storm raged around her. Even through the bedcovers she had been able to see the lightning and had quaked at every deep-throated rumble of thunder. In her small attic bedroom, it felt so close, as the rain pounded on the roof above her head, rattling the ridge tiles. She’d counted the seconds between each flash of light and each clap of thunder, as Annie had taught her all those years before, and had only begun to relax as the moments lengthened and the storm moved away.

‘It was a big one,’ said Annie. ‘It woke all the little ones. I had Lizzie in with me and the boys all tumbled in together. Then the pup started to howl, so Roy brought him upstairs too. He’s a good lad, looked after all of them for me.’

‘He’s very grown up,’ said Kitty. ‘More like fifteen than twelve.’

‘He is that,’ said Annie, casting her mind back to how maturely he’d dealt with the fawn. She’d sworn the boys to secrecy, so telling Kitty seemed wrong. Still, she wished she could share how fearful for his safety she’d been and how proud she was of both boys. She felt guilty keeping their escapades a secret. Kitty interrupted her thoughts.

‘Not in build, mind.’

‘No,’ Annie replied. ‘Sometimes I wish he was a bit brawnier, more muscular like his Dad. But he takes after me and Mum.’ The girls both glanced towards the dresser, where a photograph of their parents took pride of place. On shelves designed to display a collection of china were an assortment of items belonging to Annie and the children. A brown pottery jug stuffed with teasels and dried grasses; a number of fir cones, each the size of a child’s fist;

a wooden train that Billy had made when Roy was a toddler; a doll that had been Annie's before it was Kitty's and that Kitty had brought from her bedroom at the vicarage when Lizzie was born. In the centre a plain wooden frame held a fading studio portrait of a young couple, the woman sitting on a plain wooden chair, the man standing behind, his hand resting protectively on her shoulder.

'She would have been proud of him, Annie.' Kitty reached out for her sister's hand and squeezed it gently. 'Of all of them. They're a lovely bunch and you know how much Mum loved kiddies.'

'I didn't ever tell you she sent baby things for Roy, did I? She came just after he was born with a soft cotton nightgown and a knitted jacket. She'd made them herself, when Dad was out of the house.' Annie dabbed the corner of her eye with a handkerchief. 'She made me promise not to tell anyone, in case word got back.'

The two girls sat nursing their cups of tea, each lost in their own memories.

It was all Kitty could do to stay awake on the bus back to Hanbury. As it rumbled along the main road from Whitmore she sensed herself drifting with the rise and fall of the road, the sway of the corners. Turning off the main road, the old bus rattled over the potholes, enough to jolt her back into the day. She gathered her belongings, pulled on her gloves and reluctantly readied herself to get off.

It amazed her that Mrs Harding had woken refreshed and unable to remember the events of the night before, and had been quite dismissive of her husband's concerns. The only evidence of disturbed sleep were the dark rings under the vicar's eyes and Kitty's less than usually efficient service at breakfast.

Helena had sensibly gone back to bed, once she had seen her aunt was up and about.

‘Your stop, love,’ called the driver, pulling the bus to a halt near the Hanbury junction. ‘Mind how you go.’

‘Thanks,’ said Kitty, as she stepped off into the long wet grass at the roadside. ‘See you next week.’ She looked down at her laced boots as the bus pulled away. They were already soaked through and she could feel the moisture seeping around her toes. She readjusted her grip on her basket, pushing the handle into the crook of her arm, and set off, walking along the tarmac rather than on the wet and muddy verge. The cold damp air seemed to rouse her for a moment, and for a few paces she strode out before the exertion drained her. Behind her she heard the deep growl of an engine; as she paused to let the car pass it slowed and stopped.

‘Hop in, my dear,’ called Doctor Berrington through the open window. ‘I’ll drop you by the church. Save you a few yards, at least.’

‘Thank you, Doctor,’ said Kitty. ‘I’m really grateful.’ She settled herself into the front seat and wound up the window. ‘It’s a lovely car this, really comfortable.’ She gazed around the Bentley’s interior, admiring the wood panelling and the polished dials. She took off a glove and ran her hand over leather upholstery; it was soft and smooth under her fingertips.

‘A modest self-indulgence, I’m afraid.’ The doctor chuckled. ‘I need a car to get around my patients, so when I was offered this one, I couldn’t resist.’ He glanced at Kitty and furrowed his brow. ‘You look a little tired, my dear. A young lady of your age shouldn’t be looking so weary. They’re not overworking you at the vicarage, are they?’

‘Oh, no. Not at all.’ Kitty blushed. She had always been an unconvincing liar. ‘Mrs Harding was unwell, so we had a disturbed night.’

‘Why on earth didn’t someone call me?’ the doctor asked, pulling the car to a halt beside the church gates. ‘I know it was an awful night, but I would have come straight away. I always keep some extra strong painkillers in the surgery.’

‘We tried, but the vicarage line was down. I wanted to nip up by foot, but the wind was terrible by then and the vicar said he wouldn’t let me go out in that weather. He was insistent.’ Kitty fumbled for the latch to the door, and let herself out. ‘Thank you again for the lift.’

‘My pleasure, Kitty. Tell Mrs Harding I’ll call in later, when I’ve finished my rounds, will you?’ the doctor said, as Kitty turned to shut the door behind her. She hesitated, searching for a polite way to refuse.

‘I don’t think that would be a good idea, Doctor Berrington,’ she said. ‘She might think I’d been gossiping, you see. And then I’d be in trouble for discussing vicarage business.’

‘Of course. I can see that.’ The doctor tipped his hat to Kitty. ‘Maybe I shall just call by chance. As I’m passing as it were. And perhaps you might have some of your delicious cake, warm from the oven, eh?’

‘I think that’s a possibility,’ Kitty said, with a conspiratorial chuckle. ‘Let me think. Victoria sponge?’

‘Perfect,’ said the doctor as he reached across to shut the door. He waved as he pulled the Bentley away from the verge. Kitty slipped through the church gates, crossed the graveyard and cut through the lane to the vicarage. She picked her way between a scattering of fat black sloes strewn across the path, residue of last night’s storm. The Autumn pickings were already stored on shelves in her pantry: rich bittersweet jams and jellies and bottles of sloe gin,

ready for Christmas. The overhanging branches had been stripped bare and now the weather had brought down the final windfalls. Almost without noticing, Autumn had slipped by and the village had settled into Winter.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: HELENA

When boiling mussels, put a small onion with them. If there is any poison in the mussels the onion will go quite black. If good, the onion will retain its natural colour, and will not taint the mussels in any way.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management

Helena pushed her hair from her forehead and once more readjusted the small silver slide that held back the remnants of her fringe. She stood up, stretched her back, rolled her shoulders. Sitting on the library floor for most of the afternoon had made her stiff, and despite the oil-filled radiator that Henry had brought in, she was bitterly cold. Still, the books needed packing up as quickly as possible. The builders were almost finished in the main dining room, and they planned to start on the library and drawing room immediately after Christmas.

'Had enough?' asked Henry, coming in from the hall, his arms full of empty cardboard boxes.

'No, I'm fine. I was just taking a break. I think I've been sitting in one position too long.' She laced her fingers together and pushed her arms out in front of her, as she'd done many times before in exercise and deportment classes at St Bert's. Suddenly she was struck by how long ago all that was: school and studying, dormitories and refectories and much-anticipated exeats. How long ago, and how dull. This new life, mixing with the Ruffords and their friends, watching Benbarrow change as Henry galvanised his teams of workmen, being part of it all – this was the life. She imagined her school friends,

hunched over books, reading Austen and Elliott and the Brontes, picking apart the details of life in the grand houses of Mansfield Park, Northanger Abbey, Middlemarch. And here was she, absorbed in the events of a real country estate. She couldn't help but smile.

'Something amused you?' Henry asked as he tore a long strip from a roll of gummed paper tape.

'Not really. I was just thinking. A few months ago I was reading in books about houses like this. Netherfield and Pemberley. And now I'm helping restore one.' Helena blushed, aware that she was perhaps overstating her involvement in Henry's grand schemes for Benbarrow.

'That's how I feel, too.' Henry held out the end of the strip towards Helena. 'Hold this will you?' He reached for the sponge and ran it the length of tape, moistening the glue before kneeling on the flaps of the filled box to hold them in place. Helena smoothed the tape across the join, making sure that the edges lined up before the tape dried, sealing the box. Henry tapped the damp, sticky sponge on her nose, making her jump.

'Sorry, couldn't resist!' he said, laughing. 'Now what did you say was in this one?'

'I didn't. And now I'm not going to tell you.' She wiped the moisture from her nose, trying to look haughty and superior. The cloying, animal scent of the glue filled her nostrils. 'You'll have to guess.'

'No, let's make it a surprise for when we open it.' He took the pencil from behind his ear and scribbled on the top of the box. 'There,' he said. 'Now time for some tea.'

As Helena followed him from the library she glanced at the box. *Helena's Mystery Box*. She hoped she would still be involved with Benbarrow when the box was opened.

Every available surface in the kitchen was covered with china. Large and small plates; cups and saucers; soup bowls and desert dishes; servers and tureens and gravy boats. Some boldly patterned with burgundy and rose-pink blooms, others more subtly decorated, their rims fluted and gold-edged. Vronnie was standing at the sink, up to her elbows in soap suds.

'Good Lord, Vronnie. What are you doing?' Henry asked.

'It's just possible that I'm washing these dishes,' replied Vronnie, pausing for a moment with the base of a large soup tureen in her hands. 'Then again, I might be performing a flamenco.' She placed the tureen on the draining board and raised her arms above her head, snapping her fingers in time to the beat of her heel against the stone floor. As she twisted and turned, droplets streamed from her fingertips and tiny bubbles ran down her arms.

Henry laughed and grasped Vronnie by the wrist, swinging her into a flamboyant pirouette before catching her around the waist. Helena stared at them, bewildered by this large exotic creature cavorting around the kitchen in the arms of a young man, her arms wet and shiny with washing-up water. Vronnie came to an abrupt halt by the sink.

'No, I think I was right first time. I was washing up.' And as if nothing had happened, she carried on. They're mad, thought Helena. What was it her father used to say? Mad as a box of frogs.

Henry picked up the kettle from the top of the stove and nudged Vronnie out of the way so that he could reach the tap.

‘Helena thinks we’re crazy,’ he said in a deliberate stage-whisper.

‘And she is quite right, of course,’ replied Vronnie. She turned to Helena.

‘Pass me that dish, will you dear? And if you could dry a few of these...’

Helena did as she was asked, bringing across the next few items for washing and picking up the driest of the pile of tea-towels in order to clear a little space on the drainer. She had watched Kitty enough – and more recently, helped too – to recognise that most of the soap-streaked dishes would need a good rinse before they were used. Still, they were cleaner than when they came out of the cupboard.

‘Which shelf does this go on?’ she asked.

‘No, don’t bother putting them away. We’ve got enough in the cupboards for day to day use. Frances wants to pack the better china up and put them into storage while the workmen are in. I just thought it might help to get the worst of the grime off them first.’ And then, as if reading Helena’s mind, she added: ‘They’re a bit soapy, but it doesn’t matter. They’ll all need washing again when they’re unpacked.’

Henry picked up a few items from the table and turned them over, searching for a maker’s mark on the base. Occasionally he held one in the palm of his hand and flicked the rim with his fingernail, listening for the clear ring of an undamaged cup or dish.

‘I think some of these might be quite valuable,’ he said, gesturing to the more delicate pieces that Vronnie had placed into separate groups at the back of the work surface. ‘Goodness knows how they’ve survived. More by luck than judgement, I suspect.’

‘Might Robert know? If they’re valuable, I mean?’ asked Helena. She could remember Robert Locke turning over the ornaments on the mantelshelf at

the vicarage, inspecting the marks, checking for damage. She noticed a frown pass across Henry's brow, clouding his expression for a moment. 'I thought Kendall said he was an antique dealer.'

'He is, though he wouldn't take kindly to being called a 'dealer' these days. He's come up in the world - considers himself to be an 'expert in art and antiquities'. What is it he has on his business card, Vronnie? *Consultant to aristocracy and royalty*, or somesuch.'

Helena carried on drying the dishes, placing them in neat piles according to size and pattern. There was so much she didn't understand, so much she would like to ask, and yet it was not her place. She had thought the Lockes were friends of Henry and Frances, but it seemed that Henry felt some antipathy towards Robert, at least.

'Ah, yes,' said Vronnie. 'The sort of man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the scrunch of tyres on gravel. The kitchen door opened just as the kettle began to screech.

'Perfect timing,' said Frances as she came in, arms full of parcels, rain dripping from her hat. 'Oh God, where am I supposed to put these?' Helena dropped the tea-towel over the wooden back of a chair and reached out to rescue the avalanche of wet bags and boxes. 'And look who I've just picked up from the station!' They turned towards the kitchen door as Eric Daniels appeared, arms equally full, hat and coat even more drenched than Frances's. He pushed a battered leather overnight bag over the threshold with his foot.

'It's tipping it down out there. Awful bloody weather.' Eric stood dripping on the kitchen doormat. 'Ok to come in with these?'

‘Of course, of course. Close the door. Put that lot in the library and then get yourselves warmed up by the range.’ Henry held up the steaming kettle. ‘I’ll make a pot of tea. Helena, be a dear and fetch some towels from the bathroom, will you?’

Helena rushed ahead to drop her armful of parcels in the library before scurrying upstairs. The bathroom cupboard was stacked with thick white towels, huge bath sheets folded at the bottom, smaller hand-towels and flannels heaped on top. She picked up a couple of the medium sized towels, pressing her face into the thick terry loops. They felt luxurious. They felt expensive. She imagined burying herself in the soft, dense fabric, curling up for the winter like some woodland creature.

When she got downstairs Frances and Eric were still in the library, sorting through a pile of parcels on the desk. ‘Here,’ she said, handing each of them a towel. She helped Frances shrug the damp worsted coat from her shoulders. ‘Can I help at all?’

‘In a moment, yes,’ said Frances. ‘But nobody’s allowed to touch anything until I’ve been through them all first. Some are Christmas presents – so no peeking!’

“That bag is mine, though.’ Eric pointed to a large canvas bag, slumped by the door. ‘I brought up some fresh mussels for our supper. You could take them through to Vronnie. These too.’ Eric handed her a long paper wrap from which the slightly damp ends of a pair of French sticks protruded. Helena took the food out to the kitchen, leaving Eric and Frances poring over their purchases.

'Is everybody ready to eat?' asked Vronnie, lifting the large bowl of mussels out of the sink. 'They'll need serving the moment they're done.'

There was a murmur of assent from the others, as they took their places around the table, drawn by the aroma of shallots sizzling in butter. Vronnie tipped the mussels into the pan and poured over a generous slug of white wine. A cloud of steam billowed up around her face before she slapped on the lid. She opened the oven door and felt the crusts of the loaves; satisfied that they were warm enough, she lifted out the tray and slid the bread onto the oak board.

'The mussels smell delicious Vronnie. I can't wait to taste them.' Helena tore the bread into sections, splitting and buttering them.

'Haven't you tried them before?' Henry asked. She shook her head. 'Eric always used to bring a sack of mussels up on the train when he'd been home for the weekend. Matron let us cook them in her scullery.'

'With wine?' asked Helena, as she watched Vronnie shake the pan, the lid clasped tightly shut with a tea-towel. Helena remembered the matron at St Bert's and had difficulty imagining her being quite so amenable. She would occasionally heat some spiced milk for a student stricken with influenza, but the idea of her cooking food for the girls was unthinkable.

'Matron used to provide the wine.' Henry smiled as he selected a chunk of warm bread and bit into the crisp crust.

'That's not strictly true,' said Eric, leaning back in his seat to allow Vronnie access to the table. 'If my memory serves me correctly, the Headmaster used to provide the wine. Although he didn't know, of course. I provided the mussels, Matron provided the bread and onions, and we all enjoyed our guilty little secret.'

Vronnie poured the mussels into the large dish in the middle of the table and put the empty pan into the sink. She emptied the remaining wine into her glass and raised it in a toast. 'Here's to guilty pleasures!'

'Guilty pleasures,' they echoed, each sipping their wine before reaching for the shiny black shells. Helena watched Frances dunk a buttery crust into the rich aromatic liquor and followed suit. She chose a small mussel and picked off the flesh with her teeth, expecting it to be rubbery but finding it silky smooth and tender instead. She closed her eyes and savoured the taste and texture.

'Good?' asked Henry, an amused expression flickering around his eyes.

'Divine. It's like...' She paused, struggling for a description. 'It's like tasting a day at the seaside.'

'It's a taste of home for me,' said Eric. Helena looked across at him, startled by the sudden poignancy in his voice.

Helena put her coffee cup down on the table and sighed.

'I suppose I ought to be going,' she said. The rain had eased and the wind had dropped a little, so it was a good opportunity to set off. It wasn't often that Aunt Celia and Uncle Peter were away for the night and she had promised Kitty that she would be back by ten at the latest. She didn't want to worry her.

'I'll drive you back,' offered Henry. 'No point in walking when the car is here.'

'The keys are in my bag,' Frances told him. 'In the library. And no looking in the parcels when you're in there. Some of them are Christmas presents.' She took another truffle and pushed the box across the table to Vronnie. 'Has everyone decided what they're doing for Christmas? I'm going up to London;

Robert and Elsa are having their annual New Year bash so I may as well go up to town before Christmas.'

'Well I'm staying here,' said Henry. 'The builders are starting the damp-proofing of the front façade in the New Year. I want to get the rooms stripped before then, so the plasterers can get started on any repairs.'

'So you're not shutting Benbarrow down for Christmas, then?' Vronnie looked surprised and not a little relieved. 'I thought I was going to have to inflict myself upon the cousins for the festive season.'

'You're welcome to stay here Vronnie, although I can't say I'll be particularly festive company,' said Henry. Silence settled like snowflakes amongst them.

For Helena, Christmas would be like any other: the usual flurry of visitors at the Vicarage; Uncle Peter coming in from visiting a sick parishioner with only time to gulp down a cup of tea before rushing out to yet another service; the three of them sitting down to a Christmas dinner with all of the trimmings but little festive spirit.

For Henry and Frances it would mark the first anniversary, with all the memories of the air accident and their parents' funeral. No wonder Henry wanted to stay away from the bright city lights; no wonder Frances wanted to celebrate the beginning of a new year.

'Come on then, Helena,' said Henry, swallowing the last of his brandy. 'Let's go.' Helena hesitated, unsure whether he was fit to drive along the country lanes but deciding that it was a risk worth taking, given the weather.

Henry held the door open for Helena. She settled into the seat; even though Henry had left the engine running for a few minutes, the leather was cold and

she pulled her coat tightly around her. She watched him walk around the front of the car, his features blazing in the light of the headlamps, his twin silhouettes skittering across the wet gravel.

‘Will you be able to come up over Christmas?’ he asked. ‘Not Christmas Day, obviously. You’ll want to be with your family then. But Boxing Day, perhaps?’ He took a cotton handkerchief from his pocket and cleared the rear-vision mirror.

‘I’m not sure. I don’t see why not, if you don’t mind. We don’t have anything special happening on Boxing Day. Kitty usually visits her sister, so it’s soup and cold meat for us.’

‘I’m not sure if it’ll be any different at Benbarrow. It’ll depend on Vronnie. I’m so glad she’s staying for Christmas – at least we won’t starve.’ Henry turned the Austin out of the estate drive towards the vicarage. The headlights picked up the distant shape of a fox crossing the lane. It paused, turning towards the car, the lifeless body of a rabbit dangling from its jaws. Its eyes glittered for a moment before it slunk off into the hedgerow. Helena shuddered.

‘Will you be working all over Christmas? On the house, I mean?’

‘Probably. I find keeping busy helps. Everyone keeps saying it’ll get easier, but it hasn’t yet. It was fine during the summer, but since the winter’s set in, it’s all I can think about. It’s different for Frances. She was older. She’d already left home, seen a bit of the world, got married.’

Helena took a sharp intake of breath. The cold air struck the back of her throat and she coughed. ‘I didn’t realise. That she was married.’

‘She was. To Vronnie’s cousin, Jonathan. It was a while ago. Long story.’ He turned the car into the vicarage drive, and pulled to a stop by the front door. The opportunity to continue the conversation evaporated.

‘Thank you for the lift.’

‘My pleasure.’ Henry reached across her to open the door. ‘You know, you’re very lovely.’ As she turned, he kissed her, catching the side of her mouth. Her hand flew up to her lips; they felt as if she’d been burned. ‘Sorry. A bit tipsy,’ he said.

Helena stepped out onto the gravel, her breath sudden and shallow, clouding the cold night air. As she scurried along the path towards the kitchen door she saw the sweep of the headlights across the paving stones, the shadow of her ankles, coat, hat sliding across the skeletal framework of the climbing roses. She paused, glad to hear Kitty’s voice from the kitchen singing along to the radio. From the shadows, she watched the small car turn into the lane, its lights swallowed up by hedges and distance.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: VRONNIE

*Out of the complicated house, come I
To walk beneath the sky.
Here mud and stones and turf, here everything
Is mutely comforting.*

Frances Cornford: The Hills

‘You need somewhere with good light.’

‘Yes. And space where I can leave my things spread out, without feeling like I’m in people’s way.’ Vronnie looked around the Octagon. ‘This would be fine, but once we’ve cleared the front rooms ready for the builders, this will be needed as a living space. The dining room is too close to the hall; it will get dusty and I don’t want grit contaminating the oil paints.’

‘What about upstairs? Is there a suitable room there?’ Kendall shook a couple of Woodbines from his packet and lit them both, passing one across to Vronnie. She drew lightly on the cigarette and exhaled a curl of smoke, resting her shoulder against the casement as she gazed across the terraces.

‘Frances would go mad,’ she said. ‘She keeps saying she can’t stand the smell of turpentine downstairs and will I please make sure to keep the pantry door shut. I hate to think what she’d say if she could smell paint in her bedroom.’

‘Good point.’

Henry wandered in, chewing carefully on a steaming pasty which he had discovered on a cooling rack in the kitchen, and which Vronnie had intended for lunch.

‘Problem?’ he asked.

‘Not a problem, as such. We were just discussing the options for a studio space for Vronnie. Any ideas?’

Henry sat down in the only decent chair and slung his feet up on the low coffee table. He damped a finger and dabbed ineffectively at the crumbs which had tumbled down his pullover.

‘Have you thought about the laundry? I wouldn’t like you to feel exiled from the house, but it might be suitable. The light’s good and you wouldn’t be disturbed by the builders. Eric and I were considering it as a billiards room, but that can wait.’

‘Henry, you are a genius.’ Beaming, Vronnie leaned down and gave him a hug. ‘That sounds perfect. I might even forgive you for stealing the pasties,’ she said, heading for the door.

‘Don’t get too excited,’ he called after her. ‘It may need a pane or two fixing....’

The laundry was indeed perfect. As well as cupboards to store materials and a horseshoe of worktops over which Vronnie could spread her palettes and oil paints, there was enough floor space to accommodate both of the easels which were due to be delivered at the end of the week. And of course there were sinks for cleaning brushes, and even herself before she returned to the kitchen.

The light was excellent. One window looked across a small courtyard which once had been an adjunct to the kitchens: a scullery and smaller pantries, including one which Vronnie guessed might have been a cheese room. Two larger windows looked across a square cobbled space, a stable yard surrounded by horse boxes and tack rooms, over which ran a number of

abandoned rooms, once quarters for stable boys and garden hands. Several of these had windows missing as Henry had warned them, but with the exception of decades of grime and dust and a couple of cracked panes the laundry room was in good condition.

‘Best of all there will be peace and quiet,’ said Vronnie, unable to contain her delight. ‘I can concentrate on what I’m doing without constant interruptions!’

‘We might even have to learn how to make our own tea,’ laughed Kendall. He wandered over to the stove and peered inside. ‘This looks alright too. I’ll give you a hand this afternoon, see if we can’t get it cleaned up and a fire going.’

Vronnie was pleased she’d baked pasties in the morning. With a hearty beef stew simmering on the range she was able to focus her attention on the laundry room. While she washed out the sinks and wiped over the drainers and work surfaces, Kendall raked out the stove and checked the flue was clear. After a cursory dust and sweep, they painted the walls using a bucket of whitewash left by the builders. Instantly the room looked brighter and several sizes larger.

‘These will do nicely,’ said Kendall, backing into the laundry, tugging behind him a pair of barley-twist chairs he’d found in one of the tack rooms. He picked up a damp cloth and began to wipe them down, cleaning away dribbles of bird dirt. ‘Now, what else do you think you’ll need?’

‘A rest would be useful.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Kendall. ‘An easel?’ I thought you’d ordered a couple from Alden’s.’

‘I did. I mean a rest would be useful – a sit-down for five minutes. I’m not as young as you children.’

Kendall pantomimed a melancholy violin, and then slumped into one of the still-damp chairs.

‘The letter,’ he said, once Vronnie had settled in the chair beside him. Somehow it was easier to ask when it was possible to avoid eye contact. ‘I don’t mean to pry, but was it from Jonathan?’ She nodded, but didn’t say anything. Kendall considered prompting her, but decided against it. If she wanted to tell him more, she would. He only wanted her to know she could talk to someone if she needed to.

A mild start to December gave Vronnie the opportunity to pack a bag with pencils, sketch pad, a travel palette of watercolours and a Thermos of hot tea. She wandered the lanes near Benbarrow, clambering up to the brow of The Crest and following streams and rivulets that tricked South towards the Windrush. Gradually she felt she was developing a clearer impression of the landscape and of Benbarrow’s place in it.

Bisecting the village was the narrow road Kendall had pointed out on one of the old maps he had found; the unwavering lines of its hedgerow attested to its Roman origins. Nearby she had discovered an old church with a plague window in one wall and a Norman archway over the door; as she paused to sketch in the graveyard she was surprised by the distant rumble of a Great Western, its steady trail of smoke marking out its progress towards Oxford. Each afternoon as she strolled back through the gathering twilight, she felt a greater connection with the countryside she had captured in her rapid sketches.

Occasionally she stopped to talk with villagers or farmers, sometimes buying eggs or vegetables as an excuse to engage them in conversation. Initially they were intrigued by the middle-aged woman in her brightly coloured

skirts and long, swirling coat, who tramped along their lanes and footpaths, sketching their cottages and asking them about lives, about their homes and their families. As they got used to seeing her they waved as she passed. Once she became disorientated and, fearful of becoming lost in the dark, had called to a slender young boy crossing the fields with his dog. He had hesitated before approaching her, but had been kindly and helpful, redirecting her onto the Hanbury pathway. She had watched for some time after he said goodbye, picking out his figure as he slid between the hedgerows, until he and his dog were swallowed up by dusk and distance.

Each evening Vronnie shared her expeditions over supper. Kendall was always most interested in her sketchbook, leafing through the pages as she described the way the light had caught a winter-bare oak tree, or how a fat cow had leaned across a gate for her to scratch the whorl of her russet brow. Henry was always more interested in the farms and the people, which of the labourers she had captured in her pencil sketches worked on which farm and where she'd bought the eggs with the deep yellow yolks.

As Christmas approached Vronnie became increasingly concerned about Frances. In the back of her mind she kept turning over the contents of Jonathan's letter and she wondered if she was doing the right thing by withholding it from her friend. Instinctively she felt that the anniversary of her parents' death was a bad time to present Frances with renewed optimism. In her grief she might invest too much hope in the possibility of his return, only to have it dashed once more. Vronnie had seen the price Frances had paid for loving Jonathan, and the strain that marrying him against her parents' wishes had put on her under.

Watching Frances place her case in the boot of the Austin, Vronnie considered how most people saw Frances as a strong and self-motivated woman, even at times aloof and hard-hearted. That was certainly the view that many of her friends and relatives had taken. But unable to help as Frances crumbled, blaming herself for not mending bridges while her parents were still alive, Vronnie more than anyone, even Henry, knew another side of Frances.

‘A stroll before I catch my train, Vronnie?’

‘That would be lovely, if you have enough time. I’ll fetch my coat.’

She reappeared, swathed in her new purple Jaeger, an early Christmas gift from Frances. She performed a quick pirouette, the hem of her coat swirling out around her shins.

‘I absolutely love it,’ Vronnie said. ‘How could you possibly have chosen something so perfect?’ Frances smiled and slid her arm through her friend’s.

‘Promise me you’ll look after Henry for me,’ she asked. ‘I can’t bear to be in the country just now. I need bright lights and parties to distract me. But I feel guilty leaving Henry.’

‘Don’t worry Frances. Kendall and I will look after him. And Eric will be back again, as soon as he can decently absent himself.’

‘Ah yes, the familial duty. What a chore it is, and how we miss it once it’s gone.’ They walked in thoughtful silence until the ground became too soft underfoot to continue. Frances wiped her muddy heels on a clump of grass and they wandered back.

‘It’s different for Eric, of course,’ Vronnie said. ‘His parents haven’t shut him out, as yours did. You can’t go on blaming yourself Frances. They had the same choice and simply made a different decision. A bad decision in my view, but it was theirs, not yours.’

'I know. Sometimes that makes it easier to bear. But other times it makes it worse, knowing they didn't want me in their lives any more. At least Eric's parents still want their son.'

Vronnie stopped, turning to face her friend.

'They do want him, Frances. But on their terms, not his. He is just as torn between the people he loves as you were.'

As they looked back towards Benbarrow, they saw Henry impatiently standing beside the car, his arm raised in an exhibition of tapping his wristwatch.

'Time to go, dear friend,' said Frances, as she detached her arm and walked away, her stride purposeful. Getting into the car she turned and waved. 'See you next year!'

The initial plans for the Octagon panels were taking shape. Vronnie was holding back on images of Spring, having only seen Benbarrow from the tail end of summer. The Winter panel was clearer in her mind, and the composition was roughly sketched across the canvas. The Crest and Benbarrow were clearly recognisable, the house settled in a composite Oxfordshire landscape of villages, farms, woodland and river. In the foreground was Persephone, reluctantly returning to the Underworld.

Persephone too was easily recognisable. Her likeness was drawn across pages of Vronnie's sketchbooks, and pinned around the walls of the laundry.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: KITTY

If you live in the country have your vegetables gathered from the garden at an early hour, so there is ample time to get rid of caterpillars etc, an easy task if greens are allowed to soak in salt and water for an hour or two.

Mrs Beeton's Household Management

Kitty rapped her knuckles briskly against the door of the bothy. It was chillier outside than she'd thought. The overnight frost rimed every branch and twig and even her tweed coat wasn't keeping out the cold. She imagined the kettle coming up to the boil, the pot on the table already warm for the tea.

'Billy!' she called, when there was no answer to her knock. She glanced over her shoulder, looking around the kitchen garden. Billy was often up earlier than she was, but usually he'd be within calling distance, working on one of the vegetable plots or amongst the outhouses. She doubted that he'd be far away; she'd told him that she was intending to come down first thing for the vegetables and it was unlike him to miss an opportunity to snatch a few minutes together.

She put the empty basket down by the door and wandered down to the greenhouse. There was no sign of him. Everything was still, tidied up at the end of the season. The slatted wooden benches were clear and scrubbed, almost as clean as her kitchen table. Beneath them the rows of earthenware pots were stacked in order of size with the big tomato planters at the back and the smaller containers for cuttings and houseplants at the front. A large sack of potting compost rested against the brick wall which ran all round the kitchen garden,

encircling the greenhouse, tool shed and bothy. She tried the door to the tool shed, but it was locked. There was nothing – no discarded roll of twine or pair of secateurs on the bench, no half-drunk mug of tea – to indicate that Billy was busy nearby.

Kitty furrowed her brows. He'd not mentioned he was planning to go out early when she'd told him she'd pop down after breakfast. Why so secretive? She called his name again, and then went back to pick up the wicker basket. She'd half a mind to leave it on his step for him to find. Then he'd have to fill it with vegetables himself and bring it up to the kitchen when he got back from wherever it was he'd gone.

She rubbed her palms together as she walked towards the kitchen, trying to restore some warmth into her cold hands. The basket, hooked into the crook of her arm, bounced emptily against her hip. She counted the footprints she'd made when she went down to the kitchen garden; already they were starting to blur around the edges as patches of weak sunshine appeared briefly on the path. One, two, three, four; each one looked like a little hunched figure. She dragged her boots across them and scuffed them out.

Helena was in the kitchen, making a pot of tea. She watched Kitty shrug off her coat and hang it on the hook by the back door.

'Are you going into Whitmore today?' she asked.

Kitty shook her head. 'Not today.'

'But I thought you always went on market days.'

Kitty pulled out one of the kitchen chairs and sat down. She undid the little zip on the ankle of each boot and tugged them off. 'I usually do, but I've got lots of jobs that I need to get done today. It's only a fortnight to Christmas,

remember.' She pushed her feet into her slippers, enjoying the soft warmth against her toes and put her boots on the low shelf beneath her coat.

'Is there anything I can do?' Helena pulled the sash on her dressing gown a little tighter and stuffed her hands into the pockets.

'Well, I could do with a cup of that,' said Kitty, nodding towards the pot.

'To help, I meant. I'm not sure what you've got to do, or if I can be useful. But I'm willing to try.' She looked at Kitty. 'Is everything alright? You look really fed up.'

'Do I?' Kitty brightened a little. It was unusual for anyone to notice, still less care, how she felt. 'A bit like I've lost sixpence and found a penny? That's what my mother used to say.' Helena laughed. 'Nothing serious, just a wasted journey down to the garden.'

'To see Billy?'

Kitty blushed. She would have to be more careful. No use thinking she alone did the watching and noticing around here; clearly Helena didn't go around in quite the daydream that she had imagined. Fortunately Helena wasn't close to her aunt, so there was little chance that she'd speak without thinking and cause trouble for Kitty or Billy. Neither could afford to lose their places at the vicarage.

'To get some vegetables for the casserole. Never mind, I don't need them just yet. There's the Christmas cakes to see to. We can do those first, if you'd like to help.' She fetched the stepstool from the laundry room and climbed up to reach the smallest of five cake tins stacked on top of the cupboard. She passed them down one at a time; Helena took them from her and placed them on the table.

'Christmas cakes? Five of them?' Helena looked puzzled.

‘The smallest one is mine. I share a slice with Billy and take the rest across to my sister and her children. The big one is the vicarage cake, the one your aunt cuts on Christmas afternoon and then shares with visitors.’ This was a slight fabrication. She and Billy usually had a slice from the vicarage cake; her own went across to Annie’s uncut. God knows, there were enough mouths to feed. They’d have barely enough to go round as it was. ‘Then there’s one for the Church raffle prize and one for Dr Berrington.’

‘And the last one?’ Helena asked.

‘I don’t know,’ said Kitty. ‘Your aunt just asked me to make an extra one this year. I’ve no idea why.’ It was something that had puzzled her ever since Mrs Harding had issued the instruction. ‘Anyway, today’s their last drink before Christmas. There’s a half-bottle of brandy at the back of the pantry. Could you fetch it for me please?’

Helena returned, the bottle cradled in her palm as she read the label. She unscrewed the lid and sniffed the neck of the bottle; her nose wrinkled in disgust. Kitty laughed.

‘Not to your taste?’

‘It’s disgusting. What are you going to do with it?’ Helena screwed the lid back on and put the bottle on the table. She watched as Kitty took the first cake out of its tin.

‘I’ll show you in a moment. Go and get changed first, I’ll wait for you.’ Helena looked down at her dressing gown and nodded.

‘Thanks,’ she said, turning on her heel and scurrying down the corridor. Kitty listened to Helena’s footsteps as she ran up the stairs. She waited for the inevitable complaint from Mrs Harding.

‘Helena! Don’t run about the house! You’re not a child any more. Act with some decorum.’

‘Sorry Aunt Celia.’ Helena’s footsteps continued up the staircase, hardly slowing. Kitty chuckled and continued emptying out the tins, one by one, standing the wrapped cakes in a row on the wooden table. There was a satisfaction to baking that never ceased to surprise her and she allowed herself a self-satisfied smile. Even before she peeled off the greaseproof paper, the kitchen began to fill with the rich scents of fruit cake: sultanas and raisins, syrup and treacle and allspice. Her earlier irritation with the day evaporated.

By the time Helena reappeared, dressed in a plain woollen sweater and pleated skirt, Kitty had prepared fresh lengths of greaseproof paper from the roll. She took the largest of the cakes and gently peeled off the old paper.

‘You do that one,’ she said, pointing to the cake she’d earmarked for the church raffle and watching carefully as Helena unwrapped it. Kitty turned her cake upside down on the table and stabbed it several times with a knitting needle, before passing the needle across to Helena. ‘It helps the brandy soak right into the middle of the cake.’ She unscrewed the lid from the bottle and poured a little brandy over each of the holes.

‘Doesn’t it make the cake go soggy?’ asked Helena. ‘And why does it smell so ghastly in the bottle, but taste nice in the cake? I love your Christmas cake – I remember telling the girls at St Bert’s all about it. I’d no idea you did all this.’

‘Every week,’ said Kitty, unwrapping the next cake and stabbing it. ‘I make them at the beginning of November and give them a weekly feed until the middle of December. Next week I’ll ice them all, and then they’ll be ready for Christmas Day.’ She watched Helena dribble the brandy over the holes. ‘Not too

much. I want a drop left in the bottle for my cup of tea. Don't tell you aunt, but that's my little treat before I go to bed on Christmas Eve!

Together they rewrapped the cakes and put them back into their tins for another week. They worked side by side at the table, chatting companionably about cooking and the preparations for Christmas. Helena extracted a promise from Kitty. Once the festive season was over she would teach her to cook. Just the basics, nothing fancy. Just as well, thought Kitty. I don't cook anything fancy. Good plain cooking is what I do. Soups and pies, roasts and casseroles, puddings and cakes.

'That's reminded me. I'll pop down and get those vegetables. Could you put those tins back up on the cupboard while I'm gone?' Kitty pushed her feet into her boots and shrugged her coat over her shoulders, not bothering to fasten the buttons as she grabbed the basket on her way out. 'I'll not be many minutes.'

The frost had all but gone as she headed down the path. In the dappled shade of the herbaceous border there were patches where it hadn't melted, but the path was no longer slippery underfoot. She turned into the kitchen garden, expecting to see Billy digging over one of the patches. She anticipated his teasing *Where did you get to this morning?* and was ready with a tart reply. *No, where did you get to?* But the garden was still and quiet, except for a single robin, rooting for grubs in the soil between the Brussel sprouts.

'Billy?' she called, uncertain whether to be cross or concerned. She put the basket down on the path and knocked on the door of the bothy. There was a soft animal sound from inside, low and guttural that she couldn't quite make out. 'Billy?' She tried the handle, but the door was locked. She kicked the basket out

of her way as she skirted around the low stone building to the privy at the back. Standing on the toilet seat she felt around on the lid of the cistern until she found the key. She clutched it tightly between shaking fingers, afraid of dropping it in the spidery dark of the privy. She ran round the clinkered path and pushed the key into the lock. She struggled to turn the mortise; temperamental, Billy always called it. What did he say? Don't force it. She took a deep breath and tried again. The key turned.

The stench in the bothy hit her as she opened the door. Vomit and piss, and a faint background trace of blood. She skirted around the table and drew back the curtain that hung across the doorway to the small room at the back. It was just big enough for a single bed. In the gloom she could make out Billy's outline, the coarse grey blanket drawn up around his neck.

'Dear God, Billy. Whatever's the matter?' She put her hand on his forehead. He was sweating heavily, burning up, but at the same time he was shivering, great heaving shudders like a child struggling to catch its breath after a storm of tears. 'How long have you been like this?'

'Sick,' said Billy, opening his eyes and trying to focus on Kitty's face.

'Stay there,' she said, although it was hardly necessary. Any fool could see he wasn't going anywhere. 'I won't be a moment. I'll ring for Dr Berrington and then I'll be straight back.' She turned on her heel and hurried from the room, slamming the bothy door behind her to keep what little heat there was inside.

She was half way up the path before Billy mustered the strength to say 'Don't go.'

CHAPTER TWENTY: HELENA

Solomon's Seal: Saturn owns the plant. The root is available for wounds, hurts and outward sores, to heal and close up those that are green, and to dry restrain the flux of humours of old ones.

Nicholas Culpeper: Culpeper's Complete Herbal

Helena heard the car draw to a halt on the gravel drive and rushed down the corridor, drying her hands on a teatowel as she went. She glanced at the hall clock as she passed; over two hours had passed since she had phoned for the doctor. She wrenched the front door open just as the knocker clanked down against its brass plate.

'I came as soon as I could,' Dr Berrington told Helena as he thrust his black bag into her arms and began to shrug off his heavy tweed coat. 'Where is she? Upstairs?'

'She?' asked Helena. 'It's not Aunt Celia.'

'Oh? I just got a message to get across to the Vicarage. As quickly as possible.' The doctor paused. 'I assumed you aunt had been taken poorly. Your uncle?'

'No,' said Helena, leading him towards the kitchen. 'It's Billy. Kitty is with him, down in the bothy.' She handed the bag back to the doctor and took her coat from the hook by the back door. 'This way.'

The day was crisp and clear. Bright winter sunshine cut through the branches of the trees, picking out clumps of evergreen shrubs dotted across the bare soil. Everything seemed sharp to Helena, as though in high relief like the

sculptures she'd seen under a gallery spotlight. The intensity frightened her and she prattled at the doctor as they strode down to the walled garden.

'Kitty went down for the vegetables first thing and couldn't see Billy, so she came back to the kitchen and we did the Christmas cakes. It was a while before she went back down again, an hour or two, and the next thing was I saw her running up the path. She said she'd found Billy and I was to ring for you straight away. Which I did. Only you were out on your rounds.' She glanced at the doctor, her expression full of reproach. 'I did say it was urgent.'

'I was at Benbarrow when I got the message. It was the first call I'd made where there was a telephone, Helena.' The clinker crunched under their boots as they made their way to the bothy. A pile of soiled laundry lay in a heap outside the door; beside it a mop stood in a bucket, its wooden handle leaning against the stone wall. 'I came as quickly as I could,' Dr Berrington repeated, as he knocked briskly on the door and pushed it open without waiting for a reply.

The air inside the small room was still fetid, although not as strong as it had been earlier. Kitty had been busy. The floor was mopped, the bedding changed and Billy, although clearly unwell, looked more comfortable than when Helena had followed Kitty down after making the call. A black kettle burbled on the hob of the stove; the steady stream of vapour pouring from its spout made the atmosphere oppressive.

'Thank goodness you're here,' said Kitty, standing up and pushing her chair away from the bedside. She dropped the damp cloth she was holding into a chipped enamel bowl and carried it to the table.

The doctor touched Billy's forehead with the back of his hand. As he reached for his pulse, Kitty explained what had happened; how she'd let herself in with the spare key and found Billy delirious with fever.

‘I’ve washed him down,’ she said. ‘And he’s got a really nasty gash on his leg. He said yesterday that it was sore, but I’d no idea it was that bad.’

Helena watched from the doorway as the doctor folded back the bedclothes and exposed the wound on Billy’s leg. Kitty had washed away the pus and covered it with a clean cloth, but even in the poor light of the bothy Helena could see that it was a bad injury, deep and ragged. The skin around it was red and angry, the calf swollen. The doctor lifted the cloth and gave it a tentative sniff.

‘What have you put in the poultice?’ he asked. Kitty gave him a short list of herbs. Helena recognised it as the list of items she’d been sent to collect from the pantry, with a few additions that she’d only ever heard of as wild plants. It sounded more like a concoction from an Elizabethan drama than a modern medical dressing.

‘Good girl, good girl,’ said the doctor. He smile reassuringly at Kitty and opened his black bag. ‘You’ve done very well. Now, let’s see what I can do to help.’

Helena twisted the door handle and slipped back out into the walled garden, relieved to be outside in the sunlight again.

‘I’d suggest moving him into the Vicarage,’ the doctor said. ‘But he’s a big chap and we’d probably do him more harm than good.’ Aunt Celia looked relieved.

‘We have spare rooms, of course. And we’d be very willing to care for him.’ She shuffled in her seat, adjusting the silk cushion behind her back. ‘He’d be most welcome, but I’m sure he’ll feel more comfortable in his own surroundings.’

Helena placed a cup of tea in the space she had cleared on the small table beside her aunt's chair. She took her own over to the French windows and gazed out into the darkening garden, half-listening to the conversation. She tried to imagine Billy ensconced in one of the spare rooms, attended to by her aunt and Kitty. She couldn't, it was too bizarre.

'I'm certain you're right, Mrs Harding.' The doctor took a shortbread finger from the floral plate and bit into it. 'She'll need help, of course.'

'Pardon?'

'Kitty,' he said, looking at his biscuit as though that explained everything. 'She won't be able to manage the nursing on top of her Vicarage duties. Helena is inexperienced, but she's very sensible and a quick learner.'

Aunt Celia smoothed the folds of her skirt over her knees and nodded.

'And Kitty says she has a young nephew who can come and help out in the garden until Billy's up and about. It's not as though there's a lot to do at this time of year that can't wait a few weeks.'

'A few weeks?' asked Aunt Celia. 'A few weeks?'

'Oh yes,' replied Dr Berrington, taking another biscuit and missing the inflection. 'Billy's not out of the woods by any means, but I think he'll make a pretty good recovery. A couple of months and I should think he'll be able to do light work. Kitty's done an amazing job. If that leg had remained untreated much longer he might have lost it.'

Helena switched on the standing lamp. The sitting room was reflected in the square glass panes: her aunt sipping from her teacup, the doctor brushing the crumbs of shortbread from his waistcoat, the fire flickering in the grate. The image appeared warm and welcoming. She checked the lock was turned in the

door and pulled the curtains across, shutting out both the winter garden and the reflected interior.

‘Well, it’s very good for a first attempt,’ said Uncle Peter. He took a slice of bread and, despite his wife’s frown, mopped up the gravy remaining on his plate.

‘It was a little thin,’ remarked Aunt Celia.

‘But an excellent flavour, my dear.’

‘I’m sorry about the potatoes,’ said Helena, looking at the undercooked chunks abandoned on each plate. ‘I’ll know for next time.’ She got up and started to clear the plates. ‘There’s a treacle tart Kitty made yesterday. It’s warming in the oven; I could make some custard.’

‘Just a slice of tart and a cup of tea would be lovely Helena. We can have it in the sitting room, where it’s warmer.’ The vicar helped his wife out of her chair and took her arm. ‘Shall we go through, my dear?’

Helena scraped the waste off the plates and stacked them by the sink. The kitchen felt warm and cozy after the chill of the dining room. She wondered how Kitty managed to do everything on her own - light the fire in the dining room, set the table, warm the plates and serving dishes – as well as time the vegetables to be cooked through at exactly the right moment.

She took the treacle tart off the oven shelf, and closed the Rayburn door. At least the potatoes on the meal that she’d plated up for Kitty should be cooked through. She cleared the dining room table and washed up while her aunt and uncle ate their dessert sitting in wing chairs either side of the fire. She could hear the murmur of voices each time she passed the door: her aunt’s

complaints about the extra workload for the vicarage and her uncle's gentle reassurances.

Once she'd finished, Helena went upstairs to collect her book and a thicker jumper before putting on her old winter coat. She closed the kitchen door behind her and picked her way along the garden path by the light of her cycle lamp. The sheets from Billy's bed flapped damply, forgotten and still pegged on the line.

In the walled garden a faint glow from the bothy window cast eerie patterns across the ridges of tilled soil. The fruit trees at the far end stretched their pinned limbs in parallel lines across the stones walls; in the summer they'd be laden with leaf and ripening fruit, but now they looked exposed and vulnerable.

She knocked on the door and stepped into the bothy. Kitty rose stiffly from the chair beside Billy's bed and put a finger to her lips.

'He's just dozed off,' Kitty said. 'He was a bit restless, but he's calmer now, more settled.'

Helena put her book on the table and stepped closer to the bed. Billy's breath appeared too fast and shallow, but at least it was regular. She looked at Kitty; her face seemed careworn. Helena had read in novels about worry being 'etched' on someone's features, and now she'd seen just that.

'I've plated up a meal for you, Kitty,' she said. 'I'll sit with Billy for a few hours while you take a break.' Kitty shook her head.

'I'm not hungry.'

'Nonsense,' said Helena, surprised by her own insistence. 'You've had nothing since breakfast and you need a rest. You'll be no good to Billy if you make yourself ill.'

Kitty checked the fire and showed Helena where to find everything she might need. Not that there was much to show. Billy was not a man of possessions. He only turned the key at night to make sure no passing tinkers broke in expecting to find the bothy full of tools or over-wintering sacks of vegetables or trays of apples. A cupboard revealed a mismatched selection of cups and plates, a small tea-caddy and a tin of corned beef. A jug of clean water stood on the table, beside it a bowl and linen cloth.

‘If you need me, come straight up,’ said Kitty, taking her coat from the peg on the back of the door and replacing it with Helena’s. ‘I’ll be back about ten.’

‘Midnight. And not a moment sooner. You need some sleep.’ Helena gathered up her book and opened it to the marked page with a nonchalance that she didn’t feel. ‘Go. Now.’ She looked down at her page and wafted her hand towards the door. ‘Shoo.’ Kitty dropped a kiss onto her forehead and squeezed her shoulder.

‘Thank you,’ she said as she slipped out into the darkness, leaving the cycle lamp on the table. Helena adjusted the rough cushion behind her back and pulled the plaid rug across her knees. She turned her attention to her novel, and tried to read.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: ANNIE

I saw you sit waiting with your sewing on your knees

Till the child growing hidden in your body

Should become a living presence in the light

Frances Cornford: A Peasant Woman

It was no surprise that Kitty hadn't called on market day; at this time of year she would be particularly busy and to be honest Annie was relieved. She had upset Eddie again, and this time the bruises were taking longer to heal. She was having enough difficulty deflecting Roy's concern, without having to answer more awkward questions.

When Saturday came and still no word from Kitty, Annie became anxious. She called to Roy, who was playing cards with his brothers on the bedroom floor.

'Coming!' Roy tumbled down the stairs, and appeared in the kitchen, eagerness to please evident in his expression. 'What can I do for you?'

'Can you pop across to The Vicarage this afternoon?' Annie was already cutting thick slices from the loaf of bread, and filling them with the last of the meat stripped from the pheasant. The remains of the carcass were simmering in a pot on the Rayburn and would later become the basis for soup. Despite having a haunch of venison hanging in the cellar, Annie wasted nothing. She had learned to be frugal even in times of plenty.

'Is there a message?' asked Roy.

'No, I just want to be sure everything is alright. I'm just worried something might be wrong. It's not like Kitty to miss a Saturday.' She folded a clean cloth

around the sandwiches and pushed them across the table. She shook a finger sternly in her son's direction. 'Don't you go saying anything though. You know what your aunt is like. If she asks, you were just passing.'

The idea of *just passing*, might seem absurd in many families. A good three miles stretched between Annie's Whitmore cottage and the Hanbury Vicarage even as the crow flies and although Roy's route along footpaths and bridleways would be shorter than Kitty's bus ride, the terrain was rough underfoot. It was hardly the same as visiting a neighbour.

Roy however would get away with the explanation. Since he'd been younger than Jimmy he'd spent days out in the countryside, playing truant from school, roaming the fields and woodlands. Only when the dog became too old for long expeditions had he stayed closer to home. Now with the pup at his heels, he was back to his travelling ways, impatient if he was cooped up indoors, especially when Eddie was due home.

He fetched his canvas duffle bag from the peg behind the cellar door and extracted the thick woollen scarf and gloves Annie had knitted for him. They had been intended for Christmas, but she saw no point in making him wait when he needed them now. As he shrugged his arms into the sleeves of his coat, the pup came to his side and looked up at him.

'Yes, yes. We're off out.' The whippy tail slapped Roy across his legs as he stashed the sandwiches in the bag. He refused Annie's offer of a bottle of water; it was only added weight and he knew every freshwater spring between Whitmore and Hanbury. He pulled a cloth cap across his messy hair and headed out, dog at his heels, eager to be away from the cramped cottage.

With Roy gone and Lizzie safely strapped in her highchair, occupied with a pile of worn wooden bricks, Annie went to check on the boys. It was always a concern if they were quiet for too long, but she was relieved to find they were still playing cards. She left them to their game and went through to her room to strip the bed. It was her habit to do this every Saturday, although she wouldn't wash until Monday morning when she stripped the boys' bed too. She always put on a clean sheet for Eddie's return; it only seemed fair that he too had the pleasure of the fresh linen but she knew he didn't like the kitchen to look like a laundry when he was home. She pulled the bottom sheet away and bundled it into the basket along with her nightdress. As she stretched the remaining sheet over the mattress Michael came into the room.

'I'll help,' he said. Not quite five, he was more of a hindrance than a help when it came to making beds, but he wouldn't be dissuaded. He was used to having his way. Unlike his older brothers he was extrovert and on occasion self-centred; after two miscarriages Annie had been so relieved when he had been born safely, red and angry and bawling. She had spoiled him, and later he had resented Richie's arrival, usurping him from his role as the baby of the family. Now though, they were thick as thieves, as much a pair as Roy and Jimmy.

Annie showed him how to tuck in the corners of the sheet. She replaced one pillowslip, moving slowly so that Michael could mirror her actions with the other. He laughed as he plumped up the pillow, wisps of feathers drifting into the wintry sunlight from the window. Giving Michael two corners of the sheet, and taking the other two firmly in her grasp, she wafted the linen into the air, where it hung fatly before settling across the mattress. This was the bit Michael enjoyed most.

‘Again,’ he said. Tugging the sheet away. Twice more they lifted the sheet above the bed, and pulled it down full of air.

‘Enough,’ she said, tired by the exercise. ‘Daddy will be home soon.’ Together they straightened out the sheet and pillows, and replaced the blankets and eiderdown. ‘Just in time,’ she told Michael, cupping her hand to her ear. Downstairs in the kitchen, frustrated at having dropped the last of her bricks on the floor, Lizzie was beginning to grizzle.

It was turned six by the time Annie heard the sound of Roy opening the yard gate and scurrying up the path, the dog ahead of him already barking, at the door.

‘Quiet,’ she heard him say, and it was immediately silent. She hurried to the door to let them in. The earlier crisp cold weather had broken and they were soaked to the skin. Roy grabbed the rags from his mother’s outstretched hand, wiping the dog down before he could shake himself and splatter them all with grimy water.

‘It’s wild out there,’ he said, taking off his cap and hanging it over the rounded end of the Rayburn’s towel rail. ‘The wind’s got up and it’s pouring.’ He hooked his coat on the back of the door, where its drips quickly formed a puddle on the flags. He lifted the lid on the saucepan and peered inside. ‘Smells good,’ he said.

‘Take your wet shoes off and sit yourself down. The boys have had theirs. I didn’t want to make them wait.’ She ladled out a bowlful of hearty soup, rich and gamey with large chunks of turnip, carrot and potato. She handed Roy a wedge of coarse wholemeal bread, which he dunked into the steaming broth.

'That's good Mum.' He pushed his damp hair from his forehead. 'Just what I needed.'

'So what's the news? How are things with Kitty?'

'Pretty bad.' He took another bite of the bread and scooped up a spoonful of meat and potato. 'Billy's proper poorly and she's having to nurse him.'

'Mrs Harding, you mean. The Vicar's wife. She's taken a turn for the worse then?' Billy stopped eating, a puzzled look on his face.

'No. She was fine. A bit peculiar, but then she always is. It's Billy that's ill.' He tore off a corner off the bread and tossed it towards the stove. The young dog snapped it up and continued to watch every mouthful Roy ate. 'He's caught his leg on summat in the garden and it's got all infected. Kitty said they were lucky to have found him when they did. Doctor Berrington thought he might have lost his leg if she hadn't.'

'Dear God. Is he going to be alright? I mean his leg. Have they saved it?' She remembered all the young officers recovering at Benbarrow, some blinded by gas, others having lost limbs in explosions. She knew that the prospects for these wounded soldiers were poor and many had lost the will to recover from their injuries. *Who was likely to employ a man with only one leg?*, they'd asked. How much worse it would be for Billy, knowing only how to get the best from a garden, dependent on the land for his living?

'The doctor thinks so. Kitty had made some magic poultice which had drawn out the poison.' He wiped the last of his bread around the bowl and broke it in half, sharing it with the dog. 'Is she a witch?'

'A witch?' Annie laughed. 'No, not a witch. She's good with herbs, that's all. Your Grandmother taught her when she was younger. She'd have taught me

too, only I wouldn't listen.' She remembered her distain for her mother's country remedies, once she had begun work at Benbarrow. 'I told her they didn't use the old medicines any more. Told her the doctors at the hospital knew better than she did.' She shook her head, her cheeks colouring at the memory.

Once the younger boys were settled for the night and Lizzie'd had her last feed, Annie allowed Roy and Jimmy to clear the kitchen table and set out the dominoes. There had been so sign of Eddie and no message. Occasionally, if he'd got overtime at the plant or a friend had invited him to a Saturday night celebration, he would send a message with a friend so that Annie knew not to expect him.

She hated those weeks, when she had to eke out what little money she'd got for another week, but she knew better than to complain. Nor did she complain when he turned up the following week without either an apology or the previous week's pay packet. Eddie had never been good with money. If he handed over the housekeeping as soon as he walked through the door then she could pay the bills and even, if she was really careful or Kitty brought extra provisions, put a little away for a bad week. If he had money in his pocket, he couldn't resist spending it on beer or cigarettes, or worse still gambling it on cards or horses. It grieved Annie to think of those precious shillings being wasted, when the children need clothes or shoes.

She watched the boys place their tiles in the centre of the cloth as she sewed, pointing out a good play to Jimmy if she thought he was getting beaten too easily. She turned the quilt over on her lap and untangled a thread from the back, slipping the needle into a loop that had caught on the underside, loosening the knot, pulling the needle taut again. Mr Martin would be pleased

she had managed to finish this one so quickly. Business was brisk in the run-up to Christmas and she had been able to complete two unexpected orders. Maybe there would be time for another before the haberdashery shop closed on Christmas Eve. She was never paid until the customer had collected their quilt and declared themselves satisfied with the needlework, but she didn't mind that. With Eddie home for a few days money would be tight; she would be glad of the extra then.

'Out!' Roy played his last tile, leaving Jimmy with two on the table in front of him.

'Enough,' said Annie, cross with herself for allowing her mind to wander. It was clear that Jimmy was tiring and he was no match for his elder brother once his concentration wavered. 'Pyjamas and bed,' she said, sending him upstairs. 'I'll warm some milk and bring it up.'

'A game of draughts?' Roy asked, as he packed the dominoes away into their box.

'Why not?' she said. 'I think I've done enough for tonight. I won't be able to take it into the shop until Monday morning anyway.' The poor light was beginning to strain her eyes, and she didn't want to spoil the quilt with a few careless stitches. Better to fold it up and finish it tomorrow. She opened the dresser cupboard and put away the quilt, stowing her scissors and needlework case in the drawer.

She carried the cup of milk upstairs, but Jimmy, snuggled into the corner of the bed, was already well away. She watched his chest rise and fall under the blankets. At the other end of the bed Michael and Richie lay curled around each other, like sleeping puppies. She pushed the skin to one side and sipped the milk, cradling the cup in her hands, enjoying the warmth of the liquid slip down

her throat. She felt the baby stir in her belly and wondered again how they were going to manage.

In the kitchen Roy opened the door to let the dogs out into the yard, but the old dog didn't seem to have any interest in moving from the warmth of the hearth. Annie drew the skin of the milk from the edge of the cup and offered it to him. He licked her fingertips, looking up at her with solemn eyes.

'Poor old boy,' she said, sitting down at the draughts board and waiting for Roy.

As they moved their draughtsmen across the board, first one of them winning and then the other, they talked about Roy's visit to The Vicarage. She had avoided saying too much when the younger ones were about, even though they appeared to be absorbed in their games. *Little pitchers have big ears*, her mother used to say.

'I said I'd go back tomorrow, if Dad would let me. Aunt Kitty asked if I could help out a bit in the garden.'

'Well there's no problem with that, is there? It doesn't look like your Dad is coming home this weekend. Jimmy can help me out here.'

'I'd better go up, then. Get some sleep. The Vicar wants me to do some odd jobs like setting the fires and peeling the vegetables. I can do that, easy. And I'll get paid, too. I'd have done it for nothing to help Aunt Kitty out, but she said not to tell him that.'

'She's not daft, our Kitty. She might be worried sick about Billy, but she's still got her head screwed on.'

Annie stacked the draughtsmen and was about to drop them into their drawstring bag when there was a hammering on the door. She looked at Roy, apprehension etched on her face.

‘Who is it?’ she called, before opening the door.

‘Police, Mrs Jackson. Open the door please.’

Annie’s hand went to her chest, her heart and mind both racing. Her eyes immediately went to the cellar door. The fawn. Walter’s Dad. That stupid man must have told someone. Mouthed off over his beer down at the public house.

‘Just a moment.’ Annie smoothed down her pinafore and tucked a stray wisp of hair back into her bun, as if looking respectable would make the police more likely to be lenient. She put her finger to her lips and waved Roy from the room, waiting until he was in the hall before she opened the door. A burly police constable stood on the step.

‘Can I come in, Missus?’ he asked. She nodded, as if there was any choice, and closed the door behind him, waiting while he removed his hat. She could feel the weight of the atmosphere, heavy with menace. She could smell the damp of the constable’s coat, the trace of smoke that he brought in from the smoggy street. *My son*, she thought. *My son*.

‘Mrs Jackson?’

She nodded again, her throat too dry to answer.

‘I’m afraid there’s some bad news. Your husband has been involved in a fight. Something to do with a woman in Cowley. They’ve got him in custody at Oxford Station.’

Annie sank into the chair by the fire and felt Roy’s arms wrap around her shoulders. She realised he must have been listening from the hallway. She put her hand up and grasped his arm, relieved to feel him close and safe.

The constable unbuttoned his coat and took out a small notebook.

‘He’ll be up before the magistrate on Monday morning,’ he said. ‘Then I imagine he’ll be remanded until the hearing. I need to ask you a few questions if you don’t mind.’

‘Remanded?’ whispered Annie. ‘Is it that serious?’

‘Oh yes, Mrs Jackson. Very serious.’ The constable sat down, draping his coat over the back of the chair. He flicked open the pad, licked the end of his pencil and looked across at Annie. ‘The bloke he hit is in hospital, might not come out.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: VRONNIE

There were legions of her kind during the nineteen-thirties, women from the age of thirty and upward, who crowded their war-bereaved spinsterhood with voyages of discovery into new ideas and energetic practices in art or social welfare, education or religion....

Muriel Spark: The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie

'There's really no need, Mrs Harding,' said Vronnie as she found herself ushered into the drawing room. 'I don't want to cause any inconvenience.'

'No inconvenience at all, Miss Curbridge. I'll fetch Helena and ask her to bring us through a tray. I have no idea why she didn't answer the door.' The Vicar's wife bustled from the room, as Vronnie gravitated towards the fireplace, stretching out her hands to warm them. The mantle piece had been stripped of ornaments and instead displayed a number of Christmas cards. She picked them up, glancing briefly at the inscriptions from local businesses, neighbours, grateful parishioners. None, she noticed, from family. She realised that she had never heard Helena speak of any living relatives besides her aunt and uncle; her life seemed to be peopled by the ghosts of parents and grandparents.

Mrs Harding returned, carrying a small plate of plain biscuits.

'Bought, I'm afraid,' she said, wrinkling her nose as she put them down on a small table beside the settee. 'Helena does her best, but I wouldn't offer any of her baking to guests.'

'Do you not bake yourself, Mrs Harding? I find it very therapeutic.'

‘Goodness no. My role in the church community takes up far too much of my time to spend hours in the kitchen. We have Kitty to do the cooking.’ It was clear that losing Kitty to nursing duties, as Dr Berrington had advised, was causing some disorder in the vicarage.

‘You must be finding it very difficult.’ Vronnie smiled at her hostess, disguising her disbelief that church duties rendered the Vicar’s wife incapable of lifting a finger in the household.

Helena came into the room, carrying a tea tray. Vronnie got up to help her clear a space to set it down. On the embroidered cloth were placed teapot, milk and sugar and a pair of china cups and saucers.

‘Aren’t you joining us, my dear?’ she asked. Helena shook her head.

‘I’m trying to marzipan the cakes. Kitty has told me what to do, but I’d never realised what a sticky job it was. I’d better get back to it.’ As she reached the door she turned briefly. ‘A shame you didn’t come a little earlier. You’ve only just missed Mr Locke.’

‘Robert?’ Vronnie was startled. She hadn’t known he was back in the area. There had been some disagreement with Henry last time Robert had called at Benbarrow, but she hadn’t been involved and nobody seemed keen to discuss it.

‘Mr Locke was most solicitous. He brought those lovely flowers.’ Mrs Harding pointed to some chrysanthemums arranged somewhat inexpertly in a cut glass vase. ‘He happened to be passing and kindly called in. He’s a very interesting man and so knowledgeable.’

Vronnie couldn’t disagree. He was certainly interesting; although he kept quiet about his rise in the art world stories continued to circulate about him. There had been considerable surprise when he had married Elsa; beside her

dainty charm he seemed so boorish. He was only tolerated by the Ruffolds because of the long-standing friendship between Frances and Elsa. Vronnie hoped that wouldn't be put under too much strain over the Christmas break.

'It sounds like you've had far too much of your day taken up by unexpected visitors.' Vronnie sipped her tea; Helena could make an excellent pot of tea. She suspected that she was far more capable than Mrs Harding gave her credit for being. 'I won't keep you any longer. I just wanted to offer you any support we might be able to provide. Frances would have called, of course, but she's gone up to London.'

'How lovely to have the time to enjoy oneself,' Mrs Harding remarked.

As Vronnie walked back to Benbarrow she gathered some strands of ivy from the hedgerow. As she paused by a five-barred gate leading onto a field a colony of rooks rose from the bare earth, clattering into a stand of elms. She watched them bicker, tussling for the best perches. She wanted to keep their image in her mind, but knew she would need to return with her sketchbook if she was to capture their vigorous rivalry on canvas. There were so many aspects of the countryside she wanted to include, too many she thought. She didn't want the picture to become cluttered, and she needed to return the viewer's gaze to the slight figure of Persephone returning to the Underworld., Sometimes she felt she was making progress; other times she felt she was losing her way.

Each day she tussled with the problem, but gradually the canvas was taking shape. Benbarrow offset from the centre; in the background The Crest on one side, the gently sloping hills on the other. In the foreground she had sketched the deerpark, with its lone oaks dotted across rolling grassland. She was fascinated when Kendall had explained that the landscape she considered

so naturally English was really no more than a tableau. Since then she had realised that garden designers were artists just like herself, working at their easels to create settings worthy of these country properties. In turn she would capture their landscapes on canvas, perpetuating the myth. Yet even here, so far from the busy streets and bright lights which drew Frances to the city, man's hand was evident in field boundaries and ploughing paths, in stock ponds and every deliberately placed oak tree.

'I'm just going in to Whitmore to post a parcel,' said Henry as Vronnie walked into the kitchen. 'Do you need anything while I'm there, or do you fancy coming too?'

'That would be lovely. Are you in a hurry? I'm desperate for a warm drink.'

'Happy to wait,' grinned Henry. 'So long as there's a coffee in it for me too!'

Vronnie put the kettle on and hurried across to the laundry with her latest acquisitions.

She was gathering a collection of plants to sketch, and a nature table of sorts had accumulated next to one of the sinks. She filled another enamelled jug with water and plunged the strands of ivy into it. The dark glossy leaves offset the scarlet of the holly berries, the vivid orange of the rowans, which she worried may appear too autumnal, although she had only gathered them in the last few days. In a small pot were hellebores and winter aconites and a single pink cyclamen, its lobed petals twisted sideways like the propellers of the small planes which flew from the nearby aerodrome. Piled in a flat dish were empty chestnut cases, their contents long since roasted in the range; pebbles of

differing colours and shapes which she had picked up on the lanes; a shard of blue and white pottery Billy had turned up in the walled garden.

She was relieved to hear that he was gradually improving. She wanted to talk to him, to ask if he needed anything from the Benbarrow bothy and whether she should be doing things to protect the plants from the weather. But she was unsure if anybody at the vicarage was aware of the extra work Billy had taken on. Instinct told her that even the rosy-faced housekeeper didn't know, despite the fact that Vronnie had seen them walking out together, her hand tucked into the crook of his arm.

She returned to the kitchen just as the kettle boiled. Henry, hearing its whistle, came in from the hall.

'That's the last of the boxes from the library,' he said. 'Both rooms are clear now, ready for the builders.' He took his notebook from the pocket of his jacket and started a new page, heading it *Things To Do*, and underlining it twice.

'I don't know about doing anything,' said Vronnie. 'I think we could all do with a rest. I for one am very weary.' Henry looked up surprised.

'You should have said. You're doing all the cooking and cleaning, when you should be concentrating on the panels. I'm such a fool. We need to get some help.' He wrote *Get Help* in large letters on his list. 'Frances had organised for some girl to come and 'do' for us, when we first arrived. But there was some mix-up - she'd got another job or something. And then you were helping out and Helena. And everything seemed to be happening. I just didn't think.'

'No Henry, sometimes you don't. But it's part of your boyish charm and we love you.'

Henry laughed and - first making a grandiose gesture of licking his pencil - he scored out the words *Get Help*.

‘Did I tell you that Frances has ordered a Fortnum’s hamper to be sent down to us?’ Henry eased his sister’s little Austin out of the drive. ‘It should arrive at the weekend, she said. I’m not sure what’s in it, but knowing Frances it will be a luxury hamper, so we should only need to order fresh provisions.’

Vronnie was pretty certain that Henry didn’t have the faintest idea what they needed to keep them going until the shops opened again after Christmas, but she let it pass.

‘How many will we be?’ she asked. ‘You, me and Kendall, I assume. And Eric as soon as he can get away?’

‘That’s about the measure of it. Look, I know you were only joking earlier, but I do want to make things easier for you. In the New Year I’ll look into getting someone to help in the kitchen. But in the meantime, do we need to make a fuss over Christmas? I’m not really in the mood for turkey and all the trimmings, and if we’re only going to be penny numbers....’

‘That suits me, if you’re happy with that,’ Vronnie replied. ‘I’m pretty sure Kendall isn’t bothered what he eats, so long as it’s warm and there’s plenty of it. What was it he said the other day? A casserole is as good as a roast?’

‘And take a break from the panels. You need to rest in the evenings, put your feet up, read a book.’

‘That’s not how creativity works, Henry. When you have an idea, you have to work on it. Leave it a day, a week, and it’s gone.’

As they turned onto the Whitmore road they saw Helena waiting at the bus stop. Henry pulled over next to her and Vronnie wound down the passenger window.

‘Can we give you a lift?’ he asked. ‘

It was arranged that they would meet at the Buttercross Tearooms at three. Henry had only intended to post his parcels, but took time to visit the confectionary shop to buy some walnut fudge and Parma Violets for Vronnie, conscious that he owed her an apology for his earlier thoughtlessness.

After placing orders with the butcher and greengrocer, Vronnie stopped at the baker’s and bought some Eccles cakes. She was perfectly capable of making them of course, but for once she thought she would let someone else do the hard work. Puff pastry was such a bother and hardly worth making for the three of them. She still had some time so she sought out the antiquarian bookshop she had discovered near the church on a previous visit. She chose a guide to espalier fruit trees for Kendall, realising that at some point she needed to talk to him about the walled garden and her meetings with Billy. She added a poetry book for Henry, and for Helena she chose a small leather-bound copy of Elizabeth Gaskell’s *Mary Barton*, which although old appeared unread. The bookseller wrapped them in brown paper and tied the parcel with string.

Henry was waiting for her in the tearoom when she arrived, but there was no sign of Helena. Henry glanced at his watch.

‘We’re a bit early,’ he said. ‘Shall I order anyway?’

Helena scurried in as the waitress arrived.

‘I’m so sorry I’m late,’ she said, depositing two large canvas bags and a smaller net bag on the floor. ‘I have no idea how Kitty does all the shopping and

still has time to visit her sister. I'm so grateful for the lift. I'm sure I would have missed the bus home.'

'You're not late at all.' Henry waved away her concerns. 'We were early. I've ordered you an iced bun. Is that alright?'

'My favourite. How did you guess?'

Vronnie looked across at Helena. Her face glowed with pleasure.

Kendall leaned back on the settee and gazed up at the plasterwork ceiling. He folded his arms behind his head and followed the curlicues around the light fitting, tracing their looping symmetrical patterns as they spread out towards each of the eight walls.

'That ceiling,' he said, 'Is a thing of beauty. Exquisite'

'Wonderful. Almost as good as that delicious meal.'

'Enough! There is only so much of your charm that a woman can take in a day, Henry.' Vronnie pulled a face at him. 'And anyway, I didn't make the Eccles cakes. I bought them.' She stacked the plates, brushing the flaky crumbs from the table. 'On the subject of charm Henry, I think you need to ease up when young Helena is around.'

'What do you mean?' asked Kendall, switching his attention from the ceiling.

'You should have seen her this afternoon. She clearly adores him and he plays up to it. She positively glowed every time he spoke to her.'

'I only bought the girl an iced bun. Is it my fault that I inspire such adoration?' Henry held his palms out in supplication. 'Besides, she is lovely. She will make someone a lovely wife. I'm sure her aunt would be delighted to see her as mistress of Benbarrow.'

‘That really is a little unkind, Henry.’ Kendall sat up and fixed his friend with a withering glare. ‘She is very young and naïve. Don’t play with her feelings. She will get hurt.’

‘Sorry. You’re quite right. She deserves better.’

Vronnie gathered up the tray and carried it out to the kitchen. She was relieved that she had been able to raise the subject without Henry becoming sulky. But the sharpness of Kendall’s reaction had taken her by surprise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: HELENA

The message is merely the speaking wind amplified:

That draught from a vacant space flutters the leaves

In the octave of assent, a murmured acceptance.

But of late, observers with sensitive ears report

Recalcitrant undertones, rushles of defiance.

Geoffrey Parsons: Europe A Wood

Helena cycled slowly up the lane towards Benbarrow, singing as she pedalled. With each phrase her warm breath drifted over her shoulders like cigarette smoke. She could barely spare the time, but Aunt Celia's message had given her the excuse to escape from the Vicarage for an hour or so and she relished the opportunity to call on the Ruffords. The morning was crisp and bright again, the storms having blown away to the East leaving a mild breeze and clear skies. In the distance she could see Vronnie tramping across the long wet grass, an outsize waterproof jacket and tasselled scarf protecting her from the chill, a turquoise floral skirt swishing around her boots. Helena paused in her song and looked down at her brown winter skirt and lisle stockings. Next to Vronnie's kingfisher vitality, she felt destined to house sparrow drabness.

She looked up the drive and pedalled harder to dispel her gloomy thoughts. Parked on the gravel drive in front of the house was the little Austin, dwarfed by the outline of a black Bentley. At first she thought it belonged to Dr Berrington, and wondered who was unwell. Much as she liked the family physician, she had seen enough of him lately to last a lifetime. It seemed if he wasn't visiting Billy to assess the progress of his wound, then he was talking to

Aunt Celia, the door to the drawing room firmly closed. But as she got closer, she realised the car was Robert Locke's. She was pleased he had called on her friends; it made her feel awkward that he had called at the Vicarage when Vronnie wasn't even aware he was in the area. She cycled round to the side entrance and leaned her bicycle against the kitchen door.

She knew better now than to bother knocking. With Vronnie out walking it was unlikely anyone would hear, so she resolved to let herself in and call Henry's name instead. As she opened the door she was met by a barrage of angry voices. She crept towards the hall, anxious to stay out of sight but feeling a little voyeuristic.

'Just go. I don't want to hear any more of your excuses. Just get out of my house!'

'You're a stupid boy. And yes, I do mean a boy.' Robert Locke's voice rang round the empty hall. 'You haven't a clue what you're sitting on. If you want to make a go of this place you'll need cash.'

'I don't need your cash, Locke. Get the Hell out of here.'

'My cash is as good as anyone's, you fool.' Robert laughed, a low, hollow sound that made Helena's skin crawl. 'You'll change your mind when you're broke and then you'll come grovelling to me, clutching your precious artworks.' Helena heard footsteps retreat across the black and white tiles. 'And mark my words, you won't find me so generous in the future.'

'Get out.' Henry sounded calmer than Helena thought he must feel. She knew how little he liked confrontation, and yet here was a visitor in his own home, treating him like an errant child. The heavy oak door swung open, admitting a draught of cold air. 'Get the Hell out.'

Helena waited for the door to close, and listened for the rumble of the Bentley engine before scuttling back into the kitchen. She retreated to the kitchen door and made a pretence of having just come in.

‘Sorry you had to witness that,’ said Henry. Helena looked down at her shoes, blushing to the roots.

‘I didn’t mean to pry. I just arrived at the wrong moment.’ She looked up at Henry and smiled shyly. ‘How did you know I was there?’

‘I heard the kitchen door,’ said Henry. ‘Besides, I saw your reflection in the glass panel. It’s a terrible house for hiding secrets, this one.’ Suddenly his face became ashen and his knees buckled as he sank into a chair. ‘Oh lord, I think I’m going to be sick.’

Henry sat in the Octagon, his cup cradled in his palms. His heart rate had gradually settled and a little colour was beginning to suffuse his cheeks.

‘Thank you for this,’ he said, motioning to the tray of tea and biscuits. ‘I imagine it was the shock. I felt pretty awful for a moment. You’ve been a ministering angel.’

‘Don’t worry. I’m getting used to it.’ Helena scooped up the tabby kitten from the window seat and settled into the warm hollow it had made in the cushion. The kitten curled on her lap, flexing its claws against the fabric of her skirt as it purred.

‘I’m sorry. I didn’t get a chance to ask. How are things at the Vicarage? Is Billy any better?’

‘Much better, thank you. The doctor is really impressed by the way his leg is healing although the wound is still open and he can’t put any weight on it yet.’ She paused, noticing the colour begin to drain once more from Henry’s

features. He wasn't, she realised, very robust when it came to medical matters, but she ploughed on. 'He should be up and about in a few days, though he's still very weak. It will be the New Year before he's fit to go outside, and he won't be able to work for a few weeks, at least.'

Henry put his cup down and picked up a Rich Tea finger.

'He's lucky to have such a responsible employer. And such good nurses.'

Helena pulled her feet up underneath her, making herself more comfortable against the reveal. The winter sunlight cast watery patterns across her head and shoulders. She pushed her hair back from her temples, her expression creasing with concern as she considered the last few days. She stroked the kitten's ruff, teasing a ball of stickybud from its thick winter coat.

'It's not just Billy though. Aunt Celia has been unwell too.' She looked at her watch, reluctant to move yet aware she ought not stay any longer. 'Uncle Peter said he'd sit with her while I brought the message across.'

'Message?' asked Henry.

'Oh yes.' Helena laughed. 'That was why I came across. She wanted to invite you to supper on New Year's Eve. Dr and Mrs Berrington usually come round, and the verger and his wife.' She looked a little tentative. 'I'm afraid it's not quite what you're used to in London.' She cringed at the apologetic tone, so like her aunt's, which she heard in her own voice.

'I'll have to check with the others, but that sounds lovely. There will only be Kendall, Vronnie and me and we've got nothing planned that I know about.'

'That sounds excellent. Aunt Celia will be delighted.' Helena let out a sigh. Much as she was loath to return to the vicarage she knew she must. Annie had helped her prepare the casserole, but there were potatoes to peel and an

apple crumble to prepare if she could only decipher the instructions from the battered old cookery book. 'I must be going.'

'Going where?' Kendall came into the Octagon, drying his hands on a small blue towel.

'Back to the Vicarage,' said Helena, lifting the kitten from her lap. 'I came across with an invitation. New Year's Eve Supper.' She swung her legs down and pushed her feet into her shoes.

'And found me in the middle of a full-scale row with Robert Locke.' Henry picked up another Rich Tea finger and snapped it in half. Kendall raised his eyebrows.

'What did Locke want? And how did you get in a row with him?' Kendall dropped the damp towel on the arm of a chair and sat down. 'I didn't know he was coming.'

'Neither did I. When I walked up from the ice house I didn't see his car on the drive. I was in the kitchen making a sandwich when I heard a noise.' Henry crunched his biscuit. 'It was only when I went to investigate, I found him upstairs.'

'Where?'

'On the first floor. He was on his way down from the loft. He'd prised open the cabin trunks, the ones we hadn't got keys for. He'd got a picture in one hand and was clutching a couple of vases under arm.' He gestured with the remaining half of the biscuit, wafting it around airily. 'He said he was bringing them down to inspect them in the better light, but I think he planned to take them out to his car.'

'You can't prove that, of course. It sounds the most likely scenario, but you'd never make a case of it.'

‘I’ve no intention of taking it any further. I might get my solicitor to write to him though; make it clear I don’t want him back in Benbarrow.’

‘Isn’t it going to be a bit awkward? For Frances I mean.’ Helena paused by the door and frowned. ‘Isn’t she staying with the Lockes until the New Year?’

‘Oh, Hell yes,’ said Henry. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. Best to leave it for now. I’ll tell Frances when she gets back. I doubt if he’ll say anything to her, unless he makes out there was some kind of misunderstanding.’

‘I’ll walk you back,’ said Kendall, as Helena turned to go.

‘It’s alright, thanks. I came on my bike.’ She slipped from the room, leaving Henry grinning.

‘Like that, is it?’ he said.

When Helena opened the kitchen door she was surprised to see Kitty standing at the sink, peeling potatoes.

‘I’ll do those Kitty,’ she said, shrugging off her coat and gloves. ‘You get back to Billy.’ Kitty put down the knife and dried her hands.

‘No, it’s fine. Annie is sitting with him. It’ll do me good to stand up for a while. My back’s killing me. I don’t think I’ve sat still for so many hours in my life before.’ She filled the kettle, put it to boil and resumed peeling the potatoes. ‘Pop upstairs and see to your aunt.’

‘Is there a problem?’ Kitty looked up from the outside clothes she’d draped across the chair. She unwound her wool scarf and added it to the pile.

‘No, I don’t think so. But your uncle has had to visit old Mr Anstice, so she’s been on her own for a while. There’ll be a cuppa when you come down.’

Helena trudged up the stairs. Aunt Celia had been in bed for less than twenty-four hours, but already the bedroom had acquired the atmosphere of a

sickroom. A range of medication was placed on the dressing table. Helena picked up the bottles and packets and read their instructions: a wrap of lozenges to soothe the throat, as required; a variety of painkilling tablets, no more than eight per day; sachets of sleeping powders, one only to be taken at night, stirred into water. Beside them lay a small leather box. She opened it and found eight small indentations, each cradling a glass phial of liquid. She closed the lid and turned it over, but there was no label.

‘Daisy?’ The voice from the bed made Helena jump, although it was weak and querulous.

‘No, Aunt Celia. It’s me, Helena.’ She walked across from the dressing table and crouched beside the bed where she was in her aunt’s eyeline.

‘Where’s the baby? I can’t hear the baby.’

‘What baby, Aunt Celia?’

Her aunt stared at her for a moment, her expression vacant, her breathing rapid and shallow. Gradually it settled into a regular rhythm. Helena shifted to the chair at her side, wishing she’d picked up her book.

‘I wouldn’t put them on till your uncle’s back,’ said Annie. ‘Or if he’s not back by seven, we’ll get them going then.’

Helena nodded, only half-listening to Kitty’s instructions. In her hand she held the framed picture of her aunt and mother which usually stood on the drawing room bureau.

‘She called me Daisy,’ she said. ‘I don’t look much like my mother, do I?’ Kitty took the photograph from Helena. Despite the fact she had dusted it more times than she cared to remember, she peered at the image as though she’d

never seen it before, tipping it towards the light for a better view of the two young women.

‘You look more like your mother than your aunt, I’d say.’ Kitty scrutinised Helena’s features. ‘I never met her, of course. Mr Harding didn’t take over the parish until after.’ After Helena’s parents died, she meant and the unsaid words hung in the air.

‘And she was asking for a baby.’

‘She may be ill, but she doesn’t miss much, does she?’ chuckled Kitty. ‘Annie’s brought the baby up with her. She must have heard Lizzie crying.’ She shook her head in disbelief. ‘Even from that front window. You wouldn’t credit it, would you?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: KITTY

The evils of the tied cottage system must be remedied, and it is hoped that the Government will be able to provide time within a heavy legislative programme for this modest measure.

Mr. Bob Cryer: Abolition of Tied Cottages Bill

‘Thank you Vicar. It’s very kind of you.’ Kitty was exhausted, on the verge of tearfulness. She wanted to appear appreciative on Billy’s behalf, but not unduly grateful. So far Mr Harding had shown Billy every kindness. Still, it wouldn’t do for the vicar to think it was over and above what was expected, more than Billy’s due as a loyal employee. The truth was he could be turned out of the bothy at any moment. It was a tied cottage after all, only his home while he was employed as the gardener, and it was likely to be some time before he was able to resume work.

‘I don’t want to add to his worries,’ said the Vicar. ‘He needs to concentrate on getting himself well.’

‘Thank you,’ Kitty repeated. ‘I’ll tell him when he wakes up. He’ll be relieved, I know.’

The vicar stood for a while, watching Billy sleep. Every few moments he twitched, throwing off the heavy blankets. Occasionally he reached down to tug at the bandage around his leg, before Kitty moved his hand away, holding it in her firm grip until he became calm again and drifted into a deeper slumber. The vicar looked at Kitty, choosing his words carefully.

‘Was that your sister I met on the lane?’

‘Most likely Vicar.’ Kitty put her hand to her brow, and pushed back a strand of hair that had fallen across her forehead. She felt ragged, as though she had been tossed in a storm, and she was certain that she looked much the same. ‘She came to sit with Billy a while, so I could get some sleep. Only the message came about Mr Anstice when I got up to the vicarage, and you had to go out. So I sat with Mrs Harding instead.’

‘I’m sorry Kitty. I should have thought. You’ve been up all hours. Even with Helena helping out, it’s been very difficult for you.’ He paused. ‘And now I hear things aren’t so good for your sister.’

‘Bad news travels fast,’ Kitty said, her voice edged with bitterness. She put her hand to her mouth, wanting to bite back the words. It wasn’t the vicar’s fault that Annie was Hanbury born and bred, so her business would be all over the village in hours. But it seemed so unfair that it should come knocking at Kitty’s door, when she’d already got so much to cope with.

‘Well, yes. Precisely,’ said the Vicar, taken aback by Kitty’s tone. ‘I wouldn’t like to see her in difficulty. I gather she left the village in, shall we say troubled circumstances? But not unusual ones, of course.’

No, thought Kitty. There are plenty of other village children made on the wrong side of the blanket. They only remember Annie getting married in a hurry because of their father’s anger, an anger he took with him to the grave.

‘She did. But she’s been a good mother to those children. She doesn’t deserve this.’

‘No, quite,’ the Vicar continued. ‘I’m not sure if there’s anything I can do. And of course she’s no longer in our parish, so we would have to tread carefully. But I hear she’s a hardworking young woman, so I’ll ask around. Someone might be glad of the help.’

‘Thank you,’ said Kitty, deciding that now was probably not a good time to mention that there was another baby on the way. That was a bridge to be crossed on another day.

When Kitty woke she was immediately conscious of being watched. She lifted her head from the table and rubbed the sleep from her eyes. As she sat up, a blanket slipped from her shoulders. She gazed about her, momentarily bewildered.

‘Helena,’ said Billy. ‘It was Helena. She’s left you a meal on the stove.’

Kitty looked behind her and saw an enamel plate, over which was an upturned glass dish clouded with condensation.

‘What about you? Where’s yours?’

‘I had mine an hour or so ago. Helena plated up the meals and brought them down after she’d finished up at the Vicarage. She helped me with mine and left yours to keep warm.’

‘And the blanket?’ Kitty tugged it up around her shoulders.

‘That too. She’s turning out to be quite a lass, that one.’ Billy smiled. ‘I thought she’d expect to be waited on all her life like her aunt, but she’s shaping up.’

Kitty gripped the edges of the blanket under her chin, stepped across to the stove and lifted the plate onto the table. There was a knife and fork laid together by a glass of water. She raised one eyebrow, forced to admit that she was impressed. She pointed the knife in Billy’s direction.

‘Don’t you go letting those eyes of yours stray, Billy Griffiths. Just because you’ve got two women waiting on you hand and foot, doesn’t mean

you can switch your affections willy-nilly. I might be having something to say about that.'

Billy grinned and Kitty felt the relief wash across her. He still looked pallid and she knew he was very weak, but this was the first time since he'd been taken ill that she'd seen a glimmer of the old Billy. She ate the casserole; it was barely warm but for the first time in days she enjoyed her meal. She cleared her plate, mopping the last of the gravy with the wedge of bread that Helena had left wrapped in a cloth.

Kitty let herself back into the bothy and slipped the latch on the door. True to her word, she had not left Billy for long. Her plate and cutlery were now draining beside the sink in the vicarage kitchen alongside those Helena had washed earlier. All her working life Kitty had made sure everything was put away before she went to bed, but it surprised her how little it bothered her now to leave things till the morning.

She had taken the opportunity to speak briefly with Helena, long enough to know that Mrs Harding was little improved but seemed comfortable after the vicar had coaxed her to drink one of the sleeping draughts left by Dr Berrington. At least Helena might manage to get some rest, thought Kitty.

'The doctor's calling again in the morning,' she told Billy. 'He's seeing Mrs Harding first thing and then he'll pop down to see you.'

'I'm not sure he needs to. I don't think I can afford too many of his visits. You're doing a fine job. He said it was your quick thinking that saved my leg. That and your herbs.'

‘Best to let him keep an eye on you Billy. I did what I could, but he’s the medical man. Besides,’ she said with a smile. ‘He’s told me he’s coming to the vicarage to treat Mrs Harding; anything extra will just go on the tab.’

‘You’ll owe him a bakery of full of Victoria sponges by the time I’m better.’

‘That reminds me; I need to make a list. Helena did some shopping, but we’re already running out of some things. Would you be alright if I went into Whitmore tomorrow? I need to call on Annie. I barely saw her today.’

‘Of course. She must be going through hell. Any news?’

‘Only that they’ve charged Eddie with assault.’ Kitty shook her head, finding it difficult to imagine how Annie was coping. ‘The constable said he’d let her know if there were any developments.’ Neither of them wanted to think what those developments might be.

Kitty added a few items to her shopping list. As well as things for the vicarage, she wanted to take some extras to her sister. Usually Billy slipped her some vegetables from the garden, but that wasn’t going to be easy now. She contemplated the small tin of coins and notes, stashed under the floorboard in her bedroom. It didn’t contain much, and certainly not enough to pay the rent for long, but it might tide Annie over for a few days.

‘I forgot to mention,’ said Kitty, reminded by the thought of Annie’s rent. ‘The Vicar came down this evening, while you were asleep.’ She saw concern cloud Billy’s face.

‘Did he mention the bothy?’

‘It’s alright. He was only asking how you were. Stop worrying, Billy.’

‘I can’t. Just look at me, Kitty.’ Shakily he turned the blankets back. His leg was heavily bandaged from knee to ankle and his foot was still badly swollen. ‘It’s going to be days before I can stand on it, and weeks before I’ll be

able to put enough weight on it to dig a patch of land over. What kind of a gardener am I going to be this side of Easter, when all the work needs doing?' He sank back against his pillows, disconsolate.

'Billy, it's alright. We'll manage. The vicar is a good man. He'll wait. And Roy is going to do as much as he can. He doesn't know much, but you can teach him. Jimmy too. Oh, I know they're only kids, but they all want to help.'

She started to pull her chair towards the bed, intending to sit closer to him, but Billy shook his head. He shuffled across the bed and, the sheet still thrown back, pressed himself up against the bothy wall. He patted the mattress.

'Here,' he said. She took her blanket across to the bed and perched tentatively on the space he had made, afraid of hurting his leg. 'Lay down with me Kitty. I won't break.'

Very carefully she lay back against his outstretched arm, resting her head against his chest. He turned the blanket back across them both, wincing slightly as his weight shifted on the mattress. He kissed her gently on her forehead and she relaxed into his embrace.

'That'll do nicely, Kitty Griffiths,' he said. 'That'll do nicely.'

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: VRONNIE

She went to the stair-foot door, opened it, listening. Then she went out, locking the door behind her.

Something scuffled in the yard, and she started....

D.H.Lawrence: Odour of Crysanthemums

Vronnie reached out her arm and felt around on the bedside table for her fob watch. Her fingers touched its familiar smooth outline, the serrated edge of its winder, the snake of its Albert chain. She pulled it towards her, flicked open the hunter-case and peered at the hands. She groaned. Barely twenty minutes had passed since she'd last looked and still hours to go before sunrise. *Thank goodness it's Winter Solstice tomorrow*, she thought, eager for the return of longer days.

Conceding that she was unlikely to get any further sleep, Vronnie sat up and swung her legs out of bed. A patch of warm quilt moved and stretched beside her, transforming itself into three small cats.

'Hello,' she whispered, slipping her arms into her dressing gown and fumbling for her slippers. 'How did you get in here?' They sprang in turn to the floor, twisting themselves around her legs as she headed for the door. Her gown was yet to shake off the chill of her bedroom, so the feline warmth was a comfort. She crouched down to rub each of their heads.

'Come on, let's get some breakfast.'

The stove was still in, retaining a little of its heat from the previous evening. She opened the firedoor and blew gently across the coals, raising a slight glow. She

riddled the ashes, added a shovel of fuel and set the kettle to boil. While she was waiting she opened the kitchen door to let the cats patter out into the darkness. It seemed quiet once they'd gone, as if she were the only person in the house. She wasn't of course; Henry and Kendall were sound asleep upstairs, the evidence of their late night card session abandoned on the table. The deck was spread as their last hands had fallen. Where Henry had been sitting when she had left them to it just before midnight was a royal flush, beside it a pile of matchsticks. Opposite, face down, lay Kendall's hand where he'd thrown it in. In the middle was a near-empty Cognac bottle and two glasses. They had opened it shortly before she retired.

The kettle's steam rose to a light whistle, and Vronnie quickly lifted it off the hob, before it woke anyone. She guessed they would both have bad heads this morning; being woken before five wouldn't improve their dispositions. She heard a mew and a soft scratching of claws on wood. As she let the cats back in she thought she saw a movement in the shadows beyond the laundry, and she shuddered.

'Too many ghost stories,' she muttered under her breath, resolving not to read another for a few nights. She had found the battered M.R. James collection among the books Helena had sorted, and had taken it up to her room before it got packed away with the Rider Haggard and Gaskell, only rediscovering it when hanging up a summer skirt that was unlikely to be needed for some months. She hadn't thought she was easily disturbed by gothic fiction, but something about these tales must have got under her skin. Why else would she be unable to sleep and be imagining figures in the shadows? Imaginary or not, she checked the latch was dropped on the door and turned the key.

She made a pot of tea and took it to the table, pushing aside the cards to clear a space. The cats however refused to settle, making their needs clear, so she fetched a dish of cold meat from the pantry and shredded fragments onto a plate.

‘You’re supposed to be mousers, not lap-cats,’ she told them, putting the plate on the floor beneath the coat rack, where nobody would trip over it later. As she stood up she saw a pair of eyes at the window and screamed.

‘I’ve checked everywhere Vronnie, and I can’t see a sign of anyone about.’ Kendall closed the door behind him and shrugged off his scarf and coat. Even though the kitchen was now warm from the stove, the draught of chill air that he’d brought in with him made everyone shiver.

‘We’ll have another look when it’s light, but I can’t imagine we’ll turn much up. We’ll have trampled any footprints anyway and if there was someone they’ll be long gone.’

‘What do you mean “if there was someone”? I know what I saw.’ Vronnie’s voice rose as she spat the words out. ‘There was someone at the window.’

‘Yes, we gathered that,’ said Henry, laughter dancing around his eyes. ‘You screamed loud enough to wake the dead.’ He poured the remains of the tea into their cups. Vronnie watched the last dribbles run down the spout and bleed across the wood surface of the table.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said. ‘I didn’t mean to wake you. It just scared me so much. Look – I’m still shaking.’

‘Come on Vronnie, back to bed.’ Kendall picked up her tea and ushered her towards the door. ‘See if you can’t get some more sleep. Being overtired

can't have helped.' He chatted as he climbed the stairs behind her, his voice soft and soothing. The cats scampered along behind them both, pausing at one turn in the stairs before racing one another up the next flight. As Kendall opened the door they slipped through, launching themselves onto the foot of the bed.

'Thank you,' said Vronnie as she got back under the covers, exhausted by her encounter. Kendall placed the tea on the bedside table, next to her fob watch. In the chill of the bedroom, the tea was soon too cold to drink, but by then Vronnie was asleep, the cats curled into the crook of her knees.

Vronnie woke to the midday peel of church bells. She counted them as she rose through the layers of slumber, unable to believe she'd slept so long. She checked her fob. Yes, it was noon and she would miss the best of the day's light if she didn't haul herself out of bed pretty soon. She extracted her legs from under the tangle of cats and pulled on some clothes. A long woollen skirt, a baggy shirt and a man's jumper that she had borrowed from a friend and omitted to return. She found some thick stockings and pulled a pair of knitted socks over the top. An idea was forming in her mind and she wanted to get out in the meadows with her sketch pad before it evaporated. She picked up the cold tea and the cats followed her downstairs, mewing optimistically.

She wandered into the kitchen, hopeful that there may be bread and honey left from breakfast. Kendall was crouched in front of the stove, dragging spilled ash into a bucket.

'If there's a knack to this, I haven't got it,' he said, glancing up at her. 'I managed to riddle it ok, but then it all fell off the ashpan as I pulled it out.' Vronnie chuckled.

'I tell you what,' she said. 'I'll let you do it every morning. Practice makes perfect, so they say.'

'Why, thank you Madam,' Kendall gave a mock bow, and smiled. 'You're looking much improved for your sleep. Do you feel better?'

'Considerably, thank you.' Vronnie cut a chunk from the loaf and slathered it in butter and honey. She took a bite and chewed thoughtfully before replying. 'But I did see someone. It wasn't my imagination.'

Kendall finished sweeping up the remaining ash and brushed it into the bucket. He stood up slowly and turned towards Vronnie.

'I know,' he said. 'I've seen someone too. I think there's a tramp wandering around the area. He's probably harmless, but just take care, eh? If you need to go outside at night, make sure one of us is with you. And we'll get some blinds fixed up at the kitchen window.'

'Thanks. For taking it seriously and not making a joke of it.' Vronnie deliberately replaced her serious expression with a smile. 'I'm going out to sketch while there's some good light. I'll see you later.' She tugged on her outside garb and headed towards the laundry to collect her sketching materials, still chewing on her bread and honey.

The weather held off all afternoon, and Vronnie filled several pages of her sketchbook. Some of her drawings were detailed observations: the angle of a bare rowan growing from a hawthorn hedgerow; the outline of an abandoned nest, wedged in the crook of a birch; the flight feathers of a dead crow. Others were quick sketches to capture a passing impression: a cobweb, still moist with dew; the girl from the vicarage walking down towards the bus stop; a boy running across the skyline, his dog at his heels.

She detoured into the churchyard, intending to draw the outline of St Peter's. She paused first to sketch an angel poised on a gravestone, and noticed a carved garland of ivy a little way off. By the time she'd captured an impression of that she realised she was by the gate which led through to the back of the vicarage. The girl would be miles away; it was worth a chance to catch Billy alone. She slipped into the vicarage garden and through the archway into the walled area where she knew she would find the bothy. She tapped lightly on the door and was relieved to hear Billy's voice.

'Come in,' he said. He looked surprised when he saw it was Vronnie. As he tried to pull himself up into a sitting position, pain distorted his expression.

'Please, don't move on my account,' said Vronnie. 'I just wanted to see how you were.'

'Not so good, as you can see.' Billy gestured towards his leg. 'I'm better than I was, but still some way from being able to work. The vicar has been very generous, and I've got help from Kitty and Helena, so I'm being well looked after.'

'Well, that's positive news, at least. May I sit down?' Billy nodded and Vronnie pulled a chair over towards the bed. 'Is there anything you need? Anything that we at Benbarrow can do to help?'

The light was beginning to fail by the time Vronnie left the bothy, and she was anxious to get back to Benbarrow before dark. There was a slight drizzle; she walked briskly from the walled garden through to the churchyard and onto the lane beyond. Her conversation with Billy had given her much to consider. Their initial conversation had revolved around the issues of the gardens, and how Billy would manage his responsibilities at the vicarage, but it soon became clear

that while he had been confined to bed he had been thinking beyond the boundaries of the vicarage gardens. He talked about his dreams for the kitchen gardens at Benbarrow, and of his personal ambition of employment that would support a married man and in time children too. Vronnie could see that a more creative solution was needed.

She snapped a branch from an overhanging damson tree and swished it through the damp straggly grass along the footpath, her mind constructing a variety of scenarios that might solve all their problems. The bothy at Benbarrow was much larger than Billy's current accommodation, with the chimney in the middle of the main room, dividing it into a kitchen on one side and a parlour, from which two doors led to small bedrooms, on the other. With a bit of restoration, she could envisage it as a family home, if Kitty could be persuaded of the merits of family life. They could both continue to work at the vicarage, if they wanted, and if the gardening work became too much for one man, Billy could take on his nephew in time.

Vronnie's head was spinning with ideas. As Billy had chatted about his own problems, he'd mentioned Kitty's sister, pointing out how fortunate he was to have the Vicar's assurance of a roof over his head when others were less fortunate. Vronnie began to wonder if there might be a mutually beneficial solution to that difficulty too. They had still to resolve the issue of domestic staff at Benbarrow, despite Henry's promise to deal with it as a matter of priority. Even a few hours help with cleaning and food preparation would ease the pressure, she thought. And wasn't there groom's accommodation above the stables?

She slung the stick to one side and began to run through the gloom towards Benbarrow. There was so much she needed to discuss with Henry. The

house was mostly in darkness; a lamp in the hallway flung shafts of light through the windows on either side of the oak door, catching the balustrade framing the steps and casting bright pools across the wet gravel. Seen through the veil of drizzle against a background of moonlit clouds, Benbarrow looked timeless, beautiful, exactly as she hoped to capture it on the Octagon walls. She hurried past the kitchen, through to the courtyard and shrugging her bag from her shoulders, threw open the door to the laundry.

Instantly Vronnie was alert. Afterwards, she wondered whether it was the smell, an odd mixture of mud and blood, of sweat and damp wool. It certainly wasn't that she heard him, or saw him move, but she knew at once that someone was there. Hung beside the windowframe on a metal hook was a torch, left to light her path across the uneven flagstones when she worked late into the night. Keeping close to the door, her eyes straining into the darkness of the laundry, she groped across the wall until she could reach it.

'Who is it?' she said, flashing the beam around the laundry. She picked out an unfamiliar outline, and swung the torchlight back to pick it out. Crouched silently in the corner of the room was the tramp she had seen across the fields, his hand held across his face to shield his eyes. "Who are you? What are you doing here?' He let his hand fall away and squinted into the torchlight.

'Oh my God,' gasped Vronnie. 'Jonathan.'

Jonathan pushed the plate to one side.

'Have you had enough?' Vronnie asked. He nodded. After so many months with so little to eat, he struggled with even the simple meal of bread and cheese she had brought out to him. He swallowed down the last of the coffee and leaned back against the laundry wall.

'I still don't understand. If you knew we were here, why didn't you come to the door? Why have you been lurking around in the shadows? You scared the living daylights out of me last night.'

'I wanted to see how the land lay before I made myself known. Is she here?' He thumbed towards the sketches of Frances that Vronnie had taped around the walls. She shook her head.

'She's in London, staying with the Lockes until the New Year.'

'Those bastards. I don't understand what she sees in them.'

Vronnie reached out and rested her hand on top of Jonathan's. She squeezed it gently and shook her head.

'Unfair, Jonathan. She couldn't bear to be out in the back of beyond at this time of year. Too many memories, too raw. They were kind enough to invite her to stay and Frances needs to be in the city just now. Among parties and glamour, among people who will take her mind off things.' Jonathan laughed. It was a raw, ugly sound.

'The Lockes will certainly do that.'

'You can't blame her. It's been terrible for her. She lost her parents before she managed to make peace with them, remember. And on top of that she thought you were dead. We all did.' Vronnie sighed, recalling the months of uncertainty, of hoping and then despairing. 'We had no way of knowing.'

'And I had no way of letting you know. Not until the last few weeks. And then I daren't write to her; that's why I wrote to you at Eastbourne. When I heard nothing back, I assumed you hated me too.' Jonathan sank his head into his hands. Vronnie watched him, shocked at how diminished he seemed, how wounded, despite the lack of any obvious physical injuries. He seemed smaller, shrunken, as though his experiences had drained him.

‘But I’ve explained. I’ve not been there in months. I went to Yorkshire for some months and then stayed with Frances in Hastings, and then.... your letter kept being forwarded to me, but never quite caught me up. Until last week.’ She shook out the spare quilt she’d taken from the airing cupboard and passed it across to him, but he didn’t look up.

She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him tightly without speaking. Through the rough wool of his coat she could feel the tremors of his body as he shook with silent tears. There was nothing to say and there was too much to say.

‘I think you’d better stay here for now. I’ll talk to Henry in the morning.’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: KITTY

Full many a blessing wears a guise

Of worry or of trouble;

Far seeing is the soul and wise,

Who knows the mask is double.

Ella Wheeler Wilcox: Thanksgiving

Kitty finished her shopping as quickly as she could manage, and made her way to Annie's cottage. She had only bought the basics that they couldn't do without at the vicarage. The rest she had placed on two orders, one for Friday in time for Christmas and the other for the following Thursday, ready for the New Year. Both would be delivered to Hanbury, an extra expense she'd have to explain to the vicar's wife but which would save her the need for extra bus trips if time became tight. And how could it not be tight, she wondered, with both Billy and Mrs Harding in need of looking after?

Annie wasn't expecting her; it was unusual for Kitty to travel into Whitmore on any day other than Thursday or Saturday, when the market stalls filled the square around the Butter Cross.

'Who is it?' Annie asked in response to the Kitty's knock.

'Only me? Can I come in?'

'Of course.' Annie hauled the door open and pulled Kitty into the warmth of the kitchen. 'It's so good to see you.' The sisters hugged, until Kitty pulled

away and placed her basket on the table. She was shocked by the desperation she sensed in her sister's hug.

'Goodness. I only saw you yesterday. Are you alright?' Kitty looked around the room. Everything that had been arranged across their mother's dresser was now piled on the table. Beside the plates and dishes were a pile of folded newspapers and a half-wrapped photograph frame. The younger children were playing together on a rug on the floor, folding up pieces of paper and tearing out patterns. She stared at Annie. 'What's going on?'

'I want to get as much as I can out of the house. A friend down the lane is taking the boxes for me and next doors will take the dresser. I need the beds and Lizzie's cot to stay of course, but we can manage without tables and chairs even, if I can get somebody to store them.'

'But why, Annie?'

'Bailiffs. I'm paid up to the end of the month, but I've got nothing put away. Eddie took the last from the tin when he was home and I've had no housekeeping for a fortnight.' Annie's shoulders sagged and she dropped her head into her hands. 'The landlord will turf us out then and the bailiffs will take anything I've got.' Kitty gathered her sister into her arms.

'Oh Annie. We'll not let that happen to you.' Kitty sounded more confident than she felt. 'Besides, I've brought this. It's not much, but you can have what savings I've got.' She put the small oval tin on the table. Annie instantly recognised the picture of the little boy on the lid, wistfully watching a bubble from his clay pipe drift above his head. The brightly painted tin had belonged to their mother; she had kept her savings in it and Kitty had since done likewise.

'I can't,' Annie said, pushing it back towards Kitty. 'That's your money. You'll be needing it some day.'

'Well you need it for now, and that's all that counts.' Kitty took her sister's hands in hers. 'We need time. What's in there won't buy us much, but it'll get us through Christmas. We can worry about the New Year when it arrives.'

Somehow, thought Kitty, calling it the New Year didn't seem too bad. There was a positive sound to the New Year, a turning over of a new leaf. Something good to look forward to perhaps, maybe even the promise of Spring. With its reminders of snow and rain, of frozen pipes and iced-up windows, of wet overcoats and leaky boots, the thought of worrying about January when it arrived was altogether more disturbing.

It was almost possible to forget why they were parcelling up Annie's possessions. As they worked through the pile of glass and china, carefully wrapping each item in newspaper cadged from the chippy on Oxford Road, the sisters reminisced about each piece. There were hardly two plates in the cottage that matched. Most were hand me downs, odds and ends passed on from parents and grandparents, or when friends and neighbours had been fortunate enough to be able to afford a new service. Some were seconds that Annie had bought from the market, from traders who arrived from the potteries with an assortment of factory rejects stacked in stout wicker baskets, packed with wood-wool and shavings.

Annie told Kitty about each dish and cup, where it had come from and who it had belonged to. She knew the history of every piece and could recall the cause of each crack and chip. She remembered how this dish had slipped

through Roy's sudsy fingers when he was helping wash up and she hadn't the heart to be cross with him; how she had caught the handle on that mug on the tap when Eddie crept up on her, knocking it clean off; how Michael had thrown a toy in a paddy when he was only a few months old, chipping the rim of that plate.

Her favourite stories were about the things Kitty had helped her bring from their parents' home in Hanbury, after their father's death. It had been sad to sort through the cupboards, but their brothers lived too far away and weren't interested anyway, so the task had fallen to Kitty and Annie had offered to help.

'Do you remember the charger?' asked Annie. 'It was huge and I couldn't see us ever having enough food to put on it. I said I didn't want it. It would always look empty and then I'd feel even hungrier.'

'And I said you had to take it, because one day you would have enough.'

'I did use it once. Only the once, just last month. We had a leg of venison.' She told Kitty about Roy finding the injured deer and how he and Jimmy, aided by next door's Walter, had smuggled it back into the cottage between them. 'So much meat we hardly knew what to do with it. And look at me now,' said Annie. 'How have I got in this mess?'

She picked up a blue and white platter, its pattern a familiar scene of a willow on the riverbank beside a pagoda, with a pair of doves flying above a flowering cherry tree. Annie knew exactly where the platter had come from. She hardly dared think about it, and blushed when she admitted to Kitty how pleased she'd been to pick it up for a few pence. How little she had thought about another's misfortune back then, when the bailiffs had turned a family out of a

cottage on the next street and sold off their belongings for whatever anyone cared to pay, in order to settle the householder's debts.

'To think,' she said. 'It could be me next.' And she began to cry.

Kitty found it very difficult to drag herself away from the cottage, but she had already left Billy for much longer than she had intended. The bus was late, as it always was when she had run down the lane to get to the stop on time.

'Cheer up, it might never happen,' laughed the driver as she clambered on board. Kitty clamped her mouth shut on the torrent of words that threatened to engulf her. She could do without being thrown off the bus.

'Take no notice of him,' said the clippie, pinging the bell to let the driver know her passengers were seated. The bus pulled away from the Market Square. 'Sometimes he speaks first, thinks later. Most times he just doesn't think.' She checked Kitty's return ticket. 'You alright, dear? You look a bit pasty.'

'Yes thanks. Just got loads on my mind at the moment. Thanks for asking, though.' Kitty smiled at the clippie. 'Don't I know you from somewhere?'

'I went to school with your sister.' The clippie sat down on the seat across the aisle and dropped her voice. 'I heard she's in a spot of bother. That man of hers. It was in the paper.'

Kitty's heart sank. Of course, it would be. She could picture it: 'Whitmore Man Under Arrest', or something similar. She imagined a moment when Annie picked up some more newspapers from the chippy and saw the headlines. Kitty wished she could be there, to hold her, to offer a shoulder to cry on. And then

she imagined the moment when Mrs Harding read about it. Her face clouded over.

‘Don’t worry, love.’ The clippie patted Kitty on the shoulder as she stood up. ‘Nobody who knows Annie will blame her. She’s a good woman, is your sister.’ She turned away, heading towards the back of the bus. ‘Tickets, please. Can I see your tickets, please?’

Nobody who knew Annie, perhaps. But some would blame her, hold her to account for her husband’s wrongdoing. Mrs Harding was more likely to ban Annie and her children from calling for fear of tainting the vicarage’s reputation, than to offer her support to an innocent wife. And then Kitty would have to bite her tongue hard. Very hard.

Helena was sitting at the kitchen table, reading a book. The draining board was stacked with drying dishes and there was a pan of peeled potatoes on the other side of the sink. The large pan of stewing steak that Kitty had prepared in the morning was simmering gently on the back of the Rayburn. Kitty looked at her and raised an eyebrow.

‘All quiet on the western front?’ she asked, nodding her head towards the ceiling as she unwound her scarf. She put the net bag of shopping on the table and emptied the contents of her basket next to it.

‘Uncle Peter is with her,’ Helena said. ‘He’s been with her most of the day, since the doctor came this morning.’ She closed her book and started to help Kitty put things away. It didn’t pass Kitty’s notice that she didn’t wait to be asked to help, or enquire where things should go. In a very short time Helena

had learned what needed doing and simply got on with doing it. As Billy had observed, she was shaping up.

‘Did you get a chance to nip down to the bothy?’ asked Kitty.

‘I did, but I didn’t go in. Vronnie was there and I didn’t like to interrupt.’

Kitty was reaching into the back of a cupboard for the gravy browning and she paused momentarily. She moved the cornflour, saw what she was looking for and hauled out the packet.

‘That Miss Curbridge?’ Helena nodded. ‘What did she want?’

‘I don’t know. They were deep in conversation so I came away. She’s gone now though. I saw her slip through the back gate towards the church.’ Helena held her hand out for the gravy browning. ‘Do you want me to do that, while you go down to see him?’

‘Two dessertspoons. Mix it with water first,’ said Kitty, as she disappeared through the back door.

‘Look, I was going to tell you.’ Billy shook his head. ‘I’d been growing stuff there for months. I didn’t think anyone went there, but she’d spotted where I’d been gardening. That’s all.’

‘Was there trouble?’

‘No. She said she’d have a word with that bloke. Not Rufford. The other one. The one that’s interested in gardens. She said he might have some work for me in the Spring.’ Billy’s face clouded over. ‘It was looking like I might have a

job there, better than this. And then I fell over the blasted boot-scraper and this happened.’ He pointed to the outline of his leg beneath the blanket.

‘Well, you’re a lucky man, Billy Griffiths. I thought all these afternoons you’ve been missing from the garden, you were up to something with some fancy piece. And then Helena said Miss Curbridge was down here half the afternoon and I thought it must be her.’ Billy roared with laughter.

‘You think I’d take her, over a woman like you?’ He held out his hand. Kitty took it in hers and sat down on the edge of his bed, sliding her fingers between his. ‘When I’m better Kitty, when I’m up and about, back at work...’ He hesitated. ‘Will you marry me?’

‘Of course,’ said Kitty. ‘Do you think I’ve been spending all my time looking after you, if I wasn’t planning to?’

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: HELENA

.... a common suffering

Whitens the air with breath and makes both one

Stephen Spender: Two Armies

The book fell from Helena's hand, landing on the floor with a dull thud. She woke with a start and for a moment stared into the darkness, trying to make sense of where she was. As the outlines of furniture – a dressing table, a wardrobe – came into focus, she realised she was sitting in the winged chair next to her aunt's bed. She remembered telling her uncle to go to bed, to snatch a few hours' sleep. Hadn't she waved him away dismissively with her book, and promised to watch over her aunt? Someone must have seen her sleeping, since the table lamp had been switched off.

She gathered up her book and placed it on the bedside table. Her aunt's breath was shallow and laboured, but she seemed calm at least and free of pain. Helena decided to go downstairs and make herself a cup of tea. Maybe that would keep her awake a little longer.

On the landing she paused and listened for her uncle's familiar snore. She could hear nothing. The door to his room was slightly ajar; she pushed it further open and saw the bed was empty, the sheets rumpled and thrown back.

'Uncle Peter?' she called softly as she reached the foot of the stairs.

'Here,' he replied. 'Kitchen.' As Helena came in, he looked up from reading the editorial in a newspaper, which was spread across the table. One end of the paper was draped over the teapot and he pulled it aside. 'It should be still warm if you want a cup.'

‘Thanks. I was just about to make a pot, something to keep me awake.’

She kept her back to her uncle as she took a cup and saucer from the cupboard. She was reluctant to make eye contact, to see the disappointment in his expression. ‘I must have dozed off over my book.’

‘I know. I turned the light out, hoping you’d get an hour or two.’

‘Thank you,’ Helena said. She sat down opposite her uncle. ‘I’m sorry. One minute I was reading, and then... I think I dropped my book and the thud woke me.’

‘This won’t last much longer, my dear. And then we can all sleep soundly.’ Helena looked up from pouring her tea, surprised by her uncle’s remark.

‘Does the doctor think she’s past the worst of it now, then?’

The vicar shook his head. He slowly closed the newspaper, and folded it up on the end of the table. He reached out for Helena’s hand and placed his own on top of it. It was a gesture that Helena had seen many times before as her uncle comforted parishioners.

‘No my dear. That’s not what I meant. She is past the worst, in that I think Dr Berrington has found a way to reduce the pain. But we have to face the fact that your aunt does not have very long left.’

Helena gasped. It was no surprise that her aunt’s condition was serious; the recurrent bouts of nausea and headache had been distressing to witness and the sedative effects of the medications were as much a relief to her and Uncle Peter as to Aunt Celia. But she hadn’t considered the possibility that her aunt might not recover.

‘What has Dr Berrington said?’ she asked. ‘I had no idea she was that poorly. I’m an adult now, Uncle Peter. If I’m going to help I need to know what’s going on.’ The vicar withdrew his hand and cupped his face, pushing up his

spectacles as he closed his eyes and pressed his fingertips into the bridge of his nose. There was along pause before he replied.

‘Your aunt has a tumour. She hadn’t told anyone: not me, not the doctor, nobody. Not for a long time, anyway.’ He took away his hand and looked across the table at Helena. ‘You remember when we went away overnight?’ Helena nodded. ‘It was to see a specialist. He told us that there wasn’t anything he could do.’

‘Why didn’t you tell me?’

‘There didn’t seem to be any hurry. We thought we had much longer, a year or two, maybe more. But it appears that when the pain was too bad she’d been taking medication. Morphine. The tumour was more advanced than the doctors imagined.’ He shook his head, as though it was simply beyond his understanding. ‘Where she got the morphine from, I don’t know. And she wouldn’t say. I doubt we’ll ever know.’

‘I’m sorry, Uncle Peter.’ Helena reached across and placed her hand on top of her uncle’s in a gesture so like his own. She hesitated, and then asked. ‘How long do the doctors think she’s got?’

‘I’m praying we can get through Christmas. The Bishop will send someone out if we need help, but it’s only a few days away now so I think your aunt will probably last. I must be at her side at the end, but I would like to be available for my parishioners too.’ He tapped the folded newspaper, with its discussion of developments in Europe. ‘I think we may have some rough times ahead. We are a small village and we must be there for one another if the worst happens.’

Helena found it difficult to think about what might happen in Europe; even the needs of the Hanbury parishioners, so dear to her uncle’s heart, seemed

insignificant to her. Her relationship with Aunt Celia had never been easy, but she was family. And suddenly her family was shrinking.

Kitty stopped what she was doing, reached into the basket of linen she had just taken off the clothes horse and extracted a number of cotton handkerchiefs. She passed them across to Helena.

‘Thank you. I was so strong when Uncle Peter told me, but look at me now. I can’t seem to stop crying.’ Helena blew her nose noisily on a large check handkerchief of her uncle’s. ‘I’m not going to be any help to him like this, am I?’

Kitty carried on folding up the pillowcases. There was so much extra washing with Mrs Harding sick upstairs and Billy still confined to bed in the bothy.

‘Well, you can be some help to me,’ she said briskly. ‘Get on the other end of this sheet.’ Between them they tugged the sheet by the corners, stretching out the creases, before folding it neatly. They had been doing this so frequently that it had become like some kind of barn dance performed around the tables and chairs, their movements choreographed by country tradition. ‘Now I suggest you get some fresh air. You’ve either been in the kitchen or by your aunt’s bed for the last week. It’ll do you no harm to wander up to Benbarrow and chat to them up there. I’ll keep an eye on things here.’

Helena was about to object, but Kitty put up her hand, brooking no argument. Suddenly the idea of being away from the vicarage seemed appealing. Besides, she needed to tell Henry that she wouldn’t be up at Benbarrow on Boxing Day as she’d promised, and that the New Year’s Eve party was called off.

‘Yes, I think I will. I won’t be long.’ She stuffed the handkerchiefs into her pocket, and headed upstairs to change her sweater.

There was a crisp wintery feel to the air as Helena trudged along the lanes towards Benbarrow. The mild start to the month was giving way to chilly days and as the easterly winds brought in cold air, the forecast was for a bitter end to the year. As soon as Helena arrived at Benbarrow, she sensed an odd change in the atmosphere there too. Kendall was in the kitchen cutting thick slices of bread which he was frying in a pan of lard so hot that it was smoking. In another pan some eggs were sizzling, their lacy edges turning golden brown.

‘Thank heaven you’ve turned up,’ he said, before she had even closed the kitchen door behind her. ‘Pull that pan off the heat before that bread is done to a cinder, will you?’

She reached out for the handle, hearing his warning *Cloth! Cloth!* too late. She swore as the heat seared her palm. Kendall dropped the bread knife and immediately grabbed Helena’s hand, half dragging her towards the sink. He turned the cold tap on and held her hand in its flow.

‘No, keep it there,’ he insisted, holding her tightly as she tried to pull her hand away. He reached for the pot holder and drew both pans from the heat, before turning back to inspect Helena’s palm. She had been lucky; only a faint trace of red remained. ‘You’ll mend.’

‘Thanks,’ she said, taking off her coat and draping it over the back of a chair as she watched Kendall resume his cooking. ‘Where’s Vronnie? She’s usually the one in the kitchen. How come you’re on cooking duty?’

‘She’s in the Octagon, with Henry. And Jonathan.’ Kendall paused while the information sank in. ‘He turned up last night.’

‘Frances’s husband?’ Kendall nodded. ‘Where’s he been? Henry started to tell me something about him, but we never got to the end of the

conversation.' Helena blushed deeply, remembering the moment in the car and Henry's kiss.

'Spain,' Kendall said. 'He joined the International Brigade last year. When nobody had heard from him for months we assumed the worst.' He flipped the slices of fried bread onto plates and lifted an egg onto the top of each one. 'They've just been disbanded and he's come back.'

'Is he alright?' Helena asked.

'A few minor injuries, nothing serious. But he's had a rough time from what he's told me. It wasn't a picnic.' Kendall put knives and forks beside each slice of bread and pushed two plates towards Helena. He picked up the remaining two. 'Carry those through to Henry and Jonathan, will you? You can have a share of mine.'

There had clearly been a major discussion going on, judging by the scribbled notes on sheets of paper spread across the floor. Henry was perched in the window seat, a pencil wedged behind his ear as he peered at his notebook.

'Thank you,' he said, taking the plate she offered.

There was a dark-haired man sitting on one end of the sofa. His hair straggled over the collar of a thick sweater that she recognised as one of Kendall's gardening jumpers. His expression had a dull glaze about it. It reminded her of a photograph she'd seen once of a miner emerging from the pit shaft at the end of a shift: part relief to be out of the darkness of the lift cage, part stupefying exhaustion, part hunger. She passed him the second plate.

'Thank you,' he said, taking his food and reaching out with his right hand to shake hers. 'Jonathan.' He looked around at the others before adding 'Vronnie's cousin.' She took his hand, repelled for an instant by its scars and calouses.

‘How do you do? I’m Helena. My uncle is the vicar at St Peter’s.’ She turned to Henry, suddenly reminded of her excuse for visiting. ‘I’m afraid my aunt is very poorly, Henry. The party on New Year’s Eve has had to be cancelled.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that,’ said Vronnie, dabbing the yolk from the side of her mouth. ‘Billy told me she was unwell, but I didn’t realise it was serious.’

Helena sat on the leather pouffe beside the sofa. Kendall tapped her on the shoulder and offered her a forkful of toast and egg. There was comfort in the gesture. She opened her mouth and allowed him to feed her like a young child.

‘We were discussing Billy and Kitty, and Kitty’s sister,’ said Henry, flicking through his notebook.

‘Annie,’ said Kendall.

‘Yes, Annie. Vronnie tells us that she needs a job, and somewhere to live with her children. We need some help in the house and we’ve got lots of living space in the stable yard, above the horse boxes. It seems like the perfect solution. What do you think, Helena?’

‘I really don’t know. I’m afraid I know nothing about it.’ Helena felt ashamed. Here were people who had only lived in the village for a few months, hatching plans to help someone less fortunate than themselves, while she was totally unaware of any problem in Kitty’s family. Overwhelmed, she began to cry. ‘I think you need to talk to Kitty.’

Henry chatted to Helena as he drove her back to the vicarage. The first fat snowflakes were beginning to settle across the road. They drifted across the windscreen, forming icy ridges at the sides as the wipers swept them away. He was in his element, his head full of plans for Benbarrow. Vronnie had told everyone about her meetings with Billy in the walled garden and had suggested

that he would be the right person to take over running the kitchen gardens once his leg had healed. She had also pointed out that the bothy would make him and Kitty a perfect home, near enough to the vicarage for her to continue working there as long as she wanted.

Jonathan's return had been greeted with some reservation. Everyone was delighted that he'd returned safely from Spain, but decisions about his future would depend on how Frances responded once she arrived back in the New Year.

Helena allowed his chatter to wash over her. She was beginning to realise that there were big changes ahead for everyone, both at Benbarrow and at the vicarage. It seemed such a short time ago that she was sitting in the kitchen, taking to Kitty and bemoaning the fact that she wasn't going back to St Bart's at the start of the Autumn term. So much had changed in such a short time, and so much more was on the cusp of changing. She wanted to be involved, to offer her opinion and be taken seriously as a young woman, rather than being considered as a girl who needed to be protected. And yet, at the same time she wished she could hide under the blankets in her bedroom, stick her nose in a good book and only come out when it was all over.

Sometimes, she thought, life was just too complicated.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: FRANCES

.... the snow falling through the universe and faintly falling, like the descent of their last end, upon all the living and the dead.

James Joyce: The Dubliners

Frances relaxed her grip on the steering wheel a little as she watched the miles slip away beneath the outline of the bonnet. Uxbridge, Beaconsfield, High Wycombe.... as the suburbs gave way to countryside and the A40 ran from one town through snow-covered fields to the next, she became aware of the increasing distance she was putting between them and the events of the previous night. She glanced sideways at Elsa; she was sleeping restlessly, her head tilted awkwardly against the door frame. They would need to stop soon, take a break.

The Bentley felt heavy at first, so unlike the Austin to handle. If she hadn't been so furious she might have wondered whether she could drive it all the way to Oxfordshire, especially with the temperature still falling and more snow forecast. As it was she hadn't thought beyond the need to get Elsa away from the poisonous atmosphere that remained in the Chelsea apartment once the guests – invited and uninvited – had left.

Stokenchurch: two miles. Frances remembered stopping once, some years earlier, at an old coaching inn on the green. She daren't take her eyes off the road long enough to check her watch; it was late she knew, but with a bit of luck it would still be open. It was Saturday night after all, and Christmas Eve. Surely there would be a pub catering for the locals on their way to midnight service?

Elsa stirred as the road narrowed and the car ground up the hill, between pebble-dashed cottages.

‘Where are we?’ she asked, stretching and rubbing her eyes.

‘Just coming into Stokenchurch. I need a break, and a drink if possible. We’re about half way.’ She pulled the Bentley off the main road in front of the King’s Arms and turned off the engine. After the steady thrum of the road, the snow-muffled voices from the open door were soothing. There were other cars on the forecourt, and light streamed from the windows. It felt welcoming. She glanced at her wristwatch; half ten. Not as late as she’d thought. They’d made good time, despite the weather.

Elsa switched on the interior light, turned down the sunshade and peered at her reflection in the vanity mirror. Even in its soft light she looked a mess. She reached for her handbag, took out the slender silver-edged comb and ran it through her hair. In the bottom of her bag was a tube of Elizabeth Arden; she removed the personalised cover and twisted up the scarlet stick, applying it in slick arcs across her lips.

‘There,’ she said. ‘Who’s going to look at my eyes now?’

Frances smiled, impressed at the transformation. Only a close friend would notice the unusual lack of sparkle.

Refreshed by sandwiches and coffee, and more comfortable for their brief stop, they resumed their journey. Frances turned the heater on full blast; the car was already warm by the time the road dropped away from the Chiltern edge and on towards Oxford. The snow seemed to be easing the further west they drove, leaving behind the drifting snow that had blocked many of the roads around London. Intermittent snowfall forced her to slow down, as did the flurries blown

across the road from trees and hedgerows, but there were none of the drifts she had been warned about by the publican. Still, she was glad of the bulk of the Bentley, knowing that driving this far in her Austin might have proved too much of a challenge. She chuckled, wondering what Robert would have made of her escapade.

‘What’s funny?’ asked Elsa.

‘I was just thinking about how Robert will take the news that we’ve driven off in his precious Bentley.’

‘I don’t care,’ spat Elsa. ‘It was paid for with my money. My money has paid for everything.’ She pulled her cashmere wrap tighter around her shoulders. ‘The more I think about it, the less sense it makes. How could he need more than I gave him?’

‘Perhaps he needed to feel he had money of his own. Sometimes being wealthy isn’t enough.’

‘But to lie and cheat for money? I’ve always known he was a hard man, Frances. A strong man, determined. A ruthless businessman, even. But I didn’t think he was cruel and heartless. Why would he behave like that?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Frances, although she couldn’t agree with Elsa. She had always seen a cruel streak in him, particularly in the way he treated Henry, demeaning him with a throwaway remark if the opportunity arose. ‘The superintendent said he thought it began as a challenge, like some kind of game he played with himself. Perhaps he did it to prove to himself that he could.’ She peered ahead and turned on the wipers again, whipping the flakes from the windscreen.

Elsa reached into the back of the car for her handbag and took out the open bar of chocolate. Cadbury’s. Hardly the sort of chocolate she would

normally buy from Fortnum's or Harrod's, but it had been all that the petrol station at Beaconsfield had stocked, and she had been grateful for its sweetness. She unfolded the wrapper and broke off a strip of squares, offering them to Frances.

'Thanks,' Frances said, biting off a single square and placing the remainder on the dashboard. She gestured towards a roadsign gradually becoming clearer the closer they got. 'Headington. Not too far now.'

The A40 swung north, skirting around Oxford, crossing arterial roads, pushing out again into the countryside past water meadows and pastures. At Eynsham she breathed a sigh of relief, rolling her shoulders, releasing the tension. This was familiar territory, a road she had driven regularly over the last few months, since she'd come to Hanbury to work alongside Henry on the renovations. It wasn't until she started to spot familiar landmarks that she allowed herself to think 'nearly home', that she began to realise that this was how she now thought of Benbarrow.

'I know this road,' said Elsa. 'Isn't this the place where we stayed, when we visited you at Benbarrow? The town with the butter cross?' Frances nodded, and Elsa sat forward, straining for sight of a farm she recognised, the drive to a distinctive house, a dip in the road. Then they came to the turning to Hanbury: the war memorial carved with the names of the village's brothers and sons, St Peter's church, the Royal Oak and finally the gates opening into Benbarrow's long drive. Frances felt the smile unfold across her face and the wheels of the car scrunched over the snow-coated gravel. She stopped by the steps leading up to the main door, pulled on the handbrake and killed the engine.

‘Made it,’ she said, and the two women reached out, gathering one another in an embrace.

Despite light spilling from the hallway, the big oak door was locked. Frances and Elsa picked up their overnight bags from the back seats, leaving their suitcases in the boot, and headed around the side, towards the kitchen door. The cats ran to greet them from the shadows, winding around their legs, mewing for attention.

‘Nobody in?’ Frances asked them. ‘Have you been shut out in the cold, you poor creatures?’ She put down her bag and rummaged for her keys. The warmth from the Rayburn enveloped them as they went in. The kitchen smelled of mulled wine, rich and spicy, the remains cooling in a jug on the table.

‘Shall we?’ asked Elsa, lifting the jug onto the hob. They flung their coats across the backs of the chairs and cut slices from the loaf abandoned on the board, slathering them with butter and sinking their teeth into the soft bread.

‘I bet they’ve all gone to the midnight service,’ Frances said, glancing at her watch. ‘I don’t suppose they will be long. If they’ve had much of this they’ll be rolling home.’ She warmed a pair of glasses with water from the kettle and poured the remains of the mulled wine into them. ‘Let’s wait for them in the Octagon.’

They were both dozing by the time the others clattered in through the kitchen. There was a distant clamour of voices and footsteps through the hallway.

‘Frances?’ called Henry, uncertainly.

‘Through here,’ replied Frances, realising that the sight of the Bentley and her unheralded return might have caused some consternation. ‘We’re fine. We’re in the Octagon.’ She lifted the sleeping cat from her lap and stood up.

Henry burst into the room, an expression of concern on his face. Behind him followed others: Kendall, Vronnie and shaking off his overcoat another figure, at once familiar and unfamiliar.

‘Jonathan.’ Frances gasped, felt her knees buckle and sank back into her chair.

A cat sniffed at the neck of the empty cognac bottle which lay on the floor beside Henry’s chair. A second bottle stood on the low table, a cluster of brandy balloons around it. Whether the effects of the alcohol were medicinal, anaesthetic or restorative was open to debate, but they were all agreed it was necessary. Frances sat on one end of the settee, cradling a cup of coffee. Every now and then she would glance across at Jonathan, as if trying to reassemble his features into the face of the man she had married. He was different. Besides the scar that creased one eyebrow and the realignment of his nose – broken when he was thrown to the ground in a mortar explosion – he had a gaunt appearance which had little to do with his hollowed out cheeks.

Vronnie saw in him a damaged soul, she said, a creature wounded as much by what he’d seen as by what had happened to him. Frances was inclined to agree. She was, after all, changed herself from the woman he had left behind. She knew they would need to get to know each other again; it wouldn’t be easy. She felt for her wedding ring, suspended on a cord around her neck and lying in the hollow of her cleavage. She pressed its familiar outline against her skin and wondered what the future might hold.

'I returned to our guests, and of course they all wanted to know what was going on,' Elsa said. 'It was very embarrassing. Sir James offered to go and speak to the Inspector, but I said I thought it was best to let Robert handle the situation.'

'You were marvellous, Elsa. I don't know what I would have done with a dozen guests sitting around my dining table and the house swarming with uniformed officers.'

'There was nothing I could do except tell the staff to carry on and serve the dessert. It wasn't as if our guests could leave; they all had cars booked for midnight. Nobody could walk home, the ladies all in evening dress and high heels, and the snow inches deep across the pavements.' Elsa's laugh was brittle. 'It was like something from a second-rate play.'

'What were the officers looking for?' asked Henry.

'They had a list of items: small paintings, ceramics, silverware. They searched every room. When they'd finished in the lounge they asked us to move from the dining room.' Again, the brittle laugh. 'Asked us? Told us. The lounge was dreadful. Not a mess, just obviously rearranged: ornaments moved, a painting missing from one wall, drawers on the escritoire not quite closed.' Elsa shuddered in distaste at the memory. 'Sir James was incensed, but I said he wasn't to make a fuss. I just wanted the police to go.'

'And they did eventually, but they asked Robert to accompany them to the station.' Frances picked up her brandy glass and swirled the amber liquid around its bowl. 'As soon as Elsa's guests had gone I told the staff to tidy up and I took her back to the flat.'

'So what have they charged him with?' Kendall poured some more brandy into each of their glasses. 'Theft? Handling stolen goods? What?'

‘Both,’ said Elsa. ‘And handling illegal drugs.’

‘Drugs?’ Kendall raised an eyebrow. Elsa nodded.

‘That’s what I find most despicable. When we went to the station in the morning the superintendent told us he’d been preying on people who were old or sick. They’d been tipped off because he had befriended an old man who was dying. When things went missing the family suspected Robert of taking valuables in return for supplying morphine.’ Elsa paused and glanced around the room at her friends. ‘The man was sick and muddled. He was vulnerable. Who knows what Robert took?’

‘I was talking to Helena,’ Kendall began. But Vronnie shook her head, and he stopped. Now was not the time to suggest that Robert’s regular visits to Oxfordshire might also have been part of his illegal activities.

‘I didn’t tell you at the time, Elsa,’ Henry said. ‘But I found Robert here a few days ago, when we were all out. He’d been up in the loft, going through the crates that Grandfather packed away. I just told him to leave. I should have telephoned the police, I see that now.’

‘I’m sorry, Henry. I feel responsible.’ Elsa started to cry. Henry reached across and gently squeezed her hand. ‘I introduced him to my best friends and he stole from you. How can you forgive me?’

Frances picked up a trio of brandy balloons in each hand and carried them out into the kitchen.

‘Let me help you,’ Jonathan said, following her out with a pile of plates and the remaining shortbread.

The Fortnum's hamper was open on the side, one cat curled in the hollow in the wood wool where the biscuit tin had been. Frances shooed it off and closed the lid.

'I didn't expect to be sharing the hamper when I ordered it,' she said. 'I thought I'd be miles away, drinking champagne and dancing into the small hours. And look at me: I've driven half way across the country, back to the people I love, back to the place that feels like home.'

Jonathan gathered her into his arms and held her head against his shoulder. He buried his face in her hair and inhaled her sweet warmth.

'Me too,' he said. 'Me too.'

CHAPTER TWENTY- NINE: VRONNIE

Note nothing of why or how, enquire

no deeper than you need

Into what sets these veins on fire

Valentine Ackland: Instructions from England

Vronnie walked carefully towards the laundry. The snow which had settled in the kitchen courtyard had mostly melted and there had been no fresh falls since Boxing Day, but the cobbles were slippery in daylight and icy at night. She couldn't afford to fall, especially when everyone was out.

She unlocked the laundry door and plugged in the electric heater that Henry had found for her. Its cylinder came to about waist height and was capped with a circular grid, through which a stream of hot air circulated. It warmed the room much faster than the paraffin stove she had been using, and without the smell. In very few minutes she was able to paint without constantly rubbing her hands together for warmth.

The small paintings were nearly finished. She had worked and reworked her ideas until she was satisfied with both concept and composition, and in January she planned to scale them up onto the framed canvas that Henry had ordered for the Octagon. She would begin with the autumnal scene, an image of Persephone returning reluctantly to the Underworld, glancing over her shoulder as if to fix the image in her mind. Vronnie touched the paint at one corner where the autumnal colours were already slipping into the silver-grey of winter; it was still slightly oily.

The spring scene was less firm in her mind. She had sketched out the composition to balance the autumn scene but she felt uneasy about the colour palette. She had lived at Benbarrow for less than four months, and had watched the light and landscape change as the daylight hours shortened. Now the days were already beginning to lengthen; before long the first signs of Spring would be apparent. Before she committed herself, she wanted to witness the seasons changing, see for herself the greening of the parkland and the Wychwood, watch the shift of light against the façade as the sun became progressively higher against the skyline. She had grown to love the house; she was determined to be true to its unique atmosphere rather than simply imagine what it might look like.

Vronnie sat down in the wicker chair and flipped open her sketch book. She'd found the Lloyd Loom chair in one of the upstairs bedrooms when she was tidying up weeks earlier and had brought it down to the laundry just before Christmas. Now repainted it a stylish grey, and with a couple of old feather pillows shaken into squares and recovered with offcuts of red and gold brocade, it seemed perfect for her studio.

Odd, she thought, how it had become her space, a place where she could work undisturbed except by the regular visits of the trio of tabby cats. Not so long ago she had thought of herself as a drifter, someone who moved between the homes of friends and relations, most often responding to a call for an extra pair of hands. She had been a travelling companion, a sickbed visitor, a support in times of difficult births and traumatic bereavements. She had arrived at Benbarrow simply as a visitor, albeit one with an eye for interior décor, but she had automatically set about making herself useful, generating a role in the kitchen that justified her continuing presence.

Now that role was going to be Annie's and Vronnie would be able – expected, even – to focus on her painting. Henry had taken to introducing her as The Artist, convinced that she was capable of creating work worthy of the title. The difficulty, after so many years of dabbling in sketchbooks and on mismatched sheets of cartridge paper, would be to persuade herself.

The rumble of a small truck pulling into the stable yard disturbed her thoughts. Vronnie peered from the laundry window through the archway. She could just see the tailgate swaying gently as someone moved about on the flatbed just out of her range of vision.

'We'll have to board that window up for now. The builders will fix it properly next week.' Henry wandered up to the back of the truck, just as Kendall jumped down onto the cobbles, tugging at a length of rope. Jonathan pulled free the edge of a ragged tarpaulin.

Vronnie wandered out to join them.

'How are you getting on?' she asked, gazing at the collection of boxes and baskets wedged on top of the bedframe and cot which filled the back of the truck. Lashed to the cab was a dresser, sandwiched between two double mattresses.

'This is it,' Kendall said, nodding towards the contents of the truck. 'Henry is driving across for Annie and the little ones in Elsa's car, once she and Frances have got back from Oxford. It'll be easier than trying to fit all the last minute things in the Austin.' Jonathan looked up at the sky; a small plane banked as it turned across the thick grey clouds that had been gathering since mid morning.

'Better get these things inside before we get more snow,' he said.

Vronnie headed back to the kitchen to prepare sandwiches and coffee while they unloaded. The builder had been glad to lend them the truck in return for the promise of more work, now Henry was planning to make improvements to the stables and tack rooms as well as the house. There had been some negotiation of what needed doing and how much it would cost, but the builder hadn't pushed for more. It was rare enough to get a landlord who would do what was necessary to a property with sitting tenants; to find one who would voluntarily improve outbuildings to accommodate a family in need was unheard of. Remembering the builder's bemused expression, Vronnie smiled.

'Right, we're off to take the truck back, Vronnie.' Henry opened the door to the laundry and poked his head inside. 'We'll pick up the Austin from the builder's yard and come back here. Hopefully the girls won't be long in the Bentley and then we can finish off at Whitmore.' He caught Vronnie's expression as he was about to close the door. 'What's funny?' he asked.

'I was just imagining what the neighbours are going to say when you arrive to pick Annie up in the Bentley. A couple of scruffs in an old builder's truck is one thing, but can you imagine?' She laughed out loud. 'They probably think the world has turned upside down as it is.'

She opened her sketchbook again and turned to the drawings she'd made of the truck, a series of rough outlines she'd scribbled while the men ate their lunch. Somewhere in one of the panels she would include it, a nod towards the work the builders had done in renovating Benbarrow and maybe in the other panel she would add the Bentley, a reminder for those who would one day tell the stories of Elsa's flight from London and Annie's removal from Whitmore. She was still considering how she could fit the vehicles onto the canvasses

when she heard the scrunch of tyres on the gravel. Recognising the sound as too soft to be the Bentley, she closed her book and pulled herself to her feet.

‘That was quick, boys,’ she called out. She turned off the heater, checked she hadn’t shut in any of the cats and crossed towards the kitchen, ready to put the kettle on again. From the corner of the laundry yard she caught sight of the tail end of a taxi, driving off towards the gates. She opened the kitchen door, uncertain who might be there, and concerned that it might be Robert.

‘Hello?’ she called, tentatively.

‘There you are! I couldn’t see anyone.’ Eric emerged from the corridor. ‘It’s only me, back like a bad penny. Where is everyone?’ Vronnie sighed.

‘I thought it might be Robert,’ she said, ignoring his question as she pulled out a chair and sank down on it, relief flooding her body.

‘Robert? I thought that lot were in London for the festivities.’ He frowned, his expression confused. ‘The Lockes; Frances. Christmas, New Year and all that,’ he added.

‘Well, much the same could be said about you Eric. We weren’t expecting you till midweek.’

‘Ah, well, yes. The ancestral home. Turkey and crackers and Christmas cake. It can become a bit much after the first few days. Too much studied politeness.’ He grinned as he pulled the kettle onto the hotplate and extracted a packet of LapsangSouchoung from the depths of his overnight bag, sniffing the paper wrap and inhaling deeply.

Over its distinctive smoky flavour they shared news: of Jonathan’s arrival at Benbarrow; of Frances and Elsa’s departure from London; of Eric’s tedious but thankfully unfrontational Christmas.

‘Right. I’ll put my bag in my room shall I?’ Eric said as he took his cup and saucer across to the sink and returned to the table to pick up Vronnie’s.

‘No, we need to rethink.’ Vronnie frowned. ‘We put Jonathan in your room.’ She reconsidered the options, made all the more complicated by Elsa’s presence and the need to empty the bedrooms above the library and drawing rooms in preparation for the building work. She was oblivious to the puzzled look on Eric’s face.

‘Jonathan? Isn’t he sharing with....’ Eric’s voice trailed off. ‘Oh,’ he said. ‘It’s like that is it?’

‘It’s not like anything, Eric.’ Vronnie frowned, betraying her impatience at his lack of sensitivity. ‘Give them a chance. They just need time to get to know one other again. They’ve been through traumatic experiences, both of them. They’re different people from the lovers who parted ... what? sixteen months ago?’

‘I suppose so,’ Eric said, his expression chastened but his attitude unaltered. ‘In their situation all I’d want to do is fall into my lover’s arms.’

‘That’s because you’re young. And you wear your heart on your sleeve.’ Vronnie pushed her cup across the table towards him. ‘And anyway, your lover has missed you as much as you’ve missed him.’

‘He has?’ Eric turned, cup shaking in the saucer as he stalled halfway towards the sink. He turned, simultaneously grinning and blushing.

‘He has,’ Vronnie confirmed, her smile reassuring. ‘Now take your bag upstairs while I lock up the laundry. It doesn’t look like I’m going to get any more work done today.’

Vronnie crossed the hallway on her way to the long dining room to fetch the novel she had abandoned on the window sill the previous night. The light had faded just enough for her to spot headlamps coming up the drive, so she watched for a moment or two as the car came closer to the house. Too small for the Bentley, she thought. The Austin. She returned to the kitchen, to announce Eric's unexpected return.

Henry pulled the car into the stable yard and climbed out. He stretched and tossed the keys to Kendall.

'Lock up, will you?' he called over his shoulder as he headed towards Vronnie.

'News,' she said, leaning forward to whisper in his ear. He grinned, shrugging his coat and scarf off and casting them over the back of a chair as he hurried through the kitchen. Vronnie unhooked her own coat from the back of the door and called across to Jonathan and Kendall.

'Could you give me a hand moving this dresser,' she said, drawing their attention away from the house. 'I think Annie will want it in the living room.'

A scrunch of gravel followed by the slamming of car doors heralded the return of Frances and Elsa. Vronnie surveyed the dresser in its new position. It was old and somewhat rustic in design; it would have looked out of place in the main house. But Vronnie liked it. It had obviously been loved and carefully looked after. It had history, a sense of belonging.

'That'll do,' she said as Kendall straightened it up. 'Could you put those boxes upstairs to save Annie carrying them?' She pointed at a pair of boxes with '*bedroom*' scribbled across their lids. Vronnie doubted anyone else had

noticed yet, but she had and the less Annie carried in her condition, the better. She passed Jonathan a key. 'And can you lock the door to the room with the broken window, until the builders fix it? Then I think it's time to pick Annie up.'

Coming out of the stable yard she met Frances.

'What's the matter with her?' Frances asked.

'With who? Elsa?'

'No. Helena. She came rushing out. Didn't say a word, just nearly knocked me down as I went into the kitchen. She looked dreadful, like she'd seen a ghost or something.'

'I didn't know she was here,' Vronnie replied, peering down the drive. There was nobody in sight; Helena was long gone.

CHAPTER THIRTY: KITTY

*Between the boughs the stars showed numberless
And the leaves were
As wonderful in blackness as those brightnesses
Hung in high air.*

Ivor Gurney: Between the Boughs.

‘Grab the corners!’ Kitty said, hanging onto one edge as she tossed the sheet over the double bed, engulfing Michael and Richie. They squealed and scrambled across the rough woollen under-blanket, tumbling onto the floor like excited puppies. Kitty remembered her mother turning the task of making beds into a game when she was young, keeping them occupied at the same time as getting the job done. Michael grasped one corner in his firm grip; Richie clung to another with his chubby fingers.

‘Careful! Not too hard!’ Kitty looked at the worn sheet with concern as they tugged it over the bed. It had been cut and carefully rejoined, edge to edge, to give it another lease of life, but the fabric was already wearing thin. It wouldn’t take much to tear it. She passed a sagging feather pillow to each of the boys, and with the remaining two showed the children how to put on the clean pillow cases.

‘Finished!’ Michael held his pillow up for inspection and frowned at his younger brother. ‘Come on, slow coach.’ Richie’s lip trembled as he struggled with the pillow.

‘Here, Michael. You arrange those pillows while I help Richie.’ She scooped the little boy into her arms and sat on the edge of the bed. ‘There, all

done. Show me where it goes.' Richie put the last pillow into the empty space at the foot of the bed.

'Mine,' he said. Kitty tried to imagine the room full of sleeping boys. She had known her nephews shared a room at the cottage in Whitmore, but seeing the four pillows, two at the head and two at the foot, brought home the reality of children topped and tailed in a double bed. Roy was nearly twelve; Jimmy, although younger, was more thickset. Neither should be sharing with these tiddlers, she thought. The sooner that window was fixed and they could move a bed into the other room, the better. Kitty reached for the blankets and quilt.

'Right, let's get this job finished,' she said. 'We've still got your mother's bed to make.'

Annie was sitting in her chair, surrounded by boxes. She cradled the baby, Lizzie sucking furiously on her thumb as she drifted off. Annie began to get up as her sister came in.

'Stay there,' Kitty said. 'You must be exhausted. It's been such a long day.'

'I am. I can't believe I'm here, back in Hanbury, back at Benbarrow after all these years. I keep on thinking it's a dream and I'll wake up in a few moments.' Annie shook her head and looked down at her daughter, watching her sleeping eyes rove under her eyelids. She leaned down and kissed the child's forehead. 'I can't believe we're safe.'

The prospect of Eddie's return, although still a possibility, had receded since the policeman had called again shortly after Christmas. He'd explained that the man Eddie had assaulted was likely to survive, but with injuries so serious that the court was taking a hard line. The officer was surprised when

Annie greeted the news that bail had been refused and a long custodial sentence seemed inevitable with relief rather than distress.

Kitty pulled the warm kettle back onto the stove and dug around in one of the boxes until she found some cups. The kitchen wasn't much different in size to the one at Whitmore but with the dresser installed in the other downstairs room, the few sticks of furniture looked sparse in their new surroundings. She wandered through to see how Jimmy was getting on with the job of unpacking the last few things. He was sound asleep on a rug that Vronnie had brought across earlier. A stack of plates were piled beside the dresser, waiting for Annie to arrange them on the shelves. Kitty looked around. The room was larger and square, with shuttered windows along one side and a deep inglenook fireplace on the end wall. Originally intended as a common room for the stable hands, it would make an excellent living room for Annie's growing family, she thought. She saw a tartan throw furled in one corner and laid it across Jimmy, draping it gently in an effort not to disturb him.

'Where are the terrible twosome?' asked Annie as Kitty came back into the kitchen. Kitty laughed.

'Tucked up and well away. They found their pyjamas in a box and wanted to try out the bed as soon they'd got the blankets on. I made them go to the toilet first, but otherwise I didn't argue. They were both snoring before I'd folded up their clothes and turned out the light.'

'Thank goodness for that. I thought they might be so excited they'd be up half the night.' Annie settled the baby into her crib and watched Kitty pour the boiling water into the pot. The smell of steeping tea-leaves, the thought of a quiet brew, was a comfort to them both after the hectic day. While Annie had juggled children, dogs and packing at Whitmore, Kitty had shuttled between

Benbarrow and the vicarage, seeing to both Mrs Harding and Billy, making meals and carrying food and anything else that could be spared across to the stable rooms. She had found several pairs of old curtains in the back of the airing cupboard that she was sure wouldn't be missed; they were now hanging at Annie's bedroom windows. She poured out the tea and unfolded the remaining greaseproof wrap of sandwiches before sitting down wearily.

'How is Billy?' asked Annie. 'I'm sorry, I've been so busy I hadn't thought to ask.'

'Much better, thanks. He's managed to put some weight on his leg. The doctor has told him to take it gradually, but you know what he's like. He's impatient to get back into the garden.'

'Not yet, surely? Doesn't he understand how ill he's been?'

'I think he's beginning to,' said Kitty. 'Now he's sitting up and moving around a bit, he's starting to realise it will be a long time before he's able to work in the garden. That Mr Marchant keeps popping in to see him and talking about the plans for the Benbarrow walled garden. He's brought over a big catalogue from London for Billy to look through. He wants to grow lots of different varieties of fruit and vegetables - I've never heard of most of them.' She took a bite from her sandwich and chewed hungrily. 'They're ordering new tools and seed potatoes and onion sets and fertilisers. They'll need a lorry to deliver it all!'

'It'll be a lot of work when it arrives. I've told Roy and Jimmy that they must help out.'

'It will. But now Miss Rufford's husband has turned up, that's an extra pair of hands. He doesn't look like the type that's afraid of a bit of hard word.'

Kitty looked thoughtful. 'None of them are, when I come to think of it. They've all turned a hand when it's been needed.'

'Not bad for a bunch of toffs, are they?' Annie laughed and then her expression became serious. She glanced around the kitchen and then looked back at Kitty. 'They've been so kind and generous. I don't know where I'd be...' Her words were swallowed up in sobs as tiredness gave way to tears.

Kitty began to cross the yard. The air was clear and cold; stars scattered the sky above the rooftops and chimneys. She focussed her attention on the cobbles, rimed with frost. She had barely taken two tentative paces when she was startled by the headlights of a car. She moved back into the lee of the buildings to wait for the Austin to move off, but the driver's door swung open.

'Can I offer you a lift?' Kendall called across the yard. 'I'm on my way to the vicarage.'

'Thank you.' Kitty climbed into the passenger seat and snapped door closed. 'I'm very grateful. I'd stayed longer than planned, so a lift is a great help.'

'It's been a very busy day, hasn't it?' Kendall backed the car out of the yard and turned it on the gravel drive. The lights swept across the grass verge, the stone wall, the woodland beyond. Snow clumped in drifts in spots where the sun had yet to reach it, creating strange patterns of brightness in among the shadows. A slender figure moved through the trees, brisk and sure-footed. 'Your nephew, I think.' Kitty nodded.

'Yes. Roy. He's been out walking the dogs. They've been cooped up most of the day. Even the old dog was anxious to get outside.'

‘The boy too, I imagine. He seems like an outdoors sort of lad to me.’

Kendall turned the wheel as they reached the end of the drive, steering the small car towards the vicarage. ‘He’ll be a great help to us until Billy builds up his strength. Afterwards too, of course. There’s always plenty of work on an estate like this. If he wants it.’

‘He’s only young yet, but yes, I think he’d like to work here. He’s talked about being a gamekeeper one day.’ Kendall laughed.

‘Poacher turned gamekeeper, eh?’ he said.

Kitty glanced across at Kendall’s profile, and saw genuine amusement. Apparently she wasn’t the only one aware of Roy’s nocturnal ramblings and the treasures he had brought back to Annie’s Whitmore cottage. She chuckled and raised an eyebrow.

‘Aren’t they the best sort?’ she asked.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE: HELENA

*Her body had grown small as suddenly
And strangely as a dream dissolved in morning.
Crying through blankets, it seemed to those
who had known her a woman
Not perished but returned to infancy.*

E J Scovell: Death from Cancer

Helena looked down at her watch. Six-fifteen. Less than six hours until the radio announced the arrival of another year with the tolling of Big Ben. She imagined people getting ready for parties and balls: hostesses fussing over last-minute arrangements, women pinning up their hair, putting on their make-up, slipping into elaborate gowns; gentlemen dressed in tuxedos heading out in chauffeur driven cars to collect their girlfriends. Not that she'd ever been to parties or balls, but she'd read enough books and watched enough films; whether it was Austen or Isherwood, Bronte or Lehmann, the excitement of New Year's Eve was palpable.

The door to her aunt's room creaked open and the vicar came in.

'How is she?' he asked, looking down at his wife.

'Quiet now,' replied Helena. 'But she was restless earlier. She seemed to be wide awake, and kept talking to me, as if I was mother. She kept calling me Daisy and asking where the baby was.'

The vicar fetched another chair from beside the dressing table and placed it next to Helena's. For a moment he appeared to withdraw into himself, as though she hadn't just spoken to him, as if she wasn't even there. She

turned to face him and noticed that his eyes were closed and his lips were moving silently.

‘Amen,’ he said softly. He reached out and patted her arm. ‘You are very much like your mother, you know. You have some of her mannerisms as well as her looks. It’s an easy mistake to make in the circumstances.’

‘I suppose so.’ Helena shuffled in her seat. ‘I don’t remember her well. Aunt Celia seldom spoke to me about mother or father. She said it wasn’t healthy to dwell on bereavement.’ She fidgeted, playing with the buttons on her cardigan, avoiding eye-contact with her uncle. Now was not the time to criticise her aunt, but here was an opportunity to talk frankly with her uncle and she didn’t want to lose it. ‘Sometimes I feel like I’m remembering photographs rather than real people. Does that make sense?’

‘Yes my dear. It makes perfect sense. Unfortunately we can’t choose how we recall people. I want to remember your aunt as she was when we were young but I’m afraid my memories will inevitably be tainted by the last few weeks.’ He glanced across at the bed and watched as the blankets pulled up over his wife’s chest rose and fell in the rhythm of her shallow breaths. Her pink winceyette nightgown just visible around her shoulders and neck emphasised the yellow pallor of her skin. ‘Sitting here, beside your aunt, makes me question all the things I’ve been taught. All the things I’ve taught my parishioners.’

He took off his glasses and laid them on the table. There was a fragility to the spectacles, placed on the crochet-edged mat where the wire frame and rims caught the lamplight, that was reminiscent of a daddy long-legs Helena found curled on her windowsill at the end of the summer. She waited for her uncle to continue.

'I've lost count of how many widows and daughters I've comforted over the years, telling them time is the great healer. I always say that in a few weeks or months their grief will become less raw and they will be able to think of their loved one in happier times.' He rubbed the heels of his hands into his eye sockets. 'Is that really the way it is? Will I ever be able to forget how much pain she's been in and how little I was able to help?'

Helena reached across and put her arms around her uncle, resting her head on his shoulder. She could feel the catch in his breath as he fought to hold back the tears.

'Nobody could help, uncle. That's what Dr Berrington said, wasn't it? *The biggest challenge we face isn't curing the illness but easing the pain.*' The vicar nodded, a wry smile caught on the edge of his lips.

'That's the irony, isn't it? We'd all like to think of that Locke fellow as a bad man, and of course he was, but in reality he was the only one who was able to help ease her pain.'

Helena thought back to the visit from the police inspector, a local man and friend of her uncle's. It was an unofficial visit, a warning that the vicar and the doctor might both be called to testify when the case came to court, if Locke didn't plead guilty. Not that there was any defence; Locke had been a thorough and efficient trader and had recorded each of his illicit acquisitions in a small ledger, stashed in the gallery safe. Every item he had bought for a pittance, or simply taken when a back was turned, was recorded alongside its sale value. The police had identified a number of items that had yet to be sold on, among them several items from the vicarage which the inspector said would ultimately be returned.

‘The morphine eased Aunt Celia’s physical pain, maybe,’ Helena argued.
‘But you were the one who was always at her side.’

‘And you, my dear. I don’t know how I would have managed without your help. Kitty’s too, and at a time when she’s had so much else to worry about.’

Then sat quietly together, each lost in their thoughts.

Kitty tapped on the door and popped her head into the bedroom.

‘I’ve made sandwiches,’ she said. ‘They’re under a cloth on the kitchen table when you’re ready. I’m just going down to the bothy for an hour.’ She glanced across towards the bed and cocked her head on one side. ‘No change?’ she asked. Helena shook her head.

‘Thank you, my dear,’ said the vicar. ‘Is everything alright at Benbarrow? Has your sister settled into her new home?’

‘Yes, thank you. It’s been a busy day, but everyone has been so kind and helpful. Mr Rufford, and Miss Curbridge and all their friends. I don’t know whose idea it was, who to thank, but Annie is so grateful.’

‘Well, I’m sure it will work out well. Off you go now Kitty. You go down to your young man. You’ll find a bottle of port on my desk; take that with you and see the New Year in.’

Helena listened to Kitty’s footsteps recede down the staircase. She pushed herself out of the chair, stretched and excused herself to go to the bathroom. Her limbs were stiff. Apart from her fleeting visit to Benbarrow, she had hardly been out of the house.

Each time she thought about the afternoon she felt worse. She kept replaying the experience over and over, as if rereading a chapter in a book or watching the same scene from a film endlessly repeating before her eyes. Each

time she noticed something new, never sure whether she was remembering new details or adding them from her imagination.

She had carried across the iced cake from the vicarage. The row of cakes, which Kitty had so carefully prepared and finished before Christmas, were forgotten in the wake of events: Billy's sudden fever, her aunt's collapse, Annie's threatened homelessness and removal to Benbarrow. Remembering them seemed to offer the perfect excuse for a breath of fresh air and an opportunity to see her friends at Benbarrow, if only for an hour or so. The fields were still white-over, with drifts banked up against hedges; the light was so bright that it hurt her eyes after spending hours in the subdued light of her aunt's bedroom. The radio newsreaders warned of treacherous conditions, and indeed much of the country was caught in the grip of the worst winter for many years, but in Hanbury the lanes were passable and most of the cottages had cleared pathways. As Helena walked beyond the village, the cake heavy in the wicker basket, a flight of small brown birds, sparrows perhaps, bobbed between the bushes ahead of her, stripping the remaining berries from holly and hawthorn.

At Benbarrow she slipped round to the side of the house, towards the kitchen. The Austin was pulled up in the stableyard, recently returned she guessed, judging by the moisture evaporating from its bonnet and still-warm engine. She opened the kitchen door, but there was nobody about and she ventured down the corridor towards the hall.

Did they hear her footsteps? Did she gasp? She couldn't be sure. Each time the images replayed there was silence. No sound, just the sudden movement of two bodies separating from their embrace. She only saw Henry's back, his hair ruffled over the collar of his jacket, his lover's hands sliding

tenderly across his body in the moment before release. And over his shoulder, Eric's face in a series of vignettes: passion, then surprise as he saw her and broke free, and finally, as he drew away from Henry, his slow smile.

Helena slipped into her bedroom, the images still replaying in her mind. She barely recalled her retreat from the house although she was aware that she had stumbled past Frances as she had rushed from the kitchen. Her face burned with embarrassment.

She looked around her room, suddenly aware of the trappings of childhood, now outgrown. The books of her shelf were those of her summer holidays, compendiums of children's stories and abridged versions of Shakespeare and Chaucer, her more recent reading having been borrowed from the library or Benbarrow. The cupboard contained a few toys and a collection of board games, many of them seldom used. The pictures hanging on the walls were pretty and innocuous, cottage garden scenes of the sort Cadbury's put on their gift boxes. Even her clothes betrayed her lack of adult style; hadn't the cardigan she had come into the bedroom to collect once been part of her school uniform? It all seemed to belong to another place, to another person. And yet it had only been six months since she left St Bart's. It felt like a lifetime.

She picked up the cardigan and closed the bedroom door. Tomorrow, she promised herself as she went downstairs to collect the sandwiches, tomorrow she would select a few favourite items to keep; the rest she would box up for Annie and her children.

The vicar put his empty cup and saucer on the tray, and stood up.

'If you've finished, I'll take the things downstairs. I need a couple of books from my office. I won't be long.'

'Leave them on the drainer, Uncle,' Helena called after him. 'I'll wash them when I go down later.' She set aside the anthology of poetry she had been reading and picked up her notebook and pencil. There were words she needed to get down before she lost them, thoughts she wanted to capture. She knew her uncle was right, even if he doubted it himself; in a few months the raw edges would be smoothed over, the pain less insistent, the sadness bearable. The reality would be in the phrases she scribbled down today.

She had paused in thought when her uncle returned, a battered copy of Spurgeon's collected sermons, his bible and a prayerbook clutched in his hands. A pen and notebook too, Helena noticed.

'You don't mind if I work?' he asked.

'Not at all. I was writing myself until a moment or so ago.' She looked at her uncle's books. 'Are you going to write a sermon?'

'I wanted to write a few things down about your aunt. It feels odd to write a eulogy before she has passed away, but I don't think she will be with us very much longer.' They both watched the shallow rise and fall of her breathing. There was an occasional catch in the pattern of her breaths, before it settled once more into a recognisable rhythm. 'I was thinking about what we said earlier, about remembering her in happier times.'

Helena looked away from the bed and closed the pages of her notebook. She felt shamed by her thoughts; 'happy' wasn't a characteristic that she associated with her aunt. Tetchy, bitter, proud, judgemental; these were traits Helena had observed as she had been growing up.

‘You never saw the best of her, my dear,’ the vicar said, as if reading her thoughts. ‘She was never a beautiful woman, not obviously beautiful like you mother, but she was handsome. Striking. And she was kind and generous. I felt thoroughly blessed on our wedding day.’ He reached forward and brushed a curl of Aunt Celia’s hair with his fingertips. ‘She always wanted children, a big family to fill all these rooms. But then she lost our first child, and almost died. Did you know that?’ Helena shook her head.

‘It must have been it difficult for her when I was born.’

‘Indeed. She tried to be a good godparent, but it was painful. And when your parents died she felt guilty, as though her jealousy was to blame for their deaths. Nonsense, of course,’ he said. ‘But she found it easier than railing against God. She felt she had loved you too much.’

Helena felt the tears sliding over her cheeks. Why had her aunt never told her this? They could have grieved together for her parents rather than not talking about them. They might have become close, supported one another. Instead there was always a coldness between them, a distance that couldn’t be breached.

The vicar opened his notebook and began to write.

‘That’s where I shall begin,’ he said. ‘A spring day, the sun breaking through the rain clouds and scattering the colours of the stained glass across the pews. The bells ringing and the congregation standing. And the young man at the altar, turning to look towards the church doors.’

Helena leaned against the windowsill, chewing the end of her pencil, her notebook closed. Two minutes to midnight. Her uncle dozed in the chair beside her aunt’s bed, his eyes shut but his ears alert for change.

With the warmth of her fingers she rubbed a circle in the frost glazing the inside of the glass. Despite the weight of clouds across the night sky, moonlight lit the path through the garden. She followed it past the lawn and the flower beds, past the shed where she stowed her bicycle, beneath the trees to the archway into the walled garden. The first flakes of fresh snow began to fall. She couldn't see the bothy from here, but she imagined Kitty and Billy together. She hoped they were snug, protected from the cold and fortified by her uncle's port. Soon they would be married and beginning a new life together.

She thought of her friends at Benbarrow. At least, she hoped they were still her friends, and not upset by her sudden departure. So much had altered for them too. Good and bad. New relationships developing, old ones shuddering to a halt or reforming after long separations. Births and deaths and marriages. People moving in or moving out, running away or returning. Everyone simply trying to find out where they might fit in this complicated world.

Helena blew a draught of warm breath across the pane and tugged her sleeve over her wrist. She rubbed at the frost-free patch, making it larger, making her view across the village clearer. All the time, she thought as she puffed against the glass, all the time cradled beneath this blanket of snow there are dormant bulbs and tubers, seeds resting alongside chrysalis, creatures hibernating. Everywhere there are dark nooks and crannies, and brightly iced rivers; leaf-littered woodlands and wind-drifted fields.

And always, everywhere, this New Year promise of change.