

ROGER GOWER

1942 –

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The Green Leaves

A novella

[First of four instalments]

As of the green leaves on a thick tree, some fall, and some grow

Ecclesiasticus xiv, 18.



There he sat, waiting. He had got up even earlier than usual and was already shaved and dressed. The whole operation had taken two hours. As always, he had had to force his body from bed to wheelchair, from wheelchair to toilet, from toilet to wheelchair, from wheelchair to bathroom, and from bathroom to kitchen. And there he spent several hours getting his breakfast ready, clearing up, reading, and answering post. In the afternoons he wheeled himself to the sitting room and read, or watched something 'educational' on TV. The wheelchair was home, from the early morning when he threw his duvet to one side and lifted himself into place until the final lurch back to bed in the evening.

The morning fog showed no signs of lifting, and the condensation on the inside of the window-panes stayed frozen. What if they didn't come? Would he care that much, in fact would not he really prefer it? This dutiful family gathering was never his idea. He hated invasions.

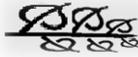
It was black outside still. They think it's my last Christmas, that's the only reason they're coming. Why don't they just not come? I don't want their pity, just going through the motions when they'd rather be anywhere but here.

Arthur had had a bad year, in and out of hospital, one chest complaint after the other, rushed off in an ambulance and then whisked back again when his breathing improved. He lived in a bungalow, a solitary building on the outskirts of the village.

It would be several hours before they arrived. Although there had been lots of phone calls to agree the arrangements, he still wasn't sure how many of them were booked into the hotel. Maybe they'll phone and say the fog is too thick. He turned off the lights and sat there in the darkness.

Of course, if they did phone, he would hate that too. This could be his last Christmas. Couldn't they have made just that bit of extra effort and found somewhere closer? As if it were a challenge to them, he switched on the lights of the small tree, put up by the district nurse last week, the same fake tree he had got out every year since his wife Grace had died, fourteen years ago.

From the outside, any early dog walker passing his window would see the flickering red and white lights reflected on the window and make out the haunted face deep in the darkness.



Charles looked out through the hotel window at the fog, wondering why he had suggested the whole thing in the first place. Thérèse had had been ‘understanding’, which he had taken to mean ‘just don’t ask me to come too’, and besides some time with the boys on her own would not be so bad.

He phoned to wish her a Happy Christmas, and tell her that Kate and Louise were staying in the same hotel and that Rupert didn't want to come because he was scared Kate would say something and ruin the day, and that Emily was making her own way down. When he’d hung up he had a terrible sense of anxiety. These get-togethers felt forced, no one really wanting them.

When he got down for breakfast, his sister Kate and Louise, her oldest daughter, were already into their scrambled eggs. He nodded to Louise.

“What do you think?” enquired Kate, looking towards the window.

“It should clear.”

For years he and Kate had barely known each other, he in his hi-tech world and big business deals and she in the rapid rise up the ladder in one of London’s biggest publishing houses. There was a large age gap, they’d gone to different schools and mixed with different social groups, within the class of the ambitious and newly rich.

“We’ve got to get him out of that place,” said Kate not looking up from her plate.

Louise got up, excused herself, and Charles followed her with his eyes.

“I wish he weren’t there, but I wouldn't want to see him in a care home,’ he said.

“Worried about your inheritance?”

“That’s not the reason. It would kill him.”

Kate looked at him hard, uncertain of his sincerity.

“Where then?”

“Near us is fine.”

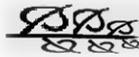
“And Thérèse?”

“She would accept it.”

“Despite what he thinks of her, a French Catholic. He'll soon need professional home care or a nursing home. Being near you is not enough.”

Kate was warming up for an argument, and he retreated into silence, leaving her frustrated.

So much for dying bringing families closer together.



Emily sat on her hotel bed, looking out of the window, fondling her long, blond curly hair. With the fog around her, she felt at peace. She got up and doodled on the condensation, knowing that when it lifted her unease about the day ahead would return. She was not sure what time she was expected but she would go when she was ready.

Despite the years of feeling frightened of her father, she was full of pity for him. She knew that in his divided self he probably loved her more than the others. She hadn't been broken by his bullying, and had understood his frustration at not being able to bend her his way. Over the years his belief that there could be any other way but his had waned. These days there was only guilt at having destroyed so much youthful joy in his children, and a sense of emptiness and loss. Even now though, from time to time, the old self broke free and the thought of Emily would cause virulent, unforgiving anger.

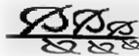
Emily was Arthur's youngest daughter. Sensitive and easy with smiles, she resisted all his efforts to push her into the kind of life in which she would get a well-paid job and settle down. At school she had resisted attempts to get her to work harder, be sporty or arty or musical in the terms it was offered. From the beginning, she yearned for something other than all that, and would sit 'in nature', in a field, under a tree, looking at the sky, wondering why, when she was with her family, she felt so outside everything.

All the same, Emily did do enough to scrape a formal education. In spite of Arthur's withering and deadly accusations, she was not lazy, at least when she worked on things she had chosen to do. For a few years after university, she had roamed the world with the remnants of the hippy generation, living off some legacy money from her mother, cooking, decorating, gardening, in exchange for goods. She had many deeply, passionate relationships but they never converted into anything lasting, usually because men seemed to want to smother and control her. So, in her late thirties, she'd settled down as a home help and sought to retain her independence of

spirit. She believed that not only was she offering practical support to the lonely but happiness from the depths of herself, which should touch those poor souls without families, in vicious housing estates, in dreary suburban bungalows and all the other backwaters assigned to them by modern society. Surely, she was convinced, her happiness would become their happiness.

She tried hard to turn her back on nihilism and consumerism. Her beliefs centred on sharing and giving, and causing as little damage as possible to the precious earth we live on.

Never once did it occur to her that she might offer herself as home help to her father, nor would he have accepted it if she had.



Louise hugged the phone close to her ear and whispered into it, softly and caressingly, tightening her hold as though willing it to bring her closer to the warmth and smells of Mia's body.

"Mum's determined to get him into a home, and Uncle Charles' reluctance is freaking her out."

Louise was pacing round the hotel room and with her free hand filled the kettle.

"Uncle hates me because of you. And yet he was so sweet to me when I was child. I was the favourite of the three of us."

Careless and clumsy, she half filled her cup and spilt the rest over the tray, not that she cared very much, just mildly irritated.

"Yes, I think he's told grandad. But I don't care. They must take me as I am."

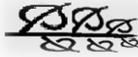
With her left hand she rolled a cigarette without interrupting the flow of words and felt their spirits were one.

"I love you, too."

And the hotel phone rang.

"Shit. Oh, hi, mum. Nearly ready. Give me twenty minutes"

She was sure the others had never known the depth of love she felt for Mia and, in joy, slurped her tea and drew on her cigarette.



Once a proud policeman in a man's world, Arthur would look at you hard and straight, with the old fierce bourgeois will to put you down if you didn't earn an honest penny and save. Women were not in this world, they were something you owned in marriage or allowed yourself to flirt with or be flattered by. He would make cruel comments to any woman who asserted herself, although he admired some who survived his assault and gave him lip in return. Now, one leg lost through leg ulcers and poor circulation, white hair swept back, he made his family feel they ought to gather round him at this time of the year, not acknowledging how much his heavy daily presence had driven them away. With his will more relaxed, his body decaying, regret and sorrow engendered sentimental tears and the pitiful refrain that he had *meant* well.

As he sat there, expectant and fearful, an idea struck him. He manoeuvred his wheelchair across the kitchen and rummaged through a drawer bursting with scraps of paper, unused Christmas cards, old biros and rubber bands. He pulled out a photo of Grace, and Charles as a young boy. It must have been taken just after the War, and everything about it filled him with regret. They were standing by a fence next to a field. Charles was wearing a three-quarter-length coat over a shirt, cardigan and short trousers; holding on to the fence, half smiling at the camera and squinting against the light. Grace, very tall with hair swept back and parted in the middle, was wearing a tweed suit under an overcoat. She held the boy's other hand, firmly but without will. Arthur very faintly remembered taking the photo, and knew that it was about then that things had started to change in their marriage. It was the beginnings of a new kind of happiness – he had *a family*, it was *his* family and that brought him joy. The War was over, he had just had promotion, and they were about to move into a new house. Domestic goods were beginning to appear on the market again, and building up a home, filling it with things, but not too many things, drove him to work harder. Charles would be a lawyer, a successful lawyer, get rich and keep them in old age. Grace he had begun to realise could be difficult but she loved the boy and was a good mother. Sometimes he would even say it was *their* family and that he provided the iron discipline when necessary.

But other things had started to change. Those days during the War, when his responsibility was only to her as a woman, were over, or so he thought. She knew he

was decent, in that he wouldn't cheat on her with other women, gamble their money away, or drink himself into oblivion. But then sometimes the knowledge that he would never do these things became a burden to her. She began to tire of his morality, his duties, and wished he were more reckless. Why was it the rigid goodness in him sometimes seemed like a sin to her, that it would stifle and cause her to freeze inside, so much so that she could hardly bear him to touch her. Some part of her started to wish she were somewhere else, maybe with her sister, and that made her ashamed. But there was the boy, the boy she loved with a passion. For him she would stay. And besides Arthur was in the end a good man, and he would always provide for her. Arthur sensed these ambiguities inside her and they caused him frustration. How could she resent him? Did he not give her everything, provide a home for her, and weren't they bringing up a family together? The boy too felt the coldness of duty in his father and began to fear his morality, and turned to the warmth of his mother. He started to sense too that his mother wasn't happy, that the way they led their lives was the way that his father wanted them to lead their lives. But Arthur reasoned to himself that he was a good husband and father. Did he not do everything right? And so mother and son closed themselves down, in fear, and got on with the business of daily living. Grace just bickered with Arthur about the little things. Later there were the two other children, Kate and Emily.

Grace was long dead and although he mourned her sentimentally, he knew he had lost her many years before without understanding why.

Putting down the photo, he searched for others. They were so rigid, these pictures of wife, children, sister-in-law, mother and father. You could interpret them as images of a harmonious life. They never showed you the years of bitterness, the sarcasms and the couldn't-be-helped sniping, and the desire for any kind of life but this. Placing them in front of him he smiled complacently.

"I'll show them to the children. Some of these they won't have seen."

And then he saw one of himself, relaxed and smiling, probably the same outing in 1947, sitting down with his arms in front of Charles, and Charles smiling back at the camera. How happy he was then!

But then there was one which froze him. It was taken probably a couple of years later. Charles, a little older, striding along, in shorts and sandals, with a comic in his hand. Arthur was marching ahead of him, holding a newspaper, and looking back disapprovingly at Charles. It was obvious that Charles hadn't done something he

should have done or had done something he shouldn't have. What struck Arthur was the tight lip and frown on Charles' face and his general determined air. Arthur's first instinct was to put this photo back in the box. He was a little ashamed of his reproving look, but then – *oh, he was such a rascal, that boy* – he decided he would show it to Charles after all, as a joke.

Kate had been a shy child. When Arthur and Grace bickered she would sit quietly in a corner reading or playing with dolls. In her early years she had the habit of keeping her eyes firmly down, giving off an intensity that unsettled those around her. When she did speak, her attitude was positive, rallying and light hearted, hauled out of an accumulation of depression and a merciless vision of everyone's inadequacies, including her own. As she grew up, her eyes sparkled and she could put on a smile suddenly, very much there, and she moved with force and determination. But when the will was in abeyance, she would lapse into silence and unhappiness, causing those who got near to feel some pity mixed in with their love. In her teens, she'd studied hard and did well enough to get herself into a good university. She envied her brother's untroubled ambition, while despising his lack of courage. Like all men, he was not really her equal even though he was so much older than her. She wanted and needed men partly because she knew they were no threat and she could take them simply by deciding that she would. Emily was more of a problem. She had a job to hide her disdain for Emily's indifference at traditional ambitions, and her sloppy domestic habits.

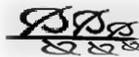
Emily, though, sensed that beneath it all Kate envied her spirit of indifference. The world might admire Kate more than it did Emily but Kate suspected the world might be wrong.

After university, Kate worked as a trainee copy editor in a publishing house in London and found promotion easy. She became materially successful and married a good looking, but rather weak accountant she'd met at a concert. She had decided that he'd make a steady husband, be capable of giving her some good-looking children, and he wouldn't cause her too much trouble. Everyone agreed he was a 'nice man' and the couple dutifully had three pretty daughters, Jessica, Louise and Samantha. Kate stayed true to him, and he was true to her, although he would busy himself, away from her, rebuilding old racing cars and playing golf.

Kate sat on the hotel bed looking out of the window and felt only anxiety. Never once had she wanted to come but never once doubted that she ought. Her hope was

that everybody would do what they had to do, that there be no disasters, that everyone would go home and the day would end. She knew that Arthur would start accusing her of being bossy if she tried to assert herself – today wasn't the day to bring up the care home – and she must try and be festive, although nothing inside her felt remotely festive. What if Charles irritated her, which he probably will? Emily was so far beyond the pale that she thought of her as a licensed fool.

She got through to Rupert, and thought he sounded tired. 'We're going to have to get going soon.... I have no idea what time I'll get back. Give them my love. One of the last years they'll be at home probably. Have them to yourself for the day.' And she busied herself packing to ward off anxiety.



“Dad, we'll be leaving in the next half an hour so. We'll be a bit late. Don't worry too much.”

Arthur reassured him. Something in his voice calmed Charles. These days in the desolation of old age there was no underlying threat in his voice. Charles could laugh at his father and jolly him out of his wilful whims. With the sting taken out he could see Arthur for what he was – a proud, upright man reduced to physical impotence, doing battle with the world with anyone that cared to listen. He belonged to an England that no longer existed, and was the only connection the family had with that time in the country's history.

Charles was a stocky dark-haired man with a designer stubble that would have passed no comment in a man half his age, but now in his early sixties it gave him a slightly shabby air. He kept his paunch at bay by daily visits to the gym. He had spent his whole life in advertising and fifteen years ago had set up his own agency and it had been a success. Although advertising was not quite a man's industry, Arthur had been pleased with his son overall. He'd had a flaky start after university when it seemed as if he was bent on 'dropping out', unwilling to look for a 'proper job', but then he'd 'buckled down', worked hard and was fairly well-off. He'd met his first wife when he first went to London, and they set up home there for a few years. From the start, though, that relationship was doomed – he wasn't very interested in her once the shine of a new relationship had worn off, neither of them really wanted children, and they both focused on their careers. Arthur wasn't happy at the split but because there were no children, he just about accepted it. Charles had met Thérèse while

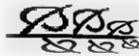
working for an agency in Paris. He'd fallen in love with her because of her Frenchness, the passion with which she talked about her family, and the sincerity with which she was determined to be a good Catholic. Thérèse too fell for something of the anglicized differentness of Charles, but refused a full relationship unless he was divorced, and without much fuss he set about freeing himself. Immediately afterwards they got married. Although Charles had never wanted to annul his previous marriage and convert, he was prepared to support Thérèse in her beliefs.

They spent two happy years in France, but Thérèse, desperate to start a family, realized that they would have to be in England if Charles was going to earn enough to provide for them all. They moved to London, bought a small terraced house on the outskirts and set up home together. From the start Thérèse hated her new country, particularly for its lack of spirituality, which she felt had made the people ugly. Every Sunday she would go to church and pray that one day they would go back to France and that she would be able to take care of her aging parents. She hoped that her family would come with her and that their children would bring forth happy children of their own, in France. She loved Charles, he was a good husband and father, and sensed in his heart a disaffection at his working life and the emptiness of much of the social world around him. He showed, though, no real desire to move to France and thought instead of moving well away from London if they could afford it.

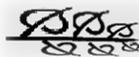
At the same time, he had an odd 'let things happen' trait that made him popular at work. Thérèse was fastidious about how things looked in the house, and whether things were properly clean. If she were out, she would leave written instructions for the cleaner, the gardener, and anybody else, whereas Charles would let them get on with whatever they thought they ought to be doing, which in truth, sometimes, wasn't very much, and they would leave early when no-one was around. For him, if he liked them, he didn't care. He knew that if he asked them to, they would put in over the odds just to please him. If he didn't like them, he'd get rid of them. At times this attitude would drive Thérèse mad. The cleaner would leave the kitchen floor swimming in water, and he'd say nothing. The gardener would leave the flower beds in front of the kitchen window un-weeded, and he wouldn't notice. As far as he was concerned, they were good people. Thérèse found it amazing that with this attitude he'd had a successful career.

"When did Pierre and David arrive?" Charles was making a last-minute call home. "Do you remember this time last year we were in France? The Christmas crib with the

live geese and the donkeys, and the little children. I wish we were there this year. Anyway, this kind of thing won't be repeated, even if the old man survives. Enjoy your day. I'll be back first thing in the morning."



Arthur had a thing about time. Hanging from the kitchen shelves there were digital watches from China, analogue watches powered by daylight, and ladies watches that Grace had left behind. There were the two watches always on his wrist, day or night, one on the inside of his wrist which he looked at frequently, the other on the outside used as a backup because he didn't trust the one on the inside. And then there were the clocks – an outsized electric wall-clock, clocks on equipment, bedside alarm clocks, a fancy clock with roman numerals on a piece of glossed Californian redwood, and in pride of place on the living room mantelpiece a torsion pendulum clock, which Grace had believed was valuable. One of the first jobs of any visitor was to wind them up, put the time right or pop out and get a new battery. But what it all meant it was hard to say. Ask him why, and he would say you never know when one was going to break down. Ask him why the time mattered and he would say he had never been late in his life and he wasn't going to start now. Ask him if it was about mortality, counting the seconds he had left, and he became evasive and claimed his life was over. Ask him if it was a secret desire to be a timepiece himself, and he'd look askance at you, suspecting an insult. So it was hard to say why.



"Teresa didn't want to come, then."

"Dad, how many times do I have to tell you? It's Thérèse."

"Even though it could be my last Christmas. She's never liked me."

"You've never exactly been that friendly to her."

Arthur took a deep breath and sat himself up in his wheelchair, as though a stiffened back and a haughty air would be riposte enough.

The old man relaxed and raised his hands weakly as if in an apology. Charles took off his coat and saw Kate looking at him from the hall. With his back to Arthur, he mouthed a 'Grrr' and clenched his fists.

“Come on. No arguments today,” said Kate getting cooked meats out of the cooler bags. “Louise, you peel some spuds, and Charles, just get the greens ready. You’ll find some in that bag over there.”

Arthur tensed visibly.

“You don’t have to go to any bother. There are plenty of tinned or frozen vegetables. Don't use that oven. It hasn’t been used for years.”

Charles joked about them being space invaders, and Kate wanted her father out of the kitchen. Arthur grumbled about Emily being late.

“Why did she never marry?”

“Dad, not now,” Charles replied testily.

“Is she...?” he said, narrowing his eyes in Louise’s direction.

“Right, that’s it. Everyone out of the kitchen, except the helpers. Out, out, out.” Feeling the excitement of her own power, Kate briskly grabbed the wheelchair, but Arthur insisted that Louise took him out. Louise shuddered but obeyed.

Charles, still annoyed about his father's feelings for Thérèse, busied himself in silence. Kate, nervous about what Arthur might be saying to Louise, was also silent.

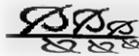
Then, as if to no-one in particular, Charles said “One of these days he’ll just tumble out of that wheelchair, and no-one will know a thing until a health visitor turns up.” When Kate didn't reply he reflected to himself, ‘So what? He just dies in the place where he has lived for twenty years. Why be nursed with fussy bonhomie until it's all over. Better to die in his own house a spiky, sentimental old fool than drift out of a nursing home a faint wisp of a soul.’

But Arthur’s soul wouldn’t be given up that easily, wherever he was. He had a proud will which would refuse to accept death’s blandishments.

Kate in this mood couldn’t stand the senselessness of it all. If he wants constant attention and looking after, he should be in a home. He could spend the mornings poring over his bloody right-wing newspapers and spouting his prejudices to anyone who would listen. And when self-pity got the better of him, there would always be carers to jolly him along.

Yet at other times, like Charles, she knew that when he left this world horizons would close in for her. As soon as he started to dredge up stories from his memory, his grasp of detail, times, dates, made those times live again. His world seemed

different and so much easier to understand than ours. Mischief and pride came together in his eyes and weaved a spell over her too, and made the children feel fondly of him.



When Emily arrives, everyone knows. You hear the hole in exhaust, the gear changes and the handbrake being put on.

She burst in, smiling, a bit flustered, and greeted *everyone*.

“Is that that Emily? Where have you been?” Arthur’s shouts could be heard from the living room, but there was softness and affection in them.

Louise emerged from the living-room, her face white and abstract, and there were hugs all round.

Kate caught Louise’s eye and froze.

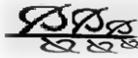
“Come in here, my daughter, and wheel me to the kitchen.”

The warmth in Arthur’s voice from the living room caused a jealous twinge in Kate but she gave Emily a kiss on the cheek and went back to slicing the meat.

“I’ve got you a little present, Dad,” said Emily, getting hold of the wheelchair and manoeuvring him out of the living room.

“Oh, you didn’t need to do that.”

In the family, there was often talk about Arthur’s sometimes obsessive attitude to his youngest daughter. She was an affront to the bourgeois ethic of his time, where a decent job and a decent home were primary aspirations, and he veered from righteous anger to bathing in her softness. Arthur had prided himself on the stability of his marriage and his caring for the long-dead Grace, but long-dead Grace had been a victim of his ethic and had felt little love for him while in the grip of it. If he'd been more reckless, less controlling, as he was when they first met, she might have felt more warmth. Head held high in an heroic pose was all right for a decent copper, but not a husband. A bit of indecency, a bit more yielding to her in spirit, instead of setting his will against hers, would have made all the difference. The gentleness he could show to the grown-up Emily he would have felt as weakness with Grace. The young Emily though had only got through her childhood by disconnecting her real self from everything she said and did.



“I think we should have gone,” David was telling his mother.

“It seems odd without Dad here,” muttered Pierre.

Pierre was two years older than David and in the last year of his Philosophy degree. Tall, with long curly hair, faintly bohemian, but relaxed and polite, with a great deal of reserve, not compulsively gregarious. He seemed to be heading for a First, even though he hadn't really worked for it. When he read, he read and thought hard, and when he wrote he wrote articulately and with ease. The religious philosophers, Thomas Aquinas and Kierkegaard, penetrated him the most deeply.

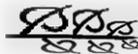
The rock-pop world didn't really interest him. He preferred to listen to Prokofiev and Stravinsky, and play Rachmaninoff sonatas on the piano. Not a total misfit, he was good for getting drunk but it didn't bother him if he didn't. Women found him remote, and he took his love-making more seriously than they did. He didn't mind going off on his own, camping, travelling around Europe on the cheap. His contemporaries had cruder tastes but they respected him.

David, as a half-joke would say to his university mates that, as he was half-French, his name should be pronounced in the French way, *Da'veed*. A big strong lad, polite in company and polite to his mother, he could be a bit surly and quietly sulky at times. Unlike Pierre, he loved hard rock and threw himself into drinking sessions, and believed his Frenchness gave him licence to behave like Baudelaire or Serge Gainsborough, louche and provocative.

Thérèse wondered why Charles hadn't phoned, at least to say they'd got there safely. Christmas Day seemed to have little point for the boys. During Midnight Mass, Pierre had meditated on the various symbols dotted around. Here were the candles which signify the light that Jesus brought to the world, there the small fir trees that suggest everlasting hope, there the wreathes which denote continuous love, and the holly berries which remind the faithful of the blood of Christ on the crown of thorns. He had thought of the old pagan symbols, when candles and fires were used to drive away the forces of darkness in midwinter, and the Druids believed mistletoe had miraculous powers. But the next morning the thrill of the religious mystery had gone, and Pierre would sound off about the economy, which depended on our readiness to spend vast sums of money on things we couldn't afford and give expensive presents to people who didn't really want them.

In the past they would retreat into the simple solidarity of the family round the table, playing games and singing, as though from an earlier generation. Charles would blot out that he, an advertiser, was a prime part of the whole system, Thérèse would blot out that her regret that she was not back among fellow-Catholic friends and relatives in France, and Pierre and David would blot out their more shameful experiences of the past year. They were, for one day at least, together.

This year the unity had been broken. Without Charles they were fragmented, and all three felt some guilt that they had not sacrificed anything of themselves to be with Arthur.



Lunch at Arthur's hadn't gone so badly. Everyone had eaten far too much and drunk just enough to be close to the legal limits when they drove home. Arthur had been grumpy – he didn't like it that his offer of tinned food and cheap wine from the larder had been rejected. He sat through it all wearing a silver hat, letting it all happen around him, tried not to drift off to sleep, and wished they would all go.

Louise had been cheery, laughing at the banter between the siblings, noting Arthur's occasional glacial smile in her direction and his way of pulling himself up and raising his head in an aloof distracted way. She saw Emily looking at Arthur with tears in her eyes when she said, "How long is it now since you came out of hospital? Three years? And you said you'd give yourself two here. All by yourself, you've done it all by yourself."

Kate stiffened slightly.

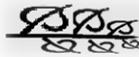
"And this is where I'm going to stay. This is my home. And I've still got my marbles."

"Don't let any of us tell you otherwise," laughed Emily.

Now she had done it. Kate was known within the family as the great finger-wagger. She would seize upon something you said, put it together with something you'd said years before, and give a damning characterization of your worrying tendencies, unforgiveable nature and your offensive characteristics. If you had offended Kate personally, often unintentionally during light-hearted banter, the venom would be made more poisonous by righteous hurt. In Kate's mind the offender needed to be put straight, even if it had to be later. Emily caught Kate's eye and saw her fists clench at the implied suggestion that she, the elder sister, was not to be taken any notice of. This put down must be returned to when the moment was right.

“Let’s clear away, shall we, and get some coffee,” said Kate jumping up and accidentally knocking over her own chair.

“Never mind about that, Kate. I’ve got some photographs to show you.”



Kate’s husband had all the attributes of a modern manager. Wherever he was, Rupert was never quite there. The space he occupied was not filled by anything that could be called ‘character’, and yet he knew exactly what was going on around him and manoeuvred the principal players into doing what he thought best. He was very much the modern organiser, admired for getting things done, quietly and subtly. Until two years’ ago Rupert had never had a senior position, preferring to be an anonymous company accountant, but when, reluctantly, as an alternative to redundancy, he had accepted the role of Finance Director he turned out to be a good manager. The attributes he had to develop came in useful among friends and family, and more obviously the golf club, where he served on the committee. To all, he was quiet, reserved and urbane, someone you would go to for advice on the best way to save money if you wanted to extend your house or arrange a wedding. But in the depths of himself all was not well. His life wasn’t quite the great success it seemed. One part of him remained untouched, for in him there were the un-watered shoots of some deeper needs and a critical faculty that could judge the shallow social mechanism of which he was a prime mover. He was also intimidated by Kate, her ambition, her opinions and her headstrong moods. He rarely stood up to her directly, just subtly and tangentially. Why were they so remote from each other these days? He stayed in thrall to her, erotically, but without any real sexual desire. He wanted to be loved by her but affectionately. And she in her own detached way held tight to him as a supportive husband and father. He felt though the bonds loosening. All they seemed to have as a couple were the accumulated habits of their personal history.

He would ponder Louise and her genetic differences, and Jessica, who often seemed not to be there with you, even when she was. A shy child who hid in her room, reading fantasy novels and internet chatting. The quiet one. Kate worried that Jessica's young life was passing her by, and found it odd that in soft-abrasive tones she would tell her sisters what they should and shouldn't do, what they should have done and what they shouldn't have done. Louise let it all wash over her. Kate said with feeling that tellers-off were not popular. As a teenager she was regarded as a 'home bird', but once at

university they hardly heard from her. She seemed to want nothing and asked for nothing.

Samantha was more like Kate but without her tendency to scold. Ambitious without wanting to do anyone down, lively and good-humoured. But in her too there was a quiet, dissatisfied self that looked askance at her fate and resented it. She was amused at Auntie Emily being 'out with the fairies', as Kate would put it, and admired the freedom she had made for herself but nevertheless thought it rather pitiful that the older woman did not have a family or serious career.

Rupert was worried that the whole family was becoming a fragmented collection of egos held together by shared memories and a sense of duty. Kate was wrong to push Arthur towards a home. Let the man be. If he wants to sit it out in his home, let him.

"It's funny without Mum and Louise," whispered Samantha affectionately, looking into Rupert's evasive eyes. The plan was that Kate would join them later and they would spend the New Year in France. Louise would go her own way with Mia.

Rupert pushed a small tuft of sandy-coloured hair away from his forehead with unexpected suddenness, a habit which he had acquired as a schoolboy and had never left him.

"Perhaps family events are over for us," continued Samantha. "Time passes."

"You're still young," consoled Rupert, not quite to the point.

Samantha looked out of the window and did not feel young. As she looked at her father, she saw a mixture of complacency and edgy discontent and wondered what life was for, if anything. She felt for him, fondly remembering his tenderness to her when she was a child. Why does he hang out with those dreary golf club cronies when he never has a good word to say about them?

"Let's dig Jessica out of her room and call Grandad."

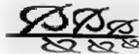
Jessica was watching TV, wishing this time of the year would pass. The years of genuine family conviviality had gone, and events were not much more than tokenism or a ghastly horror show. How she missed Marcus.

"Come on my lovely sister," said Samantha. "Dooo come downstairs. We're going to phone Grandad."

"Is that a good idea?" said Jessica wearily.

“Of course. Come on.” Samantha smiled broadly and put her arm around Jessica’s reluctant shoulders.

Rupert was already on the phone to Kate, regretting her absence, worrying about Arthur and Louise, when Arthur was put on, and Samantha in her bouncy way asked if he'd enjoyed the day. Arthur lied. Jessica said enough of what was expected of her but each in their own way felt gloomy and wished that life would revert to its comforting routines.



Kate found Louise hiding away in Arthur’s spare room, rolling cigarettes, on the verge of tears.

“What did he say?”

“Nothing directly. Just innuendo – ‘In my day women were women’,” Louise mocked his haughty manner.

Kate was indignant.

“And they spent their days looking wistfully out the kitchen window while the men were out doing pretty much what they wanted.”

“Oh, mum. Tell that to a factory worker.”

“Nevertheless.”

Kate said that her love for Mia should be enough, but Louise wanted children, didn't want to adopt, and, half-jokingly, added that it was a cruel joke of nature that she needed a man's seed. Kate knew that she had slept with men at university and the experience had made her realise that she was more attracted to women.

“The truth is she wants from me more than I can give. Her intensity frightens me. She would resent a child because it would come between us. Perhaps hers is the kind of schoolgirl crush which excludes friendship. I love her deeply but not totally.”

Louise was giving away more than she had intended.

“Good, nor should you. You must keep your own self intact, for sanity's sake and your long-term preservation.”

Louise said she was not against total love, in principle.

“Let it rest today. Forget the Arthurs of this world. Their race is nearly run, and with it their prejudices.”

“Despite what he thinks about me, I think that losing Grandad would be like losing part of ourselves. I'll be sorry when he dies.”

Kate put her arm around her and they went back in to look at the photos.”



“What are you doing?” asked Jessica into her phone, half-attentively, curled up in her pyjamas, noticing the ridges that were beginning to appear in her nails.

“Reading. Everyone else is asleep.” Marcus, alone in the family living room, legs draped over the arm of the chair, put his book down.

“How was it?” asked Jessica, half interested.

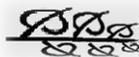
“Much the same as every other year,” said Marcus, picking up the book again. “You?”

“Weird. Everything’s not quite right.”

“The end of 2,000 years of Christian civilization,” he said mockingly.

“Oh, shut up.”

Marcus laughed, and Jessica regretted she’d phoned. They made their farewells without bitter words, or saying anything significant.



Tom was an easy-going fellow, who smiled a lot. He came from a large family and was never as much at home as when he was with a large group of friends. At the end of the year, it was quite natural for him to be at home with his family and he joined in their routines spontaneously and without disaffection. His parents had come to Britain from Hungary in 1956 as a young couple, had settled and integrated easily into the north, and started a family. Tom was the youngest.

In his relationship with Samantha, Tom was very much the easy one, Samantha the driving force. Samantha had the idea of going far away, somewhere beautiful, somewhere exotic, and starting a career there. Tom kind of went along with it. Of course, they would make new friends, and families could always visit each other.

“Hiiii... How are youuuu?” asked Samantha, and they exchanged season's greetings. “When are you leaving?” he asked.

“We can’t do anything till mum’s back,” she said. “She’s still down at grandad’s. What did you have for lunch? Tell me everything.”

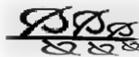
And Tom reeled off the whole menu.

“Myyyy. You Hungarians don’t ’arf eat a lot, ” said Samantha.

“You remember last year?”

“Of course I do. They made me feel really at home. It was luuuuvvly.”

The thought of their easy enthusiasms and lightness was a relief to Samantha, who was getting weighed down by family gloom. People don’t need to be so serious all the time.



“Look at her. Lovely girl. Such a pretty face.”

Arthur was showing the photographs around, and as Louise and Kate entered lingered deliberately on one of Louise taken when was about ten, with a round cherub face and a shy smile.

“Let me see,” said Emily and they all gathered round it.

“You’d never have guessed,” said Arthur.

Kate raised her eyes, Louise blushed and the temperature dropped in the room.

“Dad!” screamed Kate. “Please.”

“Don’t shout at me!” said Arthur turning to her, staring viciously, barely controlling his rage, then turning to Louise and forcing himself into a relaxed pose.

“Don’t mind me, I’m old.”

Louise looked down in torment.

“Dad, let it drop,” said Charles emolliently.

But Kate’s temper was up.

She reminded him that they had all come here to be with him. He said he was very grateful, and raised his hand weakly to shield himself from her anger.

“Come on, Kate,” said Charles.

“Don’t you start. Keep out of it,”

“Mum,” said Louise helplessly.

“Kate,” said Emily, hardly daring to say anything.

By which time, Arthur had recovered himself. He repeated his gratitude. He knew they came out of duty, but was still grateful.

“Funnily enough, young girl,” he said, turning to Louise, “I think you are the one person who actually wanted to come, and I’m very sorry I upset you. You see I have to speak my mind. I’ve always thought you were a lovely girl.”

“I understand,” Louise whispered. “I hope I still am,” she said trying not to sound sarcastic. Charles looked across at Kate and thought how drawn she looked.

“I can’t cope with the world I find myself living,” said Arthur self-pityingly. “I don’t like it.”

Charles was relieved. They could all cope with a general rant.

“Lies – fictions. Lurid soap operas. We see talentless nothings rise and fall. A wasteland of drugs and alcohol. Sex with anything and anyone. It sells newspapers.”

“Distracted from distraction by distraction,” said Charles, quoting T.S. Eliot in a mock-pompous voice.

Kate looked at him as though he were mad.

“Stupefied and made stupid,” continued Charles. “The politicians cuddle up to the talentless nothings and pretend to like them because of the hold they have on our minds. They don't care whether they are druggies or debauched adulterers.”

“You’re right there, young man,” said Arthur.

“You hypocrite, and you in advertising,” blurted out Kate.

Charles laughed.

Arthur muttered his thoughts, forgetting his audience.

“Discipline and restraint have gone. We must have things *now*. For politicians the economy is all. Phrases like 'family values'. What they mean is family units as economic units. Children as children don't have a chance.”

Arthur turned to Louise and said he was sorry, he wasn't having a go at her, but Louise said she was happy, personally.

“Is happiness everything to you?” He gave her a penetrating look. “When your grandmother and I were really together, bringing up your mum and the others, we weren’t always happy, but we led decent lives.”

“Were you religious, ever?” said Charles, and Kate raised her eyes to the ceiling.

“No. I was never brought up to believe, although I loved singing hymns.”

“Do you think it’s all over for us?” said Charles tamely.

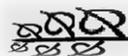
“Oh, for God’s sake,” snorted Kate.

“I don’t know,” said Arthur. “Whatever happens I won’t be around to see it. I won’t be sorry to go.”

Arthur's eyes drained as though the mind that kept them alert were roaming elsewhere. Emily saw what she thought was a death mask and felt the horror of it, Louise wanted to hug him, and Kate and Charles were preoccupied with their own irritations.

Then it was as though a small charge had been put through him and restarted his will. His eyes showed life and she turned to Louise with a big smile. For a second she felt blessed. Emily felt an unreality which made her spirits sink. She looked around at the lunch debris, and remembered the times when Arthur and Grace would come to Kate's at this time of the year laden with presents, finding delight at being in the company of young children, just for a short time. Now the half-eaten meats, the undone washing up in a dirty sink, the silly hats made it seem like a grotesque dance of death.

Kate, rallying, forcing herself to sound jolly, suggested they went for a walk before clearing up. She offered to wrap him up warmly and they would take turns to push. He said he didn't want to go anywhere. “Don’t bully me. You go if you want to.”



Second instalment next month

