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Exquisite

Written by Sarah Stovell

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Exquisite

SARAH STOVELL



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Orenda Books
16 Carson Road
West Dulwich
London SE21 8HU
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Her Majesty's Prison for Women
Yorkshire

It's better out here, where the roses still bloom. Inside, nothing can bloom at all. There's not enough light, for one thing, and for another, the flowers can sense everyone's misery, and they wilt in half a day.

The wardens think me fanciful when I say things like this, but they think me fanciful, anyway, on account of the fact that I live mostly in my mind and not in the here and now. But the here and now is a dreadful place; I'm grateful that my mind can take me out of it. Most people here don't have that luxury. It's why they ended up in prison in the first place – because they used fists and boots to make their feelings clear instead of words.

I am not like them. I am not like anyone else here. I am a model prisoner. That's why they let me work in the gardens instead of inside. The gardens aren't part of the prison, of course. They're the governor's gardens – for the governor and her husband and children to enjoy. Prisoners aren't allowed gardens. We only have only a courtyard, where our clothes are hung out to dry on good days, although there aren't many good days, because the sun hardly reaches us.

But here in the garden it's better. Because I am a model prisoner who will slog away at whatever they set me to, and because it makes no difference to them whether I'm scrubbing floors or planting flowers, they let me choose my job. So any time I'm not in my cell, I choose to be outside. I tell them I have a greater chance of being rehabilitated if they keep me outside – my hands in the earth, my eyes fixed on the sky, feeling cold rain on my skin – and they listen to me, on account of my being brighter and less trouble than most prisoners.

Today's roses are white. White roses always remind me of her. I still

remember that bunch of white roses and the gold twigs covered with berries. The berries seeped and could have been poisonous, but they'd looked just right, spread among the roses like that, tender and translucent as newly-hatched jellyfish.

She would love these roses, if I could send them to her. White roses for eternal love. The meaning wouldn't be lost on her. She was sensitive to symbolic meanings. And perhaps then she would forgive me.

Part One

MEETING

1

Bo

In the mountains, daylight still falled. The frost raged and wind rang like steel through the ice. It was winter up there, but the gentle beat of spring ripened the valley below. Light fell on the church and stone cottages; it greened the trees and warmed the silent lake. Two seasons always claimed this far-flung nook of earth.

It was my favourite time of day – the trek back through the fells after dropping my girls at school. Our home stood two miles outside the village, but from the moment we moved here I was insistent the girls walk to school, whatever the weather. That was the purpose of a Lake District childhood, to my mind: to know the slow movement of the seasons; to breathe beneath clean skies and hear the ice-cold motion of a stream; to run wild until the landscape wore their shoes out.

I thought they'd fight me harder than they did. In Oxford, they'd refused to walk anywhere. Maggie, especially, complained of the cold, the ice, the dark; the cars that passed too quickly through the rainy streets and shocked her legs with spray. But here, walking became something new and exciting. It had been September when we moved, two years ago now, in time for the new school year. The girls had watched with awe as summer's green faded and the burnished light of autumn emerged in the foliage. They liked running out in the morning mist, watching it dissolve to reveal the ochre flush of the fells. They filled their pockets with conkers and fir cones, took them home, scattered them over their bedroom floors, said they were making a bed for the hedgehog they planned to adopt over winter.

I watched them, deeply satisfied. I'd long held a theory – Gus scoffed at the hippiness of it, but so what? – that humans were homesick for the outdoors. This strange urge to shut themselves away from the elements, locked up in houses, cars, offices, thinking they were protected from the wind and the rain and the cancerous sun … it was rotting their very hearts, making them sick. They didn't know the cure was simple: Get outside. Walk. Breathe. Live.

Moving here had been good for everyone, though we'd done it mainly because of my work. At the time, I was researching the murky lives of the women surrounding the Romantic Poets – the women who'd willingly tended to sensational but sick men who had abandoned domestic life and hurt themselves with sonnets.

'I need to be in Grasmere to do this,' I'd told Gus.

He suggested a holiday, but I needed more than that. 'A year at least,' I said. 'Maybe two.'

'We can't uproot the girls for a year or two. If we need to move, we move forever, or not at all.'

It was exactly the response I'd wanted. I'd mastered this particular skill over the years: sowing the seed of half my desire, then letting him grab and plant the rest. That way, he'd always think of it as a joint decision; or, better still, his own idea.

Gus was already retired when we moved. There were twenty-two years between us and he was ready, I thought, and he agreed, for a more peaceful life. A secluded world away from the fog of the city, the grey sky that fell into the dull Thames, the shoppers and the crowds.

'There'll be crowds in the Lake District,' he said. 'You can't get away from the tourists. Even in January, they'll be there.'

What he said was only partly true. Tourists always filled the valleys. They hung around the lakes and towns, took their children to Peter Rabbit World, rowed across Windermere and ate cream teas in lakeside gardens. They paid a duty call to Dove Cottage, and came away reminded of why they'd hated Wordsworth at school. But few of them really left the vales. They didn't see Helvellyn silenced by

snow, or the high mountain tarns lying dark beneath the rocky edges of the fells. For most of the year, our home stood unseen.

I rounded a curve in the mountain path and the cottage came into view: limewashed walls, slate roof and a rose trellis, the branches knocking against the lattice in the breeze – so different from the four-storey town house we'd owned in Oxford.

The door was unlocked. I opened it and stepped into the old, quarry-brick hall that took me through to the kitchen. Gus sat in the rocking chair by the woodburner, reading the *Westmorland Gazette*: all the news about stolen sheep, a campaign to save the post office and the decision to close a crumbling footpath in Buttermere. He took no notice of the national news these days. He said the only way to survive what was going on in the world – climate change, a refugee crisis, the Tory reign of terror – was to live in ignorance of it. He never used to be like this. There was a time when he'd read a paper every day on his commute to Paddington, watch the evening news at seven and again at ten, always making sure his opinions were informed. But his mind seemed empty now. It left too much space for dangerous, depressive pondering, and I had to take care around him.

He didn't look up as I walked in. Somehow, over the years, our everyday language had slipped away. We didn't bother anymore with 'Hello' or 'How was your day?' We'd become like furniture to each other: necessary for an easy life, but really just part of our surroundings – noticed only if visitors arrived.

I didn't mind this; not really. There was something hugely comfortable about the way we lived – free to do our own thing, but bound together by companionship, by a life we'd shared for so long now, we could each hardly imagine the house without the other. Besides, I didn't have enough leftover energy to mind. The girls were what mattered. Their needs were huge. I'd always been aware, even when they were tiny and single nights had gone on forever, that this time was fleeting. So I'd put everything I had into it. And although I craved more time for my work – a day, just one day! – I knew, always, that

nothing would ever be this important again. There would never be anything in my future more meaningful than the care of my children – the two girls who wore out the very marrow in my bones and pushed me to the limits of my well-being, but made everything wonderful.

I spooned coffee into the espresso maker and set it on the stove to heat, then whipped milk in the Aeroccino. (I'd had to stop using those coloured capsules when Gus went through his environmental crisis. I pointed out that they were recyclable, but he said that was most likely nonsense invented by Nestlé, and that we were just wasting more miles having them transported back to the factory to be tossed into landfill. My husband's principles were admirable, but they did make him hard work to live with at times.)

The smell of brewing coffee rose and mingled with the smell from the bread machine; even though I knew I was at risk of becoming a bourgeois stereotype, I loved it. I wanted this to be the defining smell of my house: warm and comforting, a home people would always be happy to come back to.

I carried the coffee to my study – a small room off the kitchen that had once, a hundred years ago, or so, been the common parlour – and sat at my desk. It was covered in piles: a pile of pages from my manuscript; a pile of books about Samuel Taylor Coleridge's women; and a pile of submissions from aspiring authors who wanted me to offer them a place on the course I was running the following month. My heart sagged as I looked at them. I had to select six from more than a hundred. All of them needed sifting into piles: *definitely not; maybe; definitely yes.* The *definitely not* pile was always disheartening – always so much bigger than the *definitely yes* pile. But in that *yes* pile might be the stirrings of something, some raw talent for me to grab hold of and grow. I longed to discover a voice of the future.

I read four – three *definitely no* and one *maybe* – before the phone interrupted me. It was my biggest failing, this inability to ignore the ringing of the landline or the incoming ping of an email or Facebook alert. It robbed me of so much time. I probably lost two books a decade to frivolous chatting.

It was my mother. Her tone today was injured: she hadn't heard from me for months; she was seventy-five years old; she needed help with her shopping; she'd gone eight days without talking to another human being, and even then it had only been the postman, who made it clear he couldn't wait to get away; she was feeling ill; she was lonely; she was afraid at night, here in her wagon, where anyone could get in; she was feeling, truth be told, abandoned ever since I'd taken the children and moved to the far north of the country.

I tuned her out. I knew my friends had similar problems with their parents. Old age, they said; people became difficult in old age. But my mother had always been like this – demanding that everyone make her their sun, putting her at the centre of their lives, rotating around her, letting her shine but having no vital light of their own. If they didn't do this, it meant they didn't love her enough.

Eventually, I said, 'We'll be down in the summer.'

But my mother went on. I tuned her out again, holding the phone slightly away from my ear. I'd done a good job so far, I reminded myself, of not being like her; of not passing down to my own children this awful, hereditary madness. I was good. I was putting it all right.

The phone call ended. I hadn't been prepared for it, and for a while I sat exhausted, resting my forehead in my hands. There was no flare of the old anger, though; that was long gone. But I couldn't entirely escape the guilt about how I really felt: My aging mother was upset, and I, frankly, did not give a shit.

I returned to the pile of submissions on my desk. They were the usual, predictable stories about car crashes, murders, drugs raids and homosexuals coming out before they were ready and then killing themselves. I hadn't known the world had room in it for this much crap.

But then, there was one. *Last Words.* It was arresting. I read it to the end.

Last Words

The Japanese always burn their dead. Afterwards, the bones are taken out of the furnace and the entire family gathers round and picks them up with chopsticks. They put the bone of their choice into a jar, take it home with them and bury it. It seems a strangely sinister ritual to me. I think it's the chopsticks that do it. They make the whole thing hover a bit too close to cannibalism for my liking. I imagine myself having to gather up my mother's bones with a knife and fork. The idea makes me want to vomit, though I'm sure she herself would relish all the latent symbolism in the image. I have, after all, been wantonly drinking her blood since the day I was born.

My mother is dying. She has cancer, of course, and no will to live. I haven't seen her since I was sixteen and she went off and married Husband Four (the psychopath), leaving me on my own with Husband Three (the drunk) and the occasional weekend visit to Husband One (the father). Husband Two (the good one) died in a car accident when I was six.

My family is the stuff of tragedy, or it would be if the lack of noble emotion hadn't reduced us all to the level of soap opera. Divorce is the family sport. My mother is current champion, though this, like all records, could change at any moment.

It won't be me who inherits her title, though. I don't go near anyone.



I've always been hiding from my mother. Early on, I learnt how to make myself invisible. I kept quiet and endured her. Her fist in my face was just ice.

All in all, it was good when she left. She was gone, and I was free to stop hoping that from beneath the violence would spring the fairy tale, dressed in floral skirts and smelling of fabric softener. They all said she'd regret it. I used to picture her as the years rocked by: alone in her big house, weeping tears of blood.

Three years ago, I found her on Facebook. Emma Butterworth. Still his surname, but that didn't mean it had lasted. I clicked on her every week, without becoming her friend, and knew from a distance whenever she

changed her profile picture. I scrolled through her list of friends for anyone I remembered. There was no one. My mother did not hold on to people.

Once, her profile picture changed to one of me and her when I was a baby. She was gazing at me with a devotion not seen since the Nativity. 'I miss her' she'd written. Below it, a few comments: 'Sorry you're having a bad day, Emma.' 'Be kind to yourself.' 'Let go of guilt.' 'You did your best.'

A support group, full of supporters. I didn't click on her again but I didn't block her, either.

And that's how they found me. A message appeared in my inbox from a woman called Liz Elegant: 'Dear Alice. Your mother has asked me to get in touch with you. I know it has been a long time since you two had any contact, but Emma is in hospital and approaching the end of her life. Please get in touch if you would like the hospital address.'

I left it three days then sent a message.



Now I'm here, in the waiting area. There's a window that looks over the road to the park. Families, small and intact, hang around the swings in the sun. I glance out at them, then away. In all my old dreams of family, I didn't know how hard it would be: the uphill slog to domestic fulfilment. I used to think it would happen simply because I deserved it. I'd had my fill, my spill, my broken homes, my bag on my back and nowhere to go. Someone would hand me a future. A golden apple, wet with love.

Instead, I lay down on the floor for them. I unwrapped my skin and let them dance on my flesh with hobnailed boots. Pints of my blood still keep them strong.

I know now. The world has no need for more of my genes.

The door to her room has been closed since I got here. I've had no reason to wait. I've just been getting ready.

I cross the corridor, knock lightly and go in.

'Emma,' I say, and I do not flinch at the sight of her, beaten on the bed.

Slowly, she turns her head. She looks at me for a long time. I take the seat beside her.

'Alice,' she says.

I say nothing.

She reaches for my hand. I let her clasp it in the bones of her own.

Her voice is a whisper, hard as sandpaper. 'Thank you.'

I am silent.

'Put it right,' she says, and her grip tightens on my hand. 'Forgive me now, and put it right.'

A golden apple, wet with love. I take my hand away. Sweat glints on my palm, like poison.



I put the pages down. This was autobiography, clearly – something I usually had no time for, but I could forgive this one. Its author must still be floundering in youth, hadn't yet found a theme bigger than her mother that she could harness. And she was in pain, too. Oh, the words were brutal, the language sharply controlled, but I caught the vulnerability beneath: the longing; that endless, endless longing for the elusive love of the mother.

I fired up my laptop and typed an email to the centre administrator of the country house where the course was being held.

Subject: *Students selected for Advanced Fiction, taught by Bo Luxton*.

I typed the first name, then highlighted it and put it in bold, to indicate that I thought the student worthy of financial assistance.

Alice Dark.

2

Alice

I rose to the surface of sleep. Before I'd even opened my eyes, I was aware of that old slump of my brain, my charred throat, the pain. I glanced at the clock. 12:36 pm. Another day moving on without me.

Next to me, Jake slept on, the unwashed lump of him taking up too much space on the mattress. That mattress was a symbol of all our failures, I thought. We weren't even mature enough to sleep more than six inches off the floor. What hope was there for either of us ever forging a path through the brutal world of the arts?

I stood up, manoeuvring through scattered ashtrays, pouches of tobacco and last night's empty lager bottles to the shower room. I could hear the sounds of Chris and his girlfriend shagging in the room next door. God, no one in this house had a job. They moved through time as if it were endless, their days not numbered. All anyone did was sleep, smoke, drink, fuck and talk about how great they would be one day.

But this was what had attracted me to Jake in the first place: his brazen rejection of mainstream life; his refusal to conform. He'd told me when we met that he was a painter. It was his only passion; he couldn't bear to do anything else. And he'd found a way to make a living from it – hauling his triptychs of colourful, geometric patterns down to the Lanes every Saturday and waiting for young professionals from London to come and buy them. That's what Brighton was to these people: a place where you bought original artwork from unknown, impoverished painters standing on street corners. One day, when the artist won the Turner Prize, this early work would be

rare and valuable, and dinner guests would envy the purchaser their gift for spotting genuine, embryonic talent.

In reality, that was all horseshit, and Jake knew it. His marketable work was rubbish. He knocked it out over a couple of hours on a Friday night, in between roll-ups and glugs of Special Brew, and I would have to listen to him lamenting the poor taste of a public who hung this crap in their homes, while the other stuff – the real stuff; the good stuff that he laboured over – went unnoticed.

When I met him the previous October, Jake had just finished a serious painting. He was going to spend a year putting an exhibition together; an agent had seen a piece of his work and been excited about it, but he didn't have enough of a collection yet for her to sign him up.

I said, 'Oh, but that's brilliant. You must do it.'

He smiled shyly at me from behind his pint. 'Yeah,' he said. 'Yeah.'

Jake was just what I needed, I thought then. A man who'd turned his back on conventional expectations and was carving his own, alternative way to success. It was something I had to do, too. I'd been trapped in my admin job for so long, I could actually feel my personality being eroded by spreadsheets and extensive Word documents – each ten thousand words long, and not a single word interesting.

I knew where I was headed if I kept this up. It was a one-way street to blankness – the endless treadmill of boredom that sucked everything out of you until your eyes clouded over and the spark of intelligence left your face, and you spent your days longing for five o'clock and your evenings watching people behaving badly on television because they were desperate, so desperate not to live tiny, insignificant lives like yours that they would actually do this: They would actually suck someone's cock in front of the nation because they had to be remembered for something, and it was better to be remembered for sucking someone's cock on Channel 4 than nothing at all … And I knew, as clearly as I knew night from day, that this life would destroy me, and I couldn't live it.

University had spoiled me. I knew conventional wisdom said that

university was meant to prepare me for the workplace, but instead I'd spent three glorious years at York, doing whatever I wanted: a module in Shakespeare, a module in the Romantics, and even, for fun, the odd module in writing stories or novels. I hadn't really understood that, afterwards, unless I'd somehow achieved greatness in something by the age of twenty-one, I'd have to abandon everything I loved (because no one paid anyone to sit around reading books) and grind away at a living which was, in all honesty, barely a living at all.

It had been hard, then, to keep up with the things I loved. The energy dripped out of me and I had nothing left to give to my passions, and although I'd impressed my tutors at college, there were no grants available for someone whose only recommendation was a first-class degree and a love of the written word. Everyone had a first-class degree and a love of the written word. The people handing out grants wanted something more than that, though they couldn't tell you what it was. It was something indefinable. Magic.

But it wasn't magic, I knew that. It was only magic to those who didn't do it. For me, writing was a craft that came slowly, each word on the page some sort of mini birth. A labour. I missed it.

About two weeks after meeting Jake, I took action. I stopped going to work. I didn't even hand in my notice, just woke up one morning and decided not to go. Then I turned my phone off, sat at my table – which wasn't really a table, just a tea chest with a zebra-striped cover over it – and wrote. I did this for three days. All that came out was a load of thinly veiled angst about my mother, but it was a start: eight hundred words, there on the screen. Impulsively, I sent it off to the New Writers' Foundation, an organisation that ran week-long courses for aspiring authors in big, old houses across the country: Devon, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Northumberland. I was asking a lot, I knew. The course I wanted to do was a select one: Advanced Fiction. You had to be good, or at least reasonably good, to be allowed on it. Also, it cost £650. I filled in a form for a fee waiver.

The course was in May. It was late April now and I still hadn't heard back. I assumed I hadn't made the cut.

I stepped out of the shower, wrapped myself in a towel – damp, slightly smelly – and went back to the bedroom to get dressed. Jake was still asleep, so I made a lot of noise in an attempt to rouse him. He was meant to be at the Job Centre at one-fifteen or he'd be sanctioned and have his benefits stopped. It was the one thing he had to do, this fortnightly twenty-minute restriction on his freedom, and he only ever managed it by the skin of his teeth.

Jake fell into the category of 'long-term unemployed'. Once, when I'd ended up going with him to sign on, I'd seen a red box flash up on the computer screen when the woman typed in his National Insurance number. 'This person has been unemployed for fifteen years.' A waster. A waste of space. A waste of money. A waste of all that was good in him. But he had talent, I thought, a talent that existed outside of convention and needed nurturing.

He was thirty-six now; I was twenty-five. Since getting together, we'd talked a lot about commitment: to each other; to our futures as creatives; to building a good life together; but none of the work he'd said he was going to do had materialised. He had nothing for an exhibition, save that solitary painting he'd finished before we met.

He didn't move now as I clattered about the room, taking clothes off hangers, moving mugs thick with the dregs of ancient coffee, banging my tub of moisturiser hard against the shelf. I looked at him with distaste. He was urban decay: cigarette ash and scattered tobacco on the bedclothes; a smell of dirt and sweat; and on the floor beside him, a bag of weed and three cut-out images of airbrushed, naked women that he wanked over on the nights I wasn't there to do it for him.

I left the room and went downstairs. Maria was in the kitchen, photographing an arrangement of sliced beetroot and coriander. 'It's for the new vegetarian restaurant on Ship Street,' she explained. 'I'm going to take them some samples of my work and see if they want me as their food photographer. I could do their menus.'

'Won't they have already sorted all that?'

She shrugged. 'Worth a shot. Where's Jake?'

'Asleep.'

'Sure. There's a letter for you on the table.'

Oh, God. Another credit reference agency, probably, chasing me for a bill run up by the shit who took my mobile phone two years ago and spent a grand before I'd even got round to calling Virgin and cancelling it. It was the only kind of post I got.

I poured a mug of leftover coffee from Maria's cafetière and reheated it in the microwave.

Maria slung her camera bag over her shoulder and headed for the front door saying, 'Remind Jake he still hasn't paid me for this month's electricity bill. I'm not buying beer until he coughs up.'

I nodded, then turned to the letter on the table. It was from the New Writers' Foundation. I'd given them Jake's address because I was never at my bedsit. I braced myself for a polite note, saying I hadn't been successful this time, but perhaps I'd be interested in one of their other courses, for beginners, at an extra cost of £2,000 because those students suffering my particular level of delusion required a special kind of expensive tutor.

But it didn't say that. It said they were delighted to offer me a place on the course, together with a full grant to cover fees and food, and looked forward to seeing me in May. My tutor would be Bo Luxton, and they strongly recommended I read some of her work before the course started.

I was shocked. I read the letter again, slowly this time, then grabbed my jacket from where it lay on the sofa and set off to City Books, just round the corner. I'd never read Bo Luxton's work before, though her name was vaguely familiar.

The bell above the shop door rang as I entered. A surly woman behind the counter looked up at me and didn't smile, or say hello, or suggest that she was in any way pleased to have a potential customer.

'Have you got anything by an author called Bo Luxton?' I asked.

'Her latest has just come out,' she said, and led me to the display table in the centre of the shop.

The Poet's Sister. I turned it over and read the back. '1800. Dorothy Wordsworth has sacrificed all her marrying years to care for her brother. While he writes some of the world's finest poetry, she darns his stockings, cooks his meals and changes his sheets. William cannot live without her, but now he is engaged to be married to their childhood friend, Mary. How will Dorothy survive this loss, and what is the truth of this strange and deep love that the locals of Grasmere call "unnatural and rotten"?'

I took it to the desk, paid for it and left.

Instead of walking back to Jake's, I headed for my bedsit on Brunswick Place. I'd hardly been there for weeks, mainly because I hated it. The size of it, the hard brown carpet, the greasy walls, the depressing kitchen unit in the corner of the room with a rusty Baby Belling that scarcely worked. And the electricity meter that swallowed pound coins until I had none left, and all the lights went out and the food was gone.

But it was a place to be alone. No one would visit me here.

I got into bed and opened the book. The dedication first: 'For Lola and Maggie.' Then the opening:

> 'At last, I was outside again, walking the cottage garden with my brother. The snowdrops had gone now and all over the grass, the daffodils were out, holding the last of the day's sunlight in their petals.'

I read on – fifty pages before I put it down. I envied the writer that lyrical beauty. *Bo Luxton must be lovely*, I thought. Only someone angelic at the core could write those sentences. I wanted to be taught by her, let her pull me away from that brutal voice I'd written in: 'The Japanese always burn their dead.' Bash, bash, bash. Anger on the page.

Bo Luxton wasn't like that, I thought. Bo must write with feathers.

But somehow, I needed to get the money for the fare to Northumberland. The letter said to take the train to Alnmouth and a taxi to the village. I was skint. Since quitting my admin job, I'd worked four

mornings a week in a language school run by a man who paid me cash and told me, if ever the Home Office visited, to say I was on work experience. It was hardly enough to cover my rent. Buying that book today had been an extravagance.

I phoned Network Rail and asked for the price of a ticket if I booked it in advance. Round trip: £147. There was no way.

Of course there was a way.

In a box, in a drawer, was a bracelet my mother had given me on my eighteenth birthday, the last day I'd ever seen her, just before…

I rummaged around among knickers and tights and tops and bras until I found it. It was still there, glinting and expensive. I'd never worn it.

I put my jacket back on, slipped the bracelet in my pocket and set off for the computers at the library. I knew I'd be able to sell it quickly on eBay; though I also knew I was heading into danger now. I stored my mother carefully, shrunk her to the size of a trinket, shut her in a box and locked her away in some remote part of me. She only rose up in those moments when some professional was trying to harness my subconscious (it was why I stopped seeing professionals, in the end) or, as I found recently, if I was writing. She became inevitable then, and afterwards I'd have to commit to wasted days – long hours when I could do nothing but rage at the memory of her and the loss of her and the awful, unmendable break of us.

And then I would have to recover.

I walked through town briskly, past the shoppers and the tourists, the beggars and the buskers, keeping my eyes fixed straight ahead. Always, I was aware of my pocketful of silver. But I didn't dwell on it, not until the moment I saw her.

She was right there on the corner of Bond Street, a take-away coffee in her hand and a smile on her face so maternal and serene, it took my breath away.

'Alice,' she said, and held out her hand. 'Alice.'

I stood still, then walked towards her, my hand raised to take the one she held out to me.

She frowned, confused, and I realised it wasn't Alice she was saying, but something else, some other name, for some other child. As I watched, I saw the little girl she was with take her hand, and then the two of them walked together, away from me, until they were lost in the throng and I could see them no more.