Just Me

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Extract

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Provence

COPING AND HAPPY I was not, when, early in 2004, I arrived at our house in Provence. I had escaped after a disastrous Christmas, suffering from a deep depression. As was the weather. Alone, lugging my case, I wallowed through mud, down the track to the house. Scythed by a Mistral and drenched by the rain, I battled to open the heavy shutters.

Inside, the house was bleak. I struggled to light the wood stove – a job John had always done – and discovered the gas canisters for the oven had run out. Starving after the long drive through France, and desperate for something hot to eat, I went and got a new one from the garage. Carrying it through the garden nearly crippled me.

That night in the Phwah bed I tossed and turned in its vastness, kept awake by the aching absence, combined with the worrying presence of loirs scampering in the roof. These are pretty pests that eat through wires and beams and have to be got rid of. Not a task I relished. The house seemed to be conspiring to make me even more aware of how inadequate I was without John. Two years after his death. I felt feeble and stupid and utterly miserable.

Next morning the sun shone again with its usual brilliance, and I wandered the soaked and battered garden, performing by myself the ritual check that had always started our visits, when we listed the tasks to be undertaken to repair our beloved house after the ravages of the winter. The peach, apricot, quince, fig and cherry trees seemed to have turned into a jungle. A broken branch of the walnut was hitting the roof and dislodging the antique Provençal tiles; it was probably providing a highway for the loirs and squirrels I had heard the night before playing boules with stored nuts in the eaves.

John was besotted with that tree. When he was a child, every Christmas, his father brought home wet walnuts, and he and his brother Ray cracked them open, dipped them in salt and relished the delicacy, despite the inevitable mouth ulcers that followed. To have an endless supply growing in his garden was magic. But the walnuts were a sad disappointment to John. Each year there would be a huge crop but some nasty black blight always attacked the nuts and rendered them inedible. He even resorted to sending a question into the radio programme *Gardeners' Question Time*. On their advice he poured buckets of water on to the tree, to no avail. A year after his death, it yielded a treeful of perfect juicy nuts. They were stored in baskets, in the cellar.

Waiting.

Everyone had joked that it was a sign of divine, or leastways, a ghostly John's intervention, but I had rejected such comforting myths. I could not contemplate 'how-pleased-John-would-have-been'-type thinking. It seemed an impertinence to attribute thoughts to the absent John that I wanted to hear. The man could be unpredictable, bad-tempered and perverse. And I had no right to concoct a picture of him to bring myself, or anyone else, comfort. How often we do that when people die. 'How So-and-so would have loved that.' 'She would have wanted such-and-such', gradually shaping the dead person into a creature we want to be with.

I wanted to be with him all right. But not with some distorted invention. I wanted him with me in person, cracking the nuts, and dipping them in salt, and drooling. Or spitting them out and saying they weren't worth waiting for. Who knows how he would react? But dear God, I wanted to.

Now, as I looked at the buds appearing ready for another crop, a relentless, new season, I was beginning to suspect I never would.

The acceptance of that bitter truth was slow in coming. For two years I was doing well. I kept him with me as I relived our life together in the book I wrote. When it was published, the thousands of letters I received showed I had inadvertently tapped into a great pool of grief. It had not been my intention to write such a book. I replied as best I could to my correspondents; because many of them were keeping their despair secret, yet felt they could share it with a stranger. I arrogantly felt responsible for helping them. I, after all, was doing all right. On the road to recovery. Some of the people were still grieving personal tragedy four, five, even twenty years, later. I was mystified by this. My immediate searing anguish at John's death had, I thought, waned into something more benign.

Because he was coming back.

He'd often gone away. But he always came back. For two years I assumed that at any moment he would walk through the door and say, 'All right, kid?' I was expecting it during Christmas 2003. But I was alone in that belief.

The family all congregated at our house in Wiltshire to celebrate together. My daughters went to great pains to arrange a lovely time for my grandchildren and me. All was noise and excitement from which I felt utterly detached. I had known the same feeling when I had a mini nervous breakdown some years before. It is marvellously described by Sylvia Plath in *The Bell Jar*: 'I couldn't get myself to react. I felt very still and very empty, the way the eye of a tornado must feel, moving dully

along the middle of the surrounding hullabaloo.' I tried to snap out of my stupor and join in the fun. I should be over it by now. All the books say so. And the time-is-a-great-healer merchants.

I looked round the festive table and realised I was the only one who had not moved on.

Two of the little ones were not even born when John was alive, and the other three could not remember him. The adults did. Stories were exchanged about his notorious bah-humbug attitude to Christmas, but the tales of his sometimes destructive behaviour were leavened with laughter. He had become a fond memory. An acceptable version to treasure and chuckle over. But it wasn't my reality. The imperfect one I ached for.

Mute with misery I was a death's head at the feast. Banquo's ghost had nothing on me. I couldn't join in the reminiscence. Relegating him to the past. I wanted him in the present, in the flesh. Especially the flesh, as it happens. To caress and cling to. As my daughters could to their partners. I did my best to smile benignly, as befitted my role of brave widow, while they chattered about their plans for their homes, their children, their future. Mine did not feature. I could see they were worried about me and didn't know what else they could do. They were sensible. They knew he wouldn't come back. And quite rightly, life would go on without him. Whereas, mine was on hold. Why? It would have been madness if voiced, even to myself.

I could not let him go.

He wouldn't like it. I had to wait.

The world outside the family had moved on, too. When it was mooted that a spin-off of *Morse* should be done and I was kindly consulted, I said how pleased I was, because all his work mates would be employed and Kevin Whately would have a lovely job. But I was gutted. Finally Inspector Mouse, as we called him, would also be well and truly gone. Bless him, he too would be as dead as a doornail. And I was distraught at the finality of it.

Surrounded as I was by evidence of my family's adaptation

to John's death and their healthy ability to move on, I was aware that my behaviour was out of line. I knew the danger signs. I was depressed. I was certainly depressing the hell out of everyone else. My daughters' profound grief at their father's death had mercifully mellowed, only to be replaced by anxiety about their disturbed mother. I felt ashamed but powerless to snap out of it. I was irritable with the children.

I was furious when one of my grandchildren, Charlie John, pulled a book from the shelves and left it on the floor. It was the poems of W. B. Yeats. Inside John had written 'I love these poems almost as much as I love you, December 1983'. Marked in pencil was the following poem:

When you are old and grey and full of sleep,
And nodding by the fire, take down this book,
And slowly read, and dream of the soft look
Your eyes had once, and of their shadows deep;

How many loved your moments of glad grace,
And loved your beauty with love false or true,
But one man loved the pilgrim soul in you,
And loved the sorrows of your changing face;

And bending down beside the glowing bars,
Murmur, a little sadly, how Love fled
And paced upon the mountains overhead
And hid his face amid a crowd of stars.

In Provence John would stand on the patio, gazing in wonder at the myriads of stars sparkling there that the London city glare obliterates. So perhaps this was a message. I needed to see those stars, where he was maybe hiding his face. I could hang on, stop him slipping away. Feel his presence. France had always been a haven of peace for us. That was what I needed. So off I went.

Which is how I came to trudge through the mud to be confronted by loirs, recalcitrant wood stoves, and all the rest of the mountainous molehills.

I was fourteen when I visited France for the first time. It blew my suburban mind. I ventured nervously from a pebble-dashed semi in Bexleyheath, where the regular fare was a joint roasted on Sunday, cold on Monday, shepherd's pied on Tuesday, and rissoled (whatever happened to rissoles?) on Wednesday, and the rest of the week was sardines or tomatoes on toast, Welsh rarebit and a nice bit of cod in a daring parsley sauce. Conversation at table was about how I was doing at school, or Dad at the factory, or Mum in the shop. Anything likely to be controversial was taboo. If the grannies were there, my contribution was limited by the injunctions 'Don't speak with your mouth full' and 'Little girls should be seen and not heard'. From there, via an au-pair job organised by my school during the summer holidays, I was catapulted into a wealthy, sophisticated, Parisian household. My employer was the epitome of French chic, with black hair oiled back into a chignon, crimson lips and fingernails, and couture clothes. The husband was a bigwig with the Comédie Française, so their guests were louche and exciting people who sat around arguing passionately, long into the night, about the arts and politics. It was a seismic culture shock.

I helped prepare the meals. Even salad was a revelation. No limp lettuce leaf and half a tomato here. I swung the salad dryer full of aromatic leaves picked from the garden, and watched while Madame dressed them with pungent olive oil that bore no resemblance to the yellow stuff I bought in Boots to treat my earache. I sampled frogs' legs, snails and dishes that aroused taste buds that had hitherto lain dormant. A different wine was served for each course to enhance the food. It was nectar for the

gods. I had only previously sipped the sugary Barsac that Dad ceremoniously produced once a year at Christmas. The meals went on for hours and the smell of perfume, garlic and Gauloises made me swoon with delight.

In August we decamped to their villa in Fouras, which was then still a mere village near La Rochelle. In Monsieur's absence, no sooner had one lover departed than I put fresh, sweet-smelling linen on Madame's bed ready for the next to arrive. In between she would share her romantic secrets with me and stroke my face with tears in her eyes, muttering, 'Ah, la jeunesse.' She contrived a romance between myself and the student who sang with the café band. We danced under the stars to 'La Mer' and I still have a melting spot in my heart for the gentle Claude. France awakened me to the sensual pleasures of life. I have loved it ever since.

Numerous years and visits later, I went on a painting course in Les Bassacs, a hamlet in the Luberon, the name given to the valley between and including the Luberon mountains on one side and the Plateau de Vaucluse and the Ventoux range on the other. On the first day, under the tutelage of a professional artist, I attempted to draw a little flight of steps. It was the beginning and end of my artistic aspirations. I reckoned if Cézanne had had sixty goes at capturing the unique Provençal light on nearby Mont Victoire, on the evidence of my first attempts, I was not going to get far in a week. I bear the cross of perfectionism; being a good amateur painter held no charm for me.

So I downed my brush and basked in the sun, scenery and food. At night I guiltily joined my erstwhile fellow students around a candlelit table overlooking the pool, which in turn has a view of the valley and mountains beyond. Savouring the Provençal food and Ventoux wine, on a balmy night, listening to the cicadas was, I decided, my nirvana. I phoned John, stuck in London filming *Morse*, to wax boozily lyrical about the sun,

the landscape, the poppies, the sunflowers, and the gracious local people. My daughter Ellie Jane was filming a *Bergerac* out there at the same time and also had a go at him. He reluctantly came over for the weekend. He instantly fell under the Luberon spell, which was to enchant him for what was left of his life.

We knew at once that we wanted to spend a lot of time there but the thought of buying a house abroad seemed a bit scary and grown-up, so we enlisted the help of our new friends Liz and David Atkinson who ran the painting course. They lined up several possibles and we came over to inspect them, eventually choosing one in the *commune* of Saignon, in a small *hameau* of five houses surrounded by vineyards, lavender fields and cherry orchards. It was a little way up the Grand Luberon mountain, so cooler than the valley in summer, where the temperature can hit over forty degrees.

The orchard below our garden was obviously neglected but our efforts to buy it were foiled by the complicated French inheritance laws. Instead we have, over the years, watched the cherry trees being strangled by ivy which every now and then John and various sons-in-law have hacked away. The whole thing is very Chekhovian. The upside of this neglect is the wealth of wild flowers to be found there, untroubled by vicious pesticides. Rare orchids, violets, primrose and most bewitching of all a carpet of sweet-smelling narcissi, which arrives to synchronise with the sunbeamed canopy of cherry blossom above.

Alongside the house was a less pleasing fragrance, given off by a field in which a flock of ducks, geese and chickens had killed the grass with their foraging. The French are not sentimental about their animals and the fowl were not a pretty sight. I tried not to worry about their mangy, grubby appearance; they were not pets, but had to provide eggs and eventually dinner. And the smell was tolerable when the wind was in the right direction. Anyway, the stink of the village septic tank, which was also in the field, made chicken shit seem like Chanel.

The smells we learnt to live with, the noise was more of a problem. The clattering of the cicadas is deafening. Sometimes they get into a throbbing rhythm that drives you mad. The frogs come from far and wide to the raucous orgies down by the stream. The dogs have a choral society to rival the Philharmonic. André's tenor hound usually starts the cantata, to be joined by basses and sopranos echoing all round the valley. This cacophony we could tolerate. But the cock went too far.

The sound of a rooster greeting the dawn might be considered picturesquely rural. But not if the bird is tone-deaf. This creature was all right with the cock-a-doodle bit, but its doo was teeth-clenchingly flat. It grated on our nerves so much that we seriously considered putting the house back on the market. Then a miracle happened. One day when Caruso, as we called him, had desperately tried to hit the right note for about half an hour, I put on a tape to drown the noise. It happened to be Mozart's Requiem. Instant silence. We went out to look. He was standing on one leg, neck stretched up, ear cocked (is that where the word comes from?) in the direction of the music. He stayed in this trance-like position all the time the tape played. It somewhat limited our selection of music, as Bach and Beethoven left him cold, but Mozart did the trick every time. John believed he was the reincarnation of Salieri, trying to learn from his rival's genius, but sadly it didn't improve the cock's musical ear. He continued to sing flat till he and all the rest of the coop were slaughtered by a music-loving fox one bloody night. When I expressed my hypocritical regret to the owner, she just shrugged and said, 'C'est la campagne.'

It was a phrase Christiane, our neighbour, who was to become a close friend, used often. Swarming bees, scorpions, hornets, vipers and mosquitoes were accepted with the same insouciance – working on the theory that they were harmless unless you annoyed them. A pretty good philosophy of life really.

Christiane was the first person in Saignon I managed to communicate with. She originated from the Basque country, so her accent was less impenetrable than the local Provençal dialect – think Cornwall. Always plumply neat, with cropped hair, a ready smile and quick wit, she subtly kept an eye on things. It was not a good idea to cross her. One woman moved into the village and, when the Romany pickers in their caravans arrived for the cherry harvest, she complained to the *mairie*. Christiane was incensed that these loyal workers, known and respected by everyone, should be so insulted. The woman, not the gypsies, moved on not long after.

Christiane liked a gossip and filled me in on all the villagers. In our first week in residence, we were alarmed to see a bearded tramp with a sack over his shoulder, carrying a gun, wandering in the orchard. At his feet were two slavering hounds. Dogs are not my favourite animals, especially in a country where rabies is endemic and there seem to be a lot of frothing strays, but Christiane laughed when I told her of my anxiety. The man was out hunting, one of two brothers who live together in the next house to ours. Gentle souls both, André and Denis have the grand surname Empereur and a big family tomb in the ornate Saignon graveyard. For years they lived in thrall to their mother, whilst they worked in the local glacé-cherry factory. Now they were on their own.

Denis tends the allotment that provides all their fruit and vegetables. During *la chasse* season, André and his dogs (who the rest of the year are kept in a pen with the chickens) catch rabbit and wild boar to store for their meat supply. Although they lived next door, it was many years before these timid men would talk to us, and then I had to guess at a lot of the conversation, although John, who refused to speak French, seemed to understand them more. We have never been in their house or they in ours, but I will sometimes find beans or tomatoes on my doorstep, and I put any leftover wine or food on theirs when we leave.

John was not completely incognito in France – some of his programmes are shown, with a wonderful guttural French voice dubbed on – but our neighbours made no mention of his fame. The only indication we had that they knew we wanted to guard our anonymity was when some reporters discovered where we lived and ventured down the track. We were away. Sensing an invasion of our and their privacy, André got his gun and saw them off. We were never troubled again. Nothing was said by the brothers or us about it, apart from a mumbled 'merci' from me next time I saw them, and a lot of shrugging and blushing from them. I was told about the incident by Christiane, not by André or Denis.

When we first moved to Saignon, Christiane's husband Roget was the vineyard owner. Not as glamorous as it seems, because the local wine, in his own opinion, is pretty inferior stuff (it has to do with the soil), although he did once open a fragrant bottle that came from one secret field that was saved for family wine. Out in the sun all day, he was wizened and bent from stooping over the vines; a smiley troll. He always wore an incongruous naval peaked cap as he rode his tractor into town, laden with grapes for the commune co-operative wine collection. One of their many sons, Frédéric, was then a beautiful young man. He did all sorts of jobs for us, as well as sharing a beer with John in amicable silence. He usually picked us up at the airport in our car but one day an emergency arose and he sent Christiane and Roget instead. They trundled all the way to Marseilles in their ramshackle old jalopy, and drove us home at a sedate thirty miles an hour. Seeing sunbeaten Roget in his cap and Christiane in her best dress standing nervously in the arrivals lounge in a swirl of tourists was a touching sight. We felt so welcomed by what was, for them, a brave undertaking on our behalf.

Frédéric disappeared from our lives when he married an older woman. Apparently she has cramped his style somewhat,

much to the dismay of the local lasses and my daughters and, I have to admit, myself. I miss the sight of his glistening bare torso rippling in the sun as he chopped the firewood. 'Yes all right, calm down, dear,' as John would sigh.

We were not the only people that spoke English in the *hameau*. Judith is one of those pioneering American women who feel drawn to Europe. She left her native land to come on her own, to a part of the world where she knew no one, and set up home there. I think she was relieved when I came on the scene and her brain could have a rest from speaking French.

We were both doing up our houses at the same time. Ours was in a dilapidated state, with no bathroom or kitchen. We had a lot of barbecues. Studying scripts gave John the perfect excuse to absent himself from dealing with French bureaucracy, and shopping for furniture in the searing midsummer heat, so I was grateful for Judith's assistance with crafty *maçons*, uncooperative France Telecom and dodgy electricians. We shared a phlegmatic plumber called Monsieur Montegard. He was baffled by our need to see numerous toilets and test their seats before choosing one. He took us to a huge warehouse and was visibly mortified when we got in and out of the baths to assess their comfort level. I saw him mouthing 'anglaise' to his fellow plumbers and his explanation seemed to satisfy them.

The French do like the English. Despite our football hooligans wrecking Marseilles. But it took several years before we were really accepted in the *hameau*. We didn't make a good start. Things have to take their time, like the seasons, but we were eager to make friends. So, in what, in retrospect, was a presumptuous gesture, we invited everyone in for drinks. A little research would have revealed that the whole concept was alien to them. The women didn't drink at all, and the men, apart from André, only with meals. Our elegant titbits were eyed with suspicion, and then totally spurned. The men did not

utter a word to us but eventually made the best of a bad job and rabbited away amongst themselves. The women were just embarrassed, refusing to sit down or say much apart from 'non' and 'oui'.

The next day Christiane assured me that, despite their reticence, everyone was glad when we arrived, because we were not German or, even worse, Parisian. Their attitude to Germans was understandable. The wartime history of the area is somewhat ambivalent, and people are reluctant to discuss it, but there are some clues. In St Saturnin d'Apt there is a wall with bullet holes preserved to commemorate the occasion when the eldest son from every family was shot as a reprisal for a Resistance sabotage. You have to be French to understand their dislike of Parisians.

There is not much in the way of entertainment – the telly is awful – so friendship is important, if not given easily. We learnt to know our place and bide our time. John and I would listen to them, sitting in the sun, talking, talking non-stop. They had known one another all their lives, and do not have a drink to oil their tongues, yet the talk is as passionate as I remembered from my au-pair days. Especially over a game of boules.

At weekends, families visit and boules is played on the bumpy patch of ground that serves as a pitch: bodies contort as they follow a shot; emotional mumbled approval of a good move and the howls of despair at a bad one ring out. We would watch from a distance. Then John's father made a big breakthrough. He stood by the game, arms behind his back, watching intensely, nodding and shaking his head silently. Maybe it was his Lancashire cloth cap, similar to those worn by the old men of the village, but they invited him to join them. He played bowls in Stockport, so had a strong arm. For one radiant afternoon he had the time of his life. No one spoke the other's language but for two happy hours they gestured and grunted and laughed uproariously with each other.

Granddad took to France like a *canard* to *l'eau*. Strange for a man who was deeply suspicious of Abroad. Usually any variation from chip butties or pie and chips was greeted with 'aw no, not for me', yet in France he would try anything: crème brûlée and goat's cheese were downed with delight. He seemed to shake off all his English inhibitions and embraced the 'froggie' lifestyle. As did John.

John loathed public scrutiny, so that in England he was virtually a recluse. In France he was free to be himself, rather than some image based on the characters he played on television. This self was someone who liked the simple things of life. There, he could wander the lanes, and sit in cafés unaccosted. He could even join the crowds in a market without causing a commotion.

We were partial to a nice market and there are dozens of them in the Luberon. The biggest is on a Saturday morning in Apt, when the whole town is taken over with stalls. Just to walk amongst the sights and smells of fruit, goat's cheese, herbs, flowers, lavender, local wine and honey, and the spices in the Arab section, is an uplifting feast of the senses. In French markets you see proper shopping. Women with newly coiffed hair, arguing with the stallholders, sniffing, squeezing, prodding the produce. The Gallic shrug is much in evidence, as is companionable laughter when the deal is struck. Our shopping always ended in our favourite *pâtisserie,* where the girls would giggle when Monsieur Um Er arrived, so called because of John's solemn dithering whilst he chose his daily teatime gâteau.

We relished eating out without being stared at, although there are not that many grand restaurants in the Luberon. However, everything stops for lunch. Apt closes completely between twelve and three and everyone rushes home or to a café to eat. On one occasion we were lunching in the Café de la Gare in Bonnieux when a helicopter landed in the garden. Out stepped some electricity workers, who ate their three-course

lunch with wine before setting off again to repair a fallen cable in the mountains. No wonder power cuts are accepted as the norm. Let's get our priorities right here. Lunch or lights? No competition.

What gave us most pleasure was being at home together. Without the pressure of work or our hectic city lives, we valued domesticity. The house, even after the building work, was unsophisticated. We shunned central heating, although winters can be cold. The ritual of lighting the stove was more fun than clicking a switch. The Man of the House allowed me to twist newspaper into complicated faggots, under his expert direction. He raked out the ashes and put them on our spindly rose-bush, which didn't seem to like them very much. Then he would collect twigs for kindling from the cherry orchard, to go on top of the paper, carefully grading them upwards from small to large. Lots of manipulating of dampers and frantic blowing followed, whilst one by one he added the logs. His pleasure at the resulting fire was more than for any BAFTA award. If it didn't take, it was, of course, the fault of my faggots.

Our new kitchen was pretty basic. Except for the oven. He read somewhere that all the top chefs had a Lacanche. They cost the earth, but aiming slightly *au-dessus de sa gare*, he wanted one too. It is a monstrous iron thing that for some chichi reason doesn't have automatic lighting, so you have to fiddle around with matches, which, of course, you can never find. The oven takes ages to warm up and makes loud clicking noises as it does so. He defensively swore it cooked beautifully. Especially his signature dish. This was Elizabeth David's coq au vin, involving complicated operations with the giblets you'd do well to find in a British supermarket and a spectacular moment of flambéing the chicken in brandy.

I insisted on a dishwasher but he ignored it, preferring to demonstrate his washing-up skills. He even brought his own Brillo pads from London because he deemed the French version

inferior. He was triumphant when, after searching the bric-à-brac stalls, he came home with a sink tidy. These were common when we were kids for collecting tea-leaves and potato peelings, before the dawn of waste disposers. He spent many a happy hour scouring pans and polishing glasses with his special linen tea towel.

I, in my turn, revelled in washing the heavy, antique sheets we used instead of duvets in the summer heat. The two of us pegging them on the line, to dry in the lavender-perfumed air, was marital bliss.

Our children were desperate for us to install a swimming-pool, but that would alter the whole nature of the house. It would become a poncey villa. Besides, we enjoyed our visits to the local *piscine*. An old-fashioned lido, it has three pools: for babies, youngsters and grown-ups. The changing cubicles are stalls with a wooden bench and tiled floor. You hand your clothes in on a heavy, steel, hanger contraption and are given a rubber wristband in exchange. Boxer shorts are forbidden, strangely, for the lads' skimpy trunks are much ruder. The water is crystal-clear and unheated except by the sun. The lifeguards are strict but friendly. No anti-social behaviour is allowed and the children are polite and solicitous of those younger than themselves and old codgers like me. There is a café on a gallery for spectators, where John would sit with a coffee and croissant, reading his paper.

Like the washing-up and the fire-lighting, the pool was a throwback to our childhoods. Labour-saving machines and sleek health clubs are an improvement, but we felt a deep, nostalgic joy in getting back to basics. Even though the basics – particularly in John's childhood – were, in reality, pretty grim. But it is different when you are doing things from choice, and with someone you love.

We had tasted the high life but we agreed we were never happier than when reading our books in the dappled shade of

the two lime trees, lying side by side, on our special swing-back deck chairs that we bought in the Isle sur La Sorgue market. As I write, I have in front of me an antique toy donkey that he bought there for me, because I said it looked as though it felt lonely. Little did I think that, one day soon, so would I.

Now, between useless attempts to coax the stove into taking the winter chill out of the house, I made a desultory list of the jobs needing to be done. And stared at it. A lot. For the next few days I wandered round in a torpor of misery. Feeling sorry for myself. Wallowing in it. Conjuring up sad ghosts. The walls echoed with lost laughter: my dear friend Sheila Gish, arriving, dressed, as usual, in glamorous white, expressing her delight at the house with her distinctive chortle which, as Simon Callow pointed out at her memorial, spanned from middle C to top E – 'Ah hah' – now dead of a grotesque cancer; Clare Venables sitting by the wood stove, poring over the cryptic crossword, her fine brain utterly bewildered by the obtuseness of the clues – also gone; John stoically bearing my clumsy nursing when changing his chemotherapy bags. My mind was obsessing on death. I was aware that this wasn't healthy. Not two years after he's gone, for God's sake. But I had no desire to snap out of it. My wretchedness was changing from an acute condition to a chronic one, like a bad back that gives you an excuse for not participating in life. All the things that used to delight me had become a burden: shopping, cooking; even the sun hurt my tear-worn eyes. I wondered how I could still suffer from water retention when so much gushed from my nose and eyes.

I was on my knees in front of the stove, yet again struggling to light it, when a bird flew violently out of the flue into my face. It whirled around the room as I frantically struggled with windows and shutters to let it out. I hate fluttery things, be they man, flirty woman, or beast. Once, when the children were

little, a bat flew into our house in the country. I hurled the kids upstairs, slammed the doors and phoned John in London to come and rescue us. He drove the hundred miles, detached a curtain to which the bat was clinging, threw it out of the window and drove back to London, muttering and swearing quite a lot. I managed to get this bird out on my own and, heart pounding, went to bed to keep warm.

The following evening my bird paid another visit. This time I was calmer. It turned out to be a baby, not very wise, owl. It perched on the door of the stove, all eight inches of it, huge eyes surveying the room and eventually lighting on me, peering over the back of the sofa. If owls can smile, it did. Certainly its head jerked to a jokey, quizzical angle that made me feel very silly. I opened the window wide, said, 'Go on, then, bugger off, you daft owl,' and, casting a disdainful look at me, it glided with an elegant swoop into the silent blackness towards those myriad stars.

That night I had a vivid dream that John was there with me. I reached out and touched him. I felt the roughness of his bristles. Saw the cleft in his chin and the scar. The silky receding hair, and his blue, blue, wryly smiling eyes. I went to hold him, but he turned deliberately and drifted away. I tried to call out to him but my voice wouldn't work. I woke weeping, hideously alone.

Knowing he had really gone.

Finally. For ever. Hiding his face amid a crowd of stars.

And knowing I had to get rid of this house.

It was a home that was meant to be shared. It was no longer valid. Nostalgia and happy memories weren't working for me. This beautiful place was holding me back. I needed to tear myself away; move on. Sometimes a painful wrench is necessary to mend a broken limb. The same for a heart. A couplet from a poem by Robert Frost, 'The Oven Bird', came to mind.

The question that he frames in all but words
Is what to make of a diminished thing.

What indeed? My mother's maxim 'Pull yourself together' had a lot to recommend it. Never mind therapy, religion, AA – eventually it is down to you. The decision whether to sink or swim is yours.

'Live adventurously', a Quaker advice, was also whirling around somewhere.

Well, what about it, Sheila? As John would say, 'Put your money where your mouth is.' Be a depressed widow boring the arse off everyone, or get on with life. Your choice.