

The Well has won me back. Tonight will be my first night under house arrest. First of how many? I scarcely dared hope they would allow me to return, yet when it came to the last night in the unit, I clung to the comfort blanket of my sleeping pills and section order, desperate to stay. Security. National security. Secure accommodation. An insecure conviction. It may keep me in, but all the security in the world will not keep the ghosts out; if I am home, they will be also.

In between the nightmares I have been daydreaming my way through three months of enforced idleness: picturing myself escorted from a prison van into the house; running my fingers through the dust on the half-moon table we were given for a wedding present; picking up the photo of the three of us, taken the first day we ever saw the place, me crumbling the damp earth between my fingers and laughing. I thought I might throw open the bedroom windows, listen to the insistent buzzard, stare out over the cracked hills and wonder how it came to this. I thought I would turn on the taps and watch the water stream down the drain, like liquid silver, lost. Things I knew I would not do: pray, write, work the land.

I do not follow that script. In the end, something rather bustling and pragmatic takes over. Maybe it is nerves. I am conscious from

the moment that we pull out of the gates that my mouth is dry and I am picking at the sides of my fingernails as I used to when I was a child. I can't see of course; the windows are blacked out. I wonder if there is a sack under my bench seat, ready to pull over my greying hair and gaunt eyes, just as you see with rapists and paedophiles, when the absence of a face makes them more, not less terrifying, only the hands that strangled the child or the legs that ran down the alley visible to the waiting press.

Are these the palms of a saint or a sinner? I scratch my hands over and over again, hoping they will wake up and tell me.

Even the ruling that I am to be sent back is to be kept *sub judice*, as they say. I like that phrase. Underneath the justice. If you can only limbo long enough, then the law is upheld and everyone is happy.

'If we're prepared to act within the Rapid Processing Regulations, they'll reach a settlement. All we have to do is withdraw our intent to sue the government for illegal occupation, and then they'll let you serve out your sentence under house arrest. Deal done.' That's what my lawyer told me. I asked him what was in it for the state and he talked about overflowing prisons and adverse publicity, drought and scientific research. I interrupted him, asked what was in it for me. It sounded so simple, his answer.

'You get to go home to The Well,' he said.

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The first part of the journey from the women's wing seems slow and takes place against a soundtrack of sirens. Petrol rationing has solved the capital's traffic problems, but no one seems to have told the traffic lights. Then the feel of the journey changes to the relentless flat, forward impetus of the motorway heading north. I know that route so well and once we exchange the straight line for the swerves and lurches which take you over the hills and down into the valley, my breathing slows and I feel the saliva run again against

my sandpaper tongue. Fifteen minutes for the long slow climb past Little Lennisford church; twenty-five minutes before meeting the stretch of flat, straight road beside the poles of the hop fields (the last chance to overtake, as we used to say); forty minutes and the sharp right-hand turn past Martin's farm, grinding up through the hairpin bends, through the gears, through the clouds as often as not, to the brow of the hill, to the top of the world. Then at last, the swing to the left down the quarter mile of unfenced, rough track which leads through my fields to The Well.

'Nearly there now.'

The guard's words are unnecessary.

The van is going too fast for the potholes. Surprising they haven't done anything about them, but then again, we never got round to it either. It takes the wearing down of water to grind holes in stone and The Well wore her puddles like a badge of honour. We are stopping. The grille is pulled back.

'We'll just be a couple of minutes while we check everything. You OK back there?'

It is kind of them to ask, but not clear to me how I am meant to answer. That I am totally at ease with being brought back to my own notorious paradise in a prison van?

'I'm fine. Thank you.'

I sit very still. Part of me doesn't trust the ruling even now. Bizarre ideas from old war films tug at the rubber mat under my manacled feet and I see myself taken from the van, led to my dear oak tree and shot there, falling in a crumpled heap among last year's desiccated acorns and the sheep shit. The soldiers are getting out now, slamming the doors behind them.

'It's unbelievable, isn't it?' That is the woman with the Birmingham accent. 'It's just like they said, just like on the webpage.'

'What is?' The driver. I could tell from his choice of music on the journey that he had no insight.

'This is. It's like going back three years. Green fields. When did you last see grass like that?'

So, my fields are still green.

New voices. Greetings. Slightly formal. Then a younger man talking.

‘You should talk to the locals. They say it’s true what it said in the papers. When she was here, it rained; when they arrested her, it stopped.’

‘Where did it happen then?’ asks the driver.

‘Down in the woods.’

‘I’m with those who think the old bag’s a witch not a saviour.’

‘Quite a sexy old witch, all the same.’

They must be moving towards the house because I can’t catch the rest of their conversation. The knowledge of the space outside is somehow suffocating me inside and I feel nauseous. Not now, I think. No more of these visions, no more drownings. Sweat breaks out on my forehead; I try to raise my hand to wipe it away, forgetting the weight of the handcuffs. I too am being pulled under the surface. I am not mad. I put my head down between my knees to stop myself fainting and the darkness of the van slowly steadies itself, the thick water recedes and I become myself again, just as the footsteps grow louder on the gravel and the back doors of the van are opened.

‘Home at last!’ she says. ‘Out you get!’

There is no blinding flash of sunlight, rather the washed-out blue of an early April afternoon merges with the bleak interior of the van in the way that paints on a palette mix in water and reach a grey compromise. I try with some difficulty to get out, stooping under the low roof of the van, holding my handcuffed wrists in front of me like some bizarre posture of prayer.

‘Tell you what,’ says Birmingham woman, ‘sit on the edge here and I’ll take those off you. Home sweet home! Hope someone’s done the washing up. That’s all I ever want when I get back in the evening.’ She punches various codes into the keypads attached to my limbs.

The driver has joined us now. ‘Bet you don’t get your lily-white hands all damp and dirty in the sink.’

‘Tell you something, have to now. The dishwasher used to cost a fortune on the water meter. Still, every cloud has a silver lining, as they say, washing up’s about the nearest I get to a bath nowadays.’ She fiddles with my unattractive ankle bracelet. ‘This one stays on, it’s what we call the home tag.’

I am sitting on the edge of the back of the van, childlike, my legs not quite touching the ground, and when I am free, I feel each of my wrists in turn and then stand uncertainly and take a few steps away from the guards. In front of me, the stone front of the house stands even and steady; it is my spirit level. I turn, and then I am facing my fields which rise up and fall away before me, their hedges like ley lines, feeling the contours, the forests like velvet folded into the valleys. A hand takes my elbow. I shake it off, but follow the guard to the front door all the same. We don’t use this door, I am about to say. We use the back door, kicked off our mud-clodded boots on the tiled floor there, once; hung the fishing rods on the hooks above the raincoats there, once. We. Me and Mark. Me and my ex. Front door. Back door. River. Ex. Words.

‘This is as far as it goes for us,’ says the driver. ‘Job done. I expect your new friends will introduce themselves once we’ve signed everything,’ and he waves towards three armed young men in uniform who have appeared at the fence between the house and the orchard and are standing with their backs to us, pointing towards Wales. That was one of the reasons they agreed to house arrest, apparently, the fact that there were government soldiers here already, keeping watch over their crops by night.

‘It must be good to be home,’ comments the guard and I nod because I am trying hard to be human, just as she is. She waits until her companion strolls over to the soldiers before continuing in a quieter voice, ‘I’ve never seen anything so beautiful. You are a special woman for it to have happened like this.’

I mutter something like maybe or I don’t know. I have long ago ceased to trust people who seem to worship me.

She says, 'I'm sorry about the van and the handcuffs and all that. About the whole thing. None of it should ever have happened. I hope you'll be happy now you're back and . . .'

'And?'

'And I hope it rains again, here, I really do and . . .'

'And?'

'And, if you still pray, pray for me.'

She tries to grasp my hand. I see she is crying. The tears and the prayers at The Well have been out of balance; there will rightly be more crying than praying from now on. I pull away and for a brief moment she is left staring at her own empty palms, then she turns abruptly and strides back to the van. She gets in, slams the door, leans over and blasts the horn. At the fence, the driver punches something into his phone and half-heartedly salutes the soldiers. Just as he is about to get back into the van, he bends down as if he has dropped something and scoops up a handful of earth to examine like a gardener. He looks up, sees the soldiers watching him and chucks it into the hedge, laughing out loud, then dusts his hands down on his khaki trousers, climbs in and starts the engine. The prison van beeps as he reverses towards the oak tree and he yells out of the window. 'Don't worry, lads! We'll pray for you on your frontline duties!'

The guard sits in the passenger seat, staring straight ahead at the track which will take her away. The driver turns up the music and they are gone and then there is nothing except silence, three soldiers and me. They kick the fence with their heavy boots, one lights a cigarette and suddenly I think of a picture of Russia I saw once, taken during the Second World War: young men silhouetted against a barren landscape, staring at the horizon, waiting for relief. We face a different onslaught. I stand, halfway in and halfway out of the house, my legs shaking with exhaustion.

'Shall I go in?' I call and immediately regret my weakness. 'I mean, are there any other formalities to be completed?'

All three turn, as if mildly surprised that I can speak. A sudden

officialousness seems to come over the short one, as it does for all people newly appointed to small amounts of power. He marches over; the other two hang back slightly.

‘There are a number of regulations and procedures we need to go through with you. I therefore suggest that we meet . . . er . . .’ He has a tight voice.

‘Around the kitchen table?’ I suggest.

‘That would be satisfactory, yes – there, in one hour.’

‘You may have to knock and remind me.’

‘We don’t need to knock,’ he replies.

The thinner of the other two tries to make some joke about drinks at six. I don’t quite catch it, but try to smile all the same. *Pour encourager les autres.*

What do I do now? I try to summon old habits. Like a frightened bride, I force myself over the threshold and then kick off my shoes and go into the kitchen. It is a sparse version of its former self, being robbed of its clutter and wiped down. I run the cold tap just to make sure and then fill the kettle. While it is boiling, I take down my favourite mug and trace the delicate painting of the grayling, trout and perch which swim the porcelain river and wind themselves around the handle, wipe the dust from the rim with the tip of my finger. Instinctively, I go to the fridge, which is working normally. There has been no shortage of wind in the last few years. For us, if our turbine is working, the pump is working and if the pump is working, we will have water from The Well. Water, but no milk. I loathe the powder substitute, it tastes of the city, but the drought has forced a lot of substitution one way or another: no rain, no grass, no grass, no cows, no cows, no milk. We were going to have a cow in Year Three of the dream, but we never got that far.

Most of what Mother Hubbard had in her cupboard is gone, but there is a half-empty box of teabags on the counter, so I use one of those. Sitting at the empty kitchen table, I trace the grain of the wood. Such silence. I shiver; the Rayburn is not lit. That would help, I think, I could warm the place up a bit, but the matches have

deserted their home in the top left-hand drawer of the dresser and I don't know where they have gone. Easily defeated, I wander into the sitting room where the curtains are drawn, my hand hesitates at the window, but even tweaking them opens the way for a javelin of daylight and I leave them closed, for the time being. Moving to the stairs, I put one foot on the bottom step, but make the mistake of looking up. That is too high a mountain to climb now.

The sofa feels damp. Yesterday's newspaper lies on the table, with the ring of a coffee mug over the face of a topless model. 'Dress for drought!' A pale, hollow-cheeked woman in the photo on the opposite page reminds me of Angie, although my daughter would not thank me for the comparison. Flicking through the pages, it is as though I am in a waiting room, regretting not having brought a friend with me to soften the blow.

My name is called, but I am slow to respond. For a few moments, I can't remember who they are, these men I can see sprawling against the sink and spilling all over the kitchen as I sit obediently, rigid, feeling the wood of the kitchen chair hard against my fatless thighs. Have these men come because of the investigation? No, that was a long time ago and that was the police, not these oversized boy soldiers.

A ringless hand, cuffed in khaki, places a brown file with my name on it in front of me, then opens a laptop and hammers in a password. A voice says the purpose of the meeting is to remind me of my legal status, the reasons for that status, the nature of that status and my rights whilst subject to that status.

Ruth Ardingly is subject to house arrest under the terms of the Drought Emergency Regulations Act, section 3, restriction and detention of persons known to, or suspected of, or deemed likely to act in a way liable to: (i) Disrupt, interfere with or in any way seek to manipulate the supply of essential goods or services, in particular any service relating to the provision of water for drinking, irrigation, manufacturing processes or

commerce not covered by exemption clauses outlined in the Drought Emergency Regulations Act, section 4.

I find this funny, being the only subject in Her Majesty's kingdom who appears to have unlimited access to water and who has no need to siphon it off for my own purposes. The judge and jury in front of me don't seem to have a sense of humour. What is less amusing is that the period of detention is described as 'indefinite but subject to judicial review at periodic intervals' and my questions about what that means in practice are unanswered.

Ruth Ardingly has also been subject to the following Finding of Fact judgments, as used under the Emergency Drought Protection Order Regulations for the Rapid Processing of Justice:

- (i) that Ruth Ardingly started a series of fires with intent to cause grievous bodily harm or death;
- (ii) that Ruth Ardingly was derelict in her duty towards a minor, resulting in death.

I put my hands over my ears. I will not listen to that. I will not have that said.

The small man drones on.

Under the civil jurisdiction of the Emergency Drought Protection Orders, it is confirmed that the property known as The Well shall remain the principal domiciliary residence for Ruth Ardingly, but that under the terms of the Occupation Order 70/651, Ruth Ardingly agrees for the said property to be temporarily used for the purposes of research and development, including, but not limited to: soil sampling; the planting, management and harvesting of crops; the drilling and sampling of, but not extraction of, bedrock water

as defined under the Extraction for Use Act (amended); the collection, sampling and testing (but no distribution of) rainwater run-off.

Despite the small print of my Faustian pact, they don't own The Well – I won that much. It is still mine; underneath the wire and the helicopters and the men in brown, The Well is still mine. Half mine. It is not clear to me what has happened to Mark's share.

'That's the legal status. Have you got any questions?' he asks.

Sinking a little, I shrug. He hands over the file to the fat, anonymous man who is apparently going to deal with the 'nitty-gritty' of house imprisonment. He reads haltingly, finding it hard to make sense of the interminable regulations. It is as if I am listening to a foreign language, but the broad message is clear. They are my guards. This is my home. Words slide across the paperwork and set off randomly around the room, sliding down the sink, fluttering up the cold chimney, trying to crawl their way out like wasps from a jam jar. The photo we took of Heligan Gardens in the spring and hung to the side of the kitchen window is tilted and this makes it look as if the lake is flowing over the banks and about to trickle down the cream walls and onto the vegetable rack, empty except for the brittle brown flakes of the outer layer of an onion.

Curfew

Bread

Electronic

Rights

Request

Exercise

A sort of Kim's Game, by which a large number of disparate things are being laid out before me and named in expectation that when they take the tray away, I will remember them.

‘No need to worry about all of this tonight.’ That is the first time the thin one with glasses has spoken since we sat down. He is also the only one who has looked me in the eye.

‘I won’t,’ I reply.

‘Goodnight then,’ he says, for apparently it is bedtime.

‘Goodnight,’ I reply.

I stare after them. ‘I’m sorry, where did you say you were sleeping?’ I ask.

The small one stops at the door. ‘We didn’t,’ he says and he and Mr Anonymous leave.

The thinner, short-sighted one lingers for a couple of seconds. ‘We’re in the barn,’ he says. ‘Not far away.’ He is just a boy. I shall call him Boy.

Little did I know when we ploughed our time and money into renovating the barn that we were building a barracks for my own guards. They’re not the first to move in there and try to control me; they are following in Mark’s footsteps and his footsteps went out of the gate and straight on till morning and I haven’t seen him since. I doubt the guards will forget me so easily.

These guards of mine, what will they do all day? What do they eat? What do I eat? Now their commands have receded, questions appear in their place: thousands of questions about blankets and the internet and food and telephones and children and tomato plants and sheep and baths and books and cutting the grass and, oh my God, everything. I am a toddler again. I want to run after them and hold onto their legs and ask them why, when, how, who. I am in my own house, but I have no idea how I am going to live.

Bedtime. It seems I am going to have to force myself to go upstairs. My fingers remember where the light switches are, but I prefer the dark. I find my way to my bed and, still fully dressed, slide stiffly between the sheets and the duvet which do not smell of prison, but do not smell of home either. Even though it is cold, I leave the shutters open just so I can see the moon over Montford Forest. I will lie here and ask The Well what it thinks of the day

just gone and we will reach our conclusions. I will count the sheep I have lost as a way of avoiding sleep, because sleep avoids me. I will compose letters to the ones who are no longer here, because they are no longer here. They no longer hear. I like that pun. I will allow myself the pleasure of the occasional pun. Mark, for instance. I say his name very loudly to confirm his absence. Mark my words. Marking time. And despite the silence, despite the fact that only a wall separates me from the fathomless emptiness of a dead child's bedroom, I am suddenly knocked sideways with happiness because I am back.

I wonder if it will rain.

Stiff in my stale clothes, I wake. I could lie here all day, all week, all year and the hairs on my skin would grow through the wool of my sweater, like the tendrils of ivy through a green knitted jumper, dropped in a wood. The sun would make its rounds, from the fairground picture above the bed, to the chest of drawers, to the blue, painted mirror and back again and I would still be here, thinking and getting thinner, until one day I would have found the answer, but by then there would be nothing left of me, just an imprint, the shell of a tall woman as brittle, straight and empty as the hollow stalks of the Queen Anne's lace that lines the drive in summer . . .

Your search has found 83 matches.

Click. 'A little piece of paradise on the banks of the Severn . . .'

Click. 'Want to get away from it all? Look no further than this 3 bed, 2 recep . . .'

Click. 'Looking for a project? Turn this barn into your castle and be lord of all . . .'

That's how it started. Mark and I in London, hunchbacked slaves

to the laptop, squabbling over control of the mouse, believing that the bricks and mortar and land just a virtual second away would eradicate the bickering and divisions which had increasingly become our coat of arms after twenty-two years of marriage.

‘It can’t be that hard to find somewhere,’ said my colleagues at school.

‘With the price you’ll get for this . . .’ said our neighbours.

Moving out of London, living off the land, that was the dream. It always had been Mark’s dream, but he had mortgaged it for me and, although he never put it this way, he was calling in the debt. He had paid out for so long and now he was bankrupt, whereas I had been investing and accumulating in people and work and ways of living that to sell out now seemed, at the very least, daunting.

Standing like a child on tiptoe at the edge of the diving board, I wanted to jump and yet was terrified of jumping; I wanted to grasp the handrail and walk back down and yet the cold concrete world at the bottom was also slippery with fear. To plunge into a new, freshwater pool, live with a different energy in a world unpolluted by hatred, to come up for air at last, like Mark I was in love with the idea of getting away from it all and starting again in the country. But if we slipped, it would be a long, long way to fall and we would be far away from anyone familiar who might throw us a lifeline. As far as Mark saw it, it was the right thing to do at the right time. I was an inarticulate advocate and found it strangely hard to voice my worries in the face of his enthusiasm, not to mention his desperation. His central thesis was convincing; he might have had a fair hearing at the tribunal, been found innocent, but he had no hope of an unprejudiced future if we stayed. He had things to get away from; I had things to stay for. And whose fault was that, I thought, when I was at my lowest, even though that was neither true nor reasonable.

Mark had further supporting arguments in his brief: there may have been a lack of rain for a while, but these cycles had a habit

of correcting themselves, didn't they? Money wasn't an issue; the sale of our semi in the suburbs covered the price of a cottage in the west with land and some to spare, and his pay-off for his unfair dismissal from the local authority plus what I had inherited from my father was going to give us enough to live on for a bit; we had savings. Angie had turned out to be the cheapest of teenagers: hers was the one problem you cannot throw money at and the NHS, Social Services or HM Young Offenders had spent more time looking after her than we did. We spoiled our grandson Lucien, of course, but as I think of that word, I regret its double-edged meaning. Anyway, the theory was we would be fine for a couple of years, if we were careful, until we knew whether we could make a go of it. It, ostensibly, being the smallholding. It, in reality, being our relationship.

We almost didn't bother to get the details of The Well. There was no video link and anything that wasn't instantly accessible online seemed like too much hassle. We wanted to be able to view heaven now, without an appointment.

'It's got to be worth a real look,' Mark said.

'Only if there are two or three to see on the same day,' I replied.

There were, but one was sold two days before and the other was taken off the market, so that left The Well. We argued about it, but went anyway. Lucien was with us. He had been staying for two or three weeks while Angie tried yet again to sort herself out. He must have been four at the time. 'He's a lucky little boy to have grandparents like you.' That's what our friends said, whenever we took him on again. I don't expect it's what they're saying now.

It was an unnaturally hot autumn day, a sort of savage last stand by the sun after what had been yet another dull, dry summer following yet another dull, dry winter – dry, that is, according to the statistics the weathermen had then. The various restrictions in the southeast had already been extended to the rest of the country, even by April, and the serious papers carried editorials on

the introduction of compulsory water meters, while the tabloids alternated between the threat of Armageddon and close-ups of celebs wearing very little in the sweltering heat. No one knew then where the downward trajectory of the rainfall graphs would eventually take us.

The map was magnetic. The Well was on one of those pages where the red and yellow lines of the roads skirt around the edge, and everything else is white space with lanes pencilled in: lanes which skirt the boundaries of private estates of long-dead lords of the manor; lanes which make long detours seeking out old stone bridges, following the packhorse routes, from market to market. Mark preferred the satnav, but as we got close to our destination it let him down.

‘Where the hell are we? You’ve got the map.’

‘Don’t shout at me. This was your idea, traipsing around the middle of nowhere looking for a bolthole!’

Silence.

Me. ‘Sorry. I didn’t mean that.’ I turned the map upside down and squinted. ‘I think it’s back the way we came.’

Mark attempted a three-point turn in a gateway with a ditch on either side. He wasn’t an angry person when I met him – purposeful was how other people used to describe him – but the allegations which had led to his dismissal had really got to him and his fuse was shorter, even by then. We crawled slowly back up the hill until we saw the footpath sign with just the symbol of a man with a pack on his back and a stick in his hand and no named destination.

We turned in and Mark stopped the car, took his hands off the steering wheel and held them in the air, like a priest. There was no sight of the cottage itself; it was not that, rather it was the circle of the world running in a blue rim around us which left us breathless. Far in the distance, hills upon hills shadowed each other to the north and the west until somewhere, far out of sight, they sank into the Atlantic. The closer ridges on the

other side of the valley were forested and in that heavy autumn light, the conifers were charcoal etchings, smudged against the dust gold of the recently harvested fields below them. To the east, the amber land was mainly scorched pasture, hedged and squared by centuries of farming and behind us, the bleak scree of the Crag.

‘Have we arrived yet, Granny R?’

‘Yes, Lucien, we have arrived.’

The track ahead of us was a dotted line awaiting our signature. There it is, we said to each other, as we spotted first the barn, then the mottled red brick chimneys rising up from the Victorian stone cottage, and suddenly we were children together, going on holiday and the squabbling in the back seat suddenly stops as the cry goes up from the first one to see the sea. There it is! Look at it! We’re here! We signed up the moment we stepped out of the car, but we didn’t know what for.

The estate agent was waiting for us, propped up against a bright red 4x4 and smoking.

‘Shouldn’t do that really,’ he said, squashing the cigarette under his deck shoes, ‘not with the fire risk nowadays.’

We shook hands. He seemed to me to stare a little too long at Mark, then withdraw his hand a little too quickly. I felt the familiar increase in my heartbeat; there had been times during the Mark’s hearing in London when I had been very afraid of what people might do. There had been other cases like his in the press, in other towns when the public had forgotten the concept of due process and taken things into their own hands. I looked over my shoulder, back up the drive. Maybe there is nowhere to run to, I thought.

But the estate agent had turned his attention to his car and the moment was gone. ‘You’ll need one of these,’ he joked over-loudly, stroking the bonnet, apologising for the state of it, what with the car washes closed and the hosepipe ban.

Breathing deeply to control my voice, I humoured him. ‘Think

we're more likely to get a donkey. What per cent did they say petrol had gone up this year?' I asked.

'One hundred and twenty!' He called the words as if it was a darts score.

Mark engaged in manly talk about clearance room and low ratio gears; I could see he was impatient to look around, but he was good like that, putting himself out to make other people feel at ease and his charm was dismissing whatever doubts the estate agent might have had. That was what he did with me when we first met, the morning after a party, in the last term of the last year, exams over and the future waiting somewhere beyond the overdraft and cleaning the fridge to get the deposit back. I was sleeping in an armchair, someone else's overcoat covering my bare shoulders, and when I woke up there was a tall, dark, slightly foreign-looking gentleman offering to get me a coffee. He came back and never left me again. We spent that night together, we spent the rest of term together, and we altered our plans and spent the summer together. Four months later I was five months pregnant and we were at the registry office. We went from young to old very quickly.

The slam of a door brought me back. The estate agent was getting the details out of his car, disturbing a lone, white butterfly which had settled on a late-flowering buddleia by the gate. Everything is out of season this year, I thought, and where has the time gone, I wondered, all caught up in the past, and look at us now, moving to the country as middle-aged people do. In some odd, instinctive gesture, I put my hand on my stomach. 'I love children,' I remember Mark saying when I told him I was pregnant.

Lucien climbed out of the back of the car, smelling of crumbling chocolate and hot skin. Still sleepy, he held my hand and pointed to a grey squirrel, skulking up the trunk of the great oak tree. Our eyes followed it up through the branches until we lost it amongst the gilt-edged leaves, light falling like dappled water on dry ground

at our feet. A police car or ambulance was making its way up a main road somewhere over towards Middleton.

‘You can’t always hear the road,’ said the estate agent, keen to market the dream. ‘It depends on the wind.’

‘But that must be westerly,’ I concluded, taking my evidence from both the sun and the Welsh hills.

‘Westerly? Probably,’ he conceded. ‘That’s certainly where the prevailing wind comes from. But I bet you can hear a pin drop at night.’

Screech owls, I thought, and barking foxes.

I asked where the nearest neighbour was. Oh, he was saying, miles away and can’t see another house; but in truth, I was already feeling the distance between this place and the rest of the world and wondering if I could manage that. Maybe I looked to him like someone who wanted to escape. Much later, Sister Amelia would certainly reach the same conclusion the moment she met me.

A heavy velvet curtain hung inside the front door, which the agent held to one side for us, like a stagehand. It didn’t take long to look around. There was the back passage, the kitchen and Rayburn unchanged since the 1960s, Mark’s study – well, the room that he made into his study – and the little sitting room with a wood-burning stove, the one which we had to replace after the chimney fire. From there, we went upstairs and crowded into the small bedroom and the tiny bathroom and then in here, the main bedroom with the view, this alchemy of a view. Well trained, the estate agent left us to it and Mark felt for my hand and pulled me closer, kissed me once, slowly, on the cheek and I felt him breathe in deeply, as if he could taste oxygen for the first time in a very long while.

‘Just about enough room for Angie and Lucien,’ I said to Mark as we stepped apart. We both knew my daughter well enough to know that our home would always need to be big enough for both of them, and not just physically.

'I love it,' said Mark. I hadn't heard him as enthusiastic about anything since before the tribunal. 'A place to start again,' he said.

Lucien loved it too, running up and down the creaking staircase, opening cupboards in the kitchen, peering into the fireplace. The sunlight coming through the bay window was showing up the cracks in the banisters, the stains on the carpet, the damp patches on the ceiling, but the place itself felt solid as though it could contain whatever we poured into it.

'Ready to take a look outside?'

We followed the agent up to the 'Stone outbuilding with electricity and water, currently used as a garage/barn. Scope for development'. If the old lady had owned a car, it was clear she had never put it away in there, jumbled as it was with stepladders and spades, broken sun-loungers and coal buckets without handles. No problem to upgrade it for a holiday let, we agreed; no problem to convert it into temporary accommodation for displaced family.

Along one side of the barn were neatly stacked and recently split logs.

'How long had the old lady lived here?' Mark asked.

The agent didn't have the answer to that, but he did know that since her husband died, a lot of the land was let out to a neighbouring farmer, who had also been lending a hand, with the wood, that sort of thing. 'They're a tight-knit bunch round here, but the Taylors, they'd always help you out if you were in a fix, I'm sure.'

The synonyms for tight-knit must be interesting, I thought. Introspective, xenophobic? At what point does tight-knit become hostile? The agent was explaining that the letting agreement ran out on 31 March the following year.

'Thirty acres of field and woodland. Just the right size,' Mark commented, as if there was such a thing as a right size for a piece of paradise. It sounds small, thirty acres, for the havoc it has caused. We visited the orchard, picking up apples and pears which were feeding the worms, wondering at the old fruit cages hung like discarded hairnets over strands of growth, sticks leaning at odd

angles like old-fashioned hairpins. The vegetable garden showed signs of more recent work.

‘Look at this, Mark.’ Lucien had his small hands clasped around a fat marrow which had obviously continued swelling all summer, oblivious to the death of its planter. With a huge tug, it broke off the plant and he fell backwards. ‘Can we take it home? Can we eat it?’

‘It’s not ours, Lucien,’ I said.

‘It’s a good size, considering how little rain there’s been,’ said Mark.

‘Who’s going to mind? Give it a good tug and Mummy can carry it for you,’ said the agent.

It was a familiar error, which Lucien corrected. ‘This is my granny. My mummy’s away at the moment.’

‘Well, your granny certainly doesn’t look old enough to be a granny,’ smarmed the agent.

Lucien stared at him, crossly. ‘Well, she is,’ he insisted. ‘Everyone’s always doing that,’ he said to me, as hand in hand we went over to join Mark who, like an art lover in a gallery, was drinking in the burnished woods, mentally clearing brambles, thinning poplars, planting Spanish chestnuts where the pines had fallen in a strong wind, like spilled pencils in a dark classroom.

We told the estate agent that if it was OK with him, we would eat our sandwiches there, under the oak tree. We promised to call, and he talked the talk about quick sales and all the usual nonsense in a housing market dried out by a lack of faith in the future.

Mark called after him; there was just one thing he had forgotten to ask. ‘What about the water?’

‘It’s got its own supply. It’s not connected to the mains and doesn’t need to be. A well has kept this place going for a couple of hundred years. I can’t see it failing now.’

I pointed out that now might be just the time it would fail, since there had been so little rain for so long.

‘Obviously,’ he conceded, ‘you need to get a professional

opinion. But it's not called The Well for nothing.' He went on to tell us about the water table. That was what made the land so good. Look at it. In fact, as far as he was concerned, we were probably better off here with our own supply than being linked up to the mains and suffering all the shortages and standpipes and allocations everyone had had to put up with for the last couple of summers.

'Anyway,' he gesticulated away to the west where the wind was bullying the clouds, 'most forecasters think the drought's coming to an end. This winter will be one of the wettest on record, they reckon.'

We believed him because we wanted to.

The dust hung in the air long after he had disappeared. I got a bag out of the back with some sandwiches and crisps we had bought from the service station. We sat on a rug, Lucien cross-legged and upright and Mark struggling as always to organise his long legs which had been forced to live under a desk for almost twenty years. We passed a bottle of water from one to another, sipping judiciously, listening to the repetitive sheep and the blackbird warning us off, and then suddenly, spontaneously, we both burst out laughing.

'I can't believe this.' Mark rubbed his eyes and looked up again, as if it was all going to disappear in a puff of smoke. 'Well?' he asked.

'You first,' I replied.

'No, you.'

'Granny R, you go first.'

'I don't know,' I said. 'It's incredible. Look at it. It's got everything we're looking for.'

'Everything,' repeated Mark. 'Talk about the land of milk and honey.'

'Yes, it's beautiful,' I continued. 'And the land is just what we want. And the view is out of this world. It's just that . . .'

'And nobody would know us up here. Know me. No looks in

the supermarket, no sniggers from kids on the bus. A clean sheet, Ruth.'

'That's probably right . . .' I admitted.

'You think it's too good to be true?' suggested Mark.

'Yes. No. I don't know.' The place was breathtaking, I too was dizzy with its beauty, but I needed space to think. I got to my feet, stepped away from the rug and looked over the wooden gate leading into the field. If someone was looking to escape to the country, then they would be unlikely to find anywhere better than this. 'If,' I started.

'If what?' said Mark.

His hope was warm on my back; I did not even need to turn around to see it on his face. I counted the cost of what I might lose if we moved here and that only added up to things that could be maintained or replaced – job, connections and surely my friendships were strong enough to survive the distance. So then I counted the cost of what I might lose if we stayed in London. Mark. And The Well – I'd lose this one-off miracle of a place, this Well.

'It feels like such a responsibility.' I looked at my grandson, sitting on the edge of the rug and poking ants with a stick in the gravel. 'What do you think, Lucien?'

'I think it's the best place in the world,' he said.

We put in an offer on the Monday morning, some way below the asking price, as if there was a part of us that couldn't cope with the dream coming true. 'Offer accepted,' said the agent and I sat on our front doorstep – mobile in my hand, smelling the exhaust from the cars trapped by the city heat, hearing the plane overhead circling for Heathrow, watching the old man opposite scooping up his dachshund's crap from the pavement with a blue plastic bag – overwhelmed with a ridiculous sense of loss. What's done cannot be undone. By the time Mark came home, I had pulled myself together for his sake and we toasted the future like newlyweds. We played old favourites, Mark did his dad-dance around the kitchen, and we got ridiculously drunk. The cottage was taken off the market

and the self-timer photo we had taken that day was uploaded and greeted by a chorus of envy from our fellow suburban sufferers.

‘Hope you’re having a going-away party, because you’re sure as hell never going to come back,’ was one comment.

We pinned the picture up next to the toaster in the kitchen in London, as a reminder. It moved with us, graduated to a frame, propped up on the half-moon table in the sitting room.

♦ ♦ ♦

I creep downstairs and approach it like a communicant, hold it up to the light. In the beginning was The Well.