

I wasn't sure of the right word. *Builder? Odd-job man? Repairman?* Or perhaps I needed to see a specialist? *Carpenter? Joiner? Woodworker?*

I looked at the keyboard intently, as if the letters could Ouija themselves up, and reveal the answer.

Handyman? I typed it into Google and added my post-code, hope congealing in my heart. Most builders, handy or otherwise, are incompetent, indolent and venal.

I will not pay unless the job is done perfectly, on time and within estimate. I do not provide endless cups of PG Tips with three sugars, ta, nor do I engage in talk, small or large. Preferably no visits to my WC, though a builder who does not pee is rare. Tea makes pee. But if that is necessary, only in the downstairs cloakroom. Afterwards there will be piss under the loo.

I also wanted one who is taciturn. I loathe the inane chatter of workmen hoping to ingratiate themselves while simultaneously padding their bills. A handyman who cannot talk? Bliss. Somebody should set up a company that supplies them. Tear out their tongues or sew up their lips, that'd do it.

I added *taciturn* to my search options, but unsurprisingly

nothing turned up, though one chap described himself as ‘tactile’ which gave me the creeps. I tried various alternatives: *Quiet?* Nothing. *Unobtrusive?* Chance would be a fine thing. I eventually opted for *Thoughtful*, which provided two alternatives: one pictured in a string vest, who I suspect offers a variety of distinctly odd jobs, the other with a few recommendations affixed to his entry, which lauded his reliable service.

Mr Cooper, he is called, but I did not ring him, as that would provide evidence that I can hear, whereas I intended to feign almost total deafness. I emailed him, enquiring if he might be available next week. He responded immediately, which is a bad sign: shouldn’t he be out handy-manning his way around town?

Yes, he replied, he was free next Wednesday and Thursday. What can he do for me?

My requirements of Mr Cooper concern the entry to my house, which has a handsome Georgian door, which will need to be removed and ‘amended’ – I believe this might be the right term – in five ways:

(1) Remove the brass letter box, and then fill in the resultant hole, prep and paint in Farrow and Ball Pitch Black gloss. (There are a variety of blacks, some of them greatly preferable to others, and black is one of the few colours (or absence of colours) in which doors should properly be painted. One of our neighbours, a recently arrived Indian family, decorated theirs in a Hindu orange so offensive, so out of keeping with the tone of the rest of the street that a petition was discreetly and anonymously raised by ‘Your Neighbours’ (guilty as charged) asking him and his wife to reconsider. They did, and repainted it bright turquoise.)

(2) Install a doorbell that rings once only, no matter how many times you press it, and which issues a melodious, inoffensive tone which can be heard clearly inside the house, but not outside the door.

(3) Install a Dia16mm-x-200-Degree-Brass-Door-Viewer-Peephole-with-Cover-and-Glass-Lens, which I will provide.

(4) Install a new keyhole and change lock.

(5) Remove the brass door-knocker, and make good.

The jobs I have outlined will take a day and a half, according to Mr Cooper, 'unless something goes wrong', plus an extra visit to put on a second coat of gloss. Mr Cooper's hourly charge is £35, plus materials, which, when I compare it to others offering similar services (though without extra thoughtfulness), is pretty much standard.

We agreed that he would arrive at 10 a.m., and that I would have a parking permit ready for his van. He seemed untroubled by my announcement of my deafness.

'No worries, I can get on with my work. Not very talkative myself.'

I considered asking him to bring his own tea, but if he finds himself in desperate need (which he will, he will), he can always pop out to the neighbourhood café, a few hundred metres down the street.

James Fenimore, as I have inwardly designated him – his site, curiously, only describes him as Cooper Handyman – arrived right on time, which was a good sign. Had he been more than fifteen minutes late, I would not have answered the door. He looks reassuringly like a handyman. Stocky, uncombed white hair that manages to be both lank and frothy at the same time, florid face pockmarked like an autonomous wart. The details don't matter. But the smell did: cheap cigarettes, stale beer, decaying teeth, wood

shavings and something acrid that burned my nose, about which I didn't wish to speculate. He was disgusting, and I could barely resist the impulse to send him away: *Shoo! Off you go!* Like a stray dog.

My senses are out of control, imperious, undermining. I can smell the decomposing bodies of the flies on the windowsill, the morning light burns my retina, the residue of the morning's toothpaste coats my gums, my fingertips tingle when they come into contact with hard surfaces. It's like having a migraine without the headache.

After I opened the door, gingerly, he took a careful builderly look at it, its solidity and sheen, the perfect proportions, depth, weight.

'Don't make doors like that any more,' he said. 'Shoddy rubbish nowadays.'

I held my hand to my ear to remind him of my deafness, and made a quizzical face, as if he were speaking Mongolian.

He spoke louder, and stepped forward, which I instantly regretted. 'Shame to muck it about. Security problems I'm guessing? Lot of burglaries round here!'

None of his fucking business, is it? 'No, not security. Just some changes. I'll leave you to it. Let yourself out when you finish for the day, and I will see you tomorrow.'

At 5 p.m. I heard the door close, and went down to see how he'd got on. I was pleased – and surprised – to see that he had cleaned up after himself, and the reinstalled door closed with the same satisfying clunk as ever. It now had some new wood, undercoated and primed in dark grey, set where the letter box had been, and the area where the former door-knocker resided was filled in, sanded and painted as well. The new keyhole had been installed, and a set of three keys was on the table in the hallway. There was a newly drilled hole at eye level – he and I were much the

same height so I didn't have to be measured for it – where the peephole would go tomorrow. James Fenimore had carefully taped over it with black masking tape. Altogether, a distinctly workmanlike job.

He arrived at ten the next morning, clutching a takeaway paper cup filled, I presumed, with builder's tea and lots of sugar. He put it down carefully on the hall table, remembering to put something under it. Keeping the door open, he inspected yesterday's work and tested that the under-coating was dry.

'OK so far?' he asked, in the kind of slow, loud voice one uses for foreigners, recalcitrant children, the stupid and the deaf.

I nodded, trying not to get too close to him. His smell was so invasive that I had not dabbed but sloshed some of Suzy's L'Air du Temps on my upper lip. When I opened the tiny bottle, it released a painfully sharp memory, not visual but somatic, of my head cushioned between her breasts, her original breasts, smelling of a trace of scent, as blissfully content as a boy can be. And a girl, all those years ago, before we were lost, both of us, lost.

'Will you do one thing for me?' I asked James Fenimore. 'Please go outside and shut the door, and then knock on it as loudly as you can. Maybe five or six times?'

He wasn't an inquisitive chap, or perhaps he had already marked me down as not merely deaf but barmy. How likely was it that I would be able to hear the door-knocking if I couldn't make him out at eighty decibels over four feet?

He closed the door, and gave it a few almighty wallops with his knuckles, which must have been severely tried by the experience. I listened carefully, having walked down the hallway into the kitchen. There was a distinct but muffled thudding, to be sure, but it was tolerable at that distance.

From upstairs I would hardly have heard a thing. Well-made door that. Don't make them like that any more.

Greatly reassured, I readmitted James Fenimore, only to find that he recoiled as he passed me in the doorway, stepping back, alarmed, and checking an impulse to raise his hands. His nostrils quivered noticeably, he sniffed. I was wearing scent! And as I hadn't done so yesterday, I must have put it on just to meet him!

It explained everything. The eccentricity, the fussy taste, the fancy clothes, the fastidiousness. A poofter! And I fancied him! I could see this line of thought pass slowly over his features, as he added one observation to another. He stepped back, and leant against the wall, ready to defend himself. I had a fleeting urge to kiss him on the cheek, just for the fun of it.

'When you have installed the peephole, send me an email. I'll be online, and then I can come down and see if it works properly.'

Queer as a coot.

Just after 2 p.m. my email 'ding-ding' sounded, as I was making some notes on my current concerns, composing myself in painstakingly extracted bits. I have no job and no life: no occupation, just preoccupation.

My Inbox revealed that Cooper Handyman would be finished in twenty minutes, and reminded me that I had promised to pay in cash, to save VAT. I had ordered an extra cash delivery from American Express in anticipation of this, because my usual fortnightly £400 would not leave enough to cover the bill.

I had purchased the very expensive peephole instrument for \$200, when you can get perfectly serviceable ones for a tenth of that, because this top-of-the-range model alters the laws of nature. Your Mr Cooper fits it in your door,

and it claims to give you 200-degree coverage. Now I am no mathematician, but even I know that from the flat surface of a door only a 180-degree arc is visible. So, as far as I can make out, the new magical instrument will allow me to see into my own hallway, presumably 10 degrees on each side, through thick brick walls. For the extra \$180 I am longing to see how it works. Thus if I stand in the right position, I should be able to see myself looking at myself.

‘It don’t do that, it can’t!’ says James Fenimore scornfully. ‘Just trying to sell it to idiots. Might work if you just held it to your eye, but it’s for a door! Not worth the money you paid for it!’

‘Shall we test it? If you go outside and close the door, perhaps you could stand in various positions while I look through the peephole.’

‘No problem.’

A moment later I was looking through the new peephole directly into Mr Cooper’s face. He smiled uneasily, perhaps concerned that this might be seen as a come-on. And then, with his back against first the left-hand wall and then the right, waved a hand gently, as if the Queen from her carriage.

I cannot imagine what I have done to encourage this skittishness. Does he think all queers like waving Queens? Next thing I knew he would want us to have a cup of tea together, pinkies in the air.

I think he has had enough of me too, and clutching his small cache of £50 notes, shakes my hand, with firm masculine pressure. I allow mine to melt into his. I will wash it thoroughly when he leaves.

‘You take care of yourself now,’ he says warily.

‘You too.’

I tried to suppress a fugitive feeling of gratitude from my tone. After all, he was a good workman, unexceptionable, scratching out a living.

The new door, as I stand on the step to look it over, is stripped of both grace and function without its knocker and letter box. Black, bare, blank, beautiful in its stripped-down brutality. Just spyhole and keyhole. A bit sinister, as if it were guarding a fortress of some sort.

I hope it works. It locks them out, and me in. It gives me a – might I call it a window? – on the world. Or maybe just a way of peeping, unseen.

The next morning I woke early, and after my showering and coffee rituals, arrived at the door at 7.58. I rolled up a newly washed, fluffy hand towel and placed it above the eyehole, leant forward so that my forehead rested on it, comfortably adjusted it until my eye was perfectly aligned. The world came into focus. Across the street, just on 8 a.m., right on time like the Bombay Express, the Singh family left their house. Doctor and young son, top-knotted, turbaned. Mother and daughter in immaculate saris. You could set your watch by them. Sikh and ye shall find. Every morning both parents walked the children to the primary school before making their way to the Tube: he to the Chelsea and Westminster, she to her accountancy offices. Deloitte's, was it?

They were wonderfully presented, less disgusting than their English equivalents. Stripped of their ethnic accoutrements, their turbans, suits and saris, they would be the colour of lightly toasted Poilâne, redolent of cardamom and ghee. If you were a cannibal, you'd toss aside a pallid smelly Cooper – the colour and consistency of uncooked bread – and have a bite of these tasty Oriental morsels.

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I've composed a list of further world-proofing chores. I like lists. You think of every contingency, plan for it, cross it off. It gives the impression that everything is controllable.

It's going surprisingly well, the elements falling into place. First, the essential communication – I hope it will be the last.

Dear George,

It was good, all things considered, to see you last week. As I intimated, I have a small request. I am going to be taking some time off, and I need to redirect my mail. If you will be so kind as to receive it, all I ask is that you throw it away. All of it. Please. I do not want to be disturbed for the foreseeable future, for any reason. I will be out of touch.

I am most grateful for this.

I have also changed my email address, as you can see. I do not want this divulged to anyone. Indeed, I would rather you did not use it yourself, once you have confirmed you can help me in this minor way.

Thanks,

James

George is as close as I came to making a friend amongst my fellow schoolmasters. He is a harmless, good-hearted duffer, and a passionate enthusiast for all things Victorian. He kits himself out in fancy dress: silken cravats or bow ties, itchy tweed suits, waistcoats, flouncy shirts, shoes with buckles. And a bushy beard, of course. He is idealistic, staunch, sentimental, hearty, blinkered, patriotic, and hopeless with women. I suppose – there was speculation about this in the Common Room – you might have mistaken

him for a repressed homosexual, but he is not. He is one of that virtually extinct species, the bachelor. He visits friends in the country at the weekends, is a reliable walker for widows and spinsters, has godfathered half the children in Gloucestershire, and is keen on travel, amateur theatrics, cricket, and especially on the works of Alfred Lord Tennyson. Every 15th of September he celebrates the death-day of Arthur Hallam, the poet's lost friend and only true love, with a select dinner at Boodle's, at which he insists on declaiming the entire text of 'The Lotos-Eaters', a poem that, like Hitler, should never have been born. He acts it out, waving his arms like a drowning fairy, sensuous, mellifluous and slinky.

But, comic figure though he is, I can count on him. I'd solved my incoming mail problem. Brilliant. I have also cancelled my landline, got a new mobile number, and made a database of essential providers: handyman, plumber, electrician, doctor, dentist, optician, nurse, cleaner, ironing and laundry service, computer and telly fixers. I can order cash, coffee, cigars, food from Waitrose or Harrods, wine from Berry Brothers if I outlive my cellar. I have enough clothes and shoes to last a lifetime.

I will never go out again. If I am incapacitated by severe illness or a heart attack, I will abjure the emergency call, suffer and die. If the house catches fire, I will go down with it, perhaps put on some smothering and sizzling music – Stravinsky perhaps, can't think what else he's good for – and smoke and barbecue like Joan of Arc.

Of course the price of my enforced isolation will be a regular invasion of both house and self by a succession of strangers, none of whom will be congenial to me. Of course I dislike a chippy chippy, but I'm equally hostile to the charming, the well spoken or well read, the interesting, the

beautiful, the whimsical. Next thing I know they will be smiling and waving at me from their carriages.

Anyone who enters this house does so as an instrument of my will. I am not here to meet people, but to use them. If they could be replaced by machines, I would do so without compunction, and if they were robots they would be programmed to listen but not to talk.

Only four days after its installation, the doorbell rang. I ignored it. Either it was someone who didn't matter or, much worse, someone who did. I cannot say what time it was. I have renounced my watch, drawn the curtains. It is dark amid the blaze of noon, a total eclipse without hope of day. I am become a thing of darkness.

I do not follow the news, hardly turn on the telly or wireless. My computer wants to tell me the time and date, but after some searching I turn off that function. The house is still, timeless. Eternal in its way.

I drift off in my chair, resolve to drink my way through the wine cellar, nibble smoked oysters on cracked wheat biscuits. The oysters are delivered (on Thursdays) from Scotland. They do not come in tins. Anything that is tinned, tastes tinny: baked beans, tuna in oil, white asparagus, all similarly contaminated. No, my oysters are plump, recently smoked, and come in plastic packaging that hardly affects their taste.

I eat grapes, though it is hard to source decent ones. But if I eat too many, or drink too much, I am sick, sick at heart, vomiting, bereft. The nausea rises out of me like a metaphysical force. It is in the walls, it is everywhere around me, it is the air that I cannot breathe. But I carry on with my grapes, both liquid and solid. I don't wish to die of scurvy. I don't wish to die at all, not yet.

I feel as if the house is under surveillance, staked out, as

I am staked out within it. Crucified. But behind its blank façade, there are few signs of life, as I have few signs of life behind mine.

The only vulnerability is on Thursdays. If you were a weary gumshoe slumped over your steering wheel, eyes propped open, in need of a shave and a toothbrush after a sleepless Wednesday night, in the morning you might observe someone walk up the path confidently, open the door and go in. You might try to confront them, or more likely advise your employer to do so.

When the doorbell rang again a few days later – just once, that was a good idea – I snuck into the hallway, my footsteps muffled by the thickness of the carpet, and surely imperceptible outside the door. I looked through the peephole. It was just as I had anticipated, and feared. I retreated upstairs, my restless heart threatening its cavity, and a few moments later the knocking started, first a regular rapping, followed soon by a robust banging, less loud than burly James Fenimore had produced, but surprisingly vigorous nonetheless. I closed the door to my study.

It happened again the next day, the hammering, and a more protracted and furious banging. When I opened the door a few hours later, having ensured that the 200-degree coast was clear, there was an envelope taped to it, obviously with a letter inside it. Perhaps four or five pages thick. I took it inside, tore it up without opening it, and threw the many pieces into the bin.

From the outside, with the curtains closed, the house might well have looked uninhabited. The only tell-tale sign, ironically, was the change to the door. Why would someone who had left a house for a protracted period feel a need to reinforce its entrance in such a way? No, the unwelcoming black door signalled that someone was inside, who would

not welcome the presence of an intruder. I steeled myself – not a cliché, just the right metaphor – to expect further visits, further knocks, further entreaties. I will ignore them, steely in my resolve.

The air is stifling, humid, it feels as if I could drown in it.

Here I lie where I need to be
I am the sailor home from the sea

I choose the darkness because I hate it, and I loathe the sea, it's so bloody insistent: whoosh whoosh, drown. No, my adventures are over. Save this one, which I am writing.

If – God forbid – I had to go outside now, I would wear a sign. I could print it on the computer, on heavy gauge paper in Gils Sans typeface, and attach it with a string around my neck:

**Do not talk to me, or come near me.
I am not interested in your opinions.**

Thinking this gives me a warm feeling. I can no longer bear to be in the presence of my fellow man, even to dismiss them. I will not go out, though sometimes of a morning I fold my towel and lean against the door, peeping at my fellows on their daily rounds. The sight of them fills me with hatred, disgust and contempt. This feeling comes upon me with the buffeting terror of a tsunami. I am swept away, hardly able to breathe, in danger of extinction. The thought of wandering into the streets, bumped and jostled by these acrid creatures, makes me retch.

I have lost my capacity to avert my eyes, or my nose. They stay open, however much I blink and flinch and turn

away. I keep thinking those thoughts which, if we can only cast them aside, allow us to live tolerable, satisfied and self-satisfied existences. To make do. Reality punches you, pummels you into bruised submission, except that there is no way in which you can throw in the towel, wave a white flag, mutter 'No más' like that poor boxer once did, and retreat to the safety of your corner.

Or perhaps to your house? Reality: out there. Aversion: in here? If only it were so simple. If only it worked. How can we bear to be ourselves? How can we bear our children, whose lives begin in pain and terminate in agony? Enough. Too much.

O dark dark dark. They all go into
the dark.

Fucking T.S. Eliot. All of them? Damned? Surely somebody gets to go into the light, don't Christians think like that? The source, the beginning, the brightness at the end of the tunnel, the soft fading dribble of final consciousness, the ethereal infinite. In his end is his beginning, like a snake with its arse up its head. Welcomed by the heavenly hosts and hostesses. Pearly gates, genial chat with St Peter, try not to push in the queue, get your individual destination. Not very efficient. More sensible to suppose some quick transformation from person to angel. The soul leaves the poor just-dead remains and *Swoosh!* like that sound mobile phones make when they send a text (better than *Quack! Quack!*). The soul shoots away and finds itself in the clouds.

What do you do up there? What are you going to do tomorrow? Next year? Next millennium? What sustains and nourishes them, the angels of the dead? In pictorial accounts

they are corporeal in some faded, washed-out way, like threadbare cotton nighties left to dry in the sun, softly flapping, drained of essence.

Yet they have human features. Faces, chests, wavy hair, noses, arms (wings, anyway), something sort of leggy. In heaven there are no signs or vestiges of what got you there. No swollen tumours, no bullet holes or crushed skulls, no filled lungs or ruptured appendixes. No shrunken cadavers. Every body filled up and filled in. Reformed, reformulated, returned, retuned, resurrected. Good as new. Better.

Does this celestial self retain its humanity? Does it get cystitis or haemorrhoids? There is no testimony that it gorges and disgorges, excretes or sodomises. Do angels have arse-holes?

Do they examine themselves, these freshly minted angels, wonder at this shimmering new essence, this new freedom from weight and care? Might they, before they morph into pure angeltude, do an anxious inventory of what is, astonishingly, missing, as if they had survived some terrible bomb blast, and in a hectic, final shocked moment checked to see what was left of themselves? Lips? Check. Legs? Hard to tell. Eyes? Functioning. Ears. Nothing to hear. No viscera at all at all. No stomach: nothing to eat. No lungs: no air to breathe. No blood: no menstruating angels, no cut fingers. It's enough to make you scream with laughter. Dead and not dead. Body and not body. It makes me hysterical.

Angels are the riddles of heaven: dead things with feathers. Only the damned remain fully alive, cursing and writhing, bleeding and bruising, smelling and excreting, in agony and despair. Bit like life really.

Later in his dreadful poem, Mr Eliot assures us – can you fucking believe it? – that you are damned according to your *profession*. The Great and the Good go to Hell, along

with the usual haul of cowards, narcissists and murderers. Plenty of arseholes in Hell. Mr Eliot includes himself amongst the damned. I like that in a poet.

Heavenly reward is only for the meek, the humble, the unostentatiously kindly: dinner ladies, scout masters, carers, primary schoolteachers, nurses, cleaners, rubbish collectors, gardeners, college scouts, curates and handymen. The worthies who, in their finest hour, are offered an MBE by the Queen, and are charmingly and naively delighted. And after that they become angels!

And here we have him, ladies and gentlemen! T.S. Eliot: classicist in literature, royalist in politics, the most pompous form of the Jamesian American ex-pat. Worse yet: as from his religious conversion, a Believer! It horrified his friends, his erstwhile friends. That frigid snitbag Virginia Woolf was so distressed that she virtually sat shiva with her husband Lenny the Jew to signal the passing of poor Tom, no longer a member of the atheist tribe.

Unlike Leonard's, her nose hooked up, not down, it sniffed, she was a great sniffer, a terrific bitch. Her letters and diaries are fastidious, superior, deadly. So much more enjoyable than all those girly hyper-sensitive novels. Mrs Shalloway. To the Shitehouse. Beyond reprieve or comprehension, poor Tom, sighed Virginia, 'may be called dead to us all from this day forward. He believes in God and immortality, and goes to church . . .'

Of a sudden, he's all public pious, intellectual, and – how ghastly, how utterly uncongenial – a seeker after wisdom. We are told his poems have spiritual quality. What an oxymoron. Worse! He would be an impartor of wisdom, another failed-priest poet. Like them all.

Like that dreadful gasbag Kahlil Gibran, the archetypal fakir, whose platitudes informed the weddings of a whole

generation. Lucy produced two of his ‘poems’ at her ceremony: one read with doleful earnestness by her soon-to-be husband Sam the other intoned by herself:

Sing and dance together and be
joyous, but let each one of you
be alone,
Even as the strings of a lute are alone
though they quiver with the same
music.

Christ! This ghastly humbuggery was enough to make me yearn for Mr Eliot. Perched in the front row on a hideous plastic chair wrapped in a floppy gentrifying serviette, I suffered mightily, and (I gather) let out a discernible groan. Lucy glared at me. She was still angry from our disastrous conversation two days before.

I’d thought I was helping, like a signalman on the tracks diverting a runaway train. She’d been at the house, sitting on the bed doing something with a pile of clothes. She and Suzy had been assembling her ‘going-away outfit’ – which I gather is what your change of clothes after the wedding is called – and Suzy had announced she was popping out to buy some suitable garment or other. Lucy was turned away from me, her shoulders hunched, shaking gently and regularly.

‘Lucy, love, are you all right?’

‘It’s Mummy, she’s driving me crazy. This whole bloody farce is down to her. Just because she had to endure a big wedding, she’s inflicting it on me. She says it’s one of a woman’s rites of passage, like childbirth, you just have to bear it.’

I hate weddings, especially this one, for which I had to pay. Why does the bride's family have to shell out? Though we would have had to anyway, for Sam's worthy parents didn't have two beans to rub together. Though if they'd had them, they would have.

Give me a good funeral any day: some happy memories and encomia rather than fatuous hopes for a dodgy future. No drunken rowdies, no idiotic dancing till early morning, no ill-dressed maids of honour losing theirs with best men desperate to shuck their formal clothing and get on the job.

Lucy's eyes drifted downwards again, and she selected a cream blouse, pressed it against her chest, looked into the mirror, put it back down. She tested another blouse, rejected it, frowning. Her displeasure was directed more at the activity than the various garments. There were only two days until the wedding, and (as Suzy insisted) *choices have to be made*.

Lucy had been suborned into compliance. Left to her own devices, she'd have put on a frock, gathered a couple of friends as witnesses – *not* her parents, nor Sam's – trotted off to the local registry office, had a celebratory nosh-up with some pals, then gone back to work the next day, a wife.

'Lucy? I've been thinking . . . Can I say something?'

She put down yet another blouse, and sat on the bed. 'Sure. What?'

'I just wanted to say, you know, while there's still time . . .'

'What?'

'You don't have to do this, you know.'

She nodded her head in agreement. 'I know I don't! But I got hassled into it by Mummy, and somehow once you agree to a proper wedding you end up with all sorts of

stuff that you don't need or want.' She leant sideways and began to flick through various items of clothing.

I was determined to persevere, though I had nothing to fall back on emotionally. Suzy told me I needed to 'work on my relationship' with Lucy, but I never thought we had one, not quite, which was rather a relief. She was unaccountable to me, and I cannot recall many sustained personal conversations between us. I was rarely alone with her adult incarnation, and vaguely ill at ease when I was. She had made, it seemed to me, a set of uninspired choices, the consequences of which – work at a desk in some down-at-heel centre of worthiness – were no doubt admirable in some abstract way. Sam was another, and far more dangerous, example of her bad judgement.

'No, love. I'm sorry. Do come over here and sit for a moment.'

Lucy looked up, puzzled by my request for enhanced proximity, and came to sit beside me in the twin armchairs in the alcove by the window, her body turned slightly away, as if shielding herself from unaccustomed intimacy. 'What's this all about?'

'I just want to have a little chat, you know, before the day.'

'Day? What day? You're being awfully mysterious.'

'I'm so sorry, I'm not very good at this. Your wedding day, of course. Saturday.'

She turned to face me squarely. 'What about it?'

'Well, I was wondering, perhaps you might be getting cold feet? You seem on edge. And I just wanted to say it isn't too late if you want to reconsider. I – Mummy and I – would quite understand . . .'

'Let me get this straight. Are you asking me if I have cold feet, or advising me to have them? Because if you are . . .'

I knew there was some risk involved, but was determined to pursue the thought. 'It's just that people often marry in spite of the fact that they have misgivings. They just get carried along with the flow, and are too timid to say "hold on a minute, I'm not sure I'm ready for this"'

She stood up from her chair, until she was only a few feet away from where I was sitting, and I was looking up at her angry face.

'How dare you! First Mummy hassling me about clothes and stupid fucking details, now my father is trying to call the whole thing off! That's it, isn't it? That's what you want!'

'No, love, not at all. It's just that - '

'You've never liked Sam. You never gave him a chance, did you? You never met him halfway, sat down and talked and tried to get to know him?'

That was true enough. From our first acquaintance, when he came to dinner to meet the parents, uncomfortable in a new jacket and tie, I'd spotted him as the sort of earnest working-class Northern boy who would have benefited from a decent education, had his sharp edges and broad vowels polished and regularised.

She was leaning down now, her face close to mine. 'And you know what is sad? You don't get it at all. Sam is his own man, and he has wonderful qualities, you just can't see them.'

'Tell me what you mean.'

'It's hardly worth bothering,' she said, standing straight and backing away, making a curiously operatic gesture with her hands. 'You'd find it hard to recognise his virtues.'

'Oh yes? Tell me about them. I'm genuinely interested.'

'Goodness,' she said. 'And integrity.'

'I'm glad you feel that way.'