MYSTERY TOUR

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A CRIME WRITERS' ASSOCIATION ANTHOLOGY

Edited by

MARTIN EDWARDS

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Contents

Dedicated to the CWA Committee, in appreciation of their commitment to the cause of crime writing.

Introduction

Welcome to *Mystery Tour*, an anthology of new stories by members of the Crime Writers' Association. Contributors were invited to write stories reflecting the unifying theme of travel and intriguing destinations, and they have interpreted the brief in fascinating and diverse ways.

Diversity and quality are also hallmarks of the list of contributors. Two stories come from recipients of the CWA Diamond Dagger, while the others are the work of a pleasing mix of bestsellers, relative newcomers, fast-rising stars, and stalwarts of the genre. Contributions from overseas members emphasise the book's international flavour.

The crime genre embraces so many different types of writing that it offers something of interest to almost any reading taste. The CWA plays a central role in promoting crime writing in general and the work of its members in particular. Producing anthologies of stories (as well as occasional non-fiction collections, such as *Truly Criminal*, which appeared a couple of years ago) is just one of many aspects of the CWA's activities. It's an important aspect, though, because it has helped to keep the crime short story alive in the UK, offering a valuable outlet when many others have long since vanished.

When the very first CWA collection of stories appeared back in 1956, the editorial committee did not hide their gloom about the future prospects of short crime fiction. By publishing an anthology almost every year over the past six decades, as well as by inaugurating the prestigious CWA Short Story Dagger more than thirty years ago, the CWA has made sure that those anxieties proved unfounded. Past winners of the CWA Short Story Dagger include Jeffrey Deaver, John Connolly, Ian Rankin, Denise Mina, Stella Duffy, Reginald Hill – and also Peter Lovesey, who has written a brand-new story for *Mystery Tour*.

Today, even more so than when the CWA was founded sixty-four years ago, the publishing industry is in a state of flux. For all its massive

global popularity, crime writing, both fact and fiction, is as susceptible to the winds of change as any other branch of the creative arts. This means that the need for an effective professional organisation for crime writers has never been greater. The CWA has risen to the challenge, pursuing an ever-increasing range of activities on behalf of its members. And this has borne fruit. Membership numbers have, at the time of writing, reached an all-time high.

So have revenues, but because the CWA is a non-profit organisation, income from publications like *Mystery Tour*, as well as from subscription fees, sponsorships and other activities, is invested in expanding the range of benefits for members, including promotional opportunities via social media and other platforms. The recent appointment of both a CWA Libraries' Champion and a CWA Booksellers' Champion are innovations that reflect a strong commitment to supporting libraries and library readers, as well as booksellers and book-buyers.

All this activity has many knock-on benefits for the reading public. These include the opportunity to subscribe to free publications, including the monthly Crime Readers' Association newsletter. Meanwhile, the establishment this year of the British Crime Writing Archives at Gladstone's Library near Chester means that crime fans and researchers from all over the world now have the chance to explore the genre's rich heritage in unique and attractive surroundings. In the archives they'll find, among much else, correspondence revealing that the title of one of the CWA's earliest anthologies was dreamed up by Raymond Chandler, who urged his friend Michael Gilbert to call it *Some Like Them Dead*.

The appearance of *Mystery Tour* therefore forms part of a much bigger picture. It's a collection that offers a showcase for some splendid writers and for an organisation whose achievements even the ambitious John Creasey couldn't have foreseen when he founded the CWA back in 1953. My thanks go to all the contributors, the CWA Board, and everyone who has offered help and support in bringing this book into existence. I hope that crime readers, whatever branch of the genre they prefer, will find plenty to keep them entertained as they embark on this particular mystery tour.

Martin Edwards

The Queen of Mystery

Ann Cleeves

At Malice Domestic they call me the Queen of Mystery. Of course I'm flattered by the description but I'd never use it about myself. Malice is a crime convention for true lovers of the traditional mystery novel, a celebration of the gentle art of killing. And I do kill my characters very kindly, without torture or the gratuitous description of pain. But we aren't brash or flash at Malice. Self-promotion is frowned upon. Unfortunately, some of the newer writers don't observe the conventions. I've seen t-shirts printed with jacket covers, giveaway candy, the blatant canvassing for awards. I'm Stella Monkhouse and I'm above that sort of thing.

I feel at home at Malice. It's *my* convention. When I walk in through the hotel lobby I sense the flutter of the fans as they point me out to each other. I always dress my best to arrive. There are writers here too of course, and I wave to them as if we're tremendous friends, but really this is a performance for the common reader and the wannabe writer. I need those people's admiration, and their envy, more than the shared gossip over dreadful wine with fellow authors.

It helps that I was born British. Malice Domestic is always held in Bethesda, Maryland, but it celebrates the English detective tradition. Most of the regular attendees are ladies of a certain age, and the weekend always ends with afternoon tea. I came to the US when I was young to work as a secretary for a publisher in New York City; perhaps I had ambitions to write even then – certainly I hoped to make a name for myself. My husband was a senior editor with the company and much older than I; we never had children. I thought then that was a good thing because it allowed me to focus on my work. Now I wonder

what it might be like to leave behind more of myself than a pile of stories.

People sometimes mistake me for my series character. Molly Gregory is the gentle owner of a coffee shop in rural Massachusetts. She quilts, has a cat called Sherlock and solves murders in her spare time. I'm nothing like Molly, though I smile when readers ask me to send their love to Sherlock. One has a certain responsibility not to disappoint one's audience. But I've always adored living in the city and I wouldn't know one end of a knitting needle from another.

Publishers and other writers consider me ruthless, overly ambitious. They call me a monster behind my back though they turn on the charm when I arrive. I'm the star. The multi-Agatha-award-winner. So why shouldn't I upstage them a little when we appear together on a panel? I'm a professional and this is a competitive business. Besides, I'm more entertaining than they are, and it's me the readers have come to see.

There's no line to check in, and the receptionist recognises me. 'So glad to have you with us again, Ms Monkhouse.' This year I'm not guest of honour and I have to pay for my own room. That rankles a little, but someone else has to have a chance to shine, and next year they'll all be talking about me again. This year it's little Emily Furlow. She sets her books in Cornwall, though she'd never stepped foot outside Idaho when she started writing. She sent me her first book to blurb, but I couldn't bring myself to comment. On my way to the elevator I see her surrounded by a group of readers, but I don't join them. I give a regal wave as befits the Queen of Mystery and move on.

In my room I unpack and hang up the dress I'll wear for the awards dinner. I've been nominated again for an Agatha so I need to look my best. It's expected. The winner is chosen by readers over the weekend, and I'm confident that their loyalty will see me through. The sight of Emily with her entourage has unnerved me a little though. It's essential that I end my career on top. Second best has never been good enough for Stella Monkhouse, and it certainly won't do for this weekend. For a moment I feel something like self-pity. Or old age. Emily is at least thirty years younger than I am. In that moment I suspect that my recent

books lack the wit and pace of the earlier titles and that she's a better writer than I am. I ban the thought immediately and prepare to meet my fans.

There is nowhere for me to sit to do my make-up. The only mirror is the long one just inside the door, where the light is appalling. My husband called the make-up my war paint, and today I need it more than I've ever done. Clive and I were never passionate, but for a while we suited each other. Squinting in the gloom to fix my mascara I wish that he were here with me.

I sweep into the lobby just as everyone is gathering for the opening reception. There's a pay bar and I'm tempted to buy myself a large glass of wine, but today I need a clear head. I target members of the committee, hitting them with my special smile and the force of my personality. I need to dazzle them. These are the influential women who plan the convention and whose superb organisation keeps it going year after year. Like a politician I can make them feel special. I remember the names of their husbands and who has a son or daughter looking for an internship in the business. Many of them do. I don't actually *promise* that my publisher will provide their offspring with work experience, but they're left with the impression that it's a real possibility. I haven't put this much effort into working a convention since I was a young writer struggling to make a name for myself with my first book.

When I feel at the top of my game, glittering, I head for Emily Furlow. She's sitting on the floor next to a group of women who sit on the bright-red cubes of plastic that pass as seats. There's a glass of juice on the floor next to her – Emily, of course, never drinks alcohol. It occurs to me that I could slip an overdose of my medication into it and lose the competition forever, but I know that Emily dead will be much more popular than Emily alive. Dead, *she* would certainly upstage *me*.

There's a stir as I approach. 'Stella,' she says. 'How lovely!' She's on her feet in one movement, and we kiss on both cheeks. She's shorter than me, and I have to stoop. 'I adored your latest book.'

I smile and murmur that she's very kind, then I turn my attention to the readers. The voters. There are a couple of women from Texas who come to Malice every year, and I ask after their grandchildren. That's

always a winner. We're called into the reception, and the group walks along with me leaving Emily behind.

That night I struggle to sleep. The following evening will be the awards ceremony and I want to look my best. I think about Clive again. Before his death I thought I might enjoy living on my own with no distractions, but suddenly I realise I'm missing him dreadfully. I think of a possible parallel universe, one where I live like most of the attendees – a life cluttered with children and responsibilities, the demands of friendship. For a moment it has its attractions, but I know I couldn't stand it.

I wake to a beautiful Maryland late-spring day and decide that I'll go out to my favourite French café for breakfast. I can walk that far, despite the arthritis in my spine, and the fresh air will be good for me. In the far corner of the café Emily Furlow is sitting quite alone, her nose in a book. My book. For a brief second I'm tempted to join her. I wonder what she really makes of it, whether she thinks it's up to my usual standard, but the moment passes and I find a corner of my own and pretend I haven't noticed her. Because I'm in a strange mood. If she were kind to me I might be prompted to some sort of confession, and that isn't part of the plan at all. Not yet.

The awards dinner is just as it always is. The women have dressed in their finery and some of the men are wearing tuxes. Tradition is respected at Malice. The toast mistress is Catriona, another of my rivals – a Scottish woman based in California. She's witty and keeps things tight and fun, so we come very quickly to the announcement of the prizes. When the moment arrives, I wonder if I've lost the passion to win. Perhaps I could drift into retirement after all, take up knitting and quilting like my heroine. Bring a dog into my life. Perhaps it would be better if Emily took over my mantle. I hate to admit it, but she is a fine writer.

I pour myself a glass of wine; the other people at my table turn out not to be great drinkers. Catriona is opening the envelope. I fidget in my purse – after all, this mustn't seem to matter too much – so I'm not looking at the stage when the announcement is made.

It's me. I've beaten the record for the longest reign as Agatha champion. The glad-handing, the enquiries about grandchildren, the

promises of internships that will never be kept, have all paid off. The people at my table rise to their feet and begin cheering. I grab my wine and walk a little unsteadily to the stage. There Catriona kisses me on both cheeks, though I sense her disappointment. She admires Emily's work. I sip the drink and take the microphone. The custom is that speeches are kept very short, but this is an unusual occasion. As soon as I start speaking they will listen to me.

'This is my last time at Malice, and I thank you all for making it so special. There will be no more Molly Gregory and no more Sherlock.'

There are horrified boos and cries of 'Shame!' I pause. I've always had a sense of dramatic timing.

'By tomorrow morning there will be no more Stella Monkhouse.'

There's a sudden silence, a few embarrassed giggles, because they think I'm making a tasteless joke.

'In my fiction I take research seriously. I know about poison, the prescription meds that can kill.' I lift my glass in a mock toast. 'In here there's more than enough to finish me off.' I'd taken the pills from my purse while Catriona was speaking and I drink the remainder of the wine with a very unladylike gulp.

Ironically, I've never felt more alive. Not even when I was holding the pillow over poor Clive's mouth to kill him. He asked me to do it – after the stroke he knew he was holding me back – but he never expected me to agree. When I can't sleep I'm haunted by his pleading eyes, begging me to let him live. However, this isn't a time for regrets. This is what I've always wanted: to be the centre of attention, to shock and thrill with my words. And I know that when I'm dead my books will shoot to the top of the bestseller lists, for a while at least. Articles will be written about me. The obituaries will tell the world that I died as a champion. I couldn't have borne to be a woman who once *was* the Queen of Mystery, who slid into obscurity as her writing lost its power. Now, I'll reign for ever.

Return to the Lake

Anna Mazzola

The evening air was sharp with the tang of salt, algae, barbecue smoke, and the lake shifted silver in the fading light. Two small boys were wading in the shallows, shouting, trying to collect something in empty jam jars, and Alice, standing on the cracked front steps of the house, almost wanted to warn them. But that was absurd, of course. It happened years ago. She drew on her cigarette and stared at the water stretching before her, edged with tall fir trees, which moved in the breeze.

'You don't have to come,' her mother had told her back in England. 'But I thought it might be nice: the family together again. A chance for Michael to get to know everyone properly before the big day.'

'Yes, of course.' For they had barely met him. Michael was her new world, her better world; she had done what she could to keep them apart, but she could not do so forever.

She stared, still, at the lake. Here and there, she glimpsed dark, undistinguishable shapes beneath the surface, rippling the water, changing its flow. She had not been able to ask why her mother had chosen to return here after all this time. Perhaps it was a kind of memorial, or a way of letting go.

Alice heard footsteps behind her, felt Michael's arm around her waist. She leaned into him, smelling sweet sweat and suntan lotion. He didn't speak, and for that she was grateful. There was nothing she could say about it now. There never really was.

The lake was a favourite haunt of picnickers – mostly French, but with a smattering of Germans, Austrians, Italians, Brits. Some came just for a day trip; others camped on a hill by the lake, as she and Clara had done that night. The apartments her parents rented were in a large, shambling house overlooking the water. In the years since they had last visited the place had been allowed to decay: paint flaked from the front door and the windows were coated with a film of dirt.

'You're a strong man, Michael. See if you can carry this.' Her father was struggling towards them with a large suitcase, his breathing heavy. He was sixty-two now, his hair thinner over his scalp, his stomach straining at his belt, but he was still proud; still protective.

'You'd best treat this one right,' he'd told Michael the first time they'd met – joking, but not joking. 'She's still our little girl.'

A little girl. At twenty-eight.

'I'd best go and help Mum,' Alice said, not looking at him. She took a last pull on her cigarette and threw it to the ground, crushing the end beneath her shoe.

She found her mother in the stone-flagged kitchen, unloading crates of food and wine. 'How many people are you feeding here, Mum?'

Her mother smiled, the lines carving deeper into her face – the face Alice knew, but worn by time.

'Got to make sure my children are properly looked after, haven't I?'

As her mother unpacked, Alice's eyes were drawn to her thin arms, papery skin wrinkled over bone.

'Can I help?'

'No, no. I'm fine, love. You show the children around the house. They'll like that.' What she meant was that she would rather not deal with them, her grandchildren. They were too loud. Too vibrant. Too much.

'All right. If you're sure.'

From the door, she looked again at her mother, a small figure in a faded print dress. Every time she saw her, she noticed how life had

crushed her a little further. Her mother had felt responsible, of course, for Clara had been on holiday with them. And they had lost her.

Alice's nieces were six and four – all elbows, arguments and delight. They were already running about between rooms, sizing everything up, working out what was theirs, while Alice's brother and his wife, travel-worn and weary, carried their luggage in from the car.

'There's a funny smell,' Ada said, wrinkling her little nose. And there was: the scent of must and dust, and things unwashed.

'It's just how old houses smell,' Alice explained. 'Especially houses by lakes.'

She showed the children the large, chequer-tiled bathroom, their blue-papered room, the bunk bed in which she herself had slept all those years ago. As they squabbled about whose bunk was whose, Alice remembered the excitement of introducing Clara to the place that summer, pointing out where they kept the fishing nets and the wetsuits, the towels and torches. She remembered them brushing their teeth together in the bathroom, huddling down beneath the blankets in the blue bedroom, Clara in the top bunk, because Alice had let her choose.

'How about we never go back?' Clara had said as they lay in their bunks that first night. Alice had laughed, thinking it was a joke. But maybe it had been a real question.

Thank God for Michael, tolerating the defects of others – her own lack of words, her father's excess. He had become more brazen over the years: more wisecracks, more 'cockney charm', almost a caricature of his former self. Perhaps she should have found it amusing, but it was false, cloying. He was making up for something by being someone he was not. She left them in the back garden and went to help her mother prepare the dinner. Through the kitchen window, she could see her

father gesticulating, embellishing some story, while Michael quietly sipped his beer. From upstairs came the occasional slam of a door or the shriek of a child being unwillingly bathed.

'Here,' her mother said, handing her a bowl, 'you make the salad.'

They worked then, without speaking, the radio on.

Just before eight o'clock, Alice ran up to their room to change into a silk shirt and cut-off jeans, to pop little silver studs into her ears. She had caught the sun, she noticed. She looked healthy, even pretty. She would never be beautiful, though. She would never be Clara.

They sat at the table outside to eat, amid the whine of mosquitoes and the scent of citronella candles. They talked of nothings: their journeys, the weather, Michael's job, Charlie's new school. Her mother served quiche, a casserole, cheeses, crusty bread. Her father poured everyone too much wine.

'Is it all booked, then? The venue, the caterers?'

Michael looked at Alice. 'Yes, I think so, we're keeping it pretty simple.'

Simple and small. A plain white dress. Her brown hair straight and unadorned. Alice wished they could run away – avoid all the fuss and formalities – but it wouldn't be fair. Their only daughter, their little girl.

'Already preparing my speech,' her father said, and winked at her.

She smiled. She could imagine it, and her insides curled.

Robert's wife, Caroline, came down sometime later, glared at Robert and drank a glass of white wine almost in one. Did she know, Alice wondered, as she watched her drinking – did she know what happened here? Robert was more open than she was, less of a closed book, but this was different. Alice suspected that Robert, like her, rarely discussed it. Perhaps he never talked of it at all.

'A toast to the chef,' her father said, raising his beer. 'Santé!'

Then came the clink of glasses, the polite laughter, her mother shaking her head.

And all at once Alice could not bear it – that they were here in this very place where Clara had slid from time, and yet her name had not even been spoken.

She picked up her glass again and her father smiled. 'To Clara too. Never forgotten.'

A silence, her father's smile froze, and then Michael raised his bottle, met her gaze. 'To Clara.'

The others followed then. 'Yes. Clara.'

Her father's eyes were on the tablecloth, her mother's cheeks were flushed. Caroline did not seem surprised, only uncomfortable. She knew, then. And yet she had brought her children here.

Coughs, the scraping of cutlery. Robert talked in an overly bright voice about their plans for tomorrow: boats, shops, things to buy. He always wanted to make things right; make them all get on. Alice, however, was not really listening, but remembering. Thinking of Clara sitting across from her at this table for lunch, her freckles already darkened by two days in the sun.

What's the point of having a tent and not using it, though? Go on, Alice. Ask your mum.

She realised then that her mother was staring at her, her expression sharp. After a moment, her mother smiled, but it was too late, Alice had seen it. It was the same look everyone had always given her: watchful. Uncertain. Cold.

She rose early the following morning, slipped from the bed, in which Michael still slept, gathered a towel and pulled on her swimming costume. She could hear voices from the kitchen – the high whining of a child; Caroline's hushed tone. In her bare feet, Alice stole down the stairs and crept out of the house through the front door. Outside, the air was crisp with the remnants of the night chill, the light translucent, the sky a bleached blue. Green-winged dragonflies hovered over the lake, and a breeze ruffled the surface as she took her first steps into the cool water, feeling the velvet silt between her toes. Before she could lose her nerve, she submerged herself entirely in the lake, her arms pulling her forward into the water, her legs barely breaking the surface. There was only the sound of the wind on the water, the rustle of reeds, the call of a bird: bubbling, sad.

She closed her eyes and felt the water caressing her body, the

movement of her limbs. Then she stopped kicking and allowed herself to float, the water covering her chin, cloaking her shoulders. And all at once Clara was there, her long hair trailing, the sunlight shining on her narrow shoulders, forming a halo of light about her head.

'They didn't want me to come, you know.'

'Why?'

A shrug. 'You know what my mum's like.'

Clara's mother: tight lips, suspicious eyes. Never wanting Clara to play at hers. Alice wasn't good enough for her, presumably. Too lumpen and awkward, lacking Clara's spark. She lived in a terraced house on a mediocre street. Was that it? Or was it something else?

'What did your stepdad say?'

'Who cares what he thinks? He's a prick.' Clara closed her eyes, held her nose and disappeared beneath the surface in a spray of water, leaving Alice to wonder in what particular way she'd failed.

Clara was different that summer, harder perhaps, more closed. Maybe it was just to do with being fifteen. They'd known each other since junior school; since they were gap-toothed eight-year-olds in matching check dresses and boater hats. But it was only in senior school that they'd become friends – when Clara, now tall and graceful, had sought Alice out. She was never sure why Clara had wanted her friendship, why someone so special would have wanted anything to do with her. But maybe it was Alice's very ordinariness that made her attractive – her dull and stable home life, the lack of drama and disaster. Clara's mother was already on her second marriage and third house – a tall modern building, all glass, chrome and no mess. To Alice, Clara always seemed desperately exciting and superior. This was why, by and large, she let her have what she wanted: stickers, hairbands, the window seat. It was why, that summer, she had agreed to ask her parents about the tent.

Alice's mother had been against it. There were two perfectly good beds for them to sleep in, she said. And they'd be bitten to death by mosquitoes – they were rife that year. Alice's father, though, had

laughed. 'They'll only be a few minutes from the house. I was off for days by myself at their age. Stop making excuses, Bev.'

So she had. And they had gone.

Alice remembered the exhilaration, packing their rucksacks, stocking up on apples and crisps from the kitchen. A flask of tea from Mum. A flask of rum from her father. 'Just to keep off the cold, eh? Don't tell your mother.'

He and Robert came with them to help them pitch the tent in the small camping site that looked onto the lake. Her father was in his element amid the guy ropes and tent poles, finding them a shady spot by the trees. Robert, meanwhile, was sullen and unhelpful, whining about being left out again. He'd been sulky all holiday, with no friend of his own. Thirteen years old, pimple-skinned and lanky, insatiably in love with Clara, of course.

'Couldn't I stay with you? Until you go to bed?'

'No,' they both said at once, and Alice had added: 'Sorry, Bobs. Girls only.'

But in fact, that was a lie.

They'd seen them earlier in the week, as they sat on the pontoon, watching the dark, moving shapes of small fish darting below. Three boys, two girls, laughing, talking, taking it in turns to steer a small blue boat.

'Ahoy there!' one of the boys shouted.

'Ahoy!' Clara returned, raising her arm.

'Are you English?' He was tall with dark hair and grey eyes, narrowed into slits against the sun.

'Yes,' Clara said. 'From London. Watch – you'll fall!'

But he had not fallen. He had climbed out of the boat, sat beside them on the creaking wooden boards and taken out a packet of cigarettes, nonchalant, easy. His name was Max, he told them. He was seventeen.

'Where are you staying?'

He pointed to a hill just beyond the lake. 'We're camping just over there.'

'On your own?'

'Of course on our own. What, you think we came with our mums and dads?'

He lit a cigarette, offered them the pack.

It didn't take Clara and Alice long that evening to find them. They were sitting on deckchairs outside their tent, smoking cigarettes, drinking small bottles of French beer.

'Hello,' Max said, pushing his sunglasses up onto the top of his head. 'Fancy seeing you here.'

Alice felt her sunburned skin grow hotter, but of course it wasn't her he was really talking to.

Clara approached the group, ponytail swinging, and took the deckchair one of the boys pushed forward. She turned back to Alice: 'Come on, then.'

'Yes, come join us,' another of the boys said. 'We don't bite.' He bared his teeth, and the others laughed.

Alice hesitated then walked closer, standing awkwardly at the edge of the group.

'How come you're camping, then?'

'Just fancied it.'

'Really? I'd give anything for a proper bed.' That was one of the girls, her lips glossy as blood, her hair coiled up on her head like a snake.

'Where's that rum, Alice?' Clara's voice was hard, strange, and all at once it came to Alice that Clara didn't even like her, was embarrassed about her. Had come on this holiday only to escape her own family, whom she disliked even more.

Without answering, Alice turned and walked slowly back to their tent by the trees to fetch her father's flask. When she returned, the others had moved their chairs into more of a circle, Clara closer to Max, their arms almost touching. Alice sat at the entrance to one of the tents, conscious of her pale legs, her too-thick calves and unmanicured nails. Outside the tent opposite, a plastic toy windmill turned in the breeze.

They passed round the rum, and Alice took a few sips, ignoring the burn in the back of her throat. The boys all looked at Clara, of course, Clara with her dark eyes and nut-brown hair, and Alice shrank into herself, her dejection deepening. She wished herself anywhere but there. More beers were brought out, and the stars grew brighter, the dusk darkening into an ink-blue night. They talked about the usual things – what class they were in, what college, what subject, how long they were staying here, what things they had planned. Clara's laughter was high and false, and Alice felt her skin crawl with rising resentment, with the realisation that she had been used, once again.

At around midnight, the girl with the red lips said she was too tired, she was going to bed, and everyone decided to turn in for the night.

Had that been it? Had there been something else, something that could provide her with a clue, or a reason? An odd look, a strange remark? Alice had gone over it again and again, thinking she could piece together every moment of that evening, but there must have been a fragment missing: a shard or scrap of information that she had missed or forgotten.

She remembered them brushing their teeth together and spitting the froth into tin cups.

'I think he liked you – the short one.'

'No, Clara. They all liked you. They always do.'

They had changed into their night things without speaking, and Alice had climbed into her sleeping bag, inhaling the peculiar smell of must and polyester. She heard Clara moving about beside her, then lying still, her breathing soft.

'It isn't as good as you think.'

'What?

'Being the pretty one.'

The words were like a sharp slap, leaving her ears ringing: the acknowledgment that Alice was not special, was not pretty – was not, in fact, anything at all.

'Yes, poor you.' Her throat was tight. 'The pretty one.'

'You don't understand what it's like, Alice. It's not like I always want the attention.'

Alice turned away from her, her eyes burning. 'And what do you think it's like for me?'

'Oh, forget it, then.'

'I will.'

Clara turned onto her side too, and Alice could feel the hostility emanating from her, her shoulders tense. Alice lay in the dark, her anger subsiding into sadness, but she could not bring herself to say anything. It was too late. She could hear the wind on the water, the rustling of the trees and – from somewhere across the lake – laughter. She nestled down inside her sleeping bag and listened to Clara's breath: even, slow, slower. If she could sleep, she could not be that angry. By tomorrow, maybe it would be OK.

Alice woke early in the morning to the patter of light rain on the outside of the tent and to the smell of canvas. Clara was gone.

Her mother's panic was immediate. Her father's took longer to set in. Clara must have wandered off around the lake, he reasoned. Maybe she couldn't sleep. Perhaps she'd had a bad dream. Girls did silly things at that age.

'But why on earth would she go walking before six o'clock in the morning, Paul? Clara's a sensible girl.'

Sensible. Was she? Alice thought of Clara, ponytail swinging; the false laughter. She thought of the argument, their final words. But she didn't say anything, even later. She could not bear the thought that she might be to blame.

They asked other families first, couples camping with young children who were up early, eating breakfast; older people in camper vans or caravans. At around eight o'clock, the girl from the previous night emerged from her tent, the red lipstick gone. She regarded Alice strangely while her mother asked questions, as though she thought the whole thing a hoax or a terrible joke. She woke Max and the others

then, and they emerged from their tents, groggy, grumpy, hair disarranged. They squinted at Alice, shook their heads. No, they hadn't heard anything at all.

The plastic windmill still turned in the breeze, but the tent opposite had gone, leaving a patch of flattened grass.

They went then to people in holiday houses, people who might have seen something from a window, heard a shout or a scream in the night. Alice remembered her mother's voice growing shriller, her father quieter, more angry. She remembered Robert crying, all of his thirteen-year-old bravado gone. Mostly she remembered the panic spiralling within her like a sickness and the looks of those other people: part pity, part curiosity, part suspicion. It was the way people always looked at her, even many years later.

By the time the police came, her mother had grown silent and afraid. And that was far, far worse.

On the second day, they began to trawl the lake: teams of masked men in black-and-blue wetsuits, emerging from the surface like strange water beasts. Clara's mother and stepfather had arrived by that stage – tearful, hostile, pale. They wouldn't stay in the same house as Alice's parents. They would barely even talk to them. This seemed grossly unfair to Alice. It had, after all, been Clara's idea to camp, Clara's insistence that had led to them being in the tent that night, alone.

'Please don't worry about it, Alice,' her mother said. 'They're upset. People do funny things when they're upset.'

But Alice had heard what Clara's mother said to her parents: 'I should have trusted my instincts. I should have said no. I should never have let her come here with you.'

Two days after that, Alice flew home with Robert and their mother to make the start of term. Her father remained behind to 'keep a watch

on things'. He had become strained and argumentative by this stage, insisting that the boys in the other tent must have had something to do with it, even though the police had discounted them early on. 'I don't like the look of them, Bev. I don't like their manner. If you ask me, they've got something to hide.'

Back in England, the teachers had been gentle with Alice. The children less so.

'How could you not have heard her leave?' one of the girls asked her. 'Were you drunk, or something?'

'No. No, I wasn't.' And she hadn't been. Had she?

As Alice lay next to Michael, watching the curtains in the open window drift like ghosts, her memories of it all seemed remote and false. She had gone over what happened so many times since then, relived it for so many people – the French police, the British police, the coroner, the teachers, the parents – that she no longer fully remembered the real events. They had been trodden into the dust, mingled with other footprints, lost.

What stayed with her was the guilt. Even here, now, she could not entirely shift the fear that she was to blame. The belief that, somehow, she should have stopped Clara before she stepped out of the tent and into empty space.

The next day broke bright and fine, the sky a watercolour blue. From downstairs came the sound of water running, Charlie shrieking, Ada laughing. Alice was glad Robert's children were there, carefree and oblivious. They gave the adults something to fuss over, something to focus on that was not the spectre of the girl who had vanished years before.

They spent that morning and those that followed boating or swimming in the lake, taking Ada and Charlie to the wooden playground, shaded beneath the trees. In the afternoons, they would read or snooze in the sunshine; in the evenings, play cards or watch TV. Only once more had Clara been mentioned, and this time, strangely, it was by Robert.

Alice was sitting in the garden, a book in her lap, when he took a seat next to her and gripped its arms. 'I think she's at peace, Alice.'

She closed her book and turned to her brother, glad that her sunglasses obscured her eyes. She had never believed Clara to be at peace. She remained in Alice's mind, uneasy beneath the surface, waiting to be heard.

'Why do you think that, then?'

'I don't know. I just get that feeling, being back in this place. I think she's still here, but she's OK. You know?'

Still here. Alice looked at Robert, his long, earnest face, his large, pale eyes. Little Bobs, who had cried for Clara, who still wanted it all to be all right. She turned away. If Clara was still here, it was surely as fragments or as the echo of a scream. Sometimes Alice imagined draining the entire lake, just to know once and for all – finding a cluster of bones, fragments of cloth. It would be better that way; it would allow her to release Clara from the prison of her mind. Because, how could you grieve if you have no bones? If you had nothing to bury at all?

But she would allow Robert to think Clara was at peace. There was no harm in it. She almost envied him his delusion.

By the last day of the holiday, Alice was desperate to be gone. She never liked other people being too close, and here they were inescapable – their sounds, their smells, their opinions, brushing up against her like the wings of the moths that flew in at dusk. Again, she swam early in the lake, the outlines of the trees reflecting black on the surface of the water. It was cold this morning, but she forced herself to remain in the lake, her limbs white phantoms beneath the surface. It was her goodbye to Clara. Her apology. This was the last time she would visit this place.

When Alice returned to the house, a towel wrapped around her, her bare feet leaving watery prints, she found her mother in the kitchen, her hands around a mug of tea.

'You're up early, Mum.'

She nodded. 'Let me make you a cuppa. The kettle's just boiled.'

Alice pulled her towel tighter, not wanting to stay talking, but not wishing to offend her mother, who stood at the work surface, putting a tea bag into a cup.

'Does it bring things back, being here?' Her mother did not look up.

Alice felt her body tense. She had not expected the question. 'I suppose so. Maybe. It's not been as bad as I thought it would.'

At first Alice had thought that coming back would be impossible – too close, too painful. But she knew now that Clara had never really left her. She was always there, just out of reach. Alice was always straining to hear her voice, to catch a glimpse of her. Occasionally, she would see her out of the corner of her eye, and her heart would speed up and her skin prickle with sweat before she realised that, of course, it was not Clara at all, but some dull, dark-haired woman going about her day – a life Clara should have been living.

Her mother was watching her now, her blue eyes flecked with red. 'It doesn't make you remember anything new, love?'

Alice looked at her mother's drawn, tired face and felt a wave of irritation – that she had spoiled her swim, her moment of peace; that she was demanding she speak again of the events she had re-remembered beyond recognition.

'What do you mean, Mum?'

'I just wondered.' She poured the water into the cup. 'It doesn't matter, really.'

Alice stared at her mother. Was that why she had brought them back, then? To see if it might prompt Alice to remember something, or to speak out about something she'd long concealed?

'I didn't see anything, Mum.' Her voice was flat and dull. 'I didn't hear anything. I can't remember something I didn't see, no matter how much you might want me to tidy things up for everybody.'

Her mother was pouring the milk. 'I've just always wondered if perhaps you did see something that night but thought it best not to say.' She spoke gently, as though to a child.

'What?'

No answer.

'You don't seriously think that I've known all these years what happened to Clara, but kept quiet about it?'

Her mother's lips were a thin line.

'Really? After what her parents have suffered? After what we've all been through? After every look, every snide comment I've endured over the years – people who think I must have known, must have heard, must have done something? You can't think that.' Her heart beat jerkily, too fast.

Her mother didn't answer. She still stood at the work surface, her hands to her mouth, her fingers tugging at her lips – an odd, painful gesture.

As Alice watched, she felt her anger drain away, leaving her cold, shivering, on the flagstone floor. 'Mum, what is it?'

Quietly, her mother began to cry – an odd, choking sound, a sound that made the air leave Alice's lungs and her heart squeeze tight, like a fist.

She left the kitchen, left the house, returned to the lake, which was glass-still, dark in the shadows of the trees. She stood at the edge, her arms wrapped around herself, and thought. She thought of her mother, cowed and diminished. She thought of Robert: delusional, hopeful.

She thought of her father. Her father insisting that they camp near the trees. Her father handing them a flask full of rum.

Something in the water disturbed the surface, bubbles rose, then disappeared.

All these years her mother had been waiting for Alice to grow up. To work it out. To tell. Because she couldn't.

Alice walked back into the lake, aware only vaguely of the coldness of the water. She walked until she was submerged up to her shoulders, then closed her eyes, held her nose and disappeared beneath the surface to where it was dark and cool and safe.