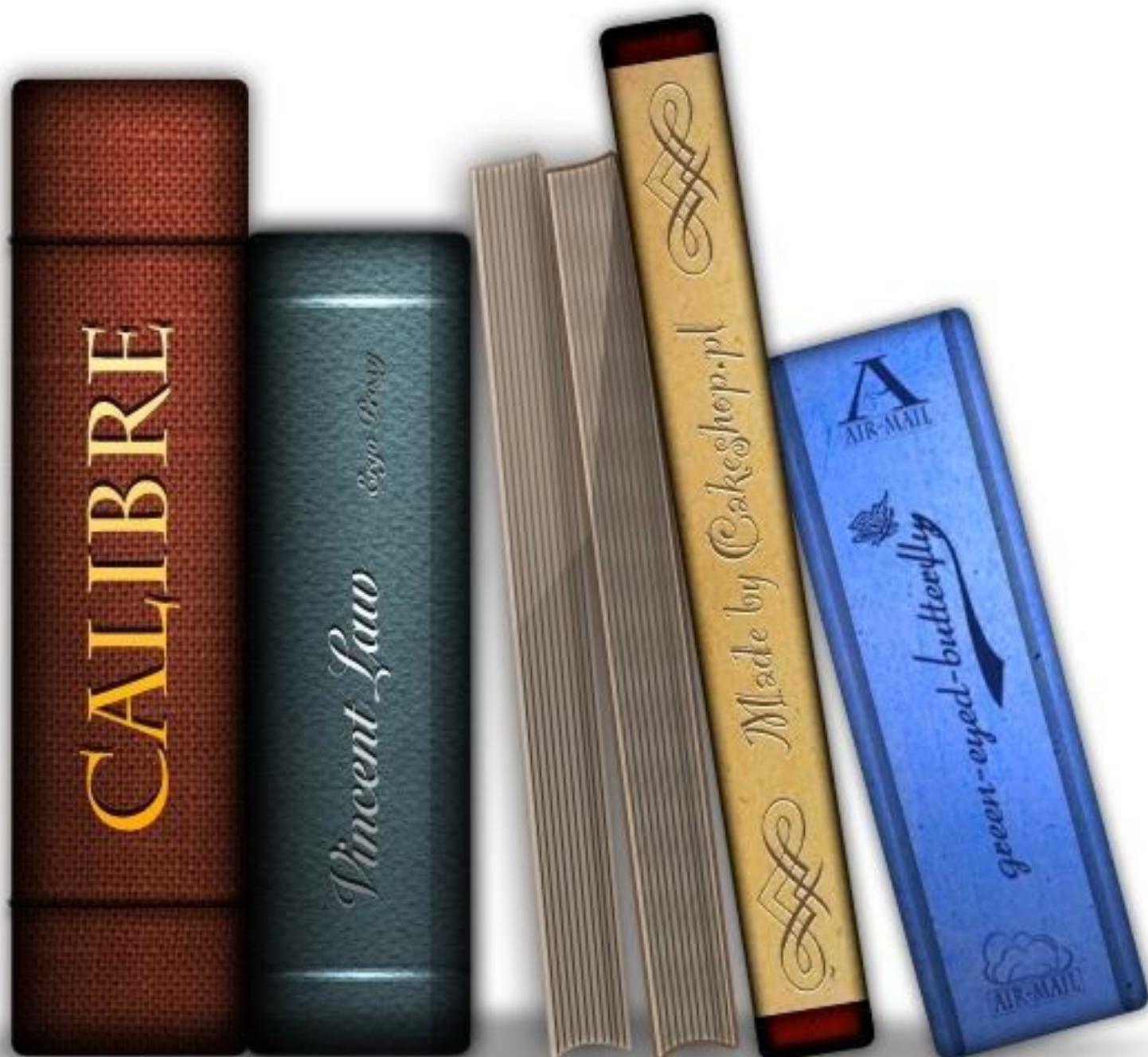


# One Good Turn (2006)

Atkinson, Kate - Jackson Brodie 02



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**Published:** 2010

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*One Good Turn*

*Kate Atkinson*

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# TUESDAY

## Chapter 1

He was lost. He wasn't used to being lost. He was the kind of man who drew up plans and then executed them efficiently, but now everything was conspiring against him in ways he decided he couldn't have foreseen. He had been stuck in a jam on the A1 for two mind-numbing hours so that it was already past the middle of the morning when he arrived in Edinburgh. Then he'd gone adrift on a one-way system and been thwarted by a road that had been closed because of a burst water main. It had been raining, steadily and unforgivingly, on the drive north and had only begun to ease off as he hit the outskirts of the town. The rain had in no way deterred the crowds--it had never occurred to him that Edinburgh was in the middle of the Festival and that there would be carnival hordes of people milling around as if the end of a war had just been declared. The closest he had previously got to the Edinburgh Festival was when he accidentally turned on Late Night Review and saw a bunch of middle-class wankers discussing some pretentious piece of fringe theater.

He ended up in the dirty heart of the city, on a street that somehow seemed to be on a lower level than the rest of the town, a blackened urban ravine. The rain had left the cobbles slick and greasy, and he had to drive cautiously because the street was teeming with people, haphazardly crossing over or standing in little knots in the middle of the road, as if no one had told them that roads were for cars and pavements were for pedestrians. A queue snaked the length of the street--people waiting to get into what looked like a bomb hole in the wall but which announced itself as FRINGE VENUE 16 on a large placard outside the door.

The name on the driver's license in his wallet was Paul Bradley. "Paul Bradley" was a nicely forgettable name. He was several degrees of separation away from his real name now, a name that no longer felt as if it had ever belonged to him. When he wasn't working, he often (but not always) went by the name "Ray." Nice and simple. Ray of light, Ray of darkness. Ray of sunshine, Ray of night. He liked slipping between identities, sliding through the cracks. The rental Peugeot he was driving felt just right, not a flashy macho machine but the kind of car an ordinary guy would drive. An ordinary guy like Paul Bradley. If anyone asked him what he did, what Paul Bradley did, he would say, "Boring stuff. I'm just a desk jockey, pushing papers around in an accounts department."

He was trying to drive and at the same time decipher his A-Z of Edinburgh to work out

how to escape this hellish street, when someone stepped in front of the car. It was a type he loathed--a young, dark-haired guy with thick, black-framed spectacles, two days of stubble, and a fag hanging out of his mouth, there were hundreds of them in London, all trying to look like French existentialists from the sixties. He'd bet that not one of them had ever opened a book on philosophy. He'd read the lot--Plato, Kant, Hegel--even thought about getting a degree someday.

He braked hard and didn't hit the spectacles guy, just made him give a little jump, like a bullfighter avoiding the bull. The guy was furious, waving his fag around, shouting, raising a finger to him. Charmless, devoid of manners--were his parents proud of the job they'd done? He hated smoking, it was a disgusting habit, hated guys who gave you the finger and screamed, "Spin on it," saliva flying out of their filthy, nicotine-stained mouths.

He felt the bump, about the same force as hitting a badger or a fox on a dark night, except it came from behind, pushing him forward. It was just as well the spectacles guy had performed his little paso doble and gotten out of the way or he would have been pancaked. He looked in the rearview mirror. A blue Honda Civic, the driver climbing out--a big guy with slabs of weight-lifter muscle, gym-fit rather than survival-fit, he wouldn't have been able to last three months in the jungle or the desert the way that Ray could have. He wouldn't have lasted a day. He was wearing driving gloves, ugly black leather ones with knuckle holes. He had a dog in the back of the car, a beefy rottweiler, exactly the dog you would have guessed a guy like that would have. The man was a walking cliché. The dog was having a seizure in the back, spraying saliva all over the window, its claws scrabbling on the glass. The dog didn't worry him too much. He knew how to kill dogs.

Ray got out of the car and walked round to the back bumper to inspect the damage. The Honda driver started yelling at him, "You stupid fucking twat, what did you think you were doing?" English. Ray tried to think of something to say that would be nonconfrontational, that would calm the guy down--you could see he was a pressure cooker waiting to blow, wanting to blow, bouncing on his feet like an out-of-condition heavyweight. Ray adopted a neutral stance, a neutral expression, but then he heard the crowd give a little collective "Aah" of horror and he registered the baseball bat that had suddenly appeared in the guy's hand out of nowhere and thought, Shit.

That was the last thought he had for several seconds. When he was able to think again he was sprawled on the street, holding the side of his head where the guy had cracked him. He heard the sound of broken glass, the bastard was putting in every window in his car now. He tried, unsuccessfully, to struggle to his feet but only managed to get to a kneeling position as if he were at prayer, and now the guy was advancing with the bat

lifted, feeling the heft of it in his hand, ready to swing for a home run on his skull. Ray put an arm up to defend himself, made himself even more dizzy by doing that, and, sinking back onto the cobbles, thought, Jesus, is this it? He'd given up, he'd actually given up--something he'd never done before--when someone stepped out of the crowd, wielding something square and black that he threw at the Honda guy, clipping him on the shoulder and sending him reeling.

He blacked out again for a few seconds, and when he came to there were a couple of policewomen hunkered down beside him, one of them saying, "Just take it easy, sir," the other one on her radio calling for an ambulance. It was the first time in his life that he'd been glad to see the police.

## Chapter 2

Martin had never done anything like that in his life before. He didn't even kill flies in the house, instead he patiently stalked them, trapping them with a glass and a plate before letting them free. The meek shall inherit the earth. He was fifty and had never knowingly committed an act of violence against another living creature, although sometimes he thought that might have more to do with cowardice than pacifism.

He had stood in the queue, waiting for someone else to intervene in the scene unfolding before them, but the crowd was in audience mode, like promenaders at a particularly brutal piece of theater, and they had no intention of spoiling the entertainment. Even Martin had wondered at first if it was another show--a faux-impromptu piece intended either to shock or to reveal our immunity to being shocked because we lived in a global media community where we had become passive voyeurs of violence (and so on). That was the line of thought running through the detached, intellectual part of his brain. His primitive brain, on the other hand, was thinking, Oh fuck, this is horrible, really horrible please make the bad man go away. He wasn't surprised to hear his father's voice in his head ("Pull yourself together, Martin"). His father had been dead for many years, but Martin often still heard the bellow and yell of his parade-ground tones. When the Honda driver finished breaking the windows of the silver Peugeot and walked toward the driver brandishing his weapon and preparing himself for a final victory blow, Martin realized that the man on the ground was probably going to die, was probably going to be killed by the crazed man with the bat, right there in front of them, unless someone did something, and, instinctively, without thinking about it at all--because if he'd thought about it he might not have done it--he slipped his bag off his shoulder and swung it, hammer-throw fashion, at the head of the insane Honda driver.

He missed the man's head, which didn't surprise him, he'd never been able to aim or catch, he was the kind of person who ducked when a ball was thrown in his direction,

but his laptop was in the bag and the hard weighty edge of it caught the Honda driver on the shoulder and sent him spinning.

The nearest Martin had been to a real crime scene previously had been on a Society of Authors' trip around St. Leonard's Police Station. Apart from Martin, the group consisted entirely of women. "You're our token man," one of them said to him, and he sensed a certain disappointment in the polite laughter of the others, as if the least he could have done as their token man was to be a little less like a woman.

They had been offered coffee and biscuits--chocolate boursbons, pink-wafer sandwiches they had all been impressed by the assortment--and a "senior policeman" had given a pleasant talk in a new conference room that felt as if it had been specially designed for groups such as theirs. Then they were shown round various parts of the building, the call center and the cavernous space of a room where people in plain clothes (NCIS) who were sitting at the computers glanced briefly at the "authors," decided, correctly, that they were irrelevant, and returned to their screens.

They had all stood in a lineup, one of their members had her fingerprints taken, and then they were locked--briefly--in a cell, where they had shuffled and giggled to take the edge off the claustrophobia. The word "giggle," it struck Martin, was an almost exclusively female verb. Women giggle, men simply laugh. Martin worried that he was a bit of a giggler himself. At the end of the tour, as if it had been staged for their benefit, they witnessed, with a little frisson of fear, a team being hastily assembled in riot gear to remove a "difficult" prisoner from a cell.

The tour hadn't had much relevance to the kind of books that Martin wrote, in the person of his alter ego Alex Blake. They were old-fashioned, soft-boiled crime novels featuring a heroine named Nina Riley, a gung ho kind of girl who had inherited a detective agency from her uncle. The books were set in the forties, just after the war. It was an era in history that Martin felt particularly drawn to, the monochrome deprivation of it, the undertow of seedy disappointment in the wake of heroism. The Vienna of *The Third Man*, the Home Counties of *Brief Encounter*. What must it have felt like to have pinned your colors to the standard of a just war, to have experienced so many noble feelings (yes, a lot of propaganda, but the kernel of it was true), to have been released from the burden of individualism? To have stood on the edge of destruction and defeat and come through. And thought, Now what? Of course, Nina Riley didn't feel any of those things, she was only twenty-two and had seen out the war in a Swiss finishing school. And she wasn't real.

Nina Riley had always been a tomboy, though she had no apparent lesbian tendencies and was constantly courted by a great variety of men, with whom she was remarkably

chaste. ("It's as if," an "appreciative reader" wrote to him, "a Chalet School head girl grew up and became a detective.") She lived in a geographically vague version of Scotland that contained sea and mountains and rolling moorland, all within a fast drive of every major town in Scotland (and, frequently, England, although never Wales, something Martin thought he should perhaps rectify) in Nina Riley's racy, open-top Bristol. When he wrote the first Nina Riley book, he had conceived it as an affectionate nod in the direction of an earlier time and an earlier form. "A pastiche, if you will," he said nervously, when he was introduced to his editor at the publishing house. "A kind of ironic homage." It had been a surprise to find that he was being published. He had written the book to entertain himself and suddenly he was sitting in a featureless London office feeling he had to justify the nonsense he had created to a young woman who seemed to find it difficult to keep her mind on him.

"Be that as it may," she said, making a visible effort to look at him, "what I see is a book I can sell. A sort of jolly murder mystery. People crave nostalgia, the past is like a drug. How many books do you envisage in the series?"

"Series?"

"Hi."

Martin turned round and saw a man leaning against the doorjamb in an attitude of studied casualness. He was older than Martin but dressed younger.

"Hi," the young editor said in return, giving the man her rapt attention. Their minimal exchange seemed to carry almost more meaning than it could bear. "Neil Winters, our MD," she said with a proud smile. "This is Martin Canning, Neil. He's written a wonderful book."

"Fantastic," Neil Winters said, shaking Martin's hand. His hand was damp and soft and made Martin think of something dead you might pick up on the beach. "The first of many, I hope," Neil Winters said.

Within a couple weeks Neil Winters was transported into more elevated echelons in the European mother ship and Martin never saw him again, but nevertheless he saw that handshake as the identifiable moment when his life changed.

Martin had recently sold the television rights for the Nina Riley books. "Like getting into a warm bath. Perfect fodder for the Sunday evening slot," the BBC producer said, making it sound like an insult, which, of course, it was.

In the two-dimensional fictional world that she inhabited, Nina Riley had so far solved

three murders, a jewel theft, and a bank robbery; retrieved a stolen racehorse; prevented the kidnapping of the infant Prince Charles from Balmoral; and, on her sixth outing, foiled a plot (almost single-handedly) to steal the Scottish crown jewels. The seventh, *The Monkey Puzzle Tree*, was currently new in paperback and was featured on the "Three for Two" tables in every bookshop. The seventh was "darker," everyone seemed to agree ("Blake is finally moving toward a more mature noir style," "a reader" had written on Amazon. Everyone's a critic), but despite this, his sales remained "buoyant," according to his agent, Melanie. "No end in sight yet, Martin," she said. Melanie was Irish, and this made everything she said sound nice even when it wasn't.

If people asked him--as they frequently did--why he had become a writer, Martin usually answered that, as he spent most of his time in his imagination, it had seemed like a good idea to get paid for it. He said this jovially, no giggling, and people smiled as if he'd said something amusing. What they didn't understand was that it was the truth--he lived inside his head. Not in an intellectual or philosophical way, his interior life was remarkably banal. He didn't know if it was the same for everyone, did other people spend their time daydreaming about a better version of the everyday? No one ever talked about the life of the imagination, except in terms of some kind of Keatsian high art. No one mentioned the pleasure of picturing yourself sitting in a deck chair on a lawn, beneath a cloudless midsummer sky, contemplating the spread of a proper, old-fashioned afternoon tea, prepared by a cozy woman with a mature bosom and spotless apron who said things like "Come on, now, eat up, ducks," because this was how cozy women with mature bosoms spoke in Martin's imagination, an odd kind of sub-Dickensian discourse.

The world inside his head was so much better than the world outside his head. Scones, homemade black-currant jam, clotted cream. Overhead, swallows sliced through the blue blue sky, swooping and diving like Battle of Britain pilots. The distant thock of leather on willow. The scent of hot, strong tea and new-mown grass. Surely these things were infinitely preferable to a terrifyingly angry man with a baseball bat?

Martin had been hauling his laptop around with him because the lunchtime comedy showcase he had been queuing for was a detour on today's (very tardy) path to his "office." He had recently rented the "office" in a refurbished block in Marchmont. It had once been a licensed grocer but now provided a bland, featureless space--plasterboard walls and laminate floors, broadband connections and halogen lighting--to a firm of architects, an IT consultancy, and, now, Martin. He had rented the "office" in the vain hope that if he left the house to go and write every day and kept normal working hours like other people, it would somehow help him to overcome the lethargy that had descended on the book he was currently working on (*Death on the Black Isle*). He suspected it was a bad sign that he thought of the "office" as a place that existed only in quotation marks, a fictional concept rather than a location where anything was actually

achieved.

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Death on the Black Isle was like a book under an enchantment: no matter how much he wrote, there never seemed to be any more of it. "You should change the title. It sounds like a Tintin book," Melanie said. Before being published eight years ago, Martin had been a religious studies teacher, and for some reason, at an early stage of their relationship, Melanie had got it into her head (and never been able to get it out again) that Martin had once been in a monastery. How she had made this leap he had never understood. True, he had a premature tonsure of thinning hair, but apart from that he didn't think there was anything particularly monastic about him. It didn't matter how much he had tried to disabuse Melanie of her fixation, it was still the thing that she found most interesting about him. It was Melanie who had disseminated this misinformation to his publicist, who had, in turn, broadcast it to the world at large. It was on public record it was in the cuttings file and on the Internet, and no matter how many times Martin said to a journalist, "No, actually I was never a monk. That's a mistake," he or she still made it the fulcrum of the interview: "Blake demurs when the priesthood is mentioned." Or "Alex Blake dismisses his early religious calling, but there is still something cloistered about his character." And so on.

Death on the Black Isle felt even more trite and formulaic to Martin than his previous books, something to be read and immediately forgotten in beds and hospitals, on trains, planes, beaches. He had been writing a book a year since he began with Nina Riley, and he thought that he had simply run out of steam. They plodded along together, he and his flimsy creation, stuck on the same tracks. He worried that they would never escape each other, that he would be writing about her inane escapades forever. He would be an old man and she would still be twenty-two and he would have wrung all the life out of both of them. "No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no," Melanie said. "It's called mining a rich seam, Martin." "Milking a cash cow for all it was worth" was how someone else, someone not on 15 percent, might have put it. He wondered if he could change his name--or, even better, use his real name--and write something different, something with real meaning and worth.

Martin's father had been a career soldier, a company sergeant major, but Martin himself had chosen a decidedly noncombatant's path in life. He and his brother, Christopher, had attended a small Church of England boarding school that provided the sons of the armed forces with a spartan environment that was one step up from the workhouse. When he left this cold-showers and cross-country-running environment ("We make men out of boys"), Martin had gone to a mediocre university where he had taken an equally mediocre degree in religious studies because it was the only subject he had good exam grades in--thanks to the relentless, compulsory promotion of Bible studies as a way of filling up the dangerous, empty hours available to adolescent boys at a boarding school.

University was followed by a postgraduate diploma in teacher training to give himself time to think about what he "really" wanted to do. He had certainly never intended actually to become a teacher, certainly not a religious studies teacher, but somehow or other he found that at the age of twenty-two he had already gone full circle in his life and was teaching in a small fee-paying boarding school in the Lake District, full of boys who had failed the entrance exams of the better public schools and whose sole interests in life seemed to be rugby and masturbation.

Although he thought of himself as someone who had been born middle-aged, he was only four years older than the oldest boys, and it seemed ridiculous that he should be educating them in anything, but particularly in religion. Of course, the boys he taught didn't regard him as a young man, he was an "old fart" for whom they had no care at all. They were cruel, callous boys who were likely as not going to grow up into cruel, callous men. As far as Martin could see, they were being trained up to fill the Tory back benches in the House of Commons, and he saw it as his duty to try to introduce them to the concept of morality before it was too late, although unfortunately for most of them it already was. Martin himself was an atheist but hadn't completely ruled out the possibility that one day he might experience a conversion--a sudden lifting of the veil, an opening of his heart--although he thought it more likely that he was damned to be forever on the road to Damascus, the road most traveled.

Except for where the syllabus dictated, Martin had tended to ignore Christianity as much as possible and to concentrate instead on ethics, comparative religion, philosophy, and social studies (anything except Christianity, in fact). It was his remit to "promote understanding and spirituality," he claimed if challenged by a rugby-playing, Anglican, Fascista parent. He spent a lot of time teaching the boys the tenets of Buddhism because he had discovered, through trial and error, that it was the most effective way of messing with their minds.

He thought, I'll just do this for a bit, and then perhaps go traveling or take another qualification or get a more interesting job and a new life will start, but instead the old life had carried on and he had felt it spinning out into nothing, the threads wearing thin, and he sensed that if he didn't do something he would stay there forever, growing older than the boys all the time until he retired and died, having spent most of his life in a boarding school. He knew he would have to do something proactive, he was not a person to whom things simply happened. His life had been lived in some kind of neutral gear, he had never broken a limb, never been stung by a bee, never been close to love or death. He had never strived for greatness, and his reward had been a small life.

Forty approached, he was on an express train hurtling toward death--he had always found refuge in rather febrile metaphors-- when he joined a creative writing class, being

run as some kind of rural-outreach educational program. The class met in a village hall and was run by a woman named Dorothy who drove from Kendal and whose qualifications to teach the class were unclear. A couple of stories published in a northern arts magazine, readings and workshops (work in progress), and an unsuccessful play performed at the Edinburgh Fringe about the women in Milton's life (Milton's Women). The very mention of "Edinburgh" in the class made Martin feel sick with nostalgia for a place he hardly knew. His mother was a native of the city, and Martin had spent the first three years of his life there when his father had been stationed at the Castle. One day, he thought, as Dorothy rattled on about form and content and the necessity of "finding your own voice," one day he would go back to Edinburgh and live there. "And read!" she exclaimed, opening her arms wide so that her voluminous velvet cloak spread out like butterfly wings. "Read everything that has ever been written." There were some mutinous murmurs from the class--they had come to learn how to write (or at least some of them had), not to read.

Dorothy seemed dynamic, she wore red lipstick, long skirts, and flamboyant scarves and wraps that she pinned with big pewter or silver brooches. She wore ankle boots with heels, black diamond-print stockings, funny crushed-velvet hats. That was at the beginning of the autumn session, when the Lake District was decked in its gaudy finery. By the time it had descended into the drab damp of winter, Dorothy herself was wearing less theatrical Wellingtons and fleeces. She also had grown less theatrical. She had begun the session with frequent references to her "partner," who was a writer-in-residence somewhere, but by the time Christmas loomed she wasn't mentioning the partner at all, and her red lipstick had been replaced with an unhappy beige that matched her skin.

They had disappointed her too, her motley collection of retirees and farming wives and people wanting to change their lives before it was too late. "It's never too late!" she declared with the enthusiasm of an evangelist, but most of them understood that sometimes it was. There was a gruff man who seemed to despise them all and who wrote in a Hughesian way about birds of prey and dead sheep on hillsides. Martin presumed he had something to do with the country--a farmer or a gamekeeper--but it turned out he was a redundant oil geologist who had moved to the Lakes and gone native. There was a girl, a studenty type, who really did despise them all, she wore black lipstick (disturbing in contrast to Dorothy's beige) and wrote about her own death and the effect it would have on the people around her. There were a couple of nice ladies from the WI who didn't seem to want to write at all.

Dorothy urged them to produce little pieces of autobiographic angst, secrets of the confessional, therapeutic texts about their childhood, their dreams, their depressions. Instead they wrote about the weather, holidays, animals. The gruff man wrote about sex and everyone stared at the floor while he read out loud. Only Dorothy listened with blank

interest, her head cocked to one side, her lips stretched in encouragement.

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"All right, then," she said, sounding defeated. "Write about a visit to or a stay in the hospital for your 'homework.'" Martin wondered when they were going to start writing fiction, but the pedagogue in him responded to the word "homework," and he set about the task conscientiously.

The WI women wrote sentimental pieces about visiting old people and children in the hospital. "Charming," Dorothy said. The gruff man described in gory detail an operation to remove his appendix. "Vibrant," Dorothy said. The miserable girl wrote about being in the hospital in Barrow-in-Furness after trying to cut her wrists. "Shame she didn't manage it," muttered one of the farmers' wives sitting next to Martin.

tin himself had been in the hospital only once in his life, when he was fourteen--he found that each year of his teens had brought some fresh hell. He had passed a funfair on his way back from town. His father was stationed in Germany at the time, and Martin and his brother, Christopher, were spending the summer holidays there on leave from the rigors of their boarding school. The fact that it was a German funfair made it an even more terrifying place for Martin. He didn't know where Christopher was that afternoon, probably playing cricket with other boys from the base. Martin had seen the funfair at night when the lights and smells and shouting were a dystopian vision that Bosch would have enjoyed painting. In the daylight it seemed less threatening, and his father's voice appeared in his head, as it was wont to do (unfortunately), shouting, "Face the thing you're afraid of, boy!" So he paid the entrance fee and proceeded to skirt gingerly around the various attractions because it wasn't really the atmosphere of a funfair that scared him; it was the rides. Even playground swings used to make him sick when he was younger.

He searched in his pocket for change and bought a Kartoffelpuffer from a food stall. His grasp on the language was slippery, but he felt pretty safe with Kartoffel. The fritter was greasy and tasted oddly sugary and sat in his stomach like lead, so it really was a bad time for his father's voice to make a reappearance in his head, just at the moment that Martin wandered past a huge swing, like a ship. He didn't know the name for it in German, but in English, he knew, it was a pirate boat.

The pirate boat was rising and falling in a huge, impossible parabola in the sky, the cries of the occupants following the trajectory in a swoop of terror. The very idea of it, let alone the palpable reality in front of him, struck an absolute kind of horror in Martin's breast, and on that principle, he tossed the remains of his Kartoffelpuffer into a waste bin, paid the fare, and climbed aboard.

It was his father who came to the civilian Krankenhaus to take him home. He had been

taken to the hospital after he was found on the floor of the pirate boat, limp and semiconscious. It wasn't a mental thing, it was nothing to do with courage, it turned out that he was particularly sensitive to g-forces. The doctor who discharged him laughed and said, in perfect English, "If you want my advice, you'll not apply to be a fighter pilot."

His father had walked right past his hospital bed without recognizing him. Martin tried to wave to him, but he failed to see his son's hand flapping weakly on the covers. Eventually someone at the nurses' station directed him to his son's bed. His father was in uniform and looked out of place in the hospital ward. He loomed over Martin and said, "You're a fucking fairy, Martin. Pull yourself together."

"There are some things that have nothing to do with character weakness, there are some things that a person is constitutionally incapable of dealing with," Martin concluded. "And, of course, that was another country, another life."

"Very good," Dorothy said.

"It was a bit thin," the gruff man said.

"My life has been a bit thin so far," Martin said.

For the last class of the session, Dorothy brought in bottles of wine, packets of Ritz crackers, and a block of red cheddar. They appropriated paper cups and plates from the kitchen of the village hall. Dorothy raised her cup and said, "Well, we survived," which seemed an odd kind of toast to Martin. "Let's hope," she continued, "that we all meet again for the spring session." Whether it was the imminence of Christmas or the balloon and shiny foil decorations hanging in the village hall, or indeed simply the novel notion of survival, Martin didn't know, but a certain celebratory air washed over them. Even the gruff man and the suicidal girl entered into the jubilee spirit. More bottles of wine emerged from people's backpacks and A4-size bags. They had been unsure if there was going to be an end-of-term "do" but had come prepared.

Martin supposed that all of these elements, but particularly the wine, contributed to the surprising fact of his waking up the next morning in Dorothy's bed in Kendal.

Her pale face was pouchy, and she pulled the covers over her and said, "Don't look at me. I'm a fright first thing." It was true-- she did look a bit of a fright, but, of course, Martin would never have said so. He wanted to ask her how old she was, but he supposed that would be even worse.

Later, over an expensive dinner in a hotel overlooking Lake Windermere, which Martin

reckoned they both deserved for having survived more than just the course, she toasted him with a nice steely Chablis and said, "You know, Martin, you're the only one in the class who can put one word in front of another and not make me want to fucking puke, excuse my split infinitive. You should be a writer."

Martin expected the Honda driver to pick himself up off the ground and search the crowd to find the culprit who had thrown a missile at him. Martin tried to make himself an anonymous figure in the queue, tried to pretend he didn't exist. He closed his eyes, he had done that at school when he was bullied, clinging to an ancient, desperate magic--they wouldn't hit him if he couldn't see them. He imagined the Honda driver walking toward him, the baseball bat raised high, the arc of annihilation waiting to happen.

To his amazement, when he opened his eyes, the Honda driver was climbing back into his car. As he drove away, a few people in the crowd gave him a slow hand-clap. Martin wasn't sure if they were expressing disapproval of the Honda driver's behavior or disappointment at his failure to follow through. Whichever, they were a hard crowd to please.

Martin knelt on the ground and said, "Are you okay?" to the Peugeot driver, but then he was politely but firmly set aside by the two policewomen who arrived and took control of everything.

### Chapter 3

Gloria hadn't really seen what had happened. By the time the rumor of it had rippled down the spine of the queue, she suspected it had become a Chinese whisper. Someone had been murdered. "Queue jumping, probably," she said matter-of-factly to a twittery Pam standing next to her. Gloria was stoical in queues, irritated by people who complained and shuffled as if their impatience were in some way a mark of their individuality. Queuing was like life: you just shut up and got on with it. It seemed a shame she had been born just too late for the Second World War, she possessed exactly the kind of long-suffering spirit that wartime relied on. Stoicism was, in Gloria's opinion, a very underrated virtue in the modern world.

She could understand why someone might want to kill a queue jumper. If it had been up to her she would have summarily executed a great many people by now--people who dropped litter in the street, for example, they would certainly think twice about the discarded sweet wrapper if it resulted in being strung up from the nearest lamppost. Gloria used to be opposed to capital punishment, she remembered, during her too-brief time at university, demonstrating against an execution in some faraway country that she couldn't have placed on the map, but now her feelings tended to run in quite the opposite

direction.

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Gloria liked rules, rules were Good Things. Gloria liked rules that said you couldn't speed or park on double-yellow lines, rules that told you not to drop litter or deface buildings. She was sick and tired of hearing people complain about speed cameras and parking wardens as if there were some reason that they should be exempt from them. When she was younger she used to fantasize about sex and love, about keeping chicken and bees, being taller, running through fields with a black-and-white border collie. Now she daydreamed about being the keeper at the gates, of standing with the ultimate ledger and ticking off the names of the dead as they appeared before her, giving them the nod through or the thumbs-down. All those people who parked in bus bays and ran the red light on pedestrian crossings were going to be very sorry when Gloria peered at them over the top of her spectacles and asked them to account for themselves.

Pam wasn't what Gloria would have called a friend, just someone she had known for so long that she had given up trying to get rid of her. Pam was married to Murdo Miller, Gloria's own husband's closest friend. Graham and Murdo had attended the same Edinburgh school, an expensive education that had put a civil polish on their basically loutish characters. They were now both much richer than their fellow alumni, a fact which Murdo said "just goes to show." Gloria thought that it didn't go to show anything except, possibly, that they were greedier and more ruthless than their former classmates. Graham was the son of a builder (Hatter Homes) and had started his career carrying hod of bricks on one of his father's small building sites. Now he was a multi-millionaire property developer. Murdo was the son of a man who owned a small security firm (Haven Security) and had started off as a bouncer at a pub door. Now he ran a huge security operation--clubs, pubs, football matches, concerts. Graham and Murdo had many business interests in common, concerns that spread everywhere and had little to do with building or security and required meetings in Jersey, the Caymans, the Virgin Islands. Graham had his fingers in so many pies that he had run out of fingers long ago. "Business begets business," he explained to Gloria. "Money makes money." The rich get richer and the poor get poorer.

Both Graham and Murdo lived with the trappings of respectability--houses that were too big for them, cars that they exchanged each year for a newer model, wives that they didn't. They wore blindingly white shirts and handmade shoes, they had bad livers and untroubled consciences, but beneath their aging hides they were barbarians.

"Did I tell you we've had the downstairs cloakroom done out?" Pam asked. "Hand stenciling. I wasn't sure to begin with but I'm coming round to it now."

"Mm," Gloria said. "Fascinating."

It was Pam who had wanted to come to this lunchtime radio recording (Edinburgh Fringe Comedy Showcase), and Gloria had tagged along in the hope that at least one of the comics might be funny, although her expectations were not high. Unlike some Edinburgh residents who regarded the advent of the annual Festival as something akin to the arrival of the Black Death, Gloria quite enjoyed the atmosphere and liked to attend the odd play or a concert at the Queen's Hall. Comedy, she wasn't so sure about.

"How's Graham?" Pam asked.

"Oh, you know," Gloria said. "He's Graham." That was the truth of it, Graham was Graham, there was nothing more, nor less, that Gloria could say about her husband.

"There's a police car," Pam said, standing on tiptoe to get a better look. "I can see a man on the ground. He looks dead." She sounded thrilled.

Gloria had fallen to dwelling a lot on death recently. Her elder sister had died at the beginning of the year, and then a few weeks ago she had received a postcard from an old school friend, informing her that one of their group had recently succumbed to cancer. The message "Jill passed last week. The first of us to go!" seemed unnecessarily jaunty. Gloria was fifty-nine and wondered who would be the last to go and whether it was a competition.

"Policewomen," Pam trilled happily.

An ambulance nosed its way cautiously through the crowd. The queue had shuffled on considerably so now they could see the police car. One of the policewomen shouted at the crowd not to go into the venue but to stay where they were because the police would be collecting statements from them about the "incident." Undeterred, the crowd continued to move in a slow stream into the venue.

Gloria had been brought up in a northern town. Larry, her father, a morose yet earnest man, sold insurance door-to-door to people who could barely afford it. Gloria didn't think people did that anymore. Her past already seemed an antiquated curiosity--a virtual space recreated by the museum of the future. When he was at home and not lugging his ancient briefcase from one unfriendly doorstep to another, her father had spent his time slumped in front of the fire, devouring detective novels and sipping conservatively from a half-pint glass mug of beer. Her mother, Thelma, worked part-time in a local chemist's shop. For work, she wore a knee-length white coat, the medical nature of which she offset with a large pair of pearl-and-gilt earrings. She claimed that working in a chemist made her privy to everyone's intimate secrets, but as far as the young Gloria could tell she spent her time selling insoles and cotton wool, and the most excitement she derived from the job was arranging the Christmas window with tinsel and Yardley gift boxes.

Gloria's parents led drab, listless lives that the wearing of pearl-and-gilt earrings and the reading of detective novels did little to enliven. Gloria presumed her life would be quite different--that glorious things would happen to her (as her name implied), that she would be illuminated within and without and her path would scorch like a comet's. This did not happen!

Beryl and Jock, Graham's parents, were not that different from Gloria's own parents, they had more money and were further up the social ladder, but they had the same basic low expectations of life. They lived in a pleasant "Edinburgh bungalow" in Corstorphine, and Jock owned a relatively modest building firm from which he had made a decent living. Graham himself had done a year of civil engineering at Napier ("waste of fucking time"), before joining his father in the business. Within a decade he was in the boardroom of his own large empire, HATTER HOMES--REAL HOMES FOR REAL PEOPLE. Gloria had thought that slogan up many years ago and now really wished that she hadn't.

Graham and Gloria had married in Edinburgh rather than in Gloria's hometown (Gloria had come to Edinburgh as a student), and her parents traveled up on a Cheap Day Return and were away again as soon as the cake was cut. The cake was Graham's mother's Christmas cake, hastily converted for the wedding. Beryl always made her cake in September and left it swaddled in white cloths in the larder to mature, tenderly unwrapping it every week and adding a baptismal slug of brandy. By the time Christmas came around, the white cloths were stained the color of mahogany. Beryl fretted over the cake for the wedding, as it was still far from its nativity (they were married at the end of October), but she put on a stalwart face and decked it out in marzipan and royal icing as usual. In place of the centerpiece snowman, a plastic bridal couple was caught in the act of an unconvincing waltz. Everyone presumed Gloria was pregnant (she wasn't), as if that would be the only reason Graham would have married her.

Perhaps their decision to marry in a register office had thrown the parents off balance, "But it's not as if we're Christians, Gloria," Graham had said, which was true. Graham was an aggressive atheist, and Gloria--born one-quarter Leeds Jewish and one-quarter Irish Catholic, and raised a West Yorkshire Baptist--was a passive agnostic, although, for want of anything better, "Church of Scotland" was what she had put on her hospital admission form when she had to have a bunion removed two years ago, privately at the Murrayfield. If she imagined God at all, it was as a vague entity that hung around behind her left shoulder, rather like a nagging parrot.

Long ago, Gloria was sitting on a bar stool in a pub on the George IV Bridge in Edinburgh, wearing (unbelievable though it now seemed) a daringly short miniskirt, self-consciously smoking an Embassy and drinking a gin-and-orange and hoping she looked pretty while around her raged a heated student conversation about Marxism. Tim, her

boyfriend at the time--a gangly youth with a white boy's Afro before Afros of any kind were fashionable--was one of the most vociferous of the group, waving his hands around every time he said "exchange of commodities" or "the rate of surplus value" while Gloria sipped her gin-and-orange and nodded sagely, hoping that no one would expect her to contribute because she hadn't the faintest idea what they were talking about. She was in the second year of her degree, studying history but in a lackadaisical kind of manner that ignored the political (the Declaration of Arbroath and Tennis-Court Oaths) in favor of the romantic (Rob Roy, Marie Antoinette) and that didn't endear her to the teaching staff.

She couldn't remember Tim's surname now, all she could remember about him was his great cloud of hair, like a dandelion clock. Tim declared to the group that they were all working class now. Gloria frowned because she didn't want to be working class, but everyone around her was murmuring in agreement--although there wasn't one of them who wasn't the offspring of a doctor or a lawyer or a businessman--when a loud voice announced, "That's shite. You'd be nothing without capitalism. Capitalism has saved mankind." And that was Graham.

He was wearing a sheepskin coat, a secondhand-car salesman's kind of coat, and drinking a pint on his own in a corner of the bar. He had seemed like a man, but he hadn't even reached his twenty-fifth birthday, which Gloria could see now was nothing.

And then he downed his beer and turned to her and said, "Are you coming?" and she'd slipped off her bar stool and followed him like a little dog because he was so forceful and attractive compared to someone with dandelion-clock hair.

And now it was all coming to an end. Yesterday the Specialist Fraud Unit had made an unexpected but polite appearance at Hatter Homes' headquarters on Queensferry Road, and now Graham feared that they were about to throw a light into every murky corner of his business dealings. He had arrived home late, the worse for wear, downed a double of Macallan without even tasting it, and then slumped on the sofa, staring at the television like a blind man. Gloria fried for him a lamb chop with leftover potatoes and said, "Did they find your secret books, then?" and he laughed grimly and said, "They'll never find my secrets, Gloria," but for the first time in the thirty-nine years Gloria had known him, he didn't sound cocky. They were coming for him, and he knew it.

It was the field that had done it for him. He had bought a greenbelt site that had no planning permission attached to it, he had got the land cheaply--land without planning permission is just a field, after all--but then, hey presto, six months later the planning permission was granted and now a hideous estate of two-, three-, and four-bedroom "family homes" was under construction on the northeastern outskirts of town.

A tidy little sum to someone in the planning department was all it had taken, the kind of transaction Graham had done a hundred times before, "greasing the wheels," he called it. For Graham it had been a little thing, his corruption was so much wider and deeper and far-reaching than a green field on the edge of town. But it was the littlest things that often brought big men down.

Once the ambulance containing the Peugeot driver had disappeared, the policewomen started to take statements from the crowd. "Hopefully we'll get something on the CCTV," one of them said, indicating a camera that Gloria hadn't noticed, high up on a wall. Gloria liked the idea that there were cameras watching everyone everywhere. Last year Graham had installed a new state-of-the-art security system in the house--cameras and infrared sensors and panic buttons and goodness knows what else. Gloria was fond of the helpful little robots that patrolled her garden with their spying eyes. Once, the eye of God watched people, now it was the camera lens.

"There was a dog," Pam said, fluffing her apricot-tinted hair self-consciously.

"Everyone remembers the dog," the policewoman sighed. "I have several very accurate descriptions of the dog, but the Honda driver is variously described as 'dark, fair, tall, short, skinny, fat, midtwenties, fiftyish.' No one even took down his car's registration number. You would think someone would have managed that."

"You would," Gloria agreed. "You would think that."

They were too late now for the BBC radio showcase. Pam was delighted that they had been entertained by drama rather than comedy.

"And I've got the Book Festival on Thursday," she said. "You're sure you don't want to come?" Pam was a fan of some crime writer who was reading at the Book Festival. Gloria had no enthusiasm for crime writing, it had sucked the life out of her father, and anyway wasn't there enough crime in the world without adding to it, even if it was only fictional?

"It's just a bit of escapism," Pam said defensively.

If you needed to escape, in Gloria's opinion, then you just got in a car and drove away. Gloria's favorite novel still resolutely remained *Anne of Green Gables*, which, when she was young, had represented a mode of being that, although ideal, hadn't yet become impossible.

"We could go for a nice cup of tea somewhere," Pam said, but Gloria excused herself, saying, "Things to do at home," and Pam said, "What things?"

"Just things," Gloria said. She was in an eBay auction for a pair of Staffordshire greyhounds that closed in two hours and she wanted to be in there at the finish.

"My, but you're a woman of secrets, Gloria."

"No, I'm not," Gloria said.

## Chapter 4

Bright lights suddenly illuminated a white square, making the surrounding darkness seem even blacker. Six people walked into the square from all directions, they walked fast, crisscrossing one another in a way that made him think of soldiers performing a complex drill display on the parade ground. One of them stopped and began to swing his arms and rotate his shoulders as if getting ready for strenuous physical exercise. All six of them began to speak nonsense. "Unique New York, unique New York, unique New York," a man said, and a woman answered, "Rubber baby buggy bumpers, rubber baby buggy bumpers," while doing some kind of tai chi. The man who had been swinging his arms now addressed empty air, speaking rapidly without pausing for breath. "Thou-sleepst-worse-than-if-a-mouse-should-be-forced-to-take-up-her-lodging-in-a-cat's-ear-a-little-infant-that-breeds-his-teeth-should-lie-with-thee-would-cry-out-as-if-thou-were-the-unquiet-bedfellow." A woman stopped in the middle of her mad walking and declared, "Floppy fluffy puppies, floppy fluffy puppies, floppy fluffy puppies." It was like watching the inmates of an old-fashioned asylum.

A man walked out of the darkness and into the square of light, clapped his hands, and said, "Okay, everyone, if you've finished your warm-up, can we get on with the dress, please?"

Jackson wondered if this was a good time to make his presence known. The actors--the "company"--had spent the morning doing the technical run-through. This afternoon they were having the dress rehearsal, and Jackson had been hoping that he could take Julia to lunch before then, but the actors were already attired alike in brown-and-gray shifts that looked like potato sacks. His heart sank at the sight of them. Theater, for Jackson, although of course he would never say this to any of them, was a good pantomime, preferably attended in the company of an enthusiastic child.

The actors had arrived yesterday, they had been rehearsing in London for three weeks, and he was finally introduced to them for the first time last night in a pub. They had all gone into raptures-- one of them, a woman older than Jackson, had jumped up and down in a parody of a small child, and another (already he had forgotten their names) dropped dramatically to her knees with her hands raised up in prayer to him and said, "Our savior." Jackson had squirmed inwardly, he didn't really know how to deal with thespians.

types, they made him feel staid and grown-up. Julia was standing in the background (for once) and acknowledged his discomfort by winking at him in a way that might have been salacious, but he couldn't really tell because he had recently (finally) admitted to himself that he needed spectacles. The beginning of the end, downhill from now on.

The actors were a small ad hoc group based in London, and Jackson had stepped in when at the eleventh hour they lost their funding to bring their play to the Edinburgh Fringe. Not out of any love of theater but because Julia had wheedled and cajoled in her usual over-the-top fashion, which was unnecessary--all she had needed to do was ask. It was the first real acting job she'd had in a while, and he had begun to wonder to himself (never to her, God forbid) why she called herself an actress when she hardly ever acted. When she thought she was about to lose this part at the last moment because of the lack of money, she had been plunged into a profound gloom that was so uncharacteristic of her that Jackson felt impelled to cheer her up.

The play, *Looking for the Equator in Greenland*, was Czech (or maybe Slovakian, Jackson hadn't really been listening), an existentialist, abstract, impenetrable thing that was about neither the equator nor Greenland (nor indeed about looking for anything). Julia had brought the script over to France and asked him to read it, watching him while he did so, saying, "What do you think?" every ten minutes or so as if he knew anything at all about theater. Which he didn't. "Seems . . . fine," he said helplessly.

"So you think I should take the job?"

"God, yes," he said a little too promptly. In retrospect, he realized there was no question of her not taking the job and wondered if she'd known from the beginning that funding was going to be a nightmare and had wanted him to feel involved with the play in some way. She wasn't a manipulative person, quite the opposite, but sometimes she had a way of looking ahead that surprised him. "And if we're successful you'll get your money back," she said cheerfully when he offered. "And you never know--you might make a profit." In your dreams, Jackson thought, but he didn't say that.

"Our angel," Tobias, the director, had called him last night, embracing him in a queeny hug. Tobias was more camp than a Scout jamboree. Jackson had nothing against gays, he just wished that sometimes they wouldn't be quite so gay, especially when being introduced to him in what had turned out, unfortunately, to be a good old-fashioned macho Scottish pub. Their "savior," their "angel"--so much religious language from people who weren't in any way religious. Jackson knew himself to be neither a savior nor an angel. He was just a guy. A guy who had more money than they did.

Julia spotted him and waved him over. She looked flushed and her left eyelid was

twitching, usually a sign she was wound too tightly. Her lipstick had almost worn off and her body was camouflaged by the sackcloth-and-ashes costume so that she didn't really look like Julia at all. Jackson guessed that the morning hadn't gone well. Nonetheless she gave him a big, smiley hug (say what you like about Julia, she was a real trouper), and he wrapped his arms round her and heard her breathing, wet and shallow. The "venue" where they had their makeshift theater was below ground level in the underbelly of a centuries-old building that was a warren of damp stone passages scuttling off in all directions, and he wondered if Julia could survive down here without dying of consumption.

"No lunch, then?" he said.

She shook her head. "We haven't even finished teching properly. We're going to have to work through lunch. How was your morning?"

"I took a walk," Jackson said, "went to a museum and the Camera Obscura. Had a look at the grave of Greyfriar's Bobby--"

"Oh." Julia made a tragic face. The mention of a dog, any dog, always provoked an emotional reflex in Julia. The idea of a dead dog upped the ante on the emotion considerably. The idea of a dead faithful dog was almost more than she could handle.

"Yeah, I paid him your respects," Jackson said. "And I saw the new Parliament Building as well."

"What was it like?"

"I don't know. New. Odd."

He could see she wasn't really listening. "Shall I stay?" he asked. She looked panicked and said quickly, "I don't want you to see the show until press night. It's still a bit rough around the edges." Julia was always upbeat about any piece of work, so he understood that "a bit rough around the edges" translated as "bloody awful." This fact went unacknowledged between them. He could see wrinkles round her eyes that he didn't remember being there two years ago. She stood on tiptoes to be kissed and said, "You have my permission to scarper. Go and have a good time."

Jackson kissed her chastely on the forehead. Last night, after the pub, he'd been expecting to have heroic sex with Julia the moment they got through the door of the rented flat in Marchmont that the promoters had found for her. New locations always tended to make her peppy where sex was concerned, but instead she said, "I'm going to die, sweetie, if I don't go to sleep this very second." It wasn't like Julia not to want sex,

Julia always wanted sex.

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He guessed it was a student flat in term time, Sellotape marks on the wall and a toilet that Jackson used two bottles of bleach on before it even began to look clean. Julia didn't clean toilets, Julia didn't really do housework, or not so you would notice. "Life's too short," she said. There were days when Jackson thought life was too long. He had offered to pay for something nicer, something more expensive, even a hotel for the run Julia wanted, but she had been uncomfortable with the idea. "Everyone else living a life of penury while I'm in the lap of luxury? I don't think that's right, sweetie, do you? Group solidarity and all that."

When he woke this morning it was to find Julia's side of the bed as cold and smooth as if she'd never nested restlessly next to him all night. He could tell the air of the Marchmont flat was undisturbed by her presence, she wasn't bathing or breathing or reading, none of which she did silently. His heart had given a little contraction of sorrow at her absence. He tried to remember the last time Julia had woken up before him. He didn't think there ever had been a time. Jackson didn't like change, he liked to think things could stay the same forever. Change was insidious, creeping up on you as if it were playing a game of statues. From day to day he and Julia seemed to remain the same, but if he thought about them two years ago they were like different people. Then, they had been clinging to each other, grateful, self-indulgent survivors of wreckage and disaster. Now they were just jetsam bobbing on the aftermath. Or was it flotsam? He was never sure of the difference.

"Oh, wait, I've got something for you," Julia said, raking around in her bag and finally producing a timetable for Lothian Buses.

"A bus timetable?" he said when she handed it to him.

"Yes, a bus timetable. So you can catch a bus. And, here, take my Day Saver ticket."

Jackson wasn't in the habit of taking buses. Buses, in Jackson's opinion, were for the old and the young and the dispossessed.

"I know what a bus timetable is," he said rather churlishly, even to his own ears.

"Thanks," he added, "but I'll probably go and look at the Castle."

"And with one bound he was free," Jackson heard her say as he walked away.

As Jackson made his way out of the labyrinth, he half-expected to find stalactites and stalagmites ("Stalactites from the ceiling, stalagmites from the ground, the voice of his geography teacher muttered unexpectedly in his brain). The whole place was carved out of the rock, the walls mildewed, the lighting dim, an underground cavern that gave

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