

**'the sound of her voice... the touch of her hand':
Working-class Representation and the General Strike**
Critical thesis

&

Nine Days in May
A novel

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Abstract

The critical thesis comprises two chapters. Chapter one identifies a recurring preoccupation with voicelessness and (mis)representation in working-class fiction of the General Strike. Examining in detail James Hanley's *The Furrys* and Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*, I argue that attending to the way this anxiety of representation manifests itself in these texts can help us better appreciate and understand an aspect of the working-class experience of the General Strike that, though not entirely overlooked, has not received the critical attention it deserves.

Chapter two approaches issues of working-class representation in historical fiction from my own position as a critic-practitioner. Through textual analysis of Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy, I examine the techniques and strategies available to the historical novelist when it comes to 'giving voice' to characters that have traditionally been side-lined or excluded from the historical record.

The creative component of this thesis is a historical novel set during the 1926 General Strike and written from the perspective of a recently widowed young woman, Alma Cox. During the strike, Alma goes to stay with her estranged father, a trade union leader, and volunteers in the local soup kitchen. As she struggles to establish a new life in a community she deliberately left behind, Alma finds she can no longer remain politically ambivalent. The novel interweaves aspects of a troubled father-daughter relationship with the complex identity politics surrounding the strike. It explores themes of otherness and solidarity, as well as the historical problem of women's work, agency and public voice.

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Introduction: the General Strike and a crisis of working-class representation

The film director Federico Fellini once said, 'All art is autobiographical; the pearl is the oyster's autobiography.'¹ Though when I began this project I was not aware of the particular piece of grit in my shell about which the work was accumulating, it is in the nature of the creative-critical thesis to confront one's preoccupations and write with self-awareness. From the very earliest drafts and fragments, the novel was about a woman struggling to make ends meet, occupying an isolated and uncomfortable position between two social classes: 'working' and 'middle'. This was a status I observed in my mother and grandmother's lives – and to a lesser extent reflects some of my own experiences. Our family straddles the border between blue and white collar, giving us, collectively, a mixed class identity.² It is no doubt this awareness of being newly launched into the middle class that means I am sensitive to and curious about (or, to extend the oyster metaphor, irritated by) issues of class identity.³

It was perhaps this preoccupation that drew me to the 1926 General Strike as a subject for historical fiction. Whether figured as a class war or, more soberly, as an industrial dispute, the strike offers a crucible in which to test ideas of class: what it means, how it is defined, interpreted, signified and experienced. One of the most concise summaries of the historical circumstances of the strike I have come across is this by Susan Pedersen:

Called by the General Council of the TUC in support of the miners' struggle to avoid draconian wage cuts [and an extension of working hours] in a poorly run industry being weaned off government subsidy, the strike was an astonishingly successful demonstration of working-class resolve. Between 1.5 and 3 million of a unionised workforce of around 6 million walked out on 4 May, bringing virtually all hauling, loading, lifting, drilling, driving,

¹ Eugene Walter, 'Federico Fellini: Wizard of Film', *The Atlantic Monthly*, no. 216 (December 1965): 67.

² A brief summary of the occupations of my extended family illustrates this point: my great-grandmother was a housewife and occasional char-woman. My great-grandfather and the eldest son were stone masons, all three daughters married black cab drivers (though in my grandmother's case, only upon her second marriage to my step-grandfather), and the youngest son was a chauffeur. My grandfather was a Captain in the army, later a security guard, then a technician for IBM. My grandmother was a housewife and later an office assistant. My aunt and uncle, previously an accountant and a plumber, are now owner-managers of a plumbing supplies shop. My mother was the first in the family to gain a university degree (after my elder brother and I were born), and is a systems analyst. Before he retired, my father was a security guard among other shorter-lived positions.

³ These days, I feel very much of the middle class and yet I still find there are times when the difference in upbringing is discernable – when, upon occasion, friends who are more comfortably of the middle class have found me coarse or materialistic, or when I have been frustrated in socio-political discussions by their inability to fully appreciate certain causal effects of disadvantage.

stoking and even typesetting to a standstill. If the goal was to secure specific economic concessions, however, the strike was an ignominious failure. With neither the miners nor the mine-owners interested in compromise, the Conservative government determined not to negotiate, the TUC itself very reluctant to escalate matters, and, crucially, tens of thousands of volunteers falling over themselves to take over the strikers' work, the General Council simply called the action off on the ninth day. Many strikers returned to face harsher conditions or victimisation, but the miners, living up to their unrivalled reputation for courage and cussedness, stayed out for seven months.⁴

Though perhaps overstating the role played by the volunteers, Pedersen quite economically notes the strike's origins, its major stakeholders and its outcome. The strike has entered public memory as the ultimate manifestation of working-class solidarity, with workers across multiple industries downing tools in sympathy with the miners. As such, it provides a unique opportunity, narratively speaking, for the thematic expansion of the experience of being between classes – with torn loyalties and conflicted ideologies magnified by historical events and an atmosphere of heightened class antagonism. The novel is, in part, an exploration of otherness at a time of (overt and imperative) solidarity.⁵

In order to write the novel, I needed to understand how the General Strike was experienced by people of all walks of life, but particularly by those of the industrial working class who were at the heart of the action – the strikers, their wives, families and communities. The process of researching a historical novel throws into sharp relief the differences between historical and fictional discourse. Writing in the realm of the imagination and senses, the novelist must seek out what Rebecca Stott calls 'the materiality of the past', its 'smell, taste, sound, colour and texture.'⁶ The historical novelist also hopes to individuate her characters and therefore operates at the level of the individual consciousness. This is why, in order to create my working- and lower-middle-class characters, I sought first-hand

⁴ Susan Pedersen, 'Triumph of the Poshocracy', *London Review of Books*, 8 August 2013.

⁵ When it comes to the question, 'why write about the General Strike?' it's important to distinguish between solidarity as a romantic mythology attached to the strike (and associated with the equally romantic tragedy of its 'betrayal') and solidarity as organised by a number of powerful Trade Unions. My research has shown me something of what lies beneath the narrative of solidarity: how it was generated and maintained; how some strikers and family members experienced it; what sacrifices were made, and personal losses sustained, in its name. I do not look to the strike with nostalgia; if anything, my novel takes the catastrophic view of history set out by Perry Anderson: 'Not the emergence of the nation, but the ravages of empire; not progress as emancipation, but impending or consummated catastrophe. In Joycean terms, *history as a nightmare from which we still cannot wake up.*' (Perry Anderson, 'From Progress to Catastrophe: Perry Anderson on the Historical Novel', *London Review of Books* 33, no. 15 (28 July 2011): 28. Italics original.)

⁶ Rebecca Stott, 'Dust, Like Pollen', in *Body of Work: 40 Years of Creative Writing at UEA*, ed. Giles Foden (Woodbridge: Full Circle, 2011), 152.

testimony. I particularly wanted to hear what people thought and felt about the strike in order to get a sense of how various individuals may have experienced it.

I started my research with the most readily available sources: a series of historical monographs on the strike, found in the UEA library. There were seven such accounts on the shelf, published between 1957 and 2007. Of these, four proved to be political histories almost entirely devoid of working-class voices.⁷ Their major sources were newspaper reports, strike bulletins, strike committee communications, BBC broadcasts, the biographies of political figures, and the Government's 'vast store of Cabinet papers, departmental records, correspondence and memoranda'.⁸ It became clear quite quickly that while I could learn a great deal about the complex negotiations occurring at a national level, these histories would be of little use to me in understanding how the strike was experienced within local communities. The remaining three monographs each went a certain way towards answering my questions about the working-class experience of the strike and included some working-class voices. The earliest 'full historical account' was written by Julian Symons and published in 1957.⁹ Writing before Government documents were released, Symons makes substantial use of first-hand testimony but unfortunately includes a disproportionate number of middle- and upper-class voices, alongside a just few from the working class. Margaret Morris's 1976 account sets out to 'illustrate how the strikers were organised at rank and file level' and her use of oral-history-style interviews with nine prominent trade unionists reveals valuable information about the strikers' side of the story.¹⁰ The third account, edited by Jeffrey Skelley, also published in 1976, provides numerous working-class voices though these are, again, predominantly trade union leaders and Labour or Communist Party activists.¹¹

What's rare within these accounts are the voices of ordinary working-class people whose lives were affected by the strike, but who were not in a position of influence in the unions or political parties. Peter Hitchcock writes of such 'synecdochic relations', in which organisations (in this case trade unions) have often 'stood in for the working class'.¹² In Morris and Skelley's accounts, union leaders and

⁷ These were: Christopher Farman, *The General Strike, May 1926* (London: Hart-Davis, 1972); Anne Perkins, *A Very British Strike* (London: Pan, 2007); G. A. Phillips, *The General Strike: The Politics of Industrial Conflict* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1976); and Patrick Renshaw, *Nine Days in May: The General Strike* (London: Eyre Methuen, 1975).

⁸ Renshaw, *Nine Days in May*, 11.

⁹ Julian Symons, *The General Strike: A Historical Portrait* (London: Cresset Press, 1957), v.

¹⁰ Margaret Morris, *The General Strike* (London: Journeyman, 1976), 13.

¹¹ Skelley has collected regional accounts written by (presumably local) historians, supported by a valuable penultimate chapter dedicated to 'Personal Reminiscences'. See, Jeffrey Skelley, *The General Strike, 1926* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976).

¹² Hitchcock, Peter. 'They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation.' *PMLA* 115, no. 1 (2000): 20-32, 21.

activists stand as the voices of the working class, however this leaves swathes of society unaccounted for, experiences omitted, voices silenced. Where, for example, are the voices of housewives, children, the elderly, the unemployed? Such omission has been partially remedied in the recent years by the publication of Sue Bruley's *The Women and Men of 1926: a Gender and Social History of the General Strike and Miners' Lockout in South Wales* (2010) and Hester Barron's *The 1926 Miner's Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (2010). Both accounts expand our understanding of the strike's wider impact, particularly in the lives of women, within the coal mining areas of Wales and Durham. What these studies make apparent is that these towns and villages had a very particular, and arguably quite insular, culture, not to mention a unique situation at the epicentre of the crisis, neither of which can be taken as representative of the country as a whole. Since my novel is not set on the coalfields, but in a port city, I had further research to do in order to try to understand how the strike might have been experienced elsewhere in the country.

The scarcity of working-class voices in these histories, alongside more complex problems of working-class representation discussed in the critical preface below, informed the two chapters of my critical thesis. Chapter one considers fiction written about the strike by working-class writers. I began by studying eight novels, a poetry collection and a play – looking particularly at what they had to say about the strike, its impact on their characters' lives, and their feelings and attitudes towards it.¹³ In these works, I noticed a prevailing theme of representational anxiety, by which I mean the fear or feeling of being misrepresented by others, stereotyped in some way, or losing control over the authoring of one's own life narrative. This, I argue, can be conceived both as a chronic aspect of working-class subjectivity and an acute response to the events of 1926 General Strike. The chapter provides a closer examination of two strike novels – James Hanley's *The Furys* (1935) and Lewis

¹³ Of these, four are realist novels: Harold Heslop, *The Gate of a Strange Field* (London: Bretano's, 1929); Gwyn Jones, *Times Like These* (London: Victor Gollancz, 1936); Lewis Jones, *We Live* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1978), first published 1939; and Raymond Williams, *Border Country* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1964). Two novels by women writers – Menna Gallie, *Strike for a Kingdom* (South Glamorgan: Honno, 2011), first published 1959, and Ellen Wilkinson, *Clash* (Nottingham: Trend Editions, 2004), first published 1929 – present an interesting blend of political content with the tropes and structures of popular genres (crime and romance respectively). Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe* (London: Hutchinson & Co, 1966), first published 1933, and James Hanley's *The Furys* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935) are modernist novels, whose thematic and formal qualities are studied in greater detail in chapter one. In addition to the novels are the play by Joe Corrie, *In Time O' Strife* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), first performed in 1926, and the collection of poetry by Idris Davies, *The Angry Summer* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), first published 1943. When I speak generally of working-class fictions of the general strike, it is to these publications I refer.

Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe* (1933) – in which the issues of voice, voicelessness and representational anxiety go beyond a straightforward reflection of historical events to permeate the texture and fabric of the narrative itself. Each of these novels represents a deliberate intervention in the portrayal of working-class subjectivity and consciousness, and in doing so they make a claim for the validity of working-class communities as the subject of art while simultaneously exploring the problems of working-class representation. Hanley explores issues of voicelessness and employs a number of modernist techniques to dramatise the unsettling experience of being objectified and narrativised by others. Gibbon's approach, by contrast, is one of reclamation and counter-attack. Constructing a unique narrative voice that registers across dual axes of nation and class, he mingles modernist techniques with a guiding satirical humour in order to highlight social prejudice and subvert dominant cultural (mis)representations of the working class.

Having identified voicelessness and representational anxiety as significant preoccupations in working-class fictions of the General Strike, in my second chapter I turn to the role and responsibilities of the historical novelist who chooses to write about working-class life. I ask whether the historical novelist runs the risk of distorting and overwriting the marginalised working-class voices of the archive, and colonising the gaps in the archive left by those who have been silenced altogether. In other words, I consider whether the historical novelist contributes to the very process of political and cultural erasure she hopes to remedy. Taking Pat Barker's acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy as an example of fiction which seeks to re-insert working-class voices into a historical narrative that has been dominated by a middle- and upper-class literary representations, I examine the way Barker handles both her class agenda and her working-class characters in the trilogy, including the foregrounding of issues of voicelessness and the silencing of the working-class; the complication of the referential relationship between the 'real' historical working class and her characters; and the techniques used to gesture towards historical alterities – so that Barker's fiction, in the words of Jerome de Groot, is 'honest about its dishonesty' and indicates to the reader that there are 'other stories out there'.¹⁴ It is my argument that historical fiction can not only engage with problems of working-class representation

¹⁴ Jerome de Groot, 'History...Fiction...Now: Upon Waverley's Bicentennial, a Look at Historical Representation', *Historical Novels Review*, no. 67 (February 2014), <https://historicalnovelsociety.org/history-fiction-now-upon-waverleys-bicentennial-a-look-at-historical-representation>.

and voicelessness but, as a flexible genre, also affords opportunities to engage with the possibilities and pluralities of history, as opposed to asserting a narrative that drowns out all others.

I conclude the critical thesis with an examination of my own work in the form of a brief self-commentary. To supplement the information provided by the histories and fictions of the General Strike mentioned above, I consulted a series of working-class autobiographies, using the Burnett, Vincent and Mayall bibliography to select those that make mention of the General Strike.¹⁵ In this passage, I discuss my responsibilities as a writer when drawing upon the voices of the archive in this way, highlighting a few techniques I have adopted. I also discuss my approach to dealing with the silences and absences of the archive, in particular, the missing voices of working-class housewives. The title of this critical thesis: 'the sound of her voice...the touch of her hand' is a quotation from *Angry Young Man*, the autobiography of Leslie Paul. In this passage, Paul describes his remorse at having ignored his mother most of his life while pursuing his own ambitions. When she falls ill with appendicitis he finds himself 'longing for consolation, for the sound of her voice, the most clear and musical that I knew, and the touch of her hand, so worn with work.'¹⁶ This description is exemplary of the way the working-class housewife appears in the autobiographies of husbands, sons and emancipated daughters – a distanced and romanticised figure, defined in part by her work and role. I discuss how I have negotiated and integrated this archival silence in the writing of *Nine Days in May*. In this way, these brief closing comments contextualise the novel within the thesis as a whole and illustrate points of interaction between the creative and critical parts.

Voice and working-class representation

Voice is multivalent term, and a brief topology may help to clarify its use within this thesis. The first and most literal definition of the word given by the OED is: 'Sound produced by the vocal organs, esp. when speaking or singing, and regarded as

¹⁵ John Burnett, David Vincent, and David Mayall, *The Autobiography of the Working Class: An Annotated, Critical Bibliography* (Brighton: Harvester, 1987). All in all, I gathered a collection of about seventy relevant passages and chapters from these autobiographies. These texts are listed in the bibliography.

¹⁶ Leslie Paul, *Angry Young Man* (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 77.

characteristic of an individual person.¹⁷ However, since this thesis has no audio component, and deals exclusively with textual sources, I work within a tree-like structure of metaphorical usages. At its base or trunk is the central concept of voice as self-expression. Branching off from this, I perceive two major groupings: voice as a political quality and voice as a formal quality. Branching off from these are more specific valences of voice: as *presence* and *agency*; and as *style* and *persona*.

As a political quality, voice may be understood as *presence* within a given discourse or text. As such, it is associated with a distinct conception of voice as *agency*. The written and spoken word has often been conceived as a locus of agency within Marxist and post-colonial studies. In her seminal essay, 'Can the subaltern speak?' Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak notes that those with no recourse for self-representation through speech or writing, and thus no access to a revisionist history, are the most isolated and oppressed in any society – the 'subaltern has no history and cannot *speak*.'¹⁸ This usage occurs frequently in the rhetoric of the General Strike, both in contemporary sources and historical accounts – be it the *British Worker* accusing the then-Prime Minister of 'attempting to stifle the voice of Labour'¹⁹ or historian Anne Perkins discussing issues of representation and 'whether Labour – its politicians or the strikers – would be allowed an effective national voice.'²⁰ When I speak of the absence of working-class voices in some historical monographs of the General Strike, or discuss the problems of 'giving voice' to the historical working-class subject, I refer at least in part to these political concepts of voice.²¹

Voice as a formal quality of texts can also be sub-divided into two closely related valences: voice as *style* of writing and as *persona*. In composition studies and more generally in literary criticism, voice is sometimes used to refer to 'a particular literary tone or style'²² – a quality or character discernable in the text analogous to

¹⁷ 'Voice, N.', *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), accessed 8 December 2015, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/224334>.

¹⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 83. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given parenthetically.

¹⁹ Trades Union Congress, 'To Our Readers', *The British Worker*, 7 May 1926, 3 edition, 1.

²⁰ Perkins, *A Very British Strike*, 135.

²¹ It's worth noting that his idea of having a voice, the *voice of the Other*, is both metaphor and metonym. After all, speaking and writing constitute only part of the whole when it comes to avenues for political agency (voting, occupation of public/private property, consumer choice and, indeed, going on strike spring to mind as non-linguistic alternatives).

²² 'Voice, N.' Sense I. 1.

the register of the spoken voice.²³ This includes a broad range of aspects of written language from the nuts and bolts of vocabulary, grammar and punctuation to more complex, expressive and figurative modes of writing. Voice as writing *style*, may act as a signifier of the writer's socially constructed identity. This is not to suggest that voice is singular and stable – none of us has his or her 'own voice' but we each adopt and approximate different voices according to our situation/audience. This multiplicity and mutability of voice reflects the relativity and instability of identity, the way we as social creatures are constructed and reconstructed, both wilfully and subconsciously.

Voice as *style* is related to, yet distinct from, voice as *persona*. Paul Kei Matsuda perceives voice as capturing 'a distinct quality in written discourse that can be discerned by readers but is not readily identifiable in terms of a single linguistic or rhetorical feature.'²⁴ It is a gestalt quality, specifically one that 'makes *impersonation* or "mimicking" possible.'²⁵ Matsuda's choice of language hints at the idea of a rhetorical persona. As readers, we tend to use the evidence of the text (not only writing style but also subject, ideology and so forth) to conjecture a speaker, or multiple speakers – we may imagine their gender and age, their relationship to the subject matter and so forth. As a narrative device, voice as persona may also be political, particularly given its relation to identity, which is why I imagine each of these valences of voice belonging to the same tree, their branches touching and even intertwining.

To illustrate the interrelation between the formal and political valences of voice, one might consider this excerpt from the autobiography of Jack Jones in which he discusses his role during the General Strike as local representative for the Miner's Federation:

Yes, I've seen many a fight, but what I disliked about the game was the way they used to send men out round after round to be punished when they hadn't an earthly chance of winning. You know the game, the seconds receiving their man in a state of collapse, working on him for a minute, then easing him up to his feet and pushing him forward to get some more of what he's already

²³ Amanda Weidman describes register as 'a complex of features including [...] semantics, grammar, phonetics, voice quality, and gesture'. Amanda Weidman, 'Stage Goddesses and Studio Divas in South India: On Agency and the Politics of Voice', *Language, Power and Social Process*, no. 19 (2007): 136.

²⁴ Paul Kei Matsuda, 'Voice in Japanese Written Discourse Implications for Second Language Writing', *Journal of Second Language Writing*, no. 10 (2001): 37.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 41, my emphasis.

had plenty. More punishment. Something like that is what we're doing as we go around shouting, 'Stick it, lads.'²⁶

In this excerpt, the formal aspects of Jones's prose are inextricable from his political purpose. He wants to make an intervention in the historical record, and he does so through the use of a boxing metaphor. This aspect of Jones's writing style contributes enormously to the sense of persona conveyed; it helps to identify the voice as that of a young, working-class man of his historical moment. (The boxing hall was, of course, a far more prevalent and influential social space in the 1920s than it is today.) However more than simply suggesting the identity of the speaker, the metaphor and the visceral language employed in its execution make a political statement about the hyper-masculine atmosphere of the struggle. Here, Jones is actively undermining the rhetoric of bravery and heroism that surrounded the strike. He figures it instead as a game of suffering – brutal, mindless and deeply cruel. The metaphor functions further to add nuance to our understanding of the role of the Trade Union representative; Jones confesses his own guilty role as the man in the corner, stiffening the men's resolve to 'go on half starving themselves and their families', then pushing them forwards to 'get some more'.²⁷ In this way, he conveys the psychological toll inflicted by the imperative for absolute solidarity. To my mind, the excerpt goes some way towards explaining why a single metaphorical term – voice – continues to perform multiple discursive functions and why, in some cases, the formal aspects of voice are inextricable from the political action of having or finding a voice.

This schema for the various valences of voice is not comprehensive – these are simply the main ways I will be thinking of and discussing voice in this thesis. An example of difference in usage is provided by Bakhtin's *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, in which he discusses polyphony as a literary technique. In Bakhtin's analysis of polyphony, he notes that aspects of voice, character and ideology mingle: 'Characters are polemicized with, learned from; attempts are made to develop their views into finished systems.'²⁸ This ideological approach to character contributes to the effect of a '*plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a*

²⁶ Jack Jones, *Unfinished Journey* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1937), 221.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. R. William Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973), 5.

*genuine polyphony of fully valid voices...*²⁹ For Bakhtin, the outcome of this dialogic approach is that, '[e]ach opinion really does become a living thing and is inseparable from an embodied human voice.'³⁰ In this sense ideology is merged with voice to give the term a hybrid meaning. However, despite Bakhtin's claim that the opinion becomes a 'living thing' equivalent to an 'embodied human voice', elsewhere he makes a distinction: 'It is one thing to be active in relation to a dead thing, to voiceless material that can be moulded and formed as one wishes, and another thing to be active *in relation to someone else's living, autonomous consciousness*.'³¹ The vital distinction to be made here is between the polemicized voice of a fictional character and the voice of a *living* person whose views the character supposedly represents. This distinction is particularly important when we consider matters of working-class representation. After all, why should the working-class writer bother to write fiction and give artistic shape to his voice and vision if a middle-class writer of sufficient skill is able to generate the voices and 'independent consciousnesses' of working-class characters in a polyphonic novel? Polyphony is a special kind of dialogic technique in fiction, within which each 'voice' is engineered to give the illusion of belonging to an independent consciousness. This is separate again from the valences of voice described above – it combines aspects of voice as *presence* and *persona*, but when considering voice as *agency*, the Bakhtinian polyphonic voice is more complex and problematic.³²

It is the very polysemy of voice that makes it a recurring concern within this thesis. Voice acts as a gateway, and formal correlative, to issues of representation and class identity, and helps to illuminate the diverse depictions of working-class subjectivity available within my chosen texts. When considering issues of representation I have also found it useful to consider Spivak's problematization of the representative process when it comes to subordinate people and groups, as set out in the essay 'Can the subaltern speak?'. As briefly mentioned above, the subaltern, for Spivak, are those who have no recourse for self-representation through speech or writing and thus no means of producing a revisionist history. She uses the example of the female subaltern in the Indian Subcontinent to question the role of the Western intellectual in the composition of subaltern histories. I am cautious in referring to

²⁹ Ibid., 6, author's emphasis.

³⁰ Ibid., 17.

³¹ Ibid., 285, author's emphasis.

³² I touch upon polyphony and its textual implications again in my discussion of Hanley's *The Furys*.

Spivak's theory, since her context differs in significant ways to the matter at hand. The 1920s working class, though subordinate, cannot be considered exemplary of Spivak's concept of the subaltern; the novels and autobiographies produced in this period illustrate a growing public voice – albeit one that is demographically patchy and very much marginalised. Moreover, Spivak's specific context of post-colonial theory and its central premise of Otherness (with significant factors of race and religion) mean that her theories cannot be uncritically transposed; one cannot make easy comparisons between Britain's colonial history and the history of its class system. That said, what I do find useful in Spivak's essay are some of her ideas about the mechanics and political implications of the process of representation. Spivak usefully delineates two forms of representation, which she argues are often elided. She uses the German forms to clarify the two senses: 'representation as "speaking for", as in politics, and representation as "re-presentation", as in art or philosophy [...] *vertreten* ("represent" in the first sense) and *darstellen* ("re-present") in the second sense'.³³ It is 'the contrast, say, between a proxy and a portrait' (71). This clarification is useful and one I return to in the chapters that follow.

Spivak also raises a number of concerns about the representative process, including the potentially homogenising effect of a historical discourse inadequate to the 'irretrievably heterogeneous' nature of the subaltern subject (79).³⁴ Equally relevant to the present discussion is her insistence on the inalienable interestedness of the mediating, representing party. For Spivak, the Western intellectual does not and cannot provide a transparent, disinterested and lossless medium through which the unadulterated subaltern voice is heard. Self-critically, she gives the example of her own desire to 'give the subaltern a voice', recognising her 'insistence on imperialist subject-production' and caricatures that narrative with the bowdlerised sentence: 'white men are saving brown women from brown men' (92).³⁵ The intellectual, therefore, must remain vigilant to his/her own interests and the ethical implications

³³ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 70. All further references are to this edition and are given parenthetically.

³⁴ Spivak highlights a reliance on concepts of cultural solidarity or collectivity to support such discourse, for example: 'the positivist inclusion of a monolithic collectivity of "women" in the list of the oppressed whose unfractured subjectivity allows them to speak for themselves against an equally monolithic "same system"' (73).

³⁵ She also highlights Deleuze's interests, accusing him of 'an unquestioned valorisation of the oppressed as subject' (69) and 'a genuflection' to the workers' struggle (67). She recognises the interests of the intellectual in the attribution of agency to the subaltern and, indeed, (latent or realised) revolutionary potential – a form of romanticisation.

of reconstructing the voices of the subaltern. At worst, Spivak suggests, homogenisation and the effacement of ideology in the representative process may inadvertently play into what Althusser describes as 'the domination of the ruling class "in and by words"'.³⁶ It could be argued that those of us who enjoy the privilege of a public voice in a more democratic age must remain wary of the limitations of our discourse to avoid compounding the historical disempowerment of subaltern groups. However, Spivak's theory is not only relevant to the role and responsibilities of the historical novelist; it is interesting to note that some of the concerns she raises – of homogenisation, the potential for misrepresentation, and usurpation or acting as proxy – echo the concerns that rise to the surface in working-class novels of the General Strike, further suggesting theoretical pertinence to the representation of a disempowered and disenfranchised working class.

³⁶ Louis Althusser, 'Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays,' *Monthly Review*, New York, 1971, 132-2, quoted in Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 68.

Chapter 1 –Voice, voicelessness and working-class representation in James Hanley's *The Furrys* and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*

As my brief discussion of the historical monographs of the General Strike suggested, working-class voices have often been elided from those discourses responsible for shaping the narrative of the General Strike in the modern memory. The impact of this elision – not only upon members of the working-class who lived through the strike, but also upon their cultural output – is worthy of greater critical attention than it has received. In this chapter, I examine the dual issues of working-class voicelessness and (mis)representation as exhibited in fictions of the General Strike, focusing on two novels by authors of working-class origin – James Hanley's *The Furrys* and Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*. I identify an anxiety of representation that runs through these texts and argue that this can be conceived both as an acute response to the events of 1926 General Strike and a chronic aspect of working-class experience in the first half of the twentieth century. These are novels in which the issues of voice, voicelessness and representation permeate the texture and fabric of the narrative itself. Each represents a deliberate intervention in the portrayal of working-class subjectivity and consciousness, and in doing so makes a claim for the validity of working-class communities as the subject of art. Hanley explores issues of voicelessness and employs a number of modernist techniques to dramatise the unsettling experience of being represented as 'other' to which the working-class characters of *The Furrys* are subjected. Gibbon's approach, by contrast, is one of reclamation and counter-attack. Constructing a unique narrative voice that registers across dual axes of nation and class, he mingles modernist techniques with a guiding satirical humour in order to highlight social prejudice and subvert dominant cultural (mis)representations of the working class.

Working-class fictions of the General Strike have been under-studied – as illustrated by the fact that Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill's literary history *Writing the General Strike* (2015), the latter half of which attends to working-class writing, is the first of its kind.³⁷ In their introduction, Ferrall and McNeill make the

³⁷ This volume was preceded by two partial surveys of strike literature, each of which touches upon works by working-class writers: a half-chapter by Morag Shiach ('The General Strike: Labour and the future tense', in Morag Shiach, *Modernism Labour and Selfhood in British literature and culture, 1890-1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 200-246) and a chapter in Morris's

following appeal: 'We need fewer repetitions of the same strike stories and more attention paid to the wayward, difficult, partial narratives still too often under-read.'³⁸ The reading of strike fictions is an opportunity to 'reconstruct the ideological, aesthetic and political contest over narratives of British history as they happened.'³⁹ This chapter is, in part, a response to that directive and considers those contested narratives in light of the working-class experience. Reading these novels – as works of art, rather than with a positivist eye for verifiable information – helps to expand our understanding of the complex ways in which the strike has been perceived, remembered and responded to by working-class writers. This, in turn, may help to point the way towards a fuller, more diverse, and nuanced understanding of how some members of the working-class understood themselves and their communities, and how they wished to be perceived.

The anxiety of representation in fiction of the General Strike

In 'What do we mean by the General Strike?' Chris Harman discusses some of the different ways in which the General Strike as 'slogan' has been conceived politically and ideologically. In his description of the Trotskyist vision of the strike as 'outlet for the accumulated ire of the masses' and the Sorelian assertion that it 'educated workers about their own strength and revolutionary potential', we see the General Strike figured as a weapon (perhaps the ultimate weapon) in the class struggle.⁴⁰ This is a popular myth⁴¹ of the General Strike and one that connotes political expression and agency for an insurgent working class. Britain's 1926 General Strike, however, did not live up to this vision. Rather than providing an opportunity to vocalize the needs, demands and opinions of the British working class, the unfolding circumstances of the strike served to stifle and distort the collective voice of the strikers and their organising unions.

In my introduction, I discussed what Peter Hitchcock describes as 'synechdochic relations' in which 'organisations have often stood in for the working

history (Adrian Mellor, Chris Pawling and Colin Sparks, 'Writers and the General Strike,' in Margaret Morris, ed., *The General Strike* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976), 338-357).

³⁸ Charles Ferrall and Dougal McNeill, *Writing the 1926 General Strike: Literature, Culture, Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 18.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

⁴⁰ Chris Harman, 'What Do We Mean by the General Strike?', *Socialist Worker Review*, no. 75 (April 1985): 8.

⁴¹ I use the term 'myth' in the Barthesian sense, meaning a dominant or culturally accepted signification/meaning (as opposed to an erroneous or fictitious characterisation of events).

class' in the course of both cultural and political representation.⁴² This standing-in-for was particularly pronounced during the strike. Not only workers, but also their wives and children, and the unemployed, were required to temporarily subordinate personal priorities and preoccupations to the greater narrative of working-class solidarity. For example, wives were called on to join the strike effort and had to run the household on a husband's meagre strike pay. The unemployed were expected to resist blacklegging no matter how dire their own financial circumstances. If we consider voice metaphorically as an expression of agency, syndicalism inevitably stifles the individual voice in order to strengthen the collective voice; everyone must sing from the same sheet.

In practice, this effort to project a strong, collective voice was undermined and complicated by the events of the strike. One exacerbating factor was the Strike Organisation Committee's decision to include the press among the industries called out. Anne Perkins suggests that this decision was made on the basis that 'the majority of the newspapers were so right-wing in their coverage that the danger of the inability to communicate with the rank and file could be more easily overcome than their damaging propaganda.'⁴³ However, as Christopher Farman observes, 'in attempting to silence the Press, the General Council had committed a grave tactical error ... In addition to the British Gazette, all those national newspapers most hostile to Labour were continuing to appear.'⁴⁴ By and large, the left-wing newspapers, which were sympathetic to the strike and might have helped to communicate the strikers' message, obeyed the order and ceased production. In terms of communicating the strike's aims on the national stage, therefore, the unions had effectively muzzled themselves.

Even fifty years later, these communication problems were remembered well by the working-class contributors to Geoffrey Skelley's history. Bob Davies recalls how – in light of the Government's unfettered control of BBC radio broadcasts – the strikers were warned time and again 'not to be influenced by any rumour they heard, from either the BBC or the next-door neighbour'.⁴⁵ Peter Kerrigan describes 'the

⁴² Peter Hitchcock, 'They Must Be Represented? Problems in Theories of Working-Class Representation', *PMLA*, 2000, 21.

⁴³ Perkins, *A Very British Strike*, 123.

⁴⁴ Farman, *The General Strike, May 1926*, 180.

⁴⁵ Skelley, *The General Strike, 1926*, 337.

weakness during the strike of what are today called the information media.⁴⁶ The strikers were perturbed, not simply the lack of an effective public voice, but also by the misrepresentation they suffered at the hands of a hostile press. Bob Carr writes, 'news media were already blazing out unprincipled lies [... and] veiled threats'; it was in the press he 'learned first about unheard-of creatures – "Moscow Reds" and "alien workshy agitators."' ⁴⁷ For tramwayman Stanley Collins, it was not the newspapers but Churchill he could 'never forgive' for speaking of the strikers as if they were a foreign enemy. He remembers with bitterness the then-Chancellor declaring: 'If they won't go back to work, get the guards out and shoot them back.'⁴⁸

The experience of being misrepresented, often demonized, by press and public figures appears to have been a frustrating and geographically widespread aspect of the strike experience, however such rhetoric did not go entirely unchallenged. The TUC produced its own emergency paper for the duration of the strike, pleading for calm and emphasising the importance of public order. Headlines such as 'What the public must know' and 'The REAL Truth of the Coal Negotiations' illustrate the publication's recuperative tone.⁴⁹ One editorial noted: 'the miniature *Daily Telegraph* yesterday, under the heading "Reckless Rumours," was so reckless itself as to print reports of policemen being murdered and a Cabinet Minister injured. It is by that kind of lying tittle-tattle that evil passions are stirred.'⁵⁰ By this third edition, Churchill's tactical requisitioning of paper stock had already begun to inhibit the production of *The British Worker*, leading the editors to accuse the Prime Minister of 'attempting to stifle the voice of labour'.⁵¹

This crisis of public representation has its correlative in the working-class fiction of the strike – by which I mean works of fiction produced by working-class writers, which take the General Strike as their subject. Reading these works, I have been struck by a recurring preoccupation with public image, perception and representation that in some cases amounts to overt anxiety.⁵² Many of these works

⁴⁶ Ibid., 325.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 343.

⁴⁸ Stanley Guildford Collins, *The Wheels Used to Talk to Us* (Sheffield: Tallis Publishing, 1977), 40. These words, of course, offer a grim echo of the events of Tonypandy in 1910 when Churchill's troops opened fire on rioters and strikers.

⁴⁹ Trades Union Congress, *The British Worker*, 11 May 1926, 7 edition, 1.

⁵⁰ Trades Union Congress, 'To Our Readers', 1.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² To give a few examples:

make explicit reference to this aspect of the strike and highlight the way the falsehoods and stereotypes promulgated by newspapers and radio broadcasts had the potential to sway public opinion and damage strikers' morale, giving rise to serious repercussions. One of the most interesting examples of this occurs in *We Live*, in a courtroom scene that not only illustrates the very tangible threat posed to the worker by such rhetoric, but also dramatizes a moment of overlap or interaction between the protagonist Len's cultural representation (*darstellen*) and political/legal representation (*vertreten*).⁵³ Earlier in the novel, a shrill editorial in the local newspaper characterises the strikers as '[a]gents of Bolshevism, who have been allowed with impunity to preach their pernicious doctrines in this country in spite of numerous warnings *we* have given'.⁵⁴ The 'we' in this editorial suggesting not only the editors themselves, but also the reasonable majority, the implied readers, who are set up in simplistic opposition to the foreign-inspired agitators. This caricature of the strikers as Bolshevik agents is subsequently co-opted by the police and Len is arrested on false charges while peaceably picketing. He is given six months' hard labour on the basis of lies and prejudice alone, the prosecution falsely claiming that

In *The Angry Summer*, Davies addresses a poem to a journalist whose intentions are suspect: '...if you come here to slander / And trade in yellow lies / Go back, young man, to London, / With shame between your eyes.' In another poem, he assumes the voice of the hostile press: 'O you stubborn, callous men, / Starving your kids and wives again, / striking because the weather is fair / [...] "You lazy miners!" the newspaper said.' Idris Davies, *The Angry Summer* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1993), 15, 27.

In *The Gate of a Strange Field*, protagonist Joe Tarrant reflects ruefully on the bias of his local newspaper: '...howling at the top of its ill-informed voice all kinds of nonsense [...] It was living up to its reputation as an enemy of the miners.' Harold Heslop, *The Gate of a Strange Field* (London: Bretano's, 1929), 235.

In *Clash*, working-class heroine Joan Craig scores a victory over Captain Bowyer-Blundell when she contradicts his false claim that some miners were earning 'as much as fifteen pounds a week'. (This amount would have been split among five or six men under the 'butty' system.) Earlier in the novel, this misrepresentation of the miners' situation brings Joan's friend Mary Maud to tears – 'She could only *feel* she was right about the miners. She ought to have *known* how to put their case.' Ellen Wilkinson, *Clash* (Nottingham: Trend Editions, 2004), 66, 176.

In *Time O' Strife* dramatizes the agonies of indecision among men who are wavering between staying out and returning to work. When neighbours Jock Smith and Kate Pettigrew argue about whether or not the strike is as an attack on the constitution, the damage to morale caused by biased reporting is laid bare:

Jock: Look at the papers and you'll see pages about it every night. It's the Socialists to blame... I ken what they want, it's a revolution they want.

Kate: D'ye mean to tell me, Jock, that you've been locked out for six months and doesna ken any better than that?

Joe Corrie, *In Time O' Strife* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013) 13.

⁵³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak uses the German to clarify the two senses: 'representation as 'speaking for', as in politics, and representation as 're-presentation', as in art or philosophy [...] *vertreten* ('represent' in the first sense) and *darstellen* ('re-present') in the second sense'. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 70.

⁵⁴ Jones, *We Live*, 104.

he is a 'desperate character' who 'associates with revolutionaries... and is always the first fomenting them to acts of violence'.⁵⁵ Len attempts to provide his own defence – to represent himself – but is frequently interrupted and his testimony falls on deaf ears. Through Len's plight, Jones paints a picture of a working class whose voicelessness and wilful misrepresentation is symptomatic of a deeply unjust society in which ingrained socio-cultural stereotypes are used as tools to inhibit civil liberties and, indeed, deny human rights – in this case, the right to a fair trial. The roots of this anxiety of representation appear to extend far beyond the limited temporal circumstances of the strike.

Such problems of working-class representation can, in fact, be considered a chronic aspect of working-class experience in the first half of the twentieth century. Working-class people had long been spoken for and about – culturally and politically – by members of a better-educated, better-connected, more-powerful middle class. As Jonathan Rose notes, the 'overwhelming majority [of working-class people] never wrote memoirs, never engaged in any serious political agitation, never became a government or trade union official'.⁵⁶ An awareness of this deficit appears to have weighed upon those members of the working-class who did find a public voice through their writing. Rose argues that among working-class writers of the period it was an avowed mission to 'correct the stereotypes and distortions produced by authors from other classes'.⁵⁷ Leslie Halward was among the most outspoken in the cause of reclaiming cultural representations of his class, declaring in a 1939 speech that writers from other classes (even those politically sympathetic such as George Orwell) 'should leave the working class alone... if for no other reason than that working class people don't care for being examined and written about as if they were African savages'.⁵⁸ Vowing to write 'in my own language about my own people',⁵⁹ Halward took on what Peter Hitchcock describes as the 'burden of representation that inheres in the figure of the worker'⁶⁰ – an ethical responsibility towards the voiceless millions who have so often been elided, side-lined, sentimentalised and caricatured

⁵⁵ Ibid., 166.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Rose, *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 190.

⁵⁷ Christopher Hilliard, *To Exercise Our Talents: The Democratization of Writing in Britain* (London: Harvard University Press, 2006), 118.

⁵⁸ Leslie Halward, 'Writing about the Working Class,' lecture at Fircroft Working Men's College, 8 Oct 1939, Halward papers, MS 1293/106. Quoted in *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Leslie Halward, *Let Me Tell You* (London: Michael Joseph, 1938), 226.

⁶⁰ Hitchcock, 'They Must Be Represented?', 27.

in the revered works of the British literary canon. In the novels of some working-class writers, this anxiety of representation manifests itself in didacticism – the author's palpable desire to get her/his message across at any cost⁶¹ – but in other works, including those of James Hanley and Lewis Grassic Gibbon, thematic manifestation and authorial technique are more complex. In the chapter that follows, I argue that Hanley's *The Furies* and Gibbon's *Cloud Howe* are novels that visibly grapple with this burden of representation and are deeply concerned with issues of voice and voicelessness, both as a chronic condition of working-class subjectivity and as an acute response to the events of the strike. Employing techniques such as polyphony, shifting focalisation and vocal ambiguity, these novels dramatise the unsettling, often appropriative, experience of 'being represented' and simultaneously claim a legitimate space in the literary landscape for nuanced, heterogeneous depictions of working-class life, identity and consciousness.

Voicelessness and representational anxiety in James Hanley's *The Furies*

James Hanley began life as an Ordinary Seaman, aged only thirteen when he embarked on his first voyage, following in the footsteps of his father, a ship's stoker. He served in the army during WW1, was injured in a gas attack and returned home 'via a number of hospitals'.⁶² In Liverpool, he worked on the railways before moving to rural Wales in 1931 to work full-time on his writing. Considering the length of his writing career and his prolific output, Hanley's work initially attracted little critical attention, a state of neglect drawn to the attention of the academy by Edward Stokes in his 1964 survey of Hanley's works.⁶³ It was a call for reassessment that would go almost entirely without response until the 1990s and 2000s. In this period, many

⁶¹ Ethel Carnie Holdsworth's *This Slavery* provides a good example of the tendency towards didacticism in some working-class novels of the early twentieth century. In this novel, the author weaves socialist messages into the plot and reinforces them through the commentary of a scathing, darkly humorous intrusive narrator. The novel is also peppered with references to literary, philosophical and political interlocutors almost as recommendations for further reading. Carnie Holdsworth's didactic intent in this novel might be neatly summed up by the exclamation of one of its most outspoken characters, Steiner, a socialist tramp, who cries: 'I believe in wakening the working-classes up!' (Ethel Carnie Holdsworth, *This Slavery*, ed. Nicola Wilson, Radical Fictions Series (Nottingham: Trent Editions, 2011), 20.)

⁶² James Hanley, *Broken Water: An Autobiographical Excursion* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1937), 241.

⁶³ Edward Stokes, *The Novels of James Hanley* (Melborne: F. W. Cheshire, 1964). Stokes's call for the reassessment of Hanley's works was echoed subsequent years by Oliver Warner and Keath Fraser ('A Novelist in Neglect: The Case for James Hanley', *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement*, 11 June (1971): 675–76), Valentine Cunningham ('The Voice of the Voiceless', *TLS: The Times Literary Supplement* 10 Nov, no. 1302), and Stephen Wade ('James Hanley: A Case for Reassessment', *Contemporary Review*, no. 1601 (1999): 307–10).

studies of Hanley's work clustered around the themes of war⁶⁴ and Hanley's relationship to the landscape and culture of rural Wales.⁶⁵ However, most relevant to the present study are those works that focus on Hanley's modernist aesthetics and formal aspects of his prose. Fordham's monograph *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (2002) is the most substantial of these – the overarching argument of which is that though Hanley has been contextualised as one of a cohort of proletarian realists, his work is better and more sensitively considered as a 'sustained engagement with modernism.'⁶⁶ This reading of Hanley's work has been accepted and built upon by Simon Dentith and Joseph Pridmore, who each consider Hanley's modernism in relation to the representation of the working class, Pridmore focusing on Hanley's representation of crowds and Dentith discussing the 'formal possibilities available to novelists of the thirties' in representing collective life.⁶⁷ My attention, therefore, to aspects of the relationship between form and class politics in *The Furies* is not unique and I have drawn upon these critics where their arguments coincide with or conflict with my own discussion.⁶⁸ In particular, I have built upon Fordham's interpretation Hanley's modernist aesthetic as one 'which refuses the temptations of any conventional closure and asserts a new priority of struggle and process.'⁶⁹ This principle of struggle can be perceived as a response to what Fordham describes as a

⁶⁴ For a discussion of Hanley's war fiction, see: Gerard Barrett, 'James Hanley and the Colours of War', in *British Fiction after Modernism: The Novel at Mid-Century*, ed. Marina MacKay and Lyndsey Stonebridge (Aldershot: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 77-87; Jean-Christophe Murat, 'City of Wars: The Representation of Wartime London in Two Novels of the 1940s: James Hanley's *No Directions* and Patrick Hamilton's *The Slaves of Solitude*', *Anglophonia: French Journal of English Studies*, no. 25 (2009), 329-40; Anne Rice, "'A Peculiar Power and Rottenness": Annihilating Desire in James Hanley's *The German Prisoner*', *Modernism/modernity*, no. 1 (2002): 75-89.

⁶⁵ For a discussion of Hanley's relationship to Wales and the rural landscape, see: John Fordham, 'The Matter of Wales: Industry and Rurality in the Work of James Hanley', *Welsh Writing in English: A Yearbook of Critical Essays*, no. 5 (1999), 86-100; Stephen Wade, *In My Own Shire: Region and Belonging in British Writing, 1840-1970* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2002); and Robin Wood, 'Resident Foreigners and Bards! John Cowper Powys & James Hanley in Wales', *Powys Journal*, no. 13 (2003), 144-65.

⁶⁶ John Fordham, *James Hanley: Modernism and the Working Class* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2002), cover. This work develops upon Fordham's earlier discussion of Hanley's expressionism, an aesthetic also identified and examined by Ken Worpole. See: John Fordham, 'James Hanley and the Project of Modernity', *Critical Survey*, no. 3 (1998): 56-61; and Ken Worpole, 'Expressionism and Working-Class Fiction', *New Left Review*, no. 130 (1981): 83-96.

⁶⁷ Simon Dentith, 'James Hanley's *The Furies*: The Modernist Subject Goes on Strike', *Literature & History* 12, no. 1 (2003): 41. See also: Joseph Pridmore, 'Mass Violence and the Crowd: The Perception of Proletarian Community in Working-Class Writers of the 1930s', *E-Rea: Revue Électronique D'études Sur Le Monde Anglophone*, no. 4.2 (October 2006).

⁶⁸ Generally speaking, the relatively small body of existing criticism on *The Furies* allows scope for further exploration, further readings; in bringing a focus on issues of voice and voicelessness to the consideration of the complex response this novel provides to historical questions of working-class representation, by-and-large I find myself exploring open territory.

⁶⁹ Fordham, *James Hanley*, 134.

'diffuse social oppression', or a sense of powerlessness in the face of a desire for 'personal, social or political change.'⁷⁰ In the argument that follows, I illustrate that the desire for a public voice, for access to self-representation, is a significant and under-appreciated aspect of this struggle – and indeed, one that pervades *The Furrys* both thematically and in its formal experiments. I set this argument out through the exploration of a number of Hanley's strategies: the portrayal of a claustrophobic, gossiping community that serves to dramatise the uncomfortable experience of being observed and narrativised; the complex relationship set up between language and agency, created in part by a cast of characters who often appear overwhelmed and underserved by language; modernist techniques employed to transfer a sense of linguistic bewilderment and loss of control to the reader; and the use of authorial ambiguity to subtly implicate the reader in the propagation of working-class stereotypes.

The Furrys is Hanley's fifth novel and the first in a pentalogy.⁷¹ It follows the lives of the Fury family – a dysfunctional, Irish-Catholic clan whose long-standing feuds are reignited by the return of the prodigal son, Peter. Having been expelled from the seminary, an expensive education that the whole family has struggled for seven years to subsidise, Peter has put an end to his mother's dream of having a priest in the family. Her anguish and the resentment of his siblings provide a great deal of the dramatic and psychological tension in the novel. The action takes place during an un-named strike, which some critics have assumed to be the 1926 General Strike, and others interpret as the 1911 Liverpool Transport Strike – of course, as Dentith and Fordham have noted, this resistance to historical (and indeed geographic) specificity is characteristic of Hanley's modernist aesthetic, a deliberate departure from the historiographical detail associated with nineteenth century realism.⁷²

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ *The Furrys Chronicle* comprises: *The Furrys* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1935); *The Secret Journey* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1936); *Our Time Is Gone* (London: John Lane, 1940); *Winter Song* (London: Phoenix House, 1950); and *An End and a Beginning* (London: Macdonald, 1958).

⁷² Fordham considers the novel's strike scenes in light of 'the infamous "Bloody Sunday" of 13 August 1911,' (Fordham, *James Hanley*, 130). It is worth noting that Hanley is thought to have been at sea for much of 1926. Despite this absence, given that the General Strike formed such a significant (and in 1935 quite recent) event in working-class history, it seems likely, and textual markers suggest (for example, when Desmond Fury is asked: 'Coming out in sympathy with the miners?' (*The Furrys*, 44)) that Hanley has drawn inspiration from aspects of both events. Ferrall and McNeill favour a dialectical reading, suggesting that 'Hanley's novel produces representations of the [General] Strike that link it to 1911 and, via Mr Mangan's memories of the Great Hunger, to older struggles still.' (Ferrall and McNeill, *Writing the 1926 General Strike*, 157.)

Though by no means its central preoccupation, the strike provides the temporal structure of the novel and contributes much to its action and atmosphere.

I have suggested that the unsettling experience of 'being represented' – of being made object of another person's discourse with limited recourse for self-expression – might be considered as a chronic aspect of working-class experience in the early twentieth century. In *The Furies*, this experience is perhaps best exemplified by the twitching curtains of Hatfields, the street where the family lives. Hanley presents these slum terraces as a claustrophobic society within a society, where the neighbours are always spying through the parlour window or sitting out on their steps openly observing comings and goings. Mr and Mrs Fury's immediate neighbours, the Postlethwaites, entertain themselves by piecing together fragments of arguments heard through the walls. In response to this claustrophobic environment of gossip and speculation, the Furies take to using their back door, but of course: 'Such habits, when formed in a street like Hatfields, naturally assumed a little of the mysterious. People talked, people whispered, flung out hints. Why did folk have to slink in by their back doors?'⁷³ One of the worst perpetrators of gossip and intrigue is Mrs Fury's own sister, Brigid Mangan, who spends the strike stuck in Gelton unable to return to Cork. Brigid not only gathers and memorises information about the extended Fury family – 'she must keep intact every single thought, every impression,' (118) – but also forms narratives, particularly about her sister's life – 'You must know by now that your mother has never had one ounce of luck since she went to live there' (115) – and casts moral judgements, perhaps most characteristically when she declares in chapter five that Joe Kilkey is a 'disgusting' man and that her niece Maureen has 'coarsened'. She is described as having 'a ferret-like capacity for gathering in information from the family and carrying this information back to Ireland with something approaching the pride of an explorer who has returned with some rare fauna' (161). This characterisation of Brigid as the intrepid explorer turned anthropologist seems prescient when one considers how, only four years after the publication of *The Furies*, the Mass Observation project would begin to recruit Observers supposedly from within the working class (though the majority proved, in fact, to be lower-middle class) to compile 'objective' reports of the goings-on in the

⁷³ Hanley, *The Furies*, 60. All subsequent citations refer to this edition and are cited parenthetically in the text.

pubs, factories, terraced streets and so forth.⁷⁴ When it comes to the working class as object of enquiry, the novel seems to suggest that it is the process of enquiry itself that is disempowering – equally (or perhaps even more) unsettling when the enquirer is of a similar social station. More than once in the novel Mr Fury voices his suspicion that Brigid is compiling a 'family history' and in doing so becoming self-appointed author of their troubled life stories (221). As she observes, she appropriates; as she gossips, she imposes her own voice in place of those of the other characters, displacing and usurping them in the narrativisation of their own lives and the expression of their identities.⁷⁵ Little wonder that after cross-examination by her aunt, Maureen feels 'something [has] been stolen from her' (162). In Hatfields, to be spoken about is to lose power and control. The net result of this hothouse environment of observation and speculation is the complete loss of privacy for the community's inhabitants, who live like insect specimens in a jar.

The claustrophobic intensity of this gossiping, self-policing society is oddly redolent of nineteenth century novels of manners, for example the works of Jane Austen and George Eliot's *Middlemarch*. Though situated at opposite ends of a social and economic scale of privilege, there is a shared sense of confinement between the impoverished, financially circumscribed sub-society of Hatfields and the chaperoned, socially circumscribed horizons of a young woman's world in late-Regency and Victorian times. Gillian Beer describes the intimate relationship between gossip and money in *Middlemarch*: 'family pressure, keeping up appearances, doing what the neighbours expect of people in your social class and financial circumstances: all these are modes by which the individual is made aware of the endoubled senses of

⁷⁴ James Hinton, *The Mass Observers, a History, 1937-1949* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 15. Hinton notes: 'It was not until the war years that MO publicly acknowledged that its volunteer panelists were predominantly drawn from the educated middle class, not from the proletarian masses who had left school at 14.' (Ibid., 10).

⁷⁵ Mass Observation was, of course, pioneered by an ornithologist-turned-anthropologist, Tom Harrisson, alongside poet Charles Madge. Ostensibly, the project's aim was democratic: to 'enable the masses to speak for themselves' – and it would be false to suggest the collection does not provide useful information about ordinary people's lives – however, the methodology of 'observation', a process of interpretation and analysis far more than advocacy, did not necessarily live up to this democratic aim. Moreover, Madge repeatedly stated that he hoped to use the evidence gathered from his correspondents to 'uncover the unconscious fears and wishes of the masses', wishes he considered 'ultra-repressed'. This curious focus on the unconscious undermines the notion of people speaking for themselves and, taken at its worst, smacks of paternalism – as if, perhaps, the lower classes couldn't possibly know their own minds nor be relied upon to accurately state their fears and wishes. See: Ibid., 8–9.

"worth".⁷⁶ In this view, gossip is an inherently conservative form of discourse, which encourages the preservation of the status quo and inhibits social mobility – in either direction. In a similar vein, Erin M. Goss notes one of the functions of gossip in Austen's novels is 'to provide surveillance of that community and keep it in line with its own established norms.'⁷⁷ Though it has the potential to damage individuals, such discourse can be seen as mutually productive for Austen and Eliot's privileged societies, since it buttresses the deeper social hierarchy that keeps their characters in a state of comfort and leisure. For the inhabitants of Hatfields, who live in overcrowded homes with even less privacy, gossip can have no such value since the slum-dwellers already occupy the lowest rung on the social ladder. It is a mutually destructive behaviour, serving only to further limit already restricted lives and inhibit even the most personal of freedoms.

Hatfields is a world free from the overseeing eyes of the middle class and yet the working-class characters gain little in the way of agency in self-representation and the authoring of their own narratives from that absence. One effect of this intra-class struggle over representation is to support Hanley's presentation of a heterogeneous and deeply divided working class. Brigid provides a case in point: travelling over from Ireland, she is one of the family and yet an outsider. She wears an ostentatious green dress, advertising her Catholicism in a predominantly Protestant area. She also has some personal funds, which further sets her apart from, and causes friction with, her far-poorer sister. One might argue that given her self-modelling as parish busybody (Brigid sends the elderly Mr Mangan to live with Mrs Fury so she can have more time to help at her local church) that Brigid stands in for the censoring, moralising eye of the middle class in a novel in which that class is pushed to the periphery. *The Furys*, however, is not a novel of such straightforward socio-political oppositions. Fordham has suggested that the novel is 'an example of how art "indicts by refraining from express indictment"'.⁷⁸ Hanley dramatises the uncomfortable experience of being observed and narrativised, presenting it as a chronic and pervasive element of his characters' lives. The larger structures of social oppression are left for the reader to observe in the story that unfolds and in the

⁷⁶ Gillian Beer, 'Circulatory Systems: Money, Gossip and Blood in Middlemarch', in *Arguing with the Past: Essays in Narrative from Woolf to Sidney* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989), 109.

⁷⁷ Erin M. Goss, 'Homespun Gossip: Jane West, Jane Austen, and the Task of Literary Criticism.', *Eighteenth Century: Theory & Interpretation* (University of Pennsylvania Press) 56, no. 2 (2015): 166.

⁷⁸ Fordham, *James Hanley*, 130.

metaphors that depict Hatfield as a prison – 'that ocean of bricks and mortar' (121), approached through 'a long, dark and damp tunnel' (121), hemmed in by the 'great wall' of the bone yard (164). Hatfields, in Mr Fury's eyes, is nothing but a 'monstrous stone cage' (60).

The task of maintaining control over one's own narrative is one the novel's secretive heroine, Mrs Fury, approaches with intensity. She spends much of the novel engaged in various efforts to manage the family's finances and also pay the outstanding bill to Peter's seminary, rarely confiding in anyone, even her husband. Mr and Mrs Fury argue a great deal, but share very little. In fact, the novel is full of unsatisfying conversations in which words prove inadequate, failing to do justice to the emotions and intrigues that lie beneath the surface. Mr Fury reflects: 'All these arguments seemed to him to be ringed around with a desperate maddening futility. They started anywhere and ended nowhere.' (25) Characters are also betrayed by their own words – for example, when Mrs Fury complains about her son's choice of wife: 'The fool! He's madly in love with her! He can't help it. Carried away. Do I care? Not a bit. Do I worry? Not a bit. I only know that by his action he disgraced me.' (116) The tone of Mrs Fury's rhetorical questions belies her claim that she doesn't care. Mrs Fury is a strong and complex character, designed to carry our interest and empathy. That her characterological intensity should be diluted by this moment of irony, serves to draw our attention to the impossibility of complete control of one's self and one's public presentation within a social setting where the threat of defamation and disgrace is ever present.

This sense of being overwhelmed and underserved by language is compounded by the circumscribed social roles occupied by the characters, which do not always allow for full and honest self-expression. One of the most affecting examples occurs when Mr Fury happens upon his daughter Maureen in a park. He is struggling to adjust to life on land and longs for more intimate relationships with his family:

'I think it's going to rain,' he said, though his mind was a complete blank. It seemed to have sunk, collapsed. He lowered his head. 'Ah, Maureen,' he said, 'I wish I had my time all over again.' His voice was filled with a passionate tenderness as he looked up at the sky; he might have visioned some world of pure fancy, into the calm and peace of which his spirit might have slipped quietly, gently, leaving behind it upon the green bench of the park his tired body.

'Everyone says that,' remarked Maureen, 'when it's too late.' She put the sewing in her bag and made preparation to go. (370)

As an absentee father and ex-sailor Mr Fury is not expected to give voice to his feelings, a point that is driven home by Maureen's tart response and abrupt exit. As with many of Hanley's characters, Mr Fury's lively, deeply sensitive mind, associated here with the expanse of the sky, appears trapped inside an inadequate social and corporeal reality – a body from which it longs to slip, 'quietly, gently'. It is perhaps not too much of a stretch to suggest that the differing tempos of the novel's stilted, matter-of-fact dialogue and the contrasting fluency of the characters' interior voices might be read as a way of communicating their limited linguistic capability (as a result of lack of education, for example). The Furys seem able to think and feel things that society has not enabled them or will not allow them to articulate – though the public voice is smothered, the interior voice freely flows. This is a conception of working-class consciousness that suggests an essential and universal cerebral realm that can be separated from the inequalities of material circumstance.

Thus, the characters' chronic inability to express themselves through dialogue is contrasted with a marked fluency, almost verbosity, of interior monologue. This typical example occurs as Mr and Mrs Fury are lying in bed, arguing:

'His nightly glass,' she thought to herself. 'He'll get quite expansive just now.' She looked at him, a kind of inward glow suffused her. Ah! All the things he didn't know! All the hidden things. She could feel them welling up in her, bursting to be free. But she held them fast. One day she would have her say. Then she would reveal everything. What a story it would be. He wouldn't know where he was standing. He'd simply be swept off his feet.' (50)

Mrs Fury associates her husband's 'expansiveness' with weakness and a lack of self-control. By contrast, she exults in the knowledge she withholds, which radiates within her, glowing like the contents of a treasure chest – a psychological form of riches in a materially impoverished life. What becomes clear in this passage is the intimate connection between speech and control of the narrative: 'what a story it would be'. We glimpse, too, a hint of what is at stake: he who loses control of his own narrative 'wouldn't know where he was standing', a phrase that suggests disorientation with regard to beliefs, opinions, apprehension of the truth and perhaps even one's own identity. Formally, the prose is typical of much of the novel in the way it mingles modes of presentation. We begin in direct thought, reported and contained by inverted commas and a framing clause ('she thought to herself'), but the

character's inner voice swiftly breaks free from these conventions and is relayed in a flurry of pure narrative ('She looked at him'), free direct thought ('Ah! All the things he didn't know!') and free indirect thought ('One day she would have her say'). One gets the sense of the character's voice overflowing the containing narrative and competing for precedence in the creation of meaning.

One of the most prominent characteristics of *The Furrys* (and indeed the strike fiction of Lewis Grassie Gibbon and Idris Davies) is a shifting focalisation that allows intimate access to multiple characters' consciousnesses – a technique that Fordham suggests 'closely approximates' Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony.⁷⁹ The following passage, in which we are given insight to the various family members' attitudes to Peter having been sent to the seminary, is worth quoting at length by way of illustration. It begins in Mrs Fury's point of view:

The spirit within her, long-buried, suddenly took fire. This son was going to be different. Peter must be a priest. At first Mr Fury protested. Why should this son be singled out for special favours denied to the others? Mrs Fury was equal to the occasion. Why had they been denied to the others? He himself knew best. Dennis Fury had nothing to say. He half believed that his wife was right, though his every word and deed only revealed the resentment against what he called his wife's "crazy Irish idea." The woman was determined. She broke down all opposition. [...] But he saw a change in the other brothers. They alienated Peter from their affections. They looked down on him, at the same time secretly hating their mother for this sudden bestowal of favours never offered to themselves. Desmond said that it wasn't being fair to the boy himself. Mrs Fury felt as though her eldest son had dealt her a blow. Wasn't fair to Peter? What on earth was he thinking about? But Anthony agreed with his brother. He said it was up to Peter. He knew best. Did he really want to go in for the Church? (30)

⁷⁹Ibid., 124. If we accept this as a useful way of contextualising the dialogic qualities of *The Furrys* it must be emphasised that it is only an approximation of polyphony. While Hanley's narrative style does present the reader with a 'plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses,' (Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, 6) the novel doesn't quite meet the criteria of Bakhtin's polyphony due to the intermittent presence of an omniscient narrator, which Dentith has also noted, and even the odd glimpse of an authorial hand adjusting the reader's moral judgements. For example, in chapter seven Peter sits on top of a wall and watches the railway men at work. The narrator makes his presence felt at first through the use of industry jargon that Peter, who has been at a Catholic seminary since he was a small boy, would be unlikely to use. Later, as the men down tools and walk into town, leaving Peter still on the wall, the narration follows, not slipping into any single consciousness but watching from the omniscient position – 'The streets seemed blocked with men. In Hatfields, doors were opened. Women stood on the steps, while from the windows above half-dressed children stared into the street.' (219) In chapter 10, Hanley provides a fairly substantial authorial summary of the clashes between police and protestors, outlining the motivations of the latter. 'Some of the crowd had come to loot, and others, like Professor Titmouse and Peter, had come to see the fun.' (332)

The interiority of this passage, divorced entirely from the materialities of the characters' fictional world, illustrates Hanley's primary interest in the inner lives of his characters. His approach here is dialogic; the occasional sentence in which the narrative is attributed (*He half believed... Mrs Fury felt...*) makes it clear that this interlocution cannot be the recollection of a single consciousness. Instead, we switch between the perspectives of Mr and Mrs Fury and it is left ambiguous as to whether we briefly inhabit the consciousness of the sons, Anthony and Desmond, or whether their voices as they appear here are fragments of remembered speech incorporated into the thoughts of one or the other of their parents. This dialogic style is fundamental to Hanley's representation of consciousness. As Dentith observes, '*The Furys* represents consciousness in a way that demonstrates its preoccupation with, or its *constitution* out of, the word of the other.'⁸⁰ It is in the friction between, and interactions with, one another that the characters come to life. Both Hanley and (as I will later discuss) Gibbon rely on polyphony as a means of presenting the life of a community without merging and homogenising its members – maintaining characterological individuation and ideological distinctions, as exemplified by the divergent political views on the strike exhibited by various characters. This polyphonic working class is not the unified mass desired by the unions and demonised by politicians and the right-wing press. Another function of Hanley's dialogism is to disorientate the reader. It is not easy to evaluate the 'truth' or authenticity of any given statement when one cannot be sure if it is direct or reported. Moreover, the boundaries between thought and speech are unclear. In this way, Hanley's prose style destabilises signification and, in doing so, manoeuvres the reader into a position of proletarian powerlessness. Ultimately, this intermingling and overlapping of voices begs the question: is anyone truly the author of their own story?

In one of the novel's two major strike scenes, the anxiety of working-class representation is manifested in a peculiar and unsettling shift in narrative voice. Thus far, the novel has been narrated from the various perspectives of its protagonists with frequent digression into internal monologue, to allow the expression of their thoughts and feelings. However, in chapter ten, Peter meets Professor Titmouse – a grotesque character who is literally larger than life, standing 'over six feet in height and almost

⁸⁰ Dentith, 'The Modernist Subject Goes on Strike', 49.

as broad as he was long' (327). Titmouse keeps up a continuous, manic soliloquy – spoken aloud, in direct speech, addressed to Peter – which dominates the narrative and through which the events unfolding are described in a theatrical flow of oratory. The pair climb a statue of a lion and sit on its back, watching a public meeting in the square. When Titmouse asks why the crowd have gathered, Peter suggests that they have come to protest against police brutality – a fact of which the omniscient narrator has earlier apprised the reader. Titmouse scoffs:

'Fiddlesticks! To protest! That is wrong, my boy. They do not know why they are here. Understand me. They are a lot of sheep. Look!' he said. 'Would you say that action constituted a protest against brutality? Brutality. They do not know what the word means. Look!' he repeated. 'Just below you. There is brutality. Real brutality. Wicked. Look at the child! She is crying. She is being crushed. Her mother holds her to her breast, but she is being crushed by the crowd. What right has that woman to bring her child here? To stew for hours, suffocated by sheer weight, by the smell of sweating bodies, of mouldy clothes.' (336)

The sheer physicality of this scene, with its focus on the press of bodies, the excretions and odours, suggests there is something deeply offensive about the working-class body en masse. Titmouse denies the crowd any constructive purpose and portrays them instead as mindless animals. His condemnation is framed in moral terms ('what *right* has that woman?') and is seconded by Peter's eroticised view of the woman suggesting another kind of moral laxity: 'Her blouse was open, and the boy could clearly see her breasts. Their whiteness stood out boldly in the darkness.' (Ibid.) Later, Titmouse again makes great use of the olfactory sense, describing 'the almost pestiferous odour that crowds exhale [...] Behold those who have risen from ten thousand stinking mattresses who have emerged from their rat-holes. Look at them! Bury your nose in that stinking heap.' (341) John Carey writes that '[d]enial of humanity to the masses became, in the early twentieth century, an important linguistic project among intellectuals.'⁸¹ He cites Nietzsche, whose 'most common image of the mass is as a herd of animals'; Woolf who visualises an 'almost shapeless jelly of human stuff'; Pound who describes contemporary England as 'the great arse-hole' from which 'the waste and manure' of the 'rabble' exudes.⁸² When Hanley describes a sound like a 'thunderous rush of water' that turns out to be a 'tidal wave'

⁸¹ John Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses: Pride and Prejudice among the Literary Intelligentsia, 1880-1939* (Chicago: Academy Chicago, 2002), 24–25.

⁸² Ibid. Of course, the modernists were not universally hostile towards the working class. Joyce was curious about, and far more willing to delve into, the materialities of working-class life.

of men and women 'flooding the side-walk,' he echoes the language of anti-democratic Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset who envisioned 'a gigantic mass of humanity which, launched like a torrent over the historic area, has inundated it'.⁸³ Carey contextualises this fear of the masses as a response to the population explosion of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which gave rise to a perception of overcrowding – the idea that the crowd had 'taken possession of places which were created by civilization for the best people'.⁸⁴ Anathema to this elitist worldview was the extension of democracy or the 'tyranny of the least and the dumbest' as Nietzsche put it, a development whose ultimate conclusion would be socialism – a 'hopeless and sour affair'.⁸⁵ On the face of it, Hanley's linguistic alignment with an intellectual elite appears as a betrayal of his class – not only shirking his 'burden of representation' but also appearing to co-opt an anti-democratic ideology. Indeed, Stokes suggests that: 'through [Titmouse's] lunatic rhetoric is somewhat equivocally conveyed what one assumes to be Hanley's own view' – an assumption Pridmore supports.⁸⁶ However, there is sufficient textual evidence to question this assumption. Most obviously, one must consider the fact that Titmouse is not a character designed to evoke empathy. He is a fairytale grotesque whose hectoring and lascivious personality leads Peter to conclude early on that 'the man must be mad' (330). Such characterisation automatically calls into question the validity of his views. Moreover, multiple aspects of Titmouse's characterisation indicate his position as a would-be social superior: his elevated vocabulary; his verbosity; his claims to anthropological and sociological expertise; his great physical presence and lofty position upon the stone lion. Moreover, he is a professor, though of course this title is as suspect as everything else about this peculiar character. As opposed to a conduit for the author's viewpoint, one might read Titmouse as an outlandish caricature of a member of the intelligentsia, whose divisive language and figurative dehumanisation of the crowd can be viewed in the context of his class prejudices. The unwholesomeness of this figure of the intellectual is further underscored by his warning to Peter: 'Learning is knowledge. But be careful. Be

⁸³ José Ortega y Gasset, *The Revolt of the Masses* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1932), 119–20. Quoted in Carey, *Ibid*, 3.

⁸⁴ Carey, *The Intellectuals and the Masses*, 3.

⁸⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1961) 75-7, 98. Quoted in *ibid.*, 4.

⁸⁶ Edward Stokes, *The Novels of James Hanley* (Melborne: F. W. Cheshire, 1964), 47. See also: Pridmore, 'Mass Violence and the Crowd'.

careful. A little is enough. Too much is rank poison. It destroys one's simplicity, my boy.' (339)

The textual evidence to suggest an implicit indictment of the elitist position is appealing, and yet this chapter resists the easy transposition of a traditional class narrative. As Peter walks home alone, he appears to have assimilated Titmouse's prejudiced view; he finds the people around him repellent and his observations, like those of Titmouse, focus upon the olfactory sense: 'The stale breaths, the smell of garbage, of cheap shag, of grease, of steam rose all around him [...] If he remained in this crowd a minute longer he would smother.' (347) This assimilation becomes even more pronounced later in the novel when Titmouse's disembodied voice rings in Peter's ears urging him to have sex with his brother's wife: '*Go up. She is waiting for you. Do not hesitate.*' (502) These interjections into Peter's internal monologue, which are marked out by italics and clearly characterised by Titmouse's grandiloquent phraseology, are sustained and disturbing. Since no other characters interact with Titmouse, it is possible to conceive of him as a figment of Peter's imagination – and, as such, a personification of the darker side of the human psyche. Thus, Titmouse's views, his deep intolerance toward, and demonization of, the working-class crowd can neither be 'assumed' to be an expression of Hanley's own views, nor safely defused as a satire of the intellectual elite. Rather, the chapter creates an uncomfortable ambiguity, leaving the reader to confront the possibility that there is a Professor Titmouse lurking inside each of us.

As the novel draws to its dramatic conclusion, Mrs Fury discovers Peter's affair with Sheila (his brother's wife) and in the final pages is overcome with rage, able only to repeat the same question, over and over – 'Have you been with that woman?' When she finally receives a response in the affirmative, words fail her: "'What!'" Then she raised her clenched fists and struck her son between the eyes. "What!" she screamed. "What!" (548) Rendered monosyllabic, she gives up on speech altogether and resorts to beating Peter's face to a pulp with her fists. It is Mrs Fury's failure to control her own narrative (which is by her own design inseparable from the family narrative) that leads to this eruption of violent, wordless emotion. In beating Peter, she is beating her own pride and her dreams of raising the family's social standing. Moreover, this reserved, self-conscious, fastidiously 'respectable' character is making the very worst of public spectacles. It reads and feels like an implosion – an act of self-harm – and suggests something more at stake than power

and control. It suggests that one of the consequences of losing this battle for self-authorship and access to a public voice, might be to succumb to the stereotypes and lose one's identity to a working-class cliché. Having fought so hard to differentiate and elevate herself and her family, in this moment of total loss and despair Mrs Fury falls into the role of a violent, inarticulate, uncouth member of the dreaded 'masses'.

The satirical voice in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Cloud Howe*

Gibbon, whose real name was James Leslie Mitchell, was the son of a crofter and grew up on rural Scottish farms in Aberdeenshire and later Kincardineshire (the Mearns), which provide the setting for his acclaimed series of works *A Scots Quair*, of which *Cloud Howe* is the second volume. Ivor Brown writes that as a child Gibbon showed literary promise early on and was 'far readier to escape with a book than to help with the work on the farm.'⁸⁷ After just a year at a secondary school, Gibbon left to find work as a reporter for the *Aberdeen Journal* and later the *Scottish Farmer*. He would only return to work in the fields with his father for a short stint in his twenties, and yet as Brown has noted, the characters and texture of *A Scots Quair* is drawn from his intimate knowledge of the crofter's way of life: '[h]e had lived with folk who lived hard, riving their food from an often grudging earth in an air that nips the blood.'⁸⁸ The first volume of the trilogy, *Sunset Song*, tells the coming-of-age story of Chris Guthrie. Chris's life is tied to the land and the animals as she farms, first alongside her father and later her husband who dies in the war. *Cloud Howe* begins after a short ellipsis of time during which Chris has married again, this time to a preacher, and consequently risen into the middle class – a change in circumstances that sets the scene for the rising class tensions of the second novel. The General Strike occurs at the climax of the book and coincides with, arguably causes, Chris's miscarriage. The strike's failure and the loss of the child become catalysts for her husband's mental and spiritual decline, and eventual death. In this way, though the strike is partly elided from the narrative as a result of Chris's illness, its impact is substantial in terms of plot and theme.

Given that *Sunset Song* has been described as 'the sacred cow of twentieth-century Scottish literature' it is hardly surprising that the *Scots Quair* trilogy as a

⁸⁷ Ivor Brown, 'Foreword', in *A Scots Quair*, by Lewis Grassie Gibbon (London: Hutchinson, 1966), 6.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

whole has attracted substantial critical attention.⁸⁹ (The MLA International Bibliography lists 74 articles for Lewis Grassie Gibbon to Hanley's 26.) Most relevant to the present study are those articles that examine aspects of narratology, voice and language. In 'Who is you? Grammar and Grassie Gibbon' (1975) Graham Trengove establishes a frame of reference for some of the novel's more unusual narrative techniques, focusing on the differing uses of the second-person pronoun.⁹⁰ The uses of 'you' identified by Trengove pertain to a number of different narrative voices employed in the telling of the story, including an anonymous generic voice, later characterised as the 'community voice' in a useful essay by Catriona Low.⁹¹ This narratological inventiveness is complemented by Gibbon's lyrical and original use of language – a form of 'synthetic Scots' – that has attracted critical interest both for its aesthetics and its political implications.⁹² Ramon Lopez Ortega's sensitive analysis of the texture of the language and Graham Tulloch's dialectical investigation have proven particularly pertinent to the present study and are referred to in greater detail below.⁹³ The *Scots Quair* trilogy has often been read with attention to the oppositions of Scotland and England, the pastoral and the industrial, the country and the city, however, Ferrall and McNeill note that the author employs 'innovations in representational technique, to make *class politics* central to the reader's

⁸⁹ Donald MacAlister Budge, 'Introduction', in *Smeddum: Stories and Essays*, by Lewis Grassie Gibbon (London: Longman, 1980), ix.

⁹⁰ Graham Trengove, 'Who Is You? Grammar and Grassie Gibbon', *Scottish Literary Journal* 2.2 (1975): 47–62.

⁹¹ Low characterises the various community voices employed in the narration of Gibbon's short stories. She uses these to build an ideological profile of Gibbon's fictional communities and argue that the primary purpose of the community voice must not be overlooked – namely the telling of a good story. Catriona M. Low, 'Community Voices in Gibbon's Short Stories', in *A Flame in the Mearns: Lewis Grassie Gibbon a Centenary Celebration* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2003).

⁹² John Corbett discusses the rhythm and cadence of Gibbon's prose – comparing stylistic and in particular prosodic differences and continuities between *Sunset Song* and another of Gibbon's novels, *Spartacus*. See: John Corbett, 'Ecstasy Controlled: The Prose Styles of James Leslie Mitchell and Lewis Grassie Gibbon', in *A Flame in the Mearns: Lewis Grassie Gibbon a Centenary Celebration* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2003). Hanne Tange presents a Bourdieusian reading of *A Scots Quair*, examining the way language is associated with social mobility. See: Hanne Tange, 'Language, Class and Social Power in A Scots Quair', in *The International Companion to Lewis Grassie Gibbon*, ed. Scott Lyall (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2015).

⁹³ Ortega argues that, contrary to prevailing critical consensus, the third novel in the trilogy, *Grey Granite*, maintains artistic parity with the other two volumes. See: Ramon Lopez Ortega, 'Language and Point of View in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*', *Studies in Scottish Literature* 16, no. 1 (1981): 148–59. Tulloch discusses the origins and influences of Gibbon's 'synthetic Scots'. A literary creation which, he argues, has its own internal coherence and logic, not equivalent to any spoken Scots of the past or present. See: Graham Tulloch, 'The Search for a Scots Narrative Voice', in *Focus on Scotland*, ed. M. Görlach, Varieties of English Around the World (Edinburgh: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1985).

understanding of Scotland's transformation... a complex, negotiated, conflicting set of discursive struggles and competing rhetorical strategies'.⁹⁴ It is my argument that these struggles and strategies are evidence of an overt anxiety surrounding issues of working-class representation that emerges in Gibbon's prose in the form of a satirical counter-attack. I discuss: the way that Gibbon's self-conscious construction of a 'synthetic Scots' voice can be seen as indicative of the compromise and contradiction inherent to the (supposedly oxymoronic) position of the working-class writer; how, like Hanley, Gibbon constructs a gossiping, claustrophobic society to foreground the struggle for control of one's own life narrative; how the technique of the 'communal voice' works to personify heterodoxy within the text; and how the author's complex use of focalisation and narrative mode are deployed, not only to satirise and undermine working-class stereotypes (and a certain brand of petty conservatism), but also to make a claim for the validity of working-class life as a subject of art.

A Scots Quair represents the culmination of a conscious effort on Gibbon's part to find a suitable voice in which to write about the rural Scottish communities of his youth. In 'Literary Lights', a 1934 essay on present state of Scottish literature, he described his technique as:

...to mould the English language into the rhythms and cadences of Scots spoken speech, and to inject into the English vocabulary such minimum number of words from Braid Scots as that remodelling requires.⁹⁵

For Gibbon, the Scots tongue is one in which the writer can 'adorn his meaning with a richness, a clarity and a conciseness impossible in orthodox English'.⁹⁶ However, to view Gibbon's use of language in purely nationalistic terms would be to oversimplify matters. In the same essay, he highlights the class politics surrounding the use of Scots language: 'it is still in most Scots communities [...] the speech of bed and board, and street and plough, the speech of emotional ecstasy and emotional stress.

⁹⁴ Ferrall and McNeill, *Writing the 1926 General Strike*, 134–35, my emphasis.

⁹⁵ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Literary Lights', in *Scottish Scene* (London and Melbourne: Hutchinson & Co, 1934), 173. The extent to which Gibbon considered the creation of this voice or language as fundamental to the creative process is evidenced by the broader argument set out in the same essay, in which he states 'there is not the remotest reason why the majority of modern Scots writers should be considered Scots at all.' (Ibid., 167) Giving the example of Willa Muir, he suggests she is considered a Scots writer because 'she is Scots herself and deals with Scots scenes and Scots characters,' however for Gibbon, the linguistic dominance of English in the works Muir and numerous other 'Anglo-Scots' authors disqualifies their proper categorisation as part of a body of Scottish literature. (Ibid., 169) This objection of Gibbon's suggests a view of language as a crucial component to the construction and representation of a culture.

⁹⁶ Ibid., 165.

But it is not genteel.⁹⁷ Quoting James Barke, he goes on to illustrate that the surviving remnants of the Scots and Gaelic tongues are associated with the 'few impoverished crofting communities,' which survived 'the decay of the Gael and his native Gaelic culture' brought about first by 'military suppression and dictatorship, then economic suppression.'⁹⁸ In this way, the Scots language has become socio-politically charged. This connection between language and class is reinforced by the orality of Gibbon's prose. Ortega describes the language of *A Scots Quair* as full of 'intimate signals, incomplete sentences, colloquial repetition, hesitations, verbal omissions, anacoluthon and other grammatical "inconsistencies."⁹⁹ The narrative voice continually blurs the line between literary and spoken language, complementing colloquial language with the use of techniques such as digression and direct audience address that suggest a sympathy and affiliation with earlier folk traditions through which the myths and histories of the common people have been handed down through generations.

If Gibbon's synthetic Scots provided a unique medium for self-expression and a voice in which to mediate the lives of his rural Scots communities, it seems also to have been written with consideration of its future readership – and, indeed, an awareness of the foibles of the literary establishment as illustrated by the critique of 'London publishers' earlier quoted. Corbett has noted the opportunities 'spurned by Gibbon to make his narrative more densely Scots.'¹⁰⁰ His own phrasing: 'to inject into the English vocabulary such minimum number of words from Braid Scots as that remodelling requires' suggests a literary balancing act, running the risk, on the one hand, of over-diluting his rich, colloquial prose and, on the other, of alienating an English-speaking readership. Another interesting aspect of this wilful construction of a narrative voice is that Gibbon refused to be fettered by notions of authenticity.¹⁰¹ In fact, Corbett notes that the writer 'was clearly at pains to distinguish his prose style

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 174.

⁹⁹ Ortega, 'Language and Point of View', 150.

¹⁰⁰ Corbett, 'Ecstasy Controlled', 90.

¹⁰¹ Gibbon was, after all, writing at a time when the nature and purpose of working-class writing was a matter of lively debate. It was only two years after the publication of *Sunset Song* that the editors of *The Left Review* called for the creation of 'a people's culture' and counselled writers to keep their formal experimentation to a minimum: 'because our content is new we must be all the more careful of our form; that we shall be better understood if we make such innovations as we need to make, gradually.' (Annabel Williams-Ellis, *Left Review* 1 (October 1934): 40.) For all its good intentions, the literary establishment's preference for a lack of artifice in working-class writing, in the pursuit of the 'authentic' working-class voice or experience must have served to further limit and delimit working-class writing.

from [...] the "authentic" transcribed speech of the Mearns.¹⁰² Thus the 'rhythms and cadences of Scots spoken speech' are mingled with literary language and imagery – an 'empty garden blind with rain', a town 'held in the hand-grip of frost', a village 'undreaming the dark tomorrows that came with the sailing ships from the south...' one might list dozens of further examples.¹⁰³ It is a voice that seems to reflect Gibbon's own identity as a writer of working-class origins, blending the literary prose of his education with the rural vernacular of his people. Ivor Brown, a close friend, noted how enormously productive it proved:

The author has said that working in this convention helped him to turn out *Sunset Song* in six weeks. It kept his typewriter flowing. That was his surface talk. I believe that the rhythm did, in fact, come from deep fountains of his own feeling for the land and for its people.¹⁰⁴

When we speak of writers 'finding a voice' it is often with an idea of resonance – that, once hit upon, this voice might allow such a flow of prolificacy. For many British writers of working-class origin, the concerns of national identity might not be so relevant as those of regional identity and the contrasts of dialect softer. Nevertheless, Gibbon's negotiation of a complex artistic terrain brings into stark relief a process that must, to a lesser or greater extent have been universal for such writers, particularly in the representation of working-class communities. Hanley, of course, chose a vastly different approach and was criticised for a lack of authenticity by reviewers in three national newspapers, the *Daily Express* commenting: '...if the *Furys* were a family of geniuses living in a refined part of Sussex, one could more readily believe in their existence, but their thoughts and language are far above the Liverpoolian stratum in which the author sets his characters' – a contemporary response that only serves to further underline the complex project undertaken by both writers.¹⁰⁵

This difference in approach to the vocalisation of the thoughts and utterances of their working-class characters is just one of a number of aesthetic and thematic discontinuities between *Cloud Howe* and *The Furys*. One striking similarity between the two novels, however, is the claustrophobic atmosphere of surveillance and wilful misrepresentation that characterises their respective communities. As Chris reflects,

¹⁰² Corbett, 'Ecstasy Controlled', 90, 89.

¹⁰³ Gibbon, *Cloud Howe*, 200, 296, 333. All subsequent citations refer to this edition and page numbers given parenthetically.

¹⁰⁴ Brown, 'Foreword', 8.

¹⁰⁵ James Agate, 'The Secret Journey by James Hanley', *Daily Express*, 16 July 1936, 8.

Segget is a town of 'murderous gossip passed on as sheer gospel, though liars and listeners both know it is a lie.' (258) She feels under constant observation even in her own home:

...she knew as well how the news went out from the Manse of every bit thing that was there – Ewan her son, how he dressed, what he said; and the things they said and the things they sang and how much they ate and what they might drink; when they went to bed and when they got up; and how the minister would kiss his wife, without any shame, in sight of the maid... (210)

Whereas in *The Furrys* the anxiety of representation is generalised and ambiguous, and the broader social structures obscured, in *Cloud Howe*, there is a clear class component to the struggle. Here it is the maid who carries out news from Chris's home for the titillation of 'all Kinraddie', the gulf between their social stations seeming to facilitate the distortion and gleeful narrativisation of Chris's actions. Unlike Hanley's Hatfields, where those members of the community on the periphery of the working class appear as lone agents (Brigid, for example), in Gibbon's Segget, there are discernable class groupings within the community largely informed by the nature of their occupations:

Half of the Segget folk worked at the mills – the spinners, as the rest of Segget called them; the others kept shops or were joiners or smiths, folk who worked on the railway, the land, the roads, and the gardens of Segget House. (215)

Much of the novel's discourse occurs between these latter characters who straddle the divide between the working and the middle class – a petite bourgeoisie of craftsmen, tradesmen and their wives. As well as looking 'up' to the Manse and misrepresenting Chris as overly proud and 'putting on airs', they look down upon the spinners as 'ill-spoken tinks, with their mufflers and shawls' and sometimes refer to them simply as 'the dirt' (203). Again, we see gossip presented as a tool for the maintenance of the social hierarchy, the status quo. Moreover, Gibbon introduces explicit class tensions to the struggle for precedence in the narrativisation and public representation of his protagonists' lives. With the exception of Jock Cronin, a local agitator (who speaks for the spinners and is one of their clan, though by profession he is actually a railway porter) the mill workers represent a voiceless subaltern, spoken *about* by other characters but never directly speaking.

Similarly to *The Furrys*, the struggle for precedence in the creation of meaning in *Cloud Howe* has a formal correlative in the use of shifting focalisation and

polyphonic voices. Though written for the most part in the third person (with notable interludes of the second person) the narrative shifts between the spoken and internal voices of a number of characters – a narrative technique that enables Gibbon to represent a diverse community with multiple and distinct personalities and outlooks on life. Though much of the novel is narrated from Chris's point of view, there are substantial sections in which the narrative drifts into a fluid, unattributed communal voice, often given the tag 'folk said', emphasising the lack of accountability in whispers and gossip. Trengove has noted that this community voice has the effect of 'powerfully suggesting a homogeneous body of opinion in Kinraddie'.¹⁰⁶ Thus, having sketched a class system in Segget, Gibbon employs this unusual narrative technique to give the abstract concept of heterodoxy a tangible, or rather audible, presence and persona within the text.

At times, when the focalisation is with the community persona, there is a sense of narrative layering, which serves to reinforce its facility of social critique. The following excerpt occurs during the Segget Show. A hammer-throwing competition is underway and the narration has switched to the communal voice, busily criticising the mill workers:

The worst of the breed was that young Jock Cronin, him that had just now thrown the hammer. The only one that wasn't a spinner, he worked as a porter down at the station, folk said that the stationmaster, Newlands, would have sacked him right soon if only he'd dared, him and his socialism and the coarse way he had of making jokes on the Virgin Birth; and sneering at Jonah in the belly of the whale; and saying that the best way to deal with a Tory was to kick him in the dowp and you'd brain him there. But Jock Cronin worked as well as he blethered, the sly, coarse devil, and he couldn't be sacked; and there he stood with a look on his face as much as to say *That's a socialist's throw!* (244-5)

In this short passage, seem to be three voices woven into a continuous speech. The hostile communal voice dominates and rings clearest in the adjectives used to describe Cronin – sly, sneering and coarse. Interjected into this narrative is Cronin's voice in the form of his views on 'dealing' with a Tory. Ostensibly, this speech comes second hand, recounted by the communal voice, but the fact that his joke is allowed a full airing suggests a third narrator – an organising consciousness allowing Cronin's humour to glimmer through the spite and small-mindedness of the communal voice. This narrator's presence is also felt in the expression of Jock's admirable qualities

¹⁰⁶ Trengove, 'Who Is You?', 49.

('he worked as well as he blethered') – since the community persona is not predisposed to making such an admission. The excerpt's final statement – *That's a socialist's throw!* – is not spoken by Jock, but interpreted from his presumably triumphant expression by the onlooker(s), the community persona. The comic absurdity of the moment, however, introduces the ironic distance, drawing the reader's attention to the kind of the black-and-white, tribal thinking that, even in the context of these light-hearted festivities, construes Cronin's every act as an extension of his unsavoury politics. Low has observed of Gibbon's short stories that much of the impact is achieved 'by the gap the reader perceives between the community's interpretation of events, and reality.'¹⁰⁷ In *Cloud Howe*, this ironic distance is so sustained as to make the communal voice appear almost as an act of mimicry – a straw man, so to speak, erected for the purposes of satire. (And, as such, it stands in stark contrast to the verisimilitude and sensitivity with which the consciousnesses of the novel's protagonists are portrayed.) Gibbon appeals to the humour and discernment of his reader.¹⁰⁸ As with *The Furrys*, the novel promotes a participatory reading experience, but rather than recreating the bewildering experience of loss of narrative control, Gibbon launches a pointed satirical counter-attack, deriding and undermining hegemonic attitudes towards the working class.

The action of the novel rises as the General Strike approaches and on Armistice Day, class divisions in the community are brought into sharp relief. As we have seen in previous moments of class antagonism, the focalisation switches from Chris to the communal narrator. The narrator notices the absence of spinners as the ceremony commences ('where were the dirt?') and is later surprised when the spinners arrive together, singing the Red Flag and disrupting the preacher's sermon. Feet, the policeman, asks '*Aren't you ashamed to break in on the War Memorial Service?*' To which Jock Cronin replies:

No, we're not, you see, Feet, we all had a taste of the war ourselves. Take a keek at our chests now, Feet my lad [...]

And then you saw plain what he meant, he himself, and all of the spinners that had marched to the Square, had War-medals pinned on their jackets or waistcoats, they were all of them men who had been to the War: except the three women, and they wore medals sent on to them after their folk were dead. Well that fair staggered Feet, and you felt sorry for him,

¹⁰⁷ Low, 'Community Voices', 104.

¹⁰⁸ One senses a sympathetic implied reader. Gibbon's satirical technique doesn't rely upon a working-class readership so much as a readership capable of empathising with his working-class characters – it is a political positioning.

especially as you had no medal yourself, you hadn't been able to get to the War, you'd been over-busy with the shop those years, or keeping the trade going brisk in the Arms, or serving at Segget as the new stationmaster. And well you might warrant if the King had known the kind of dirt that those spinners were he wouldn't have lashed out as he'd done with his medals. (267)

In this scene, the novel's riposte to the demonization and misrepresentation of the working class focuses upon the specific events of the General Strike. Ferrall and McNeill note that one of 'a stifling set of clichés' that gained currency during the strike was its widespread association with the First World War.¹⁰⁹ Throughout the strike the Government, BBC, newspapers and a number of public figures adopted this rhetorical form, making patriotic heroes of the (predominantly upper- and middle-class) volunteer strike-breakers and positioning the strikers as enemies to Britain herself. *The Daily Mail* offers a succinct example, describing its attitude to the strike as 'no more than a patriotic statement of the case of *all the people of Britain* against less than seven per cent' in an article headlined 'For King and Country'.¹¹⁰ One can only imagine the bitterness this must have caused among strikers who had served themselves, or whose family members had served in the war. In the scene above, Jock Cronin speaks out against this middle-class appropriation of the war as a symbol of bravery, nobility and sacrifice. As the communal voice reflects upon this moment, the identities of the characters behind this anonymous persona are made more explicit than usual – identifying themselves as the shopkeepers, the pub landlord, the stationmaster. There is a sense of revelation and vulnerability as the ruminating voice is forced to make excuses and ultimately retreat to its usual recourse of petty name-calling ('the dirt'). Moments later, Cronin literally takes the stage, jumping onto the pedestal of the war memorial to give voice to the silent body of workers behind him: '*WE went to war, we know what it was, we went to lice and dirt and damnation: and what have we got at the end of it all? Starvation wages, no homes for heroes, the capitalists fast on our necks as before.*' (268) His speech goes on in a substantial and eloquent passage of direct speech, uncharacteristic for the novel. One gets the impression that in the task of outlining the case of the workers and reclaiming their war honour in the face of public misrepresentation, there is perhaps too much at stake to allow the message to be

¹⁰⁹ Ferrall and McNeill, *Writing the 1926 General Strike*, 13.

¹¹⁰ 'For King and Country', *Daily Mail*, 6 May 1926, 2. My emphasis.

filtered by the layered and mingling consciousnesses of the novel's various narrators, no matter how cleverly and satirically deployed.

To use a rhetorical term, the text exhibits a form of schesis;¹¹¹ the reader is familiarised with the way the community thinks (its pettiness, its faulty logic) with the result that everything uttered by the communal voice is called into question and the opposite position subtly implied. This technique is not only reserved for the defence of Segget's subaltern figures and socialists. Ake Ogilvie is a liberal (as is Chris, the main protagonist) and a craftsman, but nevertheless becomes the subject of critical gossip in Segget because he writes fiction in his spare time:

He was jealous as hell of the real folk that wrote, Annie. S Swan and that David Lyall: you could read and enjoy every bit that they wrote, it was fine, clean stuff, not sickening you, like, with dirt about women having bairns and screaming or old men dying in the hills at night or the fear of a sheep as the butcher came. That was the stuff that Ake Ogilvie wrote, and who wanted to know about stuff like that? You did a bit reading to get away from life. (244)

Here, the satirical, overseeing narrator shares a joke with the informed reader, since David Lyall was a pen name of Annie Swan's, a writer of the Kailyard (cabbage patch) school, known for her sentimental and idealised stories of Scottish life. As usual, the joke comes at the expense of the community persona – the self-incriminating voice this time revealing its ignorance, cultural conservatism and prudishness.¹¹² More sinister, is the way the voice divides art into that which is clean and that which is sickening and dirty – a dichotomous vocabulary with Fascist undertones, which we have also seen applied to the mill workers, 'the dirt'. (Brown wrote that Gibbon 'died in 1935, knowing full well what Fascism would do to the world'.)¹¹³ The rhetorical schesis which discredits the communal voice has the effect of implicitly suggesting the opposite might be true – namely that those topics which appear distasteful to the narrator ('women having bairns and screaming or old men dying in the hills at night or the fear of a sheep as the butcher came') are in fact the things in life that are worth writing about. This is, of course, a self-reflexive

¹¹¹ Schesis: 'a figure of speech whereby the mental habitude of an adversary or opponent is feigned for the purpose of arguing against him; mocking by imitating another's speech.' George Crabb, *Crabb's English Synonyms* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1917), 613.

¹¹² William K Malcolm writes that Gibbon 'indulged habitually in self-reflexive humour that poked fun at his own literary pretensions.' (William K Malcolm, 'Art for Politics' Sake: The Sardonic Principle of James Leslie Mitchell (Lewis Grassic Gibbon)', in *To Hell with Culture: Anarchism and Twentieth Century British Literature* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2005), 38.) There may be a flavour of this habit in this excerpt, but the textual evidence suggests the joke comes at the expense of the communal persona and, indeed, Annie Swan.

¹¹³ Brown, 'Foreword', 5.

comment on Gibbon's own visceral, earthy stories, particularly those of *Sunset Song* and *Cloud Howe*. The topics carry associations of a rural, proletarian way of life (excepting the universal experience of childbirth, which is figured here in class terms by the use of dialect). Thus, having drawn on the language of his rural upbringing to fashion a voice that might be heard on the literary stage, Gibbon goes further and makes a claim for the validity of working-class lives as the subject of art.

A working-class literary tradition

In the introduction to this essay, I stated that the impact of the elision and subordination of working-class voices in those discourses – historical, journalistic, cultural – responsible for shaping the public narrative of the General Strike has been underestimated. The impact upon those who lived through the strike is evidenced by the way a grievously unbalanced press is remembered in personal accounts written some fifty years after the event. The way this anxiety of representation has manifested itself in the cultural products of an embattled working class is more complex. I hope that my study of Hanley and Gibbon's novels has not only illustrated the profound importance of issues of representation within these works, but also shed light on the sophisticated literary strategies and techniques employed by these authors in protest and in defence of the working class voice. In a 1940 discussion with Desmond Hawkins, George Orwell said: 'I don't believe the proletariat can create an independent literature while they are not the dominant class. I believe that their literature is and must be bourgeois literature with a slightly different slant.'¹¹⁴ There is not room here to argue whether the novels under discussion can be considered part of a distinct literature of the working-class. However, when it comes to the working-class struggle for a public voice and for control over one's political and cultural representation, I would venture that these thematic concerns are so loaded with class meaning as to be evidence of something more substantial than 'a slightly different slant'. If not contributions to an 'independent literature', they are certainly preoccupations (a few among many) that can be taken as evidence of a distinctive working-class literary tradition in this period. In the chapter that follows, I move from considering the contemporary – the anxieties and difficulties of voice and representation for working-class writers – to the historical. Having identified a

¹¹⁴ George Orwell and Desmond Hawkins, 'The Proletarian Writer', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. 1 (London: Secker & Warburg, 1968), 257.

pervasive theme of representational anxiety in working-class fictions of the General Strike, I move on to consider how the historical novelist can avoid compounding the conditions of voicelessness that may have given rise to this anxiety. As well as examining the role of the historical fiction writer in the representative process, and indeed the political implications of the task at hand, I will also take a practical approach, looking for the techniques and opportunities available to the writer of historical fiction when representing working-class characters – with reference to Pat Barker's acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy.

Chapter 2 – Voicing the historical working class: Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy

On London's Whitehall, there is a monument to the women of World War II, which was erected in 2005. It has the form of a cloak stand hung with the uniforms of land girls, air raid wardens, Wrens, nurses and others. The women are absent (and thus voiceless), but their clothes still hold the shapes of their bodies – the volume of the shoulders, bagginess at the elbows, creases behind the knees. It is as if they stepped out of them only moments ago. Its form invites us to imagine the women who inhabited those hard-worn clothes and can also be read as a comment on the way women had been largely overlooked in the commemoration of the war effort.¹¹⁵ To me, the monument illustrates one of many ways historical absence or silence can be recognised and integrated artistically and is also reminiscent of the task that faces the historical fiction writer who chooses to write about an underrepresented group.

In my introduction, I noted the scarcity of working-class voices in a number of historical monographs of the General Strike and the topical bias towards the voices of Trade Union representatives and political activists – an example of what Peter Hitchcock refers to as the 'synecdochic relations' in which an organisation stands in for the working class. In my first chapter, I also noted the anxiety surrounding working-class representation in a number of strike novels – the issues of objectification, stereotyping, and the loss of control over one's own life narrative. Having considered these obstacles to and pitfalls of the representational process, as a writer I must consider the implications of my craft. What extra responsibilities come with representing working-class characters in historical fiction when the voices of the working class have so often been side-lined or excluded from the historical record? How can the historical novelist avoid usurping and distorting the voices of her source material? How, too, can she avoid simply plastering over the gaps in the historical record and interposing her own voice in place of those that have been silenced? And how, like the monument on Whitehall, might historical fiction recognise, observe or integrate silence? This chapter explores these questions in relation to Pat Barker's acclaimed *Regeneration* trilogy. Barker has made a career of

¹¹⁵ The absence of any existing memorial 'marking women's role in the last [world] war' was a central argument in favour of the project from its first tabling as an early-day motion in 1997. (Polly Newton, 'MPs Back Call for Memorial to Women of War', *The Times*, 29 October 1997, 6.)

representing what Karen Knutsen calls a 'polyphonic vision' of the working class.¹¹⁶ In the *Regeneration* trilogy, she challenges hegemonic narratives of WW1, dominated by the war literature produced by middle- and upper-class officers (represented in the trilogy by the fictionalised characters of Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon) by introducing working-class voices and issues.¹¹⁷ Critics have noted Barker's dialogic approach to the historical record in her construction of narratives of class and sexuality.¹¹⁸ Less attention has been given to the ways in which Barker uses aspects of voice (thematically, symbolically, and technically) as a tool in that negotiation. In the discussion that follows, I examine the way voice figures both in the handling of Barker's class agenda and the representation of working-class characters in the trilogy. In particular, I discuss the way the writer uses voice to foreground the silencing of the working-class; to complicate the referential relationship between the 'real' historical working class and her characters; and to gesture towards historical plurality – so that her fiction, in the words of Jerome de Groot, is 'honest about its dishonesty' and indicates to the reader that there are 'other stories out there'.¹¹⁹

In my introduction, I discussed a series of potential problems surrounding working-class representation with reference to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay, 'Can the subaltern speak?' highlighting in particular issues of homogenisation, misrepresentation, and usurpation (or acting as proxy). In fiction, of course, it is not enough to simply problematize as critical discourse does with such facility. The novelist must venture, imagine, rely on instinct and take risks. She must also, therefore, explore the question of whether fiction asserts itself in quite the same way as historiography. When Jerome de Groot says *generally* of historical fiction that it is 'honest about its dishonesty', that it 'tells us that it is lying, that it is incomplete, that there are other stories out there', what exactly does he mean?¹²⁰ How often, for example, does the novelist distinguish for her reader the dividing line between

¹¹⁶ Karen Patrick Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting: Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy* (Munster: Waxmann, 2010), 76.

¹¹⁷ Both Knutsen and Pat Wheeler have noted Barker's disruption of the literary narrative of WW1 in favour of a more inclusive, class-conscious vision. See: *Ibid.*, 78 and Pat Wheeler, "'Where Unknown There Place Monsters": Reading Class Conflict and Sexual Anxiety in the Regeneration Trilogy', in *Re-Reading Pat Barker* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2011), 45.

¹¹⁸ In addition to the studies by Knutsen and Wheeler noted above, Peter Hitchcock provides a 'materialist rethinking' of the relationship between labour and masculinity, arguing that the trilogy 'destabilizes any and all attempts to narratively enclose the concept of working-class masculinity' and noting that Barker 'imaginatively tests' narratives of class and sexuality interfacing 'social determinants with what is emergent in terms of agency and rearticulation. Peter Hitchcock, 'What Is Prior? Working-Class Masculinity in Pat Barker's Trilogy', *Genders*, no. 35 (2002), www.genders.org/g35/g35_hitchcock.txt.

¹¹⁹ de Groot, 'History...Fiction...Now'.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

research and pure invention (which might be conceived of as fiction's 'lies')? Do historical novels *always* call attention to narrative plurality? One way of explaining the statement might be to suggest that the novel's fictional status is overt – announced, for example, by its placement on the shelf labelled 'Fiction' among other tell-tale signs. Patricia de Martelaere has argued against 'other world' theories of fiction, which suppose 'a kind of contract-model of the relationship between author and reader' in which the writer is only 'pretending to perform' and the reader only 'pretending to believe'.¹²¹ If such a contract exists, it is surely of a subtler type as suggested by Hilary Mantel in the first of her 2017 Reith Lectures: 'When you choose a novel to tell you about the past, you are putting in brackets the historical accounts, which may or may not agree with each other, and actively requesting a subjective interpretation. You're not buying a replica, or even a faithful photographic reproduction, you're buying a painting with the brushstrokes left in.'¹²² While emphasising the subjective nature of historical fiction, Mantel is careful not to dismiss its discursive power. Fiction's overt fictionality does not, after all, preclude cultural and political influence. It is just as capable of distorting, usurping and homogenising the working-class voice as are non-fictional genres. As a cultural product, the historical novel may influence public memory. Some of the most interesting historical fiction (such as Mantel's Tudor trilogy) inhabits the ambiguities of history and in suggesting alternative perspectives may well alter the reader's perception of people and events of the past. It may suggest revisionist histories. What I hope to illustrate in the discussion that follows are some of the specific ways in which Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy is 'honest about its dishonesty' and acknowledges that there are 'other stories out there' and, indeed, other voices telling those stories.

The *Regeneration* trilogy is set during WW1 and tells the story of the lead practitioner, Dr Rivers, and patients of a psychiatric hospital for officers, Craiglockhart.¹²³ Of all Barker's novels, the trilogy has gained the most critical

¹²¹ Patricia De Martelaere, 'The Fictional Fallacy', *British Journal of Aesthetics* 28, no. 3 (1988): 260.

¹²² 'The Day Is for the Living', Lecture, *The Reith Lectures* (Halle St Peter's, Manchester: BBC Radio 4, 17 June 2017).

¹²³ Pat Barker's *Regeneration* trilogy comprises: *Regeneration* (London: Penguin, 1992), first published 1991; *The Eye in the Door* (London: Penguin, 2008), first published 1993; and *The Ghost Road* (London: Penguin, 2008), first published 1995. All future references are to these editions and are given parenthetically using the following initials: *Regeneration* (R), *The Eye in the Door* (E), *The Ghost Road* (G).

attention and *Regeneration* has also been placed on the national curriculum as a core set text for AQA AS and A Level English solidifying its position in the literary canon and increasing its influence upon the public memory of WW1. *Regeneration*, the first in the trilogy, was Barker's first historical novel and, as Merritt Moseley notes, was received by some critics as a distinct change in direction or focus for a writer who had 'developed a reputation for politically engaged fiction dealing with the post-industrial culture of north-eastern England, particularly the lives of its working-class women.'¹²⁴ What may appear as a departure in terms of geographical and social setting nevertheless benefits from consideration in the context of Barker's oeuvre. As Moseley notes, critics have incorporated her work into a tradition that includes D. H. Lawrence, Robert Tressell, Sid Chaplin, 'and more recent authors of working-class-fiction like Alan Sillitoe (from Nottingham, 1928-2011), Stan Barstow (Wakefield, Yorkshire, 1928-2011) and John Braine (Bradford, Yorkshire, 1922-86).'¹²⁵ As such, she is regarded as a 'working-class writer' who not only represents (*darstellen*), but is also seen as a representative (*vertreten*) of her class.

The trilogy begins with the admission of Siegfried Sassoon to Craiglockhart, following his public anti-war declaration, where he is later joined by Wilfred Owen. These men are, of course, best remembered for their war poetry which gave voice to the suffering and brutality of the soldier's experience, undercutting the romantic and jingoistic rhetoric employed by the Government and armed forces to encourage men to enlist. It was an intervention so successfully staged that their counter-narrative has now become the dominant narrative of the war, iconic and canonised. However, Barker is not satisfied to simply re-tell the story of Sassoon's resistance; she complicates the enclosed world of highly educated, upper-middle-class officers epitomised by the war poets with the introduction of a working-class protagonist, Billy Prior. Prior is aptly described by Bernard Bergonzi as 'a clever scholarship-boy who has managed to acquire a commission in the wartime army, but who is consciously at odds with the shared public-school attitudes and background of Rivers, Sassoon and Graves ... he is rebellious, class-conscious and generally "bolshy".'¹²⁶ As well as exposing class dynamics, Prior also functions as a gateway to certain working-class experiences of the war that would be inaccessible to the war

¹²⁴ Merritt Moseley, *The Fiction of Pat Barker*, Readers' Guides to Essential Criticism (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 1.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 4.

¹²⁶ Bernard Bergonzi, *War Poets and Other Subjects*. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), 6.

poets and Dr Rivers. In *Regeneration*, Prior begins courting Sarah Lumb, a munitions worker who later becomes his fiancée, and this provides narrative congruity for a few scenes among Sarah and her fellow workers in the factory; in *The Eye in the Door*, Prior is working for Intelligence at the Ministry of Munitions and returns to the working-class community in Salford where he grew up to investigate a supposed assassination plot by anti-war activists; in *The Ghost Road*, Prior returns to combat in France and to the company of enlisted working-class men whom he describes in his diary. Throughout the trilogy, Barker makes space for working-class characters, causes and concerns and, as Knutsen notes, 'through Prior some present-day preoccupations with issues of class are broached and classic literary versions of the war are questioned, problematizing earlier historical representations of class.'¹²⁷

One of the ways in which Barker approaches this problematization is through a psychological and symbolic exploration of the silencing of the working-class soldier. Prior first presents to Dr Rivers suffering from mutism, only able to communicate by writing on a notepad. This symptom is politicised along class lines when Rivers explains to Prior that officers don't usually suffer from mutism, whereas he says, 'At Maghull, where I was treating private soldiers, it was by far the commonest symptom' (R, 96). He goes on:

'Mutism seems to spring from a conflict between wanting to say something, and knowing that if you do say it the consequences will be disastrous. So you resolve it by making it physically impossible for yourself to speak. And for the private soldier the consequences of speaking his mind are always going to be far worse than they would be for an officer. What you tend to get in officers is stammering.' (R, 96)

Here, Barker presents us with self-censorship both as a learned behaviour and a subconscious cause of mutism. The voice becomes symptomatic and its usual connotations of agency and self-expression are complicated. It is in fact a battleground where a conflict plays out between the desires and interests of the private soldier – the desire 'to say something' and the 'disastrous' consequences. Later, Prior provides a vivid example of just how barbaric these consequences could be; again in conversation with Rivers, he begins by quoting Tennyson's *The Charge of the Light Brigade* and goes on to say:

¹²⁷ Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting*, 78. This function of Prior's character is also noted by Pat Wheeler who states: 'it is through Prior that [Barker] eschews the stultifying middle-class perspective that is firmly attached to some First World War fictions.' Wheeler, 'Where Unknown There Place Monsters', 45.

'Shall I tell you something about that charge? Just as it was about to start an officer saw three men smoking. He thought that was a bit too casual, so he confiscated their sabres and sent them into the charge unarmed. Two of them were killed. The one who survived was flogged the following day. The military mind doesn't change much, does it? The same mind now orders men to be punished by tying them to a limber.' Prior stretched his arms out. 'Like this. Field punishment No.1. Crucifixion.' (R, 67)

Barker's choice of imagery – the crucifixion – emphasises bondage and immobility, concepts that have particular resonance in a class context, as well as the obvious Biblical connotations of persecution. This anecdote brings into relief the hierarchical functions of oppression and suppression; all of the men – privates and officers alike – are propelled into mortal danger by the war and forced to suppress their thoughts and emotions in order to conform to rigid military roles. However, the private soldier's recourse for self-expression is further limited by his subordination to the will and whims of the officers. The officer may speak in a limited way – he may stammer – but the dire consequences faced by the privates give rise to cases of total mutism, which is presented as self-censorship at its most extreme.

In a 2004 interview, Barker identified the inherent paternalism of a historical discourse that speaks *for* the working class, represented in this case by the private soldier: 'Owen and Sassoon thought they were speaking on behalf of the inarticulate soldier. But many people are *assumed* inarticulate only because nobody is prepared to listen.'¹²⁸ In this matter, she coincides with Spivak, who in a revision to her original essay notes that, '[a]ll speaking, even seemingly the most immediate, entails a distanced decipherment by another, which is, at best, an interception.'¹²⁹ Barker illustrates just how distanced this decipherment may be – how faulty the interception – when she highlights institutional and societal structures and mechanisms that precipitate the silencing and censorship of the working-class soldier. These themes are most disturbingly realised when Rivers goes to visit Dr Yealland, a fellow psychotherapist who treats private soldiers at the National Hospital. There is a starkly drawn contrast between the two institutions. The methodology at Craiglockhart is dialogic; the officer patients are encouraged to talk to Rivers, a gentle man 'adopted as a father figure' (R, 34) by many of his patients, and through

¹²⁸ Maya Jaggi, 'Pat Barker: Dispatches from the Front', *The Guardian*, 16 August 2003, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/aug/16/fiction.featuresreviews>. My emphasis.

¹²⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'History', in *A Critique of Post-Colonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 309.

this talking therapy to share and overcome their traumas. Surrounded by sunlit, grassy slopes, life at Craiglockhart is punctuated by: 'the everlasting *pok-pok* from the tennis courts that somehow wove itself into the pattern of their speech and silence, as Rivers extracted his memories of France from him, one by one' (*G*, 33). Barker's sparing descriptive style lends extra significance to this recurring '*pok-pok*', an aural motif that comes to connote the back-and-forth of dialogue, the passing of traumatic memory, pieces of the past, from doctor to patient and back again. By contrast, the National Hospital's gloomy corridors strike Rivers as 'eerie' and 'uncanny' (*R*, 223). Yealland, who is portrayed as a didactic and overbearing character, silences his patients with the mantra: 'Attention, first and foremost; tongue, last and least; questions, never.' (*R*, 226) In a protracted and disturbing scene, the staging of which Esther MacCallum-Stewart suggests 'echoes the creation scene in *Frankenstein*',¹³⁰ Rivers witnesses Yealland's faradization therapy (the application of electro-magnetic currents) practiced upon a private soldier, Callan, who is suffering from mutism having served in an enormous number of battles: 'Mons, the Marne, Aisne, first and second Ypres, Hill 60, Neuve-Chapelle, Loos, Armentières, the Somme and Arras'. (*R*, 226) The principle of Yealland's treatment is that the patient cannot leave the locked room, or end the painful application of electric current, until he speaks. Rivers later reflects on this brutal, but ultimately 'successful' treatment:

...on the ward, listening to the list of Callan's battles, he'd felt that nothing Callan could say could have been more powerful than his silence. Later, in the electrical room, as Callan began slowly to repeat the alphabet, walking up and down with Yealland, in and out of the circle of light, Rivers had felt he was witnessing the *silencing* of a human being. Indeed, Yealland had come very close to saying just that. 'You must speak, but I shall not listen to anything you have to say.' (*R*, 238, author's emphasis)

This ruminative approach is characteristic of the trilogy; scenes recur in the characters' minds and are subject to their analysis. Through Rivers's interpretation, the silence of the working-class soldier is figured as a complex symbol of both oppression and resistance: the soldier loses his voice in response to unbearable conditions against which he is not permitted to speak out; this self-censorship, however, is also conceived as a *protest* of the unconscious mind. Hence Yealland's

¹³⁰ Esther MacCallum-Stewart, 'Female Maladies? Reappraising Women's Popular Literature of the First World War', *Women* 17, no. 1 (2006): 93.

aggressive treatment, though it effectively 'cures'¹³¹ Callan of his mutism, simultaneously enacts a further silencing. Knutsen has noted 'an emergent Marxism that exists side-by-side with the paternalistic class discourse in the trilogy'.¹³² This strand surfaces at the end of the treatment scene in a dehumanising moment suggestive of the reification of the working-class subject. Yealland, having made Callan speak, takes a dislike to the bitter smile on the patient's face: 'Yealland said, "Smile." Callan smiled and the key electrode was applied to the side of his mouth. When he was finally permitted to stand again, he no longer smiled.' (*R*, 233) Tinkered with and tuned up like a malfunctioning part, Callan is then made to salute and sent out 'fixed' and ready to be reinserted into the war machine.

It is in the portrayal of Callan's treatment that Barker's vision of the working class comes closest to Spivak's concept of the subaltern. Writing about the practise of *sati*¹³³ among widows on the Indian subcontinent, Spivak highlights the layered, often opposing forces of ideological production acting upon the subaltern subject, which in effect construct the subject. She notes that the ideological production surrounding *sati* can be compared or 'read with ... war, with the husband standing in for the sovereign or state, for whose sake an intoxicating ideology of self-sacrifice can be mobilized.'¹³⁴ As we have seen, Barker calls our attention to this ideology of self-sacrifice or martyrdom when she uses the symbolically charged image of the crucifix. Callan is both subject and object of a complex layering of ideologies – not only a deep-seated survival instinct in conflict with his 'patriotic duty' to his country, his pre-determined role in the national narrative,¹³⁵ but also the ideological production of the medical profession which requires the patient to heal and conform, to exhibit what is perceived as normal or healthy both in terms of the psychological

¹³¹ Though, during Rivers's visit to the National Hospital, a member of staff is unable to answer his questions about the relapse and suicide rates following Yealland's treatment. In the following novel, Rivers notes that '[e]lectric shock treatment has a very high relapse rate' (*E*, 205).

¹³² Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting*, 108.

¹³³ *Sati*: 'The Hindu widow ascends the pyre of the dead husband and immolates herself upon it. This is widow sacrifice.' Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 93.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 98.

¹³⁵ Mark Rawlinson notes another layer of contemporary ideological production – a narrative of masculinity as *silent* self-control. He refers to a scene in *The Eye in the Door* in which a young Rivers is traumatised by a painting of his Uncle William stoically having his leg amputated. Rawlinson notes this portrayal is held up as 'an ostensive definition of manliness as repression: "He didn't *make a sound*".' Mark Rawlinson, *Pat Barker, New British Fiction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 90.

and the corporeal.¹³⁶ He is caught in what Spivak calls 'a violent aporia between subject and object status'.¹³⁷ He must be a (British) subject, he must speak, he must participate, and yet he must perform his role as an object does, suppressing his subjectivity – the fractious voices of his consciousness and subconsciousness. This scene seems designed to illuminate the worst excesses of a homogenising, reifying, oppressive war machine that makes it impossible for Callan to speak even as he regains the use of his voice. He appears as a representation of one of history's casualties, a character we may pity, but cannot hope to understand; textually speaking, he is what Spivak might describe as a 'pointer to an irretrievable consciousness'.¹³⁸

This foregrounding of the silencing of the working class, and the introduction (through Prior) of various working-class voices to the trilogy, illustrate an awareness to and preoccupation with issues of working-class representation within historical discourse. The trilogy also provides some interesting answers to the questions earlier identified: how to do justice to the 'irretrievable heterogeneity' of the working class; how to avoid closing down alterities; how to deal with the writer's own 'inalienable interestedness' and the 'standing in for' (*vertreten*) that is inherent to the process of representation (*darstellen*). Barker has made a career of representing what Knutsen describes as a 'polyphonic vision of class,' working to individuate her characters on both side of the class divide and 'chip away at cliché'.¹³⁹ In Barker's own words, fiction should attend to 'recalcitrant, bloody-minded individuality; every other way of thinking about people demeans them.'¹⁴⁰ In the *Regeneration* trilogy, this polyphonic approach centres on Prior as a singular, ambivalent, multi-voiced character.

Prior's ambivalence functions across multiple axes. He is always, as Jim Shepard notes, under 'the stress of swinging between pacifism and patriotism, the lower and upper classes, hetero- and homosexuality, madness and sanity, while never

¹³⁶ Of course, what is sanctioned as sane and healthy behaviour in wartime is in direct opposition to the same in peacetime. Barker draws our attention to this opposition when, still thinking about Callan, Rivers reflects: 'Normally a cure implies that the patient will no longer engage in behaviour that is clearly self-destructive. But in present circumstances, recovery meant the resumption of activities that were not merely self-destructive but positively suicidal.' (*R*, 238)

¹³⁷ Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', 102.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹³⁹ Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting*, 76.

¹⁴⁰ Pat Barker, quoted in Jaggi, 'Dispatches'.

feeling he belongs on one side or the other.'¹⁴¹ Little wonder that Prior's father (who, when seen through the eyes of psychotherapist Rivers, appears a stereotypical blue-collar worker, brusque, with a broad northern accent, known to beat his wife) declares his son 'neither fish nor fowl.' (R, 57) It is in the context of class, however, that Prior's multi-voicedness operates most literally. Intensely self-conscious of his class background, Prior's career in the army has led him to brush shoulders with Oxbridge graduates and he is capable of modulating his voice and deportment to fit in with, or satirise, those around him. Though naturally he has a 'Northern accent, not ungrammatical, but with the vowel sounds distinctly flattened, and the faintest trace of sibilance,' (R, 49) he often plays with the class-revealing inflections of his voice, 'slipp[ing] into his mock public school voice.' (R, 131) The effects of this vocal mutability are two-fold. Firstly, Prior's presence in the novel – cynical, satirical and brimming with class antagonism – provides an alternative outlook on potentially familiar material. A fellow officer who has a sexual liaison with Prior is discomfited by his confidence in 'acting up' above his class (he doesn't quite fit the slur of 'temporary gentleman'), but seems not to notice when Prior begins 'acting down' for his benefit: 'He'd transformed himself into the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it was all right to fuck. [...] He roughened his accent. "A' right?"'¹⁴² In this way, Prior functions as a canvas upon which the prejudices and solipsism of the officer class are projected. His 'otherness' allows for the criticism and challenging of the upper-middle-class ownership of WW1 narratives of sacrifice and trauma. Secondly, Prior's conflicted, multi-voiced character, while bringing class issues to the fore, also functions to disavow direct referentiality – his singularity and indeterminacy discourages an archetypal (or even loosely referential) reading. It makes class – literally – a performance. To put this another way, the relationship between Prior the fictional character and the 'real' working class voices of WW1 (as found in soldiers' letters, diaries and so forth) is disrupted by his complex characterisation; thus while Prior raises class issues, he does not appear to 'stand in for' the working class as a more stereotypical character might. His voice and story are self-consciously 'other'. As Hitchcock notes, 'Prior destabilizes any and all attempts to narratively enclose the concept of working-class masculinity that the war

¹⁴¹ Jim Shepard, 'Gentlemen in the Trenches', *The New York Times*, 15 May 1994, sec. Books, <http://www.nytimes.com/1994/05/15/books/gentlemen-in-the-trenches.html>.

¹⁴² Barker, *The Eye in the Door*, 10.

requires.¹⁴³ In this way, Barker not only avoids simply overwriting (or reproducing with distortions and bias) the voices of the archive, she also suggests alternative possibilities of working class experience and in doing so indicates a heterogeneous vision of the working-class.

Not all critics have approved of Barker's innovation in the characterisation of Prior. While Pat Wheeler describes Prior as 'the most powerfully drawn male protagonist in the trilogy',¹⁴⁴ Martin Löschnigg argues that 'Prior is not a convincing character, since it is obvious that his role is to illustrate the issues of class, gender and sexuality, which the author aims to explore.'¹⁴⁵ I find this assessment problematic not least because it makes assumptions about authorial intention. Bernard Bergonzi goes further to suggest Prior 'is a figure from our time rather than [Rivers and Sassoon's]':¹⁴⁶

Billy dominates the trilogy, but he does so like some visitant from the future, in some work of science fiction or magic realism. The point is not that people could not have been bisexual or bitterly class-conscious eighty years ago, but that they could not have spoken or thought about these things in the terms that Barker gives to Billy.¹⁴⁷

It is Prior's voice – the way he is able to articulate aspects of his outlook and identity – that Bergonzi finds inauthentic. He goes on to pinpoint Billy's familiarity with Freudian and Marxist theory. I agree that Prior does sometimes appear as much a character of our time as of his own – particularly the way he gives voice to a casual, untroubled attitude to bi-sexuality (seemingly impervious to the 'morality' of his day). However, while Bergonzi takes this as evidence that 'Barker has impressive literary gifts but little sense of the past',¹⁴⁸ I consider it a deliberate postmodern technique. Prior's voice is a performance, stage-managed to bring the past into conflict with the present.¹⁴⁹ Some historical fiction is less concerned with producing

¹⁴³ Hitchcock, 'What Is Prior?'

¹⁴⁴ Wheeler, 'Where Unknown There Place Monsters', 45.

¹⁴⁵ Martin Löschnigg, '...the Novelist's Responsibility to the Past: History, Myth, and the Narratives of Crisis in Pat Barker's Regeneration Trilogy', *Zeitschrift Fur Anglistik Und Amerikanistik*, no. 47.3 (1999): 217.

¹⁴⁶ Bergonzi, *War Poets*, 10.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ After all, Barker weaves a complex web of intertexts that illustrate extensive research, which suggests to me her departures are deliberate. It strikes me that the problem is not so much Barker's limited grasp of history as Bergonzi's narrow view of the capabilities and possibilities of the historical novel as a genre. He suggests, for example, that '*Regeneration* would have worked quite well as a novel of limited aims, a fictional recreation of historical events', implying his disappointment or disapproval that 'Barker is more ambitious'. (*Ibid.*, 5–6.) Later, while circumscribing the imaginative

a 'fictional recreation' of the past than it is with exploring the ways the past lives on in the present, and how we as societies and individuals shape and are shaped by our historical narratives. The *Regeneration* trilogy is less overt in its metafictionality than some other examples of historiographic metafiction,¹⁵⁰ but Barker does provide signposts for the reader – signalling a fiction that is 'honest about its dishonesty' – particularly in her use of intertextuality.

When Prior is attempting to accurately recall a childhood memory, he reflects: 'The past is a palimpsest [...] Early memories are always obscured by accumulations of later knowledge.'¹⁵¹ This palimpsestic vision of the past is upheld by the interweaving of multiple historical and literary intertexts within the *Regeneration* trilogy. In her monograph *Reciprocal Haunting*, Karen Knutsen argues that Barker 'dialogizes the discourse of class by combining residual, dominant and emergent representations of class through intertextuality'.¹⁵² As well as the obvious interaction with the war poetry of Sassoon and Owen (and indeed Tennyson) Knutsen identifies many more literary intertexts including the work of D H Lawrence, Frederick Manning, E M Forster and Dickens.¹⁵³ One such intertext is Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In *The Eye in the Door*, Prior's characterological indeterminacy develops into a full-blown split-personality disorder causing him to enter 'fugue states', which afterwards he does not remember. This appears as an extension and heightening of his multi-voiced, pluralistic character. His inability to maintain a continuous sense of self pre-empts any attempt to apply a monolithic reading of his character and points self-consciously towards the plurality (and alterities) of working-class experience and identity – as when Prior finds himself duplicated in two facing mirrors and sees 'a long corridor of Priors, some with their backs to him, *none more obviously real than*

liberties 'allowed' by the author-reader contract, he states that such fiction 'overlaps with the more imaginative forms of biography', a statement which I believe suggests a rather two-dimensional conception of the relationship between historical fiction and the historical record. (Ibid.,10)

¹⁵⁰ For instance, the novels do not overtly break the fourth wall as does *The French Lieutenant's Woman* – one of a number of novels Linda Hutcheon considers exemplary of the genre. (Linda Hutcheon, 'Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History', in *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1989), 3.)

¹⁵¹ Barker, *The Eye in the Door*, 55.

¹⁵² Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting*, 76.

¹⁵³ There is some debate as to whether the trilogy can be considered postmodern. However, even Löschnigg, who argues that 'Barker's novels are not postmodernist novels at all', makes the concession that she 'draws upon primary as well as secondary sources on the war, which makes her novels intertextual in the best postmodernist manner.' Löschnigg, '...the Novelist's Responsibility to the Past', 227.

the rest'. (E, 10, my emphasis) In fact, this description suggests a further intertext: Magritte's painting 'Not to be reproduced' in which a man looks into a mirror and is presented with the back of his own head – a moment of 'othering' or splitting from the self that also poses questions about the composition of self-image and identity.¹⁵⁴

Barker's intertextual use of *Jekyll and Hyde* (both its narrative and its cultural significance) also functions to bring Prior's character into dialogue with historical concepts of class:

'Do you know what I do when I come round from one of these spells?
I look at my hands because I half expect to see them covered in hair.'
Rivers made no comment.
'You've read Jekyll and Hyde?'
'Yes.' Rivers had been waiting for the reference.

The hairy hands that Prior looks out for are linked, of course, to the atavistic transformation in Stevenson's novel (*'I looked down; my clothes hung formlessly on my shrunken limbs; the hand that lay on my knee was corded and hairy.'*¹⁵⁵) Knutsen writes of the class connotations loaned to the novel by this intertext, noting: 'The conflict between Jekyll and Hyde sheds light on the class phobias of the late Victorian era.'¹⁵⁶ She goes on to discuss Stephen D Arata's work, 'The Sedulous Ape: Atavism, Professionalism, and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*', in which he describes Victorian anxieties about a 'marauding and immoral underclass' and notes that '[e]quating the criminal with atavism, and both with the lower classes, was a familiar gesture by the 1880s'.¹⁵⁷ Elaine Showalter reads *Jekyll and Hyde* as a way of encoding male homosexuality, arguing that the novella 'can most persuasively be read as a fable of fin-de-siècle homosexual panic, the discovery and resistance of the homosexual self.'¹⁵⁸ For Showalter, the twinned encoding of paranoia about homosexuality and the lower classes is no accident. 'Jekyll's apparent infatuation with Hyde,' she states, 'reflects the late-nineteenth-century, upper-middle-class

¹⁵⁴ To my mind, the painting highlights the synecdoches relied upon in the composition of identity. Are we our faces? Are we our voices?

¹⁵⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde', *Project Gutenberg*, 101, accessed 28 September 2016, <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/42/pg42-images.html>, author's emphasis.

¹⁵⁶ Knutsen, *Reciprocal Haunting*, 84.

¹⁵⁷ Stephen Arata, 'The Sedulous Ape: Atavism, Professionalism, and Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*', *Criticism* 37, no. 2 (1995): 235, 234.

¹⁵⁸ Elaine Showalter, 'Dr Jekyll's Closet', in *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle* (London: Virago, 1992), 107.

eroticization of working-class men as the ideal homosexual objects.¹⁵⁹ As we have seen, Barker foregrounds such eroticisation when she has Prior 'roughen his accent' to become 'the sort of working-class boy Manning would think it was alright to fuck'.¹⁶⁰ Barker borrows from Stevenson, reincarnating in Prior the Jekyll and Hyde character in order to signal a break from binary conceptions of class (proletarian/bourgeois) and sexuality (homo-/hetero-). This self-consciously intertextual approach allows her to bring historical narratives of class into dialogue with her own conception of a mutable and pluralistic working-class identity. Having invoked this image of the 'marauding and immoral underclass', she implements a subtle but significant subversion: it is in Prior's 'Hyde state' that he most diligently carries out the work of the state by betraying his childhood friend – a conscription dodger and anti-war activist. Within this altered dualism, class loyalty is a facet of Prior's sane mind, whereas the lurking monster is the hatred inspired by his traumatic experiences at the front: 'his other self hated Mac for refusing to fight, for trying to bring the munitions factories to a halt [...] He could not [...] say, "I did my duty." What had happened was altogether darker, more complex than that.' (*E*, 266) The references to *Jekyll and Hyde* are woven throughout the novel and Sheryl Stevenson notes that when later Rivers directly quotes from the original, it 'provokes our awareness of reading characters who are engaged in analysis, both psychoanalytical and literary'.¹⁶¹ This is, she notes, 'a consummately metafictional moment'.¹⁶² The metafictionality of the novel allows a direct signalling to the reader that Prior is a literary creation – far more an exploration of our ideas of class (contemporary and inherited) than a fictional reconstruction of a historical working-class man.

Of course, Prior is not the only working-class character in the trilogy. In the final instalment, *The Ghost Road*, he returns to the front and, as a commanding officer, to the company of enlisted men. Parts of the latter half of the book are

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹⁶⁰ Showalter also notes, 'In the most famous code word of Victorian homosexuality, they find something *unspeakable* about Hyde'. (*Ibid.*, 112.) As indicators of class and sexuality, it is interesting to note how inarticulacy or roughness of speech mingles with the concept of the '*unspeakable*' – indicators of otherness and subordination that serve to reinforce the idea of the voice as a locus of agency.

¹⁶¹ Sheryl Stevenson, 'The Uncanny Case of Dr Rivers and Mr Prior: The Dynamics of Transference in The Eye in the Door', in *Critical Perspectives on Pat Barker*, ed. Sharon Monteith (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2005), 219.

¹⁶² *Ibid.*

narrated in the first-person as excerpts from Prior's diary. This modal shift is accompanied by metafictional references to the process of narrativisation:

It's evening now and everybody's scribbling away, telling people the news, or as much of the news as we're allowed to tell them. I look up and down the dormitory and there's hardly a sound except for pages being turned, and here and there a pen scratching. It's like this every evening. And not just letters either. Diaries. Poems. At least two would-be poets in this hut alone.

Why? you have to ask yourself. I think it's a way of claiming immunity. First-person narrators can't die. So long as we keep telling the story of our own lives we're safe. Ha bloody fucking Ha. (G, 115)

The hut Prior describes is full of fellow officers narrating the stories of their own lives. Now the first-person voice becomes a sort of talisman, a superstitious survival reflex. Prior laughs off the idea of 'claiming immunity', but there remains a strong sense of these men making a deliberate contribution to posterity. They commit their voices (as self-representation) to paper in order to leave something of themselves behind and claim ownership of their experiences, their moment in the broader historical narrative. These simultaneous scribbles suggest polyphony and plurality – the platoon's shared experiences recorded in a dozen different voices. There are different genres too and though letter writing is constrained by what they are 'allowed to tell', there is no mention of such constraints when it comes to diaries and poetry allowing a fuller and freer self-expression.

It is interesting to compare this scene, where we witness officers finding means of self-representation and a sort of agency through these literary forms with a later scene in which Prior sits among the private soldiers as they too write. Earlier in the trilogy, the reader's attention has been drawn to the disparity in the rules surrounding censorship. Prior explains to Sarah that he reads and censors all his men's letters. When she asks who censors his letters, he replies: 'Nobody. [...] They rely on our sense of honour.' (R, 131) Again, Barker foregrounds limitations imposed upon the working-class soldier's means for self-expression. In this later scene, Prior sits among his men as they write, and because he censors their letters he knows (or at least thinks he knows) what is preoccupying them:

Moore's wife spent the evening of Friday before last in the lounge bar of the Rose and Crown (I know it well) in the company of one Jack Puddephat, who has a good job at the munitions factory and brings home five quid a week. Moore's sister-in-law, a public-spirited soul, was kind enough to write and tell him about it.

Heywood's kid has tonsillitis and the doctor's all for whipping them out. Heywood's all for leaving well alone, but the letter he's writing now won't get there in time.

Buxton's missus is expecting their first. The birth doesn't seem to worry her, but it terrifies him. His own mother died in childbirth, and he's convinced himself the same thing's going to happen to her.

Jenkins writes the most incredibly passionate love letters to his wife. They've been married since before the Flood, but obviously nothing's faded. [...] He must know they're censored, and yet still he writes, page after page. Perhaps he needs to say it so much he somehow manages to forget that I read them first? (*G*, 220-1)

At first glance, it seems that Barker is engaged in a process of individuation, transforming the private soldiers from homogeneous cannon fodder to sketches of human beings. This is complicated, however, by the mode of delivery. What comes across most strongly in each of these brief summaries is not so much the man – Moore, Heywood, Buxton or Jenkins – but rather his social container, the circumstances and constraints pertaining to his act of self-expression. Whereas the officers are depicted spending time in self-reflection and creative writing, these men are grasping to maintain connection with the world and keep hold of what's theirs – their wives, the care of their children. Barker has elsewhere used Prior's 'knowing the price of everything' as shorthand for his working-class subjectivity. (*R*, 77) Here, the five quid a week earned by the man entertaining Moore's wife poses a direct threat to his marriage and masculinity, deftly illustrating a materialism concomitant with disadvantage. Similarly, Buxton's fear for his wife's health, inspired by the loss of his mother, suggests a passing-down through the generations of particularly proletarian problems, in this case high maternal mortality. (The characterisation of the munitions factory workers earlier in the trilogy is similar; bad teeth, an abusive husband and a botched abortion dominate the conversation.) One gets a sense of precarious lives hemmed in by contingency, reminding the reader of the class war that has been waging on seemingly interminably, while the world war takes centre stage. Simultaneously, Barker returns to the theme of working-class voicelessness. Jenkins's sexually explicit love letters appear as an act of defiance – the most provocative mode of self-expression available to him and a direct challenge to the censorship the men endure. The fact that Heywood's letter may not reach home in time suggests a strong link between his voicelessness and his powerlessness. It also hints at an important distinction between the voice associated with a speech-act when the speaker is physically present and the written voice. For Heywood, the written

voice is an imperfect substitute – and here we see again the argument that the problem lies not in the (presumed) inarticulacy of the working-class subject but the fact *no one is prepared to listen*. The written voice, as an object, a letter, is all too easily ignored, mislaid, delayed. Its agency dissipates. Each of these men negotiates the inadequacy of the written voice as a surrogate for the self; it provides them only a limited and frustrated sort of agency. Simultaneously, Barker continues to remind her reader that the story is a literary invention. The interior lives of the men are buried within layers of representation: firstly their own composition process, constrained (or not) in deference to the censor, by paper shortages, by the brief windows of leisure time and so forth; these letters are not quoted directly but are twice-filtered: once through Prior's consciousness, and again through his own composition process, his diary entry, which takes the form of a brief summary of those parts he considers most interesting. The diary entries themselves are a switch of narrative mode that calls attention to the constructedness of the text, which when combined with the palimpsestic narrative layering, not only serves to disavow an uncomplicated appropriation of the voice of the private soldier, but also gestures to the way the working class voice has been buried and overwritten in the hegemonic narratives of WW1.¹⁶³

It is part of Barker's mission, Sharon Monteith suggests, 'to ensure that the reader never loses sight of the fact that the meaning of the First World War persists and changes for each generation.'¹⁶⁴ To a practitioner, the *Regeneration* trilogy suggests the possibilities of fiction when it comes to dealing with and re-invigorating our relationships with the subordinated voices of the past. Her foregrounding of the historical silencing of the working-class is worked through the novels symbolically *and* thematically, an approach which – like the Whitehall monument – serves to

¹⁶³ It is interesting to note that in the first novel, *Regeneration*, such distancing techniques are not employed in the construction of the voices of the working-class women at the munitions factory. (Though they too are very much framed by their social context rather than explored in depth as individuals; there is little interiority, instead the women appear defined by familiar proletarian problems: bad teeth, violent husbands, unwanted pregnancies.) We hear their voices directly and see them interact independently of the men and everything that goes on at Craiglockhart. I wonder whether this is because Barker feels a greater ownership and sense of license when it comes to the working-class woman – much of her fame as a novelist, after all, comes from her sure-handed portrayal of such characters. Does Barker feel she knows these women as intimately as she knows the women of *Union Street*, despite the elapse of seventy years or more? Or is it because Barker is portraying their expansion. These women are a group in the ascendant – involved in a process of emancipation as opposed to silencing.

¹⁶⁴ Sharon Monteith, *Pat Barker* (Tavistock: Northcote House, in association with the British Council, 2002), 69.

mark and honour those who have been silenced or overlooked. Barker's masterstroke in responding to the problems of working-class representation lies in the creation of the protagonist, Billy Prior, whose multi-vocality allows the introduction of working-class characters and concerns to disrupt hegemonic literary narratives; whose apparent modernity of outlook brings the past into conversation with the present; and whose indeterminacy and plurality allows Barker to enter into the discourse of class without overwriting or usurping the working-class voices of the archive, and simultaneously suggesting the heterogeneity of a historical working class. The *Regeneration* trilogy also speaks for the legitimacy of the writer's own voice and project. These novels are distinctively of one voice which, if not the author's, is that of a consistent narrator – consistent in writing style, preoccupations, modes of perception and thought processes (and other aspects of 'voice as persona'). Fiction, after all, is not a discourse of scientific impartiality and the historical novelist does not attempt to reproduce history exactly as it was, but to share with the reader something of her own ideas about the past and, indeed, the present. This is one of the capabilities of fiction I enjoy most as a reader: the way it allows me to perceive the world through the filter of another consciousness. Barker's subtly postmodern approach suggests to me that a writer who chooses to write about subordinated and oppressed subjects of history does well to be aware of and engage with the ethical implications of the task at hand and look beyond issues of authenticity and verisimilitude; it is not enough to lie complacently on the laurels of one's research, claiming fidelity to the voices of the archive. However, neither should fiction be considered a simple overlaying or overwriting of historical voices – it is a complex and sophisticated genre, which should be judged not only for its ability to 'give voice' to the silenced and ignored, but also for the integrity and resonance of its ideas.

Closing comments: 'the sound of her voice... the touch of her hand'

Having identified a pervasive theme of representational anxiety in working-class fictions of the General Strike, and considered how the historical novelist can avoid compounding the conditions of voicelessness that may have given rise to this anxiety, I will finish by making a few comments about how the creative portion of my thesis attends to these issues. To complement my consideration of the fictions of the General Strike produced by working-class writers, I spent some time exploring the British Library's collection of working-class autobiographies, with the aim of gathering more first-hand accounts from members of the working class. I collected just over seventy excerpts relating to the General Strike – a wealth of sources, relatively speaking, and yet far from comprehensive. This collection shares similar bias and blind-spots to the left-wing historical monographs discussed in my introduction – with the addition that these autobiographers, as Jonathan Rose notes, are self-selected by their literary ambitions and/or interest in posterity.¹⁶⁵ Perhaps unsurprisingly, the male autobiographers in my collection outnumber the women by a ratio of 8:1. The most noticeable absence or silence is that of working-class housewives, many of whom we know helped in the soup kitchens, stood beside their husbands on picket lines or held the home together, doing their best to make ends meet on minimal strike pay. These women, though not the exclusive focus of my novel, make up a substantial portion of its characters. I therefore faced two major challenges when writing 'Nine Days in May': firstly, how best to handle the responsibilities that come with drawing on the working-class voices of the archive; and secondly, how best to negotiate the silences and absences of my archive.

'Nine Days in May' is written from the first-person perspective of a woman in her mid-twenties, Alma Cox. Cox has left the working-class community in which she grew up and married into the lower-middle class. However, when her husband dies she has no choice but to return to the home of her estranged father, Herbert Yates, a popular local trade union leader. During the General Strike, Cox volunteers in the local soup kitchen and struggles to establish a new life in a community she

¹⁶⁵ Rose notes, '[m]emoirists are not entirely representative of their class, whatever that class may be, if only because they are unusually articulate.' This dominance of the voices of male trade union members ideologically aligned with the political left is magnified by the fact that political '[a]gitators usually managed to record their lives in some form,' – no doubt putting a knack for oratory to good use. Rose, *The Intellectual Life...*, 2.

deliberately left behind. The novel explores themes of otherness and solidarity, as well as the historical problem of women's work, agency and public voice. Cox's position – stranded in a no-man's land between classes – allows me to make a considered approach to some of the problems of working-class representation discussed in this thesis. Her ambiguity of social class, however, functions slightly differently to that of Billy Prior. Prior is able to move between classes, altering his voice, and acts as a canvas upon which the prejudices of the officer class are projected. Cox is a less-competent social chameleon; she is unable to integrate with either her late husband's friends or her father's community. In this way, she acts as a conduit for the novelist who approaches the historical subject of the General Strike from the outside, seeking a plausible and accessible way in. In this novel, it is more often Cox's own prejudices that are revealed than those of the characters around her. I have positioned her in this way in order to effect a gentle undermining of her authority, allowing for the possibility that hers is a biased view when it comes to matters of class. She is not a full-blown unreliable narrator (the reader is expected to believe her account), but there is an element of doubt when it comes to her perceptions and representations of her father's working-class community.¹⁶⁶ In this way, the novel indicates to the reader that it does not claim authority over the working-class characters it represents. This is not the only way in which I touch upon issues of narrative plurality within the novel, but it is perhaps one of the most overt.

This between-classes position also solved a technical problem I faced early on in drafting the novel – namely, how to give voice to my protagonist in a first-person narrative. I began writing Cox's character with a rather limited vocabulary. This soon began to feel inappropriate both ethically (it felt like a sort of mimicry or appropriation of the working-class voice) and also aesthetically. Moreover, when I considered her upbringing as the daughter of an avid autodidact, to limit her vocabulary seemed unnecessarily restrictive, stereotypical even.¹⁶⁷ I came to realise that since my protagonist existed between classes, it wasn't necessary to attempt to ventriloquize a working-class voice of the period. I allowed myself more flexibility and put aside the vexed question of 'authenticity' in favour of a looser plausibility. I

¹⁶⁶ An example of this occurs in Chapter 10, when Miss Havensleigh challenges Cox's stereotypical view of the soup-kitchen volunteers. Cox's father also often challenges her preconceptions of those around her, including their neighbours.

¹⁶⁷ The working-class novels of the 1920s I read early on in my research gave me a feeling for the level of education one might achieve as a working-class autodidact – not only in terms of fluency and articulacy, but also philosophical and political awareness.

hoped only to create a voice that felt characterologically appropriate and was not so implausible in terms of period and class markers as to disrupt the reading experience.¹⁶⁸ As a result, Cox's voice is (perhaps inevitably) an adaptation or modulation of my own.

When it comes to the missing voices of the working-class housewives, the only resources offered up by my archive are second-hand descriptions of such women – the negative space, so to speak. Such descriptions lack that vital interiority. They lack the individuated voice as means of self-representation, as identity and as agency. Moreover, I noticed a common tendency among the working-class autobiographers to romanticise their mothers and wives, as illustrated by this excerpt from the autobiography of Leslie Paul. Paul describes how his mother was taken ill just as the strike began:

I sat with my father in the cold waiting room miserable with longing. How flushed and ill she had been, bent double with pain, and how frightened! My misery was worse because I was conscience-stricken. I cared little, I knew, in the ordinary way, how she felt, or whether she were ill or well. I was too busy to bother now that I was pursuing my own life with such egotism and ambition. She toiled and slaved for us all, and I was not grateful, and I hated my ingratitude. I remembered the last time she had been seriously ill, and I, thinking she was dying, had sat on the hot flagstones in the backyard beating my head against the lavatory door so that I might not hear her cries. I felt again like that small boy, longing for consolation, for the sound of her voice, the most clear and musical that I knew, and the touch of her hand, so worn with work.¹⁶⁹

Paul describes his mother's toiling and slaving, and acknowledges her low profile, suggesting the low societal value attributed to a housewife in comparison to a young man with prospects and ambition, such as himself. He provides a striking image of himself, as a child, self-harming to drown out his mother's voice as she cries out in pain. He is both terrified of his mother's voice and longs to hear it. He seems to recognise that his mother's voice is only heard and desired in this way when failing to fulfil her role. A description like this is like catching a fleeting glimpse of someone through the window of a moving vehicle. There is no way of going back to find out in greater detail who she was and what she might have had to say about the events her son narrates. The autobiographies I collected are full of such passing

¹⁶⁸ In practice, this meant trying to eliminate obvious anachronisms and integrate some older sentence structures/turns of phrase, as well as cutting some overtly 'literary' passages, which were not true to character.

¹⁶⁹ Paul, *Angry Young Man*, 77.

glimpses, with little of much substance. So, while it was necessary to the plot for me to 'give voice' to some working-class housewives – Cox's neighbour, Mrs Ridley, and the soup-kitchen women – I also wanted to find a way to integrate and acknowledge this archival silence. My main narrative device in this respect is Cox's dead mother, who stands in for these missing women. Already relegated to the realm of memory, she features in the narrative only through a series of troubling memories. Often symbolically boxed away, she is also sometimes represented by objects such as her wedding ring. Straightforward and familiar as these techniques may be, I hope they combine to give the effect of keeping the reader at arms length from the mother – replicating the process of my own frustrated research.

It can have a deadening effect to explain and analyse one's practice in too much depth. Therefore, I will allow these brief observations to stand as examples and leave space for the reader to observe and interpret other technical and thematic aspects of the novel for her/himself. Ultimately, the creative portion of this thesis can be seen as a performance that draws upon some of the techniques and thematic concerns discussed in the critical portion. Such thematic preoccupations have filtered through from my critical thesis in a fairly organic way; I have tried not to impose them wilfully, but have taken opportunities to integrate these ideas as and when they arose.

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Nine Days in May – a novel (chapters 1 to 16)

One

His house wasn't far from the docks, right on the promenade. The tide was out, showing the estuary's dirty knickers. Miles of mud covered in oil stains, driftwood and the veins left when the water runs off. I had my dead husband's easy chair wedged in my armpit, fingertips just grasping the seat. Hefting great thing. I'd piled the sack barrow with whatever I could save from home. A case full of clothes. A washbowl and jug. Blankets and towels rolled round my scabbard of knives. I checked the address. Could it be right? The house before me was the last of a tiny, soot-black terrace, shored-up outside with a pair of props thick as masts. The downstairs window was draped with torn bedsheets, stitched together across the middle. One pale pink, one off-white and stained in circles like greasy paper. I couldn't see anything through the gap, but I could hear what sounded like a riot. Young voices yelling. A thump and clatter. A woman's voice, loud and shrill.

'Just you wait till you get burned, then you'll be sorry.'

I checked the address again. I felt sure it must be wrong. It had been given to me by a toothless old John who was living in what had been my father's rooms. He told me Dad had moved on some eighteen months ago. The paper trembled as I held it. So long as the fellow had scribbled it right, this was it. Two-up, two-down, only so squat to the ground I might have touched the upstairs ledge if I'd jumped. Resting my knuckles on the flaking black paint, I paused. I counted three uneven breaths. Then I took my courage by the scruff of the neck and knocked.

A woman's voice rose over the children's fighting. *Shut your bleeding mouths or I'll shut them for you.* The door was opened by a small woman with a solemn-looking mug. She had loose skin round her eyes and a mouth that sank at the corners.

'Does Mr Yates live here?' I asked.

She looked at the barrow. The legs of my side table were pointing upwards with a washbowl wedged between them. The blankets were unrolling, sloping off the pile.

'He's out.'

'Don't mind if I wait?'

'Do as you like,' she said and closed the door.

I put the chair with its back to the house and sat in it. Two girls about my own age went by, one clutching a parcel. They stared at me, at my private things. A few paces on they started whispering, their bell-shaped hats touching.

It was troubling me, the idea of my father lodging there, with that sour-faced woman and God knows what rabble. I couldn't imagine him suffering it. He'd always been fond of quiet.

I'd not spoken to him for years, but I'd seen him, from a distance, at my husband's funeral. I hadn't thought he'd come, not for Bill. Perhaps he thought it only proper. It gave me a jolt, seeing him pull off his battered cap at the back of the crowd. I got this slipping feeling, losing hold of myself. As if the whole thing wasn't quite real until he turned up. I had to look away, study the grass, the nap of my gloves, the corner of the coffin. It might have been a varnished sideboard or dresser. Later, I'd looked for him at the wake, but he hadn't followed on. That was just like him, of course. He'd done the same at my wedding, back when our falling out was new and raw. We'd been rowing for weeks. Dad would accuse me of courting the capitalist devil. And here I was, crawling to *him* for help.

I stood to go, thinking I'd rather take my chances on the streets, then looked at my great pile of belongings and fell back into the chair. Who was I kidding?

It was vexing not knowing from which way he'd arrive or how long he'd be and in what frame of mind. The house was on the edge of the lanes where I grew up, an old part of town where most of the houses were on the crook. You'd get terraces like toppling dominoes, the last in the row leering over the alley, blocking the light. The lanes were not the slums. My mother, were she alive, would have you know that. Not like the courtyards and tenements you heard such awful things about. They were for respectable folk. *Them as pay their dues. Them not afraid of hard graft. Them as keep within the law.* The sort of place where women scrub their doorsteps every morning. There'd be a halo on the pavement that marked how far Mum could reach while kneeling on the step. It had a sharp edge to it, where the pale of the stones met

the dirt. It said *we're decent in here*. It seemed my father had come in a circle, now living less than five minutes' walk from the step my mother scrubbed all those years.

I decided it was most likely he'd arrive from town, so I kept my eyes to the south. In the distance a four-funnelled ship was coming into dock. People were walking the promenade, bobbing figures I'd imagine were him until they came close enough for me to see otherwise. When Dad finally arrived, there was no mistaking him. I knew his swaying stride. I straightened my hat, blew my nose, dusted my clothes off. As he approached, I leaned against the wall, trying to look casual, not so forlorn. He showed no surprise to see me. You'd have thought I waited on his doorstep every day. He had a moustache. That was new to me. Bushy, salt-and-pepper strands. I noticed the buttons on his coat were done wrong. He was a pale, washed-out version of himself, like a shirt tired by the mangle. He stood, hands in pockets, the peak of his cap shading his lined eyes. He would have me speak first.

'I've lost the shop,' I said.

His thin lips didn't move. He looked at the estuary, where the tide had crept in ten yards or so since I arrived. There was a tug leading a float of timber up the river.

'Suppose you'd better come in.'

I was glad to see the door to the downstairs rooms was closed, though I could still hear blue murder inside. He went ahead, taking the stairs slow and pulling heavy on the bannister to pass a missing step. His room was at the front, about ten foot square with grimy walls and a whiff of rancid fat. His books were in small piles on the floor and table. Half a dozen here, a couple there. A thin, wool mattress was made up with blankets. The window looked out to the promenade and the estuary beyond. On its ledge were pamphlets and more on the seat of his chair. The floor was plain boards, not very even and with gaps plenty large enough to swallow a coin or wedding ring. There was a fireplace with an iron grate and, next to it, a kettle balanced on a tiny spirit-burning stove. I stood in the doorway and watched as he moved some books this way and that, without much purpose so far as I could see. He gathered the pamphlets from the chair, careful to keep their order.

'Sit down.'

I sat. He leaned on the wall, which shifted a little. Around the doorframe a few grains of plaster fell from the lath.

'Lost the shop, you say?'

I nodded.

'How's that then?'

I shrugged. I didn't like to quarrel with him. I'd better not, since it was getting grey out and I dearly needed somewhere to sleep the night.

'He left you insolvent.'

'There was a mistake. Something amiss in the paper-work.'

He made a short, sharp noise in his throat. There had never been any pulling the wool over his eyes.

'How about your rooms, then? Your furniture?'

'It's all gone. I've what's outside.'

He rubbed his hands over his face as if he would wipe away the sight of me. It was all I could do to stay sitting there. Every muscle of mine wanted to up and leave, to go where he mightn't make a child of me. He was longing to say it, *I told you right from wrong*.

'You'll be wanting to stop a while.'

'Just till I've found work. A few days. A week maybe.'

He opened his mouth to say something more, then seemed to think better of it. The youngsters downstairs might've been in the room I could hear them that crisp and clear. *Hands off, it ain't yours. Give him one, Danny, go on*. Dad moved a book with his toe, pushing it closer to a pile, looking as if his mind was away.

'Best fetch your things in,' he said at last.

I didn't expect him to help, and nor did he offer. He went back to shuffling his papers and books. As I was hauling Bill's easy chair past the missing step, I noticed the door to the downstairs rooms was open. There was a boy standing in the gap. He was just a nipper, two perhaps. If it weren't for the fact he was naked, I wouldn't have known he was a lad. He had long wisps of hair, plastered to his head at the roots, brushing his shoulders. There were dirty marks on his legs. He stared, but his eyes didn't meet mine. I wondered if he was simple. When I went to fetch the blankets, the nipper was gone and the door was closed again.

Dad looked up from his books as I came in with the sack barrow, now empty, and put it beside the rest. I dusted my palms.

'That's it?'

'That's the lot.'

We stood apart – him by the window, me on the landing, my things on the floor between us. Now was the time to get off on the right foot. I ought to thank him – though the thought of it stuck my tongue to the roof of my mouth. Perhaps I left it a moment too long, for we both spoke together.

I said: 'I could fetch us some supper.'

He said: 'I've a meeting to get to.'

He stepped over my side table and started looking through his books. If he'd caught what I said, he didn't show it.

'A meeting now?' I asked, looking at the greying sky outside.

He tucked a well-thumbed notebook under his arm, its pages bowed around a pencil. 'Privy's out the back if you need it,' he said. 'And the tap.'

I listened to the staircase creak, then turned to the windowpane and watched his slight figure pacing down the promenade. It was turning chill. Clearing a space, I put Bill's chair next to Dad's, by the grate, and did my best to make a bed in the opposite corner to his. As I unrolled the blankets, I was careful not to drop my scabbard. It was heavy with steel. My old friends – hardwood handles oiled, blades polished. The scabbard's leather smelled sweet in the room's sour air. Pulling the cleaver from its pouch, I let it weigh on my palm. In its cold, shining face I just about made out my own. The bulb of my nose, my lard-white cheeks. I looked forward to getting some wrinkles, my skin sagging, anything to look less of a child. I put the knives aside and set to folding my bed-sheet.

Having been under the weight of the rest, my case took some persuading to open. Inside were clothes and bits of crockery. My fingertips touched smooth, pressed cotton and a laugh burst from my lips, harsh and flecked with spittle. It was my table linen. I hadn't the room to swing a cat, let alone erect a dining set. The top napkin had a corner full of needle-holes. I rubbed it, out of habit, trying to spread the weave. Soon after our wedding, before I'd convinced Bill to let me help in the shop, I'd tried embroidery. It seemed a wifely sort of thing to do, but each stitch was more crooked than the last, so I'd unpicked it all. I took my dish and cup and cutlery from among my underclothes. Beyond that, there didn't seem much point in unpacking. I let the lid fall shut.

It had felt like a lot when I was shifting it down the lanes. I thought I'd done well to keep so much out of the bailiffs' grabbing hands. But, as I sat by the empty

grate looking at my things squeezed into this room no bigger than a scullery, it was clear to me I had next to nothing.

There was bread in my shoulder bag, a little dry. Fishing in my foundation slip, I laid hold of my purse. Four bob or so in pennies and ha'pennies and farthings. It mightn't last three days. They'd swooped on the cash box before I could get to the takings. I'd watched a lad count and pack it away, along with my polished copper pans. He hadn't the smell of mother's milk off him yet, not the whisper of a beard, and there he was robbing me. My oak table they fairly chucked onto the back of their van, no care for the varnish. Then my cellar. A whole cellar full of stock – carcasses, joints – which I watched those thieving maggots divvy up amongst themselves on account of it wouldn't keep for auction. My heart could've hammered a hole in my ribs. I let my head fall back and stared at the ceiling, cracked and spotted with mould. *How could you have kept it from me, William Cox? How could you?* Being dead was his last excuse.

His easy chair was fretted to the threads at the arms, bits of horsehair peeping through. It was stained with smoke and splashed tea. I busted a bloke's ear for it. He'd tried to wrestle it from me in the street. Right there, with all the neighbours looking on. Customers too, turning up expecting to be served and finding a bombsite, the innards of my home spilled out. Anyhow, he wasn't having the chair. They took the display cabinet and the butcher's blocks – solid oak, cast iron legs, worn to dishes by three generations of Bill's family. They pulled down stacks of tins, rennet and tallow, and then the case of shelves itself. They even unscrewed the hanging rail that ran the length of the room. When they'd finished, it was a shell. Odd coloured patches of wall where the furniture had been. Painted sheep and pigs trotting blithe along the tiles. It did me no good to think on it.

My mother always said busy hands will quiet the soul. I looked about for something to do, something to keep me occupied. There was no coal in the scuttle. I wondered if that was out of thrift or need. I tucked the sack barrow in a bare, dusty space below the stairs. Fetched water and washed my face. Tried folding my bedding different ways. No matter what, I could feel the ridge of a warped board against my spine. I rolled my overcoat for a pillow, then realising it was far too early to sleep, put it on again.

Knowing his meetings, Dad wouldn't be back until late. He'd stay arguing and philosophising until his throat was sore. It was strange, sitting among the bits and

pieces of him. His shaving tackle, not properly rinsed, the brush dried into spikes. A shirt hanging to dry from the mantle, its tail pinned by a pair of bottles filled with water. A single plate, knife, fork, spoon. A cup on its side with tea leaves stuck to the bottom. More pamphlets at my feet. *Is apathy the working man's greatest sin? What made me a socialist, by F. W. Jowett. Lessons of Black Friday. Anarchism Exposed. England's Crippling Landlordism.* He never changed.

Two

I woke at dawn to the distant groan of the Timberspit foghorn. My feet were cold and wet in places. I patted the blankets, eyes getting used to the dim light and found it was the windowledge dripping, our gathered breath streaming down the panes. It would be a time before the shops were open, but I started getting dressed all the same. As I rummaged for my clothes, Dad drew his bedclothes higher. His eyelids flickered at the sound of water pouring into my washbowl. He turned to the wall. I tried to step softly on the stairs, thinking of the family underneath, but it made no difference. The staircase creaked and thumped like falling trees.

Stepping out into the morning, I was met by the wide-open sweep of the estuary. The sun was still low and cold and a haze hung over the water. A flock of seagulls stood in the mud.

It was my intention to find a position that morning. How hard could it be? There were a dozen or so butchers in the area. I knew a lot of them by reputation. Bill used keep his nose to the ground – who was thriving, who'd fallen foul of the health inspectors, who offered credit to folk without the means to pay. One or two I'd met at market days and auctions. My idea was to try with the biggest outfits first. Some who called themselves butchers really only had a bit of a stall in a doorway while others, like Wright, spanned four shop fronts and each morning hung out enough trussed beasts to empty a farmyard. There were butchers that specialised in pork or game and some that did the lot with groceries on the side. As far as I knew, none had a woman in the cutting room. The only women you find in a trade like this – and I mean really getting their hands dirty, not sat behind the cash desk – the only ones you'll catch handling a cleaver are those that come to it by accident or misfortune. I've heard of a pair of sisters in Dover who stepped in for their father

when he took to drink and a woman in the New Forest who took over her husband's shop when he volunteered for the war. He never came back, Bill said, so she kept the place on. I'd have liked to do the same. After he died, all I wanted was to keep the business going and perhaps one day have my sister, Rose, come and join me.

As I drew nearer to town, I slowed a little. There was no point hanging round shuttered shops. I bought a pair of Russets from a woman at the gate to Sweet Briar Park. She was bundled in a shawl and looked as if she would rather be in her bed than minding her barrels. I counted what was in my purse. Three and eight, plus two grubby farthings. Ever since I left the house, I'd had a funny feeling on my side, as if my skirtwaist was rubbing. As I bent to stow the second apple in my bag, I realised I had a dire itch. Inside the park, I stopped beside some bushes, and untucked my blouse. There were four red welts on my stomach, all in a line. It never rains but it pours, I thought. Dad's room had bugs.

Sweet Briar Park was set beside the water and gave a sidelong view of the spur of the docks. This patch of green was well known to me. It was where dock workers came if they were unlucky at the calling sheds. Dad had brought me there every day one summer when he had a long spell off work with his crushed ankle. That was before he packed in and took up with the union. He would chat to the blokes milling about, introduce me to them like I was a grown woman. I think they found me a bit of a chuckle for I would act ever so grave and not a bit fierce. I'd a knack for pitch and toss, which they played on the concrete floor of the bandstand. I won him a penny or two that way. Since then, they'd laid new paths and there were stone beds full of crocuses. I wondered if it was here the unemployed still gathered or if they'd moved on to some other, less prettified spot.

I sat down and waited for a decent hour, watching the clock on the great corn store. Small figures passed in front of the dockyard sheds and windows of the old brick warehouses winked as the sun rose. One of the cranes was turning slow as the hour hand.

Wright had an army setting up. I counted five blokes dressing the window – mature blokes they were, one with a splash of grey, another with a spot of bald, proud stomachs all round. A pair of boys worked alongside them, polishing the glass display cases, kicking up a stink with their vinegary rags. The owner himself was nowhere to be seen. As I stood waiting, they lugged out a heifer to hang. Only

Wright would display a whole heifer. It was a dwarf, but still almost as big as the pair of them and they were having a time getting it on the hook.

'Your way. Bring her your way,' said the taller of the two. He was trying to step on a box for the extra height. His voice was muffled, arms wrapped round the beast. All I saw of the other was his legs. He'd been swallowed by the thing. I kneeled and put my shoulder to the rump. The tall fellow stepped up and there was a clink of metal on metal.

'Cheers mate,' he said, then turned to look at me. His eyebrows shot up. 'Sorry. What can I do for you, love?'

'Has Wright any work going?' I asked.

'I dunno. Anything going, Pete?'

This Pete's drooping jowls reminded me of a short-nose boxer. He wore a full overall, starched and pressed, the knot of his tie just showing at the collar.

'Nothing,' he said. He was watching one of the lads dawdle, dragging a broom. 'Perhaps in the summer we might lose one of these lazy beggars to hop-picking. That's if we're lucky.'

'Nothing for a butcher? Experienced hand?'

He shook his head with a sorry sort of smile, then climbed a stepladder and began hanging bunches of rabbits. I thanked him and crossed the road.

'Here!' I heard him call after me. He pivoted not quite steady on his heels. 'Tell your fella he might try the market. Think they're after a porter or two.'

Your fella. Here we go, I thought. I wandered down St Mary's and the High Street, along the side streets that fanned out. Everywhere I asked, I got the same answer. No work. Nothing doing. Each time I was turned away, my insides drew a bit tighter. I almost stepped out in front of a motorcycle, I was getting that het up. All morning, I'd been ignoring a cold, savvy voice in my head saying, *you haven't a rat's chance.* Thirty-odd delivery boys in this town and most of them hoping for a spot in a cutting room. Grey men two paces from death's door still clinging to their bone saws.

I was running out of places to try when I strayed down The Shambles. I hadn't been there in years. It was the closest part of town to the old docks, now given over to lighter craft. You'd hear the ships' horns, though the water was out of sight. From time to time you might catch a faint crash as a crane driver dropped his load. The Shambles was a run-down alley, home to all manner of trades. When we were

youngsters, me and my sister sneaked there alone one night. You couldn't help but knock into someone at every step and the steam off the pickled whelks brought tears to your eyes. There were hawkers selling pots and pipes and bits of jewellery from rags laid on the road. There were women standing around with their bosoms spilling out of their dresses. We marvelled at an old crone who had a cloud of bumblebees tied to threads on her fingers. We didn't get far before Rose had her backside pinched and we turned to see a man thin as a skeleton. I leapt up to knock his hat off and we scarpered. We were laughing that hard we could scarcely run. What we would have done if he'd given chase, I don't know. The memory brought a smile as I picked my way round the puddles and potholes. I passed a bare-headed woman sluicing the stones with bucket and broom. Outside the *Puss in Boots* it stank of urine, vomit and spilled beer. It was the morning-after smell of a sailor's night out and no mistaking it; I passed one sitting on the kerb, head resting on his arms, his wide trousers soaking suds from the gutter. Missed his sailing, I wouldn't doubt.

The butcher was just opening, even though it was nearing midday. He was stacking the shutters in their housing and drawing chains around them. I knew it was a foreign shop, Jewish or some such, but this man's skin was as white as my own. Apart from the curve of his nose, you might have thought him an Englishman.

'You got any work?' I asked.

He pointed to his sign. It read, *Kaplan's Meat*, with foreign symbols underneath.

'I'm Kaplan,' he said. He held up one finger. 'Only me.'

The shop was narrow and low on each level, subsided like most of its neighbours. They say that people were smaller in the old days, well this place would have been a better fit for a doll. This Kaplan bloke had to duck to get under the lintel. I waited and he popped out with a trestle and set it on its legs. I took my knives from my bag. I wanted to make him see I was serious. Professional. All of a sudden, he looked interested. He checked up and down the row as if he was afraid someone might make off with them.

'Two pounds' he said.

'No.' I tucked the knives away. 'I'm after a job.'

'Two pounds sixpence. Last offer.'

'I'm a butcher,' I said. 'I want work.'

He laughed at me then set about chaining his trestle to an iron loop in the wall. I took the hint and pushed off. My soles slapped against the stones as the road turned steep, past boarded windows and the ripped lace curtains of the knocking shops. Was it really so far fetched? So bleeding funny? I feared I was like the chicken with its head lopped off, running about unawares.

At the bottom, I passed a lad selling the *Echo*. I was in the habit of buying it, so when he thrust one my way, I took it before I thought better. Three and four and two farthings. I'd have to be more careful. I glanced at the top row of headlines as I walked. *Police Chief's Funeral. Ship's Coal Seized by Government. TUC Negotiations – No Sign of Settlement. Bowell Misses Century By Three Runs.*

I spent most of the afternoon trying to work Dad's spirit stove to get enough warm water to wash my stockings and underthings. When they were drying, I spread the paper on the floor and knelt over the Positions Vacant. *Obedient seamstress; respectable parlour girl; young clerk of good address; first-class men need only apply; barman wanted, abstainer.* I could just picture the lemon-sucking faces of the advertisers. I wouldn't be surprised if they specified which side a man must dress. They could demand whatever they liked; it was them that had the choosing. Alongside a single column of Positions Vacant, there were three columns of Positions Wanted.

GENTLEMAN OF SMALL MEANS would give his services for a small salary.

UPHOLSTERER would be thankful for any job; none too minor; urgently needed.

WOMAN, 38, seeks evening work laundry or cleaning; 8d an hour.

Eight pence an hour. I hoped I was not that desperate yet. How were the rest of us supposed to make ends meet when this lot were offering themselves out for a pittance? I felt like applying to the silly bitch and giving her a hiding. Devaluation of labour, Dad would say.

It was much later that Dad came home. I was staring out of the window at the estuary, noticing how the last light turned the water to sheet metal. He had a large loaf of bread under his arm and two tins of something in his hand. My heart rose, thinking he had taken it upon himself to bring home supper. I went back to kneeling over the advertisements, anything not to look idle. I had my eye on an advertisement

for a mannequin parade – *the best in British-made artificial silks* – but I was thinking of the soft, white innards of that loaf. In my mind, I was already tearing off a great big chunk to chew, dipping it in the juices of hot beans. I heard the front door clunk and his slow footsteps on the stairs. He took his time crossing the landing. I was about to go out to check he hadn't come a cropper when he stepped in, empty handed.

I'm sure my face looked a picture, but he took no notice. He hung his jacket on a hanger, careful to get the shoulders square. There was no wardrobe, of course, so he used the hook that's meant for curtain ties. Was he hiding food so he might eat it alone? I could hardly believe it of him. Dad could be hard, but never devious. A more principled man you'd never meet. I noticed him falter a moment, a tiny pause, when he caught sight of my stockings and smalls on the fireguard, then he bent with a grunt and lay flat like a dressed corpse. I swallowed my ready spittle. I would find something cheap at market in the morning.

He was still and silent, only shifting his weight to get comfortable. Yesterday, there hadn't been much to say but I'd *had* to say it. There'd been no choice. Now to speak would be to make conversation. I stared at the paper but didn't read. I folded it, lining up the words from one column to the next, making nonsense sentences. *The deceased, a Frenchwoman, presented the prizes.* After a time, I began to wonder, had he fallen asleep? I caught sight of movement. A brisk scratch of the cheek. Not dozing then, only closing his eyes to shut me out. Dad hated to speak only for the sake of speaking. We would spend long evenings together – him and me reading, Mum pottering in the kitchen – the three of us hardly sharing a word. That was a comfortable silence, broken only by the sound of a page turning like the flog of a sail. This silence had weight. It had been layering, like a glacier, all these years – hurtful things buried within. Murky shapes. How was I to breach it? Everything I could think to say was too big or too small.

In the end I found the courage to say, 'You're out late.'

In the long pause that followed, I wondered if he might be sleeping after all. Perhaps he was growing hard of hearing. I was just about to say it again a little louder when he replied.

'Meeting.' He didn't look at me, but talked to the ceiling.

'Another?'

'I think we've reason enough, don't you?'

'How should I know?'

'You don't read the news any more then, Alma? Is that so?'

It was the coal trouble. I knew that much, but little more. Just like Dad to sniff me out; he could smell ignorance a mile off. When I first married Bill, I kept up on the cause, bought pamphlets from the special shelf at the bookshop. I suppose I'd hoped me and Dad might make amends. I wanted to prove my marriage didn't mean what he said it did. I had *not* joined the other side. In the end, I let it slip. I hadn't any time with such long hours in the cutting room. Besides which, I hardly ever saw Dad. I would go to visit him, but he was never in. I would stop by his meetings hoping to catch him after speeches, but he'd always be busy, closed into a circle of serious men, serious talks. I might have tried harder, for longer, if I wasn't so hurt.

Bill and I had married in a tiny protestant chapel two hundred yards from the boxing hall where Dad held his Socialist Unity meetings. The way Dad had turned deaf-dumb when I told him Bill proposed, I'd feared he might not come at all. I'd stood in my stupid white dress on the steps of the chapel with Rose's hand in mine wondering how long I could keep everyone waiting. A group of passers by whistled and cheered. An old woman pressed sixpence into my palm for good luck.

'He'll come,' Rose said.

'He won't, the old sod.' I smiled, though I felt like crying, and tucked a stray ribbon-end into the collar of her dress.

'He told me he was coming. He said I was to go on ahead.'

'Well *I* shall go on ahead if he doesn't turn up soon. I don't need his help to walk twenty feet.' I busied myself fussing with the flowers in Rose's hair. She was a dear and put up with it, only flinching a little when I prodded her scalp with a stem, then put her small, hot hand in mine again.

The relief, when he finally arrived, was mixed with hurt. He offered me a stiff elbow and we walked. I kept my chin high. He didn't go so far as to give me his blessing. Didn't speak at all, as it happened, nor shake Bill's hand as we reached the altar. From the corner of my eye, I thought I saw him move to check his watch during the vows and no sooner was our small party out the church than Dad crossed the road, away to his precious meetings. Just the memory of that slow escape – his steady limping stride, the fact he didn't once turn to look behind or say goodbye... Even after all these years, it was withering.

Three

Dick told me all about it, a week or two before the bailiffs came. I wouldn't answer the bell, so he climbed the fence and put his mouth to the empty lockhole of the back door. He spilled the whole idiot story through that hole, his voice sloshing with beer. He knew I couldn't help but listen.

They called it an infallible betting scheme. A formula for Goodwood, tried and trusted, returning as much as forty quid on every hundred. What I had to understand, he said, was the opportunity. Barmy to turn it down. And, of course, they'd seemed like good blokes. The way Dick talked about them, the world had never known three cleverer, wittier fellas than White, Brook and Boodle. Even with their silk hats and plummy way of speaking, they didn't take no airs and graces, treated him and Bill proper. They invited them to talk the deal through in the billiards room of the Jervoise Club, a place where doors swished open as if by their own will, where penguin waiters brought them warm roast beef sandwiches, then port, then cigars and no one mentioned the cost. There was half a tree roaring in a fireplace the size of Dick's kitchen.

Returns came every month. These gents wrote elegant letters telling them how it was working a charm. Superb performance, they said. Would they care to withdraw the interest or re-invest? The letters came on club stationery, written in such fine hand that Bill and Dick felt shy about fisting their replies. They argued long and hard over words and spellings, tried their best to write joined up. In the end, they hit on sending a telegram. One word: re-invest.

Come August, White, Brook and Boodle wrote to say they'd be taking their formula to Monte Carlo as soon as the Flat Season ended. If Dick and Bill wanted to feather their nests before then, there was only one thing for it. Greater capital, chums. Invigorate the principal. Dick took half his savings from the bank. Bill went one further, like he always must. He took a loan out against the shop.

Four

Over the next few days I had no luck at all. Not a spot of work. On top of which, the bugs were eating me alive. I imagined them swarming behind the walls, crouched between the floorboards, waiting for me to fall asleep. I asked Dad didn't he ever get

bitten and he showed me a mark on his ankle no bigger than a pimple. Mine swelled and spread to the size of thrupenny bits and spread a creeping rash round my waist, up my legs. Other places that don't bear mentioning. Scratching was sweet agony. I could have torn the skin right off. Soon I was spotted with hard, headless, weeping lumps. I couldn't scratch without drawing blood, so I just pressed, gently pressed, with a wet handkerchief and gritted teeth. I felt I was going mad. My skin tickled and crawled. Out of the corner of my eye, specks moved, even in broad daylight. I would press my nose to the glass and stare at the cold, grey mass of the estuary, thinking about stripping naked and wading in.

Dad was hardly ever there. He'd started staying at the club until the early hours. I felt sure he was avoiding me. So, I spent my days and evenings alone. I wandered town in loops, following one road then another like a marble in a maze. Every shop window I passed, I stopped to look for notices. There was nothing to speak of. Delivery boy wanted. Undertaker's apprentice. Shop walker at Tyrell and Green – well, I knew that game, you had to be pretty and slight. There was nothing for someone like me. The longer I looked, the meaner the pickings seemed. I hadn't the down payment to hire a sewing machine. I went to see a lady about charring, but since I had no references another girl got the job. There was one way I might see myself clear, one last trail to follow, but even thinking on it put a bitter taste in my mouth. Cap in hand to the Coopers. How Irene would crow – not so you could put your finger on it, mind, but you'd see the light dancing in her eyes.

Dick had been apprenticed to old Pop Cox for a time. He and Bill had learned the trade side by side. Now he had a little shop on a parade in Mary's Elm. If anyone was going to give me a cutting job, it was him. Three mornings in a row, I woke up saying, *time to bite the bullet*, and three nights I laid down thinking, *tomorrow, tomorrow*.

As I traipsed town I noticed a few things changing. The strike was in the air. One grocer told me he'd sold out of tinned fish and beans. People were stocking up, he said. Large-print notices called for volunteers. Organisation for the Maintenance of Supplies. Special Police Constables. Outside the Town Hall men queued out the door and round the corner to put their names forward – smart chaps in business suits and felt hats.

I heard about a crop of weather-damaged tatties going cheap at the Overfield market. It was a three-mile walk on hearsay alone. I'd never felt more like my

mother. At the police stables, I saw a crowd of school kids peering through the chain-link fence. One lad cried, *Lor! Look at the size of them sticks.* I looked. Twenty men or more stood in ranks. Their training ground was nothing but a broad patch of dirt beside a row of stalls, where a bay pony and a white shire nosed over the half-doors. A chap with gold stripes on the arm of his uniform leant on a tethering post. He had a truncheon in his hand and was describing its handling to the gathered men.

'Correct portage is down the trouser leg, like so.' He slipped the truncheon under the flap of his tunic. 'Leave the cord exposed for ease of extraction, like so.' He tucked his thumb in the loop and whipped it out in a neat arc so the grip fell into his palm. 'Now, let's see you boys do it.'

They were a hodge-podge, no doubt about it. Seemed like none of them quite knew what to wear or how to stand. They'd been given tin helmets in the army style, like upside down soup bowls. I watched a sad-faced bloke in thick spectacles struggle to slide the stick into the waistband of his smart suit trousers. Next to him stood a pot-bellied old John in pale green tweed who looked as though he'd just strolled off his country estate. Next yet, a man the size of a jockey wore plus fours and a golfing cap. Behind were eight lads dressed for polo in all-white jodhpurs and sweaters, brown boots and riding hats. University types – each of them six foot if he was an inch. Grow to giddy heights on veal and partridge, don't they? This lot didn't have proper truncheons, just bits of banister with a loop of rope strung through one end. A ginger-haired lad and his tubby mate started a playfight.

'Communist!'

'Get back to work, you lazy cur!' said the ginger as he parried.

'Scallywag!'

'Fall in!' the superintendent yelled. 'Form ranks. Let's see you marching.'

A little boy beside me who couldn't have been more than seven clung to the fence like a caged monkey, counting in fours along with the superintendent. Two girls marched down the pavement in time, holding their arms stiff and straight like tin soldiers.

The superintendent called for an about-turn and I spotted a strange-looking group at the very back, behind the polo toffs. They were dressed neck-to-toe in black – sharp tailoring and silvered epaulettes, insignia on their collars. The tallest of them had shoulders like a pommel horse – the only one not wearing a tin hat. His dark hair shone with oil. He held a long cylinder of wood and as he swung it, following the

superintendent's instructions, I saw its turned end. It was a baker's yard-long rolling pin.

'This is police business. Off with you.' A constable came along the fence bashing his truncheon against the wire. The kids shrieked and ran back a few yards, giggling, waiting for him to turn away. The bobby drew near to me.

'I'll have to ask you to move along, Miss.'

'They don't look up to much,' I said. 'These youngsters are better at staying in step.'

The policeman tried to hide a smirk. I could see he thought the same, but he gave me the official line. 'These are private citizens doing their duty for their country. They'll come up to the scratch in time.'

As I left, I heard his truncheon rattling the fence again and another excited shriek from the kids.

I found the market that afternoon and got myself a sack of tatties going cheap. It was when I arrived home and saw I'd no fuel left to cook them that I decided it was time to go and see Dick.

I left it until the end of the day. From across the road, I watched him scraping his block. He was lighted in the window, his close-cropped black hair, thumping great arms. He was as broad as Bill ever was and only two-thirds the height. Outside, his handcart was tipped onto its handles, the bed shiny, dripping suds. One wheel was chained to the basement grate. I must have stood out there in the dark next to the hardware store for fifteen minutes, holding council with the cracked paving slabs. *Dare I turn up like this?* Two months had passed since the night Dick told me about his and Bill's speculation, since he blurted the whole sorry story through the empty lockhole of my back door. The last time I laid eyes on him was long before that. The day after the funeral — six months, a lifetime — when he'd come to offer his help. He'd asked, was there anything I needed? I couldn't bear it — the fresh-ironed shirt Irene had put him in, the pot of stew he brought me still warm from her stove, the way he kept looking to the counter where Bill used to stand. His lids were red, his voice clumped and torn. He'd loved Bill more dearly than I ever had and I feared he knew it. I was sure everyone could see it on me, plain as a port-wine birth stain. I turned Dick away, got shot of him as fast as I could, and here I was crawling back.

The longer I left it, the closer he came to locking up and leaving. I watched him put a dustcover over his till, chalk his specials for the morning. When he came

out to unchain the shutters, I stopped my dithering. I crossed. He heard my boots scraping the gritty asphalt and looked up. He let the shutter drop and tucked it under his arm like a crutch. From his expression, you'd have thought I was back from the dead.

'Where've you been, Alma? Your place is boarded. I asked after you next door.'

It was queer to look on him again. Those familiar broad cheeks with that grey shadow no amount of shaving would rid. His rolled up sleeves showed the hair of his forearms, thick and black as fur. Bill used to joke about how hairy Dick was, ask him to rub his bald head in the hope it was catching. That's how I pictured Dick, one half of a comic act, always singing or whistling, having you on. It was a trick of the memory, of course. In person, I remembered his softness, how easy it was to hurt him.

'I was wondering if we'd ever hear from you again,' he said. 'Jenkins said you left no address.'

'What else did he say?'

Dick sighed and went on, talking to the floor tiles. 'Only that you were repossessed. Ugly business.'

Ugly was one way of putting it. My arm curled, as I remembered hugging Bill's chair to my chest, fingernails digging into the cushion. I let the anger flare and pass. In a moment, Dick would find his manners and invite me in. I would not beg for a job on the street.

'Irene's been worried sick, you know. Why didn't you come to ours? You could come now. It's chops tonight.'

'There's something I want to ask you.'

'Oh,' he said. He fidgeted a moment, running his thumbnail along the edge of the shutter. *He thinks I'm after money.* 'You go on in. I won't be a minute with these.'

I stepped under the cured joints, hanging in easy reach of the doorway. The shelves that lined the back wall were empty. I'd often asked why he didn't fill them with dry goods or take them down, but the less Dick had to do indoors the better. After the morning rush, he'd spend the rest of the day out in the open air, never mind the weather. He'd stand on the pavement butchering stock to order, straight from his cart. I reckoned he only rented the shop because Irene liked the way it sounded. More respectable than being a barrow boy.

The shutters rattled and I heard the padlock clunk into place. Dick came in and drew a stool from behind the counter.

'Have a seat, if you like,' he said.

I stayed standing. 'How's business?'

'Not too bad. I don't get so much custom as I did down the market.'

'It's a different set. You've the likes of Anderson, and look at his rig-out. He's even selling game now. You name it, he's got it. That's what they're after round here.'

'Don't I know it.' He shook his head sadly. 'I'm a pork butcher. Always will be.'

'Why don't you take me on? I could do the rest – the game, the beef.' I talked faster, seeing his startled look. 'You've a perfectly good cutting room back there. I could help you *use* the place. Get more stock moving.'

He touched my arm to guide me towards the stool. I sat just to keep him happy and he perched on the edge of his counter. 'I'd like to do something for you.' He studied his boots. His forehead was shiny, beading a little. 'Bill and me, we thought we were doing the right thing by you and Irene. Bill told me he wanted you to have –'

'You needn't worry, Dick. We've been through all that.' He looked at his shoes, drifts of sawdust in the laces. I expected he was trying to remember that night, how drunk he was, how much he'd said to me. 'What are you paying for rent on this place?'

He hid his face behind his tufted hands. I saw his chest rise, then fall. A great huffing breath, muffled by his palms. 'We never meant for anything like this to happen.' His voice cracked. Fond of him as I was, I wondered how Irene coped.

'Come on, Dick. Don't take it so hard. You're getting by, aren't you?'

He nodded and pinched the inside corners of his eyes. After a moment, he wiped his cheeks. 'Sorry. Really, I am.'

'Then give me a try, why don't you? I promise you we'll have twice the business in no time.'

'Why don't you let me make you a loan? Tide you over for now...'

'Don't be daft, Dick. You've those policies to pay back. Besides which, I don't know how I'd return it. I need a job, not a loan. I'm a good butcher, you know I am. You saw how well we were doing, Bill and me.'

'It's not the same.'

'What do you mean?'

'It's not proper.'

'You mean Irene wouldn't like it.'

He held up one great paw to stop me. 'There's a reason men and women don't work together, you know.'

He coloured like a little boy caught in the pantry. I touched the cold metal of an empty shelf. It felt gritty. The crumbs of dirt fell away as I rubbed my palms. I would not beg. That was the wrong foot to start on. I only needed more time to convince him, I was sure.

'Let me clean for you,' I said. 'I'll come at closing and do your scrubbing down, sharpen your knives. You can go home earlier. Irene would be glad of that.'

He looked at me from under his wiry brows. 'I couldn't pay you much.'

I knew Dick's *not much* would be a sight over eight pence an hour. 'I understand that.'

He gave me a wonky smile. He wouldn't go easy until he had Irene's blessing, I reckoned. All the same, he shook on it. 'You'll come tomorrow?'

'I will.'

'Nine o'clock then.' He opened the door and the whiff of the fishmongers drifted in.

'Isn't that a bit late?'

'The Tolputts and the Holts have been asking after you,' he said, leaning on the doorframe. 'Everyone wants to know what's become of you.'

'You can tell them I'm quite alright. I'm staying with my father.'

'That so?' He cocked his head. 'Thought you two didn't get on?'

'Yes, he has rooms near town, quite comfortable, so you can tell the Tolputts and the Holts they needn't worry.'

'Well I never.' Dick followed me out. 'Didn't you say he was a redshirt, your dad? I'm sure you told me that.'

I had joked about it – very early on. My first dinner at the Holts' three-leaf table, the flaked remains of a pie made in the shape of a hen, the electrified chandelier they were so proud of, glaring. I'd felt so slight among them, these couples in their thirties and me three years off twenty. I was trying to stifle a fit of hiccups. Swirling my wine glass, coating its sides. At one point, Brian Holt had reached under the tablecloth and goosed my knee. When Bill popped a joke about

Dad's pamphleteering, I'd laughed along. *My dad won't be happy till we're all speaking Russian.* I felt sick as soon as I said it. Sick to remember their long, belly laughs. *She's a keen one, Bill. You've got yourself a shiny little penny there.*

I closed my eyes, waited for the memory to die.

'Well, blow me if they haven't caused a pretty fuss, your dad and his lot.'

'It won't be so bad as everyone thinks.'

'Prices were terrific Friday and that was only off the rumours. It'll be murder next week.' He took up his broom and pushed the last of the suds towards the gutter. He was his old self again, all that sorrow and guilt practically forgotten. Things never stuck to Dick for long. 'Let's hope they get what's coming to them and sharpish, eh?'

'I thought you might say something like that.'

'You can't tell me you're for it. All these fellas laying off, first excuse they get. Making trouble for everyone else. If you ask me, they wouldn't be so keen for a jolly if it was hoarfrost and sleet.'

'It's more than just a jolly. They're putting a lot at risk.' Even as I spoke, I wondered why I bothered. Perhaps it was to make up for all the times I'd turned the other cheek. Dick narrowed his eyes, bit one side of his lip, sizing me up. Then his face split into that wide grin of his. He laughed that Harry Lauder laugh, so familiar I expected to hear Bill's low chuckle join in.

'I know you better than that, girl. You might fool your father, but you don't fool me.'

We said our goodbyes and I walked home taking the long route by the water. I felt like a tree, ringed through with younger versions of myself. Strange how Dick could cut through the layers. I almost felt like the skinny waif of sixteen who'd turned up at Bill's shop to return a joint my employer thought too fatty. I had stars before my eyes having walked three miles on an empty stomach. The joint was heavy and outside the shop I'd stopped to rest, to let my scrambling heart catch up. I remember turning my face to the white-grey sky. Vast but close, touching my skin with wet flecks, cold air pouring down my collar. The hanging sign was made of carved wood. *Cox & Sons Family Butcher since 1806.* The letters had been painted so thick, layer after layer, year after year, they looked like melting ice cream.

Through the window, I caught sight of the butcher. Bill. He was puddled by the glass, a mess of colours and shapes, so I moved to another pane. I saw that he

was on his own, fiddling with his cashbox. I saw his balding crown, his florid cheeks. With his apron tied high under his armpits, he looked solid as the Downs.

My pinny was char-stained, my dress hitched off the ground with a leather belt I'd pierced myself. I may have looked a fright, but I was wily. I leaned close as if we were old friends. And, yes, I did let my hand linger on his when passing the order slip. I even scolded him a little for underselling my employer. But if I was nothing but a scrawny clinging vine, at least I didn't hide it.

I left the shop with a lamb leg the size of a man's thigh, deep red, cased in pearly silverskin. Halfway home, I stopped to rest and saw that there was something else in my basket, slipped in without my noticing. A small grease-spotted package. Inside were six rashers of salt bacon folded in the middle. I peeled one off. It was so finely sliced I could read the milestone through it. It cast the road in a pinkish haze. It smelled honest, fresh. I ate it raw.

Dad was at home when I arrived. I stepped into the room to find him in his vest, working away at a small stain on a shirt with his bar of soap. His washtub was full of suds and his hair was wet and combed. Another wet shirt was drying on the fireguard. I supposed it was a lack of clean clothes that had forced him home. He gave me a nod as I came in. Not entirely unfriendly.

'I saw the Special Officers training today. In the stable yard.' I sat in the easy chair and slipped my shoes off. My skull felt heavy, I wondered if I were to sleep in the chair would I be bitten more or less.

'Were there many?' Dad asked.

'Couple of dozen. I suppose they train them in batches. They don't look up to much, only, there were a few Fascisti among them.'

He shook his head. 'There's to be none of them in the Special Police. They put out a rule against it.'

'I'm just telling you what I saw.'

'They were in uniform?' He looked up. I nodded. I realised my heart was trotting. Now we'd begun to talk, I felt I had to keep it up. It was like swimming – having let go the side of the pool, you didn't like to flounder back and cling.

'I may have a job,' I said. 'A friend of Bill's. It's just cleaning for now, but I feel sure he'll want a butcher soon.'

Dad sighed. 'You ought to start being sensible.'

'What do you mean? Sooner I get a job, sooner I'll be off. I'd have thought you'd approve of that.'

'Be realistic. Why don't you take in laundry like your mother did?'

'In here?'

Typical that he should bring Mum into it. Wasn't I just the spit of her, now? Penniless and dependent. Only this shoddy room was far worse than our old terrace and at least my mother had the right to press him for housekeeping. Not for the first time, I wondered what he was doing with his Union salary. Surely it wasn't so mean as this? A single room in a shored-up house that hardly kept out the weather. I suspected he was printing propaganda out of his own pocket. Making donations, perhaps, to some fund or other. He chased his ideals in the daftest ways – had done all his bleeding life – and here he had the gall to tell me I ought to be sensible. I dragged my case near and started tidying my things.

'Sewing then,' he said after a while. 'You should ask Mrs Ridley downstairs, I believe she does piece work.'

'I'm useless at sewing,' I said as I folded. 'And it don't pay. Not enough to keep your head up.'

'*Doesn't* pay, Alma.' He gave me a sharp look. 'I didn't raise you to talk like a whelk picker.'

I was irritated that he'd picked up on such a little slip. Irritated with myself for giving him the chance. There was no winning with Dad. You must cleave to your class, but God forbid you should speak like them. And what right had he to talk about raising me when he'd spent so many years since showing me the cold shoulder?

'Ignorance is not a badge of honour, it's a symptom –'

'Of oppression, I know. You know I know.'

'People have a way of forgetting.' He lifted the shirt from the basin and let the first rush of water run off, then began to squeeze and twist it. He was methodical, always, working from one end to the other, neck to tail. 'You want to keep up the butchery because it earns well.'

'What's wrong with that? There's more to it, anyhow. If you'd ever come to visit the shop, like I asked, you'd have seen I'm a bloody good butcher. It's my trade. I spent seven years learning and I'm not about to give it up.'

Dad reached for the mantle and slowly got to his feet. He inched the draped shirt to one side to make room for the other. 'You know the lay of the land better than anyone, Alma. They won't take you on.'

'Then I'll get my own place. I'll find a way.'

He swiped the air. Shook his head in that slow, condescending way of his as he dried his arms on his towel.

'You don't understand,' I said. 'If you'd come like I asked you... I wrote you. I invited you and Rose...' I stopped, hearing a desperate note creep into my voice. How fast I'd moved from silence to the brink of opening half-healed wounds.

'I know what it is to have a skill, Alma,' he said. 'To master something. Believe me, it's not my desire that you should spend your days bent over a washtub.' He was staring at the floorboards as if his lines were written there. Sometimes when he was composing a speech, he'd close his lids and you'd see the eyeballs tick-tocking underneath. 'Think about the *time* it took to learn the skill... and the space, the equipment, the stock, Bill's tutorage, the privately owned premises with nice living quarters upstairs. All of that, the whole opportunity, was built on the back of capital. You talk as if it was only a matter of initiative. All thanks to your hard graft and quick wits. And I know you think you'll get it all back if you only apply yourself. You'll drive yourself mad with that fantasy. It was handed you on a plate when you married him – and the sooner you accept it the better.'

'Bill sweat blood to build that business. We both did.'

'I dare say you improved the place no end. Only the sign above the door said Cox & Sons.'

I went to the window and wiped the steam from the glass with the heel of my hand. There was no reasoning with him. How tempting it was to slip into those lazy slurs I'd heard Bill use so often. *Socialists only want to drag everyone down to their level. That lot won't be happy till everyone's miserable.* I knew better, though. It hurt, but there was truth in what Dad said. I'd no capital of my own, no home, no shop, so now I was prey to whosoever had.

I heard Dad's voice behind me. 'It's time you grew up, Alma. You've spent years trying to rise above your class. Don't be surprised if you don't get much sympathy now you've fallen.' He dropped his voice to a hoarse whisper. 'Even Mrs Ridley downstairs who spends half her day drunk shows more solidarity with her

fellows than you've ever cared to. You and your sister. The pair of you... you care for no one but yourselves. Your dear mother would be ashamed.'

I daren't turn to look at him. If I didn't turn, I could perhaps forget the note of pain in his voice. I kept my face to the gap in the window, seeking the breeze. I felt hemmed in, by the damp air, the rotten window frames, the dark wall of the estuary beyond. Beneath my clinging fingers, flakes of paint came loose from the window ledge. My eye followed the curving line of streetlamps on the promenade, leading towards the bright mass of electrification at the docks. A cluster of distant lights that seemed to rise from the water.

Five

I woke hungry and soon remembered there were no spirits left in the stove. I went to gather driftwood from the muddy beach, picking and choosing, looking for the driest bits. In the early light, the sand was striped with shadows. Every rock, twig and tin can had a comet-tail making it harder to see from a distance what was wood and what wasn't. I kept my eyes on the ground, wandering the estuary in my bare feet, ankle deep sometimes in the oily, sandy mud. In places it smelled like a stagnant pond. I tied a knot in my skirt. What did I care if people saw my knees?

Many of the sticks were too damp to burn. They crumbled like biscuits. I couldn't help but think of my coal bunker at home. It was full when I left. I'd had half a ton delivered only that morning. The neighbours would have helped themselves to that by now. I could just see Mrs Fletcher swooping like a buzzard. They'd all had a good nose while I was being evicted, but after an hour or so of watching them strip my home of every stick and fitting, Mrs Fletcher was the one who took it upon herself to come and talk to me. As I sat there, on the pavement, minding a pile of my most personal possessions, she'd placed her fat hand on my shoulder and asked, *Did I think the workmen should like a cup of tea?*

I pressed my heel into a firm sandbar, screwed it side to side to make a hollow. It was black with spilled oil underneath.

'Silly bitch,' I said, aloud. I looked around to check there was no one in hearing, no one who might have seen my lips move. My only company was a curlew digging out a lugworm. She pulled it in her beak like an elastic in tweezers.

Scavengers, the pair of us. I climbed the bank to drag a fallen branch from below its tree and began stripping it of dead leaves.

My mum had talked to herself. As a child, self-conscious, I felt it was a terrible sort of sickness. As if her brain had sprung a leak. I'd hear her wittering away in the kitchen. Not just the daft things like, *must put this milk in the cold box*, but imagined conversations with the priest, the grocer, the woman whose laundry she did, my dad perhaps. Snatches of talk I couldn't place. *Ten years now. Take it, then. You have it, if you must.* And then, there were times I saw her shoulders shaking. She cried ever so quiet. Nothing like the way my little sister wailed. I'd slink away from my eavesdropping spot on the stairs, guilty then because I'd spied. Looking back, I wondered why I never comforted her. Why couldn't I go to my own mother? Why had I to be such an awkward child?

Another curlew gave a shrill whistle from far out on the flats. It sounded full of fear, yet moved so placid, strutting and pecking at the sand. Crouched on the bank, I tore the last brown leaves and tossed them at my feet. Specks and scraps were stuck to my palms. I rubbed them on my skirt, broke the branch over my knee, then gathered my haul to carry home.

I was squeezing through the hallway when I heard Mrs Ridley's voice ring out sharp. Her door was open.

'Miss Yates!'

I hadn't been called by my maiden name for years. I put my bundle on the floor and stepped in. Their front room reeked of fish, strong enough to make your head float. Mrs Ridley was sitting cross-legged on the boards with three of her boys beside her. The eldest was stirring a glue pot over a few red coals smothering in ash. I supposed that was what gave the foul smell. Laid out before them were hairbrush parts – a box of moulded rubber ovals, a stack of wooden handles shaped like spoons and a loose pile of brown bristles. I watched Mrs Ridley lick the ends of a bunch of bristles, thread them through the rubber then tie a knot. The boys were doing the same, and almost as fast.

'Are you planning on staying long with Mr Yates?' she asked. I noticed she had a slight squint. Her tiny figure was swamped in a checked blouse, puff sleeves pushed above the elbow, and a skirt with a dusty hem. 'Only, if there's more of you it'll be extra.'

'Why?'

'Wear and tear.'

'What's there to wear? The floorboards?'

'I'm telling you it's extra. I won't have no pan-lickers, you understand? And tell your father that's the lot. Any more and the upstairs'll be downstairs. I ain't even asked what trouble you've come from – though folk might say I've a right to, what with you subletting and all. Lucky for you, I ain't one to pry.'

There was a small cot in the corner. The scrawny toddler sat looking through the bars like a budgie in a cage. He was tugging at his own foot as if he hoped to have it off. The wallpaper was patterned with pink sprays of flowers, clouded by smoke and the odd dirty handprint. It felt close and cluttered, even though there was scarcely any furniture apart from a big wooden crate and a black-and-brass bed. Watching the boys' nimble fingers working, it was hard to believe they could raise such a racket. The youngest might have been five, the eldest eleven. They kept their noses not two inches from their work, sneaking quick glances at me.

'I'll speak to my father,' I said.

'I'll speak to my father,' one of the boys mimicked, putting on a high-pitched voice. Was that how I sounded to them? La-di-da? I'd have laughed if it weren't so rude. I suppose it was foolish of me to expect Mrs Ridley to bring her son to heel.

'Suit yourself,' she said, as if she hadn't heard him. 'But I'm telling you now it's extra.'

She looked up from her furious threading. She had bright pink spots on her cheeks and her eyes shone. I'd a mind to tell her where she could shove her shabby room with its bugs and its damp seeping into my things.

'You needn't worry,' I said. 'I shan't be stopping long.'

She handed the brush she'd finished to the boy with the glue, then held a fresh rubber oval to the light. I took that to mean she'd said her piece. As I turned to leave, my eye fell on a load of posters laid over the bed blankets. They were all for the same picture – *Pretty Ladies* – and had a gay drawing of a woman's stockinged legs sticking out of the busted skin of a bass drum. At the head of the bed, a child's mop of brown hair rested on the pillow.

'He's got a bad chest,' Mrs Ridley said. How she caught me staring I don't know, since she never stopped working.

'Likes the pictures, does he?'

'You trying to be funny?' She looked as if she was about to get up and thump me. 'They're to keep him warm.'

I closed the door gently behind me.

My sticks were enough to get a fire going and boil some water. I couldn't get the tatties quite soft, but at least they weren't raw. It felt good to have something hot to eat. I washed up and waited for Dad. I wanted to let him know I wouldn't be home until late. When, by teatime, he still wasn't back – and having nothing better to do – I decided to drop in at the club.

The Working Men's Club was a big, ugly building off the London Road, with two bars at ground level for public and members, kitchens below, offices above and, at the very top, the Kier Hardie Hall. When I arrived, there were a dozen or more middle-aged and elderly men sitting at the tables, clutching their pints. A hum of conversation. Tobacco smoke hung from the ceiling to waist-height, making them look even greyer than they were. One chap whose lips curled over toothless gums turned and stared as I walked to the bar.

'Is Herbert Yates here?'

'Sorry love, members only.' The barman was in his shirt-sleeves and leaned on two of the pumps as he spoke.

'I'm not here to drink. I'm Herb Yates's daughter and I need to speak to him. Is he here?'

He shrugged and pointed a thumb upwards. 'Top floor, I think.'

I went through the swing doors and climbed the stairs. I heard Dad's voice long before I reached the Kier Hardie hall. It was set with chairs in rows, but was empty apart from two blokes at the front. Dad was on the platform, practising a speech while they acted as his audience, cheering and booing. They were rowdy enough to stand in for two dozen. I waited in the doorway.

'Now, I've been asked to tell you about this Samuel Report. So for once I shan't harp on about health and safety, or pensions, or the change of management they're promising. I shan't even mention that Diamond Cruise we saw set sail today. If anything, we ought to have pity for such persons – since they are apparently so feeble they need a staff of nine hundred to feed them, dress them and wipe their bleeding arses.'

He waited for his two-man crowd to stop chuckling, then raised a hand in the air. Dad always talked as if he was conducting an orchestra.

'Now, as for this report on the situation in the coal industry, I would have you all think on this: a team of five men can hew enough coal from the earth to keep an industrial furnace running night and day. Just five. But can those same men afford to heat their homes? No. Can they feed their families properly? No. Now someone tell me that's not proof of a broken system. A system that exploits men. Our own crane drivers offload motorcars by the hundred, freshly minted and shipped all the way from America. But at the end of a long day handling tens of thousands of pounds worth of goods, can they spare tuppence for the tram fare home? Not likely. How many of you have thought twice before buying a stamp? How many of you wear collars thrice-turned to keep up on the subs for this very union? How many of you have put off calling the doctor for fear of the bill?'

His audience of two was crying, 'Shame! Shame!' Dad lowered his voice, giving a slow, grave shake of the head.

'Too many, I'm sure. Last year, the Prime Minister said, "the wages of all workers will have to come down". His own words. You saw them yourselves in the papers. *All workers*, he said. That means you and me. What's happening to our brothers in the coalfields is just the beginning. It's just a taste of what's coming for the rest of us. Now, in my humble opinion, there's only four things you need to know about this Samuel report.' He started counting them off on his fingers. 'One: there will be no nationalisation of coal. Two: there will be no continuation of the Government subsidy. Three: miners' wages *will be reduced*.'

He paused and tossed the report to the ground.

'The fourth thing you won't find in those pages. You'll find it written in your conscience. You'll find it in the unspoken code of our class. The fourth thing is this: we must stand by our brothers and comrades. We must stand by the miners.'

The audience stamped all four of its feet and cheered.

'That's fine, Herb. You'll have them out of their seats for sure.'

'Should I put the bit about the hours back in?' He was anxious, gripping his brow. I knocked on the open door to draw his attention.

'That was good,' I said. He left the others and walked over to me.

'It's men only until seven in here.'

'I know, I know. I just wanted to speak to you.'

'What's the emergency?'

'Nothing. I'll be out late tonight, that's all. I've got myself a job. Some cleaning for a friend of Bill's.'

'Right then.'

I felt stupid then for having come. It was clear he couldn't care less where I was. 'When's your speech?' I asked.

'Tomorrow afternoon.'

'May I come and watch?'

'I don't think so.'

I searched for something else to say.

'I'll be getting on now,' he said. 'Excuse me.'

I arrived at nine, just like Dick said, and the shutters were already up. His cart had been scrubbed and was dripping suds. I wondered why he hadn't left it for me to do. I knocked and waited a minute or two as I heard him run up the stairs and back down again. He appeared smiling, holding a pot plant. He'd tried to part his wiry hair and slick it down. As I stepped in, I saw he'd swept the floor. The stock was away and the counters gleaming.

'For your rooms,' he said, giving me the plant.

It was queer of him, but I supposed Irene had bought it. I put it on the damp countertop.

'I'll just finish this block,' he said, taking up the wire brush. 'Then we can have a nice cup of tea.'

'Why don't you go on home and leave that to me? Looks like there's little enough for me to do as it is.'

He was scouring furiously. 'I like to make sure it's...' He tailed off, still oiling and worrying the surface.

'Come on now, Dick. What's this all about? Have you changed your mind?'

'No,' he said. 'No, I stand by my word, Alma. You know that.'

'So what do you want me to do? What am I here for?'

He looked around the room. I couldn't be sure if he was embarrassed or if his cheeks were red on account of dashing up and downstairs. 'How about them shelves?' he said. 'Could do with a wipe.'

I went to fetch a cloth from out the back. Things were not quite so sparkling in there. He'd a big pile of unwashed trays and tubs and every rag I could find was

stinking damp. I put them on to boil. The terracotta tiles were sticky underfoot, so while I waited, I filled a bucket with hot, soapy water. I couldn't find a mop, so I got down on my knees with a scrubbing brush. The black marks were stubborn and I'd only done about a third of the floor when Dick came in.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

I sat back on my heels, brush in hand.

'I didn't ask you to do that.'

'Come on, Dick. Let me make myself useful. Otherwise what are you paying me for?' I carried on, working up circles of grey scum. He perched on the step between the front and back rooms. For a while, there was no sound but the hiss and scratch of bristles over tiles, and the bubbling pan of dishcloths.

'We had Irene's nephews visit last week,' he said. 'I showed them how to cut and trim a rack of chops.'

'That so? And how old are they now?'

'That's asking...!' He paused. 'Oldest is twelve – he won't let you forget it – but I'm not so sure about the others. Seems she can only have boys, Irene's sister.'

'There's folk who might be glad of that.'

'I wouldn't mind, girl or boy. I'd have been happy with either.'

I snuck a glance at Dick. He had his arms clasped round his knees. It was as if he was trying to squeeze his broad body into as small a space as possible. One New Year's Eve, when she was feeling tipsy and weepy, Irene had confided in me about the half a dozen pregnancies she'd had and lost. None lasted beyond four months. I'd felt sorry for her. In that moment I felt I'd glimpsed another person behind the face powder and lip-stain. Someone who cared about something other than owning a wireless and set of silver-plated napkin rings. Of course, she wished she hadn't told me. Almost straight away, I saw her eyes go cold, her lip curl. *We all know Bill chose you for a rearing mare. Poor old Lizzie will be turning in her grave – a kid like you taking her side of the bed.* Irene prided herself on speaking the truth, and the nastier the truth the better.

'Funny the way life turns out, ain't it?' Dick said. 'We never had none and nor did you and Bill.'

I plunged my brush into the bucket, rubbing the bristles on my palm to loosen the dirt. I wasn't used to talking to Dick about such things. I didn't know what to say. He was looking at me shyly, from under his brows.

'I always thought you *would*, you two,' he went on. He licked his thumb and rubbed at a mark on his trousers. 'Would you say the problem was with Bill?'

'Dick!'

He tilted his head like a puppy dog, all innocence. 'What? I'm just saying you could have them, couldn't you? With another man.'

I sighed. 'I suspect so. Though, I doubt—'

'That's what I thought,' he said, with a businesslike nod. He got to his feet and went back into the front of the shop. After a while, I heard the clatter of coins pouring from his money belt onto the counter. He never used the shiny, brass cashbox with all its levers and slots, of course. With my thumbnail, I peeled a sticky lump from the tiles. He could be a big kid, sometimes. No wonder Irene was a scold.

While Dick counted his takings, I finished the floor apart from a patch by the sink where I stood to do the washing up. When I'd stacked everything nicely on the shelves, I spent quite a time putting his store cupboard straight. There were battered rolls of paper and all sorts of hooks and yardsticks and tools and fittings, order pads, lengths of pipe and an old zinc-lined meat box. Once I'd tidied up and swept it out, I felt satisfied I'd done enough. God only knew what the hour was.

'I think that'll do for now,' I said. 'Want to see what I've done in there?'

He was perched on the stool, head resting on his fist, spinning a coin on the chopping block. He looked as glum as I'd ever seen him.

'I'm sorry I've kept you,' I said, folding my pinny. 'You must be hungry for your supper. Tomorrow, why don't you leave me to close and clean down. I could drop the keys off at your house afterwards.'

'It's no bother.'

'Well how about I come earlier then? I could do your cart and help you take your stock in.'

'No,' he said. 'Nine o'clock is right.' He slapped the spinning shilling and swept it into his palm with a few others. Crumpled order slips fell from the countertop.

'Here you go.'

I took the coins from his calloused hand. 'Here, why don't you get some rabbits in? I bet you my shirt they'd sell.'

He sighed. 'I don't go in for all that. Too fiddly.'

'I'll skin and clean them for you. Go on, just buy a score, and see if I'm wrong.'

He scratched the back of his neck, where hair crept up from his collar. 'Suppose it can't hurt.'

It was a little victory, of sorts, but as I walked the long, straight road from Mary's Elm, I worried about Dick. Was he regretting having agreed to give me work? Was I taking advantage of his kindly nature? Something wasn't right, that much was clear. I mulled it over, holding the shillings in my pocket until they were warm. When I let go my fingers kept their grease-metal smell. At the promenade, I realised I'd forgotten the pot plant.

It was gone midnight, but Dad was still not home. I lit a candle. No sooner did I lie on my bedding than my ankle started tickling. I lifted my leg to the light. There was nothing there. Just being in the room was enough to make the bites flare up. I had to sit on my hands to stop myself scratching. It was like being pinched and burned in a dozen places at once. How could I rest knowing in the night they'd make a feast of me all over again? So I sat with sore eyes, trying to ignore the whispering, creeping itch.

I must have fallen asleep in the end, for I woke slumped on my side with a coat laid over me that wasn't mine. It took a moment to realise it was Dad's. I heard him snoring low. The streetlamp outside shone a square on the wall and in its hand-me-down light I saw a small dark speck on my white bed sheet. I looked for matches, cursing Dad for putting my candle out. The bug looked like a little brown scrap of leaf and when I pinched it between my fingers, it left a bright red smear. The bugger must have bit me already. I raised the candle and found four more trailing across the peeling wallpaper, single file. Dad was still, his swelling chest the only sign of life. How could he live in a place like this? How could he sleep? They were crawling out of the crumbling plaster. My neck was tickling, tingling. My waist. Behind my knees. I slapped and felt one beneath my fingers.

Bundling the blanket in my arms, I went out to the landing. The sound of a man's voice stopped me where I stood. Light fanned from under the back-room door. The voice came again, then another of a different tone – both men, both murmuring. The day after I moved in, Dad had told me that room was unfit to live in. I'd laughed thinking you could say the same of the whole house. I took a moment to make sure I

wasn't dreaming. There was silence a long time, a mumble I couldn't make out, and then,

'To hell with the constitution and the sooner our...' The words were spoken one by one, as if read from a page.

'No, look, you've... Here, let me.'

I heard the tinkling of metal. A sound a bit like raking through the farthings in the till. I shifted my weight and the floorboard groaned. There were whispers. The light went out.

It was like something from a magazine story – *Mystery at Mulberry Manor*, only a sight less grand. I remembered then what Mrs Ridley had said: *Tell your father that's the lot*. Why would Dad not tell me there were others in the house? It was daft to think I wouldn't find out. Knowing him, he'd say it had slipped his mind. It was all very queer.

The wind was blowing east and I was hit by the stink of the rag and bone yard at the end of the row. It smelled like a dustcart, like all manner of awful things mixed together, damp dogs and rotting meat and the sick-sweet smell of old fat. Crossing the road, I shook the blanket over the embankment wall, then wrapped it round my shoulders. It was half-tide and in the lamplight I could just make out shining snakes of water on the flats. I walked south a while, in the direction of town. I didn't really know where I was heading. Anywhere away from those grotty lodgings. It was more than the bugs and the damp. After my nice living quarters over the shop, it was hard to queue for a tap in the yard and put up with one loo to every three houses. I stopped and sat on a bench. Behind were two small, boarded-up warehouses. If only Bill could see me now shivering on a public bench in the middle of the night. If only I'd known what he was up to, I could have talked some sense into him. Why did men have to be so secretive?

The cold put my bones on edge. I pulled the blanket close around my neck and tried to imagine I was in my marriage bed with the spring-and-feather mattress. I used to have the sheets laundered every week and they came back smelling of lavender. I shut my stinging eyes.

'Mind if I sit down?'

I woke confused. My hands were numb. The sky was grey with that poor light you get before the sun's quite woken. It was almost morning. I looked up and

saw a man leaning on the lamppost. He was so thin he might have been a post himself. He wore a frayed boater, grubby wool overcoat, and boots whose toes were peeling away from the soles.

'I'm sorry to wake you.' He had a soft Welsh accent, full of ups and downs like a grassy valley. 'Awful chilly night for sleeping out.'

'I'm not sleeping.' My mouth was dry. I tried to swallow.

'Mind if I sit a moment?'

There was an empty bench not thirty yards further, but before I suggested he might bugger off there, he perched on mine and started unlacing his boot.

'I think I've a stone,' he said. The waft from his foot struck me hard as smelling salts. 'You wouldn't happen to be local, would you? I'm just arrived from Cardiff. On my way to the docks.'

'Just keep on that way,' I said, pointing. 'You can see the cranes.'

'Thanks very much. I'm a tad early for the calling shed, no doubt.' He smiled. I was surprised by his even, white teeth. He went back to fussing with his shoe and I let my eyes close.

'They do have a calling shed, I hope? Only, I've worked Cardiff and Sheffield, but never here.'

With an effort, I lifted my lids.

'They have one,' I said. 'And it's first man in. Better get going, if I were you.'

'First man in, you say? That's new to me. Very unusual. Most often, they pick you out according to the breadth of your chest.' He laughed. 'I expect you can imagine how well I do out of that. But, if you say it's first man in, it must be. Might your husband be a docker then, if you don't mind me asking?'

'It so happens, I do mind.' There was no getting rid of him. Now I was awake, my bites woke too. I scratched my neck, too fed up to care if I made them worse.

'Bugs. They're the devil's beasts,' he said. 'Spikes are full of them. I prefer the open air like yourself.'

It occurred to me he thought I was one of his own kind. Mistaken for a lady tramp. *Bill Cox, I hope you're happy now.* He reached inside his small suitcase and drew out a flour sack. I watched as he carefully rolled the top and put it on the bench between us. Inside was a mountain of peapods.

'Are you hungry?'

I shook my head, though my stomach began whining at the sight. I had the money Dick gave me in my pocket, but it would be a while before the grocer opened. As the tramp split a pod, it made a wet sound, like lips smacking. The peas might have been alive the way they jiggled as he ousted them with his thumb. They fell into his palm and he tossed them into his mouth. I noticed he was missing the little finger on his right hand.

'Ever so good, these,' he said. 'Sure you won't try?'

I didn't wait to be asked again. I took one, ran my fingernail along its length and picked out a single, young pea – flatish and green as a new leaf. Perhaps it was a trick of the hunger, but it tasted sugar sweet.

'What kind of peas are these?' I asked, popping the rest into my mouth. I could have eaten them for days on end.

'Couldn't tell you, to be honest. I came upon them in a field just up the way.'

'You scrumped them?'

'I did.'

I hesitated. He looked at me sidelong, his eyebrows raised. He was waiting to see if I'd get on my high horse. I reached into his bag and took a handful.

He smiled. 'Life is for living, is it not?'

I thought on that while I chewed the plump pea flesh and my hands kept busy shelling more. He dropped his shells to the floor and gulls started circling in from the estuary, shadows against the rising light. Soon there were a dozen or so at our feet, their boat-bodies floating this way and as they pecked and squabbled.

'It's for living *and* for working,' I said. 'Good work is half of a good life.'

'Ah! Now, that's what they want you to believe. If you ask me, a man should eat when he's hungry, sleep when he's tired and work when he's restless.'

'Are you often restless?'

'No, not very often. There's plenty to keep me occupied on the road. I've walked to the Highlands and back without really meaning to.'

'I thought you said you were after a job at the docks.'

'Well, let's say I got restless these last few weeks.' He tossed another handful of shells, then leaned towards me, speaking behind the back of his hand. 'Truth is, I'm in need of a new pair of boots.'

'Now then. You've feet of clay after all.'

He laughed, rested his hands on his hips and spoke, as if to the birds. 'I wander lonely as a cloud, that floats on high o'er hills and vales. And when my bunions get me down, I'm o'ertaken by the snails.' He gave me a quick glimpse of a smile, then frowned at the birds about his ankles. I thought he might be counting them, until he rolled his sleeves, baring stalk-thin arms, and bent double at the waist. After a quiet moment, he caught one, pinning its wings to its sides. He made it look like the easiest thing in the world. The bird didn't have time to flinch. The others flew away in a panic. Their screeching was so fierce it made my heart beat quick. As they took flight, they batted his face and knocked off his hat. His hair was greasy and curly, badly in need of a trim.

'I eat them sometimes,' he said. 'Make a lovely roast, she would.'

He sat down beside me a little closer – smelling of stale tobacco and campfires, a faint trace of smoked fish – and presented the bird for me to admire. It was a fine looking thing. I saw them every day, of course, but rarely so close and so still. It had a proud white head, its eyeball a bright egg-yolk yellow and a red-orange patch on its lower beak like a careful dab of lipstick. The colours were so perfect it hardly seemed real. After a moment, he stood and threw it in the air. I tried to follow its flight out over the estuary, but I couldn't keep trace of it in the flock.

'I'd better be off now,' he said, tucking his hair under his hat. 'I want to get to that calling shed.'

'I might have been mistaken about first man in,' I said. I was surprised to feel my face warming.

'Well, it's no bother to me either way. Nice meeting you.' He tipped his hat. As he left, the last few gulls scattered. I watched him go until he was a matchstick passing the hotels at the far curve of the promenade. I'd forgotten to thank him for the peas.

The faint sound of a door slamming caught my attention. A man in dark work clothes and cap was walking south from the terraces. I reckoned it was nearing five o'clock. I wasn't keen to return to that grim, damp room, but nor could I stay out there coatless and wrapped in a blanket.

Six

Bill had read about the Wembley Exhibition in the paper. *A glorious company. The flower of Empire. Fifty-six nations the envy of the world.* We went on a Tuesday with Dick and Irene. The place was like a little city in poured concrete with turrets and fancy rooflines. Everything was painted white. It was uncommonly hot that day and I'd have liked to stay on the pavilions, with all the lovely fountains. There were bushes weighed down by roses the size of cabbages, and the whistling and trilling from the aviary almost drowned out the sound of people's voices.

Instead, we traipsed from Newfoundland to India, Cyprus to Hong Kong. We must have walked five miles through gardens and halls and galleries. Irene touched anything that moved – an elephant, the plumes of blinkered ostrich. She stroked a camel and squeezed the bare arm of an Ashanti chief who was whittling trinkets and whatnots for sale. You couldn't throw a stick but that you'd hit a scaled down model of something or other – a tea garden, a sawmill, a Naval fleet. Thousands of pilgrims no bigger than ants, standing in holding pens beside a tinfoil River Ganges.

Everywhere we went, it was more heat and sickly smells. Hemp, smoke, engine oil, boiling sugar. There was no hiding the damp marks beneath my arms. In Canada, I pressed against the glass of a refrigerated display case. Inside, was a life-size statue of the Prince of Wales and his horse, carved in butter. I'd been married to Bill five years by then and I'd got used to having a little more. I'd learned not to embarrass him doing silly things like filling my pockets with boiled sweets from hotel bathrooms or saving the bits of ribbon from Irene's Christmas 'crackers'. Long gone were the days I'd shut myself in the dark larder and eat a whole jar of pickles, or a loaf of bread, not knowing why I did it. All the same, I couldn't take my eyes off this sculpture. The trees, the ranch buildings behind, all of it cut from pale, best butter. The sort my mother would buy by the ounce for high days and holidays.

Here, Alma, watch this fella. He'll paint your name on a grain of wheat.

I could hardly believe there was such wealth in the world. Bill had to tear me away.

Outside the Palace of Engineering was a mocked-up mining shaft. Men with smuts on their cheeks and lamps clipped to their hats worked the cages. They squeezed in cuddling young couples, then let the winding gear go with a jolt and a

groan. Girls shrieked. Lads cheered and teased to cover their fright as they went down into the dark. What a laugh. What a lark.

Indoors again and I stared too long into a glass-blower's furnace and came away half-blind. The world went green. After that was a machine that stamped five hundred biscuits a minute. Then a team of women carding wool in spotless pinnies. Every one of them was pretty and their lipstick matched. They looked like no mill girls I'd ever seen.

It was love at first sight with Dick and the Flying Scotsman. The attendant let him stand on the footplate, adjust the regulator, pull the screaming whistle. It was every man's dream to drive an engine, he said. Its great wheels were taller than Bill. It weighed ninety-six tons and went eighty miles an hour with ease. I looked through the slow-turning spokes to glimpse the pumping, gleaming undercarriage and felt sick. I imagined it bearing down on me, limbs getting caught in the workings. It thought nothing short of a mountain would stop it.

Seven

May Day morning, I woke up before Dad. I steamed my blouse above the kettle, ran a brush through my hair and borrowed his kit to black my boots. As I was finishing with his soft-bristled brush, bringing up a lovely shine on the toes, he stirred and coughed and peered over the covers. I saw his eye rest on my blouse laid smooth over the chair. He could be in no doubt that I was planning to come with him. He sat up and drew his blanket round his hunched shoulders. To look at his surly mug, you'd never have thought it was a holiday, but I would not be cowed. I'd been thinking about what he said, all that rubbish about me trying to rise above my class, as if people like Dick and Bill were all that different to the Ridleys or Dad's mates down at the club. It was madness to chalk lines between those who owned and those who rented, those who made and those who sold. I had grown, but I wasn't so changed that I couldn't mix with the same folk I had as a child. I meant to go to the rally and show him just that.

'Got your garland?' I joked.

He shuffled into his trousers and went down to the privy. It took him a full hour to ready himself, shaving and tinkering with the stove. I'm sure he did three coats of polish on his boots. I wondered if he was hoping I'd go on ahead.

When we were finally walking to the Common, it occurred to me that to look at us we might be any ordinary father and daughter. None of these folk strolling by in their Sunday best knew we'd hardly shared a word all morning.

'Are you thinking through your speech?'

'Not making one.' He kept his eyes to the earth.

'Master of ceremonies, then?'

He nodded, shoulder dipped as he leaned on his stick. His ankle must've been bad for he usually loathed to be seen with the thing.

'I was up late, last night. Couldn't sleep,' I said. 'Would you believe I heard voices from that back room?' I watched him, looking to see how he would react. There was the tiniest twitch of his moustache. 'Come on, you needn't play daft. Who's stopping in there?'

'You must keep it to yourself, Alma. Those men are wanted by the police.'

'What law did they break?'

'None in my book.'

'Sedition, then.'

'Incitement. Possession of documents with intent to distribute. A pair of kids with a handful of communist pamphlets. Might've thought the police had fatter ferrets to chase.'

'They're Reds?'

'They're *my* men and I won't see them locked up for their beliefs.' He stopped, rigid as a telegraph pole, his knuckles stretched tight clasping the handle of his stick. 'Lord knows there's been enough of their lot put behind bars this past year. Country's in a sorry state when men are losing their liberty just for holding different ideas to the powers that be.'

He walked on. I knew enough not to push it. A few things made more sense to me now. Why Mrs Ridley talked about us as if we were a hoard not two. Why Dad lived like a pauper. He was paying extra on that room, I'd wager. Mrs Ridley would squeeze every drop from that fruit. By the time we reached the wood at the edge of the Common, we'd slowed almost to pigeon steps. A girl ran past carrying a May garland which was dropping its leaves like confetti. A woman clutching a cake under a glass bell chased her, calling: 'Slow up, Maggie. You'll have me puffed.'

Dad drew a sharp breath. He'd caught his foot on a root.

'You're getting worse,' I said.

He made no reply but winced and gripped a tree trunk for balance. We stopped while he let his leg rest. It was cool and dim under the evergreens, with a damp, mushroom sort of smell. My skin puckered. Ahead was the green where people were gathering, so bright in the sunshine it hurt to look.

'You'd have me turn them out, I suppose?' Dad's voice was rough as a washboard. He coughed into his fist.

'It's hardly wise, is it? Not for a man in your position.'

He looked as if he was thinking this over. When he spoke again his voice was gentler. 'When I was young, I believed it was every man for himself. I was young and strong and I was going to get on, let no one stop me. A lot of men are the same... and they go on like that until they're forty-odd. Then the jobs don't come so easy. Coughs and colds linger. Put their backs out just digging the garden. They start to see how thin it all is. Well, I didn't have to wait; I learned that lesson young.' He tapped his stick against his bad leg. 'When you slow down, you notice your neighbour's problems, your comrades' fears. You learn to look beyond your own nose.' He shrugged. 'Those boys needed my help.'

I wondered if I'd ever seen a man look so tired. The sunlight showed patches of broken veins and large tea-stain freckles on his cheeks.

'That's all very well, Dad, but you ought to look after yourself. What use will you be to your comrades if you let yourself go to seed? That room isn't fit for a rabbit hutch. It's damp, nothing's clean, the vermin are frightful. You think you're saving pennies, perhaps, but what of your health? Couldn't you stretch to something nicer?'

'There's plenty who have to put up with worse.'

I groaned. 'Come off it.'

'Look now.' He felt in his pocket for his watch, the sun glared from its face as we came out from beneath the trees. I tugged the brim of my hat to shade my face. On the far side of the cricket field was the pavilion and a row of stalls, striped awnings flapping. People were drifting this way and that like ducks on a pond. Some were sitting on the grass near the maypole. The breeze picked up and Dad wiped his watering eyes with his shirt-cuff. 'Had I a family, perhaps I'd have kept the house on,' he said. 'But I've none. After your sister went off gallivanting—'

'She went for a job.'

'Call it what you want. You left me alone.'

I'd never heard him put it quite like that. There was a time, when I was packing my things into my mother's dowry chest, Dad had stood in my bedroom doorway and told me in a quiet, strained voice, *When you reject my politics, Alma, you reject me*. Somehow this was different. Simpler. Worse. As we walked on, his words settled like a lead necklace on my chest. *You left me alone*. Seductive as a slogan – and wasn't it him who taught me to be wary of that? If it's ever-so-sweet a thing to believe, don't you believe it.

Dad had plenty to organise, so I spent the morning watching the kiddies dancing, the costume competition, the crowning of the May Queen, the calling of the raffle. A little boy with a paper crown came by tossing hawthorn blossom. I lay on the grass and held the blossom to the light, admiring the purplish seeds on their fine stalks. A rolling movement caught my eye at the far end of the green. Half a dozen men were pushing a wagon. Dad was directing, waving his walking stick. He raised both hands when it was in the right place. The men lugged great big wheel chocks from the wagon's flatbed. Dad stood apart as they knocked them into place. A short, stiff figure like a stake in the grass.

The brass four-piece from the Rotary Club had started a tune. With each song more people went over to dance. A chap trod on my skirt hem as he picked his way past. I wondered if I should get up. The sound of people's voices rose and dropped away and rose again, the odd shout or child's scream piercing through. It reminded me of the din outside Horace Loon's pet shop. He used to keep bullfrogs in a half barrel. A fishing net draped over a wire frame, filled with budgies. Puppies of all sorts of breeds, leashed to a metal hoop in the wall. The pet shop was next door to the chemist where Mum would send me for her bottles of pills that came in a paper bag and which, when you shook them, rattled louder than a football clacker. I would always stop outside to put my finger into the mouse cage to feel their teeth nibble. One day Horace Loon gave me one for nothing. Picked it out for me, its pink paws clutching his thumb, and said I might have it for being such a brave girl. I took it in my hand, its little heart beating as I clutched it tight. Then he patted my head and told me to hurry on home to my poor mother.

Some memories you want to spit out, like hot food from your mouth. I opened my eyes and craned my neck. The tuba player was putting his music in a file while the others packed away their instruments. Two youngsters were still dancing, counting in eights as they practised their steps. Other people were milling, chatting.

They were waiting for the Labour Day march to arrive. Then there'd be the long speeches I used to think so boring as a child. I fancied I'd sit through them this time. Perhaps Dad would look more kindly on me if I took an interest. I dusted the worst of the grass from my skirt and began weaving through the small crowd. One family was having a singsong, taking up where the band had left off. The father tipped his head back, roaring at the sky. He had clearly started early in the public. I walked across the cricket field where a few men had begun to gather around the flatbed wagon. It was some sort of agricultural thing, wheels as high as my shoulder. Leading up to its bed was a set of portable steps, where I sat and enjoyed the sun on my face. Dad was beneath the fruit trees not thirty feet away, talking to a group of young folk wearing sashes that read, 'Support the miners!' He shook hands with one of them. I found it strange he knew these chaps in their pale slacks and boaters, but then, what did I know about Dad's life now? I watched as he greeted a tall young woman in a peach dress, the waistline practically round her knees. They talked for quite a time, and I couldn't help my gaze wandering back to them. Something she said made him laugh, a proper wide-mouthed laugh. I hardly thought him capable of it, the dour old sod. He took me by surprise, turning my way and pointing me out. It was too late to pretend I hadn't been watching. The girl waved gaily. I raised a hand in reply.

At the sound of distant kettledrums, people began streaming towards the stage from all over the green. I stood on the bottom step to get a better view of what was going on. I saw a nursemaid with three curly-haired little boys in sailor suits ushering them out of the park, dragging the youngest by his elbow. A white scarf trailed from her open bag. After a while, I heard the faint toot of brass as well as drums. I supposed it must be a slow and halting procession. I had my eyes on the gap in the trees, expecting to see the Railwaymen's band any minute. Instead there came a steady trickle of blue-uniformed policemen, about twenty on foot and six on horseback.

'What are they after?' I tugged the sleeve of the nearest man. 'What do the police want with this?'

He shrugged. 'What do they ever want?'

The smell of cough drops on his breath lingered in the air. Soon the band turned up at the mouth of the path, red silks tied to their instruments. They were thirty strong and the noise they made put the old fellows from the Rotary Club to

shame. They were followed by row after row of men, some in their best suits, others in collarless shirts and vests. One wore dungarees with the bib left hanging. After the railwaymen came the shipbuilders and boilermakers. Their banner had not changed since I was a child – a huge square of sailcloth, embroidered with a circle of brawny arms, locked together. It was strung between poles the length of sapling trees, the bearers fighting to keep it upright in the gusting breeze. Behind, the kettle drummers were beating a low tattoo. My heart took up the rhythm as they drew closer.

It was a quarter of an hour before the whole of the march had congregated on the field. The turnout was like no Labour Day I'd ever seen and I began to wonder if this strike might come to something after all. By the time the Transport and General Workers, the Warehouse and Distributive, the Sailors and Firemen, and a dozen or so smaller unions had trailed in, there was scarcely a patch of grass to be seen. I'd stepped aside to let Dad and some other folk onto the stage, where they were sitting, waiting. Looking out, it was hats and more hats, like pebbles on a beach. My eye fell on whatever was moving – a sheet of music flying off on the wind, a billowing banner reading *Unity is Strength*, and another made from a crooked piece of board, *An injury to one is an injury to all*. The police stood like statues round the edges of the park.

I recognised two of the six men on stage with Dad. Though I couldn't quite remember their names, I knew they were from the other unions. His opposite numbers. There was a bit of conferring, then Dad propped his stick against a chair and took up the speaking trumpet. He was trying to keep a smile in check as he looked out. The musicians had stopped, but the roar of voices was incredible. He raised the cone to his lips and called out for quiet. People started to shush each other. The shushing and laughing became a pantomime. I thought it would go on forever, back and forth, but eventually folk calmed down enough for him to speak.

'Comrades,' he said. 'I know you won't all hear us today. That you've come in such numbers is a credit to your unions. It's a credit to each and every one of you – your decency, your solidarity. Any moment now, we're expecting the arrival of our dear friend Tony Winters.' He paused, for at the sound of the man's name the crowd erupted into cheering. 'That's right. That's right. All I want to say to those of you who are lucky enough to hear him and the others who'll speak today – and I mean you fellas at the front here – it's up to you to tell the others what's been said. When you're in the public later enjoying a civilised half pint...' This drew laughter, a bit of

applause. Dad winked. I'd forgotten how much he enjoyed a turn on stage. I'd forgotten too how dearly his men loved him, their faces like daisies tilted to the sun. 'I want you to make sure those poor sods at the back get to hear all about it. Will you do that for me?'

The blast of *ayes* raised the hairs on my scalp. A young boy broke free from his father's grasp and came to perch beside me on the steps. I let him pass to sit on the highest one. He had a sharp sour smell, too warm among all those bodies. He crept higher, shifting with his hands, leaving his bare legs trailing, until he was sitting on the stage itself. Dad paid him no mind.

'Now, while we wait for our good friend Mr Winters to arrive, I want to introduce a very special young woman. She's only nineteen years of age, but she's been doing sterling work raising funds for the miners. Just last week she was up in the Yorkshire Coalfield, delivering aid and relief. And this weekend, even members of our Tory Town Council...' He waited for the boos to subside. 'Even *they* have seen fit to attend one of her fundraisers. So let's hope some of her charm rubs off on the rest of us, shall we? Right then, here she is: Miss Ivy Havensleigh.'

I didn't cotton on to the fact I was in the way, until I turned from the stage to see the tall girl standing over me. I shuffled aside. Dad had given up trying to use the speaking horn, but he offered it to her now. As she reached out to take it, I saw her hand was trembling. She had a scrap of paper, scribbled all over, and looked out at the crowd with a strange, fixed smile. A few seconds passed like that and then I heard people shushing again. *Let the girl speak. Let's hear her.* She checked her notes. I was close enough to see her swallow. Someone yelled something I didn't catch and a great laugh went up. Miss Havensleigh twitched her head like a rabbit hearing gunshot.

'Tell us how those poor bastards in the North are getting on!' There was a waft of sweet aniseed as the man beside me called out. Miss Havensleigh looked down, not at him, but at me. I tried to give the daft thing a bit of heart, smiling and nodding, though I was wondering what possessed her to mount that stage in the first place. I hoped Dad had not talked her into it. He was fussing with something in his inside pocket, looking like butter wouldn't melt.

'Go on,' I said. 'We're listening.' She gave me a flicker of a smile.

'Hello,' she said, then remembered the trumpet. 'I have messages from Newcastle.' She spoke into its mouth. Her voice was far lower than I'd expected.

Smooth and plummy. She might have been an announcer on the wireless. I don't know if the crowd was clapping her out of relief or pity, but she stood a little straighter. 'Shall I read them to you?' she cried and, like an old hand, she made a show of listening for the ayes, placing one finger behind her earlobe. Her chest rose and fell as she took a big breath. 'I asked our cousins in the coalfield what they wished us all to understand about the current dispute. One man told me: *What's been asked of us with these new contracts is akin to suicide. To work longer hours for less wages means putting ourselves and our children on a starvation diet.*' She let the paper drop to her side. 'I have visited these families and I can promise, this is no exaggeration. I met a family of nine who have not tasted meat for more than six months. They live on boiled potatoes and salt.' She paused. 'Another of the miners was keen to contradict some of the falsehoods you might have read in the national press. He said this: *It's all a cod. They base these figures on however many tonnes per day, but who can hew that much? No one, that's who. Either the going's too hard, or it's flooded or the timbers are rotten. I'm telling you it's a cod.*' She raised a good cheer with this. She was a clever girl – taking a rise out of herself. I could tell from her blushing smile she knew how funny it sounded to hear a miner's strong words in her prim-and-proper voice.

'I have one last message here,' she said, holding a finger aloft. 'I asked the miners' leaders in Newcastle what they thought about the idea of a national strike in their support. They gave me this message: *A national strike is a serious matter and will undoubtedly involve great sacrifice for all involved. That is why we do not speak lightly when we say that should our fellow union members in transport and the heavy industries choose to stand beside us in this fight, we promise we will never forget nor forgo our glad debt to them, our comrades.*

'Gentlemen. We have the chance to change the country. People may look back on this as the moment that the trade unions simply said *enough is enough*. When we have achieved a decent life and a decent wage for every worker, we may look back and wonder not *how did we do it*, but *why did we not do it sooner?*'

The speaking trumpet hung in her fingers as she looked out over the crowd. She had raised a racket of cheering, feet stamping, drums bashed. I took one last look at Miss Havensleigh – panting a little from throwing her voice, the wind pushing her dress against her boyish frame – and began to slowly pick my way through the crowd. Near the gates, it was less thick and I stopped to put my hat back on.

'Mrs Cox, I so wanted to introduce myself.'

I turned to see Miss Havensleigh, smiling, pink in the cheek.

'I believe you're Herb Yates's daughter?'

'That's right.'

'You must be terribly proud.' She looked over her shoulder, where Dad was at the front of the stage, speaking again, too far away to carry. I supposed I was a little proud – he was in his element after all – but another part of me didn't like seeing how adored he was, how they relied on him. I begrudged it. 'Thank you for your encouragement,' she said. 'I thought I would be quite capable. I've made speeches before at smaller... I suppose I'm not quite ready.' Though her cheeks took on a brighter shade, she never broke gaze with me. She had green eyes, set close together, a long narrow nose and narrow jaw to match. The girl was *earnest* – that was the word for it – and not the least bit sniffy as you might expect. I found myself taking to her.

'You came right in the end,' I said.

'I expect you'd have done a far better job.'

'Not me,' I said. 'Why would you say so?'

'Only that as Mr Yates's daughter...'

She made a quick motion with her hand as if to waft the rest of the sentence away. 'I have to confess an ulterior motive, Mrs Cox. I want to ask if you'll be volunteering for the strike effort?'

'Perhaps,' I said. I didn't like to disappoint her.

'Your father said I might be put in charge of the soup kitchen. I'm recruiting volunteers. I'd rather hoped I might be able to interest you.'

'You're to make the soup?'

She looked stung by my tone. 'The strike will be won or lost through the stomachs of the men, you know.' I had heard this line before – one of my dad's, word for word. I could not puzzle her out. She was green as a girl scout, but then again, she had guts getting up there to speak the way she did.

'Miss Havensleigh, I don't mind saying your speech was very good. Really.'

She flashed a shy smile. I felt ancient beside her. The five years between us might have been a lifetime.

'Will I see you at the club?' she said. 'Tuesday morning, first thing?'

I nodded and offered her a handshake. Her knuckles were narrow and bony. I daren't squeeze too hard. We said our goodbyes and as I walked towards the park

gates, I tried to imagine her peeling mounds of spuds in some grotty kitchen. It didn't seem right. A boy walked past me eating a thick ham sandwich, almost walking into the gatepost he was enjoying it so. Volunteering at the soup kitchen would mean free food. And what else had I to do all day?

My head began to feel tight. I was thirsty. The street seemed very quiet after the press of the crowd. There were three girls climbing on the railings, trying to get a better view of the stage. A woman stood in the balcony window of a four-floor house overlooking the park. Middle-aged, wearing a blue-silk turban, she stood like a statue holding a teacup and a newspaper, staring out. I heard faint shouts. Dad would be spending his voice.

I drifted in the direction of the esplanade, where I knew there was a water fountain. It was about half a mile and I passed four or five publics on the way, but at each one folk spilled out onto the street and the yeasty, smoky smell put me off. Beside which, I had never been inside a public without Bill by my side, not even for a glass of water. At the drinking fountain, I waited my turn. The water was so cold it made my teeth hurt. I let it trickle into my cheek and swirled it round my mouth. I was dry as a sponge.

There was a time Bill and me might have been among the couples strolling the pier, my hand in the crook of his arm. I sat down on wide sea wall and watched them, wondering if I ought to leave this town and start up somewhere new. Somewhere I wouldn't have to face so many reminders of him and the injury he'd done me. The memories were scattered over town like blood spots in sawdust.

To the left of me, two men were playing cards, kneeling on the pavement. A woman in a floral dress stood over them. The one dealing looked just like the tramp I'd met that morning on the promenade. He was wearing the same clothes – a collarless shirt buttoned at the neck, a brown jacket patched navy blue at the elbows and cuffs. His boater was upturned on the ground. Still, being ten yards or more away, I couldn't quite be sure it was him. After a moment or two, the other bloke thumped his tattooed fist against his brow. It seemed he'd lost whatever game they were playing. He began fishing around in his pockets, but the woman wouldn't let him play again. She clamped her handbag in her armpit and dragged him to his feet.

The tramp gathered his cards and stood to offer a handshake. His palm looked too broad for his skinny wrist. The couple walked off without so much as a nod. He shrugged, picked up his hat and shook it, looking inside. A ship sounded its

horn and he turned to the water. It occurred to me then I oughtn't stare, but it was too late. He tilted his head and smiled.

'It's surprised I am to see you again.' His boater's dog-chewed brim shaded all of his face but the tip of his nose. He must've laid hands on a razor for his dirt-filled beard was gone. He was smiling, so I smiled. He told me his name was Emlyn Wynne and I told him mine. I saw no harm in talking to him, in fact I almost felt I knew him.

'I hope you found the calling shed?' I asked.

He nodded. 'Not that it's done me much good, I must confess.'

'Keep heart,' I said. 'My dad says they ought to be regulated. Protect workers' rights. Meantime, all you can do is keep trying.'

I wasn't sure why I felt the need to coach him so. I worried I might have hurt his pride.

'May I sit here?' he asked, waving to a spot on the wall a polite yard away. When I said he might, he took his cards from his trouser pocket and sat down cross-legged, facing me. 'To tell you the truth, I'm not keen on that shed. Have you been?'

'I've passed by.'

'Then you'll know how it reeks,' he said. 'Ych a fi! That and it's dim as a coffin. Rather be out here, given the chance. Sunlight. People enjoying themselves.'

He pointed at a rabble of boys climbing the iron legs of the pier.

'Was it pontoon you were playing?' I asked.

'Heavens, no. Pontoon you've a chance of losing. This is Find the Lady.'

'You can lose any game.'

He grinned. 'You've not played, have you?' He shuffled the cards, nimble in spite of his missing finger, and laid three out in front of me. 'One of these is the Queen of Hearts.'

'You'll be expecting a penny.'

'Go on with you. This one's on me.'

I looked at the cards, creased and warped, twitching in the breeze. Emlyn's hand was hovering, ready to catch them if they should fly.

'She's not under any of them,' I said. 'It's a con.'

He turned the middle card to show the Queen of Hearts, then flipped it back and began muddling the three. I tried to keep my eye on the queen.

'She's there,' I pointed. It was the Eight of Diamonds.

'Try again,' he said, leaving the eight showing.

'There then,' I chose the card on the left. It was the Two of Spades.

I reached out and put my hand on the last card at the same time he touched it. I tried to lift it but he had it pinned.

'I'll let you look,' he said, letting go. It was the Jack of Clubs. The queen had disappeared.

'I said it was a con.'

He looked up at me, through the sprayed straws of his hat. A small smile, his eyes narrowed. 'You knew, but you still played, didn't you?'

'I didn't put a penny on it.'

'That's all the same. Everybody knows it's a con. They say as much before they begin, but still they play. How do you explain that then?'

'They think they'll catch you.'

'Some. Like you. But I don't let them.'

'The rest?'

He leaned a little closer. His jaw followed a delicate line. 'I'll tell you a secret, shall I? I think they like the feeling of it.'

'Of being conned?'

He nodded, sitting back again. 'Bit like falling.'

'Don't you get trouble?'

'How do you mean?'

'There's plenty of fellas like a fight.'

He laughed, a drum-skin rumble. 'Best not to think too hard on their type.'

He slid the cards back in the pack and I held out the Jack of Clubs for him to do the same. He reached for it and, shy of touching, I let go. I thought he had it, but it flew over the edge of the sea wall. I leapt up to look. The card was lying among a mess of rusty cans, broken bottles, old bits of fishing net and such like.

I apologised, thinking it lost, but Emlyn didn't seem the slightest bit bothered. He put the pack in his pocket and undid his boots. Then, he hopped onto the wall, placed one bare foot on the sloping sea defence and ran down in short, bird-like steps. Halfway, he hopped and landed on a rock fringed with barnacles. I winced for his soles.

'It's there,' I said, pointing.

'So it is.' He stepped across the uneven rocks, plucked the card from among the rubbish and wiped both sides on his trousers. It looked as though climbing up might be harder. He dug his fingers into the gaps between the slabs. My eyes fell on his boots, upturned on the pavement in front of me, toes hanging open, great splits along the sides, laces worn thin at the eyelets. It occurred to me he no longer had any socks. I wondered how a person could go on like that. Why wasn't he desperate, begging for work? When he'd climbed back up onto the wall, his long, pale feet were mucky with grit and algae. I offered him my hanky.

'Thanks, but no,' he said. 'I'll let them dry as I walk.' He tied his boot laces together to make a handle. I felt a pang, seeing him get ready to go. When he was gone I'd have no company, nowhere to be but back at the rally, all alone among happy families.

'Never met an Emlyn before,' I said. 'What does it mean?'

'Industrious. Don't suit it, do I? My father expected a miner in his own image. Strong of back and hardy of heart.' He put his coat over his arm and smoothed it, looking a little bashful. 'Now then, I'm for the seafront. Might you be going the same way?'

I nodded, though really I'd rather go anywhere than that room. As we walked, I found myself taking two steps to Emlyn's every one. I worried he'd stand on something sharp, so careless he seemed. His clothes flapped loose on his lanky frame. He looked in need of a proper hot dinner.

'I live here,' I said as we drew level with the houses. 'There's a tap in the yard if you want to rinse your feet.'

'I wouldn't mind, thank you.'

I didn't think to fetch him a towel. I waited a few yards away whilst he gave his feet a good rub and began to lace them back in his ruined boots. I imagined the slimy feeling of wet skin on the leather and shivered.

'You know, my father says the tallyman favours a familiar face. If you keep turning up, they're bound to try you out in the end.'

Emlyn was tying his second boot, careful not to touch his knee to the dirt. The lace had snapped, so he had to fix it onto the eyelets in a small hard knot. Those boots would not be coming off again in a hurry. He stood up and stretched his back.

'Maybe,' he said. 'But I understand there's to be a strike.'

'I was at the rally this morning. Must've been two thousand there. Perhaps more.'

'There you are then. Seems to me I'd be best off waiting. There'll soon be no shortage of work.'

The tap was dripping, pat-patting onto the mud. I stepped around him to shut it off. 'What do you mean?'

'They take anyone in a strike, don't they? I've seen it before – half-blind and lame, even bean poles like me.'

'You wouldn't scab?' I spoke low, aware of all the windows looking onto the yard. Dusty spectacle lenses.

'I've been on the road these six months,' he said. 'I've no part in their quarrel. Rather read a poem than a pamphlet, me.'

'I'll be running a soup kitchen for the strikers. I shall be doing what I can to help them and you –' I found myself short of words. It seemed this fellow could look you in the eye for days and never flinch. 'You want to work against them.'

'Not a bit of it. I'm no enemy of theirs. Fifteen shillings is all I need. Get me a nice strong pair of boots and I'll be off. Back on the road and out of it all.' He made a small, swooping movement with his hand.

'You'll help them win.'

'Help who?'

'The mine owners. You're the switch they'll use to whip the men.' I heard my father's words on my tongue. 'Too many like you and the strike's on its knees.'

It was the first time I'd seen Emlyn frown. His grim look reminded me how ill I knew him. What was I doing keeping company with such a man?

'I left Carmarthen when I was nineteen,' he said. 'Because the mine owners had won already. There'll be no winning for the men. Never again. What I've never understood is why no one else sees it.'

He picked up his case and tipped his hat. As he walked out of the yard, his boots left wet prints on the dirt.

Eight

When I opened the front door on the first morning of the strike, I almost bumped into a man using our doorstep to overtake someone on the narrow pavement.

'Beg pardon,' he said, tipping his bowler but barely breaking his stride. Our little promenade sounded like the High Road, feet scuffing and clacking, passing conversations. There was a steady stream of people going by. I peered round the frame to look in the direction they were coming from, feeling just the faintest spittle of rain on my cheeks. The procession stretched right along the curve of the road, both pavements full, bobbing hats, almost everyone heading towards town. Made me think of barrels floating downriver. There were bicycles too, one after the next, shuddering over the cobbles and potholes. Above, a lick of orange caught my eye. The streetlamps were still on, hardly glowing against a sky the colour of cigarette smoke. I watched a boy in piped school cap and short trousers run along the wall by the sea defences, mouth open like a dog. It was really happening, then. Something was happening, anyhow.

'Busmen out?' I asked a woman as she passed.

She rolled her eyes. 'You'll be on Shanks' pony this morning, love.'

There was a tremendous rattling and an old fellow came by on a lady's cycle, briefcase dancing in the basket. He put a hand up to steady his hat and lost control of the handlebars, veering.

I stepped into the flow of people and straight away a man brushed past my elbow. You'd have thought they were late for St Peter, the lot of them. It was odd to walk among so many men in suits and paper-white collars, shop girls clicking by on their heels. It wasn't normal for me to see such people on the street in such numbers. It put me in mind of the queues on polling day. I stopped beside a woman leaning on a lamppost, a bright red clutch bag in her hand, matching boat-shaped hat. She had her eyes closed, wincing, one foot raised from the ground. Her face-powder clotted in the wrinkles of her skin.

'Everything alright?' I asked. 'Shoes pinching?'

She waved me on without looking. Not awfully friendly, these office folk. I passed all manner of vehicles on the way to the Working Men's Club. Milk floats packed with factory girls, carts dragged by rangy old nags brought out of retirement. Plenty of private motor cars, engines rumbling like treadle washes as they sat congested down St Mary's Street. I even saw a two-wheel Brougham, iced with bird droppings like a Christmas pudding. And weaving between it all like minnows, the delivery boys on their pushbikes – *Handsome Jack's Tailors, Ambrosia Bakery, Tunnock's Laundry and Baths.*

The members' bar was full when I arrived. I put my head through the main doors and caught a whiff of stale beer and tobacco smoke, the oily overalls of those squashed nearest the door. I heard a bloke shout above the rumble of voices. *I ain't biding by a bit of paper on the wall. I want it from the horse's mouth.* I let the door close again.

Following the alley to the back, I tried to bring Miss Havensleigh's face to mind. I had pieces of the puzzle – she was slim, she had that long, narrow nose and boyish haircut, a little frizzy. I couldn't account for my nerves. Why did I worry I wouldn't recognise her? The yard was stacked with bikes. In the corner there was a pile of rotting wood and broken flowerpots. A gutted settee stood on its end. I heard a tap on the window. It was her – waving through the glass. I remembered then how young she was, how green. That was one knot out of my handkerchief. Behind her, there were other faces and turned heads, all women.

It went quiet when I shuffled in. The air was full of the damp, starchy smell of potato flesh, tinged with someone's lavender water. There was a mound of peelings in the middle of the table and two women were at the sink with open sacks of earthy potatoes beside them.

'Ladies, this is Mrs Alma Cox. Her father is Herb Yates, Membership Secretary. I'm sure you know of him.'

A dozen voices said hello at once.

'How d'you do?' I said. They looked cheerful enough. Mostly older than me, but for a slender girl who might have yet to turn fourteen. Miss Havensleigh gave me each of their names. I did my best to remember them, then took a seat next to a smiling, bucktoothed woman called Winifred. She passed me a knife.

'We were just talking about the cinema,' Miss Havensleigh said. She was at the opposite end to me. 'Nelly says I simply must see the new one. The pirates. Have you seen it?' She smiled that well-brought-up smile, smooth as a vicar's wife – and she just a youngster. Did they give lessons on how to handle people at those posh schools? I shook my head. I hadn't set foot in a picture house for years – far too busy with the shop.

'It's terrific.' Nelly was a plump, blond woman with a babyish face. 'I don't normally go in for those swashbucklers. I tell you what though, I think I prefer *him* to the other one. Valentine, what's-his-name.'

'Oh, no. Nel, you can't mean it,' Winifred said. She seemed to know who she was talking about as if it didn't need saying. They were peeling the spuds onto pages of the newspaper. I picked up what was left over and folded it to look for the news. 'Is this today's? Anything about the strike?' My eyes found the date at the top of the page. It was from Thursday last week.

'Printers are out with the rest of them,' said a stout woman by my side, whose name I think was Mercy, or Mary. I knew that, of course. It had slipped my mind. I laid a sheet in front of me and took up a spud. As I peeled, I kept half an eye on Miss Havensleigh. I was expecting her to turn the talk to the strike any minute. You'd never have known things were topsy-turvy outdoors, the streets overflowing, the transport stopped. The buzz and bother didn't seem to have made it into this kitchen.

The knife they gave me wouldn't have cut hot butter. I was hacking off great lumps of potato along with the skin, working up a blister in the crook of my finger. After a while, I started searching the dresser beside me for a sharpening steel. I didn't expect to find one and I was right. The chit-chat went quiet as I stepped into the yard. I kneeled by the doorstep and used it to hone an edge. It was grey Portland stone. Nice and smooth. Resting my chin on my knee, stroking my blade this side then that, I listened for the sounds from the road. The rattle of rusty bicycles brought out of retirement. The honking horns of amateur drivers. There was nothing, only my blade sweeping the stone, that familiar scrape with a faint bell-chime. Inside, I found some of the women had moved on to chopping carrots and swede. My bowl of washed potatoes was still half full.

'How are you getting on?' Miss Havensleigh asked.

'Fine,' I said. 'Knife was blunt.'

I picked up a potato that reminded me of a cow's heart, with lumps just where the arteries would be. I peeled, then whittled it to take the perfect shape, carved channels and veins to make it look more realistic. As the women chatted, I noticed two in the corner who hardly spoke. The girl with her hair tied in a navy ribbon sat so close to the white-haired old dear their dark dresses might have been sewn together. Miss H tried to get the girl talking. *And how about you, Irene? What do you make of the strike?* Yes, I thought, let's talk about that. The girl flushed and said nothing and I, being so far down the table, didn't like to cut across or raise my voice. Young Irene put me in mind of a spoon with her rounded face and long thin neck. The older woman, I later found out, was her grandmother Mrs Judd. She was

wearing widow's weeds. I'd moved on to carving a pair of kidneys when I heard the others start wittering about their hair.

'Do you want my curlers, Win? For I shan't need them anymore after this strike's over.' I looked up. There was a woman I could only see in profile. She had dark hair, almost black, very short and shingled. It was slick with something like pomade. She'd even stuck a few curls to her temples and the smear of grease on her skin caught the light.

'You ain't going straight, Dot?' Winifred asked.

'Lor' no! Ben says I can have a permanent wave soon as he's back on his money.' This Dot girl was pregnant – one of three expectant women in the room. Her bump sat high beneath her breasts and she rubbed it as she talked.

'Cost an arm and a leg, don't they? Anyhow, you want to hang on to your curlers, love, for when it grows out.'

'It don't grow out, Win. It's *permanent*.'

I put my half-finished kidney beside the heart and let my palms rest on the worn, grooved wood. I must've spent months of my life listening to conversations like this. Talking for the sake of what? It was enough to turn your brain to curds. Every time Bill and me went to some 'do' – the races, a garden party, dinner with one of his friends – he'd end up off with the blokes and I'd be left listening to hours and hours of how awful it is when your face powder gets damp, how hard it is to get good stockings these days, whether sweet or savoury was more fattening. They might've had bigger houses and nicer dresses, but get enough of them together and it all tumbled down to the same old rubbish.

'Do you think I'd suit a set?'

'You'd look darling. Don't you think so, Win?'

I didn't mean to knock my chair when I stood up. It clattered to the ground and I was centre of attention.

'I'm just popping to the ladies,' I said.

I took my time climbing the stairs to the Keir Hardie room. Halfway, I noticed a strong smell of paint and the rumbling sound of men's voices. The double doors were wedged open and inside a chap was on his knees, coating a placard with white gloss, dabbing at the dribbles with the tip of his brush. Propped against the wall were two more boards with the word 'PICKET' in bold black letters.

It was hard to tell what all the men were doing straight off. There was a boy with his ear to the wireless, frowning as he listened and scribbled notes. I shuffled past stacks of chairs and round a group whose heads were bent over a map of the town. One of them was an old friend of my dad's from the Trades Council, Mr Reagan. I hadn't seen him since I was a girl. He looked exactly the same as I remembered, only greyer and heavier round the waist.

'You're here, Tom,' he said, pointing at the map. 'Andy, you're to take over on Prince's Way. They've been on all night. Go downstairs and find yourself a couple of willing lads to take with you. Harold, we've nothing on the London Road. Make sure you're the far side of the crossroads.' He marked the place with a matchstick.

I found Dad in the corner, sitting on a stool at a high table, writing in a ledger as a bloke next to him read from a stack of index cards. He looked up as I arrived. His eyes were redder than ever, but he looked alert, straight-backed on his perch.

'You've not been home,' I said.

'You came.' He held my gaze and I felt shy, suddenly.

'I promised Miss Havensleigh I would.'

'Very good. This is Mark Shank, General Secretary. Mark, this is my daughter, Alma Cox. She's helping with the soup kitchen below.'

Mark squeezed my hand warmly. His grey stubble and the creases in his shirt made me think perhaps he hadn't been home either.

'Have you been outside this morning?' I asked.

Dad shook his head.

'I didn't see a single tram on my way in. All sorts walking and cycling. Saw a laundry wagon full of women on Portland Avenue. Packed like sardines, they were. Knees under their chins.'

He nodded. 'Peterson sent a boy. Says he's got eight men in ten off the buses. Nothing leaving the depot. Not bad for his lot.' He and Shank shared a look. 'I'll be out and about myself soon. Go downstairs to gee the lads up. Make a round of the pickets. Just as soon as we've done this. Where did we get to?'

'Crossley, stevedore,' said Mark.

He wrote 'Crossley' in his beautiful copperplate. It would take an earthquake before Dad let his lettering slip.

'How about your lot?' I asked.

'I've sent a thirty-strong picket to mind the gates. North and south.'

'And? How are they holding?'

'They're telling me sailors and shipbuilders are just walking through. Tony's taking names.'

'The dockers are out though?'

He looked up. 'These are my men you're talking about.'

'Our men, Herb,' said Mark.

'Our men. Exactly.' He rubbed his face with his sleeve, making one cheek red, one eyebrow frayed. Perhaps he was feeling the loss of sleep, after all. 'Granted, about half the morning shift turned up, but they went as soon they saw the picket. That's normal. They just want to see it with their own eyes. Gives them something to tell the wife when they get home.'

'You need some rest,' I said.

'Did you come in through the bar?'

'Round the back.'

'There's sixty-odd men down in the bar and every single one of them has a question he wants answered. When will the strike pay start? How much will it be? What's happening about this ship left half-unloaded? What about warehousing? Can they pass the pickets to fetch personal items? We've got fellas from the power station asking *us* should they report for work or not because they're getting no answers from their own union. What can I tell them?' He peered at the next card. Mark read it out,

'Crouch, A, stevedore. Then Crouch, S, crane driver.'

I noticed his lame leg trembling, ever so slightly, the toe of his boot just touching the table prop.

'Couldn't I do this for you?'

'I like to do it myself. They're my men, I need to keep on top of things. Besides which, Miss Havensleigh's in greater need of your help. Remember, this strike will be won or lost through the stomachs of the men and their families. Isn't that right, Mark?'

Mark was already gently nodding. 'There's no knowing how long they might have to string out last week's pay packet, Mrs Cox. Shops'll be withdrawing credit before you know it. We need you ladies up and running. Show of strength.' He stopped and dragged up a dry cough, covering his mouth with his fist. 'Daniels, H, engineer. Davids, M, stevedore. '

I looked around the room. On the next table there was a spotty lad of about sixteen carefully rolling a rubber stamp on a sheet headed GOODS PERMIT. He placed the stamped one in a box, re-inked and did the next. The sheets were piled as high as his shoulder. Even something so tedious I could stomach better than staying in that kitchen.

'I could join one of the pickets,' I said. Dad looked at me as if he was surprised to see me still standing there. He carried on writing, his head bowed over the paper, showing the thinning hair on his crown. I took it that was the end of the matter. I'd turned to leave when he spoke again.

'Alma,' he said, not looking up from his ledger. 'I appreciate it.'

As I came down the last set of stairs to the kitchen, I thought I heard someone say my name. Through the doorway, I saw the edge of the cooking range and Winifred's back as she stirred a stockpot. There was quiet for a moment, then she spoke again.

'Can't blame her, of course. You know it was January she lost her husband, poor girl?'

'This year?' There was no mistaking Nelly's squeak. 'She don't show it, does she?'

'Oh, I wouldn't say that. I knew she was grieving the minute I met her. I've an eye for these things, mind. My husband says I can be quite spooky.' There was a long pause and low voices. I had the feeling of being taken outside myself. The same feeling I'd get sometimes if I caught my reflection in shop windows. A small, far-off figure – much shorter than I really was, much more slight, strangely girlish, in spite of my rough-and-ready clothes. My reflection wasn't me – and nor was this 'poor girl' they were making so free with. I didn't recognise her.

I couldn't walk in just then. I had the sense to know there'd be a carry on, so I stayed in the passage, next to a headless mop-handle, staring at a dark rectangle on the wallpaper where there'd been something hanging. Was I wrong not to grieve? I hadn't loved him enough. I'd always been sorry for that, and guilty when I let it show. Even so, shouldn't I feel *more* after seven married years? I let my breath go. The sharp line between plum and lilac began to blur and my eyes stung. I blinked until they were clear, drew myself taller. They had no right to be talking about me like that. They had no business talking about me at all.

When I went in, I saw my potato organs were missing, as was my half-full bowl. I was glad to see Miss Havensleigh was not in the room. I hated the thought of her being party to that talk. I smiled, meeting the eye of the stout one, Mercy. I daren't look straight at Winifred.

'What's left for me to do?' I asked.

We set up tables for service in the Keir Hardie room and when the shift changed on the pickets a lot of the men came in. Feeling guilty for not pulling my weight, I stayed on and manned the ladle alongside Nelly.

'From the bottom or the top?' The next in the queue was a little chap with a very low hairline and pock-marked cheeks. He was beaming at me.

'Thick as it comes,' he said.

I took his cup and filled it to the brim. As I handed it over, he was still grinning, bright eyed.

'Been a good day has it?'

'I'll let you be the judge of that,' he said. 'Would you believe it if I told you I had a bit of a parley with Mr Young this afternoon? Mr Young of Young's International Produce, the man himself. You've heard of the fella?'

I nodded. Young's was a huge dark block of a building set just behind the dock gates. You could read its signage a mile off.

'Well, he comes up in his smart suit and that cane of his – though everyone knows the bleeder ain't lame – anyhow, he wants a man or two. He's got a load of perishables left on the dockside what need securing. Says to me, I know you lads won't take no pay, but I've got here tickets to the Variety for any of youse who'll help, he says. Front of house, he says. Now, what do you make of that?'

'I think he's desperate.'

'On the nose!' He jabbed his right fist, then turned to the next in line. 'She's a clever girl, this one.'

The man behind him raised his eyebrows. I'd a feeling he'd like to get his soup and sit down. As I stretched to take his dish, the pock-faced bloke moved just an inch. He took a sip from his cup and looked at me.

'I hope you didn't do it,' I said, seeing he was expecting something more.

'Course not. Put him straight, polite but firm, just like we was told. But I tell you what, I'll be damned if the shoe ain't switched feet now. What do you say, mate?'

I thought I saw the shimmer of a smile on the other bloke's face. He patted the pock-faced man on the back as he walked towards the tables. 'I say the shoe's switched feet.'

There came a point in the evening when I looked to serve the next man and the queue was gone. Nelly had long since reached the bottom of her pot and taken it to wash. Mine was half full yet, but it might bear reheating the morrow. A few tables were now empty. The rest were quieter – some chaps finished, leaning back in their chairs, some still supping, taking it slow. I felt warm hands grip the tops of my arms. It could only be my dad. He was never much of a one for hugging, but he used to squeeze my shoulders that way as a child.

'You girls have done well,' he said as he let go. He stood beside me and looked over the room. For a moment I wondered why we'd ever quarrelled – it was a stupid, fag-end of a thought that died along with the feeling of his handprints.

'We only had men in today,' I said. 'A lot of them told me they'd send their wives and kids tomorrow.'

'That's good. And if it's looking low, serve the kiddies first.' I hadn't noticed he'd brought his mug, but now he took the ladle and filled it. Side on, he looked much younger. I tried to call to mind the way he used to be. His hair darker. His skin more even in colour. Could I remember or was I imagining?

'How was the meeting?' I asked.

'It was grand. Plenty still to be done, plenty of confusion, but there's spirit in the men.' He lowered the ladle onto the skin of the soup and let it fill with almost clear liquid. 'Makes me wonder why we never managed it before. All these years, I've been crying out for unity. Calling for an end to the factions – *I'm a revolutionary, he's a reformist*. I tell you, I never so much as imagined we might get the Conservatives on our side. For a local strike, yes, but sympathetic?'

'You always said the working-class Tory is a traitor to himself.'

'Either that or a halfwit.' He took a thirsty gulp and nodded to say the soup was good.

'I'm after a lifeboat and sod the rest of you. Something like that, wasn't it? Have I remembered it right?'

His smile drew wings of creases from the corners of his eyes. 'Perhaps I was hasty.'

We walked home together and Dad was quiet, thoughtful. I sensed he was dying for his bed. On the promenade, he stopped in the halo of a streetlamp.

'What do you make of that?' he said, putting a finger to his ear.

I listened. I couldn't hear a thing. The estuary was calm. The gulls must've gone somewhere else to make their mischief. Often you'd hear grinding machinery drifting on the wind from the docks – engines rumbling, girders crashing. There'd be ships' horns coming in, going out. Not tonight.

'It's eerie,' I said.

'Aye, but look that way,' he said, pointing south.

There was a big dark space where the docks ought to have been. I'd never seen it at night without the lighted windows of the warehouses, the bright lanterns over the timber yard. Now there were only a few faint flickers – nautical lamps, perhaps.

'I wonder if it's the same in Liverpool.'

Dad chuckled softly and we walked on. We passed a boarding house where a woman in her rag-curls was leaning out of the window smoking. Next to it, across the fire-blackened front of the gutted Aurora Hotel, someone had chalked white letters two-foot high: WATCH YOUR LEADERS. After that was a derelict tenement. Then, on the pavement outside a shoe factory, I saw it again, already smudged here and there by people's shoes. Watch your leaders. I glanced at Dad, but he showed no sign of having noticed.

We came to the parade at the end of our row. Just a grocer, a pub and a small rag-and-bone yard. Catching sight of a piece of board propped up in the grocer's window, my feet stopped where they fell.

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Sixteen shillings. My heart had done a foxtrot – until I reached the end. The job was on the docks. That meant passing Dad's pickets, taking a striker's work. Seeing I'd fallen behind, he came back to my side. I read the notice aloud, sure to put a scornful note in my voice, then said, 'Looks like they're ready with the King's shilling.'

Dad let out a gentle snort. That was all he had to say about that. As he walked on, I looked at my reflection – not young and girlish after all, but a ghoul in the dark glass. Hollow eyes. Grey skin.

I stopped at home to fetch my knives. Dad went straight to his bed and within a minute I heard his breath come heavy. He was getting too old to go missing a whole night's sleep. I pulled my scabbard from under the folded linen in my case and took out the twelve-inch. Its smooth handle was a perfect fit for my hand. The knives were the most valuable thing I owned. The only valuable thing I owned. No matter what Dad said, I wasn't ready to trade them in for a sewing machine.

Dick had bought in a crate of live rabbits, just as I asked, only twice as many. My face must have shown my delight.

'Thought you'd be happy about that,' he said. I stared into the box of twitching fur. 'Get a lot for your money, don't you?'

'I wouldn't speak too soon,' I said. 'It's mostly fur. But you'll have meat enough to sell, I promise.'

The rabbits were Flemish Giants. Great big tawny fellas that disappeared almost to nothing when you tugged their coats off. I got into my rhythm quite quick, wringing their necks and squeezing their bladders. Dick leaned against the cutting room door and watched.

'They're fiddly buggers,' I said. 'The skin's only thin under that pelt. You have to be careful not to split the guts.'

He nodded, saying nothing, just watching me work. Soon their puce carcasses, chicken-pale at the haunches, were piling at my elbow and there was a gamey, earthy smell in the air. Dick fetched a bag for the feet and pelts – they were worth a few pennies from the rag and bone man. I paused to scrape the gore from the chopping block, to save it getting too slippery, and noticed a funny look on his face.

'What's the matter?' I asked.

'I never knew you could cut like that.'

I wanted to shake him by the shoulders – what did he think I'd been *doing* in Bill's cutting room all those years? – but I held my temper. He was staring at my hands resting on the block, slick with meat juices and blood. His fingers brushed mine as he took up the rabbit I'd just skinned. I stepped away to give him room, so he might see my handiwork in the light. He let it flop onto the pile with the others.

'Not a bad job, eh?' I said.

Something in his fierce look, the sheen of his eye, made my smile wear thin and false.

'You're a marvel, Alma,' he said, barely over a whisper.

I felt the cold tiles touch my elbow as I edged further aside. 'Take a couple home to Irene, why don't you? She'll make a lovely pie.'

He rubbed a hand over his face. Stared at his feet. At last, like the tide flooding over the mudflats, he broke into his usual grin. 'She will that,' he said. 'You can count on Irene for a fine game pie.'

Nine

My sister Rose was whimpering on the kitchen table. I thought it strange for her to be lying there, no one watching, and she so new, still bruised from birth. I picked her up, holding her head the way I'd been shown. Her head was like an orange on her wrinkled neck, her day-old eyes sealed in two straight lines. She cried even louder in my arms. I shushed her. Bounced her gently.

As I rounded the table, I saw a red half-moon on the wax-cloth floor. There was a musty, metal smell I didn't like. I remember calling for my mum and, when she didn't answer, carrying Rose into the garden. We had these slabs like stepping-stones from the house to the privy and when I stepped outside I saw they were sprinkled with ruby dots. Bright and wet like paint. Every second step there was a part-print of my mum's right shoe, D-shaped heel and a smudge in front.

I crouched outside the privy and let Rose's weight rest in my lap. My arms were burning from holding her just so. Between the baby's cries I could hear my mum breathing. Slow and long like blowing a balloon. *Is that you, Alma? Take your sister back inside.* I put my thumb in Rose's mouth, hoping she'd shut up, felt her tiny tongue jiggling as she roared. *Take her back in or I'll make you sorry you didn't.* Her voice was stretched to breaking.

I did as I was told and took her in, not stepping on the stones but crossing the grass. It was long and yellow, lying down lazy. The wet strands tried to swallow my feet.

Ten

After another restless night, I rose feeling furious with the vermin and my seeping, bleeding, itching skin. I almost envied the rabbits. Dad was gone, which was just as well for I felt like giving him hell for living in such a foul hole. I'd heard him get up and out in the early hours, not even stopping to boil himself a cup of tea. I gritted my teeth and touched my palms together. I would not scratch. I opened the window a crack and let the sea wind blow in and stood naked in the middle of the room with my arms aloft. Hoping for what, I don't know. Cooling. Numbing. It didn't work. The hairs raising all over my body seemed to make the itching worse. I took up a milk pan and pressed the cold metal base against the bites. Here and there and here, in turn. The pan left curving prints on my thighs.

When I wasn't fretting about the bugs, I was fighting the dirt. I'd sweep up and I'd wipe down, but you only had to brush against the walls for the plaster to crumble and what with the rotting windows and the soot trickling from the chimney day and night, it was a losing battle. My clothes had taken on a musty smell and my cardboard suitcase was not so stiff as it used to be. Every now and then I'd find droppings that turned my stomach. The less I thought about *them* the better.

With Dad away, I thought I'd use the morning to wash my smalls and boil the damp from my flannel and towel. I went to the grocers for soap flakes and stared a long while at a bottle of calamine. I would have liked to bathe in it, but – no – I had to watch my purse. I'd need every last shilling if I was ever to get out of that room. Most places asked for a fortnight up front and I had nowhere near enough. At the coal merchant, prices were higher than ever, so I waited on the doorstep for the hawker to come by. His were no better. People were stocking up, panic buying, he said. I could have choked on the price he asked for a half-bucket. Still, I had to pay it.

I heated the water, then beat and lathered my underthings until my fingers pruned. There were washing lines strung between our terrace and the next. They criss-crossed the muddy yard, tethering the houses together, some sagging in the middle under the weight of grey-white vests and drawers. I kept forgetting to ask Mrs Ridley which was ours. Dad had said why don't I just peg the things out and be done with it, but I knew better than to fill another woman's line. Instead, I used a length of wax string I'd put aside. It was the sort meant for binding rolled roasts, very

thin but strong with it. I went outside and wound it round a bent nail sticking from a shoring post, then hitched the other end to the guttering brace. As I worked, I was watched by a bloke leaning head and shoulders out of his window. He spat a long strand of tobacco juice into a blackish puddle beneath the dripping tap. There were two girls playing, about three and five years old, choo-chooing, engine and carriage, hands coupled as they circled the yard. They dragged their feet to leave tracks in the damp dirt.

The laundry would be slow to dry in that dark corner, but at least it wasn't on show. I took a few steps away, ignoring a tobacco-toothed grin. Above me, the mother and daughter in number eighteen began their usual morning screaming match. The shadowy flit of something hurled. A crash. Someone somewhere was hawking up their lungs.

In the early afternoon, I went to help at the club. I arrived to find a cartload of beetroot at the back door. Miss Havensleigh and the stout woman, Mercy, were filling a barrel while the driver sat on the wall, smoking a cigarette.

'Mercy has been to the market. Hasn't she done well?'

Mercy grasped two bunches and shook them, raining soil. 'Job lot. Sixpence a stone.' Her smile showed browning teeth. In spite of those teeth, and her thin hair hanging in strings, you could see she'd been a looker once. It was there in the bloom of her cheeks, her good skin.

'I'd say that's full, wouldn't you?' Miss Havensleigh passed a hand over her forehead, leaving an earthy streak.

'Right you are, marm.' Mercy bent her knees, put her broad arms round the lip of the barrel and wheeled it away.

'I have asked Mercy not to call me "marm" but she will persist.' She gave a sort of laugh-sigh. 'Now, that's ungracious of me. How do you do this morning, Alma?'

'Never been better.' I was not about to burden Miss Havensleigh, her young life neat-as-a-button. You only had to look at the cut of her sailor dress to know she'd never been short of a pound or two.

The kitchen was green as a vegetable patch and had that same turned-earth smell. Everywhere you looked there were ragged beetroot leaves with their cherry-coloured shoots and veins. I had to squeeze past a line of overflowing tubs and buckets. Even the sink basins were blooming. There was something about that

kitchen that reminded me of school. The tall windows, perhaps, letting in draughts and the grey-white light of a cloudy day. The honk of wooden chair legs on a hard floor. The tiles and surfaces were worn with the chips and scratches of other, nameless folk. At the long table there were nine of us, elbow to elbow. I sat directly opposite Winifred. Let her try and say a blind thing about me now.

Miss Havensleigh went upstairs to see the treasurer about funds for tomorrow's ingredients - *begging for alms* as she called it. I noticed how when she was gone Winifred talked that bit louder. She really thought she was somebody, holding forth about the strike.

'My Lenny reckons it's an hopeless situation. He saw an article in the paper about it: *one cannot draw a quart from a pint pot*, it said. Well, you know what that means, don't you? There's no money in coal no more and that's the end of it. They'll never win.'

'I wouldn't believe all that you read in the *Echo*,' I said.

'I suppose you know better, do you?'

I shrugged. There's no arguing with ignorance. I'd learned that long ago. We'd get customers in the shop with daft ideas. Sooner you agreed with them, sooner you'd a sale.

'The love of God in us is witnessed by our willingness to lay down our lives for others as Christ did for us... It's the Christian thing to do, win or lose.' Mrs Judd didn't take her eyes off her twisted fingers as she peeled. She had a fumbling sort of knack with a knife, painful to watch. Irene looked like a babe with a burst balloon.

'But if we're bound to lose, why bother?' she asked.

'They want the government to make up the money, love,' Nelly said. 'Keep paying out so the miners don't starve. That's the best we can hope for.'

'That's right,' said Winifred. She, Nelly and Mrs Judd were all nodding away. They put me in mind of pigeons pecking in the dirt. I wouldn't have them dash the girl's hopes so matter of fact.

'No one is asking the Government to keep on paying forever,' I said. 'It's about saving the industry without beggaring the miners. That Samuel report got it wrong, but at least it had a few ideas – consolidate the smaller mines, national contracts, national royalties. Now, if they had any sense they'd nationalise the lot. Take the owners out of the middle of it all, whinging about their returns, scarcely reinvesting. Then we'll see if the industry can stand on its own two feet.'

I paused and saw the tart looks on Winifred and Nelly's faces. Pursed lips. Noses raised. Win's mouth opened just a twitch, but I carried on.

'It's a lie when they say there's no money in coal, Irene. A tired old lie they've been peddling for years. Folk take it because it gets them off the hook – no money, nothing to be done. They don't have to worry about the details, the economics. They just read it in the paper and think they sound ever so wise when they repeat it.'

Irene's cheeks flushed almost as pink as her beetroot hands. I let the cold silence wash around me. Winifred looked as if she might spit. Only Mercy smiled. She leaned round Irene to slap me on the back, saying, 'She's her father's daughter.'

'We're all doing our bit,' Winifred said. 'Though God knows why, eh Nel? The thanks we get!'

'I think I'll have a ciggy, Win. You coming?'

My beet was a slippery mess. I held it to the light to see where to pare – as the juices bled, it was getting harder to tell the bark from the flesh. Seemed to me it was a sorry state of affairs when even a striker's wife could be so docile, so quick to swallow the government line. For all this talk of solidarity, I wondered how many of their husbands were only doing what was expected without really understanding why. Nel was giving me the evil eye through the window. The pair of them stood among the push-bikes blowing jets of smoke, not trying to hide that they were grumbling about me. I'd done it again – put noses out of joint when I ought to have been making friends. *Mixing with my own kind*, as my dad would say. I'd rather a quiet cutting room. Give me plenty to do and no one to upset.

Later, the others went to prepare the dining hall and I took the job of tending the stockpots. I slipped a small hard piece of beetroot into my mouth and mashed it to a lumpy pulp with my back teeth. Even half-raw it tasted good. I'd eaten nothing since soup the night before. After a few slivers, I grew bold and fished out a great lump of potato. I was chewing away at it when Miss Havensleigh came in with a bunch of damp, dirty cloths in her hands.

'How is it coming along?' she asked, throwing them in the sink.

I swallowed and almost choked. 'It'll be a sight softer for tea than it is for dinner.'

She drew close to peer into the pot. 'It does rather look like a witches' cauldron when you stir it like that. It's just so red.'

'It's how it tastes that matters.'

'Quite right. I'm lucky to have such help, I must say.' She passed her hands over her apron to dry them. 'I couldn't have hoped for a better group of volunteers – don't you think?'

'They know how to peel a spud, if that's what you mean.'

'Oh, Alma. You're being unkind.'

'Am I? Don't tell me you're interested in the linoleum Nelly's saving for. Or those awful problem pages Doris keeps reading out loud.'

There was a pause. She went to the sink and ran some water. As she turned off the tap, it squeaked.

'Are you aware Mrs Judd was a nurse in the Boer war?' She spoke with her back to me, swishing the cloths. 'And Nelly has five children at home. She leaves them with her mother all day, then at five o'clock goes straight home to cook their supper and does the laundry and all the other housework at night. All that just so she can do her bit – and she's not the only one.' She turned to me with a faintly troubled look. 'I don't mean to lecture, Alma. But perhaps if you knew them better...'

A rattling sound drew our attention to the window. It was a messenger lad, coming in so fast on his bicycle he almost crashed. We both watched as he hopped off and legged it round the side of the building.

'I wonder what news he has.'

'Why don't you go and find out?' I said. 'You've as much right to know what's happening as anyone.'

'Oh, I should think they're too busy for questions.'

'All the better. Perhaps someone'll give you a job.'

'I have a job here.' She turned and leaned against the draining board, cupping one elbow and pressing the soap to her chin as she pondered. 'We could ask the men at lunch, perhaps?'

'Like good little women, waiting at their elbows.'

'Well, what do you suggest?'

'The others can handle the soup kitchen. Look at that Mercy this morning. The woman could organise a platoon.' I took the box of soapflakes from the shelf and swapped it for the bar in her hand. She sprinkled it straight into the dirty water. I wondered if she'd ever washed so much as a facecloth before. 'If you'll forgive me for saying, Miss Havensleigh. You don't belong down here any more than I do. We'd be more use up there, in the thick of it.'

What a look she gave me – full of interest, her green eyes fixed on mine.

'Do you really think so?' she asked. 'Do you think we might... somehow?'

'Course,' I said. 'And it wouldn't hurt to work alongside them that's getting paid.'

'Oh.' Her face fell. 'It's my understanding only union members qualify for strike pay.'

'They're giving it to non-members who've struck. Is it so far fetched that they might pay us too?'

There was a long patch of quiet. I could see I'd ruffled her. I went back to stirring the pots, scraping the spoon along the bottom. It was starting to thicken. After a while I heard her voice, quite low.

'No one would think the worse of you if you weren't able to carry on. Volunteering, I mean.'

For all her visiting the coalfields and such, she didn't understand how things were. Not really. It would never have occurred to her I was relying on the soup for food.

'I can get by,' I said. 'It's just the principle.'

I kept my nose over the bubbling pink soup and listened to the sounds of her squeezing the rags and winching down the drying rack. After a while, I heard her soft steps on the flags and along the corridor. I felt I'd let her down.

During service, we took it in turns to sit and eat. Irene said she wasn't hungry, so I ate first. Folk were coming in, queuing with their dishes, then taking their seats. A family of youngsters without their parents joined my table. The eldest was about twelve, the youngest five or six. It didn't take long for the boys to start playing up, trying to steal the best bits from each other's bowls while guarding their own in the crooks of their arms. The language these kids knew would turn a sailor's hair white. I had the littlest girl opposite me, her skinny sternum showing in the scoop of a too-big dress. She was gazing into her bowl as if she might see the future in there and with every spoonful a fresh smile crept across her cheeks. When I reached out with my handkerchief to catch a drip of soup from her chin, she paid me no mind, as if I was her own mother. I wondered how it must feel to have a such a brood. Six half-grown souls depending on you.

I was watching the people in the queue, for want of anything else to do, when I saw Emlyn. He was among a bunch of blokes who bore the stamp of the down and

out. One of them had great flapping ribs in his filthy coat. Another was bearded and hatless, hair hanging in ropes, shoeless feet bandaged in rags. Beside them, Emlyn looked a prince. Still, I could not believe his gall. Him, a scab, turning up to be fed by the union. He had no dish or cup, but after a word or two with young Irene, she smiled shyly and ran off to fetch him one. Once he was served, he walked to a table in the far corner, head bent over his plate, his slice of bread balanced on the rim. I wasn't a bit surprised he wanted to hide himself.

I sat for a minute, wondering if I ought to say something. Taking my bowl with me for fear the youngsters would have it away, I tacked round the tables towards him. I was greeted by the top of his curly head as he ate. I put my crockery down with a thump – louder than I'd meant – and he looked up. His cheekbone was licked red and bruised. The heels of his hands were grazed and bloody.

'Here you are after all,' he said. 'I'd hoped you might be.'

'You've fallen?'

'Oh, it's nothing.'

'Are you not well?'

'Well enough,' he said. He opened his mouth a fraction, faltered, then waved towards the seat opposite. 'Will you do me the honour, perhaps?'

I stayed standing.

'Did you work?' I asked, a little above a whisper. 'Did you go down the docks?'

'I went,' he said, nodding slow as if he was thinking about it. 'But I didn't end up working, as it happens.'

I supposed that would have to pass for now. I took a seat with a sigh.

'You're a fine cook.'

'The others did most of the cooking. I just peeled and stirred.'

He raised his spoon in the air and squinted at a piece of beet as a jeweller might squint at a gem. 'Finest job of peeling I ever saw,' he said and ate it. I was annoyed with myself for wanting to smile. He was putting me off track.

'Was there some kind of trouble at the picket line?'

'Ah, well. Fell over someone's boot, you might say.' His spoon clinked gently against the side of his dish. He was holding it in an odd way, so as not to close his hand. His grazes were covered in grit specks.

'You want to wash them before they go bad.'

He tipped his head to one side and narrowed his eyes.

'You do worry about me, I believe.'

I tutted and blew on the skin of my soup.

'You needn't worry,' Emlyn said. 'I've had worse, after all.' He raised his right hand with the missing finger. A laugh burst from the table next to us, startling me. I heard a thumping sound and a bloke coughing as he chuckled.

'Was it the war?' I asked. Emlyn nodded, his mouth full of soup. As he swallowed, my eye caught on his Adam's apple, his slim neck.

'How did it happen?' I startled myself by saying it aloud. Had I taken leave of my manners, now too?

'It was shrapnel. Half sheltered by sandbags, I was, but still it got me here and here.' He touched the side of his jacket near his ribs. I tried not to think what damage lay underneath the cloth.

'That's terrible.'

'Oh, it's not so bad. Got me home, didn't it? Men enough who were jealous. Said I'd done it on purpose. Blighty wound, you know. Put myself in harm's way.'

'But you'd be mad to. You might've died.'

Again, the slow nod, as if he was mulling it over. 'True enough. Though common sense rarely troubles gossip, in my experience.' He smiled. 'They had their reasons for thinking ill of me, so I don't complain.'

'And what reasons might they be?'

'Ah, well then. There's telling. You might think ill of me yourself.'

'Perhaps I do already.' I wasn't sure if I had meant it as a joke or not. He studied me a moment, then pushed his dish aside and swept a few crumbs from the tabletop.

'Think you on this. It's a glorious day, hot, and we're marching through a field of wheat. Everything glowing in the sunshine. All these dozy little insects swimming about. I don't know if it's sunstroke or what, but even the irrigation is putting me in mind of Brecon springs. To my left, more fields, hazy hills in the distance.' He waved his left hand vaguely, then hovered the other over his bowl. 'To my right, a stone farmhouse. Chickens. Behind me the swish of the next man's boots through the stalks. In front, not two foot ahead of my nose, a man weeping, whispering prayers and curses. Pleading with God, his mother. Manchester lad, he was, not yet twenty, I think, and full of baby fat. He had blisters running the length of his feet and the sores

on his shoulders, well... it doesn't bear describing. Problem was, his webbing rig chafed and he had some sort of skin condition to start off with. Impetigo. I don't know. Didn't seem to matter how we padded him in the mornings, it got worse. Hobbling, he was. Bleeding down his sides. Every step, I heard this boyo's breath coming in sobs. Whenever he stumbled, he'd cry out. Couldn't help himself, poor fella. Only who answered him? Just the birds piping sweet joy from the trees.'

Emlyn pulled his dinner close, shaking his head. 'That war was not God's work. I felt He was letting me know. So what's a man to do?'

He looked at me, expecting an answer.

'I don't know.'

'Nor you might. Well, nor did I. So I decided to desert.'

I was shocked to hear him say it so lightly. I looked for a smile, the glint in his eye that said he was kidding me, but there was none.

'You said you were sent home.'

'That was a long time afterwards.'

'Weren't you afraid of court martial?'

He shrugged. 'Have to catch you to shoot you, don't they? Fancied my chances, I suppose. Every day we were on the march, I kept my eyes open. I knew I'd have no luck once we were at the front again. Well, one afternoon, we're walking along a railway track cut into the side of a hill. Hoot of a train and we all scramble down and walk the lower bank. Turns out it's a cargo freighter. Slow fella too. Truck after truck after truck, going back the way we've come. It has a tail of palettes and I think to myself, if I could just jump on to one of those palettes I'll be away. I had all my fingers then, mind. I knew I could do it. So I start dropping behind the others, thinking I'll have to be out of sight if I don't want a bullet. I get back there and of course who's bringing up the rear, but the Manchester boyo, as always. His face grey. Blood coming through his shirt. Sweating his life out. He sees me getting closer to the tracks and I suppose he gets wind of what I'm planning to do. I've not heard him say a word for two days but to cry out in pain. Now, he looks straight at me: *Don't*, he says. I hold my hand out to help him up the bank, help him come with me, and he shakes his head. *Can't do it*, he says, and he's crying. I tell him I'll throw his gear for him. *I won't make it*. Well, it was the last few palettes, see. I had to go without him or not go at all. So I hike higher and I'm just about to jump for it when he starts screaming. *Sarge! Sarge!*

Emlyn leaned back in his chair and his chest fell slowly as he let his breath go.

'What did you do?'

'Had to act innocent didn't I? I just came down the bank, casual-like, said I was only having a look. Sergeant told me to fall in. Stop gadding about. He was annoyed at having to come back and sort us out.'

'And the Manchester lad?'

'He goes silent again. Two days go by and he doesn't speak. All the while we're marching. When we get to the front, he gets some rest at last, heals some. Soon as he's perked up a bit, he decides he'll tell everyone what I was up to. Next thing I know there's not a fella who'll look me in the eye. I get the dampest bunk. Half-servings from the cook. When things are hotting up I'm on stretcher duty twice as often as anyone else. I'd been over the top sixteen times in one day when this happened.' He held up his hobbled hand.

'That's awful.'

'I don't know about that. If you're not with us, you're against us. Isn't that what they say?'

I felt my cheeks bloom red. The room had grown noisy with voices and yet I couldn't pick out a word.

'You think me a coward, I expect.' He paused, then carried on in a lighter voice. 'I hope not, anyway, because I've something to ask of you. A favour.'

'Was it the pickets who sent you here?'

'You told me yourself there'd be a soup kitchen. Didn't take much asking to find out where.' He picked grit from one of his grazes and rubbed his thumb and finger together until it dropped to the floor. 'I want to ask for your help. If you're able —'

'I can't help you,' I said. 'I've nothing myself. I'm living in my father's shadow. I haven't eaten today but for this and I'll soon have no skin left.' I bared a bite-spotted arm. Showed him the angry, red lumps torn at the crests like volcanoes. I had a seasick feeling rising in my chest. I swallowed and spoke more quietly. 'I'm sorry. I'm not sleeping well.'

'My God. It hurts me to hear it.'

His sympathy only made the tide rise higher. I couldn't look at him.

'Only, it wasn't money I was asking for. In fact, there might be a few shillings in it for you.'

'In what?'

'I remember you told me you're a butcher. Well, there's a man I know got a pig he needs slaughtering. Him and his neighbours been fattening him up for a rainy day.'

'When do they want it done?'

'They thought Friday evening. Late, when it's cool. Shall I tell them you'll do it?'

I nodded. 'Thank you.'

He laid the back of his hand on top of mine. His skin held a lot of heat.

'I haven't always been in such a mess.' I tried a smile, tried to make a joke of it. 'You might have liked me better when I wasn't so pitiful.'

'No.' He tilted his head to the side, considering me, then drew his hand away slow. 'I think not.'

When he stood, I was surprised to see he'd finished eating. I'd hardly noticed time passing.

'Will you try again?' I asked.

He perched again, to be nearer. 'I might. I've seen a call for workers at the abattoir.'

'Experienced butchers wanted.'

'You've seen it too? Well, like as not they won't take me, but I think I shall have a go.' He spoke quietly, simply.

'I wish you wouldn't,' I said. 'I wish you'd keep away. These people don't deserve it.' I paused and let the room speak for me. The rumbling chatter, the clinking of spoons against dishes, a baby mewling. 'You said yourself it's not your fight.'

He said nothing to that, but held my eye a long moment, then stood to go. 'I'll call for you Friday, late evening.'

I nodded and he bid me take care of myself. Then he strode across the room to return his dish. Irene took it from him with a half-curtsey. Silly chit. As he left through the double doors, he was followed by the man in the shabby coat.

I ought to have been happy thinking of the extra money I'd get from slaughtering that pig. A bag of coal, perhaps. Bacon, tea leaves, milk... But I felt

raw. It wasn't that I'd never stuck a pig before. I'd seen it done dozens of times. I had the right knife. There'd be nothing to it. No, the problem was Emlyn himself. He put me off balance. I had let him touch me, in a crowded room – and him a would-be scab and a deserter. He owned up to it all as if it was natural as breathing. I thought back to when I spotted him in the queue, next to those hangdog blokes and yet a mile apart. If he was a tramp, he ought to behave like one. If he was a man, he ought to do the same.

When I went back to the kitchen to wash up, Winifred came and helped with drying. First she said nothing, but hummed and sang snatches of love songs. She had a fine voice, if a bit nasal.

'Who's that fella you were talking to?' she asked, after a while.

I gave her a sharp look, but she didn't catch it. She was busy rubbing a plate, still humming. She added it to the small stack of crockery on the dresser, then held her cloth by two corners and flapped it.

'Seems to me you're sweet on him.'

'No need to dry the rest,' I said. 'We can leave it to drip.'

'If you say so.' She strolled off to the other side of the kitchen where Nelly was putting dried beans to soak. I turned on the tap and let the water gush over my wrist as I filled the stockpot. Behind me, I heard someone titter.

Since the Ridleys didn't show up at the soup kitchen, I took a jug of what was leftover home. I felt awkward, playing the good Samaritan, but told myself it was better to do something than nothing. I tapped their door and Mrs Ridley answered looking as worn as ever, kidney pouches under her eyes.

'My father didn't see you at the soup kitchen,' I said. 'He wasn't sure if you'd heard.'

Mrs Ridley looked over her shoulder into the room, then at the jug in my hands. Her mouth stayed fixed in a thin line.

'There was some left over.' I held out the jug. She didn't take it. 'How's Peter getting on?'

At that, she beckoned me inside. Mr Ridley was sitting on the end of the boy's bed, his arm looped over the frame. I had only ever seen Mr Ridley from above, a glimpse through the window as he left the house. He had slight jowls and

drooping eyelids. His dark hair, slicked back, had a single streak of grey. He was a fair sight older and heavier than Mrs Ridley.

'I'm Mrs Cox,' I said holding out my hand. 'I live upstairs.'

Mr Ridley didn't move or say a word.

'Mr Yates's daughter.'

'I know who you are.'

I looked around for somewhere to put the jug. The mantle didn't look very sturdy, gaping from the wall. The gluepot was still by the hearth, but the floor seemed quite empty without the boxes of hairbrush parts. Two of the younger kids were ripping a piece of cardboard to confetti. They kept on tearing, all the time eyeing the soup.

'This might want warming,' I said. 'If you send the boys with your union card tomorrow —'

'We need a lot more than sodding soup.' He looked at his son. Peter had his mouth open, breathing fast and shallow. His jaw had disappeared into his swollen neck. The sound of his breath coming in quick rasps made me think of sawing bone. His slick, staring eyes flicked my way then drifted back to the ceiling.

'Has the doctor been?'

'We had him three days ago,' Mrs Ridley said. 'He said to fetch him again if he got worse. Only it ain't as easy as fetching him, is it? He'll want the bill paid before he makes another house call.'

My hand went to the coins among the soft folds of my skirt, a hard uneven lump. 'How about the Board of Guardians?' I said. 'Won't they pay?'

'Ha!' Mr Ridley turned to his wife with a strained grin. 'Board of Guardians she says.'

'What about the soup, John?'

He waved a hand. 'Let them have it.'

Mrs Ridley sent the youngsters to fetch their dishes. While they were gone, she pulled a strip of paper from a box in the corner and gave it to me. It was a column torn from the *Echo*. *Board of Guardians Emergency Council, Relief Decision Reached*. I started reading the long-winded account of when and where the Board had held their last meeting, who attended and what resilient spirits they were in.

'Here,' Mrs Ridley said, pointing halfway down the article.

The amendment was put that no strikers who have refused work, or their families, would be relieved by the Guardians. A vote was taken and the amendment was adopted by 16 votes to 8. The board was adjourned for a week.

'They can't do that,' I said. 'It's their civic duty.'

'Hark at her,' Mr Ridley said. He coughed twice and spat in a pot. 'Just like her dad, ain't she? Thinks she can go round telling people what they can and can't do. All bleeding morals and no bleeding sense.' His broad hand moved over the blanket and rested on Peter's knee.

'I'll leave you be.' I folded the paper and handed it back to Mrs Ridley. She followed me to the door.

Mr Ridley's voice boomed after me. 'Tell that father of yours the rent's due and his share is extra now there's more of you.'

'Send one of the kids with the jug tomorrow,' I said to Mrs Ridley. She nodded. It struck me that her wide eyes had the same panicked look as the boy's.

I went to the yard to take in the laundry. When I opened the back door I was confused for an instant. My towel and underthings were not on the bit of string, nor on the line. I walked around each of the shoring-up poles, checking the floor. All the windows looking onto the yard were closed. A few houses down, a woman was beating a heavy, patterned rug with a fire iron, raising puffs of dust. I walked towards her.

'Have you seen my washing?' I asked. She was wearing a floral dressing gown, buttoned neck to ankle, and her greying hair was plaited like a child's.

'I live at number three. I hung a towel out this morning and some other things.'

She shrugged and hauled her rug off the line. I went again to my piece of string and stared like an idiot. Trying to keep calm, to not think of the cost, I unwound it from the nail. I was trembling as I tried to unpick it from the bracket. For once, the yard was silent.

That night, Dick told me he'd sold all the rabbits I'd skinned. He'd bought another box from a breeder on Petal Street. As I got on with them, breathing in the smells of game and sawdust, a calm feeling came over me. I might have been back in our shop, lighted with bright yellow gaslights, reflected at a dozen angles in the windowpanes, the baked-crust colour of the block beneath my fingers and the faint tinkle of the

takings being counted in the front. It could have been Bill out there, whistling as he stacked his coins into a measure. I stopped and rinsed my hands, stepped back and took a look at Dick's cutting room. It was smaller than ours, much smaller, but it had good sink and the cellar below was dry. It only wanted some hooks putting into the ceiling and perhaps the furniture moving. With my arms I measured the size of the cupboards and walked to the alcove to see if they'd fit. I was just handling the window hook on its long pole, wondering why he didn't keep it in its housing, when Dick came in.

'Getting your bearings, are you?' he asked.

I rested the pole in the corner, where I found it, and smiled. 'I'll have these done in a jiffy,' I said, reaching into the crate for the next rabbit, warm and wriggling. Dick looped his arm through the shelves. They squeaked as he leaned his weight. He was silent a moment, the upright pressed against his cheek. 'You know what I was just thinking on?'

I let my knife rest.

'Shipley Fair,' he said. 'You remember that?'

The words brought to mind sunshine. Stalls set up on well-trodden grass. The four of us larking about. 'Course I do.'

'We had fun, didn't we? On the big wheel?'

I looked to the work in my hands, careful as I slit the skin. 'And the hoopla. That fella wouldn't let Bill have another go. He was winning too often for his liking.'

'You told me you were fond of me,' he said. 'On the big wheel. You remember that.'

'I was. I am.' I thumped his shoulder like a pal. The heat rose from my heart to my cheeks. 'I've always been fond of you and Irene. You know that.'

He shook his head. There was no avoiding his eager eye. 'You *told* me.'

We went to Shipley Fair less than a year after Bill and I were married. My first summer out of service. It was one of those beanos where everything seems to come good. The weather was muggy but warm enough to throw your jacket off. All day we snuck little sips from the pocket flasks Bill and Dick hid under their handkerchiefs. Even Irene accidentally calling me Lizzie not once but twice couldn't take the shine off. She was too afraid to go up in the big wheel and Bill was worried it mightn't take his weight, so they stayed on the ground while Dick and I rode. Dick some six years younger than Irene, me fifteen younger than Bill, they joked they'd let

the kids have their fun. Up we went. We propped our feet on the board in front. We were high in the air and the carriage rocked as it cranked. I wondered if I'd ever felt so gay. Wasn't this what youth was for? To have friends. To see things, do things. Not to be always turning beds and mopping floors and listening for the bell. At the top, Dick had looked at me – that same eager look, eyes alight – and said, *I'm fond of you. You know that, don't you?* In the quick of my heart, did I know what he really meant? I remember now, looking out over the combed fields beyond our town and thinking, *Why bother to split hairs?* So, with the burnt taste of Bill's whisky on my tongue, I said, *I'm fond of you too*, because that was how I felt. And he squeezed my hand and turned away to look down over the carriage edge. And I came over with a fit of hiccups, each one a little voice piping: *You've done wrong.*

I put the finished carcass on the pile. 'I'm sorry. I should have been more careful.'

'Don't be daft, girl. We've always got on well, haven't we? You and me?'

I nodded. He caught my arm and turned it to show a line of bites. 'Now you tell me the truth about something. Are you happy living where you are?'

I sighed. 'I'm not.'

'Just what I thought. How about living here then?'

'Here?'

'Upstairs. I could clear it out, get some furniture put in.' He went to the crate and took out a rabbit. Not being a pet, it scratched and scabbled, but soon he had it in his grip. The hair on the back of his hands was almost as thick as its fur. 'What do you say? Somewhere to live. Somewhere to work. Hey presto – old Clever Dick's fixed your problems.' He puffed his chest out and passed me the rabbit with a toothy smile. I couldn't help but laugh. I bit my lip. I would not make my mistakes twice over. It was only a moment ago he'd been looking at me like I'd drawn his innards.

'What do you think Irene would make of that?' I said it gently. His smile fell away. I swallowed a dry feeling in my throat, wishing I could turn back the clock and stop this talk of ours before it started. 'You're a dear, Dick, but honestly. Don't you worry about me. I'll get along just fine.'

I was late home that night, but when I arrived Dad had yet to go to bed. He was lying on top of the covers, fully clothed, one arm draped over his eyes.

'You're back,' he said, blinking as he turned up his lamp. He leaned onto his side and propped his head with his fist.

'How goes the strike?'

'It's hotting up. Some bright spark has been smashing tram windows as they pass along the docks road, so it's been nothing but calls and demands and threats from the management all day. They had the cheek to send me an invoice.'

'Was it your men?'

'There's no knowing, but I've told them all again it's to be a peaceful strike. We've no need for that sort of thing. Won't be long before the student volunteers arrive from London and I don't want any trouble. I keep telling them, *rise above it, lads.*'

'Are you expecting many students?'

He rolled his eyes. 'Word is the provost is offering lenience at examination time for anyone who does his 'duty' now. Not that many of them need bribing, I'd have thought.' He huffed, but there was good humour in his eyes. I knew he was enjoying every minute of the fight. 'How goes it below deck?'

'I should say we had it easy.'

'Very good.' He smiled.

We were quiet for a while and I fried two rabbit legs in popping fat. I offered one to Dad, knowing he would refuse it. He did. He seemed to have forgotten about sleep and had taken up one of his notebooks, leafing and scribbling, making a list. After a while, as I was enjoying parting the tender meat from the bone, wishing only that I had bread to mop the juices, Dad put his pencil in his book and placed it down.

'It smells good,' he said.

'Then have some.'

I put the second leg into a dish and rocked forward onto my knees to pass it to him. After a moment's pause he took it. He put the dish in the cradle of his crossed legs. His head was bowed, looking at the rabbit, its pale bone aloft like a flagpole. If I didn't know better I'd have thought he was saying grace.

'You know,' he said. 'If things go well with the strike, perhaps I could find you a position at the union.' He gave me a quick, shy glance then lifted the meat and took a bite.

I smiled. 'I thought my handwriting wasn't up to it.'

'It's not, but you're not bad with numbers, now, are you?'

I found my eyes drawn as he ate, wondering if he noticed how clean the bone, how neat and shapely the cut. It was the first time he'd eaten a piece of meat I'd butchered. It gave me a warm feeling to share it with him, even if he was none the wiser. He caught me watching and looked quizzical. I turned back to my own dinner, a daft smile now fixed on my lips. With the smell of the meat and the lamp turned low you could almost forget the cracks and the damp. I almost felt at home. We ate without talking more and I gathered our dishes into the pan.

'Have you heard from your sister of late?'

'I haven't. Have you?'

'You used to be like two peas.'

'She's busy, I suppose.' I stood, carrying the dirty supper things, the cast-iron pan still warm on my palm, and went to the door.

'She was well, last time you heard?'

'It must be six months if it's a day, but yes... She's courting, or at least she was then.'

'And the fella?'

I knew what this question meant. Does he mine the salt from the earth or is he a good-for-nothing fat-skimmer? I shrugged. 'You might write to her yourself. She'd be glad to hear from you.'

He shook his head. 'I have one daughter returned to me. I won't push my luck.'

I hovered on the threshold, not knowing what to say but not wanting to turn my back. I couldn't remember if I'd ever heard him say *daughter* like that, like it was worth something. I didn't feel that word applied to me. Not the way he said it. I tried to smile but it was false. As I turned away, I caught a change in his expression, a flicker of confusion. As I creaked down the stairs, I was reminded again of my younger self, skulking away from my listening spot, frightened by my mother's tears.

Outside, there was a rectangle of yellow light shining between the buildings, but it didn't quite reach the tap. I was careful where I placed my feet avoiding the muddy puddle by memory, and rinsed the dishes by feel, rubbing at the grease with my rag and then my fingers until they weren't so slick. It had hurt to hear Dad talk about how close Rose and I had been. I'd felt a pang but ignored it like a knock on the door. We'd been two peas, it was true, and sometimes I felt I'd only myself to blame for her leaving.

There'd been a dim autumn evening in the garden. We'd made a pastime of sticking damp leaves to the fence panels. Wallpapering in brown and orange. Rose hadn't the skill with her hands. You had to press until all the air was gone, but most of hers would slip or peel away. And while we were smoothing the wet, veined skins of the leaves with our fingers, I told her about the rosebushes. Three bushes, along the garden's back wall, for three brothers or sisters born too soon. They slept underneath, the first one wrapped in my mother's best cotton tablecloth, the second in a gay floral print that had been promised to me for a summer skirt. The third little bundle I'd only glimpsed in Dad's hand as he strode through the kitchen, out to the hole with its mound of earth beside. It was pale blue. A rolled pillowcase slightly marked with blood. He held it as you might a tool or tobacco tin. Such a small parcel I'd wondered if there was anything at the heart of it at all. I told Rose about them, how much they had hurt my mother, how weak and ill she'd been, worse every time. We made a pact there and then. We knelt by the bare, pruned branches of the bushes and put our leaf-wet hands together. Let's never be like Mum. Never marry. Never be poor. Let's always look after ourselves before anyone else. And above all never do the thing with a man that made the babies come. I might have been twelve at the time, Rose five perhaps. Even then, I had a sense of speaking out of turn. She had no memories of Mum and I'd fed her mine. Fretful, harried, worn and tired. A vision of a woman stuck indoors propping up four walls while the world went on without her. It was the truth – my truth – but I never stopped to think how it might shape her.

My foot felt cold and I realised the water was spraying. I turned off the tap, twisting hard to stop it dripping, and carried the dishes upstairs. Dad had undressed and was in bed with his eyes closed but he had not yet put out his light. I lay down, weary. My spine felt as stiff as a tree root. As I was slipping off, my worries about Rose were overtaken by a parade of other, vexing thoughts. At the head of them all was Peter – his pillowy neck, his rasping breath. I forced my lids open.

'I spoke to the Ridleys this afternoon,' I said, hoping Dad was not yet sleeping. 'He was asking for the rent.'

'The landlord comes for it tomorrow. He knows I'll have it.' His voice came quick and clear. He'd not been dozing, then, but thinking.

'They've no money for the doctor,' I said. 'Looks like diphtheria.'

The way Dad was stretched out showed his thinness, his blanket like a tent collapsed over its poles. He made no reply.

'Could the union not pay?' I asked, a little louder.

He raised his head and squinted at me. 'There are rules about what the subs are used for. Pay one doctor's bill, you'll have a hundred.'

'But if it wasn't for the strike they'd have the money. Or they could borrow it at least. You talk about short-term sacrifices. *Short term*. For God's sake, Dad, the boy looks like a bullfrog.'

The cords in his neck strained with the effort of keeping his head up. He shook his head as if he couldn't understand why I was so worked up. When he spoke it was in an easy, even voice. 'It'll be in hand, Alma love. They'll take a collection at the picket. They always do. Ridley's plenty of mates who'll see him right.' He flopped back onto his pillow.

I shook my blankets out, looking for bugs, and dabbed lamp spirits at my wrists and ankles, hoping the smell would put them off. Then I lay down and stared at the cracks in the wall, not three inches from my nose. From outside came the sound of a pair of clogs clacking on the cobbles, and in the quiet that fell afterwards, I imagined I heard Peter's sawing breath, on and on. Faint and uneasy.

Eleven

In the morning, I took my table linen to the pawnshop. The man behind the counter stood in a narrow space among bundles of musty clothes and cardboard boxes. The ceiling was hung with pairs of boots, tied by the laces. He held the cotton to the light and, seeing he could make no complaints about the quality, chose to make a fuss instead about a few needleholes in one of the napkins. I was in no mood to go traipsing for a better deal. I took what he gave me.

Since I now had only the underthings I was wearing, and nothing to dry myself but my handkerchief, in the afternoon I walked into town. Outside St Mary's Park, I came upon two grubby boys struggling with a broken whisky crate half-full of small, powdery coal, like the dross you get at the bottom of the bunker. One side of their crate was coming away and the precious dust was pouring out.

'Where did you find that?' I asked.

'You have to *hold* it,' the elder boy said, shoving the other out of the way. He crouched by the box and showed him where to put his hands. 'Like this.'

'I shall give you something to tie it, if you like?' I took the waxed string from my pocket. 'If you go through that little hole and wind it round...'

He reached to grab the skein. I held it away. 'Come on, now. Fair's fair. Where did you pick the coal?'

'It's only little bits.'

'I'm not here to tell you off. I'm asking where it came from.'

The elder boy looked at the younger. 'From the barges.' He pointed in the direction of the docks.

'Was there a lot?' I kneeled down, licked the end of the string to bring the threads together and tied up their box as best I could.

'Only this stuff,' the smaller one said. 'Not proper coal like the man brings.'

I did a double-knot and lifted the crate for them to take. 'Your mother will know what to do with it, don't worry.'

I watched them go, walking sideways with it between them, all bare knees and elbows, then went into the park to wipe my sooty fingers on the grass. Looking along the water to the docks, the cranes were still and there was only one lonely vessel in the water. It occurred to me if those lads could make it across the picket, perhaps it wouldn't be so hard for me to do the same. Even scrap wood – a pallet, a barrel, anything – would be better than the spluttering driftwood I'd been gathering.

At the dock gates, four roads came together in a wide, open junction. I lingered by the post box on the far side and weighed up my chances. There were about twenty men milling about, chatting. A few had brought chairs or stools. They were all ages, but from a distance looked alike in their thick twill trousers and dungarees, jackets on and buttoned tight. There wasn't a fat man among them. They were Dad's friends, his colleagues, the men he spent his every waking hour thinking about, fighting for.

I'd been part of that picket line once. When I was about eleven years old there was a row over the rates and Dad had let me go along with him one Saturday. I remember the morning was foot-stamping cold and everyone was puffing steam. The picket armbands were too big, so Dad put a pin in mine and I stood side-on so no one could miss it, holding my placard straight as a post. The scabs came in a blue motorbus. They were from another town, Dad said. In front of them were four policemen on horses, strolling slow and steady. I was all for standing fast, but when the horses' velvet breasts were at touching distance, Dad stepped aside pulling me

with him. There was a taste like metal at the back of my throat. I hated them – all of them, scabs and police. Our palms drummed thunder into the sides of the bus, but inside they kept their eyes dead ahead. Not one of them glanced through the steamed-up windows.

Later, when Dad was smoking his pipe, leaning against the bricks of the dockyard wall, I leaned beside him, my shoulder touching his and asked did the scabs not know the harm they were doing? *Would they sleep in our beds as quick? Take the food from our mouths?* Dad spat into the drain, a perfect shot through its grate. He said, *There's two kinds of scab, my girl. Those who're out for what they can get and fools who think they've no other choice.*

It was like another life. I couldn't remember how it felt to be that callow girl.

I knew Dad himself would be busy at the club but even so as I lingered, watching the pickets, I caught glimpses of him. The back of his head. A cap just like his. That scrubbing brush moustache. I untied my neck scarf. It was feeling close. Behind the men, the main gates were slung with a hand-painted banner: *Supporting the miners because Baldwin won't.* These men might be all chaff and smiles and cheeky jokes when you're a mate's daughter, but cross them and you'd soon find out how serious they could be.

A charabanc, empty but for the driver, drew up to the left gate. A picket approached the vehicle. There was some talk, something written down in the ledger, and then he was waved through. *Pull yourself together, woman. Either they let you pass or they don't.* I started out across the road, heading towards the same gate, making a study of the ground as I walked. I felt the heat of a dozen pairs of eyes on me. I could hear the rumble of men chatting, close by. Two pairs of feet came into view and I dared to glance up. The chap who'd stopped the charabanc was talking to another fellow. We locked eyes for a sliver of a second before I put my head down and marched on, nipping through the open gate. Behind me, I thought I heard quick footsteps, among the voices someone calling me *love*. Any minute, they might lay hands on me. It took every ounce of grit I had not to break into a run. If I ran they might give chase. *Stay calm. Walk steady.* I was on the entry road, but things didn't look quite as they should. I felt lost. First chance I got, I turned beside a building, ran down a long, kinked alleyway, dodging bits of crate and broken glass. As I turned the back corner of a warehouse, I slammed palms-first against the rusting hulk of an old boiler, blocking the way. I tried to still my breath to hear if I was followed. Nothing.

Only flies whining, clouding round a bulging, wet paper bag. The alley stank like a privy. I wondered if the pickets had even noticed me pass.

I went back the way I'd come, cursing myself for a coward. When I arrived at the main thoroughfare, I began to see why it looked so foreign. There was the air, for a start. Usually the factories and workshops gave off great towers of black smoke, so thick it darkened the sky. You could smell and even taste it in town if the wind was blowing north. Now the chimneys stood like burnt-out matchsticks, only one or two steaming white. The little row of kiosks was boarded and padlocked – farrier, money-lender, tobacconist, hardware – and no wonder since there wasn't a soul about. Then there was the electrification. I hadn't been on the docks for years, not since my mother would send me with a message for Dad or some trifle he'd forgotten at home. There'd been a few wires overhead back then but now the poles looked fit to snap under the weight of tangled lines. Wood shavings skittered about, blown into a drift at the closed door of the police lodge. The general office and the board of trade had their shutters up too. I was beginning to feel I had the place to myself until I caught sight of a motorist outside the Royal Mail depot, standing beside his vehicle, reading a sign pinned to the door. He re-arranged a pile of leather suitcases on his back seat and set off.

Turning the corner, I drew alongside the railway tracks, seven or eight abreast, set into the road like tramlines. There was a chain of freight cars loaded with coal, no engine attached. Leaning by the last one was a bloke as black as a sweep. He had a cigarette stub pinched between his fingertips. He glared at me, his eyes queer and bright in his sooty face. I realised with a jolt I was looking on a blackleg. It was like laying eyes on a wanted felon.

It was Dad's land I walked on. His, the whole place. As I passed the corn stores and the old brick warehouses, I remembered him explaining how the winches worked. He used to buy us ha'penny of cold pickled herrings off a cart at the crossroads. At the quarantine house, I saw a bloke rolling a barrel through the doors. From inside, there was a deep bellow, followed by more lowing. I drew close to the wood-planked walls. The knot holes were still there. We used to poke bits of carrot through – Dad and me – and wait to feel them snatched away by snuffling mouths. I touched the tar-treated wood, breathed in that same smell of shit and straw. I hadn't thought to stumble on my memories like this, just lying waiting after all these years.

I heard the puttering of engines and four empty charabancs passed me by, heading towards the water, to pick up passengers, I supposed. The ocean liners would still come in, even if there was no one to unload them. I quickened my pace and the buildings soon gave way to the timber yard and, finally, masts and cranes came into sight between the sheds. Dark spurs at odd angles, looking like the leftovers of a burnt-out forest. At the other end of the alley, I paused and looked onto the quayside.

The *Santa Maria* was berthed. Her striped funnels were like the turrets of a castle far overhead. I was so used to seeing liners out in the water, I'd forgotten that shrinking, dizzy feeling they gave you up close. Her sides towered, studded with portholes and shadowing the crowd of people below. She'd been in for long enough to have six gangways set and passengers were streaming to land on two of them. On another, a pair of men were struggling with a barrowful of luggage. They clung to the railings to stop their load running away. They were not dockers – that was clear from their lacquered hair and silk-backed vests. They looked like office clerks, pitching in. You'd have thought clever men would have more sense than to use a hand-barrow on a slope like that. A third fellow appeared above with a case in each arm, tie loose, collar unbuttoned, high red spots on his cheeks. He left the cases at the brink and bounded down to help. His watch-chain flapped as he ran.

I began making my way through the people milling. I heard a tout calling taxi fares to London and Bristol. A woman with an American accent was telling an elderly lady in a wheelchair their car would come soon. A blond boy in short, striped trousers tugged at a man's sleeve – *But why can't we take the train, Papa?* As I mazed through the crowd, I saw a pair of policemen surrounded by a group of blokes in top hats. From among them rose a clipped voice, only a shade off a shout.

'I tell you, we were guaranteed direct to London! I want to know what you mean to do about it.'

Beyond the hull of the *Santa Maria*, the crowd quickly thinned. From there, it was not far to the coal jetty. It was strange to see it out of use. Many times as a child I'd stopped to watch the giant cranes winch, slow and jerking, then release with all the noise and dust of an avalanche. Now its clamshell buckets hung lifeless. Below, a barge listed starboard, its lip dangerously close to supping the water. I walked along the jetty and looked in. The bottom was lined with the stuff the two boys had been carrying – fine, but clean enough to press into cakes. I carried on along the quayside,

looking for a container. Even in the shadow of a warehouse, the warmth of the day seemed to rise from the boards. The air was thicker, moving slow and soft like a billowing drape. What with the heat and the quietness, the docks might have been another world. I touched a rust-red mooring post. The iron was queer and smooth and hot-blooded. All it needed was a pulse.

As I rounded the landward end, I saw figures ahead – about a dozen men walking a gangway with barrels, loading them onto barrows. These youths were not stevedores either. They were calling to each other as they worked, joking, hooting, larking about. Their shirts glowed white and their trousers were of a finer cloth than duck or dungaree. I fancied they were university students. Rumour had it they were volunteering in droves. *Pride of the nation*, as Churchill put it. Two had gone so far as to strip to their undershirts and were taking turns to ride a hand-barrow.

I didn't go to the abattoir on purpose. Or at least, I don't think I did. I was only searching for something to carry my coal, wandering the alleyways and crannies, beginning to understand why those boys had put up with their split crate. After a while, the familiar smell of blood and adrenaline tinged the air. I decided I would look. I was curious to see what kind of butchery it was that could earn a man sixteen shillings a day.

I rounded the front of the building and stopped beside a pair of double doors, wedged open with chocks. Inside was a cooling hall, with skylights in the roof and fans bolted to the walls, blasting a racket. Hundreds of carcasses hung from the overhead tracking. Men were working, knives in clenched fists, hacking away at the meat as if it might fight back, paring huge lumps with four or five swipes of the blade, hanging what they'd pared without care for where the hook went in. I watched as a grey-haired bloke, his arms and neck green with tattoos, finished his carcass then quick-stepped it along the line, behind his mates, to the next one. He was followed by a negro fellow whose sweat-damp shirt was clinging to his back.

The longer I watched, the surer I was that this lot were nothing special. Fast and rough as it was, I knew I could have done it. I could have held my own. I counted eight men moving in and out of the rows. Any minute, I expected to see Emlyn step from between the carcasses, but it was never him. I'd just begun to feel a little hope – thinking that he'd listened to me, that I'd put him off – when I noticed movement much further down the line. There he was, his thin silhouette against the

windows. He was lagging far behind the rest. He stooped to wipe his hands on his apron, then opened and closed his right fist, the fingers moving slow and stiff.

I slipped away, not really thinking about where I was going, only noticing that I walked ankle-deep in the shadow of a moored cargo vessel and that the concrete was gritty underfoot. I came upon a crane with a base like a giant cowbell and an archway cut through. Inside was cool and dark. I sat on the floor and slapped the thick iron wall. It hurt and hardly made a sound.

It's not my fight. That was what he said. *I've no quarrel with them.* Well, it was no more mine. I'd not been part of it for years, but you didn't see me in there lining my pockets. For all it would get me out of a fix. I so dearly wanted work I could call my own, but not at any cost – that was the point. Not like Emlyn and those others. They were buzzards the lot of them. I kicked the wall and raised a dull thud with a short, low echo. *A buzzard doesn't care what's carrion and what's living, Alma. It sees prey everywhere it looks.* Dad's words. I could have screamed. Had I a single thought of my own?

I pressed my temple to the iron and closed my eyes, looking inside, looking for myself. I tried to strip away the thoughts of Dad and Bill and Dick. Even the whispering voice of my sister. *Save up and only care for ourselves.* I put it all from my mind and looked into nothing. What I saw was an iron bedpost. Skin like a rising sponge cake. Mr Ridley's work-scarred knuckles laid over Peter's knee.

I found some sacking in a pile outside a grain store. The sun had lost its heat and the clock on the Docks Company building was chiming five. I climbed down the ladder and stepped into the listing barge, careful to keep my balance. Having nothing but my hands for a shovel, by the time I'd filled my bag I was black to the elbow. I leaned over the side, washing in the murky water and heard voices passing above. It was the students. I climbed to the level of the deck with the mouth of my sack bunched in my hand and saw them, strolling along the quayside in a group, calmer, a little weary looking. They were heading for three black cars, open-topped, manned with chauffeurs in uniform. I wondered what the staff had been doing all day while their masters played at working.

I could have gone home with my haul right away. I could have gone home and washed and got ready to go and work at Dick's, but I didn't. I wandered towards the abattoir.

It was closed up for the night and there was no one on the quay. I was neither glad nor disappointed. I didn't know why I'd come. Only that I was carrying a lump of bad feeling in my chest. I was about to leave when I noticed two figures out on the jetty. Emlyn's narrow shoulders, his cloud of curly hair. Beside him, was the negro. Smoking and talking. I stopped like a deer in the field. I wasn't certain I wanted to talk to him at all. He raised a hand.

'I see you've come for the coal,' he said, when I was near enough to hear.

'If you can call it that.' I dropped my sack on the boards with a thump. Emlyn's gaze flicked to the other fellow.

'This is Solomon. He's from Cardiff, would you believe? Though I never knew him when I was there.'

I nodded. 'How d'you do?'

Solomon raised his ciggy by way of a greeting. His legs were dangling over the side and he leaned back on his elbows, looking out over the dock.

'Care for a cigarette?' Emlyn asked.

I took one and perched on a timber upright. Emlyn struck a match and held it for me. His right hand was trembling. He had the smell of the abattoir in his clothes. As I smoked, I found myself staring at the back of Solomon's head. He seemed a talkative sort, complaining to Emlyn about the state of the loose tobacco in this town, which he reckoned was bulked out with dried dandelion leaves.

'Why buy the loose?' Emlyn said. 'You're a wealthy man, after today.'

I winced to hear him say it. Solomon chuckled and glanced over his shoulder. I caught a glimpse of a cheerful expression, deep lips, and wide-set eyes. I couldn't have told you if he was twenty or fifty, but he had patches of white among his close-cropped curls. 'This here won't chip the paint off my debts.' He patted his pocket. 'I'm only making up for lost time.'

Making up for lost time. As if the world owed it to him. I could hardly believe the pair of them. 'My neighbour has a child with diphtheria,' I said. Solomon turned to look at me. 'He hates this strike. Hates the leaders. Needs money for the doctor desperately.'

'And so?' He raised an eyebrow.

'He won't blackleg, that's all.' I blew my smoke. 'Wouldn't dream of it.'

'Is this your woman?' He asked with a smirk. 'She belong to you?'

I looked away. I didn't want to see Emlyn's reaction. On the other side of the dock, the empty boats were sitting high in the water, showing a rash of barnacles and rust welts.

'You're pouring oil on the fire, if you ask me,' I said. 'You know what they'll be saying about coloured folk when they see you cross the picket line.' My face was up in flames like a child, trading tit for tat.

Solomon laughed, a drawn-out chuckle. 'Why should I care about what John Bull says? Him and his unions never done nothing for me but caused a whole lot of trouble.'

'If it wasn't for the unions, every man on these docks would be on slave wages. You included.'

He swung his legs onto the jetty and faced me. I fought the urge to lean away. 'My brother and me been in town three weeks now waiting our next ship. All we hear is, *no union card, no work*. Can't go here. Can't do that. Can't breathe the air.'

I threw a stone at the hull of the nearest vessel. 'So why don't you just join the union and stop your bellyaching?'

He looked up at me, head cocked to one side. 'Why not?' He split a broad grin, wagging his finger at me. Then he turned to Emlyn. '*Why not?* That's a good one. I'll tell that one to my brother.'

I didn't like the sourness of his smile. My dad wouldn't grind one man down to raise another. I wouldn't believe it.

'You're wrong,' I said.

He raised his palms, pale peach and lined. Taking up his jacket, he began to search its pockets, ignoring me.

'You've got it wrong.'

Beside me, Emlyn had his eyes closed and was leaning heavy against a post. His cigarette looked in danger of falling from his fingers. Sour as I felt, I noticed his profile, his straight nose, his high forehead, the curve of his eyebrow like a bird wing. Feeling Solomon's watching me watching him, I shifted my gaze to a gull, pecking and strutting its way along the jetty. Solomon slapped Emlyn's arm.

'You better entertain your lady friend,' he said. 'She's getting fierce with me.'

'Sorry. About ready for the dogs, I am.'

'Don't worry,' Solomon said. 'You'll do better tomorrow.'

'That's if he takes me on.'

'He'll take you. Who else does he have?' He flicked the end of his fag into the water and strolled off, frightening the gull into flight.

'You've had trouble today, haven't you?' I asked.

'It's the knack with the knife, I need. I'm far too slow. Worse, the overseer docked my pay for waste.' He pulled his hand out of his pocket and showed me a pitiful pile of coins. 'I wouldn't mind, but I'd hoped only to work a couple of days. Replace *them*, get away. I'm afraid they're long past tapping.' He nodded towards his boots, slung over a post. The toes were bound with string, one was side-on, and I could see the hole beneath the ball of the foot. He was right, they were beyond fixing. Boots only by name.

'Do you believe him?' I asked.

'Believe who?'

'What *he* just said. About the unions.'

'Are you asking do I think there's a colour bar?'

I hated to hear him say it so off-hand. He didn't give me an answer and nor did I want to hear it. A queer feeling had come over me, like liquid, heavy on my chest, weighting my skull. I felt as if I'd sunk to the ocean floor. I rested my chin in my cupped hands and looked through the gaps in the deck to the lapping, shifting water.

'How goes it, looking for a job?'

I huffed. Shielding the light and peering closer through the boards, I saw small fish darting in the gloom. 'I've something in the evenings. An hour or two. It's...'. How could I explain the situation with Dick? I couldn't. I hardly understood it myself. 'Anyhow, my father keeps saying I ought to rent a sewing machine.'

'Come now.'

I felt his hand on my shoulder and looked up.

'This is not you – so glum and hard-done-by.'

'You hardly know me.'

He tamped his cigarette and put what was left in his pocket, then held his hands out to take mine. When I grasped them he pulled me to my feet, then looked me over from head to toe. 'Let's see,' he said and took my hands again and drew me a few steps to the end of the jetty. I swallowed a smile. He could be as barmy as he wished, he'd not turn me into a giggling schoolgirl. He took my shoulders and moved me like a dressmaker's dummy until I was facing out to the water beyond the dock

gates. 'Now then, hands here, I think.' I let him put my hands on my hips and as he did it, felt my chest rise, my lungs fill. He stood a few steps away, like an artist examining his canvas, then came back and gently raised my chin. I felt the touch of his fingers long after he'd stepped away.

'How do you feel?' he asked.

My whole body was tingling. I could have drunk the sea air washing over my face, but I was not about to admit to it. 'I feel like the figurehead on an old tea clipper.'

He laughed. I bit my lip to keep my own laugh in.

'Tell me, are these the arms of a seamstress?'

I shook my head, fierce. He came to stand beside me, taking up the same pose. We looked out at the blue-grey horizon, the pale sky rising to a royal blue.

'Ah... invigorating, this is. See, I think I *do* know you, Alma Cox. You and me are not like other folk. We follow our own paths, no matter what hardship comes along the way.'

'Give over.' I let my arms fall from my sides and perched on the top of a post, feeling strange and stiff. There was quiet a while and he sat on the post opposite, some three yards away. 'What are they having you do with those hindquarters anyway? Why don't they leave them to be broken down at market or in the shops?'

'You saw us?'

'I was passing.'

'They were meant for Smithfields but, railways being out, the fella says they're off to a buyer up north.'

'How will they get there?'

He pointed towards an old-fashioned steam tramp moored across the dock.

I rolled my eyes. 'Food supply is half the problem of this strike.'

'I suppose folk do need to eat.'

'If you said that to my dad, he'd tell you the TUC isn't trying to stop food distribution. They'd put their men behind it if only the government would allow it. As it is, they're giving out permits for foodstuffs and doing what they can to keep things moving.'

A twinkle of humour in Emlyn's eye made me think again on what I'd said.

'I'm not saying what you're doing *here* is right.'

'But it would be right if some of your dad's men were brought in to do it?'

I could not stay solemn with him laughing at me. I picked up a tiny piece of gravel and threw it at him. 'It's certainly not right for you to be in there making a hash of perfectly good carcasses.'

'Ah, well. We can't all be master butchers.'

'Why don't you wait it out, Emlyn. Really, why not?'

'I think not. It's about time for some boots, for those will not hold together long and I can go nowhere nor earn a shilling when I'm barefoot. That way the devil truly lies.' He pulled a hanging thread from the frayed hem of his trousers. 'I know what you must think of me, but I can't pretend to be anyone but who I am.'

'Alright then.' I got to my feet. 'Only I wish I had my knives.'

'Are you planning to feed me to the fish?'

'I'm going to show you how to do your job.'

'Haven't you your own work to go to?'

I felt something tighten inside me. I pushed the thought away. 'It can wait.'

We broke in through a high window at the back. Standing on a water butt in the empty livestock pens, I smashed a small pane and turned the catch. The sash was stiff in its housing and it would only shudder and budge, but eventually we inched it open. I was not graceful, getting through and lowering down. At one point, my hem was near my armpits and I was glad I'd insisted on going first. What a sight there would have been for someone inside – my laddered stockings and bare thighs hanging from the sill. It was a fair drop and I landed with a thump, a little bruised and out of breath. My heart was kicking. The late light made everything grey and grainy. It occurred to me we did not have long, for there'd be no switching on the electrics. I straightened my skirt and watched Emlyn unfurl from the gap like a crumpled fern. He hardly had to drop at all. He'd left his boots outside and his feet pattered on the textured tiles.

'Here we are then,' he whispered, re-tucking his shirt tail.

'Here we are.'

I got a thrill from walking around that empty place. These modern-built abattoirs were nothing like the one Bill and I patronised. I marvelled at the killing bays, each one big enough to fit my old shopfront inside. Every walkway had tracking overhead to carry the carcasses and all the sturdy tables were topped in stainless steel. The glazed bricks shone and curved round corners. There wasn't a sharp edge or cranny to hide a spot of dirt. Everything smelt of carbolic until we

came to an opening in the wall and it was drowned by the familiar tartness of raw meat.

We walked into the other half of the building, the cooling hall, past the double doors where I'd stood watching earlier in the day. It was like walking through a forest of meat. The carcasses were almost the size of a man and if I was a twitchy, turn-tail sort, it would be easy to imagine a person lurking among them, the shadow of a security guard stepping out. I laughed and Emlyn gave me a quizzical look.

'It's nothing,' I said, keeping my voice low though I was sure as salt there was no one about. 'Only, when my sister and me used to sneak about places, we'd spend the whole time trying to give each other the willies. If she was here now, she'd be disappearing, and jumping out round corners.'

'How long since she went to London?'

I was surprised that he remembered. I'd scarcely mentioned Rose, only in passing. 'Three years, give or take. She used to visit me at the shop after school and then she turned fourteen and off she went. I feel sometimes it's my fault.'

'How so?'

'She was lumped with Dad. What with me marrying Bill, she was left to look after the house, get up his dinners...' We'd reached a point where the hindquarters ended and the broken-down cuts began. I inspected a poorly cut round, crouching for a better look at its end. 'It didn't help any that Dad and I fell out. She told me once she feared she'd be there forever. A little housemaid. Only now she's a doing it by choice, for a pair strangers in a townhouse with fifteen rooms, and she calls it her freedom.'

'Do you blame her?'

I shook my head. 'I miss her.'

It seemed to me the task was primal cuts, nothing fancy. There was a tail still attached to one of the rounds, the bones showing through like fruit in jelly. It was severed at the base, hanging on by a tiny bit of flesh. There'd been no neatening up, no trimming the fat either. They were working fast and fierce alright. Emlyn padded off and appeared by my side with a knife.

'Where are the flanks?' I asked.

He pointed to the wall where there was a crate half-filled with meat.

'That's no way to store them.' I walked over and picked one up, feeling the weight. I turned a few more, looking at the condition. They'd be on the turn in no time.

'There's no buyer,' Emlyn said. 'Perhaps it'll go for dog meat.'

'Won't be fit for dogs if he lets it lie like that.' I dropped it back in. I'd never seen such waste. 'Now then, why don't you show me how you've been doing it.'

He looked at me, a little shy, quite different from the man who fanned and shuffled cards with a certain hand. He touched the carcass to steady it and began to cut.

'Hold it here,' I said, moving his grip. 'And see this? This is the seam you want to follow. Now keep close, pull it taut and draw past the thirteenth rib.'

He counted and cut. The flank was not bad. He threw it in the crate then went to move on to the loin.

'Do another flank first,' I said. 'You could pare a bit tighter yet.'

I was glad to see him taking it seriously. His lip disappeared between his teeth as he concentrated on cutting one and the next. When he was getting through them cleanly and at speed, we went back along the row to do the loins. I took the knife from him to make a demonstration – cutting near the base of the spine, feeling for the crack as the joint gave way, bringing the blade round and through, round and through, paring with its tip. The meat sliced as easily as parting veils. I was ready to take the weight of the loin as it fell. I hoisted it onto my shoulder, cool and clammy against my cheek. Above me, the rails were just within reach, but it took all my strength to raise the great lump of meat. I fumbled trying to get the hook in the right spot. Then the cut became weightless, took flight from my shoulder. It looked nothing to him, like putting your coat on a peg. Hard not to feel bitter, really. What did he do to deserve his extra four inches of height, the strength that shot through his wiry frame? What had any man done? Nothing, that's what. It was given to them like a spoilt brat gets his rocking horse. I tried to have a little grace about it and murmured a thank you.

'I'm sorry,' he said, taking his hands slowly from the cut. 'I should have let you be.'

I offered him the knife, handle first. 'We'd better get on.'

I showed him how best to angle his blade and which way to stand. He was quick to learn how to listen for the pop from the vertebrae and, as the shadows grew,

he seemed to get a feel for the right place to cut. When he'd finished the row and put the knife back with the others, I noticed his arms were now well and truly shaking.

'You've worked a long day,' I said.

He held his hands in front of him and watched them tremor. 'Suppose I have.' He folded them into his armpits, shaking his head at his own state. 'Let's go, Alma.' He laughed. 'Let's go.'

Getting out was far easier than getting in. We searched the building until we found a fire escape, bolted on the inside. Once we were out, Emlyn used a piece of board to wedge it shut so it wouldn't swing in the breeze.

Emlyn gathered his boots and my sack of coal from round the back. He stayed barefoot, preferring the cold to struggling with his bits of string. We walked the quayside in the dark, with the water shimmering and a few faint pilot lights out at sea.

'You need a hot dinner,' I said. 'Get yourself a meat pie, have a good night's sleep and you'll show them all how it's done tomorrow.'

'I can think of nothing better,' he said. 'Except perhaps two pies and two cups of tea.'

I smiled and shook my head.

'You won't join me?'

'Perhaps another time.'

'I fear you've missed your work altogether.'

'I have.'

'I don't want you to think me ungrateful, but why? You need the money, don't you?'

'I didn't want to go. Let's just say it's not all I'd hoped it would be.'

'Some jobs ask for more than you're willing to give.'

I stopped and looked up at him. It was hard to see his expression with so few lights about. What light there was caught his cheek, the stubble of his jaw, his ear. Somehow, I felt freer in the shadows. I watched our feet moving in time and thought how glad I was to be there, not manoeuvring round Dick under the bright electric lights.

As we approached the dock gates, I drew away from him. We stopped a hundred yards off, thinking it would be best not to go through together. Emlyn gave me my sack of coal, thanked me again for helping him and wished me a good night's

sleep. As I went ahead through the picket, there were just a few men standing about. I passed a lad with his thumbs in his vest pockets. He looked at my sack and gave me a wink.

'You keep warm tonight, love.'

Twelve

Sweet Briar Park was where we went instead of church. Listened to them talking from the poor-man's pulpit. A public bench. A tree stump. An orange box turned on its lip. The grass in that corner had long been trodden to mud and scattered with sand to save people's shoes.

More often than not, I'd have a sheaf of tiny leaflets in my hands – each one not much bigger than a matchbox – reading *Socialist Unity Meeting, The Old Boxing Hall, 8-9pm Tuesdays*. My dad's neat writing. My jagged scissor-work. Dad was all long legs to me then. Soft wool slacks and a leathery hand. He'd hold me by my shoulder to guide me about, lean down to whisper in my ear. *This here is John Pole, he's a Christian Socialist. Watch you don't get sprayed as he foams at the mouth. This fella's a Fabian. A bourgeois with a guilty conscience. Smells sweet, though, don't he? Like your mother's face powder. Now this chap here, he's of the Shop Stewards. Raze the state, he says. Here, here. Start afresh from new foundations. If your young eyes are sharp enough, you might see Moscow in his ear. This other one's a bleeding prig. Fornication of undesirables, my foot. Come away now, plug your ears.*

I noticed when people were really fixed on listening, they'd take my leaflets and slide them in their pockets without so much as looking. I wondered if they'd do the same with a leaf or twig. A secret note. *Meet me by the cow trough, sunset, your Long Lost Brother.*

When it rained sycamore seeds I would press them into the grainy earth with my toe. I never saw one sprout.

Dad would get stuck into these long arguments – *proselytising*, he called it. To pass the time, I'd pace a big semi-circle behind all the listeners, dragging my leg to draw a line. Then I'd shuffle along it, till I found the exact spot where I could hear all the speakers at once. Hands cupped behind my ears to cut out the sounds of the road – the chestnut man scraping his pan, wheels rumbling, a horse sneezing – and

hear only the voices. Droning. Barking. Overlapping. Dull as a town crier. Fast as an auctioneer. One drowns out the next. A cheer goes up. Laughter swells and dies just as quick. Close my eyes and I could have been by the goose farm at Lowley. Watching from the next field as they peck and fight, shriek and natter. Taking it in turns to flap like mad, forgetting their wings are clipped.

Thirteen

The next morning, I went to see a room advertised on the Post Office notice board. The house was down a leafy avenue, right at the outskirts of town. The girl who answered the door was dolled up as if she was about to step out to a tea dance. She wore a pale blue slip-dress with a gold rope tied about her hips. She had a friendly face with a heavy jaw. Her hair was wrapped in a patterned scarf.

'We're only just married,' she told me as we walked through the hall past the open parlour door. I caught sight of a mantelpiece crowded with ornaments and a large polished mirror in a gilded frame. 'My husband's a grocer. The one on Ladle Street. Feels funny to say that, *my husband*.'

Upstairs, she showed me the room at the back, with a tall sash window overlooking the garden. The bed was made-up with a crochet throw, the chest of drawers sturdy-looking, a green rug on the floor. Beside the washstand was a little rack where I might put my case. I traced the floral smell in the air to a vase of lavender on the window-ledge. Everything was clean and light.

'We hope it'll be the nursery one day,' she said. 'We borrowed the bed off Gordon's mother.'

I looked through the spotless glass. Outside a neighbour was throwing grain into a chicken coop. A pollarded tree wore a crown of early shoots. 'It's lovely.'

'Do you think so?' I could hear a thrill of pride in her voice. She must've realised how it sounded, for she blushed and dabbed at my arm with her fingertips. 'Shall I show you the best bit?'

I followed her to a lean-to just outside the kitchen. She opened the door to reveal a flush toilet, the tank bolted high on the wall.

'Isn't it grand?' She was beaming now. She lifted the lid and pulled the chain. We both watched the water swirl round the gleaming bowl. 'You could use it anytime,' she said. 'Day or night. Gordon's not stingy about the bills.'

As I walked back along the avenue, I did my sums. The rent was eight and six a week. Dick had been giving me a few shillings for the rabbits. Too much, really, but who was I to complain? And if things kept on that way, I could surely afford it. I only hoped he wouldn't be sore with me about the night before. I couldn't understand, now, what had got into me. Why make a mountain out of a molehill? He was an old friend. It was only a matter of getting used to working together. He'd forget all that silliness in time. And perhaps, after all, he'd only meant to offer me lodgings as a friend. Wasn't it possible I had taken him wrong?

That afternoon, I was peeling more spuds with the other women when Miss Havensleigh drew up a chair beside me.

'I'm going to a meeting,' she said. 'Bucket rattling. The usual sort of thing. Will you come with me?'

I looked for a clock. 'There's somewhere I have to be at nine.'

'We'll be finished long before that.' She leaned in closer, smelling somehow of peaches. My eye rested on her crisp-turned collar as she spoke in a low voice. 'I'd rather not make a broadcast of it, but I'm afraid the soup kitchen is running out of money.'

'So soon?'

She leaned away and nodded. 'We were taking from the strike fund. Now that's all going towards the men's pay, which I understand, of course, but it does leave us in a fix.' Her thin, freckled face was puckered at the brow. She ran her fingertips through her hair, causing the curls to fluff. 'You don't mind that we won't be raising for the miner's fund?'

'It's all for the good, isn't it?'

'Quite right.'

When it came to getting ready, she was quite inventive – she had us wear the 'Miner's Fund' sashes inside out and stuck paper signs over the buckets, reading *Soup Kitchen for the Strikers*. We took the main road to the park, going against the flow of people walking home from work. We had poor luck crying out for donations. *Support your local strikers! Soup kitchen for the needy!* Office workers passed us by, swinging umbrellas and briefcases. Hardly anyone coughed up a farthing.

It was an education, seeing how folk reacted to Miss Havensleigh in her smart clothes with her pretty way of walking. *Demure*, that's what they might call her

on the society pages. More than one man stepped aside and lifted his hat. Their smiles would fall away when they saw me bringing up the rear with my battered cloche and thick coat, all wrong for the warm weather. They could take their sour looks and shove along.

I saw a woman approaching with a maid's pinafore folded under her arm. I held out my bucket.

'Penny for the soup kitchen?' I'd lost hope before the words were out. She dipped her head and mouthed *sorry* to her shoes.

After a while I decided to cross the road rather than trail behind Miss Havensleigh. I reckoned I ought to try my hand alone. Somehow I couldn't make it sound like she did – like a lovely idea, something to make you feel good. *Support the strikers. Have another biscuit.* With me, it came out more like a threat. I stepped to the kerb to let a group of schoolgirls carrying instruments go by and saw a motorcar rolling near, ever so slow. There was a card in the windscreen, *Ask me for a lift.*

'You ought to be ashamed of yourself,' a tart voice called out. The car was full, five women crammed into the back seat, two more beside the driver. It might have been any of them who'd shouted. They all stared. Then they were gone, chugging and spluttering fumes.

When we reached the park I had next-to-nothing in my bucket. Miss Havensleigh had done a bit better. She spread her coins between the two.

'To get you started,' she said, squeezing my arm.

We waited outside the main entrance. The cherry tree behind the railings was in blossom, covering the ground with a dirty white mess of petals, trampled underfoot. It was uncommonly breezy, and the sky was grey. As we stood there, with our buckets, I noticed people gathering by the bus stop.

'Don't they know there's a strike on?' I said to Miss Havensleigh.

'I'm afraid there might be some buses running. My mother told me she saw two yesterday. She was quite triumphant.'

'She's not in favour of the strike then?'

She rolled her eyes. 'My mother is in favour of her own convenience.'

I liked her all the better for showing a bit of sauce. Ten minutes later, a bus arrived at speed, or at least the husk of one. It had four missing windows, the glass knocked out and wire mesh in its place. There was a bobby sitting beside the driver, gripping the dash with both hands. Down below, it was packed with faces looking

out and on the top deck a load of standing passengers were clinging to each other and the shoulders of the ones who'd been lucky enough to get a seat. The bus overshot the stop by several yards. It was hard to tell the squealing brakes from the shrieking women. A male voice yelled, *steady on!*

'Oh dear.' Miss Havensleigh put a hand to her mouth. 'I know him – the driver. He's a family friend.'

He was wearing a purple and green scarf, over-long and slung in loops round his neck. He had blond hair that fell into his eyes.

'He looks young to be driving,' I said.

'He's eighteen, I think. I had no idea he'd volunteered. Really he ought to know better. Crumbs... I suppose I ought to say something.'

She was expecting me to urge her on, no doubt, but soon the horn sounded and the bus pulled away. She let out a little sigh – of relief or frustration, I wasn't sure. The bobby was not yet aboard. He ran alongside, grasping his truncheon, and leapt onto the footplate. As it drove off, the wheels were straddling the white line, a menace to anything coming the other way. When it finally drifted to the left, a great cheer went up from the passengers.

'Listen to that,' said Miss Havensleigh, with a sad note in her voice. 'You'd have thought they were at the races.'

After another half hour, people began to arrive for the outdoor meeting. They were quiet and brisk. A few strolled with the air of men on holiday, jackets slung over their shoulders. For the most part they seemed blind to us or else passed with an awkward nod.

'Support your fellow strikers.'

'Don't let struggling families starve.'

'Love thy neighbours, fellas, 'specially at a time like this.'

I got a scattering of coins as the minutes passed. As folk poured into the park, my bucket became a little heavier. Then the speeches started and newcomers dried to a trickle. We stopped and did a rough count of what we'd made.

'Nine shillings? Perhaps a trifle over.' Miss Havensleigh sighed. 'I'm usually a first-class bucket rattler.'

'I don't think I've quite three bob. Everyone's minding their pennies.'

'Perhaps they haven't any to mind.'

'I don't know. Some'll have a jar. A little baccy tin stowed somewhere for emergencies. It's casual labour, dock work. They have to keep something aside,' I said, watching a group of young lads run across the grass. They ran like dogs, legs at full stretch, not a care for their lungs.

'But not part with it,' Miss Havensleigh said.

'No. I reckon not.'

We strolled towards the turned backs of the crowd. The sun was low and the sycamores cast huge shadows. It wasn't the biggest outdoor meeting I'd seen, perhaps a hundred or more people gathered round the stage. A clergyman was reading, his voice high but strong.

'...no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common and there was not a needy person among them. And with great power the apostles were giving their testimony...'

There was the clatter of hooves behind us. Five specials and a uniformed officer trotted off the road and into the park. They slowed to a walk. I recognised the giant of a bloke I'd seen at the training grounds, only him and his mates weren't dressed in black any more. They'd had the sense to lose the brooches and epaulettes and were dressed in ordinary suits. I wondered where they had got their shire horses. Not from the police, I felt sure. Not when the bobby himself was on a skinny bay of no more than twelve hands. The specials had glossy batons the length of swords. So much for the bannisters and rolling pins.

There was some shuffling among the crowd. A murmur and plenty of turned heads. The priest had finished and another speaker was standing in his place. He was looking from his notes to the specials as he spoke.

'Most men of the cloth will urge you in God's name to return to work. But how many are thinking of the coffers? The politics of high tea in the afternoon. The church is here for *all* its people...'

They kept their distance, sauntering round the edges of the gathering. They were good horsemen, you could see from the way they swayed from the hip. On stage, Mr Reagan had risen from his seat. He waved two fingers in a circle, urging the next speaker to begin, all the while keeping his eye on the uniformed officer who'd brought his horse to a standstill left of the stage.

As a small, pot-bellied man began his speech, I noticed one of the audience wandering off. He was clutching a bottle in brown paper. Every few steps, he came

to a halt to correct his direction. One of the specials drew close and circled in front to stop him. Words were had. I was too far away to hear. Then the special reached down with his baton and prodded the poor bloke on the shoulder, a short jab like the strike of a pool cue. He stumbled backwards and set off again. The special followed. He struck the man harder, between his shoulderblades, and he fell face first. They were far enough away for the sound of his bottle smashing to come as a soft tinkle. Before I knew what was happening, Miss Havensleigh was off, marching towards them. When I caught up, she thrust her bucket at me and made a grab for the end of the special's baton.

'What on earth do you think you're doing?' She tugged on it with both hands. 'What right have you?'

The special was holding fast. He gave his mate a helpless sort of look. I got the drunk to his feet and teased the neck of the broken bottle from his bleeding fingers. He stank to high heaven of whisky.

'Madam, the man is inebriated.' Plummy as his voice was, the special sounded panicked. I remembered the training ground. *Harrah! Vagabond! Back to your hole!*

'I rather think that's *his* business.' She yanked the baton from his grip. Either that or he let go, seeing how ill it looked to fight a young lady like Miss Havensleigh. She threw it aside. 'What's your name? The Chief Inspector will be receiving a complaint.'

The special turned his horse and began to move away. I noticed then the high red of his cheeks.

'Officer!' Miss Havensleigh called out to the policeman, who was trotting over. 'I want that man's name.'

'He is a volunteer, Madam. Come now, this chap's alright.' He eyed the swaying drunk. Miss Havensleigh's mouth fell open. I took her by the elbow and tried to drag her away. She resisted.

'If you will do nothing, then I want the name of your superior,' she said.

'Move along now, Madam. There's no harm done.'

She made a strangled noise, but let me pull her away. When I glanced back, I saw him get down from his horse for the baton. The specials were gathered by the gate. Like schoolboys waiting on the master.

We spent the next half an hour watching the speakers. Men kept turning to sneak a peep at Miss Havensleigh. She didn't seem to notice them. The only sign of life in her was the red blotches creeping up her neck. She didn't clap when the others did. I wondered if she was even listening. When Mr Shank was reading through a list of nationwide reports, she finally spoke up.

'I'm sorry,' she said. 'I made a scene.'

'You were grand. Need a bit of shouting at, them fellas. Even if it doesn't get us anywhere much.'

'It's just not decent. What they're doing, I mean. Not just them, but Michael on the bus. And the Government... setting all the dominoes, then feigning surprise when they topple over.'

I laughed, then wished I hadn't when I saw her eyes were brimming.

'There's something perverse about the way they grind these fellows under their heels, Alma. It's like watching a public flogging. I can't bear it. And if we lose, how they will hoot. They'll hoot and crow in smoking rooms and slap each other's backs. Another win. Another conquest.' She turned her face toward my shoulder and I had an urge to hug the poor lass. I gave her a shy pat on the back, wishing God hadn't built me so awkward. Miss Havensleigh fumbled for her hanky. 'I'm failing them.' She jerked the arm with the near-empty bucket in its crook. 'What will we feed them?'

I arrived at Dick's fifteen minutes early, carrying a bottle of nettle beer as a make-peace. The door was locked and he was inside, cleaning down. I tapped on the window. There were slow runs of suds heading from his cart towards the gutter. The chain round its wheel was beginning to rust.

'You didn't come last night.' He looked wounded.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'I was here half the night doing the rabbits I'd bought.'

It made me nervous that he didn't move from the doorway to let me through. 'They're still selling, then?' I handed him the bottle. He took it without even looking to see what it was.

'Where were you, Alma?'

'Sorry. It won't happen again, boss.' I tried a smile, tried to fetch up his usual cheery self. 'Shall I get on?'

'I didn't buy any more today. How was I to know you'd turn up?'

'I'll just do the cellar, then.' I stepped through the small gap he'd left for me, smelling the meat juices in his apron, the menthol shaving cream he was so fond of. I brushed against the coarse hair of his arm as I passed. He stayed rigid as a post-box.

'I want to talk to you.'

'Course,' I said. 'How about I sweep and mop first? And this glass wants polishing.' I inspected the reflection of the light in the window, looking for smears.

'Stop it, Alma.' He turned the key in the lock.

'Stop what?'

'Stop handling me. I'm not so thick as you think.' He looked at the label of the beer as if he wasn't sure how it came to be in his hand. He put it on the shelf and his chest swelled as he took a breath. 'Come upstairs. You and me are going to have a talk.'

We climbed a narrow staircase to a half-empty storeroom. There was one set of shelves, full of odds and ends, and a high-backed settee. He bid me sit beside him. Wiping his palms on the thighs of his trousers, he cleared his throat.

'While I was doing them rabbits last night, I had a good long time to think.'

I said nothing. It was like watching a train heading for a break in the tracks. There was nothing I could do now.

'Bill made me promise once if anything ever happened to him, I'd look after you.' He took my hand between his and bowed his head as if he was blessing me. His fingers closed around my wrist, too tender. I tried to ease it away, but he clung on. 'I want a family, Alma. And Irene... me and her ain't going so good. She don't respect me.'

This much was true. Countless times I'd heard her put him down in front of company. She'd tell stories about silly mistakes he'd made, make comments about how he was allergic to soap and water. She'd make fun of how he fancied himself a Music Hall singer, nag him when she thought he'd had too much to drink. We'd had a dinner party once when he didn't seem well and while he was in the lav she'd let on to everyone how he had the runs. You got used to that sort of thing from Irene Cooper, but I'd always thought he loved her in spite of it.

'Leave it, Dick. Please.' I eased my knees away from touching his. I didn't want to hurt his feelings. 'How will we work together?'

'If you let me take care of you, you wouldn't have to work at all.' He cleared his throat and stared at our joined hands. My palm was clammy. 'I feel a right plum, Alma. What I said to you the other day – it made it seem like I was asking you to be my... *fancy woman*.'

I couldn't help it – I bowed over my knees, wrapped my arms around my head and gave a quiet groan. He tried to lift me by the elbows, to get me to face him.

'I've been kicking myself. Listen, I want you to know I'd do it proper. Divorce, I mean. Our kids would never have to know we'd been married before. We could move to the other side of town if you like. The point is I wouldn't keep you hanging on, if that's what you're worried about.'

He was quiet a moment and I came out from hiding. 'Look, Dick...' I could think of nothing. No way back, but I had to try. 'We're mates, aren't we? Why don't we just forget about all this, eh?'

He shrank away from me. After a moment of staring at the floor, he got to his feet kicking a metal bracket across the floor. I wasn't sure if it was accident or anger. He reached for the handle, then turned and leaned against the door. 'Why not *me*, Alma? Is it because I don't own this place? I'll always earn well, I can promise you that. I might not have what Bill had –'

'It's not that.'

'You're not telling me it was love at first sight with Bill. I won't believe it. I was there, you remember. You can't tell me it was love.'

'It's different, Dick.'

He turned to stare at the window. It was easier to talk without having to look at his hurt expression.

'You have to understand, when I met Bill I wanted for everything. I was on a pitiful wage and always having to find the money to buy things for my little sister because Dad had no idea what a young girl needs. You don't know how it is – when you grow up feeling the pinch, forever on the lookout for what you can get. It becomes a way of thinking. I'm not ashamed of it, whatever Irene might have said. I *did* go after Bill. I admit it. He knew it. But it wasn't just for a nice flat and new clothes. It was *doing* things. *Going* places. The world opened up. All those things you lot took for granted – days trips, the races, those dinner parties. We never once had anyone over for dinner at home. Someone stopping for a cup of tea was a worry.'

And my dad couldn't be disturbed... Always with his nose in a book and expecting the same of me.' I'd lost the thread of what I was saying. I stopped, short of breath.

'Seems to me you're not much better off now.'

'I know.'

'So, why not? Why not me? I'd take care of you.'

'I know. I do. But there's Irene.' I raised a palm to stop him interrupting. 'And even if you were a bachelor or a widower like Bill was... I think I'd sooner get by under my own steam this time.'

He let out a long breath and opened the door. We walked down the narrow stairs in silence. What could I say? It was all out. No amount of chumminess would fix it now. I stepped onto the pavement. He stood on the threshold with a pleading look in his eye.

'I wanted a family,' he said and he meant it too. It was there in his voice, his heart-struck expression. He was a big, daft bullmastiff of a bloke and it didn't feel good turning my back on him.

'You've been a proper mate to Bill,' I said. I patted his arm to try to show there were no hard feelings.

'Will you come tomorrow?'

'I think I'd better not.' As I neared the streetlamp, my shadow opened up like a pit beneath my feet. 'I was only after a job. That was all.'

That night, I listened for Dad's footfall on the pavement. I had a few clothes drying in front of a feeble fire made from coal dust pressed with tealeaves and some sticks added for luck. The windows were open to let out some of the steam. I warmed water and washed myself by candlelight to save the gas. Bottom half first, then the top. I kept my clothes nearby, ready to make myself decent. What I'd give for a door that locked and a basin with hot water laid on. Outside, someone was singing drunk. The seagulls were having a party further down the promenade. The sound of boots on the cobbles had me up and at the window with my towel at my chest. I couldn't see through the steamed, grimy panes, so I put my face to the narrow gap, and felt the cool air flowing in. It wasn't Dad. I told myself he was working, poring over his maps like a General planning battle, or else he'd stayed with the men for a glass of ale. Even so, it was getting late, even for him.

It was gone midnight by my dad's mantel clock when I heard knocking. I ran down to stop whomever it was from rousing the Riddleys. A chap in his twenties stood on the step, hand in pocket, jacket slung over his shoulder. He smiled.

'Mrs Cox?'

'Yes.'

'I've a message from your father.'

'Yes?'

He bowed his head towards me so he might speak even softer. 'He's asked me to let you know he won't be coming home.'

'What do you mean? Why not?'

'Too risky,' he said, with a sparkle in his eye. It seemed it was all a great game to him.

'Police?' I asked. He nodded. 'What have they against him?'

'There's the rub. They've no need to produce anything – we're under Emergency Powers now and there's been reports of midnight raids.'

'He thinks they'll come for him here.'

'Exactly. If not tonight then soon.' He caught himself. 'I mean... it's not likely. Mr Yates asked me to say it's only a safety measure. You needn't worry Mrs Cox.'

'Is that so? And what if they should come? Am I to pretend I don't know him, or what?'

He bundled his jacket into his arms, fiddling with the pocket button. 'It's only a safety measure, Mrs Cox. No need to worry.'

'Will he be at the club tomorrow?'

'I should think so. We've men all over town, after all. They won't surprise him there.'

'And I suppose you're going to tell me you don't know where he's staying.'

'That's right.'

I sighed. 'Good night, then.'

He looked relieved, keen to get to his own home, no doubt. He bid me a cheerful good night and I watched him leave. Safety measure, my foot. Dad did not believe in running scared from the police. For him a court appearance was a propaganda opportunity. Then again, there'd never been a strike like this before. I supposed the men could not afford to lose him now. As I looked up the promenade,

the shadows between the buildings seemed to twitch. I let the door close and turned to find Mrs Ridley behind me. I wondered how long she'd been standing there.

'Are you well?' I asked. She was greyer than ever, her skin almost matching the streaks in her hair. She shifted her weight and I thought she might fall over. Her hand went out to grasp the wall. I took her by the elbow and led her back into her rooms. The elder children must have been asleep in the other room, for there was only her, the youngest in his cot, poor Peter in his sickbed, and the flame of an oil lamp without its glass.

'I keep thinking he's gone,' she said. 'He ain't rattling no more. He don't stir.'

I knelt beside Peter and put my ear close to his face, I could hear nothing, but felt his breath touch my skin, weak and regular. I turned to Mrs Ridley, perched on the box, leaning back at a strange angle, legs apart, a glimpse of baggy wool stockings. She looked a wreck. The hollows below her cheekbones were in shadow and her lip lay uneven over her missing tooth. I was reminded of the roofs of the allotment sheds, sunken here and there, the beams rotten.

'He's sleeping. You ought to get some rest too.'

'I don't sleep,' she said. 'I only lie there. What's the point?'

'Give me a minute,' I said.

I went upstairs and made two cups of tea, I hadn't any milk or sugar, but it would be better than nothing, I hoped. I took them down the steep staircase one by one so as not to spill. She was exactly as I'd left her. She took the hot tea, held it under her nose, then placed it by her foot.

'You've nothing stronger, I suppose?'

I shook my head.

'It's not what you think. I've been carrying pain ever since that one.' She nodded towards her youngest. He was sprawled, gently snoring. 'I know what folk say, but it's the only thing that helps. If you had even a drop I should be glad of it.'

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'Dad keeps nothing in. If he has a drink it's at the pub.'

'Very high-minded, your father.'

'Where's your husband?' I asked. 'Aren't you expecting him?'

'He can't bear the sound. Peter's breath. He's gone out walking.'

It was quiet a while and I blew into my cup. I wondered if I'd done the right thing inviting myself in. Perhaps she'd rather be alone. I felt a little better when she

sipped her tea. She put it down to shift her weight, wincing. Her hand touched on a scrap of newspaper and began rolling it between her fingers.

'I looked through his pockets,' she said. 'Empty. Not even a few ha'pennies. He don't trust me. If he'd left me tuppence I could have gone with my jug, see. They're ever so good at The Horse and Hay. They understand how I'm ailing.'

I felt myself drawing away from her. How could she think of drink when her child was so ill? I didn't like the twitchy way she fiddled with the paper. The rustling put me on edge. I supposed Mr Ridley had the sense to keep on his person whatever money they had. Thank God the collection would have been passed to him, not her.

'You must put it from your mind,' I said.

'Easy for you to say. It don't hurt you to sit and to stand and to move.' She looked at me with narrowed eyes, a sheen of sweat on her brow, though the room was cool. 'He's two years old now and I haven't had a proper night's sleep since I began to carry him. The pain's in my hips, and here.' She touched the crease where her belly met her thigh. 'I never had it with the others. They say the first one's the worst, but Danny slipped out like a spring lamb. I was only sixteen then, mind you. You do wear out.'

With a jolt, I realised she could hardly be much older than me. I'd have supposed her forty, but now, looking closer, I saw hints of her youth – the eyebrows she plucked very fine, according to the fashion, and the thickness of her grey-black hair, wound into a bun at her nape. Shame moved over me like wind bowing the grass. *There but for the grace of God...* Had I married a man other than Bill. Had I married as my father wished – a wholesome youngster who worked the docks. A little lodging down the Lanes. A new baby every eighteen months. Who's to say I wouldn't be as she was now? Desperate for relief, just a sip. I took a few pennies from my pocket and held them to her on my outstretched palm, not knowing if what I did was right or wrong. She looked almost frightened.

'You're a good soul. Bless your soul. Will you sit with him?' She hauled herself up, clutching the crooked mantelpiece and took the coins. From a crate in the corner, she pulled a small jug. 'I shan't be long. You sit with him. You're a kind soul. I thank you. I'll only be a minute, you'll see.'

I was glad when she was gone. I didn't like way she thanked me. Had I let myself into something I ought to have left well alone? I sat where she'd been sitting, on the crate opposite Peter's bed. After a while of watching him in the low light, I felt

my eyes playing tricks. Did his chest rise and fall, or had it stopped? I drew close again and put my cheek near his nose and mouth. Feeling the tingle of his breath, I sank back onto my heels. I daren't touch him, but looked at his bull-neck and swollen cheeks and wished I could press the swelling, smooth it away.

I was still kneeling when he opened his eyes, just a slit with the dark life of his iris moving across the white. He fixed a dull gaze on me and his rasping began again.

'There now.' I took his small hand in mine and he clung on. He took a long gasp and twitched as if to sit up, panic in his eyes. Then he lay back, exhausted, chin raised to the ceiling, seeking the air.

'There, there. You're a brave lad, now. There, there.' It was all I could think to say.

When Mrs Ridley returned with her drink, I slipped away. Upstairs, I stopped by the back room. Silence. I stood there a full two minutes and then finally heard the whisper of a page turning. I knocked, making sure to do it firm and clear. There was no answer. I'd hardly expected one. I knocked again and kept my eye on the gleaming crack, looking for shadows, signs of movement inside. There were whispers. I clearly heard the words, *too late now*. I knocked again.

He opened just wide enough for his head. He was an odd, boney-looking chap with spectacles, high cheekbones and horsey teeth. He gave me a nervous smile.

'I want to speak with you.'

He nodded and let the door fall open. I was hit by a strong smell of ink and cleaning spirits. Inside, the other lad was sitting cross-legged on a cushion with a book in his lap. He was shirtless, wearing a dirty vest. His dark brown hair was thick and straight as grass. Both had black fingers and stains up their arms. There wasn't a stick of furniture, only two large cushions. In the middle of the floor, taking up most of the room, was an amateur press. The bare boards were strewn with pamphlets, rolled paper, ink bottles, scraps of newspaper, an open packet of biscuits and all sorts. A huge damp-stain like spilled coffee seeped across the ceiling.

'You're Alma Cox. Herb's daughter.'

'And you two?'

'We're associates of your father's. Acquaintances.'

'Have names, do you?'

He looked doubtfully at the dark-haired one. 'I'm Ned Howard. And this is Leslie Moody.'

'How d'you do?' Leslie got up from his cushion and offered me his hand.

'My father told me why you're in there, so you needn't bother playing hide and seek with me.'

'Oh, no – ' Ned started.

'Secrecy is the sword of the insurrection.' Leslie leaned against the doorframe, showing off a wiry, black armpit.

I sighed. 'Well, you might need to be a bit more secret. By which I mean you can push off. I've had word from my dad – he's expecting the police.'

This did not have the effect I'd hoped it would. Leslie split a broad grin.

'Here, Ned, we shall have another chase on our hands.'

'But we've nowhere else to go.'

The sound of a door opening downstairs wiped the smile off Leslie's face. Worrying we were disturbing the Riddleys, I moved to look over the bannister. Leslie stopped me, laying hold of my shoulder.

'Shh,' he whispered. 'In here.'

'Come off it. They *know* you're up here.'

For the sake of an easy life, I let him draw me inside and usher me to one of the cushions. Ned was left to sit on the floor. Getting used to the smell of ink, I noticed something else, something musty. I couldn't put my finger on it, until I saw a lidded chamber pot in the corner. That really was taking all this cloak and dagger stuff too far. The privy was only down the row. I moved a jingling tray of metal letters to make room for my legs. My fingertips came away black.

'What did Herb say for us to do?' Ned asked, chewing a filthy nail.

'It's not for him to tell you where to go. You've had a good run of it, you must admit. Now it's time to move on. It does him no favours to be mixed up in this kind of thing.' I waved a hand at the printing press. They'd be running nowhere fast with that contraption. Beside me was a box of small sticky-backs reading, *Hands Off Russia!*, and stack of pamphlets titled, *Class War: The Road to Lasting Peace*. I took one off the pile. 'My father's done a decent thing giving you lads shelter. Are you trying to cause him trouble?'

Leslie swept his hair back from his brow. 'Herb knows our political opinions.'

'How about chalking the pavements. Don't think I haven't noticed you trying to undermine him. What's the meaning of it?'

The way he snorted and tossed his head reminded me of a young pony.

'Perhaps we *should* move on,' Ned said, doubtfully. 'If the police are coming.'

'Ned, Ned, Ned. Come on... there may never be another strike like this. What does Lenin say? *To delay is to die*. We must keep on. Keep the fires stoked. There'll be no revolution without propaganda.'

'You two are mad if you think the revolution's coming – ' I said. 'This is an industrial dispute.'

He pointed a long, inky finger. 'So say you. Lenin says, *the chance of revolution...* No, *the revolution comes...*' He looked to Ned, who was flicking through a small brown notebook. He settled on a page, glanced shyly at me, and read,

'Every revolutionary situation leads to revolution. Just the thing!' He went to the press and began selecting letters. They chinked as he slotted them into place with nimble fingers. Leslie smoothed his eyebrows, I wondered if he wasn't a little vain.

'And suppose it doesn't?' I asked.

'Doesn't what?'

'Lead to a revolution.'

'Then it wasn't a revolutionary situation. See?' Leslie tapped his temple. 'That's how you know.'

Ned clipped the frame and began rolling ink. Somehow he'd got some on his lower lip and teeth. 'I've always liked, *Peasants! Turn on your oppressors!* Has a ring to it, wouldn't you say?'

'Very nice,' I said. 'If you fancy a spell in Strangeways.'

'Oh, let them come!' Leslie said. 'You know, a public trial mightn't be such a bad idea. It'd be in the papers. Might be just the ticket, if you know what I mean?'

Ned smirked as if there was some great secret between them. I would have liked to bash their heads together, but since I was going over Dad's head, I had to be careful with my words. 'Look, fellas, if you want to turn yourselves in, that's your business –'

'There's no honour in surrender. They shall have to catch us.'

'Would you try to think beyond your own noses for just a minute? I won't be dragged into this. And Riddleys won't thank you for the trouble, either. Be reasonable,

lads. There's a sick boy down there. Why don't you think about packing up? You can't give out your handbills if you get pinched.'

Ned glanced at Leslie, then set to cleaning his glasses, avoiding my eye. Leslie was stroking his hair as you might a pet cat. He looked to be thinking on it. After a while he raised a finger and pointed at the plate Ned had just inked.

'Strike down your oppressors. How about that? Play on words.'

It was like talking to parrots. I picked myself up and stood in the doorway. Leslie had taken up a clean sheet of paper and was blocking out his slogan.

'I'll tell you what,' I said. 'I won't be lying for you if the police should come. I shall lead them straight to you.'

Leslie scribbled on, mouthing the words. Ned gave me a wincing smile and raised a hand. I left them to it.

Perhaps I'd sleep easier knowing it was a pair of fools and not real Bolsheviks hiding out in there. The courts were filled with folk who'd done far less than print that kind of stuff. These days, you only had to stand in the wrong place, keep the wrong company. There were plainclothes bobbies at every meeting, openly taking notes, taking names. Cooking their notes with plenty of spice, if Dad was to be believed.

Sitting on my blankets, I let my head rest against the plaster and looked into the dying fire. Dad's corner was all gloom. The sloping stacks of books and pamphlets were beginning to resemble a drystone wall around his mattress. They cast a shadow. Should you care to, you could easily imagine there was a person in that dark space – a man in the unmade bed. It occurred to me if the police were to come, they'd hardly be short of evidence. I got up and tidied his blankets and rolled the mattress away, tucking as many of the papers as I could inside the bedding.

I didn't feel like getting undressed. After all that had happened, my brain was like a dogfight. I put my ears between my knees and my hands over my skull and squeezed. One problem at a time. Forget that tall, sash window and the neat little bed with its crochet blanket. That was gone – along with the money and the work and the familiar pork smell of Dick's cutting room. I was ashamed to think how dearly I'd wanted to make it my own. Inching my way round him like a leech. And then there was Miss Havensleigh. I kept seeing the wild motion of her elbow. The stoop as she'd yanked the baton, knees bent, weight back, her small heels ripping the grass. His grip. On his high horse, he'd kept one hand on the reins. He'd almost laughed

before the shame caught up. He ought to be ashamed. And she, falling quiet. Those blotches creeping up her throat, red as fury, seeping through.

I changed and rubbed myself in spirits even though it didn't seem to do much. I was getting to look as if I had a bad case of the measles. It drove me mad to lie still for long. The spirits burned, especially where the skin was broken, but the pain was good. It took my mind off the itching. As I put out the candle and lay breathing in the rising fumes, I felt myself begin to float. I remembered my promise to Emlyn. I'd a pig to slaughter tomorrow. A couple more shillings to earn. I tried to put the worries from my mind. What if I'd misremembered how Bill used to do it? What if the pig got loose? I would sooner not go at all than have a cruel and bloody fight with that mild-mannered man watching on.

I'd seen a slaughtering go wrong before. I went with Bill once to fetch a bullock from the abattoir but when we got there, we found the beast was not yet killed. We stayed outside, leaning on the half door. *Just you watch this*, Bill said, *he's an artist with the poleaxe.*

Mr Gideon, the slaughterman, was wearing rubber boots. His apron was of a deep-blue oilcloth with murky pinstripes. The sleeves of his shirt were rolled to the bicep and though he went without a collar, his hair was combed and his moustache waxed to needle-points. It took three men to lead the beast in, two pulling on the rope, one smacking its behind with a hefty switch. It was a mighty weight with a silky hide and I said to Bill, *Isn't he fine?*

Bill held a finger to his lips.

The bay had been swilled and soaped and swept out since the last kill, but still the bullock could smell what was coming. My God, did it bellow. They threaded the rope through an iron hoop in the floor and, with three on the end, pulled so his head would go down. The beast had other ideas. I'd never seen a cow rear, but this one reared and he fought. And all the time, that voice, shrieking high and unholy, more like a braying ass than a cow. For a while it was tug-o-war, this way and that, until the scrubbing lad jumped on the bullock's back and Mr Gideon took a broom to its knees. When the head was down, Mr Gideon slipped his fingers in the nostrils and shifted it a little. He lifted his poleaxe from a hook on the wall. He took aim. The bullock was twitching and groaning and fighting the rope. It didn't do to see its eyes swivel and its breath come fast, that uncanny way it seemed almost to have a soul.

Gideon brought the axe down. It landed just above the socket and went through the eye. He missed.

The blood was spurting, tumbling like struck oil. Gideon darted aside. I suppose as a woman I ought to have looked away. *They forgot to tie him off*, Bill said, and sure enough the bullock was back on its feet, sending the men scrambling, heaving against nigh-on a ton of muscle, their heels slipping across the floor. Bill disappeared from by my side. Soon I saw him pulling too. The cow had backed into a corner, straining against the rope. The slaughterman was darting in and out, striking its head with a stunning hammer. It might have been three minutes or an age that passed. Men shouting. Cow screaming. In the end they got him down.

I winced as Gideon made mince of the skull. On his knees he struck again and again, again and again, with the pointed end of the axe. When he stopped, he was scarlet. Sweating like a horse. He threw his tool to the ground. After a while of mopping his brow with a hanky, I heard him tell Bill he wouldn't charge us for the head.

I turned and looked out over the fields. There was a bush full of starlings sounding like an infant school. Bill came out wiping his hands and sat beside me. I felt the fence bow under his weight. We were quiet for a while, listening to the squeaks and chirrups. All he said was, *What a mess*.

Fourteen

I decided to take an early shift at the soup kitchen. Though I hated the peeling, I wanted to be finished in time to wash and rest before Emlyn came. I slept so little at night, worried by the bugs, that I'd taken to having catnaps through the day. When I arrived in the back yard, I saw Nelly in the kitchen talking to her husband. She was sitting on a tall stool beside the work surface. She bowed her head, touched her face against his shoulder. The way she leaned into him, I could tell she was weeping. He comforted her with one arm, leaving the other hanging by his side. His chin stayed high and he stared into nothing like a man waiting for his train.

I turned away and smoked a ciggy in the alley. When I returned, I found Nelly alone at the table, cradling a cup of tea.

'No sign of Miss Havensleigh?' I asked as I took off my coat.

'They'll be here soon.' Her voice faltered and there was a silence as she poured a cup for me. I should have left her longer to pull herself together. She sniffed and glanced at me with filling eyes. There was no avoiding it.

'Is something the matter?'

'Oh, no, nothing. It's silly really. Well, it's not. But it's silly of me to cry.' She tipped her chin to the ceiling and blinked, as if the tears might flow back in.

'Would you like me to give you a bit of peace?'

She shook her head. 'I happened to notice my neighbour cleaning her husband's boots last night, that's all. And this morning, well, I wasn't watching out on purpose, but I saw him going off with his sandwiches in his pocket. And his hook. And... I knew I shouldn't say anything to my Boris. Only it slipped out, see.' She patted her cheeks with the folded square of her hanky. 'Jean will never speak to me again if she finds out it was me who said.'

'Can't help what you saw.'

'But I shouldn't have *said*. Not to Boris. I knew it would cause trouble. And poor Jean, she's six months gone and this'll be her ninth. Isn't it awful? We've been neighbours years.'

'I wouldn't be too hard on yourself. He won't have got past that picket without a mark against his name.'

'I suppose.' She drew a long breath, laying a hand to her bosom. 'Oh, but the shame of it. It wouldn't be so bad if he were just some young lad – Neville, I mean, Jean's fella. If he were a youngster he might leave it behind him afterwards, move on somewhere else but they can't do that. And what with us all living on top of each other...' She sniffed. 'We shall have to find a way to get on... but you know how it is. They won't live it down.' She dabbed a tear swelling in the hollow beside her nose. 'I can't bear a quarrel, Alma. You've only to ask the girls, I'd do anything to avoid a quarrel.'

I believed it of her. She was all frills and sunshine and smiles. No wonder she clung to Winifred, whose tongue was sharp enough for the both of them. I wished I could tell her not to worry. People forget. Grudges pass. As I racked my brains for something to say, all that came to mind was a mock funeral procession I'd seen as a child. I remembered the icy feel of a cold, wet window on the tip of my nose. They had a real coffin, hoisted on their shoulders and big sign on top painted, *RIP Dave 'Turncoat' Wiggins*. There were men and women by the dozen following down the

road. Singing *Frost o'er the graveyard* – not in church voices, but rowdy like a pub singalong. I'd marvelled at the old man's tuba, which wrapped around his body like a golden boa. My mum had dragged me from behind the curtain. It didn't do for children to watch such things. It was only years afterwards I understood what it had been. A public shaming. A message to Dave Wiggins and his kin. *You're dead to us now*. And it's a rare soul that makes it back from the dead.

That morning, I must've scored and blanched four hundred tomatoes. I scalded my fingertips numb slipping the skins off while each batch was still hot. Miss Havensleigh was out somewhere and had put Winifred in charge. I let the women's chatter pass in one ear and out the other. I imagined unpacking my belongings into that chest of drawers, laying in a proper bed between proper sheets and sleeping sound, away from the bugs and the damp and the dirt. I was making shy friends with those newlyweds. Perhaps planting a little window box. I had to force myself to stop. I was only torturing myself, like a desert-island castaway dreaming of iced tea.

At the midday service, more folk than ever turned up, but the hall was strangely quiet. The shine of it all had worn off. You only had to see the pinched face of a mother trying to marshal her children, hear her snap. Even some of the young, fit lads were drawing their jackets tight around them as they queued outside. Irene was sent to bring in the eldest and frailest first.

I stood behind the trestles and dished up the soup. It had come out lovely – bright red with the pulp left in, salted and speckled with basil from Winifred's husband's allotment. A fine layer of fat glossed the top. I only worried it might not be terribly filling.

'Anyhow, I chained the dog in the front garden,' a woman said to her friend as I served them. 'Keep her and her little book off my doorstep.'

'You'll have trouble if he bites,' said the other.

'I'll have a bit of peace, is what I'll have.' She gave me a strained grin, a nod of thanks, and they moved on.

I was glad to see the Ridley boys arrive. The eldest, Danny, was carrying the youngest, who was wrapped in a jumper so big it almost slipped off his shoulders. It was rolled into tyres round his wrists. They handed me three washed-out bean tins between the four of them, the edges ragged from the tin-lever – proof, if I needed it, they hadn't been sent by their mother.

'It's Lenny, isn't it?' I asked the next youngest after Danny. He answered me with a scowl. 'Why don't you run downstairs to the kitchen and ask for some dishes? Mrs Hood's there, she'll find you something.' I tried a smile. I think it came off false. They made me nervous, these kids. They were growing into hard souls, no doubt about it. I put the sharp tins aside and sent the others to sit on a form. Danny plonked the little one down and tugged him upright by the armpits.

The room was filling. There was a murmur of talking, the clink of spoons against crockery. Near the young Riddleys, a woman was feeding a man in a wheelchair. She was hatless, still wrapped in her coat, her hair pinned at the neck. He wore a neat brown suit with a paper collar. His white mane was combed back from his temples, his cheeks pink and clean-shaven. Her grandfather perhaps. Each time she brought the spoon, he raised a quivering hand, not touching but following the motion, as if he was helping to guide her in or else hide it from view.

Lenny came back with three large stoneware mugs and a gravy boat threaded over his fingers. I thought he looked a bit more cheerful as I filled them and helped him take them to the table.

'Better watch him with that,' I said, as I set a cup in front of the toddler.

Danny drew a spoon from his pocket. 'We have to feed him. He only makes a mess.'

'How's your brother getting on?'

He shrugged.

'Can he eat? Do you want to take some home for him? I could find you something to carry it.'

Danny said nothing. I looked at Lenny and the other brother whose name I didn't know. They had their noses in their cups. Danny scraped food from the toddler's cheeks, then stopped and glanced up with narrow, guarded eyes.

'Thanks for the soup,' he said, as if it was a magic spell to make me disappear.

Later, I went to see my dad. I found him in a make-shift office, not much bigger than a broom cupboard. The desk was stacked with union ledgers, minute books and so on. There were rolled maps leaning against the walls. His hair was ruffled.

'I brought you some lunch,' I said, edging round the door.

I looked for somewhere to put the bowl. Behind me, I heard a sound from the stairs like a stampede. Children's voices. I moved a newspaper and a mug half-full of

cold tea and sat. Dad glanced at the paper in my lap. It was a copy of Churchill's *British Gazette*.

'There are dozens of them on the news stand down the road,' he said. 'Great big stack, untouched, unread. They're printing that many. I took a bundle for use in the privy. Thought that might amuse the men.'

'What's happening about food, Dad? All this stuff they write – *Organised attempt to starve the nation* – it's rubbish, isn't it?'

He leaned back in his chair, with his fingers laced over his thinning crown. 'Course it is. I told you, the TUC offered to handle distribution and the Government turned us down. They're being obstructive.'

'Only I was wondering about all the warehousing on the docks, and the ships waiting. I heard a rumour there's goods perishing for want of transportation.'

'I don't doubt there is. That's the problem with this strike, Alma. I said from the beginning it ought to be twenty-four hours all-out. Every unionist in the country. No hardship, but a real show of force. Not only force, but feeling. Think of it, five and a half million workers, men and women – a fifth of the nation. Then you go back to the negotiating table, and if you get nowhere you strike again. Another day. Hard and fast. There'd be none of this talk of starving folk.'

'Why didn't they do it that way?'

'Why do the General Council do anything? It's a mystery. So here we are, dragging things out. Problem is if you let *some* fellas go to work, *some* goods to be transported, it's bad for morale. People get confused. And if we let every worker who handled food go back, we'd hardly have a strike at all.'

'Seems a shame, that's all. Shame to let things go to waste.'

'I don't argue with you, but half the skill of a solid strike is knowing when to sit on your hands. It's harder than you might think.' He set to eating his soup.

I browsed the paper. There were headlines aplenty making the strike out to be a lame duck – reports of trains running, food supplies plentiful, public spirits high – and yet you'd only to turn the page to find hysterics about treason, an assault on the constitution. They blew hot and cold with the same breath.

'Have you seen this bit?' I said. '*All ranks of the Armed Forces of the Crown are hereby notified that any action which they may find it necessary to take in an honest endeavour to aid the Civil Power, will receive, both now and afterwards, the full support of his Majesty's Government.*'

He pointed at me with his spoon and swallowed. 'And they accuse us of incitement.'

'It's a joke, anyhow.' I tossed the paper onto a pile in the corner. 'How can he say there's normal bus and train services when people can see with their own eyes it's not true?'

'People will believe what they want to believe. What gets me is his recklessness. What does he think'll happen after the strike? After he's spent all this time painting the working man blacker than black? How will we pretend to be a nation again?' Dad gave a grim shake of his head and went back to eating. I looked at the deep lines under his eyes, the forking veins at his temples. It was strange to see him look so worn and yet so full of spirit. I cleared my throat.

'The Ridley boys came for their dinner. They wouldn't take any for Peter. I fear he's getting worse.'

He rubbed the nape of his neck with a grimace. 'We've talked about this, Alma. Didn't I say there'd be a collection? They're sure to have it by now.'

'Do you know how much was raised?'

'I can't follow every little thing. I want you to listen to me. If I had it my way, everyone would be paid enough to afford the doctor when they need it. It shouldn't be a luxury. And perhaps if we win this strike, we might take another step along the way, eh? But until we stop the wage suppression, there's not much I can do about Peter or anyone. It's industry that needs to change.'

'Doesn't it mean anything that they're our neighbours?'

'I can't show favouritism among my men.' He swept the air with his hand as if levelling it, smoothing the wrinkles. Something about that motion lit a fire in me.

'You support those two fools out of your own pocket... what need have they? They're young and fit.'

'That's different. They're wanted by the police.'

'The Ridley's have it worse. Much worse. Only... it's not an ideological fight, so you're not interested.' I pushed my chair aside and went to the door. 'I sometimes think if Mum had died on hunger strike, or chained herself to factory gates, perhaps then you might have been there to hold her hand.'

I could hardly believe I'd dared to say it. It came out calm and even. Dad's bloodshot eyes searched my face.

'You've no right.' He said, at last, biting his words. 'I was at Wichley. What would you have had me do? Dig a tunnel?'

'I just think if you'd spent more time at home looking after her – pregnant as she was – you might not have been arrested in the first place.' I had a strange pain in my throat, as if my windpipe had fallen in, but I held his gaze. Even as he shook his head in disbelief, I didn't shy away. Seeing he had nothing to add, I stepped into the corridor. I walked past the photographs of men in their best suits, arranged in rows, perched respectably on forms.

'We don't have to be at war, you know.' I heard his voice behind me. There was a gap, a fifty-gallon pause, waiting for my apology, but all I could think of was an empty kitchen with blood on the floor and my baby sister crying on my lap. The white pimples that covered Rose's nose. The shoe-horn shape her tongue made when she screamed. And the sweet smell of apple slices, browning on the chopping board.

I went to the kitchen to collect my bag and coat. I managed a false, cheery goodbye to the others and stepped out to the yard, among the bikes. Sorrow was rising in me like the tide, damping out the anger, threatening to overflow in tears. I bit my cheek. Bit it back. I hardly understood myself. In the shade of the alder tree, my skirt snagged on a rusting bike pedal. It was Mrs Woodward who'd said it. Years after Mum was gone. She'd been talking to a friend in the next door garden while I was pegging out the sheets. My ears pricked when she mentioned the rose bushes. *It's a wonder he didn't bury his wife back there n'all.* I remember pulling the sheet along the hairy length of twine, placing the pegs on tight, knowing I ought to go in. Plug my ears. *Three of them lost in as many years. If you ask me, he ought to have left the poor woman alone.* The cotton was cold and heavy against my cheek. I stepped into it, let it pull across my hair and forehead. It smelled of Sunlight soap and felt like a shroud, like the weight of the damp earth on my skin.

That evening, Emlyn called as he'd said he would. He took me to a squat, respectable terrace where the houses had fresh-painted sills, each with a neat patch of grass out the front bound by a privet hedge. He knocked. I shuffled to fix the distance between us. Not so far from the door as to seem stand-offish, not so close to Emlyn as to frame us as a couple.

The door was opened by a square-faced woman in her fifties. She had a proud stomach and narrow hips, so much so her skirt looked in danger of falling. She

beamed when she saw Emlyn and called over her shoulder, 'Fred! Your mate's here. Come in, won't you? Would you like me to make you a sandwich? Looks as if he could do with one, don't he?'

She led us through the passage, then a dark kitchen with a low ceiling and out to the garden. There were three men perched on the edge of a raised flowerbed. They stood to greet us. Of the older fellows, one had ginger hair shot with white, the other was balding grey with skin tanned as a saddle. These, I guessed, were the crane drivers Emlyn had mentioned. Next to them was a bare-chested lad of sixteen or so. He had *Sarah* tattooed on his arm.

'Put a shirt on, Paul. For shame!' Dot shoed him into the house.

'How're you doing, Emlyn lad? This is your lady butcher, I expect?' The tanned one turned to me and offered a handshake. 'Fred Bason. That's my wife just let you in. This is my neighbour, Evan.'

'How d'you do?' I gave him my firmest, briskest grip. This was something different to what I was used to, working in someone's home, going by Christian names. I was keen to get off on the right foot and show myself a businesswoman. Let things get over-chummy and I feared I'd leave with six pork chops and empty pockets.

'Where's this pig then?' I asked.

He turned and beckoned me to follow. The garden was double width on account of the fence panels being missing between the posts. On this side it was paved over, with a few pots of budding gladioli. The other side was neat-clipped lawn and in the middle stood a table and an empty bathtub. Six kids were sprawled on the grass – five boys and a little girl who was rubbing torn-up daisies in her palms.

'Is it *her*?' one of the boys said, pointing at me.

'Mind your manners, lad,' said Evan. He gave me a quick shy glance. 'We've told them they can watch if they behave. You don't mind?'

'I don't mind,' I said. Lord, let me make a good fist of this.

The pigpen had been built with cut-down fence slats stuck in the earth. A piece of corrugated iron was leaning against the back wall. I crouched. In the shadows, I could just make out a snout and a trotter.

'Barrow, is he?'

'That's right.'

'Weighed him?'

Both the men shook their heads. I noticed then Emlyn had stayed back. He was chatting to the lad Paul, now wearing a soot-stained work shirt.

'We'll need a bowl for the blood,' I said. 'I'll want a hammer, too. Have you anything for the scratch?'

'Only the kitchen table,' he said.

'Is it sturdy?'

'I should hope so. I built it myself.'

It would take a little while for the water to heat enough for the scalding. Fred came out with a few burning coals on a shovel and began building a fire around them. While the kids were roped in to fill the tub, I put on my apron and scabbard, drew out my sticking knife. A six-inch dagger. Though I'd found many a use for it over the years, it had never been put to its proper purpose. I tested its edge on my arm hairs, shaving a small patch bare, then slid it back into place. Evan brought me a rusting tool-case and two bell scrapers.

'We've got these,' he said. 'Not as sharp as they might be.'

'They'll do nicely. They needn't be too keen.' I opened the toolbox. Inside, everything was clean and laid out neat. Some of the tools looked very old. At the bottom was a good-sized sledgehammer. Bill used to have one of those humane killers. The salesman told us it put customers' minds at ease. Perhaps it did, though in truth he didn't use it much – after a couple of mishaps he decided it was no match for a practiced hand. Evan's hammer was a ten-pounder. I was sorry to have to use it in front of the kids, but that was not my lookout.

As I stepped into the pen, I felt all eyes on me. Fred and Evan close by, the kids shuffling on the grass, pushing each other and squabbling for a better view. Rather than mess about coaxing the pig out, I picked up the corrugated iron sheet and moved it. It was heavier than I expected. There was a terrific clatter as I dropped it. I winced. *Now you've done it*, I thought, *spooked the pig and made the job ten times harder*, but the barrow hadn't even raised his snout. He was a white haired, lop-eared breed, not overly big, sitting on a pile of straw that breathed stale piss. Kneeling, I rubbed the bristles of his flank. He gave a single honking grunt, sniffed the air and settled his head between his trotters again.

'Got another neighbour?' I asked. 'Six is best.'

Evan looked about him with a start, then hopped over the fence to knock next door. Fred's worried eyes were fixed on the animal. If I'd happened to wonder why this lot didn't save a few bob by doing the slaughter themselves, here was my answer. They hadn't the heart. Beneath my palm, the pig's warm hide was rising and falling, soft and easy.

'Bring that table close,' I said. 'And keep the bowl near. Soon as I stick him, you're to catch the blood as best you can.'

Fred nodded quick, his jaw set hard. Evan came back with a sturdy-looking bloke. Just as well, I thought, since Emlyn and the lad were so slender. I had them all gather round and then on my word, we seized the pig. One on each limb and two with an arm around the middle to take the weight. A kicking hoof landed right at the top of my thigh. It would bruise. Evan was swearing blind, while the pig squealed for its life.

We got it to the table without too much trouble and the men held it down. With Paul sitting on its back and Evan on its rump, the pig forgot to shriek. It even left off kicking.

I took a deep breath and heard Bill's voice, *if you want to kill the bugger, better make sure he's dead*. I lifted the hammer high and saw Bill's nail-bitten thumb pointing out the perfect spot just below the line of the ears. But then again, this pig was lop-eared. Had I the right place? With one hand on its shoulder, I felt the muscles shift. His trotters kicked, all four at once. I brought the hammer down.

The blow was heavy. I knew in my gut I'd done him right, but even unconscious a pig will sometimes buck. I leaned to hold him still and sliced my knife into the neck, aiming for the thick arteries, seeking the spine with its tip. The blood pumped out in jets.

'That's you now,' I said to Fred, moving to give him some room. He fumbled, then held his bowl tight below the wound. It didn't help the foreleg was kicking. Fred said something I didn't catch. I kept leaning on the pig's flank as his legs slowed to a twitch then stopped.

When his heart finished pumping, I remembered to breathe. It was a peculiar feeling – I didn't know if I wanted to sleep or run a steeplechase. I heard a sound of crying and turned to see the little ginger-haired girl, hiding behind her grass-stained fingers. I touched my cheek and realised it was sprayed. My hand came away with fine red streaks.

'Don't be a baby,' one of the youngsters said. 'It's only a pig.'

I tied the hind legs together with a bit of rope, then we rigged it to hang from the sturdiest fencepost. It wasn't quite high enough to keep the front trotters from brushing the ground. The blood began to stream again, a steady cord from the snout into the filling bowl.

Evan rubbed an old rag then picked up the girl, still sniffing. 'There now, there now. You said you wanted to watch, didn't you?' He took her inside. Soon after, Dot called the boys in for their supper.

While I waited for the pig to bleed out, Emlyn offered me a cigarette, then a lighted match. His tobacco had a strange, spicy flavour.

'What now?'

'Now we scald and scrape it. That's the tricky bit. Then I'll gut it. They'll want somewhere cool to hang it for a day.'

'Bit more to it than wringing a chicken's neck, isn't there?'

I glanced and caught the end of his smile, bright and handsome. The longer I knew him, the less I noticed the scruffy hair, the dirt beneath his nails, the clothes that sat so badly on him. I turned my gaze to the pig.

'What's the biggest thing you've caught wild?'

'Let's see now... I trapped a warthog once. Honestly, not worth the effort. Two hour, I spent, skinning and so on. Tasted like old boots. Absolutely disgusting. Now game is another matter. A nice fat pheasant, that's something worth plucking. Get her roasting over a fire, a clear night, field of stars overhead—'

'You're a romantic,' I said. It wasn't a compliment.

'And why not? We Welsh have nature in our veins. They say a man who's slept a night on the Brecon moss finds fault with his bed ever after.'

'If you ask me, you paint it rosier than it is. You must get cold and hungry. What do you do when it rains?'

'I get wet. Wet through sometimes. Anyhow, I'm not so daft as to stay out all winter. I work the frozen months and lodge somewhere. Get going when the daffs are out.'

'How about this time. Where will you go after the strike?'

'I'm thinking of the Lake District. Now that is God's own land, I'm sure of it. Have you ever been?'

My laugh came out like a snort.

'What's funny about it? You were wealthy before, were you not?' He spoke low, with a quick glance at Fred and his son, who were tending the fire.

'Not wealthy. You might say comfortable.'

'Well then. I'm not so mad to think you might have travelled, am I?'

'You don't know what it's like running a business,' I said, walking away to test the steaming water. I didn't want to hear about the Lake District or Brecon or any of these places he wandered so free and easy. It was a bachelor's life. There were small bubbles rising in the tub.

'That will do,' I said to Fred. 'Let's get him in.'

We'd been scraping twenty minutes when I noticed the fire was looking bright and long shadows had joined to swallow the garden. Fred and I each had a bell scraper scuffing off the bristles. Evan was inside, seeing his kids to bed. I'd gathered by now he was lacking a wife.

The patches of colour came away with the scurf, turning the beast completely white. As I worked, I listened to Paul chatting to Emlyn.

'I signed on for Sheffield. Grain boat. That were a week ago now.'

'She hasn't sailed?'

'She's yet to come in.'

Dot appeared with a teapot and cups. She nudged Paul off the step so she might sit. I gestured to Fred we should turn the pig.

'Don't you put your back out, Fred Bason,' Dot called. 'Let your son pull his weight, why don't you?'

'I'm going down the pub in a minute.'

Fred rubbed his shoulder, wincing. 'I'll bet you are. Idle sod.'

'Shall I take a turn?' Emlyn asked. 'I'm only sitting here, after all.'

I showed him how to use the scraper and we worked in silence another quarter hour. I heard Fred sigh. When I looked up he was sitting in a kitchen chair, staring into the fire. After a while Evan appeared with his own seat and pipe. He gave Emlyn and me a glass of ale each. It was sour with yeast, but I soon got the flavour. It was a while since I'd last had a drink.

They talked among themselves as we worked. Allotments. Football scores. Rumours about a workmate who'd been caught scabbing. I wondered how much this lot knew about Emlyn.

'Blow me, if it's not muggy work.' He stopped to roll his sleeves another turn and dab his forehead. He gave me an awkward grin, as if he was ashamed to be seen sweating. Looking to check the others weren't listening, he said, 'May I say something?'

I shrugged. *Why not.* I moved the pig's head, better to scrape the neck. Tried to pretend I wasn't hanging on his words.

'I've never met a woman like you. Who can do something like this.'

'Don't do me much good anymore. I barely get by. I've told you that.'

'You're having a sour run of luck, is all. I only have to look at you to know you'll come good in the end. Come to the abattoir, why don't you? He's desperate for butchers.'

'They won't take a woman.'

'Any port in a storm. Can't afford to be picky at a time like this, can they?'

I thought he was teasing, but he held my eye. As he knocked his scraper against the ground to shed the scurf, I noticed the curls at his temples were darker, damp.

'I couldn't,' I whispered, looking at the men smoking. It felt queasy to even talk about it. I changed the subject. 'I saw a lovely room yesterday, up Kingswood way.'

'There, you see. That's more like it.'

'It's not certain, of course, but I hope to have it.'

'Alma, nothing's certain.' He let his scraper rest by his side. 'That's the joy of life, is it not?'

What joy? I thought, then caught myself. Yesterday, I might have said it aloud. *What bleeding joy?* But now, it didn't quite ring true. After all, I'd done some good today. The kill had gone well. Clean and quick. There was pleasure in a job well done. I felt that keenly, always did. Then, there was the evening – the clouds turning pink, the smell of the fire and the shag burning in the men's pipes. Perhaps it was the ale, but I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt so contented.

As we worked on, I only glanced at him when I was sure he wasn't looking. He had a crushed cigarette sticking from his shirt pocket. His elbow was going at the double and still he seemed relaxed, whistling a low tune with long notes like a hymn. I wondered what it would be like to possess a man like him. So different to Bill it hardly seemed right they could both be called men. Bill was solid. The sort you

could rely on – till I couldn't, of course. I was always so sure I knew what he was thinking, which was *nothing much* most of the time. Perhaps I'd been wrong about that too. With Emlyn, I could never make that mistake. I didn't have the slightest clue what was passing behind those grey eyes. I was suspicious of his kindness and his interest, even though I had nothing to give and he nothing to gain. The only certain thing about him was his drifting. There would be no possessing him. While he had legs he would keep moving on.

The click of the back door drew my attention. Paul had returned. He came out and leaned against the wall behind the others. Fred craned his neck to look at him.

'Pub closed tonight or did you get kicked out?'

'I heard some news,' he said. 'Thought you might want to know.'

'What news?'

'Reah's dead.'

Fred struggled from his chair. 'How?'

'They're saying he was hit by a loaded sling, guiding it out the hold.'

'Today?'

Paul nodded. He scratched inside his collar in a casual sort of way.

'Why in Christ's name was he in the hold? Quartermaster doing a ganger's job now? I said those volunteers would be bleeding lethal. Didn't I say? Who was driving?'

'Pelly.'

'Pelly, he says!' Fred looked at Evan as if begging him to explain it. Evan shook his head.

'Sit behind a desk all day, think they can drive a crane.' His voice was slow, sorrowful. 'There'll be fellas saying it serves them right, the pair. I won't say it. Even though I never liked the chap, I won't say that.' He left a long pause. 'It's a shame, that's what it is. It's a blow.'

There was silence a while and Paul scraped a clod of mud from the side of his polished boots. 'Anyhow, I thought you'd want to hear,' he said stepping back into the doorway, drawing it half closed.

'That's right, son.' Fred gave Paul the nod to go, then slumped into his seat again and tapped out his pipe against the chair-leg. Emlyn, by my side, had not stopped scraping, cigarette hanging from his lips. A few quiet moments passed, only the crackling of the bark as it burned and our scrapers rushing.

'It's not our fault if they want to behave like bleeding fools.'

Fred rubbed his face, massaging his eyes with his fingertips. Eventually, he let his hands fall away and nodded at Evan.

'Not our fault,' he said.

I gutted the pig in the last of the light. There was no outhouse for hanging so we hoisted the carcass above the chimneypiece in Dot's kitchen and put out the fire so it might cool. Fred gave me the trotters and three shillings. He said he was sorry he couldn't spare more. I didn't argue. I'd sooner have it than nothing.

As we stepped out onto the street, I realised I was light-headed from the ale. Perhaps Emlyn noticed, because he offered me his arm. It was narrow, almost bones, through the cloth of his jacket. There was no one about as we walked the row of terraces. The streetlamps were few and far between in this part of town. You couldn't see where you were treading, and all the corners, alleys and doorways were black as caves.

I took a shilling from my purse. 'This is for you,' I said. 'It's only fair.'

'You keep it. It's been no bother to me.'

'No, I should like you to have it. You went out of your way. Spent a lot of elbow wax on that scraping.' I pushed the coin into his palm. He would not grasp it, but took my hand instead. We were a dozen yards from the nearest light. I couldn't make out his expression. There was just his voice and his tough-skinned fingers gently holding mine.

'Don't be daft. What kind of man would I be to take it from you?' He spoke so low I found myself leaning closer. He touched my shoulder and bowed his head. I thought for a minute he would whisper in my ear, but then I felt his lips on my cheek. It wasn't so quick you'd call it stolen, but nor did he linger. I looked up at the windows of the houses – some reflecting bright as monocles, others thick with dust, patterned into streaks and spots by the rain. Lights off, curtains drawn. I took hold of Emlyn's arm again. Under the lamp, he drew me to a stop.

'I've something for you.' He reached into his pocket and brought out a slim book. It was printed with only the name John Dyer. I'd never heard of him. I looked inside. There were perhaps eight pages, the poetry printed no cleaner than a political pamphlet.

*See on the mountain's southern side,
Where the prospect opens wide,*

Where the evening gilds the tide...

I looked up at Emlyn, wondering what he meant by giving it to me.

'You asked me once, what my home is like. Well, if you're still interested to know, I don't think I could put it better than he does. Old, this poem is, but it's the Carmarthenshire I know. Not so many castles now, of course. I used to carry this in my pocket always.'

'You don't any more?'

'I've no need. I know it by heart.'

'Thank you.' I held the book closed. 'It's a long time since I read a poem. I don't like to admit how long.'

It was chilly in the wind on the promenade. He left me at my front door with a touch of the hat. His usual cheerful self. It was as if nothing out of the ordinary had passed between us. I watched him turn up his collar and stride away. As I touched the handle, there was something rough between my fingers. I looked down to see a slim black rag, just a scrap, like the off-cut of a trouser turn-up. So the boy was dead. I let the rough fabric slip between my fingers. As I tried to put my key in the lock, I dropped it and sat for a moment on the step, dusting bits of grit off the stone.

Fifteen

I stood in the hallway clutching a posy of white carnations, waiting for the courage to knock. There were murmuring voices in the Ridleys' rooms. After a while, the door opened and a woman came out. It was the neighbour who'd been beating her rug. She was squeezed like a badly piped sausage into a man's dark coat. She passed by, glancing at me from under the brim of her battered hat.

Mrs Ridley was holding her youngest child. She waved me in and the careless way she did it made me unsure of myself. Had I imagined seeing that black rag? She sat on a crate and shifted the toddler into her lap. He was sucking two of his fingers, dribbling.

'The boys have gone with their father to speak to the rector.'

Peter was laid out. His shirt washed and mended. His eyes were closed and his jaw was tied with a ribbon. The swelling looked less, but his heavy, babyish cheeks pressed against the ribbon making me think of tied pork belly. I winced, trying to put the thought from my head. What was the matter with me? His hair had

been brushed away from his face and tucked behind his ears. A few strays clung to the pillow. It was hard to see death in someone so young – to see it and really believe it. With Bill, it was clear. He'd looked hollowed out. Sucked empty. This child could have been wearing stage make-up, the bows of his lashes dark against his pale skin. I almost expected those small, greyish lips to move. Glancing at Mrs Ridley, to be sure I was doing the right thing by her, I laid my flowers at his feet.

'Is there anything I can do?'

She shook her head.

'Have they gone to find out about the funeral?'

'I've told him they won't let us in the church without a proper coffin. He's doing it cart before horse. Where does he think the money will come from?' She didn't seem to be asking so much as worrying aloud, her stare fixed on the floorboards. The youngster in her lap was trying to wriggle free but she held him by the leg.

'Will they come with another collection perhaps?'

She gave me a dull look, put the little lad on his feet, and followed me to the door. 'That's what my husband said when Peter was first ill. He promised me they'd come.'

'You've had nothing?'

She held on to the handle and pushed the latch with her thumb. I could see the hurt in the set of her jaw. A vein swelled in her forehead as she closed her eyes. 'It's the strike, I'm sure.'

I stood in the hallway, not knowing what to say. I could think of nothing but my father lying on his bed saying in that tetchy voice, *It's all in hand, Alma. What's got into you?*

'I'd have liked him to have a stone. Something to mark his place.' Her thin neck looked bare, in the collar of her too-big blouse.

'What would you have it say?' I asked.

She seemed to think on this a long time. 'I don't know... his name, I suppose. He was a good boy.'

I climbed the stairs slowly and stood in the middle of our room. Dad's bed was still bundled. Untouched for days. His tea things, which I'd washed for him, were stacked neat on the hearth. I toed a pile of books, gently toppled it, then another. It wasn't enough. I kicked his mattresses, once, twice. The roll came loose.

It unfurled and his papers spilled out. I sat among them, felt them crumpling under my backside, took up a thin page, torn from a small notebook, black with scrawlings and deletions. I screwed it into a ball and stuffed it in my mouth. The ink tasted sour. I crumpled another for the other cheek. And another. And another. When my mouth was so full I began to gag and the paper scratched at the back of my throat, I slapped my hand over my lips and screamed.

I'd five and eight. I made a stack, largest coins to the smallest and left it by the jamb of the Ridley's door. I put my scabbard on under my skirt, bundled my apron and set out. There were pale clouds in the sky and the wind was up. I walked at a march, clutching my hat and clutching my hip to steady the knives.

The picket was stronger than ever, maybe twenty-five or more. There looked to be a bit of a commotion at the gate. Four big motorcars were waiting in line. Shiny black tourers with open tops and six young men in each. I didn't have to look twice to know they were OMS volunteers. Upright chaps in fine sports jackets, mucking in *for king and country*. I could hear the pickets chaffing, calling out. *Chapel's up the road, old sport, think you must've gone a wrong turn. Hi! Your mother's sent word. You forgot your copybook at home.* Put aside the clothes and cars and they all looked alike – men cut from the same flesh. The home team and the away.

I decided I would walk at my own pace. They would not bother themselves about a woman. By the bonnet of the first car, a pair of policemen were arguing with a group of pickets. One harum-scarum lad, gold loop in his ear, was swearing like a tinker. An older fellow pushed him aside and stepped towards the constables. My blood halted when I saw it was Mark Shank, the General Secretary. I hid my face behind my jacket collar.

'Under whose authority?' I heard him say.

'You want your ears cleaning. I just read you the order.'

The driver swung one leg over the door. He was wearing a floppy golfing cap in tartan. 'I say, you might tell these *ruffians* –' And then his words were lost as policemen and pickets ordered him to keep out of it.

'Look fella, you've your orders and we've ours,' said the lad with the earring. 'We're telling you they ain't coming in. Now why don't you all go up the mound and have a nice picnic. Lovely day for it.' He folded his arms and grinned. One of the others slapped him on the back. The policeman gave his mate a nod.

'Start booking them, Tony. This one first.'

The way they all set to hollering, you'd have thought he'd burst a hornets' nest. More pickets drifted over to see what the carry-on was all about.

'You can't do that! He ain't broken no laws!'

'Hang about, this is a bleeding fix.'

I kept an eye on the scuffle as I slipped round the edge. Between the jostling figures, I caught a glimpse of the young chap having handcuffs fixed to his wrists. Under the shadow of the arch, I paused. I knew exactly what Dad would say if he was here: *These gentlemen are engaged in legitimate union activity. I refer you to the Conspiracy and Protection of Property Act 1875 which states that labour disputes are civil matters and not for the criminal courts.* I murmured the words for no one but myself to hear, then turned my back and walked on.

I didn't stop. I couldn't stop for fear I'd change my mind. I walked down the main access road, then along the quayside to the abattoir. Ahead of me the double doors were open and I strode full tilt until I was over the threshold. I made a bee-line for the overseer in his sheepskin jacket. He had fine, frizzy hair that was lifted and swayed by the fans. He saw me approaching and yelled to his men, 'Which one of you lads has forgotten his lunch?'

A few glanced my way. Emlyn and Solomon were further up the row, side-by-side and hard at it. I tried to speak, but found I had no voice. I coughed and began again.

'I'm here about the work,' I said. 'I'm a butcher.' It was then I realised my scabbard was still underneath my skirt. I reached into my waistband to undo the buckle.

'Hang about. What sort of a place do you think this is?'

I pulled the knives free as they slipped down to my hem. 'I'm a butcher.' I buckled it round my waist and drew out my twelve inch, holding it on the flat of my trembling hand so he could see the quality, see I meant business. A queasy feeling rose in my throat. I swallowed. 'I want to work.'

'I suppose you know how to use them, do you?' He raised one eyebrow. 'You ain't telling me you've worked an abattoir before.'

'Butcher's shop. Six years.'

'Cutting or selling?'

'Both.' Then, worrying he might think me a shop girl, I added, 'More cutting than selling.'

His face bloomed into a grin. 'Here, Solomon,' he yelled. 'Didn't I tell you I'd replace you easy enough? This girly reckons she's here to take your job. What do you make of that, eh? Shall we give her a try out?' He gave a big belly laugh and as he did, the men stopped and stared. I caught Emlyn's eye, then looked away.

The overseer shook his head, still smiling. 'I'm pulling your leg, love. This is hard work. Men's work. Go on now, sling your hook.'

'I can do it,' I said. 'I want to do it.'

I didn't mean to raise my voice, but how was I to get through to this fellow, looking on me like a teasing uncle? I took off my hat and jacket and hung them on an empty hook beside the tattooed bloke. He blocked my way with a forearm decorated with a naked woman. She was lying with splayed legs like a fallen calf. As I walked around him, he showed me his tongue.

'I can't have you touching the stock,' the overseer said as I approached a carcass, but he didn't try to stop me. I cut the flank, making a point of carving fast and neat – one smooth draw of the knife – and threw it in the crate. Still, nobody stepped forward to stop me. They were all watching now. A dozen tickets to see the bearded lady. I could feel my heartbeat in my fingertips. Hear it thumping in my ears, louder, even, than the fans. The meat was clammy and forgiving. The knife cut clean as a scalpel. *She might do it once, she won't last an hour. I've a job you can do after that, pet.* I shut out their voices, twisted the narrow tip in the joint and heard the crack like two distant hand claps. Then I was through – then came the weight of it, bearing down on my shoulder, my knees bending to take the strain. As I turned, I saw Emlyn's anxious face, his mouth ever so slightly open. It took all my strength to hold the loin steady between my right arm and my head. I reached for the hook and just brushed the metal. I rose onto the balls of my feet, grabbed the hook and lunged to drive it home. Somehow, I fumbled. I wasn't fast enough in moving my left hand away. The soft part between thumb and finger caught on the hook's sharp point, rammed through by four stone of cow. As I fell, the skin tore through.

They were laughing. I was on my knees, one hand clutched in the other. The pain had knocked the air from my lungs. I felt someone touch me and scrambled away, across the floor like an animal.

Emlyn showed me his palms.

I got to my feet. I saw the tattooed bloke's sneer, two young lads braying like donkeys, the overseer trying and failing to swallow his mirth. I didn't need to see any

more. I turned and walked away, unsteady, not daring to look back. The sound of their laughter merged with the roar of the fans, seeming to get louder, to fill the hall.

I went as far as my pride could carry me, then slumped into a doorway, struggling with my shuddering breath. I took my fist from my armpit. The pain was both shrill and deep. My blouse was stained as if I'd been sweating blood. I opened thumb and finger, slow and stiff. It took a moment for the torn skin to well up, but once it did it poured. I held it closed and bit my lip. Felt the warm trickle down my wrist, the drip from my elbow. I bit my lip and sobbed, not for my hand but for my pride.

When I arrived at the house on the promenade, I couldn't go in. I could no more step inside than I could turn about and swim to France. I kept wandering along the water's edge another half mile, coat-less, my hair blown about by the wind, and stopped by a dirty little beach. There were boulders on the flats. I was drawn to them. I sat in their lieu, sheltered from the wind. The sandy mud had a dry crust, damp underneath. It stretched, grey-brown and creased, towards the water. I sat and stared ahead. It was bleak and wide and silent, the only sign of life a pair of dunlin who strutted and pecked at their own reflections and, in the end, flew off. The longer I stared at the cloud-white light bouncing from the river and wet flats, the harder it was to tell where one ended and the other began. Perhaps the tide was coming in. I touched the grainy patch of red beneath my fingers and thought of the Isle of Wight. The coloured sands at Alum Bay. Bill had taken her there. The other me.

The horizon dissolved and the clouds passed into the water. Birds shot like darts through silt and sand. I was sinking myself, becoming part of the flats, when I heard Emlyn talking.

'Are you well? Alma?'

He was standing over me. He had my hat and jacket in his hands. I felt a slow, dumb, creeping shame.

'Come on now, speak to me.' He pushed the hair from my face and touched my forehead and neck the way my mother used to take my temperature.

'I'm fine,' I tried to stand but found my legs wobbling, my fingers numb. I settled for a crouch, leaning on the boulder. 'I'm fine.'

'Been looking for you for hours, I have. I went to your home, to the club...'
He held my wrist to look at the wound. The clotted blood was full of dirt. I tried to

understand what he was saying – what he meant by *hours*. The shadows of the boulders were long. I was shivering.

'Let's get you home. This wants washing out.'

He put his arm under mine and helped me to my feet.

'I'm not going back there. I can't.'

'You're not staying here.'

I wouldn't let him put my coat on but fumbled with it myself, trying to fit my clenched fist through the sleeve. Twice I dropped it. Everything was shaking.

'We need to get you walking.'

We went away from town, along the London road. He kept hold of me and would only let go when my legs grew steadier. Soon we were passing fields and copses, the odd hay barn and cottage. As my blood got moving, the fog on my brain began to lift. I noticed my hand was bleeding again, throbbing, and held it high to my chest. We turned onto a dirt track that ran alongside a hedgerow.

'Are we going somewhere particular?'

'Of course.'

Fifty yards later, we stopped beside a gate into a field. I lifted my skirt to keep it from snagging in the long grass and thistles. I was wading. Watching my step. When I glanced up, I saw in the far corner of the field a blue gypsy caravan beside a maple tree. There was a circle of grass trampled flat. A black patch of charred earth. The caravan sat high on its wheels as a railway carriage, not much bigger than a horsebox. It was not only blue, but painted with sprays of red and pink roses trailing yellow ribbons. Here and there, the paint was peeling, showing weathered boards.

'This is yours?' I asked.

'Since last week, yes.' He let down the steps and climbed them. 'Won it in a card game, I did.'

He opened the door for me. Inside, it was like a ship's cabin, polished wood and cupboards with brass handles. The cast-iron stove had a tall pipe that went out the roof. The window at the far end had no curtains and, below it, a raised bed took the width of the van. Emlyn set about lighting the lamp and the stove, saying he'd make a cup of tea. I perched on the edge of the bare mattress. After tinkering a while, Emlyn blew long and steady. The light changed as the fire took.

'It'll want a minute to hot up. I'll just fetch some water.' He took a pail from a cupboard and was gone. He passed the window then disappeared into the trees. My

breath fogged the glass and I wiped it clear with my filthy sleeve. The trees swayed in the wind with a sound like breaking waves. I let myself lie for just a moment, then sat up. Worn out and miserable as I was, I felt the strangeness of being in this private place.

I found a pan in one of the cupboards. I wondered who'd lived here before, whose cups had hung from the row of hooks. You always thought of tinkers and horse traders, but it might have been anyone. Really it had everything you needed bar a privy. No bugs. No neighbours but the trees. I opened another cupboard with some bits of food – tins of sardines, two onions, a large red potato. It closed with a firm click. The handle bore the coachmaker's mark, a rearing horse, its mane like flames. Inside a stiff drawer, I found a bar of soap, flannel, toothbrush, cut-throat razor and a small, cracked mirror. I turned towards the window to catch the light and picked the crust from the pips of my eyes. I was rubbing a smear of blood from my chin when Emlyn returned.

'I was looking for cups.'

'In the other one,' he said.

I put the mirror away and watched him pour a little water into a bowl.

'Is there a stream?' I asked.

'There's a river. Only a hundred yards. Beauty spot, it is. I've been swimming there every morning now.'

'Isn't it freezing?'

'Sharp as knives. Wakes me up.' He bid me sit down. 'Let's have a look at that hand then.'

'I can clean it myself.' I took out my hanky and dipped it in the water. As I wiped away the sand and gore, fresh blood sprung and dripped into the bowl. When it was clean, I could see the blue-purple bruising of the skin, the tear like an open mouth.

'Have you anything for a bandage?' he asked.

I said I hadn't and before I knew what he was doing, he'd taken off his shirt. He wore a grey cotton undershirt, worn by the washboard. Brown hairs curled over the neck. His arms were narrow as the rest of him. He made a nick in the stitching and tore off his shirttail. When he put it back on it barely tucked in.

'You've ruined it.'

He frowned and looked at the broken skin this way and that. 'You need a stitch, I think,' he said, looking about him. 'I'm sure I've a needle.'

'Don't bother. It'll heal.'

'Not well.'

'I don't mind.'

He sighed. 'Stubborn, you are.'

'It's my hand.'

As he concentrated on wrapping my bandage, I felt free to look at him – his jaw and cheeks flecked grey, his fine eyes, the slimness of his neck where it met his buttoned collar. He had a smut from the stove on his forehead. Twice as he tried to tie the knot, he dropped the ends. I wondered was he hungry, or tired, or bashful, perhaps. Was he feeling the strangeness of it all, as I was?

We sat and drank our tea, saying very little. The cabin was warm. As it turned dark outside the lantern's orange glow shone from every panel and bevel of varnished wood. Emlyn told me about a time he'd been to Canada. How the money was made of paper and there was nothing but mountains and evergreens as far as the eye could see. He talked about a season he'd spent felling trees, the character of the woodsmen, the feuds between them and the farmers. His voice was like low music. I slouched onto the mattress, which seemed to smell of hay and horses, and nodded off.

I woke to find myself tucked under the blanket, my dirty boots up on the mattress. The only light in the vardo was a glowing crack in the stove. I sensed Emlyn wasn't there. I couldn't hear the whisper of a breath. I got up and walked towards the door, half-blind, feeling for the handle. Outside, the stars were thick as falling rain. Their greyish light washed the long grass and the tops of the trees. Emlyn lay beside the smouldering end of a fire with something bundled under his head for a pillow. The steps creaked – each one a different note – and the earth felt cold and firm through my worn soles. I piled more sticks on the embers and coaxed them into flames, then kneeled beside him and touched his arm.

'Emlyn,' I said.

He spoke without opening his eyes. 'Is something the matter?'

'Aren't you cold?'

'Not much.' He turned onto his side.

I lay on my stomach beside him, feeling a faint dampness from the earth seep into my clothes. After a moment, I tried again.

'Emlyn.'

His eyes flickered open, looking first at nothing then at me.

'Have you a wife, Emlyn? In Wales perhaps?'

He drew me closer. I put my face beside his and waited, felt his breath on my cheek and then his lips on mine. He tasted of tobacco smoke and a faint trace of stale tea. His smell was a queer mixture of sweat and soap and the abattoir. We parted and he lay for a long while looking at me. I wished I could know what he was thinking. His face was strange in the firelight. He teased one pin from my hair, then held it out to me.

'I don't have a wife,' he said, quietly. 'And nor will I take one.'

I took the pin from his hand. He drew another and I took that too. He was careful – not so much like a lover as a man tinkering with the workings of a clock. I had plenty of time to think on what I was doing. I unlaced my own boots. Helped him pull my blouse over my head. It didn't feel like letting him have me so much as having him for myself. I took fright, a little, when he stroked his half-open mouth along my bare arm. He was not Bill. He was nothing like Bill. To smooth my nerves, I unpicked his shirt buttons as best I could one-handed. I felt daring. He was patient. As he pulled his undershirt free from his lean back, my breath caught. His wound was like the swipe of a bear's claws, stretched across his narrow ribs. Three deep, puckered scars, two long one short. In the firelight, the joined skin shone like scales.

'Does it hurt?'

'Sometimes,' he said, stretching as he lay back. 'It can itch. I don't know why.'

The scars felt like hard seams beneath my fingertips. Claret crests with mottled, valleyed skin all around. My courage was draining. A moment ago, he'd been an adventure. Now he was a man again – a man whose life I didn't know. He'd been places I'd never see and what had he suffered? I picked at a tuft of grass. 'You might have died.'

'Not me. Nine lives, I have.' He tipped my chin so I would look him in the eye. 'You don't mind it, do you?'

'No. How could I?'

'Hardly a picnic, am I?' He held my hand to his chest. I felt the shape of the breastbone beneath.

'They asked too much of you,' I said.

Sixteen

Mum's hands reminded me of pigeon's legs, a sore, scaly pink and rough to the touch. They had certain ways of moving. I remember how she would press her fingertips on the tabletop to pick up stray crumbs, then rub thumb and fingers together to sprinkle them into her cupped palm. To smooth a pulled thread back into linen, she had a way of strumming the weave from both sides like a harpist. And then there was her fidget – a half-twist of her wedding ring, a quick dip of the chin as she looked to line it up with the green-stained skin beneath. On those rare occasions we had company, she did this once a minute.

The only time she took the ring off was to do the dishes. Then, the green band seemed to hold its place. I thought the colour like a half-healed bruise or shallow vein. Murky and blurred like the faded tattoos of old sailors. At that young age, I'd no idea of tact and once, when she was washing and I was drying, I tried to touch the mark to see if it felt any different. She snatched her hand away and raised it as if to slap me. Only she didn't. She pointed one finger, rod-straight, the tip a millimetre from my nose, and held it there, furious, quivering, then left the room without a word.

On the draining board, her wedding ring was full of water. A pool, with the light curved on its skin. Inside, I saw my wide mouth and crooked front tooth. The dark shapes of my nostrils – one narrow, one fat.

I remember perfectly the ridges Mum's clenched fists would leave in a lump of dough, the narrowness of the wrist that bore her watch, the ovals of her fingernails, so much more elegant than mine. All that, but I can't recall her voice.

Appendix 1: Nine Days in May (chapters 17 to 20)

Seventeen

We slept in the vardo and woke before dawn. While Emlyn was outdoors making breakfast, I unwrapped my bandage and looked at the mess – deep bruising, black clots. It would take a time to heal. I washed it and, since the shirttail was stiff with blood, tore my slip to bind it afresh. As I went out to join him, I stepped over his boots and noticed that they were new. Sturdy, thick laces. I lifted one and rubbed its polished leather with my thumb. Outside, the air was cool, the sky greyish with a rising blue tinge in the east.

'Will you be off now, then?' I asked, sitting on the step and placing the boot beside me.

'Tomorrow, I think. Or the day after. Won't be long before the cavalry comes.'

Beyond Emlyn the grass was pale with dew. Above him the dark boughs of the chestnut tree seemed to hold on to the night. I stared at my hand, freshly sore from washing. I paid attention to the pain, opening and closing my fingers to feel it, like the narrow blade of a filleting knife, slicing up my arm to my elbow. At rest it throbbed and hummed.

'What do you mean about the cavalry?'

'Seems the Navy's on its way. Be here Wednesday, so says the overseer. We're to have the carcasses finished quick for loading and sailing.' He used a fork to turn the browning potatoes, then settled the pan on the hot part of the fire. 'Can't say I'll be sorry to see the back of that place.'

'That's why Solomon wants replacing, is it?'

'He's hoping for a spot aboard one of the liners. What's to stop them sailing when the Navy's there to load the goods and crew the pilot boats and such?'

There was a rushing sound below the birdsong and the popping fat. The river must have been only the other side of the copse. Emlyn came to sit beside me. A rip in his trousers showed a pale, hairy knee.

'There's quiet you are.'

'I ought to tell my dad. He'd want to know.'

'Will it really make a difference? What can he do?'

'Give him some warning. Help him make sure his picket stays safe, if nothing else.' I sighed. 'They'll lose now, you realise. He ought to know what's coming.'

'How will you say you found out?'

'I could tell the truth. Tell him you told me.'

'Heard it from a blackleg.'

I picked at the flaking paint on the stair. I knew he was right. Dad would never credit the word of a blackleg. I would have to tell him the worst of it, come clean about what I'd done. He'd believe me then. He'd have to. I teased a long shard of blue clean from the wood and dropped it on the grass. After a while, Emlyn broke the silence.

'It's not easy,' he said. 'A father's love is not an easy thing to lose.' He put his arm round me. Part of me wanted to throw it off, but a weaker part liked the warmth and comfort. I turned to him. For a moment, I put my face against the soft skin of his neck.

'You had me worried yesterday, you know. I thought perhaps you lost a lot of blood.'

'I lost *something*.' I tried to laugh and it hurt my throat. 'Who am I, after all, if I can do a thing like that? That picket line ought to mean something to me. I suppose you wouldn't understand.'

He toyed with a lock of my hair and spoke softly. 'Are you sorry that you tried, or sorry that it didn't go well?'

I closed my eyes. The shame rushed through me like water from a bursting dam. I took a sip of the cold, gritty tea dregs, forgetting the cup was finished. I wished I had something stronger. I'd have slugged a gill of gin, if only to escape myself.

Emlyn prised the cup from my fingers and went to rinse it out. He brought it back half-full of fried potato. The smell woke my stomach. I'd eaten nothing all of yesterday. From his shirt pocket, he drew a twist of salt. I pinched a little and sprinkled. When I'd enough, he sat on the grass, cross-legged, letting his food rest, watching me blow over mine to cool it.

'May I tell you what I think?'

I stopped blowing and lifted my gaze.

'I don't believe in being lost. When is a man ever more free than standing at a crossroads, not knowing what lies this way or that?'

'And what if the way he chooses leads to his ruin?'

'Then, at least it wasn't chosen for him. People live in all sorts of ways. Some are like this grass, blown about, profiting by a sort of meekness. Others are like those oaks. Your father, for instance, putting down deep roots to hold the earth together and tie himself to the earth. Thick bark. Stiff before the wind. Perhaps you have some of that in you...'

'Only perhaps?'

'I believe you're more like me than you care to admit. You think me irresponsible, I know it. But then I hear you talk about how you hate to be stuck in that room. How you dislike the way those women gossip and pick over each other's lives. Living one on top of the other. You and I, we're not meant to live that way.' He got to his knees and drew closer. When he spoke with feeling his eyes grew keen and I felt him drawing me, teetering, to a brink. My instincts held me back.

'We're swallows, Alma,' he said. 'We needn't fret over a change in the weather. We can follow fair winds and our free will... But there, now you're laughing at me. Shall I save my shilling sermon?'

I bit my lip to hide my smile, then put a piece of warm potato in my mouth. Just the taste of the salt and the fat made me stronger. 'Go on. I'm listening.'

'How about we take the vardo? I know where I could get a nice bay to draw her. Leave all this trouble behind and come with me. I'll show you the Lake District. Or why not let's take the boat to Ireland?'

I searched his expression for a sign he was having me on. 'You don't mean it.'

'I do. What could be better?'

'And what will I do when you tire of me and leave me by the roadside?'

His smile faded. 'Never would I do that, Alma fach. Don't tell me you believe it.'

He was looking to me for an answer. I felt my mind stall and stutter. Avoiding his gaze, I gathered the cups and went to wash them out. I knelt by the river catching an overhanging branch in the crook of my elbow. With my good hand, I held the cups under the water, watched the surface swirl, felt the cold seep through to the bones of my wrist. Could I go with him? Wouldn't it be sweet and fine to escape that way - to turn my back on the scrape and the squabble. Let go the rope. I pulled my pale hand from the water and rubbed the cups on my petticoat, leaving a greasy mark. The bank was marshy and I took my time so as not to slip. I saw him

through the trees, stamping out the fire. He took his shirt from a hook and pulled it on over his vest, the cotton turned yellow in the early light. I waited for him to button, to tuck, to run a little water through his hair, then I went back.

'That's about as clean as they'll come.' I handed him the cups. He took them but didn't move. 'You'll be wanted at the abattoir soon, won't you?'

'Less than an hour,' he said.

Crossing the field, my skirt clung to my calves, soaked with dew. Emlyn fought with the rusted gate latch, and it swung open with a wail. We walked towards the town on the horizon. As we passed into the forest, it was hard to see beyond the first rows of trees, but I heard a city of birds calling, some close and harsh like a telephone ring, others further, sounding in tweets and whistles and cut-glass squeaks like the workings of a great machine. Eventually we came out to farmland, an old windmill, and then the long, sloping cliffside down to the promenade. From there, terraces covered the earth, not unlike the furrowed fields. They stretched to the docks, a hazy spur reaching out over the water. I could just make out shapes of funnels, and masts – or were they crane arms? – fine as hairs.

'I walk the tracks from here,' Emlyn said. 'It's quicker.'

I nodded. I felt as if I'd swallowed a lead weight.

'Where will you go now?' he asked.

'Find Dad, I suppose.'

'Will you think on what I asked you?' he said. 'Serious, I am. I'll get a horse, no bother.'

I looked towards the houses, the grubby black rows. Stacks of shoebox rooms each one the same. He held out his hands for mine, palms upwards, fingers gently curled and I longed to take them. I couldn't. I didn't know what I was – neither fish nor fowl, as they say – but I knew what I was not. He let his hands drop and his gaze drift away, looking down the empty road. I drew close to kiss his cheek, but only reached his jaw, then stepped away feeling awkward. Stupid.

'I don't suppose I'll change your mind? I could wait a little. A day or two.'

I shook my head. 'I think not.'

Dad was not at the club. The barman reminded me they were holding a sports day in Victoria Park. Railwaymen versus dockers. A bit of fun to keep idle hands busy. The park was sunken with steep banked sides. It had been a gravel pit once and there was

only one path in and out at either end. I wanted to talk to Dad alone, so I sat away to the side under the slim shade of a young pear tree. The strikers were larking about like new-born lambs and lazing on the grass. Three grown men played at leap-frog. The glorious sunshine was at odds with how I felt. The dread sat heavy in my stomach like a lump of dough. There was a cloying feeling in my throat.

Most of the men were sitting around one side of the running track, the nearest some twenty yards away. I listened to the rumble of their voices, the odd shout rising above the rest, laughter breaking out like claps of thunder. In the middle of the field, a pair of lads were having some trouble propping up targets painted onto pallets. Dad was among the men choosing their bows. It would be him who'd called for archery, of course. What other sport had he a fighting chance of winning? I was watching him test his sight, drawing and levelling his arrow, when Mark Shank approached. He was dressed in a pale grey Sunday suit.

'I'm about cooked,' he said, stroking a hand over his bald pate. 'Mind if I sit down?'

My heart began to gallop. It was only yesterday I'd seen him at the picket line – red in the face, struggling to say his piece while they laid hands upon that young lad. I didn't think he'd seen me, but I couldn't swear on it. I hadn't wanted to talk to anyone, only Dad, but what choice had I now? I smiled and said he'd be welcome. He slumped into a wisp of shadow, placing his tea flask on the grass. He sat with legs out straight, his small paunch causing his buttonholes to gape. We watched the archery competition get underway. The field was knocked down from fifteen competitors to five. Dad was among the survivors, raising the biggest cheers from his men. From time to time, as we watched, Shank would turn to me. Something about his manner always put me in mind of a newly ordained priest. He was apologetic, a bit prim. Twice, he looked as if he was about to speak, but bugger-all came out. I began to relax a little. If he had something to say, he'd have come out with it by now.

'How are you going on?' I asked, just to break the silence. 'I heard one of the lads got pinched.'

He gave me a queer look. 'You did, did you?' He coughed. 'He's been bound over for six months to keep the peace. Lucky fella, if you ask me. Men have had far worse for doing less – your father included.'

'I suppose he has. Perhaps they were sterner when he was a young man.'

He peered at me over the rims of his spectacles. 'You do know he did another three months for incitement only last year? Breaking stones at Wichley. I feared the stones would break him not the other way around.'

I felt a slight less sure of the ground beneath me. I hated to think of Dad put to hard labour at his age. And though Shank was mild as milk, I'd heard something in his tone. Was it a whisper of possessiveness? Keen to remind me he'd been beside my father all these years I'd made myself scarce. Ahead of us, the archers were down to three – Dad and two youngsters. One was stocky, one slender, but Dad looked the more upright of the lot. As he took aim, I could feel Shank beside me as you might a furnace. The tilt of his head made me suspect he was watching me watching Dad. The crowd had fallen so quiet I heard the arrow strike the boards like a whip-crack. Dad must've struck true, for the next thing the scoreboy showed his card and great roar went up among the dockers. Dad was hoisted high on shoulders. I winced for his bad ankle, but he was cock-a-hoop, his arms aloft as they carried him to the judge's table, whistling, cheering. His cap slipped off in the to-do and was tossed to the sky, its scarlet lining catching the light.

'They're like schoolboys,' I said. 'They idolise him.'

'What else do you expect? He devotes himself to the men.'

'So do you. So does Reagan.'

'But the pair of us don't cut the figure your dad does, do we? No, Herb's the one they look to. He knows how to give them hope. Even when we fail and fail again, your dad knows how to make it seem like better days are round the corner. Me, I haven't the fire. Nor the gift of the gab.'

I saw Dad shaking the hand of the prize-giver and with a lurch realised the contest was over. It was time, now, to speak to him. I would speak straight, tell him the whole of it, the worst of it, and not get bound up in excuses or apologies.

'What you mean,' I said to Shank, trying for a light tone, 'is you've far too much common sense.'

Shank's expression hardened. He cleared his throat.

'Mrs Cox, it's no secret that Herb and I don't agree on everything he says and does. After all, I'm the one who gets his hands dirty with negotiations. And what thanks do I get for it but being marked as a bosses' man? Well, that's neither here nor there.' He coughed again, fiddling with the lid of his tea flask. 'Point is, your father's reputation's been a lifetime in the making. I suppose that means nothing to you?' He

glared at me, eyeballs like bare bulbs. 'The thing about public life, Mrs Cox, is it only takes one crack to bring down the wall. I would hate to see Herb brought low. Least of all by his own kin.' He was growing pink in the cheeks. His stumbling and mumbling made it worse. I'd done something so rotten he could hardly spit it up. I found myself staring at a drop of tea clinging to the heel of his hand. 'It'd kill him. You understand? It'd be a disaster for us all.'

'I'm not sure I follow your meaning,' I said. I felt very warm, a prickling heat. The little speech I had planned to give my dad was coming apart at the seams.

'Let's not talk at cross purposes. You've been *seen*.' He looked to the sky. If he was hoping for divine intervention, none came. 'You know very well *that man* is a scab. A scab and a wastrel. I don't ask how long it's been going on. But I ask you, who could abide his daughter going with a fellow like that?' Now he looked at me, pain lining his eyes. 'Think of his reputation... and you widowed just a few month ago. Do you think it's only women who gossip?'

Relief and shame sloshed inside me like water and oil. I could not make one feeling come to terms with the next. I saw Shank's eye catch over my shoulder and turned to see Dad making his way towards us. His limp looked worse than ever, but there was a lightness to the way he swung his cane.

'You're to give this Wynne fellow up, see?' Shank heaved himself to his feet, letting out a grunt. I wondered where he'd learned Emlyn's name. 'I've said nothing to your father, but I shall have to. You're to give him up, you hear?' He wasn't asking but begging, it was there in his pained, red face, his colour so high you'd have thought the crime was not mine but his own. I nodded. He let loose a hard sigh. A moment later, he was off across the grass and shaking my dad's hand, slapping his arm.

I put the shawl in my bag and noticed my hands trembling. Nearby, a group of chaps were making bets on the tug, squabbling over slips and scraps of paper. Dad and Shank had parted ways, and soon he was by my side. He had a ribbon pinned to his chest.

'Is that what passes for a rosette these days?' I caught a quiver in my voice and coughed.

His grin was boyish. He wasn't half pleased with himself. I knew then Shank had told the truth about not letting on. Even in company, Dad was never one to pretend fine weather when all was foul. He wore his feelings like a second skin.

'Lean times, my girl,' he said. 'I didn't expect to see you here.'

'I'm not stopping.'

A whistle sounded. The men were forming up in teams alongside the rope. The high sun gave them squat shadows like puddles at their feet. One clown was dancing about flexing his arms like a strongman. He raised a few hoots. *Ain't you taking your hat off, Johnny?* A bloke in a trilby made a show of screwing his brim down tight, then rubbed his hands on the thighs of his trousers. Dad's laugh was soft. He was in his shirtsleeves and corduroy vest, his forearms still tanned hazel, even after all these years off the job. The whistle blew a second time and the rope was taken up.

'Here we go,' Dad said, planting his feet. 'Away, our lads.'

Beyond the tug o' war, I caught sight of Mark Shank's red braces as he strolled across the running track. He joined a small group of his cronies – grey-haired chaps, union bigwigs – and I saw him bend his head to another fellow's ear. Was his mate staring at me as they spoke? I thought he was, though they were too distant to be sure. The yelling from the crowd, dockers and railwaymen alike, was fierce. They might've been a pack of baying dogs. And though it was only for sport, only a bit of fun, still it goosed the skin on my neck.

How could I begin? *Dad, your strike is doomed and I've let you down.* Let down wasn't the half of it. He'd see it as betrayal, nothing less. He'd never look at me the same again. I swallowed a dry, sore feeling in my throat.

'Dad.'

'What is it, love?' He was absorbed in the heaving to and fro, only half listening. I hadn't heard him call me that for years. It took me right back to the days he'd sit in our living room with his nose in a book. I'd tug on his sleeve for attention. Crouch to wriggle my head between him and the page. Or the nights, after Mum was gone, when I'd tire of Rose's bawling and carry her into his bedroom. He'd wake like he'd been in hibernation. *What is it, love? What's happening? It's alright, give her here.*

'I'd better get going,' I said.

The teams were inching and trembling, the mark on the rope started gaining for the railwaymen. Some of them were all but horizontal, their heels scrambling for purchase on the grass. As Dad turned to me, the smile fell from his face.

'Now what do you suppose they're after?'

Following his gaze, I saw a posse of mounted police trotting through the park gates. He gave me a gentle push on the small of my back.

'You get going then.'

'They'll only be on their rounds.'

'I take no risks with that lot. Go on, now.' He gave my arm a quick squeeze and set off towards the police, calling over his shoulder. 'Will I see you for dinner at the club?'

I nodded, watching him go, limping every second step. The five mounted police were making for the judge's table. As I left, I looked back through the railings. Dad was craning his neck to talk to one of the constables, clutching his head to keep his cap from falling. They might have had the decency to dismount.

I walked Strood Lane to town turning over Shank's little speech in my mind. *You're to give him up. It'd kill him.* Where had this talk begun about Emlyn and me? I had sat with him in the hall, over soup. I felt a flash of heat remembering that, yes, we'd touched, but who'd been there to see? Only Mercy and that dopey chit Irene. And Winifred. Without meaning to, my pace slowed almost to nothing. Winifred had asked me about him. She'd been sniffing about me like a dog looking for bacon.

At the club, the kitchen was full of women, every chair taken, and the air was damp with steam. There were quite a few new faces. I said 'how d'you do' to the room and glanced round just long enough to see Winifred sitting alongside Nelly and Mercy. I went to help Miss Havensleigh, washing potatoes in the sink. She greeted me with a smile.

'How are the games going?' she asked.

'Police turned up.'

'What a shame!'

As we scrubbed the veg, I tried to put Winifred from my mind. Nothing to be gained from another quarrel with her. Some folk liked to play town crier – that was just the way of things. The skin of the potato felt rough, the earth crumbling, then turning to slime as I washed it away. It was quite satisfying brushing off the dirt to leave the pale, speckled skins. Miss Havensleigh seemed in a world of her own, her slim neck bowed over her working fingers. I could hear Winifred reading in a low voice. *Murder of her mistress by strangulation...* It occurred to me Mrs Havensleigh had done well to get so many hands on deck on a Sunday. She had a pretty way of

asking a body to do things. You felt a rotter saying no. I heard Mercy's voice rise a little higher than the rest. *She ain't pregnant, you mark my words. She's putting it on so they won't hang her.* I peered through the open shelving and saw Winifred pointing the tip of her peeling knife at a newspaper column. A blackleg newspaper – it could be nothing else carrying news like that. They were whispering over it like kids with stolen ciggies. Beside me, Miss Havensleigh stopped to look at her fingers. Her tips were ruttled as the pages of a damp library book. She rubbed them on her floral pinny. Just then, I heard running feet at pavement level. A man shouted. We looked up at the high window, as if our chins were drawn by strings. Shadows passed, then quiet again. It was another ten minutes before the barman came down to the kitchen.

'Begging your pardon, Miss Havensleigh.' He gave her a hurried nod. 'Nel, you're wanted in the bar. It's Boris.'

Nelly said nothing, but placed her knife flat and went swift out of the room. Winifred followed close behind.

'Has there been an accident?' Miss Havensleigh asked the barman, who'd stood aside to let them pass.

'He's in a bad way.'

'Everyone stay here,' Miss Havensleigh said. 'I'll go and see what's needed.'

Shouts from upstairs raised the hairs on my arms. I thought of the mounted police talking to my father. Boris had been standing by his side. I took the stairs two at a time, close on Miss Havensleigh's heels. In the bar, Nelly knelt over her husband. She'd bundled her cardigan and was pressing it to his head. Blood like syrup matted his hair. A middle-aged man was slumped beside them, panting, his hands scarlet, his shoulder wet too.

Miss Havensleigh went to open the smoked-glass door for folk struggling to get in. Two men came through carrying a third, his arms slung over their shoulders. His head drooped as if he was deep in his cups. I heard a sob and turned to see a young boy sitting in the booth beside me. His tears left trails on his grubby skin. Beside him, an older man sat cradling one of his wrists.

'What's happened?' I asked. He made no reply. Beyond the horseshoe bar, I caught sight of Winifred's back. She stood beside a lad with a split lip, drizzling. She was trying to stop him slipping out of his chair. His arm flailed, knocking an ash-tray to the floor. As another youngster tried to help her pull him right, I caught sight of

bleeding gums, two lone teeth, smeared pink, standing apart like gateposts with nothing in between. The lad made strange sounds like speaking Russian, flecks of blood flying from his lips.

'What's he saying?' his mate asked.

'You watch him,' Winifred said. 'You're to keep him awake.'

I sat down in the booth opposite the little boy and his father.

'Are you hurt?'

The boy took a shuddering breath and shook his head.

'Have you come from Victoria Park?'

The man raised his curled fingers, which were swelling purple. 'How am I to work?'

'Can you bend them?'

'I put them up to save my head, see?' He lifted his hands like shields and looked at me, dire, through the gap. 'Should have taken the clout to the head. I'd have been better off.'

I touched the wax cloth of his sleeve. 'Did the police do this to you?'

He shook his head. 'Not them. They tried to stop it.' He took two short breaths. 'How am I to work?'

'You'll mend,' I said. What else could I say? 'If the strike goes on, you'll have time to mend. Don't think the worst just yet. Here, I'll fetch you some cold water.'

No sooner had I brought him a basin than Winifred sent me back downstairs to boil water and find clean rags. She seemed to know better than anyone what needed to be done. The local doctor was sent for, but couldn't be drawn from his Sunday dinner and so Miss Havensleigh set off across town on her bicycle to fetch her family physician. I must've seen some thirty men come and go through that bar in less than an hour. A few you could see were injured. One had a great lump on his scalp and a pair of black eyes forming like ripe plums. Another had a split eyebrow, which Winifred cleaned and stitched herself. A lot of the men weren't hurt but wound tight as springs. I was on my knees, cleaning up the sick of a lad who'd had a knock to the head, when I heard a group of them talking it through.

'I'm going down that fucking station. Policemen is one thing, that lot is something else. Turn them loose on unarmed men?'

'Coshes as long as your leg.'

'Thick n'all. Thick as a bastard bedpost.'

'Keep it down, George.'

'I'll come with you. It ain't lawful. If we don't say something...'

'For God's sake, fellas. Who d'ya think armed them in the first place?'

'They were joining in! Two dozen bastard coppers and us without so much as a switch in our hands.'

'I'm saying, it ain't lawful!' A glass smashed beside me, pieces scattering, water soaking into my skirt at the knee. I looked up to see a blond man step back from the group. He didn't look too steady on his feet. 'Didn't dare when there was a war on, did they?' He was shouting at no one and everyone, spit flying. As he turned, I saw a graze on his cheekbone, full of dirt, and grass stains on his shirtsleeve. 'Heroes one minute, Bolsheviks the next. They can shove it. Next time there's a bleeding war on, just you wait.' He was bundled out by his mates, leaving my side of the bar deserted but for the lad missing his teeth, waiting on the doctor. I could hear Boris moaning low. *When did he stop talking? How long?* Nelly's voice was tight. I threw my sick-smelling rag into the basin and set to picking up shards of glass.

When I passed by, Nelly was still putting pressure on his head, her cardy dandelion yellow in parts, sopping red in others. As I opened the double doors with my hip, carrying the basin full of sick-water and glass, I found two young girls standing in the hall. They ran away a few steps like scolded puppies, half frightened, half curious. The smallest, who I believed belonged to Doris, took her sucked fingers out of her mouth.

'Is Mr Lloyd poorly, Mrs Cox?'

'Don't you worry about that. Go on down to your mother now.'

The kitchen was empty but for Doris, Mrs Judd and Irene, the table still covered in peelings. I'd seen some of the women go off on errands – to fetch a nurse, to find ice. The others, I supposed, had gone looking for their menfolk. The sink was full of washed potatoes. I piled them on the draining board, then rinsed the blood from the rags, watching it slip in ribbons down the plughole. I wrapped the glass in the advertising sheets from Winifred's newspaper.

The smell of sick lingered even after I'd scrubbed the bowl. I opened the door to change the air and stepped outside. The pale blue sky seemed to give the lie to all the pain and panic upstairs.

I heard a quiet cough and turned to see Dad, sitting on the low garden wall beside two rusty bike frames. He had his bad leg stretched out straight and was clutching the bricks as if they might fall away.

'Thank God you've not been pinched,' I said.

'I had to take a young lad home. Cracked his rib. We couldn't find his father.'

'You're hurt, aren't you? How long have you stayed out here?'

He waved my questions away as if they were smoke.

'Nelly's husband's up there, bleeding like a stuck lamb,' I said.

'Doctor been sent for?'

I nodded. Moving his jacket, I sat down next to him. I'd been choked with nerves only a few hours before, but now all that was gone. I only felt a deep kind of weariness. I didn't like that he was hiding in the yard like this. He must be bad, but Dad never could stand coddling.

'You ought to telephone the newspapers. Tomorrow they'll be calling it a riot. A mob. You know how they'll twist it.'

'Feed stories to that Tory rag?' He sucked breath through teeth, his face stretching into a grimace. 'They have their facts, we have ours. People will believe what they want to, anyhow.'

'I can't get one thing straight from the next.'

'We were fish in a barrel, Alma. I never thought of it – steep banks, railings all the way round like that – we should never have gathered in a place like that. For God's sake, I should've known better.'

'They charged on you, then?'

He shook his head. 'Read the riot act. Said we were to disperse. Well, the fellas didn't want to go, did they? Reckoned they'd a right to enjoy a public park on a Sunday afternoon. I tried negotiating. *Give us an hour, I'll have them out. Let them think they're going under their own steam.* Officer was having none of it. Then the cavalry shows up.' He sighed.

'Specials?'

'Only half a dozen. You'd have thought there were a score or more the ruckus they caused. They came in the other end to the police, see. If you ask me, they got wind of something happening and fancied a piece of the action. I was trying to talk the officers down. Negotiating. These Specials, they start pushing fellas about, making darts at them like sheep dogs – only they're on eighteen-hand horses. One of

them ploughed right into a group of my men. I saw it. Police saw it. I told them to call the Specials off.' He raised his palms as if he was seeing the whole scene in front of him, calling it to a stop. He let them fall into his lap. 'Anyhow, it was too late. It was the last straw for the lads. Can't abide the Specials, can they?' His smile was twisted, lips pressed tight. 'Not sure which kind they hate more – Johnny Citizen in his plus fours or the off-duty blackshirts...'

'There was a fight, then?'

'You could call it that. Few of our lads started chucking stuff. Sticks. Pebbles. Nothing much to chuck in a place like that. It's not as if they were tearing up cobblestones. That was that, anyhow. Pandemonium. You'd only to breathe to find a truncheon in your mouth. There were blokes toppling down the banks, scrambling to get away.'

'Did you get the boy home? The one who hurt his ribs.'

'Aye. Norman Brigg's little lad. Frightened half out of his wits, he was. Still wearing his bib for scorekeeping. He fell trying to get over the fence.' Dad patted his pockets. Whatever he was fumbling for, he didn't find it. His hand came to rest on his knee. He hadn't moved his bad leg an inch.

'You'll write a report, then, for the General Council?'

'I will.'

'Shall I fetch your walking stick?'

He stared into branches of the alder growing in the next-door yard. A squirrel darted halfway up its trunk, then froze. 'I think I'll sit here a while longer.'

'If you've hurt that ankle, we ought to raise it.'

'Give a man a minute to collect his thoughts, why don't you?'

I went back inside and got on with the peeling and after an hour of Irene and me working on our own, we were joined by Miss Havensleigh and the pregnant two – Eileen and Dolly. They said the men had all been taken home, apart from Boris and a man with a broken jaw who'd been driven to the hospital by a friend of Miss Havensleigh's mother. More women turned up late in the afternoon. Word had spread about what happened in the park, but there was still stew to be got up, people to be fed.

Later, I went up to sweep the hall. I thought perhaps I'd get a chance to talk to Dad. On the stairs, I saw him being carried to his office. His leg was trailing. It was clear to me he could no more put weight on it than he could lift an automobile. Since

Shank was among the men helping him, I hung back until the door closed behind them. I felt even lower, seeing that. It was the worst time for it to happen, during the strike of his life.

In the Kier Hardie hall, I cleared and swept and mopped the room, then sat and waited for the floor to dry. Waited to hear those men leave his office. With its puddles and dry patches, the floor looked like the estuary at low tide. I leaned over sideways on the platform and let my head rest on the crook of my arm. I almost wish I'd stayed longer in the park. It might have been better to witness what happened than to listen to my imagination. I could hear the crack of weighted ebony meeting a man's brow. The dull thwack of a shoulderblade bruised. I knew it how sounded to break flesh and bone. I had a good idea of the sort of force it took to leave a man with no front teeth and one eye swollen shut. It was vicious, all of it. Heavy handed. It gave me a sharp, burning feeling in my chest. I was furious and, to make it worse, I knew I had no right to be.

Later, I went and listened at Dad's door. I heard two men's voices, then three. They must've been like sardines in that cupboard of a room. I thought about knocking – thought about it long and hard – and decided I could tell him tomorrow. Tomorrow morning would do.

Eighteen

Bill was watching from a stool beside the counter, one thick freckled arm resting on the cabinet. It was before the last of his hair went. Before his wedding band grew dented and scratched. I had yet to turn eighteen, and wasn't much heavier than the sow-carcass in my hands.

The bone saw was driving me mad – teeth jamming, gummed with marrow and fine splinters – but I would not give up. I gripped a trotter to steady the carcass. *Easy now. Let the blade do the work*, he said. Easy for him, seventeen stone with hands like vices. Mine were slippery with juices and fat. The fabric of my dress sleeve drew tight as I forced the saw to and fro. Halving was always the hardest part – getting enough purchase to split a pig's thick, crested spine. Sweat tickled my upper lip, under my arms, one louse-like drop crept down my lower back. I made small progress – a few rasps, short and precise – before it jammed again.

I could have thrown the carcass across the room. I glanced at him, but he wasn't laughing. Not the whisper of a smirk. I took a breath and put my weight behind the saw again. Half a minute of hard graft and it gave way. A satisfying crack. I leaned against the cool tiles, panting, rubbing my sore arm. Now Bill grinned.

Proved your point?

I said I had.

Can I go and do the cellar now, Boudicca?

I said he might.

Movement in the window caught my eye and I realised it was my own reflection. I hadn't noticed night rolling in. Wind rattled the door in its frame and the fire fluttered in the chimney draft. I poked the coals and added more, my pig-slick fingers leaving prints on the tongs, then got back to work. I'd left the forelegs on for leverage, but they'd be next to go. I picked up my cleaver and my eye was drawn again to my reflection. I wondered, did I look absurd with that thing in my hand? A little like a child holding a carnival flag.

The darkened glass brought out the hollows of my face and stole the youth from my cheeks. I went closer to the window, and looked at my own narrow figure, standing there among it all: the equipment, the stock, the bright yellow gaslights, the polished tiles, the meat hooks twinkling overhead like a chandelier. I waggled the cleaver, enjoying its weight, and smiled. If only my mother could see me now.

Nineteen

I went to the club in the morning. The stools and chairs were upturned on tables and as I rounded the bar, I found the barman on his knees working away with a ball of wire wool at the boards where Boris had lain. His fingers were covered in faintly pink suds. Stacked on the counter were unwashed mugs ringed with scum, flies like poppy seeds hovering, drowning in the dregs. It smelled of stale yeast and smoke, tinged with bleach.

'Have you seen my father?'

The barman sat back on his heels. He used his forearm to sweep a lock from his brow and I noticed he had slight jowls, a softness to his jaw. I wasn't sure I'd ever looked at him properly before. He'd always been a pair of bared, tattooed biceps.

That haircut – close cut above the ears, slicked back on top after the fashion of the sailors and barrowboys. 'He's down Victoria Park. Giving the tramwaymen a talking to.'

I thanked him but, as I turned to leave, he called me back.

'Mrs Cox?'

'Yes?'

'He didn't seem right, this morning, your father. His leg's bad. And this trouble with the tramwaymen... he let go his temper in front of some of the fellas. Not like him in the slightest.'

'It's probably all this sleeping at strange addresses. He'll be tired.'

He looked doubtful. 'Aye, perhaps that's it... Any road, you'll look to him? Try to cheer him up, if you can?'

I nodded, feeling like one of those pitiful fruit flies, drowning in the beer I'd hoped to sup. He gave me the briefest of smiles, no warmth in it. How did Dad do it? All these men in his thrall – half of them looking up to him as a father figure, the other half wanting to mother him.

It was a sparse sort of a meeting at Victoria Park. Couldn't have been more than thirty men standing around Dad and Mr Godfrey, his opposite number with the tramwaymen's branch. Even as I approached, a group broke away and wandered off. Dad was leaning heavy on a pair of crutches. I'd never seen him stand so still to give a speech. It looked hard enough for him to stay upright. Godfrey was not twelve inches behind him, nodding along to everything he said. I drew close to listen.

'Now I know what you're hearing on the wireless. And I know what that filthy rag's been saying, but before you heed a word of it, think on who's writing it. Think on the fact that that paper is a *blackleg* paper. Do you think they're likely to report how the men are holding fast across the country? No. They pick a figure from the air and say that's how many thousand men are back to work. Of course Sir Simon will stand up in Parliament and lay it on thick. Of course he'll cry revolution and call our great strike *unconstitutional*. It's to be expected. But all of you here, you've too much between your ears to fall for it. Ask yourselves, why all the hysterics? Could it be that they're afraid? Could it be that they've begun to smell defeat? Think about it and don't let them turn your heads with their lies. Friends, this is an honest industrial dispute – not only honest but generous and brave. What chance have we against the might of capital unless we use our own assets? Our strength of will. Our solidarity. I

want you to go and have a word with your mates. You tell them there's no reason on earth the tramwaymen shouldn't hold as strong as the dockers and the railwaymen. You tell them there'll be no going back until we all go back together. Come on, men! We are not weaklings to be pushed about by those who think themselves our betters!

There was a strained note in his voice. He got a rumble of ayes in response, while some of the men turned away and left. To close the meeting, he tried to lead them in *The Red Flag*, but the noise they made was pitiful. A few voices droning. Dad's was louder than the rest, but fierce. Too fierce and fast, and his eyes too wide. They faded to silence, leaving him to sing alone. He lasted almost a verse. It was painful to watch. And then his eye landed on me, lingering at the back, and he stopped, halfway through a line.

'Comrades,' he called. 'Don't be disheartened. Peace! Bread! Land!'

There was a patter of replies – *Peace! Bread! Land!* – some more passionate than others. The meeting was over. Men began to drift. A handful gathered round Godfrey. Dad stepped off his box and hobbled towards me. I did not like to talk there, with listening ears only a few yards away. Not in the wide-open space of the field with the grey sky hanging so low. I'd sooner have cornered him in his paper-coop of an office, where what passed between us would be private. He arrived in front of me looking as tired as I'd ever seen him. A vein in his eye had burst and coloured one corner of his eye a shocking scarlet.

'You're in a bad way,' I said, though I knew he would hate me mentioning it. I was floundering already. 'I've something to tell you. Something important... about the strike.'

'What's that then?'

'Only, I have to tell you first how I found out.'

'Go on.'

'I've been seeing a fella. He's been working on the docks. He's a tramp.'

'A scab.'

The seriousness of his gaze sapped the courage from me. I looked at the grass between our feet. The shafts of his crutches set an inch or two before his toes. 'He told me the Navy's due tomorrow. They all know about it... the scabs. They'll run the docks. Get the ships sailing again.' I looked up to see how he took it. I don't know what I expected, but his face hadn't changed. He looked on me with the same, steady gaze.

'They'll win, Dad. They'll break the strike, don't you think?'

'Maybe so. If it's true.'

'You don't believe me?'

'I'm waiting to hear the worst of it.'

'What do you mean?'

'You tell me.'

I dropped my scarf and bent to pick it up with shaking hands. I could hardly make them follow my will. I was angry, all of a sudden. Furious with him for being so untrusting, for always seeing fault in me. Was it any wonder I behaved the way I did?

'I crossed the picket line. I tried to work – at the abattoir. Only you were right, as you always are. They wouldn't have me.'

He swallowed. In an instant, I felt sorry. I wanted to touch him, take his hand, but I couldn't. He stood rigid as a church, buttressed by his crutches. He tilted his head and the peak of his cap shadowed his eyes.

'I thought we were growing friends again, Alma. Really I did.'

He made a shuffle-step to steady himself. As he set off, I walked alongside him. It wasn't hard to keep up. Something about his drawn face, the unnatural way he moved, like a three legged dog... it frightened me. He was so unlike himself. I stepped into his path to stop him.

'Wait, Dad, please. I'm sorry. Really I am. It was a mistake. A rotten mistake. I... I didn't think it would make any difference.'

It was the wrong thing to say. He set off again, his shoulder brushing past me. He breathed hard, grunting slightly with the effort of every swing of his bad leg.

'I mean it. I felt sure you'd win no matter what I did. I was only... acting up.'

He unlatched the gate and went through, letting it close behind him. 'We will win.'

'How can you? Didn't you hear what I said? You'll have to call off your picket for safety's sake.'

'Call off my picket on the advice of your turncoat tramp? I should think not. For God's sake, Alma!' A fleck of spittle landed on my cheek. He checked his rising voice. 'We shall go on as we are and we shall win – no thanks to you.'

He walked away, keeping close to the hedge and railings, but after a few steps, stopped.

'I want you out, you understand?'

I looked at his back – his brown jacket with the marks of the brush still showing, his upturned collar almost touching his cap.

'Alma?'

'I heard you.'

I took a room above The Cart and Bay, a dim place with cocoa-coloured walls and a heavy green carpet. Its window looked out onto the square. The landlady showed me the lavvy and where I might hang a few clothes. To my relief, she didn't question how I would pay. When she was gone, I sat on the bed and realised there was no one on earth who knew where I was but that old woman who'd just ordered me to crack the window if I boiled any water. It was a queer, unsettling feeling, something like the way I used to feel when I played truant to babysit Rose. I never worried about getting caught – what did for me was how easy it was. You just went on your way, kid sister in hand, lunch wrapped in a hanky. No one stopped you. No one asked what you thought you were up to. The inspector, that idle codger, never once came looking. Even the women on the common didn't mind you, so long as you didn't touch their drying laundry, slung between the apple trees. And while we were in the silent copse, stripping bark off a fallen tree, who knew what was happening at school? A pause in the register. A tick missing. Your pals might make a joke about you swinging the lead. Then the teacher would go on teaching, everything would go on the same.

What would the landlady care if I disappeared? She'd hardly launch a search party. The walls felt very close. I'd a vague idea I'd go for the paper and check the notices, then I remembered I hadn't a penny to buy it. Still, I went out. I had to see people and be seen – even if only by strangers.

The roads were quiet, everyone in the parks and pubs or down the coast. I walked on the shaded side of the street. Between clots of cloud, the sun was quite fierce. I didn't think about where I was going, but like a homing pigeon I soon found I was drawing near to our old parade of shops. I was met by the grocer's painted side-wall. *Jenkins's Grocers, Purveyors of Fruit, Vegetables & Provisions, Fine Marmalades & Preserves made on the Premises*. Opposite, was The Swan. I could hear a piano playing inside and blokes singing along. A few stood outside the door. One of them, an old fella wearing a long coat too hot for the day, shouted, *you mark*

my words, before crossing the road cradling his pint to his chest. The pub still had a broken windowpane with a piece of crate nailed over, cut down so only half a word was showing, Ponz. I had looked at it in quiet moments behind the counter, wondering what the whole word might have been, wishing they'd get the blasted thing fixed.

Jenkins's fruit display was out on the pavement, though he was nowhere to be seen. Just like him to open on a holiday. He'd rather lose a leg than a sale. I skirted round the goods, not looking in, and stopped next door. The shutters were closed and there was a notice pasted on one of the boards. *Spacious six-room Commercial Property including Living Quarters, available to let. Apply Wrafter and Wrafter, Estate Agents and Valuers.* I took a step back and looked at the upstairs windows. The curtains had been taken down and against the dim ceiling I saw our frilled velvet lampshade, a wedding present from an aunt of Bill's. Too ugly even for the bailiffs. I read the sign again, then touched the brass catch on the shutters, tacky with dirt, warmed by the sunlight. The main door was a brilliant green, paint scratched around the lock where Bill would miss with his key. I tried the handle, leaning my weight against the door, but of course it was fast. Crouching and lifting the letterbox flap, all I could see in the gloom was a patch of carpet. A busy floral design in red, green and blue. Swirling sprays. Blooming roses. Sweet Williams spattered in between. The pattern was so familiar it might have been my own skin.

I heard a squeaky, shuddering racket and turned to see a tram pass behind, so full they were standing on the footboards. As it switched tracks, the passengers jerked sideways like dolls. I expected to see a university student or some sportsman in plus-fours and a buttonhole, but the conductor on the back was an old fellow in full uniform. He was fiddling with his ticket puncher, not gripping the rail but swaying in perfect balance. He was no volunteer.

On my way back to town, I thought about that swirling carpet. To think I'd been nagging Bill about replacing it just weeks before he died. And then there was the smokery. He'd been planning that for months. How excited he'd get when he talked about us doing our own bacon. I should have known something wasn't right when all of a sudden he dropped the idea. *No need for it, my love*, he'd said, when I brought it up. *We've enough on our plate as it is. And think of the mess and the noise the builders would make.* And all the time, he knew the money was gone. Not only the money, but the shop itself, our home. To think of the deceit still felt like a blade

to the chest, sharp and deep. It hurt the same every time. Would it never fade? I wished for nothing more than to see him face to face and ask him, *how could he*. I longed for it. To show him the white-hot hurt he'd caused, to have him feel it too, to have him answer me once and for all. *How could you, Bill Cox?*

I could spend my life longing for that, but he was gone. He'd never speak again, never apologise. And all that was left to me was to forgive him, though it felt like opening a vein. Giving away the last of myself, after being robbed of so much. Still, I knew I must. I must find a way to forgive him. Forgive him. Clinging on to the blame would hurt no one but myself.

When I reached the High Street, I stopped by a woman selling pasties. She wore a frilly white pinny, and had her goods on a tray slung over her shoulders. Even from where I stood, I could smell the fresh-baked pastry, the sweet onions.

'Are they beef and swede?' I heard a bloke ask.

'Four pence the one, sixpence a pair, darling.' She tore a sheet, folded the pasty inside, twizzled the ends, in a single swift movement. Before I knew it, she'd turned to me.

'You want one or a pair, my duck?'

I tore my gaze from her and walked away.

In the square, the market men were packing up, loading their stalls on vans, leaving a mess of spoiled tomatoes smeared across the paving, cauliflower leaves trodden underfoot. I sat on the steps outside the Town Hall, overlooked by its fake columns and the clock tower of the Labour Exchange. A man in a suit trotted up the stairs, clutching a briefcase to his chest. You'd have thought he had the crown jewels in there. On the roads that ran three sides of the square, there was slow-moving traffic of hand-carts being stocked and towed.

'You're not waiting for a tram are you?'

The girl gave me a start. She had a picket armband, bunching the sleeve of her baggy jumper. Her skirt was pleated and she wore white woollen stockings. She'd have passed for a schoolgirl if it weren't for her womanly bosom. I'd been staring at a man sweeping spilled feathers, my mind running over the conversation with my dad.

'I'm not waiting,' I said. The tram stop was at least twenty feet away.

She sighed. 'No, I didn't think you were.'

'Looks like that's where you're needed,' I said, pointing to the queue of people on the other side of the square.

'Oh, they're *all* manning that one. That's why they sent me here.' She sat with her legs out straight in front of her. A woman in a greatcoat was prodding a young male picket in the chest with the handle of her umbrella.

'It doesn't look as if they're having much luck,' I said.

'It's terrible. All the other arms of the union are doing so marvellously. I feel we're letting down the whole show.'

'Are you from the TGWU?'

'Labour Party.' She gave a sorry little pout. 'I'm on loan. They couldn't quite find a use for me.'

'They'll have no use for any of you soon enough.'

'What do you mean?'

I looked her over. Keen as mustard. She had short brown hair with an awkward wave she'd tried to tame with a pair of brass slides. Despite her nice way of speaking, her skirt was made of cheap, shiny stuff with a crease where it had been let down. 'Tell me something,' I said. 'If you were on a picket and the authorities were on their way to break it up, would you rather someone let you know?'

'Are they coming?' She looked about her, alarmed.

'No, not here.'

'Oh. Well, forewarned is forearmed.'

'And if you were someone's wife. A striker's wife, I mean. Would you want to know if your husband was about to be pinched?'

'I should say so.'

'And what would you do?'

Her smile contained a wince. She held up her bare right hand. 'I'm not married.'

'No, I see that. But just saying you were...'

'Well, I suppose I'd ask him not to picket. Not if it was certain.'

Across the road, the young chap was still arguing with the umbrella woman. She looked about ready to clout him over the head.

'I suppose you would,' I said.

'I say, are the police coming here?'

I shook my head just as a tram rounded the far corner.

'This what you're after?' I asked.

It stopped and three of the pickets went to speak to the driver. Another tried to usher everyone aside. I looked up at the girl who was practically on tiptoes, fists clenched. She took a few steps, as if to cross, then backed off.

'Go on,' I said. 'They'll need you now.'

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, I will.'

She cantered over and disappeared in the throng. There was a lot of beckoning and pointing going on. People spilled out onto the pavement and I saw through the windows they were being turned off. The conductor was having a nose-to-nose row with one of the pickets, a skinny lad who might have been half his age, moving an inch backward for every inch the conductor moved forward. At the same time, the driver was pulled down from his cab. He had a picket at each elbow. He didn't struggle. Soon the square was dotted with passengers and passers-by who'd stopped to watch. A couple paused right in front of me, blocking my view.

The tram was shaking and I couldn't quite see how. Two of the pickets were in the road stopping traffic. Then I heard voices – *Heave! Heave! Heave!* The tram began rocking. It tipped a little then slammed back onto its rails. I moved towards the Labour Exchange, keeping my distance, trying to find a better angle. You'd have thought it'd take an army, but there were only about a dozen of them pushing, leaning low. Among the arms braced against the side, I saw four picket bands. A pair of white stockings among the trouser legs. Who were the others? Bystanders? Troublemakers? Friends? Every time they shoved, the tram rocked a fraction further. Suddenly people cottoned on to what was about to happen. They scattered. Someone yelled. There was a moment when it seemed weightless. Balanced on two wheels, the other two in the air, the top deck looming like an overhanging cliff. The pickets drew back as it began to topple. It hit the road, metal groaning, glass shattering. There were cries – hard to tell if they were frightened or amazed. Someone cheered. The girl was standing apart now, clutching her cheeks.

I stayed where I was while others rushed in for a closer look, broken glass crunching under their feet. The shrill of the police whistle sounded mild after all that noise. Like a bird calling for mates, there was the echo of more whistles in the distance. The pickets had the sense to make off, pushing, calling, legging it. One stumbled trying to loosen his armband and run at the same time. As people fled, I drew a little nearer and stared at the underbelly of the tram, its pipes and girders exposed like the innards of a felled beast. Its frame had twisted with the impact of

the fall and one of the corner supports of the roof had crumpled entirely. It must've weighed ten tons if it weighed an ounce and they'd toppled it in a moment.

They were cleaning down when I stepped through the kitchen door. There was soup bubbling in the pots and the room had that close, starchy smell of boiling root veg. Ivy Havensleigh was sitting on the edge of the dresser, her feet on a chair writing up her inventory. Eileen and Dolly were sitting down, legs wide to make room for their bumps, while Mrs Judd poured out tea from a pot. Alice was bent over the sink, scrubbing.

'How many have you in today?' I asked.

Miss Havensleigh looked up from her list. 'Hello,' she said. 'I wasn't expecting you.'

'I'm not here for shift,' I said. 'There's something I need to ask of you.'

Her smile wavered. 'Shall we go to the other room?'

'It's best that they all hear it. And who have you upstairs?'

'Oh, Winifred, Irene, Bessie...' she looked to Alice as she counted them off on her fingers.

'Joan, Dolly, Edith, Mercy,' said Alice.

I'd no idea who Joan or Edith were. Miss Havensleigh seemed to find new women every day of the strike. 'Can you call them down? It's important.'

'They're in the middle of service.'

'People can serve themselves, can't they? Don't need us to dole it out.'

'Well, I... Look here, Alma. You can't simply walk in and ask us to drop everything.' She was smiling, but serious.

I had not foreseen this. It couldn't wait until the shift was finished. I'd already stayed idle too long. Besides which, they'd start to drift off home in dribs and drabs. And I didn't have it in me to make my little speech ten times over. It was just as my dad had said, sometimes the mass has finer instincts than the man.

'Will you come upstairs with me?' I turned to the others. 'All of you?'

Miss Havensleigh glanced round at her women, a little alarm and a little mirth in their expressions. 'Alright,' she said. 'You are mysterious, Alma.'

They followed me into the corridor. It took the pregnant girls and Mrs Judd a long time to climb the stairs. Dad's office was closed. I tried the handle. Locked.

'They've taken to moving,' Miss Havensleigh said. 'To avoid the police. What's happened, Alma? There's something wrong, isn't there?'

I nodded, looking beyond her at Doris heaving on the bannister.

'You could say that.'

I turned to open the double doors. I was coming across barmy, I knew that. But I couldn't stop or I'd never get going again. The Kier Hardie room was full. Men, women and children, sitting round the tables eating their supper. Winifred and Irene were serving. There was no way out of it now. I had all the women in one room, and about five dozen of Dad's men besides. I pushed between two kids in the queue, took the ladle from Irene and clanged it against the side of the stockpot. The room fell quiet like the dropping of a stone. What had I to say now? I glanced at the doorway where Doris and Mary stood with Mrs Judd between them, leaning on her stick. I paused too long, thinking what to say. People began to take up their own conversations. I clanged the ladle again to quiet them. Long and steady like the bell for mass.

'I wasn't expecting to speak to so many of you, but it's as well you all hear what I have to say. It's about the strike, so it concerns us all.' People were craning their necks to see me. I stepped out into a space at the front of the room. 'My name's Alma Cox. I'm Herb Yates's daughter and I've something to tell you about the strike.' I was repeating myself. I felt like a faulty bobbin, casting but not catching. I put my hands in my pockets to hide their trembling. My dad always said the trick is to find three kindly faces and talk only to them. I looked at Mrs Judd in the doorway. Miss Havensleigh, leaning against the wall. On the far side of the room, Mercy was helping an old man to his seat. I held her eye and swallowed. 'I can't make a speech like my father,' I said. 'I won't stand here and call you my brothers and sisters... I can't pretend to be the same as you. I won't try to gee you up, for each of you has his own mind, *her* own mind...' I was going off the point, trying to find a way into it. A way around my own forked tongue. 'I have some information and I believe each of you deserves to hear it. So...' Miss Havensleigh, May, Mercy, back to Miss Havensleigh – she gave me a nod as if to say, *go on*. I swallowed my thick spit. 'Well then, I've heard news that the Navy's coming to run the docks tomorrow. And we all know that means it's likely our picket will be arrested to clear their path. I shouldn't be surprised if they pinch every last man. It's been done before, after all.' There was a kerfuffle right away. Among the rising voices, I heard someone say, *Our Percy's on*

the picket. I waited for the noise to die down. When it didn't, I held up my hands and started speaking over them.

'I came here to ask these women if they'd join me on the picket. It's my belief that a mass picket is the only way to protect our men and save the strike. Now, I've said my piece. You must each do as you think's right. You can stay at home or you can go down there in the morning and stand together.'

The voices rose again. Someone said the word, *Tonypandy*.

'I won't have them do to my Denny what they did to Boris,' Mercy said.

'Where's Yates?' I heard a male voice from the back of the room. I couldn't tell who'd spoken.

'We don't do nothing unless it comes from the leaders.' A man beside me stood up from the table, swinging his leg over the bench. He was a big bloke with frizzy red hair, the scurf of his scalp like snow on his jacket. I felt sure I'd seen him before. I wondered how many of the men in the room might be close to Dad, even consider themselves his friends.

'I'm not here on the union's behalf and you members must do what you think is right. The rest of us, though – mothers, wives, daughters – we're beholden to no leaders. We're free to do as we please, for our own reasons. I don't tell them what to do. I'm only saying I'll be there in the morning. I'd like to show them they can't have their own way all the time. We're not cattle.'

There was a sharp pain in my chest and I stopped short. It felt as though I'd a flint lodged there. I sat down on the end of an empty bench. Anything not to be the centre of attention any more. There was quiet a moment. Murmuring voices. A woman beside me began a coughing fit. I'd made a hash of it.

I felt relief when Miss Havensleigh came forward, just as I'd hoped she would – her youth, her clean conscience, her good breeding, all of it glowing through her pores. She would speak up. She'd nothing to stop her.

'Our men are doing the decent thing,' she said. 'They're standing up for the miners, trying to stop them being ground under the capitalists' heels. I for one will be joining the picket in the morning.'

The red-haired bloke made his way to the door. He was followed by two others.

'I'll believe nothing till I hear it from Yates or Shank,' I heard him say.

Voices rose again and Miss Havensleigh's volunteers gathered round me at the table. Beyond, I could see one or two unfamiliar faces, standing near, listening in as the women shot questions. *Where had I heard about it? Why weren't the union leaders doing something about it? Why hadn't Mr Yates come to speak himself?* Mercy stood behind me, resting one hand on my shoulder. I waited until Mrs Judd and Irene had drawn near. Winifred was asking, *was I sure someone wasn't having me on?*

'I told my dad, only I suspect he didn't believe me.' I drew a thick breath. 'Let's say he and I have had a falling out.'

There was a silence. Since no one else took it up I found myself carrying on. 'Perhaps you won't credit it either, but I hope you'll go to the picket anyhow. It's not for me. It's for the men. And the strike.'

'Of course we believe you, Alma,' Miss Havensleigh said. 'We'll be there first thing in the morning, won't we?'

Alice, Doris and Eileen were nodding. Irene looked to her grandmother whose head was held high. I craned my neck to look at Mercy. Her face was calm as carved wood, lips slightly pursed. She met my eye and I touched her warm fingers, still resting on my shoulder.

Twenty

I saw the crowd long before I reached the dock gates. The junction was black with figures, so thick with folk that only at the edges was it possible to make out one from the next. Where had they all come from? After speaking at the soup kitchen, I'd gone back to my room above the pub. I wondered what on earth had happened while I slept. I looked down at the people gathered by the gates, watched a figure break away, run a little, then rejoin the mass as a raindrop joins a puddle.

At the bottom of the hill, I became part of it. The crowd was looser than it looked from afar. I wove through. As I passed a small circle of women in their good hats, their Sunday shoes, I thought of Miss Havensleigh and began looking out for her among the bodies. I kept expecting to see those green eyes lit by the thrill of it. The further forward I pushed, the thicker the people. There reached a point where I could no more ask folk to stand aside than I could part the Red Sea. I was in the middle of the junction. I felt a hard edge against my ankle and looked down to see

the kerb of the island in the road. Someone was smoking shag that smelled almost as foul as tanning leather. At such close quarters, I only saw glimpses of people between other people. A young chap leaning to speak in his mate's ear. A woman putting her hand on her husband's shoulder for balance as she bent to do something, fix a shoe, smooth a stocking perhaps. Movement among a group of blokes, a quick motion of arms, a flash of a jacket cuff. I supposed someone was holding forth for nearby another man's face wore a mild smile, his head tilted as he listened. A youngster climbed the bottom of a lamppost and clung to it like a damp flag.

All those voices together, they sounded like the buzz and crackle at the beginning of a gramophone record, only louder. Far louder. I caught some words to my right: *Perhaps we ought to give them a show*. Someone had hold of a policeman's whistle and was tooting on it from time to time. My eye went high to the offices, a five-story building on the other side of the junction. There were figures in the arched windows. Clerks and secretaries had stopped to gawp. A tall woman with very white skin, wearing a pale-pink dress, stood alone, touching the glass. She might as well have been a ghost, so distant, silent, not moving an inch. I wondered if I'd ever find Miss Havensleigh and the other women. How many had come? And where was my dad in all this press and push? I stood on tiptoes and tried to see over the heads in the direction of the gates, the place where his picket would have been. It was hopeless. Two boys were sitting on top of the docks wall, bare feet dangling, their boots hanging round their necks by the laces. They were watching a third lad climb up to join them. It was twelve-foot high. They didn't look the least bit frightened.

I passed a couple of long, slow hours in that crowd and hardly got any closer to the picket. My blouse was prickling, damp. It was half-past ten by the gate clock when the police began to arrive in numbers. They came along Dover Road, as I had. We saw them marching downhill by the dozen. When they reached the bottom they went out of sight. The crowd packed in closer around me. People were shuffling and nudging, all of us pushed towards the dock gates. It was gradual at first and then there was a rush. Bodies moved like a wave, feet shuffling to keep up. There were objects underfoot, a dropped glass bottle, something soft like clothes. Beside me was a tall man who, whether he knew it or not, was leaning on my shoulder. I tried to shift from underneath his elbow, but I couldn't. On the other side were two blokes doing their best not to be thrust against me. One of them looked over his shoulder.

'You're alright, love,' he said, with a wincing smile. No sooner had he said it than there was movement and he fell. He cried out as someone trod on him and his mate held people at bay, trying to give him space to stand. Frightening as it was, I decided I might use the ebb and flow to make my way towards the gates. Any gap, any give, I edged into it. I wanted to find the others. I was beginning to have an awful gut-sick feeling. I could see nothing but the backs of people's heads. A sour smelling man beside me kept whispering he was sorry. Feeling his buttons dig into the bare skin of my arm I realised I had lost my shawl. The crowd pressed back again and my arms were pinned to my side, my chest so tight between the bodies I thought my ribcage might break. I tried to part my arms to find the space to breathe, but the pressure was too much. Someone was gasping – a fast, shallow breath in my ear. The sound of someone in panic and it caught. I lost all sense and struggled hard, not caring that I was forcing my arms against someone's back, bending my elbow into someone's side. A woman shrieked. My struggling made no difference. I felt the life being slowly squeezed out of me.

'Open the gates! Tell them to open the gates. Open the dock gates!' A man's voice rose above all the rest. For a moment, I thought I saw a bird darting, then realised it was something thrown. Far ahead, below the offices, things were kicking up into the air. I couldn't see who was throwing them or where they were landing, but I knew well enough they'd be aimed at the police. Whatever happened next, whatever the police did in reply, we felt it as a great wave. I lost my footing. One toe was crushed under a heavy heel and tears sprang to my eyes. What had I done? I'd thought we had strength in numbers, but this felt nothing like strength. We were penned like cattle. I craned my neck this way and that, frantic, now, for a way out of it. Behind, I saw the main gates of the docks opening, the banner tearing in two. There was a slight let up in the crush, but then the pushing and shoving got worse. Everybody wanted to be free. As I tried to keep up with the push and drag, something wound round my ankle and I fell to my knees. Someone landed on my shoulder and my chin hit the paving. The next thing I felt was three hands, maybe four, grabbing my armpits, my collar, pulling me to my feet. Beside me the sewage-smelling man was making a wall with his body around me. There was a woman with her arms outstretched, keeping people away on the other side. We went, like that, moving in a knot, through the gates where the pressure eased.

'You're alright, love?' he said again. I nodded. Not long after, I lost the pair of them in the crowd.

People were streaming down the main dock road, walking with space to breathe but no way back. I felt cool air and realised my blouse had come open, my left breast overflowing my underclothes. I stopped in a doorway to tidy myself. I thought of staying there, where it was safe. Waiting it out. I'd been standing watching folk go by for ten or fifteen minutes when I caught sight of a bald head that looked just like Shank's and sure enough, beside him, there was my dad. I shouted myself hoarse. I thought he would pass by, but at last one of my calls turned his head. He made his way to me, haltingly. He'd lost a crutch.

He stepped into the doorway and leaned against the bricks, wincing and out of breath.

'You're hurt?'

I put my hand to my chin and it came away bloody. 'It's not bad,' I said.

'They told me you called for this.'

'I didn't know there'd be so many.'

'Don't you think I'd have called a mass picket if I wanted one? Don't you think in twenty-odd years of leadership I might have learned how to manage union affairs?'

'You wouldn't believe me. You thought me a liar.'

His pupils jerked side to side, following the flow of the people. 'We'll be lucky if we get out of this with no one badly hurt.'

'You were going to let them win. And get yourself arrested.'

He leaned forwards and grabbed my arm. His quickness gave me a lurch of fright. 'Has it occurred to you this strike might be beyond saving?' His lips shied clear of his clenched, chipped teeth. I saw his gums and thought of that bullock braying. Skin and flesh. A skeleton underneath.

Together, we walked out and down the main road where the crowd was thinning. The police were bringing up the rear, walking a slow step in ranks. They had their truncheons in hand.

Most of the people had gathered at the furthest tip of the docks where the passenger liners came in. We stood on the quayside, in the shadow of a dry goods warehouse. You couldn't miss the navy ship, out on the water. She was a two-funnelled battleship with gun turrets fore and aft. Though I knew they wouldn't,

couldn't be used on us, they had a fearful look about them. Her crew was standing out on deck and lining every tier, right up to the bridge. White figures by the dozen, pegged like seabirds on rooftops. They were watching the tugs and the pilot boat. Watching us, too, as we watched them. *Here come the cavalry to put down the mob.*

Dad stared into the crowd. I could see from the puckering of his cheeks that he was in a good deal of pain.

'Look for Shank,' he said.

I stepped up onto a pallet. Beside me a boy shaded the sun from his eyes, looking for someone too. All I could see were men's and women's hats, the odd bare head, and the dark hillocks of police helmets down the main road.

On the sixth storey of the warehouse, a man hung out of a window, painting. He had a rope around his waist to stop him falling. In uneven, dribbling letters, daubed on the brick, it read: *NAVAL RATINGS, TURN YOUR WEA...* as he painted the next letter I caught sight of his profile. It was Leslie Moody. I could guess who was on the other end of the rope. He disappeared and popped out of the next window along. A few letters more and I realised what he was writing: *Turn your weapons on your oppressors.* Dad would be livid.

When the police took up positions at the mouth of the main road and on either side of us on the quay, the crowd was much smaller than it had been. We stayed where we were, Dad still searching for Shank. My ribs were tight and it hurt to breathe too deeply. I hoped it was only bruising. I watched as a pair of constables dragged Leslie from the window. His tin and brush flew into the crowd below, a tail of paint whipping like a Catherine wheel.

Dad stepped gingerly on to the other end of the pallet. A young chap in docker's dungarees stood with an outstretched hand to steady him if he should stumble. Another came and took up the other side. They might have been guard dogs, flanking him.

'I don't think he's here, Mr Yates,' one said.

'He must be. He won't have left his men.'

'What are you going to do?' I asked Dad. 'Will we stand our ground?'

He ran his tongue over his bottom lip, but didn't reply. He was watching the police. Behind their lines, I caught a glimpse of Leslie and Ned being man-handled into the wagon. If Dad saw it too, he made no comment. He faced into the wind, eyes

narrowed, lips pressed tight. I wished he would only talk to me, tell me what he had in mind. I wondered how long we could last with no water, no supplies.

A window opened in the warehouse, on the first floor, just above people's heads. It was a huge swing-pane. A pair of constables tinkered a while, then lifted it right off its hinges.

'Looks like we're in for an announcement,' Dad said and at that moment a police sergeant appeared in the open frame. He had a speaking trumpet in his hand. He called for quiet, making a patting motion. It was hard to say if the navy ship was drawing closer or not. The tugs were scarcely steaming, but the lines were taut.

'Attention! Each of you is in breach of the law and may be charged with mobbing and rioting.'

'What rioting?' One of Dad's guard dogs snatched his hat off his head, strings of oiled hair falling into his face. He stopped short of throwing it on the ground. A bottle flew from the crowd and smashed on the wall beside the open window. The sergeant raised his trumpet and carried on, despite the angry shouts nearly drowning him out. 'We have the capacity to hold you here until each of you is placed under arrest. However –'

Someone shouted, 'Liar.'

'However... Hear me!' He waited for a dimming of the noise. 'HOWEVER, if you comply with our instructions, the majority of you will be allowed to leave under police escort. The following men are wanted: Mark Shank, Andrew Reagan, Herbert Yates, Albert Foster, Stephen Heslop, Stephen Godfrey and Samuel Gitzen. Let these men come forward and the rest will not be charged.' He nodded to a bobby who took the trumpet from him, and stayed in the window looking down on us, arms folded.

'You're not going forwards.' I grabbed Dad's arm. 'They don't know you're here. There's nothing to be gained from it.'

'She's right, Mr Yates,' the tall lad said. 'Reagan is railwaymen not dockers. Gitzen and Godfrey are trams. They don't know the first thing.'

'And they've four wagons,' I said. 'Only four. It's hot air. They can't hope to arrest us all.'

Dad's face had not shifted in the slightest. He was looking far beyond us to the police line. 'I ought to go forwards,' he said. 'I'll tell him the others aren't here. The sooner this mess is over the better.'

'Mr Yates, there's no need. Let's wait it out.' The dungarees lad steadied Dad's elbow as he eased himself down from the pallet. 'If you give yourself up, the picket's finished. The strike's finished.' There was fierceness in the lad's eyes, his dark irises like bullet holes in the whites.

'Would you look behind, for God's sake,' Dad said. 'We've lost, lads. Can't you see it? What are a few hundred against a naval platoon?' He took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his face, dabbing his watering eyes. 'I'll have no more broken heads.'

The two lads stayed behind and let him walk on. The tall one called after him, 'I'm going nowhere. *I* won't roll over.'

I followed Dad. At the front, the police stood three-deep in the mouth of the road. I reached out and grabbed his sleeve.

'Stop, Dad. Will you stop?'

He turned, looking puzzled. Dazed. Almost elderly.

'I'm asking you not to give yourself up. There's no need for it.'

'This is the right thing for my men.'

'What good will you be to them locked up? You could get six months. A year even. What will they do without you all that time?'

'They'll have Shank. There'll be others to fill my shoes.'

'And what about me?'

He let out a sharp breath, a shade off a snort. I felt pathetic, like a limpet.

'You preach unity, Dad. But you don't give an inch. You won't change – not even for your own kin. You're already thinking of the hero's welcome you'll get when you're out, aren't you? And won't it be fine to know all the fellas are raising a glass to you, praising your name while you're inside.' He flinched as if I'd spat on him and forced his way ahead. I grabbed his arm again, too hard, this time. He stumbled and let out a sharp cry.

A man in ordinary clothes was up in the window where the constable had been. I wondered how he got there. Why was he not being led away? He had the speaking trumpet and was waving a piece of paper. The only part I caught was *BBC*. A roar went up from the crowd around us. I leaned in to ask Dad if he'd heard what was said. Someone slapped him on the back and his cheekbone thumped against mine. I pulled away. He took hold of my arm to steady himself. Either side of me people were hugging. Dad kept his eyes on me. Below his ear there was a smear of

blood from my chin. He said something, but I didn't catch it. The man with the speaking trumpet was still shouting, but he might have been miming for all I could hear. I kept expecting the police to pull him away as they had Leslie. Next thing I knew, a bunch of lads had swept Dad off. He was up on shoulders. Riding a sea of waving fists and hats. I caught his crutch as it fell. We were sucked along with the flow, towards the police lines. There was a crush, people pushing forwards, then a release. I passed a policeman and a striker grappling on the floor. Another copper called to his mates to regain their line, but he was carried along even as he yelled and struggled.

I looked around me, trying to make sense of people's smiles. Their peculiar energy. A woman grabbed me and hugged. 'Why the long face?' she said. 'We've won.'

I heard, then, what the crowd were shouting. *It's off. It's off.* The strike had been called off.

Dad sent me home to burn all the papers in the back room. He said a pair of his men would come by to collect the press. Now the communists had got themselves arrested, there was an even higher chance the police would soon be on our doorstep. *Those lads are about as loyal as rabid dogs.* He didn't know how right he was about that.

I gathered all the pamphlets and brought them through to our room, careful to keep them separate from Dad's books and papers. I began with a pile of notices that read, *Towards a dictatorship of the people.* I put them into the flames in great wads and watched as the page-edges caught and bloomed, then fell away, the curls of ash not so different from dead leaves. It was all only trees after all. Strange times when you could be arrested for having in your possession a piece of paper. Certain words. Those lads might get as much as three months hard labour for that daubing and yet Churchill sewed the thread of righteous violence into the minds of young men the country over and was cheered on. I placed another wad into the fire, keeping one to read. *Britain is turning the weapons and economic mechanisms of colonialism onto its own people.* I twisted it tight to make a spill and poked it into a gap in the coals. As it burned it unwound in jerks. Besides the sheets they'd printed, mucky and unevenly inked, there were other, more professional-looking papers. A thick pamphlet entitled, *The Great Hypocrisy*, priced at sixpence. I leaned against the

warming bricks of the fireplace and flicked through its pages. *Even the most violent attacks of the workers upon the bourgeoisie are as nothing compared to the systematic, torturous violence, the Chinese 'death by a thousand cuts', which the bourgeoisie inflicts in the name of economic supremacy. It is the very alienation of violence, its integration to the State alongside the holy tenets of property and nationhood, that lends such insidious force.* I picked the stitching from the spine to make it easier to burn, then sat and stared into the fire. I was exhausted. I was worried about Dad.

He had fought his way down from the shoulders of those men. His face had a sick, grey pallor and it was more than just the pain of being set on his ankle. I'd heard him talking to the man who brought the radio transcript. One of his members. He had them listening on a rota. Dad had grabbed the front of the man's shirt and pulled him close. *Who gave notice first? The government or the TUC?* He'd shaken the transcript under his nose. I'd never seen him talk to one of his men like that. *Who gave the bloody word?*

As the papers burned, I must've dozed for my mind was roaming when I heard the banging at the front door. I ran down to save Mrs Ridley the trouble. To my relief, it was not police, but the men Dad had promised.

'It's up here,' I said. 'Mind this step.'

In the back room I watched one of the men unload the letters from the plate and throw them into the tray, not bothering to sort by the alphabet. He had the banana fingers of a gardener and they were soon smeared with ink. His mate gathered up the bottles and rollers and tools.

'Did my father give you any message for me?'

He wiped his inky fingertips on his overalls and straightened his cap. 'Not that I know of. Johnny?'

The one with the clinking bag of bottles shook his head.

'Do you happen to know if he'll be home tonight?'

'No, miss. If I see him shall I tell him you were asking?'

I hesitated. Shook my head.

He grappled with the press to get a hold on it. I went ahead to open the front door and flattened myself against the wall to let him pass. I didn't envy him carrying that thing all the way to town. He was red in the cheeks just getting it down the stairs. I watched them walk, stopping to rest on the sea wall after a hundred yards. It

was getting dark. I looked across the water, where the navy ship had disappeared, swallowed by one or other of the docks.

At eleven o'clock, there was still no sign of Dad. Though I knew he'd likely be holding talks into the night, I was anxious for him, anxious to know what was happening. I opened his chest and searched the neatly folded clothes for a jumper he sometimes wore on a cooler evening. It was excuse enough, I thought, to go and take it to him.

The club was in darkness, the doors to the bar bolted, shutters up. Was it really necessary, I wondered, to keep staying at different houses now the strike had been called off? And whose house might he have gone to? Surely he wouldn't impose on his men, but there'd be just as much risk going to Shank's house as his own. The quiet was uneasy after all that fuss.

There was nothing for it but to go back and wait and hope he might come home. I'd left my things at The Cart and Bay, but it was gone midnight and the landlady had a curfew. I found myself looking round corners and up side roads as I returned to the promenade. By Sweet Briar Park, I stopped. There were lights on the dock. Not the bright windows of the factories and warehouses, but streetlamps dotted and two berthed ships illuminated. For work, I supposed – for unloading. As I stared, thinking how much it looked like the clustered jewels in a crown, I noticed something pale in my line of sight. A billowing rag tied to the railings at the far end of the park. As I drew closer, I saw it was a man in his shirtsleeves. Closer still and I fancied it was Dad. I stepped quietly past the box hedges and the benches dedicated to the dead. He was leaning over the edge, his head hanging so low he seemed to end at the shoulders. It troubled me he didn't look up, not even when I spoke. I touched his arm and he looked at me like a man drawn from sleep. Confused.

'What are you doing out here?'

He handed me a notice. I stepped away, into the pool of light, to read it.

Fellow Trade Unionists:

The General Strike has ended. It has not failed. It had secured the resumption of negotiations in the Coal Industry, and the continuance, during negotiations, of the financial assistance given by the Government.

You came out together, in accordance with the instructions of the Executive of your Unions. Return together in their instructions, as and when they are given. Some employers will approach you as individuals with the demand that you should accept conditions different from those obtaining before the stoppage began. SIGN NO INDIVIDUAL AGREEMENT, CONSULT YOUR OWN UNION OFFICIALS AND STAND BY THEIR INSTRUCTIONS. YOUR UNION WILL PROTECT YOU AND WILL INSIST THAT ALL AGREEMENTS PREVIOUSLY IN FORCE SHALL REMAIN INTACT.

The Trade Union Movement has demonstrated its unity. That unity remains unimpaired. Stick to your unions.

'So it's official. You won.'

'Read it again.'

'It says it here. You won the subsidy.'

'It's not right. You must see it's not right.'

'What do you mean?'

'No one has ever won a strike and announced it with, *We have not failed*. All that stuff about consulting your officials. If they'd made a national agreement there'd be no talk of looking for protection. You don't need protection in that way when a strike is won. It's all part of the negotiations.'

'You can't have lost?'

He was staring over the railings, down the sheer edge of the concrete to the estuary below. It was high and running fast. The surface was trembling, pocked and rippled as if trampled by a fleeing herd. He brought his head to rest on his clasped fists.

'What have they done?'

In all my life I had never seen my father cry. Not even at my mother's funeral. At first I thought he might be laughing, the way his breath juddered, but then I saw his twisted mouth. I put my arms around him, awkwardly, from the side. Pressed my cheek to his ear. He stayed exactly as he was, leaning heavy on the railings, every muscle rigid. I felt his ribs racking beneath my arms and held tighter. Like a barrel hoop, I would not let him split apart.

In the end, easier breaths came. Longer, softer. He made a tiny movement to show he wished to be free. I let him go and we walked in silence towards the park exit, but before we reached it, he lowered himself onto a bench.

'What will you do?' I asked, sitting beside him.

'The union will have to wait until the truth comes out. Wait to find out how hard we've been hit.' He stared ahead, at the glimmering docks. 'I shall stand down.'

'They'll need you more than ever, now. If they've done as badly as you think, if they've really secured no conditions, you'll have to fight it locally.'

'How can I, Alma? How can I pretend to lead them? I asked those men to put their livelihood on the line. I told them we had strength in numbers. *We cannot be hurt so long as we act as one.* They did everything I asked of them and their good faith has been betrayed. If it's as bad as I suspect, every promise I made has been turned into a lie.'

'It's not your fault.'

'Who will see it that way? They don't know Bevin, do they? Much less Bromley, Pugh or *Thomas*.' He spat the name. 'It's me that's been giving the orders, sending them out round after round. Geeing them up, greasing their wounds, putting them back on their feet still reeling. Thought you'd had enough, lads? Well, there's plenty more fight to come.' He gave a sorrowful shake of his head. 'How can I call them out again? Ask them to go on living like paupers, half-starving their kids? For what? For a mirage. *Solidarity*. Solidarity. Just another word to keep the working man in line.'

I didn't like to hear him talk that way. It wasn't him. I touched his elbow but he shrugged me off.

'It's not solidarity if it doesn't reach all the way to the top.'

'You know you can't abandon them now.'

'There is no can't anymore. Yesterday, it was *we can't fail*. We'd just called out the second wave. Stronger than ever. Look at us today. We can fail. *I've failed them*. They'll think they've been toyed with – and who's to say they haven't?'

At the far end of the path there was another streetlamp, pouring green onto the leaves of a sapling tree. It was the only thing that grew above elbow height in this patch of grass and hedges and floral borders. It needed more trees. More shelter. Anything to interrupt the bleak sweep of the estuary and the great black cavity of the marshes beyond. I was reminded of a time we'd come to a jetty nearby to fish. A

friend had loaned Dad a couple of rods and we'd raided this park for worms, then sat out all day in the cold drizzle, catching nothing. I'd whined and sulked from lunchtime on, but he'd insisted. We oughtn't go home without a fish to give Mum. Even a tiddler would do. Something to show for our efforts. We stayed out long past supper, long after it was too dim to see if there was bait left on the hook. Knowing nothing about fishing, he kept trying different ways, leaving it trailing, jiggling the line, casting it far, casting it near. I had a vision of him standing on the jetty, one rod tucked in each armpit, pipe between his teeth and his fists in his pockets for warmth. He'd kept his chest square to the river like a youth spoiling for a pub fight.

I folded the notice and gave it back.

'The men love you. You'll have to tell the truth, that's all. Tell them you did it all in good faith.'

He gave me a queer look, a twisted smile. 'And do you imagine that will work? Would it have worked, do you suppose, with you and your sister?'

I pretended not to hear, running my fingers over the loose weave of my bandage, mapping the tenderness beneath. When I moved my thumb the pain kicked into life, sharp as a dog bite.

'Would you have stayed if I'd protested my innocence?' He asked. 'Would it have made the slightest difference?'

'Let's not talk about that now. It's water under the bridge.'

'Not for me. You think I failed your mother.'

'I shouldn't have said anything.'

'I'm glad you did, for now I know what you think of me. I understand now, why you and Rose turned so cold. So sarcastic with your old Dad. You grew up, started thinking for yourselves, and you decided it was all my fault.'

'Don't be daft.'

'*You think* I ought to have looked after her better.' He saw me open my mouth to protest and raised a finger. 'That's what you said! You think I let her down. Well, so do I sometimes... God knows I've had long enough to dwell on it. And imagine how it was for me, being locked in that hole and finding out she was gone. Your mother, though...' He tipped his chin to the sky, reminding me of Peter seeking his next breath. 'Put it this way, when I first had my accident, my ankle, your mother was seven months pregnant with you. We'd been saving for ages – saving for a cradle, for the napkins, all those things you need for a baby. She had a list. First two

weeks of me being laid up, the savings were gone. We didn't panic. We felt sure the compensation would come. Of course, it never did. The accident was *my* fault. Unnecessary risk, though I was following my orders to the last word.' He glanced at me, looking vexed. Impatient to get to the point. 'Anyhow, by then, it's only eight weeks until you're due to arrive and we haven't a penny and no sign of any coming in. Your Nanny Gladys is bringing us meals, God rest her soul, but she can't stretch to more than that. Your mother – heavy as a cow in calf – she decides she's not going to have a baby without a cradle to put it in. I wake up one morning to find my breakfast under a plate on the bedside. She's gone. I spend all day worrying what's happened to her. I can't put weight on my leg, have to keep it raised, so I stay put. I lie there feeling like a broken spoke. When she finally comes home, she's pink from the tips of her fingers to her elbows and her arms are scratched to bits. She's been picking blackcurrants with Roma gypsies out near Hazelway. They're the only ones who would take her so ripe. I don't like it, of course. I try to put her off, but will she hear me? She will not. She keeps on going, every day, weekends, right up until the day you're due and then a whole extra week because you came late.' He pulled his cap off his head and placed it in his lap. By the lamplight I could see the sweat stains in the scarlet lining, a faint line where it touched his forehead. 'That's the kind of woman your mother was. She wasn't the kind you stayed home to babysit. She wouldn't have had it.'

I wish I remembered her better, remembered more of her, not just the things that made me fearful or uneasy, and the daft little things that stuck in my young mind. Listening to Dad talk, I felt a longing to know her the way he did. A sort of jealousy.

The distant sound of a pianola cranking into life drew my eye to the houses behind us. I could see nothing, only the glow of a side street. Somewhere a woman shrieked. Men began to sing, loud voices loose with beer. How strange to sit in that empty park, the dock lights shining out on the estuary, music and laughter drifting on the warm breeze. Everything appearing right and well. Dad turned, drawn from this thoughts by the sound, the din of a tune pedalled too fast.

'They're celebrating,' he said.

Appendix 2: Chapter summary

Chapter 1:

Alma is evicted from the butcher's shop where she once lived and worked with her late husband, Bill. She seeks shelter with her estranged father, Herb.

Chapter 2:

Alma goes job hunting without success. She and her father are not getting on well.

Chapter 3:

A memory – Bill's best friend, Dick, tells Alma how both men lost substantial sums of money through speculation.

Chapter 4:

Alma watches Special constables being trained in preparation for the General Strike. She visits Dick to ask him for a job.

Chapter 5:

Alma meets her downstairs neighbour, Mrs Ridley. At the Working Men's Club (WMC), she witnesses her father practising a speech. She goes to work for Dick for the first time. That evening, she meets a tramp (Emlyn) on the promenade.

Chapter 6:

A memory – going to the Empire Exhibition at Wembley with Bill, Dick and Irene.

Chapter 7:

May Day fair and rally. Herb reveals to Alma that two communists are staying in the house to hide from the police. At the rally, she meets Miss Havensleigh who asks her to volunteer for the soup kitchen. After a chance meeting with Emlyn, Alma discovers he intends to blackleg once the strike has begun.

Chapter 8:

Day one. Alma works at the soup kitchen where she meets some of the wives of the strikers. She is keen to get involved in strike action, but her father asks her to stay in the kitchen. Alma sees an advertisement for blackleg labour on the docks.

Chapter 9:

A memory – her mother's post-partum bleeding, which caused her death.

Chapter 10:

Day two. Alma gets into a political argument with two of the striker's wives, Winifred and Nelly. Emlyn visits the soup kitchen and tells Alma how he tried to desert the army during WW1. At work, Dick suggests Alma could move into his rooms. Mrs Ridley's son, Peter, has diphtheria but the family has no money for the doctor. Herb assures Alma that a collection will be made to help them.

Chapter 11:

Day three. Alma crosses the picket line to scavenge for coal. She meets Emlyn and a fellow blackleg, Solomon, who complains of institutional racism in the trade unions. Alma and Emlyn break into the abattoir after-hours so she can teach Emlyn how to butcher properly.

Chapter 12:

A memory – as a child, Alma listened to the public speakers at Sweet Briar Park.

Chapter 13:

Day four. Alma goes fundraising with Miss Havensleigh and witnesses the Special Officers picking a fight with a drunk. Later, she returns to work for Dick, but he has become more insistent and she must turn him down for good. Against her better judgement, Alma gives Mrs Ridley money for a drink. Peter's health is worse. Herb does not come home and in his absence Alma attempts to persuade the communists to leave.

Chapter 14:

Day five. At the soup kitchen Alma asks Herb again if something can be done for the Ridleys and he tells her it's in hand. Alma goes with Emlyn to slaughter a pig for some local strikers. There is a street party and Emlyn gives her a book of poetry. She arrives home to discover Peter Ridley has died.

Chapter 15:

Day six. Alma visits Mrs Ridley to offer her condolences and discovers that, contrary to her father's assurances, there was no collection. She attempts to gain blackleg work at the abattoir; however, she is not strong enough to lift the hindquarters and damages her hand in the attempt. Emlyn takes her to his vardo, where they spend the night together.

Chapter 16:

A memory – of her mother's hands, her cheap wedding ring.

Chapter 17:

Day seven. Emlyn tells Alma the navy are on their way to break the strike. Alma goes to the Union Sports Day to tell her father, but lacks the courage to admit having blacklegged. Later at the WMC, men begin to arrive with injuries after an altercation with police and Specials.

Chapter 18:

A memory – how it felt to work as a butcher alongside Bill.

Chapter 19:

Day eight. Alma finds Herb at a public meeting. She confesses to blacklegging and tells him about the imminent arrival of the navy, but he appears not to believe her. She goes to the soup kitchen and makes an announcement calling for a mass picket to prevent the navy breaking the strike.

Chapter 20:

Day nine. Alma and Herb are caught up in the mass picket, which soon becomes unmanageable. As police begin to make arrests, news travels through the crowd that the strike has been called off. The strikers believe they've won. That evening, Alma finds her father grieving the loss of the strike. She does her best to comfort him.