

It's beyond belief what you find between the pews, Mrs Armitage was saying. Coins and gloves you might expect, but socks and underwear? Hairclips, buttons, handkerchiefs, and now look at these, these peculiar white pills. She held out her hand to Father Diamond, who looked at it carefully and shook his head. Mrs Armitage brushed the pills into the plastic rubbish sack beside her and went on: d'you know, the other day there was an old chap in here who was looking for his teeth? I said to him, I said I think you need a dentist not a church. But no, he swore he'd left them here and we had to have a good look round . . .

Excuse me, Father Diamond said. Behind him the sacristy door opened and Stella Morrison came out, her arms full of dying flowers. She stepped into a band of sunshine that streamed through the high windows of the south wall and for a moment she was wrapped in gold. Father Diamond turned and looked at her, the sunlight woven through her hair and spilling on the sheaf of fading roses and gloriosa lilies that she carried. She genuflected briefly in the direction of the altar and said: look, the last flowers we were allowed and now they're dead. She went on down the aisle to the main door. Excuse me, he said again to Mrs

Armitage, I can hear the minutes of the council meeting calling, I'd better love you and leave you, I'm afraid. Oh but, she said, but Father, I did want to have a word with you about the candle grease on that new surplice, and she put her hand firmly on the sleeve of his soutane.

Mary-Margaret O'Reilly watched Father Diamond's disappearing back less wistfully than usual, as he followed Mrs Armitage into the sacristy. She had been waiting for this moment, for this quiet, empty church. Now was the perfect chance. Mrs Armitage had finished with her sweeping and her polishing; the great mop she used, stiff and black with floor wax, was back in the cupboard in the porch. If Mary-Margaret could get the job done now, and quickly, she'd have things ship-shape before Father D put up the purple shrouds. She'd hate to think he'd see the dirt that she had noticed when she was gouging candle-wax out of the pricket stands.

The problem was she could not find the ladder. She had thought there was one in the cupboard. But a chair would have to do instead. She took one from the back of the church and carried it through to the Chapel of the Holy Souls. There, with a silent prayer of apology for offence unwittingly caused, she stepped out of her shoes, climbed on the chair and from it onto the altar. She would change the white cloth later. Now she was face to face with Him, their eyes were level.

It had been difficult to choose the right materials for the task. Flash was far too harsh and so was Mr Muscle. Fairy Liquid, maybe? No, she felt this called for something special and, having rejected Boots as ordinary, she decided on the Body Shop at the top of the King's Road. The mingled scents she found there befuddled her a little, and she wasn't sure what to say to the powdery lady who bore down on her

with an offer of help and a sample of glow enhancer. But she stood her ground and found the shelves of brightly coloured bottles arrayed under the heading Body Care.

There was such a range to choose from. Papaya, clementine and starflower; fig, mango, passion fruit and melon. He had cursed a fig tree, hadn't He? Passion fruit perhaps? That might be suitable. The wounds, the crown of thorns. But when she sniffed it she felt the scent was far too womanly; He would want something cleaner and more masculine. Essence of pine? Would that make Him think of home, of wood, the shavings from His father's workbench, fat blond curls of clean-cut timber, or the wood of His own cross? Hang on though, was that not made of olive? Of course. Now she saw it was entirely obvious. Body wash with extract of virgin olive. Olives must have been his bread and meat.

The containers came in two sizes; she chose the smaller. It was still expensive. She also bought a pot of olive body cream.

The air was still and heavy in the church; sunlight, which had glistened briefly, gone. Mary-Margaret had already soaked the sponge she'd been carrying all week in Holy Water. It was a real sponge, the organic kind, not the nasty blue or pink thing you would use to clean the bath. It too had been expensive but she knew that it was necessary and, like the olive oil, would make Him feel at home. That is, if the sponge came from the Red Sea as she thought all sponges did. Or was it from the Dead? Well, in any case. The sponge absorbed all the water in the stoup, leaving nothing for the visiting faithful, but that could not be helped. Father Diamond would refill it later, she was sure. Now, standing on the altar, she took the wet sponge from the sandwich-bag in which she had temporarily stowed it, and transferred it to the

little plastic bowl she had also been carrying in her shopping bag. She unscrewed the cap of the body wash and poured half of it onto the sponge. It was not easy to do this while balancing on the altar, trying to hold the bowl at the same time. She could have done with an extra hand.

She began with His poor, wounded head, so cruelly pierced with thorns. With infinite tenderness she stroked the frothing sponge across His matted hair, around the rim of the torturers' crown. His eyelids drooping with tiredness and pain, His nose, His cheekbones taut beneath the skin, His beautiful, suffering mouth. The length of each arm straining from the cross beam; His hands most horribly pinioned to the wood. She had packed a J-cloth, already moistened, this time with mineral water, and a dry one too for the rinse and final polish. As she wiped away the grime that had settled on His palms, going carefully around the rusty nails, she imagined that she soaked away His pain and sorrow as a mother would. His mother, or her own. She saw a child perching on the white rim of a bath-tub, small grazed hands held out to gentle adult ones, trusting them to wash away the hurt with cooling water, make it better with a kiss. This picture was not a memory of her own. She pressed her lips briefly to His hands.

She could hardly bring herself to touch the deep gash in His side. His ribs protruded so painfully through His flesh, it was as if He had starved to death upon the cross. Years ago the nuns had told her how a person died from crucifixion. In effect He suffocated, exhausted from heaving Himself up against the agony of the nails for every breath. No one should be able to contemplate His passion and stay dry-eyed, the nuns had said, and Mary-Margaret could not; not then, nor ever. Now, dabbing at the dirt that overlaid His emaciated chest, her eyes were overflowing.

At the cloth that covered His loins she paused. The sculpted folds fell gracefully; after she had washed them they glowed white again, as they must have done when new. She wiped the froth away and dried them. To clean His legs and feet she knelt down on the altar. Those crossed feet pierced through by a single cruel nail. She remembered Mary of Magdala drying them with her hair; long it must have been, and flowing; long enough for her to wrap it round His feet as she bent over them, for she would not have dared to raise them to her head. Mary-Margaret's hair was too short to be used as anything other than a mop.

What was nard, she wondered, the pure nard that Mary of Magdala had got into such trouble for, when she poured it over His dear head? Probably it was very like the cream in the green pot she now took from her shoulder bag – buttery and thick and costly. Rich with the scent of herbs. Not simply olive, she imagined, but the others in the Gospels: hyssop, aloe, myrrh.

On the narrow altar she struggled back onto her feet, feeling a little giddy. The tiled floor beneath her suddenly seemed a long way down. By accident she knocked the plastic bowl, spilling the remaining foam. She tore the seal off the green pot, opened it and scooped up some of the ointment with her fingers. With endless love and reverence she stroked His sacred head. There were scabs where the thorns were rammed right through the scalp. She felt warmth against her hand. When she lifted it from His wounds she saw that it was red.

That evening Stella Morrison did not tell her husband Rufus that she had found poor Mary-Margaret unconscious on the floor of a side chapel. It would have been so easy to

miss her, lying there in the dim light; it must have been some extra sense that prompted Stella to look right on her way back to the sacristy. That and the faint trace of an unfamiliar smell, something sickly and synthetic overriding the eternal ghost of incense that breathed out of the church walls. She had only gone back for her forgotten car keys, but she had looked, and she had seen a body sprawled there on its side, one arm flung out, a halo of blood around its head. She had thought that it was dead.

Poor Mary-Margaret, with her elasticated denim skirt scrunpled up about her thighs, her flesh-coloured knee-high socks. Stella had checked that she was breathing, and called an ambulance. She had remembered that she must not move the body, in case of spinal damage. She had run to fetch Mrs Armitage, who, thank goodness, was still in the sacristy with Father Diamond. Together they watched over Mary-Margaret, the three of them kneeling round her, until some kindly paramedics came and carried her away. Stella had to leave then because she was already late for her meeting with the volunteers of the Citizens Advice Bureau. Mrs Armitage had cleaned up the mess all on her own. Well, Mary-Margaret was already two sandwiches short of a full picnic, Mrs Armitage had said. Lord knows what she'll be like now.

Stella did not tell Rufus anything of this because she knew he would not be interested. And he would not have time in any case to listen. He didn't get back from the House that night until eleven o'clock, and he was hungry. Stella was hungry too but Rufus expected her to wait for him; he disliked eating on his own. She cooked fillets of trout with tarragon and crushed potatoes and she listened while Rufus talked about the crisis over MPs' expense claims. It would be an outrage if they took away the second-home allowance.

What were people like him supposed to do, when they had constituencies miles away, in Dorset? If you pay peanuts you get monkeys, Rufus said.

Mrs Armitage told her husband Larry every detail. How Stella had come rushing to the sacristy, her face ghostly white. Mary-Margaret's pink-sprigged knickers. She still could not work out what Mary-Margaret was doing. There was a chair toppled over by the altar, the altar cloth all twisted, a Tupperware bowl lying on the floor, a soapy sponge, a J-cloth. The oddest thing was the big smudge on the altar cloth, which looked like the print of a hand that had been dipped in paint. Or blood. There had been a quantity of blood seeping from Mary-Margaret's head but, as she had said reassuringly to Stella and Father Diamond, you would expect that: head wounds always bled a lot. How, though, had Mary-Margaret managed to get blood on the cloth as well? Had she staggered up after she had fallen and grabbed the cloth before crashing down again? If she had, there would surely be spots of blood all over the shop. Well, it was a mystery but not an especially entertaining one; not one to mull over in her mind for long. Mrs Armitage had fetched a fresh altar cloth from the sacristy and taken the stained one home to wash.

In the small brick presbytery behind the church, Father Diamond ate the supper his housekeeper had left for him – peppered mackerel and coleslaw. Tonight was a rare night, without parish commitments; he supposed he would go to bed early, make up for much-needed sleep. But once he was in bed sleep mocked him, playing catch-me-if-you-can and

slipping from his grasp just when he thought he'd caught it. He was constantly surprised by how alert the mind could stay when the body was expecting sleep. And the senses too; each magnifying the elements in its particular orbit. The wind, which in truth could not be much more than a breeze, became a gale, the sound of the traffic on Battersea Bridge a roar. The light from the street-lamp outside that edged his window-blind was too bright for his eyes. In the morning, when his alarm clock woke him, his bed would be comfortable but now it felt as if the sheets were made of fibreglass and the pillow stuffed with stones. He tried every trick he knew to entrap sleep. Keeping one's eyes wide open in the dark was said to be infallible, but it never worked for him. Tensing every muscle in the body slowly, starting with the toes of the right foot and working upwards to the face before relaxing all of them in one swift rush was another recommended failsafe. But Father Diamond found it only made him conscious of his body. So he tossed and wriggled and meanwhile his mind whirred on and on like a machine with a faulty off-switch.

Thank the Lord for Mrs Armitage, he thought. She was so reliable, turning up every Thursday morning with her mops and buckets, carting home stained albs and altar cloths, returning them the next week in piles as crisp and clean as newly fallen snow. And asking for nothing in return, except for conversation, which, it must be said, tended to be prolonged. But, even so, salt of the earth. Good of her to clean up all the mess in the Souls Chapel: what could that silly woman have been doing? If Mrs Armitage was a right chatter-box, Stella Morrison was an icon of silence. The sunlight streaming down on her, and her arms full of flowers. Stella, he said out loud. He loved the sound of that word. Stella maris. Mater admirabilis, Rosa mystica. Stella.

*

No one thought of telling Mary-Margaret's mother that her daughter was in hospital until Mary-Margaret herself came round to her full senses at about six o'clock that evening. Fidelma O'Reilly answered the telephone beside the armchair in which she had sat all day. She might as well stay there, she thought. It was too late to be facing all that kerfuffle on her own. Hauling herself out of the armchair, reaching her bedroom, sloughing off the outer layer of clothes. No, there was no point; she might as well stay where she was till morning. She had everything that she might need. A flask of tea, a packet of chocolate-covered digestive biscuits, her Winstons. She sat wedged in her chair and looked out of the window over the streets of Battersea to Wandsworth, where darkness had long fallen. Across the way a tower block, the twin of hers; columns and rows of rectangular windows, lit up like bisected screens. People going about their lives behind them. Fidelma leaned forward to unlatch her own window and push it open. It did not open very far. She knew why: imagine if all the people in all these blocks were able to throw their windows wide and stand upon their sills, rocking slowly back and forwards on their heels while the London traffic crawled beneath them and beneath them too the wheeling gulls. No, she could see why the windows were designed to let in no more than an inch or two of outside air. But it was air enough. Up here on the nineteenth floor, with the window open, the wind blew in like a housebreaker, searching underneath the chairs to find what might be hidden there, lifting the curtains in case someone stood behind them. It rustled through the pages of the *Radio Times* as if it needed to read them in a hurry. Fidelma saluted the wind. At home it had been

her daily companion, although there it was at the level of the ground. Brothers and sisters the winds must be, a whole gang of them, scouring the world for lost things, like the children of Lir. With the strong wing-beats of swans. When they fly overhead, the swans, no sound then but their wings. And that a sound so surprising in its loudness. Thunder almost. Swans and wind. The winds were the same winds all through time, all through the world. Born when the world was made, trapped by it like wild birds in bell-glass, their wings forlornly beating, forced to roam around it until the end of time.

In St Elizabeth's Hospital, Mary-Margaret lay in bed, with stitches in her scalp. Every hour, on the hour, a night nurse woke her. What month is this? she asked. Do you know your postcode? Who is the Prime Minister? Mary-Margaret had been extremely lucky, the nurses and the doctor said. She had cut her head, apparently, on the sharp edge of the tiled step leading to the altar, but it was a flesh wound merely, nothing graver; no fracture nor serious damage. Mild concussion. She would be none the worse for it. Her wrist was broken, though, where she had fallen on it, and she was badly bruised. Best to stay there for a day or two, rest and recover, then she'd be as right as rain. Meanwhile Mary-Margaret was still a bit confused. What had happened just before her fall? She could not quite remember but images came back to her: a bleeding head, clear eyes looking into hers. She tried to tell the nurses who floated in and out of her dreams, but mostly they just hushed her: rest now, dear, they said. After all, this patient was concussed. Only one of them, Kiti Mendoza, stopped to listen. She had heard that this fat woman had been brought to hospital

from a church. He opened his eyes, the woman was saying. He looked at me. His head was bleeding but it wasn't my fault. Really, it was not my fault.

Stella Morrison also lay in bed, listening to her husband breathe. His snuffling joined the other noises of the night; an open sash window rattling in the wind, a motorcycle in the distance, the sighing branches of the silver birch outside. Often sleepless, Stella was in the habit of wandering around the house at night, moving in the darkness through the empty rooms. It was a habit born in the days when her children were still small and she, a light sleeper like all mothers, would wake at the slightest sound. Then, she would have gone into their bedrooms to kneel beside them, to listen to the rhythm of their dreams. She would know if the dreams were calm or hectic by their bed clothes; tangled round them or composed. Felix in particular spent heated nights; his hair was often wet with sweat and she'd stroke it off his forehead, breathing in the sweet small-boy scent of him, her sleeping child.

If the children had ever woken to find her there beside them, would they have felt she was intruding? She thought not: they would simply have accepted her presence in the night as they did during the day, unquestioned as the source of all they wanted, trivial or large. Besides, it is difficult to wake a sleeping child.

At that time she would have welcomed the quiet of the night. The voices of children had filled every minute of the day; there was never time to think her own thoughts or repair the ravelled threads of life. After she had tucked the kicked-off duvets back and kissed her children lightly, she would often go from room to room, straightening rugs and

cushions, putting toys away, making neat piles of the books and papers Rufus always scattered. That way she could greet the next day with lightness in her mind. Imposing order brought repose. She was familiar with the night sounds then; the creakings and the rustlings, the intermittent humming of the fridge, the sudden twang the piano sometimes made as if a ghost inside its case had plucked a string, occasionally a hunting owl. There would be all the same sounds now in the further reaches of the house but tonight she did not care to meet them. These unpeopled spaces, which usually seemed quite kindly, tonight threatened to unsettle; there was too much emptiness in them. For no clear reason she found herself thinking of the palaces of extinct kings. Fortresses on the crowns of hills, as large as towns, like labyrinths or termite mounds, the inner depths a honeycomb of rooms, jewel-embedded marble, windowless. Lost courtyards in which lonely women hid. Stella had got completely lost in the hill palace of Udaipur on her honeymoon with Rufus. One minute Rufus had been there, taking photographs and batting away the touting guides, the next minute he was not. She was in a narrow roofless space with doors at each corner opening onto spiral staircases, where the only light came filtered through fretworked pale stone. She chose the stairs she hoped would lead her in the same direction she and Rufus had been following; he must have gone on without her; she would find him at the top. But at the top there was only a narrower room lit by one dim bulb and she no longer knew whether to go left or right. She felt the panic of a lost child, of a dreamer in a hostile and strange city. This unimaginably complicated place was a maze, a prison; designed as such by one beleaguered ruler after another, each one insisting on his own accretions until there could be no one living who had kept count of all the

rooms. It was all too easy to envisage being trapped in one and beating as ineffectually as a moth against the solid wood and brass inlay of its heavy door.

‘The spider weaves the curtains in the palace of the Caesars; the owl calls the watches in the towers of Afrasiab,’ Stella said under her breath. The women of the emperors and the sultans: had they found consolation in the scarlet petals of the roses in their secret gardens, in the soft breath of a sleeping child?

Some nights, when she could not sleep, Stella got out of bed and crossed the landing to Barnaby’s room, untenanted in term-time. It faced onto the street and there was a street-lamp right outside, beyond the railings, which turned mist into gold on autumn nights, made raindrops bright as fire-flies. Stella would lean her head against the glass, feeling its coldness, watching her breath cloud it, sensing the London smell of dust. If she closed her eyes and counted to ten before she opened them again, he would be standing on the pavement looking up, his collar turned against the damp, in a mandorla of light. Who he was she never knew: only that she needed him to be there.

The next day was a Friday. Fidelma O’Reilly was woken by the need to pee. She had been drifting in and out of dreams for what seemed like hours and in those dreams there had been toilets with locked doors, corridors that she was lost in, until finally she let go luxuriously of a great cascading stream. Fidelma’s dreams often contained a bursting bladder. Of late she had begun to fear that the release which was so carefree in her dreams might signify a real event; that there would come a morning when she would waken to a mattress stained and stinking, wet sheets already cooling as she slept.

But this morning she woke in her chair. It took her a bit of time to hoist herself out of it and stand up. Her legs were cramped and stiff. Hold on, my darling, she said aloud to herself. Get a good grip on yourself down there, my girl.

In the bathroom she pulled up her skirt and plopped down on to the specially adapted lavatory seat. Long ago she had dispensed with underwear; the elastic gouged red tracks on her skin and there was no call for that. When she had finished she shivered involuntarily and wondered, not for the first time, why that happened. Little girls shivered every time they went; she remembered that. It was a sort of pleasure, she supposed, that warm flow of liquid running from the secret places. One of the best, now she came to think of it: there was nothing like the relief of going when you really had to, like thirst it was; it's worth working up a real thirst just for the pleasure of its quenching. Sometimes she'd let her throat grow dry as the last scrapings of a scuttle before she drank cool water down.

A picture came to mind of a thirsting man, beads of sweat like teardrops, well-toasted from the sun. Lifting a tall glass full of Guinness to his mouth. You could see how cold the glass was from the frost upon it, you could see the way the young man's Adam's apple went a-bobbing up and down, the way a young fellow drains a pint without stopping for a breath, or so it seems. Had she once been acquainted with this young man, or was he off the telly? – these days she found it hard to know. There was a young man in an ad, but that was for Coke not Guinness, he was a builder or some such, a nice flat belly and the lasses crowding at an office window, craning for a look. Ah well.

Fidelma rinsed out a flannel in the washbasin and mopped at her face, her neck and armpits. Then she manoeuvred herself into the kitchen. There was just enough space in

it for her to stand between the counter and the cooker and, if she stepped to one side, she could open the fridge. What with Mary-Margaret not coming home last night, there might not be much in it. Mary-Margaret would have stopped off at the shops on her way back. But Fidelma had forgotten there was still most of a pork pie in there, some cooked potatoes, eggs and half a loaf. She put some lard into a pan and fried up the potatoes. When they were done, she pushed them to one side of the pan with a wooden spoon, added another lump of lard and fried two eggs as well. While they were doing, she spread margarine on a slice of bread.

That doctor of hers was forever going on about what Fidelma should be eating, or, more to the point, what she should not. Diet, diet, diet, she was sick of the stupid word. It was not by chance that if you took the 't' off it, you'd get its close relation. Anyway. Not even that interfering woman – and she was so scrawny that if she were a chicken she'd be fit for nothing but the stock pot – could complain about the meal Fidelma had made herself today. Meat, eggs and potatoes, that was all she'd ever eaten as a child, near enough, and then she was as slender as a reed, as the tall leaves of the yellow irises that grew in the boggy places, and had stayed so, until Mary-Margaret came along.

Fidelma took her plate of food back to her armchair, and ate it looking out of the window. It was late morning; children who went to school were long gone, and those of the parents who had work as well. There was not much happening below. If Mary-Margaret had been there, they would have watched the telly but left to herself Fidelma could not be bothered to turn it on. She'd rather sit there with her food, savouring the salt taste of the pie jelly and then its rich fat melting on her tongue, thinking her own thoughts and minding her own business. Later she would

brew some tea and have a cigarette but she'd wait a while for that; the waiting made the first drag so much better. The raisin scent of the fag unlit, that small white tube of promise and then the almost painful rush of it into the lungs, well, all in all, with a brew of tea, that would be just about enough.

As it was a Friday, Father Diamond spent most of the morning on the wards of St Elizabeth's. As usual he collected his list of Roman Catholic patients from the cheerful lady in the Welfare Office and as usual she greeted him: how's tricks then, Rev? At the bottom of the list he was annoyed to notice Mary-Margaret O'Reilly but he'd have to look in on her, he knew he could hardly miss her out. He would leave her until last, after he had visited the seriously sick where they lay on the surgical wards.

Father Diamond had been an ordained priest for less than a year when his Superior added hospital chaplaincy to his list of duties. At first he had found it very hard. It was not the dying he minded, on the threshold of eternal life. No, for that he had had some training and besides it was precisely because he must learn to face the infinite that he had decided, after years of torment, to become a priest. To kneel beside the dying, to pray with them and at the end to bring them the precious consolation of the sacraments; well that was a blessing and a God-given privilege. But it was the naked way in which some of them were dying that upset him. The reek of advanced illness, all those tubes and pumps full of vile liquid, the yellow and the red, the mottled flesh, the ulcers, the indignity, the crusts of spittle, the toothlessness; all of this he found repellent. And he knew that he was wrong to do so. *Humani nil a me alienum*

puto was the line that kept coming back to him but, as he often reflected ruefully, those self-righteous souls who cited it so glibly less often prefaced it with its true opening words: *Homo sum*.

Father Diamond knew that nothing human was foreign to God. The sores of lepers, the stumps of amputees – God saw them, loved them and would not hesitate to stroke them with His hands. When Lazarus stumbled out into the daylight from the darkness of his tomb, putrid and stinking to high heaven, having lain for four days dead, Jesus clasped him to His breast. (Who, though, would have peeled off his winding cloths, sticky with the liquefaction of the body in the heat of Bethany? Not Our Lord, thought Father Diamond. Martha, most probably. And then she would have laundered them for further use.) But it was all very well for God. And for those saints on earth who tended suppurating wounds and wiped the black froth from the mouths of the plague-ridden without flinching. Such mortals had the protection of their certain faith. Human though they were, they were also touched by the divine. For ordinary men and women it was natural to shrink away from the impure. Father Diamond had read his behavioural science and he knew that disgust was a primordial reflex; the species maximising its own chances of survival by avoiding sources of infection and disease. *Homo sum*, and for that very reason I am nauseated by decaying flesh.

All Father Diamond could do was pray for strength. And so he did, until by now, eleven years after he had been appointed one of the several chaplains at St Elizabeth's, he was much less squeamish. Even so, there were sights that still made him gag and served starkly to remind how far he was from sainthood.

Today Father Diamond visited a middle-aged man on the

genito-urinary ward, two ladies in gynae and a young man who had a tumour in his jaw. To remove it, the surgeons had also to remove some of his face and now there was a hole where bone had been before. He also went to see a man who had been dying for some time and had already received Extreme Unction. Father Diamond made the sign of the cross over him in blessing. Then he set off to find Mary-Margaret O'Reilly.

She was on a general ward, in the middle of a row of beds. Father Diamond was glad to see that she was sitting up and draped decently in a hospital-provided nightdress. How are you, dear? he asked. Her face lit up.

I'm doing well, Father, she said. I'm sorry for the trouble.

No trouble at all, he answered. The thing is that you're on the mend. Nothing broken, I trust?

My wrist, said Mary-Margaret. But only that. And a bit of bruising. But much worse things happen on a big ship, don't they?

They do indeed. You are very lucky. We should give thanks and praise to our good Lord.

I do and all, she said. And I say sorry to Him too, although it was not my fault. I promise I was gentle. I did not mean to hurt Him. It was not my fault.

What do you mean, Mary-Margaret? Father Diamond asked.

Well you know what I mean, she said. The wounds on His poor head. The blood. When He opened his eyes I could see how badly He was hurting and I'd have given anything to take away the pain.

There were no wounds, said Father Diamond gently. The blood was from *your* head. And from the look of things

that's mending nicely. No need for vinegar and brown paper!

Mary-Margaret looked puzzled. She had no idea what he meant. Vinegar? She let it pass; Father Diamond was prone to saying strange things, she found. But now he must be made to see the truth. There was, she said. Blood. From the holes made by the thorns. It went all over my hands when I was anointing Him. With the olive cream.

My dear, said Father Diamond. You have had a big bump and a nasty shock into the bargain. Please don't worry any more. The cross is fine, nothing was broken. Mrs Armitage will wash the altar cloth. Just you concentrate on getting better. We need you back on Thursday afternoons! Mrs Armitage is made of sterling stuff but even she can't manage the cleaning by herself, we need both of our Stakhanovites!

More riddles, Mary-Margaret said to herself, and suddenly she felt too weary to explain. She'd show Father Diamond when she was back on her feet, she thought; it would be better if he saw it for himself. Meanwhile she accepted his blessing and the light touch of his hand on hers before he walked away.

Kiti Mendoza, on the Friday evening shift, pulled up a chair beside the fat woman's bed and asked how she was doing. Well enough, the woman said, except her wrist was hurting. But you were fortunate, said Kiti, from what I heard. You could have broken your back. It must have been an angel stopped you fall. Oh no, said Mary-Margaret. I know it was Our Lord. He didn't manage quite to stop me falling altogether – it happened very quickly – but He caught me before I did myself any real harm. I could've died, you

know, it was a long way down. What was you doing there, Kiti asked and Mary-Margaret told her. The open eyes, the bleeding wounds, the certainty of love.

Early on Saturday morning, Stella and Rufus Morrison drove down from Battersea to their house in his constituency. Stella packed food for the weekend in a cool-box; there would be no time for shopping. Rufus had his surgery to take, meetings with his agent, with the Master of the local hunt who was campaigning for the repeal of unpopular legislation, and with the chairman of the parish council; there was also a fundraising dinner to attend that night. Some kind of competition – she had forgotten what – to adjudicate on Sunday morning, and then they would have to drive back to London so that the whole week's round could begin again – Shadow Cabinet meetings, off-the-record briefings, debates and argument, Select Committees, jostlings for air-time – Rufus's round, all underpinned by Stella.

There was one small break in Saturday's programme that Stella was anticipating with the pleasure she had known when she first met Rufus. He had been married to someone else then, his secret hours with Stella stolen out of a shared and busy life. They used to meet in the back room of a pub in Dean Street and Stella remembered the ardour she felt as she hurried towards it, the ecstasy of being sure that in a moment she would be with the man who filled her waking thoughts and her better dreams. That ecstasy must have been visible in some way, she later thought; strangers stopped what they were doing and turned to look at her rushing past them on Shaftesbury Avenue; men, with hungry eyes.

So many years ago, and now Stella was longing for a meeting not with a lover but with her youngest child. It would be too brief – these meetings always were – and she'd pay for it with an hour of cold on a soggy sports pitch, but he'd be there, his aliform shoulder-blades, his muddy knees, the ravishment of his smile. How was it possible, she thought, to miss anyone as painfully as she missed him? Even in the most fervid time of her affair with Rufus, when every parting felt as if a layer were being cruelly torn from her vulnerable heart, she had known that she could bear the hours that followed. But this? This was sorrow of a different kind. A dull but unremitting throb that was the pulse of every day in term-time.

Rufus drove. He always drove, except after dinner parties. He did not want to talk; he was listening to a disc his secretary had recorded of an important speech made at the CBI. Stella contemplated his hands, resting on the steering wheel; long fingers with protuberant knuckle bones, a feathering of light brown hair over the outer metacarpals. An edge of tattered check cuff showing beneath his navy jumper; his tweed jacket on the back seat; a weekend shirt, working weekend clothes. Hands were so strangely intimate, she thought, and yet they were the one part of the human body that was always on display. Even where women have their faces covered, they are allowed to bare their hands. Hands that have known the inner places of the body; their own, their children's and their lovers'. She had looked at the hands of men holding knives and forks at a dinner table – fat hands and slim ones, stubby-fingered, hairy – and envisaged their profound acquaintance with the bodies of their wives, who sat a conventional distance away round the same table. Rufus's hand recognised the contours of her breasts so easily, he'd probably ceased to

register them as things apart. Stella's body had become his property through the rights of ownership accumulated over years of marriage.

The M3, the A303, past Andover, through Sherborne. A route so tediously familiar she barely noticed the landmarks. But she did notice the changes every week in the hedgerows and the waysides, those reminders of the fields and hills that had been there before the roads tore strips from them and left their green flanks scarred. That Saturday morning, in late March, winter skeletons were beginning to be touched by green, pale sunlight flickered throughout translucent leaves. Wild cherry flowering everywhere, cherry like drifting snow. On the blackthorn, tender and beautiful white blossom, as delicate as a bride's veil, and as hopeful. The bravery of these ancient trees, opening the paths to new sap every year, putting forth their youthful flowers. The white flowers of the thorn. The green of infant leaves so tentative they looked like mist on the bare branches, not solid form.

Saturday was Kiti's day off. She slept late, then called her friend Melinda. She mentioned the woman on the ward who believed she had reopened Our Lord's wounds. Kiti knew the church she had been talking about, on the corner of Riverside Crescent. Melinda said that was a little bit interesting; they should go and take a look. What else was there to do on a rainy Saturday in London, when you were trying to save money? Both girls were very homesick.

The Sacred Heart was open, as it was every day from 8 till 6. It was a point of pride and of principle to Father Diamond and his Superior, Father O'Connor, to allow unfettered access to the church. You could never tell when a soul in need might seek the presence of the Blessed Sacrament,

Father O'Connor always said, even though it meant the devil to pay in insurance premiums. True, there were more often homeless people escaping from the rain in there than bona fide prayers, but they too were souls in need, of course, and who knows if they might find the Lord even though they were only seeking shelter?

There was no one in the church that Saturday afternoon. Kiti and Melinda crossed themselves with Holy Water from the stoup, genuflected and set off to find the cross that the fat woman had talked about. There were all the old familiar figures in the church: St Joseph in his brown cloak, the Virgin in her blue dress, Jesus with his heart exposed. The cross hanging from the ceiling in front of the altar had no body on it, so clearly it was not the one they wanted. Eventually they located it in one of the two side-chapels. A crucifix nailed to the wall above a narrow altar; Jesus in coloured plaster.

With no natural light, the little chapel was very dim. Kiti and Melinda felt around for a light-switch but they couldn't find one. Melinda suggested taking one of the candles from the wooden tray in front of the statue of Our Lady; Kiti put a 5p coin in the collection tin. A box of matches had been thoughtfully provided. Kiti struck one and held it to the candle-wick while Melinda screened the new flame with her hand. Melinda carried the candle to the chapel and raised it to the crucifix. It flickered in the darkness, throwing the shadows of the two girls across the wall. They could just make out the silver reliquaries behind locked bars in niches in the wall, a painting to one side of a figure they could not identify. The pink legs and feet of God. But there was no blood. Kiti and Melinda were disappointed. Although what more could one expect from a silly English woman who had given herself a big blow on the head? Then Kiti screamed.

And Melinda too. Oh God, they screamed together. Did you see that? It was far too frightening. Melinda dropped the candle and they both fled from the church.

Felix Morrison spotted his mother hurrying across the pitch and felt a small constriction in his heart. She was late and the under-11s were already being thrashed, as usual, having missed their first conversion and a penalty kick. But that wouldn't worry his mother, she never seemed to mind whether the team won or lost. In fact, she never even seemed to know which side was winning or losing until the match ended and the victors cheered. Felix had tried to explain the rules to her a hundred times but she still got them muddled up. The important thing is that you enjoy yourself and do your best, she had told him once, and he had not wanted to upset her with the truth, which was that winning really mattered. In the harsh world of his boarding school no amount of motherly solace could save a boy from being a loser.

In keeping with custom, Felix only nodded curtly to his mother when she reached the touch-line, and ran past her after a disappearing ball. She gave him a little wave. That she was there, though, that she'd made it when he hadn't been sure she'd be able to, gave Felix a rush of strength, as if the sluggish blood in his veins had all of a sudden been displaced by something warmer and more pure. Ichor, he said to himself under his breath. The clear fluid that flowed in the veins of gods. The horrible hard ball was now cannoning towards him and could not be evaded unless Felix were to turn tail and head in the opposite direction. With the strength of heroes flooding through him, Felix lunged for it, grabbed it and ran for the try-line.

Stella kept her eyes trained on her child as he was tackled, stopped breathing as he disappeared beneath the ruck, breathed again when he emerged, without the ball but with his nose unbloodied. This barbarous pursuit, she thought, why do we do such terrible things to our sons? Rufus had been a rugger Blue at Oxford.

Some of the under-11s, who could, apparently, be almost twelve, were nearly as tall as men and growing bulky. Felix was by far the smallest of the team, a child so thin you might think you saw the gleam of bone through his white skin. A child made of lines and angles, the nape of his neck heart-breaking, his new front teeth like trespassers in his mouth. When the game was over he ran across to Stella. She looked beautiful, he noted, as she always did, much nicer-looking than the other mothers. She knew not to kiss him. Match tea, he said, I'm sorry, Mum. We have to have it with the visiting team. That's fine, she said. I hope it's good. You must be starving after all that brilliant playing.

I am, said Felix. It's a bit less than two weeks, I think, to the end of term?

That's right. About ten days, she said. I'll see you then. He nodded quickly and turned back to his team, now streaming off towards the changing rooms. She watched him go, yearning after him, the mud-stained hollows behind his fragile knees.

Father Diamond, readying the church for Saturday's vigil mass, saw the candle lying on the floor outside the Chapel of the Holy Souls. People can be so careless, he said to himself. The candle was no longer burning but it had evidently been lit; it could have caused a fire. He picked it up and stuck it in the stand.

There were eleven worshippers that evening, not bad for a Saturday in London, and Seamus was there to serve. Afterwards, Father Diamond asked him to help with the Lenten veils. They were difficult to manage on one's own. Seamus, who also served on weekdays, was too shaky to be really helpful, but it was good to have an extra pair of hands.

Together the two men fetched the step-ladder from the garage behind the house. Father Diamond had already taken the shrouds out of the cardboard boxes in which they were stored for the rest of the year, and had heaped them in the sacristy. Heavy, thick material, a little faded at the folds, a little dusty; redolent of charity shops with their scent of mildew.

He and Seamus worked systematically, carrying the ladder between them. Our Lady and St Joseph; the Sacred Heart, which was a statue Father Diamond disliked intensely but dared not upset his congregation by discarding; the crucifix in the Holy Souls. The cross that hung from the ceiling above the sanctuary was always the hardest to cover; too high for Father Diamond to reach with ease, and the material would keep slipping off. Eventually he managed to secure it with safety pins.

It was dark now, and the violet coverings made it seem darker still. Always such a bleak time for Father Diamond, the flowers gone, the statues shrouded like corpses in their cerements, like possessions under dust-sheets in an abandoned house. His foot was on the top rung of depression; if he did not hold on fast he would slip down so far it would take enormous strength to clamber up. He was not sure that he could find the strength again. Before him stretched the final weeks of Lent: Palm Sunday, Maundy Thursday, the terror of Good Friday, agony and passion, tallow candles and the altar bare.

I don't know what I'd do without you, Seamus, he said truthfully. How about a drink, or are you rushing off this evening? Seamus made the sideways movement of his head that expressed regret more courteously than a straight refusal. Thanks a million, Father, but there's things I should be doing. Fine, said Father Diamond, bless you.

Stella did not stay for tea with the other parents after Felix's match but sped off to get herself ready for the evening. It was desolating to drive away from the school and out through its iron gates, leaving her child behind. Stella had heard other women tell of times when they had forgotten their children in playgrounds and shopping centres; there had been a family recently in the news who were halfway across the Atlantic on a plane before they realised their four-year-old was missing. Stella had laughed in the approved manner at these comic instances of the softening effect of motherhood on the brain but was privately appalled. When her children were small she had felt as if the cords that once connected them to her were still in place; she was as aware of them as her own heartbeat, her own breath.

Barnaby and Camilla had made their own graceful adjustments to the umbilical ties; stretching them to encompass nights away at first, and later weeks, then holidays with friends and finally the long intervals of their gap years and university. Camilla at that very moment was in the north of Thailand, near the Burmese border, teaching English to the children of Karen refugees. Barney had spent a year travelling in South America and was now at Cambridge. It had been agony, of course, to let them go. When she waved Barney goodbye at Heathrow Airport, she had felt terribly afraid that it would be forever. At the back of her wardrobe

was Camilla's nightdress, discarded on her bed when she went to Thailand. A faded grey thing, an old favourite, it had reached Camilla's ankles when it was new and now it skimmed her thighs. Like a frugal addict, Stella allowed herself to bury her face in it, to breathe in its scent, only at the times when she most acutely missed her daughter. As the months went by, the scent was getting fainter. Stella worried a little, and knew she was quite mad for doing so, about its laundering. To wash it before Camilla came home safely would be to court disaster. But if she waited, Camilla would know, and think her mother sentimental.

Rufus was at the front door of the house when she got there, leaning against the jamb, listening to an elderly man in tweed whom Stella did not recognise. You know my wife, of course? said Rufus, and the man said that he did. Won't you come in for a cup of tea? Stella asked him, and then caught Rufus's warning look. Luckily the visitor said he must get home, he still had to wash the dogs.

Thank God for that, Rufus said, when the man had finally taken his leave. He's got to be the biggest bore in Christendom. What were you doing, asking him in for tea? Anyway, I've still have calls to make – what time are we on parade?

7.00 for 7.30, Stella said, wondering if there was enough time for her to prune the ceanothus that grew along one wall of the garden. Towards the end of spring its fallen flowers would drift like flakes of dark blue paint, of lapis lazuli, across the paving stones. If she were not there at the right time, Stella would miss them – their intense blue against the grey stone, the white clouds of bridal wreath still flowering about them. Too often she missed the ephemeral events of this garden which she saw only at weekends, and felt that she neglected. There was a climbing rose for instance, so briefly in bloom that it was like Bishop

Berkeley's tree: if it flowered unseen, could it be said to flower at all?

This was the house that Rufus had bought when he knew he had been selected to stand for the safe seat of Central Dorset. Nothing ostentatious, he had stipulated beforehand. Something comfortable, in a village, something that would put him at the heart of the community.

And so this rather beautiful old house with its walled garden and a mulberry tree. A passage led straight from the front door to the back; when both doors were open on a bright day it became a corridor of light. The roof beams were hundreds of years old. In one room, now converted to a kitchen, were the remains of an ancient anvil; when Rufus bought it the house was called *Ye Olde Forge*. He had officially renamed it 32 Middle Street but the children still called it the *Forgery*. Their possession of it was a little fraudulent, Stella sometimes felt. For the generations who had lived there it had represented permanence, a place of work, a settled place in life. The house next door had been a bakery, the one beyond, built a little later, was still called the *Old Bank*. Now there was nowhere in the village where a person could earn a living except as a cleaner or an odd-job man. Or, of course, as an MP. Rufus's office was in the house; during surgery hours on Saturdays his constituents straggled up the path with their anxieties and complaints, their health and housing problems. Or simply because they needed proof that he was there in person. Rufus was good at what he did.

Darkness was falling too fast to allow for any pruning, Stella realised. Tomorrow the clocks would go forward and there would be a precious extra hour of light that evening, the start of a gentle progress towards nights when it would not be necessary to draw the curtains and light the lamps

against the dark. Today, though, Stella could still feel the touch of winter in the damp stone walls and in the silence of the birds that were also waiting for renewed light, and the morning.

An unsettling aspect of life in this old house was that there was seldom anything in it for Stella to do, except the gardening. That, she had chosen – it was not a difficult garden to look after, being small and stone-flagged and containing nothing delicate or rare. But Linda from the other end of the village came in twice a week to keep things clean, and any other routine jobs were dealt with by Rufus's constituency secretary, who summoned plumbers and electricians as required, and sent their bills on to the House of Commons. Stella had never even needed to change a light-bulb. It was, she thought, like living in the sort of hotel whose barely visible management pretended it was an ordinary home.

Now she wandered through the sitting room and the kitchen, wanting something, but not knowing what that was. She picked up the book that she had been reading – Elizabeth Taylor's first novel – and put it down again. She wondered about telephoning a friend. By then it was after six; she could legitimately suppose that it was time to change for dinner.

Almost all of Stella knew exactly what that evening had in store. But a fraction of her could still feel faintly hopeful. Interesting people turned up in the least likely of places, even at a dinner in a nearby country house held in support of an appeal to raise money for the local stag-hounds. She and Rufus had to be there; he was a great friend of the host's and, besides, he was in favour of the Countryside Alliance.

Dressing for the evening has a ritual quality about it,

Stella thought. As for a priestess in an Attic temple preparing for sacrifice, there were ceremonial adornments to put on in a special order. She looked at herself carefully in the bathroom mirror. Brushing shadow onto her eyelids, underlining them with charcoal grey, she saw a face that did not entirely fit her own. Something had been lost behind those dark-fringed eyes but she did not know what it was.