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Some Quaint Types

It is as she is painting the rose that she knows something is wrong. The realization comes upon her all at once. She has just finished one petal—a sumptuous curving shape, like a shell, or a baby's ear—and is dipping her brush before starting another, when she feels that clutch around the heart that presages disaster. The feeling is so sharp that she wants to cry out, restraining herself just in time because it might disturb Wilfred; although that's silly, she tells herself, because Wilfred is dead.

With fingers that tremble only a little she completes the action she has begun: swilling the brush around in the jar until the clear water turns cloudy; the sound it makes as it clinks against the glass seeming to her heightened senses to be the sound her heart is making as it knocks against her ribcage. Only when she has washed the brush and dried it—squeezing out the excess moisture against the rim of the jar and then laying the brush down carefully—does she surrender herself to the rush of a feeling she finds herself unable to name. Fear, perhaps? Her hands are trembling so badly she has to press the palms together to control the impulse. Fear—but also something else. Exhilaration; excitement; even a kind of joy.

Slowly—because that is the way it has to be, these days—she lowers herself into the armchair, her hands still clasped together, feeling the smooth worn upholstered sides close around her, the comforting solidity of things. She sits very still, looking out at the room, in which all the objects are familiar to her: the gate-leg table now strewn with her paints; the glass-fronted cabinet, with its chipped china ornaments and tarnished silver; the worn Turkey carpet, its colours darkened by age and dirt; the piano,

massive and dark as a coffin, with its stained ivory keys. She considers, too, the blackened mirror, the books with their mildewed covers, the portrait of her mother that hangs on the brass chain—as if these objects might hold the key to her unquiet state of mind. Her gaze comes to rest upon the rose. A beautiful thing, creamy white flushed with dull pink, dropping its petals on the table's smeared surface. She will never paint it, now.

Connie feels the silence grow around her. The house ticks like a breathing machine: quiet creaks and groans; a footfall overhead. Wilfred, she thinks automatically; remembering, in the same instant. Not Wilfred. A ghost, then? The sound of a mouse gnawing behind the wainscot; the fall of dust; a spider spinning its web. Implacable, invisible—the passage of air across a room as someone closes a door in another part of the house. Voices. Whispers. The shifting of shadows as the sun moves around.

Again the feeling. Her fingers clutch and uncurl in her lap.

'Is it Death?' she wonders aloud (not an unusual thing for one who often goes for days without hearing another voice). But the feeling passes, the clutching in her chest below the breastbone subsides and she thinks quite calmly, no. Not Death. At least, she amends this, again speaking aloud to the listening room—not yet.

The dust falls, and the house is given over to emptiness and silence. Connie sits and dreams, and thinks of everything she has lost. For her, the past is a series of interconnecting chambers, through which she walks, picking up objects and setting them down again. Inconsequential things—the smell arising from the opened lid of a sandalwood box; a smear of rose madder on the edge of a plate—provide the key to rooms she hasn't visited in decades.

Just now, she is thinking about Guy Strickland, although it's years since she had reason to revisit *that* particular chamber of horrors. *Be bold, be bold, but not too bold—lest your heart's blood should run cold*... Bluebeard, indeed. Not that she'd been unaware of his reputation on that score. Edith Challoner had warned her that he was a bad lot, their first or second day out—just before they'd hit that sticky patch in the Bay of Biscay. 'An artist, my dear—need one say more?' Then, seeing the look on Connie's face—'Oh, sorry. I was forgetting. You dabble, too,

don't you? But you *know* what I mean. These chaps are all the same. Rumour has it –' Here Edith had lowered her voice, leaning across the table with a conspiratorial air, 'he's had to leave England in rather a hurry, if you follow me...' Edith could always be relied on for that kind of story. 'According to Marjorie—who knows the family quite well, because she was engaged to the younger brother before that unfortunate business with the gamekeeper—he (Guy S., that is, not the brother) has been given an ultimatum to leave the country until all the fuss has died down (the girl's no better than she should be, of course, but still) and so Shanghai's the obvious place for him, don't you see? There's an uncle out there, according to Marjorie (*sweet* girl—did you ever meet her?). Owns half of Shanghai, apparently. The uncle, that is, not Marjorie. The idea is to ship the black sheep out there for a year or two, Marjorie says. Find him a job—and perhaps a wife into the bargain.... So you see,' Edith had concluded, with her customary air of malicious enjoyment, 'you really don't want to set your sights on *him*.' And Connie, laughing, had replied, 'Oh, don't worry. He's not my type.'

What her type *was*, she'd yet to discover. Although the fellow was attractive enough: tall and blond, with a handsome face and the easy, arrogant manners of the well-born. She'd met men like him at the Slade—dilettantes, for the most part; living off family money while they played at being painters. Now she came to think of it, there had been talk of a Strickland. One of John's acolytes, she rather thought—a flamboyant lot *they* were, given to sweeping around in capes and those soft hats that only artists and poseurs wore. She wondered if it could have been the same man; not that she cared. All that sort were the same. Too pleased with themselves by half.

It wasn't until a week after the conversation with Edith that she actually spoke to Strickland. They were through the worst of the storms by then, although it was still pretty choppy. She'd been up on deck with her sketch-book, fiddling with a drawing that wouldn't come right and trying to expel the lingering stench of seasickness from her nostrils, when she became aware that someone was watching her. She was used to this (you couldn't draw, and not expect to attract a crowd, from time to time), and

so paid no attention. Only when he came up to her, and without a by-your-leave, took the book from her hands and leafed through it, did she realize who it was. 'Not bad,' he'd said carelessly, handing the sketches back when he'd looked his fill. 'If you like, I'll show you some of mine.' She'd opened her mouth to say no. 'I don't mind,' was what she said.

And so, thrown together in that closed world, they'd become, if not exactly friends, then more than acquaintances.

'Tell me about yourself,' he'd said that first evening, as, escaping the polite society of 'A' deck, with its bejewelled matrons playing piquet and loudly convivial groups of 'China hands', they'd found themselves alone. 'What takes you to Shanghai?'

When she'd started to explain about the Selbys, and their pressing need for a mother's help during Lily's forthcoming confinement, he'd cut her off with a gesture of impatience. 'That isn't what I meant. You must have some other reason. Is it a husband you're after? Some dull young man who'll save you from the worse fate of being left on the shelf? Or is it something else?'

She'd hesitated, wondering how far to trust him. 'I wanted to get away,' she'd said at last.

He'd raised an eyebrow. 'And you think the Police Commissioner's household offers your best chance of escape?'

'There wasn't an awful lot of choice,' Connie'd said.

'I suppose not.' He'd stood silently for a while, smoking his cigarette and looking out at the vastness of the night sea, flecked here and there with the phosphorescence of a breaking wave. 'Well,' he said. 'I wish you all the luck in the world. Only don't expect too much...'

Of course, she hadn't been entirely straight with Strickland—there had been reasons, apart from her own ennui, which had prompted her acceptance of Cousin Lily's offer. Her father's threatened withdrawal of her allowance, for a start. She wasn't due to come into the money from Great-Aunt Dolly until her twenty-eighth birthday—which was still four years away. Her father had intimated that he hoped to see her married—'settled' was how he put it—well before that.

So Strickland's observations about finding a husband weren't so far off the mark—although if Connie herself had any say in the

matter, she'd prefer not to marry at all. A stupid business all round, with that ridiculous pretence about being in love, when everyone knew it was all about hard cash. A financial transaction, with herself as the bill of goods. She'd said as much to her father, and he'd flown into one of his rages. 'You talk some sense into her,' he'd shouted at her mother (who'd of course been listening at the door of the study and had heard every word). 'I've done with her.'

Then it had been up to Mama to try and smooth things over—although if anything she was keener on the whole idea of marriage than Connie's father. She'd already managed the trick with her youngest daughter (but then Peggy was such a pet) and with Leonora's looks, it wouldn't be long before she was settled (although the silly girl had ideas about going on the stage). Getting dear Constance off her hands was proving more of a trial. It had been a mistake to let the girl have her way about the Slade. Three years which could have been spent finding her a suitable husband had been wasted, messing about with paint and charcoal, and picking up a lot of silly ideas. 'Financial transactions', indeed! Anyone would think they were living in an age of arranged marriages.

Constance had always been difficult, even as a child. Preferring to romp around with Hugh and his friends, bird's-nesting and climbing trees, instead of settling down with her needlework, like dear Peggy and Leonora. So it was a bit of luck, Helen Joliffe thought, that Lily's letter was still awaiting a reply. *I did wonder if one of your girls might like a change of scene. Shanghai is very pretty at this time of year. Freddie knows some very nice people—not all of them stuffy old married types! There's quite a crowd of ambitious young chaps working their way up through the Service, or doing interesting things in Tea...*

So it had been decided. As far as Connie herself was concerned, it wasn't such a bad idea to get out of London. The whole Slade thing was becoming a shade incestuous. If you weren't a protegée of Tonks or Brown (and she'd never been able to stomach all the toadying one had to do) your work didn't have a hope of selling. Women painters—the very idea was anathema to some. At least Shanghai might offer fresh perspectives, she

thought. Surely people there wouldn't hold such narrow views? She'd been wrong about that, as it happened.

Ray is sulking, because Sandy has snapped at him twice in the past half-hour, and it wasn't his fault they'd taken the wrong turning after Lewes. He hadn't wanted to come on this jaunt in the first place. In fact if things hadn't been getting a bit sticky in Brighton he'd have told Sandy where to put his weekend in the country. It made you laugh the way he said it. *My aunt's place in Sussex*. Very lah-di-dah. We could motor down for lunch if you like, he'd said. Give Auntie a nice surprise.

Sandy, glancing sideways, catches the look of disdain on his passenger's face and feels his heart turn over. How adorable he looked when he was cross. And of course it wasn't fair to blame him for getting them lost. He didn't know the countryside the way Sandy did, growing up in the slums of Deptford or wherever it was, poor love.

'Sorry for being a grumpy old bear,' he says huskily. He wonders if he dare take his hand off the wheel for a moment to give Ray's knee a squeeze, but thinks better of it. Ray could be touchy at times.

Ray's only reply is a shrug. His profile (such a charming one!) fixed on the undistinguished Sussex landscape as if it were the most interesting thing in the world.

'Won't be long now,' Sandy adds, in the falsely bright tone one uses to a recalcitrant child. 'I wonder if Auntie'll have the sherry out...'

Ray makes a non-committal sound, which Sandy takes for encouragement: prattling on into the silence about his beloved Auntie, and what a dear she was, and how good she'd been to him when he had that spot of bother with Lily Law, and how much he'd loved spending his hols there as a boy, and how jolly it all was, with the orchard where he'd scraped his knees scrumping for apples and the garden with its hollyhocks—'taller than I was, when I was a nipper'—and the big black range in the kitchen where he'd had his bath in a tin tub—'before they installed the mod-cons'—and the tea-tray brought in at four o'clock with scones and plum cake, and the clock in the hall which tick-tick-

tocked until the sound of it entered his dreams and on and one and on until Ray is almost ready to *scream* with boredom.

Sandy himself, although unconscious of the effect his recital is having on his captive audience, is fleetingly troubled by an awareness of certain discrepancies between his rosy memories and the reality. It wasn't that he was making it up, exactly—the orchard and the kitchen range and the grandfather clock were real enough—it was just that a certain amount of embellishment (poetic licence you could say) has crept in between his version and the truth. A very clear image of that dark chaotic house, overstuffed with old-fashioned furniture and with the relics of every transaction which has ever taken place there, rises in his mind as he speaks, dispelling the bright visions he has conjured.

'You mustn't think...' he starts to say, then hesitates. He so wants Ray to enjoy himself. Indeed, the success of all his hopes depends upon it. 'I mean, it's all a bit different now, of course. Auntie's getting old, poor darling. She's become rather forgetful. And of course it's impossible to get the help these days...'

'Look at *that*!' Ray, who stopped listening some time ago, suddenly sits bolt upright.

A racing-green Alfa Romeo, this year's model, is approaching from the opposite direction. The lane along which they are driving is narrow, scarcely wide enough for two vehicles to pass. The oncoming car shows no sign of giving way and so Sandy is obliged to move over. The Morris (which, it has to be said, has seen better days) has to go right up onto the verge so that the shiny green monster can get by.

'Beautiful...' Ray makes kissing noises at the car and indirectly at its driver, a spivvy sort in a flat cap and string motoring gloves. 'That's my baby.'

They drive the rest of the way in silence.

Connie wakes with a start, a drying snail's trail of saliva at the corner of her mouth. The sun has moved round and the room is dark and cold. She feels suddenly, fiercely hungry. In the kitchen, amongst a litter of eggshells and empty sardine-tins from which Rufus, it appears, has recently breakfasted, she finds a congealing cup of cold tea. She throws the slops down the sink and inex-

pertly rinses the cup—one of her mother's best Royal Doulton, only slightly chipped—before looking around for the means to make a fresh one. There is tea she knows, in the caddy with its Diamond Jubilee portraits and curly Twinings lettering. She has seen it somewhere—but where? After a half-hearted search (under the table? In the china cupboard?) she gives up the attempt, contenting herself with a slurp of water from the tap and a stale crust rescued from the bucket by the door to which scraps intended for the goats are consigned; although the goats, like Wilfred, have long ceased to exist.

The kitchen where Connie stands, contentedly munching her breakfast, is not a large one, by the standards of the late-Victorian rectory where she spent the first twenty years of her life. *That* was a kitchen, if you like, with sculleries and wash-houses to match. Stone sinks. An iron range. There'd been a range here, of course, when she and Wilfred first moved in —a nasty thing that smoked. It is still there, somewhere, buried under the pile of old newspapers, empty jars and bottles and ancient savings coupons with which almost every surface in the house is covered. The Baby Belling she'd bought to heat Wilfred's suppers on was much better. It did for her meals, now.

The longer she lives alone, the harder it is to remember that it has ever been otherwise. But then Wilfred had always been more of an absence than a presence: a man so quiet one forgot he was in the room. Towards the end, she'd passed whole days in his company without hearing him utter a word. Sounds he disliked, but other people were what he feared. When visitors called—and there were never many—he'd retreat to the top of the stairs, hiding there in the shadows until Connie had dealt with the intruder. Latterly, he preferred not to leave his room at all, even for meals. Then, as she sat downstairs in the evenings, the sound of his footfall overhead or the sudden flushing of the lavatory was a startling and not wholly comforting reminder of his existence.

It wasn't always so bad, of course. When they were first married he'd liked her to sit with him; even liked to hear her read aloud. *The Waverley Novels* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Kipling's poems. Nothing modern. Wilfred hated anything mod-

ern. It was one of the reasons (another being the lack of a proper studio) why, after her marriage, she'd taken up painting in watercolours rather than oils. Abandoning portraiture, life drawing and other unsuitable subjects for the safer realms of still life and landscape painting. These, as it happened, were areas where Wilfred felt at home; in art as in literature, he preferred the known to anything too obscure or difficult. Which ruled out Cubism, Vorticism, Futurism, Dadaism and all the other 'isms' which had been bandied about years before, when Connie was an art student. Modern, all far too modern.

How he'd have hated the Stricklands, Connie thinks, wiping a stray crumb from her chin with the back of her hand. A good job, really, that he wasn't around to see them delivered. Such a strange day that was—last year, or was it the one before? Living alone, one tends to lose track... She remembers the van drawing up outside with its consignment of large flat squarish objects wrapped in sacking. Two burly chaps man-handling them into the house ('Sign here, please dear...'). Then the moment of truth: unwrapping the layers of sackcloth and brown paper covering the first of the six parcels to reveal what lay beneath. Her own face, as it happened—gazing back at her from the canvas where he'd set her, so many years before, when they were young.

How strange it had been to see herself pictured there, so full of that assurance the young all possessed without knowing that they possessed it; not smiling, but holding the viewer's gaze with a kind of challenge. She'd been rather full of herself, at that age. Twenty-four or five. Silly little fool. Thinking the world was her oyster... For a moment, as she stood there, she'd been almost angry with Strickland, for visiting such memories upon her. Remembering, in the same instant, that he was beyond her reproaches now...

Sighing a little at the memory—which like a Chinese box conceals another within it—Connie pads into the drawing-room in her stockinged feet. She finds her shoes where she has left them—slipped off while she was dozing—and puts them on. She has never flattered herself that she was tidy, but there are certain standards, after all. Her mother, whose winsome image, dressed in the outlandishly flounced and be-ribboned fashions of the

1880s, gazes down from the wall above Connie's head, was never seen by her children until midday, when she would appear, immaculately turned-out, with gloves, hat and umbrella, for her morning walk to the shops.

Connie puffs and blows a little as she stoops to put on her shoes. Her feet, once so small and pretty her lover had kissed the soles of them, are now swollen like sausages in their pale pink lisle stockings. Feeling her head swim with the effort, she crams them in. *There*! She rests for a moment, her hands on her knees, until the black swirling spots in front of her eyes have gone.

Hat, she thinks mechanically, wondering where she left it; guiltily recalling a time when she'd retrieved it (only a bit more shapeless than usual) from Rufus's basket. But the hat, for a wonder, is on the hat-stand; triumphant, she pops it on, deftly skewering the dun-coloured felt in place with two long pearl-tipped hatpins. Gloves. Her face, as she smoothes out the wrinkles in each grey kid finger, as she has seen her mother do a thousand times, is watchful as that of a small nocturnal creature: mouse-like, it peers from the depths of the hallstand's spotted mirror. A delicate, wrinkled face, slightly flushed with its exertions, beneath a frizz of white curls. It always surprises Connie that her hair has grown so white.

'Now where's that dratted purse?' she demands of the silent house. Humming a little under her breath, she goes in search of it. In the basket? Not in the basket. The chair, then? No. She frowns, and at the same moment a snuffling explosion that never quite achieves the resonance of a bark announces the waddling arrival of Rufus, her cocker spaniel. Rufus is nearly blind, but he has retained a sharp canine intuition for the putting-on of hats and the finding of purses.

'In a moment, Rufus. Good boy,' murmurs Connie distractedly. 'Purse, purse, purse, purse...'

At last she finds it, innocently resting on top of the mantelpiece clock, at which she has had no other occasion to glance, since, like all the other clocks in the house, it stopped some time ago. The purse having been found, there remains only the business of affixing Rufus's lead—which, since both mistress and dog become easily breathless, takes longer than might be supposed.

Keys. 'Where did I put them?' muses Connie. But as she seldom locks her doors, theirs is not a serious omission. Umbrella?

Cautiously, Connie unlatches the front door and puts her head out. It doesn't look like rain, but there is a patch of cloud no bigger than a man's hand on the horizon. Satisfied, Connie addresses her companion. 'I think we'll chance it, Rufus old boy.'

It is a mile and a half from Dunsinane to the village—a distance which would have been nothing to Connie in the old days, but which she now negotiates in the awareness that her reserves of energy are no longer inexhaustible. Ahead of her blunders Rufus, snorting asthmatically, his stumpy tail wagging from side to side as he stops to identify new smells—the only reliable source of pleasure he has left to him. Connie enjoys these excursions, too—but the growling in her stomach cannot be ignored much longer. 'Shake a leg, Rufus,' she murmurs, giving the lead a gentle tug, so that the dog, splay-footed with resistance, is towed reluctantly away from whatever fascinating object—dead vole or owl's dropping—he has been engrossed in. Grumbling, he shuffles after.

Swinging her free arm energetically, Connie strides out, her mud-brown tweed skirt (a riding-habit of Mother's, altered to fit), flapping about her calves. She breathes deeply, enjoying the fresh, faintly manure-scented air; the warm breeze in her face. Summer, Connie thinks, her heart lifting. Those rambles with Hugh. The day he'd shown her the kingfisher's nest and she'd leaned out over the brook to see and lost her balance and fallen in. How wet and muddy she'd been. How he'd laughed and laughed. Smiling at the memory of her long-dead brother, Connie doesn't hear the car until it is almost upon her. Then it's only because Rufus has chosen that moment to lumber into the ditch in search of frogs that she avoids being knocked flat. She has time for no more than a fleeting impression of hurtling green; a blaring horn—before the thing is past, leaving nothing but a smell of scorched rubber behind it.

Reaching the village without further incident, Connie makes straight for the Post Office, which is also the general store. Here, as she waits for Mrs Doherty to finish measuring out the sugar, she glances incuriously around at the shelves with their familiar

display of Bisto and Smedley's peas and Lifebuoy soap, and at the Barnardo boy with his callipered leg next to the bacon slicer, and the bottles of humbugs and pear drops and winter mixture ranged in rows behind Mrs Doherty's head, and at the knitting patterns—*Smart Pullovers for Active Kiddies*—and at the copies of *The Lady* and *Woman's Own* and the *Daily Express*, with its blaring headline: SOVIET SPIES HELD IN BATTERSEA.

'Fine day,' remarks Mrs Doherty pleasantly, as Connie hesitates between pressed tongue or luncheon meat and Connie agrees that it is. As she is putting the last of her purchases in her string shopping bag, the jangling of the shop's bell and a pungent smell of tobacco announce the arrival of Iseult Barrett-Smythe.

In her customary uniform of man's corduroys and blue checked shirt, Iseult is lean as a boy. Her dark brown hair, now flecked with grey, is worn in two plaits tied up over her head. Her bright blue eyes, surrounded by a web of crow's-feet, regard the world from a tanned and wind-burnt face. Iseult's chief—that is, only—beauty is her teeth, which are square, white and strong. Since these are seldom revealed (she is not a ready smiler), beauty is not a word one tends to associate with Iseult. Not that this—if it entered her head at all—would trouble her. Claptrap, she would call it; poppycock.

'Morning, Mrs D.,' Iseult mutters gruffly. 'Morning, Aunt Constance.' As she speaks she casts her eyes around, looking at anything but the person she is addressing. At forty-five, Iseult is bashful as a child; hopelessly awkward in company, she is only ever at ease with her employees—the farmhands and Alf Fletcher, the farm manager, with whose assistance she runs her late father's farm. Years ago, when Iseult was a shy twenty year-old, there'd been gossip in the village about her and Fletcher, a married man. Much had been made of the fact that he'd given her a lift once or twice on the back of his motorbike, and that they'd shared fire-watching patrols for a night or so. Had she been even dimly aware of this scandalous talk, Iseult would have laughed like a drain. Not that she didn't like Alf Fletcher well enough—he was a fine figure of a man if it came to that, albeit nearly twenty years her senior. But monkeying with another

woman's chap just wasn't on. And there was the small matter of *noblesse oblige*. Iseult isn't a snob—not a bit of it. But one had to think of the example one was setting.

'How's old Rufus?' Iseult enquires tenderly, bending down to scratch the dog's ears. Iseult much prefers dogs to people—you knew where you were with a dog. Under her hard caress, Rufus wriggles ecstatically. 'Good old Rufus. Dear old fellow,' Iseult murmurs. 'And are you keeping well, Aunt Constance?' she remembers to add, when her order ('Packet of Woodbines and a box of matches please, Mrs D.') has been delivered. Wool-gathering as usual, poor old love, she thinks fondly, noting Connie's air of distraction.

But Connie is only thinking how brown Iseult has become these last few years—it came of being out-of-doors so much, she supposes. You would never have called her a pretty child, of course, but she could look very nice when she tried. That time on Sandy's birthday, when Leonora had made her wear the green velvet. Her face in the flickering light had been almost beautiful—golden, rapt—as she'd waited for him to blow out the candles.

Poor old darling, Iseult thinks as the shop-bell clanks behind them and they stand once more upon the windy High Street. Getting a bit rickety on her pins.

'Got the Norton with me,' she offers abruptly. 'Give you a lift, Aunt.'

Before Connie can protest, she finds herself bundled into the motorbike's capacious sidecar—a monstrous appendage resembling the cockpit of an aircraft—with Rufus shivering across her feet and the canvas hood with its brittle yellow porthole snapped down over her head.

'Get you home in jiffy,' Iseult shouts cheerily, donning vast leather gauntlets and goggles. She flings her leg over the big machine, stamps down with a booted foot. There is a shuddering roar, and Connie's head snaps forward as they start to move. 'Hold tight!' yells Iseult above the din, although Connie is no longer able to hear her. Inside the hurtling capsule her bones feel as if they are coming loose from their sockets; her teeth buzz with the vibration. At her feet, Rufus whimpers as if at a bad

dream. The last time Connie travelled in this fashion had been in another world. It was 1910 or thereabouts. Shanghai. The night of the Embassy dance, when Benjy Furnival gave her a lift on his motorbike along Bubbling Well Road. He'd wanted to kiss her but she'd told him not to be an ass. He was two years younger than she was and besides, she'd finished with all that sort of thing.

With the wind roaring in her ears and the smell of petrol pleasantly filling her nostrils, Iseult can spare no more than a passing thought for her passenger, crouched small as a child in the sidecar's bucket-seat, her head bobbing up and down as they bounce over the potholes. All getting too much for her, poor old thing. Even the walk to the shops did her in, you could tell. Getting on a bit now of course. Older than Mummy. And *she* hadn't ventured out on her own in months. A vision of her tiny, delicate mother, exquisite in pink crepe-de-Chine, reclining on the sofa as she skimmed a Boots novelette flashes across Iseult's mind. Before she became a farmer's wife, Leonora had been an actress. In old age, she has reverted to the mannerisms of this earlier incarnation.

'Nearly there, Aunt,' bellows Iseult as, with a practised shifting of her body, she brings them around the corner and into the home stretch. Above the screen of trees at the end of the lane the house comes into view. Not a pretty place, Iseult thinks, with the twinge of unease she always feels at the sight of its tall chimneys with their barley sugar twists and its pointed windows. Like that house in the fairytale she'd hated so much as a kid. *Nibble, nibble little mouse*. A memory surfaces of a white face at the window, a shuffling step on the stair. Uncle Wilfred having one of his bad days, Aunt used to say.

They reach the gate. 'Hello! Looks like you've got company,' Iseult observes. A blue Morris Minor is parked untidily half-way in and half-way out of the drive.

The sound of the motorbike's engine has not passed unnoticed, either. As Iseult dismounts and goes to let her passenger out, two figures come out of the house.

There is a moment's startled pause.

'Well, I'm damned,' says the first of these interlopers. 'This *is* a surprise...'

'Hello, Sandy,' mutters Iseult, her face a vivid scarlet.

Both seem equally at a loss for words.

So that for Ray, coming last upon the scene, the encounter has the look of a bleeding what-d'ye-call-it—*tableau*—with the two of them standing there gawping at one another like that, Sandy as red in the face as she is—if it is a she and he had his doubts about *that*, dear—and the mad-looking one, the old bat, with one of those fox-fur things with glass eyes that gave you the creeps just to look at, coming slowly up the path behind them with the dog in her arms like a bleeding baby.

If it has crossed Sandy's mind once or twice in the past that Iseult is in love with him, it is a thought he prefers to dismiss as quickly as possible. Oh, when they were kids—no doubt about it—Izzie'd had a bit of a crush on him. Hero worship, you'd call it. And of course (if he says so himself) he was a good-looking lad in those days. Red-gold hair swept back from a forehead you'd have had to call noble. Eyes a piercing blue. A well-shaped mouth. The nose really quite his best feature: neither too big nor too small, with that fine straight bridge. Grecian, he supposed you'd say. And he'd always had a pretty good build. A six-footer, even at sixteen. Broad shoulders. A well-turned leg. Oh, yes. He'd been a handsome youth...

And she was such a tomboy, dear old Izzie, with her rough brown curls and dirty knees. Always tearing her frocks—it used to drive Leonora wild. 'Such a terrible hoyden, my daughter,' she used to say with that laugh like a tiny scream. 'How ever did a daughter of mine turn out this way?' And it was certainly true that they weren't a bit alike. Unkind people said Leonora'd got her come-uppance, for wanting a boy so badly. Instead she got Izzie. Jolly little chap she'd have made, too, with that round freckled face and a grin she seemed to switch on like a light whenever she looked at you. Plucky little kid.

He remembers the day he and Joe Fairfax (now he was a nice boy; killed at Monte Cassino, worst luck) had been messing about in the old stables with a rope they'd rigged up from the rafters,

shinning up hand over hand and then climbing out along the beam to swing there for a minute or so before dropping back down to the floor—a good fifteen feet it must have been, silly little fools, they might have broken their necks. Izzie had appeared as she always did sooner or later—like a blessed shadow, Joe said—wanting to see what they were up to.

Seeing her standing there looking at him so trustingly was enough to put the devil in him. 'I say, Izz,' he'd said, ever so casual, 'I don't suppose you can do this…' The dare was hardly out of his mouth before she had both hands on the rope, hauling herself up like a little monkey. Did all right, too, until she was almost at the top. Then just as she'd let go the rope to grasp the beam, her legs had kicked out and there'd been a flash of white knickers. 'Oh, oh, I see daylight,' Joe'd howled, the coarse oaf—those village louts were all the same, nothing on their minds except S-E-X (although it could work to one's advantage on occasion).

At any rate, it had been enough to distract her. She'd faltered, dangling there helplessly for a moment, before crashing back down to the floor. She must have winded herself quite badly because she went white as a sheet, her freckles standing out against the pallor. He'd felt a beast for egging her on, but it wasn't the first time he'd seen her risk her neck. Bit of a kamikaze merchant, old Izz.

And now here she is again, blushing all over her face with the pleasure of seeing him. He wonders with an idle stirring of cruelty whether she's worked out yet just exactly how much of a lost cause he is, or if she still, in her heart of hearts, cherishes fond hopes that one day her passion might be reciprocated. If so, she'll wait a long time, poor old maid, smirks Sandy to himself. Till Hell freezes over, in fact.

'Darling Izzie. It's been... what?'

'Three years,' says Iseult.

'Is it really? Good Lord,' exclaims Sandy. 'I hadn't realized it was as long as that. Well, I must say, you haven't changed a bit...' He is gratified at the paroxysm of shyness this induces in his cousin, who smiles and stammers something incoherent. 'And you, too, Auntie,' he adds, addressing Connie but turning to wink

at Ray, who is hanging back from this happy reunion, shy boy. 'I swear you get younger every year—doesn't she, Izzie?'

At this, Iseult, who has been staring fixedly at the ground, rallies her senses. 'Here, Aunt Constance. Give Rufus to me.' She scoops the dead weight of the old dog out of the old woman's arms as if it weighed no more than a kitten, setting the flea-ridden thing down on the path where it flops like a great slug, positively inviting one to kick it, Sandy thinks spitefully.

'Thank you, dear,' says Connie—the first words she has spoken. 'Why, Sandy, what a pleasant surprise,' she continues, as if people were in the habit of dropping in unexpectedly every day instead of once in a blue moon—or slightly less often than that, to judge from the state of the house, Sandy sniffs disdainfully. 'Such a bit of luck you found me in.'

'Quite a co-incidence,' Sandy agrees, winking at Ray, who regards him stonily. 'Allow me to present a friend of mine,' he adds hastily, realizing that he has neglected to perform this introduction. 'Aunt Constance, this is Raymond...'

'Brown,' supplies Ray, before Sandy can say anything more. He smiles. As if butter wouldn't melt in his mouth, the little minx, Sandy thinks fondly. 'Charmed, I'm sure.'

In the end, lunch isn't as bad as Sandy had feared it might be when he first set eyes on Auntie—not to mention the house itself, Gawd help us, what was the old girl thinking of, to let it get into such a state? The dust. The cobwebs. And (not to put too fine a point on it) the smell. It was enough to make one want to *heave*. If one were being charitable, one could put it down to the dog.

Really, it was too bad. He'd had such high hopes of this weekend. Even though Ray (bless him!) was being remarkably good about it—so far, at least. He'd sat though the whole of that interminable meal without a murmur, although there'd been moments—when she'd come staggering in with the soup in that huge, cracked old tureen—when his eyes had met Sandy's, and it had been as much as Sandy could do not to burst out laughing at Ray's look of mingled outrage and incredulity. When he'd eventually nerved himself to taste it, the soup hadn't been as bad

as all that. In fact, considering where it had been made (that kitchen!), it had been surprisingly good. Not packet, either. But then Auntie had always been a decent cook. Fairy cakes. He could taste them now. Light as a feather and with a nice buttery texture that melted on the tongue. Although sometimes you found the odd dog-hair or nameless something which was not part of the recipe.

The soup (which Ray has left untouched, Sandy can't help noticing) had been followed by tinned salmon, and boiled potatoes—the metallic taste of the former exacerbated by that of the silver dish on which it had been served, part of Great Aunt Dolly's dinner service, now almost black with age and infrequent cleaning. This had met with the same treatment from Ray as the first course—although he did spend somewhat longer thinking about it, staring at the dish with its flaky mound of pinkish fish as if he had never seen such a thing before in his life.

'Do eat something,' Sandy had urged him, during one of Auntie's absences from the room. 'You'll waste away otherwise.'

But Ray had only frowned and shaken his head, cross boy, as Auntie returned with a tin of stale water biscuits and the cheese on its big Delft platter.

Not that Auntie noticed anything untoward. Away with the fairies as usual, poor old love. That was the disconcerting thing about Auntie—you never knew which version of her you were getting. There was the Aunt of Sandy's childhood recollections—what a good sort she'd been. Almost like a child herself, in her enthusiasms. Climbing trees and making paper aeroplanes. He remembers the summer they made the kite—'a proper Chinese dragon, to bring you luck'; the time he'd had German measles and she'd made him the tiger mask—'So you can see yourself with stripes instead of spots...' Oh, she'd been a dear.

Of late, the place of this youthful, resourceful Aunt has been usurped by a vaguer creature. Auntie had always had an impractical streak—it came from being a bohemian, Sandy supposed. She'd leave the washing-up for days—and as for the way she dressed... 'Constance always looks as if she's been dragged through a hedge backwards,' Mumsie used to say. Auntie wasn't a great one for talking. Conversation bored her—unless it was

about things that mattered, she said. Which meant painting, of course. From an early age, he'd got used to hearing words like *chiaroscuro* and *impasto* bandied about. He was used to her silences—but really, with Ray here, it was too embarrassing...

So: 'How are you, Auntie?' he says. 'You're looking well.'

She considers this 'Am I? I suppose I must be, if you say so. I'm not dead yet, at any rate,' she says.

This *is* a good start, thinks Sandy grimly. Why were old people so obsessed by death? You'd have thought they'd avoid the subject, all things considered. He tries another topic.

'Fine weather we're having...'

There is a contemptuous snort from Ray.

'Is it?' says Auntie. 'Do you know, I hadn't noticed? I suppose it is...'

'Garden's looking nice.' (A shocking fib, but one had to say *something*.)

'Is it? Oh, good...'

After that, Sandy gives it up as a bad job. No one could say he hadn't *tried*.

So for a while there is no sound in the big dark room in which the smell of fallen soot mingles with the riper odour of Cheddar just starting to sweat as well as the faint, ghostly whiff of port and cigars emanating from the massive sideboard with its freight of cutlery canteens, silver trays and empty soda-water siphons. Only the tintinnabulation of knives against plates, the creak of a chair as one or other of them uneasily shifts his weight.

And then, just as Sandy has given up hope of ever hearing either of his companions utter another word, Auntie wakes from her dream.

'Tell me,' she says, addressing Ray with what seems to her nephew like extraordinary animation. 'How is your dear mother these days?'

You have to hand it to him, Sandy thinks—he picks up his cue without missing a beat.

'Mummy?' The drawling inflection is just right. The note of languid hesitation. 'Oh, Mummy's very well. Never better, in fact.' The artless smile with which he ends the performance. '*Dear* Mummy...'

A real little pro, thinks Sandy, with the mixture of admiration and faint unease Ray's improvisations always inspire in him. Isn't he laying it on a bit thick—even for Auntie?

The really eerie thing is, she doesn't seem to think so. To judge from the way she is smiling—quite like her old self, in the days before she'd started to go gaga—Ray's remark is no more than she's been expecting. It is as if, Sandy realizes with a twinge of jealousy, they'd known one another for ages, instead of a matter of minutes.

Her face lights up. 'Oh, she is such a dear, isn't she?' she smiles. 'Such fun. Dear Poppy.'

And Sandy thinks, of course. She's got it into her head he's Julian.

Even from where he's sitting, it's an understandable confusion. Because with that cut-glass profile and those raven locks, Ray, if he did but know it, is the spitting image of Cousin Julian. Those whom the gods love etcetera. Poor Julian had copped it in '42 when his sub was torpedoed off Iceland. Such a shame. He'd looked so delicious in uniform, too, Sandy thinks, quite misty-eyed for a second. About the age Ray is now when it happened. No wonder the old girl was seeing double.

Ray nods and smiles, but wisely says nothing. His eyes, meeting Sandy's over Auntie's head, are cold as stones.

The silence prolongs itself. Looking at Auntie, Sandy sees that she has fallen into a light doze. Her eyes are open, but their expression is vacant. No one at home, thinks Sandy, resisting the temptation to pass his hand in front of her face. *Asleep*, he mouths at Ray.

Ray's answer is a shrug. 'Got a fag?' he demands abruptly—the first words he's addressed to Sandy since their arrival, Sandy realizes.

'Shh,' he hisses, jerking his head towards the still-unconscious Auntie. 'You'll wake her.'

'Won't make much difference, will it?' sniffs Ray.

Connie isn't asleep in fact; it's just that she sometimes forgets to talk. When you live alone, there isn't the same need—and besides, her thoughts are still occupied with Julian. Her brother's only child—and so like him, she recalls. Such a pretty baby. He'd

been quite spoilt by them all. Because after Hugh was killed at Ypres, dear Poppy had come to live with them for a while. A household of women they'd been by then, because as well as Hugh, they'd lost Father in the 'flu epidemic that year. Even after Poppy'd remarried, the boy had come to them for holidays. It had made up for the times when Sandy wasn't there. An engaging little chap he was by then—as dark as Sandy was fair. So handsome in his navy-blue uniform with the gold braid—although of course that was later. Now she looks a bit closer, she can see this one isn't as like him as she'd thought...

As if he senses her scrutiny, Ray makes a big show of yawning and stretching. Carelessly he pushes back his chair, making a scraping sound on the bare floorboards, on which, sheets of newspaper (now yellow with age) have at one time been spread in lieu of a carpet, during some long-ago, never completed spring cleaning. The room, like the rest of the house, smells of neglect—its wallpaper blotched here and there with damp, so that its intertwining roses seem to have sprouted monstrous growths. The curtains—once a deep crimson but now faded to brownish-pink—are mildewed, their cream silk linings hanging in shreds. Expensive, too—like all Auntie's things, thinks Sandy. That was Great-Aunt Dolly's influence, of course—she'd always had an eye for quality. Pots of money, too, in the old days—but that had all gone. All that was left was what he saw around him: the house and its contents. It would all come to him in the end, he supposed. His precious inheritance.

With a proprietorial air he runs his hands over the mahogany table—large enough to lay out a corpse on—observing with distaste the sticky bloom upon it. Nothing a good French-polish couldn't cure, but still. The sideboard, too, where Ray is even now poking about amongst the empty bottles and decanters in search of something to drink, was another nice piece. A bit on the heavy side for modern tastes, but Victoriana was going to be big. Already the smart set, the Mayfair and Chelsea crowd, were getting rid of their Swedish teak and stainless steel and snapping up all this kind of thing. Oil lamps. *Chaise-longues*. You name it, they'd be panting for it.

'Find anything?' he asks Ray.

'Not a sausage,' Ray says flatly.

'There's a village shop,' Sandy ventures, seeing the mutinous frown on the boy's face. 'Sells everything. I could run us down there later, if you like. Pick up some supplies for Auntie...'

'I'll walk,' Ray says curtly. 'Need some fags, anyhow.' He pauses in the doorway, his expression suddenly conciliatory. 'Lend us a coupla quid.'

'Typical,' Sandy grumbles fondly. He fishes out a crumpled note or two. 'There. You've cleaned me out. Don't get lost!' he calls after Ray's retreating back.

The sound of a raised voice startles his aunt back to consciousness. She blinks at him. Smiles. 'Silly of me,' she murmurs. 'I must have dropped off for a moment...' She looks around her, all vagueness gone. 'Where's your young friend?'

'Oh, him,' says Sandy. 'He had to go out for a bit. Won't be long.'

'I was just about to make some coffee.' Connie gets to her feet—quite sprightly now, Sandy thinks. A tidy little body, his mother would have said. Compact. That round childlike face he recalls smiling down at him in childhood days—*Now Sandy, dear, won't you have some more cake?*—has changed not at all. The agelessness of old age, he thinks, rather pleased with the observation. A second childhood. Sans eyes, sans teeth...

'And what exactly does he do, your friend?' enquires Auntie crisply.

It was disconcerting how suddenly the old girl could change tack. One minute bats-in-the-belfry, the next all there.

'Raymond?' Sandy blusters. 'He's an artist. Well, more of an art student, really. Still very young, of course. But talented, you know. He... er, helps me out in the shop sometimes...'

It is hard to lie with Auntie's eyes upon him, their mild gaze bringing back memories of other inquisitions. The time Izzie'd cut her head open when they were climbing on the roof—that had not been his fault, but he got the blame of course. That business with the chickens. Not that Auntie, on those far-of occasions, had ever been severe. Slight reproach was the worst she'd ever mustered—although somehow that was worse, he recalls, that either Father's rages or Mumsie's tears.

'An artist,' she muses. 'Indeed. A painter, would that be?' Auntie's Scotch forebears surfacing in the dryness of tone she adopts. The hint of a rolled 'r'. Painter-r.

'Something like that,' agrees Sandy. He can hardly admit that what Ray actually does is a specialized form of painting politely described as restoration, more brutally called forgery. A branch of the antiques trade, which is Sandy's own profession. Buying cheap and selling dear, is how he thinks of it. Although naturally you had to know what you were buying.

Paintings—Victorian, mostly—were a speciality of the firm. And Ray had a talent for this particular branch of the restorer's art. A genius, you might say.

Sandy thinks of the time he first saw Ray, a month ago, in the big first floor studio in Roly Fisk's house in Royal Crescent. My *pied-à-terre*, Roly called it, with that oh-so-casual air he liked to affect when referring to his not-inconsiderable inheritance. Pied-à-terre—my foot, Sandy thinks sourly. Place must be worth a cool twenty thousand. Immense light rooms that made you feel as if you were on the deck of an ocean-going liner. And the view. On a clear day you could practically see what they were having for breakfast in Boulogne.

He likes that about Brighton as a whole—that feeling of foreignness. As if a little piece of France had somehow detached itself from the mainland and drifted across. Something about the light—the effect of all those white buildings, he supposes—made the place seem almost Mediterranean at times. A city of dreaming piers. Failed bridges, someone had said—but he rather liked them. Extravagant constructions—follies, really—with no earthly purpose except to prove it could be done. The British genius for engineering harnessed in the cause of pure frivolity. Oh yes, he thoroughly approved of piers.

That day he'd walked into Roly's studio they'd all been standing at the window. As befitted the room's graceful eighteenth century symmetry, there were two of these, opening out onto wrought-iron balconies overlooking the street and beyond it, the sea. He remembers the light flooding in, dazzling him momentarily so that he stood there blinking. A large mirror over the fireplace filled the room with marine reflections; this was the room's

only furniture, apart from a large easel which stood in the centre of the floor, and a trestle table strewn with Roly's paints and brushes. If the rest of the house testified to its owner's fondness for fine things, this room was the ascetic exception. My monastic cell, Roly used to say, with his little laugh.

It was here that Roly played the artist, got up for the purpose in a fisherman's smock artfully stained with oil-paint; here he entertained boys—his 'models', he called them—beginning with a healthy dose of flattery ('My dear! Such skin! Such hair!') and ending with an hour's vigorous sex on his white sheepskin rug. Meeting Ray for the first time, Sandy had assumed he was merely the latest in the series. One of Roly's beauties. He was certainly lovely. Seeing him turn from the window, where he and Roly and the rest of them had been ogling a bunch of townie boys, had been for Sandy a kind of revelation.

Such skin, such hair. Eyes the colour of a stormy sea. Not especially tall; but with a lithe, muscular build—broad shoulders, a tapering waist, a tight round bottom—which was, in Sandy's view, the epitome of masculine perfection. And his clothes: *white trousers* and a striped matelot jersey. Espadrilles. Sandy almost groans aloud. Lust, clouded by envy (damn Roly!) blurs his vision.

With his customary airy insouciance, Roly performs the introductions. 'You know Nigel, of course. And dear Terry. And this is Ray...'

Sandy blinks and smiles, trying to recover his equilibrium, as Roly, chattering as usual, draws him away from the others towards the centre of the room. So absorbed is he in his thoughts that it's a moment before he realizes his opinion is being solicited.

'So what do you think?' Roly hisses in his ear. 'Marvellous, isn't she?'

This is blatant even for Roly. The boy's only standing a few feet away, for heaven's sake—even if he is being monopolized by Nigel and co. Surely Roly isn't proposing to give him a blow-by-blow account of his latest conquest's no doubt versatile talents while the subject of his eulogy is still in the room?

Sandy coughs discreetly, signalling his discomfort at this insensitivity.

But then Roly, impatient for a response, plucks him by the sleeve—and Sandy realizes, with a stab of relief, that it's merely his opinion of a picture that being asked. He is Roly's dealer, after all. Thanks to him, the downstairs rooms of this far from austere residence are crammed with paintings, valuable furniture, bibelots of all kinds. For Roly, in common with a lot of rich people, has more money than taste. He relies on an army of others—interior decorators, landscape gardeners and antique dealers to supply his deficiencies. When he does try to branch out on his own, the results are usually calamitous. Sandy thinks of the particularly frightful canvas by a minor Pre-Raphaelite that hangs in Roly's opulent drawing room. *Mariana in the Moated Grange.* Dear God.

He composes his features to address Roly's latest disaster. And sees at once that he has misjudged him. The thing is a masterpiece. Exquisite. A gem.

There it sits, propped up on Roly's easel. Quite a small thing, really—not more than twelve by twenty. A charcoal sketch of a woman's head. Unmistakable, to anyone who knew what they were looking at. Those voluptuous, Cupid's bow lips. Those languorous eyes. That Grecian nose. The squiggle denoting the hair.

But *what* a squiggle, Sandy thinks, his heart swelling with a complex mixture of emotions, of which envy of Roly Fisk's good fortune and naked desire were uppermost.

'It's... it's very fine,' he says when he can trust himself to speak.

'Isn't it, though?' Roly's smile is one of barely suppressed glee. The cat that got the cream, Sandy thinks.

'What did you pay for it?' he asks, as casually as he dares.

To his astonishment and chagrin, Roly bursts out laughing. 'Oh, I say!' he splutters. 'That's too priceless. I might have known that'd be the first thing you'd ask...'

Before Sandy, flushing at the insult, can think of a riposte, Roly is calling the others over. 'You'll never guess what dear Sandy just said. It's too funny for words...' Tears of laughter standing in his eyes.

'I merely asked what you gave for it,' Sandy says, affronted. 'I might have been able to get a better price for you, that's all...'

'I doubt that very much,' Roly gasps, wiping his eyes. 'What do *you* think, Ray,' he says, addressing the marvellous boy. '*Was* it a reasonable price?'

'A bargain, I'd say,' grins loathsome Nigel. His paramour giggles. At this moment, Sandy would like nothing better than to punch both their heads.

'Ray?' Roly persists.

'S'pose so.'

Even in his confusion, Sandy notices that the boy will not meet his eyes.

Because—as Roly has to explain, so that he, Sandy, can share the joke—Ray's in a position to say.

'Considering that he drew the precious thing himself not ten minutes before you came in.'

All that Sandy can do is shake his head and laugh, and admit that they'd had him fooled—and he's no mean judge, when it comes down to it. Even once visited the old maestro's studio in Nice. You wouldn't believe the stuff he had lying around the place. Half-finished paintings and sketches. Most of them not half as fine as this one, he adds gallantly.

But while Roly is chuckling over the trick they've played, and calling for a glass of champagne to celebrate—because he's as thrilled with it as if it were a real Matisse, he insists—Sandy finds himself catching Ray's eye. And what he reads there—the look of pure scorn for Roly and his antics—makes his humiliation seem suddenly worthwhile. Because Ray, he sees, with one of those flashes of insight which occasionally surprise him, is in the same boat as he is. Both are hirelings—court jesters—to be pushed around at the whim of a rich man. And he knows (oh, he knows!) exactly how that makes one feel.