

PROLOGUE

October 2, 2010

The voice is brittle. Raw. The words sound as if they are being scratched into sandpaper with a coffin nail.

‘ . . . yrja alttawaqquf . . . yrja wade hadd laha . . . ich habe keine informationen . . . ’

The sounds rasp up and out of the old man, grinding into the dead air around his face. It seems that some invisible force is pushing on his chest. The utterances spew onto the front of his paisley pyjamas. They froth onto his stubbled, red-veined chin. They spill into the bristly caverns of his big pink ears and rain upon a woollen blanket that has taken on the appearance of an unwrapped shroud.

‘What’s he saying?’ asks the elderly lady in the high-backed chair beside the bed. She is in her early eighties. Beneath her tights, her legs are swaddled in bandages. Her feet are clad in mauve slippers, cookie-cutter holes snipped out to accommodate matching bunions. She wears a pleated skirt and pale blue jumper. She has a pleasant face and kind eyes.

‘It’s almost sad. You feel so helpless. They look at you like it’s your fault – like you should be able to make it stop. You end up feeling angry at yourself and at them and then at the whole world. You sometimes wish it would all just end.’

DAVID MARK

‘The whole world?’ asks her companion, who stands at the foot of the bed and leans on the mattress, her hands planted either side of the old man’s feet.

The lady in the chair watches her companion’s mouth as she speaks. She is deaf in one ear and has grown used to reading lips these past few years. She has a habit of imitating the words of the speaker while they talk so it seems that the room contains a faint echo.

‘The pain,’ she explains. ‘The suffering.’

‘Seems a silly wish to me. You don’t get to pick the bits that you like in life. You agree to the whole lot. Pain and suffering are part of it. And if you want to know what he’s saying, he’s asking for it to stop. Asking for the pain to end.’

‘It will soon,’ says her companion.

‘Too bloody soon. His Arabic’s terrible. German’s good. Wherever he is in his mind, he’s not having a good time. Wouldn’t be eligible to serve these days. You talk in your sleep and you’re out of the service. There were experiments with shock treatment to try and prevent it, back in the ’50s. I read the files. Horrible.’

‘I do wish you wouldn’t tell me these things,’ says the woman in the chair, shuddering. ‘Hands hurting, are they?’

Her friend scowls then looks down at her hands as if they are enemies. Her knuckles are twisted and swollen so that her fingers spread out and twist like the roots of an ancient hawthorn. ‘Anybody who tells you pain is all in the mind can take a running jump,’ says the woman. ‘Pain is in the bloody nerve endings.’

Despite the suffering they cause her, the woman still wears her rings. There is a diamond and a gold wedding band on the third finger of her left hand, and a modern, Aztec-style twist

THE BURYING GROUND

of silver on her thumb. She has long white hair and a thin, sharply angled face. Her eyes are lapis-blue. She wears a fitted white jacket over a clinging blue top and smart, neatly-pressed trousers. She is a handful of years younger than her friend but could easily pass for sixty. She looks younger still when she smiles.

‘I should have switched to a typewriter,’ she mutters, sighing. ‘Or a computer. Writing by hand will kill your joints. Damn things.’ She glances at her friend, an incongruous and impish smile chasing the anger and sadness from her face. ‘They’re not nearly as ghastly as your legs.’

‘Ooh, you’ve a nasty side to you,’ smiles her friend. ‘You could twang a raw nerve like a violin string, you could. My legs don’t hurt. They’re just annoying.’

‘They’re bloody horrible to look at.’

‘I know. Our John says they look like those sausages you get abroad.’

‘More like a pair of nylons stuffed with haggis.’

‘I’ve never liked haggis.’

‘You tried it?’

‘No.’

The silence stretches out for a moment. Neither feels compelled to talk. They have been friends for a long time.

The younger woman screws up her face. Tastes the air. ‘It’s supposed to smell of disinfectant and boiled cabbage in places like this. I can’t smell anything at all.’

‘It’s nice. I enjoyed my last stay.’

‘You’re not meant to enjoy it, Flick. It’s a hospital.’

‘Not really. It reminds me of that B&B where I stayed when

DAVID MARK

I was down in Bournemouth. Nice people. Lots of chatter. A few people who don't know what day it is . . .'

'Sounds lovely.'

'Aye well, it was good enough for us,' says Flick. 'I tried abroad. Didn't like it.'

'There's a lot of it, I've told you that before.'

'Well I didn't like the bit I saw. We've been through this before, Cordelia.'

Cordelia rolls her eyes. She looks back at the small, frail figure in the bed. She fancies she could pick him up and carry him and he would weigh no more than a sack full of bones.

'Shall we wake him?' asks Flick, cautiously. 'It seems wrong, somehow. I know we've come a long way but it was different just talking. It seems wrong being here. I don't feel like I should.'

Cordelia scratches her forearm and the scent of her fruity, floral perfume fills the small, comfortable room. This is a pleasing space in which to die. The walls are a sunshine yellow and hung with pictures of local landscapes. There is a TV mounted on a stand in the corner of the room and though the curtains are closed, the window by the far wall usually offers a view of the front garden. Cordelia would like to open the curtains. Outside, a light rain is falling from a grey-blue sky. She enjoys such weather. It reminds her of home.

'It's now or not at all,' says Cordelia, quietly. 'The nurse said if we can steer him onto the right path, all sorts of recollections might pour out. He might have fooled them into thinking he doesn't know who he is but that's only because they don't know the truth of him. He's been so many different people it's no surprise he's in a muddle. But here, at the end, I have a feeling

THE BURYING GROUND

the centre of him, the truth of him, will want to make itself heard.'

'I don't know if I want to know. Not really. Not now we're here.'

'We've waited half a bloody century, Flick.'

'But look at him. Whoever he was, he's not him any more. People change . . .'

'We can't make him suffer any more than he already is,' says Cordelia, gently. 'Whatever he can see in his dreams, he's in his own hell. He would thank us for the reprieve.'

Flick turns to look at him. She seems to be considering her own mortality, her own mounting frailty. 'Don't ever let me get like that,' she says.

'You already are,' says Cordy, and her face splits into a smile that her old friend shares.

They take a moment. Pause; revelling in this last, final instant in which they can still walk away. They are two figures upon a clifftop, leaning forward into the wind, held upright by a gale that could drop without warning. Then Cordelia walks to the side of the bed and leans over the decrepit figure who fits and cries and prays in his tortured sleep.

'Wake up,' she says, and closes her fingers around his nose, flinching a little at the contact and the pain the action causes joints. 'We have questions. You have answers. And if you keep pretending, I'll bury you. I'll put you in the ground, just like the body in the blue suit.'

Beneath her hand, the old man coughs. His breath is warm upon Cordelia's wrist. She applies more pressure and his fragile body twists. Only when he seems about to burst do his eyes slide open.

DAVID MARK

He looks up at the white-haired, blue-eyed figure, lit from behind by a glowing golden bulb.

He smiles the smile of a man who had expected to wake in Hell.

CORDELIA

October, 1967

I was lying in a grave the first time I met Felicity. It was the day the storm came. The clouds were a mound of dead doves; all grey and purple, silver and muddy white. Made me think of foxgloves pulped against stone. It would be a week before we saw blue again. A week before the clouds rained themselves out. The Tyne rose six feet that fortnight. They had to evacuate half of Haltwhistle. Bones rose from the churchyards like worms.

I wasn't uncomfortable, lying there, looking like something the earth had winkled out. It was out of the wind, protected by the branches of the big laurel tree that stood sentinel over the oldest headstones. I liked such spaces, at the time. I liked containment. Manageable environments. I would have dug a hole and crawled inside it if I knew anybody well enough to shovel the dirt back on top of me.

I breathed in. Damp grass. Mud. That high, meat and camphor whiff of unloved furs. I experienced the sudden sensation of coming back to myself. I realized I had drifted off again. Not asleep exactly – just absent. It felt like I was dying in increments, dwindling into nothingness, like a name in an unread book. What had I been doing? I flexed my fingers and felt the reassuring weight of the novel, sitting on my belly in the place where Stefan

DAVID MARK

used to like to plonk himself; a jockey on his mother's belly, giggling while I jiggled him . . .

I adjusted my position. My clothes were sticking to my skin. Grass prickled at the skin of my wrists. A long-necked daisy had grown between the fingers of my left hand. I wondered how long it would take for the earth to claim me. I had a vision of myself, semi-consumed, a risen hump of grass, cow parsley and buttercups, split into sods with the gravedigger's spade. I shook the image away before it took hold. I found myself staring out at the little grey mausoleum that stood at the rear of the churchyard. Were I a painter, this would be the section of the landscape that I would have chosen to paint. Cosy, in a Gothic sort of way. I envied the building its indelible pocket of gloom, shielded as it was by the purple leaves of an overhanging tree. Moss grew on its walls, as if the stone was a living thing that somehow provided nutrients. I had seen swifts flitting in and out of the elaborate eaves.

Upper Denton. That was the name of the village. A mile south of Gilsland. A place at the edge of things. It was shaped like a crucifix – the cross section formed by a straight grey road that ran parallel to the train tracks. Three houses at the top of the village and a couple more sloping away down the hill. Ragged outbuildings and crumbling barns. Then the church. Beyond that lay the river and the trees and endless miles of nothing at all.

'Oh Jesus, Joseph and Mary, I thought you were a ghost!'

I didn't move. Didn't make a sound. I'd heard her approaching. Lain still as a housebrick and hoped she would pass right on by.

'Are you well? Oh my goodness, I'm shaking!'

THE BURYING GROUND

She was one of them. A local girl. One of the tribe. A girl from the borderlands, the place between pages; tucked into the margins between two northern counties and a stone's throw from the Scottish border. A Gilsland girl. As much a part of the landscape as the cow shit and tumbledown stone walls.

She'd jumped like a startled cat when she saw me. Literally jumped. Both feet off the floor and one hand rising to her face. The other held a small bouquet of carnations, which she was crushing against her damp jacket like a child with an ice cream.

'I'm so sorry . . .' she began.

I stopped her with a shake of my head. I couldn't abide feebleness. Already I felt I knew what she was. Could imagine her running a neat little home, peeling potatoes, picking elderberries, scrubbing medicated shampoo into some pale-skinned little ruffian's hair. I drank her in a little more. She was older than me. Mid-thirties, though with the fashions in that place it was never easy to be sure. Women started dressing like their grandparents as soon as they pushed out a child.

'You gave me quite a start,' she said, all fussy. Her accent was local, a low, self-conscious marbling of Geordie and Scot. 'Have you fallen? Can you hear me? Are you not well? I'm Mrs . . . well, I'm Felicity, really . . .'

I probably shrugged. I certainly didn't have the energy to smile. Just looked at her, over the top of my book, and wondered if she was going to say any more. I didn't want company. Hadn't wanted company in a long while. Didn't even know if my sore throat and cracked lips would allow for conversation.

'It'll be Mrs Hemlock, am I right?'

She wasn't going to accept silence, that much was clear. But

DAVID MARK

I wasn't about to jump up and thank her for acknowledging my existence. I was enjoying being rude. Made me feel like I was back at university and so full of anger and ambition that it sometimes made me want to tear at my clothes and skin. I was like that, then. Maybe I still am.

I shifted my position a little and managed a tight smile. The action felt unnatural to me, like putting on a dress that used to fit and finding it suddenly uncomfortable and restrictive. The air felt wrong around me. It was as if there was burning metal on the breeze. I didn't know if I was too hot or too cold; a wet baby beneath a thick woollen sheet.

'I was just enjoying the quiet,' I said, aware that my mouth opened more precisely around my words than her's did. I sounded posher. Richer. Better bred.

'In a graveyard?' she asked, looking baffled at the notion. 'On your own?'

'Nothing to be scared of in a graveyard,' I said, in the tone of voice that had always made people think of me as a little fond of my own opinions. 'There's nothing here that can hurt you. We're the only people in history to think of bones as unclean things. There are cultures where people dig up their ancestors every year. Dress them and take them for a celebration. We're the ones who decided there should be a dividing line between life and death. Other people think of it in shades of grey.'

She nodded. Gave a tight smile. It was a well-meaning gesture, the sort you give a child who has just drawn a picture of an eight-legged cat. 'That's nice.'

We both fell to silence. Something buzzed, fatly, by my ear.

THE BURYING GROUND

I felt the tickle of tiny creatures scurrying across my skin. At length, she tucked her elbows in to her sides and drew a circle around me with her eyes. 'That's a grave you're laying on.'

'I know,' I said, oddly pleased. 'Victoria Asbrey. Died in 1717, aged 100, though I have my doubts that they kept proper records. She was probably much younger.'

'She was a Reiver,' said Felicity, jerking her chin in the direction of the grave. It was a mannerism I associated with men – hands in their overalls and giving directions with grunts. 'She was a hundred when she died. Says so on the headstone, look.'

'A Border Reiver?' I said, and winced at having asked a silly question. I wanted this woman to know how clever I was. I had always needed to be the brightest in the room.

'Rough people,' explained Felicity, quietly, in case they overheard and took offence. 'Fighters. This whole area is Reiver country. Used to be, anyways, though if you throw a rock in the air it'll hit somebody with a surname from one of the old clans.'

'I've studied the Reivers,' I said.

'How?' she asked.

'I'm sorry?'

'How did you study them? They're long gone.'

'Read about them, I mean. In books.' I waved the novel I was reading. It was probably an Orwell. I liked Orwell a lot in those days.

She continued to stand there, staring at me. Now she had recovered herself she seemed disinclined to move on. Behind her the sky was an ugly grey, like wet limestone. Her coat was buttoned up to the top but she looked cold, as if she was suppressing a tremble.

DAVID MARK

'I'm not a big reader,' she said. 'My husband likes cowboy books. And films. I try to read but I fall asleep.'

'You're reading the wrong books,' I said, primly.

'Yes?' She seemed interested in the idea. 'You can tell me which are the right ones.'

I gave her a little more attention. Angled my head, enquiring whether she wanted any more of my time. The wind played with the long grass. The birdsong was shrill, a plaintive whistle, like a drowning sailor calling for help.

'Do you know all the occupants?' I asked, waving generally in the direction of the next headstone. It was a sandstone affair, its letters semi-obsured by wind and rain and time.

'Not all,' she said. 'Most of these are before my time though I recognize a lot of the surnames. Mam's in a family plot, you see. All the newer burials these days are back in Gilsland. St Mary Magdalene. The new church, we call it, though it's been up more than a hundred years.'

'Your family's from here, then.'

'Oh, aye. Dad says they built the place around us. Reckons we helped put up the Roman wall. I'm Denton, now, I suppose, but I hope I'm still Gilsland.'

I didn't let myself laugh. Gilsland was roughly a mile back down the railway line – a village of a few hundred inhabitants clinging to the remnants of Hadrian's Wall. Its only other claim to fame was a sulphurous spring, rumoured to produce long life among those who held their nose and drank its waters. The village had experienced a boom two decades back when men from the ministry arrived and declared they were going to transform countless acres of virginal peat bog into a modern RAF

THE BURYING GROUND

base. They did so, at colossal expense. Brought wealth and workers to the place. Tested the rockets that might one day have flown to the moon. Broke the sound barrier so often that the locals got used to their windows rattling. Then the government lost interest. The plug was pulled on the space race and the workers went away. The money that locals had earned in the good times was sunk into subsidising family farms and paying the rent on properties they could no longer afford. People stopped visiting the tourist sites. Dr Beeching even closed the railway station. Gilsland began to fade.

‘You’ll maybe know Dolly,’ said my new friend.

‘Dolly?’ I asked. This was the most I had spoken in months. I was torn between craving a return to the silence, and continuing to lose myself in the warm comforts of her inane prattle.

‘Little woman,’ she explained. ‘Lives in the house by the turn. She’s got normal hands but no arms. Do you know who I’m talking about? She’s a dinner lady at the school. She said you’d had a natter a few weeks back. You said you might come and give a talk at the school.’

I had no memory of the conversation. All I could recall was a short, stout woman who had said something about me coming to the school and talking to the pupils about what it was like to be from somewhere other than there.

‘Would you want to talk to the children?’ asked Felicity. ‘Your neighbour, Mr Parker – he talks to the schools. Our Fairfax is a regular too. You might have something worth hearing.’

I considered my new acquaintance properly. She had a nice face. Her teeth were white and even and she was wearing no make-up. Her hair was the brown of varnished wood. She was

DAVID MARK

wearing clumpy brown shoes and her skirt reached past her knee. I would never have spoken to her had she not spoken to me first. I'd have laughed at her type at university. Would have sneered into my drink and made fun.

'I'm not sure I'd have anything worth hearing,' I said. 'I don't know the area. Not really. And I'm a bit lost, to tell you the truth.'

'Lost? Like, you don't know the way home?'

I wished it were that simple. I wanted to tell her how it felt to be me. How it felt to be bereaved beyond enduring; to have one's insides scraped out with a spoon like a turnip carved out for Halloween.

'What's your family name?' I asked, out of forced politeness. 'I'll check the headstones.'

'Eagles,' she said. 'Though I've married a Goose. There aren't many women can say they've gone from an Eagle to a Goose and never flown. My John says I'm bird-brained, but he doesn't mean it nasty.'

She waited for me to smile at her joke and I obliged. I lowered my book. Marked the page. Readjusted myself against the hard stone.

'You're from the Zealand place,' she said. 'Farm over the river. Mrs Winslow's.'

I nodded, watching as her features realigned themselves.

'I was so sorry to hear about your son,' she said, looking down at the ground. I think her lip even quivered. 'Horrible. Just so sad.'

I kept staring at her. I think I did it unkindly, so as to make her feel uncomfortable. I was full of venom, back then. Angry

THE BURYING GROUND

at everything. Hateful and spiteful. I was surrounded by so much blackness it felt like I was swimming through ink.

‘Thank you,’ I said, quietly, though my expression didn’t change.

‘How are you coping?’ she asked, putting her head on her own shoulder so she looked briefly like an injured chicken. ‘I wanted to come and bring you something but John said you’d no doubt have staff for that sort of thing. Are you on the mend?’

I gave a short, harsh laugh. It was a ridiculous question. My child was dead. The child I’d changed my life for. The child I’d given up everything to keep. Every day it felt as though I were wearing damp sheets around my skin and that my throat was being slowly dammed with smooth, cold stones. My existence was sorrow; my every thought an agony.

‘Not well,’ I said, and my face twitched. Just one rebellious muscle, high on my cheek, pulsing like a tiny heartbeat.

‘How old was he?’

‘Just under two.’

‘Awful,’ said Felicity. She sniffed, smearing the heel of her hand across her nose and eyes and shaking her head at herself as if in reprimand.

Tears have always undone me. I’m not one for crying. I can’t see the sense in it. I never feel any better for having squeezed out a few tears. But other people’s weeping is impossible to endure. I find myself overcome by pity. I pulled myself up without thinking about it. Before I knew it I was standing in front of her and offering a handkerchief which she took with a grateful smile.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said, shaking her head again. ‘It’s just so sad. I thought of you, up that place on your own, having to go through it all. I cried a bucketful when my husband told me.’

DAVID MARK

‘Do I know him?’ I asked. ‘Your husband?’

‘No, no. But your neighbours, Mr and Mrs Parker, they let people know what had gone on. It’s a small place, even with the airfield and people passing through. People hear things quickly.’

I thought of the Parkers. Her, with her serious face and eyes like Roman coins. Him, with his bad wig and his hunched shoulders in a suit three sizes too big. They’d descended on me after the doctor left. Could they do anything? Did I need help? Was there anything they could get me or anybody they could contact? I’d wanted none of it. They’d never taken the trouble to get to know me or my boy while he was alive and there was no chance I would let them have a part of his death.

‘Is your son buried here?’ asked Felicity, quizzically.

‘He was cremated,’ I said. ‘I scattered him places he liked.’ I gestured around me, remembering his little plump legs kicking at the air, laying on his back and smiling, gummily, with a face he had yet to grow into, on the brown summer grass at my side. ‘I scattered him here.’

‘Cremated?’ asked Felicity. There was something like disapproval there. Something else, too.

‘It felt right.’

‘People get buried around here. I’m surprised I didn’t hear. That sort of thing can be a scandal.’

I felt my expression change. Forced myself not to let the temper out. I didn’t know this woman well enough to give a damn about upsetting her but I knew that if I started shouting, I might never stop.

‘It’s nobody else’s business,’ I said. ‘He was my son.’

‘I’m sorry,’ said Felicity, suddenly looking aghast at having

THE BURYING GROUND

spoken so freely. 'Truly. You and your husband must have been through so much. And with him being away so often . . .'

I nodded, sparing her the embarrassment of having to finish the lie.

'I'm Felicity,' she said. 'Mrs Goose, really.'

'Felicity,' I said, surprised. 'I knew a Felicity at university. Flick, we called her. Do you get Flick?'

Her face broke into a beam. 'Never! No, I get the full title, or Phyllis, to those who think the name's too fancy. Flick! Well, I never.'

'I'm Cordelia,' I said. 'From *King Lear*.'

'Where's that?' she asked, interested.

'No, the play. Shakespeare. The name's from there.'

'Oh,' she said, and did not seem to realize she should be embarrassed at her lack of knowledge. 'Mrs Hemlock, yes?'

'I'm fine with Cordelia. I haven't got used to the Hemlock yet.'

'It's funny, isn't it? Having a new name. I still get mine wrong and I've been married thirteen years.'

'And your husband?'

'John. Works in Carlisle for the corporation. Two children. James and Brian. Brian's a little so-and-so. Could charm the skin off an apple. You've probably seen him in your garden. He knows you've got goosegog bushes and he's the sort to help himself.'

'Goosegogs?'

'Gooseberries. Mrs Winslow's father planted them years back. They still yield?'

I looked at her like she was speaking a foreign language. She started talking quickly then, as if to spare me the embarrassment of not knowing.

DAVID MARK

‘Grand old place, the Zealand Farm. Went there when I was little. Day out with the school, I think. Mrs Winslow played the piano for us. She was already on her own by then. Grand old woman. Strong as an ox. Worked until she couldn’t stand and then took to her bed and gave orders the rest of her days. Shame her son couldn’t take it on but I’m sure your husband’s going to do right by it. Must get lonely up there though. Cold, too. A bugger to heat, I’m guessing . . .’

I let her talk. Stefan had been dead seven months. I don’t think I’d exchanged more than a handful of words with another soul in that time. I wrote letters to family but couldn’t bring myself to read their replies. I gorged myself on food and drink or starved myself as my mood dictated. My face had begun to look unhealthy, like meat left out in warm weather. When I did take the trouble to brush my hair I would find whole clumps of it wrapped around the brush. If I dressed myself in more than a blanket it was in Cranham’s discarded clothes – big, patterned shirts with extravagant cuffs and collars; rugby shorts so big I could fit my whole body through one leg-hole. I floated around the house like a leaf on the breeze, wafting into empty rooms and nudging against the great thick walls and ancient bannisters; knocking pictures askew with careless movements, hugging myself in the dark behind thick, dusty curtains; cuddling my knees in front of a dead fire.

It took me an effort of colossal will to emerge into fresh air. Took small walks to the pretty places Stefan and I had enjoyed. Dragged myself down muddy tracks and over damp wooden stiles to look upon waterfalls and deep pools of whisky-coloured water; breathlessly clawing my way up steep riverbanks

THE BURYING GROUND

to stare at landscapes that had made my baby smile; mosaics of so many different greens and browns; the houses and farms arranged as if a giant hand had scattered them across the landscape.

‘... but you went to university, you say?’ asked Felicity, when she finished a lengthy monologue on the various people who had showed an interest in the Winslow place before Cranham had bought it.

‘Classics,’ I said, and realized I might have to add a bit more. ‘Nuffield. Oxford.’

‘Oxford? That’s a good one, yes?’

I smiled, not unkindly. ‘It is, yes.’

‘They let women go, do they?’

I let my surprise show. ‘Why wouldn’t they?’

‘Don’t know,’ said Felicity, and seemed to mean it. ‘Just seems a man sort of thing. You must be very clever.’

I wasn’t sure what to say. What was the right story to tell? That I was one of only three females on the course? That I’d had to fight twice as hard to prove myself? That I was seen as a tea girl by half the faculty? Or should I tell her how I’d ruined it? How I’d let a married man become the only thought in my head? How I’d become infatuated? I was Byron’s lioness; a creature of undiluted passion, driven mad by a desire to possess and be possessed. I had thrown myself at him. His protestations and dismissals were twisted by my imagination into declarations of eternal love. I left him no choice but to have me. He did his damndest to resist but I was young and my skin was soft and my mouth was hot and in the end it would have taken more strength than he possessed to resist me. He cried afterwards. Sat

DAVID MARK

on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands, weeping at what he had done. I see myself there, now. Laying on my back with a triumphant smile on my face and a warm, pleasant pain between my legs. I had done what I set out to. I had earned him. Taken him inside myself. His tears spoiled the moment. I told him not to cry – that he had done nothing wrong. I wanted it. I had forced it. He had earned the right to some happiness. I've never forgotten how he looked at me. At the disgust and the anger and the sheer contempt in his eyes. I had trapped him, he said. I'd ruined everything. He did not want this. Never had. I was a whore. A tramp. I was repellent to him . . .

'I didn't finish the course,' I said, briskly. 'Baby came along.'

'Oh well, at least you must have learned something, eh?' said Felicity. 'And you're married now so it doesn't really matter anyways.'

I wasn't sure where to start with Felicity. Wasn't sure how to begin re-educating her. I didn't know whether to let her ignorance go by unremarked, or to analyse her every statement to see if she could possibly mean the things she said.

'Dulling over,' said Felicity, looking at the sky.

We both looked up. I hadn't noticed the change but she was right. The sky was a leaden grey and the clouds that were tumbling in from the east were black battleships. The birds had fallen silent.

'Spot of rain,' I said, extending a hand.

'You walk here?' asked Felicity.

'I don't have a car,' I said.

'Of course you don't have a car,' she said. 'A bicycle, I meant.'

'No. I just walked. You?'

THE BURYING GROUND

'I'm only up the road. White house at the top of the lane. Two minutes. You'll never make it back to Winslow's.'

'It's fine. I don't mind the rain.'

She looked at me as if I was mad. 'There's going to be a storm. You get caught out in it, well, it's not the rain you have to worry about. It's the lightning.'

I dismissed her fears, screwing up my face as if to say that such a thing was a needless worry. Above, the clouds twisted upon themselves, like milk being poured into black tea. I heard raindrops begin to hit the leaves. Felt droplets of water fall as footsteps upon my skin. There was something in the air; a static and charge. The hairs on my arms began to rise like sails.

'Come to my place,' she said. 'You can wait out the storm. I have a nice apple cake. The children are at school. I would be worried sick letting you walk.'

'I'll just pop in the church,' I said, waving at the sturdy grey oblong with its flat roof, leaded windows and thick walls.

'Is it open? It's always locked. Fairfax is the warden and he lives two doors from me. You're just as well popping to my place.'

I was torn. Part of me was enjoying this sudden moment of human contact. Felicity was a warm, kind and generous soul who wanted to keep me safe from the storm. What did it say about me if I refused? Yet the idea of a warm, comfortable family home filled me with dread. I would never have such a thing myself. I would never know such a life.

'Here it comes,' said Felicity, and she raised a hand above her head. She was still holding the flowers and seemed to realize it. 'Here, give these to the grave you've been laying on. I'll get more for Mam.'

DAVID MARK

For a moment I felt as though I was inside a tin shack and somebody was banging upon it with a bat. The rumble in the sky was a colossal thing. God moving furniture in the heavens. I ducked my head into my shoulders. The shiver that passed through me was primal; a fear that would have seemed as familiar to the Romans who stood on the nearby boundary wall as it did to me. It was a feeling that the ground was about to split; that some almighty force was preparing to plunge His fists into the ground and pull up the earth's foundations.

'Come on,' said Felicity, and to my surprise, she took my hand. I found myself smiling, grinning inanely, as I was led briskly between the ancient graves that stood out of the long damp grass and the untended wildflowers like boulders from the sea.

'Oh goodness, here it comes . . .'

I gave a shriek as the skies opened and a deluge like I had never witnessed tumbled down. It was as if somebody had flipped the earth; as if the sea had become the sky. I felt as though I was running through a waterfall. Felicity kept hold of my hand and we staggered up the shingle path towards the rusty black gate. Felicity wrenched it open and turned to tell me to hurry.

I felt the lightning strike rather than saw it. I experienced a sudden moment of light and heat and power at my back, as if somebody had suddenly opened the door of a furnace behind me. I spun and lost my footing, dropping painfully to one knee and my hand was wrenched from Felicity's. I lay there, twisted and sprawled, watching the deluge beat down upon the tiny church and the ancient tombstones, flattening down the grass and thistles, ragwort and cow parsley. Then came the sound. A

THE BURYING GROUND

noise like the cry of a dying beast; a keening wail that grew to a scream before climaxing in a crack that hurt my ears.

I looked up to see the ancient laurel split in two. It tore down the middle as if somebody were ripping a photograph. For a moment the trunk was two perfect halves. And then they fell. The branches were still tangled together and both halves of the trunk fell in the same direction, collapsing downwards with a dreadful crescendo of splintering wood.

It missed the church. Fell at an angle that would later be seen by the faithful as an act of God. Instead it stamped down into the churchyard with an impact that made the ground shake and one of the stoutest arms smashed into the stone roof of the little crypt that had stood there for three hundred years. The construction was not much bigger than a garden shed. It was surrounded by rusty iron railings and there were ornate carvings above the rotten wooden door. The whole edifice collapsed as if made of cards.

‘Oh,’ said Felicity, in my ear. I will always remember that. That sudden, simple exclamation. She had her hands under my armpits and was dragging me upright while her feet battled for purchase on a path that was already becoming a river.

We both saw it happen. Both watched as the crypt came apart in an explosion of stone and ancient timbers.

We knew there would be bones. Knew that if we did not look away we would see ancient skeletons and grinning skulls.

But the body that tumbled onto the grass was dressed in a dark suit and had a full head of hair. The face that looked at us had staring eyes and the mouth was open as if in surprise. Were it not for the unnatural position in which he lay, folded in on

DAVID MARK

himself and twisted as if dropped from the sky, he may have just as easily been sleeping.

I turned to Felicity and saw the horror on her face. Her mouth was open and I wondered if her scream was lost to the sound of the wind and the rain and the settling stones.

She looked at me, then. An accusing, puzzled glare. Looked at me as if I had done this thing. I had brought this ugliness into our lives. Then she dragged me upright and grabbed my wrist and tugged me through the storm.

I had to look where I was going. Had to try and find my feet as I splashed through the path and felt the earth pull at my boots as if hands were reaching out from the earth.

I took a last glance at the body as I splashed through the lychgate. The pummelling of the rain ceased for an instant. When it slashed back down it was with the precision of a blade. Through the rain I saw a man in blue. Dark hair. Neat brown shoes. A greenish-brown satchel wrapped across the torso. Then he was lost as I tore my gaze away, searching the pock-marked road for patches of ground where I might keep my feet. I ran. Thought of myself first. Thought of my boy's ashes after that. Felt a wave of something inside me as I pictured the dust of my baby being washed away like sand.