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The Care and Cultivation of Poisonous Plants

A thesis
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Abstract

Set in London in 1932, *The Care and Cultivation of Poisonous Plants* is a historical crime novel centred on the murder of Cynthia Greenaway within the private residents' garden of St Mary's Square. While employing the framework of the traditional cosy mystery, the novel uses the enclosed community of the garden square to explore themes of female agency, trauma, identity, social control and belonging in the interwar period.

The communal garden functions as both setting and organising metaphor. Interwoven throughout the narrative are extracts from the writings of the gardener, Brandon McSweeney, whose observations on cultivation, decay, adaptation and renewal provide a commentary on the lives of the residents and the unfolding investigation. Through this structure, the novel examines the interconnectedness of individual lives and the ways in which personal choices, social expectations and historical forces shape human behaviour.

The narrative follows Gráinne Redman as she investigates a series of deaths linked to the square while confronting questions surrounding women's autonomy, reproductive rights and the gendered power structures of early twentieth-century Britain. The novel further engages with contemporary and historical debates surrounding eugenics, bodily autonomy and social conformity, exploring how individuals respond to trauma through resistance, accommodation or self-destruction.

By combining conventions of Golden Age detective fiction with literary historical fiction, *The Care and Cultivation of Poisonous Plants* contributes to traditions of female-authored crime writing while reimagining the role of the woman detective as both investigator and advocate. The novel serves as the first in a projected series examining transgressive roles for women and the limitations imposed upon them within twentieth-century society.

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The Care and Cultivation of Poisonous Plants

Part 1

Garden Aspect

Frames

For optimal effect in landscape design, some plants need to be raised off the ground. Training them against a vertical or horizontal structure also allows their fruit, flowers, and foliage to be appreciated from an entirely different perspective. The means of achieving this could include a metal or wooden frame, a teepee, or — often for aesthetic appeal — an interwoven architectural structure. Such supports can be made from a variety of materials, but most gardeners prefer to use those found in nature, such as the pruned branches of other plants.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.3.

The Residents' Garden, St Mary's Square

Thursday, 23rd June 1932

A false widow spider detects the scent of death in the private garden of St Mary's Square in Kensington. It carries traces of dust on velvet and sun-dried summer wheat. In her cyclical world of birth, life, death, and decay, she understands how the vitality of corpses feeds and sustains the garden's inhabitants. To her, the smell is all too familiar.

Beyond the spider's skeins of web, Brompton Road borders one side of the Square. Its buses, even at this early hour, sweep past with their spectacled, suited and cardigan-clad occupants. The passengers neither see nor suspect the untimely death of someone in their prime.

The Square's other three sides are bordered by a single road. Its terraced houses rise in uniform rows. Above the spider, mullioned windows refract the first rays of morning sunshine. She sees the reflections, the way they wink, the light like compound eyes.

Identically slim, the houses stand queueing around the green space as though they gaze down on a baize table. Their upper storeys are identically jumpered in caramel brick, their lower levels adorned with white plaster skirts, each portico standing on Doric legs. Every basement has an edging of delicate black filigree railings, as rarely remarked upon as the lace edging a lover's satin negligee.

Sometimes, the spider ventures across the road to sun herself. She tight-ropes up wires and swings onto newel posts, polishing her feet on the brass name plaques, rubbing her abdomen on the door knockers. But on this Thursday, she peeps around

the edge of an aconitum leaf that supports a corner of her web as dawn paints the sky in muted shades of bumblebee, for the morning's golden glow is overlaid with stripes of dark cloud, swollen with rain.

As the air begins to press its warmth into the spider's silken lair and its threads tremble with the quick travels of its architect, she makes several exploratory passes beyond her web. Her legs dance lightly through pools of dew, barely flicking up water, as light as trout flies on a glass lake. She pirouettes down a bent and near-broken stem of gladioli, her destination: a steam bath of warm compost. Here she seeks both warmth and height to test the air for rain.

She lingers over the freckles on a nodding foxglove and the shy blush of the pinks that edge the nearby path. In this half-acre of garden space, the cruelty of April has long given way to the heat and languid thoughts of an especially hot June.

A church bell tolls six as the spider passes through dense shrubbery, leaving a trail of wet prints upon a polished brown brogue. One of the man's feet had come to rest beneath the branches of a viburnum that is freshly clothed in layers of pale spring leaves. Pansies along the border's edge are crushed beneath the weight of his upper body. The man, Grayson O'Rourke, is dressed in a mud-coloured three-piece. He lies half-sunken into the pungent garden mulch, almost indistinguishable against the surrounding earth.

Fingernails of wood chip cling to his thick chestnut hair. If his eyes were open, they would be forest green. They are flecked here and there with flakes of gold. Were he smiling, nail-deep dimples would appear either side of his mouth. His lips are soft, plump, and kissable, and he has teeth that are improbably white.

The spider is concerned only with the fact that the man's body forms a large lump she will need to expend energy climbing over. To the spider, the man seems entirely ordinary; she finds him as unremarkable as a common house fly with his earth-coloured hair, stubbly cheeks, and the curl at the back of his neck like the tail of a duck.

To the spider, the silent way the man lies so still is of little interest. The only human sounds amid the teeming subterranean insect life and stirring birdsong are the rattle of a passing Morris Oxford and the distant cough of a homeless veteran waiting for the soup kitchen to open further along Brompton Road. If the lump-of-a-man lives, the spider suspects, it is lightly.

From her position at the highest point of the compost pile, the spider can see almost all of the garden. Though modest in size, it is perfectly ordered. Most of its

specimen trees and shrubs resemble pieces in a collection of glassware. They are tapered and fluted, with any upward branching tamed into a neat V or U. A pair of clipped yews on either side of the entry gate raise their arms in supplication. These trees frame the path leading to a large square of thick lawn of vibrant green interspersed with darker pads of springy moss that feel to the touch like a well-risen sponge cake. The spider likes to walk on it early in the day and collect glittering diamonds of dew on her legs.

Late afternoon light playing across the grass and moss creates a shifting pattern of shade. The movement of shadow is often remarked upon by aspiring impressionists. They sometimes pause as they stroll past after a day at the Kensington School of Art. They frequently ask to capture the interplay of shadow and luminescence, but are always denied access, because the garden is reserved solely for the owners of the houses that border St Mary's Square and for spiders and wildlife small enough to enter without a key.

Each of the privileged residents has in their possession a single engraved brass key. It has a head shaped like a clover leaf with their house number engraved on the barrel. It is small enough to sit in the palm of an average-sized hand without protruding, light enough to travel in a pocket without the bearer ever feeling its weight. The holders of these keys are the only ones to breathe the tangy frog spawn of cut grass and trodden moss. Only they know the way it cushions the body on warm afternoons, like the inside of a cumulus cloud.

On this half-formed dawn, the spongy lawn has captured several footprints. It seems that both shoes and boots have milled about for a time. They have left their treads next to and around the brogue that lies beneath the viburnum. They lead away from the prone body in more than one direction.

The most substantial specimens in the garden are a matched pair of oaks. They stoop low, forming pools of shade and places of concealment. They are the only trees in the Square whose branches have been allowed to roam freely. In winter, when the leaves have fallen, the spider observes how the limbs snake from the trunk in sweeping curves. At this time of year, at the height of summer, fresh green leaves unfurl to veil the branches gently. One arm of the oaks stretches close to a sturdy wooden bench beside the compost heap. It is here that the spider sits, watching a praying mantis ambling by.

Within the garden are several places for sitting quietly and absorbing the stillness, for breathing long and slow. Some are embellished with brass plaques dedicating the bench to benefactors or deceased family members, usually a token from a long-entrenched resident of the square. The back slats of one particular seat bear just such a plaque.

The inscription reads:

*Donated by the Wendy family in memory of their son David,
who died of wounds sustained in action, 1919.*

The bench sits in a pool of blue-black shadow where the sun has not yet reached. Along its length lies a woman wearing one T-barred silver shoe. Parallel impressions from the bench slats mark her back. The spider looks down on her from the mound of compost while her feet and legs are warmed as steam begins to rise from the warming heap.

She wonders if the sound of the woman's last breath was a soft rasp reminiscent of a cricket's wings or a shrill cry like the barking of a fox. Her rosebud mouth is stretched wide like an overblown bloom, and the delicate column of her throat is red and crushed. She is most definitely dead, thinks the spider.

Suddenly, her attention shifts to a blue tit perched close by. The bird rubs his beak against a branch; a decapitated worm hangs from the tip of his beak. In a blink, he rotates his head and fixes her with a single still-hungry eye. In response, the spider edges under a hosta leaf and pulls her legs in tight, flipping onto her back. She lies still with her legs tucked tight, feigning death. When the bird at last departs to follow a beetle inching up a garden stake, the spider takes the opportunity to scurry up an oak branch to safety. From this vantage point, she observes the woman from a different angle.

As well as the damaged throat, a raised welt like a mayoral chain marks the woman's neck. Her skin there is freckled with dark spots. They have the rusty smell of blood and are slick and wet, clustered just above her collarbone. They look like flecks of darkened mould against the creaminess of her flesh. Her death seems undiminished by the sparkle of her low-cut sequined dress or the pallor of her skin. Both shimmer like fireflies trapped in a jar in the rays of early morning light.

Heavy drops of rain plink-plink against leaves and the windows of the houses around the square. The sound is like rice falling on the taut skin of a balloon. As the shower eases and the morning light spills across the garden, a loud belch comes from

beneath the viburnum and Grayson sways tentatively to his feet. Clutching either side of his head with soiled, leafy hands, he stumbles towards the gate.

As he moves, the drunken argument of a couple out on Brompton Road echoes through the stillness of the Square. He turns to catch glimpses of them through the foliage. They are clad in formal attire. She wears a rose silk backless dress and loops of pearls; he is dressed in black trousers and a white dinner jacket. His bow tie hangs loose about his collar, like the limp neck of a dead swan. As they fade into the distance, Grayson sees the man drape his jacket about the woman's shoulders in reconciliation.

As his eyes follow the retreating couple, a flicker of light from beneath one of the winding oaks catches his attention. He wanders back to investigate. Suddenly he halts midstride: the source of light — and the lump on the bench — is a person. With growing apprehension, he reaches the woman. Shaking her brings no response. His fingers at her wrist can feel no hint of a pulse. He brushes back the hair from her forehead gently and recognises the woman as someone he chanced to meet only a few days ago.

'Cynthia? Oh God, is that you?' he asks desperately.

But the silence is his only response.

'What are you doing here, Cynthia?'

Because of the angle of her neck, she appears to be looking toward the tall wrought iron gate, the park's only exit. A huff of air from a passing double-decker causes a white egret feather from her headband to zigzag down and come to rest beside his shoe. The bus conductor looks down from the open top deck. He sees the shaken man, the prone woman, but the bus continues on.

Grayson removes his jacket while gently shaking the woman's shoulder in a final attempt to revive her. Bobbed and shingled hair moves in corrugated waves, dropping loosely with her limp head over the edge of the bench. A white mink stole lies puddled on the grass, soft and lifeless beneath his foot. A black bow tie, camouflaged by the tree's alligator bark, dangles unseen, high in the branches above the woman's lifeless eyes. Her eyes are frozen wide, like the painted mouths of carnival clowns.

'Help, help ... somebody!' Grayson cries.

He cradles the limp body in his arms, whispering words of comfort before settling her carefully back onto the seat. He picks up the stole and spreads it over her like a cowl, then lays his own coat over the top, tucking it in at the sides. From the grass he plucks up the feather and tucks it into his waistcoat pocket along with his bow

tie. Then he takes out his green handkerchief and uses it to cover her eyes. Swiftly, he runs through the garden gate towards the nearest door.

He doesn't bother with the corner premises of Number 1; he has seen the TO LET sign in the window of its commercial frontage and no one answers his hammering at Numbers 2 and 3. Their drapes hang like lowered eyelids: shuttered and empty. His anxiety builds — it is like a stretching rubber band pulled ever tighter, its stressed edges thinning towards breaking point. The sensation doesn't slow his progress, although it serves to dry the last of the moisture from his mouth. At each door, after a frantic spell of knocking, he presses his ear to the wood.

'Hello? Hello? Is anyone home?' he calls while pounding on Numbers 4 and 6, but the same silence and lack of movement greet him.

He had seen the young family at Number 5 leave the previous morning, the rear seat of their Armstrong Siddeley tourer piled high with suitcases and spades, fishing rods and nets, tartan picnic blankets and parasols. The boot of their motor-car had been tied shut, the protruding bone of a large leg of ham and the labels on a crate of Fortnum & Mason sherry just visible. Grayson assumed they were off for a prolonged seaside break, so he bypassed their door.

He rushes to Number 6, where the knocker is a heavy brass ring passing through the mouth of a gargoyle. Its face seems amused by his lack of success. Still, he lifts the knocker and lets it fall. This was the house where, only a day ago, a young woman wearing plimsolls and a raspberry dress had run up the stairs swinging a tennis racket with zest and carefree abandon. Today, the door opens immediately when he knocks, and the same young woman stands before him in a silk robe emblazoned with a dragon. The blue thread of its tail perfectly matches her turban. She wears an expression as transparent as a dragonfly wing, a look of intrigue heightened by anticipation.

When she sees his expression, Grayson notices how quickly she turns her attention to helping, even as she holds a struggling tuxedo cat desperate to escape her embrace. Both cat and woman greet him — she with a disarming smile, the feline with an unsettling *ka-yow*. He is momentarily disarmed by their golden, enquiring eyes.

'Kat,' she says, tapping herself over the heart with her free hand.

After a moment of confusion, during which he glances between the cat and her hand, Grayson realises it must be her name.

Then, jolting himself back to the present, he tries resolutely to ignore a black onyx ashtray on the hall table containing two bitten cigar butts. Each is circled with a band of gold foil, and beside the debris rests a silver cutter. There is also a crystal brandy snifter, empty but for dregs. The caramel scent of aged oak briefly catches his attention before he checks himself and returns his thoughts to Cynthia on the bench.

‘Can I help?’ Kat asks.

‘There’s a dead woman in the garden — please could you phone the police immediately? I’ll wait by the gate and let them in ... I have a key. I moved into Number 9 a few weeks ago.’

Grayson sees Kat release the cat in shock, her teeth biting into her bottom lip, her anxious eyes widening. She gives herself a shake visibly pulling herself together.

‘Of course, I’ll call the station right away,’ she says.

As he turns, he runs a hand through his hair in agitation. It stands to attention like the crest of a blue tit. Then, as an afterthought, he turns back and adds, ‘It’s Grayson, Grayson O’Rourke.’

The church bell strikes seven as Grayson waits at the gate to the residents’ garden in St Mary’s Square. All other sounds seem muffled, although to his ears his breathing is loud and rasping, like the refrain of a harried locomotive. The garden itself seems unusually still, its birds and insects hushed while the wind gusts in gentle spurts through the leaves. The rustling makes a kind of music, like sighs through wind chimes. After a while, when the oppressive silence eases, he wonders why Cynthia’s stockinged foot appears so small where the shoe’s straps hang loose about her ankle, and what has become of her other silver shoe.

Part 2

Cotyledons and Shoots

Pruning and Training

Some species lend themselves well to topiary: the shaping and training of plants into balls, pyramids, spires, and even quirky feature shapes or animal forms. Plants most used for such a purpose are box, yew, and bay laurel, owing to their dense habit and small leaves. For the horizontal effect of espalier, apples, grapes and pears are especially popular, because they can be trained into ascending rows of branches. Species such as wisteria and laburnum, with their pendulous flowers, are ideal specimens to train on pergolas or along verandahs. Often, with such plants, the bark, trunk and branches themselves become a feature.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.42.

Cynthia Greenaway, Number 18

Wednesday, 22nd June 1932

Cynthia was simply overcome with emotion. It sat bitter and thick on her skin, congealing like last season's marmalade. As she lay in the residents' garden on the soft grass, interspersed with its lace of moss, this surfeit of emotion came and went, irregular as drifting cirrus crossing the fullest of moons.

Beneath the surface ran cocaine, warming her veins. It chased away inhibitions, dissolving them, swallowing up the bitter pith of discontent and any last residues of boredom.

Minutes before, she had turned her little clover-headed key in the garden gate. She had heard its soft snick. Then, twirling twice despite her fear, she danced the gravelled path as quietly as size eight silver heels on small stones would allow.

To Cynthia, her quick step sounded extremely loud. As though a giant moved about in hobnail boots. She heard her heels tear through the occasional fallen leaf. This elevated danger and heightened noise increased her excitement, setting her heart aflutter — its moth wings barely contained within her fragile chest.

When she looked up, she could just make out Thea sitting at the window of Number 2, watching the garden. She could see the fringed blue velvet chair and a shoulder of her cotton wrapper patterned with roses. The light was behind her, illuminating only her outline, her features shadowed. The small eau de nil chip hat she wore seemed a little unusual for the evening, but who was she to question the strange

and varied tastes of the *au courant* crowd? This thought floated past like a bubble, vanishing as quickly as it had arrived.

In an attempt to avoid being seen, Cynthia tightened her fur stole and inched forward, trying to blend in with the pale flowers of the twining datura. They hung, large and luminous as trumpets. She imagined herself into the very centre of the blooms, her limbs curving as she moved, sinuous as a vine.

At last, she tiptoed onto the central sheltered lawn, blocked from view by the gateway's yews, away from prying eyes. It seemed as green and deep as a lake, and she lay down in its centre pretending to be a child in the Cumbrian snow, moving her arms and legs out and up, etching snow angels in the moss.

The moon passed overhead, a quartered, bitten watermelon rind, forming silver freckles on her milky skin. As she looked at the patterns, she thought about the fragments of her life that had brought her to this.

She rubbed her upper arm where the rubber tourniquet had been pulled tight, fingered the spot where the needle had left its prick. There remained a freckle of blood that had made its way to fleck the crook of her arm.

It was increasingly difficult to focus. A fog settled ever thicker over her mind. Scenes came to her like the coloured markings of a kaleidoscope — each incomplete. If only she could piece them together, she thought desperately, she might understand her life, what she had made of herself.

She was standing at the Fernhill Estate window, a petulant figure gazing down on the world. There were many shards of her childhood that looked like this: her standing immobile — the world, the clouds, the seasons passing, the sheep. A forever watercolour of a cloud-softened landscape in muted tones.

From the nursery, she could see there were exactly six sheep. From this height they were like puffs of cotton wool. They stood singly. She counted them on the fingers of her right hand.

She had just said to Nanny yet again, 'I'm bored!', to which the elderly woman gave her usual reply, 'Only boring people get bored.'

Nanny had always uttered this in a Scottish brogue that thickened her vowels like sourdough upon the tongue. To Cynthia's ears, Nanny's well-worn phrase sounded something like 'oanly burin people git bored.'

The tail end of the sentence was clipped off as Nanny attempted a quick bend. She always did this in one swift motion to avoid a flying book, toy, or fragile object.

Briefly distracted by her recently applied Crimson Poison nail varnish, Cynthia held up her fingers and counted them. Seven ... one was crossed and hiding beneath the other. Thumbs aren't fingers, she chided herself.

The nursery floor was littered with the sharp fragments of a small hand mirror, a cherished gift to Nanny from a previous employer, its back adorned with an enamelled peacock. Cynthia had hurled the mirror into the nursery fireplace, and it was reduced to fragments. One or two splinters still clung loosely to the silver handle and oval frame.

'The little miss is a minx,' Cynthia heard Nanny complain to her husband, the estate gardener.

She was watching them through the window of their cottage where they shelled peas before a roaring fire. The room was aglow with yellowed light. She realised that it was Nanny's fault that she found nothing quite as boring as the overuse of clichés.

She'd known a way to warm herself upon hearing the words uttered with such venom. She felt the swirl of the winceyette nightgown about her legs as she turned around. There was a power in the arm that swung in time with the clamouring in her chest. She took down her brother's riding crop from the hook in the stables and cut down row upon row of vegetables in their prime.

As she again examined her nails, Cynthia wondered if the warm house, the tartan armchairs, the flicker of candles, all tinted golden in the warm light of the gardener's house could have softened the cold edge from her loneliness.

Father and her brother, Donald, had passed below the window where she stood. A blur of black, silver grille, and flashing bumper passed below as they travelled about the estate in a Morris Oxford.

Father telling Mother that he was showing Donald 'how things were done'. The way a boy needed to stand tall and never to cry as the cane swished through the air and bit flesh from a delicate palm. The continuation of a legacy passed from father to son. The decorative nature of women, like collected ornaments on a mantelpiece, to be dusted down and handled with care.

She still didn't think, after all these years, her brother had grasped the concept that legacy required reproducing, as she remained devoid of any nieces and nephews. The thought of Donald making love to his pearl-and-cashmere buttoned-up bride made her giggle into the soft fur of her wrap.

A moment of understanding on the other side of a smudged window pane dividing her from the world. The knowledge that, in a girl's world, the days just rolled over and over in their sameness. The events of her life were like a hand winding a ball from an endless skein of wool. The realisation that she would not be given the choice to do much of anything — let alone a hint of how it should be done.

As time ticked past, the cool dampness from the soil and grass permeated her dress. It chilled her skin, the backs of her arms, the bones of her spine. Her body quaked and shivered before she wrapped her stole more tightly around herself, spreading it out beneath her at the same time to shield her slight torso from the cold earth.

Standing in the corner while Nanny took a nap, Cynthia's eyes had just been drifting closed in a fantasy of rescue and emancipation when she caught sight of the yellow Daimler sweeping around the curve of the driveway. Its top was down. Sunlight glinted off the windscreen, and along each side ran silver pipes that sparkled like smiling alligator teeth.

Aunt Lettice was dressed in scarlet, a scarf blowing out behind her, ramrod straight at the wheel. She was accessorised in black, round sunglasses, a black cloche

hat with a baby emu feather. When she stepped from the vehicle — her patent Mary Janes gleamed. All were set off by the glisten of a wide smile.

Without waiting for Danby the butler to lend a hand, Aunt Lettice's shoes reflected the well-scrubbed flags, the blue-sky day and, from where Cynthia stood several floors above, the future possibilities for an unwanted daughter. If she could only emulate the entitled way Aunt Lettice glided into the house, her chin tilted up. Such confidence seemed capable of opening any door.

That day marked the end of Cynthia's boredom. Lettice, like a cleared-of-cobwebs Miss Havisham, swept her up from her spot hiding beneath the sofa, spun her around, weighing her potential, recognising how malleable she was made by the soft shell of her loneliness. Then deposited her, along with her hurriedly packed suitcase, into the car with teeth.

Her last sight of Nanny: bent over, running her bath. Breathing in the smell of rose soap and violet water as she was clasped to Nanny's generous bosom for the last time.

A small pension in Venice, where she stood before the long mirror in Aunt Lettice's suite of rooms, pink and towel-wrapped, fresh from her bath. Her hair was brushed yet not completely dry. She could see in the mirror that it hung over her shoulders in ropes. It covered the nodules of bone exposed along her back. There were many such bony ridges because of the slim and gangly nature of her adolescent figure. She saw a young woman trapped midway through metamorphosis, trying to break free. No longer a child, not yet a woman; in her mind she was an irrelevance — someone plain and purposeless.

Cynthia dropped her towel and turned this way and that. She evaluated herself with critical, measuring eyes, like a baker weighing dough by touch and heft: the texture of the skin, the space between the eyes, the length of the legs, the weight of the breasts — as yet, nubs like the swollen bones at her knuckles. Cynthia knew that men liked breasts to have a presence in the room. She had seen their eyes follow Aunt Lettice's generous curves, but everything she measured seemed to come up short by

an inch or two. She saw that her hair was lank and thin — the colour of sparrows' feathers.

Lettice's lessons weren't seeded in the vibrant colours and depictions painted on domes. They didn't come from the knowledge or stories about gargoyles or Greek gods or lessons about the naked fig-leafed men. Rather, Lettice taught her tricks gleaned from her own bitter practices. How to spin out her skein, wind it tight, and suck the lifeblood from her prey.

These became small seeds that Cynthia would water and nurture in the years that followed. They came to shape the character she played. The most important lesson was to have fun. To imbibe life like champagne through a straw, enjoying the bubbles as they travelled all the way down. She learnt one of the greatest sins was not to be bored but to be boring.

'Hats, yes, hats with feathers and plenty of bows,' said Lettice, planting a baby pink cloche over her own curls and pirouetting to look longingly over her shoulder. 'Your eyes are reasonable, a lovely cerulean blue, but practice at pulling them wide. They have a hint of the oriental which can be a boon or a curse — and fluttering — lots of fluttering of the lashes. Men like it when women look overcome.'

Cynthia pulled her smock over her head and Lettice pinched and tucked the fabric into place. As she fixed its shape about her niece with imaginary pins, she pouted her lips and showed Cynthia how to make them look kissed by dew. From the orderly dresser, Lettice picked up a bright red lipstick lying beside a crystal bowl. Next to it, on a little stand, sat a feathered chip hat. By careful application of the lipstick and a skilful tilt of the hat at a jaunty angle, she was transformed into a different girl, a rather effective disguise. She rubbed the lipstick off and put it on again, rubbed it off and put it on again.

'There is surely power in both — being the centre of attention or remaining inconspicuous,' said Lettice.

Fragments of cathedrals and statues and coffered, painted ceilings rushed past on a tour of Europe along with all the sweetness and admiration of men. The uttered

phrases of their flirtations. It lived in their querida, mi vida, bellissima, bella mia, lieblich and schatz — the proclamations of their undying love.

By the time of Lettice's death, her protégée's blossoming womanhood came to her in waves of effervescence — it bubbled just beneath her skin. It proved something of an anaesthetic to her instilled religious inhibitions. Cynthia became like a lion without a leash.

A small squirrel dropped down an acorn. As it scampered away, Cynthia stretched her arm and clutched the nut to her. With care she deposited it into her small zebra-skin handbag where it lodged in the gap between a syringe and a sanitary napkin.

The family squeezed into the Morris Oxford. A cramped drive down to Bourton-on-the-Water with the windows down to accommodate Donald's nervous odour. A meeting with the black-coated solicitor with dandruff snowing on his blotter. Single file they traipsed up to the second floor of a small office sandwiched between a brewery and an inn. There was a shocked silence when the clause was read out:

To my niece Cynthia Calvert-Brown, I leave my property at Number 18, St Mary's Square, and my 75 per cent share in the Royal Albert Park Hotel, plus an annual annuity of ten thousand pounds.

All eyes turned to Cynthia, leant up against the wall at the back in her coat of chinchilla. The front of her now blonde hair sprayed into pin-curls, while the back fell in a series of gentle waves.

In the event of Cynthia's betrothal, this property and annual income will pass to her husband to hold as an interest in her welfare during the course of her lifetime.

Cynthia's smile, reflected in the small compact she held up to retouch her make-up, was both cat and cream. She thought about the train timetable; how quickly she could make her way to London. Her firm grip on the fountain pen as she signed the deeds to the house was only slightly weaker than her grasp on the cheque made out for her first annuity. When the solicitor handed her a brown envelope, which contained

the keys to the Daimler, Cynthia realised that, after this return to London, she might never need to take the train again.

Departing the offices of Loxbridge, Loxbridge & Sons, she resolved, while raising her eyes to the lawyer's sign, to continue the work of reinventing herself. To spin her web and sting her prey. To completely drop the saintly part of her routine. No advantage in marriage, just more fun, fun — unfettered fun, she had thought to herself.

She tripped from the yellow Daimler to run up the stairs of Number 18, throwing the keys to Dalton, her newly employed butler. The pheasant feathers to the side of her raspberry felt hat trailed behind her in retreat, while Cynthia plunged forward.

When she entered, the ghosts stirred — they were the last vestiges of ancestors from well before even Aunt Lettice's time. Yet still they lingered within the house. Lettice, modern and vivacious, smelt like wind in the hair and wide-open spaces. By contrast, there was a scent of camphor and old lace. The coat hooks and umbrella stand were empty save for the lead of a long-extinct dog. It was caked with dried mud and a lone peacock's feather rested where umbrellas should stand.

In the drawing room, a thin layer of dust had settled on everything. It coated the small table holding a vase of dead flowers, the frame of a miniature by Rossetti. It was especially thick on a glass dome containing a faded taxidermied yellow canary. In the expansive living room, a quick shake loose of the drop cloths brought on a sneeze that may have cured the room of any lurking ghosts and perhaps even rid the room of dead flies, were there not so many.

A moth with gold-dusted wings landed on her forearm and too afraid that she might damage it, she watched it silently and still. Until finally it rose in the air with two wing-beats only to be plucked up by some dark bird in a quick swoop.

'This just won't do,' said Cynthia.

She addressed this to the painting of a stallion with flared nostrils and heaving sides rather than Dalton who stood at the door. The horse hung crooked above the mantelpiece. She turned her attention to the leather-bound Dickens's first editions on

the small table beside the tartan sofa, sweeping her arm around the room as though directing a wheeling troop of cavalry.

'I'll need to replace all of this. How I'll even recline on this monstrosity beggars belief. It'll clash with my every ensemble. I will need a chaise longue, something in a nice neutral grey. Aunt Lettice always said exemplary presentation is the starting note to all adventures, see to it, would you, Dalton,' she said.

In the lounge stood a semi-circle of sofas and chaise longues, all upholstered in plain fabrics to best offset their occupants, except for Cynthia's, which was draped with a striped zebra-skin throw. On the most prominent loungers sat three tittering blonde young women, lifting and lowering glasses of champagne as they moved restlessly about the room like frightened gazelles.

Her friend and confidant Pamela watched while she popped the cork on another bottle of champagne. She gave an audible gush of pleasure. Cynthia brushed the cool dew from the side of the bottle with her little finger and moistened her lower lip. Her fingertip held the residue of her lipstick; it stained the whorls and nail of her finger a deep red. As she lifted her arm, her chiffon bolero dropped back. The fur-edged pompoms nestled in the crook of her elbow. She nuzzled them with her chin, extending a hand, offering a bunch of grapes.

'Sorry darling, I have no substantial food in the house, only this anathema in a bottle. A gift from him. Along with these delicious purple grapes,' she said, rubbing her forefinger over the thin wax on a single fruit's skin. Eventually she placed the plump purple grape between her white teeth, before biting it in two. 'He tells me I am his muse. It's all just so theatrical. I feel like an actress on the stage.'

'Oh, how exciting, darling, just thinking about it is getting me all hot and bothered! Like a call-girl or a maid?'

'Exactly, though my roles are becoming more and more risqué, dearest. Last week I was to pretend I was his Peloponnesian slave girl. He says he has a little treat in store for me tonight. Something I am just going to adore.'

Cynthia lowered her kohled eyes and held them closed, admiring the darkness at the back of her lids. One little birdie, two little birdies, three little birdies. Her eyes

sprang wide when her white Persian cat, Ming-Ming, jumped onto her lap and began to knead the velvet cape puddled about her knees. As she stroked along the cat's soft back, hairs drifted up into the air, moving in time with the dust motes.

She tipped her head back and enjoyed the feel of her freshly cut hair. Its light strands clung to her head like a helmet and it brushed a damp line along the top of her shoulders. The moist ends had dangled into a puddle of water beside the bathroom basin after she had powdered her nose and bent low to sniff up the white powder he had given her. It sat like snow on its dainty silver spoon.

As Cynthia pulled up a handful of grass, she quickly gave up counting each blade individually, unable to make the difficult decision whether to register the individual parts as 'one' or to add them together to make a whole. Where in this tangle did the tiny roots begin and end?

When Aunt Lettice died, she found there were no longer any voices to validate her, to let her know she existed. So, she had made new friends. They were flitting petals of women that clung to her every word. Petunia, Daisy, Felicia, Bryony — all named for flowers.

Cynthia saw a small field mouse inching its way from beneath a fallen hollyhock at the edge of the lawn. She clicked her fingers, and the little creature scarpered away.

Cynthia stretched herself like a tiger skin and her eyes gleamed in the slice of moonlight from the small chapel's transept window where they met sometimes. For a moment she felt very afraid, of the man, of her feelings, of the fun she could see coming.

At the party, Cynthia had let the remaining white powder, along with the small spoon, fall to the floor. All the other guests were engrossed in their own pleasures, disinterested in the tell-tale white dust fingerprinted along her cheekbone. Her eyes rolled back, then after a time began to flicker between the play of light on the chandelier and the progress of a doodle bug making its way east along the picture rail.

In order to marvel at the view, she simply spread herself out on the bearskin rug, her limbs spread-eagled, while a man, leading an antelope and a coffee-skinned boy, took an amber drink from a nearby tray. The boy wore a collar threaded with a ring from which hung a gold chain. The man stopped when he saw Cynthia. He released the chain and his charges wandered off. Then he lay down beside her.

'It's rather lovely down here, isn't it, darling?' he said.

A youth ran a stick along the fence rails. Its *tat, tat, tat, tat* rose in volume, then faded into the night. A door opened and closed; soft voices were carried to Cynthia on puffs of air. There was a kindness in their parry and thrust, she thought, and her arms came around her body for a moment in a heartfelt hug.

As the lavender's soporific scent invaded her nostrils, Cynthia relived the weighty emotion from her thirteenth birthday — anticipation. An overwhelming excitement over the thought of a chocolate birthday cake. A silver jubilee biscuit tin was clutched to her thin ribcage as the Daimler navigated hairpin bends. Uncaring about the tracks of tears. Concerned only with the entirety of the thirteenth birthday chocolate cake.

A hastily made vow as she was shooed away by her parents that never again would she go unnoticed, and, on her birthday, there would always be a party and lashings of chocolate cake.

The flavour of the sweet icing and moist dark centre returned to her as she lay on the grass saliva pooling in her mouth. The imagined sweetness mingled with the scent of lavender and the nearby honeysuckle — clove, bitter grapefruit pith, bee pollen. It lulled her, and she drifted on the edge of sleep, when suddenly a shadow passed between the oaks and came to rest high up in their interwoven branches. It startled Cynthia from any thoughts of sleep and cake.

'Who? Who?' the shadow asked.

Good question, Cynthia thought.

She knew he had come at last, for she heard the key turn in the lock and the soft click as the gate closed behind him. Instead of getting up, she merely rose onto

her elbows and let out the last of her energy with a sigh. She saw him come along the path, passing between the trees, a stealthy shadow slipping through the darkness. As he raised his head to check whether Thea was still at the window, she recognised that the frisson of fear caused by the danger of discovery excited them both. She knew that the shadow of the oak and the mere sliver of moonlight could not cloak him entirely. As he took her in his arms, Cynthia imagined herself the petal, the pear tree and even the moon.

Afterwards, she turned and said, 'I feel somewhere between a bubble and a wild beast.'

But the poetic nuances of her thought and speech were silenced by the gold chain that was looped around her neck. As his hands drew it tighter about her throat, she felt the tiny gossamer threads holding her to life loosen.

In those final moments, she at last made sense of those fragments of memory. She realised that rather than transforming herself into a creature that felt the winds of the moor ruffling her fur, she had shaped herself into a desperate, darting, untamed thing. With her final breath, she understood this was no longer amusing. She wished then with all her young heart that she could say once more that she was bored, or even boring.

Protection of Frost-Tender Species

Some plants are unable to withstand temperatures below freezing. When the winter cold sets in, care must be taken to ensure such tender species are well protected. Bell jars, mats or straw may be used to cover these plants overnight. However, to ensure they enjoy optimal growing conditions, the coverings should be removed each morning so the plants may absorb the sun's heat and light.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.234.

Brandon McSweeney, Number 10C

Monday, 11 July 1932

The caretaker of the residents' garden at St Mary's Square is an Irishman named Brandon McSweeney. As part of his stipend, the basement flat is given over to his use. Before the war, the flat was the home of Number 10's downstairs servants. However, owing to the declining fortunes of its original owners, the terraced house was divided up into A, B and C, and the upper storeys eventually sold off. The basement level, C, became the gardener's residence by default with the proviso that the peppercorn rent still trickled to those higher up.

McSweeney's current landlords, Lord and Lady Remington-Brown, occupy the two upstairs flats. Having managed to reunite and refurbish these to a level surpassing their former glory, the Remington-Browns keep B and C pristine through their long absences. A well-connected couple with friends in high places, they are currently lording it over the natives in some far-flung colonial diplomatic outpost.

Periodically, McSweeney enters their flat to water their houseplants and check on the slight damp ingress affecting their upstairs bedroom. He stretches out on their bed and checks the watermark's progress; sometimes he takes a nap. As he knows the Remington-Browns are neither prone to a tippie nor big smokers of tobacco, he figures they will never notice the dilution of their fifty-year-old Scotch nor the sawdust taste in their depleted supply of Virginia's finest. He banks on the fact that their guests will be too polite to mention it.

Access to McSweeney's basement unit is through a narrow snicked gate of black wrought iron. On this Sunday, both the gate and the dark blue door are propped open while he hurriedly sweeps and washes the five tiled steps leading to his door.

Within this cramped enclosure of stairs, landing, and darkened porch, the gardener has created a compact oasis. On either side of the flat's doorway sit planters of standard laurel. White alyssum spills like frothy lace over the pots' edges.

McSweeney collects a small watering can from beside the kitchen sink and fills it with water. He adds a splash of his special fertiliser and gives the laurels a good dousing before snipping away any shrivelled or browning flowers or leaves from the alyssum. On Mondays and Thursdays these confections are carefully moved up to the top step where they get the chance to sun themselves in better light.

A bicycle is chained and locked; it leans against the stone wall that forms the side of the stairs and has the colour and lustre of Elizabeth Siddal's hair. After watering the plants, the gardener gives the bicycle a quick buff over with a strip of flannel nappy. He takes extra care to get into the creases and corners of the handlebars and the springs beneath the seat. McSweeney gives the chain a tug to check that the padlock is firmly secured.

Baskets swing from the base of the wrought iron fencing and overflow with pansies, lobelia and drooping love-lies-bleeding. Just as McSweeney is sweeping up a few stray dead leaves and flowers from this riot of plants, there is a squawk from inside the flat that quickly turns to a wail. He replaces the battered brush and shovel on its hook behind one of the laurel pots. As he does so, his hand brushes the key hidden behind the shovel. It swings back and forth letting out an 'eek, eek'. The sound echoes around the compact space like the call of a hungry baby bird.

The gardener's modest flat comprises twin bedrooms. When McSweeney took possession, each contained two narrow single beds that were pressed flush against the side walls, a tiny window in between. Now, in one room, the two beds are pushed together to make a double. Bright yellow side tables stand on either side. Each is topped by a fuchsia pink shaded lamp, its base the shape of an onion bulb.

In the other room, both beds lean up against the wall. Their legs extend across the room and, in the space created between, sits a wooden cot. In this a baby boy lies kicking his legs and rumpling the blankets. He is three months old. His name is Thomas, and he cracks a wide, toothless smile when McSweeney gently picks him up and takes him through to the kitchen where he settles him into a blanket-lined cardboard box.

'Good morning to you, Thomas. What a clever little man you are, sleeping through the night,' he says. Then he fills a glass bottle with milk and places a red kettle

on the Aga. It whistles when it boils and the baby turns his head in glee and croons, imitating the sound.

When McSweeney moved into his flat, all the rooms featured the same Chinese blue-and-white wallpaper. It depicted pagodas and arched bridges with streams meandering to nowhere and geese flying in groups of five. However, he papered over it with a bargain-box roll of William Morris's *Strawberry Thief* found at the Portobello Street Market. The rolls were cheap because they were a mismatch, and the discrepancies in colour have softened into indistinguishability in the dim light of the basement flat.

McSweeney has also put up a set of shelves and installed several bookcases. From a low cabinet he collects a tin of tea, a small trivet for making toast on the Aga, and two dishes. One contains butter and the other contains honey. Once he has had breakfast, he takes Thomas on his hip and walks through to the lounge. He sets him down on the rug. From a neatly folded pile on the spindle-backed rocker he takes a flannel nappy, a small knitted blue cardigan and a red pair of corduroy dungarees.

'Here we go. Soon you will be nice and clean and smelling fresh as a daisy,' says McSweeney. He wipes the boy's bottom with a muslin cloth and warm, soapy water from a basin beside him. Then he takes great care to fasten the nappy's three safety pins securely.

'All done and clean for Grannie now. She can't help but be pleased with that,' says McSweeney.

While the gardener speaks, Thomas waves his small fists and blows a bubble.

'Yes, we know she won't be... yes we do,' he says. Then undoes the straps of the dungarees, pushes aside the jersey, and blows a loud rumbling raspberry into the baby's belly button. Thomas chortles with glee, bouncing his fists off McSweeney's lowered dark head.

For a time, McSweeney plays with Thomas on his knee, responding with 'da, da, da' and 'bah, bah, bah' to the boy's gurgles and sounds. Then he picks him up and walks around the room, stepping around the two faded crimson chairs and tickling the baby's face with a wad of stuffing that has escaped the arm of one. He stops before a wall where a single picture hangs. It is an embroidered country scene of a thatched cottage and scattered chickens. A maiden with a basket and curls that look to be dancing casts around grain.

‘Maybe we can get a couple of hens and move out of the city. Your mother would have enjoyed that. Plenty of work for gardeners on the big country estates,’ he says to the boy.

He runs Thomas’s small hand down the length of the picture, and Thomas moves his head in that direction, but his eyes remain blank.

McSweeney wanders around the flat with the baby in his arms. He describes the mantelpiece to the boy in careful detail.

‘We have two blue-green jugs. They are made by a company called Wedgwood; this range is ‘majolica’ it’s famous for the bright glazes they use. They have minor imperfections — chips or little hairline cracks,’ he says, bringing one of the boy’s chubby fingers up to graze the rough edge of a chip, ‘that’s the only way I could buy them. But just as much joy can come from things which aren’t quite perfect.’

He guides the boy’s palm in turn to the contents of each jug. A dried Scotch thistle, the tips of its petals dusted with gold with age. The other holds a single freshly picked sunflower with a smiling face.

‘See, they are each spiky in different ways. Feel that.’

The little boy beams in the direction of the voice and gives a single chortle while drawing back his chubby fingers into a fist.

McSweeney takes a look at his wristwatch, then one-armed, he fills and returns the kettle to the heat, placing Thomas back in the lined box beneath the window. Next to it sits a small white cage in which two yellow canaries flit from perch to perch. The baby, in his nest-like bed, bats his fists against the cardboard’s sides in time with their interludes of song.

The gardener surveys the room and thinks, not for the first time, that Dante Gabriel Rossetti would have loved the colour in the small flat: the cerise tablecloth; the jewel-like window recesses where yellow and red begonia flowers hang papery in the light, translucent as gooseberry cases; the way the summer morning patterns the floorboards, crisscrossing it with golden reflections from the battered well-used copper pots. Suddenly, he is jerked from his musing by the high-pitched whistle of the boiling water which he pours over the tea leaves in a square blue-and-white chrysanthemum pot. It has a very fine hairline fracture running through the largest of its flowers, but it never leaks.

McSweeney practices a few conjugated Latin verbs that he reads from strips of paper pinned to the wall beside the window. It was the scientific names of plants which

had initially sparked his interest in the language. At first, he cut the names of his favourite flowers from seed catalogues, the holes becoming tools to test his recall. He liked the idea of finding value in absence. Eventually the names led him to try out phrases, and now he has memorised whole sections of *Elementary Lessons in Botanical Latin*. There is nowhere else for him to use it, but he has noticed that Thomas loves to make sounds that mirror the language's rhythm and intonations from the pulpit of his box.

In the few scant minutes that remain, he thinks again of the country cottage and his eyes are drawn to the chickens and the gentle expression of the maid. Quickly, he takes a blank piece of paper from a drawer and scribbles a few lines down with a red stub of pencil, before returning to his preparations at the bench. Just as McSweeney places the teapot and a trivet on the table, there's a firm knock at the door, and he opens it to find his mother standing there.

'The train was a crush again and somebody tried to steal my umbrella,' she says as she pushes her way past.

'Maybe it was an attempt at flirting. An excuse for a later meeting?' he says, smiling down at the baby, who gurgles lightheartedly as though he understands the joke.

Bertha plants the umbrella forcibly into the stand next to the door. It is near to bursting and a handle in the shape of a galah comes a little unstuck and leans precariously on its stem.

'It would be far easier if I just moved in with you. I'm sure you would find it far less stressful than trying to look after the little mite outside work hours on your own.'

'We've been over this before, Mother. The flat's not big enough for the three of us, and at thirty-six years old I am far too set in my ways to share my home with my mother.'

He takes two cups and saucers from the nearby dresser and pours tea into both. He places a slice of lemon into one and pours a splash of milk into the other.

'Give it a rest. If it's too much for you, I can always get in some hired help.'

Bertha angrily flicks some crumbs from the tablecloth, then picks up her cup of tea, pointing her little finger accusingly at the canaries. She cradles the saucer in her other hand, while taking small sips of the scalding tea, grimacing whenever the bitterness of the lemon catches her tongue.

‘Well, we both know your finances won’t stretch to that. I guess I’ll just have to keep putting up with the train journey. It’s lucky you have me, or I don’t know what you’d do.’

She gives a disgruntled huff.

‘And I must prostrate myself before you in appreciation on a daily basis,’ McSweeney mutters under his breath.

As soon as the tea has been drunk down to the last drop, he rinses his cup and saucer and places them on the sideboard to drain. Then he plants a kiss on his finger and smudges it onto the forehead of the little boy.

Already up the steps, he calls back to his mother, ‘Remember not to cover the canaries today, you know how much he enjoys their chatter.’

She merely scoffs and pulls a dark blanket over the cage anyway.

Across the quiet street, McSweeney uses a brass key to open the gate of the private resident’s garden, a place he thinks of as his own retreat. He has to bend low to enter his small potting shed. It stands narrow and erect like a sentinel on guard at a cemetery. It’s made from old timber and packing cases and holds the smells of linseed oil, pumice mix and sunflower seeds — the air inside tastes of sunburnt summer straw. It is located in the corner of the garden opposite the red door of Number 3 St Mary’s Square.

Once inside, McSweeney has been heard to hum tunes from Gracie Fields records while sharpening and oiling his tools, or Noël Coward, as he carefully mixes his sprays and toxic chemicals. He has a deep baritone that reverberates like cicadas wrapped in calico. The notes hang in the air around the garden — they are as dense as cocoa.

Lately, he no longer sings or hums while he works, nor does he enjoy records on the gramophone. The colour seems to have been sucked from the flowers of his oasis, replaced now by faded hues.

Crossing to the small potting shed in the shadow of a large elm, he trundles out his wheelbarrow, a spade, two forks — one long-handled, one short — a small trowel and some shears. He dips the spade into the soil, cutting and turning, cutting and turning the sod — all the way along the bed that runs parallel to the shed’s wall. By the time he has worked his way to the other end, the last of the tension in his shoulders has uncoiled and dissipated.

McSweeney first took up his role of gardener in the Square when he returned from the Great War. Since then, he has cultivated a rich, aromatic soil throughout the garden. It is laden with the scent of pungent musk. He thinks of it as the smell of life's potential. It is the densest and darkest of it, taken from the newly turned bed, that he now scoops into his metal drum sieve. Back and forth he works it to a fine tilth. He spreads this fertile dark gold carefully around the drip line of a patch of foxgloves and aconitum. Then he uses a special manure taken from a bag beneath the potting shed bench to fertilise a row of newly planted seedling yews.

In the garden, as in the house, McSweeney has indulged his lavish attention to detail and riotous sense of colour. However, if an especially observant onlooker studied the plants carefully, they might notice that amid the dainty daisies, dahlias and dianthus are many species which could be used with deadly intent. It might also be observed that it is upon these poisonous beauties that the gardener bestows the most love and attention.

To them he now takes the special tea strained through a purloined pair of his mother's stockings. He makes the tincture from comfrey leaves, fish heads from the local fishmonger and wood ash. He dribbles it around the roots of his pampered darlings, talking to them quietly as he progresses.

Before it was necessary for his mother to come and look after Thomas, this was the first job in his day. Now, he finds that every morning, after she arrives, he has to do some turning and slicing of the sod with his spade. He must pummel food scraps into his compost, or sever flower heads and hang them with little nooses of jute string. Now, one or all of these tasks must be carried out before McSweeney can enjoy the work of the rest of the day.

The nurturing of his favourites in no way means McSweeney has been neglectful of the other plants or features of the garden. There are still many plants grown simply because they are pretty: the whiskered pansies and the blue-belled campanulas. Several he cultivates simply because he enjoys saying their names; love-in-a-mist, snow on the mountain, or his favourite, the delicate bleeding heart. Others he grows for their smell, their feel, or simply the appearance of their leaves. However, such beauties as aconitum, digitalis, belladonna and yew will always be closest to his heart because they have hidden depths.

McSweeney has very high standards. He keeps the edges of the beds, like his tools, straight and sharp. They rise in mounded drifts of rotting leaf litter. He recognises the irony in the cyclical nature of life — the quiet exchange at work beneath the soil.

Long, fat worms are plucked from their holes by birds. Sometimes their size means they must be pulled in two; sometimes, if thin, they can be swallowed whole. A small family of blue tits has a fondness for ruby juniper berries. They take their exercise on Brompton Road, where they make small shoulder deposits. It is a favourite walk-to-work route for the Savile Row brigade. The way nature both embraces divisiveness and cocks a snook at the privileged crinkles the lines at the corners of McSweeney's eyes.

Physically, he is a tall man with hair the colour of Bovril, and a thick cowlick that often curtains his eyes. It is prone to fluid movement, swaying as he moves, mimicking the dancing hips of Polynesian girls. His brown eyes are fringed by long, curled dark lashes. Their sweep across his cheeks in sleep embodies the innocence of prepubescent choir boys. This soft-lashed innocence may help explain how he has successfully ensnared three wives. Yet much can also be attributed to the way he smells. The gardener exudes the scent of well-tilled soil and leaf mould — a heady brew, bursting with untapped growth and a profundity seldom found beyond nature's truly wild spaces. The fragrance has been known to stop passing maidens — and more than one elderly spinster — in their tracks.

Unfortunately, during his first two marriages, McSweeney was prone to fits of temper. He tended to raise his voice, loom in close and nudge with his shoulder. He was never physically abusive, but he knew how to use his speech, how to occupy a space — the volume needed to make a woman's ears ring. He knew how far to expand his chest so a woman searched for a space to back into. He even came to crave the way the hairs stood to attention on their forearms, the bright bead of moisture trembling on their top lip.

During his first wife's time in the flat, he had kept his savings in a Jacob & Co's High-Class Biscuits tin, squirreled beneath a thriving pot of mother-in-law's-tongue. He trusted the symbolism might serve as a deterrent to stop grasping hands from dipping in. It seemed, however, that his mother, Bertha, was not capable of scaring anyone but him.

A few years later, when his second wife moved in, he hid the meagre amount he had managed to scrape together since the loss of the High-Class biscuits tin and

his favourite plant, on the top shelf of the pantry. Folded notes were tucked carefully into a rusty tin labelled Andrews' Liver Salts.

The fact that he worked across the road, within sight of his flat, did not prevent either woman from making off with large items of furniture, all manner of household goods, the repositories of his cash — and the biscuits and liver salts as well. They didn't know he had watched them go, and part of him felt a curious relief, as though in surrendering the money he had not entirely failed them.

As he potted delicate seedlings, snipped the spent heads from the roses and cut back the penstemons, McSweeney mulled over the failures of his past relationships. He accepted responsibility for his rough handling; yet he had also come to believe he had been planting the same specimens in the same exhausted soil, where neither nutrients nor aspect suited their needs. The previous autumn, it had occurred to him that the two wives were merely opposing faces of the same coin.

With wife one, small trinkets appeared in their flat several times a week: a yellow enamelled bird brooch, an ostrich plumed headband, blue, red and green chequered lounge slippers with ermine trim, a matched pair of plum-coloured diamanté hair clips. The little flat was soon filled to bursting with steadily multiplying women's clothing and accessories. The beds in the spare bedroom disappeared beneath outfits, and the wardrobe doors had to be leaned on to close.

Wife two, on the other hand, kept something of a ledger. She rationed McSweeney to three squares of toilet paper per visit. Biscuits with tea were deemed unnecessary. Pudding was only served once a week, on the Sabbath. Items of clothing and jewellery gave way to coupons and sales notices. She was rarely home, being perpetually engaged in queueing for a bargain.

When he looked back on these marriages, McSweeney concluded that at least the financial nous of number two had cancelled out the spendthrift nature of number one. When he considered the safety of the nice little nest egg he kept untouched in the bank — a modest annuity that he had received from his father upon his death — he reasoned that the net effect of the two wives on his savings meant that, overall, he had broken even.

When, after the two marriages, he found himself a free agent, he felt no deep well of sadness. Rather, there was a lightness about his shoulders, as though a dense yoke had been lifted from his neck. Up to that point, he had been largely unaware of

the way the women's presence pressed against his sternum, squeezing each breath from him, winding ever tighter the breaths drawn in.

With the passage of time and distance, he came to liken his personal development to the annual pruning of one of his perennials. The initial showy and prolific blooming of his early feelings gradually browned and shrivelled, then transformed into something vital. He had been stripped back to his bare bones, but slowly, he began to feel the thrusting emergence of some new and virile shoots. The passing of his third wife, in contrast, was a different matter entirely.

McSweeney had first seen Helen in October of 1931. She was there one day when he glanced up from tying willow branches into a wigwam ready for his summer crop of sweet peas. At first, she appeared fragmentary, the bars of the fence dividing her into sections: a slice of raspberry beret, a wedge of woollen tights, half a plait spilling dark threads of hair, one scuffed and worn brown lace-up shoe, a slender hand, its fingers circling around the wrist of her other, a fringe of scarf, a collar of worn coat. These parts formed an image that, assembled, suggested the sum of her poverty.

She stood unmoving while he threaded the soft green twine through the lattice of willow, pared back to rust-orange stems. Over and under, over and under. Her dark eyes seemed to drink him in, her head slightly angled like a bird after dipping its beak into water. Afraid she might flit away, he took tiny glances at her through his lashes. The light was at her back, illuminating her pale fragility and tinting her outline softly golden. Because of this light, the details of her face were obscured and small black crosses smudged into dancing shapes on either side of her head.

A scent drifted from her that he was reluctant to recognise. It came in faint wisps that crept through the bars of the fence. It was syrupy, with notes neither floral nor nutty. It carried the spice of Christmas pie consumed out of season — ground cinnamon and clove gorged on in June. He knew it from the war, yet he resisted naming the cloying note — the smell of laudanum.

Instead, he felt himself swept away. He wanted to paint her, to write about her, to record the moment as musical notes, to graft her onto a rootstock — somehow to stop time and frame the moment. Perhaps that was why a voice murmured deep within his inner ear, putting a name to her: '*Regina Cordium.*' From then on, that was how his mind addressed her, from the soft space within himself where his love of art and colour

had recognised, in this woman at their first meeting, something true. For him, a green shoot blossomed despite the weather into a fully formed bloom.

He blinked once, twice. Casually, he brushed the forelock from his eyes; it immediately fell back. Meanwhile she just continued to stand, drinking in the garden — the bare skeletal plants, the delicate frost on scant petals, the deep green thickness of winter foliage, the rough solidity of bark. Her eyes seemed to take small careful sips. When at last she looked at him, he saw her eyes were as green as sphagnum moss. Then she grinned, and he was lost.

Pretending indifference, McSweeney shrugged and continued with his work of tying together the willow while the woman's eyes were drawn to a small blue whiskered pansy with a bright yellow eye. The flower had escaped the garden, defying the cold. It had seeded into a crack in the pavement.

'Successfully broken free,' he said.

But she gave no response.

He could see her wrists and ankles were extremely thin — more malnourished than willowy. The rest of her was difficult to gauge, dressed as she was in a thick coat and scarf although it was an unseasonably fine day. Yet, despite the bulk of her clothing, she held her back straight with an air of pride; her spine pulled taut.

Her left hand, unlike her right, did not clutch at the railings. Instead, it was held loose and open, caressing her midriff. It pulled at the hem of her homespun cardigan, visible where the coat buttons wouldn't close. Her fingers tugged, trying to stretch the knitted wool over the swell of her pregnant waist. Both hands were chapped and bare of rings.

Suddenly she stumbled, using the fence to steady herself.

'Are you all right there? Can I call someone for you? I can use the phone in my flat — it's just a little way up the street.'

With a pale hand, she brushed aside both his offer and the damp hair from her forehead.

'Helen. That's my name,' she said.

After a few more moments contemplating the drooping flower on a winter rose, she turned, walked toward the South Kensington station, and was gone.

A few days later she returned. Again, a hand rested on the bars; in the other she held a large currant bun, which she ate slowly, breaking off small pieces and chewing carefully. It was a long process; she didn't waste a single crumb.

Atop her curls, which were the colour of walnut skins, sat a small act of rebellion: a soft pink beret that leant at a jaunty angle. It matched exactly the soft cotton of her well-travelled dress. The hem bore an unenthusiastic frill, smudged dark with dust. The seams strained a little around the waist where the fabric stretched to accommodate her growing shape. At times the cuffs rode up her arms, exposing a cigarette burn just above her wrist and the faint marks of rope.

As McSweeney approached for a closer look, a gust of wind caught her beret and blew it through the bars.

'Sorry, it's a private garden, miss. Only for the residents of the square,' he said more to the dislodged hat than to her.

He wondered why he'd said it, as though she were attempting to squeeze through the fence. He felt a stir of annoyance — at himself and at her. He was annoyed that his voice had come out sounding like a gruff policeman's, and that he felt that he needed to compensate for the smudge of mud that marked the soft felt of Helen's hat.

His fingers circled beneath his shirt collar, releasing some of its tightness. He shifted from foot to foot, then resolutely bent to retrieve her beret. Then, from his pocket, he took a snowy handkerchief, dampened it from his watering can, and rubbed at the felt as gently as a professional art restorer.

'I was only looking. Can't be no law against that surely,' she said.

Her statement contained no trace of a question.

'Course not,' he replied, returning the hat and resuming his digging and parting of the dirt so he needn't look at her.

He deposited crocus bulbs along the furrow as he progressed, pressing them into the soil, tamping firmly around the base with forefinger and thumb, dousing them generously from the watering can. She watched as he planted a row of seedling billy buttons interspersed with lamb's ears in preparation for the spring, as he staked a clump of loose and floppy chrysanthemums, and sprinkled dried eggshells around a clump of well-bitten hostas to combat the slugs and snails. As he turned from stripping the small round seeds from the hollyhocks — which came away from the spike in whorls — he noticed that she was gone.

The third time Helen appeared was at midday on a Friday. McSweeney knew the time because the bells were pealing from the tower of the small local church. The ringing seemed to swell and press its way gladly around the small garden, and he wondered if it was heralding her arrival.

He knew the day had been a Friday because ordinarily it was his office day, the day he dealt with invoices and records. But as the rain had held off, he was making the most of the break in the weather.

Instead of greeting Helen, he strode quickly into his shed. When he returned, he tentatively held out a small bunch of pansies. Each day he had plucked a fresh handful, waiting patiently for her return. He'd selected plants that had popped their seed heads open and scattered themselves through the bars of the fence. They seemed resistant to the cool temperatures, flowering continuously throughout the year.

He slid the fresh bunch through the railings along with half a sultana cake wrapped in brown paper and tied with string. The small yellow eyes and whiskers trembled in his hand and the cake, recently delivered by his mother, barely squeezed between the bars.

In the moment of hesitation before her hunger won out, a small blue ladybird alighted on Helen's shoulder and walked slowly towards the worn lace of her collar. It was light-footed and unafraid.

'Hold very still,' he said.

When she recoiled, fearing he might touch her, he pointed to his own collar.

'A little blue ladybird. They are lucky. You wouldn't want to hurt it and your good luck to be damaged in any way. Quiet now,' he said, as though gentling a mare.

With great care, he reached through and placed his little finger upon the collar and the iridescent creature crawled onto his outstretched finger. He raised it to eye level, blew gently and with a whirr of jewelled sapphire wings it flew away.

'Thank you,' she said, inclining her head as she tucked the flowers and cake beneath her arm. 'Normally I'd not accept charity — especially from a stranger — but you know what they say of beggars.'

He thought he saw her eyes fill then, but she blinked any tears away as though they were merely smuts. Turning on her heel, she squared her shoulders, straightened her spine and walked away.

It was several visits more before Helen finally agreed to let him take her out for tea and a shared scone. On that day, the heavy rain and her lack of an umbrella may have been an inducement. McSweeney had to employ all his charm and wit to keep the conversation going, for there was an absent quality in the way Helen tucked her hair behind her ear, the way she rubbed and rubbed at a small blob of jam that had settled upon her sleeve.

He put the dreamy vacancy in her eyes down to worry about the coming baby, for her stomach was growing larger each visit. Sometimes her dress would swell and ripple like wind blowing softly through a field of poppies. She tried to camouflage the small movements with the drumming of her fingers and tugs to pull together the opening of her coat.

McSweeney was pleasantly surprised at how quickly things progressed after that first outing. In the ABC tearooms Helen expertly divided a large cream cake into thirds. Two pieces for him, one for herself — he moved one back onto her plate when her back was turned. Sandwiches followed in the small teashop with the bright red awning. From their window seats, they watched the buses traversing Brompton Road, speculating on the occupants and assigning names to their dogs. The following weekend, a picture and an ice cream.

During this slow and careful courtship, McSweeney never once asked Helen about the father of the baby, the rope marks or the burns. Instead, he resorted to telling her with flowers how he felt about her — as the Victorians had done. Inexpensive allegorical things, he handed over each time he noticed the disappearance of a physical sign of abuse.

When the cigarette burns on the back of her hand healed, he gave her a blush-coloured queen protea from a roadside flower stall — transformation. The finger-marked bruise gone from her clavicle, three dried stems of Queen Anne's lace tied with white ribbon — sanctuary. When the scabs on her knees peeled off, a last surviving stem of bright yarrow — cure for a broken heart. A vase of bluebells for the yellow stain that had circled her wrist — faithfulness. A few of last season's bulbous pods of love-in-a-mist when her eyes and skin were clear.

Finally, when he could see through the cotton of her dress, her belly button making a raised mound like a strawberry, he gave her a ring. It fitted her finger

perfectly. A tiny chip of diamond in the midst of pointed enamelled petals that was set in a plain gold band. It was an apple blossom flower — eternal love.

He put his hand on her waist then and finally they talked about the coming baby. He would treat it like his own, he said, and when something fluttered beneath his hand he felt his heart expand and open like a spring bloom.

Wednesday, 27 April 1932.

The day Helen died started like any other. There had been some rain overnight — just a few showers — but by dawn they had moved away to the north, and the day arrived blue and new. McSweeney was savouring mouthfuls of honeyed toast and slow sips of warm tea. *The Times* lay spread before him on the table and his feet were propped on a cushion resting on the opposite chair. It was Sunday — his day of rest.

Occasionally he reached down and ran a finger through Thomas's fine downy hair where he slept beside him in his box. Now and then he glanced across at Helen. She was entirely taken up with watching the feet of passers-by. In the time it took him to cast a cursory glance out of the window, he noted white tennis shoes, scuffed work boots, two pairs of black sandals walking together, as though their owners had just attended church. A pair of brown polished brogues with a dead leaf stuck to the sole, strolled and stopped, then strolled, then stopped again. Silver T-bar sandals walked slowly by and their matching twin passed in the opposite direction accompanied by a fluffy white cat on a sparkling lead.

Just as the paws of a Great Dane turned the corner, he heard the *erk* of the letterbox flap being raised. There was a surprising *thunk* as mail hit the mat. This was unusual as there was no post on a Sunday.

'I'll get it — don't you get up,' Helen said.

She walked to the far end of the table and picked up a white envelope from the mat.

'It's addressed to me. How odd.'

He heard the rip as she tore it open. The colour had drained from her face. A gasp escaped her before being muffled as she busied herself with the already clean dishes.

'Is anything wrong, love?' he asked, rising from his chair and laying aside his newspaper.

‘No — no. Just the passing of a distant relative... nothing to worry about. I will need to go out, I’m afraid.’

She seized her summer duster from the hook beside the door, and as he tried to gently take her arm, she brushed him off. So he merely took from the hook a warmer coat and swapped it with the one in her hand. All the while her eyes fixed upon the blanket hanging over the side of Thomas’s box.

‘I will get some nice lamb chops for our supper on the way home. Would you mind looking after Thomas while I’m gone?’

Her voice held alarm — and something close to terror, but her eyes were bent on evasion, so he knew better than to ask. She was still haunted by past demons, and he didn’t want to push her too hard for information until she was ready. He was distracted when Thomas blew a bubble and a broad smile lit up his face. McSweeney could never resist a cuddle at moments such as that, and he picked up the baby and spun him around in his arms.

‘I will also have to go and check on someone — a relative out by Hampstead Heath, so it might take me some time.’

‘Sure, take as much time as you need,’ he said.

But as his fingers grazed the inside of her wrist, he thought how he didn’t know she had any relatives close by. It was the first he had heard about this one out on the Heath. When their eyes met, hers were full of worry and fear, but there was affection there too. She gave a slight nod, and he knew she understood what he had chosen not to ask.

When he turned to say goodbye, Helen was already gone. He could see the laces of her poorly tied shoes bouncing off the pavement as she hurried down the street. She was still trying to push her arms into her coat as she walked and passed her small handbag from hand to hand. She appeared a little frantic as she stuffed the offending letter inside and grappled with the clasp.

Afterwards he could not help thinking he should have offered to go with her. He wondered if his being there would have changed things. He always wondered about the aunt on the Heath. When he had asked in the past, she claimed she was alone in the world: her father having perished in the war and her mother succumbing to the Spanish flu not long after.

He had strode through the blue door she had left swinging open and reached the pavement just as she rounded the corner onto Brompton Road. A squawk from the kitchen meant there was no chance of catching her.

It was the golden hour when the telegram came, that time just after sunset when the garden is always at its finest, its leaves sharp and its colours muted and soft. The telegram, however, held neither clarity nor warmth. It read:

COME AT ONCE STOP

WIFE INVOLVED IN ACCIDENT STOP

STATION MASTER PADDINGTON

The officials claimed Helen had stepped before a moving train. They said that it had been an especially busy day. Some people said there were signs she had been crying. Among the witnesses to the event, there was no consensus about whether she had jumped or been pushed. Some people spoke of a clean-shaven man in a suit deliberately bumping her. Others claimed he had a beard. A few people stated they were positive it was actually a woman impersonating a man.

When McSweeney explained about the relative, the lamb chops, the hand-delivered letter through the mail slot, the station master said they couldn't find her bag containing any proof. Only a small vial of laudanum was discovered in her coat pocket.

The coroner's enquiry concluded that Helen was a woman who found the twists and turns of life too much to bear: the small poky flat, the subsistence gardener's wages, the disability of their child — McSweeney saw no need to correct them with regard to parenthood — the disconnection with her people.

'These were all contributing factors that shaped her decision to step before the train. The weight of contradictory evidence is insufficient to allow any other conclusion,' said the magistrate.

Wednesday, 13 July 1932

Now, there are strands of grey in McSweeney's dark hair; they feather his temples and crown. His mother, Bertha, believes they are multiplying at an alarming rate. Signs of this premature ageing began to appear shortly after his third wife's funeral. Within weeks of her passing, the residents of St Mary's Square also noticed a slight droop to the left side of his mouth.

They spoke softly to each other in passing, remarking that after a particularly intense afternoon's labour, the gardener had begun to unconsciously support his gloved left hand with the roughened, ingrained fingers of his right. Closed, quiet conversations and intense observation became the favoured pastime among them after Cynthia's body was found reclined on the bench. They speculated about the way death seemed to be following the gardener around and they moved to the other side of the path or a different bench in case standing too close caused his bad luck to rub off on them.

It was around this time that McSweeney's mother began insisting she move into his basement flat because 'someone had to look after the child.' Or the 'freeloader', as Bertha preferred to describe the baby out of Brandon's hearing. As Thomas was an infant, outsiders were left to wonder what the baby was supposed to do to supplement the family income.

The gardener held firm against his mother's onslaught, for he knew how to lean in close and lead with his shoulder at opportune moments. He knew when to pitch his voice so it carried, and how to cradle the little boy against the bulk of his chest.

So, the two males continued to live in quiet harmony without a woman permanently housed beneath their roof: the Latin-loving man with the bright taste in interiors, and the small, tubby baby who responded to music but didn't react to the sight of flowers or birds — the gardener and the blind boy who shared the basement flat of number 10C.

McSweeney still maintained every last possession of his third wife, although she arrived with little and departed with even less. They took up precious space, but he thought that maybe the smell and feel of these things might mean something to Thomas one day. It occasionally worried him that he had no address to write to regarding her passing.

Another letter had been pushed through the slot in his front door. It had lain like a funeral notice on the mat until he pocketed it in passing along with a handful of other bills and advertisements. He fingered the stiff cartridge on his way to the garden shed. Under the empty heads hanging from the rafters — shucked and denuded — he glanced reluctantly at the letter on the bench.

Along the back wall stood jars and tins containing white chalky dust, viscous yellow liquid and small azure pebbles: lime and fertiliser, rose spray and rat bait, each labelled with a neat, curling script. From beside them he drew out a small biscuit tin,

removed the lid and carefully placed the thick envelope beside five others. Only three of the letters bore a sharp slit along the top; they all contained the same note. From one letter's opening peeked a corner of pink writing paper. This exuded a distinct scent — lily of the valley.

McSweeney had held each letter to his nose and breathed in the smell, each a reminder of his failure. At last, he crumpled the brittle spikes of a dried echium between his fingers, the sharp blue spikes dug under the soft skin beneath his nails, and with this movement he resolved to act. To seek justice for Helen. He set aside his fear and made himself another promise: he would not let anyone take Thomas from him. No matter how important or how wealthy the boy's biological father might be, the child would remain with him.

He laid the envelopes in a row and removed the letter from each, placing them in a pile. He read them once more:

She didn't jump. She was pushed. Look for the father of her baby. He was there on the platform. I saw his arm go out. Don't let him get away with it.

The next day he visited the bank and withdrew his savings. He entered a telephone box on Kensington Road. After thumbing through the phone book for some time, he picked up the black Bakelite mouthpiece.

'Kensington 6634, please, operator,' he said.

'Albert Brown, private investigator, speaking,' said a deep voice.

'Hello. I'd like to engage your services to investigate a murder,' said McSweeney.

Trios

One of the basic principles of landscape design involves the grouping of plants. For maximum impact, varieties which are the same should always be arranged in odd numbers. The reasoning behind this principle is that such an arrangement mimics how species are commonly found in nature. Pansies, for example, would be planted in drifts of three, five, seven or nine and so on; not grouped together in even numbers and rarely placed alone.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.27.

Grayson O'Rourke, Number 9

Monday, 28th March 1932

The bronze-polished fox that formed the doorknocker of Number 9 St Mary's Square had seen a thing or two. He'd been attached to its heavy black door since the house was constructed. He awaited its newest residents with a sense of anticipation. He still thought of them as interlopers, for as yet, Fox was unfamiliar with the brother and sister's habits and ways.

If Fox had been with them in their childhood years, he would have felt the chilly bite at the back of his throat from the wind that blew down from New Zealand's Crown Range. The fur on the inside of his ears would have stood proud when the cold settled in the Manuherikia valley, pooling in its dips and troughs. Fox would have been familiar with the touch of the Central Otago wind like frosted metal and he would have tasted the ancient salt of the landscape's valleys and ridgelines. He would have glimpsed the way the rain washed down the alluvial gold to nestle amongst the stones on the valley floor.

The house had been purchased a few months before, and the sale was barely finalised before the little fox noticed the tea chests and boxes beginning to arrive. They had sticky white labels and large black lettering. The household goods were carried in over the course of several days by two men. Both were heavy-set and wiry-haired with greying whiskers. They had a clipped way of speaking that lacked embellishment. One man was a little on the short side, which was more noticeable because the other, when standing erect, was a smidgeon over six feet five inches.

To the fox, their conversation was like the feel of plain cloth, or the vocalisation of builders' tea. There was a lack of musicality to the vowels that seemed to rasp as they travelled and were released roughened from their tongues. Their skin was

mapped by corded muscles and veins, as they heaved about the boxes filling the large and light rooms of the terraced house.

The short man had an artificial eye and a metal mask that covered the right side of his face. It was painted in an attempt to mirror the facial features of his left. Held in place by elastic, at times the man's blue glass eye beneath the covering swivelled at inopportune moments off to one side.

The tall man, taken by a bout of coughing, was periodically bent double due to the tailor-mades he constantly smoked. They deposited strings of tobacco on his lower lip. While his deep and resonant voice carried through the house. No matter where he was, the little fox could hear what he said.

'Made their money in gold, so I heard. They didn't even need to dig. It just damn floated on down from the mountains into their hands,' he said. Then he rolled his shoulders back and stretched his spine in preparation for another heavy load.

'Heard from who? Came up while you were sharing a cuppa with the likes of them did it? Hang out with the hoity-toity between deliveries, do you? Nice for some!' said the short man.

He bent his hands into c's like bone china handles, then placed them on his hips and minced around the room, raising his nose in the air, 'la dee dah,' he said dragging the last notes high.

'Heard it from Polly, my brother's Missus. She's all set to do for them Mondays through Fridays.'

'I could do with a bit of that gold myself, maybe I'll go buy a boat ticket to New Zealand after we finish unloading this lot. Met some Kiwis during the war. Sure they could point me in the right direction, give me a place to lay my head for a few nights while I'm there.'

The short, masked man perched on the side of a nearby packing case, and crossing one leg over the other, mimed taking sips from a dainty cup while he flicked invisible braids coquettishly over his shoulder.

'It's all been got out of them hills now, no point. Come on with ya, stop your foolin' about or we'll never get home in time for supper.'

'Don't see why some more of that precious gold wouldn't float on down to me. Just a couple of bricks of it. That's all I be needin' to keep the missus and me in comfort and style.'

‘Yeah, well, at the speed you work you won’t have a missus for much longer, let alone be home in time to father any more children. I did hear that for their old man, it were more a curse than a blessin’. While he said this, the tall man tried to bring in two bulky boxes at the same time. He stumbled but recovered his footing just before the one labelled ‘fragile — handle with care’ toppled to the ground.

‘Whadda ya mean? I don’t see how a load of gold bars ‘id make life worse rather than better.’

‘Well, you can’t buy happiness or your good health. The father fell off the wagon, took to drinking and whoring after the mother died from cancer of the breast.’

The taller man was doubled over by a fit of coughing, which he remedied by quickly lighting another misshapen cigarette with the burning stub of his first. He held the gasper at the corner of his mouth while he hoicked a large ball of spit into the back of the fireplace. On his next inhalation, he took the smoke all the way down to the depths of his lungs then gave a sigh of pleasure as he exhaled.

‘Apparently, it got so bad that the youngsters had to be sent away to get their schooling. In the end he just disappeared one day. They all said he must’ve thrown himself in the river. The pain and the shame just too much to bear,’ he said.

‘Seems like there must’ve still been plenty of money left for the two of them orphans to afford this place,’ said the shorter man.

As his arm swept the room, he dislodged a small china stewardess. It shattered into pieces when it hit the tiles of the fireplace. Her basket rolled into the pool of saliva but neither man paid either the spit or the broken ornament any attention.

‘Yeah, well, the sister also married into money. Her husband was killed early in the war, at Gallipoli, so Polly said. So, between ‘em, the brother and sister are not short of a bob or two.’

‘Yeah, well I guess their life doesn’t sound as though it’s for the likes of us. I’m happy of an evening with the missus’s steak and kidney pie and a pint at me local.’

Having filled the rooms with stacked chests and boxes, the two men drove off in their battered Bedford trailing exhaust and the edge of a felt blanket trapped in the door.

A few days later, Fox felt just such a soft cloth polishing the bronze between his ears to a golden shine. The warmth and the pressure of its touch brought with it a modicum of acceptance, for it had been a long time since Fox had felt anything gentle or soft. He hunkered down to watch the person who held the cloth. From the men he

had heard his name was Grayson and the sister, who would arrive by boat from New Zealand later, had a lilting Irish name, Gráinne.

Grayson tended to order his life into subsets of three because he found this to be the only way he could maintain a hold on the thin thread of normality. He had taken to imagining his precarious mental well-being as something he grasped somewhat feebly between his index finger and thumb. He called this strategy trio-ology, and it had become his way of reducing the strain of his life into manageable portions. Palatable pieces he could swallow, units that didn't choke him as they went down.

The conscious grouping into threes was a practice he started in order to cope during his time on the front line during the war. But Grayson knew that it had begun long before that. He acknowledged it had started as a coping mechanism during the hardships of his childhood. But in the years since 1918, it had become the only way for him to stomach getting out of bed each morning. The only tool that served to press away the rank taste of mustard gas, rotting horse flesh and decay on his tongue.

Before the war one of his favourite trios comprised a group of things that he loved to touch: the feel of horses nickering beneath his palm, the tickle of a buttercup as it burnished the skin beneath his chin, and the soft crumb of soil balling in his palm after rain. But those associations were gone now.

Initially, when he made it home, there were three foods he found he could no longer stomach: cold sliced meat, hard crusts on his bread, and any kind of stew — they reminded him of the stale rations and the cold glutinous wartime tins he had scraped clean. Three colours he loathed to see in the shirts of his lovers: red, brown and yellow — blood, mud and mustard gas. But as the years passed, his reactions even to these associations had lessened and almost faded. By the time he was invited by his sister to come join her and live at Number 9, he had created and discarded a litany of groupings.

However, there still remained one preeminent group of three. He kept them on his bedside table: a book, a small box containing a green ribbon, and a shallow dish full of dried scales of orange peel from a Valencia orange — his most important talismans.

Grayson ignored the book of poetry for he didn't need to pick it up to know what it contained. The volume represented a reminder of the war, that bloody conflict that had shaped his life and Owen's ability to put into words the futility of the loss of life. Owen expressed Grayson's thoughts on the conflict so succinctly, especially his favourite of the poet's pieces 'Dulce et Decorum Est'. But, folded within the book's pages were, more importantly, three letters. These Grayson had memorised. They were to him a form of *memento mori*. Their thin paper sheets formed part of his life's tracery like blue veins beneath his skin. These especially chosen three mapped out a trajectory of his fiancée's affections and the decline of her love — it was illustrated in her words — the inevitability of her faithlessness.

There was no longer any need to pass his fingers over the book's cover or for the thin sheets of blue paper to be removed from their worn envelopes. He no longer raised them to his nose. A faint whiff of violet no longer caught in his nostrils. It was rare now that he recited them like a eulogy or dwelled on their relationship that had withered like a corpse. He kept a larger bundle in a box beneath his bed, but these few he had chosen were the first, the last and the one in between.

October 5, 1914

Dearest Heart

Today I walked beneath the Bridge of Sighs, then through the parks and down to the Cherwell. I remember it as the route we loved so well. I often go that way and imagine you beside me, hoping that one day soon we will walk there together again.

I find my thoughts taken with you often these days, especially when I read the casualty lists. I silently rejoice each time your name is not there. So many souls have not been so lucky. The lists seem longer and longer and we are coming to understand that the war will extend far beyond Christmas, contrary to what so many initially were given to believe.

I remember how we met. That first time when you stumbled out of Jesus College in the rain. The droplets hung like copper lights from your hair that day and this strange dance of light was what first attracted me to you. The easy way you sat in nature and nature sat upon you — it was as though you were one of its strange and natural creatures. I realised then how fortunate I was that you chose me to share your life. I can't wait for you to return so we can plan and have a future together.

But for now, more than all else I simply long for the moment when you step safely off that train. All my thoughts and prayers are with you.

All my love Thea xxx

January 13, 1915

Dearest Gray,

I was so afraid when I heard of your injury but am so glad you sent Captain Devereaux to bring me news of your health; he has proven such a consolation to me. We have been walking every morning around the botanic gardens, and his hand is healing up nicely.

He has been entertaining me with so many tales of his high jinks and escapades. I can't wait to hear all about what you have been up to. It is such a comfort to me that he will be staying on in the area. It is a solace to have a friend during this difficult time. I have felt so powerless to comfort you during your recovery. I so wish that you could also be released from battle duties and be safe home with me. Sorry, Grayson, I know this is so selfish of me when so many have given up so much. Please stay safe now that you have returned to action.

Love your Thea.

June 16, 1915

Dear Grayson,

I never thought I would be writing a letter such as this. I am so sorry to have to break off our engagement but my feelings toward you are not the same. Perhaps we were too young when we made our promise to each other. Perhaps the world and I are just so irreparably changed.

I must be honest with you and admit that I have developed a deep and lasting relationship with Dorian. Out of respect for you I cannot deny that this is what has come about through the long hours we have spent in each other's company.

I wish you all the best for a safe return home and a long and happy life.

Your friend Thea.

Grayson picked up the book of poems, and as his hand tightened around it, he experienced a constriction of his chest and a slightly ragged intake of breath — but it

was manageable now. He no longer felt the need to take out a paper bag and breathe into it, focusing entirely on the air going in and out, in and out.

As the frisson of panic brought on by the letters eased, he was overtaken by other memories that came entire and untarnished. As he picked up and stroked the nap of the green velvet ribbon back and forth, the motion transported him back to the 1890s — to Central Otago in New Zealand. To his childhood home around the time of his mother's death. That time, that place, was recalled with absolute clarity as though it were a ripe, vibrant plum bursting with juice.

He saw their childhood home as clearly as if it were yesterday. It sat on the hill, like a freckle lodged in the fold of skin between thumb and forefinger. In his mind it appeared small and brown amongst the surrounding wasteland of dry dirt. It had been constructed of mudbricks and corrugated iron. It was bigger than a shanty but, because of its piecemeal construction, lacked the formal definition of a proper house.

There were two bedrooms, a drawing room, and a lounge. Attached to the back was a corrugated iron structure that housed the kitchen. This contained a coal range and a large concrete double sink for washing both dishes and clothes. A mangle sat to one side; on the other stood a food safe, and a shelf that held an array of tins and bags.

In his mind's eye there was always a tin of Colman's mustard, a bag of Chelsea sugar and a sack of flour. On the bottom shelf, two tins of condensed milk. Gráinne always liked to sweeten her fingertip when one of these was almost emptied. When the air had formed a thick skin on top — double the sweetness, double the reward.

Sitting by itself on the lowest shelf was always a tin of their mother Ffion's famous fruit cake. To Grayson, who had only just grown tall enough to touch the back of the wooden bench, the tin of cake appeared enormous.

Out back in the yard was the privy, a strung-up washing line, a chicken coop. This was where Ffion's prized flock of Leghorn hens and their protector, Basil, the feisty rooster lived. Basil strutted about like a decorated general. He coveted the raspberry bushes, adoring their fruit. When in season he jealously guarded his bounty, defending it from all comers, even his queens — the well-attended hens.

To the side of the yard hung a cobbled together gate. It was constructed from oddments of timber and hung at a decided lean. The gate led to the paddock of Sybil the cow and the ponies: Florence and Bess. These animals could always be seen from

the veranda that stretched the length of the house. In Grayson's memory, this was where Mother sat watching them eat or dozing on a low chair. She was often slumped down, surrounded by a mountain of embroidered cushions. Her eyes were, more often than not, closed.

Sometimes Grayson would sneak close and observe the tiny ticks of movement beneath the lids. He thought they looked like tidal ripples, advancing and retreating while her breath whispered in and out. To him, Mother was like one of her precious chickens. The way she sunned herself in a dust bath, her stretched skin transparent as feathers, papery eyelids lowered but for a thin slit. Occasionally she gave a jerk of movement. This always made him jump away. He especially remembered how the delicate bones of her wrists and hands were stretched wide and open, just like wings. The way they were angled to capture even the slightest trace of warmth.

On that particular afternoon, Grayson had been relieved to see her resting because Father told them that tomorrow they would be going on a long journey. That they would need to look after mother most carefully on the way. When he said that Mother was to have a special appointment at the hospital in four days' time, he used his soft voice. Grayson remembered the way his father's hand had rubbed at his forehead while he spoke, trying to smooth away the lines, to soften his face again.

Before leaving home they had spent a lot of time parading around in their new togs and working out where they would sit on the train. He recalled that on that day it was sunny and the air from the garden tasted of berry juice pooling on the tips of their tongues.

They had set out early in the morning to begin the trip South. They had called, 'Goodbye, house.'

Their voices echoing back at them just before they rounded the bend of the path winding down the hill. It curved out of sight of the house. As they passed from view, they had waved to Basil and his girls, Sybil, Florence, and Bess. It had seemed at the time as though they were off for a grand adventure while the animals were missing out — trapped in their pens.

The way the sun had been sieved through the leaves' shadows always stood out in his mind, how it played on their burnt brown arms as they travelled, dancing from where they lay amongst the cushions and blankets in the back of the dray. They

were warm and tucked tight. Father and Mother had bundled them in several layers of clothing, the bedding piled around them like a nest.

In the back of the cart, they thought it their duty to guard the picnic basket's contents from ants and flying midges: the ham sandwiches scraped with butter and Colman's mustard, the cool bottle of lemonade taken from the icebox, gradually warming within its damp towel, and the large square of fruit cake that was thick with peel and dried cherries. It was wrapped in brown greased paper and tied with jute string.

After the dray, they met the Cobb and Co coach in Naseby and then took the train from Middlemarch, overnighting in guest houses along the way. In the corner of the coach, as their bodies absorbed the rutted track, they had surveyed with fierce gazes the strangers. They had turned their shoulders in the fragile hope of protecting their mother from any sourness that assailed their senses: the smell of aged leather, fresh ink and rancid sweat. All pressed against them in the closeness of the carriage, like the glue of album stamps.

Finally, they guarded her with sticky fingers spread wide on the window of the large locomotive, as it steamed its way through the Otago hills and lowlands. They blocked her view of the steam that stretched behind, hanging in the air as ghostly as lichen. To their young eyes it seemed to come close enough to be touched as they rounded the long curves of the sweeping bends.

Grayson remembered how desperately they had both wanted this to be a holiday that healed her, how they felt she must only taste, smell, and see the golden moments and untarnished things.

In Dunedin, they stayed with Father's parents in their large house. It sat just across the road from the ocean, at a place called St Clair beach. Father told them he'd swum there once or twice when he'd been to visit. Gráinne had asked, 'Who was Claire?' But no one seemed to know.

While Mother and Father were at the hospital, they stayed at the tall Tudor house across from the beach. They could hear the waves breaking from the upstairs balcony. They watched as the tide came in and the ocean seemed to take huge bites from the dunes and hungrily suck its meal of sand out to sea. They slept in a small bedroom close to the eaves in a pair of hard narrow beds with multi-coloured crocheted

covers. Gran let them drink their cocoa in bed and read to them stories from Charles Kingsley's *The Water-Babies*.

One morning for breakfast they were allowed to try Craster's kippers and Gran told them they had come all the way from England.

'They should be eaten with bread and butter and a poached egg,' said their father, as he broke the yolk of his egg and scooped it onto a fork with a sliver of fish. But Gráinne had started to cry when she saw the way the yoke was moving beneath the transparent skin of white. When they tasted the fish, they spat it out because they didn't like the way it coated their tongues with salt, how it made their mouth feel fur-coated. In the end they had just their usual boiled egg with toasted soldiers.

'Just like your father preferred when he was little,' Gran had said.

Outside Grayson saw the light fading, but he remained caught in his memories, the ribbon still in his hand. He remembered there was a maid, Daisy, who brought them breakfast. It stuck in his mind as she wore a black dress with a little white apron, and a hat like a meringue. She ran up the stairs enthusiastically carrying dishes prepared by the cook. He realised she must have been very sprightly, as when clearing up, with unflagging energy, she always ran back down with them.

They had been so excited that neither of them had to wash or dry any dishes, do chores, or even help with clearing the table. They just sat back and watched, enthralled as the maid balanced jam, butter, a delicate blue and white cup and its saucer, and a pot of tea all at the same time. Taking it up to Mother when she returned from her appointment. They were told by Gran, that Mother was feeling poorly, but would be down in the afternoon.

At around two, they were spoilt with sponge cake alongside their milk and then taken by Mother and Father across the road to the beach. They had run in and out of the waves, jumping over the foam that coated the top of the surf. Grayson remembered how the waves rushed past, catching them while they held their mouths open. They were being pelicans who opened and closed their pouch-like mouths. The sea had tasted just like the breakfast kippers, and they had ended up gagging and laughing at the same time. Then they covered each other with sand.

Why hadn't they paid more attention to Mother who lounged beside them on a deck chair? Hadn't they noticed how carefully Father had wrapped her in a tartan rug? Instead, they had been set on enticing her to walk with them a short way along the sand. They'd all looked for paua shell, and she had admired the black veins

interspersed with aqua and blue — their luminescent, shining inner skin. Mother said it was more beautiful than the coating on Gran's special pearls.

In the evening as the light began to fade, he and Gráinne were allowed to stay up late and watch the dunes through an extendable spyglass that stood three-legged on the front veranda. They saw small penguins come out of the sea, their eyes flashing yellow in the dusk. The little birds were hunched over like tomcats moving down an alley, hesitating as they tried to feel their way home. They minced slowly to their nests in the dunes, checking left and right as they went. That was the first time they'd seen a bird that burrowed.

'If I was a penguin, I would be a green-yellow-eyed penguin,' Grayson had said, 'Father, you would be a blue-green-eyed!'

Gráinne had hit her head when she fell off the bed laughing.

The next day, the water was calmer and when the tide rolled out, they had found some warm quiet pools where undulations in the sand held remnants of water from high tide, it had been warmed by the sun. In these tepid pools they had floated on their backs watching the clouds wheeling by. They called out the shapes to each other: candy floss, a herd of elephants, the man in the moon and a hen. Then, they sat on the sand next to their father. A long way out to sea, hanging from the horizon, they saw the shadow of a lone bird. He told them it was probably an Albatross.

'They are huge birds with a big wingspan. I read once that they can fly thousands of miles. So, I guess they are a symbol of the power of endurance,' Father said.

That night as the twins lay in bed, he came in to kiss them good night. Gráinne had seen a spider on the windowsill and asked, 'what do spiders symbolise Father?'

'Well, the Irish don't really have specific myths around spiders like some other cultures do. But killing a spider is thought to bring bad luck. Also, in the old Irish language their web fabric is known as lusna, it was thought to be good for healing, so they used to put it on wounds.'

'What about foxes? Did they have foxes in Ireland? I wish we had them here; I would get one as a pet,' Grayson said.

At that time, he knew he'd been especially enamored with the clever fox from *Aesop's Fables*.

‘They are often presented as magical and clever, so if you meet a fox be very careful to make friends with it,’ Father said with a smile. ‘All right children, time for bed, it’s been a long day.’

He walked over to the door and extinguished the lamp. Then Grayson had leaned over and blown out the candle on the table beside him.

‘I would rather be a fox than a spider, Gráinne, how about you?’ he asked.

‘I think I would like to be an albatross,’ she replied. ‘Today has been the best day ever, don’t you think?’

‘Yes, I will remember it for always!’

‘Here, take my hair ribbon. It will be like a talisman. You know that thing that when you hold it transports you back in time,’ she said. ‘We can use it as a kind of password to our special memories. A secret code.’

The children were told many years later that their mother’s body had been laid out in the study of the big house on Viceroy Street and that after she had been buried in the graveyard of St Patrick’s Basilica. Grayson always imagined that the study that day smelt of fruit cake and orange marmalade, as that’s how he always remembered mother smelt, all burnt orange and tangy dried peel. They had not been allowed to enter the room where she was laid out.

In his mind, mother would have clutched a small bunch of purple violets the stems wrapped in a green satin ribbon, the ends kept damp so that they remained fresh — violets were her favourite flowers. Grayson envisioned the windows open and the curtains billowing in the breeze as the sky pressed dark and close.

On the day of her funeral, Gráinne and he had turned the study handle as they walked past on their way to play in the drawing room. They had glimpsed themselves, reflected in the full-length mirror opposite, dwarfed by the overstuffed bookcases, blurred by the shadows. But he remembered they had been distracted venturing further by some old Irish story books which Gráinne grabbed and clasped to her chest. It was as though the books were the most precious thing in the house.

She had taken the books out through the French doors, and Grayson had trailed along behind. He remembered the mattress of fresh green moss upon which they lay. They were cradled in the embrace of the oak’s divided base, its V’s held them snugly where the roots plunged into the dark, fragrant soil.

‘Green ribbon,’ Gráinne said.

The smell of moss always calmed him and stayed with him still.

After some time, Gran had called, 'Come inside now, children, please.' She guided them toward the stairs, saying, 'Stay up in your room and read or play with the wooden train set or blocks on the second shelf. They were favourite toys of your father's when he was little.'

They'd heard talk about Father that morning where they were crouched behind the couch. A yellow-haired woman with fuzz on her lip told the lizard — a distant cousin with a lisp and red, inflamed skin on his neck — 'Inebriated, although it's only 10.30 in the morning. Passed out in the spare room,' she had said.

He and Gráinne had snuck down the hall to check. They found him sprawled on the narrow bed with his shoes on the pillow and his blazer halfway down his arms. Although his snores puffed softly from his mouth, they sounded like the bandsaw that came to cut the trees for logging on the way back in. No amount of shaking had been able to wake him.

For Grayson, the memories from those days by the sea formed one of the most important of his sets of three. The green ribbon became his talisman, transporting him back to one part of his most treasured trio-ologies. It bound together the taste of sand on his upper lip, the shadowed bird wheeling on the distant horizon, and the golden circles around the eyes of the colony of little penguins launching themselves into the surf. Salted tears, clouds like shrouds, and the golden flecks in his mother's eyes moving with the sea shadows like tiny bones of sparrows.

Sitting on the bed in his room, Grayson stroked the ribbon between forefinger and thumb. 'Green ribbon', to him symbolised those childhood halcyon days, his mother's death, his father's decline — the best and the worst tied together in a bow. Finally, he folded it with great care and returned it to its box.

He picked up the small bowl containing dried orange rind, he inhaled the smell deeply. It remained sweet from a long-past summer and held a few grey specks of dust, he liked to imagine this came from the convent. The orange itself had been won at poker.

That night, when he stretched himself out and fell into sleep, he dreamt he was back there again and it was all so vivid and unchanged, as though he were both Dorian

Gray and his painting in the same instant — present and past etched onto a canvas or, in this case contained within the pith of this dried fragrant citrus peel.

The nightmare always arrived complete with every detail, vibrant and sensory. Once again, it was Saturday, 31 October 1914, and he was standing on the edge of the circular lawn outside the Château de Hooze. The machinery of war had advanced ahead of itself, its command centre protruding beyond the Allied lines like a pimple on the Menin Road.

Observed by the enemy through ocular lenses for quite some time, the Germans had taken to picking off the occasional epaulette. Grayson had seen one or two fall — taken down by snipers on their way to the mess. The British generals, however, seemed to believe such a large gathering of important men were immune to cannon fire or gunpowder.

The grand château was the colour of regimental puttees, with a grey slate roof and a small central tower. Grayson often wondered whether it housed a bell. Woods surrounded it; tall stands of oak, beech and hornbeam. As he walked through them, whippy hazel saplings flicked at his calves and thighs.

These woods were destined for infamy: Chateau Wood, Sanctuary Wood, Railway Wood— landmarks for men to die on. But at this early stage, there were still birds and streams. The trees were not reduced to jagged stumps, nor the air filled with the stench of equine and human corpses. In his dream, Grayson knew what was coming.

Minutes before the first bomb hit the lawn, the room had been alive with the parry and thrust of male egos — the sourness of testosterone ripe in the air. The planners and commanders of the first and second divisions had spilled beyond the four walls, so the French doors had been flung open.

Grayson had been taking a break from notation. A long-awaited smoke had calmed him. Drawn deep into his lungs, it was a balm to shaky nerves, like a soothsayer's gentle voice. As he dwelt on the joys of a good fag, his attention was caught by something at the fringes of the woods: a flash of colour, a bright bud amongst the green. He had bent forward examining the lone flower perched against the tangle of grass and scrub, when the first explosion hit throwing him to his knees.

Suddenly, his mouth and eyes were full of soil, rotted leaves, twigs, half a worm, a feather. A piece of lichen clung to his eyebrow. He cleared away the detritus so he could see, spitting out dirt, worm and dampened feather. At the same time, he tried to

rise, to stumble back toward the lawn. In a blur, he could just make out stars, stripes and the green serge wool of trousers rushing forward to stand in the doorway.

There was a brief moment of jostling for the best view before a second explosion seemed to bubble up from the lawn. Then all went black. Even in his dream all light was suddenly extinguished.

His lower body was dressed in black... He tried to raise a leg, to wiggle just his toes, nothing... He moved his head; the air was cold on his face and cheeks... wet somewhere... Black.

He came around, then willingly slipped back into unconsciousness. It was a relief to his throbbing head, like sinking beneath the surface of a cool pond. He allowed the fractured dance of light, that played amongst the leaves above him engulf him. Everything faded into shadow, the day shattering into pieces.

When he came to, his limbs were straight and stiff like a toy soldier's, pinned in place by the earth itself. All around him came the sounds of battle. Raised voices approached and retreated. There were groans, screams and desperate sobbing. The noise rose and fell like the shifting of the earth earlier that afternoon. On the periphery of his vision, he thought he saw bodies felled like broken branches, and an arm stripped of three fingers close to his ear, so he closed his eyes. He welcomed the black.

He caught fragments of conversation. The speakers seemed close, but he was having trouble hearing. A ringing filled his ears, like a wet finger tracing the ring of a crystal glass. The sound was soft but distracting. He found it hard to focus for long.

'His arm blown off...can't save the major...get the medical officer...this one's still alive...fragments to the back...he's a goner...turn him over we may see the problem...cut it away.'

More blackness.

Suddenly he was aroused by someone tripping over him and a heavy weight lay across his chest. It was a sword between his ribs. In his chest, arm, shoulder, leg, the pain was immense and although he wanted it with all his being, he couldn't make the black come, even when he closed his eyes and tried to pull the earth over himself — a comfort blanket.

Then very close to his ear there was the shrill blast of a whistle, like a knitting needle stabbing deep into his eardrum.

'Quick, this poor lad needs urgent medical attention,' a man said.

Grayson took reassurance from the voice because its soft clipped vowels and rolling r's were so familiar. The cadence reminded him of his father's voice, of Central Otago soil, of gold buried deep. But Grayson could neither raise his head nor see the speaker. So once again, he let himself sink back and be taken by the earthy smell of alluvial soil, down into the gold and black. He breathed in the deep chocolate notes with a hint of liquorice. They had a top note of snail and worm. In his dream, he travelled tunnels like a worm down through the earth.

Just before he came to again, he took a huge sniff as though it were a heady glass of Bordeaux.

'Oi ova 'ere would ya,' said a voice.

This one had a cockney twang.

He felt himself rolled onto his side, the serge of his uniform cut away along his right pectoral muscle to reveal his arm and shoulder. Every time the fabric brushed his skin spots of pain danced red across his iris. Black.

He just came back to consciousness in time to hear the *tink, tink*: the sound of metal fragments dropping into tin. Then there came a dry dusty smell that reminded Grayson of Gran, of old lace. Iodine bit as it was wiped into his flesh and muscle. Then a bandage was wrapped tightly around his chest, while his arm was placed in a makeshift sling.

At last rolled onto a stretcher, he found he was face down. All he could see were passing mud and weeds. With the movement came more red dots and then the voices became distant as everything faded to black.

It was dark outside when he saw the nurse, her eyes were tired, her uniform dirty and streaked with blood.

'Where am I?' he asked.

'You're at the Benedictine Abbey. It's what we're using as a dressing station.'

Then the dream, just like his consciousness at the time, flicked through a series of images like stills running fast on a spooling film. Days were reduced to a series of flashes coming at him through a dense fog.

A bell ringing...light playing on the clay walls... the sour smell of pus and vomit... the reflection of his camp bed in a dirty smudge of window... the soft brush of a sponge dragging on his skin... women's voices raised in song... dancing colours caressing his arm... a bell ringing... muffled whispers... snatches of a hymn... a bell ringing... the smell of oranges.

When everything came back into focus, he was seated at a poker table with three men. Fractured light fell across the face of the man sitting opposite. When he took in his surroundings, he saw that the building was constructed of honeyed stone walls and underfoot, rough clay tiles, their surface uneven due to the sinking of the earth and the passing of many feet. In places the clay was scratched and worn.

No sooner had he become aware of the walls and floor than all seemed to fade and he sank back into unconsciousness. These brief periods of awareness and then fading back into oblivion continued for what must have been several days. In his dream, mere seconds passed.

There were tastes in his dream: the fat of slow-roasted mutton, a heavy rind of cheese, the salty crust on his lip from a mouthful of French potatoes dripping with butter, a sip of sanctified wine — a young Bordeaux.

Then he was seated at the poker table again. Three men were seated around him. But every time he strained to get a closer look at the men on either side of him, their features faded. He could only make out the man who sat opposite, the dark-haired captain. His cards were held close in his left hand, while his right alternated between holding a hand-rolled cigarette and a glass of brandy. Where he had sourced the liquor troubled Grayson even in sleep.

In his own hand were three cards, two queens, aces wild. Two discards were face down on the table.

‘No money left for the pot?’ asked Captain Dorian Devereaux.

‘May have to fold, my pockets are empty,’ he said.

‘How about that photo you keep beneath your pillow. I’m prepared to be generous; I’ll even throw in this orange if you lose,’

‘No deal, sorry,’ he said.

‘Must have an especially weak hand if you aren’t prepared to take a chance. Green and Buxton have already folded.’

Grayson looked again at Devereaux’s discards. There were four cards on the table and only one remaining in his hand.

Pretty much a sure thing, he thought. In the dream his hand tightened around the photo and refused to let it drop but as was the nature of the nightmare, the next moment, it sat atop the other flotsam anyway and his hand was empty. Then, there was the slap, slap of cards being dealt. Then the *thwick* as they were turned over and slid against others in newly assembled hands. The scene cut to the cards laid out

before Devereaux; three twos and two fours. Before him were two queens, an ace, an eight and a jack.

Devereaux plucked up and pocketed the photo and ants crawled on Grayson's skin — tiny fissures of unease that began to take root and grow. In his dream they were like huge shadows and they darkened the room — ghouls that ate at the sandstone walls; they bred panic. Why was he so stupid as to bet his fiancée's photograph and why did the man want it anyway?

He took a sweet round orange from his pocket and threw it to Grayson who plucked it from the air. There was no pain, no tension in the muscles of the hand, just a soft tightening of bandages as his fingers secured the ball of citrus in his fist. He held it there and looked at it as though it were a precious thing. As though this ball of sun and sweetness, equal parts summer sunlight and pith and seed, might replace the girl, the blossom, and the apple tree. He breathed in its tangy smell, a globe of sunshine in his palm.

As the room darkened, Grayson peeled the fruit and set the skin on the windowsill to dry. He consumed the flesh, letting the juice drip down his chin, staining his lips ochre as he ate. All the while, his eyes remained locked on Dorian Devereaux's. As his white teeth tore through the fruit's flesh, he held the other man's challenging gaze.

Dormancy

Many bulbs may undergo a period of dormancy. During this time, they are in the process of resting and accumulating reserves to burst forth into new life during spring or when growing conditions are right. Some bulbs, especially those in warmer climates, may require a period of chilling in order to induce flowering. Kept in a dry, dark place, many bulbs can be successfully maintained in a dormant state.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.25.

Seamus O'Rourke aka Algernon Aintree, Number 22

Thursday, 21st April 1932

As Seamus crouched in an azalea bush and the moisture soaked through the hole in the sole of his left shoe, he wondered yet again what had brought him to this. It seemed that he spent more time hiding in bushes or buried in hedges than he did out of them.

He blamed it on the Catholic Church — its inherent love of self-flagellation. He'd been under its twin compulsions of guilt and self-punishment, and as yet he didn't feel he'd done the time for his crime. Whenever he searched for the root of it, he was led back to those last days with Ffion, and to how he had failed to cope with her loss, let alone be there for his children.

He often returned to memories of those times, if only to distract himself from the cool damp seeping through his sock or the twigs scratching and tearing at his arms. Yet the remembering only deepened his remorse. That relentless habit of self-denigration would have made Father Adamson very proud. It came over him again now — this revisiting of the scenes of his greatest failure.

Cambrians, Central Otago, New Zealand, 1890

His and Ffion's bedroom was light and north-facing, with willow-patterned wallpaper and a large four-poster bed. The bed had been given to them after the passing of Ffion's Nain. They'd replaced the original horsehair mattress with one covered in blue-and-white striped ticking. It was stuffed with soft feathers.

He had first felt Ffion's lump when his hand brushed her breast as he took her against the wall of the willow-papered room. At first, it was merely a soft mass, grazing

Seamus's fingers as they moved toward the darkened areola surrounding her nipple. But within a year it had hardened beneath Ffion's left armpit, and Seamus noticed her struggle to bring her arm in close. It no longer rested naturally along the line of her side. Eventually, her arm stuck out a fraction — a partially opened wing — and the lump was visible beneath the skin. Sometimes he thought he saw it shifting, like an egg yolk.

The lump became all that he could see.

In the evenings he knew it ached with a pain like a blunt knife worrying a smooth stone, because he saw the frown worn into Ffion's forehead and the way she turned inward, how she removed herself to some distant place.

He saw that she struggled to contain it. Sometimes she could barely restrain her cries of pain as she waited for the children to go outside to play. Then he would watch her go to the privy, knowing she jammed her fist into her mouth to muffle the sounds.

At first, Ffion claimed she thought that the lump would go away through wishing. She said she made promises and bargains with God.

'I swore I'd attend church every Sunday,' she said.

And he swore it too.

They had kept up regular attendance for a good three months. But then he saw that the long services and the priest's droning voice were becoming too much for Ffion. With her other responsibilities, she was worn out, and her eyes drifted closed before the end of each service.

Meanwhile, the lump continued to harden and did not diminish.

'I'll cook more meals for the poor and needy.'

'I'll give my family's secret fruit cake recipe to Mrs Sheppard for the Women's Institute.'

'I'll spend more time with the children — play their games, read to them at night.'

'I'll listen to you more, Seamus... be more outwardly affectionate... stop complaining about carrying water... about the distance to the privy... stop threatening to put the rooster in a pot... put all my jewellery in the collection plate.'

These were all whispered and negotiated in their marriage bed. But he already knew such promises would have little effect.

Finally, when Ffion described the pain as blunt knives were scraping at soapstone — when she said she could feel parts of herself being shaved away — he

at last managed convince her of the truth. Of what he had been saying all along: that they must go to Dunedin and see a specialist.

At the Dunedin hospital, they were met by a tall man with distracted, moist eyes and slender hands.

'I'm Doctor Adamson. I'm the surgeon responsible for the hospital's cancer patients,' he said, with a slight dip of his head.

Seamus had hoped the surgeon's bow stemmed from pride in his own achievements, and he dipped his head in response. As Adamson shook his hand, the man passed Ffion a blue gown and gestured toward a folding screen. When she had changed, she called out, and the doctor joined her behind the partition.

He could only imagine what was happening in that corner of the room from the sounds and small cries that reached him.

Seamus knew there was a bed in there, and that the doctor would have motioned for Ffion to lie down on it. He supposed the man was examining the tissue beneath her arm, pressing hard around the lump. Maybe Ffion had closed her eyes in fear. Maybe she saw the night sky spread black before her, like a vault on the backs of her eyelids. Maybe she felt the pain speckling her vision, the dots floating like feathers escaping from torn ticking.

He pictured the lump unmoving beneath the doctor's fingers. It was held in place like prey caught in a web.

He took a deep breath and tried to blink away the sounds of her pain. In his mind, he wiped away a single tear that had run down into the shell of her ear. As he dabbed at his own eyes with a handkerchief, he fixed his gaze on a spider on the window ledge, imagining himself swinging free outside the room.

The doctor at last drew aside the screen, adjusted the blue gown and marked Ffion's skin with a black pencil. He explained to Seamus the risks of chloroform and of ether, using his hand to block out the breast that would be taken — the parts of her that would be subtracted to keep the whole. He then demonstrated on a headless dummy with his pencil, making slicing motions with the pencil where the cuts would be made.

During the explanation, he had tried to stroke away his wife's fear with the small movement of his thumb across her wrist. The scene seemed to condense into a single note of doom — a deep resonating A. It sounded like the beginning of Beethoven's

Allegretto: a lost tune from his childhood, a moment of painless innocence just beyond his grasp.

‘We may have caught it in time, but I won’t lie — there’s risk involved. The lump is quite large, and we will also need to remove all the lymph nodes beneath the arm,’ said the doctor. He looked at a small yellow stain on his white coat, at the heavy cloth of the curtains, at Seamus’s hand stroking Ffion’s wrist. But Adamson never looked into the green eyes of Ffion; he never saw what Seamus did, the gold flakes that floated there.

Later that day, as Seamus felt the sand rubbing between his toes, it reminded him of sunny days spent on that same beach where they’d holidayed as children — when they’d been merely visitors passing through for a short time. He thought of sandcastles and driftwood sculptures; of drying salt tightening his skin; of sand chafing the creases of his toes and more private places.

As he turned to walk back to his chair next to Ffion’s, he noticed that their sunken footprints, made scarcely half an hour ago, had already been washed away by the incoming tide. It seemed as though already, any sign of his wife’s presence had been erased by the sea, while the twins continued to leave their mark as they ran up and down amongst the dunes.

He felt a sudden fear of what the operation might bring, but then he was more afraid of doing nothing.

Later, after a short nap, Ffion’s eyes followed the children while he’d stood beside her, allowing the silence to stretch. For a time, the only sound was the rhythmic break and withdrawal of the surf and the call of the white-fronted terns — *siet, siet* — as they darted back and forth, advancing and retreating before the ocean spray.

He placed his hand on Ffion’s shoulder and gave a small squeeze.

‘For the children?’

As she turned and looked at their small footprints in the sand, she seemed to let the ocean sounds fill her. Her breathing matched its soothing rhythm.

‘Yes... alright... for the children,’ she said.

As he watched them, he wondered how he would protect the twins if the tides of change washed their family away. The sound of the waves grew so loud, sweeping in and out, that it seemed to drown all resolve.

He remembered leaning against the wall while Ffion went into a small room to change. He followed and helped her to remove her new dress, embroidered with purple pansies along the hem. A row of green velvet ribbons ran down the front; he untied them one by one. He lifted her corset carefully over her head. With his fingers, he widened the special slit she had cut so it didn't rub against the growth in the pit of her arm. Then he helped her put on the hospital gown and tied it at the back.

Then Ffion lay on the hard, narrow bed, her hands resting just below her breasts, arms crossed in an X over her body. By the time the surgeon entered, he had made a pile of her clothes, neatly folded with the green ribbons trailing down. She lay like Ophelia — soon to be dragged under, flowers parting in her wake.

As she waited for someone to take her into the operating theatre, Seamus hoped that she might think of the way Grayson and Gráinne's hair — thick and brown — moved like willow leaves in water. He tried to use those memories to brush aside his own fears, to sweep them away like crumbs into a pan.

As the doctor moved to guide him out of the room, he glanced back and saw Ffion's hand drift to her right breast, touching it in farewell. A nurse stepped in and pressed a cloth mask over her face, adding drops of ether: one, two, three.

After Ffion died, Seamus worked very hard at the act of preserving. He pickled his liver mainly with strong, cheap whisky — or whatever alcohol was closest to hand, often beer. His shame and pain he bound tight, embalming them so they might stay fresh.

It always seemed to him that everything had deteriorated quickly. When he first returned to the room with the willow-papered room, she had gone — but something of her still remained. It lingered like a stain, darkening by the day. He swallowed it in every glass of whisky, and it tasted as sour as lemons and as bitter as poison, yet still he drank it down.

He left the house and gradually transformed himself — through fermentation — into yet another nameless face living rough. His only constant was his nightly walk to the local watering hole, and the quick way he turned away when he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

Uncouth and unshaven, he'd no longer recognised his reflection. The man's eyes — one green one blue — had become empty shells, picked clean of meat.

The years that followed blurred into indistinct occasions and missed milestones: the children leaving for school to board with his sister in Christchurch; a loud, bitter argument with his ageing father when his mother died; the beginning of his life on the road, drifting through isolated sheep stations in the back blocks, where he allowed himself to disappear from public view.

Until one day, he'd found himself having come full circle to the chipped shells of St Clair Beach, standing looking up at the towering Tudor. He was startled from his thoughts by the cries of a family of terns dipping their feet and bills into the surf.

That night, lying in the dunes, the memory returned to him of sitting on that same shore with Ffion and the children. As half the sun dipped below the horizon, the remaining slice dyed the waves gold as marigold petals and something like purpose bloomed in his chest.

That was how he came to be hiding out in hedges and walking in damp socks — how he came to be risking it all to help his daughter find a murderer and free his son. One day, he hoped he might free himself from the prison of his own making.

In the meantime, the only way forward was to endure: the damp, the cold, the soggy petals soaking through his soles, the branches scratching his arms raw. So he waited, hiding in the residents' garden, for the clue that might earn him a kind of probation.

Latency

The seeds of some plants must be exposed to a traumatic event in order to germinate. This may involve such actions as nicking the seed with a sharp knife, rubbing it with sandpaper, or subjecting it to a spell of freezing or even burning. Following such measures, germination is likely to be successful once the seed is planted.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.25

Dorian Devereaux, Number 5

Thursday, 7th April 1932

Dorian leaned back in the leather button-back chair and watched the penguins bustle about. He thought their need to exhibit some form of masculine anal clenching bolstered their confidence, lending them an air of self-importance. He had not been bothered before the war, either by acquaintances' chins dissolving into the flaccid folds of their necks or by buttons straining around midriffs. Now the sight of bulges and bloating brought on hypertension.

As Dorian checked the length of his shadow in a gilded mirror opposite, he stroked his moustache with a well-manicured forefinger, admiring how svelte it felt beneath the whorl of his fingertip, the way the nail glided over the dark, glossy hair.

He raised a glass of whisky, toasting his own handsome reflection and, in doing so, drew attention to a thick gold band on his little finger — its ruby chip caught the light. Then he ordered another dram of the golden elixir, lit a cigar, raised the glass, and repeated the process.

He knew he was an attractive man. Since boyhood, people had declared him a dark angel, one of the shadowed cherubim. Black hair, black eyes, a well-defined, strong chin. As a man, he had developed a body like a loaded gun — muscles as hard as packed powder, mechanisms cocked and willing to fire.

Then the muscles tightened around the vessel.

Squeezing.

Squeezing until the thick crystal shattered.

'Bloody inferior quality,' he said to the waiter.

The man rushed forward with a brush and shovel. He hurriedly swept up the shards, keeping low as he backed away.

‘I’ll have another, on the house. Don’t give me flawed glassware this time.’

Dorian never brought his wife Thea, although the club did have a ladies’ lounge.

‘She’s quite happy at home knitting... Another little bonnet for an expectant friend,’ he said. Often using some form of crafting to explain away the absence. Another favourite excuse was that she was caught up at a charity meeting.

He knew that Thea was probably seated in her sitting room gazing out at the St Mary’s Square garden, fingers in motion, teasing loose threads of her favourite shawl. She had unwoven so many strands from the border that cotton now hung like cobweb silk. The garment was of little use in keeping off what has become for her the year-round chill.

Such statements served to explain away the absence to other couples as they walked through to dinner. In truth, he didn’t want Thea tainted by these crass men and their talk of money, nor by their tittering wives with trivial conversations and meaningless charities. In his mind, everything about his wife was on a higher plane — metaphorically she floated on a kind of cloudlike effervescence, naked save a pair of wings.

If Dorian had complete control, Thea would never go out at all. She would stay in her jewel-like room — a stained-glass effigy. Most evenings, this is exactly where Thea could be found. Often, he stood on the footpath below, shadowed by the garden trees, observing the slim figure looking down on the world from her blue-fringed velvet couch. This kept him calm, content in the knowledge that, at all costs, his wife needed to be carefully handled and protected lest she break.

There was a time before the war, before the whore, when Dorian saw the world differently. When it was all bright colours and tiny well-placed brush strokes applied with care and skill. Now the world’s creator seemed to slather paint on thick in jarring combinations. Daily living had been reduced to the slow drip of water to a thirsty man on his last sip of water — never enough to reach satiety. Except when he’s alone with Thea in the jewel-coloured room.

Dorian again checked his reflection by holding slightly aloft the head of his horse-headed cane, turning it slightly to the right. From this angle he had long perfected the capture of his darkness in silvered light. His head turned it this way and that admiring the mirrored profile: the dark wings of hair brushing his ears, its fashionable length, the pleasing way it curled slightly where it touched his collar, the way the blackness of it was enhanced by the colour on his dove grey suit.

The cane was won in a card game after he was injured at the First Battle of Ypres. His skill at cards had also won him the photograph.

The man had been unconscious when first admitted and for days he had lain still, without uttering a sound. His army jacket hung over a broken spindle-backed chair at the head of the bed, his rifle and pack at the foot. All the while his bandaged hand rested loosely beneath his pillow, a creased white corner of a photograph protruding from beneath his fingers.

Dorian thought he would only take a quick glance. What could possibly be so important that it must remain within reach, even during unconsciousness? Merely a look — just a peek to fill in a minute of the ever-stretching hours it took for some wounds to heal.

It was two weeks since he had visited the doctor and, as he raised his heated fingers to take the photograph, he realised the taint was already beginning to show. At first, he couldn't see clearly; there was pressure behind his eyes causing his vision to blur and spots to dance. But suddenly, as he lifted the picture, light from the abbey's stained-glass window illuminated the black and white image.

A young woman stood with her back to an apple tree. Her smile was illuminated as he held the photograph up in the refracted light from the stained-glass angel looking down from the nave.

Dorian used the shaking stones of the convent, struck by heavy mortar, to disguise the unsteadiness of his hand. To silence the ringing in his ears. In that moment, he knew he had to save her — save her for himself.

As soon as Grayson O'Rourke was well enough to sit up, Dorian invited him to the nightly games of poker. He bided his time, gathering information: where to find her, her name, her favourite colour, flower and food.

He discovered that her name was Thea, and that she studied while she waited in Oxford for this bookish boy-soldier from the colonies who imagined himself an Englishman. What could the child of a miner offer compared with the youngest son of a lord?

So for the first time in his life Dorian sacrificed a small part of himself for another: he took out his pistol and shot himself through the hand, away from the tendons, clear of the fine bones — just enough to make firing a rifle impossible. Then he returned to

Oxford and rescued Thea from a life of living with a colonial. A life of academic drudgery.

He found them a place in London where she could have a room flooded with light, to which she brought colour — a place where she was framed by the books he bought for her and where she could stretch her intellect, her mind like an ever-expanding rubber band.

A garden she could observe, and if she wished, sit within.

He never joined her there. He hated the perfection of it, the way every bloom was formed with an artist's eye for detail, painted in such tiny exquisite strokes, every leaf a different shade of green.

She rarely needed to leave her home or this garden, for increasingly he required every breath of her to calm him.

But lately Dorian had come to believe there was only so much tranquillity one can take. Time spent at home had to be interspersed with the adrenal rush of play and prey.

Of late, on evenings when the light turned dull and dense shadows stretched thin before the coming dawn, his attention had turned to playing with his prey. The new resident at Number 18 had proved a worthy distraction.

For a short time.

Dorian's dark head turned so that it caught the light, presenting a perfect profile as his mind moved from trenches and bullets, and from the screaming of a horse — the last sound before the *come to me, come to me* of the hospital train travelling home.

The hand had returned to full function, with the sole evidence of injury no more than a puckered red mark in the soft pad of skin between forefinger and thumb. Dorian examined each nail in turn and removed a small ragged tag of skin from around one cuticle.

As he rested his cigar against the heavy cut-glass ashtray beside him, the bent, sagging ash flaked into the bowl and a man in grey tails came into focus over the waiter's shoulder. David Beetham loitered at the bookshelves of the club's library. The man was well known to Dorian from Thea's little soirées in the early days — a time when he had found it necessary to indulge her.

Beetham held an embossed first edition, one of the library's newly acquired treasures. He lifted it gingerly to his nose and inhaled the pages before lovingly running a finger down its gilt spine.

'Beetham,' said Dorian, holding out his hand while remaining seated and waiting for the other man to cross the room to him. 'After another volume for your collection? Thought I ought to let you know I have you in my sights before that's pocketed and turns up on your library shelf.'

David Beetham looked a little sheepish.

'Devereaux. It's been a while. How's that lovely wife? I suppose she's occupied with the progeny while you swan about snapping up business opportunities and financial returns. Always did have your finger in a great many pies.'

He drew up a chair and sat opposite.

Dorian took another cigar from the humidor beside him. One end bore a heavy gold band embossed with his family crest. He removed the tip cleanly with a silver cutter and smirked with satisfaction. He neither offered one to Beetham nor avoided his gaze as the other man's eyes followed his every movement.

'No patter of little feet yet. They'll make an appearance when ready. Thea's parents on both sides came from large families, and you know that she herself was one of eight. So, no cause for concern in that department.'

As Dorian crosses his right leg over his left and adjusts his trousers, the two men swirl their glasses, warming the Scotch and looking deep into the golden liquid as though contemplating some complex undiscovered galaxy.

'Yes, such a shame the old man couldn't have fathered a few more females just like Thea. Damned unfortunate,' said Beetham wistfully.

Dorian raised his glass and it caught the light, causing his reflection to fracture and reform.

'And you? Married yet? No longer free to roam the country after elusive volumes? Met with success in procuring an heir and a spare for Dovetail Manor?'

'Still looking, I'm afraid. Unfortunately, you snaffled the best one, and I've yet to find one that measures up.'

'Is the search for that elusive creature what brings you to town?'

'Not likely,' said David, giving a chuckle while running his fingers through his thinning hair. 'Just hoping to catch up with a few acquaintances and discuss

opportunities for investment. The estate's slipping a little, and I need to find some way to generate ready cash. These damned inheritance taxes — they're crippling.'

'I have a few options you might be interested in. You'll need to move damned quickly, though, these things are kept quiet for a reason. Join Thea and me for dinner Tuesday and we'll run through the possibilities over billiards and port.'

'Alright — Tuesday it is. It'll be an added bonus to see Thea as well.'

David rose and left the club with a salutary wave, glancing back only once, longingly, at the well-handled embossed volume. Meanwhile, Dorian remained seated, contemplating the arranged meeting ahead: the dress he would have Thea wear, the enticing way he would have her arrange her hair, for he had every intention of fleecing Beetham — just another overfed pigeon, like so many he had plucked before.

He ensure that Thea catches no scent of his involvement in the man's financial decline, for she never liked hearing her childhood friends were up against it, let alone that he was the cause. It was unlikely she would think to enter his study or the billiard room — to venture into the darker confines of his lair.

He would make doubly sure, with a little chemical assistance. Just enough in her sherry and Thea would find she must plead tiredness early in the evening. A little alcohol, a gentleman's word given over billiards — for an Englishman, honour still clings stubbornly to such things.

His thoughts on honour, and on the true nature of the British gentleman, drew him to his new neighbour. What a coincidence that a former acquaintance, now nemesis — had made his home down the street. He knew that, as yet, Grayson O'Rourke was unaware that the garden square was also home to Dorian and Thea.

The fates must be indulging some private cruelty, thought Dorian. Or perhaps merely settling accounts: the wheel was turning full circle, the three weavers taking up their thread.

After stealing what was Grayson's during the later years of the war, Dorian realised that the damned man was now in the position to give Thea the one thing he himself was unwilling to — a child.

Not that he could not get her with child, but rather that, because of his particular malady, he chose not to. He would protect her from his tainted seed. One incident had already proven enough.

The little boy at Number 10C — a careless indulgence with his elder brother's maid — had demonstrated what defects might follow. It still amused him, the way that

particular consequence had also been tidied away. One timely thrust between the shoulders, and the girl had ceased to threaten anything at all.

He had every intention of forcing O'Rourke out of the neighbourhood, by foul means or fair. No one should have to live near a person who knew the truth at the heart of himself, his deepest secrets — one who may still harbour feelings for his wife. Most of all, someone who knows a secret that Thea must never discover.

That, above all, would be prevented.

Already he has taken precautions: a bloodied tie draped over a bough, footprints placed with care imprinted using another's shoes, doubt whispered in the proper ear regarding character, a shoe left where it ought not to be, the undiscovered tie taken and placed there also.

As he reflects on his small instigations and interventions, he remembers the surge of elation as the train's wheels gripped the rag-doll body. The joy with which his fingers tightened the links of chain. The pleasure in the way the circles of metal cut into the neck's delicate rings of cartilage.

His nostrils flare.

Outside, as he passes the garden railings, a smell lingers, the top note sour with seaweed and bitter fertiliser but beneath lingers a familiar scent — he imbibes it. It smells like the tangy yeast of fresh semen.

Germination Conditions

Bees are essential to the germination of some seeds in the garden. In the absence of these helpful insects, or if they neglect to pollinate a reliant species, no germination will occur. Sometimes this may happen because a part of the flower is damaged. In this case, pollination becomes on occasion ineffective or even impossible. Promotion of bee-friendly species within the garden is a good way to ensure the presence of these pollinators and increase the likelihood of a species' successful fertilisation.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.26

Thea Devereaux, Number 3

Friday, 6th May 1932

There was something of the delicate flower in Thea, with her petal-like complexion and soft, stamen-like lashes. This contrasted sharply with the ferocity of her lion eyes — all golden-centered and pouncing presence — and, just like a village tom, she loved the evening. Twilight and darkness were her favourite hours, when the fringes of the residents' garden flowers appeared pale as icing sugar, stained argent beneath the first rays of the lunar landscape. It was a time when even the dark, regimented leaves of the yew were silvered.

Thea loved nothing better than to contemplate the close of the day while looking down upon the garden square. Her room was a special place, where there was ample evidence of her other two passions: a love of reading and an interest in the science of microbiology.

In the window, Thea often sat upon a chaise longue, one of her favourite pieces of furniture, positioned for the best view. From there she observed not only the garden but all the comings and goings of the Square. The colour of the chair's brocade matched the hooded blooms of the aconitum that she could see below, tied around a wigwam of bamboo. The blue fabric was threaded with gold, while the chaise mirrored the contour of the flowers' hoods. Around the base ran an emerald-green fringe.

In such moments, Thea was often overcome by a rush of catharsis. It was as though her languid repose lifted something within her. When this happened, she liked to imagine herself a free and uninhibited spirit, one of the bright young things lying back blissfully carefree. She envisioned her hair and face aglow in a camera's

mercurial incandescence. In her imagination, Cecil Beaton called, 'Lay your arm just so, tilt your head back just a little.'

When taken by these imaginings, Thea would toss her head like a mare in season and form her mouth into a little moue. She often draped herself in a white marabou boa given to her by her sister. Made from real stork feathers, it had come with a low-cut, sequined dress that shimmered when she moved and set off her lovely legs and slim figure. Thea had never worn out it in public, thinking it far too risqué. But in the secluded privacy of her room, she often put it on and lay back with her elbows extended behind her head, her breasts pushed forward, and her legs exposed as the dress rode to the top of her thighs. She crossed her ankles resting her feet on the divan's rising end, while the dress twinkled beneath the light. In this persona, she often found herself smiling just enough that the dimple in her left cheek gave a little wink.

Her dimple had twinkled, then died, when Thea first felt dampness trickle down her leg on that Thursday in July, and she quickly stretched her body long across the rug. Then she contracted the whole of her lower body as tightly as she could, from navel to toes. But the coiled tension with which she held herself failed to stop the continued trickle of blood running down the well between her inner thighs onto the Turkish rug.

Thea tried to focus on *The Anatomy of Plants*, a tarnished leather-bound volume with a crimson cover. She endeavoured to examine it closely as she rested her palms lightly on her midriff despite the pain. All her will became bent upon resurrecting the dying egg through this attempt to focus God's attention. She hoped that such close introspection might bring on a sudden bout of sympathy, might force God to renege.

One week later Thea was not to be found seated in the window. For a very different reason, she was again laid out long upon the rug. Her body formed a rigid line like a solitary knitting needle. A cushion cupped her head while her hands, fingers spread, rested lightly on her abdomen.

Soon, she thought to herself, soon I will be able to feel a light flutter, a movement beneath my skin like a candle flame. My nipples and breasts will tingle, remaking themselves as the new life grows in my belly. The doctor has promised me.

She held on to this new hope as desperately as Rapunzel wished for her hair to grow — to provide a means of escape. Then her hands came down beside her and her nails dug into the golden cage pictured on the rug.

Most of the centre of the room was taken over by the rug on which she lay. It was coloured in greens and purples and smelt faintly of rust and cinnamon quills. The scent made her think of disused machinery and ancient Middle Eastern spice markets, all as cankered as her insides. The rug depicted a faded aviary where rosellas and canaries looked out from behind the bars of their confinement. Thea assumed it was someone's vision of a prison, for the artist had woven wild creatures into this cage. Somehow, the bars and their constriction felt a little familiar — comfortingly so.

The next day Thea was to have the operation. She found no consolation in her books nor the room's décor, only a few niggling doubts that bore down upon her, like the suffocating fuzz of a pressing giant peach. But she set them aside, rising from the chaise longue where she had spent the night. She hadn't wanted to keep Dorian awake with her anxieties.

She dressed carefully in a tweed pleated skirt, silk blouse and comfortable shoes. Into a Wellington bag she slipped a cotton nightdress, a toothbrush and paste, a comb, a book about alpine plants and a bottle of aspirin. She told herself that the pain of the operation would be worth it if she could hold a child cradled in her arms. If the vision did not pop and vanish like a departing bubble.

Dorian would look after her. He had insisted they have faith in Doctor Calvert, and when she came downstairs, he was waiting in the morning room. He placed a hand against the small of her back, saying, 'Morning darling, I hope you managed some sleep.'

As he shepherded her into the cab and climbed in after her, she realised that he hadn't eaten any breakfast.

'You didn't have anything to eat, dearest?'

'In sympathy for you, darling. I know you aren't allowed any, my dear. We're in this together.'

Then he tucked a strand of hair very gently behind her ear and patted her knee, giving it a small, firm squeeze, all the while rolling his wedding ring around and around upon his finger.

Selective Breeding

Selection and breeding new and more resilient plant varieties has been a pastime of gardeners since the Stone Age, when even cave dwellers' gardens had room for only the most productive and hardy varieties. From these earliest gardeners to the monks, landscape designers, and even the royalty of Europe — who took an interest in their roses if nothing else — the green-fingered have always striven to improve upon nature's bounty. This pursuit has shaped the propagation of everything from flowers to cabbages. At its heart lies a multitude of goals: practical aims such as disease resistance and drought tolerance, and purely sensual ones, such as aesthetic appeal, for example stronger scent or exquisite variegation.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.234.

Enid Calvert, Number 17

Wednesday, 13th April 1932

Enid Calvert was a razor-sharp whip of a woman with a razor-sharp nasal voice, a pointed chin, and a face and neck like a race-ready greyhound. It made it all the more startling that she had hair that was inclined to swathe. She fastened it in a large bundle atop her head with numerous pins despite the fashion for neat, clipped, edgy bobs, shingled and waved that hung lightly around the ears.

In Enid's mind, her hair appeared as a shining golden crown. It served to accentuate her well-defined features. Those who held women occupying traditionally male roles in contempt likened the arrangement to a discoloured door jamb. They noted how she arranged it atop the very pinnacle of her skull, and how this emphasised the pointed harsh lines of her over-thin face. It contrasted oddly with the sweet, curvaceous way in which her figure draped itself over furniture.

Her lovers' memories of those swathes were reverent ones. They remembered her hair as a cloak that warmed them. It wound about their bodies during heightened passion, cradling them in place. Its shining curtain of buffed blonde added to their experience of ecstasy. For Enid Calvert was an extremely skilled lover, having learnt from a smuggled copy of the *Kama Sutra*, all the arts said to heighten physical pleasure. As a doctor specialising in women's health, she also possessed an intimate understanding of the female body and of how to tighten its muscles for maximum effect.

It was her hair that Enid tried to focus on running the silver brush through it, counting off to one hundred softly to herself

‘Sixty-six, sixty-seven, sixty-eight.’

This act of grooming was what she tried to bend her entire mind towards as the back of the filigreed brush caught the light and cast a coin of reflection on the mirror’s oak surrounds. But no amount of brushing could prevent her thoughts from returning to the operation she had performed on Thea Devereaux three weeks before.

She had first met Dorian in the Victoria and Albert Museum, where she had gone to escape the cloying advances of her husband. Despite their supposed openness, to affairs and third parties sharing their bed, Gerald — an old-school, suit-and-tie Etonian — liked to know every detail of her sexual conquests. Lately, she had begun to question whether he undertook any such capers himself beyond pounding his mousey secretary in his office cloakroom or beside the boiler in the basement. Recently he seemed to have become more voyeur than sailor upon the choppy seas of sexual proclivity.

She had been contemplating this while standing before a detailed miniature, *Young Man Among Roses* by Nicholas Hilliard when Dorian Devereaux approached.

The adoration with which the man in the painting gazed outward had seemed, at the time, to encompass how Dorian himself thought of his wife: some kind of sainted figure backlit in amber. That was how the man had always presented her when they met at social functions or passed in the street. Although perhaps that was because Enid herself had grown so jaded.

Even from their previous short conversations she came to understand that such reverence did not extend to other women. Other women — especially those of the ancient profession — he appeared to loathe. To him they were little more than worms: creatures to be pulled from the ground and dismembered. Any lovers he took, and she was sure there were more than a few, would be treated with similar disregard.

Because her very career was at stake, Enid could do little to protect such women. She found herself busy enough protecting herself from the man — or at least from what he knew. This became clear when he came to stand beside her as she admired the Hilliard.

‘I know about the back-door surgery you seem to have going,’ he said without preamble.

‘Pardon, what are you accusing me of?’ she asked.

But the brief pause before her response had given her away, and they both knew it. Added to that was the kink in her otherwise straight mouth, the creasing of her perfectly shaped brows, and the heat spreading up her neck from the soft curve of her bosom. Her body’s final betrayal came when a long strand of blonde hair unravelled from the top of her head and fell over one shoulder. The limp way it hung was the last straw, almost toppling any further denials.

‘The little operations you are performing — though they are a little more than what the women require, aren’t they?’

‘I have no idea what you’re talking about,’ said Enid.

She was determined to deny any wrongdoing for as long as possible, even though her heart raced and her hand rose to tug at her earlobe.

‘Shall I spell out what I know? In here, where the polite members of society might hear?’

As his arm swept the room and heads began to turn, she grasped his arm, pulling him into a gallery that contained a display of colonial cultural artefacts. The space was entirely empty of people.

‘They come in to put paid to an unwanted pregnancy, but you take away rather more than that, don’t you? A little snip here, tie something up and remove something there. No future visits required,’ said Dorian.

There were hard lines about his mouth, a brittleness to his tone when he spoke — it lent a viciousness to the little speech, and Enid felt more than a little afraid.

‘Most of them can’t afford to bring up the children they have,’ she said.

‘Don’t feed me those justifications. I’m not actually interested in you or what you’re doing. Only in how that knowledge will convince you to do a little favour for me. A little bird let me know that some of these women don’t have other children. That your choice is based entirely on their finances, profession, colour or creed.’

She puffed out her chest like a dissident fowl, realising she did not need to justify her actions, yet doing so anyway. She was in the right, even if it was not legal. These women would thank her in the end.

‘I’m doing society a favour, weeding out the weak and undesirable going forward. It is their seed that will merely weaken the vine. We have to be very careful in the way we shape the future. The war proved that.’

'I don't disagree with you. But as I said earlier, I'm not really interested in discussing your politics, rather in you performing the procedure on my wife.'

She stepped back in shock. Her hand went to her mouth.

'Why would she consent to such a drastic measure? I understand she's still quite young and seems healthy enough.'

His hand swept through the air as though brushing all concerns aside.

'Thea has lately become somewhat obsessed with bringing a child into our marriage. I neither want one, nor can I have one without complications, thanks to a poxy whore — a moment of necessary release when I was a soldier.'

He said this entirely without shame. Enid saw that he placed all blame for the infection upon the woman. She was chilled by the lack of responsibility he took himself. But her reluctance lessened when he continued:

'My wife's grandparents were Jewish, which should help you make the right decision.'

'You seem set on offering me very little choice, but I'll admit her heritage does little to recommend her as a mother.'

'I know you are a great supporter of Germany's recovery. I've been paying attention to those you believe are responsible for the situation. No need to discuss my views on the subject but I'm sure her ancestry will ease your conscience.'

'So what is it exactly you are wanting me to do?'

A couple had entered the room and were absorbed in looking from all angles at a glass case containing a greenstone adze. Enid and Devereaux moved to the far corner, out of earshot.

'I can't afford for my wife to find herself with child, so I need you to remove that possibility permanently. I shall bring her in on the pretense that you will put her under the knife to help her with conception. She believes the problem lies with her.'

'Instead, I'm to remove that possibility for good? What if I do not wish to take part in this deception?'

They stopped before a storm-tossed seascape by J. M. W. Turner, where two warships duelled with guns ablaze. Wooden fragments and broken masts crested the white caps.

'Then just think of the consequences if the press were aware of what's going on in your back room.'

He took a step closer and Enid in trying to step away felt the hardness of a bench seat press into the taut veins at the backs of her knees. She kept her eyes focused on the waves and the orbs of flame that had settled upon the water.

‘I don’t think there will be much tolerance for your German sympathies, many people still remember whose side of the War we were on.’

He had taken the loose lock of her hair between his fingers and wound it around his forefinger just enough to tug at her scalp before he let it fall and moved a step away.

‘Or just think, if one or two of these women whom you have sterilised, were aware of your little deception. I’m sure they are bound to have a burly husband, brother or friend that might wish to call upon you. Consider this to be just another of those little services you do for women, women who don’t need a child — those not suitable to breed.’

‘What about if she finds out?’

‘The only way she will find out is if you tell her. We’ve established that wouldn’t be in your best interests. As to the specifics — as her husband, I can just as well sign the consent form.’

‘Can I ask why you are doing this?’

‘My wife is an angel— a bright force in my life. I can’t have any stain attaching itself to her. From the moment I set eyes on her photograph in a Belgian hospital I knew she was a flame I had to hold in my hand, I’ll allow nothing and no one to dim its glow.’

‘But you must be aware, syphilis doesn’t necessarily pass to the child.’

‘I have already seen the evidence of making that assumption once.’

‘What if I still do not wish to cooperate?’

‘I’m sure when you’ve had a night to think on it, you’ll find the arguments compelling.’

He moved in close and held his hand to her throat in a gesture that, to other museum visitors, might have appeared a caress. But she felt his thumb find her windpipe and press just hard enough to make drawing breath difficult. She inhaled with a rasp.

At the hundredth brushstroke she crossed to the small oak desk where she sometimes piled files and documents brought home from the surgery. Upon the brown

leather blotter sat the file inscribed with Thea O'Rourke's name. It contained initial notes: observations that the woman's uterus and ovaries were perfectly normal and undamaged. Enid had been told that Dorian used condoms as a safeguard, although this had not proven entirely foolproof. Yet again she found herself wondering at women's ignorance of anatomy and conception. It was a shame that more women had not read *Married Love* by Marie Stopes. Yet more than once this ignorance had, for Enid, served as an advantage.

The cardboard-encased file contained documents Thea herself had never read. Enid placed it carefully beside her leather satchel along with two other case files, then carried them downstairs and placed them beside her light autumn coat. She would pack them along with a cut lunch in the morning. They were ready to return to her filing cabinet in her Kensington office. She knew she ought to burn the file, but years of medical training prevented her from taking such drastic action.

Instead, she vowed to forget it, just as she had forgotten the others — cases where she had played God and decided medical intervention was necessary. It was for the greater good, after all. She was in the service of society. The woman might have produced a child deaf or blind. What joy would such a child have brought?

Companion Planting

In the design of mixed plantings, it is important to consider the light, moisture, and nutrient requirements of each species and how these complement one another. Otherwise, deficits may occur that hinder not only plant growth but also disease resistance and longevity. Some plants simply grow better together and show preferences for the company they keep.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.83.

Peregrine Montgomery the Third aka Perry at Number 14

Thursday, 14 April 1932

Peregrine Montgomery the Third was born under the star sign Sagittarius. He was proud of his adventurous nature and of his astrological connection to Jupiter, king of the gods, for Perry was a firm believer in portents and signs. Chinese money cats, four-leaf clovers, tarot cards and rabbits' paws all held special significance for him. He paid especial attention to the movements of black cats and the shapes formed by tea leaves when he drained his cup. There was, however, one overriding source of cosmic guidance that dictated every aspect of his daily life: the omens left for him by a higher power in the residents' garden of St Mary's Square.

The day before Perry placed his advertisement in *The Times* began like any other. He drained his cup of Lapsang Souchong and returned the octagonal yellow cup to its matching saucer. Its handle was perfectly aligned with the blue-and-white spout of the antique Ming teapot. He peered at the leaves — a bear and two butterflies — and consulted his volume of *Madame Dragonova Reads the Leaves*.

Bear + butterfly: Today is a day for light-hearted frivolity + beware of large men who bring flowers.

He took a bite of his triangle of toast spread with butter and marmalade and poured a demitasse of strong coffee from a silver pot at his elbow, for he did not really enjoy the lingering aftertaste of black tea. From a drawer under the table, he brought out his tarot cards, but *The Chariot* and *The Wheel of Fortune*, both inverted, were as far as he got before the little gold carriage clock on the mantel chimed nine o'clock.

At the window, Perry stood in the shadow of a pair of heavy curtains, a gift from his gran along with his dressing gown. A reminder of his Scottish heritage, both were

made of heavy wool in MacDonald tartan. About his thickened waist hung the loosened tasselled cord from which protruded his generous paunch and flaccid penis, for nude and unencumbered was how Perry liked to sleep.

He always enjoyed the lightness of his imported vermilion satin sheets; the way they rose and fell in time with the expansion of his chest and shifted with the gentle bursts of his flatulence. Since he had found himself living alone and unobserved, he no longer felt any necessity to tighten his dressing gown cord. A month before, things would have been different.

As his eyes took in the scene below, the daffodil-yellow cup paused halfway to his lips and its gold rim knocked against one of his bottom teeth. The matching saucer was carefully balanced on one of his large, meaty palms, and a small square of marmaladed toast slid to the floor.

Below lay the garden, its flowers and shrubs miniaturised like a sand saucer at the village fête. Perry could almost touch the upper branches of the two spreading oaks, while the blades of grass appeared as indistinct as threads in a tapestry. The bells and spires of delphiniums were mere smudges the colour of the sky amidst the swathe of green. It was the gardener's early start that had momentarily startled him, but when he saw that McSweeney was accompanied by his baby son, he knew there was plenty of time to soak up the scene.

'Oh, how delightful, a little microcosm. The play of light, the pools of dark,' said Perry to his empty cup.

He viewed himself as something of an *à la mode* photographer. He set down the petite cup and saucer and stepped on the forgotten toast. Then, oblivious to the carnage, he held up his thumbs and forefingers and brought them together to frame the scene. Nothing was immune from capture within the squared-off right angles of Perry's frame of fingers.

'Exquisite! Exquisite! How simply delightful! It must be captured. I will take my bath, then simply wade into it,' he muttered to himself.

He entered his adjoining bathroom and turned on the taps with a flourish humming 'Button up your Overcoat' under his breath. When the bath was full, he turned off the water and abandoned his dressing gown, but he didn't climb in. A few bare-skinned turns of the drawing room charged the circulation. Shoulder rolls and knee raises restored his postural alignment. Occasionally, he kicked out his legs in a cross between a frog-march and sergeant major's drill — such was his daily routine.

Next, he administered a series of sharp slaps to his buttocks, thighs and chest while he paraded around the living room. All the while Perry thrust out his chest like a wood pigeon performing a mating dance. The smacks were followed by a number of rises onto tip toes. Then, to wind up, he used two tins of Vim, raising them to the ceiling twenty times before pulling them into his chest for a count of thirty.

When the steam coming off the water had reduced to a level at which Perry could clearly distinguish the fawn-being-chased-by-the-fox-being-chased-by-the-hounds scenes of the bathroom's wallpaper, he carefully stepped into the bath and treated his empty rooms to a stirring rendition of one of his favourite tunes. That day he chose 'The Biggest Aspidistra in the World' and sang in a lower-than-usual key, as suds formed islands and rafts of bubble on the checkerboard tiles.

As Perry soaped himself, passing the flannel about with great thoroughness, he considered the day ahead. A few pages of the paper down on that bench after a nose full of rose and a good sniff of fragrant white lily to clear the sinuses. Look at the direction of sticks on the path, count the blooms on the pelargoniums, listen to the prophet speak — perceive what seems judicious by reading these signals.

A little gander at the personals column, see if that woman has been reunited with her missing canary, or the Indian fellow has come across his mongoose. A wander down Exhibition Road, around Albert Hall. A chance to train the eye in proportional profiles, I shall limit myself to buttocks and breasts. Just measuring with the eyes, measuring with the eyes ... no need for any more incidents like that other day in Green Park.

Perry soaped up his chest and brushed it vigorously with a loofah. Then he indulged in one of his favourite pastimes: the contemplation of what he would eat: I shall treat myself to one of those tiny almond cakes in that Knightsbridge café, a sheltered table outside beneath those lovely silver and blue striped awnings. That'll set off my pocket square nicely, he thought.

As he wiped between the folds of his waist and the delicate crease where thigh met torso, he contemplated how the great yawning chasm, left by his butler-cum-lover could be exorcised, how it might be plugged, stopping the cold draught that blew from within. He allowed himself half a minute to wonder what Dawes was doing now that he was no longer occupied ironing his newspaper, making sure the eggs were soft boiled, or pressing his suit.

Then, brushing such thoughts aside, he reassured himself that the dinner of *Crème de tomate* would be excellent, although without Dawes, it'd have to come from a tin. He towelled himself off vigorously, wiped at his eyes and dressed. He smoothed his pants by running his palms over the wrinkles, then attempted with his forefinger and thumb to iron a crease down the front.

To end the day a nice dinner at my club. He admired his reflection in the hall's full-length mirror. As a finishing touch he tucked a pale blue and silver pocket square into the breast pocket, and in doing so, also patted himself reassuringly over the heart.

At the door, with the paper beneath his arm, he wound a thin plaid scarf around his neck while setting aside his bowler, placing instead a soft grey fedora on his head. It was so soft it could be folded in half using only one hand.

After breathing in the rose and the fragrant lily, Perry seated himself next to an azalea, admiring the delicate paper-thin petals on the bunches of blooms. At last he caught sight of Brandon McSweeney and the baby over by the small shed. The gardener was occupied digging a trench along the fence. It ran parallel to the narrow road encircling three sides of the Square. Perry moved to a closer spot on the shadowed bench beneath the oak without being observed. There he tried to blend into the darkness of the gaps between its slats.

From the bench he watched for some time as the gardener diligently forked over the soil. The digging brought worms to the surface. At the same time Perry could hear what was said to the small baby that moved like a centipede on a tartan rug.

He took from his inside pocket, with a flourish, a bright pink fountain pen and a small notebook and jotted down a line or two.

Bring up the goodness to the surface. Narration is key to imparting knowledge.

Squirming draws affection as well as predation.

'Yes, your mummy needs a break, and why not enjoy a bit of sunshine? You and I are two peas in a pod. You love to be outside as much as I do, don't you? Yes, you do,' said McSweeney.

He chuckled Thomas beneath his chin, then handed him a bunch of thyme twisted into a loose knot. The baby crushed the tiny flowers against his nose with a fist, gummed the thyme for a moment before spitting it out with a delighted raspberry.

Be sure to make the most of time. Taste it, smell it, feel it in your mouth, Perry wrote.

The gardener collected from the glasshouse, on the far side of the shed, two trays of plants. One had lime green leaves and small white flowers, and the other was filled with small grey seedlings. The plants were mainly leaf, but the odd one had a pair of purple bobbing lavender wings.

‘Feverfew and lavender go together,’ McSweeney said.

He walked along the bed he had just created, dropping two feverfew plants then one lavender as he went.

‘I am planting the feverfew to keep the bugs and flies away from the lavender. Some plants thrive when they are paired with others that keep them healthy and safe. It’s called companion planting.’

Safety in numbers — companion needed, like doesn’t always have to be with like, noted Perry.

Thomas seemed to be regarding his father with rapt attention but then Perry noticed the boy’s hand was on a spittle beetle that had been slowly crawling across the balloon of his belly. It was traversing the strip of bare skin where his knitted jumper had ridden up, tugged by the straps of his corduroy dungarees. Before McSweeney could flick it away, the baby swiped the bug up in his closed fist and popped it into his mouth.

After removing the crushed beetle and its residue of insect saliva as best he could from the baby’s mouth the gardener continued with his work.

‘Some plants are also better than others at attracting bees,’ said McSweeney.

Everyone’s strengths deserve recognition, Perry wrote.

The small baby’s unseeing hazel eyes appeared to gaze through his long dark lashes while he thought about what the gardener was saying. His chubby fists beat on the rug. Then he pursed his lips and blew a bubble that popped. The saliva dribbled unnoticed down his chin. Unseen, Perry tapped out a rhythm with his toes in response.

‘Some plants just like the limelight, while others prefer to live in the shade,’ said McSweeney to Thomas. He brushed the flower of a salvia against the boy’s cheek and then tickled him beneath his chin with the beak-like bloom.

‘Daah, Daah,’ said Thomas.

‘Here’s one that hides in the shade. It’s called *Helleborus niger*. I won’t let you touch that one as its poisonous, though we can practise remembering the name. Can you say hell-he-bore-a-tiger.’

‘Daah.’

‘Close. Before long, you will have all the names down,’ said McSweeney, laughing.

Just before Perry got up to leave, he wrote down a few more lines of inspiration. *Work out whether you grow best in the glare of the light or in a sheltered, more private aspect.*

‘Morning,’ he called.

He popped up out of his hidden corner and casually strolled past the pair, tucking his notebook and stub of pencil into his pocket as he went.

Later that evening, as Perry consumed his fish in the dwindling light of the Traveller’s Club, he reflected on the portents and signs he had observed and recorded that morning. I don’t need to think very hard to identify my ideal growing conditions — I am definitely no shrinking violet, he thought as the waiter refilled his water glass, removed the empty plate and took his order for dessert. He acknowledged his love of the theatrical — the thumb and forefinger he used to section off a scene, the pose in profile he resorted to as a photographer.

During the meal his thoughts had returned to Dawes: not only to the fact that he would not have over-cooked the halibut, but also to the way he’d always worked quietly in the background, keeping things running smoothly behind the scenes.

Perry raised his hand and ordered another glass of Pimm’s over ice and in doing so his high voice rang and seemed to surge and echo throughout the members’ dining room. As he popped the last morsel of his main between his lips, he saw more than one mouth moving behind more than one hand. But it was from over by the billiard room that a familiar voice reached him.

‘It’s that Perry Montgomery, always has to make a spectacle of himself... any excuse,’ said Dorian Devereaux.

Perry felt warmth creeping up his neck and lowered his head to his chest in embarrassment. He was unaware that Devereaux had moved across the room to stand at his shoulder, caught off-guard with a spoonful of apple charlotte halfway to his mouth.

Bending low, Devereaux said barely loud enough for Perry to hear, ‘What are you looking so happy about? I told you I’d report you to the police over that special friend of yours, Dawes, being passed off as a butler. Best not flaunt friends like that about the square. Your type can’t keep such friends.’

As this sentence tailed off, a musician in tails seated himself at the piano in the corner. As all eyes in the room turned towards him in anticipation, Devereaux spat a wad of saliva into the centre of the mound of whipped cream and sauntered away.

Perry opened his mouth but merely gulped on air. He told himself that perhaps a bone from the fish course had lodged in his throat, for there was a pain near his larynx and moisture welled up in his eyes. His hand curled around the handle of his knife, but he knew that as had been the case in the past, he was powerless to stand up to that man. He wondered how he could ever avenge Dawes and looked down at his frail hand and noted its weakness, the liver spots and bitten nail quicks.

But Perry knew the truth of the matter — the signs today had told him. He drew out his notebook and read the words again.

Safety in numbers...companion needed... like doesn't always have to be with like.

From this grew a dawning realisation — he needed a companion, someone he could tie his dressing gown closed for. They didn't have to be a lover like Dawes, just to have a voice to fill the silence, someone to still the cold wind that blew through his chest. It would also be an advantage if they were burly enough to put the wind up Dorian Devereaux.

The next day, Perry drank his Lapsang Souchong. Bird and five figs. He looked them up in *Madame Dragonova Reads the Leaves*.

Five figs + a single bird: stay alert for roaming bee swarms + danger will come into your life in silk underwear.

After his usual constitutional, Perry took extra care in dressing. He embellished his three-piece with a flamingo pink cravat and a sapphire pin. It sparkled in place, occupying a prominent position, speared through the tie knot. Then he strode purposefully to the news agent and placed an advertisement in *The Times*.

Male assistant required for gentleman photographer. Accommodation and board included, with generous stipend. Prefer applicant with boxing skills who is also proficient in the Chinese fighting arts. Applicant required for six full days per week. Must be capable of lifting heavy items. Comfortable accommodation in central London with park access. Small dogs tolerated but no cats allowed. No wives, no children. Apply in writing or in person at 22 St Mary's Square, Kensington.

When Perry looked around the living room with fresh eyes, he noticed the socks drying over the wooden arm of his favourite chair. In the bathroom, a damp row of white smalls hung over the shower rail. As he drew the smoke up the tube of a long plastic holder, dropping yet more ash upon the Abyssinian rug, he realised he might need to settle for a tolerant companion who liked housework and returned everything to its place. Someone who saw past the clutter and recognised the fine proportions of his abode — the advantages of its sunny aspect.

Perry immediately got to work on a rearrangement. From his bedroom, he removed one of the two single beds and pulled and pushed it into the spare room. He carefully made it up with newly pressed clean cotton sheets and a lemon cambric bedspread. He collected up his photographic equipment and Dawes's collection of taxidermy forest dwellers. The barn owl, the grinning stoat, and a family of small field mice were all removed to the attic. Only a large stag's head remained and he positioned this above the fireplace. A symbol of male virility never hurt, he thought.

In his own bedroom he ferreted out a pair of flannel pyjamas, a gift from his sister the Christmas before last. He put them under his pillow and added a hot water bottle to the crocheted blanket at the foot of each newly appointed bed.

'Homely touches maketh a house,' he told the photograph of his mother that leaned in its frame on the piano.

She was pictured as a young girl, petting a goat and wearing Norwegian traditional costume.

He displayed in the living room several books by Dickens, Robert Graves and a copy of the plays of Oscar Wilde. Then he stood back and perused his work, bringing a hand beneath his chin as he stroked his moustache. After much thought he put the Wilde back and replaced it with *Paradise Lost*. Finally, he took a recently purchased copy of Faust and arranged it on his bedside table. He ruffled the pages and thumped it on the back of an armchair to ensure it didn't look quite so new. A little hellfire and damnation would do wonders for his reputation.

Next, Perry turned to the pantry, which was empty save three tins of bully beef and half a bottle of crème de menthe. He moved quickly, holding the brush at arm's length, as he swept the scattered mouse droppings into the pan. Then he began to write a list:

Tin of cocoa

Bag of sugar

Flagon of sherry
Huntly & Palmers biscuits
Wedge of cheese
Two large steaks
Four apples

He worried momentarily about the need for condiments, for he was of the opinion that nothing appealed to a man and made him feel more at home than brown sauce and Colman's mustard. A burly solid kind of soul could really flex the muscles as they appreciated dabbing them on food. Maybe a bottle of Worcestershire sauce was also needed. The name itself always sounded truly masculine and had been very popular in the military. He wouldn't buy anything that looked too pale or pasty. Build up the man's bulk, that's what he needed to do. Devereaux was tall but he was sure he wasn't that strong, lifting balance sheets, surely, wouldn't equip a man for much.

Just as he decided that he should organise for Mrs Darcy to come on a Wednesday and a Friday as well as a Monday, reassuring himself that she would appreciate the extra work, the doorbell rang. Perry found a tall man standing on the stoop. He had a black beard, thick black rimmed glasses, and a dusty bowler hat pulled low over his eyes.

'Come about the job or a secret mission?' said Perry with a grin. 'Travelling incognito, are we?'

He assessed the stranger's physique: the finely muscled forearms, the tanned, lean shape before him. A few more exercises with boxes would add some size to the biceps, he thought.

'Just a little battle disfigurement, nothing a bit of extra hair and a hat can't hide,' replied the caller as he held out his hand. 'Algernon, Algernon Aintree,' he said.

Perry's hand was shaken with such vigour that it took all his self-restraint not to cry out. This was not from discomfort but from relief that such a man so well suited to his requirements was standing before him. He smiled broadly as he pulled his hand out of the stranger's grasp.

'Best come in and we can see if we might suit each other,' he said and led Algernon through the flat.

He noted how the fabric of the man's jacket strained as he moved and his muscles flexed; how he moved his hips like a gunslinger, and the careful way he looked about with an expression that implied he was nobody's fool.

Exactly what I envisaged. Not a man to let himself be bullied and pushed around, Perry thought.

‘I think we shall get along nicely,’ Algernon said.

As Perry handed Algernon a large glass of Pimm’s, the other man looked into his eyes and smiled broadly. That was when Perry saw that the man had one green eye and one blue, and realised he had forgotten to ask his new assistant whether he knew anything about photography or if he could even use a typewriter.

The next day, as he stood with one hand on the garden gate, half-turned to enter, he noticed through the trees that the door to Number 17 stood propped open. Out of concern for the Calverts, whom he wished he knew better, he hurried out onto Brompton Road and made his way to their door. Presented with such a situation, he could not see what else he was supposed to do. There, on the hall table, sat a stack of three buff folders tied with cloth tape.

The tab of the top one read *Thea Devereaux*. Remembering the apple charlotte, the emptiness of his stomach, the feeling that his longed-for quiet meal had been quite ruined — as was the sanctity of his club, he looked right, then left, then right again. The street was deserted. Behind him the garden was empty. Quickly he tucked all three files beneath his arm and returned to his flat.

Part 3

The Germination of a Seedling

Division

Many clumping varieties of hardy perennials can, over time, become root-bound. Such plants benefit from division at this stage, as the heavy demands of large established groups tend to quickly exhaust available nutrients from the soil. In such cases, the plant can be dug up and separated using a sharp spade, secateurs or, in the case of an especially large and interwoven mass, a tree saw. Care must be taken to ensure that each segment has a piece of root, giving it the best possible chance to thrive.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.346.

Saturday, 2 July 1932

As the black cab drew up to the kerb outside Number 9, St Mary's Square, it shone with the enamel brilliance of beetle elytra caught in the afternoon light while its engine throbbed like a chorus of cicadas. But as Gráinne Redman climbed out, she felt neither glossy nor inclined to hum. The journey had been long, so her movements were slow. Eventually she unwound enough to pivot smoothly and take in the caramel brick, black wrought iron and white skirts of the house and the floral profusion of its nearby private residents' garden.

Two large trunks and a hatbox encircled by a wide purple ribbon squatted on the pavement beside her. Gráinne's most treasured possessions shortly joined them. They emerged from the taxi's luggage compartment thanks to her awkward and not-so-gentle efforts. First a Raleigh lady's roadster was hauled onto the footpath. Its clip-on wicker basket was egg-shaped like a squashed-so-slightly summer hat. This caught on the boot catch and was promptly bent even rounder still. The green paint of the bicycle exactly matched the colour of newly emerged pea shoots. It blended so well with Gráinne's drop-waist cotton summer dress that she failed to notice the chain had bitten off a mouthful of hem.

When she opened the cab's back door, Henry, a toffee-coloured spaniel, leapt out uninvited and straight away started grumbling at an unseen assailant attacking his left flank. Worrying the fur, Henry's tiny teeth tried to grasp the creature as Gráinne swung a Remington typewriter in a scratched and dented grey metal case from the taxi's bench seat. A ribbon tied to the handle trembled in the breeze. Gráinne deposited

the dog and the typewriter on the top step, while the bicycle remained leant against the black filigree railing chewing on its scrap of pea-green cotton.

Wheezing, the cabby dragged up the remaining suitcases, pocketed the fare and generous tip from her extended palm, then let out a hawking cough as he departed with surprising grace. As he drove away in a dark cloud of exhaust, Gráinne wondered if she should have advised him against lighting further gaspers for the rest of the day. He had told her the story of his tobacco habit on the journey from Paddington station.

‘Got used to the foreign smokes. Hangover from the war, it is. Now I can’t seem to do without the French ciggies or me misses her Belgian chocolates. The war sure has brought us extra financial burdens.’

Health ones too, she thought, as he delivered this proclamation between coughing fits while they rounded the corner on three wheels at the Hyde Park intersection. Each to his own, she tried to tell herself the entire time they had travelled from the station. The entire time the man puffed away on a smoke held at the corner of a mustard-gas-coloured smile. He had nearly set fire to the cab itself when a cigarette became dislodged from his lip as he rounded a tight corner. Luckily, due to the cab’s incline, it rolled into the path of a passing schoolboy, who quickly extinguished it beneath the sole of his shoe.

At last, alone in a space where the air was clean, Gráinne raised the knocker and decisively rapped on the shining black door and waited with her hand resting on the ring of its fox-shaped hardware. She was quite taken by the quirky nature of its grin and the way the ring seemed to fit so snugly between its teeth. After several minutes with no response, she lifted it once more and let it fall with an even louder, more self-assured thump.

Through the side-light she was able to glimpse a portion of the drawing room. There the rapping on the knocker caused the chrome bar trolley’s bottles of gin and absinthe to rattle against one another while crystal champagne glasses replied in protest. Even the sequins of Cecil Beaton’s black-and-white *A Living Modigliani*, hanging above the fireplace, seemed to quiver in expectation. Yet she could hear no stir of activity from within. No sofa springs sighed, no hurried footfall sounded. Through the fanlight she could see only a swirling dandruff of dust in the stairwell and spiders parachuting down their skeins of thread.

‘He’s not home... saw the coppers take him just after noon. Not a black maria — only your standard Austin — so perhaps a few questions and he’ll be back soon,’ said a male voice.

It was deep and artfully accented, muffled as if wrapped in a scarf or a balaclava. It seemed to originate from the other side of London. The speaker revealed himself only as a movement among the sparse branches of a gangly hawthorn. The bush was clothed in very few leaves and a mere handful of flowers, yet nothing of the speaker could be seen.

For a moment Gráinne wondered if it was the fox itself that had spoken.

‘Talking to you is like speaking to a fish underwater. Next time why not use a string and two cans,’ she replied at last to the hawthorn.

In response, a couple of the shrub’s few remaining leaves drifted to the pavement. They were trodden underfoot by a couple walking arm in arm. Then she glimpsed a figure crouched behind a neighbouring rhododendron. His shadow pooled darkly amongst the cloying pink flowers. When she reached through the fence, brushing the petals in search of a body, she came away with nothing but a handful of flowers — their colour and smell reminded her of Sunday’s freshly carved beef.

‘Stop! Why has he been arrested?’ asked Gráinne.

But the shadow had long since slipped away. Only a thrush remained, flitting between hawthorn and rhododendron. Its freckled breast heaved as though preparing to tell her more about her brother’s fate. But when black eye met green, the bird turned its back. It balanced, shifted, spread its wings, dropped from the branch and soared away.

As the silence lengthened, Gráinne drooped, her shoulders slackened until they resembled the curves of an ampersand. The warm glow she had felt for the bronze fox trickled out of her like sand running through a sieve. Almost more than she yearned for the sight of her brother, she became obsessed with the thought of a cup of tea, a slice of cake — preferably Madeira. She wanted so badly to sink into a sofa with a cushion at her back, an ottoman beneath her bare feet. Shoes discarded, red nails exposed, toes, blisters, bunions released into cool air.

Bored by this idyll, Henry abandoned his self-inspection. His head swung up towards the garden railing, while his tail quivered like a loose loop of frayed string. He let out a deep, decisive bark that seemed to come up from somewhere subterranean. The spaniel appeared very pleased with its resonance as it erupted from deep within

his chest, its ferocity shook the golden curls of his slight frame. But still not a flower petal stirred, and no one in sight was cowering in fear.

Meanwhile, Henry abandoned his vigil and cocked his leg, relieving himself on the brown-ribboned handle of the typewriter case.

‘Fantastic, Henry. Thanks for making the effort to record the situation,’ she said.

The little dog shook his head and looked up at her. One ear perched atop his head, turned inside out. Always agreeing with her wholeheartedly, the spaniel let out a single consoling bark. Then, finding his lead disregarded in the commotion, he promptly bolted towards the garden gate. In his hurry he grazed the front wheel of a passing cyclist, who rang his bell, scattering expletives like confetti into the afternoon air.

‘Damn it,’ said Gráinne. After retrieving Henry, she returned and sat down with a ‘harrumph’ on the top step.

Both exclamations were meant to encompass the entire universe: the day, her blistered feet, her eyes that needed matchsticks to hold them open although it was only three in the afternoon, her brother’s arrest, and the wayward dog. Then she sighed and gave a short laugh of resignation. This came out more like a bray because hysteria bubbled not far beneath the surface.

Just that morning, she had raised a thimbleful of whisky to her reflection, to her future. The Scotch had come from a bottle intended as a gift for Grayson. When he returned, she was sure he would notice the loss of those few drops. But as she sat on the steps, uneasy about his well-being, she no longer cared. Nor did she find it amusing that her morning resolution to embrace new beginnings, thanks to him, had come to nought so soon.

Why had the police taken Grayson to the police station? How long should she wait before trying to find a room for the night? She forced the anxious questions aside and focused instead on an errant scuff mark on the black-and-white tiles beside her, wishing — not for the first time — that her daughter Isobel was still by her side.

On the long boat trip from Christchurch to London, Gráinne had at first enjoyed extended stretches of her daughter’s company. They strolled the decks, heads inclined towards one another in conversation. Even on the days when the boards were slick with foam or hard with frost and ice, when midges harried and bit, they had enjoyed these companionable walks and conversations.

They observed the gulls and seabirds as they wheeled and swooped around the funnels of the steamship, and Isobel looked them up in Richard Kearton's *Pocket Guide to British Birds*. The book omitted some of the more exotic species, but served them well as they drew closer to England. They also filled their hours with reading and deck quoits.

Somewhere between Suez and Port Said, however, Isobel formed a friendship with Marjorie the daughter of an Oxford don. After a fervent game of backgammon, they had begun a conversation and soon discovered they would attend the same girls' preparatory school in Headington, Oxfordshire — they would even be in the same form — though Marjorie would be a day pupil and Isobel a boarder. From that moment they were inseparable.

They spent hours with their heads close together in deck chairs or lounging about in each other's cabins. As they lay on their bunks and gazed dreamily up at the shiplap ceiling, they often discussed their upcoming nuptials — the shared groom, their cinema idol the modish Douglas Fairbanks Junior. They also spent hours poring over an old photograph of Rupert Brooke. They scanned the decks, in search of his reincarnation amongst the stewards and passengers. Each night, his picture was tucked safely between the pages of his *Collected Poems*. Gráinne suspected they had not read a single line of his poetry.

Because Marjorie possessed several recent editions of *The Sphere*, the girls often reclined on her bunk, studying and talking about the pictures. They often carefully cut them out and pasted them into an old, little-used ship's log — a gift from one of the crew.

Somewhere in the Mediterranean the idea arose of Isobel travelling on to Oxfordshire with Marjorie when the ship arrived at its final dock. The girls' plan was that they would spend the remainder of July and part of August acquainting themselves with the countryside around their new school. They meant to cement their friendship, scout out the best tea houses, and watch as many films as they could squeeze in and their pin money would allow. Gráinne assumed there would also be the inevitable crushes on local boys.

Of course, Isobel would catch the train to London in mid-August to spend a fortnight with her before the Michaelmas term began — as a boarder she was due at the school on September the third. *Of course*, her mother would be accompanying her to settle in for the new term. *Of course*, they would be spending some lovely days

together before they were separated. *Of course*, she would behave like a sensible young lady and mind her p's and q's. *Of course*, she knew her mother would miss her; she was not so ignorant as to overlook the fact that this was the first time they had ever been parted. But — and this was exclaimed with much gusto — *it was time that Mother had the chance to pursue her own interests and stretch her wings.*

'I'm fifteen now,' Isobel said.

'Yes darling, you have come to quite a ripe old age. When you turn sixteen, you will be quite past your prime.'

In retaliation, the wind took Gráinne's new straw hat with its wide green ribbon. It tossed it over the ship's railing into an approaching swell. The hat bobbed, was caught in a swirl of current, circled twice in a nod to Poseidon, was sucked down into the watery depths.

'Look, Mother, I just want the chance to get to know Marjorie better. I know that you want me to make friends at my new school to help me settle. This will help me. It will give me an advantage,' said Isobel.

'Yes, I understand but this was meant to be time we spent together. Just the two of us,' said Gráinne. Her hair was blown forward onto her face and, with long smooth fingers, she tried to push it from her eyes. She did this swiftly in order to continue reading Gráinne's face.

'I am going from small town provincial Christchurch to the dreaming spires of Oxford. Unfortunately, unlike you, I don't have a twin to protect me and to put any nemesis in their place. I'm sure there will be other boarders travelling down early, or other day girls we might chance to meet about town,' said Isobel.

'I wouldn't say that Grayson necessarily protected me,' said Gráinne. Her hand rose to her throat and rubbed the delicate skin either side of her windpipe.

'I know that you found it hard even going from the Cambrians to Christchurch — you've told me often enough. So, imagine how wonderful it will be for me to have a friend already. It's not as though the Waddells are complete strangers; you've grown fond of them on the voyage. Please, please say yes.'

Isobel wrung her hands desperately and then her fingers lightly plucked at the delicate wool of Gráinne's coat like a hungry fledgling pecking for food.

'Well, I'll think about it for a few days. I'll decide by the time we dock in Gibraltar,' Gráinne said.

As she watched a solitary gull wheel on the currents of wind and hover in the air above the ship the following afternoon, she remembered both how right, and yet how wrong, Isobel had been about her own transition. Her mind drifted back to the day before her and Grayson left the Cambrians. The town was otherwise known as Welshman's Gully and their Irish heritage had always set them apart.

In that small community most of the voices rang with a Gaelic lilt. Their Irish burr had them marked out for teasing and torment. It was true her brother was always trying to come to her aid. But she had been perfectly capable of defending herself. More often than not it was him who needed protecting.

The fists on this occasion had held more than the usual malice because this fight was about more than differences, this time it was about opportunities and choices. When she looked back on the incident from an adult perspective, she realised it had been more about frustration than anything else. This knotted and tangled emotion had created within Aidan Morgan an internal whirling dervish that expressed itself through bitterness and rage. This was what had swept all control aside, what had made the lad bite and claw. The boy seemed engaged in a kind of internal howling at a world from which Grayson and she, whether deserving or not, were able to find a way out of. For the Welsh boys, life in the mines was a life sentence.

As Gráinne sat on the checkerboard step of Number 9, she realised for the first time that the boy had once harboured a crush on her — which had probably further fuelled his anger. It had shown itself in the extra seconds he held her down at bullrush; the way his voice rose louder than the others when they jeered that her legs were short as a leprechaun's; in the look that passed between them when she caught him watching her change behind a tree at the swimming hole. He always scowled when their eyes met, furious at his own interest.

She understood it as an adult for the schoolboy confusion it had been. He hadn't known what to do with his feelings or his body's urges, so he tried to purge them by turning his fists on her. She had seen the same behaviour in her own son — now grown and independent. They were both boys who used their fists and anger to deal with a surfeit of emotion. This was before they learnt to swallow it down and become men. Thank goodness I bested Aidan — I sure put any thoughts of romance out of his head, or he may have been scarred for life, Gráinne thought, smiling.

The fight had begun in a small draughty classroom that smelt of new timber, damp laces of hand-me-down boots and was scented with coal. A room where the fuel used to feed the small potbelly was made up more of dust than of lumps. This floating smudge settled on everything — desks, chairs, in the hair, even in the whorls of fingers. It served to saturate and mark the young lives, shaping their trajectories as small, long before adulthood.

Coal and gold for these children were equally a curse and a boon. Most were destined to work in Welshman's Pit or on the tall mechanical sluicer the twins' grandfather had installed to wash out the ore. Looking back Gráinne guessed a graveyard in the Somme would have provided a different resting place for some. Not a happy ending to their opportunity to escape the place and see something of the world.

On the outside, the schoolhouse wore freshly painted white weather boards and a blue corrugated-iron roof. A silver birch stood alone in the yard, its milky trunk luminous against the dust. When she first started school at five, she had believed that she might dip her fingers into that bark and draw them out coated with fresh cream.

Nearby stood a small A-framed shelter with a cerulean roof. It protected the school's heavy cast bell. Each morning and afternoon its peal cut the mountain air, ringing out as sharp and clean as teeth biting into crisp apple.

It was while Miss Baker rang that bell that Aidan Morgan struck Gráinne open-handed across the cheek. The blow came for no other reason than her clearing out books from her desk.

In a valiant effort at defence, her fingers quickly responded by nipping and tucking the skin of his inner thigh. At the same time, her incisors sank into the soft skin on the underside of his arm while she thrust him down to the wooden floor.

Within minutes, several tables were overturned, their ink wells bleeding a cornflower blue stain across the floorboards, their legs pointing at the ceiling. Broken chalk was littered about. Two dusters lay abandoned beneath the chalkboard, and beside them rested a bloodied lump of tooth.

The violence of Aidan's kicks against the rough-sawn wall echoed through the building beating out a tempo that nobody could ignore. Meanwhile he frantically tried to extract his skin from Gráinne's sharp teeth. All the time, Grayson stood in the corner rumpled and glaring. From his mouth came a spitting tomcat hiss.

Releasing her jaw at last and rising to her feet, Gráinne discovered a gob of spit dangling from her hair. She wiped it away with the back of her wrist, straightened her pink hair ribbons with a casual calmness, then returned the favour with a wad of her own. It flew through the space between them and landed squarely between her combatant's eyes.

The jeering mass of other pupils squeezed themselves back against the walls to avoid sustaining any injury and let the battle play out. The rough planks snagged their homespun jerseys, pulling threads and leaving runs they would later have to explain away at home. Fear of such consequences only increased the volume of their jeers. Here and there, black gum stuck to the knitted wool like glue.

Suddenly all went silent. Miss Baker strode in, cane already in hand. From her position opposite Aidan, Gráinne glanced over her shoulder and gave Grayson a lopsided smile and a wink.

'What on earth is going on here?' asked Miss Baker.

She hauled Gráinne toward her by the ear, at the same time hitting her with the cane squarely across the backs of the legs. Then, in order to grab them both securely by the ears, she let the cane drop to the floor.

'Nothing, Miss,' they both replied in unison.

But she was having none of it.

'I can see that you are observing the classmate not-so-secret code of silence out of some kind of feigned Welsh-Irish code of solidarity. But I'll tell you this for nothing: it's nay that easy to overcome cultural differences. The Irish and the Welsh would rather go to hell in a handbag, than to concede defeat in an all-out brawl.'

The pain in the children's ears was becoming unbearable, and Gráinne was given to wonder if she might ever wear a hat comfortably again.

'I won't have this kind of uncivilised carry on in my classroom. There'll be no civil war on my watch. Do you hear me!'

'Yes, Miss.'

'Sorry, Miss.'

'Now go to your desks, you'll both be staying after to clean up this disgrace. You'll be scrubbing my blackboard and the floorboards until those ink stains vanish.'

'Yes, Miss.'

‘The rest of you gawkers will write out your seven times tables five times. Standing back and doing nothing to stop these hoydens destroying my classroom is shameless. Lacking any moral fortitude, the lot of you!’

‘Yes, Miss Baker,’ the children said.

‘Charlie Morgan, wipe that gormless smile off your face or you will be cleaning blackboards along with your brother and his girlfriend. Now sit down. You have already forfeited part of your break, and none of you can afford to squander your education.’

After school, Gráinne emerged with an ink-smudged cheek and stiff knees. She found Grayson leaning up against the schoolhouse wall waiting.

‘I know you’ll miss me, but there’s no need to try and take your anger out on Aidan Morgan’s privates, or on William Owen’s ears. I saw you twisting them yesterday. They’re looking like cauliflowers without your help,’ she said.

Grayson didn’t reply but scuffed at the dirt with his big toe. He tried not to smile.

‘I can defend myself. You don’t need to keep trying to protect me or my honour — or lack of it,’ she said.

As they rode their ponies up the dirt track that wound up the hill, she added, ‘I don’t intend to live an ordinary life — and I won’t be helpless.’

But before the sentence was complete, he had already kicked his pony into a canter, so she dug in her heels and quickly gained on him. With a rush in her chest like a gust sweeping through a quiet valley, her plaits and satchel flew out behind. They flapped against her back while the pony’s hooves drummed a wild tattoo as they ate up the winding dirt track.

She still remembered that feeling of flying, the boundless potential of youth and freedom — the time when horizons felt as wide as aquilegia skirts. At that time, it was as though the world lay before her like an oyster, succulent and tasting faintly of the sea — that she need just tip back her head to drink it in — for life to slide as an aphrodisiac down her throat and be swallowed whole.

Gráinne looked from the steps to the residents’ garden, then at the row of roses that drooped, browning and blown under the weight of their spent flowers. Sparrows plucked the last remaining seeds from the sunflower heads, glutting themselves on the final days of summer. She recognised that up to this point, ordinary had been exactly what her life had been: marriage, children, a large house in the leafy Christchurch suburb of Merivale.

Until the war came and everything changed. Her husband died at Passchendaele. She was left to raise two children alone. Her father disappeared — last seen clutching a bottle somewhere on the rugged west coast. Though rumour had him dead in the bush, he eventually emerged unable to live entirely in the open, a figure who lingered on the margins and seemed incapable of stepping beyond them. Her grandparents had recently died, and the money they had hoarded had finally passed to Grayson and her.

Now a new possibility lay within her grasp. The money would give her a fresh start. She had come full circle. She asked herself as she looked down at the tiles, interspersed squares of black and white, wasn't she too old to feel her hair flying behind her in the wind — to swallow that oyster. She had to admit she didn't much like seafood. Maybe in time her tastes would change.

For now, the pressing question was simpler: how to get into the house. New ambitions would have to wait for another day. All she craved in that moment was nothing more than that cup of tea and a piece of cake or a biscuit in the company of Grayson. She hoped it would not be necessary to break him out of jail, for baking was not one of her strengths. A file in a cake wasn't going to work, although she knew that one of her sponge creations might well serve to punch its way through stone and mortar.

Henry scratched at his ears while she crawled about on the doorstep testing for loose bricks or empty pockets of mortar. No flowerpots, no loose tiles, no hidden key — the search ended quickly.

Just as she was about to traipse out to Brompton Road and hail a cab, a police car drew up and a barely rumpled Grayson stepped out. He looked as though he had been merely enjoying the company of a friend over crumpets and lemonade. Upon seeing her, he clasped her to him wrapping her in a tight embrace.

'Sorry. Detained at the station — nothing serious. Didn't manage to untangle myself as quickly as I'd have liked. I assume you are simply gasping for a nice cuppa,' he said.

'I was beginning to worry but our usual guardian angel kept me informed — repentance and retribution still in progress.'

'Ah. Father's made his way onto the scene again has he. Well at least you weren't left dangling, come in. Let me know what you think of the place. It's really

rather smashing, though regrettably a couple of undesirables inhabit the square. Talk about unfortunate coincidences. The Devereauxs are at Number 3.'

'No! I do hope that's not going to be too uncomfortable for you darling?'

'I am well past mooning over that departed ship. There's a new book out by Angus Mowbray on the phonetic origins of Greek verbs. It deserves my complete devotion.'

Grayson hefted in the trunks and the hatbox while Gráinne wheeled in the essentials — the leaf-green bicycle, the basket that housed the beast and the typewriter to record errant thoughts. Henry yawned extravagantly, his jaws stretched wide enough to display every tooth and a stubborn shred of gristle lodged near a back molar. Then he shook himself so that one ear again sat inside out on top of his head.

Meanwhile, the man in the shrubbery slipped quietly back to Number 14.

Nocturnal Delights

When designing a garden, a conscientious landscape planner should consider not only colour and form, but also the inclusion of species that flower after dark. Such plants as the moonflower, evening primrose and deadly nightshade bring visual interest at night. Equally important to consider are species whose scent intensifies after dusk, including nicotiana and night-scented stock. The incorporation of such varieties into a well-designed scheme ensures that the garden space can be enjoyed by visitors both day and night.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.69.

Saturday, 16th July 1932

Gráinne wore herringbone tweed pants and a matching Norfolk jacket with a belt across the back. A deer-stalker hat flattened her chestnut bob, while a pipe dangled from one pocket. Its precarious angle was evidence of her disregard, for although she considered lighting it just for a lark, she had no desire to carry the heavy object around with her all evening.

Just as she thought of abandoning it amongst the foliage of an enormous potted palm beside the front door, Grayson said, 'Don't even think about it!'

After straightening his tie, he returned the pipe from her outstretched hand to her generous pocket and added a bone-handled magnifying glass.

'Why do I have to take the leading role? Why can't you be Holmes and I Watson?' she asked, nudging him playfully with her hip.

As she spoke, she swung the large black door open to reveal an evening sky speckled brilliant with pollen-like stars. The summer air felt warm and gossamer against her skin, hovering at street corners with the lightness of a spider-silk shawl. It skirted away from the houses where the gas streetlights stood pencil-straight. They guarded the central garden like silent sentries. Along the length of the street, checkerboard squares of window light twinkled golden in the night.

'This tweed is insanely itchy around the collar, and you would think a supposed genius would have had more sense than to carry around this kind of paraphernalia.'

She ran her fingers beneath the thick collar, trying to loosen the fabric. Then she stretched out the pleated pockets, raising her eyebrows at Grayson, showing him

that neither the pipe's French horn shaped bowl nor the magnifying glass was secure within.

But he just ignored this and said, 'As I am currently under investigation, I'm hoping to blend into the background. Anyway, you've always had such an aptitude for being the centre of attention.'

She scoffed.

'A Moriarty outfit might have suited you better. Top hat, black coat, razor-sharp collar, a cane with concealed blade.'

In passing, she plucked a delicate pink rose protruding between two fence spindles and tucked it into her buttonhole. A sleeping bee stretched and emerged from the centre of the flower. As she brushed the insect from her lapel, she added:

'Posing as Moriarty could well lull someone into a false sense of security. They might let a gun fall from their handbag, pull out a used garrote to wear as a necklace, scratch their back with a stiletto.'

'Doctor Watson's inconspicuous sidekick seems a little more appropriate at this point,' Grayson replied.

'More likely it's an excuse for you to dress in comfortable clothes,' she said.

Then, she raised the magnifying glass to her eye, drew up her brows and looked him up and down, focusing closely on the orchid in his buttonhole. 'Hmm... *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*. I like the Victorian symbolism — a taste for decadence? Planning a hedonistic rendezvous?'

With a wink, he said, 'I'm sure this party will be very tame. If it gets out of hand, I have the means to check if anyone sets your heart racing.'

With that, he took the stethoscope from around his neck and attempted to press the diaphragm to her chest, but she carried on walking, brushing it aside with an elbow and a laugh. Her shoes ground the footpath's scattered rose petals into mush. Those that remained untrodden shone silver in the moonlight.

'I've gone to quite a lot of trouble to source just the right tie for this party,' Grayson said.

He smoothed the tail down the length of his chest. It was a dark navy with a deep red diagonal stripe.

'Some chaps I knew who served in the 5th Northumberland Fusiliers. It only just arrived by the morning post.'

'The blue and red becomes you. Moss, on the other hand, is not really my colour. I'd look far better in scarlet, don't you think?' said Gráinne.

He laughed and jiggled the garden post as they passed. It moved not an inch.

'The methods of Holmes and Watson could be some help this evening,' said Gráinne, who changed her mind about the buttonhole, ran up the stairs and passed the flower through one of the neighbours' letter boxes.

'Posing as detectives while actually detecting. Who would have thought?' said Grayson.

'Ha! Let's hope we don't come up against too many Jack the Rippers or Hawley Harvey Crippen also embodying their characters.'

'A useful first step — identify the neighbours before they identify us. Mightn't be so easy after my picture in *The Times* this morning.'

He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his glasses.

'Well, you were helping the police with their enquiries, apparently,' said Gráinne with a nudge.

Having arrived at Number 17, Grayson hesitated on the top step. His hand came up and rested on Gráinne's upper arm. Looking into her eyes, he said, 'Thanks Grain. You've been a brick.'

'Well darling, you know I'm a huge Agatha Christie fan.' She tapped her temple with a carnation-red nail, 'Got to keep the little grey cells active,' she said.

Then, before entering the party, Gráinne glanced back at the garden square, taking comfort from its green beauty as she prepared to brave what she saw as the untamed jungle of social obligation. The final breath of scented air steadied her when the door opened, and a group of young women dressed as sirens spilled onto the footpath. They formed a kaleidoscope of movement and colour, fracturing and reforming as they danced off. They only hesitated for a moment on the corner of Brompton Road — all crimped bobs, exposed thighs and badger eyes.

'The carefree nature of youth,' Grayson said, as he gazed after them.

When they at last managed to squeeze inside the door, they found themselves awash amidst a sea of bodies. A shipload of pirates was competing for space with a female circus troupe. In the tussle, the geometric black-and-gold wallpaper had sustained a jagged rent, and a chrome wall scone was left hanging by a single wire thread.

‘You’re sounding like a wistful centenarian,’ said Gráinne as she sidled between a centaur and a unicorn, at last losing the pipe when it snagged on the beast’s horn.

‘Must be the result of the prison food and horsehair mattress.’

‘Come on — you didn’t even see the inside of a cell, let alone sample the bread and water.’

She punched his arm playfully, sliding two glasses of champagne from a silver tray, narrowly avoiding a maharani and a mermaid. The two women hardly noticed, as they were too busy entwining their limbs, their lips, their tongues.

Entering the drawing room, Gráinne was surprised at the size of the space. A grand piano stood out against plum panelling. There was a large fireplace with oversized chrome firedogs, and fanned, stepped wall sconces that glowed, softening the gloom. As she squeezed into a space beside an empty couch, she thought how the burnt sienna upholstery set off to perfection the mossy fabric of her lapels. She gave Grayson a small nod as he wandered off into the crowd, spilling champagne and dropping professions of geniality in his wake.

It was four cocktails before anyone approached or spoke to Gráinne, by which time her cheeks had taken on a warm, companionable glow. She directed this new-found bonhomie toward a slim woman who appeared beside her in the costume of Hercule Poirot, admiring the curling c’s of her extravagant black moustache. Both sides of this were stained a vibrant violet by the icing from a large slice of cake, the final bite of which had only just disappeared between her rosebud lips. Its colour mirrored the rosy skin of the woman’s fine-boned face and neck.

The fingertips of her slim hands peeped from the cuffs of an overlarge black man’s dinner jacket while a white bowtie and waistcoat matched her black-and-white lace-up shoes.

‘Delicious moustache,’ said Gráinne.

‘Thanks...I do believe we might be neighbours,’ said the woman, and as her dimples flashed visible despite the curling moustache, all Gráinne could think was that she and this woman would definitely be friends. There was a warmth about her, like a contagion.

Gráinne gingerly grasped and squeezed the outstretched hand. To avoid most of the icing, she only touched the fingertips, and these she held very lightly, though the smile on her face broadened.

‘I’m Katherine Verlainne from number 3,’ the woman said. She bowed and her eyes shone as brightly as the wall sconces. ‘Budding ingénue and aspiring actress at your service. You must be the other half of the pair that moved into number nine. I’ve already met your brother, Grayson. My friends call me Kat.’

Gráinne couldn’t help but be charmed and her smile stretched wider still.

‘Interesting surname. Is it French?’

Gráinne had always held an interest in the origins of names and ancestry.

‘Yes — England by way of Normandy, before the ancestors finally settled in the Square.’

Kat gave a yawn so wide that it revealed her tonsils. Then her bright eyes came to rest on Grayson. He was over by the piano trying to extract a wood nymph from a life-size sculpture of Krishna. The statue glowed in peacock colours and was being treated rather like a tree.

‘Your brother’s been making quite a name for himself. I saw him down at the police station the other day, and again in this morning’s paper. Always spices up the day when there’s a bit of danger and intrigue. The Square overall is usually really quite tame. Though the late Cynthia tended to liven things up a bit,’ said Kat.

‘Cynthia? The woman who met with an accident? You were friends?’

‘More passing acquaintances, I like life to be interesting but I’m not really part of the fast and loose crowd.’

Again, she looked over at Grayson, and her fingers twirled the ends of her moustache now clean of icing.

‘Just because Cynthia was wild, didn’t mean she deserved what happened to her. Personally, I’d like to see it put to rights, but William insists I don’t get involved. That’s what happens when your brother is a stick in the mud.’

‘How does your brother fit into this?’

‘He’s that tall serious type leaning against the bookcase. His lack of costume pretty much sums him up — genuinely rather boring. Typical personality of a plod.’

Gráinne glanced over and saw a tall man with greying temples propping up the book collection. His masculinity seemed to shrink *Little Women* and overcome all the inhibitions of *Pride and Prejudice*. Where his shirt and jacket rode up, exposing his forearm, the browned limb seemed to throb with vein and muscle. She thought a night alone with him might cause Lady Chatterley to blush. I don’t think he looks especially boring, Gráinne thought, and had to fan her heated face.

Aside from his physical presence, there was a seriousness about him that had etched a permanent cleft between his dark brows. But as his eyes met hers across the room, the skin wrinkled at the corners reminding her of the gull-tracks at St Claire. They were the deep brown of freshly turned earth.

‘He’s some kind of policeman?’ she asked. Her voice came out a little weak and high.

She brought her eyes back to rest on Kat in an attempt to quell further impure thoughts while placing her cool palms against her warm cheeks.

‘Chief Inspector at South Kensington station. Between you and me, he brings a sorry lack of imagination to the role...*Unlike us.*’

In saying this, Kat indicated their costumes with a flourish and raised her palms in a shrug, to which Gráinne nodded in agreement.

‘We’ve not only a common interest in amateur detection, but enough knowledge between us to stock a lending library,’ said Kat.

Gráinne laughed at the repeated flamboyant way she swept her fingers from the tops of their heads, down to the tips of their matching co-respondent shoes, then pointed to a shelf where, crammed amongst others, were works by Marsh, Allingham and Sayers, interspersed with several books by Christie. Kat straightened her bowtie while Gráinne tried unsuccessfully to extricate the magnifying glass from her pocket.

‘I assume you’re trying to work out who may have put an end to Cynthia. I’ve no idea why your brother was taken in for questioning, but I’d be keen to help find out.’

With that, she quirked a single eyebrow raising it so high it disappeared into her chestnut fringe.

‘Care to join forces? I doubt you’re even familiar with who the suspects are or why they might have wanted to harm Cynthia,’ said Kat.

‘How—?’

‘How do you know I’m not the culprit? Dr Sheppard and Roger Ackroyd situation — guilty narrator and all that?’

Gráinne found herself wrong-footed in her attempts to look innocent, which Kat seemed to find especially amusing. She let out a tinkling laugh that possessed the ring of a teaspoon tapping lightly on the side of a crystal flute. All heads turned toward them before quickly losing interest and pivoting back around.

‘The night Cynthia was killed, I was out for dinner with your brother,’ said Kat.

Her hand then came up and gripped her chin.

Gráinne suspected she was preventing herself from looking across the room, at Grayson. There was a definite interest there.

‘True, I have more than one motive for spending time with you,’ Kat said. Then she winked.

‘I left him quite sozzled, just after midnight, as I put in a few hours at the station — I help William out sometimes; receptionists are hard to come by.’ She gave her moustache another coquettish twirl. ‘Especially ones capable of dealing with the charming folks who are always trying to book a room at that particular South Kensington exclusive hotel.’ She mimed a ringmaster beckoning children into the big tent before continuing, ‘I was wo-manning the counter from midnight ‘til morning. That’ll be backed up by the bobbies on the morning beat. So, partners?’

Gráinne thought for a brief moment, then gave her an enthusiastic nod. As they shook on it, Kat lifted another glass of champagne from a tray beside her and offered one across. The bubbles travelled up Gráinne’s nose and danced about in her sinuses before going on to delight her other senses. In unison the two women sank into the sofa, and the business of detection began.

‘Father Brown over there is Peregrine Montgomery. He lives at Number 14 with his newly acquired secretary, Mr Aintree. Only employed the man a few months ago,’ said Kat.

Gráinne was beginning to enjoy herself and the champagne made her feel light and effervescent. She listened with one ear, while the bubbles rising to the top of her glass and inaudibly bursting with a *tink, tink*, also demanded her attention.

‘He’s a close friend of the Remington-Browns, who occupy the top two floors of Number 10. They’ve been posted overseas since last May, so they’re definitely out of the picture. Perry’s a tad colourful — likes his bread buttered on the other side, if you know what I mean, darling.’

Gráinne looked over to the corner by a large potted palm. Perched on the edge of an octagonal side table were two men dressed as chorus girls, entangled in a tight embrace. The hands of an ormolu clock, balanced precariously behind them, ticked on. It was unperturbed by any of the revellers’ antics, meticulously keeping track of time.

‘I might have said he wouldn’t hurt a fly, but there was some kind of ding-dong the other week between him and Dorian Devereaux from Number 5. I heard it had something to do with why Dawes, his butler of many years, suddenly moved out,’ said

Kat. She brushed back her fringe from her forehead revealing a pair of startlingly blue eyes.

Gráinne looked across at the man called Perry. He was occupied assisting a swan to untie its wings. The feathers had become entangled in the window catch. There was a moment of tension when the pair almost brought down the heavy curtains, but somehow, they remained on their feet. She was reminded a little of a mole, for his small eyes were damp and shiny behind thick, black-framed glasses. When he finally managed to release the wedged vane and its quill, his freed hand went to the swan's bottom and lingered there for more than half of a showtune.

Relieving a passing waiter of an entire tray of hors d'oeuvres, Gráinne consumed over half of the tiny treats before Kat could continue. She motioned towards the corner of the room, where a well-matched couple stood by a baby grand piano. They were dressed as Scheherazade and her Arabian prince.

'Our hosts for the evening, the Calverts. Doctor Enid Calvert has quite a fashionable medical practice — mostly women's complaints,' said Kat.

She saw that the woman's costume made the most of her strengths, for her blonde hair was long and thick. It was arranged in a plait which snaked down her back and disappeared amongst layered veils and scarves that floated over luscious curves, softening them.

Suddenly a voice between them interrupted their analysis of the party-goers:

'So, quite the utilitarian suit you have on there — a pocket for everything. I am a sucker for tweed and a well-buttoned waistcoat, especially when worn by a woman. As you crossed the room, I noticed yours did much to heighten the curves of your derriere.'

The speaker was a man who had slid between them with the skill of an especially dexterous sardine. Dressed as Caesar, his toga was wound loosely and as a result there were a number of unfortunate openings. A slim cheroot discharged more smoke than seemed possible from so slender a cigar. Neither the two women's disinterest nor the arid smoke dissuaded him from beginning his own rambling commentary. His monologue commenced as soon as his bottom touched the seat and was concerned with the state of his gout and treatments for his bunions. Unfortunately, his conversation lacked the edge to cut through the smoke that hung like a pall.

Gráinne wrinkled her nose and buttoned her jacket securely just in time, for he suddenly toppled drunkenly sideways and attempted to nestle into her breast. Thank

goodness for the thickness of tweed and the propulsion afforded by a good elbow, she thought. Recovering herself, she saw Kat pretending to sip her drink, the raised glass doing little to conceal her laughter. Unperturbed, the man held out a hand like a limp biscuit to each of them in turn.

‘George Fellows, from out on the Brompton Road. Doctor Calvert rents a charming suite of rooms from me on the Kensington High Street. Well-positioned but dish creet.’

He ended with a slur, unable to contract the adjective to its usual length. Then he tried to tap the side of his nose knowingly but missed entirely.

‘Discreet? Why would she need to be discreet?’ asked Gráinne, ignoring the hand.

‘I shouldn’t say... but you both look like you can keep a she-cret.’

‘Rather an astute judgement about someone you’ve only just met,’ said Gráinne behind her hand to Kat.

She managed to keep a straight face while Fellows hiccupped loudly and ran tremulous fingers across his brow. She wondered if he was about to bring up his dinner, so carefully inched a decorative pot within reach while keeping her eyes trained on his mouth.

‘She’s built up quite a reputation for helping the less fortunate. Little issues on the side, you know what I mean,’ he said, this time successfully tapping the side of his nose.

He gazed at a passing Christmas tree, a string of saliva dangling from one corner of his parted lips. While Gráinne frowned at the implication that a poor woman’s troubles ought to be treated like some kind of state secret.

Meanwhile, the trio by the piano had been joined by the Queen of Hearts and Dracula. The woman’s crown was perfectly poised upon the shellac of her Marcel wave; beside her, the Transylvanian hovered with coiled athleticism — a predator barely restraining the urge to spring. The man lit a cigar, and it burnt intensely red, like the devil’s coals.

‘Dorian and Thea Devereaux,’ said Kat, following the direction of Gráinne’s gaze. ‘He’s in the business of relieving the impoverished gentry of their ancestral lands; she studied microbiology at the University of Oxford. Past friends of your brothers, I believe — now less than acquaintances.’

Gráinne watched them with interest, trying to measure her wrath at their treatment of Grayson against their culpability in Cynthia's murder.

She admitted there was enough of the Byronic about him to command a first glance. His dark, tousled hair and its widow's peak sprang in a pronounced V from the forehead — undeniably appealing. He wore it longer than was the current fashion and it tended to curl where it brushed against the starch of his raised collar. She had always been prone to growing warm when her fingers could grasp a handful of her husband's hair at the nape, on the way down to his groin.

But any heat soon cooled when she observed that, despite his wife standing at his elbow, he turned to present his best profile to the room. She disliked the way he ran his tongue slowly over his upper lip, the lazy way his lids drooped to hood his eyes, the way he appeared to search the room for a neck in which he might sink his teeth. The affectation of the silver animal-adorned cane, the large, arid cigar.

All the while his hand rested proprietorially in the crook of Thea's back, his fingers tapping out some silent internal rhythm. Gráinne thought he fancied himself a modern Heathcliff — but to her the wildness felt rehearsed, a thin disguise for the predator within.

She thought his sculptured chin, dark eyes and swarthy looks must once have contrasted sharply to Grayson's fair-skinned, ginger-haired, wholesome boyish charms.

When their eyes met, she felt a cool shadow cross her chest. It was like the scent of autumn leaves raked in preparation for a bonfire — the withered residue of sunny weather. She understood immediately the cool hand of fear as it travelled the length of her spine: how easily this man might snap a neck. She looked away at once.

A beat later, his attention returned to Thea. Whatever they discussed caused two petals of colour to appear on his cheek bones. His hand, firm as a bandage, pressed around Thea's thin upper arm.

'Friends of yours too? You two seem to be taking quite an interest in their conversation,' Fellows asked, motioning toward the piano.

'No, just neighbours. My brother and I recently moved to the Square. Do you often mix with the Calverts socially?' asked Gráinne.

'Occasionally, but I try not to combine business with pleasure.'

He raised one eyebrow in a manner she thought he assumed looked rakish. It merely made one side of his face look apoplectic.

‘Rumour has it they’re in tight with the Devereauxs though,’ he said inclining his head in their direction.

‘What’s their common interest?’ asked Kat.

Gráinne saw Kat had noted Fellows’ liking for an overacted pose. She raised one eyebrow, brought up her hand to support her chin and frame her face, opened her eyes unnaturally wide and fluttered her eyelashes as though a midge were caught beneath the lid. This badly acted tableau only served to loosen Fellows’s lips further. This was probably aided by the three large highballs he had consumed since sitting down.

‘Yes, quite the success in matters relating to the inner workings of the fairer sex.’

Gráinne edged the pot slightly closer when he cupped his hand around his mouth. But he merely whispered at a volume loud enough for everyone nearby — and even a few standing at the edges of the room — to hear.

‘As I mentioned, something of a backyard business going as well.’

He brought his finger to his lips and shushed the crowd, although no one was listening to him aside from the two women. Most were occupied with their own amusements.

‘Removes unwanted babies. Told me herself — needed a back way in for the ladies who preferred not to be noticed. Says she’s performing something of a service. Society needs quality rather than quantity.’

Gráinne’s hand rose in shock, fingers pressing hard against her lips, though a question escaped, nonetheless.

‘Where did she train?’

He answered without hesitation.

‘Somewhere in Germany. Her mother’s German — boasts of it.’

‘And what might her business be with the Devereauxs?’

At the piano, Dorian extracted from somewhere in his cape a silver cigar cutter and a round cylinder from which he extracted a fresh cigar. After neatly snipping off the end, he lit it with a box of matches resting on the mantel. After several draws, the tip glowed fiercely, tiny embers tinting his face red and orange.

‘Good stock, the Devereauxs. Like all the great houses after the war — impoverished by death duties and taxes,’ mused Fellows, watching the group before continuing. ‘From the Kensington entrance, the good doctor helps rich women who

have problems conceiving. Clears the way for the stork's deliveries. At a price — charges heavily those that can afford it.'

With that, George Fellows rose and strode purposefully after a prancing filly who still cavorted despite her pole being unattached to any carousel. The candy-striped appendage remained visible for some time as it bobbed from room to room.

As Gráinne contemplated the precarious pyramid of cheese straws beside her and dwelt on the potency of champagne bubbles, a loud disturbance broke out by the piano.

A tray of glasses was shattered; shards flew across the floor. Then, as the bodies scattered, Dorian Devereaux was revealed attempting to grip the piano. Failing, he slumped first onto his wife's shoulder before sliding slowly to the floor.

Gráinne rushed forward and joined the cluster gathered about him. Around the room, woodland creatures and fictional beasts seemed to melt into the wallpaper unwilling to share the stage with so final a curtain call.

The man's hand clawed at his chest, attempting to loosen the ribbon that held in place his cape, until Thea prised it loose and let the garment fall away.

'Water,' he rasped out, his face turning crimson.

Thea seized one of the few remaining unbroken glasses from the tray and pressed it to his lips. He took several small sips, but they bubbled up and settled frothy on his lips. Suddenly one hand rose to his throat; he coughed once and took two long, rasping breaths.

'I should have chosen the orange, Thea,' he gasped.

'You had a choice to make,' she replied.

A waiter hurried over and handed Thea another large glass of water, ice cubes cracked against the glass sides. She raised it to his mouth, but with the exhale of that last solitary breath, his eyes widened.

A moment later, he was gone.

Help arrived too late. Enid Calvert pushed aside the crowd and knelt beside Devereaux in her bundle of scarves, her plait curling like a snake returning to a charmer's basket. She placed her ear to his mouth and listened for breath. Then she moved his arms up and down, attempting to expand and compress his chest. After several minutes she laid her fingertips over his eyelids, unsuccessfully trying to press them closed before she removed one of her scarves and laid it over his face.

For a time, there was only silence. The tick of the ormolu clock, the scratch of the wind at the window, the house settling.

Then, two waiters came and carried the body from the room while Thea made a show of bundling up the cape and tucking it beneath her arm, the paleness of her face contrasting sharply with the black cloth. As the body made its exit, Gráinne looked around and noticed that Peregrine was smiling broadly, that Grayson had turned a deathly shade of white, and that William Verlaine — who had taken no interest in the unfolding tragedy — was flicking intently through the second volume of *Mein Kampf*.

From a shelf beside the mantel came a voice. It wafted to her from behind a curtain of old man's beard that hung down the wall.

'He's been poisoned. Quick grab the glass, the cutter, the cigar, anything he's eaten,' the voice said.

But as Gráinne looked around she saw that the glass shards which had been scattered about the floor were now ground to dust. She knew that he hadn't eaten a single canape. Although she searched for them everywhere, neither the end of the cigar, the butt of the one previously smoked, nor the cutter was anywhere to be found.

Garden Staples

For many garden architects, the emphasis is on the showy: those plants that push themselves to the front of any display. These may be plants with large flowers or bright, vibrant colours. However, the talented garden designer should not underestimate the importance of the less flamboyant species that form the backbone of a good design — the ordinary garden varieties that provide the framework of the garden, its structure and shape. Such plants anchor the design and create the contrast that allows their showier neighbours to be seen at their best.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.49.

Sunday, 17th July 1932

It was the small hours of the morning before Grayson and Gráinne fitted their key into the lock of Number 9. Although several questions hovered on Gráinne's lips, they remained unspoken.

She was so tired that all she wanted to do was slip between the sheets and let her mind drift into blankness and forget the image of Dorian Devereaux's eyes so wide and dark in death. There had been an unnatural blackness in those depths, as though hell itself were reflected there. It was the absence of light that disturbed her most.

She dragged herself up the stairs and collapsed fully clothed on top of the bed's quilted cover, not even able to summon the energy to draw together the heavy velvet curtains at the floor-to-ceiling windows.

She didn't wake up until daylight streamed across her face.

She might have slept beyond eight had it not been for the arrival of a red-faced woman with the shape and colouring of an English robin: a rounded body perched on short legs, a cowl of ruddy skin spreading from her neck to her chest and staining her ample bosom crimson. Yet it was the bird-like way she flitted about the room — gathering discarded clothing and humming under her breath — that had endeared her to Gráinne from their first meeting, along with the steaming cup of tea she invariably placed beside the bed each Monday and Friday. No milk, just a slice of lemon, exactly how she liked it.

'Mrs Stubbs, you are a gem. Have I slept right through Sunday? Is it Monday already?' asked Gráinne.

‘No pet, I came in today as I am needing tomorrow off. I’ve got to take his nibs to a doctor’s appointment. Nothing serious mind you, just a few corns and a touch of gout but he may not be in any condition to drive himself home after,’ said Mrs Stubbs.

Thoughts of Mr Stubbs’s ailments vanished quickly when a loud banging at the door was followed by gruff voices. Some kind of altercation was going on below between Grayson and the callers.

‘Now don’t you worry yourself. I’ll pop down and sort this out — you just relax and take the time to wake up properly,’ said the woman. ‘What could they be thinking making that kind of racket at the weekend,’ she mumbled to herself before disappearing down the hall.

Gráinne quickly snatched up a light cotton robe and shrugged into it, descending the stairs just in time to see a handcuffed Grayson being manhandled into a police van.

‘I need to tell you about the orange, Gráinne — come visit me as soon as you can,’ called Grayson as his head was forced down to avoid the door frame while he was bundled inside.

‘The orange. Good lord, I hope it’s all right. I threw away that old peel beside the bed and replaced it with some nice potpourri I got from the Portobello Market yesterday morning,’ said Mrs Stubbs.

She ran her hands through her thinning hair, leaving the fringe standing at an odd angle. It exposed her high forehead.

‘Don’t you worry Mrs Stubbs. I’m sure it was just his leavings from a late-night snack.’

In the entry hall by the door stood two uniformed police officers, along with William Verlaine. Kat’s brother leant against the parlour door frame, one eyebrow cocked, comfortably self-contained. Gráinne chided herself for noticing how well he fitted his suit under such circumstances and returned her attention to the vehicle doors as they slammed shut. She caught Grayson’s worried expression through the small square of glass as it pulled away.

‘We have a warrant to search these premises. Apologies for the inconvenience,’ said Verlaine.

As he handed her a folded piece of white paper, his gaze briefly travelled down the length of her thin nightwear before returning to her face. When their eyes met, she saw genuine regret there.

‘What’s this about? You have already questioned Grayson with regard to Cynthia. He was cleared, so what’s changed overnight?’ she asked.

‘Something new has come to light, not to mention the murder of another person closely associated with your brother. I understand that, in the past, there were issues between your brother and Devereaux? His wife, Thea, was once engaged to Grayson?’

‘That was over years ago. Why would he suddenly want to kill the man now? Nothing’s changed beyond us coincidentally finding ourselves living around the corner from the couple. So, was he murdered then?’

‘Sergeant, come upstairs with me,’ he said, motioning to one of the officers and ignoring her questions. ‘Madam, could you please show us to Mr O’Rourke’s bedroom,’ he said, directing his command to Mrs Stubbs.

The old lady looked questioningly at Gráinne.

‘It’s all right, I’ll come up too, make sure nothing untoward happens,’ said Gráinne.

In Grayson’s bedroom, Verlaine strode straight to the wardrobe and opened the door.

Inside was a little dog, nestled amongst the shoes. One pair in particular — an especially shiny pair of brogues that seemed to have been little used — had been chewed down to the sole on one side and was devoid of laces.

After a brief tussle, Henry was lifted gently out. He guilelessly wandered over and planted himself on Gráinne’s foot.

‘He’s a particular passion for shoes and socks — something of a fondness for footwear,’ said Gráinne.

Grinning, she indicated her inability to free her toes, at the same time rubbing Henry between his silky ears.

‘An especially intelligent hound,’ said Verlaine, looking at her toes and running his tongue over his bottom lip. ‘But not exactly what I was after on this occasion.’

With that, he reached up, took down a shoe box and lifted the lid. Inside lay a single silver shoe and a blood-stained bowtie.

Gráinne sat at the table, her head in her hands, consuming a box of bonbons. Beside her on the floor lay a second box, empty save for a few strands of coconut clinging to the paper wrappings and a single flake of chocolate caught on the lid. During the half-

hour Gráinne spent consuming the sweet treats, Mrs Stubbs had completed several circuits of the parlour without bruising herself once, despite the room being stuffed with oversized furniture and her generous proportions.

Gráinne watched as the cleaner wielded her feather duster to great effect. Between passes she made Gráinne several pots of tea and produced a platter of scones that were fresh from the oven. They were arranged around a pot of strawberry jam — berries gathered from her own allotment, she told Gráinne — and perfectly whipped cream.

‘I’ve asked the milkman to leave two pints of cream in future rather than this scant one,’ she said.

Just before she was due to depart for the day, as she put on her woollen hat and coat, she said, ‘There’s a *coq au vin* in the oven, pet.’

When Gráinne gave her an adoring look, Mrs Stubbs added, ‘I do love to dabble in a bit of French cuisine — hence the need for extra cream.’

‘Oh, Mrs Stubbs, you are simply a dear, especially after the incident with Dorian Devereaux at the party last night. Did you hear what happened?’ asked Gráinne.

Mrs Stubbs took a step back, but the calm way she continued buttoning her coat suggested she had already heard the news.

Gráinne swiped at her eyes with the back of her hand, popped the last bonbon into her mouth, and squared her shoulders.

‘I need to get to the bottom of these crimes in the square. Let’s start at the beginning. Does anything particularly stand out to you around the time of Cynthia’s murder? I believe you were here cleaning several days before?’

Mrs Stubbs halted her dressing and sat down in an armchair while Gráinne poured tea and handed her a scone loaded with a generous serving of jam and cream.

‘Yes, I was here on the Monday, and then again, the day after the incident, the Friday. She was found in the small hours Thursday morning, if I remember rightly. I know because my Joe always gets paid once a month on a Thursday, and that pay contained a little something extra. My Joe, he always looks out for me. He brought me a new best hat — green with a feather.’

She removed her woollen hat and smoothed her greying hair.

‘I can’t recall anything out of the ordinary happening that week.’

‘No unusual visitors? Unfamiliar people hanging around the square?’

Gráinne poured the cleaner another cup of tea, adding two extra sugars, then offered her newly opened box of bonbons. Mrs Stubbs took four.

‘Why don’t you close your eyes for a moment, try and place yourself back into the scene.’

The cleaner tilted her head back. Silence followed, broken only by the rhythmic tick of a large carriage clock marking the passing of the seconds. Mrs Stubbs’s head drooped slowly forward until she emitted a series of little snores.

‘Mrs Stubbs!’ said Gráinne. She gently put her hand on the sleeping figure’s arm.

‘Oh, sorry love!’ said Mrs Stubbs, rubbing her eyes. ‘Me youngest’s stopping with us for a bit. Her first is suffering from colic and the sleepless nights just plain overtook me.’

‘No harm done — but did anything come back to you?’

Mrs Stubbs paused halfway to her feet.

‘I do remember now — that Friday, the day after the murder, there was a fella walked past just as I were locking up. Bit dodgy-looking. Hat low, cuffs frayed, eyes down. Then he looked up and down the street — couldn’t see me because I’d stepped back behind the porch post — and then he slunk down the stairs to that gardener chappie’s flat. Mr McSweeney that’s his name, lives in the basement flat at number 10. This was around three o’clock.’

As Mrs Stubbs retrieved several of the sweet treats from a hidden fold in her skirt and settled back into the chair, Gráinne watched in amusement as she proceeded to devour her bounty. All four disappeared within half a minute, and with each bite crumbs scattered across the width of the newly hoovered carpet.

Gráinne got up, went to the kitchen, and returned with a brush and shovel. She quickly swept up the fragments of biscuit just as Henry, ever vigilant, bounded onto the scene. She withdrew a small notebook from her pocket and scribbled down a few words.

‘Did you note anything else about his appearance? Was he tall, short, dark or fair? And any idea what time he might have left Mr McSweeney’s?’ she asked.

‘He was a stocky bloke, nothing remarkable there, but wore glasses. Completely bald he was, not a hair on his head.’

She rubbed her hand across her eyes as though she were literally removing scales, then blinked twice, returning to the topic with increased clarity.

‘He was the kind of fella I’d normally have taken no notice. Familiar like he was, someone I might come across in my neck of the woods. But he was carrying a black briefcase with him, that’s what I took to be a bit strange. Folks from my parts don’t own briefcases.’

Gráinne poured another cup of tea for Mrs Stubbs, who bit into her seventh biscuit, chewing it over and over like a cow working cud.

‘The case was black with gold initials stamped beside the handle. Like something a legal man or banker might have. Strange, because, as I said, he was quite a burly man, you know — big arms, buttons readying themselves to pop open around the chest. A bit like the inspector. But he looked like a man not afraid of physical labour. Not at all the type who sits behind a desk all day, sharpening his pencils.’

She brushed more crumbs off her skirt onto the rug, then tried to inconspicuously manoeuvre them under the settee with the side of her foot.

‘Also, come to think of it, he walked funny. A bit like one of them horse-handlers that had been kicked where it hurts. He crouched a little as he went, his feet were turned out.’

‘Thank you, Mrs Stubbs, you’ve been most helpful,’ said Gráinne.

As she got to her feet, readying the brush and shovel for Mrs Stubbs’s departure, she added, ‘If you’re sure there’s nothing else, I mustn’t hold you up. I’m sure you’re looking forward to getting home to your family.’

Then, with her hand on the doorknob, Mrs Stubbs turned and said, ‘Although if I remember rightly that was the day that I had the problem with the door.’

‘The door?’

‘That fellow went past as I was stepping onto the pavement. I’m always very particular about locking up. That day, because Mr Grayson had gone down to Oxford for a long weekend, I remember trying it twice to make sure it was locked. I figured I better make doubly sure seeing as he wasn’t coming back until Monday. He was coming via Paddington, late afternoon, on the 4.50 train.’

Gráinne took some ornaments from the single remaining unpacked box. She removed the brown paper and arranged them carefully on the shelves.

‘When I came on Monday, the door was unlocked. I’m so sorry, madam.’

‘Don’t you worry yourself, Mrs Stubbs. Maybe a problem with the catch. You have been such a help. I’ll look forward to seeing you again on Friday.’

After the woman departed, Gráinne went upstairs and collected a red velvet bag. It had a large brass peacock clasp and enough room inside to hold all manner of things. Into it she placed the large magnifying glass from the night before, a pair of tweezers and a powder compact.

Then she opened the front door and examined it closely from the outside. Her mouth fell open in concentration as she used the face powder from the compact to dust all around the lock, the fox's face and the ring clasped between its teeth.

She took out a snowy white handkerchief and pressed it gently onto the powder, then lifted the magnifying glass and inspected the result, lips parted as she focused, like a baby bird awaiting a worm. Nothing — only a vague smear where she hoped to find a print.

With a sigh she laid the handkerchief gently onto the hall table along with its indistinguishable smudges of powder. She took a table napkin from the dining-room cabinet and returned to the door.

Holding the napkin like a communion salver in her left hand, she used the tweezers to remove a short dark hair from beside the knocker. She prised it from a tiny crack in the wood. She folded it carefully within the square of linen and placed it on the table beside the handkerchief.

Through the magnifying glass, Gráinne noticed several fine scratches around the escutcheon. From the depths of her bag, she took a piece of paper and a soft drawing pencil. Holding it over the lock, she rubbed back and forth, capturing an impression of the scratches in the metal and the surrounding wood.

'Hmm, a set-up,' Gráinne mused softly to herself. The hair might prove useful, but the scratches she had recorded from the lock and surrounding wood could have been made at any time. At least she was taking small, purposeful steps, even if they ultimately proved of little use.

Frost Protection

At certain times of the year, some plants must be taken inside or protected from extremes of temperature. Such species can be either placed within the shelter of other larger, hardy plants which will provide overhead cover, or removed from harm entirely in a glass house or conservatory.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.16.

Monday, 18th July 1932

After clipping the lead onto Henry, Gráinne pulled the door shut behind her and thrust the letter into her pocket, having read it several times. *Come to the station at four this afternoon*, Kat had written. *P.S. Bring a handbag big enough to fit a file — a paper one, no prison escapes today!*

At four on the dot, Gráinne entered the squat brick building of South Kensington Station. She was greeted at the reception by Kat who wore the uniform of a clippie. A thick navy wool double-breasted jacket, a tight navy pencil skirt, a white blouse, a peaked hat and sturdy lace-up shoes. Her hat was embellished with a variety of badges bearing place names from far and wide. The collection gave the impression that its wearer travelled the length and breadth of England.

Around Kats neck hung a pair of black-rimmed spectacles that dangled from a gold linked chain. She put these on as Gráinne approached but instead of acknowledging her friend, resumed her study of the open document.

'What can I do for you today madam?' she asked.

Gráinne was a little taken aback but quickly recovered, masking her surprise by focusing her attention on Henry.

'I'm here to visit my brother, Grayson O'Rourke,' she said.

Kat shuffled together the papers into a neat stack, then snapped the file's cardboard covers shut, creating a puff of air and both of the women's fringes rose and fell.

Gráinne noticed that Kat carried a small over-the-shoulder leather bag. It was a common sight on London's buses, where a conductor kept his ticket machine. Kat, however, was using it for an entirely different purpose. She took out a small powder compact and a bright crimson lipstick, powdered her nose and touched up her lips. Gráinne realised the mirror was serving a second purpose: Kat was using it to watch

the men behind her. At the same time, her hand fumbled in the top drawer, rummaging for something just beyond her grasp.

Finally, the three officers behind her rose and, as the door swung closed behind them, a voice directed at Kat drifted back, 'We're off for a cuppa and a bite. Don't show us up while we're gone.'

To which remark there was a general guffawing.

When the men had safely retreated down the hall, Kat whispered, 'Quick, hand over your bag, collect it on the way out, I'll put the information I've copied into there. I'll come over tonight and we can go through it together.'

She had just stowed it safely under the counter when one of the officers returned and grabbed up his misshapen packet of woodbines. Gráinne turned on him an innocent placid smile while Kat bent her head to work to discourage further conversation. She took hold of Henry's lead firmly.

'Here, leave him in here while you visit, it wouldn't be wise for him to get ideas for a series of misdemeanors,' she said, fondling his ears. Then Gráinne saw Kat remove her cap and readjust the tight blonde bun beneath. As it settled more securely in place, she wetted her finger. She ran it along both eyebrows and smoothed back a few errant strands of hair, pulling them back behind her ears.

'William is out the back handing over to the evening crew and giving updates on any unsolved crimes. That's basically every crime that's occurred in the vicinity since the Great War. Possibly since the previous century,' she said with a laugh.

She tossed her head back and raised the wooden bench partition that separated them and stepped through it. Then, from the little leather bag, she took a key and led Gráinne down a corridor to the cells.

'Occasionally, when I pop by to brighten up the place a little, I leave handy clues strewn about on their desks. Still not much comes of it. I find myself also responsible for organising and maintaining all the files. I like to think of myself as the invisible chief inspector. I prompt them in subtle ways.'

As Gráinne followed Kat through to the cells, she saw a bedraggled streetwalker in the first one, her stockings ripped and dirty. The woman walked up to the bars and blew Gráinne a series of air kisses.

'Here's a lovely one boys. Bit old to be on the game, girl, but still, those perky tits might be worth a bob or two to ya, darlin'.'

Kat stopped beside her and took from her pocket a bag of lemon drops.

‘Keep your energy up with those Mary. Make sure you keep your mouth shut about this visit, alright.’

As the woman popped a lozenge in her mouth she nodded.

Kat gave a long and drawn-out sigh as they passed a cell with two inmates. Gráinne identified them as an extremely agitated postman complete with an undelivered bag of letters and a journalist.

‘The mail must get through,’ called the postman.

The latter scribbled with a grubby stub of red pencil into a small notebook. He had a general air of dishevelment, for his tie and unbuttoned jacket were both askew and his hair was sticking up in all directions like porcupine spikes. He continued to comb it through scissored fingers while he wrote.

Kat indicated the man’s cell and said, ‘A bit too succinct in his agitation. He’s in for breaching the peace, bursting out with too many bloodies and God-damns at a Worker’s meeting. Probably formulating a piece on police brutality and corruption as we speak.’

Hearing this, the priest crossed himself before taking out a hip flask from beneath his cassock. Kat nodded in his direction.

‘Round the back of the Hyde Park toilets fiddling about with young boys,’ Kat said.

‘How do you know all this?’ asked Gráinne, leaning in as close as she could to Kat’s ear.

‘I read the files — nothing else to do around here.’

Her eyebrows spoke volumes. They arched into inverted capital Vs.

As they approached Grayson’s cell, Kat took from her bag a smudged rag and used it to clean her glasses, all the while keeping it balled tight.

‘Hard to see through these when you don’t need them, but I’m all for authenticity of costume.’

Then, placing her back to the other occupants, she whispered, ‘Quick into your pocket, it’s the crime scene report and the evidence they have on Grayson. I copied them out for you. Whatever you do don’t let them know you have it. I wanted to take extra care, this is a good spot to pass it over, no prying eyes.’

Gráinne entered the cell to find Grayson stretched out asleep on a thin mattress that barely covered a wire-sprung single bed. Draped over his sleeping body was a

grey blanket with brown and yellow smudges. The room smelt strongly of urine, boiled cabbage and old chip paper.

‘Gráin, it’s good to see you,’ he said sitting up.

He patted the space beside him and, although Gráinne hesitated for a second, after carefully checking the area for urine stains, pubic hair and marks of desperation, she bent her knees, smoothed her coat and sat down. She breathed in the scent of him as they embraced. It was a mix of stale tobacco and worn tack. The familiarity of his nearness and smell reassured her.

‘You only have ten minutes together, so you’d better pass over the teaspoon and hacksaw smartly,’ said Kat with a grin and left.

Gráinne nodded, but her eyes remained on Grayson, concerned about the heavy creases beneath his eyes and the slightly fetid atmosphere of the cell.

‘Caught me napping sis, it’s been a long and restless night. Not much privacy in here and the plumbing leaves a lot to be desired. The philosophies of the residents leave little to the imagination either, always someone shouting from their soapbox.’

On cue a voice from the other end announced:

‘Take back the women’s vote.’

‘In here for his own safety, got two black eyes from his missus,’ said Grayson, nodding toward the neighbouring cell. ‘No harm in making a few friends while I’m in here. Could be useful connections if I end up on skid row.’

Gráinne found her eyes drawn to the marked and grubby porcelain bowl in the corner. The seat was missing and the bowl hadn’t been cleaned for quite some time.

‘It’s better not to look,’ he said, waving his hand at the toilet dismissively.

‘Yet another tangle I need to get you out of,’ she said. ‘Good thing I arrived in London when I did. Left to your own devices, you’d be serving a life sentence by Christmas.’

‘I’ll let ya feel me tits for a tenner,’ called out the harlot down the line to a passing young bobby. A chocolate-skinned African woman was led in, her wrists straining against the cuffs. It seemed likely she was also a streetwalker. The rough way the constable shoved her into the cell suggested familiarity, while the warm greeting she received from the other woman hinted they already knew one another. He quickly scurried away like a rat from the Titanic.

‘That was something of an eventful party last night!’ Grayson said.

‘A little wilder than I’m used to,’ said Gráinne. ‘All the more interesting for it. Sure beats tatting with Auntie June or a gimlet after the theatre at the Warner’s Hotel.’

These memories of life in Christchurch made her grin and a little colour stained her cheeks. She fanned it away with a letter she’d taken from her bag adding:

‘We don’t have much time. I need to know what Devereaux meant just before he died when he said he should have chosen the orange.’

‘I didn’t understand it. The orange was a token he gave to me at Ypres when I lost a game of poker to him.’

‘If you lost, why give you the orange?’ asked Gráinne.

‘It was a gesture of consolation as he’d taken from me Thea’s photograph. I guess he had designs on her even then. Must have caught sight of her photograph when I was unconscious.’

Grayson rubbed his forehead in thought.

‘His comment would seem to imply that maybe his ardour had cooled — how quickly love can turn to hate, did you see any sign of it? Had she contacted you, written at all?’

Gráinne’s eyes drifted from Grayson’s as she said this, her fingers twisted the ring on her own finger — around and around it went.

‘Could she be the killer? What might possibly be her motivation? I wouldn’t believe it of Thea. Although our courtship and engagement were brief,’ he said.

‘She had the means. You mentioned that she studied biology although we don’t know as yet how he was poisoned. Perhaps that will come out at the coroner’s inquest. There might be something in the file Kat gave me.’

‘Did you understand what she meant when she replied that he “had a choice.” The phrasing is a little awkward, could it have been an accusation?’

‘I’m not sure but it seems damned surprising that they’re not looking in the direction of the gardener who has access to all manner of seeds and leaves.’

‘I think that’ll be my next port of call. Most convenient for everyone to blame it on someone outside their social circle. Would tie it up quite nicely with the minimum of disruption,’ said Gráinne.

She squeezed Grayson’s hand trying to reassure him.

‘How did you come to meet Cynthia? And why would the police be searching your flat? Seems like a tip-off — you’ve not been here more than a month. I wouldn’t have believed even you could’ve got the backs up of the natives in so short a time?’

‘Honestly, I hardly knew the woman. I met her briefly once on the street when I first moved in. She was in tight with a fast crowd. She probably didn’t even note me on that one occasion — had her champagne goggles firmly in place.’

He rubbed his hand across his eyes and Gráinne realised the depth of his anguish and exhaustion.

‘Fast crowd?’

‘I watched her from the parlour window. She was with a couple of butterfly-like creatures. They hailed a cab out on Brompton Road and off they flitted. They were well past the point of being just a few sheets to the wind, more like the whole sail had come completely adrift.’

‘When was this?’

‘About a week or so after I moved in.’

‘So how did you come to be snuggling up to her dead body in the park?’

‘Usual story — drank too much, world rose-tinted, spinning gladioli, delphiniums at a lean. Ended the evening unconscious on a bench, thinking I was going to do a bit of star-gazing, but instead fertilising the plants. When I woke up, there she was. I’ve no idea whether she arrived before or after I laid myself out on the bench — I was more intent on sleeping outside, the smell of soil and a bed as hard as nails, hoping it would bring back some good memories of the army days for once.’

His mouth stretched wide in a yawn. He took a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his face carefully, then refolded the snowy cotton.

‘Speaking of hard beds,’ he said, affectionately tapping the mattress beneath them.

‘But you only just woke up.’

‘As I said before — soapboxes...’

‘Alright, I’ll continue working away while you lay about. Brandon McSweeney will be my next stop.’

Learning from the Masters

Before planting, or even planning any garden scheme, a wealth of knowledge can be gained by visiting and learning from other garden designers, gardeners and their work. Not only can ideas be gleaned during this process, but so too can preferences for plant combinations and inspiration for hard landscaping.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.121.

Tuesday, 19th July 1932

Gráinne figured there was no harm in confronting the situation head on: she would visit McSweeney at his house. But she also reasoned that this strategy required a three-pronged approach. First, she would visit the residents' garden and soak up as much calming, fragrant air as possible. Slow breaths, taken over a long period — at least an hour — would do it. Second, she would take along Henry. He would be no help in any physical encounter, but he certainly had a way of softening hearts when he tilted his head to the side and looked at a person with his soft brown eyes. Small children loved him, especially the feel of his silky ears. Finally, she dressed with care. Her feminine charms might no longer turn heads, but at least a floral dress and a touch of violet scent might soften a man's heart a little.

After much rifling through her trunks and boxes, she settled on a drop-waist cornflower silk dress, and to add a touch of flair, brown-and-cream co-respondent shoes. She wanted McSweeney to think of her as nothing more than a marginally attractive spinster with time on her hands — one with fine taste in shoes. She supposed that was, in fact, a very apt description. Why not play to her strengths?

With this in mind, she also put on a pair of reading glasses, perched a brown beret squarely on her fly-away hair — angled would have seemed a trifle risqué, she thought — and tucked a book beneath her arm. She chose *Bleak House*, though soon exchanged it for Austen's *Emma*. Why not add a touch of humour to the situation?

It was this she read while sitting in the garden, the hat beside her to reduce the amount of flattening — yet still, her hair drooped. The day had turned uncommonly warm and, just walking from her door to the bench beneath the oak, a dampness had gathered beneath her arms, while her fringe became dogtailed and stuck to her moist forehead. She wished she looked a little less like a fusty librarian despite her splendid

dress, and had worn even lighter clothing. Several of the garden's flowers seemed of the same mind. Their petals were limp and, in some cases, the foliage had wilted.

When Isobel and Gráinne sailed through the Middle East, light, floaty garments had been à la mode. She wished she could have pulled off the outfit Kat had worn the previous day, when they visited Fortnum & Mason: a peony patterned pyjama suit, a straw saucer hat, and lamé beribboned sandals.

Henry was quite taken with the birds. Having unsettled a family of blackbirds — whose glossy wings snapped in quick response to his frolicking advances — he moved on to tease a pair of magpies. As he narrowly avoided a swoop that came close to his ear, he froze mid-stride and began to paw and sniff at the ground, ignoring her calls to heel.

‘What’ve you got there, fella?’ she asked.

After digging frantically for a few minutes, Gráinne went over to survey the dirty piece of flotsam he had dragged from the small hole. Picking it up between two fingers and brushing it off with her other palm, she discovered it was a silver shoe. Perhaps it was the mate of the one dug out of Grayson’s wardrobe?

By the time she finally arrived at McSweeney’s flat, her hair was even more dishevelled, but she pulled her beret down firmly. Having hurried home and deposited the shoes carefully on their hall table, she had decided against changing her outfit — and regretted it immediately upon stepping outside again.

As she stood before Number 10C’s blue door and squared her shoulders, she pressed her arms tightly to her sides so that no more sweat trickled and pooled into her clinging underthings.

From within, she could hear a baby squawking and the resonant hum of a man’s voice when, suddenly, a slight breeze picked up. She raised her fist and knocked firmly and, as she waited, heard the *EEK, eek* of something grating on the stonework — something swinging back and forth. The sound came from behind a blue metal brush and shovel that hung from a hook. She quickly lifted it and saw beneath a small key. She owned one of the same type herself: it fitted the padlock she used to secure her bicycle chain. It must be the key for the one just behind me.

As she went to knock again, her raised fist met only air — the door had swung open.

‘Just popped in to say how much I admire your bays and alyssum,’ said Gráinne.

She held out her hand, knowing that the man didn't believe that story for a minute.

'I'm Gráinne Redman, Grayson O'Rourke's sister. I believe we are now neighbours; we've newly moved into Number 9, I hear you've met my brother a few times in the garden?'

'We've had quite the conversation about the value of dahlias in the summer border; he's quite the fan. That was the day before he was arrested. I did notice you waving to him as he was hauled away by the bobbies.'

'I also have a great admiration for dahlias. There's nothing like them to add late summer colour ... Though I must say, in my brother's defence, that he was wrongly arrested.'

From his disinterested frown, it seemed he might not be quite so convinced.

'I've every intention of clearing his name. That's why I am here — I was actually hoping you might be of some help,' she said.

But McSweeney moved to close the door. Quickly, Gráinne placed her shoe as a stopgap and took from her sleeve a neatly folded handkerchief. She dabbed at her eyes, blinking frantically in an attempt to stimulate some tears. She had always found large, strong men to have a weakness for delicate watering pots.

McSweeney merely grimaced and displayed a general disinterest, kicking at the rug. Fortunately, a fresh chorus of squawks came from behind him, and Henry pushed past to provide soft ears for small hands to wring.

He grumbled, 'I guess as your dog has already made himself at home, you had also best come in as well. It may be of no interest, but before we go any further, I don't hold dahlias in the same regard as either you or your brother; in fact, I detest the plants.'

Gráinne thought she detected a hint of a smile.

'I did notice a few in the garden?'

'The garden is for the residents; at times I need to pander to them rather than my own tastes. Which is what this conversation is about, I presume — your interests.'

He spooned tea into a chrysanthemum teapot, placed a kettle on the hob to heat, and continued:

'In the case of Cynthia's death, I believe your brother may've merely been in the wrong place at the wrong time. It's a shame that he can't hold his liquor better,' he said.

He looked at the boy and handed him a segment of banana.

Gráinne seated herself on a green couch and waited for the man's full attention. Henry washed mashed banana from between the baby's fingers with gentle licks of his pink tongue; the little boy let out bursts of uninhibited laughter.

'What of your own relationship with her?'

'I'm a gardener and she was a rich heiress who liked the fun things in life. Our paths never crossed — why would they? In addition, my only concern these days is the welfare of Thomas.'

He took the whistling kettle from the stove and poured water over the tea leaves. After cups were produced and tea poured, they both moved to the well-scrubbed table and sat down. McSweeney placed a plate of biscuits between them, handing Thomas one, which he gummed enthusiastically. Henry turned his liquid eyes on Gráinne from where he sat on her foot begging for a piece of hers.

'Perhaps she thought a romp in the flower beds or a fondle in that little shed of yours might be fun?'

'I've not long lost my wife, and I'm kept rather busy enough looking after this one,' he indicated Thomas with a tilt of his head. 'I've no interest in the likes of that one.'

Gráinne thought a change of subject might help, and she didn't want to delve too deeply into the matter in case he clammed up.

'I saw your mother coming to help out the other morning. Are your wife's family also involved in caring for Thomas?'

'She was alone in the world. No family that I was ever aware of.'

Giving up on the chance of anything from her, Henry went back over to the box containing the baby and licked up a few soggy crumbs that Thomas had scattered on the floor.

'I can see you're very attached to your son,' she said.

'He's my world.'

He said it simply, yet it carried all the more weight. She couldn't imagine him risking doing anything that would mean leaving the boy to fend for himself.

'Look, I've put up with your questions because I liked your brother. He actually talked to me when he saw me in the garden — appreciated my work. That's more than can be said for most of the other residents of the square. If you're serious about wanting to know what happened, I may be of some use.'

He rose from the table and picked up Thomas from his box. With the other hand, he cleared the table of the teapot, the empty plate and the cups, placing them in the sink. Then he continued:

‘I’ve hired a private investigator to look into my wife’s apparent suicide. I’m not sure if the two are connected or if they have a bearing on what happened to Devereaux last night at the Calvert’s party. But if you want to find out what my man has discovered come down tonight to the White Datura club in Soho. He moonlights there as a doorman. I’m not too proud to share whatever he’s discovered; I just want to know what the devil happened to my wife — the damned truth, either way.’

He pulled on a light coat and trilby, and as he worked Thomas’s arms through the holes of a blue knitted cardigan, Gráinne placed her hand on his arm.

‘I’ll be there, but before I go, I believe someone broke into our house and planted some evidence the night that Devereaux died. I found some scratches around the lock and the evidence seized by the police was planted. Did you see anyone coming or going? Everyone else seems to have been at the party.’

McSweeney lifted his hat and scratched his head in thought while he manoeuvred the pram he had placed Thomas in towards the door.

‘I did see your woman come back that evening around ten, she was out on the doorstep fumbling with her keys,’ he said.

‘Are you sure it was a woman? It can’t have been Mrs Stubbs as she only comes in Mondays and Fridays, and it was her grandson’s first birthday that night.’

‘Could have been a man or a woman. They were rugged up tight,’ said McSweeney

‘Did you happen to notice whether Thea Devereaux was home, or see Dorian about? They didn’t arrive at the party until after eleven.’

‘She was sitting in her usual chair, surveying the square. I didn’t see him.’

Intermingling of Varieties

Gardens that appear the most natural are those created when drifts of plants are not held separate from each other but rather are allowed to mix and mingle. The swathes of not only plants, but colour and texture, can be run together at the margins. Although this effect is deliberately achieved, it can appear very natural. The colours and foliage of one variety, used in this way, can be used to offset the others.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.165.

Tuesday, 19th July 1932

As she and Kat descended the narrow stairs of the White Datura Club in Soho, Gráinne again wished that she had Kat's penchant for dressing for the occasion. Kat's long cigarette holder preceded her down each slippery step and she seemed unfazed by the flecks of ash that dropped like flakes of snow onto her bias-cut lemon silk dress. They speckled the cream pompoms of sable that adorned her strappy heels. At least the sequins of her headband were immune, Gráinne thought, as she noticed how the dark kohl that circled Kat's eyes served to draw attention to how they shone opaline in the dim light.

How she moved from stair to stair like her namesake — a cat.

Gráinne loved the way she was able to float so seamlessly between role after role. As for herself, she wished she could find at least one persona in which she felt useful.

She wondered if the stocky man on the door was who they had come to meet. He wore a dark suit and projected his chest to such an extent that his spine appeared concave. Even his monobrow failed to retreat into the darkened doorway. As they approached, there was no time for conversation, for he waved them through a thrumming green door without a glance. His eyes, like currants, darted this way and that — keeping a careful eye on the street.

The room was thick with smoke, cheap perfume, and pheromones. There were a large number of tables crammed into the small space and each overflowed with a rainbow of cocktails displayed in an astonishing array of glassware. Some were almost empty while others vibrated to the sounds coming from the small stage. Occasionally,

the contents of the glasses lapped over the rims, creating sticky residues that eventually dripped to the floor. One or two glasses had fallen and overturned entirely.

As they searched about for a seat or an empty length of wall, the ceiling itself seemed to press down upon them, concentrating the aromas and sounds within the room. From the stage came the *swish, swish* of the drummer painting time on the snare, while the saxophone issued peacock-like notes beneath the honeyed singing of the female crooner. They knitted together a loose weave of sound that shimmered and held. She found her body already beginning to respond. Her hips sashayed of their own accord, setting the tassels of her black dress swaying.

They saw Brandon McSweeney over on the far side of the room and pushed their way through the crush of bodies, only upending one or two other people's drinks on the way. Their own sidecars remained full due to the skilful gyration of their hips.

'Evening. I see you brought a friend. A bit too closely related to the men in blue, isn't she?' asked McSweeney.

'It isn't as though we are doing anything illegal. We may in fact be helping the police, saving their valuable time. They're an under-resourced force after all,' said Gráinne.

As she looked around the room, her eye was drawn to a couple on a small sofa jammed in just shy of the piano. His head, although bent into the fold of her neck, seemed somehow familiar. Meanwhile Kat continued:

'I guess you could say we are merely pursuing lines of enquiry they have chosen to ignore,' she said.

She drew on her cigarette with renewed vigour and a large pillar of ash dropped from the end onto McSweeney's polished Oxfords. Across the room the couple stood up and began swaying to an especially velvet-dark number. His hand wandered to places not usually touched on a crowded dance floor. Visibility was poor and the room grew more smoke-filled by the minute. A fact Gerald Calvert must have banked on.

All the while around them, building to a crescendo, a variety of accents battered the senses. The place was a League of Nations with not only the regional English variants but American, Caribbean and French voices blending with the burrs of Ireland, Scotland and Wales. It was like a mallet running the length of a xylophone, striking out discordant notes from every bar.

'The detective's due a break soon. We're to meet him in the back alley. At least out there we'll be able to hear what's said,' McSweeney shouted.

He cradled a beer and the froth on the side carried the imprints of countless fingers. He must, in his nervousness, have pawed at the glass repeatedly, twisting and turning it in his hands.

‘Great, let’s hope it’s not too far away or I may lose Kat to the American army,’ said Gráinne as Kat was whirled past again, this time on the arm of a handsome major.

At last, McSweeney beckoned them out where they huddled in the narrow alley. Gráinne pulled her mink coat closed around her, trying not to brush it against the soot of the bricks while Kat merely danced from foot to foot, reciting passages from *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. Gráinne assumed it was to distract them from the cold, but she wished Kat wouldn’t find it quite so necessary to keep building on the atmosphere.

A dark figure approached them, his shadow growing ever larger until he looked to be a cross between an enormous raven and a creation worthy of Mary Shelley.

‘Quite the crowd gathered I see, perhaps I should be charging extra for this size of audience,’ the man said.

‘I’ve paid you well enough, so don’t keep us out here shivering in suspense,’ said McSweeney.

‘I’ve not found much to go on. It seems quite a number of people claim they saw a dark man in a pea green coat push your wife in front of the oncoming train. Apparently, he made off immediately after taking something of a fright at a woman near the back of the platform. No one can remember much about her, save that she wore a light blue chip of a hat.’

As the neon light advertising VACANCY illuminated the man’s face, he rubbed at the side of his nose. Red with drink, it sported a smattering of blackheads and reminded Gráinne of pepper grounds on a cut tomato.

‘They especially remembered the hat as the wind was blustery that day. The ladies took note because a gust nearly took it. Quite a few seemed to have coveted it. They noticed it had three yellow feathers and a paw clip like you’d find on a sporran if you were Scottish. Quite pale she was apparently and she wore silver shoes. T-bar with a slight heel.’

Death and Disease

Although in many instances an investigation into the decline and death of favourite plants may provide some explanation, in most cases the cause is such a complex combination of factors that it is just a case of the gardener accepting the death, replacing the specimen, and continuing on with his daily practices.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.77.

Monday, 25th July 1932

A number of brown hairs peeped from just below Titania Delèque's hat brim. They reaffirmed Gráinne's initial suspicions: the woman's hair colour came from a bottle — red was not her natural colour. She deduced the woman's lyrical name must also be a pseudonym.

However, because of her admiration for the woman's column in *The Times* and the progressive way she dug so relentlessly into issues affecting women, Gráinne decided to withhold final judgement until she could take in the eyebrows. So far, she had seen nothing of Delèque's face from her position directly behind the journalist. The bench seating at the coronial inquiry provided no opportunity to lean forward or swivel. Identifying hair colour conclusively was made harder by the writer's lolly-pink fedora, its hatband embellished with pheasant feathers on either side of the brim.

Gráinne had arrived early to secure a place amongst the other spectators and get a front-row seat. There were a number of veterans with missing limbs who had come just to escape the rain. Given how many years had passed since the Armistice, many now appeared older than their years.

There was also a flock of old dears with nothing but time on their hands who came with their knitting. Most of the seats were occupied by official-looking gentlemen in well-tailored suits and members of the press gallery. Scattered among them were the residents of St Mary's Square who she and Kat had identified as having some kind of motive for the crime. Despite the opportunity this presented, the closest she managed to sit was seven rows back. It was nowhere near close enough to catch all the ticks and tells of those on the witness stand, nor the reactions of her neighbours.

Peregrine had brought his shadowy friend and seemed to be giving him a running commentary. Though the pair were seated several places down from Titania,

the tilt of her hat and the way she kept pushing her perhaps-not-genuinely-red hair behind her ears suggested she was capturing every word. Although Gráinne still could not get a proper look at her, she occasionally made out words scratched onto a small pad with a red pencil stub: *red rash* and *foaming at the mouth*. Useful enough, certainly. *Persil*, *beef cubes* and *Weetabix*, in a column on the other side, not so much. Any important tidbits from Algernon would be passed on by note through her letterbox or by a shadowy voice from the bushes when she least expected it. Any important tidbits from Algernon would find their way to her eventually.

Thea Devereaux was playing up her role as aggrieved widow and wore a hat the size of a dinner plate, complete with an acre of veil. Despite the muffling effect of all the tulle, occasionally a sob escaped and briefly silenced the milieu.

She was the first to be called to the stand and explained the couple's movements before attending the party. She had been in her room reading and then preparing for the party when Dorian had slipped out for a while. He had not returned until quite a late hour and as a result they had arrived at the party later than they intended. They had been there for about forty minutes when her husband collapsed at around half past twelve. None of the guests were able to revive him. No mention was made of his final cryptic words, nor of her response.

When asked what he had eaten and drunk during the course of the evening, she replied, 'the usual, scotch and cigars. He never ate much when he was smoking and drinking; said it ruined the flavour of those godly burnt nectars. Not surprising he didn't touch any of the hors d'oeuvres. We had a light supper before leaving home. Just sandwiches and fruit. I suppose the cook may have slipped something into the fish paste.'

In response to which there was a general tittering.

'Thank you, Mrs Devereaux. I will ask Mr Ralph Calvert to come forward to corroborate that version of events.'

'Mr Calvert, could you please tell us first of all what your relationship was to the victim?'

'We were acquaintances rather than friends. His wife was a patient of my wife's, Dr Enid Calvert. He would call on Enid occasionally at our home. To fine-tune Thea's medication, I would assume.'

'Are you aware of any medical conditions that the man suffered from?'

‘As I said, it was his wife rather than he who was my wife’s patient. Anyway, she wouldn’t have discussed his case with me even if he were.’

‘Did he ever mention any health issues to you in passing? I understand that you both frequent the same club?’

Calvert shifted uneasily in his chair and mopped at his forehead with his cuff.

‘No, we didn’t have the kind of relationship that lent itself to confidences.’

‘Did you notice at any point any signs of physical distress, or see anyone slip anything into his drink? We have established he ate little, if anything, so I am guessing food would be a rather uncertain method.’

‘No, we had merely had a brief conversation about trivialities — the weather, forthcoming theatre productions, and what was being proposed regarding increased security for the residents’ garden — when he collapsed and struggled for breath. My wife tried to resuscitate him, but it was too late. Nothing could be done.’

He ran his fingers around his collar, attempting to loosen it.

‘I understand the man was somewhat tardy — arrived rather late to the party — and that the previous afternoon the two of you had an altercation outside your home?’

‘Merely a misunderstanding over some investments. I admit I became a little heated. A storm in a teacup. Certainly nothing that would have led me to poison the man!’

Such was Calvert’s bluster at that final phrase, that those sitting in the front row were obliged to produce their handkerchiefs and wipe away patches of spittle from faces and clothing.

‘Thank you, Mr Calvert. This isn’t a trial. We are merely seeking to establish the cause of death. I had hoped, through this line of enquiry, to gain some sense of the deceased’s state of mind.’

The coroner turned over several sheets of paper in the file before him, then pushed his spectacles firmly up his nose before continuing.

‘I will ask Dr Oliver Purdie to come forward now, please,’ he said.

A stocky man came to the stand with a face like failed punctuation: eyebrows leaning commas, a crooked dash of mouth, his eyes set too far apart and a nose resembling a disjointed exclamation mark. No feature appeared correctly formatted.

‘Dr Purdie, would you please relate for the court your qualifications and explain in what way you might assist this enquiry?’

'I originally trained as a doctor, though for the past ten years I have devoted myself to the study of poisons. The police have called on me in a number of cases where the victim has died through ingesting some part, or all, of a deadly plant.'

With this he squared his shoulders and puffed out his slight chest. His cheeks worked as he spoke and coloured to a delicate shade of pink.

'I do not believe there is anyone in London who knows more about this subject than myself. I have travelled extensively throughout South America and Asia studying the effects of toxic plants native to those regions, many of which are now cultivated here in England.'

He took several sips from a glass of water and cleared his throat noisily before continuing.

'I have added the seeds, roots and flowers of these beauties to my collection, and published my latest findings in numerous medical journals,' he said.

At this point Titania began scribbling frantically in her notebook, though she angled it so that Gráinne was unable to read what she had written.

'So, having examined the body in this case, were there any signs that death may have been the result of poisoning?'

The courtroom erupted into startled chatter, and Gráinne could hear several people nearby advancing theories as to who was responsible and how the poison might have been administered.

Dr Purdie continued, 'Those around him reported that his eyes appeared unusually dark, which leads me to believe the pupils may have been dilated. At one point he began coughing and reached for water, which suggests that his throat may have been parched — another possible symptom. Near the end, Dr Calvert stated that his breathing was laboured and his heart racing. She concluded that the man had suffered a heart attack.'

Several people turned to glance in Enid Calvert's direction and Gráinne saw that among many of the men present there was unmistakable surprise that so weighty a conclusion had come from a female doctor.

'On the contrary, I suspect his death to be a result of atropine poisoning,' said Purdie, swelling with renewed self-importance, 'for such a diagnosis we use the mnemonic: *hot as a hare, blind as a bat, dry as a bone, red as a beetroot and mad as a hatter*. In Mr Devereaux's case there was an obvious rash on his upper chest. This usually occurs if a large dose is administered all at once. When someone is poisoned

with atropine over a number of days, the drug can have a cumulative effect. In such cases no rash is usually present.'

'Is there anything further to support these suspicions?' asked the coroner.

'An autopsy should be carried out immediately. Already five days have passed since the death. If left more than ten days any trace that may have been in the liver will most likely have left the body. Atropine provides a very effective means of doing away with a person.'

'Thank you, Doctor Purdie. The evidence of the rash, a shortness of breath, thirst and dilation of the pupils, points to the possibility that Mr Devereaux was poisoned. However, some of these symptoms might also be present in the case of a heart attack. I will at this time record the death as occurring under suspicious circumstances. In the meantime, Detective Inspector, please organise for an autopsy,' said the coroner, turning to Verlaine who sat in the front row.

At once the courtroom dissolved into pandemonium. As Titania rose, pocketed her notebook and straightened her hat, Gráinne saw that her eyebrows were a definite shade of chestnut brown.

Taming the Wilderness

Even the garden which has been completely let go can be cut back, turned over and reborn. A strong pair of hands is required and often the most skilled landscaper is not one who can make something of nothing, but one who can reshape that which has been let go and has run to seed.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.165.

Wednesday, 3rd August 1932

The black cab rolled along narrow Swain's Lane with the ease of a ripe currant and halted before the two chapels that comprised the west gate of Highgate cemetery. Gráinne had read in her Baedeker that, beneath the entry-arch, the door on the left led to a place of worship for Anglicans, while the one on the right was reserved for dissenters. As she took in the entry to the Tudor Gothic building, she supposed that, had she been Victorian, her mourners would have needed to go right. At least the horse guard officers would have swelled the mourner's ranks, for they would have been present to guard her body from grave robbers.

'Can you please wait? I may be some time, but I'll make it worth your while,' she said to the taxi driver.

The man sported mottled grey-ginger whiskers which gave the effect of fungi having run amuck on his chin and neck. Despite this lapse in grooming, he was an avid reader of Dorothy L Sayers and Margaret Mitchell and his name was Bob. Gráinne had learnt this, and the complete history of the five generations of his household who, according to him, came and went from a shared two-up two-down in Earls Court at all hours of the day and night.

She slipped a pound note into his palm as she eased herself off the worn leather seat. As she made her way into the cemetery through its towering cast iron gates, she turned and gave him a grin, which Bob returned with a limp-fish wave. She thought she would put even odds on him still being there when she returned.

Her dress, black diamonds on a white ground, swirled about her legs for the day was breezy and punctuated by occasional bouts of drizzle. As she moved, the

geometric pattern expanded and contracted. When she was still, the diamonds marched across the silk and collected in small pleats around the waist and frilled hem. Over the thin dress, she wore a duster of black silk that was belted loosely, its buttons unfastened. Her black patent shoes featured diamante buttons, and she knew they were wholly unsuitable for this endeavour. But she wore them anyway, enjoying the *click, click* sound they made on the courtyard's cobbles.

She imagined this lent her the air of an officious secretary, someone suitably tall and lithe who walked with her chin in the air. But she couldn't pull this off without stumbling. Still, the image made her stand taller, extending her five-foot-seven frame. It made her tighten her stomach muscles, flattening the slight bulge that stretched the fabric of the dress around her middle. She popped open an umbrella to keep off the rain.

Both the cobbles of the courtyard and the colonnade under which Gráinne passed were crusted with moss and, in places, had lost their mortar. Slow moving fingers of green stained the bricks — they ran down in flowing patterns. She paused briefly beneath the shelter of the arch to avoid a passing shower. When she reached out to steady herself, a little slime worked its way beneath her nails.

Following the drizzle, Gráinne's chestnut hair sprang up about her head in the humidity. It reshaped itself from the formal combed bun which had arrived in the cab, creating something wilder and more unruly, in keeping with its surroundings. From her small handbag she took a raspberry cloche hat and, pulling it firmly down at the sides, tried somehow to subdue her hair.

She checked her watch, admiring again its mother of pearl geometric design and its black moiré strap. It was a new accessory recently purchased from Harrods. The beginning of an attempt to remake herself.

Gráinne saw it was fifteen minutes until midday and continued along the gravel path, turning from the wide Colonnade's uphill slope to take a small branching trail. On the map it was merely a thin line.

The diagram had been poked through her mail slot the previous evening along with the note that instructed:

Come to Highgate cemetery west. I will meet you at noon beside Christina Rossetti's grave. I have vital information. Bring sustenance. K.

As Gráinne made her way through the cemetery, she admired the Victorian symbolism of so many of its headstones: inverted torches, draped urns, angels and

lilies. They adorned graves throughout the cemetery. Her favourite was the passionflower, often small and inconspicuously carved into corners. It appealed to her Catholic sensibilities with its symbolism of Christ's passion, redemption and crucifixion.

It was a surprise to find the Rossetti family tombstones so unembellished, topped only with a simple quatrefoil with plain inscriptions decorating the grey stone. This contrasted sharply with the young woman standing beside them.

Kat was dressed in a ballet leotard and a chiffon skirt handkerchiefed in triangular sections. On her feet were ballet slippers and her legs were encased in tights of the same pink blush. With her arm slung round the tombstone, she appeared to be preserving her slippers by standing *en pointe*.

'Gráinne, I thought you would never get here,' she said. Then she eased herself down from her toes and, taking each foot in turn, bent up her leg and gave the sole a good rub. Her slippers were somehow spotlessly clean but quickly began to absorb the surrounding wet dirt.

'I am actually early,' said Gráinne pointing to her watch. 'What's with all the cloak and dagger? Just out of curiosity, how the hell did you manage to keep those slippers so clean?'

'Come, let's dip our toes in a little of the history of the place while we're here,' said Kat. She began to walk back toward the main path.

Through the fabric of Gráinne's thin coat, the branches of the trees bordering the narrow path brushed against her face and she noticed that seedling brambles tore at Kat's tights. Yet as they returned to the main path, the wilderness seemed to retreat a little. Ahead of them rose the Egyptian Avenue with its towering obelisks framing the view.

'Sorry this place is a little out of the way. My ballet lessons are out here. Madame Lebedeva insists on living outside what she calls the putrid air of the inner city.'

Gráinne's craned her neck to take in the burial chambers of the Circle of Lebanon, while Kat executed a series of *pliés* bobbing low to the ground before launching into a high *assemblée* before the silent sepulchre of one Jeremiah Greator. She had to admit that the movements displayed a degree of talent, yet the wrought-iron gates remained closed and the carved stone angel above merely looked on indifferently.

‘She came highly recommended, having danced with the Bolshoi. Also, William receives a sizeable discount after he pulled some strings to get her father released from the clink. He was caught lifting cigarettes from a newspaper agent in the Strand.’

‘I’m surprised your brother lets you travel about the outskirts of the city on your own.’

‘Did I say I was alone? One of his poor constables is always made to accompany me. But I encouraged him to go and enjoy a pint in the Peasant and Hare on Chester Road. He thinks my lesson finishes at 2pm so if I’m not back in time there’ll be hell to pay.’

Kat gave a laugh, sat down on a grave and began to untie the ribbons of her satin slippers. Reaching behind the stone she brought forth a pair of green Wellingtons, a matching raincoat and a bright pink umbrella.

‘I always like to come prepared for every eventuality.’

She slipped her feet into the boots and rose.

‘I wanted to meet here as there are no prying eyes nor ears, merely the dead, and given the increasing neglect, I am not sure if the future holds much hope of this entire area returning wholly to wild wood.’

Gráinne looked about and noticed the speed at which the encroaching ivy that was slowly enveloping the bases of many of the plinths, gravestones and sarcophagi. It seemed to her that there was a battle going on here and nature was gradually winning. The cemetery’s maintenance was slipping, and signs of its rapid decline could be seen all around them in the slumps, cracks and chips of the markers of the dead.

‘A reduced number of able-bodied gardeners after the Great War. The years since the conflict had not improved matters,’ said Kat.

She looked about her a little wistfully.

‘I actually find the wilderness quite soothing.’

Gráinne noted signs of neglect everywhere; even the garden itself was beginning to suffer.

Bent like a crone’s digits, the gnarled and denuded branches of the plane trees were overrun by convolvulus. Self-seeding ash and sycamore were sprouting — attempting to overshadow the more graceful specimens— stealing light and sustenance. Many of the cypresses and yew trees had errant branches that told of their years without tying or shaping. The slow creep of ivy’s tendrils smothered grave

markers and strangled both shrubs and trees in a snakelike tide of green, squeezing the life from them and causing even the markers of the dead to lean drunkenly.

By now they had entered the catacombs and, despite the occasional spider and the inhabitants of the loculi, the place was deserted. Beneath one of the skylights, Kat took an envelope of papers from her pocket and held it out.

'I have made a copy of your brother's police file. In there, you'll find the fingerprint results of the shoe and the tie. Both were clean so whoever it was wore gloves. The shoe was broken at the heel. Were you aware that Cynthia was barefoot?' asked Kat.

'Henry happened upon the other buried in the garden. I just can't fathom why anyone would bury the mate? What might be achieved?' asked Gráinne.

An inscription caught her eye as she was speaking and she moved closer to examine it, while Kat took out a yoyo from a fold in her chiffon skirt and began very skilfully to work it up and down with her left hand as a couple entered and closely examined the plaques on the graves at the far end. Both were dressed in thick woollen coats despite the warm weather.

Gráinne removed her cloche hat so that she could run her fingers through her hair, but when it again sprang out about her head in wild abandon, she replaced the hat and smoothed it firmly in place. The furrows on her brow, however, remained creased in concentration. In *calceis eius ambulavimus* read the inscription.

'We have walked in his shoes ...' she translated. 'Of course, how do we know they were in fact her shoes? What if they belonged to the murderer?'

'A possibility, or someone else discovered the body first?'

'A possible witness! Something to ponder on,' said Gráinne. 'What else have you got?'

Kat took out another envelope.

'A copy of the autopsy report. Sorry, I was a bit pressed for time so I just copied the conclusion. He was poisoned with belladonna. They tested the fragments of the glass and were able to get a little whisky residue from the bottom shard, but it contained no poison. They concluded the poison had most likely come from belladonna seeds added to the cigar.'

'That seemed to have disappeared from the scene, I wonder where the seeds came from? I will need to visit the widow for that.'

Kat glanced towards a couple who appeared to have come into the catacombs to escape the rain and were now shaking out their umbrellas. But they came no closer and would be unable to hear what they said from so far away.

‘So why look at Grayson? He has no knowledge about herbs or poisonous plants.’

‘I suppose they figure an in-depth knowledge of the Greek tragedies may have given him ideas. I heard my brother make some joke about learning from Cleopatra and the Borgias. More fool him, as they aren’t even Greek. As I said before, not the brightest stars in the firmament. There seems to be no logic to the way these male detective work,’ said Kat.

As the couple they had been watching exited the catacombs, they shook out their raincoats, unfurled their umbrellas once more and disappeared back into the rain.

‘Anything else you managed to copy down?’

‘There’s just this: Devereaux’s movements the evening of the party, and this a list of the contents of his office desk. That was the only room he entered when he came home to get ready, at around ten.’

She held out two pieces of pink paper from which wafted the scent of Shalimar and gave a wink.

‘I just pretend I am writing little notes to *Mon amour* then they avoid reading what I’ve written, especially William. No man wants to think of his sister having any romantic inclinations. He’d far rather I decided to take my vows than meet a man for afternoon tea.’

‘Where was he earlier on that evening? They came quite late,’ asked Gráinne.

‘According to Thea, Dorian claimed he’d had a business meeting that ran over.’

‘I don’t think me interviewing Thea is going to get me very far. She seems rather cool when I pass her in the street. I’m going to need to think on this for a bit. It’s as though I hold in my hands a seed, but I’m missing something essential to make it grow.’

They parted at the taxi with Gráinne quickly shutting the door after introducing her friend. She didn’t want the meter to be running when Bob began his recital of another in-depth family history for Kat.

Late Summer

Late summer can often be a time for the landscape designer to merely sit back and admire the fruits of their labour and plan for the future. As summer turns to autumn the riot of colour and, at times discordant, mix of hues and textures reminds one of nature's abundance and variety. At this time of year, like no other, it becomes apparent that, no matter the amount of planning or preparation, summer's overblown abundance may cause some species to slump under the weight of their own profusion.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p.75.

Sunday, 14th August 1932

Gráinne manned the vegetable tent, and from behind an empty trestle, she watched as the garden fête's female guests swooped and chattered, moving like a restless flock of brightly coloured birds. Their groups came together, separated, then reformed. Distinct pastel colours and a variety of shapes distinguished one woman from the other despite the common gold accessories that twinkled and shone. Yet still her table remained empty of any vegetables.

The men at the gathering were quite content to adopt the earthy utilitarian tones and forms from the landscape. Soil and bark, shingle and crag: their suits mirrored these tones of brown, moss, grey and blue. As for the garments themselves, some stretched to accommodate midlife, while others draped over thin frames like a tent.

It seemed to her that not one of them displayed the slightest interest in growing vegetables, and she found herself wondering why such a category existed, when a man in shirt sleeves and red suspenders approached with a pram. He reached in and placed a huge vegetable marrow before her.

'Number 1,' she said.

She handed him a card bearing the digit and propped its twin against the marrow, while Kat took hold of Henry's lead and made off with him toward the dog show. To her retreating back, Gráinne called, 'Hopefully that's the beginning of a flood of vegetables, though heaven knows where they're to come from. There's not a veranda or a doorway boasting a potted lettuce in sight.'

Mrs Hilton-Best of the Lancashire Hilton-Bests — Number 15 — had informed Gráinne that the fête was the most important event in the calendar for the residents of

St Mary's Square. In fact, she had given her an in-depth insight into the funding of the gardener, and the trials and tribulations this entailed.

The garden 'party', as it was euphemistically called, funded the continued care and maintenance of the grounds. It was used to augment the gardener's dwindling salary, the remainder of which came from money invested by the Square's original developer in stocks and bonds. The value of this had shrunk with inflation and circumstance over the years. All property owners were not only expected to put in an appearance at the event, but to part with valuable goods and bring along wealthy friends to purchase them at the auction — the final event.

The most prestigious prize was the coveted cup for the highest Victorian sponge. This drew entries from far and wide. Mrs Hilton-Best herself was carefully balancing on one arm a triple-layered confection. At the same time, she struggled with the gate. Leaning on top of three layers of sponge and cream was a marzipan bride kicking up her heel while planting a shy kiss on her groom's bashful cheek.

Just in time McSweeney, the gardener, arrived to relieve her of her burden and placed it in the centre of the cake table. As he turned to continue looking after youths trying their hand at the coconut shy Thea Devereaux entered the garden covered from head to toe in a length of organza veil. It served to soften her voice, her expression, her entire face. McSweeney doffed his cap but paid her little more attention than his coconuts. However, it was not the cake, nor the veiled woman, that drew Gráinne's attention but the slim woman who slid in after Thea wearing a tangerine saree shot with gold and smoking a Sobranie — Titania Delèque, the not-truly-a-redhead journalist after yet another scoop.

Approaching the lone marrow she said to Gráinne:

'I would imagine that Miss Marple would be using this opportunity to question as many people as the opportunity provided.'

'That's assuming Miss Marple were on the job which she is not.'

'Rather interesting methods of deduction, then, considering your brother is still rotting in jail.'

With this she picked up the marrow weighing it with both hands before rotating it about and repositioning the card.

'A slightly better profile. Not much one can do with such an ordinary vegetable.'

She looked Gráinne up and down.

‘Even the ordinary can produce the most extraordinary flavours. I take it you haven’t tried it roasted with a Roquefort sauce,’ came a voice from behind them.

They looked about but were unable to locate the speaker, meanwhile Kat returned with Henry and a red first placed ribbon. Somewhere along the way she had changed into an orange and pink silk kaftan. Atop her head was a cerise turban with a white egret plume that swayed with the slightest movement of her head. In the centre of this glittered a huge pink stone. She passed Gráinne a card on which the words were picked out with plum ink — *Madame Wanda Palmist Extraordinaire*.

‘Come to my tent over by the compost heap around three, I may be able to change your fortunes,’ she said.

A dimple twinkled as she grinned and pirouetted away. Gráinne turned to find that Titania had dissolved into the foliage along with the mysterious speaker. Then she looked at her wristwatch and realised it was already close to two and, as yet, she had made no progress towards freeing Grayson.

‘Busy with your stall I see,’ said McSweeney.

He placed down a bundle of beans tied with twine and a bowl containing a single red tomato. It was a glossy, large specimen and seemed ripe to be sliced and sandwiched between pieces of fresh bread, she thought, realising just how hungry she had become.

She breathed a sigh and, as she inhaled, was reminded of smelt lux flakes and lemon oil with a top note of peat.

‘Scrubbed up nicely today,’ she said.

‘It’s the one day a year I’m on sale as well as the produce. Got to show it’s worth their while going to all this trouble.’ With that, he removed his cap and combed his fingers through his hair and turned on his heel. ‘Off to have my palm read, the news can’t get worse than the weeds I’m wading through,’ he called over his shoulder, doffing his cap in parting.

No need to search people out; they just seem to come to me, she thought, as Enid Calvert approached with a shapely vegetable marrow cradled in her arms like a new-born.

‘I think we both know immediately who the other is don’t we, so glad to make your acquaintance, saw you at the party the other night but — a series of unfortunate events...’

‘Yes quite.’

‘The town is becoming quite overrun with the Irish immigrants and those from the colonies,’ said Enid.

‘A good thing, I hope?’

In response Enid ignored Gráinne’s proffered hand and tapped her bottom lip with a vampiric red nail. Gráinne noticed that a thin line of lipstick already stained her left cheek.

She placed her marrow on the table beside the other one saying.

‘I breed this especially. I’ve been raising it in the little courtyard behind my rooms in Kensington. Far fewer seeds in this beauty.’

‘Are those the same rooms where you perform illegal operations?’ asked Gráinne.

Enid was about to stalk off when William walked up with a blue clad constable at his elbow.

‘Dr Calvert, I understand that you are missing a couple of patient files? Why didn’t you report this theft to the station?’

‘I assumed you would have far better things to do than chase after a few pieces of paper about women’s concerns.’

She straightened her straw-chip hat. But Gráinne noticed her fingers shook a little. One of the hat’s mottled feathers, secured by a diamante pin, blew away just as Perry’s cat Ming Ming was passing. It was quickly caught up in her fur. The flouncing cat was being led about on a sequined lead and, on discovering the intrusion, began the slow process of washing around it before eventually sweeping it aside with her paw. Perry was brazenly listening at William’s shoulder out of sight and out of mind.

‘The files were handed in to our desk this morning. One related to a Dorothy Smith, the other to Helen McSweeney. The woman was then unmarried, so it was labelled Helen Tremaine. Just so you know, I’ve read them both.’

He seemed to have noticed Gráinne for the first time where she skulked trying to look inconspicuous behind the newest marrow. But he carried on regardless.

‘Helen Tremaine — the one that got away. Wasn’t about to let you take a knife to her, was she? So you silenced her at the station. That same hat you’re wearing today was seen on the platform on the day of her death. Persuaded your husband to clear up that little mess did you?’

Enid had turned very pale and ran her fingers over the remaining feathers pinned to the side of the straw hat.

'I was there but I didn't push her. I had followed her that day but I merely wanted to scare her. Dorian Devereaux did the pushing. I could do nothing to stop him,' she said.

'That's very convenient. Can't question a dead man. Constable take her away.'

'I swear it's the truth.'

The constable placed his hand on her crown to protect the top of her head as she lowered herself into the waiting black Morris Oxford. Then Gráinne asked William, 'What about the third file?'

'How do you...'

'Woman's intuition?' she replied.

But he was already striding off in search of his sister. Gráinne hoped her disguise served her well or her fortunes didn't look so rosy. She popped a humbug into her mouth then had to wrestle with a piece of lint that had travelled with the sweet. She finally managed to extract it from between her front teeth as a voice spoke at her shoulder:

'Quite the *arriviste*, my dear — all haste and no breeding. Set herself up for a fall. Though I suppose it's to be expected for a woman trying to do a job best suited to a man. Trying to specialise in *les questions feminines*, an area seldom of interest and much less understood by the dominant sex can get one into hot water,' said Mrs Hilton-Best.

She surveyed the sparse number of entries on the vegetable table.

'Let's hope there's a sudden rush on. I shall relieve you of your duties as I assume you would like to circulate before the auction.'

Hilton-Best wore her hair in a bob, and wings of corrugated dyed black hair were held back from her face by a line of diamond clasps. Although approaching ninety, she favoured the attire of a much younger woman. Unfortunately, the short hair merely served to display more fully her crepey neck. The lilac silk pajamas were also an unfortunate choice — the loose fabric seemed to accentuate the slump of her breasts that hung like shucked grapes. She had suckled seven offspring. The goose down trim on her slippers, however, certainly hinted to a lightness within.

Gráinne was reluctant to leave the woman's side, for Mrs Hilton-Best was not only nosy but also a potential source of information. So far she had learnt that Mr Higgins, who was currently travelling in France, suffered from not only gout but also an uncommon venereal disease, that Toby Peabody of Number 12 was really a

German spy monitoring the movements of the temporarily grounded Admiral Boston, a naval commander in Number 15 and that Mabel Aldridge at Number 4's current male companion was really a woman who liked to dress in men's clothing.

When in public, Mrs Hilton-Best, brought forth others' secrets and publicly polished them at opportune moments.

'What a darling your Arthur is.' said Gráinne.

She had reached out her hand earlier to ruffle the fur on the little Pomeranian's head and narrowly avoided the snap of his tiny teeth.

'He took a particular shine to your dear brother, and he is an astute judge of character. Arthur simply loathed my first husband, the man turned out to be a total bounder.'

The little dog issued a series of loud farts to which Mrs Hilton-Best seemed completely immune. This left Gráinne to wonder if her sense of smell was quite as sharp as her other senses.

'Did you notice anything of interest on the night of Cynthia's death by any chance?' Gráinne asked.

She was unfazed by the bluntness of her question, for she knew that the woman's greatest joy in life was a juicy tidbit.

'Wednesdays are my bridge night and if I remember rightly that night it was my turn to host. The ladies arrived around 7 and we had shrimp puffs and champagne before getting down to business.'

The little dog had become somewhat restless and when Hilton-Best placed him on the grass he waddled off to do his business amongst a vibrant clump of dahlias.

'We do all take it very seriously and that night Veronica Delancy of the New York Delancys had joined us. She was visiting her sister from the new country. Needless to say, the game got rather heated with Veronica leading 3 clubs on a very weak hand.'

'Did you leave the table at any point? I notice that your windows would have a very good view of the street?'

'Come to think of it at one stage I did get up after an especially thrilling hand of hearts. I went over to the sideboard for the bicarbonate of soda. Creamy Seafood doesn't tend to agree with my constitution the way it used to.'

Arthur's deposit amongst the Azaleas looked remarkably like prawn mousse topped with a parsley garnish, and Gráinne held her fingers to cover her nose at the same time coughing to disguise her retch.

'I know it was about 11 as the last bus for Paddington Station had just passed on Brompton Road. My poor grandson Gerald took the same bus when he returned to the front. Wanted to take that double decker and see the lights of the city, before heading back to the Somme.'

She adjusted her thin hair, smoothing what remained into a sleek cap, then attempting to bunch it together at the nape of her neck. The wispy strands escaped and fell back into waves.

'The garden in the square has never felt the same after his passing, it used to be his favourite spot to sit and read. He was a quiet boy given to academic study and the contemplation of the physical world. Your brother reminds me a little of him. Grandmothers daren't have favourites, but ...'

Her fingers rubbed at the plucked skin of her upper lip. Gráinne surreptitiously glanced at her watch but didn't want to hurry the old lady.

'Yes, I was standing by the window at the refreshment table just thinking of my boy when the bus passed. That's how I was so sure of the time that I saw the couple go by.'

'So you did see someone?'

Mrs Hilton-Best picked up the little dog again before continuing, 'I instantly recognised Cynthia. I knew her by her dress. It was illuminated in the headlights of passing cars out on Brompton Road. She had a way of walking, slow and practiced. Everything was like a performance with that girl. The light caught her sinewy limbs, almost as transparent as spider silk. I realise it is *à la mode to be so willowy*; however, I much prefer a figure such as yours. Something held in reserve for a health emergency.'

'A sweet tooth and advancing years will do that for a woman. The man — did you recognise him?' asked Gráinne.

'There's only one man on the street that walks with that confident swagger. I also thought I saw the glow from those foul cigars he continually puffs on. But when I told the police constable about seeing them, he said I must be mistaken. He claimed Dorian was at his club, someone had given him an alibi.'

'Anything else you saw of interest? Did he mention who gave him an alibi?'

'I could see Thea seated at her window. I wasn't sure if she was asleep as she seemed awfully still and I couldn't fathom why she might be wearing a hat inside, not on a mild night such as it was that evening.'

'Thank you Mrs Hilton-Best, I do appreciate you sharing this information with me.'

Gráinne laid a gentle hand on the old lady's arm as she began to move away. 'Do call on me if you fancy some company and a chat,' she said recognising the loneliness beneath the woman's chatter.

Just one more prey to corner, thought Gráinne, as she looked about for Thea. She spotted her chatting to a woman wearing a dress as blue as a kingfisher's back but as she began to make her way over, she was intercepted by a man who seemed incredibly overdressed for the warmth of the day. From beneath a thick beaver hat, the man said, 'I wouldn't beard the beast in her lair if I were you.'

'Whatever can you mean?'

'Thea Devereaux has just lost her husband, and in her desperation she could be dangerous.'

'Desperate in her grief, do you mean? Why should that be the case? Sad or woebegone, maybe, but desperate — that's an interesting adjective to use.'

'Wounded animals can be unpredictable when cornered, even if their injuries are self-inflicted.'

The man strode off and when Gráinne again turned to confront Thea she discovered that the woman was nowhere to be found. All around tables and stalls were being dismantled. Mrs Hilton-Best rushed past saying:

'Quite the success the day has been. Enough to sustain our talented gardener for yet another year and, even perhaps, increase his stipend slightly with the way things have gone. Nothing like a death in the vicinity to bring out the gawkers, but at least they emptied their purses while they were looking.'

A Bird's-Eye View

No matter the care and attention that has gone into the design of any planting scheme or landscape plan, it is worth taking the time to step back and examine the plants, their characteristics and the bigger picture from afar. Contemplating the design and all its aspects, even putting it aside for a spell, can only be of benefit in ensuring that nothing has been overlooked. It may even lead to new inspiration and improvements.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p. 487.

Saturday, October 29th 1932

The day was typical of London in the early days of winter. The clouds hung low and grey, and the drizzle, although light in a half-hearted kind of way, clung to the hair and dampened the backs of exposed necks. Only the wind was playful. It swirled in eddies, lifting the leaves about the ankles of the passers-by.

When Gráinne knocked on the door of Number 6, her spirits were every bit as subdued as the weather. Henry, however, bounded into the house exhibiting little in the way of manners. He greeted Kat, the house, and the day with unbridled enthusiasm and quickly sought out corners and crannies in which to explore unfamiliar smells searching for mislaid treats or toys.

'Come on up,' said Kat.

She led Gráinne through the hallway, with its overstuffed dark furniture, up the stairs and into a small sitting room.

'My private sanctuary,' she said.

As Kat returned downstairs to collect the tea things, Gráinne gazed around at the exquisite room. All four walls were papered in a geometric design, its black background shot through with bands of blue and thin gold stepped squares. Stylised poppies featured in the foreground. The flowers' petals had an angular quality while their stamens and stems were rendered in exaggerated, inflated forms.

Before a blazing fire stood two large velvet armchairs and matching footstools. A small table between them was loaded high with a stack of crumpets, a pat of butter, and a jar of thick honey. Gráinne took up one of the toasting forks in readiness and waited for Kat's return, trying to stifle the rumblings of her stomach while Henry looked up at her with liquid eyes, his head resting on the stool at her feet.

As Kat sunk into the armchair opposite and took up a crumpet and a toasting fork, Gráinne asked, 'Is this room your doing? Or was it your mother's inspiration?'

'No, my mother died shortly after the war. The Spanish influenza.'

'I'm sorry. Your father?'

'Ran off with one of the housemaids to the continent when I was about fourteen. We still hear from him on and off. At the moment he is taking the waters in Baden-Baden.'

'That must have been a difficult time for you and William. Left with just one parent to bring you up.'

'A little, but then my parents were entirely unsuited, they'd been papering over the cracks for years.'

They both stared into the fire and Gráinne contemplated the layered nature of relationships and what was often hidden beneath. It was the longest silence Gráinne could remember Kat allowing in all the time she had known her.

At last Kat recovered herself, exclaiming as she reached out and speared second crumpet, 'I'm afraid we will need to clear the table before we can begin examining the evidence in the deaths of Helen, Cynthia and Dorian. It's always wise to have one's priorities in the right order.' She grinned savouring each bite of crumpet that oozed butter and dripped its generous dollop of honey.

When the table was clear, both women produced crumpled paper bags from their handbags.

'You go first,' said Gráinne.

Kat brought out a stub of cigar and a silver cutter.

'How on earth did you come by this?' Gráinne asked, taking the butter knife. She carefully rolled the cigar onto her empty plate and used it to cut down the centre.

'My daily Miss Partridge came upon someone adding this to one of our dustbins. She wouldn't normally have paid it much mind, but the furtive way they dropped it in and then made off when she called out raised her suspicions.'

Both women leant forward and with care Gráinne scraped out the contents of half of the cigar. Wisps of tobacco lay on the side plate tangled together like knotted wool. In amongst these were small black seeds not much bigger than a pin head. Kat searched the bookshelves behind them. Eventually she took down a weighty plant encyclopaedia. Heads together they paged through and found the entry for belladonna

and compared the seeds in front of them to the description. They found them to be a perfect match.

Gráinne said, 'The number of cigars this man seemed to smoke it wouldn't have been hard to plant a poisonous one amongst his supply. Grayson said there were half-smoked cigars at your house the night Cynthia was killed, he saw them when he went to get help. Were they Dorian's?'

'Yes, he came by that night around eight. Tried to have something of a tête-à-tête with William. Apparently, he was trying to imply your brother had criminal leanings. William just laughed him off, it made him seem all the more interesting to me.'

'So we know the poison of choice was belladonna, and we are now clear on how it was administered, but no progress on the who or why,' said Gráinne, leaning forward and opening her own paper bag.

'Another piece of the puzzle?' asked Kat. She brought her ankles together as though she was about to spring from her chair.

'It's just the shoe I found the other day, but I wondered if you had checked what size the one found on Cynthia's body was and also that of the shoe taken from Grayson's wardrobe?'

'Funnily enough, the one she was wearing with the broken heel was a size 9 while the one taken from Grayson's wardrobe was a size 8,' said Kat. No longer able to contain herself, she jumped up and began to prowling about the room, taking down books and then returning them to random places amongst the alphabetised volumes.

'This one is also a size 9. It seems that there must have been two pairs of identical shoes that were different sizes. One must have belonged to either the murderer or a witness.' Gráinne absently twirled her earring between her thumb and forefinger while her eyes caught on the volume of *The Secret Adversary* that Kat held in her hand before it was slid between *A Room with a View* and *Howard's End*. Then she slid a chain from the bag and continued, 'I also have this. It's from Brandon McSweeney's. Anyone could have taken it and used it. A few evenings I heard him lock his bike with it. The sound was distinctive enough that I'd recognise it anywhere. The links fit the description of the murder weapon used on Cynthia. It would, however, have taken quite some force to strangle someone with this.'

She held up the links and demonstrated by pulling them tight. Although it held fast, the chain seemed large in her small hands, and it slipped through her fists relatively easily.

'We also need to think about the descriptions given by those at the station who were observers of what happened to Helen. They described a woman with the hat, it had two yellow feathers. Both Thea and Enid have hats that could be identified like that,' said Gráinne.

'But Enid admitted it was her,' said Kat. 'You told me that's what she said as she was led away?'

'During a fit of rage, when she would have done anything to incriminate Dorian.'

'Maybe, but Thea had an alibi. She was seen up in her room, in the window,' said Kat.

'Perhaps, but then did you never sneak about the house at night when you were a child, arrange your clothes to resemble a body, wander about with the freedom to ramble where you chose. Thea seems to have been a very still presence, always just sitting. God, even the strongest of us need a lavatory break now and again to stretch our legs or pick up a book.'

'We seem to have an accumulation of shoes. A chain that is most likely the murder weapon. No sign of the third file taken from the home of Enid Calvert and the possibility that Thea Devereaux's alibi doesn't hold water.'

Gráinne watched Henry twitching in a dream while he slept, his legs slowly circling as though running in slow motion. Now and again he gave a faint yip. She too felt that something was just beyond her grasp. Yet as the little dog woke and stretched, she became convinced it was only a matter of time before the partially formed image appeared clear and solid before her.

Winter

Friday, December 2nd 1932

Brandon McSweeney sat on the crimson sofa while Thomas slept at the other end oblivious to the world. Firmly held between the little boy's pursed lips was his thumb and his legs were bent at the knee and turned outward. For a time, the gardener's fingers worried at the stuffing that continued to weep from the sofa's arm. He wondered how long it could spill from within before the upholstery ceased to look like a couch at all — at what point it would be considered beyond repair. Then, with a heavy sigh and a glance toward the sleeping child, his expression hardened into resolve. He picked up the stub of pencil and his blue-bound notebook and began his final chapter. After jotting down the title, he began to write.

Chapter 25

The Care and Cultivation of Poisonous Plants.

When using poisonous plants in a landscape design, the same principles that apply to non-poisonous varieties remain relevant. The fact that these species have developed additional means of defence through their berries, leaves, roots or seeds should not blind the garden designer to their other qualities. One would be remiss not to include the delicate freckled spires of the foxglove, the drooping heads and rich blue of the aconitum, nor the dense-foliaged and long-lived yew. Diversity must remain at the centre of every garden ecosystem and, rather than exclude such species, they merely warrant some extra care and attention.

Brandon McSweeney's *Garden Notes and Tips*, p. 523.

McSweeney continued his work, carefully transcribing the corrected manuscript onto fresh white paper with a well-used fountain pen. As each page was completed, he added it to the large pile beside the spool of red ribbon on the desk.

Meanwhile, across the road in the residents' garden, Gráinne noticed a disjointed quality to a bird's movements. It balanced on one leg and gave a hippity-hop as it tried to take flight. Gráinne doubted that its wings were strong enough, covered as they were in fledgling feathers and tufts of down. She was sure it was a female, having watched the care it had taken earlier in preening the feathers along her back and wings.

The first attempt at flying was a failure and resulted in a crumpled heap of tangled limbs, but the little bird didn't let that deter her. The next time she managed half a metre before her wings gave way. This process of flapping and crashing continued for thirty minutes or so, before suddenly the bird mastered the trick of it and, with a few self-congratulatory peeps, was off and away.

During this display, the mother bird was nowhere to be seen. Gráinne was just dwelling on the absence of mothers and the independence of offspring when she first smelt the smoke. She could see it was coming from the round metal drum by the shed, which stood beside the compost heap and was used by McSweeney to burn large branches and garden rubbish. He often scooped out the ash and sprinkled it around his seedlings as a slug deterrent.

All that afternoon she had sat on the bench under the oak where she could view the garden clearly. In the peace of the tree's dappled shade, she contemplated the interwoven threads of the case, trying to see how they might fit together. How those threads could so easily tie two people together. How they might cloud the case and make the three deaths seem to have been carried out by the same person. She thought of the shoes, the missing file, the planted evidence and the act of disguise. In time, she thought she had pieced together the complex, thinly connected puzzle. Yet it was not until she smelt the smoke that she realised the person who held the answer to the mystery of Dorian Devereaux was there in the garden.

As she approached the woman in a small chip hat, the yellow feathers quivered once or twice, but the figure didn't turn around.

'I'm not going to run any more. I'll take my medicine,' said Thea.

The statement was met by silence that stretched and then held; the weight of it as light as spider silk.

'He killed Helen and Cynthia, didn't he?' asked Gráinne at last.

'Yes,' said Thea, turning at last and looking at Gráinne. Her eyes were dark and shadowed, the black deeper even than the patches of dappled shade. 'I couldn't understand why at first. I think he blamed them, he blamed all women for his disease. For what it had made him, as though he felt it was their fault, his fall from grace.'

'Still blaming that bite of the apple on Eve, was he?' asked Gráinne. But when no response came, she continued, 'You were there, weren't you? Using a dressmaker's dummy or a bundle of clothes so you could come and go as you pleased.'

‘Yes, I saw him push Helen. I tried to help after what he did to Cynthia. I was determined I would go to the police after that.’

She wrung her hands. When Gráinne saw how red and chapped they were, she looked away, bowed her head and could not bring herself to look at them again.

Thea continued, ‘But the next day I received the file in the mail. It spelt out just how far he would go to control me, to have me all to himself. Something came over me. I couldn’t just sit back and let him get away with taking my life too. Changing my body to suit his purposes, I had to act.’

She dropped to the ground then as though willing the very earth to take her up. Picking up a leaf she began to shred it between her fingers, sections came apart falling away along the veins. ‘I had spent years letting him decide everything. What I wore. What I thought. What I could do with my own body. For once I made the decision.’

‘I’m so sorry, Thea. You must have loved him very much at one time,’ said Gráinne.

She crouched down and squatted beside her. There they sat for some time looking over the garden. The roses were bare aside from shrivelled hips, while the viburnum was merely a collection of sticks. Together they noticed the mottled leaves of a lone cyclamen, its small white flowers forming pockets of light against the backdrop of brown leaves littering the ground.

‘Even in the winter there seems to be something to light the dreary days,’ observed Gráinne. Thea returned a sad smile. Rising to her feet, Gráinne said, ‘The southern hemisphere gardens are really quite spectacular at this time of year. Maybe a holiday in the colonies might be just the thing after your tragic loss.’ She took a bare stick from the ground, walked over to the smouldering fire in the drum and stirred it anew. The flames revived and licked at the rusted metal sides as the last remnants of the file turned to ash.

When Gráinne looked out from her seat in the garden a few days later, she was struck by a new vision of the Square. She saw herself as a tiny raindrop reflecting the greater deluge in miniature: a world both benevolent and malevolent, forever changing and yet forever the same.

Over at Number 1 she saw the painter apply the last touches to the lettering. Then, as the sun reflected off the glass, she smiled for it lit up the letters of the new proprietor and the words that followed:

Redman and Associates — Investigators for Women, by Women.

Then she tucked the letter from her cousin in Ireland into her pocket and booked a ticket to investigate the disappearance of a woman's daughter in far-off Kylemore Abbey. She looked across at a small black spider weaving upon a branch, each thread finding another until the whole web was complete.