

# Part one tuesday



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

I

Two mornings after her husband's death, Mary Fairbrother woke at five o'clock. She had slept in the marital bed with her twelve-year-old, Declan, who had crawled in, sobbing, shortly after midnight. He was sound asleep now, so Mary crept out of the room and went down into the kitchen to cry more freely. Every hour that passed added to her grief, because it bore her further away from the living man, and because it was a tiny foretaste of the eternity she would have to spend without him. Again and again she found herself forgetting, for the space of a heartbeat, that he was gone for ever and that she could not turn to him for comfort.

When her sister and brother-in-law came through to make breakfast, Mary took Barry's phone and withdrew into the study, where she started looking for the numbers of some of Barry's huge acquaintance. She had only been at it a matter of minutes when the mobile in her hands rang.

'Yes?' she murmured.

'Oh, hello! I'm looking for Barry Fairbrother. Alison Jenkins from the Yarvil and District Gazette.'

The young woman's jaunty voice was as loud and horrible in Mary's ear as a triumphal fanfare; the blast of it obliterated the sense of the words.

'Sorry?'

'Alison Jenkins from the Yarvil and District Gazette. I want to speak to Barry Fairbrother? It's about his article on the Fields.'

'Oh?' said Mary.

'Yes, he hasn't attached details of this girl he talks about. We're supposed to interview her. Krystal Weedon?'

Each word felt to Mary like a slap. Perversely, she sat still and silent in Barry's old swivel chair and let the blows rain upon her.

'Can you hear me?'

'Yes,' said Mary, her voice cracking. 'I can hear you.'

'I know Mr Fairbrother was very keen to be present when we interview Krystal, but time's running - '

'He won't be able to be present,' said Mary, her voice eliding into a screech.

'He won't be able to talk about the bloody Fields any more, or about anything, ever again!'

'What?' said the girl on the end of the line.

'My husband is dead, all right. He's dead, so the Fields will have to get on without him, won't they?'

Mary's hands were shaking so much that the mobile slipped through her fingers, and for the few moments before she managed to cut the call, she knew that the journalist heard her ragged sobs. Then she remembered that most of Barry's last day on earth and their wedding anniversary had been given over to his obsession with the Fields and Krystal Weedon; fury erupted, and she threw the mobile so hard across the room that it hit a framed picture

of their four children, knocking it to the floor. She began to scream and cry at once, and her sister and brother-in-law both came running upstairs and burst into the room.

All they could get out of her at first was, 'The Fields, the bloody, bloody Fields ...'

'It's where me and Barry grew up,' her brother-in-law muttered, but he explained no further, for fear of inflaming Mary's hysteria.

II

Social worker Kay Bawden and her daughter Gaia had moved from London only four weeks previously, and were Pagford's very newest inhabitants. Kay was unfamiliar with the contentious history of the Fields; it was simply the estate where many of her clients lived. All she knew about Barry Fairbrother was that his death had precipitated the miserable scene in her kitchen, when her lover Gavin had fled from her and her scrambled eggs, and so dashed all the hopes his love-making had roused in her.

Kay spent Tuesday lunchtime in a layby between Pagford and Yarvil, eating a sandwich in her car, and reading a large stack of notes. One of her colleagues had been signed off work due to stress, with the immediate result that Kay had been lumbered with a third of her cases. Shortly before one o'clock, she set off for the Fields.

She had already visited the estate several times, but she was not yet familiar with the warren-like streets. At last she found Foley Road, and identified from a distance the house that she thought must belong to the Weedons.

The file had made it clear what she was likely to meet, and her first glimpse of the house met her expectations.

A pile of refuse was heaped against the front wall: carrier bags bulging with filth, jumbled together with old clothes and unbagged, soiled nappies. Bits of the rubbish had tumbled or been scattered over the scrubby patch of lawn, but the bulk of it remained piled beneath one of the two downstairs windows. A bald old tyre sat in the middle of the lawn; it had been shifted some time recently, because a foot away there was a flattened yellowish-brown circle of dead grass. After ringing the doorbell, Kay noticed a used condom glistening in the grass beside her feet, like the gossamer cocoon of some huge grub.

She was experiencing that slight apprehension that she had never quite overcome, although it was nothing compared to the nerves with which she had faced unknown doors in the early days. Then, in spite of all her training, in spite of the fact that a colleague usually accompanied her, she had, on occasion, been truly afraid. Dangerous dogs; men brandishing knives; children with grotesque injuries; she had found them all, and worse, in her years of entering strangers' houses.

Nobody came in answer to the bell, but she could hear a small child grizzling through the ground-floor window on her left, which was ajar. She tried rapping on the door instead and a tiny flake of peeling cream paint fell off and landed on the toe of her shoe. It reminded her of the state of her own new home. It would have been nice if Gavin had offered to help with some of her redecorating, but he had said not a word. Sometimes Kay counted over

the things that he had not said or done, like a miser looking through IOUs, and felt bitter and angry, and determined to extract repayment.

She knocked again, sooner than she would have done if she had not wanted to distract herself from her own thoughts, and this time, a distant voice said, 'I'm fuckin' comin'.'

The door swung open to reveal a woman who appeared simultaneously child-like and ancient, dressed in a dirty pale-blue T-shirt and a pair of men's pyjama bottoms. She was the same height as Kay, but shrunken; the bones of her face and sternum showed sharply through the thin white skin. Her hair, which was home-dyed, coarse and very red, looked like a wig on top of a skull, her pupils were minuscule and her chest virtually breastless.

'Hello, are you Terri? I'm Kay Bawden, from Social Services. I'm covering for Mattie Knox.'

There were silvery pockmarks all over the woman's fragile grey-white arms, and an angry red, open sore on the inside of one forearm. A wide area of scar tissue on her right arm and lower neck gave the skin a shiny plastic appearance. Kay had known an addict in London who had accidentally set fire to her house, and realized too late what was happening.

'Yeah, righ',' said Terri, after an overlong pause. When she spoke, she seemed much older; several of her teeth were missing. She turned her back on Kay and took a few unsteady steps down the dark hallway. Kay followed. The house smelt of stalefood, of sweat, of unshifted filth. Terri led Kay through the first door on the left, into a tiny sitting room.

There were no books, no pictures, no photographs, no television; nothing except a pair of filthy old armchairs and a broken set of shelves. Debris littered the floor. A pile of brand-new cardboard boxes piled against the wall struck an incongruous note.

A bare-legged little boy was standing in the middle of the floor, dressed in a T-shirt and a bulging pull-up nappy. Kay knew from the file that he was three and a half. His whining seemed unconscious and unmotivated, a sort of engine noise to signal that he was there. He was clutching a miniature cereal packet.

'So this must be Robbie?' said Kay.

The boy looked at her when she said his name, but kept grizzling.

Terri shoved aside a scratched old biscuit tin, which had been sitting on one of the dirty frayed armchairs, and curled herself into the seat, watching Kay from beneath drooping eyelids. Kay took the other chair, on the arm of which was perched an overflowing ashtray. Cigarette ends had fallen into the seat of Kay's chair; she could feel them beneath her thighs.

'Hello, Robbie,' said Kay, opening Terri's file.

The little boy continued to whine, shaking the cereal packet; something inside it rattled.

'What have you got in there?' Kay asked.

He did not answer, but shook the packet more vigorously. A small plastic figure flew out of it, soared in an arc and fell down behind the cardboard

boxes. Robbie began to wail. Kay watched Terri, who was staring at her son, blank-faced. Eventually, Terri murmured, 'S'up, Robbie?'

'Shall we see if we can get it out?' said Kay, quite glad of a reason to stand up and brush down the back of her legs. 'Let's have a look.'

She put her head close to the wall to look into the gap behind the boxes. The little figure was wedged near the top. She forced her hand into the gap. The boxes were heavy and difficult to move. Kay managed to grasp the model, which, once she had it in her hand, she saw to be a squat, fat Buddha-like man, bright purple all over.

'Here you are,' she said.

Robbie's wailing ceased; he took the figure and put it back inside the cereal packet, which he started to shake again.

Kay glanced around. Two small toy cars lay upside down under the broken shelves.

'Do you like cars?' Kay asked Robbie, pointing at them.

He did not follow the direction of her finger, but squinted at her with a mixture of calculation and curiosity. Then he trotted off and picked up a car and held it up for her to see.

'Broom,' he said. 'Ca.'

'That's right,' said Kay. 'Very good. Car. Broom broom.'

She sat back down and took her notepad out of her bag.



'So, Terri. How have things been going?'

There was a pause before Terri said, 'All right.'

'Just to explain: Mattie has been signed off sick, so I'm covering for her. I'll need to go over some of the information she's left me, to check that nothing's changed since she saw you last week, all right?'

'So, let's see: Robbie is in nursery now, isn't he? Four mornings a week and two afternoons?'

Kay's voice seemed to reach Terri only distantly. It was like talking to somebody sitting at the bottom of a well.

'Yeah,' she said, after a pause.

'How's that going? Is he enjoying it?'

Robbie crammed the matchbox car into the cereal box. He picked up one of the cigarette butts that had fallen off Kay's trousers, and squashed it on top of the car and the purple Buddha.

'Yeah,' said Terri drowsily.

But Kay was poring over the last of the untidy notes Mattie had left before she had been signed off.

'Shouldn't he be there today, Terri? Isn't Tuesday one of the days he goes?'

Terri seemed to be fighting a desire to sleep. Once or twice her head rocked a little on her shoulders. Finally she said, 'Krystal was s'posed to drop him and she never.'

'Krystal is your daughter, isn't she? How old is she?'

'Fourteen,' said Terri dreamily, 'n'a half.'

Kay could see from her notes that Krystal was sixteen. There was a long pause.

Two chipped mugs stood at the foot of Terri's armchair. The dirty liquid in one of them had a bloody look. Terri's arms were folded across her flat breast.

'I had him dressed,' said Terri, dragging the words from deep in her consciousness.

'Sorry, Terri, but I've got to ask,' said Kay. 'Have you used this morning?'

Terri passed a bird's claw hand over her mouth.

'Nah.'

'Wantashit,' said Robbie, and he scurried towards the door.

'Does he need help?' Kay asked, as Robbie vanished from sight, and they heard him scampering upstairs.

'Nah, 'e can doot alone,' slurred Terri. She propped her drooping head on her fist, her elbow on the armchair. Robbie let out a shout from the landing.

'Door! Door!'

They heard him thumping wood. Terri did not move.

'Shall I help him?' Kay suggested.

'Yeah,' said Terri.

Kay climbed the stairs and operated the stiff handle on the door for Robbie. The room smelled rank. The bath was grey, with successive brown tidemarks around it, and the toilet had not been flushed. Kay did this before allowing Robbie to scramble onto the seat. He screwed up his face and strained loudly, indifferent to her presence. There was a loud splash, and a noisome new note was added to the already putrid air. He got down and pulled up his bulging nappy without wiping; Kay made him come back, and tried to persuade him to do it for himself, but the action seemed quite foreign to him. In the end she did it for him. His bottom was sore: crusty, red and irritated. The nappy stank of ammonia. She tried to remove it, but he yelped, lashed out at her, then pulled away, scampering back down to the sitting room with his nappy sagging. Kay wanted to wash her hands, but there was no soap. Trying not to inhale, she closed the bathroom door behind her.

She glanced into the bedrooms before returning downstairs. The contents of all three spilt out onto the cluttered landing. They were all sleeping on mattresses. Robbie seemed to be sharing a room with his mother. A couple of toys lay among the dirty clothes strewn all over the floor: cheap, plastic and too young for him. To Kay's surprise, the duvet and pillows both had covers on them.

Back in the sitting room, Robbie was whining again, banging his fist against the stack of cardboard boxes. Terri was watching from beneath half-closed eyelids. Kay brushed off the seat of her chair before sitting back down.

'Terri, you're on the methadone programme at the Bellchapel Clinic, isn't that right?'

'Mm,' said Terri drowsily.

'And how's that going, Terri?'

Pen poised, Kay waited, pretending that the answer was not sitting in front of her.

'Are you still going to the clinic, Terri?'

'Las' week. Friday, I goes.'

Robbie pounded the boxes with his fists.

'Can you tell me how much methadone you're on?'

'Hundred and fifteen mils,' said Terri.

It did not surprise Kay that Terri could remember this, but not the age of her daughter.

'Mattie says here that your mother has been helping with Robbie and Krystal; is that still the case?'

Robbie flung his hard, compact little body against the pile of boxes, which swayed.

'Be careful, Robbie,' said Kay, and Terri said, 'Leave 'em,' with the closest thing to alertness Kay had heard in her dead voice.

Robbie returned to beating the boxes with his fists, for the pleasure, apparently, of listening to the hollow drumbeat.

'Terri, is your mother still helping to look after Robbie?'

'Not m'mother, gran.'

'Robbie's gran?'

'My gran, innit. She dun ... she ain't well.'

Kay glanced over at Robbie again, her pen at the ready. He was not underweight; she knew that from the feel and look of him, half-naked, as she had wiped his backside. His T-shirt was dirty, but his hair, when she had bent over him, had smelled surprisingly of shampoo. There were no bruises on his milk-white arms and legs, but there was the sodden, bagging nappy; he was three and a half.

'M'ungry,' he shouted, giving the box a final, futile whack. 'M'ungry.'

'You c'n'ave a biscuit,' slurred Terri, but not moving. Robbie's yells turned to noisy sobs and screams. Terri made no attempt to leave her chair. It was impossible to talk over the din.

'Shall I get him one?' shouted Kay.

'Yeah.'

Robbie ran past Kay into the kitchen. It was almost as dirty as the bathroom. Other than the fridge, cooker and washing machine, there were no gadgets; the counters carried only dirty plates, another overflowing ashtray, carrier bags, mouldy bread. The lino was tacky and stuck to the soles of Kay's shoes. Rubbish had overflowed the bin, on top of which sat a pizza box, precariously balanced.

'N there,' said Robbie, jabbing a finger at the wall unit without looking at Kay. 'N there.'

More food than Kay had expected was stacked in the cupboard: tins, a packet of biscuits, a jar of instant coffee. She took two biscuits from the packet and handed them to him; he snatched them and ran away again, back to his mother.

'So, do you like going to the nursery, Robbie?' she asked him, as he sat scoffing the biscuits on the floor.

He did not answer.

'Yeah, 'e likes it,' said Terri, slightly more awake. 'Don' you, Robbie? 'E likes it.'

'When was he last there, Terri?'

'Las' time. Yesterday.'

'Yesterday was Monday, he couldn't have been there then,' said Kay, making notes. 'That isn't one of the days he goes.'

'Wha'?'

'I'm asking about nursery. Robbie's supposed to be there today. I need to know when he was last there.'

'I told you, din' I? Las' time.'

Her eyes were more fully open than Kay had yet seen them. The timbre of her voice was still flat, but antagonism was struggling to the surface.

'Are you a dyke?' she asked.

'No,' said Kay, still writing.

'You look like a dyke,' said Terri.

Kay continued to write.

'Juice,' Robbie shouted, chocolate smeared over his chin.

This time Kay did not move. After another long pause, Terri lurched out of her chair and wove her way into the hall. Kay leaned forward and shifted the loose lid of the biscuit tin Terri had displaced when she sat down. Inside was a syringe, a bit of grubby cotton wool, a rusty-looking spoon and a dusty polythene bag. Kay snapped the lid back on firmly, while Robbie watched her. Terri returned, after some distant clattering, carrying a cup of juice, which she shoved at the little boy.

'There,' she said, more to Kay than to her son, and she sat back down again.

She missed the seat and collided with the arm of the chair on her first attempt; Kay heard the bone collide with wood, but Terri seemed to feel no

pain. She settled herself back into the sagging cushions and surveyed the social worker with bleary indifference.

Kay had read the file from cover to cover. She knew that nearly everything of value in Terri Weedon's life had been sucked into the black hole of her addiction; that it had cost her two children; that she barely clung to two more; that she prostituted herself to pay for heroin; that she had been involved in every sort of petty crime; and that she was currently attempting rehab for the umpteenth time.

But not to feel, not to care ... Right now, Kay thought, she's happier than I am.

III

At the start of the second post-lunch period, Stuart 'Fats' Wall walked out of school. His experiment in truancy was undertaken in no rash spirit; he had decided the previous night that he would miss the double period of computing that finished the afternoon. He might have chosen to skip any lesson, but it so happened that his best friend Andrew Price (known to Fats as Arf) was in a different set in computing, and Fats, in spite of his best efforts, had not succeeded in being demoted to join him.

Fats and Andrew were perhaps equally aware that the admiration in their relationship flowed mostly from Andrew to Fats; but Fats alone suspected that he needed Andrew more than Andrew needed him. Lately, Fats had started to regard this dependency in the light of a weakness, but he



reasoned that, while his liking for Andrew's company lingered, he might as well miss a double period where he had to do without it anyway.

Fats had been told by a reliable informant that the one fail-safe way of quitting the Winterdown grounds without being spotted from a window was to climb over the side wall by the bike shed. This, therefore, he did, dropping down by his fingertips into the narrow lane on the other side. He landed without mishap, strode off along the narrow path and turned left, onto the busy dirty main road.

Safely on his way, he lit a cigarette and proceeded past the run-down little shops. Five blocks along, Fats turned left again, into the first of the streets that made up the Fields. He loosened his school tie with one hand as he walked, but did not remove it. He did not care that he was, conspicuously, a schoolboy. Fats had never even attempted to customize his uniform in any way; to pin badges on his lapels or adjust his tie knot to suit fashion; he wore his school clothes with the disdain of a convict.

He had decided that he possessed traits that were authentic, which ought therefore to be encouraged and cultivated; but also that some of his habits of thought were the unnatural product of his unfortunate upbringing, and consequently inauthentic and to be purged. Lately, he had been experimenting with acting on what he thought were his authentic impulses, and ignoring or suppressing the guilt and fear (inauthentic) that such actions seemed to engender. Undoubtedly, this was becoming easier with practice. He wanted to toughen up inside, to become invulnerable, to be free of the

fear of consequences: to rid himself of spurious notions of goodness and badness.

One of the things that had begun to irritate him about his own dependence on Andrew was that the latter's presence sometimes curbed and limited the full expression of Fats' authentic self. Somewhere in Andrew was a self-drawn map of what constituted fair play, and lately Fats had caught looks of displeasure, confusion and disappointment poorly disguised on his old friend's face. Andrew pulled up short at extremes of baiting and derision. Fats did not hold this against Andrew; it would have been inauthentic for Andrew to join in, unless that was what he really, truly wanted. The trouble was that Andrew was displaying an attachment to the kind of morality against which Fats was waging an increasingly determined war. Fats suspected that the right thing to do, the correctly unsentimental act in pursuit of full authenticity, would have been to cut Andrew adrift; and yet he still preferred Andrew's company to anybody else's.

Fats was convinced that he knew himself particularly well; he explored the nooks and crevices of his own psyche with an attention he had recently ceased to give to anything else. He spent hours interrogating himself about his own impulses, desires and fears, attempting to discriminate between those that were truly his and those that he had been taught to feel. He examined his own attachments (nobody else he knew, he was sure, was ever this honest with themselves; they drifted, half asleep, through life): and his conclusion had been that Andrew, whom he had known since he was five, was the person for whom he felt the most straightforward affection; that, even though he was now old enough to see through her, he retained an

attachment to his mother that was not his own fault; and that he actively despised Cubby, who represented the acme and pinnacle of inauthenticity.

On the Facebook page that Fats curated with a care he devoted to almost nothing else, he had highlighted a quotation he had found on his parents' bookshelves:

I do not want believers, I think I am too malicious to believe in myself ... I have a terrible fear I shall one day be pronounced holy ... I do not want to be a saint, rather even a buffoon ... perhaps I am a buffoon ...

Andrew liked it very much, and Fats liked how impressed he was.

In the time it took him to pass the bookmaker's - mere seconds - Fats' thoughts lit on his father's dead friend, Barry Fairbrother. Three long loping strides past the racehorses printed on posters behind the grubby glass, and Fats saw Barry's joking, bearded face, and heard Cubby's booming excuse of a laugh, which had often rung out almost before Barry had made one of his feeble jokes, in the mere excitement of his presence. Fats did not wish to examine these memories any further; he did not interrogate himself on the reasons for his instinctive inner flinch; he did not ask himself whether the dead man had been authentic or inauthentic; he dismissed the idea of Barry Fairbrother, and his father's ludicrous distress, and pressed on.

Fats was curiously joyless these days, even though he made everybody else laugh as much as ever. His quest to rid himself of restrictive morality was an attempt to regain something he was sure had been stifled in him, something that he had lost as he had left childhood. What Fats wanted to recover was a

kind of innocence, and the route he had chosen back to it was through all the things that were supposed to be bad for you, but which, paradoxically, seemed to Fats to be the one true way to authenticity; to a kind of purity. It was curious how often everything was back to front, the inverse of what they told you; Fats was starting to think that if you flipped every bit of received wisdom on its head you would have the truth. He wanted to journey through dark labyrinths and wrestle with the strangeness that lurked within; he wanted to crack open piety and expose hypocrisy; he wanted to break taboos and squeeze wisdom from their bloody hearts; he wanted to achieve a state of amoral grace, and be baptized backwards into ignorance and simplicity.

And so he decided to break one of the few school rules he had not yet contravened, and walked away, into the Fields. It was not merely that the crude pulse of reality seemed nearer here than in any other place he knew; he also had a vague hope of stumbling across certain notorious people about whom he was curious, and, though he barely acknowledged it to himself, because it was one of the few yearnings for which he did not have words, he sought an open door, and a dawning recognition, and a welcome to a home he did not know he had.

Moving past the putty-coloured houses on foot, rather than in his mother's car, he noticed that many of them were free of graffiti and debris, and that some imitated (as he saw it) the gentility of Pagford, with net curtains and ornaments on the windowsills. These details were less readily apparent from a moving vehicle, where Fats' eye was irresistibly drawn from boarded window to debris-strewn lawn. The neater houses held no interest for Fats.

What drew him on were the places where chaos or lawlessness was in evidence, even if only of the puerile spray-canned variety.

Somewhere near here (he did not know exactly where) lived Dane Tully. Tully's family was infamous. His two older brothers and his father spent a lot of time in prison. There was a rumour that the last time Dane had had a fight (with a nineteen-year-old, so the story went, from the Cantermill Estate), his father had escorted him to the rendezvous, and had stayed to fight Dane's opponent's older brothers. Tully had turned up at school with his face cut, his lip swollen and his eye blacked. Everyone agreed that he had put in one of his infrequent appearances simply to show off his injuries.

Fats was quite sure that he would have played it differently. To care what anyone else thought of your smashed face was inauthentic. Fats would have liked to fight, and then to go about his normal life, and if anyone knew it would be because they had glimpsed him by chance.

Fats had never been hit, despite offering increasing provocation. He thought, often these days, about how it would feel to get into a fight. He suspected that the state of authenticity he sought would include violence; or, at least, would not preclude violence. To be prepared to hit, and to take a hit, seemed to him to be a form of courage to which he ought to aspire. He had never needed his fists: his tongue had sufficed; but the emergent Fats was starting to despise his own articulacy and to admire authentic brutality. The matter of knives, Fats debated with himself more gingerly. To buy a blade now, and let it be known he was carrying it, would be an act of crashing inauthenticity, a pitiful aping of the likes of Dane Tully; Fats' insides crawled at the thought of

it. If ever the time came when he needed to carry a knife, that would be different. Fats did not rule out the possibility that such a time would come, though he admitted to himself that the idea was frightening. Fats was scared of things that pierced flesh, of needles and blades. He had been the only one to faint when they had had their meningitis vaccinations back at St Thomas's. One of the few ways that Andrew had found to discompose Fats was to unsheath his EpiPen around him; the adrenalin-filled needle that Andrew was supposed to carry with him at all times because of his dangerous nut allergy. It made Fats feel sick when Andrew brandished it at him or pretended to jab him with it.

Wandering without any particular destination, Fats caught sight of the sign to Foley Road. That was where Krystal Weedon lived. He was unsure whether she was in school today, and it was not his intention to make her think that he had come looking for her.

They had an agreement to meet on Friday evening. Fats had told his parents that he was going to Andrew's because they were collaborating on an English project. Krystal seemed to understand what they were going to do; she seemed up for it. She had so far allowed him to insert two fingers inside her, hot and firm and slippery; he had unhooked her bra and been permitted to place his hands on her warm, heavy breasts. He had sought her out deliberately at the Christmas disco; led her out of the hall under Andrew's and the others' incredulous gazes, round the back of the drama hall. She had seemed quite as surprised as anybody else, but had offered, as he had hoped and expected, virtually no resistance. His targeting of Krystal had

been a deliberate act; and he had had his cool and brazen retort ready, when it had come to facing down his mates' jeers and taunts.

'If you want chips, you don't go to a fucking salad bar.'

He had thought out that analogy in advance, but he had still had to spell it out for them.

'You boys keep wanking. I want a shag.'

That had wiped the smiles off their faces. He could tell that all of them, Andrew included, were forced to choke down their jeers at his choice, in admiration of his unabashed pursuit of the one, the only true goal. Fats had undoubtedly chosen the most direct route to get there; none of them could argue with his common-sense practicality, and Fats could tell that every single one of them was asking himself why he had not had the guts to consider this means to a most satisfactory end.

'Do me a favour, and don't mention this to my mother, all right?' Fats had muttered to Krystal, coming up for air in between long, wet explorations of each other's mouths, while his thumbs had rubbed backwards and forwards over her nipples.

She had half sniggered, then kissed him with more aggression. She had not asked him why he had picked her, had not asked him anything really; she seemed, like him, to be pleased by the reactions of their entirely separate tribes, to glory in the watchers' confusion; even in his friends' pantomime of disgust. He and Krystal had barely spoken to each other during three further bouts of carnal exploration and experimentation. Fats had engineered all of

them, but she had made herself more readily available than usual, choosing to hang about in places he might find her easily. Friday night was the first time they would meet by pre-arrangement. He had bought condoms.

The prospect of finally going all the way had something to do with him truanting today and coming to the Fields, although he had not thought of Krystal herself (as opposed to her splendid breasts and that miraculously unguarded vagina) until he saw the name of her street.

Fats doubled back, lighting another cigarette. Something about seeing the name of Foley Road had given him a strange sense that his timing was wrong. The Fields today were banal and inscrutable, and that which he sought, the thing he hoped to recognize when he found it, was curled up somewhere, out of sight. And so he walked back to school.

#### IV

Nobody was answering their telephone. Back in the Child Protection team's room, Kay had been punching in numbers on and off for nearly two hours, leaving messages, asking everyone to call her back: the Weedons' health visitor, their family doctor, the Cantermill Nursery and the Bellchapel Addiction Clinic. Terri Weedon's file lay open on the desk in front of her, bulging and battered.

'Using again, is she?' said Alex, one of the women with whom Kay shared an office. 'Bellchapel'll kick her out for good this time. She claims she's terrified Robbie'll be taken off her, but she can't keep off the smack.'

'It's the third time she's been through Bellchapel,' said Una.



On the basis of what she had seen that afternoon, Kay thought the time was right for a case review, to pull together those professionals who shared responsibility for individual fragments of Terri Weedon's life. She continued to press redial between dealing with other work, while in the corner of the office their own telephone rang repeatedly and clicked immediately onto the answering machine. The Child Protection team's room was cramped and cluttered, and it smelt of spoilt milk, because Alex and Una had a habit of emptying the dregs of their coffee cups into the pot of a depressed-looking yucca plant in the corner.

Mattie's most recent notes were untidy and chaotic, peppered with crossings out, misdated and partial. Several key documents were missing from the file, including a letter sent by the addiction clinic a fortnight previously. It was quicker to ask Alex and Una for information.

'Last case review woulda been ...' said Alex, frowning at the yucca plant, 'over a year ago, I reckon.'

'And they thought Robbie was OK to stay with her then, obviously,' said Kay, the receiver pressed between ear and shoulder as she tried and failed to find the notes of the review in the bulging folder.

'It wasn't a case of him staying with her; it was whether he was going to go back to her or not. He was put out to a foster mother, because Terri was beaten up by a client and ended up in hospital. She got clean, got out, and was mad to get Robbie back. She went back on the Bellchapel programme, she was off the game and makin' a proper effort. Her mother was saying

she'd help. So she got him home and a few months later she'd started shooting up again.'

'It's not Terri's mother who helps, though, is it?' said Kay, whose head was starting to ache, as she tried to decipher Mattie's big, untidy writing. 'It's her grandmother, the kids' great-grandmother. So she must be knocking on, and Terri said something about her being ill, this morning. If Terri's the only carer now ...'

'The daughter's sixteen,' said Una. 'She mostly takes care of Robbie.'

'Well, she's not doing a great job,' said Kay. 'He was in a pretty bad state when I got there this morning.'

But she had seen far worse: welts and sores, gashes and burns, tar-black bruises; scabies and nits; babies lying on carpets covered in dog shit; kids crawling on broken bones; and once (she dreamed of it, still), a child who had been locked in a cupboard for five days by his psychotic stepfather. That one had made the national news. The most immediate danger to Robbie Weedon's safety had been the pile of heavy boxes in his mother's sitting room, which he had attempted to climb when he realized that it attracted Kay's full attention. Kay had carefully restacked them into two lower piles before leaving. Terri had not liked her touching the boxes; nor had she liked Kay telling her that she ought to take off Robbie's sodden nappy. Terri had been roused, in fact, to foul-mouthed, though still slightly hazy, fury, and had told Kay to fuck off and stay away.

Kay's mobile rang and she picked it up. It was Terri's key drug worker.

'I've been trying to get you for days,' said the woman crossly. It took several minutes for Kay to explain that she was not Mattie, but this did not much reduce the woman's antagonism.

'Yeah, we're still seeing her, but she tested positive last week. If she uses again, she's out. We've got twenty people right now who could take her place on the programme and maybe get some benefit from it. This is the third time she's been through.'

Kay did not say she knew that Terri had used that morning.

'Have either of you got any paracetamol?' Kay asked Alex and Una, once the drug worker had given her full details of Terri's attendance and lack of progress at the clinic, and rung off.

Kay took her painkillers with tepid tea, lacking the energy to get up and go to the water cooler in the corridor. The office was stuffy, the radiator cranked up high. As the daylight faded from the sky outside, the strip-lighting over her desk intensified: it turned her multitude of papers a bright yellow-white; buzzing black words marched in endless lines.

'They're going to close down Bellchapel Clinic, you watch,' said Una, who was working at her PC with her back to Kay. 'Got to make cuts. Council funds one of the drug workers. Pagford Parish owns the building. I heard they're planning to tart it up and try and rent to a better-paying client. They've had it in for that clinic for years.'

Kay's temple throbbed. The name of her new hometown made her feel sad. Without pausing to think, she did the thing that she had vowed not to do

after he had failed to call the previous evening: she picked up her mobile and keyed in Gavin's office number.

'Edward Collins and Co,' said a woman's voice, after the third ring. They answered your calls immediately out in the private sector, when money might depend on it.

'Could I speak to Gavin Hughes, please?' said Kay, staring down at Terri's file.

'Who's speaking, please?'

'Kay Bawden,' said Kay.

She did not look up; she did not want to catch either Alex's or Una's eyes. The pause seemed interminable.

(They had met in London at Gavin's brother's birthday party. Kay had not known anyone there, except for the friend who had dragged her along for support. Gavin had just split up with Lisa; he had been a little drunk, but had seemed decent, reliable and conventional, not at all the kind of man that Kay usually went for. He had poured out the story of his broken relationship, and then gone home with her to the flat in Hackney. He had been keen while the affair remained long-distance, visiting at weekends and telephoning her regularly; but when, by a miracle, she had got the job in Yarvil, for less money, and put her flat in Hackney on the market, he had seemed to take fright ... )

'His line's still busy, would you like to hold?'

'Yes, please,' said Kay miserably.

(If she and Gavin did not work out ... but they had to work out. She had moved for him, changed jobs for him, uprooted her daughter for him. He would never have let that happen, surely, unless his intentions were serious? He must have thought through the consequences if they split up: how awful and awkward it would be, running across each other constantly in a tiny town like Pagford?)

'Putting you through,' said the secretary, and Kay's hopes soared.

'Hi,' said Gavin. 'How are you?'

'Fine,' lied Kay, because Alex and Una were listening. 'Are you having a good day?'

'Busy,' said Gavin. 'You?'

'Yes.'

She waited, the phoned pressed tightly against her ear, pretending that he was speaking to her, listening to the silence.

'I wondered whether you wanted to meet up tonight,' she asked finally, feeling sick.

'Er ... I don't think I can,' he said.

How can you not know? What have you got on?

'I might have to do something ... it's Mary. Barry's wife. She wants me to be a pall-bearer. So I might have to ... I think I've got to find out what that involves and everything.'

Sometimes, if she simply remained quiet, and let the inadequacy of his excuses reverberate on the air, he became ashamed and backtracked.

'I don't suppose that'll take all evening, though,' he said. 'We could meet up later, if you wanted.'

'All right, then. Do you want to come over to mine, as it's a school night?'

'Er ... yeah, OK.'

'What time?' she asked, wanting him to make one decision.

'I dunno ... nine-ish?'

After he had rung off, Kay kept the phone pressed tightly to her ear for a few moments, then said, for the benefit of Alex and Una, 'I do, too. See you later, babe.'

V

As guidance teacher, Tessa's hours varied more than her husband's. She usually waited until the end of the school day to take their son home in her Nissan, leaving Colin (whom Tessa - although she knew what the rest of the world called him, including nearly all the parents who had caught the habit from their children - never addressed as Cubby) to follow them, an hour or two later, in his Toyota. Today, though, Colin met Tessa in the car park at

twenty-past four, while the schoolchildren were still swarming out of the front gates into parental cars, or onto their free buses.

The sky was a cold iron-grey, like the underside of a shield. A sharp breeze lifted the hems of skirts and rattled the leaves on the immature trees; a spiteful, chill wind that sought out your weakest places, the nape of your neck and your knees, and which denied you the comfort of dreaming, of retreating a little from reality. Even after she had closed the car door on it, Tessa felt ruffled and put out, as she would have been by somebody crashing into her without apology.

Beside her in the passenger seat, his knees absurdly high in the cramped confines of her car, Colin told Tessa what the computing teacher had come to his office to tell him, twenty minutes previously.

'... not there. Didn't turn up for the whole double period. Said he thought he'd better come straight and tell me. So that'll be all over the staff room, tomorrow. Exactly what he wants,' said Colin furiously, and Tessa knew that they were not talking about the computing teacher any more. 'He's just sticking two fingers up at me, as usual.'

Her husband was pale with exhaustion, with shadows beneath his reddened eyes, and his hands were twitching slightly on the handle of his briefcase. Fine hands, with big knuckles and long slender fingers, they were not altogether dissimilar from their son's. Tessa had pointed this out to her husband and son recently; neither had evinced the smallest pleasure at the thought that there was some faint physical resemblance between them.

'I don't think he's - ' began Tessa, but Colin was talking again.

' - So, he'll get detention like everyone else and I'll damn well punish him at home too. We'll see how he likes that, shall we? We'll see whether that's a laughing matter. We can start by grounding him for a week, we'll see how funny that is.'

Biting back her response, Tessa scanned the sea of black-clad students, walking with heads down, shivering, drawing their thin coats close, their hair blown into their mouths. A chubby-cheeked and slightly bewildered-looking first year was looking all around for a lift that had not arrived. The crowd parted and there was Fats, loping along with Arf Price as usual, the wind blowing his hair off his gaunt face. Sometimes, at certain angles, in certain lights, it was easy to see what Fats would look like as an old man. For an instant, from the depths of her tiredness, he seemed a complete stranger, and Tessa thought how extraordinary it was that he was turning away to walk towards her car, and that she would have to go back out into that horrible hyper-real breeze to let him in. But when he reached them, and gave her his small grimace of a smile, he reconstituted himself immediately into the boy she loved in spite of it all, and she got out again, and stood stoically in the knife-sharp wind while he folded himself into the car with his father, who had not offered to move.

They pulled out of the car park, ahead of the free buses, and set off through Yarvil, past the ugly, broken-down houses of the Fields, towards the bypass that would speed them back to Pagford. Tessa watched Fats in the rear-view mirror. He was slumped in the back, gazing out of the window, as though his



parents were two people who had picked him up hitchhiking, connected to him merely by chance and proximity.

Colin waited until they reached the bypass; then he asked, 'Where were you when you should have been in computing this afternoon?'

Tessa glanced irresistibly into the mirror again. She saw her son yawn. Sometimes, even though she denied it endlessly to Colin, Tessa wondered whether Fats really was waging a dirty, personal war on his father with the whole school as audience. She knew things about her son she would not have known if she had not worked in guidance; students told her things, sometimes innocently, sometimes slyly.

Miss, do you mind Fatssmoking? D'you let him do it at home?

She locked away this small repository of illicit booty, obtained unintentionally, and brought it to neither her husband's nor her son's attention, even though it dragged at her, weighed on her.

'Went for a walk,' Fats said calmly. 'Thought I'd stretch the old legs.'

Colin twisted in his seat to look at Fats, straining against his seat belt as he shouted, his gestures further restricted and hampered by his overcoat and briefcase. When he lost control, Colin's voice rose higher and higher, so that he was shouting almost in falsetto. Through it all, Fats sat in silence, an insolent half-smile curving his thin mouth, until his father was screaming insults at him, insults that were blunted by Colin's innate dislike of swearing, his self-consciousness when he did it.

'You cocky, self-centred little ... little shit,' he screamed, and Tessa, whose eyes were so full of tears that she could barely see the road, was sure that Fats would be duplicating Colin's timid, falsetto swearing for the benefit of Andrew Price tomorrow morning.

Fats does a great imitation of Cubby's walk, miss, have you seen it?

'How dare you talk to me like that? How dare you skip classes?'

Colin screamed and raged, and Tessa had to blink the tears out of her eyes as she took the turning to Pagford and drove through the Square, past Mollison and Lowe, the war memorial and the Black Canon; she turned left at St Michael and All Saints into Church Row, and, at last, into the driveway of their house, by which time Colin had shouted himself into squeaky hoarseness and Tessa's cheeks were glazed and salty. When they all got out, Fats, whose expression had not altered a whit during his father's long diatribe, let himself in through the front door with his own key, and proceeded upstairs at a leisurely pace without looking back.

Colin threw his briefcase down in the dark hall and rounded on Tessa. The only illumination came from the stained-glass panel over the front door, which cast strange colours over his agitated, domed and balding head, half bloody, half ghostly blue.

'D'you see?' he cried, waving his long arms, 'D'you see what I'm dealing with?'

'Yes,' she said, taking a handful of tissues from the box on the hall table and mopping her face, blowing her nose. 'Yes, I do.'

'Not a thought in his head for what we're going through!' said Colin, and he started to sob, big whooping dry sobs, like a child with croup. Tessa hurried forward and put her arms around Colin's chest, a little above his waist, for, short and stout as she was, that was the highest bit she could reach. He stooped, clinging to her; she could feel his trembling, and the heaving of his rib cage under his coat.

After a few minutes, she gently disengaged herself, led him into the kitchen and made him a pot of tea.

'I'm going to take a casserole up to Mary's,' said Tessa, after she had sat for a while, stroking his hand. 'She's got half the family there. We'll get an early night, once I'm back.'

He nodded and sniffed, and she kissed him on the side of his head before heading out to the freezer. When she came back, carrying the heavy, icy dish, he was sitting at the table, cradling his mug in his big hands, his eyes closed.

Tessa set down the casserole, wrapped in a polythene bag, on the tiles beside the front door. She pulled on the lumpy green cardigan she often wore instead of a jacket, but did not put on her shoes. Instead, she tiptoed upstairs to the landing and then, taking less trouble to be quiet, up the second flight to the loft conversion.

A swift burst of rat-like activity greeted her approach to the door. She knocked, giving Fats time to hide whatever it was he had been looking at online, or, perhaps, the cigarettes he did not know she knew about.

'Yeah?'

She pushed open the door. Her son was crouching stagily over his school bag.

'Did you have to play truant today, of all days?'

Fats straightened up, long and stringy; he towered over his mother.

'I was there. I came in late. Bennett didn't notice. He's useless.'

'Stuart, please. Please.'

She wanted to shout at the kids at work, sometimes, too. She wanted to scream, You must accept the reality of other people. You think that reality is up for negotiation, that we think it's whatever you say it is. You must accept that we are as real as you are; you must accept that you are not God.

'Your father's very upset, Stu. Because of Barry. Can't you understand that?'

'Yes,' said Fats.

'I mean, it's like Arf dying would be to you.'

He did not respond, nor did his expression alter much, yet she sensed his disdain, his amusement.

'I know you think you and Arf are very different orders of being to the likes of your father and Barry - '

'No,' said Fats, but only, she knew, in the hope of ending the conversation.

'I'm going to take some food over to Mary's house. I am begging you, Stuart, not to do anything else to upset your father while I'm gone. Please, Stu.'

'Fine,' he said, with half a laugh, half a shrug. She felt his attention swooping, swallow-like, back to his own concerns, even before she had closed the door.

VI

The spiteful wind blew away the low-hanging cloud of late afternoon and, at sunset, died out. Three houses along from the Walls', Samantha Mollison sat facing her lamp-lit reflection in the dressing-table mirror, and found the silence and the stillness depressing.

It had been a disappointing couple of days. She had sold virtually nothing. The sales rep from Champetre had turned out to be a jowly man with an abrasive manner and a hold-all full of ugly bras. Apparently he reserved his charm for the preliminaries, for in person he was all business, patronizing her, criticizing her stock, pushing for an order. She had been imagining somebody younger, taller and sexier; she had wanted to get him and his garish underwear out of her little shop as quickly as possible.

She had bought a 'with deepest sympathy' card for Mary Fairbrother that lunchtime, but could not think what to write in it, because, after their nightmare journey to the hospital together, a simple signature did not seem enough. Their relationship had never been close. You bumped up against each other all the time in a place as small as Pagford, but she and Miles had not really known Barry and Mary. If anything, it might have been said that they were in opposing camps, what with Howard and Barry's endless clashes

about the Fields ... not that she, Samantha, gave a damn one way or another. She held herself above the smallness of local politics.

Tired, out of sorts and bloated after a day of indiscriminate snacking, she wished that she and Miles were not going to dinner at her parents-in-law's. Watching herself in the mirror, she put her hands flat against the sides of her face and pulled the skin gently back towards her ears. A younger Samantha emerged by millimetres. Turning her face slowly from side to side, she examined this taut mask. Better, much better. She wondered what it would cost; how much it would hurt; whether she would dare. She tried to imagine what her mother-in-law would say if she appeared with a firm new face. Shirley and Howard were, as Shirley frequently reminded them, helping to pay for their granddaughters' education.

Miles entered the bedroom; Samantha released her skin and picked up her under-eye concealer, tilting her head back, as she always did when applying make-up: it pulled the slightly sagging skin at her jaw taut and minimized the pouches under her eyes. There were short, needle-deep lines at the edges of her lips. These could be filled, she had read, with a synthetic, injectable compound. She wondered how much difference that would make; it would surely be cheaper than a facelift, and perhaps Shirley would not notice. In the mirror over her shoulder, she saw Miles pulling off his tie and shirt, his big belly spilling over his work trousers.

'Weren't you meeting someone today? Some rep?' he asked. Idly he scratched his hairy navel, staring into the wardrobe.

'Yes, but it wasn't any good,' said Samantha. 'Crappy stuff.'

Miles enjoyed what she did; he had grown up in a home where retail was the only business that mattered, and he had never lost the respect for commerce that Howard had instilled in him. Then there were all the opportunities for jokes, and for other less subtly disguised forms of self-congratulation that her line of trade afforded. Miles never seemed to tire of making the same old quips or the same sly allusions.

'Bad fit?' he enquired knowledgeably.

'Bad design. Horrible colours.'

Samantha brushed and tied back her thick dry brown hair, watching Miles in the mirror as he changed into chinos and a polo shirt. She was on edge, feeling that she might snap or cry at the smallest provocation.

Evertree Crescent was only a few minutes away, but Church Row was steep, so they drove. Darkness was falling properly, and at the top of the road they passed a shadowy man with Barry Fairbrother's silhouette and gait; it gave Samantha a shock and she glanced back at him, wondering who he could be. Miles' car turned left at the top of the road, then, barely a minute later, right, into the half-moon of 1930s bungalows.

Howard and Shirley's house, a low, wide-windowed building of red brick, boasted generous sweeps of green lawn at the front and back, which were mown into stripes during the summer by Miles. During the long years of their occupancy, Howard and Shirley had added carriage lamps, a white wrought-iron gate and terracotta pots full of geraniums on either side of the front door. They had also put up a sign beside the doorbell, a round, polished

piece of wood on which was written, in old Gothic black lettering complete with quotation marks, 'Ambleside'.

Samantha was sometimes cruelly witty at the expense of her parents-in-law's house. Miles tolerated her jibes, accepting the implication that he and Samantha, with their stripped-back floors and doors, their rugs on bare boards, their framed art prints and their stylish, uncomfortable sofa, had the better taste; but in his secret soul he preferred the bungalow in which he had grown up. Nearly every surface was covered with something plushy and soft; there were no draughts and the reclining chairs were deliciously comfortable. After he mowed the lawn in the summer, Shirley would bring him a cool beer while he lay back in one of them, watching the cricket on the widescreen TV. Sometimes one of his daughters would come with him and sit beside him, eating ice cream with chocolate sauce especially made for her granddaughters by Shirley.

'Hello, darling,' said Shirley, when she opened the door. Her short, compact shape suggested a neat little pepper pot, in its sprigged apron. She stood on tiptoe for her tall son to kiss her, then said, 'Hello, Sam,' and turned away immediately. 'Dinner's nearly ready. Howard! Miles and Sam are here!'

The house smelt of furniture polish and good food. Howard emerged from the kitchen, a bottle of wine in one hand, a corkscrew in the other. In a practised move, Shirley backed smoothly into the dining room, enabling Howard, who took up almost the entire width of the hall, to pass, before she trotted into the kitchen.



'Here they are, the good Samaritans,' boomed Howard. 'And how's the brassiere business, Sammy? Breasting the recession all right?'

'Business is surprisingly bouncy, actually, Howard,' said Samantha.

Howard roared with laughter, and Samantha was sure that he would have patted her on the bottom if he had not been holding the corkscrew and bottle. She tolerated all of her father-in-law's little squeezes and slaps as the harmless exhibitionism of a man grown too fat and old to do anything more; in any case, it annoyed Shirley, which always pleased Samantha. Shirley never showed her displeasure openly; her smile did not flicker, nor did her tone of sweet reasonableness falter, but within a short time of any of Howard's mild lewdnesses, she always tossed a dart, hidden in a feathery flourish, at her daughter-in-law. Mention of the girls' escalating school fees, solicitous enquiries about Samantha's diet, asking Miles whether he did not think Mary Fairbrother had an awfully pretty figure; Samantha endured it all, smiling, and punished Miles for it later.

'Hello, Mo!' said Miles, preceding Samantha into what Howard and Shirley called the lounge. 'Didn't know you were going to be here!'

'Hello, handsome,' said Maureen, in her deep, gravelly voice. 'Give me a kiss.'

Howard's business partner was sitting in a corner of the sofa, clutching a tiny glass of sherry. She was wearing a fuchsia pink dress with dark stockings and high patent-leather heels. Her jet-black hair was heavily lacquered into a bouffant, beneath which her face was pale and monkeyish, with a thick

smear of shocking pink lipstick that puckered as Miles bent low to kiss her cheek.

'Been talking business. Plans for the new cafe. Hello, Sam, sweetheart,' Maureen added, patting the sofa beside her. 'Oh, you are lovely and tanned, is that still from Ibiza? Come sit down by me. What a shock for you at the golf club. It must have been ghastly.'

'Yes, it was,' said Samantha.

And for the first time she found herself telling somebody the story of Barry's death, while Miles hovered, looking for a chance to interrupt. Howard handed out large glasses of Pinot Grigio, paying close attention to Samantha's account. Gradually, in the glow of Howard and Maureen's interest, with the alcohol kindling a comforting fire inside her, the tension Samantha had carried with her for two days seemed to drain away and a fragile sense of well-being blossomed.

The room was warm and spotless. Shelving units on either side of the gas fire displayed an array of ornamental china, nearly all of it commemorating some royal landmark or anniversary of the reign of Elizabeth II. A small bookcase in the corner contained a mixture of royal biographies and the glossy cookbooks that had overrun the kitchen. Photographs adorned the shelves and walls: Miles and his younger sister Patricia beamed from a twin frame in matching school uniforms; Miles and Samantha's two daughters, Lexie and Libby, were represented over and over again from babyhood to teens. Samantha figured only once in the family gallery, though in one of the largest and most prominent pictures. It showed her and Miles' wedding day

sixteen years before. Miles was young and handsome, piercing blue eyes crinkled at the photographer, whereas Samantha's eyes were closed in a half blink, her face was turned sideways, her chin was doubled by her smile at a different lens. The white satin of her dress strained across breasts already swollen with her early pregnancy, making her look huge.

One of Maureen's thin claw-like hands was playing with the chain she always wore around her neck, on which hung a crucifix and her late husband's wedding ring. When Samantha reached the point in her story where the doctor told Mary that there was nothing they could do, Maureen put her free hand on Samantha's knee and squeezed.

'Dishing up!' called Shirley. Though she had not wanted to come, Samantha felt better than she had in two days. Maureen and Howard were treating her like a mixture of heroine and invalid, and both of them patted her gently on the back as she passed them on her way into the dining room.

Shirley had turned down the dimmer switch, and lit long pink candles to match the wallpaper and the best napkins. The steam rising from their soup plates in the gloom made even Howard's wide, florid face look otherworldly. Having drunk almost to the bottom of her big wine glass, Samantha thought how funny it would be if Howard announced that they were about to hold a seance, to ask Barry for his own account of the events at the golf club.

'Well,' said Howard, in a deep voice, 'I think we ought to raise our glasses to Barry Fairbrother.'

Samantha tipped back her glass quickly, to stop Shirley seeing that she had already downed most of its contents.

'It was almost certainly an aneurysm,' announced Miles, the instant the glasses had landed back on the tablecloth. He had withheld this information even from Samantha, and he was glad, because she might have squandered it just now, while talking to Maureen and Howard. 'Gavin phoned Mary to give the firm's condolences and touch base about the will, and Mary confirmed it. Basically, an artery in his head swelled up and burst' (he had looked up the term on the internet, once he had found out how to spell it, back in his office after speaking to Gavin). 'Could have happened at any time. Some sort of inborn weakness.'

'Ghastly,' said Howard; but then he noticed that Samantha's glass was empty, and heaved himself out of his chair to top it up. Shirley drank soup for a while with her eyebrows hovering near her hairline. Samantha slugged down more wine in defiance.

'D'you know what?' she said, her tongue slightly unwieldy, 'I thought I saw him on the way here. In the dark. Barry.'

'I expect it was one of his brothers,' said Shirley dismissively. 'They're all alike.'

But Maureen croaked over Shirley, drowning her out.

'I thought I saw Ken, the evening after he died. Clear as day, standing in the garden, looking up at me through the kitchen window. In the middle of his roses.'

Nobody responded; they had heard the story before. A minute passed, full of nothing but soft slurps, then Maureen spoke again with her raven's caw.

'Gavin's quite friendly with the Fairbrothers, isn't he, Miles? Doesn't he play squash with Barry? Didn't he, I should say.'

'Yeah, Barry thrashed him once a week. Gavin must be a lousy player; Barry had ten years on him.'

Near identical expressions of complacent amusement touched the candlelit faces of the three women around the table. If nothing else, they had in common a slightly perverse interest in Miles' stringy young business partner. In Maureen's case, this was merely a manifestation of her inexhaustible appetite for all the gossip of Pagford, and the goings-on of a young bachelor were prime meat. Shirley took a particular pleasure in hearing all about Gavin's inferiorities and insecurities, because these threw into delicious contrast the achievements and self-assertion of the twin gods of her life, Howard and Miles. But in the case of Samantha, Gavin's passivity and caution awoke a feline cruelty; she had a powerful desire to see him slapped awake, pulled into line or otherwise mauled by a feminine surrogate. She bullied him a little in person whenever they met, taking pleasure in the conviction that he found her overwhelming, hard to handle.

'So how are things going, these days,' asked Maureen, 'with his lady friend from London?'

'She's not in London any more, Mo. S