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Reservoir 13

Written by Jon McGregor

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Reservoir 13

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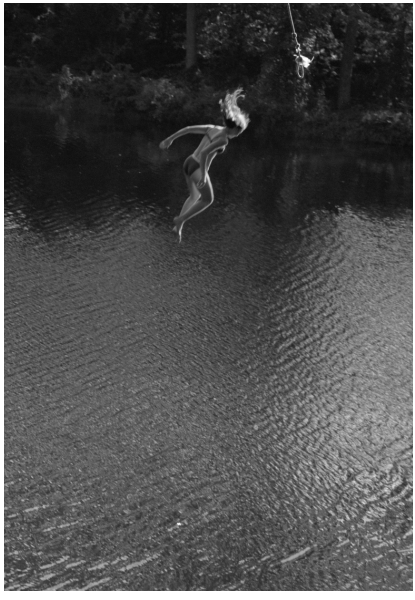
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The river is moving.
The blackbird must be flying.
– Wallace Stevens

i.m.

Alistair McGregor

1945–2015

1.

They gathered at the car park in the hour before dawn and waited to be told what to do. It was cold and there was little conversation. There were questions that weren't being asked. The missing girl's name was Rebecca Shaw. When last seen she'd been wearing a white hooded top. A mist hung low across the moor and the ground was frozen hard. They were given instructions and then they moved off, their boots crunching on the stiffened ground and their tracks fading behind them as the heather sprang back into shape. She was five feet tall, with dark-blonde hair. She had been missing for hours. They kept their eyes down and they didn't speak and they wondered what they might find. The only sounds were footsteps and dogs barking along the road and faintly a helicopter from the reservoirs. The helicopter had been out all night and found nothing, its searchlight skimming across the heather and surging brown streams. Jackson's sheep had taken the fear and

scattered through a broken gate, and he'd been up all hours bringing them back. The mountain-rescue teams and the cave teams and the police had found nothing, and at midnight a search had been called. It hadn't taken much to raise the volunteers. Half the village was out already, talking about what could have happened. This was no time of year to have gone up on the hill, it was said. Some of the people who come this way don't know how sharply the weather can turn. How quickly darkness falls. Some of them don't seem to know there are places a mobile phone won't work. The girl's family had come up for the New Year, and were staying in one of the barn conversions at the Hunter place. They'd come running into the village at dusk, shouting. It was a cold night to have been out on the hill. She's likely just hiding, people said. She'll be down in a clough. Turned her ankle. She'll be aiming to give her parents a fright. There was a lot of this. People just wanted to open their mouths and talk, and they didn't much mind what came out. By first light the mist had cleared. From the top of the moor when people turned they could see the village: the beech wood and the allotments, the church tower and the cricket ground, the river and the quarry and the cement works by the main road into town. There was plenty of ground to cover, and so many places she could be. They moved on. There was an occasional flash of light from the traffic on the motorway, just visible along the horizon. The reservoirs were a flat metallic grey. A thick band of rain was coming in. The ground was softer now, the oily

brown water seeping up around their boots. A news helicopter flew low along the line of volunteers. It was a job not to look up and wave. Later the police held a press conference in the Gladstone, but they had nothing to announce beyond what was already known. The missing girl's name was Rebecca Shaw. She was thirteen years old. When last seen she'd been wearing a white hooded top with a navy-blue body-warmer, black jeans, and canvas shoes. She was five feet tall, with straight, dark-blonde, shoulder-length hair. Members of the public were urged to contact the police if they saw anyone fitting the description. The search would resume when the weather allowed. In the evening over the square there was a glow of television lights and smoke rising from generators and raised voices coming from the yard behind the pub. Doubts were beginning to emerge.

At midnight when the year turned there were fireworks going up from the towns beyond the valley but they were too far off for the sound to carry and no one came out to watch. The dance at the village hall was cancelled, and although the Gladstone was full there was no mood for celebration. Tony closed the bar at half past the hour and everyone made their way home. Only the police stayed out in the streets, gathered around their vans or heading back into the hills. In the morning the rain started up once again. Water coursed from the swollen peat beds quickly through the

cloughs and down the stepped paths which fell from the edge of the moor. The river thickened with silt from the hills and plumed across the weirs. On the moor there were flags marking where the parents said they'd walked. The flags furled and snapped in the wind. At the visitor centre television trucks filled the car park and journalists started to gather. In the village hall the trestle tables were laid with green cups and saucers, the urns rising to the boil and the smell of bacon cobs drifting out into the rain. At the Hunter place there were voices coming from the barn conversion where the parents were staying, loud enough that the policeman outside could hear. Jess Hunter came over from the main house with a mug of tea. A helicopter flew in from the reservoirs, banking slowly along the river and passing over the weir and the quarry and the woods. The divers were going through the river again. A group of journalists waited for the shot, standing behind a cordon by the packhorse bridge, cameras aimed at the empty stretch of water, the breath clouding over their heads. In the lower field two of Jackson's boys were kneeling beside a fallen ewe. There was a racket of camera shutters as the first diver appeared, the wetsuited head sleek and slow through the water. A second diver came round the bend, and a third. They took turns ducking through the arch in the bridge and then they were out of sight. The camera crews jerked their cameras from the tripods and began folding everything away. One of the Jackson boys bucked a quad bike across the field and told the journalists to move. The river ran

empty and quick. The cement works was shut down to allow for a search. In a week the first snowdrops emerged along the verges past the cricket ground, while it seemed winter yet had a way to go. At the school in the staffroom the teachers kept their coats on and waited. Everything that might be said seemed like the wrong thing to say. The heating pipes made a rattling noise that most of them were used to and the mood in the room unstiffened. Miss Dale asked Ms French if her mother was any better, and Ms French outlined the ways in which she was not. There was a silence again in the room and the tapping of the radiator. Mrs Simpson came in and thanked them for the early start. They all said of course it wasn't a problem. Under the circumstances. Mrs Simpson said the plan was to follow their lessons as normal but be ready to talk about the situation if the children asked. Which it seemed likely they would. There was a knock at the door and Jones the caretaker stepped in to say the heating would be working soon. Mrs Simpson asked him to make sure the yard was gritted. He gave her a look which suggested there'd been no need to ask. When the children were brought to school Mrs Simpson stood at the gate to welcome them. The parents lingered once the children had gone inside, watching the doors being locked. Some of them looked as though they could stand there all day. At the bus stop the older children waited for the bus to the secondary school in town. They were teenagers now. It was the first day back but they weren't saying much. It was cold and they had hoods

pulled tightly over their heads. All day they would be asked about the missing girl, as if they knew anything more than they'd heard on the news. Lynsey Smith said it was a safe bet Ms Bowman would ask if they needed to chat. She did finger-quotes around the word *chat*. Deepak said at least it would be a way of getting out of French. Sophie looked away, and saw Andrew waiting at the other bus stop with Irene, his mother. He was the same age as they were but he went to a special school. Their bus pulled up and James warned Liam not to make up any bullshit about Becky Shaw. It snowed and the snow settled thickly. There was a service at the church. The vicar asked the police to keep the media away. Anyone was welcome to attend, she said, but she wanted no photography or recording, no waving of notebooks. She wanted no spectacle made of a community caught in the agony of prayer. The wardens put out extra chairs, but people were still left standing along the aisles. The men who weren't used to being in church stood with their hats bent into their hands, leaning against the ends of the pews. Some folded their arms, expectantly. The regulars offered them service books opened to the correct page. The vicar, Jane Hughes, said she hoped no one had come looking for answers. She said she hoped no one was asking for comfort. There is no comfort in the situation we find ourselves in today, she said. There is no comfort for the girl's parents, or for the family members who have travelled to the village to support them. No comfort for the police officers who have been involved in the

search. We can only trust that we might meet God among us in these times of trouble. Only ask that we not allow ourselves to be overcome by a grief which is not ours to indulge but instead be uplifted by faith and enabled to help that suffering family in whatever way we are called to do. She paused, and closed her eyes. She held out her hands in a gesture she hoped might resemble prayer. The men who had their arms folded kept them folded. The warden rang the bell three times and the sound carried out through the brightening morning and along the valley as far as the old quarry. At the end of the month the sun came out and the fields softened. The still air shook to the thump of melting roof-top snow. There were rumours and only rumours of where the parents might be now. They were beside themselves, it was said.

In February the police arranged a reconstruction, bringing actors over from Manchester. There had been no leads and they wanted to make a fresh appeal. The press were allowed up to the Hunter place and given instructions on what to film. The day was clear and edged with frost. The press officer asked for quiet. The door of the barn conversion opened and a couple in their early forties appeared, followed by a thirteen-year-old girl. The woman was slim, with blonde hair cropped neatly around her ears. She was wearing a dark-blue raincoat, and tight black jeans tucked into calf-length boots. The man was tall and angular, with wiry dark

hair and a pair of black-framed glasses. He was wearing a charcoal-grey anorak, walking trousers, and black shoes. The girl looked tall for thirteen, with dark-blonde hair to her shoulders and a well-acted look of irritation. She was wearing black jeans, a white hooded top, a navy body-warmer, and canvas shoes. The three of them got into a silver car which was parked outside the barn conversion, and drove slowly down to the road. The photographers ran alongside. At the visitor centre the actors waited for the photographers to get into place before climbing out of the car and setting off towards the moor. The girl lagged behind and three times the actors playing her parents turned and called for her to hurry up and join them, and three times the girl responded by kicking at the ground and slowing a little more. The two adult actors held hands and walked ahead, and the girl quickened her pace. This sequence of events had been drawn from police interviews, it was later confirmed. The two adults kept walking until they'd gone over the first rise and dropped out of sight, and a few moments later the girl dropped out of sight as well. The cameras photographed the empty air. The press officer thanked everyone for coming. The three actors came back down the hill. Work started up at the cement works again and the roads were silvered with dust. The freight trains came shunting through the hill and around the long bend between the trees. A pale light moved slowly across the moor, catching in the flooded cloughs and ditches and sharpening until the clouds closed overhead. On

the riverbank towards the weir at dusk a heron stood and watched the water. A slow fog came down from the hills overnight. At four in the morning Les Thompson was up and bringing the cows across the yard for milking. Later in the day the vicar was seen driving to the Hunter place. She was inside for an hour with the missing girl's parents, and she didn't speak to anyone when she left.

The investigation continued. By the end of March the weather had warmed and the parents were still at the Hunter place. There was no news. Jane Hughes went up to see them again one morning, and on her way past the Jackson place she saw Jackson and the boys out front of the lambing shed. They wore the looks of men who've been working hard but see no need to admit it. They had mugs of tea and cigarettes. The smell of breakfast being cooked came from inside the house. It was only when they saw the first children on their way to school that Will Jackson remembered he was due at his son's mother's house, to fetch the boy for school. The van wouldn't start so he took the quad bike, and he knew before he got there that the boy's mother wouldn't be happy about this; that it would be one more thing for her to hold against him. When they got back to the school the gates were locked and Will had to call Jones out of the boilerhouse to let them in. He took the boy down to his class. Miss Carter accepted his

apologies, and settled the boy down, and asked Will if he might think about the class coming to visit at lambing time. He told her they'd started lambing already and she looked surprised. She asked if there weren't more to come and he said if she wanted to arrange a school trip she'd have to put something to his father in writing. It was the most she'd heard him say in weeks. When he got back to the yard his brothers were all inside the shed. They'd lost a ewe while he'd been gone. There was a meeting of the parish council. Brian Fletcher had trouble keeping people to the agenda, and eventually had to concede that it was difficult to pay mind to parking issues at a time like this. The meeting was adjourned. The police held a press conference in the function room at the Gladstone, and announced that they wanted to trace the driver of a red LDV Pilot van. The journalists asked if the driver was considered a suspect, and the detective in charge said they were keeping an open mind. The girl's parents sat beside the detective and said nothing. In the afternoon the wind was high and the clouds blew quickly east. A blackbird dipped across Mr Wilson's garden with a beakful of dead grass for a nest. There were springtails under the beech trees behind the Close, feeding on fragments of fallen leaves. At night from the hill the lights could be seen along the motorway, the red and the white flowing past one another and the clouds blowing through overhead. The missing girl had been looked for. She had been looked for all over. She had been looked for in the nettles growing up around the dead oak

tree in Thompson's yard. Paving slabs and sheets of ply had been lifted before people moved away through the gates. She had been looked for at the Hunter place, around the back of the barn conversions and in the carports and woodsheds and workshops, in the woodland and in the greenhouses and the walled gardens. She had been looked for at the cement works, the huge buildings moved through with unease, people nosing vaguely behind pallets and forklifts and through the staffroom and canteen, their hands and faces slick with white dust when they ghosted on down the road. At night there were dreams about where she might have gone. Dreams about her walking down from the moor, her clothes soaked and her skin almost blue. Dreams about being the first to reach her with a blanket and bring her safely home.

By April when the first swallows were seen the walkers were back on the hills. At the car park as they hoisted their packs they could be heard speculating about the girl. Which way she might have headed, how far she might have gone. North and she'd have been over the motorway by nightfall. East and the reservoirs would have been in her way. West and she'd have come to the edges, where the heather and soil frayed out into air and the gritstone rolled away from the hill. The weather she'd have been walking through. And in those shoes. There were so many places to fall. How was it she hadn't been found, still, as the days got longer and

the sun cut further into the valley and under the ash trees the first new ferns unfurled from the cold black soil. In the evenings the same pictures were shown on the news: an aerial shot of the search party strung across the moor; the divers moving through the water; the girl's parents being driven away; the photograph of the girl. In the photograph she matched the description of what she'd been wearing and her face was half-turned away. It made it look as though she wanted to be somewhere else, people said. The girl's mother was again visited by detectives. Sometimes there were new questions. At the school before the children arrived Miss Carter filled aluminium jugs from the dinner hall with water and arranged in them cut branches of willow tight with buds. On the allotments the purple broccoli was sprouting, the heads snapping off cleanly and too sweet on the tongue to get a decent harvest home. Surveyors were seen up on the land around the Stone Sisters. There were rumours they worked for a quarrying firm. The annual Spring Dance was almost cancelled, but when Irene suggested holding it in aid of a missing-children's charity it became difficult for anyone to object. Sally Fletcher offered to help organise it, once Irene had looked pointedly at her for long enough. The divers roped up again, slipping into the reservoir while the herons sloped away overhead. The trees came back into leaf. A soft rain blew in smoky clouds across the fields.

At the butcher's for May Day weekend there was a queue but nothing like there once would have been. Nothing like the queue Martin and Ruth needed to keep the shop going. Martin had been keeping this to himself, although it was becoming obvious and nobody asked. Irene was at the front of the queue telling everyone what she knew about the situation at the Hunters'. She did the cleaning there, and knew a thing or two. You can imagine what it's like for the girl's parents, she said. Having to watch us all down here just getting on with things. Ruth saying but surely the village couldn't be expected to put life on hold. Austin Cooper came in with copies of the *Valley Echo* newsletter and laid them on the counter. Ruth wished him congratulations, and he looked confused for a moment before smiling and backing away towards the door. Irene watched him go, and asked if Su Cooper was expecting. Ruth said yes, at last, and from the back of the queue Gordon Jackson asked would there be any chance of getting served before the baby was born. A breakdown truck came slowly down the narrow street, with a red LDV Pilot van hoisted on the back and a police car following. The van was wrapped in clear plastic. Martin wiped his hands on his apron and stepped outside to watch it pass. Gordon came out with him and lit a cigarette. Martin nodded. That changes things, he said. Fucking breakthrough is that, Gordon said. The swallows returned in number, and could be seen flying in and out through the open doors of the lambing shed at the Jacksons' and the cowsheds over at

Thompson's, and the outbuildings up on the Hunters' land. The well-dressing committee had a difference of opinion about whether to dress the boards at all this year. Under the circumstances. There'd never been a year without a well dressing that anyone could remember. But there'd never been a year like this. In the end it was agreed to make the dressing but to keep the event low-key. There were sightings of the girl. She was seen by Irene, first, on the footbridge by the tea rooms, walking across to the other side. Quite alone she was, Irene said. Her young face turned half away and she wouldn't look me in the eye. Gone before I got to her and I couldn't see which way she went. I knew it was her. The police were told, and they went searching but they found nothing. There were lots of young families in the area that day, a police spokesperson said. But I know it was her, Irene said again. There was rain and the river was high and the hawthorn by the lower meadows came out foaming white. The cow parsley was thick along the footpaths and the shade deepened under the trees. Stock was moved higher up the hills and the tea rooms by the millpond opened for the year. In the shed Thompson's men were working on the baler, making sure they'd be ready when the time came for the cut. The grass was high but the weather had been low for days. The rain on the roof was loud and steady. The reservoirs filled.

The van had been found behind storage buildings at Reservoir no. 7. The area had been searched in the days after the girl went missing, which meant the van had likely been placed there at a later date. Somebody may have seen that van being moved. Somebody may remember who was driving that van. Police were appealing for any witnesses to come forward, and were trying to trace the owner. The number-plates were false and the chassis number had been filed. The van had been removed from the scene and was subject to a thorough forensic examination. A creeping normality had begun to settle over these press conferences. The chairs were put out, the cameras set up in the usual place. There was a weariness to the proceedings. There was a volume to what was not being said. The room emptied and the chairs were stacked away. The floor was swept and the lights turned off and Tony went back to the bar. The wild fennel came up ferny bright in the shelter of the old quarry, and when Winnie went to pick some she found knotted condoms lying around yet again. It was the knotting that surprised her. A man in a charcoal-grey anorak with the hood up over his head was seen standing on the far side of Reservoir no. 8 for a long time, before turning and walking up into the trees. Martin Fowler went to the incident unit in the square, and told them what he knew about the driver of the red van. This was after a conversation with Tony. Martin had mentioned knowing the man's name was Woods, and Tony asked why he hadn't told the police already. Martin said this wasn't the type of bloke you

wanted to be talking to the police about. Tony was persuasive. There were gaps in the story Martin told the police about Woods. The gaps were to do with scrap metal, poaching, and red diesel. Woods was known to be involved in these enterprises, and Martin had been drawn in on occasion. The police didn't want to know. They wanted to know where Woods was, and why the van had been hidden, and why the van had been seen at the time of the girl's disappearance. Martin was reluctant but the information was obtained. Later in the pub he spoke tensely to Tony about repercussions. Woods is one of those as values discretion, he said. Man's connected. Just so you know what you've got me into here. Martin, come on now. She were thirteen. Think on. You don't know Woods though, Martin said. But if I did I'd have gone to the police quicker than you did, Tony told him. They watched each other while Martin drained his glass and walked out. By the evening there was a photo-fit on the news. The police said they were keen to eliminate the man from their enquiries. At the cricket pavilion the teenagers gathered to drink. Sophie Hunter had a bottle of wine she'd sneaked from her parents' cellar that she said would be years before it was missed. They were a long time trying to open it, and in the end Liam used a screwdriver to force the cork down inside the bottle. They were talking about the girl again. James Broad said he wondered if they should say something after all. The others told him there was no point. They'd discussed it before. It wouldn't make any difference, Lynsey said. She's gone.

It would only get the rest of us into all sorts of shit. You weren't the one who was there, James said. It was just a mix-up, Deepak told him. You didn't do anything wrong. They sat on the pavilion steps and drank the wine, and they asked each other if it was working yet. None of them quite knew how they were supposed to feel. When the wine was finished they'd long stopped talking. Sophie hid the bottle underneath the pavilion steps and they all went home. There was an unexpected warmth in the air and they stumbled against each other more than once. Their voices were louder than they realised.

The girl's parents were seen near the visitor centre, walking up the hill with a pair of detectives. From a distance their movements looked stiff and slow. They took a wide detour around the area where she'd last been seen. The flags had been taken down and there was nothing to mark the spot. No one would know it, unless they knew. They followed the old bridleway which led past Black Bull Rocks towards the reservoirs. They were gone for most of the afternoon, and by the time they came back there were photographers waiting in the car park. It had been more than six months and still there was nothing. No footprints, no clothing, no persons of interest, no sightings on any CCTV. It was as though the ground had just opened up and swallowed her whole. Journalists used this phrase by way of metaphor or hyperbole; people in the

village knew it as a thing that could happen. Questions were asked about how much longer the parents would stay. The Hunters had cancelled all the bookings in the barn conversions, but it wasn't known how long that could go on. Little was seen of them, and if the Hunters knew anything they weren't passing it on. It was known that Reverend Hughes was visiting. More flowers and candles were left at the visitor centre, and the question of what to do with them was broached. It was understood that the girl's father had been seen out, walking. It wasn't known what he was trying to achieve. Irene said he was taking it badly, and was asked what the hell other way she'd imagined him taking it. Woods was found working security on a building site in Manchester. He was arrested and questioned at length. There was nothing to link him to the missing girl, and he had an alibi for the night in question. It hadn't been his van that was seen, as it turned out. He was released, and immediately rearrested on a number of other charges relating to theft and handling. In the hay meadow south of the church there were groups of wild pheasants moving through the grass, the mothers steering their young with nips and cries, whole groups scattering at the slightest noise. Cathy Harris walked around the edge of the meadow and crossed the river with Mr Wilson's dog. As she entered the woods she let the dog off the lead and squeezed between the gapstone stile. People wanted the girl to come back, so she could tell them where she'd been. There were too many ways she could have disappeared, and they were thought

about, often. She could have run down from the hill and a man could have stopped to offer her a lift, and taken her away, and buried her body in a dense thicket of trees beside a motorway junction a hundred miles to the north where she would still be lying now in the cold wet ground. There were dreams about her walking home. Walking beside the motorway, walking across the moor, walking up out of one of the reservoirs, rising from the dark grey water with her hair streaming and her clothes draped with long green weeds.

The last days of August were heavy with heat and anything that had to move moved slow. At the allotments the beds were bursting with beans and courgettes, the plants sprawling over the pathways. The bees stumbled fatly between the flowers and the slugs gorged. The first lambs were ready to sell and Jackson's boys were busy making selections and loading them into the trailer. At the cricket ground the annual game against Cardwell was lost. The girl's mother came to the church from time to time. She arrived just before the service began, escorted by the vicar to a seat in the side aisle which was kept free for her, and left during the closing hymn. There was an arrangement. Jess Hunter sometimes waited for her in the car outside. People understood they were to leave her be. When it came to sharing the peace she shook hands briefly, with a smile that some said seemed defensive and others

took as grateful. Late in the summer the teenagers held their own search party. It was James's idea. They could walk up over the moors, go as far as Reservoir no. 13, check all the places they knew about that the police wouldn't have thought of. If they found anything they'd be on the news. Liam said they could take some cans, make it a party. A search party. Lynsey said it was messed up making a joke about it. They headed out early, Liam and James and Deepak, Sophie and Lynsey, each telling their parents something different, meeting at the car park by the allotments and cutting up through the beech wood while the morning air was still cool. They had ideas about what had happened to Becky, based on what they knew about her, and what they thought themselves capable of in the same situation, and on what they knew of the landscape. They'd seen her the previous summer, when the family had stayed at the Hunter place for a fortnight, and they'd spent more time with her than people seemed to know. It made them feel involved. By midday their pace had faltered in the heat and they stopped at a fork in the tracks. At the bottom of the hill there was a ruined barn where Jackson stored feed and equipment. They were thirsty and they shared the only two cans of lager they'd managed to get hold of. There were crickets in the heather and a beetle moving on Lynsey's hand. The sheep pushed in and out of the barn, looking for shade. Did they search that place? Deepak asked. Obviously, Liam said. I searched it myself. I borrowed one of those thermal-imaging cameras; nothing.

Deepak gave him the standard slap for bullshitting. They searched everywhere, said James; so what are we doing? No one answered. Lynsey and Sophie had their eyes closed already, and in the midday sun Sophie's skin was starting to burn. There were butterflies feeding on the heather. An aeroplane went overhead. What time is it? asked Liam. About twelve, James said, his eyes closed, guessing. The heather sprang firmly beneath him. They were all lying closer to each other than they were used to. Someone's stomach gurgled and no one acknowledged. There was a distant sound of traffic, and farm machinery. They slept. At some point James saw a man walking up the path towards them, poking at the heather with a stick, and as he came past he didn't seem to see the five of them lying there. He was wearing a charcoal-grey anorak. James stood up and the two of them nodded, and James meant to say he was sorry about the man's daughter but all that came out was *sorry*. The man nodded again and kept walking. Later James wondered if this had happened at all. It would have been too hot to wear an anorak. In the afternoon the five of them made it to the top of the hill overlooking Reservoir no. 8, and it turned out that Liam had brought vodka. They found a mine entrance they hadn't seen before and went in with torches, scratching a line in the mud behind them and putting the wind up each other. When she was very scared Lynsey grabbed on to Deepak's arm. By the time they came out again it was dark, and in their confusion they went down the wrong side of the hill. When they finally got home

they were in more trouble than they thought possible. Their parents were furious and held them close, and there were police officers waiting to have words.

Su Cooper redecorated the small bedroom in their flat above the converted stables, ready for the twins. Austin had offered to help, but she'd told him he had too much on with the *Echo* and she wanted to just get it done. He'd asked if there was something she meant by this. She hung animal-print curtains at the windows, and assembled the second cot more easily than the first, and fixed hooks in the ceiling to hang mobiles from. She folded the tiny white clothes into the drawers, and stacked nappies on top of the wardrobe, and arranged toys along a shelf. It was a small room, but everything the babies would need seemed to fit. It was a small flat. The space had once been sleeping quarters for the stable lads. It had never been meant for a family to live in. But Su and Austin had loved it since they'd first moved in, and they were determined to make it work. She'd bought storage baskets which slid neatly beneath both cots. She knew there was a danger in preparing the room so thoroughly, so soon. There were people who had superstitions about this kind of thing. She knew her mother wouldn't approve. But she wanted it done. She wanted to be ready. She didn't yet know people well enough to assume they would help. She didn't know how Austin would rise to the challenge. She

suspected he might not. She suspected he was the kind of man who would gaze lovingly at his infant without realising it needed a nappy change, or another feed. He would provide for them, she knew. She had waited until she was sure of that. But he would have no idea what to do. This she was prepared for. He was a sentimental man, and, when it came to anything besides the business of writing and editing and printing, completely unpractical. She wound the babies' mobiles, and listened to the whirring tunes, watching the snails and frogs turning circles in the sunlight. She'd closed the door behind her before the music had stopped. The badgers in the beech wood fed quickly, laying down fat for the winter ahead. They moved through the leaf litter in a snuffling, bumping pack, turning up earthworms and fallen berries. Their coats were thickening. The river turned over beneath the packhorse bridge and ran on towards the millpond weir.

The clocks went back and the nights overtook the short days. The teenagers walked home from the bus stop in the dark. A man fitting the missing girl's father's description was seen walking further and further away from the village; at the far side of Ashbrook Forest, past the last of the thirteen reservoirs. There were reports of a man in a charcoal-grey anorak walking on the hard shoulder of the motorway. The bracken was rusting in swathes across the hill. There were dreams about the missing girl

being found face-down in pools of water, and dreams about her being driven safely away. Mischief Night passed and it wasn't what it had been in recent years. No one quite had the spirit, besides whoever filled the telephone box with balloons. Jackson's boys brought the flock down to the bye field and spent the day clipping around the tails, getting ready for tupping. At the school the lights were seen on early, and there was black smoke rising from the boilerhouse. In the staffroom Miss Carter was running through the week's lesson plans with Mrs Simpson. When they were done Mrs Simpson asked Miss Carter how she was settling in. Miss Carter nodded quickly and said it was fine, it was only that she was finding it hard to get to know people. Mrs Simpson laughed and said she knew what Miss Carter meant, and had she tried marking up the register with little portraits to jog her memory? Miss Carter said she hadn't meant the children. I thought you meant settling into the area, she said. Mrs Simpson apologised and said that to avoid confusion Miss Carter should know she'd never ask anything about a teacher's private life. We're only worried about what happens within these gates, she said. At the reservoirs the dams were inspected again, and areas of concern were noted. In the dusk the woodpigeons gathered to roost.

In November Austin Cooper and his wife came home with twins, and carried them up the steps to their flat above the converted stables. When he turned to close the door he stood on the threshold for a moment, looking down at the street, as if expecting or perhaps even hearing applause. It would have been deserved, was his feeling. He'd never imagined finding the kind of deep friendship he'd found with Su, and ten years later the twins' arrival was the kind of extra he'd long trained himself not to expect. At some point, in some life, he must have done something right. Irene saw him closing the door, saw the deep glowing light from their windows, and remembered bringing her own Andrew home some fourteen years before. But when she got to the Gladstone and told people there, all anyone could say was sweet buggering hell, those steps; how's she going to get a twin buggy up and down those steps? Austin didn't sleep that first night. He made hot drinks for Su while she phoned her parents and friends and told them the news all over again, and later he walked in and out of the bedroom to look at the rest of his family sleeping, and finally he lay down beside Su and listened to the different sounds of breathing in the room: Su's long and measured; the twins' fast and shallow, as though they'd only just come up for air. In the night there was crying and waking and feeding and changing, but amongst it all there were moments when the breathing was the only sound in the room and Austin felt he had only to stay awake to keep them safe. That this was the only thing required of him now. In the

evening when Su had been on the phone to her parents he'd tried to pick out some of what she said. He knew the words for mother and father and children, but beyond that he was lost. He thought he knew the word for happy, but Su spoke so quickly to her parents that he could never be quite sure. He assumed she was happy. Mostly she just seemed tired. It was so long they'd been hoping for this; she'd been trying so hard and now all the strain in her body had nowhere useful to go. It looked a comfortable sort of tiredness, a relief. He could tell already, from the way she held the twins and the way she moved around them, or leant across and made small adjustments while he was holding them, that she knew exactly what she needed to do. And that she knew without even being surprised. It was one of the things that kept delighting him about Su, this equanimity. As though she'd known all along that life would be like this. The very first night they'd spent together, the look on her face in the morning had seemed to say well, now, of course this has happened. What else did you expect? Early in the morning the lights were seen on downstairs, where Austin had converted the stables to an office for the *Valley Echo*. The white office lighting was stark against the dawn and the dome of his head was just visible through the window as he worked on the last few pages of the next issue, adding something to the announcements column while being careful not to exploit his position. And when the issue appeared through letterboxes and on shop counters a week later there was only this for the few

who didn't already know: *Su Lin Cooper and Austin Cooper announce the safe arrival of their twin sons, Han Lee Lin and Lu Sam Lin, and thank everyone for their kind wishes.*

At the school the lights were seen on early in the hall. Preparations were being made for the Christmas assembly. Jones had cut holly and fir from the woods, and Mrs Simpson was on her knees arranging it around the nativity scene. Miss Carter asked Jones to hold the bottom of the ladder while she took some tinsel up. Ms French couldn't help noticing, glancing across from her half-finished wall display of shepherds and cotton-wool sheep, that Miss Carter was wearing a skirt. Also that Jones was not keeping his eyes down. She didn't like to interfere but she thought it best to ask Jones to put the chairs out instead. When Miss Carter looked down to see no one holding the ladder she stood very still, and looked at the wall in front of her, and tried not to think about how recently Jones had polished the floor. She found herself thinking about Tom Jackson's father, Will, and about him not seeming the type to wander away from a ladder like that. She held on tight. There were carols in the church with candles and the smell of cut yew and holly. Olivia Hunter sang a solo verse of 'Silent Night'. She was eight years old and blithely confident. Her voice trembled a little on *all is calm, all is bright*, and at the end of the verse she beamed as she waited for the congregation to join in.

At the village hall the production of *Jack and the Beanstalk* was finally staged. The costumes and scenery had all been kept from the year before, and most people had been happy to keep the same parts. The hall was full on the night of the show. Lynsey Smith had shot up over the year, and was looking less boyish than when she'd been cast. But she climbed up the beanstalk with just the right recklessness, and when she disappeared into the curtained rafters Cathy Harris, playing Jack's mother, did a good job of looking bereft. Afterwards the chairs were cleared and the bar opened and trays of mince pies brought out. Richard Clark was seen in the audience for the first time in years. He'd been staying with his mother for a few days. He hadn't got there until his sisters had been and gone, which his mother was used to now, and he was out of the country before the year was through. He was a busy man. Some years she was glad to see him at all. He lived out of a suitcase, it seemed, and this was no way to live for as long as he had done. They didn't really sit down and have a conversation the whole time he was there, and when he left for the airport she didn't even know where he was headed. He was a consultant, was as much as she knew. There seemed to be a new lady friend but he hadn't mentioned a name. When he was gone she changed the sheets on the bed and opened a window to air the room and the sound of church bells came into the house. They were holding another service to mark the year since the girl's disappearance. There were no extra chairs this time, and no one left standing at

the back of the church. Jane Hughes said many of the same things she had said the year before. And still we have no answers, and all we can do is wait. She closed her eyes and held out her hands and let the silence settle. The missing girl's name was Rebecca, or Becky, or Bex. She had been thirteen at the time of her disappearance. She'd been wearing a white hooded top with a navy-blue body-warmer, black jeans, and canvas shoes. She would be taller than five feet now, and her hair may have altered in both style and colour. The investigation remained active, a police spokesperson confirmed. The girl's mother was seen on the side of the moor, walking the same paths and tracks she'd always walked. There was more rain on the way, or worse. A cold wind blew shadows across the reservoirs and on the higher ground a flurry of thin snow whirled against the tops of the trees. The goldcrests fed busily deep in the branches of the churchyard yew.