

The Detective's Daughter

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Also by Lesley Thomson

Seven Miles from Sydney

A Kind of Vanishing

LESLEY THOMSON

The
Detective's
Daughter



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For Mel.



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'To walk is to lack a site.'

'Practices of Space', Michel de Certeau

Above a pond,
An unseen filament
Of spider's floss
Suspends a slowly
Spinning leaf.

'Dark Matter'

A Responsibility to Awe, Rebecca Elson



Prologue

Monday, 27 July 1981

‘Jonny!’

Kate Rokesmith heard no sound from three floors up where, insisting that his new toy come on their walk and despite her efforts to dissuade him, Jonathan had gone to fetch the steam engine from his bedroom. She took a silver cigarette case from her jacket pocket, flipped it open, snapped it shut, put it back.

Where was he?

She rearranged her scarf, welcoming the cool silk against her skin in the stuffy heat. She would have to confess that the prized engine was scratched and flecked with crustaceans best not examined. At breakfast she had appreciated her little boy’s creativity when he poked Shreddies through the cab window and trickled milk down the funnel; she had made only feeble efforts to stop him. Although she had kept Jon away while the spare room was decorated, somehow plaster dust had crept in around the wheel axles and, once moistened with spoonings of milk, had set hard. At least the wheels still turned. It was not a good idea for Jon to bring the 1950s Triang steam engine to the river.

Kate had ducked out of her mother-in-law’s birthday lunch on the pretext of a headache. Time had not secured either Mrs Rokesmith a toehold towards intimacy. Kate appeared to the older woman listless and entirely wrong as the spouse of an established civil engineer. Hugh Rokesmith’s mother was fond of the ‘idea’ of her grandson, but found his full-tilt reality irksome. Outside work, Hugh shirked the role of mediator and did nothing to encourage a

LESLEY THOMPSON

rapprochement between his mother and his wife; Kate's decision to stay at home with Jonathan suited them all.

As soon as Hugh had driven off, Kate told her son they must have fresh air so would go to the river.

She caught her foot on a kilim spread across the spacious hall floor and stooping to smooth it hit her forehead on the marble edge of the table. Tears welled as the pain exploded and she pummelled her scalp furiously.

'Jonathan. Hurry up!'

No answer.

Once by the river, she told herself, Jonathan would abandon the engine in favour of dagger-shaped stones, snakes of rope and leaves and twigs that would end up in his duvet or stuffed in his toy-box.

His mother's systematic disposal of his treasures was to the little boy a betrayal that he could not articulate.

Kate wandered through to the dining room. It smelled of polish. They seldom entertained: she was no cook. Hugh met his clients in restaurants. The room had become his impromptu study. Papers and technical drawings were laid out on the table that she and Jonathan were under strict orders not to touch. In one corner was an upright Kemble piano that Hugh had bought Kate for her twenty-first birthday three years before. The lid was up, a book of Beethoven Sonatas open at the 'Pathétique'. This was Jonathan's favourite and his mother knew it by heart.

Standing at the instrument, Kate played the opening bars of the Adagio cantabile. Perhaps she hoped Jonathan might be lured down by the poignant melody, the notes rich and mellow in the high-ceilinged room, but he did not come.

She returned to the hall and absently tapped out the tune on the balustrade; she pictured him crouched in her wardrobe, hands clamped over his eyes, his face buried in her coat; a new game that culminated in spectacular tantrums when she would not play with him.

The tide would be coming in.

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

The air in the house was still. Plaster dust lingered, making her skin feel dry and papery.

'Jonathan! Last chance or I'm leaving you all alone.'

No answer.

If he were here, Hugh would have stormed upstairs to fetch him; used to assessing risk, he would assume his son was hurt or systematically damaging something. Kate craned up the stairwell to the topmost landing and met the cantankerous eyes of Brunel, the adopted stray cat. Jon wasn't there.

She peered in the oval mirror. It was spotted with silver, but she could examine the cut on her forehead, delicately dabbing at beads of blood, wincing when it stung. She had attempted to divert Jon's attention by giving him her good luck amulet, but he had been unimpressed and plonked it on the hall table.

In the suspended quiet, the tick-tock of the ancestral grandfather clock, a faithless presence in its sombre ebony case, marked time. She heard a noise from above; it would be the cat.

With the blood wiped away, the wound was faint.

'Here he is!' Jonathan Rokesmith had developed a trick of speaking about himself in the third person. Hugh said it avoided taking responsibility for his actions. Kate found it strange.

'Sweetheart, at last!'

She reached out to her son who was stumping downstairs in blue wellington boots instead of the sandals she had put him in. A graze on his knee had practically healed; the skin a livid pink against his toasty brown tan. He would have a scar, despite her attempts to stop him picking at the wound.

Sturdy, compact and red-cheeked, Jonathan Justin Rokesmith, with his choppy shock of hair, fine blond like his mother's, a kitchen-scissors fringe flicking over one eye, was charmingly oblivious that he had delayed their expedition. The four-year-old waved the illegal engine aloft, making choo-choo noises as, left foot first, he took each stair with reckless intent, sure that his mummy would catch him should he topple.

'Are you my special man?' Kate pushed her palm against Jon's

LESLEY THOMPSON

chest forcing him to halt. He grinned, shying from her looming kiss. Abruptly she let him go and he stumbled before regaining balance.

As Kate and her son came out of 47 St Peter's Square, the next-door neighbour Professor Ramsay was climbing out of his vintage Rover, a car that Hugh and Jonathan coveted. He paused on the pavement to mime approval at Jonathan in his boots and billowing *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* T-shirt, military marching down the path. Kate shrugged her shoulders in a show of helpless pride. In sunglasses, tight-fitting trousers and shirt that flattered her, she might have turned heads, but that day the streets, bleached by relentless sunshine, were deserted and there was only Mark Ramsay to appreciate her.

A world expert in Parkinson's disease, the professor was busy, so Kate did not expect conversation. His wife was less predictable; Isabel Ramsay might initiate chat, give a stern nod or appear not to see Kate at all. If it was a 'talking day' this would involve eulogies about rambles with her 'gorgeous baby Lucian'. Her stories – garnished with sentiment and bread for ducks – lacked the blood, mud and bruises of Kate's outings with Jonathan. Isabel Ramsay spoke as if her children were young; in fact Lucian, brisk in brogues and chinos, was about Kate's age and not, she thought, gorgeous. He must always have been impeccable and obedient – unlike her own child.

Hugh had once remarked that the Ramsays had been glamorous sixties people, appearing in gossip columns and throwing parties for friends in high places until some scandal. Her husband's eye for detail did not extend to humans so he could only hazard that one of the kids had got into a scrape involving a girl. Kate decided it was Lucian: the quiet ones were trouble. As Jon chattered confidentially to his toys or constructed tunnels from stones and twigs, she was grateful he had the imagination to misbehave.

'Embarking on an expedition?' Lifting a garden spade and doctor's bag from his car, Professor Ramsay addressed the boy, who knelt on the kerb coaxing a beetle into a porthole in the back of the engine's cab.

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

'We're going to the Bell Steps, aren't we, Jonny?' Kate, with the mother's anxiety that her son would ignore the question, replied in a cheery tone.

However, the boy announced: 'He is going to fight at a war.' Jon gravely eyed the spade.

'Splendid. We need good soldiers.' Mark Ramsay tucked the spade under his arm.

Jon snatched up his engine and struggled to his feet, causing the beetle to tumble out of the cab. It was crushed by his heel when he set off in a straight line, keeping to the kerb.

'I've a headache so cried off my ma-in-law's. A stroll should clear it,' Kate ventured, taking her eye off Jonathan.

'This is headache weather,' Mark Ramsay agreed, swinging the medicine bag as, smiling, he watched Kate set off in pursuit of her son.

She straggled along the baking street towards the church, dazzled by darts of light from flecks of quartz in the paving and oppressed by the dome of white-blue sky. At Rose Gardens North, the asphalt had softened and swollen in the intense heat. Kate felt her limbs grow leaden. She glanced back; Professor Ramsay was still by the kerb.

Too late she made an effort to steer Jonathan away from the statue of the Leaning Woman. Naked from the waist up, as the name implied, the statue leant towards the Great West Road with arms folded; her sublime pose, describing the curve in the carriageway, contrasted with the clamour of speeding traffic.

Jonathan had become attached to her. He painted sloppy powder-paint pictures of her and fashioned lumpy clay models with misshapen breasts.

'Boo!' He sprang out from behind the plinth. Kate pretended shock.

On their last visit he had been dismayed to find her actual breasts slathered with green paint and a plastic strawberry punnet dangling like a handbag from her arm and demanded Kate climb up and take it off. She had been unable to snap the nylon cord or undo the knot, but had promised that next time they would bring

LESLEY THOMPSON

a knife. She had presumed he would forget and had brought no kind of cutting implement.

Jon rampaged around the statue, deaf to his mother's assurances that she would remember the knife on another walk. He slid to the ground with a despairing sob, lips pouting, grizzling: 'You said you would be-fore and you did-ent.'

Kate snatched the steam engine off him and stalked away. His yells escalated to choking screams. She made for the subway ramp and did not stop when the noise subsided into intermittent wails. Later, this scene – a little boy huddled at the foot of a statue, hugging his knees – would shock the police officer who was unable to persuade him to leave.

Kate plodded on, her sandals slapping the ground; glare bounced off the concrete slope, the tiled walls, the metal railings, all conspiring to bewilder and enervate.

She did not hear the footsteps or notice that the crying had stopped.

The engine was wrenched from her, the metal ripping a nail on her forefinger. Jonathan barrelled past, jolting her hip, and belted on into the tunnel.

'You hurt me. You idiot!'

She turned on to the lower ramp. Through the subway railings she caught a flicker by the statue, but dismissed it as a trick of the light. The turquoise tiles were closing in. A ring pull in the gutter flashed in the sun as she passed.

'Calm down, darling.' Kate tried to sound calm herself in case anyone could overhear. Jonathan had gone and she really did have a headache.

In the convex mirror at the mouth of the tunnel a figure merged into the darkness.

St Peter's church bell struck 'quarter to' as the boy galloped along the subway, toot-tooting his way, his voice hollow. The fading sound had a melancholy quality, dying away in the ceramic-lined chamber. Although it was cooler here, the air was raw with exhaust fumes and the smell of piss.

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

Kate emerged on to Black Lion Lane South. The jumbled sounds of a television drifted from open windows in the Ram public house where baskets of vibrantly red geraniums, leaves frazzled, hung along the frontage, the red of their petals finding echo in the red umbrellas casting shade over empty tables. A solitary pint glass stood on a window sill; it was too early for lunchtime drinkers.

Kate steered Jonathan across Hammersmith Terrace. He shook her hand off his shoulder when she prevented him running his engine over the bonnet of the Ford Anglia outside the end house. She checked her hair in its wing mirror and caught Jonathan being Worzel Gummidge, lurching crabwise down the Bell Steps.

With no boats to churn up the river, the flickering surface mirrored spindly trees lining St Paul's School playing fields on the far bank. The turrets of Hammersmith Bridge tottered as light obliterated the looping spans between the portals. If he were here, Hugh would inform them that the bridge had been designed by the man who created the London sewers and was opened by the Prince of Wales in June 1887.

She stepped gingerly over to where the wall of the gardens on Hammersmith Terrace cast a strip of shadow along the top of the beach; the shade did not afford a drop in temperature. A line of moss in the brick marked the level of high tide. Slung from iron hoops was a chain stained a lurid green by slime and weeds. Kate grasped this to steady herself on the rough ground.

On the shoreline, Jonathan Rokesmith filled the funnel of his engine with specifically chosen stones and fragments of glass. These, he explained to his invisible audience, were 'je-wels'. He liked the sound of the word and repeated it when he reached the critical part of his operation. He guided the engine into the water. This was naughty. He looked to see if his mummy was watching.

The river filled and the current increased; the engine stirred lazily in the shallow water and for a while, made of metal and weighted by stones, remained anchored in the mud amongst rubble and the

LESLEY THOMPSON

debris of centuries. It dislodged itself and, lifted by the current, was swept away to catch against a stanchion at Putney Bridge and sink. Buried in the silt of the Thames it would not be found for eighty-three years.

Kate Rokesmith was dead, her body sprawled on its back in the shrinking shade. Her neck twisted, she gazed sightlessly at the river, tangled tresses of her hair fanning out over the sun-baked mud. The swelling above her eye was stark as gravity drained the blood downwards and that side of her face gradually paled.

The tide encroached, narrowing the shore below the Bell Steps, which apart from the body was deserted.

Over the following weeks people would pick over the events of this day. In the Ram, drinkers sifted the few facts, retracing the likely route of the young mother's walk from St Peter's Square to the banks of the River Thames.

Kate Rokesmith's decision to go to the river changed the lives of many. Jonathan's memories of his mother would fade to a procession of shadows and murmuring embraces less substantial than his dreams.

In Britain, the Wednesday of that week was a public holiday. For decades, inhabitants of the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham could describe where they were when Prince Charles married Lady Diana. The wedding overshadowed the murder two days earlier; few could recall that otherwise ordinary Monday in July 1981.

Even the smallest observation might have helped the police solve the murder of Katherine Rokesmith. In the end, it did not.

One

Sunday, 9 January 2011

The Toyota took three attempts to fire and the car was out of sight by the time Terry got moving. A skilled driver, he wove through the lunchtime traffic, snatching space, overtaking to slip in two vehicles behind the car at lights on Chalker's Corner. It was indicating right. There was no right turn. Terry felt heat rise as the police officer in him wanted to pull alongside and flash his badge. The car crossed the junction but the indicator had warned him there would soon be a right turn. At Lower Richmond Road the car did indeed go right, then right again to rejoin the A316. Terry slid in behind and when it took the slip road on to the M3 congratulated himself on keeping his petrol tank full.

Terry Darnell knew he was dealing with a meticulous and observant personality, likely to notice a vehicle keeping pace, so he hung back until the M25; then he risked overtaking and keeping the vehicle in his rear-view mirror. He knew better than to underestimate his quarry: people surprise you.

Later he dropped back and tucked into the left lane with the car ahead. Luckily this was a cautious driver who would not speed; just like a woman. Just as well because Terry's ten-year-old 1.4 engine would not be tortoise to this fuel-injected hare. He increased his distance when the other car crossed into his lane.

When it took the exit, Terry didn't need to keep the car within his sights. He knew where they were going.

The hamlet had no through road and, although close to a town with a station, felt to Terry as remote as the depths of Dartmoor. It

LESLEY THOMPSON

was remote in time too; iron lamp-posts had yet to shed light on a Victorian pillar box and the one street sign. Spreading oaks and forbidding acers and flint walls partially concealed substantial detached houses.

Terry watched the car go off left and continued on the bypass before he took a road to the sea and doubled back.

He let the Yaris bump along a lane treacherous with potholes and, steering it on to a secluded verge, killed the engine. If anyone came he would ask for directions to the church; that always went down well.

Terry registered his full bladder. He had not touched the flask of coffee he had made for staking out the premises; these days he wanted to piss all the time. He relieved himself behind the boot of the car. He tested his camera with shots of the tyres; feeling the tightening in his chest, he dismissed it.

The air was freezing; snow was forecast. He buttoned up his jacket. Snow would obliterate clues and hamper the simplest action. He did not find it as joyful as when Stella was little.

A weather-beaten sign pointed him towards the church and, picking his way along a rutted footpath crunchy with fallen leaves, he reached a lych gate. The intense quiet was broken by bells chiming three o'clock. Already the sky was darkening. He patted his pocket; his torch was there.

As he unlatched the gate and walked under the tiled canopy, another bout of dizziness overwhelmed him; despite what the doctor said, Terry knew it was blood sugar dropping. He had not eaten since his cornflakes that morning and these days he could not get away with it. There was no quaint village shop and he was reluctant to go into the town. It was when the perpetrator was cornered that less experienced detectives grew careless. Later he would eat the Kit Kat in the glove box with his coffee.

Terry lowered himself on to a bench within the lych gate and, resting his head back, read the laminated notices pinned opposite: flower rotas, times of services; a Wednesday coffee morning. His attention was aroused by a sign on red paper: 'If you have lost a

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

child, or know of a child that has died, however long ago, please come and join us in remembering them.'

He wondered if anyone could come or if it was for locals only. Did it matter if your child was alive and lost only to you?

He mulled over how many parents in this backwater could have suffered such a particular bereavement. It could not amount to a large congregation. A child had gone missing in the sixties near here; the girl had never been found but, as was becoming frequent, Terry could not conjure up detail. Some poor sod was tortured by that case; worrying over minor specifics, rifling through files he knew off by heart. Terry wiped his face – his memory really was on the blink – the poor sod was called Hall and was dead. He had read that the girl's parents had also died; they would not be attending the service.

Kate Rokesmith's murderer would be brought to justice. His own torture was at an end.

Terry took the path to the church. The tower was square and tapered; each point where it slimmed was marked by a line of jutting bricks giving the impression the structure could be telescoped upon itself. On its spire a golden cockerel weathervane facing towards the sea glinted in sunshine escaping from a break in the clouds. He remembered it from the funeral; it had put him in mind of his little girl. By then fifteen and doubtless into make-up and boys, she had no time for him. It was like one of Stella's drawings which he had mounted in a scrapbook. Stella's primary school pictures were bright with colour; if only life was how she had drawn it. When he asked if he could keep the ones she did on her visits, modest about her talent, she would shrug OK. The scrapbook still gave him happiness.

He had attended the service with a colleague, a woman whom he had quite fancied. Afterwards they dropped off for a drink at a pub on the A3 where she had called her boyfriend from a phone booth by the toilets; no mobile phones in those days. So that was that. Terry told himself it was not wise to mix business with pleasure. Instead, he had not mixed it with anything. Neither of

LESLEY THOMPSON

them had seen anyone suspicious at the funeral. The case was as cold as ice and Kate had only been dead six weeks.

The murderer had been there, coiffured and respectable, in the left of the photograph by a headstone, watching the coffin carried out from the church. Three decades on, Terry, knowing whom to look for, had quickly spotted the killer in the crowd.

Any hope the Rokesmith family had of privacy had been dashed by the photographers, journalists, television crews and the obligatory straggle of onlookers who packed the churchyard. They had made Terry's job harder but now he was grateful; he had the picture. It only proved the culprit's presence at the funeral, but it was a start.

It would have been easy to chat with mourners without them batting an eyelid. There was no talk of a stranger acting oddly from the would-be detectives on the ground that day. Truth be told, Terry had been more interested in his sergeant – Janet, that was her name; after all, they believed they had solved the case, so in reality were only crossing Ts.

Hugh Rokesmith, Terry had observed to Janet over a pint of Fuller's London Pride, had given a sterling performance, with the boy in his arms the perfect prop for the grieving widower. Terry had gone into the telephone booth after Janet and, with Stella's weathervane drawing on his mind, called the Barons Court flat to see if she fancied meeting when he got into London. Stella informed him she was busy.

The dizziness ebbed. Trying to recall the whereabouts of the grave, Terry stumbled over uneven ground, going anti-clockwise around the building. The word 'widdershins' popped up: he had an idea his mum had warned it was bad luck to go widdershins around a church.

For the first time since Stella was born, Terry felt that luck was on his side. He threaded between the grassy mounds, the grass was damp with winter dew, and soon the bottoms of his trousers were sodden. He was long-sighted and could see the words engraved on headstones yards away. He ignored a row of nineteenth-century

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

vaults for the moneyed dead, the mausoleums creating gaps like the canyon-like avenues in Manhattan. Or so he imagined, he had never been there.

In this section, headstones were older: Terry made out 1814, but most inscriptions were illegible beneath greenish-yellow lichen that crept over the eroding stone. Some were broken, their pieces lost in foliage or laid on top of the grave. Those who had tended the plots were themselves long dead.

An impenetrable hedgerow of beech bounded one side of the graveyard, woven through with tendrils of ivy and clumps of holly.

Terry came upon a gate and peered through the curling metal; another hedge within meant he had to crane sideways to see a house on a lawn. It was from one of the stories he had read to Stella: a witch's house in a forest clearing, with lattice windows on the upper floor beneath gables carved with cut-out birds in flight, their shapes echoed by silhouettes of actual birds circling the stout chimneys.

Terry shrank back. Although the windows were dark, someone might be watching. On a weekday winter afternoon, a visitor to the church was rare; he would not blend in.

He stuck to a flagged path, grateful for firm ground and hastened between bushes clipped to form columns into an overgrown area with a wall, beyond which stretched away fields, brown and grey in the fading light. He crossed the grass in the gathering twilight and there it was; shaded by a larch and hidden from most sightseers: 'Katherine Rokesmith. 27th July 1981'.

Terry doubted that these days the name would mean much to anyone.

A bunch of flowers leant against the headstone. Terry's heart beat faster as he bent to examine them. Five yellow roses, their heads browning, the wrapping wrinkled from rain; he estimated they were about a week old. There was no shop label or price. He tore off a flower and dropped it in his pocket to show Stella. The grave was in good order, the grass clipped with no weeds; someone

LESLEY THOMPSON

was tending it. Terry circled the plot snapping pictures: of the stone, a close-up of the roses and of the epitaph. He used flash: the merciless light highlighting the deteriorating writing. It could have been centuries old, yet some letters had no moss or lichen on them, as if whoever had begun restoration had given up or planned to return.

Suddenly the stillness was broken. The sound was slight, but Terry identified it instantly: the scrape of a shoe on gravel.

Someone was coming.

Two

Monday, 10 January 2011

A woman sat in offices on Shepherd's Bush Green integrating new clients into a cleaning schedule. It was an early morning task she enjoyed; it involved creating a list of staff, lining up availability to match time slots and applying a colour code to cells on a spreadsheet. Blue for mornings, yellow for afternoons, green for evenings and light green for late nights. She was methodical, switching between grids, extracting data from two files to populate a third. She chewed spearmint gum with her mouth shut, her jaw quietly working.

The starched white cotton shirt, sharp haircut and tailored suit trousers hinted at an authority confirmed when, having identified cleaners to cover the shifts, she tossed her gum into a waste bin and dialled the numbers on the list. She was pleasant but firm, overcoming objections or obstacles from the seventeen freelancers who worked exclusively for her. By five to nine the rota was complete and she had been at her desk three hours.

She strode through to the main office to fetch client details from signed contracts in her PA's pending tray and was startled by knocking. A policeman was gesticulating through the wire-reinforced glass door panel.

'I'm looking for Stella Darnell.'

'You've found her.'

At six foot and in her mid-forties Stella was taller and older than the officer.

While he talked she grabbed a cleaning equipment catalogue from a shelf and, resting it on a filing cabinet, scribbled busily, squeezing words into the margins and around pictures of a soft

LESLEY THOMPSON

banister brush with a wooden handle and a galvanized flat-top socket for a broom. ‘Superintendent Darnell ... coming out ... Co-op ... Seaford ... collapsed. Ambulance in 10 mins, paramedics worked ... failed revive ... dead on arrival.’

Stella circled ‘dead on arrival’ and laid down her pen. She contemplated the banister brush. It was not necessary, but would impress fussier clients; she would ask Jackie to order one and see how it went.

A mug of tea materialized by the catalogue and, as if she hovered far above, Stella gazed down uncomprehending: she had not heard Jackie arrive. The policeman’s voice, droning on like a radio announcer, was drowned out by the telephone. She counted the rings: it was answered on the seventh. Not good enough. She stipulated it should be picked up at three max.

‘Clean Slate for a fresh start. Good morning, Jackie speaking, how can we help?’

The tea was scalding and sweet. Stella’s own voice was reminding Jackie that she didn’t take sugar and Jackie was replying slowly and patiently, explaining in words of one syllable that it was for shock.

Your father is dead.

It was not until the late afternoon, in the Royal Sussex County Hospital in Brighton, that Stella entertained the notion that she should be upset. All day she had dealt with the police, medical staff, administrators and Jackie, who treated her with practical sympathy. Everyone’s response was out of proportion to Stella’s so she was grateful at last to be alone.

The NHS bag containing Terry’s belongings banged against a door as she emerged on to a goods road between the Cardiac Unit in a high-rise block and the shambling nineteenth-century building which housed the reception she had arrived at five hours earlier. Once a paean to Victorian endeavour, it was dwarfed by a maze of new-builds clad in steel and glass, its grandeur undermined by stuccoed pre-fabs and flaking render. She dodged a van and pushed through plastic flaps into a passage with a

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

suspended ceiling and a flooring of epoxy quartz screed that emphasized a list to one side and gave her the impression of being on a ship.

Terence Christopher Darnell was pronounced dead at half past eight a.m. in the street where he had collapsed twenty minutes earlier. A female doctor told Stella that the probable cause was cardiac arrest but they could not be definite until they had performed a post-mortem. It was most unlikely, she had assured Stella, that 'Terence' had experienced pain.

His name is Terry.

She rarely called him Dad.

Stella frowned. She had not considered that he might have been in pain. She had also been informed, perhaps by the policeman, who was clearly both relieved and appalled by her lack of tears, that a lady coming out of the Co-op behind Detective Superintendent Darnell had said he'd toppled over like a toy soldier making no effort to save himself.

He was a toy policeman, Stella had nearly said.

She shouldered through another set of doors and found herself in a chapel; warm and dark, the quiet extreme after the bustle of the hospital.

Stella was about to leave, but arranged around an altar was a semi-circle of chairs and she slumped on to the nearest one, and dropped the NHS bag beside her.

Terence Christopher Darnell's sudden death would mean extra work at a busy time, she mused. Stella's parents had divorced when she was seven and her mother had not seen her ex-husband since Stella was old enough to visit him without being delivered or collected. Suzanne Darnell would lament that her marriage had been a wrong turning; she lived alone in West London, having made no further navigational errors. She would not help her daughter dispose of Terry and his belongings.

In Stella's business, death was a prompt for a house clearance and thorough clean in readiness for sale; Terry's death need be no different to any other, she told herself.

LESLEY THOMPSON

Although she was Terry's only child, it had surprised Stella that he had a slip of paper in his wallet naming her as his next of kin because she saw him no more than three times a year. Sitting on the hard chair, surrounded by wall plaques commemorating patrons and patients of the hospital now at peace and in a higher place, Stella dwelt on the earthly fact of the death of a man she hardly knew. His body had not looked at peace.

Two electric candles dripping with fake wax were plugged into a socket on the altar. Stella recognized the scent as one of the flower fairy ranges of Asquith & Somerset and doubted it could be on the NHS preferred supplies list. A bunch of fresh freesias drooped out of a cream plastic vase beneath a stained-glass panel of the Madonna and Child. She made a mental note to order lavender spray for Mrs Ramsay in St Peter's Square. On her last visit, there had been a stale odour; she suspected the old lady of smoking, although she claimed to have given up.

This led her to think about her other clients and, getting out her phone, she scrolled through her messages. Jackie had signed up someone responding to the advert in the local paper and had trialled a new cleaner in the office after Stella had left for Sussex. The woman had not passed, but Jackie wanted to know if she should hire her anyway. Stella tutted at this, the noise distinct in the silence; rapidly her fingers busied on the keypad as she instructed Jackie *not* to take on someone who had failed the cleaning test. As Stella dreaded, her business could not carry on without her being there.

Paul had texted, wanting to see her. She had not told him about Terry, nor did she want to. He would be hoping that over a bottle of wine he could persuade her to let him move in.

Jesus, pale and chipped upon the Cross, gazed down at her with blank eyes as she typed: *Let's call it a day. We know it's not working. Stella.*

She hesitated before adding an 'x', but then, just before she pressed 'send', she deleted the kiss. She did not love Paul – whatever love was – and it was better to be honest. She watched the envelope

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

icon tumble into infinity to become a dot, and insisted to herself she was doing Paul a favour; he could find someone who loved him.

Having mustered up the wherewithal to release herself from a relationship about which she had been ambivalent for too long, Stella tackled the NHS bag. Each item was in a sealed packet, which did not stop a sour reek of sweat escaping, sickly and clinging. Her stomach coiled. She extracted the leather wallet with delicate fingers – the crackle of plastic was loud in the chapel; she had given it to Terry for his fiftieth birthday over fifteen years ago. She had asked the shop to have his initials embossed in silver: 'TD', forgetting about 'Christopher'. The letters had rubbed away to the merest indentation. Terry had folded up the birthday wrapping paper, smoothing it flat on his coffee table, and let slip how his colleagues nicknamed him 'Top Cat'. Stella had been infuriated, although she could not have said why. The policeman in her office had momentarily stepped out of role to exclaim that Terry was a 'top man' but if this was meant to console her, it had landed wide.

The clothes he was wearing had been folded and placed together. His dark grey suit was from Marks & Spencer's Autograph range: the jacket had a tear under the shoulder; a blue cotton shirt striped with brown was also torn with loose threads trailing where the paramedics had ripped away the buttons. Applying the method of fixing the age of a tree, salt rings under the arms indicated to Stella that Terry had worn it for two days. Little though she saw him, she knew Terry ironed his shirts and kept his hair washed. On the few occasions that she kissed him – in greeting, or on departure – his chin was smooth and scented with Gillette Series Aftershave Splash Cool Wave, his hair smelling of Boots anti-dandruff men's shampoo. He would not wear anything more than once. She looked up and caught Jesus looking at her balefully. She considered that the detective, whom her mother insisted was happier with tagged corpses and evidence bags than with his family, was now a collection of belongings sealed in plastic and backed up by a sheaf of paperwork. Terry would have hated such an end.

LESLEY THOMPSON

Stella passed over underpants, shoes, a T-shirt and balled-up socks and stuffed them all back in the bag, inhaling deep the chapel's flower fairy scent.

The nurse who had taken her to see Terry's body must have been on some training course about dealing with bereaved relatives. She was keen that Stella should banish timidity in the presence of her dead father.

Stella had noted his greasy hair was brushed the wrong way and the stubble on his chin was white. A stained tooth was visible between stiffened lips. She had not seen Terry lying down since she was a child. He was naked under the sheet, draped loosely over the gurney.

'It's OK to touch him,' the nurse had whispered encouragingly.

Stella pretended not to hear. Keeping her hands in her pockets, she nodded in confirmation like an actor in a police procedural drama and muttered: 'Yes, that's him.'

Identification was not an issue; the hospital had his driving licence. She refused the offer of 'time alone with your dad', thinking what was the point? At the nurses' station, she caught sight of Terry's name on a form: 'Certification of Life Extinct'.

Beneath these words she scanned his admission notes. Words floated free of their sentences as she read, her brain fighting to dismiss meaning: 'Attempted to resuscitate. Police called. Date of death Monday 10 January 2011. Last seen alive, Broad Street, Seaford, 8.25 a.m. today. Means of identification: personal papers – driving licence, bank cards. No suspicious circumstances.'

A doctor had signed his or her name and underneath the signature had printed more legibly: 'May he rest in peace.'

The chapel door banged and a wheezy man in a fluorescent jerkin that showed off his beer gut pattered in, sighing.

Stella drew her jacket around her and tipped Terry's Accurist watch into her palm. She put her hand through its heavy bracelet and snapped shut the clasp. Her wrist looked childlike and the watch slid up her arm, cold against her skin. It would need links taken out to fit. Terry kept it three minutes fast for punctuality, a tip

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

Stella followed. In the same bag was his wedding ring. Her mother had thrown her own in the bin. Stella presumed Terry wore it to make women think he was married, just as Suzanne's ringless finger signalled she was unattached. Stella had retrieved her mother's ring from a wad of damp tea bags. She now had both rings.

There was no spare underwear or toothbrush and this confirmed her growing suspicion that Terry had not expected to be away overnight. What was he doing in Sussex?

The last bag was labelled 'Contents of pockets' and comprised a half-eaten packet of chewing gum, £7.80 in change, a scratch card with a winning prize of ten pounds and the head of a yellow rose. She took the flower out of the bag; it had no scent and was browning. She did not think Terry liked flowers. She found his keys.

Stella knelt up on the chair, leaning over the kitchen table, and worked her way through each key.

'Daddy has lots of doors.' She began to chatter on and bang went his chance to have a read of the paper. Propped on her elbows, she questioned him about each one like a detective. When she behaved like a grown-up, going all serious, he had to try not to laugh.

He started by answering promptly, as if it was a quiz, but after a while had to admit he got fed up; it had been a long night and he needed his bed.

'Do you lock up murderers and throw away the key?'

He snatched the bunch off her.

'Where'd you get that from?'

'You know where.' In came her mother. Suzanne has to have a go.

Game over.

Stella dangled the keys from her forefinger. When she was twenty-one Terry handed her his door keys; in case of emergency, he had explained. He had cancelled her birthday dinner that year

LESLEY THOMPSON

to attend a fatal stabbing on the White City estate. Her mother said giving her his keys was his idea of a rite of passage and that would be her lot. Once she was over eighteen, Stella had told herself she had no need of a father.

Two months ago, suspecting an intruder, Terry had heightened the back garden wall with a trellis and changed the locks; he had not given Stella the new keys.

Now she had them and had inherited the doors they unlocked: she had unrestricted entry to Terry's abandoned life. She brushed the leather Triumph fob with her thumb.

Where was his car?

The stained-glass window had become opaque; it must be dark outside. The man had gone. She could not remember what car Terry drove: the Triumph Herald had long ago packed up on him. The police officer had relayed an offer of help from Terry's colleagues at Hammersmith Police Station, which she had refused. She would not ask anything of the police.

Terry's wallet bulged with papers: receipts, loyalty cards, the driving licence and sixty-five pounds in twenties and a five. He was one coffee away from a free drink at Caffè Nero; she had presumed greasy spoon cafés were more him. She struck lucky: a receipt from a filling station in Seaford. She peered at the faint blue ink and worked out that Terry had bought petrol at sixteen minutes to eight that morning.

Stella had never driven Terry; if they went anywhere together it was in his car. When she passed her test – first time – her mother had told her that Terry did not trust women drivers.

At the bottom of the bag two glistening ham rolls nestled in a Co-op carrier; the doughy bread mummified in cling film had been flattened by a can of Coke. Her stomach heaved: Terry had bought them just before he died.

At London Zoo, Terry had treated his little daughter to a bottle of Coke. Stella hated drinks with bubbles but at the giraffe house she had upset him by calling him 'Terry' as her mum did, instead of 'Dad', so she sucked dutifully on the pink straw, willing the level to

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

creep down, the bubbles exploding in her throat. They waited on the westbound District line platform of Earls Court station to go the one stop to her new home in Barons Court and Stella got a feeling in her tummy. She swallowed a rush of saliva and stayed stock still.

The train clattered in, doors swished, a voice boomed and when people pushed behind her Stella threw up over shoes and legs. Brown foaming liquid chased along the carriage floor. The train was taken out of service and it was her fault.

She had retreated to the new bedroom, with no toys and a stain on the ceiling. Before being sick she had planned to say 'Thank you for having me, Daddy' to make it all better. In Stella's memory her parents' voices conflated with the policeman who had mutely reprimanded her lack of emotion: *'What were you thinking of? You don't know your own daughter. She hates fizzy drinks.'*

You don't care about your father.

The NHS bag bulged with bald indicators of a life. Stella did not think of Terry Darnell filed in a steel drawer in the hospital mortuary, but as following her out of the hospital warning her to mind her own business.

Jackie had told Stella that Seaford was a seaside town twelve miles east of Brighton; she took the coast road recommended by her satnav. A notice announced Seaford was twinned with Bönningstedt in Germany. She swung past the station over a mini-roundabout, took a left then a right on to a street with Barclays Bank on one side and a Pound shop on the other. She was in a ghost town: no cars; no pedestrians on the shop-lit pavements. A crisp packet broke free from the shelter of a lamp-post to spin and skitter along the camber like tumbleweed. A church clock tolled nine as Stella stopped the van outside a disused Woolworths store and turning off the engine became aware of a creaking like a rocking chair. She got out: further along the street the metal sign for a men's clothes shop swung back and forth; the place unsettled her.

Jackie had said Terry died at a difficult time of the year: right after Christmas. Stella did not see what that had to do with

LESLEY THOMPSON

anything; she had not spent a Christmas with Terry since she was seven.

The Co-op had closed an hour ago. Stella guessed that it must have looked the same when Terry arrived early that morning; the shelves restocked with packets, jars, bottles, their labels stark in the low security lighting. Rows of shopping trolleys were corralled next to the fruit and vegetable section, ready for the next day. Terry would not have used a trolley for so few items; he had not touched them. Opposite, she read 'Sweet Moments' on the fascia of a handmade-chocolate shop; perhaps these were the last words that Terry had seen.

If Stella expected to find a clue to the drama that had taken place in the doorway twelve hours earlier, she was disappointed. The two-storey shop buildings, block paving, tang of disinfectant and yellow plastic 'wet floor' hazard cone near the tills yielded nothing. It could have been any Co-op store in any town.

She stepped back from the store to where the pavement extended into the road for a pedestrian crossing delineated by ridges. Terry had told her that gold studs on the stones marked the boundary between private land and the public walkway, or had he? An outlet next to the supermarket was to let; unopened mail piled up on the door mat.

Terry had arrived here early that morning; he must have stayed the night somewhere but, since he hadn't even taken his toothbrush, Stella was sure he had not planned to. Where had he stayed?

She was staring at a snatch of white. She bent down: a piece of paper had wedged between the bars of a drain cover. She extracted it and in the low security light of the Co-op doorway unpeeled it, careful not to tear along the fold. It was a newspaper photograph, photocopied on a skew, cutting off some of the image. A footprint had transferred the surface of the pavement like a brass rubbing so she struggled to read the caption: *To th ma or Mr say launches Charb new vi all.*

The black and grey pixels comprised a group of people, their features bleached out in sunlight. There was a figure in the

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

foreground who might be a woman, but a splodge of dirt blotted her face. Triangular shapes crossed the top of the frame. The only unmistakable element of the photograph was a church. The angle of the shot made it appear to be balanced on the woman's head and the time on its clock was midday. Although there was nothing about the cutting to connect it with Terry, Stella slipped it into her pocket.

She heard the beeping of a reversing vehicle and scanned the street; it was empty. She hurried back to the van and saw that a light was flashing on an automatic teller in the wall of a building society on the other side of the road. At the end of the street a stretch limousine rolled by, a gaggle of young women in orange afro wigs hanging out of the windows bawling Robbie Williams' 'Angels'; the raucous sound faded into the night. The beeps stopped and the light in the cash machine went out. She approached it: a twenty-pound note lay in the cash tray.

Stella retrieved the note; brand new, it crackled when she folded it into her coat pocket with the cutting. She saw a 'P' for a car park and, jumping into the van, slung it left down a narrow road with a terrace of cottages on one side and a building with a castellated roof silhouetted against the sky on the other. Ahead of her was the car park. Four cars were dotted around the asphalted space and again Stella tried to recall the car Terry had owned.

She felt about among Terry's things and at the bottom of the bag found his keys. When she pressed the remote button on the fat plastic head there was no response. She extended her arm and hazard lights to her right flashed twice.

The blue Toyota Yaris had a parking penalty clamped to its windscreen by a wiper; Stella ripped out the ticket in yet another plastic bag and, nerving herself, got in the driver's seat. She caught a whiff of vanilla deodorizer and saw with approval that Terry had plugged an air purifier into the cigarette lighter socket. The car started first time. She cruised around the area until she found a residential street with no parking restrictions. Before getting out she gave the car a brief check, searching for a clue to why

Terry had been in Seaford. She found nothing but a Kit Kat wrapper and a half-drunk flask of coffee that had rolled under the front seat and concluded that the vehicle would need valeting before she sold it.

Only when she had locked the car did Stella notice that Terry had, after all, paid and displayed; a ticket face up on the dashboard was valid until eight fifteen that morning.

Terry had died fifteen minutes after the expiry time.

Half an hour later, Stella was speeding along the M23. Her rear-view mirror reflecting the empty motorway was a black rectangle. Earlier there had been tail-lights ahead, which were snuffed out when the driver rounded a bend and had not reappeared. She adjusted her phone in its cradle on the dashboard.

Where was Terry's mobile phone?

She rumbled on to the hard shoulder and, releasing the seat belt, scrabbled through the NHS bag on the front seat. There was a shuffling in the back of the van. Stella froze. She had not adhered to her own rule of looking in the interior if she left the van. It was easy to hide amongst the buckets and spare overalls. She heard the shuffling again, then a thump, and she spun around.

A bag of dishwasher salt granules lay on the carpeted floor. Many clients included appliance maintenance in their contract and someone had stacked the bags on the racks without securing them. Another was about to go; Stella clambered through the seats and caught it. She stowed the salt where it belonged, on the bottom shelf in a plastic container.

She checked the central locking and remembered why she had stopped. One thing Stella did know about Terry was that he always kept his mobile phone with him. Yet it was not in the NHS bag nor in his car, although there was a phone charger in the glove box.

The keyboard on her BlackBerry was fiddly in the feeble light but eventually she selected 'Dad'. She clenched her teeth, waiting for it to connect: some part of her expecting Terry to answer.

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

The ringing briefly fell in step with the click-click of her hazard lights. She was about to hang up when it stopped.

'Who's that?' Stella almost said: *Dad, is that you?*

Who's that? a woman responded.

'No, who are you?' Stella demanded.

No, who are you? It was her echo.

The line deadened with an almost imperceptible change in quality; a cessation of sound as if someone had replaced a receiver.

The screen said 'Call duration twelve seconds'. Stella selected 'Dialled numbers'. 'Dad' was top of the list with 'Clean Slate' underneath: her last two calls.

She pressed 'redial'.

This time the answering service cut in and Terry's voice invited the caller to leave as much information as they liked. Even in retirement he was encouraging witnesses to come forward with evidence, available any time of the day or night.

Stella had always told herself that if she called, Terry would be too busy to talk.

Her voice hesitant, she asked whoever had the phone to ring her to arrange collection.

Maybe Terry had dropped his phone when he collapsed and it had been stolen by kids. Thinking that she had called the wrong number, she went into 'Dialled numbers' again: the word 'Dad' lost meaning the longer she stared at it.

Stella caught her reflection in the side window, the dark rendering it high contrast: lumpy hair, her eyes lost in their sockets and her mouth a grim pencil line. She ran the window down to erase herself and was hit by cold wood-smoked air. Beyond the carriageway ragged trees were outlined against the sodium-pink sky of a town. A light blinked through the branches, moving, vanishing, then appearing closer and she heard a long low whistle.

She looked in her wing mirror and saw that a car was parked on the hard shoulder twenty yards away with its lights off. It hadn't been there when she had pulled off the road. She tilted the wing

LESLEY THOMPSON

mirror, but it was too dark to tell if there was anyone inside. She did not want to wait to find out; she started the engine and gunned the van out into the middle lane. Fixing her seat belt, she accelerated to seventy. Careful of petrol consumption and after all a policeman's daughter, Stella did not speed.

By the time the lights of London twinkled ahead, she was clear: Terry's death was a task to be ticked off and then she would move on.

She easily negotiated the tight gap between bollards on Hammersmith Bridge, but instead of joining the Great West Road to go to her flat in Brentford, she crossed a deserted Hammersmith Broadway and headed for the office.

Shattered from the day but exulted at the prospect of working, Stella paid little attention to headlights that stayed behind her all the way to Shepherd's Bush Green.

Three

Monday, 10 January 2011

*'Now the day is over,
Night is drawing nigh,
Shadows of the evening
Steal across the sky.'*

Jack sang softly while he strolled through the subway and up the ramp. At the statue he paused under cover of the hedge and the bells pealed again, this time counting the hour. The church clock was a minute fast – not that when he was walking he cared about measuring time. On his journeys he noted only slipshod work, wanton neglect and deliberate damage; he counted dented cars, skirting scatterings of windscreen glass glittering on kerbstones and squashed smouldering cigarette butts tossed in gutters. Jack took trouble on behalf of those who did not bother.

The sound of the bells reverberated in his ear. Sundays were the worst, Jack confided to the statue of the Leaning Woman; the chimes and changes upset him more than horns, or roadside drilling, which at least had purpose. Blood had trickled down his neck, warm at first, drying to a crust. He had been instructed not to tell and, good at keeping secrets, told no one. He cupped a hand over his ear – the cold made it worse – but the ache was too deep.

In the lamplight breaking through the tree branches, the statue stretched her arms out to him.

Today's journey had been simple; the route on the page was like two circles attached by a straight line and Jack ended up where he had started: on Church Road in Northolt in the London Borough

of Ealing. From there it was no distance across Western Avenue to the Underground station, a building dating from 1948. After clicking through the route on Google Street View he scribbled the year on page fifty-three in his street atlas. On Street View, he plotted anything of potential interest in the A-Z before embarking on the actual journey. The five and three of fifty-three added together equalled eight and the numbers 1948 added up to twenty-two which in turn equalled four. Four and eight made twelve which made three. If this was a sign, Jack did not know what it signified.

He had chosen the middle carriage in the train. Northolt was on the Central line so he was unlikely to know anyone, and if he did, he was ready with a plausible excuse.

He made the journeys in strict page order during the day. At night, his favoured time was reserved for walking the city without a map, when he was reliant on a future Host to lead the way. As he passed each house, he saw which blinds were drawn, which curtains pulled or shutters swung across. People were careless, and left gaps. He slowed down when a possible Host stopped at his gate, dawdling to get out his door key. Most did not have the forethought to have it ready as Jack always did; if they did this he would know they did not after all have a mind like his own. However, they might offer him a warm and friendly home while he looked for the True Host.

If the man entertained suspicions – those with minds like his own were men – Jack walked on head-down, his efficient step intended to allay their suspicions; he was just a man going about his business.

He marvelled that people set store by burglar alarms or a steel-plated doors with double mortice locks and then left doors on the latch to pop out to dump newspapers and cans in the recycling bin or to whisk a dog around the block for a last walk. He tut-tutted at the welcome of keys beneath doormats, secreted under ivy or tucked inside plant pots. Those who made him truly at home left him a key dangling from a string on the inside of the front door.

THE DETECTIVE'S DAUGHTER

He would wait beneath a sill out of sight of the street or in the recess of a bay window while lights went on and later were extinguished. He was soothed by the muffled jumble of music and voices within, confident that soon he would join them. If the person lived alone, he would have liked to reassure them that soon they would have company.

Jack regretted that these relationships, however meaningful, had to be short. He called the unwitting residents Hosts, preferring to think of himself not as a guest or cuckoo in the nest but as belonging.

Only those with minds like his own knew a person can be randomly chosen by another and such a mind is alert for that eventuality. Like the man sipping coffee in the window of a café, or the man wired to an MP3 player on a Tube escalator who did not acknowledge Jack when he made room for him, or the fussy middle-aged man on the towpath. When certain inhabitants of London slotted their security chains into place before going to bed, they were unaware they had a visitor.

People were oblivious. How often solitary dog walkers, children playing, joggers – those types who strayed off paths and were out at odd times – reported nearly missing a body, assuming it to be a pile of clothes or rubbish. Sometimes, even in a city, the dead lie undiscovered – buried in snow, on wastelands, in alleyways – for weeks.

The presence of water does untold damage to a crime scene.

For those killers intending the corpse as a gift, like a cat with a bird, he presumed this was a disappointment. For professionals with a mind like his own, those who did not crave cheap adulation, measured time mattered only briefly: every second was good because vital clues were eroded and destroyed. Jack understood how valuable was the currency used to buy or kill time.

He was disappointed how few had minds like his own and was meticulous in eliminating each one.

He slipped a roll-up out of a slim silver case and in the shelter of his coat lit it. He palmed it and, hiding the glowing tip, stepped

LESLEY THOMPSON

from behind the hedge on to the pavement. At Rose Gardens North he checked but the Toyota Yaris was still missing, the house in darkness. He continued into St Peter's Square. Restless and alert though the old lady was, she must be asleep by now.

Jack's choice of Host was not always random.