

Killing Hapless Ally

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Anna Vaught has a BA and MA in English literature and is an English teacher. She runs a company offering mentoring and one to one English tuition and is an occasional freelance journalist. Since her teens she has been a volunteer at home and abroad in a variety of roles with children and young people. She has self-published two previous books and now writes poetry, as well as working on a new novel and some short stories. Her novel draws on many real episodes in her own life. She is upfront and robust in discussing her own mental health challenges these days; to be otherwise does a disservice to those who have not yet been able to recover and find appropriate support.

Anna is the mother of three young boys. Her husband, Ned, is from Georgia and theirs is a lively Anglo-Welsh household with three cats and a gang of rescue chickens.



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Disclaimer: this is a work of fiction and, while real authors and musicians are characters in the book, they are in the role of imaginary friends and are the author's interpretations only; any celebrity or individual in the public domain who features in the text in no way endorses it or is associated with it; any dialogue is an invention of the author and resemblances to anyone else living, dead or undead but still quite lively, are drawn as literary creations only. I did, however, write regularly to Tony Benn and once sent him some rock cakes.

WARNING: this book contains bad language, graphic accounts of suicide attempts, self-harming, sex, funerals, deaths and some brutal culinary episodes.

For Ned. For everything.

And for those who struggle with mental illness in its many forms.

‘The millstone has become a star.’
Patrick Kavanagh, from ‘Prelude’.

Prologue: A peculiar life

Shall we start at the end? Friend; sympathiser; co-conspirator: read on.

Until recently, for worse and not for better, I had a habit of characterising myself as an accident prone, slightly unfortunate character called ‘Hapless Ally’. I would, for example, write travel journals and, in them—I’m looking at *Hapless Ally’s Subcontinental Travels* right now—inscribe the amusing tales of how Hapless Ally fell down an ill-signposted hole in Chennai, how Hapless Ally was attacked by a holy cow in Varanasi and how Hapless Ally once fainted on a train in Bihar, fell backwards and knocked over six men and a Sadhu: down like dominoes they went. It was impossible to venture anywhere without causing some sort of calamity; it was just funnier when it was her and not me. And people liked Hapless Ally more.

Of course, Hapless Ally wasn’t just tottering about abroad: she had her foot in the door at home, too. She was reliably funny at family gatherings, distractingly eccentric and larger than life when required. It was tiring, toting her around all

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those years. So enough! I wanted to excise her; to scrape her off and be plain Alison and see if the scenery collapsed and the sky fell in around me. Could it be that, after all, it wouldn't? So, the moniker had to go and taking away her name was the first step in her demise. I wrote it on a piece of paper, scratched it off and stuffed it in the composter; saw yesterday's peelings begin to suppurate on the little jag. A continent away, the Sadhu picked himself back up, with a wry smile or two. I think he *knew* what I was up to.

The killing was going to take a while and I didn't know how it would go yet.

Hapless Ally had amused me and caused me intense pain in turns; I imagined that she gave colour to adventures and added the sparkle and dance of a prism in light to what was a dull, trying personality. For I was an individual who should, as my late sweet mama said of me, have been left in a hospital bucket at birth, not dragged up to dance on the grave of her beatified parent, Santa Maria.

And Mother's housekeeping song went like this:

'Little bitch. I will watch you dance on the turf as I lie below, all broken up.'

'But Mama: you know I can't dance.'

Slap and funeral eyes: 'I might have known you would answer me back. Pod those broad beans you little slut and afterwards go and thin your father's leeks.'

'Does Dad hate me, too?'

'I can't speak for him. Get the preserved gooseberries from the top shelf and don't knock everything down this time.'

Crash. *Inevitable*. And Mother went off to pray to the

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almighty she called God, who was Dead if He ever Existed and I cleared up the crushed glass and the gooseberry ooze.

And still we had such a splendid lunch. That was the odd thing. It was partly the lovingly grown vegetables, topside of beef and billowing Yorkshire puddings that gave credence to Mother and Father's pronouncements. Grandmother at *The Hill* (a place of no hope where lived and haunted the egregious paternal relatives) was all tripe and spite; all mould and chintz; couches and chairs clear plastic-covered for the dirt; the hecatomb of eyeball pickled eggs and rancid-looking umber pickles in the damp pantry. *That* made sense of the curses in a house of such desolate proportions. But Mama, ladling out the best gravy and sweet carrots: *it had to be me*, didn't it? I was the smut; the little canker on the pod; on the silken corn husk. In my dreams, the corn smut was *huatlacoche*, which they eat in Mexico as a delicacy. There, I was prized and devilled up with ancho chillies. There, in the markets, I was as startling and free as Mrs Kahlo: I was *delicious*. But that was only a dream. At home I was neither beautiful nor a dish to covet. *You would spit me out.*

So sometimes Hapless Ally—because on occasion it was hard to decide not to be her—drove me into the bathroom as a child (post broad bean podding and leek thinning) when she began to hate me too; thus, she would laugh and mock a spit. *Out bad thing.* So I—or rather, *we*—would apply Mama's scarlet Chanel lipstick again and again, round and round, pulse skittering and looking like a clown, red slick smeared

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across a face. What I saw, job done, reflected back, was properly the monstrosity I was.

Hapless would shout, ‘Do it now and do your worst, wart!’
‘Okay, I know I deserve it. Maybe things will be better, when I’m properly punched?’

So I would hit my head with my fists, as hard as I could and until my ears were ringing and the passionate beat of my heart and pulse let me feel less alone. Calmed, I would venture out alone and ask if I should help with tea or tidy the shed, or did they want me to hang myself from that rather fine damson tree, out there in the orchard? Hapless Ally became me: I couldn’t tell where I ended or began any more, but I knew that I learned to grow an appealing comedy that obliged the onlooker to accept me. Or, should I say, *us*?

You see, one of the vagaries of a lively psychiatric history such as mine is that not only might you co-exist with an alter ego, a different version of you more attractive than yourself, but also you baulk at living in the moment; everything is loaded with nostalgia, dripping with it in a way that is tiresome and enervating: you can’t see the live oak for the Spanish moss and boy do you *hate* that moss, tumbling down and catching your shoulder in the breeze as it does. And the nostalgia is not kind. I mean that you look at a shimmering Christmas bauble and yet you see *another* pretty Christmas bauble of times past. Its prettiness—fugged with the familiar scents of cinnamon and cloves and all the season’s spice—will soon have you tensing your muscles as you remember the underside of the carolling and the wassail: you knew you weren’t wanted and you swallowed up the curses; you went

into your room, having been told you didn't deserve the presents, and you longed to expire, immolated in your fit of self-loathing. You let people who bore you gifts do the most appalling things to you and didn't tell anyone until a kind lady called Dr Crook, who wrinkled her very professional nose (because she wanted you to be happy and on your feet), teased it out of you over thirty years later and you fell on the floor, onto the prickly carpet at Pink Pantiles House—the tremendous-gabled Victorian house, whence they send *Those Who Can't*—and you had to be helped up.

I know, I know, it was just a bauble, but some minds work like that, skipping from thought to thought and unable to see something, just now, for what it is. I can tell you that, over the years, I have experienced delirium over pickles, torments over toffees, cabbage, gooseberries, spotted dick, caravans and those lines in Dylan Thomas which tell of a picture or a shroud saying, ‘Thou shalt not’—*oh yes*. These were things I saw: in sweetie shops where Mother pinched my hand and I tried to rock shut, away from her; in intense vegetable-boiling kitchens, through spat kindness, at funerals and in beastly, vaporous dark pantries. While ‘Thou shalt not’ hung in paternal grandmother’s house at The Hill: once, with typical incongruity, above a picture of blue-tinged kittens playing with wool; thus, again, below a depiction of a particularly dark and evil dead aunt, whose scorn slid down the wall and onto the sateen cushions below. From both shalt-nots, spoke out a thin, dry voice:

‘Thou shalt not’ cry or laugh; ‘Thou shalt not’ spare the

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nasty little child. ‘Thou shalt not’ tell everyone you don’t really believe in God but just fancy yourself as an Old Testament pedagogue.

And the thin, dry voice spoke to a little girl. She was me and I was so, so scared.

I am Alison and I am glad to be sharing my tale with you. I will tell you, as we go, about the venerable doctors Crook and Hook who got me to a better day. Oh—and I have a *stack* of unusual imaginary friends. I still have some of them, you know. There’s Frida (the brunette one) from Abba, Albert Camus, (not often connected with Swedish super-groups), Mary Anning the fossil collector, Sylvia Plath, John Keats and Dolly Parton (now there’s another odd yoking!) plus Shirley Bassey and a few more flirtations along the way.

But after the end, which is about both death and first breath, I offer you the beginning. Not just the beginning when the ink of her name ran rivulets in the composter: the beginning of *me*. Do you want to know how it was? Hold my hand, now, while we traverse lines and move over into the third person while I share this. Both would help me to keep the tale straight.

The Hill: avoid it

The girl is standing on a soft bank in a spring breeze as the laundry blows high above her there in the orchard. The breeze blows cold, but there are currents of warmth about her legs as the day decides whether it will whip or kiss. She is wearing a long, chunky necklace that she had made of wooden Galt beads, a pink hand-knitted jumper and a pair of knickers. It's the kind of outfit difficult to carry off once you're a big girl. But sitting now, legs akimbo on the bank, she sees the faces of the yellow celandines open to the sun, the hedge full of primroses beyond the whirling laundry and she is happy. She knows she can bury her face in the violet patch and lounge there with their sweetness. That is, for a short while, because this child knows that after such delicacy come *penalties* and *consequences*.

Dozing now, in the day that is definitely kissing not whipping, the girl feels something against her elbow. She

doesn't open her eyes at first, but now she feels it shuffling towards her cupped palm: it is a thought—insistent; warm; compelling.

Here came a voice now and the voice screeched, 'Alison! Down here now and finish getting dressed! Hopeless dirty little child!' (That was her mother.)

But also, the thought again, curled up in her palm: 'Don't worry, be a *Hapless Ally* whenever you need to. *Make something new: to cover up you!*'

The little thought in the palm continues to nuzzle; it won't give up and so Alison suspends disbelief and decides that there might be an alternative to feeling skin-off vulnerable; unwanted. Now she had a new name to put in her pocket. She didn't know what 'hapless' meant yet, but she figured it sounded clumsy; clunky and *less* of something—and yet *useful*. The funny thing was that it came to fit: right, like a well done sum. It was a red letter day: an invisible amorphous thing in the hand had given her a moniker.

And into the house we go. Mother, ah Mother! Jesus wept: she was such a saint. That's why, of course, Alison called her Santa Maria.

'To do list: ironed apron on; stoke the stove in the house I do not love; teach a class; be a pillar of the community.'

It was the same with her husband; he just said less, unless he was lay preaching, quoting from *The Book of Revelation* or cursing badgers. Alison had, periodically, reflected that to spill the beans would be quite satisfying when people sneered at her, having told her what a saint her mother was. But

let us try to be sympathetic; try and see where someone else's unhappiness might take them, for Mother was acutely frustrated, so this is how the cooking went; its attendant feeding as a sort of virtuous violence:

'Bang' to the oven,
'Crash, cruciferous bastards' to the sprouts,
'I hate living here' to the father. 'It is all too *too* much. And most of all I hate *her*. Was she your idea? When is Number One Son coming home? At least he listens and isn't actually the spawn of the devil like that little bitch. I blame it on your weird slit-eyed family, all locked in up on The Hill.'

Ah, *The Hill*. We meet it again; a bleak little eruption; a hamlet of wall-eyes sat atop a plain, where the wind whipped up and the people turned sour and gnarled. Its name precipitated in Alison a fear of people *up there* where the ground swells up (*see also fear of buckets*, below); a cold and leering folk, standing around with pitchforks, occasionally performing crop dances or evil singing like that scene in *The Wicker Man* when they burn Edward Woodward alive. Always the fuck-wit indigents stood, staring nastily at people from away. No wonder a little girl should be scared. Also, a myriad fears floated about in a single day or with a collection of words in the world of Alison. Because of the influence of Santa Maria and the little thought in the orchard—for it is understandably hard not to be taken in by a prevailing saint and a talking, nuzzling thought—Alison also had to keep telling herself that she was just Alison and not altogether 'Hapless'. It had all got a bit complicated and the Hapless

bit had really started to stick, so that it was sometimes hard to know when she was acting out and when she was being herself. There was so much to think about: batting back so many terrors at once.

In a truncated childhood, old before young, there were a few events that stood out. We will lump a few together and call them ‘The Winters of our Discontent’—silent bronchial times when Santa Maria was bedridden; her activities brought to a violent halt by influenza, chest infection, pneumonia and grumbling mitral valves. Which was why, as she had not infrequently intoned, Alison was lucky to have been born and not left aborted in a bucket.

Or she would say, ‘Ah! I should have left you in the bucket after birth because I saw you and just knew. You are forever Baby in the Bucket!’ (Which felt worse.)

‘Why did you never want me?’

‘Shut up! I’m making fondant icing; it has to be *just so!*’

‘Please tell me what it is about me—and I’ll try to change it, I really will!’

‘This is exactly what I’m talking about. Yapping always—and now you’ve broken my concentration and buggered up the Christmas cake. I can see the fucking marzipan through the icing!’

Yes indeed: that was a hard one to hear and it stimulated many years of bad dreams about buckets and abandoned babies. Even as a very big girl, with babies of her own, it still continued—and ended with the dreamer coming to consciousness, reaching out and crying herself awake. Fortunately buckets, after all that effort by the NHS, were

eventually no longer entirely an object of repulsion or the stimulus of a phobic reaction. And the two harpy friends of Santa Maria, who said the same thing, over tea and fondant fancies, are also dead. No more Mr Kipling for you! From time to time Alison entertained really bad thoughts, expecting to have Santa Maria pop back, alive or dead, with another slap and some broad beans to miserably pod, all the while.

She would dare, aloud, ‘I—I’ve got a Bakewell tart next to me right now. Ah, the Witch of the Women’s Institute; the Troll of the Town Council, Doyennes of our Community: didn’t Alison turn into a nice little girl?’

Or, ‘Ha! Can’t be that Hapless if I’ve managed to stay alive with *my* level of stupidity and clumsiness! And, you know, I always knew I was lucky to be alive. I never thought otherwise! I just could have done without you all mentioning *The Bucket*. I had such a lively imagination. A surgical bucket: look away everyone!’

But the spirit of the dare did not sustain her and she was claimed by the snarling winters: they were colder inside than out; even the radiators managed to radiate cold. Silence sat over the house; everything began with a closed door. Alison would scamper in—determinedly larger than life and determined to be helpful. Trying to be *that Hapless thing*: bang-crash-visual-comedy: but everyone loves *her* better, don’t they? Impossible, of course: riding the skirts of her father’s stress, watching the pulse throb angrily in the temple; trying to be the Alison she thought they liked, she would endeavour to boil potatoes and make tea and end up creating

an enormous mess. It brought only a shout and a child rushing out to the beech tree—the wishing tree in the wood, with its kind heart and tender trunk.

Alison would wrap her arms about the tree's velvet neck and say, 'Make me fly!'

Or, 'Make me just me and not *her*!'

'Make me a tree!'

Or just, 'Make me not be.'

And somewhere nearby skulked a shadow who might have been Hapless Ally, waiting to adhere: to stick back on Weird Kid and make others like her; make 'em laugh. On the other hand, it was a big wood, by the lane through the village, so the shadow might have been a wandering Bible Billy, the oldest man in the village, with a beard you could hide your ferrets in; he fancied himself as Tiresias, except he wasn't blind or particularly prophet-like. Or it could have been Pervert Pete, who liked nothing better than a lurk and to steal pants and pegs from washing lines. It was a strange place; its beauty compromised by menace and perversion. This time, however, the sylvan skulker was Hapless Ally, after all. A stark reminder that Alison had to keep up the act, *or things would only get worse*. Hapless Ally was a figment in the head, but occasionally she stood as a shade beside Alison; you had to watch it. And Alison made a poem for herself, its starting point some lines she had once heard:

'Stone walls do not a prison make,

Nor iron bars a cage.

And Mother dear can do much worse

Than populate your page.

And Bucket Baby has to try
To mollify their rage.'

Alison contrived the idea that everyone must think she was malevolent to people with heart conditions, pneumonia or those compromised by infarction; or that she had wickedly brought on others' ailments, disfigurements or sneezes by being this burden: the cruel little idea flew into her head and would not let go. And she thought that if she *really* tried to be less herself and more *Hapless*, then perhaps less harm could be done. The heart raced: while she was out there tree hugging, might at least one person in the house die and she would be found responsible, aged seven? What if other people would die because of things she did in times to come? To keep hidden from charge a while she built a den inside the creepers near the beech tree; a crawl space. And, with a gentle, warm blush of light, Alison became three people because it was there that she first romped through the snow in Sweden, in a long fur coat, chased by an amorous Björn from Abba: yes, she was *Agnetha-Alison* (the blonde one) and she talked to her best friend, Frida (the brunette one), about love and Sweden and kissing men and how she felt girlish and kind of coy that everybody was crazy about her. With a pleasure that embarrassed her, Alison was no longer alone.

Frida was *always* understanding. Also she told Agnetha-Alison that this little bucket-girl-maggot was pretty, did really cool things with her eye make-up and fawn coloured knee boots and that it wouldn't be her fault if anybody died.

'What's with all this guilt, sweet kid? You know, the man before Benny—ya he was a Norwegian; I knew I shouldn't

have dabbled—well ya, he fell through the ice on a frozen lake, right next to me: eventually came back up looking like a fish finger! Well, was I responsible? Ya, no. I'd been wearing really pointy shoes when I was dancing on the ice, but the hole, I did not cut.'

The crawl space was a good idea: no-one could find Alison if she snuggled up inside, plus she had a big bag of Marks and Spencer tomato ketchup crisps, a pint of milk and a banana so she could stay fugitive for some time. She thought Frida would console her when it got a bit colder and darker because Frida was used to cold and dark, being from Sweden. Alison ate the crisps; Frida declined them because she was dieting to look super svelte for her wedding to Benny and ate only herrings and crispbread.

'Look, my little friend, I'm not going to join in with this Hapless thing. You're just Alison to me, so be Alison to others. You're a fine kid; you're going to be super hot! Stellar, baby. And, ooh, ya: look at your long eyelashes! Wanna be my double date and chief bridesmaid?'

'Frida, will you always be there? Visit me even if I go to prison as a murderer and everyone points at me and laughs?'

'I will always be there and I will bring my glitter, do your eyebrows and paint your nails. Ya, I will be your Swedish prison bitch.'

There were so many more winters of discontent: the best were iced with a macabre comedy and so fast forward to Cyclamen Terrace in Gateshead, the rain and November. Nothing promised but dull days; memorable days, withal, though, because here was a nasty bit of jest, ending on a

dying fall and a suck at the morphine pops. In this case, the sucker was Helen, Alison's godmother, the only one of her father's siblings to be accepted by Alison's mother. She had got away from The Hill, gone off to the Sorbonne and been extremely clever out and about in France. She smoked in a cool, languorous way and said that Alison could come and live with her, get—‘*I'm not your mother so I can say inappropriate things*’—some proper shagging in, have adventures and travel the world. The only pictorial record Alison had of someone looking motherly to her as a baby was Helen, chic in a tweed Chanel ensemble, holding her and gazing at her lovingly. So that was great. But Helen moved inexplicably from Montmartre to Cyclamen Terrace, got dumped by Santa Maria, developed a brain tumour (two events which were not related although Santa Maria felt there was a link) and got married to Terry. If you've ever seen the Fat Controller on ‘Thomas the Tank Engine’, well that was how he looked: with a further roll or two over his collar and marginally increased facial expression. By coincidence he was an enthusiastic train spotter.

He told them, puffed-up proudly, ‘That tumour’s the most aggressive they’ve ever had on Tyneside. She’s a case for the history books is my wife, although it’s a crying shame she can’t teach her piano lessons, what with the confusion and all.’

There was a silence. An excruciating one, when tumbleweed and a sort of bored, listless apocalypse blew against the window.

Down by the gas fire and squinting through his mammy’s

enthusiastic gusts of air freshener and the puffs from the Glade plug-ins, they sat. Helen was upstairs in bed; Terry and Mammy were downstairs, fussing about the kitchen. Mammy was laying the table for her son, pulling his chair out and patting him on the head; Alison and Santa Maria perched on the edges of chairs while Father *did* for them outside. Terry was not in the least practical and also rarely went outside, preferring the two-bar fire, ‘Countdown’ and Mammy’s commodious breast. Occasionally, there would be shouts of pain and cries for morphine from upstairs, but generally all you could hear was the sound of Terry chomping on his cabbage or spotted dick and the chirrup of Carol Vorderman in her earliest days. And that ominous twittering sound, before the thinking time’s up, when you think, ‘My life is shit.’ *De da, du da diddle de da! Ping!*

Now and again Terry would call up, ‘No morphine yet, pet. Can you hang on until one?’

‘I can’t stand it any more. I can’t, I can’t...’

‘I could pop up with some paracetamol in a bit, pet. Mammy and I are trying to decide between vowel and consonant at the minute!’

Dad was outside trying, she thought, not to cry as he dug and pruned savagely, then got on a ladder to repair the flat roof out back. Santa Maria sat rigid within. No-one spoke. Terry had an extraordinary appetite and tended to dribble.

On the day of the funeral, on the sixth day of Christmas, the scene changed to Gateshead, rain and December. Occasionally there was grey sleet: Alison could feel it falling into her soul when she was not trying to stifle inappropriate

laughter. It was a burial you might not forget (or at least remember more than other burials, should you get about much to that sort of thing: there are folk who love to caress a silent hearse) with Terry weeping by the open grave in a strange ecstasy, throwing in red roses and a picture of their Airedale Terrier. He also threw in his wedding ring. The grave next door had pictures of a nasty-looking Alsatian and Rottweiler propped up behind its rigid plastic flowers.

‘God forbid,’ said Santa Maria, who absolutely did not believe in God (Who was Dead if He ever Existed).

‘I don’t suppose you have a tube of caulking for further DIY, Terry?’ spat Alison’s father with the starker incongruity he could muster, as the undertakers started shovelling.

Terry had perked up considerably by lunchtime. There was dinner cooked by Mammy, but just for him, so the funeral crowd dispersed while he tucked into his baked meats. He sat at the table, with his napkin tucked in around his fat neck, and enjoyed being waited on. It was Friday, so he knew it was stew and dumplings, but they broke from tradition and had spotted dick again; twice in one week. Spotted dick was *Monday*: crumble was *Friday*, but a lot of suet was consumed that day because the lad needed comfort and Mammy believed in the restorative powers of lard.

Santa Maria said, ‘I hate him and never want to see him again’ and also that the reason Terry had thrown his wedding ring into the open grave was so he could go back to being married to Mammy. They drank PG Tips and ate mince pies and after lunch Terry and Mammy settled down to start a jigsaw from his extensive collection: it was of a Spanish

holiday resort, complete with big hats and festive tissue paper and cardboard donkeys.

Mammy purred, ‘La! Look, pet! I got you a new jigsaw roll. It’s got a super velvet back. Ooh: feel it!’

Terry fingered the soft material thoughtfully, ‘Oh yes, Mammy: that’s lovely.’

‘You mustn’t be sad, my lovely little troll-boy. Mammy’s got you now and the other will be in heaven.’

‘Ooh yes, I know. Have you got any custard slices in?’

‘Yes, pet, and Mammy’s little troll-boy can have two with a cup of tea and a Garibaldi on the side.’

‘Oh Mammy—you’re my favourite girl, you are.’

Alison’s father expectorated loudly outside. The dog had mysteriously disappeared.

The Gateshead and grave in winter experience got even cheerier because, on return, Dad went to The Hill to visit another sister: not, that day, sister Evil Plant Emily, but sister Mad but Nice Andrea. The latter took the news of the funeral well (the former was at bingo, which took precedence because she was on a roll), but then she got out of bed and threw a console table at her brother. As a ten-year-old, Alison could not quite grasp what was going on sometimes; for example, why she was never left alone with Terry, why her paternal grandmother’s pantry with its huge jars of glowing pickled eggs and onions scared her so much, or why Mad but Nice Andrea didn’t get out of bed for five years, apart from to gibber and jibe at the traffic, hurl objects and take overdoses of something. Alison also wondered, guiltily, whether her aunt threw other furniture. There was a Welsh dresser verily

laden with plates and Toby jugs: that could *surely* go down with a mighty crash and anyway the jugs were gurning, hideous things. But generally Mad but Nice Andrea picked small items.

Alison desperately wanted to ask her, ‘Auntie Mad but Nice? *Can you hear me?* Before you were a lunatic, did you have imaginary friends and an alter ego? I’ve got a friend like that; I’ve got a second me; I think I’ll get more of both. You see, I’ve been trying to be someone else so everyone wouldn’t hate me. I can be myself with you because you are mad and also my favourite auntie apart from dying Helen.’

Mad but Nice Andrea might have croaked, but with a startling clarity, ‘You are great. A bit eccentric, but that’s fine. Get away from these people; get away from Hapless. Go be you! You can be happy.’

But instead, when Alison caught her sweeping eye, Mad but Nice Andrea, shrieked, ‘Fuck off, fuck off. Why is this shopkeeper here?’ and threw a bottle of cologne at her niece. Alison replaced it, at a pace, knowing that the liquid was vital for keeping the smell of bed sweats down. The child tiptoed out, dodging a flying hot water bottle in a bunny cover, its ear flapping—and feeling all hope had gone.

‘We are going to Clevedon to listen to the brass band play on the pier. Get me my fur coat and my muff!’ shrieked the voice behind her.

Funny and funnier things happened at The Hill: hangings, rumours, enormous rats with giant teeth, an unexploded bomb, repeated lightning strikes, cats with Old Testament names—Simeon, Rastas and Tiresias—locked rooms that no-

one ever went into and, according to Santa Maria, Grandmother merrily stoking a huge bonfire of Alison's father's books to punish him for not collecting his things quickly enough after he had married Santa Maria and cut the apron strings. There was cruelly boiling tripe with its gusts of steam and laundry-smell; the pantry of frightening pickles, stacked like eyeballs in Grandma's dark chamber of horrors. You felt in your bones the damp and the crawling mould. It was a combination of Peggoty's dark store-room, so frightening to David Copperfield with its smell of 'soap, pickles, pepper, candles and coffee, all at one whiff' and the Salem House schoolroom, with its smell of 'mildewed corduroys, sweet apples wanting air and rotten books.' And, to accompany the odours, there were the stories, recounted over sausages and mash, about the bizarre ways in which Grandpa's brothers had been killed.

'And say—do you remember what 'appened to Uncle Ralph?' While he spoke, in his broad Mendip-voice, Grandma's tripe for tomorrow slapped against the sides of the boiling pot.

'Well, I...'

'Ah well, what's that? Say you don't? Now, Uncle Ralph, now 'ee hit 'is head on the way up from the quarry, got trepanned and that were that; Uncle Harry were squeezed between the buffers of the train at Bristol Temple Meads, though I can't say which platform and Uncle Percy went out with the tide at Weston Super Mare and 'is hat came back on the mud; people said the body were washed up at Portishead, but we never claimed it. Dear old Uncle Reg,

clumsy flatfoot bastard, now 'ee fell off the back of 'is horse and were trampled to death in front of 'is fiancée, who ran off in 'aste with the grocer, which Mother said served all three of they right for carelessness. Mother! Bring pickles from the pantry!"

Off the dark hallway, seeping red cabbage waited for the hard-knuckled hand and downy arm of Grandmother to scoop and slop and lay down with less than love. No-one here would have even noticed whether Alison was just herself or being the more palatable Hapless Ally; besides which, they hated everyone. It was almost a relief for the child. It didn't matter who she was, did it?

Here, all the skewering and squishing death-stories were told as gentle reminiscence, horrible endings so comforting over an otherwise silent dinner on the huge table by the old range with the clothes on the Sheila Maid hanging overhead. Frequently, in this exposed position on The Hill, the wind would whip up, Grandpa's chickens screamed like banshees, timbers creaked and doors quavered and smashed shut: perhaps the unquiet souls of the dead, disliking the cheery retellings of their worldly extinction. Grandpa was nearly blind, but compensated verbally with story after story, determinedly still driving his red Morris Minor van to 'The Hollow', the next village along, to go bell ringing with his wall-eyed, big-foreheaded friends: if he killed someone on the road, then clearly they should have known to move and anyway, tolling bells stopped for no man. He was a fine poacher and trout tickler and handy with an axe or chainsaw, with no maiming or fatality up to that point. Had he lived

longer, propped up by tales of incompetent oncologists, chiropodists with shaky gin-hands and mental asylums, doubtless he would have expired horribly, like his brothers. Disappointingly, he went quietly, not far from The Hill, in an old people's home, which smelled overpoweringly of wee, talcum powder and the pungent boiled cabbage smell Alison associated with Terry and Helen's house. The day he chugged off, the grandfather clock kept going, but the staked dahlias wilted and the cats howled into a place behind the pantry door where a dead grandmother must have lurked as she waited to slop and slap the sludgy umber pickles at future despised grandchildren.

Grandpa had never been able to read very much, but he could recite poems by Tennyson and Arnold and the whole of Browning's 'The Pied Piper of Hamlin'. Those were the spellbound, golden moments. And it was hard to imagine Arnold's 'Sohrab and Rustum' told with anything other than a broad North Somerset accent, a bit of a dribble and a touch of snuff on the lip and septum. It wouldn't have made sense, which Alison remembered years later sitting in a tutorial in Corpus Christi College. The esteemed professor declaimed assorted lines and she thought, 'Wrong! I don't know what yer saying!' It should have gone, 'And firs grey o' morning filled eeest,/And the fog rose out Oxxxus streeem' and not, 'And the first grey of morning fill'd the east,/And the fog rose out of the Oxus stream' in received pronunciation. But, however it was said, here's the thing: words can heal. They can make you soar, whether read or heard. And you cannot take them away once brought into the world. Sometimes

they are good even if a bad person said them; because the words can exist independently of the mouth that uttered them or the horrid geography that spawned them. *It is magic.*

Mad but Nice Andrea had a husband called John who terrified animals: anything ran when he appeared. The cats would howl and sprint; Grandpa's chickens scattered. Dad said it was because John was a vet and they were instinctively nervous of him; that he must smell of chloroform and antiseptic, but Santa Maria said it was something else; something black and sinister—just typical of folks round that way. When he came in, after dinner and terrible deaths, for crumble, Alison eyed him suspiciously. Did he vex cats or sacrifice chickens for pleasant diversion? Pets regularly disappeared around here. Alison looked outside to see whether the rooks in the elm tree had stopped their chatter. It certainly looked still out there. A robin fell silently off its perch.

‘Wow, festive. Hark the fucking herald.’

When they popped by with sedatives and a hypnotic on the way home, Alison watched Mad but Nice Andrea from the corner of her eye; her aunt had retrieved the hot water bottle and was ripping off the bunny cover and chewing its edges. Someone sat next to her doing needlepoint vindictively and Alison couldn't be sure if it was another relative, or maybe a kind of minder. Like Grace Poole in *Jane Eyre*, only in a fifties bungalow rather than the attic in Mr Rochester's stately pile.

Alison thought, ‘How would I explain my family to anyone? But Frida will understand and at least I can be Alison

and not Hapless Ally with Auntie Mad but Nice because she doesn't know a bunny bottle cover from a ham sandwich, so it's all the same. There's always the risk that she'll kill me, but it's probably okay.'

Alison had overheard mutterings in the kitchen; she heard phrases such as *personality disorder*, *manic depressive* and *psychosis*. She heard the voice of Uncle John, saying of his keening wife, '...And Mother, I did think when I married her she might have been a sociopath, but she was cheerful enough then and anyway folks don't mind that at The Hill.'

Alison thought, 'What's a sociopath? It sounds cheerful anyway. Kind of chatty.'

So a curious but normal Christmas break and Alison went back to school with the customary sense of being just a bit separate. To get away from mad women (who lived in depressing slapdash-mortared bungalows, which after all weren't interesting in a pointy, Gothic sort of way and where there was no hint of left-behind Caribbean heat on the top floor), she furiously and hungrily read and re-read that bit in *The Wind in the Willows* (it's at the end of 'Dulce Domum' if you care to look) where Rat manages to make a cheering little feast for Mole and the field mice who have come to sing carols at Mole End. For added reassurance, she read 'The Wild Wood'—with particular emphasis on the moment when Badger opens his front door and the two animals tumble in out of the snow. There are hams hanging from the ceiling, a big fire, the plates wink in a kindly, anthropomorphic way and when the famished animals are fed and ready for bed, their sheets are coarse but clean and smell of lavender. To

Alison, a hybrid of the two chapters connoted Christmas; the word *cosy*; into life came a wafting amorphous thing which some might have called *happiness*. And best of all, no Baby in the Bucket. Here, Hapless Ally could stay away because her host didn't need improvement and could just slough her off and relax. *It's okay, baby girl. It's okay.* Because in *The Wind in the Willows*, the creatures veritably fall upon one another in a riot of being pleased to see you, which felt like an unfamiliar construct beyond the books. Well, with the exception of how Helen made her feel, but Helen was gone, with the wedding ring—and possibly the Airedale—to a grave in December Gateshead, leaving a shelf of books in French to Alison. *Ooh la la!* Alison thumbed the books and missed her so much in a world that made fuck-all sense.

One Saturday afternoon, as Santa Maria and her father bickered in the kitchen, Alison started Camus's *L'Etranger* (*The Outsider*): she liked the picture of Albert Camus on the back; he looked sort of confident—had an attractive hauteur about him—and he was leaning against a wall like he didn't give a toss whether or not you liked his book. Of course, the writing was not comprehensible to Alison yet, but we'll be meeting its author good and proper when Alison is a little older. With an *Oh yes. A very big yes:* because Albert Camus was very much present at the first sexual experience *seule bonne femme* and most likely no-one could say that of *The Wind in the Willows*. It is terribly inappropriate and infra dig to think about or write the word *wank* in the same paragraph

as *The Wind in the Willows*, but now and again euphemism loses out when an orgasm's at stake.

At home, the Christmas tree came down early and Dad had a big bonfire. Alison's parents always had bonfires when there was tragedy. Or just indecision. Or Tuesdays. Alison—trying very hard to be kooky, daft Hapless—dared a grown-up dialogue with her father. ‘Are you ever so sad? Are you crying?’

‘Bugger off, you little cuss.’

‘I mean, about your sisters?’

‘Aren’t you listening? I’ve got work to do, fuck-wit.’

‘I mean one being dead and the other chewing off the water bottle cover and being a sociopath and a lunatic. Are they the same thing?’

Her father stared hard at her with his watery grey-granite eyes; he was so strong; with beautiful, muscular forearms and shoulders like Atlas. She wanted to be scooped up to rest there. To have him say, ‘*It’s okay, baby girl.* I’ll keep you safe. You’re fine just as you are,’ but he snorted in a derisory way and kicked sparkles from the bonfire; the miniature stars should have been pretty, but were angry and ugly. Alison threw her advent calendar on the bonfire and stood for a moment watching it curl up and little green flickers come from the purple plastic bit which had contained the Cadbury’s miniatures.

Daddy. My daddy.

Ah, ‘The Twelve days of Christmas’ and The Winters of Discontent. Such larks and lossocking, for the season brought with it much anecdote that is only (and darkly) amusing

in hindsight. There was the time when Alison's brother—an umbrageous much older sibling (hereafter known as Brother who Might as Well have been Dead) who had informed her she was brought home and found to be the wrong baby, but Mummy didn't have a receipt so the horror couldn't go back—impressed upon her that she had brought on the deaths of her parents. At night the child would wake in a wet bed, with no-one to tell, crying, '*They are coming for me because I am a killer.* I am a wart; how could I be otherwise? I am Baby in the Bucket.'

Brother who Might as Well have been Dead took her out for a walk at twilight in a papoose on his back; such an early memory, forged in fire. At home there was a dark and shadowy wood—darker than the wood which contained Alison's wishing tree—and in that wood he picked the darkest tree of all and left her behind it, upright in the metal-framed papoose. She could hear the laughter as he walked away, knowing that wart could not extricate herself; he retrieved her past darkness, silently; she had been too scared to cry because she believed wolves came when the day fell.

Alison said, 'I will tell someone.'

And he spat, like his mother when she was pulling out her daughter's hair over bean pods and sink, 'Ah, but who would believe *you?*'

Inside, the tree twinkled and there was a 'Fourth Day of Christmas' feast, sour in the mouth.

Another Christmas, Santa Maria died alone in an armchair during 'Neighbours' while elsewhere, and free for a while, Alison was chasing the moon and the stars in a little corner

of South Asia—and on return (a retrograde step) Alison found comfort in the arms of Sardonic Steve, who liked weird sex and hated most people and all religion. There was ‘The Fifth Day of Christmas’ when Alison got into Cambridge and felt, for the first and last time, a sense of having done something that was actually condoned, making the five gold rings both glister and tarnish at the same time; which occasion preceded the one with the hideous parting when Sardonic Steve left her, ‘You’ve wrecked my life, you selfish bitch’ notes; not enormously festive, but at least he put pen to paper and had drawn some ironic holly, next to a picture of a bleeding heart with a steak knife in it. He’d also come round and stuck scissors into cushions: her embroidery scissors protruded from the hideous heart-shaped felt one.

Now *that* was a man who, if he’d been inclined that way, could have turned his hand to farce and black comedy, but Alison retrieved all the scissors and cried and cried because she had been proved (again) bucket-worthy. Also, she was slightly jealous of Sardonic Steve’s talent for melodrama and punchy visual indexing. Scissors collated, Alison reflected on the first Christmas after Dad died. She had swooshed in, deliberately bang crash look-at-me-jolly Hapless Ally; that was a better bet than giving anyone pause to accuse her of seeing the old bugger off. So, in her cheerful weeds, Alison was Hapless Ally and she really tried, but put too much tinsel on the tree and cooked the giblets, still in the plastic bag, inside the duck and Santa Maria and her porcelain doll-faced, pillar of the community friends shouted at her for screwing it up, ad nauseam; she sat snivelling and full of headache

through the Indiana Jones film thinking, ‘I bet Harrison Ford doesn’t have this kind of trouble.’

She even thought about writing to him:

‘Dear Mr Ford, did you ever have a really shit Christmas? Like one where you cooked the giblets in the bird and everyone hated you? When you decorate your tree does everyone say, “Ooh a triumph! Just enough Hollywood shine and festivity”? Were you left upright in a papoose as a kid in a dark and shadowy wood where you thought the wolves would come and eat you? Did you ever have an alter ego; something to stick on so that people liked you and so you weren’t loathed by your family? Like Harrison...and...Comparison: that could have worked.’

What was it about this time of year? She recalled yuletides when Sardonic Steve sulked all day because he was so hungover and thus invited his friends over to smoke pot and throw the stubs in the fireplace: Alison went out crying into the wind and running to escape—and fell over on the ice. Even the ice had something to say, but everyone was too stoned to notice the wet and muddy idiot in the room. These were also the years when Sardonic Steve would not allow a Christmas tree owing to simply too much festivity and the scale being all wrong—but I expect Alison asked for it, did she not?

Shall we leave Christmas for the time being? Instead, it is time for *the colour table* and to reassure you that the revels do get better because later on—precipitating tumultuous events with Hapless Ally—Alison meets the drawlin’ travellin’ Dixie Delicious. And some proper fun is had along the way. Having

said that, aren't things that are, well, a bit shite, a bit (again) infra dig, those that are so much funnier in retrospect?

Thus, 'Oh and it was twenty for Christmas dinner, we had an idyllic afternoon walk and a lovely time with Grandma. Just perfectlovelytralala.'

Pollyanna *fuck*: would it sound sneering to ask, '*Where's the comedy in that?*'

If the perfect family and the well-crafted Christmas truly exist, may the Lord strike us down for saying it ain't so.

Scary ordinary things

Now, in Alison's room there were two essentials: the colour table and the little books containing the rules of the room. The colour table (all set out on a pretty little wooden stool later presumed lost as tinder for one of the parental bonfires) became an essential part of the room's structure and hue. Alison changed the colour table weekly. It was *hers*—even if she might have been little cuss, fuck-wit or Baby in the Bucket. A memorable table was the pink one: that contained a pair of salmon-pink silk knickers borrowed from her mother, a polished stone from a craft shop, a rosy cameo brooch of uncertain provenance, a scallop shell with a rim, the pink ones from a packet of refreshers, a Barbie-pink wafer biscuit, a necklace and—depending on the season—some damask flower petals. She set them all down tenderly and at the last minute added a tiny amaranth-tinged gone-off bottle of perfume that had come from the Avon Lady.

Alison rearranged the treasures regularly; refreshed them if need be—and an important thing was that she formed navigable gaps between them. So that, if you were *really* small, say, you could walk along the little roads between the petals of an aster and the cameo brooch. This was the secret bit: the colour was pleasing to any onlooker, but the order, traced round and round in the curlicues of a little finger—of Alison’s little finger—was the private bit.

‘If I were a miniature me, I could spend all day basking on the petal, looking up at the gemstone rock’ or,

‘I could climb on the pink wafer and jump down, sliding across the pink knickers.’

It may appear to you, reader, that this was an overly detailed way in which to see something; or a recollection that cannot possibly be. But it *was* and *is* so. Such a commanding impulse: to arrange little things in groups and trace a finger round the gaps in between; a microcosm that is intimate and seen only by its author.

In childhood, it was the one area where Alison could say, ‘I can be me: make things with my hands! And I didn’t knock things over or break things.’

True. All the items on the table stood still; didn’t wobble, knock each other over or fall on the floor at her clumsy feet. In these still hours, Alison and her alter ego were divisible, so the former could be at ease: briefly, Alison was in control. At such decorous times of arrangement and rearrangement, you couldn’t hurt her. Little matter, anyway, if a pink shape fell, because she had a drawer of reserves—such as a lovely little gold clock—with cherry blossom painted on its sides and fine

enamel face; the clock tied in elegantly with the colour table and rounded off the proportions of the microcosmic world.

There was ritual to be observed here, again and again: three little steps by the pink wafer; turn around three times and say the first lines of *The Secret Garden* four times.

‘“Chapter one

THERE IS NO ONE LEFT.

When Mary Lennox was sent to Misslethwaite Manor to live with her uncle, everybody said she was the most disagreeable-looking child ever.”’

When the table was set, the rituals performed just so, Alison reduced herself, like Alice, so she could travel its roads and, at other times, she made the *Rules of the Room*. The rules: nothing complicated there. There were laid out lots of little strictures in very bad spelling which we would struggle to replicate now, all set out and neatly underlined in tiny books she had made. Alison imagined the room as a world to travel in, so the books were partly a guide: the bed was the island, the wardrobe the ship, the chair was the cave and *don’t touch the floor: mermaids could get nasty*. She had bad dreams about them, with the faces of Santa Maria and her two harpies, the porcelain doll-faced friends with whom she consorted and who would advise her on suffering the dreadful martyrdom of being mother to such a child. Alison’s books contained the rules of the world and the room.

‘Friends can come in.’

‘Doll-faced people cannot.’

‘There are jellies and After Eights for tea.’

‘The room is only lit with candles.’ (Which, unfortunately, were not allowed by decree of Santa Maria.)

Also, ‘Do not touch the colour table.’

‘Do not chew gum.’

‘Share things.’

And sometimes, ‘Let me be just Alison and not the two of us.’

Or, startlingly, ‘I am scared I have killed people.’

And, ‘No Mummy allowed in my room.’

The books had blank covers and were stapled together badly, because she was a bit young to be a dab hand with the stapler just yet. She lived in fear of Santa Maria finding them and so moved them around periodically. Every so often, starting in childhood, and subsequently all through adolescence, Alison would wake shortly after going to sleep, hot and sweating and frightened: she would get out of bed and check the arrangement of the colour table and the placing of the miniature rule books: the expression of fear of which we spoke before—‘Am I or will I be a murderer?’—haunted her for thirty years after that and never let go, leading her as a child to be scared that the police would come to the door and as an adult that she would be roundly caught in the street and charged by children and parents. It is what the good Drs Hook and Crook of later life described as a *ruminating thought*.

Once, after the nastiest crack up, Alison was at Pink Pantiles House with the Mental Health Recovery Squad (MHRS—and the S is really for *Service*, but Alison reckoned *Squad* made it sound more superhero). Dr Crook the

psychologist said, ‘Let the thought flood your head and feel what it does to your body. Now notice that nothing else has happened or has *ever* happened. This way, you will re-train yourself and the fear will diminish. It is groundless.’

Alison thought that this would, indeed, be marvellous; that she could give up the permeating anxiety about arranging and rearranging things and go out other than apologetically or in disguise. But she thought of buckets and the day everyone said, ‘*You did it! You hurt the lovely little girl!*’ And she said to Dr Crook, ‘How do you know? *You weren’t there.*’

And there was a rambling, tumbling idiot in the room who was spitting out in a desperate and horrible rush for expression and to purge the long held evidence against her, ‘When I was five, I was playing with a girl and she fell and cracked her head open. Everyone said I pushed her. But I didn’t. I just **didn’t**. She died when we were teenagers. It was her head. Santa Maria said her parents might have thought it was my fault. So I couldn’t write them a card. They might come knocking on the door, after me, after me, me, murdering me and she would understand why. I have had nightmares about it all my life. It is like the Sylvia Plath story called ‘Superman and Paula Brown’s New Snowsuit’, where everyone rounds on the girl who *didn’t* do it—who *didn’t* ruin the beautiful clothes of the popular girl—and the more the clumsy unpopular girl tells the truth the more everyone’s faces say, “*Yes of course you didn’t but you must ring that nice Mr and Mrs Brown and apologise and write a letter to Paula.*” And they all know and everything, everyone and the world have

changed and her parents are so disappointed. And anyway everybody knows what she is like. Damn Sylvia Plath. No damn Paula Brown! Damn Santa Maria. *And fuck fuck fuck nasty evil me!*

Someone was screaming in the room. Well, a fairly controlled sort of screaming, one doesn't like to exaggerate, but it was building to a crescendo. It came from Alison. There was a little blood on her palms where she dug in her nails. Gradually, came diminuendo as Dr Crook continued to meet her gaze; she was unwavering and determined. When the noise stopped, there was a long pause. Dr Crook left the room at a gentle pace and came back with Dr Hook, the trainee psychologist, and she said, looking intently and sternly into Alison's eyes, while Dr Hook put the gentlest of pressure on her hand, 'You did not do this. You never did this. It is not real.'

It was the most frightening moment of Alison's life. A dreadful confession of what she had been and quite clearly what she must still be: the ensuing silence was bitter and cold. Finally, someone spoke: the fragmenting words came from her own mouth.

'But how do you know? How? But... *You weren't there!*' said Alison.

And when Alison raised her head, she thought she saw Hapless Ally out of the corner of her eye. Previously, the latter had been smirking, waiting to adhere and improve on the little murderer; now she sat slumped in the corner, muttering quietly as the patient was stripped back to a core,

and what she muttered was this: ‘Bitch. You little bitch. You can’t ever be just *you* now.’

‘Dr Crook! Dr Hook! It’s *her*. It’s Hapless Ally. Can’t you see her? Can’t you? I have to have her and she has to stay because if I don’t and she doesn’t, what will happen to me?’

Dr Crook said, ‘You are being a difficult patient. Shh now. Let her go. Be laid bare for the first time. Could I shove her out of the window? It’s a way down and that might finish her off.’

It was a startling suggestion, but the good doctor smiled, from a place beyond words, and the other good doctor looked into Alison’s eyes and, still, kept the gentlest pressure on her arm. Alison wasn’t ready to open the window just yet, however.

Once, when she was nine, Alison had come back from Brownies to find a fire engine outside her bedroom and the fireman having a cup of tea with Santa Maria. One of them said something like, ‘You’ve been a very naughty girl so we’re here to talk to you and tell you off. Your parents rang us. *Aren’t you the bad little girl?*’

The fact he guffawed and showed a gummy smile as he said this meant little, but sent Alison to the crawl space by the beech tree to turn Swedish and very blonde and commune with the ever sympathetic Frida. Did everyone know what she had done to the little girl? Before, she had been scared only of policemen; now it was the firemen, too. It was only after three visits by the fireman that Alison spotted the link with her father’s enthusiastic bonfires in the wood and the

whoosh noise from the chimney as he started a chimney fire.
(Note from the future, from Alison to Drs Crook and Hook:
'No fear of fireman developed, only an ill-judged short romance with one later on. He had curiously oily, slightly sooty hands and smelled of toast. Also, wish you both had been there in those drab days to stop this all in its tracks and meet a good friend, Frida, before the love went all melancholy in Abba and poor Agnetha was forced to bare her pain in "The Winner Takes it All".')

In the den Alison whispered to Frida, 'Mum says everyone knows what I'm like. That's why they look at me all funny. I'm not like other kids. I'm the wrong kid.'

Alison told her about the girl and how the memory she couldn't properly form was so scary. Said how others must see such sin in her because Santa Maria always told her they could: the kid was transparent—or translucent. Like a nasty little octopus containing a box whose markings you could see through that lucent flesh: *THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH*. Alison always admired her mother's extraordinary similes; it would have been hard not to.

Like a box telling of sin and death. Inside an octopus.

Meanwhile,

In a dead room, lay a mad aunt who might also have been a sociopath.

In Gateshead lay a dead aunt, buried with a ring and an Airedale terrier.

At the half-dead Hill now shrieked the ghosts of dead brothers and the bad tempers of strange cats and the rats with

big teeth and ‘Thou shalt not’ spat down the wall onto the plastic-covered couches and sateen cushions.

‘Is this what everyone’s life is like? I suppose it must be.’

And THE WAGES OF SIN ARE DEATH.

‘Heave, ho, everyone: it’s my little bitch daughter. I expect you all know about *her*. Look at what it says on the box: she’ll die or go up in flames for what she does. It’s a sin what she is.’

Dinner time.

Night or day, it felt as if the well-preserved porcelain doll-faces of Santa Maria’s decent community-spirited friends pressed in on her with open mouths that showed more grimace than joy. And how come Santa Maria was so big on sin when she said God was Dead now even if He had ever Existed? Did that mean He had once lived, but had given up? He’d been extinguished somehow: perhaps He too had spent too much time on Cyclamen Terrace in Gateshead and got stifled by the plug-ins? But Frida’s beautiful hands made an expansive and confident cat scratch and she scattered the smug albescence doll-faces as if they were thistledown. And Santa Maria and the nasty doll-faces were elsewhere and maybe God was not Dead, but had come back.

‘Frida? Why can’t I just play with Sindys like other girls?’

‘My little friend! You are what you were meant to be. You just need somebody to help you chase your shadows away. Also, your relatives are as weird as all fuck, ya? Let us say thank you for the nice music and always, *always* remember that I’ll be there, every time that you arrive. The sight of me will, ya, definitely, prove to you you’re still alive, and when I

take you in my arms and hold on to you tightly, you'll know it's going to be okay tonightly and that is for sure.'

'Oh thank you, Frida. It's two o'clock in the afternoon, though.'

As Frida stood by in a ready-to-chase-the-shadows-away sort of stance, Alison confessed her nervousness about *the others*. There was the orthodontist, for example. Santa Maria taught his golden son and when Alison had accidentally bitten down during an impression for a brace he had got cross and said, 'Your mother told me what you were like.' Also brandishing a miniature mirror, pink water and a pointy stick was Mr Fisher the dentist, with another creepy son who Santa Maria thought was such a gift. Mr Fisher had given her an injection with his big bold hands before removing some teeth (he was in league with Mr De'Ath, the orthodontist of considerable evil). Alison yelled and wriggled and he leaned hard on her in the chair and, while he mouth-breathed like a rapist and emitted unsettling wafts of Old Spice aftershave with a mint top note from the mouth breathing, he stuck the needle into the side of her mouth, missing the gum area by the pre-molars.

Setting his jaw *just so* he said, triumphantly, 'Your wonderful mother said you would be like this. I expect you always will be.' The extractions were excruciatingly painful because the gum wasn't properly numbed, but nothing to be done there.

Anyway, 'I shall tell someone.'

'Who would ever believe *you*?'

On the wall by the chair were merit charts and certificates

and pictures of the son, Fisher Junior, *summa cum laude*. Alison didn't get a sticker on the way out. There were none saying, 'I've been an awkward shit at the dentist.' Santa Maria glowed pleasure at the Fisher Junior memorabilia; imagining for a moment this was her pretty little son. If they had been for a girl, such trophies would have been earmarked for the likes of Heroic Alice, Alison's classmate, whom Santa Maria admired, momentarily and vicariously living the life of this child's mother.

Now the books and the colour table helped to impose some order on the world, but Santa Maria had ideas of child improvement and she had conceived of things to impose order and decorum and culture on her grubby child. Her friend's daughter was just the role model required. She wasn't a Baby in the Bucket Alison of course; she was *Heroic Alice*, fluent in all the skills of growing and pleasing her parents endlessly. Alison disliked her smug, confident little gait on sight, but did try to make friends during enforced playtimes, when Hapless joined in to make the base layer more entertaining, more vivacious. Alison was simultaneously enrolled for piano lessons, Brownies and ballet. *Wrong wrong wrong*. Heroic Alice had it all down to a T of course: diligent piano practice, pretty in a tutu and angora cardigan and badges all up her arm.

The piano lessons started amidst much howling and slapping and hair and ear pulling and spawn of the devil comments. Santa Maria was determined, however, and the fact that Miss Hamm the piano teacher did not appear to like

children was not considered an obstacle. The teacher had a large wart on one side of her chin with a big hair sticking out of it. On the very worst days, with Miss Hamm narrowing her eyes in derision at Alison, the child would be scared that Miss Hamm would shut the clumsy, hateful fingers in the piano lid. Alison fantasised about pulling the hair from the wart. Snap! Yank! It is gone with one deft movement! Miss Hamm had very big teeth: like a big mean rat. Like Anna Maria the nasty rat in Beatrix Potter: the one who tries to eat Tom Kitten, unskinned, but covered in roly-poly pastry. There was nothing to be done though, save the lonely feeling of the stone sinking down, down, on a Sunday afternoon in the provinces.

Alison had no patience with the piano; it just would not agree to accommodate her, its keys remained resistant against the pressure of her fingers. After months of poor reports and an embarrassing turn in a little concert in Miss Hamm's house (made tenser by the arrival of the fireman at home shortly beforehand to put out a particularly recalcitrant chimney fire), her mother capitulated and told her she could stop. It was mainly because Heroic Alice had played so sweetly, a child graced by immaculate white socks pulled up to her knees, brushed hair and bobbles and no boiled egg smeared on her face. The angel even bowed with some expertise when she had played her piece and paused, so considerately, for applause.

The comparison for Santa Maria was too painful to bear, but the relief to Alison of being removed from scorn and properly attired pretty little girls was sweet indeed. And,

anyway, Alison had a secret: she wasn't 'tone deaf', as Miss Hamm had pronounced, for when she closed her eyes at night, great patterns of notes would swarm and swoon behind her eyelids. They would become friendly, glide like water and, gradually, become still and compose themselves into translucent melodies.

'Hmmmm,' thought Alison: '*One day. One day.*'

It took another six years until she picked up a flute, found it melted into her hands and became acquainted with Miss Ermutigung, the music teacher from Berchtesgaden who had found love with a British backpacker when she was acting as a tour guide in Hitler's bunker and subsequently come to live in Wiltshire and rescue Alison from the closed-in world of the terminally tone deaf. And anyway, Miss Hamm died; it was rumoured she'd choked on an eyeball pickled egg, which just goes to show that you should not snack while playing the piano. She was found, upright, egg in mouth and fingers rigor mortis under the piano lid, a nasty crotchet shouting at weary descending minims. Outside, a cat looked in through the window and smiled if ever a cat could.

'Ha! I learned about nasty pickles from Grandmother at The Hill!'

'You're not allowed to play at my house any more because you're weird and you're dirty,' Heroic Alice had announced (post-concert dénouement) giving her hapless fellow musician a kick. 'Mummy says so!'

Alison thought she would plot revenge on the little bitch one day. *But how?* And didn't the provenance of that thought prove Santa Maria's point: such a sin = death?

‘Yeah: but it might be worth the risk. I had a bad thought about Miss Hamm and look what happened there. Result!’

After possibilities had clearly been exhausted with music, Santa Maria announced that Alison would, next week, start attending ballet. Mother produced the outfit and Alison hated it straight away: it had no pockets, for a start, and pockets were always required for interesting things you had found: funny shaped stones, small sticks to fashion into weapons: treasure from other folks’ detritus. But her mother had the steely run for cover look on and it was raining, so Alison gave in and tried on the wretched outfit. She looked like an evil-tempered sugared almond. Because it was going to be a very public exposure, Alison also knew that she had to be Hapless Ally. She was going to be useless, so she had better be comically funny: that way they might laugh, but it was better than black looks and other people choking on their tea in horror at Baby in the Bucket.

The village hall, venue for ballet, had a highly sprung floor. Hapless Ally (as she was trying so hard to be) set off its squeak with her man feet from the first footstep in. Ahead of her, there were lots of sweet little girls in their pink ballet pumps, leotards, tutus and soft fluffy wraps. They were well-proportioned with delicate girl-child feet and they had looks of steely determination on their faces: they were ruthless cheerleaders. Of course, our girl had tried to walk in gracefully with a big buoyant smile, but it came with a thud and a creak and the girls turned. She realised one of them was Heroic Alice—and also that they were, en masse, looking at

her with their eyebrows raised. But it was too late to run from the pretty, shiny hell-hounds.

There was a witchy woman in charge of the little girls; her name was Miss Close. As with Miss Hamm the piano teacher, it appeared to Alison that the lady didn't particularly care for children, regarding them only as rough objects to be trained and improved upon, with condescension and brutality, if necessary. So the best she could do was big up the Hapless.

'Maybe she'll feel she can work with me, if that's who I am?'

But Sophie could do every little move expected of her, including the mimsy scarf work; Emma could bend her leg up behind her back, while smiling and keeping excellent poise. Ah—the grace of Heroic Alice. Oh. Miss Close was smiling. Perhaps, like Miss Hamm, she just didn't like Alison (or her Hapless counterpart). But the girl gave her all, her fake character welded on as she thundered around the hall in vain mockery of the pretty movements the girls had been asked to perform. She was aware of the shame, scorn and embarrassment settling upon the room when she, elephant as she was, danced past the old room heater with its big wire guard. It rattled and croaked as she passed, with not a sound for the other ingénues.

This time, Santa Maria was so disappointed that she never sent her daughter to ballet again. As Alison left the hall, unbuttoning Hapless with her silly clothing, she could see Heroic Alice, now wearing a lovely little fur cape with a diamanté button on top of her ballet clothes, and speaking in stage whispers behind her hand to the other girls, 'Oooh yes:

that's the one I was telling you about. The one with boiled egg on her face and dirty socks!'

'Ugh. Disgusting, isn't she?'

But on this particular occasion it was too much for Alison and she ran back and kicked the ringleader in the shins saying (she thought the reference clever but was clearly alone in this), 'You're a bad nut and I hate you and hope the squirrels chuck you away.'

Alison ran off, shamed. But a further afterthought made her run back: 'And I know loads of rude words so you and your tutu can fuck off!'

Heroic Alice burst into tears; she had been crushed and stained by the dirty girl with the dirty words. Alison stood on the veranda of the village hall. It was strange: the building looked like a little hall in the Hill Stations of Northern India. She had seen these pictures in a book called, *People of Other Lands*. There was just time to glimpse the foothills of the Himalayas and for a reassuring chat with a handsome Indian man before Alison was belted by her mother. She called to him, 'I'll be back when I'm older and I'll help you on your tea estate! Really, could you hang on for me?'

The beautiful eyes of the man simmered love, acceptance and some definite possibilities of future fucking. Alison knew all about fucking from the piles of pornography under the bed of Brother who Might as Well have been Dead, with whom she had once been sent to stay, between the years of being left by him in a dark and shadowy wood for the wolves, and his years of popping back to organise funerals with considerable enthusiasm, breathing onto coffin plates

and buffing them up with the edge of his jacket. Gone was the soft romance of the little girl; the sweet notion of holding the hand of a boy in a daisy meadow, for she had looked with horror at the images in the glossy magazines and internalised the language, wondering if what was painted there might be useful when picked on by the pretty little *girls that could*. But for now it was more sin and wages and a second belt before a shouty drive home. Inside the Hill Station hall, Heroic was still being consoled by her similarly distressed friends and Miss Close had come and expectorated a stern telling off against the car window as they pulled away. Later that night, Alison was forced to make an apologetic phone call to Heroic Alice's mother.

'It's for what you did to that nice, pretty little girl. You don't have half her determination. And change your clothes—you smell like...like...like an old dog! Oh, all I had wanted was a child of sweetness and light after the misfortunes I've had and now your father always being so close to death. Why why why?'

Oh Santa Maria, if only you had known. If only. If only you knew her *now*.

On the phone Heroic Alice's mother chirped, 'I am sure you will never understand what good behaviour is or be anything like my daughter. You are a nasty little waste of space.'

Alison lowered her voice so Santa Maria could not hear and whispered, 'Well, I saw you with Mr Melchizedeck the vicar in the bushes after the Christmas Fayre. What were you doing? *Collecting holly?* So you can fuck off, too. Oh: I killed

my piano teacher with a pickled egg. And I know all about porn from going to stay with my older brother! He's got piles of Readers' Wives in his house! You'd be amazed at what I can describe and at the sex-vocabulary I know!

And the phone went down. Alison sighed, for so much swearing was tiring, if eminently satisfying and effective. Sweetness and light it wasn't. And we weren't done yet. There was Brownies, the third tine of Santa Maria's three-pronged attempt, to mix a cutlery drawer metaphor: it was an accident waiting to happen.

Having already been forced into two arenas inhabited by Heroic Alice and the pretty little *girls who could*, here was another. The urge to rebel on the swearing-in day was strong, but as ever she was in fear of the words and Santa Maria's hair and ear pulling, so she chanted the Brownie Guide pledge, stepping from one chair to the other; over the apex of the two into a new realm of enchantment. Not, of course, as delicately as the other new recruits or with the right words.

'I think that I will try to do my best:

To love the queen (but with a capital Q)

And serve my God and his country (with a capital H)

And try helping other people

So everyone can manage to keep the Brownie Guide Law

And definitely do loads of good turns

Because it is the law.'

'Hopeless—but sit down because I can't stand listening to it anymore, so help me god,' said Brown Owl.

‘Written with a capital G,’ said Alison. ‘Yes, like for God, who was, I mean is, Dead if He ever Existed.’

Brown Owl was gasping now, discombobulated; fingering the silver cross on her flaccid bosom. But then she never smiled very much; always looked mired in her own anxiety. Was there more to it than just having taken a dislike to Alison as the little wastrel shambled through her initiation into Brownie club? Over the next few weeks Alison hoovered up snippets of conversation. Alison was *always* eavesdropping on adult conversation: it was how she knew her maternal grandfather beat her grandmother, that Santa Maria wanted to go and live somewhere exotic (like The Cotswolds) because Somerset was full of heathens and hadn’t been an improvement on South Wales, and that Mr Gibbs who did craft work at the school was having a torrid affair with the mother of Alison’s classmate, Samantha Stokes (more fucking in the bushes; Alison *always* noticed fucking) and that last weekend they had gone on a hot air balloon flight together (possibly involving more of the same), having previously carried on in the school staff room while collating takings from the summer fête. Under the very nose of her husband, who was Chair of the Governors.

Alison learned that Brown Owl was not happy in her sterile—she said *sterile*; why was there so much antiseptic on it?—marriage; that she felt duped into the volunteer role but had cast herself, anyway, in the role of martyr. It was all especially hard because her prize poodle had recently been run over by a tractor. Alison felt a bit sorry for her so did her best to attain a badge: *that went Horribly Wrong* (written

with a capital H and W). On badge day, Brown Owl brought Tawny Owl along; the latter was a sour-tempered owl who had, like Miss Hamm, warts with big hairs in them. The catering badge was, as one might have predicted, a disaster. Notes on clipboards stated that there had been '*Too many spent matches. 1) An entire roll of kitchen paper was wasted. 2) There was considerable mixing up of food and non-food substances*' and, worst of all, '*3) The inappropriate use of water in a tiled area leading to unsafe floors and, potentially, mild peril.*' Santa Maria paled and Alison knew that soon she had better run for Frida and the crawl space.

'And the child is unsuited to structured and responsible activity! That can be point four on the clipboards!' intoned the owls, with victory in their eyes, as Santa Maria and her unfortunate Brownie left.

Alison dived for the back seat before her mother could belt her and pelted for the crawl space as soon as she was at home. Frida, who was wearing a very glamorous floor length fur coat and matching muff, laughed throatily at the turn of events.

'I'll give them one, two, three and four! Oh, for sure! I've never liked owls. The owl-kind are not kind. *Jag anar ugglor i mossen!* Bastard owls! But you are a rock star and Björn is just crazy for you. Don't worry about those cupcakes, ya. Would you like some Ryvita and lox? Or we could do "Waterloo"?"

Alison still had a stash of tomato ketchup crisps, so she ate those, pondering that she could likely stay out for hours. She could see chimney smoke, so her parents were settled

inside and had possibly locked the back door by now anyway. But then her palm itched; an angry, unremitting itch; she scratched it, but the itch would not subside. Up came the feeling from the day she turned three and sat in the warm grass of the orchard: it was the little thought in the palm, nuzzling; insisting.

And it said, ‘I’ve got plans for you, Hapless Ally or are you just Alison? Can you even remember when you were just Alison? And do you understand the name I gave you yet? You feel it don’t you? It is coming, Hapless Ally. *Coming.*’

Frida heard it too and shrieked, ‘Get out ya, bitch or boy hound! Leave her alone. *I will be her Waterloo and not you, little fuzzy thing in the palm.*’

But at that moment all the scratching and every chord of the best friend she had in the world could not clear Alison’s hand.

Ah, point five on the clipboards: *Baby in the Bucket! Just watch the consequences of being born, and not reading the writing on the wall...*

Crap holidays; lusty blacksmiths

We've spoken about The Winters of Discontent, The Hill and a little about miscellaneous Christmases and the leisure time that wasn't really leisure. What of the holidays, or the summers of childhood. Those halcyon days of which we are told?

Before most trips, Alison's father would say to her, '*You are only here under sufferance.*' After this announcement, he would methodically slap her three times to get it out of the way before the journey, then blow his nose and adjust the car mirrors. It was part of the routine. But the words caused confusion for some time because Alison was not, as a child, entirely certain what *under sufferance* meant. That she had to suffer and grin and bear? She surmised by her father's tone that it meant *we have to suffer you*, so it wasn't the most festive start to a trip. It was at times like this that Alison couldn't bear to look at the palms of her hands. She was too frightened

that she would find the itchy scratchy dark thought there; too frightened to remember anything.

In the Brecon Beacons, there was the same campsite always and the same stream churning through. It was lovely though: rich malty earth and the farmers calling to their sheep. But there was a caravan involved: if there was one thing Dad loved it was his caravan. And if there was one thing that Santa Maria hated it was his caravan. The caravan led to a couple of funny but sour anecdotes in later days and was also the cause of *The Worst Parental Swearing*.

Herewith caravan anecdote one. When Alison's father retired from his own pillar of the community job there was a feature on him in the local paper. (Nobody ever said he was dying; Alison was supposed to have worked that one out: as he'd only said, 'I've got a lump on my leg' it sounded to Alison like a job for antihistamine, though in retrospect it did appear odd that he'd pulled over suddenly in a lay-by to point this out.) The article in the paper stated that, 'the family's main hobby was caravanning.' *Was*—like they'd all been squished already. Santa Maria regarded it with scorn; meanwhile Alison felt uncomfortable about the word *family*. Then Santa Maria said, 'I hate Fucking Caravans.'

There was an awkward silence.

Not so long later, by the time Dad was shuffling and gasping about the house and the caravan sat outside on the drive, green with algae and with little patches of moss and grass sprouting here and there, Alison decided she had better heave ho and be Hapless Ally: make him love her before he gasped and shuffled off to God who was Dead if He ever

Existed. She wanted to bounce in, clumsy but funny; cause a few splashes, but make it look like new for him. Even so, she was sure that his condition was reversible; that he'd be up, oiling tow bars, pretty soon. That particular day she had to wait until Santa Maria went out because she thought (rightly) that her mother was probably hoping the Fucking Caravan would suffocate and moulder away, or be buried by trees. But the power washer, assorted soaps, T-cut and a shammy did the trick. Alison—all bouncy Hapless Annie and ‘Daddy it’s me!—went in to her father; he was drawing spring flowers in a sketch book with some felt pens. It was as if he were having a sort of sentimental dotage, or maybe a second childhood. And she interrupted to say, ‘Go and have a look.’ He stretched up like a meerkat sentinel, suddenly oddly alert on caravan patrol. And he said, slowly and deliberately, ‘Don’t you ever touch my Fucking Caravan again.’

And it is strange: Alison’s sibling, Brother who Might as Well have been Dead, condescended, out of the blue, to send her a CD of family photos. (Proving he wasn’t dead, although you never can tell.) Pictures of the maggot-child were outnumbered a hundred to one (and when she was in the picture it was to gauge Fucking Caravan perspective) by pictures of flax, periwinkles, cows, vegetable rows and a flotilla of petrol lawnmowers. And tender shots of the caravan: France; Spain; Holland; Porthcawl; Rhyl; Aust and Magor services. They were generally just of the caravan from all possible angles, but several featured Santa Maria, glaring and standing in the doorway, wearing a range of unattractive headscarves as if in protest. It was hard to understand why

these, with a clear image of simmering anger, were included in the archive.

The Fucking Caravan had taken them many times to the Brecon Beacons. There were silent but beautiful walks in the mountains; Kendal mint cake and Bounty bars eaten by Llangorse Lake and Alison sneaking out to kiss a boy from a trailer when they thought she was idling on a swing. Once even a proper lying down snog with a boy in a barn and some advanced kiss chase in a spinney. There were many angry cooked breakfasts, viciously spitting bacon and eggs, her father's spectacular snoring close at hand, and Alison running away to gather sheep wool on the mountains, determined that she'd gather enough to make something fantastic. Of hours washing the wool in the stream, trying to stay away, as Santa Maria and the Fucking Caravan-fancier dozed or bickered. She remembered that, with some regularity, badly packed bottles fell out from overhead cupboards onto her head and there was a painful memory of a bottle of vinegar mixed with her blood. Everything stank of bacon fat and portable toilet disinfectant; behind the chintz curtains, it was hell and you were released from it with the smell of fat clinging to you and the chill of the disinfectant in your nostrils: it put a barrier between Alison and the outside world, so that nothing scented as it was: the world stank of the inside of the Fucking Caravan.

One pretty time, Santa Maria ripped off her ugly caravan headscarf and let fly, pounding on Alison's back while shouting, 'You little bitch! You little maggot! You don't even know what violence is! I grew up with violence.'

‘Mummy, should I cook the bacon? Mummy, isn’t this violence?’

‘No this is not violence!’

With the un-pounding hand, Santa Maria fried bacon in the warped and blackened pan. More fat. Dad disinfected the cramped little toilet. The pounding spent, the afternoon segued, incongruously, into tea, bacon sandwiches and a box of Mr Kipling’s while Alison’s parents listened to Alastair Cooke’s *Letter from America* on Radio 4. It was, as she reflected in later years, a childhood replete with incongruity. She just didn’t know what the word meant yet. While her back throbbed, she ate a second cake. Outside, the stream thundered on to the kind and distant sea.

‘Oh, I want to dip my hand in that icy sea like boy-Dylan Thomas. I want to be in the sea town away from monsters and throw stones at cats and meet Mrs Prothero as she beats the dinner gong. Her daughter Miss Prothero would look at me kindly and ask if I’d like something from her bookshelf to read because Miss Prothero always knew what to say and I would say back to her, “Oh yes, I would and I would and can I come up to your bedroom and we can talk about all the books you have and I can borrow and come back? Can I maybe stay forever? You could read the *Mabinogion* to me! Oh, I would and I would!” ’

There was another time; a fine time, she hoped. This was the project for her and her father to walk, in stretches, the whole of the Pembrokeshire Coast Path. To this day, Alison thinks that this is the finest coastline she has seen, though it holds such piercing memories of St Bride’s Bay on a fine

day and setting out on a voyage around her father: really, it was *his* project; she just happened to be there, but it would definitely beat bad-tempered crochet with Santa Maria in the Fucking Caravan. Up and down, climbing over the rocks; occasionally, or at least this is how it was remembered, perilously close to the cliff edge, or along thickets of gnarled, lichen-covered trees, they did a different stage each day. She climbed on rocks at the water's edge, took the face of the wave in her face, coming up new for a while and chewing on bladderwrack seaweed. The cormorants eyed her suspiciously, sleek and stretching out their wet wings to sun and breeze. Out there in the bay, she could see the great tankers waiting to come in to Pembroke Dock or Milford Haven, or perhaps they were setting out for balmy climes. To *where*? Somewhere tropical perhaps? Out there, to the heart of darkness and down a deep wide river that was an inscrutable force of nature, old as time. Looking far out to sea, it always felt to Alison that the tankers carried a tinge of the supernatural with them; they might have been cresting warm waves weeks ago, visited by flying fish and graced with cinnamon and warm spices: these were soft nuances they carried into colder waters.

She imagined herself like a pretty little mermaid on the rock: ‘But sailors, sailors: *take me with you*. Take me away from this. I will grow up on your boats and cook for you and not break anything and when I am old enough and big enough maybe you will fall in love with me with my long shining hair! And I don’t mind if there has to be fucking

although I already promised the handsome Indian man at the tea garden outside ballet.'

The coast walks were, apart from visits to The Hill and jobs in the garden, the only time she spent with her father. You'll notice he didn't gain a moniker. That's because, to Alison he was then, as he is now, incomplete; shadowy; an unknowable figure. Alison could have told you everything about his accomplishments and his hobbies and about how hard he worked, though: so that had to be *knowing* enough. He was a silent man (apart from the episodes of badger cursing and shouting at anything, human or feral, which got near the Fucking Caravan), but teacher; woodsmith and wordsmith; creator of fires; fine cricketer; lay preacher: many lives in one. He had survived The Hill, was mad for petrol lawnmowers with their craft and their finely calibrated maintenance, chainsaws and the correct manner of cleaving logs (done with mathematical precision). Yet he was intensely accident prone. He had cut off a big toe in a lawn mower accident, twice severed his thumb in the workshop—once as Alison watched.

On the toe-lawnmower day, she heard the hideous shrieks before she saw the shredded Wellington boot and heard the scream of the mower (and of her father): 'Fetch the frozen peas, you little fuck-wit. I'm holding my toe on.'

'Why would you put your toe in the peas?'

'Now! It's come off!'

Alison rifled, with great anxiety, in the freezer. No peas. She settled on a bag of frozen gooseberries. 'Could it go in here? Put it in and I'll take it back to the freezer.' It was an

odd place to store a toe, but Father was puce so she said no more.

On a quiet but thumb-severing Sunday, Alison's face was hit by the ricochet of blood; one other Sunday, as the light dimmed, he felled a tree and ran the wrong way so the tree felled him. She pulled him out. An apocryphal tale had it that during military service he had fallen asleep, standing up, under the inspection hatch of a plane; it fell open against his head and he lost most of his teeth. The plates stood, at night, weirdly yellow and majenta candy-coloured as they fizzed in glasses in the bathroom. Also, he had never, in his whole driving career, cared for using the indicator, but this had never, as far as she knew, led to any mutilation, amputation or fatality. That didn't mean it hadn't happened; those at The Hill would have killed and pickled any witnesses for one of their own, so it might have done.

But who he was, Alison did not really know, although she had felt his blood on her skin. So, in the teenage years, as they walked, she would try to talk to him about thrift, seabirds or whether the cormorants that had scrutinised her on the rocks could be trained to dive down and fish and come back up and drop their catch, like she had read they were in China or Southern India. And once, particularly daring, but really against her better judgement, she asked him A Difficult Question. She said, knowing that her parents spoke so highly of Number One Son—of how easy and gentle he was, while she stayed Baby in the Bucket, 'Dad, can I ask you something. I, I want...for you to tell me something?'

‘Oh! What is it *now?*’ The watery grey-granite eyes looked past her.

‘I think I want some reassurance. I mean, I’m sorry, I mean that I know Mum doesn’t like me and that I am a trial and that The Wages of Sin are Death and all, but—’

‘For Christ’s sake, get on with it. I want to identify those birds on the rock there and can’t if you keep talking.’

‘Well, when you talk about me, do you say that I’m, that I’m, well, okay?’

His answer was blunt. ‘We prefer to spend time with Number One Son. He listens to us; he likes to be with us and he never says a word. And you should know you are here *under sufferance*. Now pass me the bird spotter.’

‘But I listen. It’s how I know you like cormorants and thrift and caravans.’

‘You are talking.’

‘Dad, I *want* to talk to you.’

‘Be quiet, you little cuss.’

Alison always remembered this conversation. And she would remember the advice she overheard him giving to parents: ‘Never crush a child’s spirit’ being an important phrase. But the *sufferance*, the plainly preferred sibling, the palpable disappointment in and plain dislike of the daughter; it rankled on the clearest day: ‘He never says a word. You are talking.’ She couldn’t keep quiet because the words were so beautiful, whatever risks they brought with them.

Maybe her father felt delight, of sorts, at the academic career later on, but always in terms of her doing, not being and that is a significant distinction. In later years, while lifting

him from the bath, rescuing him from the bathroom, hosing out fires, rescuing his caravan from peril, the words would come back and visit.

Their last conversation ran, ‘Remember to put out the bins. Try to get something right before I die, won’t you?’

She forgot.

He said through clenched teeth (and with much with the same staccato diction as the *Fucking Caravan* line), ‘*You. Have. Let. Me. Down.* I will probably die before you can get anything right. I am at the point of death now. It could happen at any moment.’

Not, ‘Ach, you forgot, you idiot. Oh come on, run for the bin men, there’s a good girl. I’ll try to pop off after they do, so we’re square.’

Instead, always and innocently, there breathed the syntax of damnation. It was there rattling the bucket with the tiny, mewling form in it and graced by, some years later, the vision of her mother coming to consciousness after a life-saving operation and saying, ‘Why are *you* here? Where is Number One Son?’

Ah, but Brother who Might as Well have been Dead had somewhere to get to, didn’t he? It’s like in Auden’s poem, ‘Musée des Beaux Artes’, which reflects on how, in Brueghel’s ‘The Fall of Icarus’, ‘...the expensive delicate ship had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.’ And that was fine. It is odd and jarring to be so brief on the description of a sibling, but *hear ye, hear ye*: FAMILY IS A FLEXIBLE CONSTRUCT. It might be that you have a more meaningful relationship with the man who services your car.

And anyway, when her life went tits up, to quote Auden again, ‘For him’—for the one who is supposed to love you—‘it was not an important failure.’

Sometimes you lean on the family you store in your head. Funny, later on, to find that you’re related to Albert Camus... Sometimes people do not love you. Sometimes they did and they stop. To them, that failure might not be as important as it is to you. It might not even matter at all if the wax melted on your wings as you flew too close to the sun and down you came to die.

But from a garage to feathered boy to chapel of rest we must go in one easy bound, for when Alison’s father died, he was wedged in a very yellow coffin, under a periwinkle blue nylon quilt which gave her a small electric shock. But that was not what she saw most: it was the lilies. He hated lilies. He hated them—*had* hated them—with an irrational passion and now they were clustered round him on the catafalque and below his hands. They appeared to be spitefully multiplying. Alison sucked in the sweet, ponderous smell of the Victorian sick room with its nuances of the newly-dug tomb or vault hanging heavy in the dismal municipal room. These odours mingled with the cold anonymous smell of the chapel of rest; perhaps it is the no-smell of embalming fluid. Does embalming fluid have a smell? But here was something she could do and this time—for the *only* time—she would get it right. She kissed the waxy face and said, ‘Please take those lilies away from my father. He hates lilies.’ And also, ‘I loved him. Why did I fucking well have to love him?’

On the halcyon holidays, whether it might be Bavaria, The Beacons or after a day on the Pembrokeshire Coast Path, in the lonely evening, Alison would settle into the hammock bed in The Fucking Caravan, draw the curtain and pray for a very long time either not to wake up at all or to be a brand new person on waking: a person who was new to them. So, in her dreams she swam in a lagoon, a long swim in a fine azure lagoon, and she found a tunnel, like a breach between worlds, coming up through the water to a new place. There was warm sun, nothing fell on her head or itched her palm, there was breadfruit rather than smash and tinned stewing steak and the girl's shoulders dropped with the relief. Gone was the stench of bacon fat and disinfectant and she felt comfortable with her name, without the moniker for a while; she was just Alison, before returning to the world and The Fucking Caravan. Plus encore.

Moons later, there was an ill-advised trip to France à la caravan and so *Herewith caravan anecdote number two*. Alison was *under sufferance* all the way and her father's driving was erratic; the four toed foot unsteady on the accelerator. It was the illness; the elephant in the room: metastasis on the motorway. Outside Paris her father had a panic attack, clawed at the windows, and wove a dramatic pattern across the road; he had been stung by a bee in the car as they slugged along on the heavily congested autoroute, which was readily made more congested by the *Rosbifs* who had plugged it up with their caravan. For an eternity he did not move but started muttering and then, with hardly a crescendo, to scream.

‘That bee! That bee! An end-time bee—it came for me!

Why would it be in the car now? It is the bee of Abaddon sent from hell. The bee of Apollyon! There in the book: *The Book of Revelation*? Yes, isn't it? Isn't it? I am dead! Dead of abominations! God does not want me! Things are sent! It is too late!

Alison held her breath, tried to make herself invisible and decided not to correct her father: not bees, *locusts*. She wondered about whether she should try, extra hard, to be more Hapless, as her thoughts wandered over the familiar paradox: *I am too sad to cry*.

Now, they had pulled over to the side of the road and Dad was screaming, 'Jesus help me! Help me Jesus! Come now and help me! The bee!'

And, 'This is hell on earth. Help me, help me; Jesus help, me! I am at the point of death, but help me! And please Jesus help my Fucking Caravan!'

Alison thought they were all about to die, right there: at the sting of Apollyon's bee. Either that, or she would have to drive them all herself along the autoroute, without having had a single driving lesson. That day, God really *was* Dead if He ever Existed and Santa Maria sat rigid in the front passenger seat, clenching and unclenching her hands, with the side of her head pressed against the car window. Alison could not read the expression on her face. Eventually, as though the near-death incident had never occurred, they were on their way, in silence, for half a day until a site was found for lunch. The inconstant driving sallied on and, somehow, her father misjudged the gap between two trees

and wedged the caravan fast. Alison laughed accidentally and caught the full force of her father's slap across her face. They were going nowhere. Her father started whimpering and crying; her mother still sat rigid, like she used to do when Terry dribbled while eating spotted dick.

'Go to the village. Do something, little cuss! You're not close to death like I am!' shrieked her father. A requiem played from the car radio. It was Fauré's.

The dying man had screeched both vague and dramatic instructions; commanding a not wholly sensible project for a seventeen-year-old girl in a crop top and miniskirt. But he had also made a reasonable point; she wasn't as close to death as he was, so off went Alison, trying to be big and bouncy, to do that *Hapless* thing, tripping over the tree roots and walking to what appeared to be a conurbation. Dad was, once again, shrieking about Jesus and picnickers were looking on.

She could see a blacksmith in a forge. He dropped his tools and swaggered over. The burly looking man was dripping with sweat.

'Nous avons une grande problem, Monsieur! Voulez-vous aider des touristes en France?'

It took a while to explain a caravan being stuck between two alders, but he followed into the wood with hacksaw and cut the caravan out by sawing off its double glazing. It wasn't a pretty sight. Alison's father still sat whimpering in the driver's seat but Santa Maria came out and offered some money.

'Merci mais NON, madame. Peut-être votre fille?' growled the blacksmith. And in English, 'But I will take your daughter?'

The letter R reverberated at the end of *daughterrr*; it sounded feral: rebarbatively sexual.

Alison dropped Hapless, said, ‘Go away’ to her and saw a chance to run towards the light. For a moment she wondered whether Santa Maria would settle on such a bargain and the two of them could carry on their sojourn alone. She thought about it herself; he looked a powerful enough man, with strong forearms and an apron with manly looking tools in its front pocket. Plus, he was Gallic and Samantha Stokes (the one whose mother carried on with creepy Mr Gibbs, who did wicker-work craft at school—and she whose parents had what was called a *porn collection*—starring each other—in their garden shed) had said French men were always extremely hot in bed. Staying in France at the forge would certainly get her out of A-levels and she wondered whether a really hefty and risky shag over an anvil would make her feel better. But the moment passed and ended with a Gallic shrug and a flick of a black apron.

Still whimpering and palpably at the point of death, Alison’s father turned the key in the ignition. As they drove off, towing the very ragged-looking caravan with the blacksmith shuffling off into the distance, Alison felt the stone drop in the heart. She did not know, until adulthood, that not everyone’s holidays were actually like this. But what she *did* know was that the leaden weights in her heart and somewhere around her solar plexus were despair.

There were, however, more and rather more consoling adventures with blacksmiths on that particular trip to France. Alison’s father had eventually parked up without fatality or

further use of hacksaws and they had headed off to the fête at Chinon in the Loire. Alison's parents wandered a while and then, with terminal cancer and failure of the mitral heart valves between them (which made them snappy and a bit breathless and caused her father to overreact to bees and autoroutes) they went back to sit in the car and listen to the World Service with a picnic of rice salad and *rillons de porc*, followed by a diazepam each. Alison was most definitely not allowed to talk. In the end Santa Maria said, 'Bugger off and go for a walk.' It didn't sound hopeful, but off went her daughter.

And *what* a walk. There was money enough for cheese, wine; for slabs of pork from the hog roast. Hot *so hot*. Walking for hours, for too long; sloughing off the trailing despair by ducking into alleys and small, dark crevices to explore between the tall houses. She knew Dad and Santa Maria would be furious and that she would hear no end of how selfish she had been, but it was said commonly enough. The slap in the face and a pinch she would take. Even the loss of a handful of hair (Santa Maria had a very good grip): a bargain struck.

Alison stood and watched a production of Molière's '*Tartuffe*' for a while and she felt a hand at her back. It was firm and strong, but she sensed that the caress of the thumb across the palm of her hand made it unlikely it belonged to a pickpocket. The hand drew her out away from the theatre crowd and she met its owner. He was broad-shouldered, verily covered in sweat and soot, bare-chested and wearing

a black apron. It was Denis the Lusty Blacksmith. The man had followed her periodically during the hours; stalking her sweetly. He was fine of face and his eyes were dark and limpid.

He said, ‘You are the most beautiful thing I have ever seen. I do not know how it is possible. Come with me. You are the chance of my life. And I am no *hypocrite*.’

And is a truth commonly observed, I think, that when a Frenchman speaks to us in English we want to fuck them: right here, right now. It’s just one of those true things, like not being too *soignée* being sexy, or Napoleon writing to Josephine, ‘*Ne te lave pas, j’arrive*’ knocking you out *en français* and sounding dim and grubby in English.

‘What is your name?’

‘It is...’ She had to think for a moment, ‘It is...just Alison.’

‘Oh, my lovely Just Alison. Whirl and dance this way to me and away from this Molière! You are the chance of my life!’

If you had to look back and pick some stand-out moment, then I suppose this was one. It is possible that it was a cheap seduction, but we will choose to believe otherwise and not spoil the story of Denis, in the medieval streets, glistening with sweat, begrimed and holding some blacksmith’s tongs, with which he gesticulated happily and wildly as if they were an extension of his hand. Ooof! *Hot*. Alison had no conception that someone might think she was beautiful and she walked through the streets with him, stopping for Calvados, cherries, to smoke. She saw his street-side forge,

felt the fire; met his mother. He kissed her and time, as they say, stood still with a long and smoky kiss.

In fact, up came the poet Louis MacNeice to comment now: he liked France, too, and he whispered in her ear, ‘This was a moment, Alison. Time was away, and in this moment, life was different. Go. Change. Run towards the light.’

But her stomach suddenly lurched. She had been out for hours.

‘I have to go, but I will be back.’

‘*Promis?* My Just Alison?’

At that moment, Alison was entirely convinced that she would just grab some things, her passport and run for it; back to him and *towards the light*. But when she got back to the car, her parents were asleep. Deliberating what to do, she looked at them and experienced a wash of tenderness that was not commonly felt. No-one ever said any smug guff at home about love or washes of tenderness. When a man told her he loved her once, she couldn’t stomach the expression, so paused and said, ‘Right, thanks. And quite. And indeed.’ Moreover, Alison instinctively felt that those who were full of the lexis of love were not those to be relied on in a crisis because everyone who had ever told her they loved her had, in fact, fucked off in a crisis. But here it was: *the rush of love* for them. And so she got into the back seat and cried silently and painfully for an hour, missing her hot blacksmith. When her parents woke up, they said nothing to her. They just drove off, mute.

Alison never told anyone about this event, but it remained, for many years, peculiarly and inexplicably painful. He was a

strong man who could have carried her through the streets. Or maybe we will say that he was just a cheap encounter. But I don't think so.

But oh how funny what the years draw to you, for years later, when Alison stood knee-high in monsoon water on a Kolkata street drinking *chai* with the boys on the stall, a kind looking man with deep brown eyes asked her for directions and later followed her to her hotel, rocked her in a hammock and read to her until she fell asleep. That was when she surrendered the memory of Denis the Lusty French Blacksmith to the past. You will meet Dixie Delicious later. And you will be rewarded for your trouble. Technically, we would have to wade through Artefact Nigel, the two troubled and coked-up Americans, the swinging Canadian, Professor Pobble, poet and academic, Tom the Brilliant Cellist who frowned like thunder and went away and Sardonic Steve. Well, actually, we're being economical: Alison didn't keep count. Nor did she actually realise she was having a relationship with some of them, until she went, 'Ohhhhh', courtesy of the crash course in self-awareness and interpersonal relations, as delivered by psychologists, Drs Crook and Hook in days with the Mental Health Recovery Squad. But then along came Albert, more incendiary than the forge of any blacksmith. How could a girl resist?