

A Passing Shower



*Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
But hope of orphans, and unfathered fruit...*

- Shakespeare: Sonnet xii

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1

What Granpop Tom called “a passing shower” lasted for three weeks. It drove Granma Mattie into a flurry of reading and note taking for her novel. The weather would inevitably have driven everyone else into a fit of cabin fever, except Granma Mattie died suddenly on the third day (while writing the first paragraph of the novel) and was buried on the sixth, so the sky took a back seat. Granpop Tom kept saying “passing shower” for the days after the funeral until it cleared up.

Granma had dropped dead on the patio holding the tea cosy she’d bought in Toronto years ago on a bus tour. Little did she know when she said to the Indian lady in the knick-knack shop, “They don’t seem to sell proper tea-cosies in North America”, that it would be the very thing she had in her hand when she dropped dead. She had taken the teapot onto the patio and forgotten the cosy. Going back into the house she grabbed it, returned, and collapsed into eternity.

A few years back Granma had jokingly said, during an inane conversation with her daughter, that she would like her last word to be ‘igloo’. Peggy asked why not something more profound? and Granma said that if she ever became famous they would write whole libraries on why ‘igloo’ should be her final statement. “It’s like Shakespeare’s Bear in *A Winter’s Tale*,” she said. Granma had some university degree in her younger days before having seven children, three of whom had died, and the allusion to Shakespeare’s Bear was one of the many occasions when she let her education shine.

Not that Peggy, having a science degree, had the slightest clue what it meant, but she couldn't help but think, on her mother's death, that a tea cosy bore some vague resemblance to an igloo.

Granpop was to last for seven more months before he faded out. "It's for the best," agreed the four surviving children to their children, trying to squeeze some meaning out of incomprehensibility.

There we have it: two deaths in the first four paragraphs; Granpop Tom and Granma Mattie already passed on and nothing yet happening. Still, it is good to get the deaths out of the way early lest the reader wonder if the characters are going to die, and discover (contrary to life) that they didn't pass on *before* the narration was complete. Now you know. It's a fairly safe observation to say that everyone dies in the end. So let's get started!

Perhaps I should tell you a little bit about myself before we go any further. This is not going to be just another book about a person writing-a-novel-writing-a-novel. But I often wonder when I'm reading, half the time you don't know who's telling you the story. So that's why I thought I'd say who I am. I'm not very well educated, but I once took an intelligence test and the man said I was way out of the box. He said I have a photographic memory, whatever that means. I don't recall reading about it, so there you are. I work in a Laundromat in Toronto, and I've been there since I left high school. My name is Yvonne. How do you do? I'm a grandmother now, quite young for a grandmother really. If you want to know, I'm within a twenty-year radius of forty-three. A little while ago, I got tired of not knowing anything and began a night school course in

reading Charles Dickens. It is a real eye-opener, and I love the course. But I thought there's no reason why I can't write a book too. So here I am starting one!

I'm a little bit plump. Did I say that already? No, I didn't, I just checked back. I'm blonde (although between you and me I colour it a bit). I said to my Charles Dickens' teacher at night school that I was going to write a novel, and he looked surprised. I told him that the thing I most looked forward to was that you didn't know what was going to happen next. He said to me, "Yvonne, you need to plan it". But it's such fun, I've already found, to sit down and let things happen. I had no idea when I started that I'd kill Granma and Granpop off in the first chapter before they're even introduced. Such power! If you keep reading you'll get to know Granma Mattie pretty well. She's a very nice person, and once you know her, her death will seem a terrible shame. Even sad. In fact, I hope to make it downright tragic. It would be nice if I could get you to bawl your eyes out.

That's enough about me. But I thought you might be interested. Well, I'm not that endearing as a person, my life is really rather ordinary. But you might wonder who was telling you the story. My life is not dramatic enough to be a character in a book. I seem to live a sequence of seemingly unrelated minutiae. Whose life doesn't seem that way? Unless you're important. Like the Queen of Denmark or someone.

So where was I?

At the time of her death, Granma was just beginning to re-read Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*. She made a point of reading it every year. "It's not the greatest novel ever written," Granma would say, "but it's the most perfectly crafted. That prissy John Lockwood and gossipy Nelly Dean! By the end you've no idea what's fact and what's fiction." I guess it doesn't matter if you've read *Wuthering Heights*. It's not going to

destroy the pleasure you're hopefully getting reading my book. Isn't it amazing? To think at this very instant you're reading what I'm writing at this exact second!

By the way, before I go on, both deaths were a terrible shock to Granma Mattie and Granpop Tom's four grown children: Peggy, Nick, Cob and Holly. Cob is male, short for Jacob. Come to think of it, Nick is male too, short for Nicholas and not short for Nicola. The other two names, Peggy and Holly, should speak for themselves. (The names won't speak for themselves of course, because Holly is, in fact, a man. But I'll explain that in a minute. Peggy's the only living daughter in the family). They couldn't believe it, especially their mother's so-sudden death. Their father's 'fade' was at least a gradual process of acclimatization.

In the wills, mother left everything to father, and father left everything to mother, and the offspring felt more desolate than ever that they didn't get as much as a goodbye: like they didn't matter. It could have caused huge ructions in the family as to where the supposedly valuable dinner-set should end up. It was typical of their parents not to think ahead, despite the biggest parental arguments they could remember being over "who would go first". Mother won that one, and father may have got everything in the will, but the main thing he got (before his wife's death) was Alzheimer's.

"You have to laugh about it," said Holly, who was nonchalantly joking towards claiming the supposedly valuable dinner-set.

To be truthful, the four siblings cared only a little about claiming a stake on their parents' belongings. Peggy had pointed out that it would be a shame if the supposedly valuable dinner-set had its pieces separated one from another. "It's best to keep it as a set. And I should really have the silver cutlery that goes with it as well."

But Holly (how he hated having a girl's name - yet it was actually Harold after a distant relative) was on orders, from his second wife, to "get the stuff". He praised to the skies the lovely table placings mother set on special occasions, with "not only the supposedly valuable cutlery, but all the bits and pieces: the candle sticks and damask tablecloths and so on. And the silver napkin rings."

"It's Irish linen," said Peggy. "Damask is different."

"I suppose nothing is really of great value money-wise," said Nick who was trying to pay off his third car. "They're more of sentimental value."

This discussion could go on for weeks, and indeed it did. It reached the point where Peggy, Nick, Cob and Holly (all lovingly suckled since birth on the innocent world of Beatrix Potter) stopped communicating amicably with one another and started pouting their way towards possession. Meanwhile, the tea cosy and all the accompanying bits wilted in cupboards, unclaimed-unshared-unloved, and then...

("Oh, and the house!" said Peggy as an after-thought. "I suppose we should sell the house.")

"Like hell," said Nick. "Too many memories.")

Anyway, as I was about to say before Peggy interrupted, and then...

...the phone went.

It's a strange thing, the phone. It can turn things upside down in seconds.

2

“It’s Mattie here,” she said. (This is years before I had her die; years before the last chapter I wrote.) Up until now you’ve known her mainly as Granma or Mother, but in fact everyone called her Mattie. Even her children called her Mattie, but they’re not born yet. You don’t owe me anything, but just give me a bit of time. I find I need to tell you everything at once, and she’s not even married, let alone have those seven kids that I’ve *planned* she’s going to have.

Not that Mattie was her real name. Her real name she never owned up to. Whenever her full name had to be used she always jokingly said, “Well, it’s better than Boadicea”.

“Are you Matilda Anne Trythall?” asked the registrar, and it was never a “Yes” but always “Well, it’s better than Boadicea”. Those who knew the ‘Matilda’ bit thought that ‘Mattie’ came from ‘Matilda’, but in fact it came from her initials, M A T. When she married Tom Trippett it stayed the same. “Stick to the tees,” she advised her daughter Peggy. “Tee to a tittle.”

Incidentally, the children had an argument at the time of the funeral as to what name should be inscribed on her coffin and headstone. Peggy and Cob wanted ‘Mattie’, Nick wanted ‘M.A. Trippett’ and Holly’s second wife wanted ‘Matilda’. At the service the priest called her ‘Mary’ throughout, and said “Mary was a pillar of the community”. In fact he went further and declared, “The name of Mary Trippett is a byword for charity”.

“Perhaps we should put Charity Trippett on the gravestone instead,” joked Tom their father. But it went unappreciated, and he felt a kind of sadness. As if he didn’t matter. As if he didn’t need to cope. As if forty-two years of tea-cosies and things was simply a preparatory parade before the real events of life. And he said silly things, like when he told his grown kids sometime after the three-week passing shower, “No one in the world was *better than Boadicea*”. They looked at him as if he had lost it. He thought, they don’t remember. They’ve forgotten already. Perhaps they never knew. Peggy had politely smiled.

So all in all, it was “for the best” when seven months later he faded out.

“He kind of lost it in the end,” said Nick.

Anyway... (this is years before, as I said)...

“It’s Mattie here.” (She was on the phone).

“Who?”

“Mattie.”

“Mattie who?”

“Mattie Trythall. We met in the cafeteria. Remember? Is that Tom Trippett?”

“It’s me. How did you get my number? What you want?”

“Nothing really. Nothing. Sorry.”

Mattie hung up the phone. It was worth a try. She was writing one of the final assignments for her degree (I think it was on the complexity of the narrator in *Wuthering Heights*), and Tom was studying to become a marine biologist. There was no common interest, except she thought he was good-looking. Tom wanted to become a marine biologist because he liked scuba diving and fishing and stuff, but they made him take

physics, chemistry and mathematics as part of the marine biology degree, so after one year he left tertiary education and got a job doing things in an office. There he stayed for forty-one years before getting the sack. Occasionally he had pined for marine biology, but usually it was just ‘Good Old Tom Trippett’ in the office.

Mattie decided Tom was the one, despite the failed phone call, despite the incompatibility of Heathcliff and snorkels. And it was thus that, two weeks behind on her *Wuthering Heights* assignment, she casually turned up togged and goggled on a rocky beach, ready to spear her fish.

“I spent two weeks trying to accidentally discover the beach where Tom scuba dived,” admitted Mattie once to daughter Peggy. But when Tom left marine biology and took an office job, Mattie’s flippers went into an old apple crate and stayed there forever...

“What’s all this scuba stuff?” said Nick. He was going through his departed parents’ belongings with his kids. “You kids want any of this scuba stuff? It’s a bit old.”

It was then that Peggy arrived at the parental homestead.

“What you doing here?” snarled Peggy and Nick.

Peggy was the oldest. Her full name was Margaret Emily Trippett. She was tall and thin, with dark straight hair that became pony-tailed when she meant business. She always wore trousers. Oh! the happiness on the day she was born. Tom kept unwrapping her and saying, “The poor thing can’t move.” Mattie would wrap her up again. And they wrapped and unwrapped her so often that it was like Christmas around the tree. A ritual developed in the first few months. On the unwrapping Tom would declare, “Why! It’s a

girl!” On the rewrapping Mattie would feel Peggy’s tummy through the blanket with her fingers like a Christmas parcel and say, “I think I know what it is!” until one day Mattie said, “You know Tom, I think I’m expecting again.” And that was Nicholas.

When they were small, Peggy and Nick were called ‘the terrible twins’. They were inseparable. Find one and you’d found the partner in mischief.

But on this day, many years hence at their recently-departed parents’ homestead, Peggy and Nick snarled, “What you doing here?”

3

There's no doubt that Peggy and Nick had drifted apart over the years. Gone were the days when Peggy would pull Nick around in a little red cart behind her bicycle, or they would disappear for hours down at the creek looking for things.

These days Nick was slightly overweight, for he enjoyed the finer things of life. He was big-framed; if he'd been a dog he would have been bred to pull a sled. Like Peggy he had dark hair. He was a lovely man, so good-hearted under his often brusque manner.

Peggy had grown up not entirely lionizing men. She had one baby, the father being a Professor of African-American Studies upon whom she performed an experiment in her science degree-getting days. She called her son Hindley Newton Trippett. He was all grown up now and living somewhere else not entirely grateful for his mother's youthful fling. He didn't write and he didn't phone much, so Peggy said "that's life" and got on with it.

Nick on the other hand had married well and divorced worse. He had three children, all his according to the blood tests, and his ex-wife had given them the names of Lake, Fire and Mist. "They can decide when they're old enough what they want to be called," she pronounced, and everyone asked "Boy or girl?" Not that in the long run it particularly mattered. Nick saw them once every two weekends, and this weekend he was teaching them to scavenge.

“You kids want any of this scuba stuff? It’s a bit old.” But they didn’t want it, and Nick thought it was for the best and that probably if he got the supposedly valuable dinner-set, he could pass a couple of the plates on to his daughter Lake as part of the family heritage provided it didn’t too much lower the selling price with a few pieces missing. His sons, Jake and Oscar (as Fire and Mist now called themselves), didn’t really care.

“You know,” Nick said to Peggy when she turned up, “I suppose Hindley won’t want the dinner-set. So it should go to Lake because she’s the female heir.”

Peggy snorted, her hair tied back, and Nick thought she looked like a horse.

“Holly’s wife has her claws into the dinner-set,” she said. “She never lets go. Look at poor Holly.”

And it was true. Holly’s wife was the type of person you’d read about in a novel: a ‘flat character’ in a Dickens’ novel with only the one attribute. Her name was Grace, which even if you don’t believe in God, is divinely risible. She was the picture of homely beauty and yet was permanently transformed into the proverbial stepmother. When she married Holly she had two children from a previous marriage, and Holly had two as well. Holly’s two boys didn’t stand a chance. Everything was for her Gloria and Claudia. Holly’s Tom and Harry could fend for themselves. Grace thought that Gloria could get the dinner-set and Claudia the cutlery. “The poor things have never had much of a chance in life. They need a break.”

“Indeed they do,” said Peggy.

By now you’re all muddled about the family. But you’ve heard a bit about everyone, except for Cob. Cob was thirty-one and “still looking for the right girl”. He’d

done a lot of looking, and in most cases in considerable detail. Something had gone wrong during his adolescence, and he'd never fully recovered. He said he didn't really need the dinner-set, but he would like something, he said. You know, he said. Just something of Mattie and Tom's. That would be good.

Cob had fair hair. He was tall and freckled,

*young and easy, under the apple boughs
About the lilting house and happy as the grass was green.**

Cob and Holly were the two youngest. There were three between Nick and them: Unnamed Male, Kate, and Unnamed Male. The Unnamed Males died at birth, but Kate died wrapped in a blanket when she was five and a half.

"Cob can have the scuba stuff if he wants something," said Nick to Peggy.

Peggy whickered, her hair tied back, and Nick thought her nostrils would flare fire.

"Stuff Holly's wife," said Peggy. She was always behind in a conversation. Half the time you have to read several paragraphs back to know what she's talking about.

"It's no good the dinner-set and things going to Cob," said Nick. "And as far as I'm concerned, Holly's wife..."

"Stuff Holly's wife," said Peggy.

"I'm with you there," said Nick.

"So that leaves you and me," said Peggy.

"Well I think logically, really, um, to be honest..." mumbled Nick.

Peggy veritably whinnied.

* I'm not a hundred percent sure if I'm meant to tell you where quotations come from. I suppose I should really, in case you want to look them up. This one is from Dylan Thomas' *Fern Hill* – Yvonne.

Nothing was settled. Well, nothing to do with the inheritance. The only settled thing had been their father who had settled well into a nursing home before his death.

“Yeah. That’s another hurdle I suppose. Dad’s funeral,” said Nick.

“Cob can have the tea cosy,” Peggy said. They both sniggered, and for a flicker of a second it was like the old days. Like a candle on its final splutter.

4

You're probably confused about who's who. What with all the different names and none of them clearly delineated. How like life my novel is becoming!

I didn't want to describe Mattie and Tom too early, so that you wouldn't feel too sad at their deaths. But now I've had them pass on, I suppose I should really tell you what they were like.

There's Matilda (it's better than Boadicea) Anne Trippett nee Trythall called Mattie. Mattie was a beautiful person. When she was old she was every ones grandmother; so good-hearted and full of warmth and hugs and fun. She was immensely intelligent. She was plump (a little bit like myself) and wore reading glasses that she was always losing. She had the twinkliest eyes. She was lovely. Of course, when she was younger she was lovely too, but in a different sort of way. Nothing was ever a bother. She was very magnanimous and loved nature. Every new day was an adventure for her, and every sunset was a momentous event. "Oh gosh!" she would say about everything, "would you look at that?" as if what she was seeing was the most wondrous thing in the history of the world. And then, she loved to read. In the kitchen, propped up open on the recipe bookstand would be no cookbook but a copy of James Joyce's *Ulysses* or Jorge Luis Borges' *Ficciones*. And such a hard worker! Goodness me!

Then there's Tom Trippett, Mattie's husband, never called Thomas. He was quiet and retiring, some would say even shy. He loved his vegetable garden. He always wore his hat and tie. Tom was a little younger than Mattie, and quite the opposite. He was

smaller and thinner and wore permanent glasses. He liked to work out how things worked. He could spend days taking the lawnmower apart just to put it back together again. When the children were small he made them all sorts of things, such as Peggy's little red cart that she pulled around behind her bicycle. He was a gentle man.

By the way, the children had a bit of an argument over what to put on their father's gravestone. This time it wasn't over the name. Cob wanted to put 'Tom, loved wife of the above'. But Peggy, Nick and Holly thought all those letters were a bit expensive. In the end they left 'loved' off.

Peggy had gone to the cemetery on a rare visit.

TRIPPETT
Mattie
Also Tom
Wife of the above

"They've put wife instead of husband," neighed Peggy. And she raged at the stonemason who claimed that I'm sorry but that's what you gave me. It wasn't. It was. So the headstone was removed to the stonemason's shop. There it languished, awaiting payment.

TRIPPETT
Mattie
Also Tom
Husband of the above

Soon Peggy's rage diminished. She got on with life.

Nick, Lake, Jake and Oscar never noticed the headstone wasn't there.

Holly, Tom and Harry, with Grace and her Gloria and Claudia, could never find it. "I'm sure it was over here, darling. What am I to do with this bunch of flowers? The service station won't take them back."

But tall, fair-freckled Cob knew. He watched the soil sink as the bodies rotted. He thought it nice when the weeds flowered. Mainly dandelions. “You’d like that, Mattie - the wild flowers.”

And what’s a cemetery without mist? The mist lay in the graveyard, like the mist that clung in the morning light over the little house in the country that Mattie and Tom had bought years ago...

“I think we’ll paint the roof green,” said Mattie, expecting her third, the first of the Unnamed Males.

How it rained that summer! The moss never dried. The sunlight steamed through great fissures in the clouds.

“I think we’ll paint the roof red,” said Mattie, expecting her fourth who was Kate, and scattering wildflower seed heads on the bank.

I know a bank where the wild thyme...

“This weather’s no good for the beans,” said Tom, late for work.

“I think we’ll paint the roof silver,” said Mattie, expecting her fifth as it rained again.

“A passing shower,” said Tom all summer.

“This weather’s no good for the nesting season,” said Mattie.

The stillborn birth of the second Unnamed Male.

“Not a good year,” said Mattie.

“Can we get a rabbit?” said Peggy and Nick. “Kate wants a rabbit.”

“I think we’ll paint the roof blue,” said Mattie, expecting her sixth, who was Cob.

That was a good summer. Tom grew more beans than Mattie could freeze. She froze and bottled and pickled all season.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” said Mattie. “All these pickles and chutneys. No one eats them. But it seems such a waste to let things rot.”

What a bank that year of wildflowers! In the evenings on the patio Mattie would tell the children stories of Titania and Oberon. She made little secret caves and hid tiny trinkets in the flowers.

“Mattie! Look! The fairies live here!”

“Oh gosh! Would you look at that? Shhh! It’s Titania and Oberon! The fireflies! That’s Robin Goodfellow setting off around the world in forty minutes. There he is! Quick! He’s gone!”

Nick would pretend to be Oberon and hide around corners leaping out at his mother. “Ill met by moonlight, proud Titania!” he would say.

“Ohh! My little Indian boy!” Mattie would shriek in surprise.

Even when he was grown up, Nick never knew what an Indian boy had to do with fairies and elves and imps and pixies or anything.

5

It was during her seventh and final pregnancy that Mattie decided to learn French.

We all have to have hobbies. The roof! Je vais le peindre.

“It’s winter, for God’s sake,” said Tom. “It can wait.”

“It’s a girl this time,” said Mattie. “You can tell by the kick. Just like Peggy and Kate.”

Since the baby was due at Christmas, they thought Carol, Holly or Merrilynn. But it was a boy.

“I thought you said a girl,” said a disappointed Tom.

“How was I to know?” said Mattie. “The male decides these things.”

Mattie named the baby Harold after her own mother’s uncle who had once written a book on organ tuning, with Mattie thinking, “This one is going to be the intellectual of the family”.

Harold was called Harry. Cob couldn’t say ‘Harry’. He would say ‘Howy’. Somehow it degenerated into Holly anyway.

And then the house caught on fire, and all of Mattie’s pickles and chutneys and canned things and frozen soups and vegetables burned to a cinder, and the strings of garlic and dried peppers, and the boxes of potatoes kept in the dark, and the books, and the bunches of lavender hanging upside down all along everywhere, and Kate.

You didn’t know Kate, did you?

She was lovely. She was five and a half. She had little ringlets in her hair. She was an angel. She was a fairy queen, a firefly.

In the freezing winter, a family of eyes peered from blanket-shrouds, with no fire brigade handy, just some neighbours from somewhere.

“To hell with the house,” said Tom. “It’s Kate.”

“It’s Katie. Kate,” said Mattie. “I don’t want to live here any more, Tom.”

In fact she couldn’t. The house was burned to a nothing. It’s possible to search through the embers somehow for something, but in the end you don’t know if it’s bits of burnt pet rabbit or what.

And the French went out the window, except there was no window left.

At the funeral Tom and Mattie sat next to a pretend sort of box. Peggy and Nick kept saying, “Can we get another rabbit?”

“Someday. Someday,” said Mattie. “The Salvation Army doesn’t let us keep pets. Shhh. Shhh. We must be quiet.”

Mattie was determined to speak. She gathered her last bit of whatever it was she had and stood at the lectern:

*These our actors were all spirits, and
Are melted into air, into thin air,
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve,
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind: we are such stuff
As dreams are made on; and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep.*

Goodbye Katie.

And everyone said it was very nice and that she spoke lovely. What inner strength you must have. How did you do it? I couldn't. It was just lovely, it was beautiful, simply superb, really nice, so moving. It was almost a poem. Was it Kahlil Gibran or Helen Steiner Rice? Did you write it yourself? It was... it was... so...

Soon with the insurance and the sale of the old land they got another house, still in the country but in a different place. Their new house, not unlike the first, was wooden and set on five acres of woods and lawn and garden. It was two stories, with a steep roof, and Anne of Green Gables would have lived there if this were her novel - although there was no cherry tree in flower and no nearby babbling brook. The house had the loveliest large patio, partially covered, that overlooked a bank leading to the woods. There were tracks through the trees, and wild strawberries and raspberries grew rampant. In front of the house, on either side of the long driveway, were gently sloping lawns. Around the house were flower gardens and an herb garden. Looking towards the driveway's gate, at the top of the right-hand lawn, was a large flat area of long grass and brambles that Tom hoped to turn into a vegetable garden. Mattie named their new home *The Duck's Nest*.

When the Trippetts moved in, the local church got together and found things for them: tables and beds and stuff. Nancy of around the third pew took up a special collection and they gave the Trippett family a supposedly valuable dinner-set and some silver cutlery.

6

Cob couldn't remember the burning house. Nor could he remember Kate. He was too young. His mother took up wildflowers again in the new place. And she took up weaving.

"I should have been a doctor or something," said Mattie. "It's such a waste. It's such a waste me just doing all this."

Tom got interested in hens. He would come home from work and sit in his new-made henhouse like he was waiting for a golden egg. What a rigmarole it was trying to heat the hens in winter.

"I don't know why you don't take them to bed with you," grumbled Mattie. "I should have been a doctor or something. It's such a waste. It's such a waste me just doing all this."

How it gnawed at her. Slowly at first.

"I should have been a doctor. The world was my oyster"...

"They're oysters there," said Tom on the rocky beach to the toggled and goggled Mattie years and years before the bit you've just read. (While they were still students at university). "Sooo... you're studying literature?"

"Yes. Mainly British writers," said a somewhat now-shy Mattie.

"I'm doing marine biology", said a somewhat shy Tom.

"That sounds interesting," said Mattie.

“It’s quite good,” said Tom.

“So that’s what an oyster looks like,” said Mattie.

“Do you want to eat one?” asked Tom.

“Raw?” exclaimed Mattie.

“Why not?”

He reached for his knife and split open a shell.

“Would you look at that? You’re an expert,” said Mattie.

“Yeah, right,” said Tom. “So what do you do with a literature degree?”

“I don’t know,” said Mattie. “Teach or something. Anything really.”

There was a pause, like in a play, like a great Harold Pinter pause crammed with meaning, and Mattie was holding the opened oyster and said, “What’ll I do? Do I just suck it up?”

And he said yes and they had another, and by the end of the afternoon the toggled and goggled Mattie and the prospective marine biologist were (they were after all, at least for those days, wearing the briefest swimming attire) in love. Not that they realized it. Mattie realized later when she found she couldn’t stop thinking about Tom. Tom took longer. He found he was unable to apply himself to physics, chemistry and mathematics...

“I should have been a doctor or something,” said Mattie eleven and a half years later. “It’s such a waste. It’s such a waste me just doing all this.”

“You’ve had all those kids. That’s not bad,” said Tom.

“I’m going to take a course by correspondence,” said Mattie. “I could learn something. You know, I could study law or something. I could get a job. I could become a lawyer or something.”

“There’s no time,” said Tom.

Mattie sat on the patio. She sat on the Bench. She sat on the Privy Council in London. Your Honour, I don’t know how you manage to squeeze together running such a large family with all your duties as a Judge. Oh yes, being Governor General keeps me busy. Yes, being bilingual is certainly handy. Opening parliament and things, and meeting this and that, is very rewarding.

(She started to scan the employment classifieds in the newspapers, and the advertised education courses. There wasn’t much there.)

I think I’ll write a novel, thought Mattie. Your Majesties, what an honour to receive the Nobel Prize for Literature! When I began writing my first book it had the working title of *The Duck’s Nest*. Then I thought around Chapter 6, “Has anyone seen my duck?” The Queen of Denmark was convulsed with laughter, and at the official dinner she said, “Mrs Trippett, that was the best speech in the history of the Nobel Prizes” and I said “Can you pass me the milk please, Your Majesty?” Or was she the Queen of Sweden?

“Oh gosh!” thought Mattie, “would you look at that? That tea cosy’s getting a bit tatty.”

“Gosh,” thought Tom sitting in the henhouse.

“Gosh,” thought Cob sitting in the cemetery thinking he was thirty-one with no kids of his own.

“Gosh” thought everyone, at different times, in different generations. Quietly frenetic. Unsure if it was dissatisfaction or just life. Gosh.

7

Peggy's now-grownup son, Hindley Newton Trippett, was what Holly's wife, Grace, called 'one of those'.

Subconsciously, Grace hoped that either of Holly's Tom or Harry might be 'one of those'. "Oh," she could say at dinner parties, "Holly's boy is 'one of those'."

It wasn't quite the same, but for the moment all she could say was, "I have a sister-in-law who has 'one of those'."

She could instantly become the centre of attention at the dinner table: "I have a sister-in-law who has 'one of those'."

All would turn and semi-gasp: "Really?"

It was as if Grace had personally and benevolently showered Hindley Newton Trippett with her own magic moon dust. In reality, Grace had met Hindley but the twice: at Mattie and Tom's funerals.

At Mattie's funeral she had been introduced and all that was said was, "Nice to meet you. I'm your Aunt Grace by second marriage". At Tom's funeral seven month's later, she greeted him like he was an old high school friend whom she hadn't seen for years.

"Two deaths in one year!" she cried as she hugged him. "You poor darling! How you must feel! How are you?"

To which Hindley replied, "I'm fine thanks," and wondered who she was.

After Tom's funeral, at the family home, where the odd relative and the occasional parishioner called for a coffee and a nibble, Grace had a couple of sips of wine too many. She became a little bolder.

She'd fortuitously fall into conversation with any female (of marriageable age or not) in the room, and whisper, "Yes, that's my nephew. Yes, he's a lovely young man. Oh no, darling, you can't have him. He's 'one of those'."

By the time the funereal teapot had been emptied several times, most in the room had learnt that the son of Grace's sister-in-law by second marriage was 'one of those'. And to be honest, most wondered what 'one of those' was.

It culminated in Margery asking Peggy straight out: "Is your son a nuclear physicist or something?" At which Peggy laughed and replied, "No. Why?"

It greatly amused Peggy, for she had a science degree, and all that Hindley became was...

She didn't have a clue what he did. Not a clue. "No, no, no. He lives in Toronto", was all she could say.

Peggy had been a practical, though kindly, mother.

"Hindley, you got enough money?" asked Peggy at the funeral.

"Yeah, I'm alright," said Hindley. "Need a fridge, but I'm okay."

Not long after, a fridge turned up at Hindley's apartment. No card. Nothing. Just a fridge.

"It'll be Peggy," Hindley said. He always called his mother Peggy. Unless he was annoyed, in which case he called her Hannibal. Usually they both got on with their lives.

“One day I’m going to Toronto,” thought Peggy. “Mattie went to Toronto once”...

“One day I’m going to Toronto,” Mattie had said to Tom. And indeed she did. She joined a bus tour and off she went, leaving Tom with the four surviving kids (all in their teens) and a freezer packed with frozen food and a list:

Tuesday: take out pizza. Heat it for dinner.

Wednesday: cold meat (in fridge), frozen green beans, potatoes.

Thursday...

Everything was pre-cooked and ready for her weeklong absence.

The other people on the bus were nice, which was just as well, for Mattie was to spend the whole week in their company. “Not simply scenery, but a week of camaraderie,” the bus tour brochure had said.

She visited Niagara Falls. Tom, it was spectacular.

“And I got a new tea cosy in Toronto. They don’t seem to sell proper tea-cosies in North America. It was an Indian shop. That’s Indian as in Asia. Those Indians know how to make tea. It’s pretty isn’t it?”

The tea cosy took pride of place on the table. For Mattie, it stood as a symbol of the one independent week in her married life when she had become a conquering Boadicea. “That week I could have conquered Rome,” said Matilda Anne Trippett nee Trythall.

“Just a passing shower,” said Tom.

8

When all is said and done...

When Tom's funeral's over. When Hindley Newton Trippett has got in his yellow car and headed back to his still-fridgeless apartment in Toronto. When Grace has gracelessly condescended to take the children home. When the last third cousin twice removed has nonchalantly dipped the last unsalted low-fat cracker into the last bit of guacamole on the way out the door. Then...

It leaves Peggy, Nick, Cob and Holly. Sitting in the old family home. On the bit of land somewhere in the country. Weeds up to the window. A self-seeded cherry tomato saying "I can do it on my own".

It's getting towards evening.

"We're orphans now," said Cob.

"Yeah," smiled Peggy.

"You have to laugh about it," said Holly.

"I suppose nothing is really of great value money-wise," said Nick.

But there was the dinner-set. And the silver. And the damask.

"It's Irish linen," said Peggy. "Damask is different."

Outside, a great harvest moon rose unnoticed. The ghost of Mattie Trippett hid trinkets in the flowers. Tom's ghost gathered eggs.

"Just take the whole damn lot then, Nick," Cob said. "I don't give a stuff."

"Well I do," said Peggy. "A lot of this usually goes to the daughter."

“We don’t have to follow that,” said Holly.

“The courts would decide in my favour,” said Peggy.

But all that the courts would do would be to purify each thing of memory. Each cup would be cleaned of tea-stains; each tablecloth bleached of turkey and cranberry marks from some faraway all-gone day. Each would cease to be a family heirloom and become a selfish possession. “Yes,” the four siblings could say to their own grandchildren, “this came from your great-granma and great-granpop. The courts awarded it to me because I was the best at being greedy.”

“Oh, and the house!” said Peggy as an after-thought. “I suppose we should sell the house.”

“Like hell,” said Nick. “Too many memories.”

And then...

...the phone went.

It’s a strange thing, the phone. It can turn things upside down in seconds.

“I thought we’d cut that off,” said Cob.

Nick answered.

“You what? You what? You what?”

Who was it?

Some things are best left unsaid. Best unrevealed. Best sometimes just to get on with it, before it’s too late.

You what? You what? You what? Already it’s too late. Already the nest of wasps has been trodden on. The swarming can’t be stopped.

“Some woman,” said Nick. “She said Mattie and Tom were her parents. She was adopted out by them.”

“She’s mad! A mad parishioner,” said practical Peggy.

“God!” said Cob.

“She said she was adopted out by them,” said Nick again.

“Who was she?” said Holly.

“God!” said Cob.

“Irene or something,” said Nick. “I never got the name.”

Outside, the ghost of Mattie Trippett whispered “Yvonne” in the wind. A great tea cosy descended on the house. It was dark. It wasn’t the slightest comforting.

9

It would be a lot easier if we novelists didn't have to stick to life. Life happens. It can't be helped if a complete new set of characters has to be introduced rather suddenly. How simpler it would be to write fantasy!

Maisie (why would anyone name anyone Maisie?) Prigmore (her maiden name was Heape) put down the phone. Her middle name was Yvonne, and that's what she was known as: Yvonne Prigmore. Aged between twenty and forty-three. Husband John. Three children, all flown the nest.

Yvonne had spent seventeen years looking for her biological parents. She found them too late...

Donald and Elsie Heape on the outskirts of Toronto had tried frequently, furiously and fruitlessly to make a baby. Eventually they decided to adopt and put their names into an agency. Not long after the arrival of Maisie Yvonne, Elsie and baby were abandoned. Donald went off to Anaheim, California, on a more fertile venture. Elsie had to 'work the outskirts of Toronto'.

Despite having two further fathers and a number of uncles in the course of her growing up, Yvonne managed to earn an average high school education, and left school to run a Laundromat. She was only seventeen and managed the Laundromat, which distinguished her from some of the others from her high school who worked further down the chain.

By the time she was nineteen, Yvonne had happily married a truck driver called John Prigmore. They had three children (a girl and two boys), and to give credit where credit's due, she had brought them up rather nicely. She was a grandmother now. Wee Zachary was the darling of her heart.

Sometime well into her marriage, she began to go to the library to research her husband's family tree. It was more of a social thing. Three other women were doing the same thing, and they spent most of their research smoking and chatting outside the library foyer.

"I don't know why you don't do your own family tree?" said Jill.

"I was adopted."

"That shouldn't stop you."

The idea came like moonlight in a crack of cloud. Yvonne had never thought too much of it. She didn't know where to start. But once started it became an overriding passion. It was a crossword puzzle with no clues. It was both a game and a desire.

After years - weddings, funerals, Christmases, children's birthday parties - she had a break through.

She found the name of her mother! She found the name of her father! They can't be? They can't have? They're married!

"Why would they adopt me out?"

She found their address. She found their phone number. She caught this snippet and that snippet. Twice over two years she half dialled the number before slamming the receiver down.

It would be different if they weren't married. Why would they adopt me out?

“Just do it!” said her husband.

So she did. One evening she picked up the phone. I can’t afford to think too much. Hello. Hello. My name is Yvonne Prigmore. Is that Thomas Trippett or Matilda Trippett? Formerly Trythall. I am a daughter. I was adopted out. I am their daughter. A daughter.

“I made a mess of that,” she said. A great sadness came.

Why would they adopt me out? Why?

What was a question before became now a sense of overwhelming abandonment.

“I wish I’d never started this,” she said. “I should have let things lie.”

The contentment of having a relatively ordinary life was shattered by knowledge. She was Rosencrantz or Guildenstern thrust into the role of Hamlet.

Not that she put it in those words, of course. She still ran the Laundromat. But, gosh...

*Maisie Yvonne Prigmore nee Heape
Wife of one
Mother of three
Grandmother of wee Zachary
Smoker outside the library foyer*

is conceivably going to become (in the ensuing pages) a tragic hero.

10

Many years earlier Mattie went on a bus tour to Toronto with another plan in mind, and hoping she'd left enough food in the freezer. It'll be all right. The children will be all right. Everything's fine.

It was a long trip. She dozed. She slept. She read. She looked out the window.

On her eventual arrival in Toronto she told the bus driver she was leaving the tour ("the bus makes me ill") and would catch up with it in a week for the return home. She lugged her luggage up and down the main street of Toronto until she found the cheapest hotel for the night. The next day, still with her luggage, she spent all morning catching the wrong buses this way and that, until she arrived where she had planned: the outskirts of Toronto.

Taking an old blouse in a handbag, she made her way to the Laundromat.

"Yes," she said. "I'd like this blouse dry-cleaned please."

"Name, address and phone number?"

"Well, I'm a visitor. I'm Mrs Virginia Woolf. I live on the road... to the lighthouse."

"Where's that?" asked the woman.

"These things never matter," said Mattie. "Are you... is your name Yvonne?"

"No, Yvonne's away for the day. Can I give her a message?"

"No," said Mattie. "It's not important."

So Mattie, a little lost now, a tourist rather randomly called Mrs Virginia Woolf with no lighthouse and without a tour party, wandered and then watched TV in the hotel. She had dinner. She went to bed. "I shouldn't be doing this," she thought. "Really I shouldn't be doing this."

The next morning she went back to the Laundromat. The same woman was there.

"We're so sorry," said the woman, "we seem to have mislaid your blouse."

"Oh," said Mattie. "Is Yvonne here?"

"No, Yvonne's away for the day. Can I give her a message?" So Mattie caught a bus and went to Niagara Falls. Tom, it was spectacular.

The next morning she went back to the Laundromat. The same woman was there.

"Oh," said the woman. "We're still looking for the blouse. I'm so sorry."

"Oh," said Mattie. "Is Yvonne here?"

"No, Yvonne's away for the day."

Mattie, grateful yet again for an excuse to come back, said she would return the next day. She went back to her hotel room. She got a coffee. She turned the TV on. She turned the TV off. She cried and cried and cried. She wept away twenty years.

I could have become a doctor or something. I hope I left enough food in the freezer. The children will be all right. Tom's perfectly capable. I shouldn't be doing this. The children are old enough. I should have left more ice cream in the freezer. The boys will open the freezer lid and gauge out handfuls of ice cream in their fingers when I'm not there. I hope there's enough food. I'm giving it one more try. Tomorrow. I shouldn't be doing this.

The next morning it was again to the Laundromat. Another woman was there.

“Yes?” asked the woman.

“Yes,” said Mattie. “I’ve come for my blouse. Is Yvonne here?”

“I think she’s away for the day. I’ll check.”

The woman went out the back. How long eternity must be. Joseph Conrad would have made two chapters out of this one-minute wait. Thomas Hardy would have described every fleck of fly-dirt on the Laundromat window. Emily Brontë would have entered a Yorkshire farmhand to speak in an incomprehensible dialect for several pages. They all have their ways. But Mattie stood there and thought, “My God! If she’s here what am I going to say?”

A young woman, of about twenty years, came out. “Hello. I’m Yvonne. How can I help?”

“How do you do?” said Mattie putting out her hand and shaking Yvonne’s. But it was really a touch. It was her first and final touch.

“I’m terribly sorry,” laughed Mattie, “I’ve got quite the wrong Yvonne. I’m so sorry.”

“That’s fine,” said Yvonne, “it was nice to meet you anyway.”

Yvonne gave the blouse and docket to Mattie.

“Thank you,” said Mattie. “It was so nice to meet you. Have a happy life!”

“You too, Mrs Woolf,” said Yvonne.

“What a nice lady,” thought Yvonne.

“What a lovely girl,” thought Mattie. And she skipped her way to downtown Toronto where she bought a tea cosy from an Indian lady. It was spectacular, Tom. Just spectacular! I could have conquered Rome.

11

What does one do when, in the middle of inheritance negotiations, another party enters claiming possible ownership? Peggy, Nick, Cob and Holly became a little disoriented to say the least, and spent the rest of the evening doing arithmetic.

“It’s impossible for them to have fitted in another baby. Given the time,” said Peggy.

“They were having babies like it was going out of fashion,” said Nick.

“It must have been around the time of Kate,” said Cob. “That’s the only gap.”

“Mattie breast-fed,” said Peggy. “It would have been very unusual for her to get pregnant.”

“Anyway,” said Holly, “why would they have adopted out?”

“There’s no time when they could have had a baby,” repeated scientific Peggy. She had even sketched a time-line on the back of an old copy of Chinua Achebe’s *Arrow of God* that was lying on the coffee table. “It’s impossible.”

“It’s a hoax,” said Nick.

“She’s mad! A mad parishioner,” said Peggy.

Each went home to their home. But with the appearance of a possible rival, they were filled with a sense of greater urgency to divide the family spoils. Well, Cob wasn’t. Cob was more upset than anything else. It messed him up more than it messed up the others.

He had a friend of a friend of a friend who traced the phone call. He had a name and a number. Except it was a man's name: John Prigmore on the outskirts of Toronto. It didn't quite make sense.

"It'll be his wife or something," said Peggy when Cob phoned her, "but let's let sleeping dogs lie."

Peggy woke the sleeping dog. She got straight on the phone to Hindley.

"Hindley. No, it's Peggy here. I want you to do a little job." And several days later each sibling knew that the impostor was Yvonne Prigmore, a laundry lady on the outskirts of Toronto.

"She's older than you," said Nick.

"That wouldn't be hard," said Peggy.

By now the psychological disorientation caused by the revelation of an older sister named Yvonne Prigmore had settled into a reality.

"We've got to dish the things out and sell the house fast," said economic Peggy. "Who knows what the strumpet wants?"

"I made a mess of it," said Yvonne in Toronto. And she took out her box of seventeen years of notes and jottings and said, "I made a mess of it".

"The name Trippett's not common," said husband John. "Have you looked in the phone books and electoral rolls?"

"Of course I have. A thousand times," said Yvonne. "There's one Trippett in Toronto, Hindley N. And there's a few others over where they live."

"They might be the children," said John.

“They might,” said Yvonne. And she put the box away. “I’ve put it away, John. Elsie Heape’s my mother. I’ve gone as far as I ever want to go.”

Meanwhile, Grace’s fascination with Hindley Newton Trippett being ‘one of those’ leapt into oblivion. “You didn’t know my husband has a sister who was adopted out? Irene. Way back. They had to of course. They were hard times. I believe she lectures in something at a college in Toledo.”

“Well, Holly’s father graduated as a marine biologist but there was very, very little money in marine biology in those days.”

“No, Holly’s never met her. We might one day. It’s such a long drive to Toledo. Claudia has her singing competitions coming up over summer. She’s such a talented singer and it’s such a long drive to Toledo.”

“No, no, no, no. It’s not Holly’s adopted sister who lectures in singing. It’s my Claudia who is the nightingale!”

“No, no, no, no. It’s not Holly’s sister Peggy who was adopted. It was another sister who was adopted OUT. Irene. Not Peggy. IRENE!”

“I’ve gone as far as I ever want to go,” said Yvonne.

12

Sometime after the years-ago day on the rocky beach with scuba-diving Tom, a de-togged and de-goggled Mattie sat on the bed in her university hostel room and thought, “I’m pregnant”.

She’d just got her assignment back on *Wuthering Heights*¹. No mark. No corrections. No grade. No comment. Just scribbled on the last page at the bottom: “See me. Prof. Cartwright”.

Mattie knew she’d been late with the assignment. Her final year. Just a short time to go. In ruins perhaps.

Even now she could graduate still and no one would know about the baby. She could finish her degree, have the baby, adopt it out, and go teach or something. Anyway, Tom hadn’t phoned. It had been just one of those things, one of those days. “*Salad Days*,” she thought. These are my Salad Days because you get chopped and devoured. I’ll remind you to remind me, we said we wouldn’t look back.

“It’ll be a postscript in my autobiography.” She smiled one of those smiles she smiled when you don’t know what she’s smiling about.

Outside it rained. Of course it rained. A passing shower.

“No passing shower,” thought Mattie. “This is a deluge.”

¹ I’ve since heard that the assignment wasn’t on *Wuthering Heights* at all. The clever, but creatively eccentric, Professor Cartwright had set the topic for the final assignment simply stating “Use What You Have Learned in My Course” – Yvonne.

She went to the library. She read Synge's *Riders to the Sea*. She'd read it before. She went for a walk. She sat again on the bed in her university hostel room and thought, "I'm pregnant".

She looked at her assignment. "See me. Prof. Cartwright". She smiled again and didn't know what to do next.

She went to see the university doctor who confirmed what she already knew.

"Yeah, you're right," she said. (She being the doctor). "It's no hassle as long as you enjoyed yourself."

"It is. I did," said Mattie.

"I'll make an appointment," said Dr. Kenneth. "These things are common you know."

"An appointment? For what?" said Mattie.

"You know," said the doctor.

"Not necessary," said Mattie.

She left. She went for a walk. She sat on her bed. She went to the library and walked the isles brushing the rows of books with the back of her hand so that her fingernails went clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack clack as she went along. She left.

There, in front of her, was the door! 'Prof. Cartwright'.

"Ah, Matilda," said Professor Cartwright.

"It's better than Boadicea," Mattie said.

"This assignment of yours using what you learned in my course," said the professor. "Where'd you get it from?"

“I made it up,” said Mattie. “You said you were tired of students rehashing other people’s thoughts. You said you wanted to be shocked. So I thought I’d be original.”

“It’s remarkable!” said the professor. “It’s marvellous! Of course I can’t give it a grade. It was late. But I thought it was wonderful! It should be published!”

All Mattie could think was “if he doesn’t hurry up I’m going to have the baby here in his office” and she laughed out loud and the professor thought he had cracked something amusing and said “What’s the joke?” and Mattie said “I was just thinking”.

“You’ve got a few months to go,” said the professor.

“Indeed I have,” said Mattie and she laughed again.

“There are scholarships available,” said the professor. “Harvard. Oxford. The Sorbonne. You name it. I think you can take your pick. The world’s your oyster.”

“Gosh,” said Mattie, “I’m pregnant”, and she went back to her little room, packed, caught the train home to her parents, and never set foot again on a university campus until Peggy’s graduation many years in the future.

13

It is to be hoped that you don't think you'll have to keep reading for nine months until the baby is born. This is, after all, not a Russian novel. The events of the next nine months can be kaleidoscoped into the briefest mention that, yes, Mattie's parents were upset, and, yes, Mattie's parents were extremely upset. It is a blessing that we all know Mattie by now, and that she was not particularly fazed by it all.

"You could have got a doctorate or something," said her mother.

"The world was your oyster," said her father.

Mattie had never told them about the scholarships.

"What did you have to go and do that for?" said her mother.

Mattie thought how short a memory a mother has. She didn't point out that she herself had been born just five months into her parents' marriage.

It was one of those quiet pregnancies. One of those pregnancies where you hang around and wait. Mattie did some gardening. She went to the library. She read popular romances. She thought she'd start writing a novel, and began dreaming of what the future might hold for her baby.

Well, it was all quiet until the seventh month.

"Why haven't you phoned the fellow that did it?" asked her father.

"Hello, Tom. It's Mattie here."

"Gosh," said Tom. "Where you been?"

"Gosh," said Tom when Mattie told him. "I wondered where you were."

Tom hung up the phone. "Gosh," he said.

Tom was a just man. In those days you 'did what was right'. That's what Tom did.

He went down town and tapped on a few doors. By the end of the day he'd found a job in an office. He gave up the marine biology, found a cheap apartment and started saving.

Three months later he phoned Mattie.

"Yeah, Mattie. I got a job. When's the baby due?"

There was silence. A quiet voice said, "I had it, Tom. It's adopted out."

"But I got a job, Mattie," said Tom.

"Babies don't take ten months, Tom."

"Gosh," said Tom.

There was another silence.

"Boy or girl?" asked Tom.

"They don't say," said Mattie. "They just take it away."

"Oh," said Tom. "I'm sorry."

"What will be will be," said Mattie.

"Yeah," said Tom. "I guess."

There was a final silence before they hung up.

Mattie thought that with his knowledge of biology and mathematics perhaps the office job was best.

"You'd better find yourself a job," said her father.

"That was Tom," she said. "He'd got a job because of me and the baby."

“A bit late,” said her mother.

The phone went. It was Tom.

“We’ll get the baby back,” he said.

14

It was not around this time, but many years later, that Yvonne of the Laundromat thought her high school education was not enough. She enrolled in an adult education night school and took a course on Charles Dickens.

“I always heard of him,” joked Yvonne, “but I never knew what the dickens he was about. All I know at the moment is that the books are very heavy and very fat and I don’t read fast.”

She took ages, but when she had finished *Great Expectations* she said, “I never read such a long book in my entire life. It was good. I liked the second ending best.”

“You’re no slug,” said the teacher.

But long, long before the second ending, around the fourteenth chapter in fact, Yvonne’s phone had gone.

“Is that Yvonne Prigmore?”

“Yes.”

“Yeah. My name is Cob Trippett. Can I come and see you?”

“Trippett?” said Yvonne. “What about?”

“Well, it’s important,” said Cob.

One night Cob got in his old truck, and drove the long, long trip to Toronto.

“I shall be wearing a red dress and blue shoes,” said Yvonne. “We shall meet outside the café just opposite the service station. I have shortish hair and blonde. I am aged anywhere between twenty and forty-three.”

“I’ll be wearing an old pair of jeans and a T-shirt,” said Cob.

Yvonne laughed. “I’m a little bit nervous,” she said to Cob.

“Now you know how I feel,” he said.

“Your name’s Cob then is it?” said Yvonne.

“Yeah,” said Cob.

And there she was! wearing a red dress and blue shoes outside the café opposite the service station, with shortish blonde hair and aged between twenty and forty-three.

“Hi,” he said going up to her. “I’m Cob. Are you...?”

“Hi,” she said shaking his hand. “You’re a lot younger than I thought.”

“Well, I’m thirty-one,” said Cob.

“I’m Yvonne,” she said.

It should have been one of those family reunions like on television, but they weren’t so sure about their facts and neither was particularly demonstrative.

“What’s this about parents?” said Cob.

“I’m really rather nervous,” said Yvonne, suddenly more overcome than she had thought she would be. “I’m so sorry. I don’t want to be a bother.”

“That’s fine,” said Cob. Yvonne went through pieces of her research that she’d brought with her, and Cob kept saying “No! No!” until he said “Well, I guess you’re my sister then?”

She shook his hand, more as a joke, and said “How do you do?”

“God!” said Cob. “You’re just like Mattie!”

“Who’s Mattie?” said Yvonne.

“Who’s got the dinner-set?” said Peggy. “Who’s taken the darn dinner-set?”

A volcano had erupted back in the old Trippett family house. Peggy, alone, had called in to winterize. No good the faucets freezing in a cold house, and with no phone now on, she got straight into her car and drove to Nick's work demanding, "Where did you hide the darn dinner-set?"

"I didn't," said Nick.

"Grace!" neighed Peggy. "Darn Grace!"

As if on a treasure hunt, rushing from one clue to the next, they hurtled off together.

"Give me some credit," said Grace. "It's not Royal Doulton bone china."

"Well Cob won't have it," said Peggy. When they visited Cob, he wasn't home.

"He's never home," said Nick.

"You never know what he's up to half the time," said Peggy.

15

“I’d love to, but I really can’t,” said Yvonne to Cob. “I’d love to but it doesn’t feel right. I wouldn’t mind a little memento though. Perhaps a photo. I’d love to see a photo.”

So Cob left the dinner-set in the truck, and put it back in the family house when he got home. He was glad he’d been to see Yvonne.

Picture Peggy’s confusion, being the only witness to the death and resurrection of the dinner-set. Nick and Holly swore they knew nothing about its disappearance, and Cob told Peggy he reckoned she was starting to imagine things.

“I bet it was Grace,” thought Peggy. “Thank God I made a fuss.”

It may seem up to this point that the entire cast of characters (Tom, Mattie and Yvonne excluded) has been doing nothing to earn a living. But that’s not life. None of them were on welfare, except for the brief post-professorial-child-benefit fling that Peggy had engaged in after having Hindley when she was a student.

Incidentally, Mattie and Tom hadn’t made much of a fuss when Peggy got her Aunt Liz to “go and see my parents and tell them I’m having a baby”.

“They seem to be the most reasonable parents in the world,” said Peggy.

All that Mattie had said to Peggy was, “You do what you like dear, but it seems to me it’s a good idea to keep it.”

Tom kept saying, "I'm too young to be Granpop, just call me Tom like the kids." But Granpop he became, and he used to say, "Where the blazes did your mother dig up the name of Hindley?" Tom started calling him Newt, but Peggy put a stop to it.

Hindley spoke at Tom's funeral, and said: "Tom used to call me Newt when my mother wasn't around because she hated it. Sorry Peggy, but I'll always be Granpop's Newt." He burst into tears at the lectern, and was led back to his seat.

Peggy grimaced. She was used to funerals. Despite her science degree, she owned a florist shop. "It's a lot harder work than you guys think." She was the only florist in town to have survived. "I sent the others flowers on their demise." Now she employed two women in the shop "to stick things in vases for dead people".

Nick worked as a used car salesman. He was pretty good at it too. He liked to make the most of an opportunity, and although he didn't own the business he made a reasonable bonus by being able to legitimately pocket a percentage of each sale.

Cob had his own lawn mowing business. In winter he found odd jobs like scissor and chainsaw and knife sharpening, and in the early spring he'd drive with a couple of friends to Québec to collect maple syrup. He loved that.

Holly drove a truck. "To think with my university education I married a truck driver," Grace would say. The main part of her story was the fact that she'd had a university education, which Peggy very much doubted. "Her touted academic achievements might have more credence if she knew which university she'd attended," Peggy mumbled.

Mattie clucked. "They're all good kids, everyone of them. I thank my lucky stars every day. Not one of them even smokes as far as I know. They're all happy. They're all

healthy. When you look at some families and you see the tragedies they have, I think, my goodness me, when will it strike ours? It's such a worry."

Yvonne ran a Laundromat, as we all know. But her life now burned with dissatisfaction. She was happy she'd met Cob. She was happy to know a little of her roots. But it had posed more questions than answers, and her life was becoming a 'what if'. What if I hadn't been adopted? What if I had had a decent education? What if I had known Mattie and Tom before they died? What if? What if?

The exhilaration of life had been in the search and not in the discovery.

Then disaster struck for Peggy. She got a phone call.

"Peggy, it's Hindley. I'm on Highway 81 and heading south. I'm off to live in Asheville, North Carolina."

"What the hell?" said Peggy. "What the hell? It's Ku Klux Klan country!"

"So?" asked Hindley.

"Hindley! You may not have noticed, but your father was black!"

Mattie would've said, "Oh! Thomas Wolfe, and O. Henry, and a day's drive from Flannery O'Connor."

But scientific Peggy said, "Hindley! Your father was black!"

There's far too much going on. Far too much happening at once. Too many strands. Too many characters.

I, Yvonne Prigmore, am here signing off. I've had enough of trying to write this damned novel. I should never have started reading Dickens. I was happier just running the Laundromat.

Postscript

Good afternoon (at least, it's afternoon at the time of writing). My name is Mr John Lockwood. What a state! What a pretty mess!

Having had experience with another novel (called "Wuthering Heights" and a best-seller at that), I have been asked by a psychiatrist to see if I can finish this as a help to Yvonne's recovery. Yvonne's had her breakdown, or whatever it is, so here I am. God knows why Yvonne suddenly turned her family into African-Americans. Of course, they were not. She is all over the place at present, so I implore tolerance.

Or is it just Hindley who is black? I suppose it is.

If I had my way I would change the name of Holly. When I was reading through to see if I would accept the task of taking up where Yvonne left off, every time I saw the name Holly I thought "female". There is no reason why it cannot be changed. It is a novel after all. But I cannot think of another suitable nomenclature. Harry maybe?

Harry and Grace. Except (I've just realized) one of Holly's sons is called Harry. But people do that, don't they? They name their children after themselves, so you get whole strings of Harry Trippetts and Cathy Earnshaws generation after generation. They don't do that in novels; it's too confusing.

Sam Trippett might be better?

I don't know. I'll stick with Holly and let you know if or when I come up with something better.

There's going to be a few other changes as well, but you shall find out as you go along.

Hindley was on his way down Highway 81 to Asheville, North Carolina. Why Yvonne stuck that in I've no idea. I suppose I could have him turn around and come back. Presumably he was in pursuit of sex, or whatever it is that Grace calls it... yes, he's 'one of those'. So I guess he's chasing someone to the Smokey's. On second thoughts I think I'll just have him go down and leave him there out of the way. He hasn't created much of a splash in the novel any way.

Tom and Mattie are dead. Yvonne kept resurrecting them, and having them have conversations like a couple of talking skeletons. That's one of the things I can't change. Yvonne has no sense of time!

You know, Yvonne, poor thing, she has had this breakdown. She used to joke outside the library foyer that she could never have a breakdown because she was too lazy, and then suddenly, here she is way into writing a novel and in the middle of a nervous breakdown.

The other thing I can't work out is where she's set it. It must be (looking at the map) to the left of Toronto, because if they came from too far on the right they'd be speaking French? And then I thought maybe the Ohio area - going back and forth across the border. But it doesn't make much sense. She's got her geography messed up.

There's a lot of other little things as well that are a bit muddling: like how old the kids are. Cob is 31. Yvonne is between 20 and 43, presumably 43. That's a big gap, and Cob's not the youngest, so why all this fuss about trying to squeeze having a few babies

into a few years? They'd plenty of time to have twenty kids, let alone how many it was they had.

Also, Yvonne was so polite. That maddens me. The way they go around saying "Gosh!" all the time. It's like 'Gone with the Wind' with "Great balls of fire!" minus the "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn".

Anyway, it's my book now. I've just decided I'm not going to go back and change the bits Yvonne wrote. Just leave it as it is. If you don't like it, you can change it yourself. Yvonne seems to think that irrelevant details about people's lives have significance.

I would've had Mattie have an abortion. It's simpler and takes away a lot of hassle. But then there would have been no Yvonne, and no first fifteen chapters. They seem very short.

Part II

Chapter 1

It was sultry Trowbridge (Ohio) weather. The mist from Lake Erie had covered the desolate landscape for a week. This Saturday it lifted. Thomas Trippett was nervous. He'd arranged to meet with a calm Matilda Trythall, who was travelling from her hometown of Bellevue. Thomas had driven to the lake and gone for a walk in the morning. The shore of the lake was spotted with dead rotting fish. He needed to think.

The previous week Thomas had gone to see the people at the adoption agency. He had told them that he was the father of Matilda's baby, and that they wanted it back. The person at the agency had given him a lecture about responsibility. He came home with three pamphlets on family planning, and was advised that if an application was to be made regarding the child, it had to come from the mother. He was also advised to be careful, as some mothers who had adopted out a child wasted little time in conceiving another.

Thomas had told Matilda the information over the telephone. Apparently Matilda (who had just finished reading *The Mill on the Floss*) had gone to the agency after that, and Thomas was waiting to hear from her as to the response. He had not seen Matilda since the day they went scuba diving. He was more nervous about meeting her than about hearing what they had to say about the baby.

Lake Erie seemed so vast. The blue of the morning sky, apart from distant dark smog on the horizon, contrasted with the dull grey of the polluted sea. Waves fell on the shore without energy, as if they broke more out of duty than out of life's enthusiasm. The lake was sick.

Alone on the shore Thomas felt as if he was the last person to walk the dying and polluted earth. What was once a...

16

It's me: Yvonne. The doctor says that writing might be good therapy, provided the plot doesn't get too tormented and I stay in the third person singular.

Mattie was more churned up than she could remember. Tom was coming from his town to her town to see her, and she felt both terrified and excited. Unlike Tom, she'd been to see the adoption agency people. They'd given a bit of hope. The very nice lady had said, "It depends," and although she said it was sometimes possible to "get back the baby" it was not something that either usually occurred or was recommended. "Think about it," she'd said.

They had arranged to meet in a park. How Tom would've got from Lake Erie to Mattie's hometown without being in a novel by H.G. Wells is anyone's guess. That's probably because he lived absolutely nowhere near Lake Erie, and to have stuck the Trippetts in Ohio is a travesty. Ohio's flat! As for Hindley been driven by sex all along Highway 81. Is this D.H. Lawrence? Gosh!

(Let me make one thing clear: I never had a breakdown. I mean *Yvonne* never had a breakdown. It was over-the-top blood pressure brought about by a considerable amount of stress. The cause of the stress will become clear as the story unfolds, but for the time being I wish to state categorically that Yvonne at no stage was plummeting towards becoming a fruitcake. I found I was counting everything. I had been to the market and bought a box of fresh unpodded peas. (There were two hundred and twenty-seven pods). I started podding them, counting backwards, and at the same time I was counting each pea

in every pod while trying to work out the average number of peas per pod. I was doing that for everything I did. I went to see a psychiatrist, but that was to help with the stress).

Mattie had borrowed her father's car for the day, to "go see a friend in town". All along the road from their country house she kept saying aloud, "And a fish that would be stinking". "And a fish that would be stinking". She knew it came from somewhere, some novel, some book. For the life of her she couldn't think why it would be in her head anyway. "And a fish that would be stinking". It annoyed her.

Then she started saying, "Oh my grief, I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World". She knew at least that that was Pegeen Mike in Synge's play.

"I've lost him surely. I've lost the only Playboy of the Western World". That's not far from the truth, thought Mattie, and went back, on purpose this time, to "And a fish that would be stinking".

Tom arrived late after several hours and, even though it was a smallish town near where Mattie lived, he had a terrible time trying to find a place to park the car close to the park where they'd arranged to meet. If you thought they'd arranged to meet in a concrete *car park* then there's not an ounce of romance in you. No, they'd arranged to meet in a park with trees and flowers and lawns and lakes and white swans and fountains and hummingbirds.

Mattie loved her hummingbirds, and the feeders were a summer feature of her married life. "There's the Second World War out there," she'd say after a hummingbird fight. (At least the hummingbirds place their geographical abode in the Americas. Why they got a Mr Lockwood to continue writing *my* novel is beyond me).

“Mattie!” called Tom, who’d suddenly spied her.

“First things first,” said Mattie meeting him half way after not having seen him (but for the once or twice) since the scuba diving day. “I need to find a bathroom.”

At least that solved the problem of whether to greet with a kiss on the cheek or a handshake. In fact, Mattie, who wasn’t born yesterday, had planned it that way and her need to find a bathroom was a concoction she’d contrived in between the “And a fish that would be stinking” mantra. She waited in the Ladies for about thirty seconds before reappearing. “That was quick,” said Tom.

How they got on! They talked and walked and laughed about this and that. Anyone who saw them strolling in the park would have said, “Now there’s a couple in love!” Then they got to the baby.

“I’ve been thinking,” said Mattie. “About the baby. I would love it to be mine, but it’s found a home now.”

And Tom agreed, although he didn’t really, and Mattie said it was their mistake and they had to let go. “We can’t fix one mistake by making another.”

And Tom agreed, although he didn’t really.

“We go through life collecting scars,” said Mattie, “and this one breaks my heart.”

And Tom agreed. And then he said, “Will you marry me anyway?”

Mattie stopped in her tracks. And then she said, “No.”

All the short drive home she kept saying, “I’ve lost him surely. I’ve lost the only Playboy of the Western World”. She had a little cry. “It’ll be a postscript in my autobiography.” She smiled one of those smiles she smiled when you don’t know what she’s smiling about.

Two weeks later Tom phoned.

“Stuff it, Mattie,” he said. “Will you marry me?”

“Are you on your knees, Tom?” asked Mattie.

“I am now,” he said.

“In all the years,” said Mattie to Peggy, sitting on the patio with a copy of Émile Zola’s *L’assommoir* opened upside down on the table next to the tea cosy, “one of my only regrets is that I didn’t say yes two weeks earlier.”

17

When Tom and Mattie celebrated their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, Tom had asked Peggy what she thought he should get Mattie.

“Well Tom,” said Peggy without even needing to think, “I’ll tell you what she would really like: an engagement ring.”

So that’s what Tom got Mattie as a twenty-fifth wedding anniversary present.

“Oh Tom!” cried Mattie. “It’s beautiful! Just beautiful! Tissues! Nick, pass that box of tissues!”

The kids made Tom get down on one knee, which he did even though he was having cartilage problems, and he said, “Matilda Trythall, will you marry me?” and Mattie shrieked with laughter and said, “Oh for God’s sake Tom!” like she was being tickled to death. And Tom, as well as producing the ring, said, “And here’s the tickets for the honeymoon,” and presented her with an envelope.

“Oh for God’s sake Tom!” shrieked Mattie. “All I got you was a new wheelbarrow.”

Cob came in (in tears because he was quite overcome) wheeling a brand new orange wheelbarrow that Mattie had bought for Tom. And the kids had decorated it with old tin cans and balloons, and had painted graffiti that read ‘Just Married’. So Mattie sat in it, holding the envelope with the honeymoon tickets while Tom pushed her around the patio with Mattie still shrieking “Oh for God’s sake Tom! We got the vehicle! Where we off to now?”

And she opened the envelope and it wasn't a honeymoon ticket from Tom at all, but a present from the kids for a holiday to Britain.

"Oh children!" bawled Mattie. "Oh children! Would you look at that?" Cob had to go outside to recover a bit, and Peggy said "Calm down Mattie, you'll have a heart attack," and even Nick was pleased, and Holly's girlfriend, Cassandra Austen, who thought she might be expecting a baby, muttered to Holly, "At least you got that one right."

"Oh children! It was everything we ever dreamed about," said Mattie some time later when they got back.

"She never saw a damn thing," said Tom, "except for the wrong side of the road." Tom had done the driving during the venture, and Mattie spent most of the time saying, "The other side Tom! The other side!"

We saw the Tower of London with Richard the Third, and I walked the wuthering heath with Cathy and Heathcliff, and, children, you wouldn't believe it, but in the Lake District, as if it was planned, as if they had been waiting for me, there was a host of golden daffodils, just over the brow of a hill, suddenly, there they were! and Stratford-on-Avon.

"I got dragged from one damn book to another," said Tom. "At least Shakespeare kept a decent herb garden."

We went all the way to the top, you're father can't stop driving, where we caught a boat to the Orkney Islands from John O' Groats, and you wouldn't believe it, oh children, we stayed the night with a family. In the evening they sat around the fire and told stories.

“I couldn’t understand a damn word,” said Tom.

And the Tower of London. Did I tell you that? We went everywhere and saw everything.

*...what I hear is the murmur
Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.*

Did I tell you about Wordsworth’s daffodils? And London?

*Earth has not anything to show more fair:
Dull would he be of soul who could pass by
A sight so touching in its majesty.*

On the way back, the airhostess was lovely and had the name of Goldsmith. I asked if she was descended from Oliver. She looked at me as if I was from the moon.

So Mattie was restricted, by her children, to two stories a day. Then one story a day. Then one story a week. Until she was weaned off the trip of a lifetime.

Even for weeks after the weaning Mattie was heard singing in her averagely unpleasant voice:

*As I was going to Strawberry Fair,
Singing, singing, buttercups and daisies,
I met a maiden taking her wares, fol-de-dee.
Her eyes were blue and golden her hair,
As she went on to Strawberry Fair.
Ri-fol, ri-fol, tol-de-riddle-li-do,
Ri-fol, ri-fol, tol-de-riddle-dee.*

“It must have been exhausting,” said Peggy to Tom.

“I wouldn’t have missed watching her there for the world,” said Tom. And he went out to his garden pushing the brand new orange wheelbarrow with ‘Just Married’ painted permanently on the side.

18

While Mattie and Tom were away, something happened that's going to take a bit of getting to before you can be told. It's really rather complicated. Actually, the story is not complicated, but the getting to it is a bit complicated, and you won't understand what happened without first hearing the complicated bit.

You see, something happened to Cob. He was sixteen. There's no telling what, although if you use your imagination it's not going to be particularly difficult to make a speculative guess.

One day Mattie had gone to get some groceries. It was as ordinary as getting groceries can be. Down one particular isle of the store she was approached by a relatively young man who said, "Excuse me, ma'am, but I wonder if you can help me?"

Mattie said, "Sure."

"I'm looking for corn flour," he said, "but I can only find cornmeal and cornstarch. Do you know where to find it?"

"That's a problem and a half," said Mattie. "The name depends on what country the recipe comes from. Have you got half an hour?"

"Is it that complicated?" asked the young man.

They got talking. His name was Abram Gill. He had crossed the border to avoid being drafted into the Vietnam War. No doubt you're already thinking he's the one responsible for whatever happened to Cob. But you shouldn't jump to conclusions too fast.

Mattie wasn't a particularly political animal, but she ended up nodding about the war, and saying, good for you, and have a nice day, and so on.

A week or so later there was a knock at the door, and Mattie called out, "Tom it's that nice young man from the store avoiding the war. He wants to know if we've got any work."

So Tom got him a sickle and told him to start cutting the long grass in the ditches. Tom said he could stay for a while with free board provided he worked hard and was prepared to get paid a pittance because that's about all they could afford.

"It's our bit for the war effort," joked Mattie to Tom, but, to be truthful, she didn't know what side of the fence she sat on when it came to American politics. "I can't even understand their voting system, let alone have an inkling into the whys and wherefores of this and that. It's as confounding as the Stock Market."

Peggy thought her parents were fantastic: "Imagine harbouring a draft dodger!" But Nick was of two minds: "Are my parents secret communists?"

Abram Gill worked hard, and fitted in well with the daily routine at the Trippett household. Mattie thought that Abram and Peggy might end up having a thing going. "He's a nice young man."

Then when Tom and Mattie were on the trip of a lifetime, Abram went off on a fishing weekend with Cob.

After that, Peggy, who had been acting as if she was in charge during their parents' absence, told Cob a few days later that his attitude was abominable. They had a shouting match, and Cob ended up blurting out a few details about Abram that Peggy reckoned she didn't want to hear.

With Peggy, don't press the button and expect the bomb to not detonate.

"On your donkey, Yankee Doodle," she bellowed at Abram. "On your Yankee Doodle Dandy donkey!"

"What for?" asked Abram.

"You can stick a feather in your... in your..." huffed Peggy. "I hope they send you to the front and you get shot in the macaronis."

Cob laughed so hard at that he convulsed. He laughed hysterically. Peggy thought he would hyperventilate or something. "You were like a dog with rabies," said Peggy to Cob.

But Abram was on his donkey and gone. Peggy said, "No big deal, Cob. We go through life collecting scars. You just got a biggie."

"You sound like Mattie," said Cob. But he was never quite the same after that, for
he sang in his chains like the sea.

When Tom and Mattie came home, Mattie asked Peggy where Abram was. "I sent him packing," said Peggy.

No more questions were asked. Peggy always thought her mother supposed something had happened between her and Abram. In fact, Mattie couldn't help but notice that Cob was different. In between her countless stories of the trip of a lifetime, she managed an aside to Cob.

"We go through life collecting scars, Cob. You can make a big deal of it or you can get on with it. Scars don't matter unless you're Zha Zha Gabor, and you ain't no Zha Zha Gabor."

Cob didn't know what Zha Zha Gabor was. But he sort of found it helpful in the long run.

19

Hindley Newton Trippett had gone to Asheville, North Carolina, to die.

In Toronto he'd been to the doctor, not long after his fridge arrived, and the doctor had said, "I hate to tell you this".

I hate to tell you this. This is very hard for me. This is almost as hard for me as it is for you. This is extremely difficult. If you'd sit down please. The results of the tests have come in. How's it going? I've got the printout from the laboratory. Um. Look, I, ah... I have some sad news. Not good I'm afraid. It doesn't look too promising. It's not particularly hopeful. This is one of the not so nice things of being a doctor. It's ah, it's um, it's a... You've got...

Have a nice day. Yeah, three bags full and humpty-dumpty to you too.

What was Hindley to do? Run to mother and say, "I've got AIDS. Cure me"? So he looked at the map, got in his yellow car and drove in the direction of Asheville, North Carolina.

He thought, you know, I'll just linger on and let Peggy think things are fine. Then I'll get someone to phone when I die and she'll get a big shock but at least she won't have to live with the lingering month after month of dying.

But Peggy never got a phone call, except for the one from Hindley on the way down.

“Peggy, it’s Hindley. I’m on Highway 81 and heading south. I’m off to live in Asheville, North Carolina.”

“What the hell?” said Peggy. “What the hell? I just got you a fridge!”

And sometime later, on that very day, instead of month after month of dying, she got a visit from two policewomen. His yellow car had run off the road, had hit a tree, had gone out of control, had gone tumble tumble tumble and yes, he was dead.

Why should a dog, a horse, a rat have life...

There was no apparent reason for going off the road.

Words cannot say...

“Then don’t say them,” said Peggy.

Time heals.

“Like hell,” said Peggy.

Everything but silence is crap.

20

Up until now, there just hasn't been the time to talk about Nick. Nicholas Thomas Trippett. Used car salesman. Father of Lake, Fire (now Jake) and Mist (now Oscar). Divorced. Owner of three cars, all new.

He was the one who had helped Hindley get his yellow car, and at a good price too. Not brand new, but pretty good nonetheless.

Nick was what Mattie called 'a good boy'. "He's a good boy," she would say, even if he had done something naughty. He loved to mow the lawns, which in Tom's eyes notched him several steps above good.

Once during high school days he arrived home early on his bike, and when Mattie asked "What for?" he said, "The teacher wasn't happy."

That evening the principal of the high school phoned to say that Nick was suspended from attending school for several days because he had called his English teacher, Mrs Middlemore, a 'complete arsehole'.

"Well she is," said Nick.

"That's no reason to go into the gutter," said Tom.

"She's a very competent teacher, Nick," said Mattie. "They were quite right to send you home."

"You listen to your mother," said Tom. Mattie and Tom made it a policy always to support the teachers in times of disagreement.

Several days later, Mrs Middlemore phoned Mattie and said she would like to see her before Nick returned to school. “That’s no trouble,” said Mattie, and they arranged a time on Thursday evening.

“Nick has become impossible,” said Mrs Middlemore at the meeting. “He’s most uncooperative.”

“He’s generally a good boy,” said Mattie.

“You might think so,” said Mrs Middlemore, “but one can hardly expect a mother to be objective.”

“No,” said Mattie. “He is a good boy, but this time he was naughty. I suppose...”

“You call that naughty?” interrupted Mrs Middlemore. “That’s the attitude I’ve come to expect from a parent who’s had more babies than she’s competent to handle.”

Mattie bit her tongue.

“He’s totally disruptive,” continued Mrs Middlemore, “and he’s moving to another class. We were studying the poetry of Bob Dylan when...”

“Dylan Thomas,” Mattie corrected.

“No, Bob Dylan,” said Mrs Middlemore proudly. “I don’t believe in teaching irrelevant dead poets.”

“It’s a hard rain gonna fall, Mrs Middlemarch,” said Mattie, her hackle feathers now raised. “Dylan Thomas was alive and drinking until fairly recently. And I think...”

“A dead poet is about as relevant as an Indian novelist,” scoffed Mrs Middlemore.

“I take it you haven’t read *Kanthapura*,” said Mattie.

The reference was beyond Mrs Middlemore. Her voice was tense and squeaky.

“Next thing you’ll be quoting *Richard the Third*.”

“Hedgehog! Painted queen!” cited Mattie.

“Now I know why your son is like he is,” screeched Mrs Middlemore.

“Goodnight! Foul wrinkled witch!” said Mattie. She stood. She grasped her handbag. She departed.

“Mattie,” said Nick coming from school the next day, “they’ve taken me out of Mrs Middlemore’s English class and put me into Mrs Galloway’s.”

“Mrs Galloway’s a good teacher. You do everything she says,” said Mattie, still shaking from the parental interrogation. “That other woman was an absolute arsehole.”

“A *complete* arsehole, Mattie,” said Nick. “Not absolute.”

Nick was nearly always a good boy after that. He left school the day he was legally allowed. He got an apprenticeship with a mechanic and was never happier. Never happier until he met Sylvia. Sylvia Drake changed her name to Silvana Arcadia and was a great fan of Bob Dylan. When she discovered that Mattie knew more about Bob Dylan, Joan Baez and Jimi Hendrix than she did, Silvana Arcadia decided she didn’t like Mattie.

“Silvana’s wonderful,” said Nick, “she’s really into Bob Dylan.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Bob Dylan,” said Mattie.

21

It was Nick who decided, a couple of weeks after Hindley's funeral, that Peggy should get the supposedly valuable dinner-set and the silver cutlery. He phoned Cob and Holly and they both agreed.

"What the hell," said Holly, "just give her the stuff."

But Peggy said, "No. I've no need for it. It's really nice for you to offer, but no. Thanks though. It's appreciated."

Grace said, "Peggy's quite right. Why would she need all those plates and cups and that silver when she dines alone?"

"I wouldn't mind something though," said Peggy. "Just a little memento. A memory."

The funeral for Hindley was in Toronto on a Saturday. Peggy said she wanted to travel alone, so she drove there on her own. "Need space to think." Cob went with Nick. Holly went on his own as well, as he had to get back that same night. Grace stayed behind. "It's one of those things. I didn't know him very well. Met him just the once. I'll look after the kids I think."

The chapel was packed with people Peggy had never met. She sat up the front with Nick, Cob and Holly. She wished she'd sat further back. She wanted to turn around and have a good look. She whispered to Nick, "It's not good for a florist to be seen weeping at a funeral." Nick sniggered. "You can cry as much as you want. Just don't pretend you're related to me." And Peggy's lips quivered and she said "Humph".

It was mainly speeches. A couple of people gave nice little talks. “He was a nice person.”

“I wonder if that one was special to Hindley,” thought Peggy.

Nick spoke on behalf of the family. Peggy nearly lost her mask, but she was able to say to Nick when he returned to his seat, “You did it well, Nick. I like it short.”

Then a man, whom up until now Peggy had thought was the funeral director, came to the front and started saying at first what Peggy thought was a speech, but when he said “Heavenly Father” Peggy thought “It’s just a prayer, thank goodness”. And then he raised an arm high in the air and said “Heavenly Father” and Peggy thought, louder this time, “My God! Hindley! Don’t tell me you became *one of those*.”

To save herself she did what she thought Mattie would have done, and began analyzing the syntax. How could he speak for five minutes to our Heavenly Father and not have as much as a semi-colon? Not even a comma! Peggy kept thinking, “There’s no punctuation in heaven - just the odd dash - that’s a blessing.”

“Heavenly Father who deigned to spread your love how we thank and praise you for the life of...”

“My God!” screamed Peggy inside, “the other hand’s gone up!”

“... so Heavenly Father shedding your everlasting light and causing it to rain on the just and unjust so that not even a sparrow falls without...”

“Blessed are the sparrows,” thought Peggy desperately. “Blessed are the hairs on my head. Blessed are those with no punctuation for I tell you solemnly they are the only ones God understands. Help! Help! Help!”

What a relief, some two hundred minutes later, to say “Amen!”

“AMEN!” affirmed Peggy, and Nick whispered, “What the hell was that about?”

What a relief too, at least for Peggy, to discover a little later that the man with his limbs in the air expostulating to our Heavenly Father was in fact dragged in for the occasion, and Hindley hadn’t become ‘one of those’ after all.

“I can survive a funeral but I don’t do crematoriums,” said Peggy to Cob. “You go if you would because... because... I don’t want him left alone.” Peggy broke down in Cob’s arms and Holly’s arms and Nick’s arms, and the four siblings all had a sob together in a huddle, which would have immensely embarrassed Grace if she had been there and not at the hairdressers.

There’s never anything to do at a crematorium. Except to sit and wait for the plastic music to start, and when it does, in a triumph of modern technology, the coffin inexplicitly slides noiselessly behind a curtain. When the last little flap of the curtain has settled, people look at one another, rise, and leave with a sense of futility rather than completion. “Why did I bother to sit?” thought Cob.

At the cup of coffee after the funeral, Peggy spied a young man at the bottom of the garden sobbing behind a hedge. She went down and said, “I’m Hindley’s mother”. The young man flew into her arms, unaware of Peggy’s predilection for undemonstrative behaviour. His shoulders shook. Peggy wept a thousand years of weeping.

She never asked his name, and she always wondered if that was the someone who had been ‘special’.

22

Back at the motel, with Peggy and Cob, Nick opened some wine. There's never much to do in a motel after a funeral, except have a wine and order pizza and not eat it.

They talked about this and that. They reminisced about Hindley and Mattie and Tom. Each topic was introduced with "Do you remember when?" Each common remembrance ended with "That was so much fun" or "That was good".

A lull came, and Peggy said, "Well? What do you think?"

"Think what?" asked Cob.

So they got into Nick's car and, armed with the map Peggy had bought at a service station to find her way to Hindley's funeral, drove to the outskirts of Toronto.

It was half past eight. "The Laundromat won't be open," said Cob.

"Hopefully it'll be shut," said Peggy. "I just want to look."

There it was! Laundromat! Tiny letters at the bottom of the sign read, 'Manager: Yvonne Prigmore'.

They parked. They got out. They looked through the window. A sign on the door said 'Open Mon. – Fri. Closed Sun.'

"The mystery deepens," Peggy said. "Saturday is unaccounted for."

There wasn't much to do after that. Not much else to see. They went back to the motel.

The next morning Nick offered to travel back home with Peggy, but she said she still needed the space, and she'd call when she got back home.

So Peggy set out, and Cob set out with Nick.

“Where you going?” said Cob. “It’s the wrong way.”

“It’s Sunday,” said Nick. “Let’s meet Yvonne.”

Cob confessed that he had already.

“Have you?” Nick said. “What’s she like?”

Cob related his meeting with Yvonne. “Well blow me down!” laughed Nick when Cob told him about Yvonne refusing the dinner-set. “Blow me down! Peggy always thought it was Grace.”

They got lost. They asked for help at a shop and headed in the wrong direction towards Mississauga.

“It’s the airport!” said Nick.

“Peggy’s got the damn map,” said Cob.

At last they found the house of John and Yvonne Prigmore. They rang the doorbell. Nick was nervous.

Yvonne answered. “Cob!” she said.

“This is Nick, my brother,” said Cob.

“How do you do?” said Yvonne shaking his hand.

“God, you’re like Mattie,” said Nick.

“Come in,” said Yvonne, and they were ushered into a small but comfortable living room.

“What you doing here?” said Nick to Peggy who was ensconced in an armchair.

They stayed for lunch. They stayed all afternoon. They stayed for an early dinner.

“This is ridiculous,” said Peggy. “We’ve got to get going.”

They left, this time with Cob driving Peggy's car and Peggy travelling with Nick.

"It was like bumping into Mattie twenty years ago," said Nick.

"What a lovely person," said Peggy. "Hindley would've liked her."

23

So much for Holly having to get home that night. His car broke down. A thing under the hood snapped or something (don't expect me to know all these mechanical terms).

He phoned Grace from halfway home.

"The car broke down," he said.

"Can you get it fixed?" said Grace.

"It won't be ready till morning."

"It's the third time this month," wailed Grace.

"Tomorrow," said Holly.

Leaving the phone booth he got back in his car, and he and Wendy-mae booked into a secluded motel under their usual name of Mr and Mrs Nigel Butler.

My doctor says I've gone over the top. He says to stay calm. It is my husband, John, and not Holly, who is having the affair. The doctor told me not to become Lady Macbeth on every second page. Try to keep things in orderly perspective, he said. Objectivity.

Third person singular remember?

It's my first book, said Yvonne. It keeps spinning out of control.

Leave it for a while, said the doctor. Put it aside.

So that's what I'm doing.

Postscript

It has been two years since Yvonne left off writing her novel. Much has happened, much water under the bridge, many a passing shower. It has been a difficult two years for Yvonne. It has been difficult for nearly everyone in fact. Peggy does not cope particularly well, although she pretends very well indeed.

Nick has a new girlfriend. Her name is Mary. Nick is not too sure what her last name is. It is one of those Polish names where they forgot to put in any vowels. He rarely sees his children now; more because of failed parenthood than anything else.

Holly and Grace continue to live in matrimonial bliss. Holly is always out of pocket. The education of Grace's Gloria and Claudia at rather expensive private schools makes it worthwhile however. His own Tom and Harry attend the local school, and are happy to do so.

The big news is Cob's girlfriend. They are serious about it. Her name is Lovedy Lees. Peggy told Cob she thought that Lovedy Lees was a woman forged personally by the gods.

*Once again I have been asked if I would continue Yvonne's novel. I said I would **not**. I received a rather rude and ungrateful removal last time, although I am prepared to excuse Yvonne's behaviour on the grounds of a certain psychosomatic anxiety.*

Instead, I have asked an academic colleague (more of a friend), Ms Dean, if she could, or rather would, continue it. She has agreed; more I might say as a favour to

myself, rather than as a tribute to Yvonne's attempted novel, which my friend rather humorously described as "Yvonne's scrambled eggs!"

We have collaborated before on a previous novel. I pass this manuscript, rather gratefully, to my friend.

It's all yours, Nelly.

Part IV

Chapter 1

After her visitors had left, Yvonne decided to make some tapioca pudding. Here is the recipe:

½ cup tapioca	3 cups milk
¼ teaspoon salt	2 eggs
½ cup of sugar	½ teaspoon of vanilla

Combine tapioca, milk, and salt in a pan on medium heat. Stir until boiling. Simmer five minutes, uncovered at a low heat, adding sugar gradually. Beat eggs in a separate bowl.

Add eggs to tapioca. Bring to boil. Stir constantly for three more minutes over a low heat.

If you need it thicker, then cook a little longer. Yvonne did it for just over three minutes.

Let it cool for about fifteen minutes before adding the vanilla.

The mangy dogs, Charlie and Phoenix, lie next to the fireplace. I have a terrible problem with fleas in the house. I've tried every conceivable canine shampoo.

Before I forget, egg-lumping can be a bit of a problem in the recipe. So what I do is mix in some of the hot tapioca very slowly to the beaten eggs to equalize the temperature of the two mixtures. This way, it shouldn't go into lumps. Yvonne's lumped apparently, according to Charlotte Lucas when I was chatting with her on the phone, and she said that Elizabeth Bennet told Fitzwilliam Darcy that Yvonne...

24

Oh for God's sake! Yvonne here.

There's no reason not to continue writing this book. I had other interests and I was working on them. I had a few problems, I know, but now I'm perfectly well, thank you. Now that I'm back on my blood pressure pills. Academic Nelly's tapioca pudding convinced me to get back into my novel immediately. Enough said.

Two years had, in fact, passed since the death of Hindley (as if time matters). Holly and Grace were divorced. The courts had awarded Grace, she not being a workingwoman, the house and most of the little that was left in Holly's bank account. Divorce had thrust Grace from common housewife to woman of independent means. Holly had put his foot down when it came to the education of Grace's Gloria and Claudia.

"They can go to normal schools like every other slightly-below-average kid in the country," said Holly.

Grace had found his attitude offensive. It was a rancorous divorce. Grace wrote to Peggy:

Dear Peggy,

About two years prior to her death, dear Mattie promised my girls, Gloria and Claudia, the family croackery (sic) and cutlery. She had promised Gloria the dinner-set and Claudia the silver.

It seems that the promise has not been fulfilled. Because Holly and I have 'fallen out' is little reason for the girls to be deprived of the wish, in fact final desire, of their loving grandmother.

The girls await the arrival of their beloved grandmother's promised items They possibly have little value in themselves, but as objects of sentimental value, they are priceless to Mattie's 'sweet princesses' as she used to call them.

Regards to most of your family,

Grace Wragg

Peggy could hardly breathe. She was enraged. She screwed up the letter, unscrewed it and read it again...

"Here come the sweet princesses! Put on your tiara, Tom!" called out Mattie, seeing Gloria and Claudia walking up the driveway. Their mother had presumably dropped them off at the gate.

"Oh, my goodness me!" said Tom. "They have a damn puppy."

"How very Isabella Linton," muttered Mattie. Tom was used to Mattie's incomprehensible literary asides.

"It is four month's old and is not to be touched," said Gloria.

"What is it?" said Mattie.

"It's a pug," said Claudia.

"I mean, is it a boy or a girl?" said Mattie.

"Mother said that we don't as yet know," said Claudia. "So we are calling it 'Grasshopper' until Holly gets home because mother says he will know."

“Then,” chimed Gloria, “if it’s a girl we shall call it ‘Delilah’ and if it’s a boy we shall call it ‘Samson’.”

“I’ll put my money on ‘Samson’,” said Tom.

Mattie patted it.

“It’s not to be touched,” said Gloria. “It might get worms.”

“You never know where Granma’s been,” said Tom.

Tom put Grasshopper in the wheelbarrow and all four went out to the garden. Mattie heard the word ‘WORMS’ waft from the garden through the kitchen window several times. Eventually Grace came to collect them.

“They’re helping Granpop in the garden,” said Mattie.

“In those clothes?” gasped Grace.

“And with the androgynous pug!” gasped Mattie.

“It will get worms! Senseless! Senseless, stupid, silly man!”

Grace and offspring departed.

“See you later, alligator!” called out jovial Mattie.

“In a while, crocodile!” waved back Claudia.

Mattie clenched her smiling teeth and muttered, “I wasn’t talking to you, sweet princess.”

25

That's the end of Grace and her Gloria and Claudia. Divorce can do that. If Holly and Grace had a girl of their own she would have been called Victoria. But they didn't because Holly had a vasectomy pretty early on in his first marriage, to Angela. Two boys were enough.

Some will no doubt be glad to see Grace written out of the book.

"She was straight out of a novel," Mattie had said.

"You wouldn't read about her," said Tom.

Of course, Grace could have been 'killed off'. A writer can do that. "This morning I will kill off Grace. Or perhaps I will prolong her with a slow and gruesome death this afternoon. Perhaps I'll have her die screaming in a swarm of stinging wasps." But getting a divorce is like a death. I should know; I went through one at the same time as Holly and Grace.

The men were not good at finding women of sturdy character. There might be a hue and cry about that, but it can't be helped. It's not really my fault. They seemed to do the finding and losing themselves.

There was Nick's Silvana Arcadia, and Holly's Angela Stubly and Grace Wragg with her Gloria and Claudia. This business about Nick finding a Mary with an unpronounceable Bosnia-Hertzeogovinian-or-whatever family name is a concoction of dubious origin. As for Cob's Lovedy Lees! Forged by the gods! Forged is right! Such fiction!

The list of Cob's girlfriends reads like a telephone book, if Peggy is to be believed. He was 'getting on' (now thirty-three) and pretty keen to start a family. "I can't find the right one, Peggy." He had the disadvantage of setting his sights too high, and discovered (usually on the first date) that his own animal magnetism had rather quickly transformed any viable prospect into what he considered to be 'unsuitable material'. He wasn't per se an absolute male chauvinist. He was more just a quietly mixed up man. Who knows why?

"He's looking for his mother," Silvana had once said, hoping that in the wide world there was not going to be another like her mother-in-law. She was probably wrong, in both her observation and her desire.

I'm sorry for going on a little long in the first person singular (at least at the beginning of the chapter) but I felt the need. You see, the doctor had said to try and write my troubles in the third person singular. "Write things in the third person," the doctor had said, so that was why Yvonne popped into the novel around the time my troubles started. But now and again I feel the need just to be me, so you got a paragraph or two in the first person singular.

You know, it's pretty horrible what happened to me, and although this is a novel, it's extremely hard not to allow actual events to slither in like a poisonous snake. You'll hear about it soon, if I can possibly bring myself to do that to poor Yvonne. All the books on "How to Write a Novel" say to stick with your own experience. Well I'm trying to do that. Believe me!

The books on "How to Write a Novel" talked about the eye-of-God technique. I started out using it but somehow got distracted. However, I have enjoyed playing God

thus far. The exhilaration that goes with it! as I said about that business of whether to kill off Grace slowly or whatever, and in the end I had her have a divorce, which is very gracious considering what she was really like. You see, Grace wasn't as flat a character as maybe I've made out. So I might go back and rewrite her out of the book later in a slow or violent or vile way if I think it's good for my healing. As I said at some stage, there's a great deal of truth in *The Ugly Duckling* – even though ducks can't talk. I'm not too worried about the facts of the reality; I'm more interested in telling you the truth of the reality. That's what fiction does!

I'm about to get on with the novel, because no doubt you are getting muddled with my first person singular. But just before Yvonne re-emerges I'd like to apologize for the short chapters. A number of people who have seen what I have written, and they are very few, have said, "Too short (the chapters), you'll never get it published." But I'm doing my best. Some days it's difficult for me to squeeze out even a sentence.

After the night school course that I took on Charles Dickens, I took a course on Jane Austen, and she certainly knows how to make her chapters long. I would love to write something like *Pride and Prejudice* but the events of life knocked all the pride out of me. Then I took the course on Thomas Hardy, after which my teacher said, "Look Yvonne, you can keep on taking these courses if you like, but really you're on your own now if you want. You don't need a teacher to tell you to read a book!" So I quit taking courses for a time and did my own reading. But I said to the teacher, "Well, Rufus (believe me, I didn't make that up), I'll come back once I get onto Shakespeare!"

The girls at the Laundromat would rib me about the books I used to bring to work to read during the lunch break. When I brought along John Millington Synge's play *The*

Playboy of the Western World it caused huge laughter. And I saw one of the girls surreptitiously dipping into it and looking quite disappointed.

I've enjoyed this little chat thanks. It's funny isn't it how people like me don't read all these great books, because really they're very enjoyable once you know how to dust a jacket and open its cover. I still think Jane Austen is my favourite, although I really love Hardy's *The Mayor of Casterbridge* even though it's not his most famous. I just can't get enough of these things. Many people view literature as a way of escaping from their day-to-day life. But it's not an escape from life; it's a doorway into it.

So anyway... Yvonne went to the library and took out *The Complete Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield*. She read the story called *Bliss*, in which Bertha Young was so happy she could have thrown her handbag in the air, and in the end Bertha saw her husband kissing Miss Fulton and saying "Tomorrow?" while the young poet said, "Tomato soup is so *dreadfully* eternal." And there was a beautiful silver pear tree in the moonlight.

"How nasty the heart can be!" thought Yvonne, and then the phone went.

It was Peggy. She was coming to Toronto for a couple of days – "just for fun" – and could she stay?

Yvonne and Peggy had become firm friends fast after their first meeting. "It's so nice to have a sister," said Yvonne, and Peggy would say, "Yeah, right. It's cheaper than a hotel." But the truth was that Peggy had no reason to come to Toronto other than to visit Yvonne, and Peggy, to be honest, had little family left.

Yvonne was always saying, "One day I'm going to come to your place when I get my driver's licence" and Peggy was always saying, "I don't know why you don't." They

would go shopping, and they even went to the zoo once and took a ride on an elephant. They were as different as coffee and tea.

Nick had called in twice “just on the way through”, and Cob had been three times. “The only one I haven’t met is Holly,” said Yvonne, and then Grace phoned.

“I was just wondering,” said Grace, “if you would like to meet?”

Well Yvonne thought that Holly was coming too, but Grace turned up alone, and when at the door Yvonne said, “How do you do? Come in! Come in!” Grace said, “I’ll just get my things out of the car.”

Yvonne thought that maybe Grace had brought her a bunch of grapes or some little gift, but Grace entered struggling with two large pieces of luggage like she was travelling through Europe.

“The house is a lot smaller than I thought,” said Grace, and when Yvonne showed her to the spare room Grace said, “I really prefer a bigger bed.”

By now, Yvonne was wondering what was going on and lit a cigarette that had to be extinguished immediately. “I’m here only the week,” said Grace, “and I’m not in the mood for picking up cancer.”

How happy Yvonne was to hear husband John’s truck pull up outside. “Help me!” she said. “For God’s sake help me!”

So John Prigmore came in, and met Grace, and they chatted like they were a house on fire, and Yvonne said to John later “You seem to get on very well with that insufferable frump” and John said “I was just doing what you asked”. Which he was.

Yes, the insufferable frump stayed the week. Well, she stayed for breakfast and came back for dinner. She would go into the city centre, and goodness knows what she

did, but she would come back an even greater drooling komodo dragon than in the morning.

Yvonne spent her days at the Laundromat hating Grace and thinking “I’d better phone Peggy and ask what to do next”. But she never got around to it.

The week ended. What seemed like a century ended.

“Next time I’ll bring the girls,” said Grace. “They can use the master bedroom.”

“It’s your fault for being too nice,” fumed Yvonne to her husband.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” said John.

Grace was the only one of the family she’d met thus far to whom Yvonne hadn’t said a million times on departure: “You must come back. Make sure you stay longer next time.”

“She’s a no-no,” said John.

“I don’t need telling twice,” said Yvonne.

It’s funny how some things happen sometimes so imperceptibly that you don’t see them happening. Not long after the episode with the insufferable frump, when John was away at work for a week driving the truck, Yvonne didn’t miss him as much. She didn’t notice that she didn’t mind. One time after that, they even forgot to kiss goodbye.

Then Yvonne noticed that they didn’t seem to talk so much at dinner on the evenings he was home. They would turn the TV on, and eat watching it. They’d always done that. But now they did it because they didn’t really have anything to say.

“It’s one of those things,” said Yvonne.

“It’s the seven yearly itch,” said Peggy.

“I guess,” said Yvonne.

How wonderfully time can pass when one writes a novel!

“I couldn’t say no,” said Yvonne to John. “She’s coming again and this time she’s bringing the girls! She’s divorcing her husband and needs a break.”

Yvonne had a heart of gold. John was furious. Arrive they did: Grace, Gloria, Claudia and baby Victoria.

Yvonne had to take two days off work so she could look after baby Victoria while Grace took her Gloria and Claudia into town. “There’s so much more one can do without a baby,” said Grace.

Then the crunch came, because without too much of a preamble, Grace announced on the evening of Yvonne’s second day off work, “Oh, no dear! Holly had a vasectomy! I thought you knew. Holly’s not the father. It’s your husband’s.”

26

Grace found a lump on her breast. She was bottle-feeding Victoria at the time.

Oh what a great! huge! ugly! inoperable! lump.

They operated nonetheless, and removed both breasts.

She had chemotherapy and radiation treatment and lost all her hair.

“Aha!” cried the doctor, “the cancer has spread.” It spread slowly and unevenly, like hard acrid yellow butter on stale bread. It spread to her face.

It grovelled in her ankles, and they amputated her legs below the knees. The anaesthetic didn’t work and Grace felt every spin of the blunt electric saw blade. The wounds wouldn’t heal.

The cancer crawled to her throat. It crept through her bowels.

“Kill me!” gurgled the hideous shrew.

But she didn’t die; she lingered. She yellowed into a tattered nightgown on a broom handle.

After months of excruciating anguish - abandoned by daughters, husbands and stepsons; lonely in a sanitized, pictureless hospital ward; unvisited, unloved, far from unconscious - she wheezed her last words (like a mad Queen Elizabeth the First) through the tracheotomy tubes:

“I curse God!”

The doctor prematurely declared her dead, and had her buried (alive) in a pauper's grave. God took over and consigned the insufferable frump to a teeth-gnashing perpetuity of paroxysmal sobs.

But it wasn't Grace who had discovered the lump on her breast at all.

It was me. Yvonne.

27

It was one of those days, weather-wise, that Mattie called a ‘Gerard Manley Hopkins Cloud-Puffball Day’.

“A passing shower,” said Tom, referring, not to the weather, but to the event that is about to be related.

It was Kate’s fourth birthday. Kate, permitted for the day to be more wayward than usual, had raided her mother’s closet and was parading around in one of Mattie’s cotton dresses with a delicate print of pink roses, and a pair of Mattie’s twenty-times-too-big-for-her high heel shoes and a sort of large blue unfashionable hat. She had lipstick spread from nose to chin, and walked out to the garden clutching a handbag and saying to Tom “How do you do?”

“How do you do, ma’am?” said Tom, and shook her gloved hand. “How may I help?”

“I am trying to find the fairies’ house,” said Kate. “Do you know where they live?”

Tom thought it was all worth a photo, so he said, “Stay here a minute and I’ll check inside the house to see if Mrs Trippett knows where they live.”

When he came back (Tom swore no more than a minute later) Kate had gone.

He didn’t give it a second thought, but went back to the gardening, until about an hour later Mattie called out, “Tom, have you seen Kate?”

“Not for a while,” said Tom.

Slowly panic set in. They began calling “Kate! Katie! Kate!” and searched along the ditches and down the creek.

“Kate! Katie!”

Peggy and Nick were brought into the search.

“Kate! Katie!”

“We have to call the police,” said Mattie.

So they phoned the police and a policeman came and asked Mattie and Tom all sorts of questions for his official form including Mattie’s full maiden name, and she said fairly desperately, “For goodness sake, officer, I’m not the one lost” and quite forgot to say “It’s better than Boadicea”.

Suddenly Peggy appeared on her bicycle pulling her little red cart with Queen Kate sitting in it still decked in her mother’s cotton dress with a delicate print of pink roses, and the pair of Mattie’s twenty-times-too-big-for-her high heel shoes and the sort of large blue unfashionable hat.

“She was walking in the gate,” said Peggy.

“I went with the fairies,” said Kate, as if it was no more than a normal event.

“And where did they take you?” asked Mattie, pretending to play the game but eager to get to the bottom of the mystery.

“They took me to this beautiful place because it’s my birthday,” said Kate.

“And where was that?” asked Mattie.

“I’m not sure,” said Kate, “but it’s somewhere near the garden.”

“Well aren’t you a lucky girl!” said Mattie.

“They took away the scar on my hand, see! Because it’s my birthday.” Kate held out her hand. “It used to be there.”

Mattie went quite pale and said, “Well aren’t you a lucky girl!” For it was true.

“Scars don’t disappear like that, Tom,” said Mattie later. “They just don’t. They stay forever.”

Mattie never pushed too hard, but Kate would never say anything more about it. Several times Kate said, “Peggy rescued me”.

“I don’t know if she was blessed or jinxed,” said Mattie. “But something happened on that day.”

*There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.*

“Just a bit of fantasy,” said Tom. “You’re the one who put all those Shakespeare things in her head.”

And now it was Yvonne on the phone saying, “Peggy... Oh Peggy... Peggy... Peggy... Help me, Peggy.”

“Oh for God’s sake, Yvonne,” said Peggy. “Pull yourself together.”

But Yvonne kept saying (but softer), “Peggy... Oh Peggy,” until Peggy said, “I’m coming to get you.”

Driving the hours to Toronto she brought Yvonne back, like she had rescued Kate the years before in the little red cart behind the bike. This time the one rescued was covered in scars beyond recognition. Rubble of infidelity. Debris of cancer. Wrecked beyond belief.

28

Now you know why I took two years off from writing this novel. Even though it might seem Grace had triumphantly announced her baby's paternity at the end of the two years, in fact it happened near the beginning.

So it's been about that length of time since Peggy rescued me on the outskirts of Toronto and brought me to her home.

Now you know why I can keep writing this book. It's not as if I suddenly arrived at Peggy's and continued the narrative like a magic fairy cure at the bottom of the garden.

Well, so much has happened, and now that I've got all that John and Grace stuff out of the way I must admit I'm feeling so much better, and the doctor said that all said and done I've made a reasonable recovery, and my divorce is behind me, so hopefully I can get on with life a bit better than before. As long as I keep taking my blood pressure pills. In fact, I am already getting on with life rather well, and seem to have recovered from the mastectomy. The medical tests prove promising.

My daughter and her wee Zachary have been to stay with me three times. It's such a joy.

Yvonne didn't get much out of the divorce. Peggy kept saying "it doesn't matter" and "just take life as it comes". But after my divorce from John came through and the settlement, Peggy phoned Nick about it. I was on the other side of the room, and I could hear Nick's voice shouting through the telephone. I didn't know there was that many swear words in the English language!

Now I'm getting all muddled between me and Yvonne! As if they're not one and the same! As I was about to say before I went off the track a little, much has happened...

You wouldn't believe it, but Yvonne and Peggy have ended up living in the old family homestead on the land that Mattie and Tom bought years ago! It's a long story! We've been here three months now.

It was Cob's suggestion. He said, "I don't know why you two are living crammed up in Peggy's small apartment when there's a whole house fully furnished sitting there unused."

Nick and Holly (needless-to-say I've now met him!) both agreed. So here we are.

The work that had to be done to get the house and property back to scratch! Peggy and I have worn our arms to the elbows. We have laughed so much these last three months that you'd think there was nothing left to laugh about. You should have seen Peggy trying to use the sickle! And I dug a veggie garden, I can't believe I did that, and it's such a joy because Peggy and I go out there every morning with our coffees before she leaves for the florist shop, and we say "This bean here has a new leaf!" and "I think this is a new pea popped out!" and Peggy, after a week, dug the potatoes up because she wanted to have a look to make sure they were sprouting! It's been so much fun. And then the mice dirt in the cupboards! You wouldn't believe it. But enough said about that. Peggy screamed with laughter when she caught me out in the garden wearing an old blue hat of Mattie's and pushing Tom's old wheelbarrow with a faded 'Just Married' written on the side. "Stay there!" she screeched, "I'm getting the camera!"

Well, it was my forty-fifth birthday, and I was going to quietly let it pass and say nothing, but I got a phone call from one of my two sons (I know you don't really know

them), and my daughter and wee Zachary phoned and they had already sent me a most beautiful little ornamental birdhouse and a birthday card. Peggy never as much as wished me a 'Happy Birthday'. Then, you wouldn't believe it, but it was a Saturday, and suddenly Nick, Cob and Holly all turned up and, I think I'm going to cry just telling you, it was so lovely.

We had a family birthday party! It was so beautiful. We had a barbeque because they had all gone nuts, and spent this money like they were made of it, and we're all having a wine and I'm thinking, what are we going to eat there's not much in the fridge? Peggy goes out to the shed, and comes back dragging a big carton from the hardware store, and it's a barbeque. The fun we had putting it together! Those how-to-put-a-thing-together instructions might as well be written in Swahili. "I'm getting hungry," said Nick.

Then Cob and Holly say that we should have put the barbeque together out on the patio because now we'll have to drag it around, and I'm all for carrying it from the lawn to the patio and Cob says "I've a better idea". He and Holly disappear and come back (I'm going to cry again) and Cob's driving one of those sit-down lawnmower things and Holly's in the little trailer behind it and they pull up in front of me and Holly says, "There! You can move the damn barbeque yourself now."

And you wouldn't believe it but that's not all. I don't believe I have ever laughed so much in my life. Because after all the putting together of the barbeque and the moving it to the patio, Peggy produces some steaks she'd hidden at the bottom of the fridge, and Nick says "Oh God! We've forgotten to fill the damn gas tank with propane!" It was the funniest thing in my life!

Well, I volunteer to take the tank and go fill it because the service station is only ten minutes drive away in town, and Peggy had taught me to drive and I got my driver's licence, and Nick says "Take my car" and hands me the keys and says "It's the green one over there." And I said, "What you doing driving an old bomb like that?" and when I got in the car they all crowded around the car window and sang "Happy Birthday dear Yvonne" and it's just too much, too much, and I burst into tears, and I said "It's just too much! Too much!"

To think that I had lost them all for forty-five years and found them. It's been like a dream. They have made me feel like I was truly one of the family, and I'm not saying it would have been the slightest bit easy for them. I'm halfway through eating my barbequed steak and Cob's there and he says, "So what do you think of that, Codger? A pretty good birthday I reckon."

Cob always calls me Codger, because he said it was a funny thing he'd picked up off a New Zealander he heard and after that he always calls me Codger. And I'm starting to think it's nicer than Yvonne. It's certainly better than Maisie. And although I never found the word 'Codger' used in *The Complete Short Stories of Katherine Mansfield* nor in any of Janet Frame's novels, I take it to be a Kiwi word of endearment, rather than in the North American sense of an old, eccentric man. After all, I'm not a man, and certainly *not* old.

Peggy says, "You'd better enjoy the birthday because who knows if you'll ever hit fifty."

I said, "A woman never hits fifty", and Nick says, "I bet you hit more than fifty in your little green car."

So I stand up on the patio to make a speech, which I've never done in my life, and I can't think of what to say, so all I said was from Hopkins because, even though I'm not very religious, that was all I could think of:

*Glory be to God for dappled things -
For skies of couple-colour as a brindled cow;
For rose-moles all in stipple upon trout that swim;
Fresh-fire-coal chestnut-falls; finches' wings;
Landscape plotted and pieced - fold, fallow and plough;
And all trades, their gear and tackle and trim.*

*All things counter, original, spare, strange;
Whatever is fickle, freckled (who knows how?)
With swift, slow; sweet, sour; adazzle, dim;
He fathers-forth whose beauty is passed change;
Praise him.*

Cob was in tears, and I heard him say to Holly, I don't understand it and thought I might have said something wrong (you'll have to pardon me), but he said "It's frigging Mattie back from the dead".* So that was my speech and I didn't feel that good about it but it's all I could do and I didn't want to appear ungrateful. I'm not that good at much, except for running a Laundromat and that went down the drain in a hurry.

That was my forty-fifth birthday party. It had one really good thing come out of it because we used the supposedly valuable dinner-set and the silver cutlery for the barbeque, and they all decided, without any discussion, that they really belonged with the house. So, after many pages, we can at last put the jolly things away.

It was lovely fixing up the house and grounds with Peggy. She had a story about Tom and Mattie to go with everything we did. I grew to feel a little as if I had been a part of the growing up there, part of Tom and Mattie's life. I suppose it can never be so, but still, it doesn't hurt to dream a little. We're all allowed our dreams.

* These were not Cob's exact words - Yvonne.

When I cleaned out the old henhouse (the manure is great for the garden) I said to Peggy, "We should really get some chickens." Well, we did that, but the thing was, Peggy told me about Tom and the hens and what happened for a while not long before Mattie died.

Tom used to go and sit out in the henhouse. He would come home from work and sit in the henhouse like he was waiting for a golden egg. What a rigmarole it was trying to heat the hens in winter.

"I don't know why you don't take them to bed with you," grumbled Mattie.

He would bring in the eggs and say "Seven eggs today, Mattie." Then he would go back to the henhouse, and five minutes later he would come back to Mattie and say, "There's no eggs today. I wonder why they're not laying."

At first Mattie didn't really notice, but then Tom started doing it two or three times in an evening, as if he meant it.

Gradually he got worse and worse, well, not too gradually apparently. He had to resign from his job.

"He's too young for this," said Mattie, watching Tom walk up and down the driveway, up and down, up and down. "There's fewer and fewer times that Tom's there."

On some days Tom was as good as ever, like nothing had ever happened, the Tom of old. "Tom, you're here today, thank God," said Mattie. Then he would go out and feed the hens four times in an hour, and Mattie would say, "Tom's gone away again."

He wore a nametag with his address and phone number in case he wandered. But luckily he didn't, except up and down the driveway.

When Mattie died suddenly on the patio he seemed unaware of what had happened. For brief moments he was there.

“He wanted to put Charity Trippett on Mattie’s gravestone!” said Peggy. “After Mattie died we put him in a home. It was sad.”

Tom was of the old school. He wore a hat and tie, even in the weekends, out to his lovely garden; out to his henhouse. He was undressed without his hat and tie.

“But nothing was ever a bother to him,” said Peggy to Yvonne. “Even the worst was just a passing shower.”

29

I'm really rather loath introducing a new character of importance into the novel at this stage. But the passing of Mattie, Tom, Kate and Hindley, and the pleasurable eviction of Grace from these pages (along with her Gloria, Claudia, baby Victoria and the androgynous pug), has slightly depleted the supply of people I can draw upon.

The truth of the matter is anyway, I am not the one who designed the complexity of life. We all know that around the next corner there could well be a person (hitherto unknown to us) who is going to turn our life upside down one way or another.

Thus it was with Cob. Her name was not Lovedy Lees, and the gods did not forge her personally. But she was pretty close to perfection. At age thirty-three, Jacob Stanislaus Trippett was head over heels in love with Vivienne Elizabeth Unsworth.

I'm well aware of the danger of this novel becoming a tawdry romance. But (despite wars, pestilence and plague) there *are* lovely things in life, and this was one of them.

Where Grace had been a great big oversized passed-its-prime purple peony losing her petals, Vivienne was a wild and windblown little blue cornflower. So unassuming, and yet, as Cob had said, "Tom would be pleased: we're at last getting a marine biologist in the family."

Vivienne had a doctorate in ichthyology, specializing (of all things) in the growth rings of flounders' ears. I'm well aware of the danger of this novel becoming a farce, but the growth rings of flounders' ears is apparently of particular importance to the fishing

industry as a way of measuring the age of fish and the possible depletion of fishing resources.

“This is the one, Peggy,” said Cob. “It’s taken me a while. She’s from New Brunswick.”

“You going to live over there?” wailed Peggy.

“No,” said Cob, “she works in the local pet shop.” Such are the vagaries of doctorates. Such were the pleasant unpretensions of Viv Unsworth.

Everyone in the family liked her. Cob and Viv were engaged, and before you knew it, it was the wedding day.

Yvonne wept at the wedding, it was so beautiful. She wept even more when Cob in his speech thanked “my brothers and sisters - Yvonne, Peggy, Nick and Holly. I know that Tom and Mattie, if they were here, would be delighted that I’d found someone as lovely as my wife Vivienne.”

Vivienne, not to be outdone, in her speech said she was keeping the name of Unsworth but was proud to become part of the Trippett family who had made her so welcome. She made a special mention of “my sister-in-law Yvonne”, thanking her for baking and decorating the wedding cake so beautifully, and Yvonne had to stand and take a little bow and people clapped and whistled and Yvonne called out “Oh for God’s sake Viv, I’m just the laundry lady!”

Six months later Jason Jacob Trippett was born. “They’d been doing more than counting rings in flounders’ ears,” observed Peggy.

(A tawdry romance would have had the child a girl, and named her Mattie Peggy Kate Yvonne Vivienne Unsworth-Trippett).

Heaven cannot last, they say.

Two months to the day after Jason's birth, Vivienne was rushed to the hospital with some artery thing. She died two days later.

I don't know why I bother introducing new characters if that's all they can do.

What a mess Cob was. He and baby Jason came and stayed with Peggy and Yvonne.

"We go through life collecting scars," Mattie had once said. It might be true, but it doesn't help the pain.

The doctor says I should take another break, and I'm going to do that. Vivienne's death knocked me out flat. Besides, I'm pretty busy anyway looking after Cob's Jason for him during the day. And I promised my daughter I'd look after wee Zachary for two weeks while she and her partner, Jack, were on vacation.

Then it's the canning season, and I've got all those autumnal things to do, as it looks like we're going to have so much stuff out of the garden it seems a waste not to do something with it. Of course, I've already made a lot of strawberry and raspberry jam. Their season is well over. So I'm taking time out. Peggy and I are thinking of driving to Québec sometime. It should be fun. When we can get Cob's Jason settled, and so on.

So I'm signing off now for a while. It might do us all good! I promise I won't let any one else get their hands on my manuscript!

These things take time.

Love, Yvonne Heape (I changed back to Heape from Prigmore after the divorce. I don't know if I told you. I can't find it anywhere in my novel, so I guess I forgot to mention it).

Addendum

Don't panic! It's me: Yvonne. What a winter it's been! Quite a lot has happened and I don't want to keep you in suspense, so I'll just get this bit out of the way and then get on with it.

Peggy and I went to Québec in the fall. What a trip that was! I've been busy looking after Cob's Jason, and my daughter's wee Zachary came for two weeks and stayed for three. I'm getting to be quite a professional aunt and grandmother!

Listen, I've been having more than a few misgivings about the last chapter; about Vivienne dying. It seems so unnecessary, even though I was simply writing down the facts. I get quite muddled at times between fiction and fact.

Then I took a trip to Toronto in my little green car to take Zachary back home. While I was there I went to see Rufus, my old teacher who taught me Charles Dickens and so on. I showed him my manuscript.

He was very positive, but he said, Yvonne it's disintegrating. It's going from scrambled eggs, to poached, fried, easy side over and sunny side up, with the odd quiche, omelette and eggnog thrown in for luck. He said I needed more discipline.

So I've decided, and I hope you don't find it too disorienting, to rewrite the last chapter and make it more fictitious and disciplined. I'm sure Cob won't mind too much if Vivienne stays alive (even though he misses her terribly).

So if you'll bear with me, I'll continue from a few sentences prior to her death, and then we'll try to get into that discipline that Rufus recommended.

Sometimes I get befuddled between the idea of keeping a diary, journaling for the psychiatrist, and writing a novel. I keep forgetting that fiction is just that: fiction. This is not intended to be an autobiography. I trust it contains the deepest truth of my personage nonetheless.

Okay then, so off we go. Thank you for your patience.

Just a wee while ago I had to look up how to spell 'ichthyology' in the dictionary. It's funny how you forget to spell the simplest words at times. The worst case was when I couldn't remember how to spell 'of'. I kept putting down 'ov', and it didn't look right. I knew it was wrong, but of course 'ov' is not in the dictionary, so I was stuck for about half an hour. Such persiflage!

Part VI

Chapter 1

... Vivienne, not to be outdone, in her speech (at the wedding) said she was keeping the name of Unsworth but was proud to become part of the Trippett family who had made her so welcome. She made a special mention of “my sister-in-law Yvonne”, thanking her for baking and decorating the wedding cake so beautifully, and Yvonne had to stand and take a little bow. The wedding guests applauded. Yvonne said afterwards, “The pleasure was all mine.”

Ten months later Jason Jacob Trippett was born. “It’s wonderful for Cob to at last have a family of his own,” Peggy observed.

Two months to the day after Jason’s birth, Vivienne was rushed to the hospital with a relatively mild heart complication. How they all prayed! Vivienne made a slow (and, to some, surprising) recovery, although it was recommended that she not get pregnant again as she had some permanent heart damage.

Cob and baby Jason stayed with Peggy and Yvonne during Viv’s hospitalization. Then Viv joined them in the old family house for her recuperation. Yvonne’s grandson, wee Zachary, came and stayed for several weeks over the winter, and what a time they all had! Viv was wonderful. She was always kind and cheerful, despite her illness. Cob was a doting father and a loving husband.

The winter weather was atrocious. Yvonne took up weaving, using Mattie's old loom that had sat unused for years. She continued to read. She had thought, just prior to the first snowfall, that winter would be spent conquering the poetry of Walt Whitman and Ezra Pound. And African novelists. By the end of winter she thought, "I never quite got around to the novels, but call me an expert on Walt Whitman. Ezra Pound, well, dear me, he seems to have a few personal problems."

All in all, it was a happy winter spent under the roof of the old Trippett homestead.

By the time the first yellow and purple crocuses appeared,

When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd

Cob, Viv and Jason were ready to return to their own home. Peggy, who saw the inconvenience of snow and not its beauty, bought every seed packet for the garden she could lay her hands on. She would sit next to the fire reading the backs of the seed packets and waiting for warmth. "The days seem to be drawing out," she would say wistfully looking through the window at the empty expanse where she hoped Yvonne was to dig an extended garden.

30

Yvonne sat on the patio. She stared at the blank page of her manuscript. Too many people had seen her novel while it was in progress. Too many suggestions had been made. Too many comments. All she had wanted from them was, “It’s brilliant! Keep going!” But instead, they had said to do this and do that; change this; alter that; more discipline; scrambled eggs.

It was like poking the fire once too often and the flame had gone out.

“Where to next?” she thought. How difficult to invent fiction and make it sound like life without bringing one’s own life into it, or turning it into a farce.

“Write from your own experience. Write from your own experience.”

She began to make a disorderly list of the things that had happened:

The house burned down
Kate died
Hindley in car crash
Mattie died
Tom died
Alzheimer’s
Failed university
Weddings, no weddings, pregnancies, babies
Adoption
Marriage breakdown and divorce
Silver Jubilee and Birthday Party
Not a nervous break...

Peggy came onto the patio.

“There’s a snake in the garden,” she said.

Neither liked snakes. “The only good snake is a dead one.”

Peggy sat down.

Who can garden with a lurking snake? Who can write without one?

There is an impasse! A lull!

Silence before the turn of the wind.

“The new phonebook’s arrived,” said Peggy.

“Has it?” said Yvonne. “Is my name in it?”

“I haven’t looked yet,” said Peggy.

Yvonne had never had her name in the phonebook before. When they had the phone reconnected the lady had asked if they wanted their new telephone number unlisted. Peggy said “definitely unlisted” and Yvonne had said “Oh Peggy! I’ve never had my name in print!” Like it was Las Vegas with YVONNE! YVONNE! YVONNE! flashing on and off in fluorescent pink.

“Here it is!” said Yvonne. “Heape, Yvonne.”

Yvonne glowed. “Don’t call me, I’ll call you!” she laughed.

It was a simple thing, but when you’d spent your life being Mrs John Prigmore, to be Yvonne Heape, and in print! Well!

The phone rang. Peggy and Yvonne laughed.

“It’ll be for you, Yvonne,” said Peggy going inside the house to answer it.

“It is!” she said.

“Who is it?” said Yvonne.

“She never said,” said Peggy.

“Hello,” said Yvonne. “It’s Yvonne Heape here.”

“Hello. Look, I’m sorry to bother you. I’m really rather nervous. My name is Elizabeth. I do hope I’ve got the right Yvonne Heape. I got it out of the phone book. I’ve

searched for years. Many years ago, I'm sixty-three now, many years ago I had a little baby girl, and she was adopted out. I'm so sorry to bother you, and am really rather nervous. I wondered if you were interested in meeting up?"

Silence before the turn of the wind.

"In fact I know I'm your mother. My name is Elizabeth. I was just wondering if you would like to meet?"

31

Yvonne went and stood in the garden, despite the snake, or maybe because of it. She wanted to be like Cleopatra and grab the copperhead (if indeed one had slithered that far north) and plunge it into her bosom (if indeed she hadn't had a mastectomy). But who knows if she lived that far north in non-copperhead country? And who knows if she'd had a mastectomy? It could have been a fabrication, a figment of the mind, a fiction in a novel. It could be changed. Her life could be revised. Rewritten. Started over again. It's better the second time around; more discipline, less fragmented. She could divide her life into twelve even chapters, all lengthy, have two or three semi-complicated crises, resolve them, and die in a dénouement of rose-patterned tea-cosies. Her life could win the Man Booker Award for its profound and orderly contribution to humankind, provided of course she lived in the British Commonwealth.

She felt she had stayed up all night, the sun had risen and she was in a world of faerie near a garden that wasn't there. A great Dali tiger streaked the sky in black and gold. It was a mass of swarming wasps: a thousand wasp-thoughts scrambling in all directions at once, too big for the mind to wrap around.

"Is there anything wrong?" said Peggy. But Yvonne didn't answer. She was walking a path in her head and a tree turned into a witch.

"Never enter the unknown forest," said the witch.

"But of course I did," said Yvonne out loud. "Of course I did, they always do in fairy stories, and I got locked in the oven like Gretel in a candy house."

“I beg your pardon?” said Peggy.

Here is one of those moments of madness when a novelist such as myself wishes she had the skill of Emily Brontë and could write of Yvonne tearing open the pillow with her teeth and scattering the lapwing feathers all over the extended vegetable garden. Or like what’s-her-name in Shakespeare’s *The Winter’s Tale* when she hands out flowers and says that’s rosemary for you because I’ve fallen off the edge of reality. Or like Ophelia saying “Goodnight, sweet ladies” before rushing off to pose for Millais’ famous painting while drowning in the creek.

But there was too much (well, up until now, too much) of Mattie in down-to-earth Yvonne. So she said in a featherless sort of way, “I think, Peggy, we’d better get inside and sit down.”

32

Thank heavens for Vivienne! Peggy and Yvonne had barely sat down when Vivienne turned up with Jason in tow. A toddler is a distraction. It removes anxiety by busying the mind.

“We’re family no matter what,” said Vivienne.

“She can’t be right,” said Yvonne, bouncing Jason on her knee, and referring to the sixty-three year old Elizabeth.

“I don’t see what the problem is,” said Peggy, “except it makes me feel wonky, like a lop-sided crab or something.”

“I can’t speak for the family,” said Vivienne, “but I don’t see what difference it makes.”

Yvonne didn’t know what to do. She said, “They say I look like Mattie.”

She found an old photograph of Mattie, and held it up to the mirror to compare faces. She said, “It looks to be the same nose.”

The three women laughed as they peered at Yvonne’s nose in the bathroom mirror.

“If not, you can always get plastic surgery,” said Peggy...

“I tell you, Tom,” said Mattie coming from the bathroom for bed many years before, not long after her trip to Toronto, “you can say what you like, but she has my nose.”

“I take that to mean,” said Tom, “she’s always sticking it where it doesn’t belong.”

Mattie snorted. “She’s quite different from Peggy. Peggy’s dark and Yvonne’s blonde like Cob. She might have dyed it.”

“You might have got the wrong person,” said Tom.

“Impossible,” said Mattie. “I’ve done my research.”

In fact, Mattie had done more than research into her rediscovery of Yvonne; she had gone into espionage.

She had visited the Adoption Agency files personally. “I can’t help it if they leave Yvonne’s file open on the desk and get called from the room,” said Mattie. “I simply leaned over and copied it out. Well, I may have taken it out of the cabinet. They left the keys on the desk. Actually, the keys were in a drawer. But still...”

She produced her jottings on the back of a grocery receipt:

Biological Mother: Matilda Anne Trythall
Biological Father: Tom Trippett
Adopted Mother: Elsie Maisie Heape nee Swinden
Adopted Father: Donald John Heape

And so on and so forth. Unlike Yvonne, Mattie hadn’t taken seventeen years.

“I got the right one all right,” said Mattie...

“If you decide to go and see this Elizabeth,” said Vivienne back in the now, “Peggy and I can go with you.”

Peggy swallowed hard, and said “Quite right. If that’s what you want.”

Yvonne said she’d think about it, but she knew deep down she would end up going. “I don’t like to have loose ends,” she said.

The three of them went to the meeting: Yvonne, Peggy and Vivienne. Elizabeth wasn't what they expected. She didn't furnish any proof of motherhood. She seemed surprised that Yvonne would want to meet.

"What pain I have felt these years," sighed Elizabeth dramatically. "What hours, O what black hours, I have spent."

Yvonne almost giggled. She nearly stood and recited Hopkins:

*I wake and feel the fell of dark, not day.
What hours, O what black hours we have spent
This night! What sights you, heart, saw; ways you went!*

"It didn't feel right," said Vivienne afterwards. "It felt staged."

"I don't know where she was coming from," said Yvonne.

"She ain't your mother, Codger," said Peggy. "That woman was straight out of a soap opera."

"Why do people do that?" said Yvonne.

But Peggy saw something. She never told Yvonne. She saw Elizabeth, aged sixty-three, with Grace. And they were laughing.

33

At first I was a little bit upset (perhaps more disappointed than upset) that Peggy hadn't told me about Grace. I suppose she was protecting me. Grace is not my favourite person in the world. It came as no surprise that Grace would waste her time concocting a plot like that. The world is made up of all sorts, and someone has to grovel below Caliban. But my discovery that Peggy had seen Elizabeth laughing with Grace came as a shock.

There's so much as yet I haven't told you. There hasn't been the time, what with all the vegetables and hens and lawn mowing, and baby sitting, and dashing off to the butcher's in my little green car. And then, by the time Peggy gets home from work, it's time to sit out on the patio and have a glass of wine while the sausages cook on the barbeque.

I've set out to make a fishpond! I wasn't going to tell you until it was finished, but I couldn't wait! Hopefully I'll be able to tell you a bit about it after I get some of the other things I want to say down on paper.

Peggy and I saw Elizabeth on television. Did I tell you that? Anyway it was just an advertisement. She was advertising laundry detergent. It's a bit of a silly advertisement, and incidentally it's the same brand as I use. I must remember to change.

The fishpond has a little waterfall. I don't have any water coming down it yet. In fact I'm still at the hole digging stage. Peggy has said several times, "I thought you said it

was going to be a *little* pond!” Wait until she sees the size of the waterfall! Enough about that. It’s just that I’m so excited about it!

There are a number of things you haven’t heard about yet. One is Holly. Poor Holly! Here we are miles into the novel and you don’t as yet know even the colour of his hair. He’s been terribly neglected thus far. It seems that Grace came prancing into the limelight every time Holly got a mention. Then Nick appears to have taken a bit of a back seat recently. I don’t know how these novelists keep all their characters constantly to the fore, page after page, chapter after chapter. I still seem to be in the exposition half the time.

Then I want to tell you about the trip to Québec. What an adventure! But what a schlimazels!

Yvonne and Peggy had decided that for the trip to Québec they would hire a campervan. It was fairly late fall. (That’s the previous fall, not the one coming up). One day Peggy turned up home from work driving a hired campervan, and said, “Right! We’re going ready or not. We don’t want to go to Québec in winter, and we keep putting it off.”

Well, it had barely been two weeks since Yvonne had found Mattie’s old Teach Yourself French books, and thus far had learnt that at 5 o’clock in the afternoon she must switch inexplicably from bonjour to bonsoir.

“I don’t know why they put all those letters in their words if they’re not going to pronounce them,” said Yvonne. “Why can’t it be like English?”

Peggy had taken French at high school. “It’s just a vague memory,” she said.

They were up half the night, packing, and arranging for this and that. Cob was to feed the hens. Yvonne addressed each item of clothing she packed: “Excusez-moi, monsieur. Parlez-vous anglais?”

“There’s not a single anglophile in your closet,” said Peggy.

Off they set the next morning, staying the first night with Yvonne’s daughter and wee Zachary in Toronto. Then on to Ottawa! Montréal! and then, “My God!” exclaimed Peggy, “it’s like being in a foreign country!”

“Every church seems to be Church of England,” observed Yvonne referring to the word ‘Eglise’ posted on every ecclesiastical edifice. “I thought they were more Catholic.”

“It might mean that they have Mass in English,” said Peggy.

They had almost arrived. They had just passed through Gentilly.

The campervan broke down.

It was cold. It was dark. It was late.

“Excusez-moi, monsieur,” said Yvonne. “Parlez-vous anglais?”

Peggy resorted to her best schoolgirl French and gave a fairly free translation of Yvonne’s question. “Does any bastard round here speak bloody English?” Peggy shouted down the phone.

Yvonne sat on the side of the road and laughed.

“Sales étrangers!” she said.

34

Mattie had just finished her second Teach Yourself French book, and she said to Tom, “We’re ready for Québec!”

It was Tom’s annual vacation. Not only did Mattie want “to practice my French on real people”, but she also had this long-held desire to visit Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré.

“Saint Anne was the grandmother of Jesus, and we should all make at least one pilgrimage to somewhere in life,” she said. Besides, she thought that to go there would be “something different”, and Anne was her patron saint.

They set out on their pilgrimage: Tom, an ordinary Presbyterian; Mattie, an ordinary Catholic.

They had just passed through Gentilly. Mattie recalled a children’s chant they used to recite in the convent school playground:

*Dear Saint Anne
find me a man
as fast as you can.*

“I hope not too fast,” said Tom laughing, as the car swerved on the atrocious road, spun two and a half times and landed them facing in the wrong direction. Mattie was hurtled out of her seat into a heap on top of Tom.

“Are you all right?” said Tom.

“I’m fine,” said Mattie. “I’ve never had a prayer answered so fast in my life!”

The car wouldn’t start. They were in a kind of shock of disbelief. Ten seconds ago who would have thought this would happen?

“I don’t believe it,” said Tom.

There were shops nearby, and Tom said to Mattie that it was a good opportunity for her to start using her French. So they went into a butcher’s shop to ask if they might use the phone.

There was much consternation in the butcher’s shop, with the first butcher replying to Mattie’s French request that he would have to ask. Then the second butcher said that the man in charge was away, but he would phone up himself. So he got on the phone. When he’d finished he said to Mattie, “Ça sere pos long”, and Mattie (whose Teach Yourself French books had never used that phrase) said, “Un peu plus lentement, s’il vous plait.”

“Ça sere pos long,” said the man slowly.

“Je ne comprends pas,” said Mattie.

“Un petit moment,” said the man.

“Ah! Merci!” said Mattie, and Tom was so proud of his wife speaking so fluently and for so long in a foreign language.

Mattie translated for Tom, “they’ll be here in a minute”, and was feeling pretty pleased with herself. Soon a van arrived and Tom ended up paying for seven large T-bone steaks whose delivery Mattie had inadvertently ordered.

“What the hell are we going to do with these?” said Tom. “What happened there?”

Mattie, standing next to the broken down car and holding the large package of delivered meat, said, “I wouldn’t have the slightest clue what happened. It’s not my fault they can’t understand my exquisite Parisian accent.”

In the long run, nothing too serious was wrong with the car, and they made their way through Québec city and on to Sainte-Anne-de-Beaupré. “We might as well get this Saint Anne thing out of the way early,” said Tom.

As they entered the church Tom said, “Dear Saint Anne find me a man as fast as you can”, and when they saw all the crutches and walking sticks hanging from the pillars Mattie exclaimed, “It’s just like Lourdes!” even though she’d never been to Lourdes, and all she could think of for some reason was Kate burning in the fire.

Tom said he’d go outside and sit in the sun while Mattie “did her thing”, and Mattie lit a candle to Saint Anne and sat down.

“Well Anne,” prayed Mattie, “it’s Mattie here. Here I am on my pilgrimage and I don’t know why really, unless you want seven large T-bone steaks. But there’s Peggy soon going to college, which we can hardly afford, and she’s going to make a mess of things. And Nick is mixing with the wrong people and called his English teacher a complete asshole, which she is, and there’s Cob and Holly who are going the same way. And there’s Kate, oh little Katie, who died in the fire, and (Mattie started to cry) I had a baby once, many years ago adopted out. Always on my mind. Every day. Always. I suppose you know who it is. I don’t. So here I am. And since you’re the grandmother of Our Lord I don’t doubt you have a certain influence, and I want you to make sure that all of mine turn out good and happy.”

She stayed there half an hour, and when she emerged into the sunshine Tom thought he’d never seen Mattie look like that. She was radiant as the heavens.

“She speaks English,” said Mattie.

35

Yvonne and Peggy spent the night sleeping in the campervan on the side of the road.

As it turned out they'd simply run out of fuel (ce qui étoit plutôt gênant) so the next day they were able to make their way to Québec city without much trouble.

"It's like medieval Europe!" exclaimed Yvonne, who had never been to medieval Europe, but was looking at the castle on top of the hill.

In Québec there was a skinny street, without a road, going down the hillside, and artists would line both sides trying to sell their wares. As you walked down they would say "Hi!" and if you answered "Hi!" back it meant you were a rich American tourist and were about to be cornered and convinced you needed to purchase a painting.

Peggy learned this quickly, and to save time and not be pestered, she would descend pointing to herself and announcing to each vendor as she passed, "German! I'm German!"

She successfully reached the bottom when a young woman selling numbered engravings responded to Peggy's "I'm German!" with, "Das ist kein Problem. Ich spreche Deutsch." Peggy thought "Great Scott! She speaks German!" and said to her in a very guttural German accent, "But ich vant to practische mein Englisch."

"That's no trouble," said the young woman artist, "I'm from Australia."

"Are you?" said Peggy, forgetting she herself was Bavarian and beginning a long conversation about Australia, and how she had always wanted to go there.

Yvonne and Peggy came away having purchased a little engraving of a pig, numbered 190/200. “We’ll hang it in the kitchen,” said Peggy. “It’ll remind us not to over eat.”

And then they shopped! Did they shop! They shopped like they needed a complete new wardrobe, which they did, and they bought other things as well. Yvonne bought Peggy a beautiful little tea strainer of silver that wasn’t too expensive but very nice indeed. Peggy said she supposed this was as good a time as any to get Yvonne a water-pump for the fishpond she was planning to make.

“The French word for ‘fish’ is one of the few I can remember,” said Peggy, as she bought the biggest and best pump the shop had. “Gigantic cataract” Peggy kept saying to the salesman, thinking that “gigantic cataract” sounded more foreign and might ring more bells in a French speaker’s ear than “big waterfall”.

Within several days they had “done Québec city” and Peggy suggested, “you don’t know a place till you’ve seen the countryside”. So they set out heading sort of south towards the border of Maine. They avoided the big roads and went down every French-speaking country lane they could find, in search of the perfect French-speaking village.

In the Beauce, they came to Notre-Dame-des-Pins. It began to snow.

“An out of season passing shower,” said Yvonne. The snow fell harder.

In the middle of nowhere, down an unpaved country road, the campervan came to a halt.

“We’re stuck,” said Peggy.

“Neige coince!” said Yvonne, with a finger in her English-French dictionary.

It was the biggest snowstorm in years.

A local farmer and his wife rescued them (est-ce que ça n'arrive pas que dans les romans?) Monsieur and Madame Paul-Eugène and Lorraine Jolie took them in. They lived in an old colonial-style chalet with a floor that wobbled and a staircase so steep it was almost a ladder. Their children had quitté le nid. The farm was mainly dairy cows.

The visitors were given a room in the loft. Lorraine did all her cooking on a wood-burning stove. "We'll have to get one of those," said Peggy, "it'll save us a fortune." Yvonne and Lorraine swapped pickling recipes. Paul-Eugène taught Peggy how to make her own wine. "This'll save us a second fortune," she said.

Yvonne said she'd like to milk a cow, and even though they were milked by machine, Paul-Eugène insisted she milk the cow by hand. They say the laughter was heard in Portage la Prairie. No matter how hard she pulled, Yvonne could not entice a single drop from the cow's 'dingly-danglies'. (I'm sorry, but I can't bring myself to use the proper word for 'dingly-danglies'. It sounds so offensive, don't you think? Paul-Eugène told me they have no such trouble in French).

Peggy and Yvonne stayed three days before the weather cleared enough for them to depart. But they made firm friends, and in the short time trapped in the snow Yvonne learned more French than Peggy knew from an entire education. Peggy reckoned Yvonne should open a bilingual milk bar in Paris. Lorraine and Paul-Eugène promised to come and stay with them sometime. Yvonne even borrowed a couple of Lorraine's French cookbooks.

Such nice people! Once or twice in a lifetime, if you're lucky, the right people meet the right people, and friendships are forged. No strings attached. No debts of gratitude incurred. No obligation to pay back, except out of a feeling of genuine geniality.

“That was a trip to end all trips,” said Yvonne getting home.

They unpacked.

Peggy used her beautiful little tea strainer of silver for the first time. Yvonne discovered that the fishpond pump to make a “gigantic cataract” was a mechanism for some sort of complicated sewerage system.

“It’s a French anti-bullcrap device,” said Peggy.

36

It's always nice to be home. That's often the best part of a vacation away. One checks the mail with a great deal of hope, and thinks, so? what do I do now?

Yvonne and Peggy inspected the garden: each nasturtium flower born in their absence was admired and welcomed. They inspected the hole for the in-the-making fishpond: no progress there. They inspected the chickens: nothing different.

Vivienne was home of course, with baby Jason, and she said, "No news is good news."

Well, that was before the last winter. They survived that. Cob, Viv and baby Jason Jacob (he's called JJ) have moved back to their own home. What a blessing is Viv's recovery.

I've spent all day putting the final touches to the fishpond and waterfall. Peggy has planned an 'event'. She's got some champagne and while we're cooking the barbeque we're going to turn on the "gigantic cataract". (Sorry but I've gone back to the first person singular. I'm so excited!) AND, we're using the family dinner-set and silver! Nick and his Lake, Jake and Oscar, Holly and his Tom and Harry, and Cob, Viv and JJ are all coming! It'll be a family reunion. Not that we don't have them quite often. But this time it's with a splash of water and a flash of lights.

So I'm feeling satisfied and rather weary, but at last it's done. It was a lot bigger project than I'd first thought and there are three goldfish in it already. But the waterfall!

I've had a sneak preview, but this evening it's all go when we flick the switch. It's got lights! I already said that!

Anyway, here I am, and it's time that Yvonne told you about Holly. So, Yvonne got out her manuscript and sat down on the patio.

"Hopefully Grace won't come clawing her way onto the stage," thought Yvonne.

Holly was born with a deformed foot. He wore one shoe built up higher than the other. That never stopped him of course. It never slowed him down.

Peggy's just come in and said, "It's going to pour down with rain, Codger."

I thought I'd heard thunder, so I'm going out to mow the lawn before it gets wet. The grass is getting a wee bit long. Hopefully, with tonight's grand opening, it's just a passing shower. I'm actually feeling a bit cold, so maybe the summer is passed its peak. It's going to be perfect tonight and I'll be back in a short while to tell you more about Holly.

The weather's definitely turning colder. We'll soon be locked in our winter igloo.

* * * * *

37

My name is Jason Jacob Trippett. People call me JJ. I live in the old Trippett family homestead with my partner, Rochelle, and we have two and a half children: Miranda Vivienne, Pollyanna Rochelle and Unnamed Male (although he's going to be called Braxton Smethurst Trippett when he's born. Smethurst is Rochelle's family name).

It's been twenty-seven years since Aunt Yvonne died. I never knew her. At least, I don't remember her. Dad (that's Cob in the book) said she died mowing the lawn. Sounds a good enough way to move on!

Anyway, I found this manuscript at the back of a cupboard, and I don't know if I should call this Chapter 37 or what. But it was pretty interesting for me to read.

I asked Dad about Aunt Peggy, and he said she left for Australia twenty years ago or so (chasing a man called Johnny Jones or Johns or something like that) and he hasn't heard from her for about seventeen years. If she were still alive she'd be in her seventies. I have a vague memory of her, but not much.

My mother, Vivienne, died when I was nine. She had a bad heart. My image of her is like a shadow. Dad's in his sixties, and he lives on his own.

Uncle Nick died of cancer. Uncle Holly killed himself. I was quite small, and I don't know much about it. I know my cousins quite well though. We don't see much of each other, but we're 'there if needed'. My grandparents on Dad's side, Mattie and Tom, died before I was born. So, to be honest, I don't really remember anyone much who is in Aunt Yvonne's book.

I work as a pharmacist in town. I got quite a good degree and have my own business.

So I found Yvonne's manuscript and I showed it to Dad. He broke down in tears a bit when he read it, and said it was pretty accurate. At least the bits he knew. He'd first read it way back he said. He said the exercise book Yvonne used was always on the patio and everyone in the family used to dip into it when they visited. So I asked him things, and I'm trying to fill in a few gaps. He gets a bit weepy at times. Dad.

I looked on the internet and I've been trying to locate Aunt Peggy, if she's still alive, but I haven't had much luck. In fact, I haven't had *any* luck. No leads at all.

So, for what it's worth, this is Chapter 37. It feels a bit awful just going on to Chapter 38, as if I could write as good a stuff as Aunt Yvonne. So I'm starting with Part VIII, Chapter 1. Already I'm in a fix because I don't know if I should have written "as *good a stuff* as Aunt Yvonne" or "as *gooder stuff* as Aunt Yvonne". They both look pretty bad.

Part VIII

Chapter 1

Cob, that's Dad, keeps quite well. He had an operation for varicose veins a few years back, but apart from that he seems fine. He still works with his lawn mowing business, and tool sharpening in winter. He gave up going to Québec for the maple season years ago.

After I'd found Aunt Yvonne's manuscript I went looking for her grave. I couldn't find it, but Dad said it was there somewhere near his parents and the rest of the family. Dad used to live in this house on his own until I started living with Rochelle and we had Miranda and Pollyanna. Then Dad said we might as well move into the bigger house, and he moved into town.

When we came here, the place was looking a bit run down, and Rochelle and me renovated it. Dad had taken some of the stuff, but we had a yard sale and got rid of most of the old things. Now that I've read Yvonne's memoirs, I wish we'd kept some of the things, like the dinner-set, and the little tea strainer of silver. I actually remember burning the old tea cosy – that's if it's the one mentioned in the book. It certainly looked shabby enough to be the one.

It's funny how one generation moves on and the things that were significant to them have little value in themselves. It's all in the knowing, in the association. I suppose if you go to an antique shop and buy an expensive chair or something it has intrinsic

value. But most things are just everyday things to be used and discarded. It's a bit like the little engraving of the pig in the kitchen that Peggy and Yvonne had bought in Québec. It was valueless, and I think someone bought it at the yard sale for about fifty cents. That's not even the cost of an ice cream.

Yvonne's fishpond I'm feeling a bit guilty about. I always knew it as a pile of rocks, and we had the area bulldozed and put in a swimming pool. Goodness knows where they had the henhouse. There's not a trace of it anywhere.

Rochelle Smethurst, my partner, is a very nice person, naturally enough! When Miranda and Pollyanna were born (they're twins) Dad hated being called Granpop, so the kids call him Cobpop.

I don't know where to start in this continuation of Yvonne's masterpiece. I thought I'd fill in a few gaps, but Dad hasn't actually said much about it other than he didn't think there were many gaps to fill. I might have to make some of it up!

38

“Jacob Stanislaus Trippett! I’ll get you back one day!” screamed Yvonne.

Cob had found Yvonne’s manuscript sitting on the patio at the fishpond grand opening and had scribbled in several pages! Yvonne shrieked, “What’s this? I’m leaving your confounded contribution in there.”

I know that might be a bit of a shock. I apologize. Yvonne’s death certainly came as a sudden and sobering revelation to myself. As far as I’m concerned I’m still inhaling, and relieved about it, so you can all stop dabbing your eyes. Cob shall answer for it in hell fire.

The fishpond grand opening was an event of marvellous proportion. They waited until it was dark, and by then they’d already finished most of the champagne and hadn’t even lit the barbeque. Once it was dark, all the house lights were turned off, and Yvonne got to flick the switch, and said “Behold!” like she was Queen Gertrude of Denmark officially declaring open a new bridge.

There was a little row of pretty lights down the higgledy-piggledy path, and a big spotlight under the water in the pond, and an ornamental fixture to shed light on the gigantic cataract. When Yvonne flicked the switch with her royal “Behold!” the lights went POP! POP! POP! all in sequence and ended with a great explosion of the ornamental fixture. The onlookers were left standing in utter darkness with the sound of a waterfall beginning its splendid life.

Everyone was helpless with laughter. “We got fire works!” snorted Nick.

What pandemonium! Things are funnier when you’ve had champagne.

Peggy was so convulsed she forgot all propriety. She was sprawled on the tiles of the patio floor holding her spilt-empty champagne glass and gasping, “Oh Codger! Oh Codger! It’s a masterpiece!”

Holly leaned back on his chair bellowing helplessly and the back leg of the chair broke so he grabbed the tablecloth to save his fall and brought down the entire collection of cutlery onto the floor

“It’s a drum roll!” convulsed Peggy, who thought she had just recovered and was off again in another breathless paroxysm.

Nick was crying with laughter. The tears were streaming down his face, and his daughter Lake said, “What’s wrong, Daddy?” and all he could manage through the sobs was “Nothing! Na-aa-aa-thing!”

Cob was doubled over the patio railing, drawing in great screeching gasps like he was drowning in the fishpond and saying, “I think I’m going to die! I think I’m going to die!”

Yvonne didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and she said, “You can’t expect a laundress to be an electrician.” But the laughter was contagious, and what began as a nervous giggle grew into a mountainous fountain of uncontrollable mirth.

Things settled down a bit as the night progressed, but suddenly someone out of the blue would remember and there would be a great out-of-context guffaw and that would set them all off again. What an evening!

The next morning, Peggy's sides were so sore she wondered if she shouldn't go to the doctor. "I completely overdid it last night," she said. "I think I've broken a rib."

Nick and Holly came in the afternoon and reinstalled the electric wiring. They were still laughing.

But it was a masterpiece! Water gushed from the high rock, and tumbled in a cascade of mist and fern and wildflower. It was as if it had caught the joy of the previous evening and transmuted it into a permanent memorial.

When the lights came on at dusk, Mattie and Kate danced with Titania and Oberon.

*I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
Where oxlips and the nodding violet grows
Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbine,
With sweet musk-roses, and with eglantine:
There sleeps Titania some time of night,
Lull'd in these flowers with dances and delight;
And there the snake throws her enamell'd skin,
Weed wide enough to wrap a fairy in.*

In the summer evenings, Peggy and Yvonne would sit on the patio for hours, just looking.

"It's the best thing we've ever done," said Peggy. "It's a masterpiece, Codger. A masterpiece!"

39

It's getting to the stage now when I'm starting to think of a title for my novel. I thought of *Scrambled Eggs* but that's a bit meaningless, and in fact, I find it a little offensive. *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* – or even *An Apology for the Life of Mrs. Shamela Andrews* - would be okay if not already taken. I thought of *The Duck's Nest* but I heard myself asking around Chapter 39, "Has anyone seen my duck?" Cob suggested *Wuthering Heights*. He's such a dear man!

At one stage I thought of *The Near of Winter*, but Peggy says it's gauzy and vague and sounds like a romance novel. She said to call it *Grace Between Meals*. She says she hasn't read it, but I've seen her dipping into it out on the patio, and she's read it all right. In fact she couldn't put it down, because I was watching her through the sheer.

It's so satisfying to think I'm up to Chapter 39. It's quite an achievement for me. Talk about 'development of character'! If anyone ever says that my characters don't develop, I'd say, "Look at me!" I'm getting more and more confidence. When it comes down to the bare essentials, you might think I've always been pretty confident, but deep down I'm fairly shy really. If I'd been given half a chance early on I could have conquered Rome. My mother (my adopted mother Elsie) did her best but she wasn't the right person for me really.

I don't want to sound horrible or ungrateful. I'm not. It's just that looking back I'm amazed how well I did at school and the Laundromat and that. And then here I am now, struggling to read Jules Verne's *Voyage au centre de la terre* in the original French!

Struggling I know, but doing it nonetheless. I don't want to sound conceited, but it's very satisfying. I suppose I've always been like that, but you know, I can't help but feel I'm doing rather well.

My daughter in Toronto says that I seem to be happier than she has ever known, and she'd be right. We get on so well. I've never told you much about her, other than she has a boy called Zachary and a partner called Jack. That's because she doesn't really come into the story of the novel too much, and I've never even told you her name. I don't want her hounded by paparazzi when the novel becomes famous! Just kidding! Her name is Andrea Louise Prigmore.

My mother, Elsie Heape... well, I've never told you much about her either. It's like I've abandoned her and got swept up into the Trippett family and said to my mother, "Thanks for the forty years, but I've found something better". It wasn't like that at all. In fact, she died a couple of years after I was married. We were never very close, but I miss her. I'll always be grateful for everything she did for me.

My two sons, Paddy and Jim, are fine. Paddy keeps in touch. They go their own ways. Neither is married. They're all good kids. I'm so lucky.

Actually, that's not quite true. I wasn't going to tell you. I didn't think it was important, but I suppose it is. It's about my two boys. When my ex-husband was having an affair (before he met Grace), my two boys had an argument with their father. It's very difficult to know what to do at times, and whose side to take. I was trying to do my best to mend a broken marriage, and it was very confusing and upsetting. I took their father's side. Yes, and... well... Andrea said she'd heard that Paddy had gone to Vancouver and Jim was living somewhere in Rhode Island in the United States (illegally I believe). It

makes me sad, but I live my life as best I can and I try to let everyone else do the same. So that's the story.

I haven't been able to work these past few years, because of certain problems and things you know about. Peggy's really supported me, both emotionally and financially. And so have all the others of course.

I've been trying to find a little part time job that I can do, and make some contribution. But no one seems to want me, and then when I get turned down just the once I go into my shell a little bit, and it takes me quite a while before I pluck up the nerve to ask anyone else for a job.

Peggy says not to worry about it. "Once the film rights come through for your novel we'll go on a world trip," she said. But I know deep down that it's going to get rejected by a publisher anyway, and sometimes I think about that and how I'm wasting my time writing it. It makes me feel very worthless. They say no one makes a living from writing any way.

Don't panic! I feel better about feeling worthless every day!

I asked at the local Laundromat if they had any vacancies, but they didn't. Then I applied for a cleaning job at a motel, but the position got filled. I even asked at the local library if they needed a hand, and they told me I'd be most welcome to help on a volunteer basis. So I was just getting ready to do that when they said it would be better if they had someone who had more than just a high school education. So that kind of left me stranded a bit.

The other job I applied for, and didn't get, was washing dishes at a delicatessen. Apparently I wasn't educated enough there either. After that Peggy said, "Oh for God's

sake Yvonne! There's more than enough work to do around here." She's right, except it doesn't help financially.

A couple of times Cob has phoned up and asked me to come help with his lawn mowing business because he gets a bit overworked. And he wasn't just being nice. He always offered to pay me after my day's work, and I always said, "Don't be stupid." I prefer that he doesn't pay me. I already owe him for too much.

This doesn't of course solve the problem of what to call my novel. But I'm thinking.

I also thought of calling it *As Flies to Wanton Boys* after the *King Lear* quotation:

*As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods;
they kill us for their sport.*

I believe a number of books have already been called that. The world is running out of titles.

Strangely, if you're reading this you already know what the title is. You only have to look at the cover. I find it bemusing that you know more than I do!

It's funny though (I've thought of this every time I've quoted any famous lines in literature throughout my novel), everything that's profound in these pages is a quotation from someone else. That's a bit like writing a play for the theatre and the production has Ravel's music played at the interval. And after the performance is over everyone says to the playwright, "Loved the music!"

It's impossible to be profound if you set out to be, so I'm not going to try.

40

Something's about to happen now that I've been putting off creating. I suppose it's almost inevitable in the divine plan of things that such things happen. I keep putting it off because I don't want the lovely life of the garden and fishpond and henhouse, at the now venerable Trippett homestead, to disappear off the face of the map. Can arcadia last forever? At some stage Apollo takes over from Pan, and the simple life is swept from the rustic to the hoity-toity.

Some people prefer the metropolitan lifestyle anyway. They like to live in an apartment building, and pay the earth for it, in the middle of town, with a balcony four stories up overlooking a street jammed with tooting cars and thought-absorbed pedestrians. They like to be within walking distance of shops and restaurants and theatres and cinemas. They like to tend their little geranium pot on the balcony and think they have the best of both worlds.

Not so Yvonne. Her dream world had become an expansive rurality; a place where if the rooster crowed at four in the morning she didn't have to fret about it waking the neighbours.

The truth of it was (and at first it may seem insignificant) Peggy met a man.

It was an ordinary day at the florist shop. "May I help?" asked Peggy of a gentleman customer, and within three weeks they had become inseparable.

The process of getting from "May I help?" to inseparability is a seemingly complex and sometimes painful one, often filled with deep turmoil intercepted by

moments of the loveliest balm. Other novelists have dealt with this topic in some detail. Now might be the time to get out *Wuthering Heights* and peruse the passage about Heathcliff standing in the garden howling like an animal and bashing his head against a tree trunk. Replace the name of Heathcliff with Peggy Trippett. Love is a cruel irony for one such as Peggy, who had spent her life scorning those ruled by the baser instincts.

“You’ve become like a little puppy dog,” said Yvonne.

“He’s coming to dinner. I want you to meet him,” said Peggy.

So Jonathan Mawson-Johnson came to dinner. Before his arrival, Peggy was in a flap. Yvonne couldn’t do anything right. Yvonne, who had volunteered to cook, hadn’t, in the opinion of Peggy, ever cooked before. Peggy was in and out of the kitchen, stirring this and poking that. She was adding herbs to this and garlic to that.

“I’ve already used some,” said Yvonne.

“Not enough,” said Peggy. “It doesn’t taste right. You’re not doing it properly.”

But once Mr Jonathan Mawson-Johnson arrived for dinner, Peggy was all light and lovely breeze. “This is my sister, Yvonne. What a help she’s been to me in the kitchen!”

“How do you do?” said Yvonne shaking his hand and thinking, “I was expecting someone handsome, but he’s really not that good-looking.”

Jonathan (called Jonathan) Mawson-Johnson was a tall, thin, bald man. About fifty. A widower of some years, who shared a common tragedy with Peggy in having lost a son and only child in a car accident several years before. He was an accountant. Quite well off, Peggy believed.

For all of Peggy's magnanimity in wanting Yvonne to meet him, Yvonne felt as if she might as well have been a piece of candelabra on the dining table. Yvonne understood perfectly each topic of conversation. She understood comprehensively each sentence uttered. But she thought, "Why the heck are they talking about nothing?" Jonathan and Peggy laughed and joked, and created problems they didn't have so they might solve them together.

"It's like watching a movie," thought Yvonne. Suddenly she snorted out aloud in the middle of nowhere because she'd thought of something very funny, and Peggy turned and said "What's funny?" and Yvonne said "I've left the stove on" and went out to the kitchen to recover.

But Yvonne had snorted because she had the most ridiculous vision enter her mind of Peggy as the great Judith in the bible. Peggy gesticulated with her knife as she spoke, and Yvonne thought, "Ahhhh! She's going to cut off the head of Holophernes in his tent!" She saw Peggy march from the enemy camp holding high a food bag containing the head of Jonathan Mawson-Johnson and exclaiming, "The Lord has struck him down by the hand of a woman!" So she snorted, even though it's nothing to snort about unless you're trapped at the dining table for an hour as a piece of candelabra.

The evening was over. It was lovely to meet you. What a lovely place you have here. What a lovely evening. You certainly know how to cook. Peggy saw Jonathan out to his car.

"Well? What do you think?" said Peggy to Yvonne, wiping her shoes on the mat as she entered.

"He's lovely," said Yvonne.

But what she had really seen was a vision of her own happiness fading; of a shining knight on a white horse passing through the property on the way to war, trampling the garden, and burning the buildings. Things can never go back.

“He’s really nice,” said Yvonne.

41

In such circumstances, and at such an age, an early engagement is inevitable.

Peggy, who (apart from a few experimental beads in her student days) dismissed all jewellery as paste, exhibited her diamond ring with élan. Her penchant for trousers (old or new, patched or fashion-designed) made way for a frock. Yvonne (appropriately clad in blue) was to be matron-of-honour. The honeymoon was to be three weeks in Tahiti.

“Thank God you know French,” said Yvonne.

“I’m not marrying for money,” observed Peggy, “but it certainly adds to the pleasure!”

The wedding was in a registry office, and for all the preparatory fuss for the five-minute ceremony, Yvonne thought she might as well have worn her pyjamas. But the reception afterwards was beautiful, with Peggy’s family and Jonathan’s family, and a few friends whose names have never appeared in this novel because there’s absolutely no need; other than to mention that Monsieur and Madame Paul-Eugène and Lorraine Jolie came from Notre-Dame-des-Pins, Québec. Peggy looked stunning. She shimmered with joy. Even Jonathan looked handsome; it’s amazing what clothes can do.

The reception was held in a school hall, because even though Peggy thought they could have it at home outside with a marquee, Jonathan’s wishes won the day.

Sometime before the wedding, Yvonne said, “Peggy, I want you to sit down, and keep still. I’ve something to say.”

Peggy sat.

Yvonne had arranged for Nick and Cob and Holly to be there. Something was afoot. Something important.

“Well,” said Yvonne, “you have always made me so welcome in the family. It has been wonderful. But this is the family home, and I think I should move on, because you’re the ones who have lived your lives here. In some ways this lovely place is more yours than mine. I think Peggy and Jonathan should live here if they would like to.”

Cob said, “But what will you do?” and Peggy said she’d “talk it over with Jonathan.”

“I’m going to live with my daughter in Toronto,” said Yvonne. “I’m looking forward to it.”

They all talked about it, and Peggy said again she’d “talk it over with Jonathan.”

Jonathan agreed that “if that’s what Yvonne wants it’s for the best”. Yvonne would look after the house during the honeymoon, pack and tidy, and then move to Toronto.

“It’ll be the end of a chapter,” said Nick.

“There’s plenty more to write,” said Yvonne.

The wedding day dawned, sunny, as every wedding day ought to dawn.

“Do I have to make a speech?” said Yvonne.

“Yes,” said Peggy.

In such a night as this,
When the sweet wind did gently kiss the trees,*

* I can’t remember if this is from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or *The Taming of the Shrew*. It’s Shakespeare anyway. I’m no good at preparing speeches, so I end up saying the first thing that comes into my head - Yvonne

*And they did make no noise, in such a night
Troilus methinks mounted the Trojan walls,
And sighed his soul toward the Grecian tents,
Where Cressid lay that night.*

*In such a night
Did Thisbe fearfully o'ertrip the dew,
And saw the lion's shadow ere himself,
And ran dismayed away.*

*In such a night
Stood Dido with a willow in his hand
Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
To come again to Carthage.*

*In such a night
Medea gathered the enchanted herbs
That did renew old Eason.*

In such a night as this, I wish Peggy and Jonathan every joy.

Jonathan whispered, "What an embarrassing speech. It'll have to do." Peggy was in tears.

The honeymooners flew away. Yvonne went home and scrubbed the house from top to bottom. In the evenings, she would get herself a wine, sit on the patio in front of the dancing gigantic cataract, and think:

"What the heck am I going to do?"

42

Yvonne's avoidance of the stark nihilism of her future was sublimated into making things nice for the happy couple.

The potatoes were mounded. The carrots were thinned. The tomatoes were staked and had their laterals removed. The beans were fenced. The cabbages were butterfly-dusted. The peas were picked, podded and frozen. More radishes were sown to be ready on time.

Amongst the flowers, everything was planned for nature to explode into blossom as Jonathan and Peggy stepped from their limousine.

She put eggs under a broody hen so that fluffy, wonderful, magical chicks would hatch at the end of the three-week honeymoon.

She tidied the fishpond. She mowed the lawn. She painted the faded birdhouse.

"They'll be here in a week," she thought.

She cleaned the chimney. She stacked enough wood to last two winters. She polished the silver.

"They'll be here in a day," she thought.

She returned her library books and card. She packed her clothes.

"They'll be here in a hour," she thought.

She put pate and crackers, with a bottle of wine, a corkscrew and flutes, on the patio table. She added a great vase of deep blue irises, and a card that said, "Welcome Home – from one tropical paradise to another!"

She made a final round of the garden and henhouse and fishpond. She went into every room of the house and said aloud, "Goodbye!"

She put her house keys under the rock in the garden where they hid such things.

Getting into her little green car, she toddled off to Toronto.

43

Andrea, Jack and wee Zachary were glad to see her.

Zachary wasn't too 'wee' anymore. In fact, he had started school. Yvonne had bought him a little schoolbag and some coloured pencils. "I don't know quite what to do about it," she thought, "but that's the last of the money."

After two days, Yvonne started to look for a job. She asked at her old Laundromat, but without luck. She scanned the newspapers. She walked from factory to factory, shop to shop. She telephoned.

"I don't know why you don't mail the job applications," said Andrea. But the truth was, Yvonne couldn't afford the stamp. Nor gas for the car. Nor a bus ticket.

After three weeks of walking, Yvonne joked to Andrea, "You know, I don't think I present well!"

"I don't know why you don't drive around," said Andrea.

"Walking helps me think," said Yvonne.

Tensions started to rise in the Andrea household.

"How long's your mother going to stay?" asked Jack.

"Until she's on her feet," said Andrea.

"Oh God!" said Jack.

Yvonne started to find Zachary too loud and too boisterous. "I don't know why you don't control him a little bit better, dear," Yvonne said to Andrea.

"How long's your mother going to stay?" asked Jack again. And again.

Yvonne walked another week without success. “I’d make a good taxi driver,” she said. “I know every street in town.”

One evening, Yvonne overheard an argument between Jack and Andrea. Yvonne thought, “I’m the cause of that. I’m moving on.”

The next day, full of apparent joie de vivre, Yvonne said, “I’ve found a job! In a shop in town! I’ve got my own apartment!”

Jack said, “You don’t have to, you know.”

“I want to do it myself,” said Yvonne. “Keep my car here. I don’t need it yet.” She took just the one bag and, after walking all day, she slept in a bus shelter.

Yvonne lived for two months like that. She made a cardboard sign, in English AND French, which read:

I’M NOT A BLOOD-SUCKER
JE NE SUIS PAS UN PARASITE
I’M GOING THROUGH A BAD PATCH
JE PASSE UN MAUVAIS MOMENT
JOB OR MONEY!
TRAVAIL OU ARGENT!
HELP!
J’AI BESOIN D’AIDE!

She got no job, and little money, on the main street of Toronto. But she got a lot of comments. Scavenger! Slut! Earn a living! Imbecile! Va te faire voir! Nuisance! Blot! “At least I’m getting something,” said Yvonne.

For the week of a papal visit, she was shunted off to a suburb. But she returned with a brand new shopping trolley.

“It’s my belief,” said Yvonne, “that the suburban shopping carts are far superior to the ones from the city centre.”

The other people who begged in the main street knew her as ‘The Hermit Crab’.
At night she would set up her own cardboard house in her own little alleyway, and be
seen scribbling unsociably in an exercise book.

Another month passed. It would soon be winter.

Three teenagers whizzed by on skateboards.

“Get a life!” they shouted as they shot passed stealing her trolley-cart.

“My novel!” bellowed Yvonne. “It’s ended more abruptly than the reader might
have wished.”

*I wander thro’ each chartered street,
Near where the chartered Thames does flow,
A mark in every face I meet,
Marks of weakness, marks of woe.*

Get a life, lady.

She found a church, and lit a candle. She didn’t know what for or who to.

“They can get the twenty-five cents for the candle another time,” thought Yvonne.

She howled her heart out. Like a wolf. Like a wolf. Like a wolf.

44

There are certain skills to be acquired in the street. One skill is how to steal in the nicest possible way.

“Distraction is the key to being a good thief,” said Yvonne, as if she was giving a lesson in larceny to a class of students. “Keep poking the person with one hand while you reach for the wallet with the other. And keep moving! Dodge about like a boxer. It distracts the eye.”

Coming out of the church Yvonne needed no such skills. She forced open the poor box (“I guess I qualify”) and took seven dollars and forty-two cents.

Over the next few days she collected, in one way or another, one hundred and thirty-three dollars and eighteen cents.

She walked. She reached her daughter’s house. Andrea wasn’t home.

She went inside and took her car keys, leaving a message next to the telephone: “Have taken car. Sorry to have missed you. I am well. Will be in touch.”

Much aged, but not too hungry, she headed in her little green car for the house of her sister, Mrs Jonathan Mawson-Johnson.

Time alone at last in her own space!

It was an uneventful slow drive. It was slow because she was frightened to arrive. She filled the car with gas several times. She bought a chocolate chip cookie. Luxury of luxuries, she thought. She felt ill from the chocolate. She stopped and vomited. She bought a bottle of water. She slept the night in the car.

The next day, mid-afternoon, Yvonne arrived at the old Trippett homestead. The lawns were long. The garden was a jungle.

Peggy came to greet her. "Where the hell you been, Codger?" she said.

"I took time out," said Yvonne.

She never said how destitute she was. For Peggy's eyes were black and swollen. Her face torn and bruised as if a boxer's pummelling bag. Her right arm burned and bandaged from a tossed boiling pot.

"I'd kill for a cup of tea," said Yvonne.

45

Those of you who have been through such an experience as Peggy's will think, maybe, it's a little too flippant, a little too shallow. Those who have not had such an experience may think, how very Isabella Linton.

There's not much to be said. Being beaten by a spouse is not a recoverable malady. It's permanent in one way or another.

It's not a passing shower.

Jonathan Mawson-Johnson is out of the scene. He's on his horse. Once I restarted my novel (yes, all over again) I was determined to write him out as quickly as possible. But he hangs around, even if he's not here in the pages. Peggy will never be quite the same old Peggy she was. She'll probably be as cynical as ever, but less funny. More pointed in her observations. More, well... I don't know.

Peggy said she hopes Jonathan and Grace meet up sometime. They could hold a convention.

The physical recovery of Peggy Trippett (as she's back to being called) was fairly swift and fairly complete, except for a tiny scar on the corner of her mouth. The psychological recovery, of course, was partial, long and slow.

But we're both almost back to our old selves now. I've put on a bit of weight.

The garden was tidied. The grass was mowed. The place was generally fixed up, and we're now in the middle of winter. It's given me a bit of a chance to catch up on the novel. As you can see, I'm past the spot where the teenage skateboarders told me to "Get

a life!” and whipped the original manuscript into oblivion. Probably the original was better, I don’t know. Peggy gave me Mattie’s old exercise book to use, in which Mattie had once started to write a novel. It’s a family heirloom. It’s a privilege to write in it. I write each word as if Mattie’s hand pushes the pen. I like to think of it as *her* novel.

Yvonne has since told Peggy of her exploration into life in the concrete jungle. It was the first time, since Yvonne’s return, that Peggy had laughed.

“Well, Codger,” she said, “it’s hard to know which one of us is the foolish virgin and which is the wise.”

I asked Peggy if the house now held too many bad memories, and perhaps we should move. She said that Jonathan so detested living here that it would be a pleasure for her to remain.

We’re both determined to die old maids. Except, as Peggy said, it would take a considerable number of miracles.

I’m not back in favour with my daughter, Andrea. I knew she would be worried. I phoned. Jack answered and said I wasn’t welcome. I’ll let it lie a while.

Viv’s not well. She did what the doctor told her not to do and got herself pregnant. Peggy, with her science degree, reckons that Cob might have helped. But what do scientists know that we artistes don’t? So I go over there to look after baby Jason several times a week, and sometimes Viv phones and I pop over extra.

Something wonderful has happened! One of the two ladies whom Peggy employed in the florist shop has died!

Peggy said to me, “Why don’t you come and take her job?”

I said I don't know anything about arranging flowers, and Peggy said "So much for being an artiste." Peggy said she'd pay me, but I suggested that instead of that why don't I do the lady's job for nothing and save on wages. Peggy said it was a tax thing, but when we worked out that I'd have to pay taxes too, we found that it was better for me to work for nothing. So we're putting that money aside out of the business, and when there's enough in the kitty, the florist shop is paying for Peggy and me to go on an overseas educational flower-decorating trip!

Would you believe? I've read every book on flower arranging there is. I start next Monday, four mornings a week. Peggy screamed with laughter when she came home the other night and saw me with an open flower-arranging book. And I was sticking the long kitchen wooden spoons and cleaning brushes into a vase.

"I need one more agapanthus," I said, and Peggy went to the bathroom and came back with the lavatory brush.

I'm going to feel so much more useful. There's only so much that one can take of being unemployed. One can lose one's sense of personal worth. I never realized, but even if you clean toilets at a gas station, it gives a sense of dignity. It sounds silly, but it's true.

It's snowing again outside. It's all very well for us to have one of those sit-down lawnmower things with a detachable blade for pushing the snow. It's easy enough to put the blade on. What they never told us was that it's too cold in winter half the time for the lawnmower to start. I'll have to shovel.

Enough blabber! I'm going to, at last, I hope, finish telling you about Holly.

46

If Yvonne were to have a favourite in the family, it would have been Holly. He was a charmer. What he inadvertently lost by having a girl's name, he made up in quantities of testosterone.

He was born with a deformed foot, as you've been told. And his real name was Harold. Harold Michael Trippett.

Holly had two unfortunate marriages, again as you know: to Angela and Grace. He had the two boys, Tom and Harry, although Peggy told Yvonne that way back down the track there was another one when he was at high school.

Holly drove a truck. Sometimes for quite some long distances too, and sometimes all over North America.

Anyway, Holly called in the other day. He visits Peggy and Yvonne often when he's "on the way back" from wherever it is he's been. He lives on his own now, and his first wife, Angela, seems to have the boys most of the time. However, this time he called in, and Peggy and Yvonne thought he was a bit morose. He didn't say a great deal, and he had a beer and that was about it really.

Of all the men in the family, Holly was the one most upset about what Jonathan Mawson-Johnson did to Peggy, and since then he's visited a lot more than he used to. You've only got to accidentally say the name 'Jonathan Mawson-Johnson' and Holly will paint the room with colourful adjectival phrases.

He's a great fellow though. When he called in the other day, it was not long after the shocking news that Jonathan Mawson-Johnson had gone missing, and Holly knew that the police must've been around to see Peggy, which they had.

Holly said, "I hope the bastard drowned", and Peggy filled him in as to what the police had said. But really she didn't have much to add and Holly didn't have much to add to the story either, except what we'd all read in the paper.

To be honest, the area is not very populated. The local town is quite small, and the place that Jonathan Mawson-Johnson came from was a couple of towns away. About half an hour. So the local 'village rag' has been full of the story of the local accountant gone missing.

At one stage they mentioned Peggy's name as his wife, and Peggy phoned the paper and said that if her name were mentioned again in the context of Jonathan Mawson-Johnson she'd sue the paper for every penny they had. Her name hasn't appeared again, thank heavens.

But the point is, even though the paper has been full of brouhaha, there's really no story to write about because all that anyone knows is simply that "the local accountant has gone missing". He could have gone on vacation for all anyone knows.

This evening Holly called in to see us again, and again he didn't say much. Peggy wondered if there was anything wrong. And he said, "No, not really. Just a bit tired that's all", as he'd just been all the way to Alabama and back.

But he's so faithful to Peggy. I'm telling you all this so you can get a picture of what he's like.

Tonight he said he wished they'd solve the problem of the missing Jonathan Mawson-Johnson just to get his damn name out of the paper. Peggy agreed. We both did. Because it's upsetting to be reminded so often of what Peggy now refers to as her 'flight into wedlock'.

Anyway, Holly left because it's snowing quite heavily and he didn't want to "get trapped in a house with two women for a week. Besides it's been a bit of a hard drive all week in those Alabama swamps."

After he'd gone, Peggy was a bit quiet, I thought at first because of the Jonathan Mawson-Johnson business. But she said, no, she was fine.

Then we were sitting down in the lounge watching television, and it dawned on me, and I think it had dawned on Peggy earlier.

So I said to Peggy, "I've just had this thought."

Peggy said, "If it's what I'm thinking, then it's best left unsaid."

I agreed.

But we both know that perhaps the other has a great and terrible secret.

47

When the courts appraised Jonathan Mawson-Johnson's apparent demise, Nick was convinced that Mrs Peggy Trippett Mawson-Johnson, who never bothered to divorce through fear of lawyers' fees, should be the sole and official heir. The papers had after all, said Nick, discovered just how rich Mawson-Johnson was. The government however had discovered just how much in debt. Peggy said it was better not to open old wounds. And Holly and Cob agreed.

But there is no denying the wonder of the legal process, and before she knew it, Peggy was responsible for all sorts of debts incurred by her late (almost ex-) husband, and little to pay it with.

"We'll have to sell the house," said Peggy. "The bureaucrats will take it away anyway."

It's a sad yet joyous quirk of fate that Nick, Cob and Holly bought the house for a trifle and wrote the title in Yvonne's name.

Those of us who spend our days arranging flowers have little understanding of the legal niceties, and no doubt people will pick holes in it. But it is a novel after all, and if some legal particulars are omitted it's because, I, Yvonne Heape, have this mental block when it comes to legal things. When all is said and done, I can spend months getting the legality of things right (believe me I've tried) but the outcome is the same. The old Trippett family homestead was now in Yvonne's name. The same went for the florist shop. Suddenly its ownership was in the name of Yvonne Heape.

Yvonne should have felt immense pleasure at her windfall. Instead she felt guilt. She had become the impostor she hoped she never was.

How different life becomes, when instead of being simply part of a family, one becomes its owner.

“I’ll have to change my will,” she said. “I’ve left everything to my daughter.”

For a time the apparent simplicity of the rustic life had faded. Life was complicated. It was cruel. Who needs the gods to mess up our lives, when others do it nicely enough?

Such is the winter of our discontent. Locked in a snowbound house. Cabin fever. The all-pervading coldness of life. Each seems wondrous and simple enough, but oh, the complexity of a snowflake!

Yvonne didn’t have much of an understanding as to what was going on, but she worried about it nonetheless.

Then the first of many phone calls began.

“It’s Yvonne here,” she said.

“Is Mrs Peggy Mawson-Johnson there?”

“I’m sorry she’s away,” said Yvonne. “Can I take a message?”

“Yes, we’re debt-collectors. She owes so much. So much. So much. Tell her to give us a call.”

“I’m sorry,” said Yvonne, proud later that she had thought so quickly, “Mrs Mawson-Johnson is overseas. In Mexico I think. Or is it Columbia?”

“Well, you must be in contact with her.”

“I’m sorry but I just mind the house,” said Yvonne. “She’s away for at least a year I believe.”

Ten minutes later the phone would go again.

“You wouldn’t like your Peggy to get into trouble, Yvonne?” slithered the greasy voice. “The house seems to be in your name.”

All winter long the phone would ring, and Peggy could not answer.

“We know all about you, Yvonne Heape,” the voice would slime.

“You’re hounding me because I’m Hispanic,” said Yvonne in a fit of inspiration.

“Are you Hispanic?” came the surprised response.

“A legal one,” added Yvonne.

In the end, without any to-do, she would answer the phone and recite,

*Now is the winter of our discontent
Made glorious summer by this sun of York...*

On and on the Shakespearean quotation would go, until the threatening, vicious, slippery debt-collectors hung up.

“I believe I’ve read *Richard the Third* three times this winter,” fretted Yvonne.

“I’ve been through thick and thin, but never in my life have I lived in so much fear.”

They had the phone disconnected but the dread lingered. They spent the spring phoneless and in fright.

The ordinary can be more overpowering than the dramatic. It was the only time in a life of frequent grief, that anyone ever heard the usually kindly Yvonne use the word ‘arsehole’.

48

Poor Vivienne! She's eight months into disobeying the doctor's orders and I fear she's going to die on me a second time. She was introduced late into the novel I know, but she hasn't as yet been able to do anything of import; other than have a baby, and of course, to Jason that's probably reasonably significant.

I keep telling myself that I'm the one playing God, I'm pulling the strings, I call the shots. It lies within my power to keep Viv alive. But what is she going to do to warrant a chapter? I've already brought her back from the brink once – and that after her first death. I want to shout, “Vivienne! Deliver or perish!”

It's a strange thing, life. When Yvonne Heape (formerly Prigmore) researched her ex-husband's family tree she discovered that ancestors all have one thing in common: death. In the end, Yvonne had pages and pages of meaningless word combinations who had died. The ancestor called ‘Jennet Woosencroft’ could just as well be called ‘Ellen Whalley’. It was a collection of syllables and not of people.

Perhaps Vivienne Elizabeth Unsworth, wife of Cob Trippett and mother of Jason, is just that: a collection of syllables, a word combination.

Deliver or perish!

Who can remember Matilda Anne Trippett nee Trythall? Fewer and fewer. One more generation and she will be a mere collection of syllables stored in an archive.

Eight and a half months after she got herself pregnant Vivienne Unsworth gave birth to a new word combination: Anne Mattie Trippett. She has no memory of Mattie

Anne Trippett. She never can. She never will. Some things are beyond even the greatest of novelists, so don't expect me to resurrect more than fragments of a person for her.

Cob is over the moon. Initially, he got a good telling off from the doctor for making it happen.

"We did everything we could to stop it, doctor," said Cob. "It just happened anyway."

Just happened anyway indeed! Mother and baby are well. I blush from my place at the pulleys of life.

49

I promised myself that I would get to Chapter 50 before Peggy and I took off on our overseas educational flower-decorating trip.

“We’ve both earned it,” said Peggy.

It doesn’t look like I’ll reach my target before the flight. I’ve been so busy, with the four mornings a week at the florist shop, and helping Viv with baby Anne in the afternoons.

How I’m loving the florist shop! It’s not really just a flower-arranging thing. It’s a jolly counselling service. I should have been a psychologist! People come in and, you have to remember, they are either happy or sad.

One young man came in, quite desperate. It was Valentine’s Day. He was at work and twelve red roses arrived with a card that said “Tonight?” and nothing else. He didn’t know if it was from his wife or his girlfriend, and said, “What the hell am I to do? What if I thank my wife for them and they’re from the other one?” I told him exactly what I thought he should do (with the roses).

And the brides for the weddings! I hope I wasn’t like that. Perfect! Perfect! Perfect! Happiest day of my life! Me! Me! Me! The flowers must enhance and not distract from my beauty. My chosen nuptial venue is the loveliest, and most wondrous, since the Garden of Eden. Me! Me! Me!

You have to, of course, at least pretend to be excited. I reckon I can tell, even before the wedding day, which marriages will last and which won’t. That sounds a little

arrogant, and I guess it is. But goodness me! If I were a man I wouldn't be marrying half of them. Sometimes, listening, I wonder if the bride is not marrying herself. If I ever remarry (and I trust I won't) I'd be happy with a bunch of old wooden spoons and a toilet brush.

Then there are the deaths. People are lovely to other people when someone dies. There's so many sad and so many beautiful stories. The death of a child breaks my heart every time. I try to arrange the flowers as carefully as possible. I've shed many a copious tear I can tell you.

But now it's time to pack. You won't believe where Peggy and me are going!

See you in three weeks!!!

Part X

Chapter 1

I've long longed to go there, and now I have! What a long flight it is to New Zealand! I'll have to be careful not to turn this novel into a travelogue. It was wonderful. Peggy wanted to go to Australia, and I wanted to go to New Zealand. In the end, Peggy said that we'd do Australia next time. We've certainly caught the travel bug. We landed at Auckland International Airport. Neither of us slept a wink. We sat in the plane in the dark for hours, waiting to land. It's early fall over there. Everything is backwards and upside down. Even the light switch flicks up for off and down for on. There's too much to see and do in one trip. It's impossible. We hired a car, and first drove up (on the wrong side) to Northland where we saw the great kauri tree they call Tane Mahuta. It's gigantic! "Try putting that in a vase," said Peggy, wanting to justify calling our voyage an 'overseas educational flower-decorating trip'. And in the Bay of Islands they have a big traditional Maori meetinghouse. Then we came back to Auckland and 'did the city'. There's dozens of volcanoes everywhere. All dead ones. And sailing boats! They call it the City of Sails. After that we headed south, towards the active volcanoes called Ruapehu and a couple of other names that I can't spell that we saw in the distance. But before that we stayed the night at Lake Taupo after going to Rotorua. Oh! The smell of sulphur! And everything is steaming with boiling mud. I shore (or is it sheared?) a sheep at Ngongotaha! I said to Peggy, "I want that on my gravestone: Here lies Yvonne who

shord sheeps at Ngongotaha.” They have such lovely place names and of course we couldn’t pronounce half of them. It was like being in a foreign country! Then we stayed for several days at a farm-stay near Onga Onga, which is near Waipukurau. It’s way in the ‘boonies’, which they call in the ‘wop-wops’. And we went with Dave and Cynthia, who owned the place, to round up the sheep with the sheepdogs. We got on with them really well (the people, not the dogs!) They’re so nice. They call their hens ‘chooks’. And when they feed them they call out “Chook! Chook! Chook! Chook!” I’m going to start doing that with ours! Then on down to Wellington, stopping at Waikanae to visit an orchid grower. We had such fine weather all the way, crossing Cook Strait in a ferry to the South Island. They eat their pumpkin as a vegetable! The sweet potato they call kumara or something and it’s different from ours. And the accents! That was the first thing that struck me. They all spoke with an accent! Then we drove down to Christchurch, the Garden City. But the whole place is a garden. And beyond Christchurch we didn’t do, but they say that’s the loveliest of all. So we have to go back, we just have to! And Peggy agrees. What a marvellous time. And in Rotorua I forgot to say we went to a concert. I don’t want to bore you, but goodness me! I just had to get it out of the way before getting on with life. If you ever visit, we should have the photos developed by then. Cob’s coming tonight to hear all about it. He’s going to hear about it if he wants to or not! I asked about the word ‘Codger’, and they said yeah, it’s used as a friendly term, but it’s probably more Australian. The accents and all the different expressions! It was marvellous! I’m going to “rattle my dags” and reread Janet Frame! And I brought back the short stories of Frank Sargeson. And Allen Curnow’s poems.

*Simply by sailing in a new direction
You could enlarge the world.*

50

Yvonne had been looking forward enormously to getting to Chapter 50 of her novel. But instead of joy, it brought sad news.

Barely had Peggy and Yvonne arrived back from their overseas educational flower-decorating trip, when Cob came around with the news that Nick had cancer.

“The doctor’s given him three weeks,” said Cob.

Nick was a smoker. Now’s not the time to get into the whys and wherefores of what people should or should not do with their lives. The reality was, smoking or not, he had about three weeks left.

It was mid-spring. There were daily thunderstorms. The garden growth was prolific.

Yvonne thought how beautiful everything was: the shades of green, the flowers, the blue sky with furious cloud. Why not in winter? Why death in the season of growth?

Peggy and Yvonne went to see Nick. He was home. Alone.

“You’re coming to stay with us,” said Peggy.

“Too much hassle,” said Nick.

“You’re coming anyway,” said Peggy.

Peggy and Nick had an argument, as they always did. It was an ancient pattern, a way of life. And Nick said, “Well, I won that one”, and Peggy said, “You sure did. Now get in the car.”

Yvonne was left to pack a few things, and drive one of Nick's three cars back to the old Trippett homestead.

"I might as well end where I almost began," said Nick when they pulled up at the family house.

Nick settled into his old way of life in the family home like he'd never left, like he wasn't ill. Except he was yellow, and a little slow.

"Does Silvana know about this?" said Peggy.

"She doesn't need to," said Nick.

"And the kids?" said Peggy.

"That's a different story," said Nick.

So Peggy phoned Silvana, and said that Nick was dying, and he'd like to see the kids. Peggy said that Lake and Jake and Oscar could stay if they wished.

The children, now in their teens, might have wished, but Silvana thought it inappropriate that young people "at such an impressionable time of life" should be exposed to death. "It would harm them irreparably," she said.

"Come off it," said Peggy. "He's their father."

But Silvana would not budge.

For the next week or so they had a lovely family time. It was like the old days except Yvonne was there as well. And no parents. Cob and Holly would come when they could, often for the evening barbeque on the patio. Nick was fading, yet, with the morphine distributor gadget strapped to his thigh, he kept a fairly balanced existence.

"Either you can go down hill slowly and fade away, or you can stay averagely constant and go bump at the end," said the doctor. Nick was to go bump at the end.

It worried Peggy that Nick was not to see his children. It probably broke Nick's heart, but he never said.

One day, Peggy set out on a mission, as only Peggy could. She came back with three teenagers: Lake, Jake and Oscar.

"I met them at school," said Peggy. "They volunteered to be abducted."

She left them on the patio with Nick.

As evening came, so did Silvana Arcadia, with the fury of the accompanying thunderstorm.

She never left her car.

"Thanks, Aunt Peggy," Jake said as he passed. "Can you let us know when... when...?"

Jake broke down in Peggy's arms.

"Hurry up, you fool," screamed Silvana from the car, "I'm late for Bridge."

51

Time passes quickly when you're dying. Time passes slowly when you're dying.

There's so much to do. One has to get out a book on the stages of dying from the library and follow it assiduously. Or one can perhaps even somehow do it on ones own.

Nick did it without the book.

He became grateful for everything. The most frequent phrase they heard him say was "thank-you". He grew weaker. The "thank-you" was whispered through the teeth.

He would sit on the patio. "That's a great fishpond, Yvonne," he used to say. "It's always different." He was the same Nick, but they half expected him to be someone else because he was dying.

"You know," he said, "I hope that heaven's true. And I reckon it is. But if it's not, I want five seconds before oblivion to learn how I was fooled."

Peggy would say, "If there's no afterlife, God's going to have some explaining to do."

One evening, Cob and Holly had just left. It had been a pleasant time. So much to talk about. So much to recall.

A visiting nurse called in and said, "He's fading fast. He could die tonight."

Peggy phoned Cob and Holly. They both had just arrived home. They both turned around to come back. Peggy phoned Silvana. Lake answered.

"Yvonne's coming to get you," said Peggy.

Peggy told Nick that the children were on their way. His eyes were closed. He was holding Peggy's hand.

"That's jolly good," he whispered.

Cob and Holly arrived. They sat around the bed. Nick's breath was laboured. He was somehow fighting death.

Yvonne took well over an hour.

"They're here," said Peggy.

Lake, Jake and Oscar grasped their father's hands.

"Hi Dad," said Jake, "it's us."

Nick's breathing changed. He died.

52

The funeral was big. If you want a big funeral die in your forties, while you're still young enough to be remembered from school, and old enough to have collected enough friends along the way for standing-room only before they all pass on before you do.

Peggy asked Silvana if the children could come.

"How do you think I feel?" said Silvana not answering the question. "I was married to him for almost six years. No one seems to consider my feelings."

"I think you should bring them," said Peggy. "They'd want to. Nick would want it."

"I'm not going," said Silvana, "and I don't want to be left alone in the house."

In the end, Yvonne volunteered to stay with Silvana while Peggy took the children to the funeral.

"I don't mind not going. It's better for the kids," said Yvonne. But she minded a lot, believe me.

Later, Yvonne described the funeral as "the saddest funeral I've ever not attended."

"We played Scrabble," she said. "Would you believe? We played Scrabble!"

Silvana put on a Bob Dylan tape, and "we played Scrabble!"

It was as if there was no funeral, as if Silvana was drumming home the point that death did not exist.

But Peggy told Yvonne that the funeral was lovely, inasmuch as a funeral can be. She said that Cob and Holly both went up together and spoke. She was so proud of them. And the flowers they arranged from the family on the coffin. They were beautiful.

Lake and Jake and Oscar came up to the front of the church near the beginning of the ceremony. It wasn't on the program and Peggy thought they decided to do it on their own initiative. They came up and put a big bunch of rhubarb on the coffin next to the flowers. Jake said, "Dad was a practical man. He liked flowers and stuff, but he liked rhubarb even better." And then he put the bunch of rhubarb on the coffin and said "Goodbye from us kids Dad." And the rhubarb stole the show. In fact, the kids stole the show. There wasn't a dry eye anywhere. They're such nice kids.

"They didn't get that from their mother," said Yvonne. "We played Scrabble! Would you believe? We played Scrabble!"

Peggy says I should stop going on about it. I can't help it. Silvana's a dill-brain. I scrabbled a whole lot of words like "callous" and "spiteful" and "vile", but she never got the hint. When I managed, with my scrabble letters, to make the word "selfish" on a triple score, Silvana huffed up like a broody goose and squawked, "That's not how you spell shellfish".

She was so amused at my dumbness.

Grrrrr!

53

After the funeral, things began to settle. Yvonne kept at her French. She had a brain for the written word but no ear. She pronounced every letter.

It reached a point of crisis when she practiced on a passing French speaker. He accused her of butchering his beautiful language. “You bull in a Chinese shop the pretty language of me,” he said. Yvonne had to say “Pardon?” four times before she realized it was not a compliment.

Peggy said, “There’s only one thing. Go back to the basics.”

Discouraged but not subjugated, Yvonne began again.

“You’ve no idea,” said Yvonne, “when we played Scrabble I wanted to use French words. That Silvana didn’t win a single game.”

She was again getting towards the end of the second Teach Yourself French book when she came across a small piece of paper that Mattie had obviously once used as a bookmark. It was a sales docket.

“That’s funny,” thought Yvonne, “I’ve seen that before.”

She went on studying. “That’s a docket from my old Laundromat,” she thought.

Her heart raced. Why would there be a docket from her Laundromat there? She looked again. She couldn’t have brought it with her. Why would she? The date was too old. Yvonne thought, “I must have been about twenty then.”

“I’ve initialled it! They’re my initials!”

She asked Peggy, “Did Mattie go to Toronto?”

“Years and years ago,” said Peggy. “She went on a bus tour.”

“Look!” said Yvonne. “Look! It’s a dry-cleaning docket for a blouse. From my Laundromat! Mattie came to my Laundromat! I’ve initialled it!”

“But it can’t be,” said a suddenly-disappointed Yvonne. “The docket’s made out to Mrs Virginia Woolf.”

“Mattie used that name when she thought names didn’t matter,” said Peggy.

Yvonne thrust back her mind. She couldn’t remember the face of any customer, even in more recent years. I spoke to her! I must have!

Did Mattie say anything? Ever? Is there anyone alive who could remember? Did Virginia write it in a book?

How much easier to be far away. To be near a touch and not to touch becomes an unbearable longing.

54

The business of Jonathan Mawson-Johnson's disappearance is running hot. (I seem to be jumping all over the place. There's so much to tell. I get half way through telling you something, and then all of a sudden events of seeming more importance occur, and I have to leave what I was telling you and get onto the more important item).

The police say they've taken someone in for questioning. That usually means they're on a trail.

"Oh dear me," said Yvonne. "Oh gosh."

Not a great deal has been planted in the garden this year. It's all been a bit much.

Just a bit too much for me.

I've left off writing for almost two years now, and just picked this up today. A lot has happened and I've got to let things settle before I get back to it. It's Yvonne here. It's not a pretty picture.

It's three years now. I don't know if I'll ever get back to it. I hope so though.

It's been another couple of months. I'll be back soon. Don't worry. Love, Yvonne. It's been a couple of months. It's winter now. I'm going to get back to the novel later. Soon, I hope. I already said it's been a couple of months a couple of times!

I've had a bit of a bother, but I'm okay now I hope. In fact, quite good! Doing well!

Gosh. It's been seven years. I'm heading for sixty. I made a resolution. I'm going to finish my novel this spring. So there you have it.

A Kind of Prologue

Having spent several months living on the streets of a big city, you would be inclined to think that there was not a great deal left to learn about the human condition. You become quickly worldly-wise.

Not so! The cosmos is so big and complex. Our short lifetime makes it impossible to experience and know everything.

Just a few weeks ago I was out in the henhouse, and a pair of barn swallows were about to build a nest. I watched them put the first beakfull of mud on the rafter. Today I saw five baby swallows. They were darting this way and that in their angular insect-search flight. So quickly from a no-nest to an egg to an aerodynamic wonder! The mystery of it all! Yet how much more unfathomable to a human is a human! How immeasurable is oneself!

It's been a long seven years since you last heard from me. If you want to know, I'm aged anywhere between thirty and fifty-seven.

So as not to keep you too much in suspense, I'll sum up the seven years by saying that I still live in the old Trippett homestead; I run the florist shop; Cob's JJ is nine years old and his sister Anne is seven. They're both "mine": I'm their guardian.

I've grown even more plump and grandmotherly. I keep telling myself not to spoil the children, but what can you do? For all I know, they're the only Trippetts left in the world.

*If I can bring myself to tell you, if I can relive it again, here are fragments of
fragments. Bits of a passing shower. The disjointed flight. Scattered swallow shells of
disintegration.*

55

Not long after Nick's funeral, Holly was taken in for questioning.

Peggy and I already knew the truth. It was the exposure of our great and terrible secret. He was arrested, tried, and given life for the death of Jonathan Mawson-Johnson.

Peggy blamed herself. She thought if she had never married that man, none of this would have happened. Holly had (perhaps needless-to-say) driven his truck with the battered and living body of Jonathan Mawson-Johnson to the swamps of Alabama.

"It wasn't," said the judge, "simply murder. It was a cruel and slow act of revengeful torture."

The entire thing was planned. It wasn't a crime of passion. It was conceived, plotted, and executed.

Holly had followed Jonathan Mawson-Johnson. He'd got to know Mawson-Johnson's movements, his habits, his indulgences. Mawson-Johnson was a regular man. On Thursdays he would visit the brothel. You could set your watch by it, as if he switched his libido on at nine on a Thursday evening. He would dine out three times a week. He always ordered the same thing. He had a liking for squid; calamari the menu called it.

If he hadn't been such a regular man, Holly perhaps would never have been caught. People began to say, "Where's Jonathan? He's usually here at this time." The case of the missing accountant became a murder enquiry.

Holly's truck was parked outside *The Shaydie Laydies* one Thursday evening. To give credit where credit's due, Holly had been there before and he never disguised his truck. Never parked it around the corner. If Holly was doing something, he didn't mind too much who knew. Unless of course it was murder. That's why people liked him; he was honest as the day is long.

When Mawson-Johnson furtively emerged from *The Shaydie Laydies* he would nonchalantly wander the windows of the neighbouring shops, as if to say "I'm window shopping. I had no idea that was a brothel". This time he felt a revolver in his back.

"Get in the truck," said Holly. "The back of the truck."

Mawson-Johnson had his hands and feet tied, and he was strung upside down in the back of the truck swinging from side to side like a carcass of meat as they drove to wherever it was he was taken. Where that was the police could never find out, and Holly would never say.

The coroner's report filled in some of the details. Mawson-Johnson was castrated, probably four or five days before he died. He was partially strangled. He had been whipped. It was not impossible he'd been driven alive on the two-day trip to Alabama, said the coroner. It was not impossible he drowned in the swamp.

"The crime is made doubly worse," said the judge, "by the callous involvement of your late brother, Nicholas Thomas Trippett. One can only hope that the Almighty might see fit to see that he pays for his deeds in an appropriate manner. As for yourself, I sentence you, Harold Michael Trippett, to life imprisonment with no possible parole."

There are some events in life that can put a halt to novel writing, and this was one of them. I don't want to joke about it, and of course I'm not. I haven't ever got used to it.

I'm simply attempting to tell you why I haven't been about for seven years. I couldn't help but think, when it came to the judge condemning Nick, that he was rather enamoured with the beauty of his own words. It was quite unnecessary for him to tell the Almighty what to do. God is quite capable of doing what's best.

Silvana Arcadia, so I have heard, called Lake, Jake and Oscar forth and issued a decree. They had to change their name from Trippett to any other name in the world but that. I've never heard from any of them since Nick's funeral.

One evening on the patio some time after the trial, Peggy asked Cob if he had known about Holly and Nick's plan.

Cob said he'd worked it out after. At least, he worked out that Holly was involved.

"We did too," said Peggy.

"But," said Cob, "I knew about Nick a bit later. He told me himself when he was ill. It was like a confession."

At the time of the arrest, Angela disassociated Holly's two boys from their father and the rest of the family. I suppose that's fair enough, don't you think?

Holly said once, not long after Mattie and Tom had died, "You have to laugh about it." Some things are not laughing matters, but you do have to laugh about it sometimes, just to survive.

I have only one regret about the whole affair (apart from it ever happening). Yet it's not a regret really, it's just a little joke, a way of coping. I've grown too wise and too benign now to worry too much about such things. But I almost wish, at least at times

when I'm angry with God, I kind of wish, almost, that when Holly was arrested he'd still been married to Grace. She would have hated that.

56

I had intended that last chapter to be longer. Now that I need not write for therapy, I thought I could get into a bit of a Jane Austen mode, but old habits die hard. When I got to the end of the chapter I thought, goodness me! I've already said everything I wanted to say. Then I thought I'd pad it out a bit. I could do a paragraph or two on a great chomping alligator in the swamps of Alabama (or even describe for the uninformed the décor of *The Shaydie Laydies*), and describe the heat and sweat and smell of it all. I've never been to Alabama (nor to the other place). It would be straight out of the encyclopaedia. So I thought, well, that's a waste of time. Especially since there's so much you have to know that I haven't told you.

The problem is, if I tell you what happened over the last seven years, all in a great rush, you wouldn't believe it. It would sound like a big melodrama. It might be but, believe me, when you live it, it's not melodramatic. Life, call it what you will, seems to spread our tragedies over time. So I'm trying to present the events of the past thoughtfully and thoroughly – even though I know you want to know what happened.

Sometimes I get out the ironing board, and I'm ironing things for Cob's JJ and Anne for school the next day. I sometimes have a little cry at the ironing board. It's not that I'm full of self-pity. It's just that sometimes I'm overcome with the mystery of life. I know that sounds like it's straight out of an American operetta, but it's true. Here I am doing the ironing and my world is falling apart. I think, if all this tragedy is to happen to me then at least I should be sitting on a throne. How much more meaningful suffering

must be for the Queen of Denmark. She sits in the throne room, dressed in the crown jewels, undergoing an immense tragedy. But me? My life is markedly miniscule, a collection of infinitesimal fragments. We're all like that. Aren't we?

Anyway, Peggy and I tried to visit Holly in prison as often as we thought we should. It was usually about once a week. You don't want to overdo these things, as he needed his own space as well, but he was always glad to see us. We were never ashamed to say he was our brother and we were his sisters.

They got to know us at the prison, and we got to know how a prison operates. After a while, visiting the prison became no more dramatic than visiting the supermarket. The first time we went I was petrified out of my skin.

Poor Holly! He was always my favourite. He was the same Holly I suppose, but I watched him slowly change. He got a couple of tattoos. Not that I've got anything against that, there's nothing wrong with tattoos, but these were prison ones. They weren't... how shall I say?... they weren't... nice?

And then he seemed a lot sourer in disposition.

It's funny how you think you know someone, and then they go and do a murder. Then you think, well, that's a side of their character I didn't know about. Then you keep visiting them, and one day you get a phone call and you hear he's hanged himself in the cell. That Holly was found hanging dead in his prison cell. All that people say is how could he have done that? They don't let them do that in prison. They take away everything, like shoelaces and sheets, so they can't do it. They seem to forget that the person who hanged himself lonely in the prison cell might be someone's loved one.

So I have a little weep sometimes while I'm doing the ironing, and I think "Gosh". I don't know why I say "Gosh". There's no context. It's just that, I, Maisie Yvonne Heape, often iron standing in front of a great curtain of incomprehensibility that blocks me from an infinite knowing. I find I end up ironing JJ's shirt three times while I try fruitlessly to ponder the imponderable. Saying "Gosh" sums it up really, don't you think?

Then they had the funeral (yet another in these pages) and what a misery it was. If you want a small funeral, do a murder.

There was Peggy, Cob, Viv and myself. Apart from that there were seven other people, and the prison chaplain. He started by saying a prayer, and then he gave a little speech (which was nice enough). At the end of it, I realized that all was over, so I stood and said, "Excuse me, sir. I wonder if I might say a few words?"

So I said to Peggy, Cob, Viv, the prison chaplain and the seven others who were there:

"Dear Holly was our brother. We didn't agree with what he did, but we loved him. We're going to miss him. There's so much more to a person than their one and violent deed. Those of you here were his seven faithful and true friends who stuck with him to the end. I want to thank you for letting him keep his dignity as a human being, while others gasped and tut-tutted at his shame."

I thought my speech was lovely, and so did Peggy, Cob and Viv. But did we have a laugh afterwards! Because Peggy said that the prison guard "to help put butts on seats" had mustered the "seven faithful and true friends" up.

"It was worth saying anyway," said Cob.

57

Holly was buried in the family cemetery plot next to Mattie, Tom, Kate, Nick and the two Unnamed Males. There's getting quite a collection down there, and there was still no headstone; so don't expect a *Wuthering Heights* ending to this novel, with the all-pervading moss and damp creeping over the tombstones while they have an unquiet slumber.

I'd like to be buried there when I go. So I asked Peggy if there was enough room for me.

"Of course," she said. "You can take my space. I'm going to be cremated."

"Are you?" I said, like I was disappointed that we weren't all going to be buried in the same spot to spend eternity at the one perpetual party.

We laughed! "The ashes will be there," said Peggy.

"That'll fertilize the wildflowers," said Cob.

You can be stung only so often at a picnic before you lose the spring in your step. Life had become a bit like that. Peggy and I still got on so well. We gardened and fishponded and barbequed and poulticed each spring, summer and fall. We even got a billy goat, which we called Hajji Baba. We wove our way through winter. Neither liked winter much. Life was fun, but without the innocence of the earlier days. It's more carefree not to be wise.

Frequently, I'd look after JJ and Anne. Viv was often ill, or just feeling a bit off-colour. She was no hypochondriac. She simply wasn't well. She was wonderfully patient.

I called her 'My Sweet Thel' after the strange William Blake poem. In the poem, Thel is too afraid to come into mortal life because birth is the beginning of a journey towards death.

My four mornings at the florist shop grew into five. My old green car had putt-putted off its mortal coil. I use one of Nick's now-old three cars. No one could ever find the titles, so I drive 'tax free' and in constant fear of the traffic department.

After Holly, life settled down into its everyday rhythm for several years. A little measuring out our life in coffee spoons. A little J. Alfred Prufrock. A little ordinariness before the next great melodramatic scene in the life of Yvonne Heape.

Peggy died.

She died suddenly. No warning. She was fifty-two. That was three years ago. It was a stroke. She was in the garden.

I'm not going to tell you any more just yet because I can't face it.

I miss her.

58

Gosh it's Saturday today, and I'm just back from taking JJ and Anne to the park in town. JJ has his skateboard, and Anne has her little scooter. There's more 'speed' for them at the park with the paved path than there is here on our stony driveway.

Of course, they whiz around the park while I stop and smell the flowers. Sometimes, I must admit, I even illegally take the odd seed head or cutting for propagation.

The children call me Auntie Codger. I've told them dozens of times to drop the auntie, and they're slowly getting there.

Speaking of names, I'm thinking of changing my name to Trippett. It's no big thing I suppose, except at the school they keep calling me Mrs Trippett. I keep saying I'm Ms Yvonne Heape. The school thinks I'm their mother, and I've told them a million times that I'm their guardian and aunt. It makes no difference. The next visit to school and I'm Mrs Trippett again.

They're both doing well, and I think, as I help them with their books in the evenings, that I'm probably learning more than they are. I challenge any child in the universe to a quiz on dinosaurs.

You know, if I did change my name officially, I think I'd drop the Maisie Yvonne and be Mattie Trippett. In fact I've thought seriously, and I am serious about it, that I would change my name to Mattie Trythall Trippett. It's not that I want to be her. It's just that I feel Mattie might have liked that. I would.

Tonight we're having a little barbeque. We usually do that anyway. JJ, who's nine, is an expert on the barbeque. I keep saying, "You're a typical man. When it comes to a barbeque you think you own the world." Inside the house, he pretends he doesn't know where the sink is to do the dishes. Or you start the dishes and he has to go to the toilet. Isn't that universal?

Having them here with me has been a real blessing. And it's been a blessing for them too, of course; otherwise they'd be at an orphanage or wards of the state. I have to be careful though that I don't regard them as just props in my life. They have distracted me, and busied me, and propped me up, you can't deny it. I don't know what I would have done if they were not here with me. They've given me a meaning and a reason. But I have to let them be themselves. I keep worrying about my age. I've only got to live to sixty-seven and they'll be all right. Just another ten years!

And then of course at the park today, Anne fell off her scooter and grazed her knee. You'd think she was a limbless Gulf War veteran. She has this knack of not complaining but nonetheless making JJ and me constantly aware that she's in an all-consuming agony.

Shhh! I'm watching! JJ's just come onto the patio and he's lighting the barbeque. He's so like Cob. Gosh.

59

A while back, it seems like yesterday, Vivienne took a turn for the worse. With her heart.

I don't understand the medical niceties, or even the terms. She didn't die. They operated. Something somewhere went wrong; either before, during or after the operation. She lost oxygen to the brain. And to put it very UN-nicely, she's a vegetable. No one is to blame.

I took the children at some stage to see her, having explained to them first. They said they would want to visit. It's very difficult to know at times what's the best thing to do.

She didn't recognize the children of course. She doesn't recognize anything. She lays breathing in a labyrinth of tubes. She's a shadow in a snake pit.

The children didn't recognize her either. Which may have been a blessing. I told them that if ever they wanted to see her at the hospital, I'd take them. But I never pushed it. They said, bless their hearts! that they would visit their mother once a month.

"Is that enough, Auntie Codger?"

I said that was plenty enough. So once a month we've been going to see Viv, and the children take flowers and put them next to her bed like they hope it's magic and the flowers will bring her back to them.

I suppose it affects them deeply, of course it does, but children seem to bounce back. There was a time, after all, when I could actually put my foot in my mouth. I may

have been too young for it to be a memory, but I dare say it was true. These days I have trouble bending over far enough to put on my bright and battering sandal. But children are so flexible, not just physically. Me? Goodness! Can we ever bounce back?

Poor Vivienne. A wild windblown little blue cornflower, I think I said. Intelligent. Educated. An unassuming ichthyologist. Counter of rings in flounders' ears. Assistant in a pet shop. Wife of dear Cob. Mother of two.

She never complained. I knew her well because I looked after her children almost every day. Hers is the bravest soul I know. As I said, I called her 'My Sweet Thel' after the Blake poem. I still do. Without being too flippant, as you know I had the devil of a time getting her to come into existence, and now I'm having the devil of a time helping her out of it.

*Ah! Thel is like a wat'ry bow, and like a parting cloud,
Like a reflection in a glass, like shadows in the water,
Like dreams of infants, like a smile upon an infant's face,
Like the dove's voice, like transient day, like music in the air.*

She's still here, but she's gone. This time, I'm sorry, but she's never coming back.

60

I'm nearly through telling you everything now. Everything, that is, in the last seven years. Everything of significance. I'm not quite done though.

I think you already know that. At least I've tried to let you know without having to tell you. I've tried to warn you.

It happened several months before Viv's hospitalization. Dear Cob. It's too terrible for the stage. Too much. Too many deaths. Too like *Hamlet*. But there's no hero at the end to pick them up. There's no heir apparent to make a final speech.

I'm tired of death. I'm tired of funerals. Perhaps that's why Silvana Arcadia preferred Scrabble to death. I think not. But still...

It was an ordinary workday, towards the end of July. Cob phoned me to ask if I could help him with his lawn mowing business, as he was backed up with work. It was a wet summer, and the grass grew lush, so it made it almost impossible for Cob to keep up with the demands of his clients. Unfortunately, I was unable to help because I'd already promised Viv I'd give her a hand in the afternoon, and in the morning I was going to be at the florist shop.

On that day Cob was clearing a large property overgrown with long grass and brambles,

*green and carefree, famous among the barns
About the happy yard and singing as the farm was home*

He must have found an old raspberry patch growing there. He stood on a wasps' nest, yellow jackets I believe, and they swarmed. Apparently he'd rolled in the grass to

try to get rid of them, as a great number of wasps were found squashed beneath his shirt. Nearby they found his sunhat filled with freshly picked wild raspberries. Some people are allergic to stings but, as far as anyone knows, Cob wasn't. The coroner thought Cob might have been lying paralyzed for about an hour before he died. He was still crawling with wasps.

Sometime before Cob's death, he'd asked me, "If anything happens to Viv and me, would you take care of the children?"

I said, "Yes, but it won't happen." But it did. Of course, it did. Of course, and of course Cob never wrote down that I should care for the children. That could be another chapter looming, but I'll avoid it. Viv's parents are "just trying to do what's best for the children." I don't like children used as the rope in a tug-of-war, so I let them go. Yes, that's right. That's what I said.

Now this is very hard for me to say. It's not quite the full truth. I'm not particularly keen to tell the whole story. Cob's death was a tad more awful than that, at least from my point of view. I never told Viv or anyone. I could have helped him on that day. I hadn't promised Viv at all that I'd give her a hand, and the florist shop didn't need me either. It's the only time in my life I can remember being untruthful. That's all it was: a fiction. Cob would still be alive if I hadn't told a lie. It's frightening for me. The truth is, I was making Cob and Viv a little pottle of ginger conserve for Christmas (which was miles down the track and I didn't have to be ready so soon), and it's a very old recipe that I'd found in a French book once given me by Lorraine Jolie of Notre-Dame-des-Pins. It requires the ginger to be simmered for twenty-three hours. That might sound ridiculous, but it's both true and delicious, and I'd already been up all night and done sixteen hours

of simmering when Cob phoned. And I think (I think I'm going to cry) if only I hadn't been so lazy, and I was thinking of the astronomical electric bill for running the stove for so long if I had to start the recipe all over again.

Sometimes, as right this very minute, I get filled with self-pity and become a big blobby mess, and sometimes if I'm working on my novel the ink gets all washed out. This is the second time I've written down this chapter because the first time half the page ran away in a wash of blue tears. I write longhand, and with an old-fashioned fountain pen. I've never learnt to type. Everyone used to say that I should learn to type, and now there's no one left to pester me about it.

Now you know. In a few brief chapters, as at the beginning, I am no longer related to any Trippett in the world.

*How like a winter hath my absence been
 From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!
 What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!
 And yet this time removed was summer's time,
 The teeming autumn big with rich increase,
 Bearing the wanton burden of the prime,
 Like widowed wombs after their lords' decease:
 Yet this abundant issue seemed to me
 But hope of orphans, and unfathered fruit,
 For summer and his pleasures wait on thee,
 And thou away the very birds are mute.
 Or if they sing, 'tis with so dull a cheer,
 That leaves look pale, dreading the winter's near.*

Part XIII

Chapter 1

What does a novelist do when she discovers she has written all the characters out of her book? You have to laugh about it, but there's no one left to laugh about it with.

Here in these fragments of a passing shower, I, Yvonne, in my first, and some say "scrambled", novel, seem to have stymied any further progress. The narrator can't be killed off, so I'm still here!

It's like *Wuthering Heights*, in which there are really only the narrators Nelly Dean and Mr Lockwood left at the end. Do you know what I mean? At least Emily Brontë had another generation coming on. Mine have all abandoned me. Goodness! I should have taken the advice of Rufus and planned it better.

Yet, it is life. My life perhaps. Life heightened into art some might argue! but nonetheless... gosh! I'm sorry, Mr Lockwood! my life is not as ordered and heightened as you might desire. I too would have wished my loved ones to wait. But they didn't.

Once or twice I've chatted about the exhilaration that goes with playing God. I don't quite mean "playing God", although I do really. What I mean is, how wonderful it is to create or change a world! To give shape to chaos! To select the paint, the colour, the canvas, the subject! To choose a key for the music! To write a never-before-heard melody! To orchestrate! To make ducks talk! God said "Let there be light!" and there

was light. I discovered that to write a novel (God or not) is to take part in the ever-churning creative rumble of the universe. I too have said “Let there be” and there is!

Heck!

Anyway, I hired a lawyer to try to keep the children. It cost the earth. I sold the florist shop to do it. In the end, I thought I was being selfish. Whatever is best for them. Their family name, I believe, has been changed to Unsworth.

There’s no characters left. No players remain to strut the stage. Even now, I, Maisie Yvonne Heape, am about to change my name. No one! No one left! Oh what a literary feat!

I am Mattie Trythall Trippett. A different set of syllables. A new word combination. Perhaps a novel literary concoction. How do you do?

61

Before I go on, I received a beautiful letter when Peggy passed away from Monsieur Paul-Eugène Jolie of Notre-Dame-des-Pins in Québec. Lorraine, his wife, had also died suddenly around the same time. It is so bleakly poignant to think that our lives first converged in such a happy snowstorm circumstance and touched again in time of bereavement.

It sounds frightfully selfish, and it is, but it was a solace to know that I was not the only one with a broken heart.

How strange it is that events in our lives have no significance at the time of occurrence and somehow they acquire an intensity of meaning that could not possibly be foreseen. When Peggy and I went to Québec it was for fun. That was all. It was a journey of no consequence. But isn't it odd how it became for me a significant and endearing consolation when I received Paul-Eugène's letter?

That is my life: an inconsequential, inexpedient expedition. Yet when I look back I see a voyage of marvellous contingency. I don't regret a moment of it. If I had my life all over would I choose any of it? Hardly an iota! How enriching is the apparent pennilessness of life! Memory casts meaning upon my triviality.

I often sit on the patio in the evenings, and I ponder the journey I've made. It's extraordinary how things happen. Almost like a Providence (if you believe such things). I'd be in the Laundromat on the outskirts of Toronto until the day I died, if dissatisfaction hadn't prompted me to begin this adventure. What I'm going to say now might sound like

it's out of a paperback romance, but if I had not found and loved the Trippett family, then I would never have cried for them. And if I hadn't cried, I wouldn't be who I am. I'm so grateful, and I miss them all. I'm quite different because of them. On my own, I could never have turned my life into such a rollicking, and sometimes sadly winsome, dance. I know I'm slightly plump, and you might laugh at my dancing. But the Trippetts have given me an appetite and a daring to pirouette my way into tomorrow.

Last week I was going through some old photographs. There was one of Peggy standing in the garden. It wasn't so much the picture of Peggy that took my attention but the fact she was holding an old garden trowel. I remember that trowel. We'd both used it a thousand times. One day it broke. We spent an entire Saturday afternoon visiting every hardware store in the vicinity selecting another trowel. As if it mattered. Somehow it did. I don't know what happened to the old trowel. I suppose we threw it away, but the photo of it flooded me with melancholic yearning.

As you can tell, I've been ironing before the great curtain of incomprehensibility again. No doubt you're pleased there's so little ironing to do these days.

62

The child custody battle was most unpleasant. Apart from losing the children of course. I had no way of proving definitively that I was a Trippett by birth, and hence a genuine aunt. Vivienne's parents were difficult. I don't know where My Sweet Thel got her loveliness. They waited until Cob's death before announcing that they never approved of the marriage in the first place. They could have left it unsaid. It was unnecessary.

I had presumed the children would come to see me occasionally. It hasn't turned out that way. Things never turn out the way one hopes. I take flowers to Viv on behalf of the children, wherever they are. Flowers for a rainbow.

As I said, I've sold the florist shop, but I still work there for a wage. In some ways that's nice, as there's no longer the worry of having to balance the shop's books. So I'm making enough to live on, and that's fine. Peggy left me everything in her will, but as you know, we'd both had a lifetime of shopping behind us. And there were debts.

Peggy's ashes are in an urn on an old apple crate in the corner of the patio, and sometimes I find myself talking to them. I'm going to scatter them on the family plot, but it's not as if I haven't got around to it. I can't quite bring myself to do it yet. It's been three years, for goodness sake.

Almost inevitably (I know you'd think I'd do this) I went to have a headstone made, and then when I was planning the lettering I thought, it won't bring them back. The family are buried far at the bottom of the graveyard, so I went to see the cemetery

man and I asked if I could scatter a packet of wildflower seeds there. The man was lovely. He said, as far as he was concerned the less he had to mow the better. And do you know what? You wouldn't believe it. He helped me clear the grass. I've bought the biggest packet of wildflower seeds you can imagine and I'm going down tomorrow to throw them about. Yes, of course I'll be taking Peggy's ashes. I have to do that.

I don't like being on my own. There are all sorts of funny things to get used to. I still find myself sometimes pouring two cups of tea. And then there's little ironing to be done, and no one to cook for. I planted one tomato and three beans, which is enough for me. It takes me about one minute a week to weed them. Then there are the hens. What on earth am I meant to do with a dozen eggs a day? That's eighty-four eggs a week! I pickled some. I have rows and rows of pickled eggs. I baked a couple of cakes but haven't eaten a crumb. I fed the cakes to the hens. Oh! the vicious circle of life.

I read a lot of course, as you know. But it's not the same when you can't bore someone silly by telling them about Edmund Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac*. I used to tell Peggy everything.

Today I saw the most unusual thing. It was a great white shelf fungus growing high in the branches of a tree. I'd never seen one as big as that before. I burst into tears quite out of the blue. I know that's a little daft, but I saw, deep down, for the first time, that I had no one left in the world to show the fungus to. Who ever thought fungus could have such an effect!

I thought that this little book of people's lives would be of interest to Mattie and Tom's children, and grandchildren when they're older. Oh well.

63

I'd normally not go in so early on a Wednesday morning. To the florist shop. But there'd been so many deaths, and there were so many weddings coming up. It was as if Fate, desperate for yet another war, had decided nonetheless to cram everything into the one week.

So I went to the florist shop early. I left Peggy standing with her mug of coffee in the garden.

She didn't turn up for work, and I thought, "Oh well." That's not a very profound thought I know, but it's a way of not having to worry. It's a phrase that doesn't carry any meaning; so to say "Oh well" is an act of resignation that stops my imagination from concocting all sorts of disastrous events that aren't actually occurring.

Except, this time they were.

I went home at lunchtime. I thought I could go back in the afternoon if needed. To the florist shop. If Peggy was busy or something.

I couldn't find Peggy anywhere. Her car hadn't gone but sometimes she caught the bus. So I phoned the florist shop. Our paths hadn't crossed. At least, she wasn't there. After a while I started saying "Oh well" again.

Then I saw her. She was lying in the garden behind the row of brussel sprouts. Her eyes were open. She was still breathing. I called an ambulance.

I came straight outside again. I couldn't lift her. She was tall although not big, but she was too heavy for me. So I tipped the wheelbarrow on its side and I rolled her into that. That's how she got back into the house.

I don't want to tell you this, because it will sound stupid, farcical, ridiculous. You might say, "Don't tell me, Yvonne's lost the plot again". But it's true.

Peggy died in the wheelbarrow.

That's how I lost my dear-best sister-friend. I couldn't bring myself to tell you earlier because... I couldn't bring myself to tell you. Also, I was ashamed about the wheelbarrow. I've never revealed that to anyone before. I suppose I could have made a story up, and then we'd all be happy.

Peggy would have enjoyed the mundane originality of such a death. How we would laugh!

64

I've mislaid my reading glasses so I hope you can read my writing.

Today I went to the cemetery. I scattered Peggy's ashes. I scattered the wildflower seeds. I thought, perhaps I should hoe them in a bit.

Then I thought, well, it's a bit like hoeing in Peggy. I didn't know what to do, so I laughed. Such a grave quandary!

"Blow it!" I thought. "What would Peggy care?" So they all got a good hoeing. The whole jolly lot.

I won't go into my thoughts and feelings. To be honest, I didn't have many. I didn't have a cry. I went there completely objectively, like I was going shopping for groceries.

I'm sitting here on the patio on this lovely summer's evening. There could be a passing shower, but I doubt. The weather's been a little out of kilter. The gigantic cataract is playing. I'm having a cup of tea. I believe it's that same old Toronto tea cosy. (Goodness! I forgot to bring it out!) I've given up wine. It's too expensive.

I've made a decision. It's not been easy, but I think it's for the best. I'm selling the house. I'm moving to Notre-Dame-des-Pins. I know I haven't told you much about it. I find I can't tell you everything at once. Paul-Eugène says I'll have to learn to milk a cow. Would you believe!

Lots of love

Mattie

See me. Prof. Cartwright