

L DESTINATION

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FOREIGNERS

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STORIES



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IN THE MORNINGS HE AWOKE EARLY, just as the sun began to lighten the sky, chasing away the last of the night that in this, the month of April, left behind it a low-lying mist. Slippers on his feet and housecoat wrapped tightly around him, he would pad quietly along the carpeted upstairs hallway to the toilet, which was always cool and drafty no matter the season. There he would shave his face with the old straight razor that had been sharpened so often that its blade was no wider than the thickness of a pencil. He no longer used cake soap, but perfumed foam from a can. His teeth he brushed with powder that the chemist in the village ordered specially. He didn't much like paste, though he kept a tube in the mirrored cabinet above the sink against the eventuality that the powder became unavailable, as had happened with most things he'd grown accustomed to. Afterward, he would dress: white string vest, flannel trousers that had lost their crease, blue collared shirt, the knitted waistcoat that Pippa had

made for him the winter before she died, and gabardine jacket frayed at the cuffs. The waistcoat had gone shabby, the wool slack, and where the stitches had let loose he'd done his best to darn them, though the result was a puckered patchwork of mending.

Then he would walk, wellingtons on his feet: down the drive and over the road, where he climbed the ladder set across the stone wall, and on through the field opposite the farmhouse. It was a good field that drained naturally toward the woods at its bottom. A path there followed through the trees, mostly beechnuts and elms, then ran alongside a river for a mile before turning back on itself and leading once again to the field.

He'd taken this walk every morning for longer than he cared to remember. Had taken it even when this field, and those surrounding it, had belonged to the farm, and when doing so meant having to put off the chores that needed tending. Over the years a collection of dogs had accompanied him. There'd been setters and spaniels, and a skittish terrier that one day jumped into the river and, having gained the far shore, ran off never to be seen again. The dog he recalled most fondly was the last: Duchess, a Labrador retriever bitch that always dragged a stick along with her wherever she went. When, the preceding autumn, she'd been run down by a red Mondeo in the road out front of the farmhouse, he determined that there should be no more after her. He was too old for a new pup, and too set in his ways to take on a stray from the RSPCA. Rather, he resigned himself to walking alone.

Making his way back up the slope toward the stone fence, he thought what a shame it was that the field had gone unused

for so long. Ten years it had been this way, ever since he had sold off the farm's acreage to developers. It was meant to have been turned into a golf course, but the work was never begun. He figured that there must have been trouble with the Ramblers' Society, who no doubt laid claim to the ancient footpath that cut across the two fields above the farmhouse.

He was thinking of this, and about how he was happy that the golf course had not been built, when he took the first rung of the ladder. Then something stopped him: a dark-clad figure standing out front of the farmhouse, face pressed up against the window that gave onto the lounge, hands cupped at the side of the head, so as to get a clear view inside.

He lowered himself back down the ladder and ducked behind the wall. Part of him had been expecting this for some time now, living on his own so far from the village. He was glad he was out of the house; the thought of being done violence terrified him.

He squatted in the wet grass and waited for the sound of shattering glass. How long, he wondered, did it take to burgle a house? Ten minutes? More? These people knew exactly what they were after. Light fare: silver, jewellery, old-age benefit kept in a jar on the countertop, mementos and picture frames that could be pawned in the city. In and out quickly so as not to get caught. That was, of course, unless the intent was merely to do him harm, in which case he would have to remain hidden for some time longer.

It started to rain: a thin drizzle, a cold mist that settled over him like a damp veil. Sitting in the wet grass aggravated his sciatica, and soon the pain shooting down his leg became too much to bear. He stood to stretch it out, and when he did so

he glanced over the wall again and saw that the burglar was no longer at the window, but was sitting now on his front doorstep, face in hands, looking altogether pathetic. The sight gave him nerve. He climbed over the ladder and crossed the road. As he came up the drive, though, he began to doubt his impulse and considered that this might have simply been a ploy to get him out into the open where he could be more easily attacked.

As he drew near, the stranger raised her head and revealed a face streaked with blue mascara.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” he demanded, with more force than he had expected.

“Do you live here?” the woman asked, her voice thick from crying.

“I do,” he said, struggling now to keep up his tone. “And I want to know what you think you’re playing at?”

She did not reply, just dropped her head again into her hands.



He stood at the stove and heated a tin of beef stew, stirring it more than was necessary. She sat at the table behind him, hands wrapped tightly around her mug of tea, her face tipped forward into the rising steam. Every so often he moved to the sideboard on the pretense of arranging the crockery or cutting brea or setting out the salt and pepper so that he might steal another look at her. She still wore her dark blue anorak, wet with rain and dripping on the floor. Below that, black jeans and scruffy white trainers. She was, he decided, in her mid- to late thirties, possibly

even forty, but surely no older. Her hair was short, thick and dark; black almost as Duchess's coat, with no hint of grey. He thought it likely dyed, being that it was a shade or two darker than her eyebrows. Her skin contrasted sharply: pale; not alabaster, but ashen. Except for beneath her eyes, where it deepened almost to purple. At first he'd considered this a result of the smudged mascara, but the colour remained even after she'd dried her eyes. Then he recognized it to be the bruising of exhaustion. Pippa's complexion had taken on a similar aspect in her final months, when she began to fear sleep.

He finished buttering two thick slices of bakery bread and set them on a plate. Then he turned off the gas ring and removed the pot from the stove-top. As he portioned the stew into bowls, he made certain that the extra ladle went into his own. He placed a bowl before her, and she mumbled a thank you but did not look up from the table. She appeared wary of him, of his generosity, though he could see no good reason why. If anyone should be uncomfortable, he felt it should be himself. He was the one who had taken a stranger, a peeper, quite possibly a person bent on criminal intent, into his home. Who was to say she did not have a partner lurking about outside, awaiting the signal to burst through the door and batter him senseless? Though he had to admit, the likelihood seemed remote. To look at her, she seemed more apt to do harm to herself than to him.

"It's all right, is it?" he asked, sitting opposite her as she greedily spooned the stew into her mouth.

She glanced up quickly, somewhat embarrassed as she raised a hand to her lips to stifle a small belch.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, averting her eyes again. “I’m sorry. My manners. It’s just that I’m so very hungry. I’ve not eaten since the day before yesterday.”

“That’s quite a while,” he said, carefully lifting a spoonful of stew and blowing on it before eating.

“I’d a cheese and pickle sandwich,” she offered. “From a machine at Derby Station.”

“Derby’s a long way from here.”

“Yes,” she said and continued eating.



Her name was Marion. She was married. Her husband was in London, but of that she would say no more. She’d left two weeks before. A coach from Victoria Station had taken her to Torquay, where she’d stayed in a small seaside hotel until her money ran short. With her remaining pounds, she purchased a one-way rail ticket as far as Derby. After Derby, she walked. As for reasons, she did not offer any, and he did not press. One further piece of information did, however, come to light, though she remained unaware of it. He perceived it in her voice; it was not the words she spoke, but the manner in which they were spoken. There was a sharpness to her vowels that she could not quite hide. Her borrowed English inflections could not completely conceal her original accent. In her voice he recognized himself: that slow progression in his speech patterns that over time made his tongue all but indistinguishable from those he lived among. Only a keen ear could discern his foreignness any more, as his keen ear had discerned hers. But he said nothing to her of this, not wishing to establish a confidence.

When she finished eating, he gathered their bowls and rinsed them in the sink. Outside the skies had opened and heavy raindrops streaked the kitchen window. He began to consider how he might broach the subject of her leaving. Her presence unsettled him and he distrusted her story. That she'd so easily admitted to having no money made him suspicious. But when he turned back to the table he found that she'd fallen asleep, sitting upright in the chair. Her head drooped forward; she was snoring softly. He looked out the window again. Already the rain was forming into puddles on the drive.

He walked around the table and gently nudged her shoulder. She looked up at him in alarm.

"You seem rather worn out," he said, trying not to sound too concerned. "If you'd like, you can rest here a while before carrying on your way."

"That's very kind of you," she said, smiling for the first time. "Only if it's not too much trouble."

He led her upstairs to the guest room. It was the room in which Pippa's mother had stayed until he and Pippa moved her into the nursing home. At one time they'd imagined it would become a nursery.

"It might be a little musty," he said. "You may want to open a window."

"I'm sure it will be fine," she replied. She closed the door behind her.



He spent that afternoon as he spent most afternoons. First it was a nature documentary on BBC2, followed by the *One O'Clock News*. An arts program on Radio Four filled the

silence while he fitted pieces into a jigsaw of Westminster Abbey; it was the third time he'd done the puzzle. If he managed to finish it before the end of the week he would allow himself to purchase a new one from the newsagent's in the village.

At half three he gathered up the loose tiles and returned them to the box. After which he sat himself in his armchair beside the window in the lounge to read. But when he picked up the book from the side table, he discovered that he'd neglected to mark the page, and try as he might, he could not find where he'd left off the previous afternoon. So he set the novel aside and gazed out the window.

He saw the smudge on the pane: the greasy stain left behind when she pressed her nose and forehead to the glass. He looked toward the ceiling. Not a sound had come from upstairs since she'd closed the door on him. She'd been so quiet that he had half forgotten he was not alone in the house. He found the thought of this disconcerting.

She must be made to leave, he decided, and the sooner the better. He realized, however, that it was now more than simply a question of turning her out, though in all honesty he knew that he had already done far more than was to be expected. After some consideration, he resolved to give her thirty quid and pay for a taxi to take her to the village. If she liked, she could use the money for a bed and breakfast or to buy a coach ticket to Derby or London, or wherever it was she needed to get to. It made no difference to him, just as long as she was gone.

He left her to sleep while he arranged things. He found the number of a minicab company in the telephone directory and wrote it down on a pad of paper. Then, as a gesture of added

generosity, he retrieved two twenty-pound notes from the jar on the countertop and laid them on the table beside the telephone.

When the hour came that he usually sat down in front of the television to have his tea, he climbed the stairs to wake her. At the door to the bedroom he felt a flutter of nervousness and had to wait a moment before knocking. When no answer came, he tapped a little louder. Still receiving no reply, he turned the handle and gently pushed open the door.

The first thing he noticed was that she had laid her clothes out over the floor. It was almost as if as she'd shed her wet layers as she made her way across the room. But the garments were not strewn haphazardly. Instead, they were neatly stretched out so as to avoid wrinkling as they dried. He was careful not to tread on anything as he walked over to the bed.

She stirred as he approached, rolling onto her side. As she did, the duvet fell away and revealed to him a naked breast. For a moment he was transfixed. The soft, pale flesh; the blue faintness of veins around the brown bruise of her nipple. She murmured something he could not understand; moaned softly.

Slowly he reached out and took hold of a corner of the duvet and covered her again. Then he turned and left the room.



He was disappointed to find her sitting at the kitchen table when he came downstairs the following morning. She'd made herself a cup of tea and was smoking a cigarette, the ashes of which she flicked into a saucer.

"I'm sorry," she said, extinguishing the cigarette. "I couldn't find an ashtray."

"I haven't any," he replied, picking up the saucer and depositing her fag-ends in the bin before rinsing the plate clean. "Got rid of them years ago."

"You gave up smoking, then," she said, trying to sound cheerful.

"I've never smoked."

He turned and faced her. She looked different to him: healthier, less fraught. He felt strangely guilty for having been harsh.

"My wife did, though," he added. "When she was still alive."

"I see," she said.

He wondered if she did. He'd not been trying to imply that cigarette smoking had caused Pippa's death; he'd simply said it for the sake of saying something. Although now he wondered why he had bothered. For the remark seemed to be having a wounding effect, and the slight trace of colour he'd seen in her cheeks a moment earlier drained away. An awkward silence descended. He thought now might be the time to bring up her leaving, but she spoke before he had the chance.

"It was awfully kind of you to take me in like that," she said, trying to muster a smile again. "I can't believe I slept so long."

"You must have been quite tired."

"Oh, yes. Yes, I was." Her voice brightened and she sat forward in her chair. "I didn't know it myself, but I truly was. I think I was asleep as soon as my head touched the pillow. I didn't move a muscle until I woke up this morning."

He looked past her to the telephone table. The two twenty-pound notes and the paper with the number of the minicab company lay undisturbed.

"It's the fresh air," he said. "It tires one out."

"It sure does," she replied. "I've always thought that odd. You would expect it to be invigorating, seeing that it's so clean and . . . well, fresh."

It seemed to him, now that she was rested, that she was eager to talk. He wished she wouldn't. He had grown accustomed to silence, and the thought of having to fill it taxed him. When he gave no indication of wanting to carry on the conversation, she took up the mantle herself.

"You've got a lovely farm," she said, attempting to draw him out.

"It's not a farm. Not any more, at least."

"Really?" she said.

"The land's all sold off," he said and walked into the mud room to find his wellingtons.

When he returned, a look of pity had settled over her. As he sat down at the table to pull on his boots, she leaned slightly toward him.

"That must have been very sad for you," she said, sympathetically. "Having to sell your land, I mean."

"Was never really mine," he said, bent over his boots. "Belonged to my wife's family. I was never much of a farmer. Truth is, I was glad to be rid of it. Always was too much work for one man."

"What did you have?" she asked. "I mean, was it crops? Livestock?"

"Beef cattle first," he replied, absently. "Sheep for a while after that. Nothing much near the end."

"And you did it for your wife."

Now he looked at her, annoyed that he had allowed himself to be taken in by her talk.

“She must have been quite special,” she said after a moment. “For you to keep a farm going when you really didn’t want to.”

He stood up from the table and turned toward the door.

“I’m going for my walk now,” he said, coolly. “I walk every morning.”

“I wonder,” she said before he could add anything, “would you mind so much if I used your bath? It’s just that I haven’t had a proper wash since I left the hotel in Torquay. Days ago now.”

He did not look at her when he spoke: “You’ll find the bathroom at the top of the stairs to your right, beside the toilet. Towels are in the linen cupboard just inside the door.”



He first came to the farm with Pippa on their honeymoon. Two days were all they’d been given, and all things considered, even that was generous. They’d been hastily married by the base chaplain at Aldershot, who, before he joined them, reiterated his disapproval of wartime marriages. Her parents had not been able to attend. So it was decided that rather than Land’s End, as they had planned, they would go north to the farm.

For a few delirious days, Pippa’s mother paraded him around all the shops in the village, fawning, almost flirtatious, in her delight. Showing him off like a trophy to all, and running her hand proudly over the shoulder flashes of his dress uniform.

At the farm, two evacuee children from Whitechapel, whom Pippa’s parents were fostering, followed him around; as he pitched in awkwardly with the chores, they laughed at his

clumsiness and strange accent. Even Pippa's father, whose weak heart left him able to only direct the young boys in the farm work, smiled at his well-intentioned but feeble efforts at mucking out the cowsheds.

They were given the guest room, the two boys being made to share the narrow bed in Pippa's own room. Their first night together as man and wife, Pippa allowed him to undress her. She stood beside the bed, eyes closed, a faint smile curling her lips, as he unbuttoned her skirt and let it fall to the floor. Her blouse, once opened, he pushed gently from her shoulders. He unfastened her stockings from her garters one at a time and rolled them down her soft white legs; she put her hands on his shoulders as he slipped them from her feet. She lay down on the bed then and raised her hips so he could remove her knickers. She reached around and unclasped her brassiere as he climbed in beside her. They made love quietly; the only sound, the voices of her parents talking to one another in the next room.

Later, after Pippa had fallen asleep, he got out of bed and sat in a chair by the window. The entire house was silent then as he watched her sleep. The bedclothes were gathered around her hips and her bare torso was lit by the moonlight through the window. It was a clear, starry night. There would be air raids over the cities: Liverpool, Birmingham, Hull, London. But there, in the quiet countryside, watching Pippa as she slept, he did not care.

It had been such a very long time since he'd thought of that night. And as he stood now, in the middle of the field, the slate grey sky again threatened rain.



He stood in the doorway to the kitchen and watched as she buttered toast on the sideboard. On the countertop beside her lay his library book. She put the knife down, licked the tip of her finger and turned a page, still unaware of his presence. He retreated into the mud room and opened the outside door, then slammed it shut again. He took his time removing his boots.

When he re-entered the kitchen she had set the book aside and was standing by the table, in her hands a plate piled high with toast.

“What’s all this, then?” he asked.

“You’ve just been so kind,” she said, sounding very pleased with herself, “that I thought I would do something nice for you.” She put the plate down on the table, which had been set with cutlery, paper napkins, salt and pepper, brown sauce and red. “I found some side bacon and eggs in the fridge. And a can of baked beans in the larder.” She took a dishtowel from the counter and moved to the stove. From the oven she retrieved the two plates she’d left to warm. “I thought you would be back sooner. I didn’t want everything going cold.”

She set the plates down on the table and smiled at him. He’d not come any farther into the kitchen.

“I hope you don’t mind,” she said.

“I was saving that for my Sunday tea,” he replied.

“Oh.”

She looked at the table, then back to him.

“I should have waited,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “You should have.”

Even as he spoke, he could see the tears beginning to well in her eyes. She wiped them away quickly with the back of her hand.

"You're right," she said. "It was presumptuous of me." She folded the towel into a neat square and set it down on the table. "I should go, I think." She looked at him; her smile waned. "You've been very good."

For a moment he felt quite weak and thought he might have to put a hand against the wall to steady himself.

"I've left a few things upstairs," she said, moving toward the hallway. "I'll just collect them and be on my way."

He remained where he was, listening to her footsteps as they made their way up the stairs and along the corridor. He could hear her moving about in the room above. Then came the sound of the bedroom door being closed. She was carrying a small black haversack when she came back into the kitchen. He'd not noticed it before; she must have worn it under her anorak. She stood for a moment looking at him, as if searching for something to say, then turned to go.

"Wait," he said.

She stopped, but did not face him.

"It seems such a waste," he said, crossing to the sideboard where he opened a narrow cupboard. "You've gone to the trouble of making a meal; it would be silly not to eat it." He withdrew two dinner trays and brought them to the table. "I'll never be able to finish all of this myself," he said, as he began to load the plates onto the tray. "Please stay."

Now she turned.

"Are you sure?" she asked, her voice uncertain.

It was his turn to smile.

“Of course,” he said, trying to sound casual. “Besides, I couldn’t send you off on an empty stomach.”

He held out a tray to her.

“I hope it’s all right,” he said, “but I prefer to eat in the lounge.”



They ate in silence, and afterward he collected both trays and took them to the kitchen. Then he set about making a pot of tea, which he carried back into the lounge with the china service Pippa always saved for special occasions. He’d had to fetch it down from a top shelf in the cupboard and wipe away the dust. He also brought along an extra saucer for her to use as an ashtray.

She was standing beside the settee when he returned, looking at a small silver-framed photograph hanging on the wall. It was the picture taken of him and Pippa immediately after their wedding ceremony, just before they left for the station to come to the farm. It had been a windy day, and in the photo Pippa had to hold her nurse’s cap on with her hand because she’d misplaced her hatpin. They were both laughing at something that had been said, but he could no longer remember what it was. They were standing outside the base chapel, and if one looked closely, the chaplain’s pinched face could be seen peering through a small window on the far right.

“That’s you and your wife, is it?” she asked, leaning in close to the photograph.

“Yes,” he said as he set the service down on the coffee table. “We were just married.”

“She’s very beautiful.”

“Yes. She was.”

He poured out the tea. “Do you take sugar?” he asked.

“Just a little milk, thank you.”

She sat down on the settee and he passed her a cup. After she’d taken it, he set the extra saucer at the edge of the table and nodded toward it.

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” she asked.

“No, not at all.” He took his own cup and sat again in the chair beside the window. He watched her as she took a packet of cigarettes from the pocket of her anorak, which she’d laid over the arm of the settee. She withdrew one and lit it with a slim gold lighter, then tipped her head back and blew a thin cloud of smoke toward the ceiling. He seemed unable now to take his eyes off her, and as he brought his cup to his lips, he slightly misjudged the distance and spilled a drop of tea down his front. This brought a smile to her face.

“What was her name?” she asked, picking up her cup and saucer while still holding the cigarette between her fingers.

“Pippa,” he said. “Philippa, actually.”

“That’s a lovely name.”

He nodded and glanced up at the photograph.

“How,” she said, “if you don’t mind my asking, did you meet?”

He set his cup down on the side table and folded his hands in his lap. She was perched on the edge of the settee, an almost childlike glint in her eyes.

“Ah, well, yes,” he said and brushed a piece of lint from his trousers.

“If you’d rather not, that’s fine.”

“No, it’s perfectly all right,” he said. “Just not much of a story, really. I was a second lieutenant in the Sixth Infantry.

We were stationed at Aldershot, down south. Training for the Normandy invasion, as it turned out; though we'd no idea of it at the time. Pippa was a nursing sister in the British Army Surgical Hospital at Newdigate."

"You were wounded?" she asked, concerned.

He was amused by her worried tone, so long after the fact, and felt a flickering of emotion for her.

"No," he continued. "Not wounded, per se—unless you consider appendicitis a wound. I was operated on at Newdigate. Philippa was on the recovery ward. Sounds romantic, I know, but in truth, it was all rather messy. Bedpans and sick and what have you. But that didn't put her off. We were married after I was released from hospital."

She took one more puff of her cigarette before stubbing it out in the saucer, then sat back on the settee. Her face became gloomy.

"It must have been so awful for you."

He wrinkled his brow: "How do you mean?"

"France. Normandy. Those terrible beaches."

"Oh, I never went to France. Not long after that photo was taken," he said, pointing over her shoulder, "I contracted peritonitis. Spent most of the duration of the war in an invalid hospital."



She was curious and wanted to see the farm. He told her there wasn't much left worth looking at, but she was insistent, and it made him rather prideful. First they crossed the yard to the one remaining outbuilding, but she seemed disappointed when he explained that it wasn't anything more than a

storage shed; he'd kept winter feed in it at one point, but now only used it to store old garden tools and other such rubbish. The foundation for the barn was also rather a letdown. He'd sold the slate roof tiles to a salvage company from Matlock and had the walls knocked down after they became something of an eyesore to him.

She perked up a bit when he pulled back the rusty gate and led her through to the paddock. The grasses had already grown knee-high and here and there among the nettles beechnut saplings had begun to take root. He pointed them out to her and explained that the sheep would have eaten them long before they reached such a height; that, in fact, they'd have eaten everything to the ground, nettles included.

At the top of the paddock was the one remaining cattle shelter; the other, which stood on the opposite side of the stone wall that separated the paddock from the upper field, had collapsed three winters before. He showed her the long trough where he used to feed the sheep, and the cattle before them, as well as the remnants of a salt lick that had melted away over the years, staining the concrete floor of the shelter a pale violet blue.

She ran the toe of her trainer through the powdery blemish, then walked on to the stone wall. He stood back a moment, watching her. She leaned on her elbows and stared out over the field. A slight breeze coming from behind ruffled her short hair, revealing the pale nape of her neck. He went and stood beside her.

"This wall could do with mending," he said, rocking a loose stone on its top. "I've let things go a bit."

"It does seem a shame," she said.

“Well, it’s not such an easy job for me any more. I’d have to take it down to its base to fix it properly.”

“No,” she said, turning to him. “I mean this.” She nodded toward the field.

“Ah, yes,” he agreed. “I think so, too, at times. But things change.”

“For the better?” she asked.

“Sometimes yes, sometimes no,” he smiled. “This time, I think yes.”

She looked away again. She seemed unconvinced.

“Tell me,” she said. “Is it lonely?”

He shrugged his shoulders; he’d never thought so before. Then he turned and started back down the paddock. “Come with me,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ve something I want to show you.”



He could not recall the last time he had looked at them, and for a moment was panicked when they were not on the shelf in the lounge where he’d thought. Finally, after some rummaging, he found the small black cardboard box with the silver lettering that read *Pepper & Sons* in the bottom drawer of the bureau, beneath Pippa’s mother’s lace tablecloth.

He left the drawer hanging open and went and sat next to her on the settee. He put the box down on the coffee table and took a deep breath.

“She was very angry with me when I gave them to her,” he said, sounding slightly mischievous. “I drove all the way to Birmingham to have them made. I was told by someone in the village, I can’t remember who, that Birmingham was the place.”

Very carefully, he lifted the lid from the box and set it aside. Then he folded back the tissue paper. She had to lean forward to see what was inside.

“My God, they’re beautiful.”

He grinned: “Go on, take them out.”

He watched her as she dipped her slender fingers into the box and gently removed the two rings. She then placed them in the palm of her hand.

“For a long time,” he said, “we had very little money. When we were married I gave her a copper band, which was itself hard to come by. It always turned her finger green. There was never any thought of an engagement ring.”

“How could she ever have been angry with you?”

“Well, as I said, we hadn’t a lot of money really, even then. Truth be told,” he continued, “I’d been putting little bits away for a few years before I bought them.” Now he laughed: “And when I did finally give them to Pippa, she was so upset with me that she refused to wear them.”

“Really?”

“Oh, it didn’t last. Once she let me put them on her finger she never took them off. Not even when she was doing the washing up, which made me rather nervous.”

She slipped the rings, a small diamond solitaire in a raised setting and a gold band with delicate scrolling, onto her bare ring finger and held her hand out in front of her.

“I don’t blame her,” she said. “Though I can understand your being worried.”

As she removed them she noticed that the width of each had been slightly altered, thin cuts where a dull metal had been added.

“Were they too small for her?” she asked.

“Oh, that,” he said, taking the rings from her and returning them to the box. “That’s nothing.”

She placed a hand on his forearm. “I’m glad you showed them to me.”

“Yes,” he said, rising quickly from the settee. “Yes, I just thought you might like to see them.”

He walked back to the bureau and put the box in the drawer. He straightened the folds in the tablecloth and laid it carefully on top.



They fitted the last piece into the jigsaw puzzle of Westminster Abbey shortly before three and then, at her insistence, he napped in his chair in the lounge while she set about preparing tea. He slept soundly and woke refreshed, if a little stiff-necked, to a meal the likes of which he’d not had in a very long time: roast chicken, parsnips, potatoes, Brussels sprouts, boiled carrots and pork sausage. They ate not in the lounge, but at the dining-room table. They finished with cups of coffee and ice cream from a tub she’d found at the bottom of the deep freeze, where the chicken had lain hidden for so long. They did the washing up together. And afterward he took down two tumblers from the cupboard and brought them into the lounge, along with the bottle of cognac he kept now for whenever he felt a cold coming on.

First they watched a comedy program that he did not fully understand, but it made her laugh so he said nothing. Then it was time for the *Nine O’Clock News*. As the presenter began with a story on the Middle East, he wondered how it was that

the evening had passed so quickly. He poured himself a second glass of cognac.

“I sometimes think,” he said, “that the world has gone quite mad.”

The third story was that of a pensioner, an eighty-one-year-old widow in Luton, who’d been attacked by two men who followed her home from the post office after she’d cashed her benefit cheque. They’d tied her to a chair and beat her with a blackjack until her eyes had swollen shut. Then they’d used old newspapers to set fire to her settee and left her to die. Neighbours had heard the struggle, but none called for help until they saw smoke billowing from the window of her council house. All were shocked that such a thing could happen. A photograph of the woman in hospital, bandages covering her face, was shown. Police had no leads in the case, but were confident that the perpetrators would be found.

“You’re right,” she said. “Quite mad.”

As the main news switched over to the East Midlands broadcast he leaned back in the chair and watched her. He felt slightly light-headed from the cognac. She was sitting forward on the settee; her glass, only half-drunk, she rolled between her palms, every once in a while taking the smallest of sips, at which she wrinkled her nose. Looking at her in profile as she eyed the television, he wondered if he didn’t see something of Pippa in her. In the line of her jaw, possibly, which stood out strongly from her thin neck; or in the smallness of her ears. Pippa had had tiny ears, with only the hint of a lobe. Often he’d teased her about them by talking more loudly than was necessary.

When she turned to him he was smiling.

“Is there something funny?” she asked, returning his grin.

“No, no,” he said, shaking his head. “I was just thinking.”

“What about?”

“Nothing in particular, really,” he said. “Least ways nothing of interest.” He held out the bottle. “Would you like a top-up?”

“No, thank you. I’m fine.”

She set her glass on the table. “In fact,” she said, getting to her feet. “I think I might turn in if it’s all the same to you. It’s been a long day.”



It used to be that he would have a glass of cognac every night before bed, to help him off to sleep, until the time came when he found that even this small tippie left him groggy the following morning. But now, nearing the bottom of his third, he was looking forward to a fourth.

The empty Pepper & Sons box lay on the table beside him and he held the rings in his hand. The jeweller who’d mended them had done a poor job. The director of the funeral parlour had been apologetic about having to cut them from Pippa’s finger and quite kindly offered to pay part of the repair cost, but he’d refused. And when he drove with them all the way back to Birmingham he found that Pepper & Sons was no longer in business. It had become a museum. The woman who ran the gift shop suggested he take them to a jeweller in the city centre. The address she gave him was that of a shabby storefront shop whose proprietor offered to buy both rings. When he wouldn’t sell, the man suggested that he at least replace the stone in the engagement ring, informing

him that the original was of deficient calibre. In the end he took them to the local jeweller in the village who did the job for him at half price.

He laid the rings back in the box and poured himself another measure of cognac, which he carried across the room. Standing beside the settee he looked at the photograph of himself and Pippa. Before that afternoon it had been some time since he had taken notice of it. And staring at it now, he realized that he had forgotten how young Pippa once was. Most often when he thought about her, it was as she was near the end: her bones brittle from the osteoporosis, her heart congestive like her father's and her mind ruined by the dementia that robbed him of her even before she died. In those last months, he remembered her walking the darkened house at night, unable to sleep, not recognizing him when he came to take her back to bed. A different Pippa from the one in the photograph, from the laughing girl who had to hold her hat on in the wind. He took a drink of cognac and held it in his mouth until it burned his tongue.



He stood in the open doorway and watched her as she slept. The light from the hallway splashed across the floor. She had folded her clothes and laid them on the chair beside the window. In bed she lay with her head turned away from him, facing the wall. Through the duvet, which was pulled tight under her chin, he could see the shape of her breasts, rising and falling in the slow motion of slumber.

He took a step forward and plunged the room into darkness. He listened to her breathing: measured, constant. When he

stepped back, the light returned, illuminating her again. He remained a moment longer, watching her, then pulled the door closed.



In the night he dreamed that she crept into his room and stood naked at the foot of his bed. She was lit by moonlight. When he pulled back the duvet she slipped into the bed beside him, pressed herself against his tired body. He took her breast in his mouth, tasted the warmth of her flesh, the distant saltiness of her skin. In his dream she did not speak, just a faint smile curling her lips. Then the brightness woke him and he felt spent. It was late, the morning sun already high.

He stood before the mirror in his bedroom and dressed himself. As he buttoned his waistcoat, he found that another stitch had come loose. It would need to be mended before it could unravel further. After his walk, he decided: a cup of tea, the darning needle; maybe he would watch some television as he set about it.

The faintest trace of cigarette smoke greeted him in the kitchen, but nothing else. No empty teacup; no saucer with fag-ends. The money was gone from the telephone table, but the number for the minicab company had been left behind.

In the lounge he found his empty glass and the bottle of cognac where he had left it on the side table beside the Pepper & Sons box. He sat down and filled the glass halfway and looked out the window. The previous day's rain had not quite washed away the stain her face had left on the pane. He saw through it to the field across the road, brilliant green in the bright morning sun. He brought the glass to his lips and drank,

feeling the warmth of the cognac as it slid down his throat into his empty belly. It settled there like a small fire.

He set the glass back down and picked up the box. He turned it over in his hands several times, tracing his finger along the edges before opening it, though he needn't have bothered. He knew by the weight alone that the rings were gone. Sitting there, he remembered how they had looked on her slender, bare finger. She could get a fair price for them from any pawnbroker. They were of good quality, no matter what the Birmingham jeweller had said, and they would take her as far as she needed to go.