

The Hole in the Wall



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Caroline

I do my best not to mind about the hole. Strictly speaking, it's not a hole anymore; it's a rough patch. When you walk into the study, your eyes gravitate towards the knee-high vomit-textured rectangle of wall. Perhaps I should say 'I' instead of 'you'; Michael claims he can't notice it. I suppose it's because the episode with the Grangers got to me more than it did him. Nothing ever does get to him.

When I look at that patch, I see Jazz Granger crouching on the rubble-strewn floor, with that ancient cigar box in his hands. I've just switched the light on. He's staring at me with a face that is half frightened rabbit, half the lorry that is doing the frightening. A few specks of plaster have settled on his nose and just as I hear Michael grumbling out of bed, he says: 'I can see through your night dress.' Then I see Michael flapping at him with the belt of his dressing gown and shouting words like 'bloody outrage' and 'police.' I want to tell Michael that he's just a boy, but when I open my mouth no sound comes out.

I swerve into our bedroom. I sit down. Take a few deep breaths. Then, pushing aside all that has happened since that unfortunate bump in the night, I go right back to the beginning.

It was a few months ago – in May. I was stuck with my seminar paper on the late Victorian women's movement. All I could do was stare out of our front window, watching as the wind blew the petals off of the council tree on the pavement, across our garden wall, slowly covering what is an earthy excuse for a garden the rest of the year. One day, I was jolted awake by the sight of a little girl crouching there. She was scooping up the petals into an old LIDL bag. Poor child, I thought. Her parents shop at LIDL; I'd better let her have my petals.

The mind works in mysterious ways: seeing that girl enabled me to swoop right to the heart of the motives and actions of those placard-bearers and marchers and school mistresses. I dreamt I was trapped inside one of their long dresses. Whenever I was talking to Michael, or any of my colleagues, I was conducting a secret conversation with my women.

A few weeks later they ceased to communicate with me. Perhaps I overwhelmed them, as I have a tendency to do. Perhaps my heart was holding back. Either way, I returned to the window. The girl was there again, sitting on our garden wall. She was swinging her legs wildly and scribbling on a piece of cardboard on her knee. The wall had been past its prime when we moved in and we hadn't had it repaired in the three decades since; worried that some disaster would occur for which I would be blamed – oh, the irony! – I went and asked her to get down.

'Why?' she said, in a brittle little voice.

'Because it's dangerous.'

At this, she threw her head back and cackled.

‘This is nothing,’ she said. ‘My big brother once let me climb over the fence of the park with him and his mates and I was the third fastest.’

‘That’s all very well,’ I said, ‘But I still think,’ –

I walked towards her but she swung her legs round and jumped down onto the pavement before I could get too close.

I asked about her drawing. She suddenly made a show of being shy, sticking her thumb in her mouth and hiding the paper behind her back.

‘I’m sure it’s a beautiful drawing,’ I persisted.

Lowering her reddening face to the ground, she handed me a segment of one of those techni-coloured cereal packets Oscar is forever pestering me to buy. On the plain interior side, she had made a most remarkable likeness of the front of our house – the Georgian ratios were beautifully rendered, right down to the details, such as the window boxes and the brass lion door knob.

‘This is really a most remarkable drawing,’ I told her. ‘Especially for a child of your age. What did you draw it with?’

She held out a chewed-up biro.

‘Even more remarkable!’ I said. ‘You are really talented. I am sure you will be a famous artist one day.’

‘No, it’s rubbish,’ she said. She was trying hard not to smile, however.

‘I need it back now,’ she said. ‘It’s for my gran and she’s ill.’

When I didn’t move, she added: ‘She is going to die soon. She might be dead now.’

I handed it to her, and she ran off.

A few weeks later I returned home, triumphant at how well my paper was received at a seminar, to find Oscar and the girl sitting on the wall.

‘Oscar, get down from there this minute!’ I said.

‘Sorry mummy!’ he said. He jumped down immediately.

‘Mummy, this is my new friend Treasure.’

My heart sank. ‘Treasure? Treasure, yes of course – the budding artist.’

‘Well, it’s time for Oscar’s tea now, so let’s say goodbye,’ I said.

‘Oh, but mum, Treasure was telling me a *story*,’ he said. He crossed his arms and stuck out his bottom lip, which is about as close as to contrariness that he gets.

He crossed his arms and refused to move. This was most unlike him. I’m usually very gentle with him, but on this occasion I pulled him inside by the wrist. Just before I closed the door and said goodbye to Treasure, I noticed that she was peering into the hallway with an intensity that was beyond her years. An urgency. It wasn’t until Michael was halfway through plastering over the hole made by her brother that he told me he’d seen her standing behind the wall later that night – she must have stayed there for hours.

I had to go into the university a lot more in the weeks that followed. Michael, however, was doing some freelance work, so he watched Oscar after school. Treasure became a regular appearance. Oscar talked excitedly about the games they played together – all wholesome, old-fashioned games that involved the exercise of the body and of the imagination. Michael and I were thrilled: these were the aspects of childhood we’d been afraid he’d miss out on, growing up in twenty first century London.

After a month or so, it occurred to me that Treasure was probably dying to be invited in for supper. Indeed, when I held open the door for her, she was unable to suppress her smile.

As soon as she put her rubber-clad toe on the doorstep, her babble ran dry. Oscar ran around showing her the piano and the art box and the game cupboard and the photographs of the tigers he helped his dad take when they went on holiday to India. Treasure kept her thumb in her mouth the entire time, nodding silently.

Treasure was unimpressed with Michael’s spinach and potatoes; she pinged her fork on and off her plate until Michael asked her to stop. I don’t want Michael to think that I don’t appreciate him trying to do his share, so I ate mine up. (Although the fish *was* rather dry, the potatoes underdone, and the spinach watery). Anyway, Oscar had stopped babbling, Michael was absorbed in an article, and I was exhausted, so there was a long, awkward silence, into which Treasure spoke: ‘how comes you’re the same age as my gran but you’re not a gran, you’re a mum?’

She looked so serious that I nipped my laugh in the bud. ‘Well,’ I said, ‘People have children at all sorts of different times. For all sorts of reasons.’

‘Oh...’ She looked at her uneaten fish, disappointed.

‘Where’s your mummy?’ said Oscar.

‘She’s on holiday,’ said Treasure. ‘She’s been there for years and years.’

Michael and I exchanged The Look.

‘She writes us letters sometimes,’ she continued. ‘Gran reads them to us. Jazz never wants to listen and Ben is too young to understand, but I do. I like letters and so does Gran.’

‘She’s not... too sick, then?’ I asked.

Treasure shrugged. ‘I don’t know. Jazz told me she wants to die but he just said that to be mean. She doesn’t want to die. She wants to get one of her letters in the paper. She’s sent them one every month for years but they never reply.’

Michael jerked into action. ‘What’s this... what paper?’

‘The *Daily Mail*.’

Michael gulped. ‘Well, I can’t say I have all that many connections there, but I do have lots at the *Guardian*. Bring me her letter next time you come round, and I’ll see what I can do.’

Treasure’s face scrunched up with fear. ‘No, no that’s OK. She wants to do it herself, you see. She doesn’t want anyone to help her – she wouldn’t even let me check her spellings...’

Although her reaction struck me as odd, I thought nothing more of it. I cleared up the plates and unearthed some organic choc ices from the freezer. (Which were received enthusiastically by the children.)

After that, the children disappeared into Oscar’s room. Michael and I whispered over the washing up. (Well, I did the washing and he, the drying. He says he’ll wash up but somehow I always get there first. Most men don’t bother at all, so I’m lucky, really.) He said he wasn’t sure if this Treasure was a suitable playmate for Oscar. I told him he might as well throw his socialist theory books in the bin.

‘Yes, but have you heard the words she uses when we’re not around? Have you heard the things she tells him? Sex, drugs, you name it – she knows...’

‘Oh, but she’s a lovely girl,’ I said. ‘And very talented. And besides, aren’t all kids like that these days – frothing over with misplaced wisdom gleaned from the television.’

Michael raised his eyebrows. ‘You can’t tell me there’s no difference between her and his friends from school.’

We’d managed to get Oscar into the nice state school in the area. The other school is full of estate kids. And ones who’ve just arrived in the country. Oscar’s school gets excellent

SATs results and is crammed with kids from the terraces. We're not racist or classist or anything – a skim of our academic and career interests would disprove any accusations of that – but, like any parents, we wanted the best for our child.

'OK, I take your point. But I do like Treasure.'

At the sound of her name, he winced.

'And it's not her fault about her name,' I said. 'And let's face it – Oscar isn't the most sociable of children. We should do all we can to support him in making new friends.'

That night, Oscar ran into our bed with a nightmare. This was his first one in years. When we asked if he was scared of anything in particular, he said no.

Over the next few weeks, Treasure spent more and more time at our house. Oscar had nightmares nearly every night. Treasure relaxed around me and Michael, telling us stories of the injustices she'd suffered at school. She asked a lot of questions – mainly about the house. ('Is this a vase from the olden days? What are all those books for? What were the walls like before you painted them?') Now, it seemed perfectly obvious this was not normal behaviour for a ten year old. But I assumed she was one of those children who dreams of being an adult – as opposed to a fairy or a Power Ranger. She never said one word about where she lived. Or who she lived with. And – to my shame – I never asked.

One day, I got a call from Oscar's school, saying that he'd disappeared at lunch time. I said that was ridiculous, he must be hiding in a cupboard or something. The gormless thing cleared her throat. One of the front gates had been left open, 'by mistake, it was, honest,' she confessed. I really lost it, and after she told me – in a tone that suggested *I* was the imbecile – that shouting would assist no one, I hung up. I rang Michael, and we agreed to meet at the school at once. There was still no Oscar, so we called the police.

We spent the afternoon on the front room sofa, staring out of the window. We did not talk. We did not even drink tea. It was as if everything – time, space, proportion – was closing in on us, suffocating us, and there was nothing we could do. This sort of thing wasn't meant to happen, and yet... It was. It *was* happening. Control was a fragile illusion.

Just as it was getting dark, there was a knock on the door. A policeman was standing with Oscar. We were so pleased to see him that we squashed him between our chests, part of me wishing him to remain there, a warm and wriggly ball of energy between us, forever. We examined him for signs of hurt; luckily we only found a few scratches on his shins and a slightly sunburned nose.

I made him his meal of robot-shaped pasta and melted mozzarella cheese and peas. When he'd finished, we asked what had happened. He said it was a secret.

Michael seized him – a tad too firmly, in my opinion – by the shoulders.

‘Mummy and daddy were very, *very* worried about you today,’ he said. He put on his baby voice, which I have always found rather sinister.

‘We thought that something bad might’ve happened to you. We hoped you weren’t dead,’ he continued.

Oscar looked like he was about to cry.

‘Michael,’ I began –

‘No, Caroline! I’m putting my foot down. He must understand that running away from school is a very naughty thing to do. Very naughty indeed.’

‘I’m sorry daddy. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry!’

Oscar’s eyes expanded and contracted with fear. This happened every time we had an issue with him. I hated it, but I was powerless to make something else happen.

The best I could do was to give him an organic choc-ice and pat him on the shoulder. What a lucky boy! Wouldn’t he like to tell mummy and daddy ask ‘a teeny weeny titbit’ about what happened?

After nibbling off the chocolate coating, he confirmed our suspicions: Treasure had ‘fetched’ him out during break.

‘And where did you go?’ asked Michael.

Oscar took a tremendous bit into what was left of his ice cream. He made a noise that suggested pain and flapped his hands about. I couldn’t help laughing, but Michael was determined to remain serious.

‘Sorry,’ said Oscar, ‘Sorry, daddy. I got a brain-freeze. Me and Treasure just went around the high street, to the park and stuff.’

‘I see,’ said Michael, ruffling his hair. ‘Well you’ve had a big day. It must be time for bed.’

We did not have to say anything to one another to agree that Oscar would not be seeing that girl anymore. We didn’t want to upset the children by telling them this, however. We simply banned Oscar from ‘playing out.’ We also enrolled him in a plethora of extra-curricular activities, something I’d been meaning to do for a long time, in the hope that it would make him a bit more out-going. Treasure knocked on the door a few times but we told her Oscar was out. We didn’t invite her in, as we would have done previously. Oscar didn’t complain, and his nightmares stopped.

Then it really was the holidays. Our life was back to normal. Having almost had it ripped away from us, we appreciated it as we never had before; watching Oscar arrange his cereal around the edge of his bowl brought tears to my eyes on a number of occasions; this life was so precious. So precious.

Then came that bump in the night. We woke up, stumbled into the study, and saw Jazz there, clasping the box in his hands. I was scared, but after our ordeal with Oscar, I knew we'd get through it. Michael didn't deal with it so well; all the veins were popping out of his forehead and as he shouted at the boy, he clenched and unclenched his fists.

'I haven't done anything wrong,' said Jazz. 'I just came to get this.' He waved the box. 'And it's ours anyways.'

'But it's in our house,' said Michael. 'How can it possibly be yours?'

Jazz tried to push past Michael but Michael grabbed the box out of his hand.

'Hey, give it here! It's *ours!*'

Jazz pawed at the box but Michael's arm was so long that he had no hope of reaching it.

'I'll give it back,' said Michael. 'I just want to see what's inside.'

There was a spine-curdling scrape as Michael rammed open the box. All sorts of papers flew out. Jazz threw himself to his knees, and scrambled around for them, saving them from falling down the cracks between the floorboards.

'What is all this?' I asked.

Jazz didn't reply; he was reading one of the letters. His lips were wobbling. He looked up at me and he knew that I knew that he was crying. I suddenly felt that *we* were the intruders.

'Come on,' I said to Michael, 'Let's go next door for a moment.'

Michael tightened the belt of his dressing gown. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he said. 'We're going to get to the bottom of this.'

He towered over the crying boy:

'Well young man, are you going to tell us what you're doing here or not?'

Jazz looked up at him with wet, frightened eyes; his irises were swamped with Michael's reflection. He slumped his shoulders and stared forlornly at the nest of tea-coloured pieces of paper surrounding him.

‘OK, whatever. We – my gran used to live here, before you.’

‘What do you mean?’ I asked, in my softest voice.

‘She was born here. Her parents lived here since before the war. Their aunts and uncles lived down the road. Before the war, everything was good. After, it all went to shit. The landlords let the place get so damp. They put the rents up. People started moving out – into the new council houses and all that. But not my gran – she loved it here and she wasn’t going to move for anything. When her parents died she sold some of their stuff and moved the rest into this room.’

‘What?’ I was astonished. ‘But it’s so small.’

He knocked on the wall with the hole – a hollow sound.

‘Ah,’ I said, smiling.

His body and his face sprang to life; he trusted me.

‘They put this in later, see?’ he continued. ‘This was part of the next room. Sometimes, the memories made her sad but she had a job in Boots and she had to work there a lot to pay the rent so there wasn’t much time for that. Then she met my granddad. He had just come over from Jamaica. His job was to sort post at night. One day he took her back to his flat. When she saw how damp and cramped it was, how he ate only dry bread and cheese and had one loo to share with twenty other people, she demanded that he moved in with her. They were in love, you see.’

‘When she got pregnant, they were delighted. But when she got so big she couldn’t work, they had trouble paying the rent, even though my granddad was working so many hours they hardly saw each other anymore. The baby was actually two babies – twins. A few days after they were born, granddad came home very angry. He said he wished he’d never come to this country; he’d been sacked from his job. They hadn’t been paying him what they were supposed to; when he complained, they said that he would have to learn to control his temper now that he was in a civilised country. He got angrier after that; they said he had to leave.’

‘They were both very sad for a while; he wandered all around London looking for work and she was up all night with the twins. As if things couldn’t get any worse, the landlord started hassling them for rent. He sent round some Bouncer-types to threaten them. Then he sent round builders – to build that wall. She tried to stop them, of course she tried, but what could she do with a baby in each hand? Granddad didn’t come back that day. He didn’t come back the next day, either. The builders were building this wall, getting dust everywhere, and she was just sitting there with the babies. Babies but no money. She didn’t know what to do; her family were either dead, or refusing to speak to her because she’d gone with a black man.’

'Eventually, the bouncers moved her stuff out into the street – just like that. They let her have a few minutes in there alone. She emptied the cigars out of the box granddad had left behind. Into it she put all the letters they'd written each other when they'd been living apart; the letters he'd received from his family in Jamaica; the letters her family had sent her before they'd stopped talking. She put it in the half-finished wall because she knew that that life was over now.

'After that she moved into a hostel. One of the babies got a really bad cough from the dust; it died. The other one, well... it turned into my mother. Not that that's saying much.'

The boy looked up. He winced as if expecting a telling-off. I had a lump in my throat and Michael looked dreamy, which is not at all like him.

'I'm sorry if I've talked too much,' he said. 'But you asked. I didn't know any of this myself until gran got ill. She seemed to kind of slip underneath time: she could only see things that happened a very long ago. But when Treasure told her about her visits to the house, and what it was like now, she sort of came back. She liked those stories. When you stopped her coming, gran got worse. I was so angry. But I wouldn't have done anything, if I hadn't seen the front door key Treasure had nicked off you. Gran had changed her mind; she wanted those memories back, and this was the one thing I could do to get them for her.'

'Well, that's sweet of you.'

Jazz looked at me with frightened accusatory eyes – as if somehow, this was all my fault. At some point during the boy's story, Michael had slipped into our bedroom; I went to retrieve him, certain he'd know what to do, or at the very least, what to say.

In the glow of our ancient bedside lamp, his face looked like melting wax. He was hunched over, his chin on his hands and I thought: he looks old. He is old. We sat in silence for a few minutes and then he said that we'd better take the boy home. He stood up, took a few steps forward, then stumbled back onto the bed.

'Everything's black,' he said. 'Too much blood in my head.'

I told him he couldn't go out of the house like that. I tucked him under the covers, kissed his forehead and turned off the light.

In the car, Jazz put the box on his lap and tapped his fingers against it. I always snapped when Oscar did things like that. Hardly knowing the boy, I asked about school instead.

When he said that he was sixteen, I tried not to let it show that I'd assumed he was several years younger. I made a casual reference to GCSEs.

‘Already done them,’ he said. ‘Although I didn’t really do them. I’m meant to be doing some again at college, but it’s boring. And I’m rubbish.’

‘Oh, I’m sure that’s not true,’ I said.

‘It is. All my teachers said.’

Before I could find some words of solace, he instructed me to turn off the main road. A few minutes later, I was parked outside a tower so high that I could not see the top; I realised it was the ugly grey protrusion Michael and I frequently cursed for ruining the view from the loft.

‘Well, I hope your gran is ok,’ I said. ‘Have you... got anyone to help you?’

He looked up at me. ‘Do you... want to come and have a look? I – we... Gran said not to tell anyone, but...’

‘It’s OK,’ I said. ‘Of course.’

I parked the car. We walked up a shadowy, smelly stairwell, whose walls were decorated with misspelt graffiti.

The smell in the flat was worse. In fact, it was putrid. When Jazz switched on the light, I gasped. I’d never seen such a dump. I followed his snaking path through the mounds of broken chairs, old magazine, toys, and god knows what else. I discreetly put my hand over my nose.

Jazz disappeared through a doorway, calling, ‘Gran, I got your box.’

I followed. The smell worsened. The room was so cluttered with junk and so dingy, that I could not discern the source. I peered over a dusty plastic kitchen unit, to find a narrow bed in the corner. When I saw what was inside the bed, I had to put my hand over my mouth to stifle a horrendously inappropriate laugh. I knew it wasn’t funny. I just couldn’t believe that this raisin, this mummy, a museum exhibit, a Halloween costume, a corpse, had once been a living, breathing, feeling human being just like me. I forced myself to look long enough to take in the skin had been stretched taught over cheekbones, the pinched-in nose, the greasy hair, the eyes that were not quite closed. So this was the woman who had inhabited our house before us, this the famous ‘gran,’ and she had ended up like this, at the very same age as me, a hair’s breath from sixty. My urge to laugh was replaced by an urge to vomit.

I looked, instead, at Treasure, curled into a foetal, cat-like position at the foot of the bed. Something crunched underfoot: cardboard. The floor was covered with her cereal packet drawings. I suddenly remembered the first time I’d seen her, crouching among the petals: that concentration, those desperate, yearning eyes. And all this time she’d been clinging to death, breathing it in, pretending with all her might that it was life.

Jazz placed the box on the blanket that covered the dead woman's body.

My eyes were rebels; they looked and looked at that face, just as they look and look at that hole in the wall. The face was shrunken and horrifying. It was a strange, strange colour, but it was still, somehow, irrepressibly human.

'I think,' I said quietly, 'That your gran should go to the hospital.'

Jazz nodded. 'I know. I knew that. I just... I didn't want to move her. She always had to move about. I thought she might like a break. She might settle here after all. Or go back to her – I mean your – house.'

Things moved very quickly after that; the ambulance people came; I drove the children to the hospital; I stayed with them until the morning, when the social workers came. The social workers told me it was OK, I should go now; I wasn't a guardian or a relative so there was no more I could do. When I asked what would happen to them they said that Treasure would be taken into care. Jazz was sixteen, so could live on his own, although he'd get assistance. I should have argued. I should have refused to leave them. Or offered to adopt them. I could at least have arranged a funeral. But they were so resigned, zombie-like, to their fate, that it was easy to give them each a quick hug and leave, telling them they could visit us any time. The last I saw of them, they were turning back to watch me go down the hospital corridor, each holding that box with one hand. What they did with it, I don't know.

A few days later, we were off to France. We had a lovely time, cycling and canoeing and eating in quaint old Bistros. I didn't think of Treasure at all; there were no reminders. No bumpy patches. I suppose I could get a handy man in to smooth it over. Or I could just refrain from going into the study. But even then, I'm not sure how far that would go; Oscar doesn't have nightmares anymore but there have been many times when I have woken up, sweating, certain that old sunken face is in the room, watching. I am overwhelmed with the sensation that somehow, I got this life on the sly. I got it on the sly and its foundations are subsiding. Michael doesn't like it when I tell him such fears. He says that you can't save everyone. Sad things happen, bad things happen – there is nothing you can do. He's right, of course – he does, come to think of it, have a much stronger practical streak than I do. This may not stretch to being able to cover over holes with his hands, but he can certainly do it in his *mind*. I'm different; I'll avoid the rough patch all day and it still gets me. When I feel it coming, I know there is nothing I can do; not even tea will do the trick; it will scorch and parch my mouth with its bitterness. Sometimes the tea is just going to taste bitter and using a gourmet brand or doing better DIY is never going to change that; you just have to wait for it to pass.

Oscar

Mum and dad think they know all about Treasure but the only things they know are the silly ones. They know what she looks like. They know she only eats ice cream. They know she's the reason I disappeared out of school and they got very, very scared and had to call the police.

What they don't know is what actually happened that day, or why. It was my fault. I kept on telling Treasure how I couldn't wait for the school holidays. I showed her how I'd already packed my Pokemon rucksack with everything I'd need on the ferry. I asked if she'd ever been on a ferry and she said no. A plane? No. 'Have you even been to a foreign place?' I said. 'Well I don't have to wait till the end of term to go on holiday,' she said. 'I don't have to go to school if I don't want to, and neither do you, not if you come with me.' I didn't show her any more of my rucksack after that, because she was jiggling her legs about the way she does when she's about to tell a scary story, and I didn't want that.

The next Monday, I saw her standing outside the school gates at break time. I wasn't playing with anyone because I was sad. I was sad because after break I'd have maths group with Adam and Martin, who kick me and pull my ear lobes and call me names. Mrs Bernard only ever looks round when I yell at them to shut-up-and-leave-me-alone, so it's always me who gets called naughty, not them.

'*Oscar!*' Treasure hissed through the half-open gate.

I knew that shouting in maths group was a little naughty but that not going at all was a very big one. Even though I hate getting told off, I hate maths group more, so I slipped out onto the road.

Treasure grabbed my hand and pulled me all the way down the hill to the big main road which mummy doesn't let me cross unless I'm holding her hand. Treasure crossed it without waiting for the green man. I followed her into the corner shop. We stole some penny sweets, and although I knew this was another naughty thing, we'd done it so many times before, that I'd kind of forgotten.

We got on the bus. It was nice being on the bus without any grown-ups; people might have actually thought *we* were grown-ups. Treasure said that we were going on holiday to where her mum was. I told her that I was OK for a holiday because we were going to France soon; I wanted to get back to class for the afternoon, so I could finish my scrapbook about trains. She stared at her half-reflection in the bus window and said that her gran was getting iller and iller. If we didn't go to get her mum now, there'd be no one to look after her and her brother. I didn't think it would be very nice not to have anyone to look after you, so I said yes. I could always finish my train scrapbook next week.

When we got off the bus there was a big, big fence. She told me that on the other side there was a really nice hotel with a pool and those drinks with the little umbrellas in

them. And ice cream. She said that if we walked round the fence, we'd get to the door. But we walked and we walked and all we got to was a very big gate. There was a sign that I couldn't read because someone had graffitied a picture of a man doing a poo on top of it. I don't know who did that or why but it made us laugh.

There was a graveyard across the road. Treasure said that actually her mum had agreed to meet her there. The graveyard had millions of graves in it and I didn't want to go there. But I didn't want to stay by the fence, either, so I followed. We walked between the graves until we got to these old mossy ones that looked like play houses. Treasure knelt down besides one and put her eye and then her ear up to a crack in its roof. She told me to shut up about her scrapbook. Then she told me that she could see a skeleton and that it was talking to her. It was telling her more stories about the dead people that lived in our house. I told her not to tell me about more of those stories because they were very, very scary. But she did anyway.

There are four dead people in our house. The ghosts have been forgotten by everyone and they are very angry – if Treasure didn't tell me those stories, the ghosts would come out of our house and into hers and they would take her away in the night. That is what she said. She said that the scariest thing about the ghosts was that they looked just like people. If I ever saw someone in our house that I didn't recognise, it wasn't a burglar; it was a ghost. She'd already told me the story of the mummy ghost who smoked so much she floated up to the ceiling and got stuck there. She'd also told me about the daddy ghost and how he had come from a very faraway place and when he had died half of him went back to it, and the other half got stuck here – that's why he was so angry. Now she was telling me about the baby ghost. The baby ghost was so sick it died. It died and the mummy and the daddy ghost wrapped it up and buried it in the wall of our house. Although it was dead, it was still sick. It will go on being sick and stuck in the wall forever.

When she had finished she told me to look down at the skeletons myself. I didn't want to but she grabbed the back of my head and pushed it down to the hole. She asked if I could see the bones. I said yes but that was only to get her hand off my head; all I saw was the blackness that was going up my nose. We walked around the graveyard a bit more. Treasure looked sad. When I noticed how small some of the graves were, I felt sad, too. She didn't have any money and neither did I, so we had to walk all the way back.

Treasure wouldn't walk back to school with me, even though it's the quickest way back to the tower where she lives. She likes to do naughty things and although she acts like she doesn't know they're naughty, sometimes I think that actually, she does.

There were three policemen pacing up and down my school hall. I thought that I was in big, big trouble. I thought that maybe they knew about all the penny sweets we'd stolen. And that time I swore out of the back window of our car, on the way to see grandma in Cornwall. Instead, they gave me a lollipop and drove me home. They even put on the *nee-nor* when I asked.

Mummy and daddy were so, so happy to see me. I didn't want to tell them about Treasure because I knew they didn't like her much. This made dad angry at me which made mum angry at him, which made me tell them a bit of what happened because I don't like it when they're angry. They didn't say much but I knew that I wasn't going to be allowed to be Treasure's friend anymore. I knew it even more when mummy made me go to that drama club on Mondays and Wednesdays and Orchestra on Tuesdays, even though I hate saying things in front of people and I don't like playing the flute because it makes my lips hurt.

When the holidays came, I was kind of glad that I wasn't friends with Treasure anymore, because she would've stayed at my house too long and been too bossy and told me too many scary stories. I even forgot about the ones she *had* told me.

After a while, I got bored with mummy and daddy. They're too sad and quiet and grown-up for playing. I began to feel the bad feeling – the ghostly feeling – around the house again.

Mum and dad seemed happier when we went to France. I was too, but it wasn't like I'd imagined. I'd packed my rucksack a gazillion times by then, but I didn't have quite the right things.

I made lots of friends in the campsite. Mummy and daddy liked them all because not one of them was naughty. But I would've given up my Gameboy and my lilo and my rubber ring and my Pokemon colouring book, to turn them into Treasure. No one would have lilo races with me because the sign by the pool said you couldn't; no one wanted to swim in the sea because the mummies and daddies said it was dangerous. No one wanted to sneak into any of the caravans because strangers equalled danger. Treasure would've done all that. She would've thought up even naughtier things, ones that were so, so fun, I couldn't think them up myself. She'd have liked the campsite ice creams, and the bubble pool. She'd have made pretty shapes in the sand on the beach. But she was stuck in that grey tower, and when I got home, she'd still be there, and I'd still be with mum and dad. This made me sad because you can't find interesting things without being naughty, but mum and dad aren't naughty people, so I don't really know how to do it by myself.

When I got home, I snuck into the loft room, because you can see Treasure's tower from there. I got out the heavy binoculars dad uses for bird watching. I saw pigeons, sea gulls, and a woman throwing a cigarette off of the balcony of one of the flats in the tower. I couldn't see the woman clearly but I could see the orange cigarette fire falling and falling until it hit the ground. I saw other things too, only I can't remember what they were, because not one of them was Treasure. I'll keep looking though, I will.

Michael

Caroline has stopped buying my fig rolls. When I mentioned it, she said that if I wanted one so badly I could bloody well buy them myself. She's rather brittle these days. The other day I watched Oscar pick and pick at a scab on his knee until it was bleeding all over again; no prizes for guessing who he got *that* habit from.

To think that this is all a punishment for my botched DIY job, oh, it makes me laugh! It makes me laugh a resigned, hopeless kind of laugh. When something is over, it is over. Your life carries on and when you look back to the event – whatever it may be – you find that a box has grown around it, meaning that it can never quite touch you. If it is a joyous event, then this is highly frustrating. However, if it is an event that you'd rather forget, you breathe a huge sigh of relief.

I suppose I should be more specific. Yes. The box in the wall; a curious business. When I saw that boy, saw his face, saw what he was holding, saw that look in his eyes, I began to wonder. About the other box, I mean – the box that separates the present from the past. I saw myself popping round to our house just before it was our house, in 1974. For weeks Caroline had been pestering me to go in without the slimy Estate Agent, so we could give it a thorough checking-over for damp.

The boy's grandmother opened the door. Her hair was in curlers and she was dressed in a silky red dressing gown. I was wearing a suit with elbow patches. I started to explain who I was but she told me to stop jabbering and come on up. I followed her up the stairs. It just so happened that my gaze was level with her shimmering, pearl-like legs. I felt flushed, itchy, beneath my tweed jacket that I was not yet used to; I had never been so close to a woman like that before, a woman with pearl legs – the kind of things that Caroline and her feminist ilk were trying to outlaw. And we were already married by then.

I was surprised when she grabbed my shoulders and pushed me onto a bed which took up a disproportionate share of the room. Silk scarves were pinned to the ceiling; I felt as if I had strayed into a cave. I said that I was interested in seeing the house, and – but she put a finger on my lips. There was a look in her kohl-rimmed eyes that I could not work out; it had a sad element, a knowing element, and triumphant element, and ... Something else. Whatever it was, it made my heart beat very fast. Very fast indeed. She untied her bathrobe and leant over me; her long breasts brushed against my nose.

As she undressed me, I thought of how Caroline was waiting for me, a few streets away, at a friend's house. She would be sitting in a tense, hunched position, and when I arrived, she'd jump up and say, 'Well, how was it? Was the damp as bad we suspected?' All that thinking made me go cold and limp.

She asked what the matter was.

I grabbed one breast in each hand and filled my mind with their soft touch and with her department store scent. Then I ran my hands down her fleshy back. When I reached the nylon seam that bisected her buttocks, I stopped. She asked if there was anything the matter. 'Quite the contrary,' I replied. 'Those pearl stockings you've got on, ahh...'

'They're not stockings,' she said, offended. 'They're *tights*.'

'*Tights*?' I knew what Caroline thought about tights. I hooked my thumbs into under those soft tight seams. She let out a sharp cry. I imagined that I was whipping Caroline right out of the world. A wonderful crackling as her legs came free; Caroline was gone; I kissed the goose-pimplly flesh of her calf. What happened after that filled the moment so entirely that even now, decades later, I only have to think the word 'peel' and I fall right back into it.

Just as I'd buttoned up my shirt, she said that would be '£100 quid.'

When I protested, she said, 'Oh, come on, don't act all innocent. You knew exactly what the deal was.'

I swore that I really *had* come to check out the extent of the damp, so that we could plan how much we'd have to do when we moved in.

'Oh,' she said, 'it's *you* that's moving in, is it?'

I nodded.

Some of her makeup had smudged; she looked tired, ordinary, her eyes drained of their *something else*.

'Well, I should be asking a lot more. Shall we say £500?'

I stood up, and told her I really didn't understand. She pushed me back down on the bed again. Instead of crawling on top of me, she stood with her arms crossed, and told the story of the landlords. When she had finished, she looked at me as if to say: don't you see, it's all your fault?

It wasn't, though; if it hadn't been Caroline and I, it would have been someone else. I wrote her a £100 cheque and made to leave.

She stopped me again, telling me to open the chest of drawers. I don't like to be bossed around, but I have always been a highly curious person, so I opened the drawer to find two babies sleeping in a nest of tissue paper and rags.

'So those are the twins,' she said. 'Now, you want to see damp? I'll show you damp.'

She leapt onto the bed and pulled at the ceiling scarves. Underneath, the wallpaper was black with mould.

‘I’ll come back,’ she said. ‘I’ll come back and I’ll tell your wife what you did, if you don’t give me the extra money.’

I told her the truth; I didn’t have £500 to spare because I’d used it all on buying the house. I did, however, know several people who were involved with the council; I’d arrange for her to torpedo to the very top of the housing list.

‘I don’t want to live in those towers, I want to live in a proper house,’ she said.

‘You call this room a proper house?’ I said. ‘And what about the...?’

I pointed at the babies, then the ceiling, then back to the babies.

‘Oh, they don’t know,’ she said. ‘They don’t know what’s going on.’

‘They’re very quiet,’ I said.

‘They’ve got to be, haven’t they? We wouldn’t have done all that if they’d been crying. And if I hadn’t given them both a good dose of paracetemols, they would’ve been at it like nobody’s business.’

I didn’t know much about babies but I knew you weren’t meant to do *that*. All that pleasure whilst there were two drugged babies in the drawer, why, it made my elbows itch again. I took down her details, and left.

I knew, by the time that I got to the stained-glass door of the house where I was to meet Caroline, that I would not put that woman on the housing list. I would not be able to explain it to anyone without arousing suspicion. Whilst I waited for someone to let me in, it dawned on me that I could live for years in fear of that woman returning to our house. The other option was to draw a neat line around the incident, label it ‘unfortunate accident,’ then imagine putting it into a briefcase, and burying that briefcase in the very depths of my mind.

Eventually my friend ushered me inside, telling me not to trip over the paint pots or to mind too much about the plaster hanging off the walls. Caroline was in their gutted living room, laughing. I walked straight up to her, kissed her hard on the cheek and told her that the damp was a lot worse than the estate agent had led us to believe.

‘Oh Michael,’ she said, ‘Let’s not talk about that now. We’ve got all this to look forward to!’ She gestured at the bare walls as if they were stars. Or children. Then our friends gave us an extensive account of their decoration plans. We drank wine, ate, laughed; by the end of the evening the accident was very far away and I was looking forward, unquestionably forward, to our new life.

And it's worked out very well, it has. But only so long as everything is in its place – the box here, our life there. So, to bring me back to the original point, the sight of that Jazz with his grandmother's eyes unhinged me so far that I had to go into the other room and sit down. The bedside dresser was far messier than it had been when I'd gone to sleep that evening; perhaps the house was subsiding and everything inside it was tipping, ever so slowly, from one side to the other, and it would carry on tipping until it was all piled up in one corner, in a huge, undifferentiated bundle. Ridiculous. I closed my eyes and told myself to get a grip.

It was Caroline, in the end, who brought me back to my senses; she took my hand and she said:

‘What should we do? What should we do?’

She looked so frightened, so vulnerable; I took her in my arms, kissed her forehead, and told her I'd sort it out. I don't know why, but something about the look in her eyes that evening – or perhaps it was her shallow breathing – made me suspect that she knew the exact shape of that dark turn, without – of course – knowing a thing about it at all.

It was the same the day Oscar went missing; we were united through fear. We clung to one another like limpets, squashed into the very middle of the sofa, sometimes craning our necks out of the window with hope, otherwise staring blankly at our living room, wishing there was some way we could exchange the antiques and the paintings for the other hot pulsing human life that ought to have been spread over our laps. Everything we owned seemed somehow sinister, as if this loss had been written into them from the beginning, and we had failed to notice.

Oscar's return transformed everything; everything in the house sparkled with promise and beauty. His face glowed and his words were like music. As Caroline and I watched him eat his favourite dinner and listening to him tell us the story of his strange day, I had the strangest sensation that *we* were somehow the children. That night was a saucy one; if Caroline and I had met in our teenage years, it would have been like that.

Unfortunately, things are now back to normal: Caroline and I go to bed with our backs turned towards one another, our faces buried in a book. Sometimes I wish we'd a bit more danger in our lives, so that we clung together more often. Most of the time, we are so certain of ourselves that we wander about the house without touching or even looking at each other; we must look like those prehistoric standing stones.

It was even worse on holiday. For weeks, we'd filled the little gaps in the day with talk of the holiday. We'd moaned about our need to get away from work. Oscar had a great time running around with the other kids, but Caroline and I ... we were scared; scared to be just sitting, with no emails to write, no phone calls to make, no meetings; no legitimate excuse not to interact. We were each on a novel a day. I don't know about her, but I didn't enjoy any that I read; I guzzled the words in the way that certain people guzzle

burgers. And there were quite a few occasions where even that wasn't enough to quell the desire to put down the book and run from Caroline and that poolside table, to run far away.

At meal times, when we were facing one another, surrounded by other chattering people, we'd discuss work. She'd tell me all about her radical Victorian ladies. From the way she talked, I knew that they fed some part of her imagination – the child-like part that was still holding out for a heroic, fairytale life. I do the same with my seventies radicals; living a life of danger, intrigue, risk and heroism vicariously through them. When we first met, it was this characteristic that had kept us talking to one another all night in the cramped kitchen of a party: a passion to understand the lives of people who got their hands dirty, coupled with a deep, deep fear of dirtying our own. I don't know where it came from or why it now has the capacity to swamp almost everything else.

Of course, I don't mean to complain too much. We're much happier than the other couples we know. In fact, a lot of them are no longer couples – the pair we visited on the day of the box, for example. And on that holiday we were forever overhearing squabbling by the pool, or on adjacent balconies. We didn't squabble at all. We may have disagreements over petty things like, for example, the DIY. We never let them blow up into what I would call an argument; we never bring out the Big Things. Never. Sometimes, though, I wish we would.

Treasure

Doesn't bother me what happened with Oscar because I've got Mr Preen now. It's weird, because I met him in the exact same way I met Caroline; I was sitting on a park bench drawing the sky reflected in the footprints in the mud, when he sat down next to me and said that my picture was well good. Then he said I was very pretty. I couldn't help smiling because at school everyone says I'm butters.

His face looked just how a pug dog would look if you squashed it between your palms; long and thin and wiggly with folds. He had sad eyes and his shoulders were lost in a too-big coat; I told him that he was pretty too. He said I must be blind, but he was laughing and smiling, so I reckon he was secretly pleased. He told me to meet him in the same place this Saturday and he'll take me to a wicked party. When I asked what he meant by this he said, 'Well, what kind of party would you love to go to?'

I told him how Annabelle is having a party this Saturday and I wasn't invited but I didn't care because she was only having a sleepover and although I've never been to one apart from with Oscar, I bet they're rubbish. I told him that my ideal party would be in a room with high ceilings. The ceilings would be painted like a forest, which I'd done myself before everyone got there by lying on top of a ladder like that Italian paper did in the old olden days. (I'd read about that in a book in Oscar's house). There'd be a mirror ball and a lot of people. Drinks with umbrellas and sparklers inside. Pretty dresses. Cupcakes. Skateboards. And a slide.

He laughed and said that I was in luck because the party we were going to would be just like that.

'Even the slide?' I asked.

'Even the slide.'

This time when he smiled I noticed that his teeth looked like the nuts at Oscar's house that I could only half-open because I'd never used a nut-cracker before.

He kissed me on the cheek and made me promise to meet him there at 4.00 this Saturday. I told him that would be fine because Bern has a nap around then, so she won't hear me sneak out. He said it would be better if I wrote down my address just in case, so I did. Then he kissed me on the other cheek and he left. I waited until he was a dot at the very end of the path to wipe his spit off my cheek.

I am glad that I have Mr Preen because Beryl is OK but she does sleep a lot. When she's not sleeping, she's watching television. She must do other stuff when I'm at school, because one afternoon I came back and she'd ripped all my pictures off the wall and put them in the outdoor bin. When she was asleep I took them back out of the bin and now they are in pieces under my bed. I hope she doesn't find them. I don't reckon she will because I won't be with her long, I can tell. Mr Preen will probably say that I can come

and live with him and it won't be just for a few weeks like it was with Caroline and Michael because he doesn't have any children.

It's easy to tell adults who have kids from adults who can't; the ones with kids only watch their own. Ones without look right at you like you are a mini adult. When Caroline first saw me, she looked mainly at my pictures; with Mr Preen, his eyes were stuck onto me.

Still, I was a tiny bit sad when Caroline started to pretend not to see me at all, because I had done a very good job of asking all the grown-up questions about all the pretty grown-up things in her house. She always looked like she enjoyed answering, like maybe some part of her was imagining that she was being interviewed on a television show. What I should have done was, I should have shown her all the pictures of the inside of her house that I drew when I got back to our flat. Jazz said that they just looked like random shapes and colours – that was because I'd done them from memory. Caroline would have got it, though; she would be able to tell which shapes were the paintings, which were the African masks, and which the chest of drawers, the huge silver fridge, the piano, the dresser, and the bidet. She owned the originals, see.

Before Gran stopped moving and talking, she told me that if you really wanted to own something, you didn't have to buy it; you just had to carve out a really firm place for it in your mind. You had to cut it out of the place you'd touched it, work out exactly what it looked like; only then would it fit. She told me that this was an especially useful skill if you were a person who had things happening to them; if nothing ever happened to you, you could go around with your whole life one big vague mess in your head; it wouldn't be fully yours but you would be happy.

Well we were in the first category; I was seven when Gran taught me about owning. It was just after mum got sent away. I was crying all the time. She told me to pick out the best times and draw them; that way, they would be mine forever. I drew a picture of her pushing me down the slide at the park. I drew her tied to the sofa that one time that she agreed to play monsters with me and Jazz. I drew the rabbit story she used to read to me. The problem was, I was a rubbish drawer back then; I didn't want to own those ugly scribbles. I drew all over my exercise books, the school tables, tissue boxes, cereal boxes – I was always getting in trouble but I didn't care; I had to practise.

By the time I was nine, I could catch anything in front of me with a pencil. I took mum's patent leather heels out of the bottom of Gran's wardrobe. After wiping them on my bed-sheets, I sketched them onto my bedroom wall with Gran's eyeliner. Gran cried when she saw them, which was strange, because that was the only time she did it. When she'd blown her nose and wiped her eyes, she snatched the shoes off my bed and told me that I'd have to save up to buy her a new eyeliner. I was scared she'd throw the shoes away but what she did was, she went back into her own room and shut the door. She didn't know that I could see through the crack in the door. She sat down on the bed and she hugged the shoes and cried some more. Then she put the shoes back into the bottom of the wardrobe and put on a eyeliner and foundation and mascara and blusher and lipstick,

which she hadn't done for years. She took off her clothes and looked at herself in the mirror. She squeezed her belly folds together; they looked like lips. This scared me and I think it scared her too, because she shivered and put on a short black dress with her back to the mirror. After that, she came out of her room and said that she was going to see a friend.

She came back from her friend's the next day and although she didn't look happy she didn't look sad anymore. When mum left, she stopped getting dressed up and going to see friends.

'Does this mean mum's coming back?' I asked. I got that feeling like someone was popping bubble-gum in my belly, which only happens when you're really happy.

Gran couldn't hear me, because someone had drilled a hole in the top of her head and sucked out all the sad life goo and put a smile in there instead. (Once, when mum was still here and Gran came back from a friend's, she had a red sticky patch where her parting should be. I asked what had happened but no one heard me).

Anyway, Gran gave me a twenty pound note and told me and Jazz to get out of the flat and treat ourselves. Me and Jazz went down to the high street. I thought we could go to Pizza Hut but when I asked Jazz he said, 'Pizza? Do you know where that money comes from?'

I said her friend must have given it to her. He shook his head and just kept on asking if I knew where it came from, over and over and over. He spent all the money on a scratched-up GameBoy from the electronic exchange shop. Jazz can be really mean sometimes.

I don't know who Gran's friends were or what she did with them but I don't think they were very nice because it wasn't long before I first saw her coughing purple lumps into the toilet. When I asked her what they were, she pulled down hard on the flush and said that I had an over-active imagination. She shut the door after that but I could still hear her; she coughed so hard and so loud that sometimes I could hear her when I was walking up the stairwell on the way back from school.

It was around that time that Jazz started to do grown-up things, like going to Lidl and putting fish fingers in the over. Once, he even took a bin liner of clothes to the Launderette. They came back weird shapes and colours, but I didn't tell him that because I could tell he was really proud of himself. Gran used to do those things but by then she didn't want to leave the flat. If she went out, the doctors would get her. They'd stick long thin metal things inside of her and that would be that. That's what she said. By then, sweat was forever running into her eyes, stopping her from seeing straight; sometimes she talked to me like I was mum and sometimes she talked to Jazz like he was a lot of other people that we had never met but she had.

Sometimes Jazz got angry and told her that she was a mentalist but I don't think she was. What happened was, was kinds of stuff rolled out of the cubby holes in her mind and into

the air around her: sometimes she thought she was back in Oscar's house and that it was still hers. She'd tell me to sit on her lap. She'd hug me very close to her chest and I'd have to hold my breath because she did smell quite funny. She'd tell me that she was sorry she had put me in the drawer and that she would never do it again. Another time she put Jazz on her lap and told him to tell her stories of the place he had come from. Jazz said he was born right here and she knew it. She slapped him on the cheek and shouted that she'd never been abroad and that he should stop being so selfish and share those places. Jazz is actually a lot taller and stronger than her and when he pushed her away he did it so hard that he made a mark on her arm that was red and then the colour of the sky the day before it snows. He didn't apologise but I know he felt guilty because he stayed up that whole night sponging her forehead and singing whatever songs she asked for.

The problem with Jazz is that he doesn't know how to tell stories. If I was him, I'd have just made up something about being born in a distant tropical island with a tangerine sun that hung all day in the sky. Whenever you got too hot or too thirsty, it would squirt yummy juice all over you. Gran would've liked that story because ever since the purple lumps started to jump out of her mouth, she was always hot and always thirsty. What I did was, I brought her pictures and stories from Oscar's house; that's how comes I asked Caroline so many questions. From the African vase, I told Gran the story about riding the hippo; me, her, Jazz and mum went on a great adventure on its big rubbery back. Gran caught fish and I held them up to the sun to dry them and then jazz made sushi out of them by wrapping them in river grass. You had to concentrate very hard so as not to fall off the hippo. Gran and me and Jazz could do it but mum's eyes were too cloudy to concentrate; she slipped into and under the water. We never saw her again. We didn't mind, though, because the hippo told us that she was happy down there, with the mud and the crocodiles. Also, when we got back, we had the best tans ever.

That wasn't how Oscar's family got the vase; they bought it from a shop in a safari park. I asked Oscar if he'd been really scared by the lions and the tigers. He shrugged and said that they weren't really scary because the animals were outside the Jeep and they were on the inside. Also, he couldn't look at them too carefully because he had lots of itchy mosquito bites and was upset because his Gameboy broke that morning. Jazz said I should have told Gran the truth, but I didn't want her to know that you could go so far away and still be bored. Jazz said she didn't know what I was saying anyway. She did, though; her eyes flickered as if all the things that she owned had gone back into the dark inside of her head and she could see me again.

Gran was getting smaller and quieter, so I fed her more and more stories to make sure she didn't disappear all together. I fed her the story of the frogs' legs. On Valentine's Day Michael and Caroline flew to France because they wanted to eat dinner in a chateau. A chateau is exactly the same as a castle except that it's in France; they got grumpy when they saw a lot of other English couples at the reception. When they went into the candle-lit dungeon for their special meal, they wore black velvet and rolled their *rs* and said as many French words as they could remember: they wanted the other couples to see that they were different. Neither of them had spoken French for a long time; they laughed a lot at each other's mistakes, and at how much effort it took to say very simple things. The

waiter could not understand their order. Caroline giggled so much that she slid down her seat. The waiter stroked his polished black hair with his white-handed glove. He asked them in very slow English what they'd like. From underneath the table Caroline shouted, 'Frogs' legs! Bring us all the frogs' legs you have!'

'But there will be no more left for everybody else,' said the waiter.

'Exactly!' said Caroline.

Michael was tucking a napkin into his collar. His cheeks were red.

'I will see what I can do,' said the waiter, and sidled away.

Michael saw that many of the other couples were looking at him; he was reminded of a bat colony he'd seen in a cave in Peru.

'Caroline, that's enough. Get up,' he hissed. 'I shouldn't have let you finish the wine.'

Caroline got back into her seat properly, smoothed down her velvet dress and pulled Michael on the ear. Then she started singing an old French song very loudly. Michael ate all the crusty bread and oil whilst staring at the crumbs he was dropping on the tablecloth.

A while later the waiter brought them ten frog's legs. Caroline asked if that was all they had left. The waiter nodded and disappeared.

They peeled the skin of the frog's legs in silence. Caroline took a few bites, then attempted to tell Michael in French about the first time she'd ever tried that particular dish. She was interrupted by a couple. The couple were dressed in blue velvet. Speaking at the same time, they asked if 'everything was quite alright' with the frog's legs.

'Oh yes, *superb*,' said Michael. 'Peeling them was as easy as ripping tights of a lady's leg!'

He laughed from the belly-up. The couple peeped at one another nervously and twittered.

'Oh,' said the woman, 'Because we thought there was something rather strange about ours.'

'Yes, yes,' said the man. 'We've had much better in the Café Rouge in Milton Keynes, haven't we?'

'Only we thought we'd come over, because when we asked the waiter, he refused to do anything.'

'We thought,' –

‘We were meant to be talking *French!*’ exclaimed Caroline.

The couple shrank towards one another. Michael opened his mouth, but Caroline got there first:

‘I don’t wear tights,’ she said. ‘I never wore tights; in the old days, stockings, and now, just trousers. No tights. Never tights.’

‘Well,’ said the woman, sliding her arm into her partner’s. ‘Thank you. Enjoy your evening.’

Caroline hailed the waiter.

‘Take these away.’ She pointed at the frog’s legs.

‘But what is the problem?’ asked the waiter.

‘They are wrong. Horribly, horribly wrong. I never want to look at another one again.’

The waiter took the plate away. Caroline said she wanted to go home, so they did. They spent the rest of their Valentine’s evening on an Easyjet. They got home at midnight. Normally Oscar would be in bed, but he was being looked after by his big cousin Johnny and Johnny didn’t believe in things like bed times. So Oscar saw his mum run over to the kitchen sink and spew purple lumpy stuff into it. Her lumps weren’t like Gran’s, though; just frog’s legs and wine.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said to Michael. ‘I don’t know what came over me. It must have been all that wine.’

‘Or perhaps it was the frog’s legs,’ said Michael. ‘My stomach does feel a bit funny too.’

‘I’m glad we got away from all those other couples,’ said Caroline. ‘Happy Valentine’s Day.’

‘Happy Valentine’s Day.’

Then they kissed a big sloppy kiss right there in front of Oscar and Johnny. When the two cousins burst out laughing Caroline and Michael remembered that they were no longer in that silly castle. They were in their normal house and they had to be parents. They shouted to the boys to get to bed this minute. The next morning, they were back to normal. They never spoke about the frog’s legs again but Oscar didn’t forget; he told me, and I told Jazz and Gran. Gran laughed a bit when I told her that story. Jazz stood in the door listening and I heard him laugh too, but when I turned around to look at him, he tried to look all serious and grown-up. He asked me how comes me and Oscar could know all that. I told him that when Oscar didn’t have me or Johnny or his computer to play with, he spied on his parents through the cracks under the doors.

Other stories I told were about the people that lived in Caroline and Michael's briefcases. What they did was, they went to all the sad places in London and asked if any of the people there wanted to feel better. Some of the people were too sad to hear them, but others said ok. Caroline and Michael told these people to climb into their briefcases. The people didn't believe they'd fit, but when their toes touched the leather they shrank. Caroline and Michael took these people to their office. They opened the briefcases. They ran out of the office, locking the doors behind them. The office had a window in one wall, and through that they watched to see what the sad people would do. The strange thing was, that some of the sad people did not go back to their original size, whilst others did. The ones that did tried to grab the ones that didn't, and when the little ones saw the gynomous hands swooping down on them, they jumped off the edge of the tables before it was too late. When the big people realised that the splats on the floor were actually their old friends, they began to cry. They cried until there was no more water left inside of them. Then they began to blame each other for what had happened. They threw tables and chairs. Soon all but one were big splats on the floor. This one was an old woman. She was bleeding and soon she was going to be dead. She could not bear to look at all the splats on the floor that had once been her friends; that was how she noticed Michael and Caroline staring in at her through the window. She walked up to the window and banged her fists against it and screamed for them to let her out. But Caroline and Michael were so busy writing down everything they'd seen on clipboards that by the time they looked up, she was dead.

By then, Jazz had stopped pretending to be too grown-up for my stories; he sat right next to me on Gran's bed. He didn't like that story; it was scary and didn't make any sense. I said that if he'd heard Caroline and Michael talk about their jobs for as long as I had he'd know what I meant. He said he preferred my earlier stories, like the one about Oscar and Johnny getting swallowed by their Gameboy, or the one about the talking bathtub.

Gran didn't say or do anything; she wasn't saying or doing anything anymore. Jazz put his hand on her hand but as soon as he touched it he took it away again. He told me not to tell anymore stories because I was making Gran scared and ill people could not get better if they were scared. But I knew that my stories were the only thing keeping Gran alive; through them, she could feel what it was like to live in her old house, which was the only place she thought it was worth staying alive for and after spending so much time there I can see why. I can see *why* as if it was a person standing right in front of me, a big person with a loud voice.

I started on the one about the time Caroline got a cold so bad that even after wearing all the jumpers and rugs and duvets and cushions and towels and shawls and cloaks and coats in the house, she was still icy inside. I didn't get very far because Jazz pushed me off the bed. I bumped my tail bone on the ground and I cried. I remembered Gran telling me that the reason this always hurt so much was that it reminded us of the long-ago times when we were just animals; back then, we didn't have thoughts. We didn't know who we were or who other people thought we were. We just did stuff. That made me cry some

more. Jazz picked me up and threw me down on the sofa in the other room, telling me to shut up because I was hurting Gran.

He went back into her room and shut the door. I swallowed the water back into my tummy and put my ear to the door. Jazz was whispering, but so quietly that I couldn't tell what he was saying. He stayed in there so long that I fell asleep against the door. When he opened it, he must have realised I'd been spying on him, but he picked me up and carried me back into bed with Gran and said that she'd told him she loved me very much and that my stories hadn't scared her one bit because she was a tough old thing. She was a tough old thing. He was smiling, and he told me that he was going to get something that would make her better. He told me to watch her carefully until he got back, then he left.

That was the first time I'd been alone with Gran in the flat since the time when she had stopped moving and talking; I'm not sure how long that was because I never saw the stopping. I could hear my heart beating very fast, but I couldn't hear hers. I could not hear hers. I lay down next to her but I did not want to touch her skin. I closed my eyes and I whispered to her the story of Caroline's cold, but I fell asleep before I could get to how she made it go away.

When I woke up, Caroline was there. I thought that she'd come to say we could move back into our house; the time that was stored up Michael and Caroline's olden day and faraway things would go into Gran and make her move and talk and warm again. Then I looked at Caroline's face and I knew that it was all over; I'd never go to her house again, not with my feet and not in a story. I knew that Gran couldn't really live with us anymore because she wasn't really living. Sometimes I wish she could have been with us long enough for one of us to have finished that story.

I didn't like the bright shiny smelly lights at the hospital. I felt like I was in Caroline and Michael's office in the story. We had to sleep in the hospital that night because they said we were too young to be home alone. I couldn't sleep. The darkness didn't move in the way that it did in our flat. I felt tiny, like I was trapped in a briefcase and would be forever. Jazz kept on thumping his legs against the bed. I asked if he was awake; he said no. I asked if I could climb into bed with him; he said no but I did anyway. A few minutes later, we were asleep.

We slept together for that whole week we were in the hospital but we can't do it anymore because I have to sleep at Bern's and he has to sleep at Morris's. This is because Bern wanted a girl and Morris wanted a boy. Mr Preen agreed with me that this was really unfair. He also said that after the party on Saturday, it wouldn't be a problem; he'd arrange for me to sleep with whoever I wanted.

I told Mr Preen a lot of things that afternoon on the bench. I told him how lucky and nervous and cosy I'd felt at Oscar's house. It was as if I'd tumbled into TV world by mistake. I told him how happy I was when Caroline said that my pictures were good and when she invited me for dinner. I told him how one day when we were big me and Oscar were going to get married and live in a house exactly like that. He told me that Caroline

was a two-faced woman and that I didn't have to wait all those years to be happy; just until Saturday. So that's what I'm doing. I'll go to school today, tomorrow and the day after, but I won't have to listen to all the other girls talking about Annabelle's party or swimming lessons or any of the other things that they have and I haven't, because I'll already be at the party. If you concentrate really, really hard, you can live as far from your body as you like.

Jazz

The box is mine just mine and that's the way it's going to stay. Treasure doesn't know about it, and there's no way I'm going to break up her pretty-happy make-up world by showing her what's inside. The people in Gran's house know, but the things they reckon are in there I made up because I could tell from the way that they stood with their hands on their hips and their eyes open too wide that they are the kind of people who reckon the world's a better place if everyone knows everyone else's business. Well it's not.

I'm in this old guy's house. He lets me spend all night on the internet if I want. I did that a few times but I won't do it again because all it did was make me feel like I'd accidentally dunked a fried chicken drumstick into my brain. It's bare hard to get to sleep with a chicken drumstick where it shouldn't be. The box helps, though. The box does help. I like to see the person that gran was before Treasure or me or even mum or her dead twin were alive, back in the sixties (or whenever; I had to guess, since there's no date on any of the letters). Nice to see that you're not stuck being one person the whole time you're alive.

Dear Mary,

I'm sorry I never wrote a goodbye note. I picked up the pen but then I heard dad at the top of the stairs and I knew that if I didn't leave then, I never would.

It was quite scary though, at first. London was very big and noisy after the farm. I was very lucky though, because I was taken in by this woman named Jill. She saw me lugging my bags through the rain somewhere near King's Cross, and she offered for me to come into hers and have a cup of tea. We got on so well that the cup of tea lasted well over a month!

You would like Jill's house; it's even bigger than the manor. Do you remember that house in the Sunday paper that you cut out and pinned onto the board next to the larder? Well it's just like that – velvet tassels and the like. You should come down soon because I'm not sure how much longer I'll be staying here for.

Another reason you should come down, is that Jill is dying to meet you. She knows practically everybody in London – including politicians and actors and other famous people – but when I told her all about you she said she'd never heard of a more interesting and admirable young woman.

There are other reasons, too: there are buses here, so you can go wherever you want, whenever you want. You can walk along the river or hang around a train station or go to a teashop or any other sort of shop – there are so many! – or to the stalls in the east end where you can get a coat and a dress like the ones in the magazines for hardly any money at all! I'm a make-up girl in the Boots on Oxford Street, so I'd paint you up for free. Then we could stroll about, arm in arm, and it would be exactly the scene we used to dream when we were little.

So please don't hate me for leaving you up there with dad. You could come down here, too, if you wanted. (He keeps his money in the bottom drawer of his desk in the study – I left half for you). Come here, and forget all about him. Come; be free; be free here, with me. For the first few days you won't be able to sleep because you'll be scared he'll find you; then you realise that London is a very, very big city, and that you're safe. I am safe, but I'd rather be safe with you.

Love,

Carry

*

Dear Dad,

I love you but I couldn't stay in the house any longer on account of my dreams. I dreamt that me and Mary were playing hide and seek in the garden. I was the seeker and Mary was hiding. After a really long time, I found her behind the cowshed. I heard her squeal before I saw her. When I saw her it was very strange because she wasn't by herself; she was with you. She looked into my eyes. Her mouth opened as if she wanted to tell me something but then I woke up. I had this dream every night for a whole month. Every time I saw you, I had it again.

When I first got to London it was such a big change that I forgot all about the dream. But now that I'm settled in my own flat it's coming back; each time it comes it is clearer than the last, and sometimes, it hangs over me all day. So I was wondering whether you'd know what it meant.

Love,

Carry.

*

Dear Mr Biggins,

I was woken up by a rag and bone man this morning and I thought of you. I thought of that time I was playing by the river and you got me to watch the dog whilst you and Mike lifted that car out of the river. You rolled it up onto the bank and the water gushed out all over you. I was so amazed that you had managed to move it at all, I didn't notice when the dog ran off.

After working out how much money you'd get for the metal, you noticed the dog was gone. I said that I didn't know where it had gone and Mike muttered, 'In-bred cretin.' You told Mike to shut up. Then you asked me if I'd known you could make so much money

out of scrap metal and I said, no. You sent Mike away to look for the dog and then you sat me on your knee and you told me that now that everyone wanted things new and shiny, there were more scraps than ever. You jiggled me up and down. You said that soon you'd have enough money to go to Spain and see a real bull fight. You'd seen them on telly but you wanted to see with your own eyes how anyone could tame a beast that big with a handkerchief that small.

Mike came back with the dog and you let me follow the two of you back to the garage. You let me stay there watching you clean the car for the rest of that day. The radio was on and I danced in the shadows. I pretended I was on stage in London, which is funny because that's exactly what I did the other day. (It wasn't a theatre stage, not exactly, but there were lights and beyond them there were faces that were looking at me.) When it started getting dark, Mike asked where the in-bred had gone. I crept further into the shadows. You said I must have slipped off earlier.

Ever heard what happened to the sister? said Mike.

Sister? You said. I thought it was the mother. Yes, it was definitely the mother who went to the loony bin.

Never, said Mike. She wasn't old enough. And I thought she ran off with the circus, not to a loony bin.

Strange family, you said.

You didn't say any more after that. You smiled at your car in the way that I smile when I've sewn something really pretty. I could tell you were about to leave, so I snuck out of the door and back home before you could see me and know that I knew what things had come out of your mouth.

I didn't have anything to give the rag and bone man; neither did anyone else on my street because it isn't the sort of street where people have things spare. But I almost ran out to thank him for letting me know those things which I don't really believe but that make my belly and my head feel a bit less like jelly when I think about Mary not being there anymore. I hope that a lot more people drive into the river so that you can go to Spain.

From,

Carry.

Dear Mary,

You know how you sometimes used to creep back to our house after you were gone? Well I was wondering whether you could creep all the way down here to London. I'm not friends with Jill anymore and it can get quite lonely.

Love,

Carry.

*

Dear Mrs Scrump,

I honestly don't know how that lipstick got into my handbag. All I know is that I didn't put it there on purpose. Please let me come back to the store, oh please. I loved it there. I loved the lights and perfume-thick air. I loved giving some colour to all those sour women in mackintoshes. I loved listening to the other girls talking about the dance halls.

I'm not desperate or anything; I've got a new job. I'm a cabaret girl. This man heard me singing as I walked down the street and he asked if I wanted to perform at his restaurant. It's very exclusive. All sorts of famous people go there, only I can't tell you exactly which ones because it's so smoky that I can't see the customer's faces as they stare up at me from the tables. This is just as well because I'd start telling them what shade of blusher they should go for – and that would ruin the whole show!

I should be grateful because it pays the rent and there are plenty of girls who would kill to earn money for getting people to admire you. The thing is, however, that I just don't feel as at home up there on the stage as I did in the store, between the eyebrow pencils and the mascara. In the store, I changed people by moving my hands just so; now I am the one who must change. The restaurant owner tells me, 'Something Caribbean tonight.' Or, 'A little less saucy than yesterday.' He stands so close that he spits on me, but I have to wait until he is gone to brush it off otherwise he'll be offended.

I do hope you'll let me have my job back.

Kind Regards,

Carry.

*

There are other things in the box, too. There are black and white photos of a man with a walrus moustache and a girl and a baby. They're all fatty boom-booms and look well vexed. One thing I remember from history is that in the olden days people had to pose for *time* if they wanted to get in a photo, so maybe that's why. Or maybe it's because the house behind lets in too much cold and wind through it's big windows. Maybe that's why Treasure was always telling stories about girls who could never get warm.

There's another photo of a metal thing in a field. I don't know what it is but it has sharp rusty teeth. Also, colour post card of Big Ben. A patch of fabric decorated with pink flowers. I reckon Gran found it somewhere and wanted to get it made into a dress but never did because there was no more of that material left anywhere else in the world. Or maybe there was but she couldn't afford it.

What there isn't, is anything about my granddad. I don't know anything about my dad either, so when that box spilled open the first time, I was really hoping. When I saw how upset that Caroline and her husband were by my story, I kind of expected it to be true. I didn't know where it had come from, but it felt true. Sometimes, I pretend it is. Like, when I'm bunking off school with my mates and they're talking about some girl they got off with, I think of my granddad going from place to place looking for work and everyone telling him to piss off.

That time when they got Carly down on the floor of the basket ball court and pushed me on top of her and pulled down my pants, I thought of the boat with the steam and the waves rocking it from underneath. I was walking back down the gang plank to this island where everything was green or red or yellow and there were all these people clapping and saying how glad they were that I came back. They were patting me on the back and giving me this golden food that I reckon was fried bananas and then I was in a hammock.

Whilst I was doing all that, my mates were pressing me up close against her and she was making noises. I didn't like her noises and I didn't like the feel of her skin against mine either. When they started hitting me round the head and flicking my dick and laughing because it wouldn't stand up, I tried to get further into the island but instead I was shivering. I pulled up my trousers and I ran away. They won't let me go around with them anymore because they say I'm gay. I'm not though; I just haven't ever got close to a girl and felt like kissing her. They all liked climbing on top of Carly in the basket ball court but it made me feel sick; I don't know why.

I reckon dad really was from an island but from Sri Lanka, not the Caribbean. Before I went around with the lot that I don't go around with anymore, I went around with Prabu. All we did was play computer games and talk about them and draw pictures of them, but I felt kind of calm when I was with him. I liked the sound of his voice and the coconut smell that came off his hair.

Once, I went round to Prabu's after school. His mum made me this huge sour pancake with coconut sauce and some other sauce that was well spicy. I told her that I liked the fire it made in my belly and she smiled. Prabu let me run up and down the stairs with his brother and his cousins. Later, the adults called us back into the room where we'd eaten, only I thought it was different one at first because the tables and chairs had been replaced by giant sparkly cushions and musical instruments. They gave me a wooden thing with beads inside it to shake. Prabu's mum sang, his sisters danced, his brother played something that looked like a guitar and his cousins played something like a piano. His dad played the hand drums. I didn't know what the music was called or what language

the song was in but I shook my thing and although the sound got lost in all the others I felt at home then, I did. I never felt that way before or since. I tried to sing the song to Gran but I couldn't remember it and even if I could, I don't think it would have sounded as good with me playing on my own. I wished I had stayed friends with Prabu instead of going around with that big group; then Gran might have had one night less coughing and one more night of peace. Anyway, that's why I reckon that my granddad was from Sri Lanka.

Still, I guess at least I know where Gran came from. I know a bit more why she was always making things up and why Treasure does now. I know why mum went away and why I always end up with no one to go around with, and why it's so difficult to keep my mind and my body in the same place. I don't know whether the things she wrote were true or whether the people she wrote to were real, but I can imagine her living in that room. I can see her sitting in front of the window and writing those letters. When she has finished writing, she folds them up into the box and says she'll send them later. Sometimes, I see her writing out copies and sending those. Other times, the box is all there is, but I don't mind; I'm just happy not to worry about how much she must've hurt after her insides were outside and in the sink. I don't have to worry about whether I should've told someone about her insides being outside and whether if I had, she'd still be alive.

I keep the box under my pillow and although it digs into the back of my head I don't mind. It's actually a comforting dig because it reminds me of the way her nails dug into me when she picked out my nits that time. Then I remember that other thing she said about there being a place where everything that ever happened is still happening and will happen for ever and I'm asleep before I have time to decide whether or not it's true.