DARKROOM

They crossed at the traffic lights, and on Wimbledon Hill Road there were tall trees and fewer people. After ten minutes' walking they reached the Common. There was a fine drizzle. The ground was soft underfoot and here and there were the muddy runnels left by car tyres. People were walking their dogs or pushing toddlers in buggies. Two pensioners were flying a kite. Lenny stood with Malcolm at the edge of the round pond. The surface was flat as a mirror, its colour the soft grey of clouds. At the margins of the water long grasses with flaxen seed heads quivered lightly in the breeze.

"There's a car in the middle of the round pond," said Malcolm. "Some kids shoved it in there one night about five years ago. It was a green Austin Allegro. The council never got round to fishing it out." He had his hands in his pockets, his shoulders slightly hunched against the breeze. There was a chill in the air and she supposed he was cold. He was so thin, after all. He was probably more susceptible than most.

"Imagine what that would be like," he said. "If you lived in the pond, I mean."

She laughed.

"It would be like a spaceship falling to earth. Imagine how it would be written about and spoken of and stripped of its wonders."

"Shall we go and get a coffee?" she said.

He asked for a latte. When it came he folded his hands around the cup as if to warm them and she wondered about the scabs on his knuckles. He looked bruised all over somehow, as if he'd fallen down in the gutter. Perhaps he had. She knew nothing about Malcolm except what Ted had told her. That he had once been a brilliant student. That somehow he had gone off the rails.

"Why did you drop out of college?" she said suddenly. She wondered if it was all right to ask those sort of questions or if talking about the past was liable to upset him. Ted had never said.

"I prefer London to Oxford," he said. "You can do what you like here and nobody notices." He took a sip of his coffee and it seemed to put the life back into him. He looked directly at her and drew a deep breath. "I wanted to write a book about Sylvester John," he said. "But my tutor thought I was wasting my time and refused to give me a reference."

She knew there was more to it than that. Ted had told her that Malcolm had gone missing for two days then turned up at the house filthy and incoherent. It turned out he had walked all the way from Oxford to London even though there was plenty of money in his account and he could easily have taken the train. He'd been in bed for six weeks afterwards with pneumonia.

She'd never heard of Sylvester John.

"Do you think you'll go back?" she said.

"No," he said. "I ended up hating the place."

They wandered back up the High Street. Malcolm looked about himself constantly, like a tourist in a foreign country. Almost without thinking Lenny put her hand on his arm. She was afraid he might take fright at something and bolt like a startled horse.

Wimbledon Village specialized in the kind of pretty shops you might find in the more affluent market towns of Surrey and Hampshire. She found herself oddly delighted by the items on display, the soft fabrics and polished ornaments, the jade earrings, the hand-blown glass. In one of the windows there was a display of commemorative mugs, not just the gaudy recent issues but hand-painted originals

dating from before Queen Victoria. Quite suddenly she found herself wanting to go into the shop and buy something. It seemed to her that the mugs were more than just household utensils, they were coloured fragments of history you could hold in your hand. She knew she wanted to remember this day, standing there with Malcolm in front of that window, yet if someone had asked her why she would have found it hard to put into words. She hesitated then drew back, knowing how much Ted hated mass-produced pottery. It would be difficult to explain why she had bought it.

Her face was reflected next to Malcolm's in the window. To anyone wandering past, she supposed, they would look like lovers. Malcolm pressed his fingers against the glass. He stared at the objects intently, as if he were trying to memorise them in a specific order.

He looked like he'd been travelling for days.

When they got back to the house she made supper. She served him a half-portion in a small dish, hoping that might make it easier for him to finish it. When he began to eat she felt a rush of pleasure she hadn't anticipated. Later they went upstairs. His body was skinny and pale under his t-shirt. He had long fair eyelashes, the longest she'd ever seen on a man. His eyes were pale turquoise, reminding her of the clear faceted stone in a Victorian tiepin that had once belonged to her grandfather.

He seemed so fragile she felt nervous of touching him. He entered her easily but came too soon.

"Oh God," he said. "I'm so sorry." He buried his face in her shoulder and stroked her cheek. She raised his hand to her lips, mouthing gently at the tender grazed flesh.

"It doesn't matter," she said. "Let's just lie here and talk."

He sighed then kissed her mouth. They lay in silence for a while just holding each other then he opened his eyes and told her what he knew of Sylvester John. He said it had been reading John's stories that had made him want to be a writer himself. Later they made love again and it was successful for both of them. She groaned at the moment of climax and bit his cheek. He gasped heavily and came, digging his fingers deep into the flesh of her shoulders. The bruises were still there after his death, two rows of penny-sized blotches the colour of mould. At around ten o'clock the phone rang. It was Ted. He was calling from the M5 services just south of Bristol.

"I should make it back by midnight," he said. "But don't bother waiting up."

*

Three weeks after the funeral she got a new commission. She took a studio at the top of a house in Kensal Rise, a large attic room with a galley kitchen at one end and a shower room and toilet at the other. The day after she moved in Ted phoned and asked her to come back.

He sounded angry but was probably just upset. They'd been together for almost five years. She'd known Malcolm for less than three weeks. She hadn't told Ted what had happened between them. She didn't see what good it would do.

"It wouldn't work," she said. "You'll see that in time."

He swore at her and put the phone down. A minute later he rang back to apologise.

"That's all right," she said. "I understand." They talked about trivial matters, trying to smooth things over. Near the end of their conversation he asked if they could meet for a drink.

"Let's do that," she said. "That would be nice."

Later she put on her jacket and took a bus down to Ladbroke Grove. She browsed the tatty parade of shops just south of the Westway, liking their curiously esoteric range of imported merchandise. One shop sold fabric by the yard: cheap ginghams, oilcloth, Indian cotton, outlandish fifties florals. She sifted through the remainder bin, selecting a yard of pink silk, some gold netting, a scrap of grey velvet. The next shop along was a junk shop that specialized in second hand airport paperbacks and the unwanted leftovers from local house clearances. On the table outside there was a stack of 7" singles and a shoebox full of old photographs. One showed a boy on a beach. Wispy strands of hair clung wetly to the nape of his neck and something in the tilt of his head, the stark angularity of his shoulder blades reminded her immediately of Malcolm. She bought the photograph for fifty pence and then walked home. Buses swept by on the Harrow Road, loading the summer twilight with the reek of diesel. She laid her bag against her chest and held it close.

*

The couple who had commissioned the dolls' house were called Talbot. They were both freelance translators and lived in a narrow mews cottage close to Blackheath Park. Natasha Talbot opened the door. She was slim and quite young, still in her early forties. She had pale skin and smooth dark hair. She took Lenny through into the living room. There were several antique clocks and a large marine aquarium. When Frank Talbot joined them Lenny saw at once from the look of him that the Talbots were brother and sister. She blushed without knowing why.

They gave her tea in a china mug and showed her a photograph of their godchild.

"We want the dolls' house to be something truly special," said Frank Talbot. "Something she can treasure all her life."

They said the design should be left completely up to her. Lenny thanked them and closed her notebook. She wondered how she ought to bring up the subject of money but here again the Talbots had made it easy for her. They had a cheque already prepared for half the amount. Lenny's pulse quickened when she saw it. It would cover the rent on the flat for the next four months.

*

Malcolm had first come across John's work when he was twelve, in a book of short stories he'd borrowed from the local library. He was drawn to the book because the cover blurb described it as a collection of ghost stories. John's language was descriptive yet uncomplicated, easy for a child to understand. Malcolm had liked the stories so much he had asked his parents to give him a copy of the book for Christmas. He read it again and again, wondering if he too might be able to write such stories, though it was some years before he dared to try. He wrote his first tale when he was sixteen. He decided to set it in Brighton, because he had been there once on holiday and loved it. There had been a puppet show on the pier, a man who walked on stilts, the lilting, grinding lament of the hurdy-gurdy. The memory of the place was simultaneously gratifying and painful. It seemed as good a place to start as any.

In the hours following Malcolm's death Lenny had gone to his room and taken all John's books from beside his bed. She had also taken the file of notes that contained photocopies of the few reviews of John's work Malcolm had managed to unearth as well as colour snapshots of John's birthplace and details of his biography.

Sylvester John had been born in Ludlow, the only son of an army captain and a Sunday school teacher. He had died at Kensal Green, less than a mile from where she was now living. He had published three novels, as well as the 'apocryphal diary' called Darkroom Journal and numerous short stories in magazines she had never heard of, such as London Gothic and Capital Bizarre.

He had spent the last twenty years of his life at the house in Kensal Green, a modest Victorian villa in one of the long terraces close to the station. It would have been a poor neighbourhood then, although in recent years the area had undergone a radical improvement. The ground floor of the house had been converted into some kind of private medical consultancy. The two upper floors, where John had lived, still appeared to be a separate address.

She photographed the house from all angles, then made enlarged drawings from the photographs, accentuating the most prominent architectural details. Finally she transferred the drawings to graph paper, reducing the templates to scale, one inch to one foot.

Ted made tall baluster jugs and loosely thrown wide rimmed bowls. His pieces had clean outlines and no decoration. He had a deep respect for traditional Japanese pottery, a love of the tenmoku and celadon glazes that fired to a liquid shine. For Ted the beauty of a thing was very much tied up with its usefulness.

He had never said as much to Lenny but she had always known he found her work frivolous. He had once asked her why she didn't retrain as an architect.

She had tried to explain to him that she had no wish to design real buildings, that what she wanted was to realise dreams.

For his birthday one year she had organised a trip to Amsterdam. She had taken him to the Rijksmuseum to see the famous dolls' house of Petronella Oortman, a seventeenth century merchant's wife who had spent as much money fulfilling her fantasy as it would have cost her to buy a second home. Ted seemed briefly diverted but quickly bored. He seemed relieved when they went back outside, and set quickly to planning a walk along the canals.

There were many ways of building a dolls' house. As well as the more traditional designs there were houses with interlocking chambers and secret doors. The furnishings in such houses were kept to a minimum so as not to obstruct the hidden mechanisms that brought everything to life. She had once seen a dolls' house with no furniture whatsoever, an oriental piece of unknown provenance that had been part of an exhibition at the V & A. The China House, as it was called, was kept locked behind glass but Lenny had applied for a study permit, allowing her to examine it in the presence of a museum attendant. It was hardly a house at all, more a series of interconnected spaces that might loosely have been described as rooms. The number of chambers that could be accessed seemed to depend on the order in which they were viewed. When she tried to open a 'locked' room the whole mechanism jammed, and she was forced to close all the compartments and start again.

She purchased a folder of slide transparencies of the China House, also the museum's booklet on Chinese puzzle boxes. The booklet stated that some people were prepared to pay exorbitant prices for boxes by the most renowned makers. These specialist collectors displayed their acquisitions proudly, even though there were some they never succeeded in opening.

She based the room layout on John's descriptions of Martin Newland's house in Darkroom Journal. She began by making a stencil for the living room wallpaper, drawing the pattern freehand and then transferring it to graph paper exactly as she had done with the house itself. She traced the finished design onto lining paper and completed it in watercolour. It was a pattern of fleur de lys, parchment yellow against a background of dirty white.

The next time Ted rang she agreed to meet him for a drink at The Mason's Arms. Ted was already there when she arrived.

He told her he'd started seeing someone.

"Her name's Ruth Dawson," he said. "She works at Lycett's. I thought you should know."

Lycett's was the artists' suppliers where he bought the raw oxides and pigments he used in his glazes. She had a vague memory of Ruth Dawson as tall and rangy, a pleasant open face scattered with freckles.

She felt an upsurge of relief, as if she'd been released from some onerous task.

"I'm pleased for you, Teddy," she said. They talked politely for a while about other things. As soon as she'd finished her drink Lenny got up to leave.

"I've been reading that book Mal was working on," she said as she was going. "Did you ever have a look at it?"

"Horror stories, weren't they?" he said. "Not really my kind of thing."

She walked home, making a detour that took her straight past John's house on Ashburnham Road. The ground floor lay in darkness but lights were burning in the upstairs windows. There was a smell of wood smoke and honeysuckle. She imagined John returning home in the evening from one of his walks in Kensal Green cemetery or from visiting the shabby shops he liked on the borders of Maida Vale: the

stationer's that stocked the notebooks he liked, blue feint with a marbled grey cover, the tiny basement store that sold antique maps and glass paperweights.

She wondered if John had shared the flat with anyone, a friend perhaps, or a lover. Malcolm's notes hadn't said.

*

The Evening Standard's review of Darkroom Journal had described Sylvester John as 'the English Lovecraft.' Lenny tried reading one of Lovecraft's stories but could see no connection between his ornate archaic prose and John's language, which was always plain and simple, leaving nothing concealed.

She noticed also that whereas Lovecraft's characters were often highly educated eccentrics John wrote about the kind of people you might easily meet and chat to in the street. The narrator of Darkroom Journal was called Martin Newland and he was a sales rep for a greetings card company. His adversary, Harold Phelps, was a pest control officer for Westminster City Council.

The novel didn't have chapter headings, just a series of dated entries such as you might find in an ordinary diary. For a long time the entries themselves seemed ordinary. Newland went into great detail about his home, his neighbours, his various excursions to the firm's clients in Liverpool and Manchester. It was revealed only gradually that he travelled between dimensions, and what he actually dealt in was fiends, or petty devils, the rat-sized, skittering woodlouse-like creatures that swarmed and bred in the cellars of Ladbroke Grove.

He earned good money and had a taste for expensive antiques. His purchases, usually made after a particularly successful business trip, were likewise described in

painstaking detail. Lenny found herself impressed by Newland's knowledge and love of beautiful objects. She came to rely on his judgement more and more.

Her friend Lucy came for supper and Lenny asked her what she thought of her work. Lucy particularly admired the long case clock Lenny had made, which kept perfect time and could have its battery replaced by removing a tiny panel in the back. The case itself had been made from rosewood then waxed and stripped repeatedly until it began to acquire the patina of age. The design of the marquetry had been taken straight from Darkroom Journal and showed the rare Sicilian Ladder Orchid, a flower so seldom seen it was thought extinct.

"How on earth do you do it?" said Lucy. "I don't know how you have the patience."

Lucy designed bathroom tiles. She wanted to talk about Ted. "He seemed such a nice guy," she said. "I thought you were one of the lucky ones."

*

"It would have been my dream to own something like this," said Natasha Talbot. "I think it's every child's dream really." She was looking at the photographs Lenny had brought to show her, and telling her how she had once badgered her parents into taking her to see Queen Mary's dolls' house at Windsor Castle.

"It frightened me actually," she said. "It made me feel sick to my stomach. Everything about it was so perfect it made the world outside seem spoiled."

She showed Lenny some more pictures of her godchild.

"Deborah is very important to me," she said. "She's the closest I'll ever come to a child of my own."

The girl looked about four years old. She had straight mousy hair cut in a pageboy and extraordinary, bright green eyes.

"She's the daughter of Frank's best friend from university," she said. She apologised to Lenny for her brother's absence, and said he was running errands up in town. "To be honest that's why I asked you to come," she said. "I get so nervous when he's out of the house."

"Nervous of what?" Lenny said.

"That something might happen to him. I know it's stupid but I can't help it."

Lenny stayed with her until Frank Talbot phoned to say he was on his way home, and then caught the train back up to town. Instead of going straight home she crossed the Harrow Road and went into Kensal Green cemetery. The grounds were so extensive that once away from the main gates it was easy to find yourself lost. The central avenues were kept neat and well-weeded but the minor pathways were overgrown, banked heavily on either side with foxgloves and stinging nettles.

She followed one of the paths for almost a mile. The sounds of people and traffic seemed far away. 'If the grey skies and rain-dashed cloisters of Brompton are a foretaste of purgatory, and the ivied avenues of Highgate are where the scholars and poets commune with the spirits of their ancestors, then Kensal Green is the interface between realities,' wrote Martin Newland in Darkroom Journal. 'It is where the living bid the dead farewell and the dead return to share their news with the living. It is the bus terminal of the dead, a place of common memory and, above all, gossip.'

Malcolm's funeral had been at Lambeth crematorium. William Foster had been quick to make it family only and so there had been just the five of them: William and Deirdre Foster, herself and Ted, William Foster's sister Margaret who had driven

over from Petworth. The Fosters had compassionate leave but were due to return to Hong Kong the next day.

Lenny didn't know what had happened to Malcolm's ashes. She couldn't bear to think that the Fosters had taken them back to Hong Kong with them, so she didn't think of it. She hoped they had been scattered at Lambeth, just a mile or two away across the river.

Malcolm's notes didn't say how Sylvester John had died. He had been sixty-five years old and to all intents and purposes perfectly healthy. Malcolm had told her that John had volunteered for the army in 1939 but had been turned down for active service on account of his short-sightedness. He had worked for the War Office instead, although his record of service had subsequently been lost.

After the war he had stayed on in London, working for the MoD and renting rooms from a Major Neville Manley, who owned several substantial houses in Maida Vale. In the January of 1952 Sylvester John had fainted in the street close to St John's Wood station. He was diagnosed as suffering from strain due to overwork. He was kept under observation for ten days in St Mary's hospital, Paddington, then spent the following four months in a convalescent home. He resigned from the MoD and soon afterwards the first of his short stories, Mansion House, was published in Capital Bizarre.

*

The police had brought the news at around midday. Ted began to tremble all over. By the time he ushered the two constables inside his teeth were chattering.

"Why didn't he watch where he was going?" he said. "I bet he just walked straight out."

She had gone with him to identify the body but had waited outside in the car. Her lips felt so numb that every time she spoke she sounded drunk.

Ted lay awake into the small hours, talking. He told Lenny about how he had once come home from a party to find Malcolm in the kitchen covered in blood.

"I thought it was paint at first," he said. "There was glass all over the floor and in the sink but Mal said it had just been an accident. I got him down to Casualty and he seemed all right after that, although he wouldn't go near the kitchen for several days. When I asked him what had happened he said he thought he'd seen a rat by the waste bin. I poured him a shot of brandy and sent him to bed. It took me ages to clear up the kitchen. I had a look around for rats but there was nothing but a couple of dead woodlice." He felt for her hand under the bedclothes. "He was always imagining things," he said. "Always seeing more than there was."

She would go to bed around midnight exhausted and be wide awake again at two. When this happened five nights in a row she picked up the phone and called Lucy. It was just after three o'clock.

"I'm sorry to wake you," she said. "It's just that I miss him so much."

"What's that?" said Lucy. "Where are you?" She sounded bleary-eyed and confused at first, but soon got back into her stride. She began railing against Ruth Dawson.

"She's got this stupid smile," she said. "As if butter wouldn't melt in her mouth."

"I think she's nice," said Lenny

"You were too good for him, Eleanor Cunningham," said Lucy. "That's your trouble."

She sounded fully awake now and seemed to be enjoying herself. She told Lenny about her new clients. "You should see what they ordered," she said. "They might as well have papered the walls with five pound notes." She chuckled softly and Lenny felt herself begin to relax. After a while Lucy asked if she was all right and Lenny said yes.

"Goodnight then," Lucy said. When Lenny broke the connection sounds rushed in but less obtrusively. Traffic went by on the main road, somehow riding the wave of her own even breathing.

*

The four rooms in the central compartment could only be opened in rotation. When one of the rooms was open the others lay flat, folded against one another like theatre scenery. She made the interiors from folded paper, like the pop-up illustrations in the books she had loved as a child. One contained a street market, where barrow boys hawked canaries in bamboo cages. Another was a hothouse garden with carnivorous plants and exotic butterflies. One room was mostly empty, containing nothing but rusty paint tins and old packing cases. This was the room she liked best, and whenever it appeared she would sit on the floor among the tea chests and begin to unpack. Everything was wrapped in old newspapers: *dustmen's strike, scorching summer, great train robbery*. There was a Doulton tea service, translucent white china scattered with pale pink roses. Ted had always hated factory-made porcelain. He said it was soulless. The window of the room overlooked a beach promenade. There was a

white pavilion with gilded turrets and a pier that extended some distance out to sea. When she opened the window she could hear the screams and laughter of children on the carousel, the clamour of the hurdy-gurdy. She longed to go out into the sunshine and look for Malcolm but when she tried the door to the street she found it was locked.

In the end she let herself out by the back door and went straight to Ashburnham Road. The doctor's rooms on the ground floor lay in darkness as usual but all the lights were on upstairs. She rang the bell and waited. After a few moments a light came on in the hallway and she heard someone coming downstairs.

The woman was of medium height, with grey hair drawn back from her face in a straggling ponytail. Her hand on the latch, although slim and still graceful, was covered in liver spots. She was wearing a paisley-print housedress that reached to her feet.

"I'm sorry to bother you," said Lenny. "But did you know a famous writer once lived in your house?"

"It's late," said the woman. Her voice was clear but quiet. Lenny had to strain to catch her words.

"I could come back tomorrow morning if you'd prefer?"

"I don't mean that," said the woman. "I mean it's been more than twenty years since he died and no-one's come looking before. I've lived here in this house for forty years."

The hallway was dim and shabby but John's rooms upstairs were well-kept. Lenny recognised certain things at once: the stack of cigar boxes he'd used to store press clippings and old postcards, the brass prayer-bell that had been given to him by Neville Manley, who had been in Burma. On a low table close to the door was the

Satsuma ware bowl with the red and gold dragons, and next to it the cigarette lighter in the form of a pistol, a so-called lady's weapon, with the engraved barrel and mother-of-pearl handle.

The lighter had belonged to Martin Newland. It was exactly his kind of thing.

"I can make tea," said the woman. "Or cocoa if you prefer."

She disappeared, presumably to the kitchen. As soon as she was out of sight Lenny got up from the sofa and started looking around the room. She hoped she might find John's photograph, something that had thus far eluded her. There were two or three framed snapshots on the mantelpiece. One was of a sandy-haired girl in a blue blouse with the London Eye in the background, another was of three men in a garden, laughing and drinking champagne, but she couldn't tell if any of them was John.

Beside the photograph stood one of the hand-held projectors that had been popular when she was a child, a white Perspex box that lit up when you pushed the slide in. When she looked through the viewfinder she saw a deserted street flanked by tall terraces. In the foreground a set of steps led to an open front door. Lenny put the box down quickly, not wanting to see what was inside.

She crossed to the window and looked out. The room overlooked the garden. There was a scrubby lawn, a row of dustbins, beyond that the roofs and gardens of Kensal Rise. It was deep dusk and there were lights on in most of the houses. The sky glittered with stars, and the winking lights of jets approaching Heathrow.

The woman served tea in the white porcelain cups with the pink roses. There were biscuits on a plate, yellow langues du chat that were slightly soft in the middle, as if the packet had been left open.

"What was he like?" Lenny asked.

"He was a quiet and gentle man," said the woman. "He always preferred writing to talking. Some people found that difficult to take."

Lenny finished her tea then asked if she could use the bathroom. The woman directed her into the hallway. The first door she tried opened into a large closet. There was a vacuum cleaner, some coats on hooks, a pile of old newspapers. She was about to shut the door when a faint glimmer of brightness caught her eye. She stepped towards it, pushing aside the coats. At the back of the closet was another door. A pale yellow light was shining from beneath the crack.

A flight of steps led downwards, the bare wood darkened with age and smooth from use. There was a light switch and a single bulb, ancient wallpaper stippled with faded roses.

Lenny leaned forward, trying to see what lay at the bottom of the stairs. After about a dozen steps there was a small landing and then a corner-turn, making it impossible for her to see all the way down. She moved forward hesitantly, descending as far as the half-landing. From there the steps went down into darkness, but from somewhere far away she could hear the distant sound of children's laughter, the melancholy strain of the hurdy-gurdy.

"Mal?" she called softly, hoping the woman in the next room wouldn't hear.

She stood very still and listened, but the sounds had gone. There was just the faint susurrus of air rising, warm and faintly foetid, from deep underground.

She fought her way free of the coats and closed the door. The one beside it led to the bathroom, a pleasant space with dove-grey tiles and a tall vase of wild flowers on the windowsill. The window, like the one in the living room, overlooked the back of the house.

*

The saleswoman wrapped the mug in a double page of the London Lite. She had huge pink hands, smooth-skinned and perfectly shaped, like the hands of a doll. She asked Lenny if she was old enough to remember the wedding and Lenny said no, but that she'd recognised the picture immediately. It was the same as the one on the first day cover. Her brother was a keen collector of commemorative stamps.

"Her dress was so lovely, I thought," said the sales woman. "It had a high neck and long sleeves, and those hundreds of tiny pearls. She looked like a real queen in it. Dignified, you know. Not like that other one."

On her way back to Wimbledon tube a storm broke, heavy thunder overhead and then a cloudburst. Lenny sheltered with five others in the doorway of a newsagent's, watching the rain cut steel diagonals in the steaming air. The downpour ended as suddenly as it had begun. Patches of blue appeared between the clouds. The sun glanced off the wet kerbstones and slid down through the cracks in the pavement.

When she got back to the house she went downstairs and continued with her unpacking. She began with the Royal Doulton tea set she and Malcolm had bought in Brighton. They had gone there because Mal had had an idea for a story about a Punch and Judy man. He'd spent a long time in the pier amusement arcade, watching the teenagers playing the fruit machines, the copper cascades of small change. She had sat on a bench in the sun and listened to the laughter and screams of children on the fairground rides, the sweetly lamenting music of the hurdy-gurdy.

Though it was some years ago now she remembered the day perfectly. The pink-and-white china was grubby with newsprint but would be beautiful again once it was washed. She usually took Mal his tea at around four o'clock. Sometimes he was

so deeply engrossed in his work that he didn’t even look up when she put the cup down, but when she came to collect it later it was always empty.