A Hidden Life

Adèle Geras

Published by Orion

Please note that this extract is taken from an uncorrected proof

All text is copyright of the author

This opening extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

-1-

Lou Barrington had stopped loving her grandmother when she was eight years old. There had been times lately when she'd hoped that something could be done to improve the chilly relationship they'd fallen into, but now Constance was dead and buried and it was too late. Lou had done her best, but she'd waited years for some indication of a softening, of a change of heart from her grandmother and none had come.

Milthorpe House, Lou reflected as she made her way across the hall, has changed. In her opinion, it had lost its heart and its warmth after her grandfather died, but now there wasn't even Miss Hardy, the housekeeper, to remind her of her childhood. She'd been in charge of everything up until a few years ago, but since her death Dad had been arranging for agency staff to look after both the house and his mother. Miss Hardy had been pleasant enough and not in the least like Mrs. Danvers from *Rebecca*, but you knew that anything you said in front of her would be instantly relayed to Constance. The two of them were very close, so you had to be wary in her presence.

Lou had been told to wait in the library. She opened the door and went in. The room was dark on this cloudy day and she switched on the lights as she came in. Vanessa and Justin, her brother and sister, were in the room already. Why hadn't they noticed how gloomy it was and turned on a light? Burgundy brocade curtains hung at the tall windows. On either side of the fireplace stood the vases which she'd loved when she was a small girl. In those days, they towered over her head. She'd thought they were beautiful, admiring their narrow necks, rounded middles and the mess of dragons, flowers and assorted *Chinoiserie* painted all over them. Looking at them now, they struck her as verging

on the hideous: too large and impractical in every way. Justin turned to greet her with a smile.

'Oh, hello, Lou,' he said, coming forward to kiss her. 'I was just saying to Nessa - Constance hardly ever came in here, did she?' Justin was running his hands over the backs of the books without really looking at them. Lou loved the window seat in this room. Its cushions hadn't been re-covered since she was about ten. Sitting there as a child on rainy days, looking over the flowerbeds and then at the apple tree near the back gate, with a bench built around it, and beyond that, at the slopes of the South Downs had made her feel as though she'd strayed into the opening pages of *Jane Eyre*. There was always a small slice of sky between the curve of the hill and the frame of the window, and clouds drifted across this luminous space, making pictures that she found entrancing.

'No,' Lou answered. 'She wasn't much of a reader, really.' Nessa came over to greet Lou and peered at one of the shelves, her dark hair falling forward over her brow, and looking more ethereal than usual in a grey jersey, with a filmy scarlet scarf around her neck. She was slim and though not exactly pretty, always beautifully dressed and elegant. She made Lou feel large and a little clumsy. Now she said, 'Where are Grandad's books? They used to be down here, didn't they?'

'Yes, next to the collected Dickens,' Lou said. 'Aren't they there?'

'She must have given them away. Not that anyone read any of them, did they? Not now and not when he wrote them, poor old Grandad!' Nessa smiled. 'You were the only person who ever opened them, I think, since the day they were published. Putting him next to Dickens was wishful thinking on Constance's part.'

'I've got them all at home,' Lou said. What she didn't say was that she treasured them. John Barrington had left his own copies to her in his will and now, even though she hadn't yet read them properly, they reminded Lou of the hours and hours her grandfather had spent with her, talking about the sorts of things no one else seemed to be interested in: countries far away and times long gone and astonishing people. Stories and more stories. She remembered him reading parts of his first

novel, *Blind Moon*, aloud to her when she was quite young. All she could bring to mind now was that it told the story of a young boy called Peter having adventures in a Japanese prison camp. There were other children shut up there with him and the book was about the hero and his gang and the narrow shaves they had with the guards. Most of all, she recalled the atmosphere of what Grandad had read to her: heat, and darkness and the image of the moon, which frightened Peter because it seemed to be like the glowing, pale eye of a blind person looking down at them out of a black night sky.

Grandad had still been handsome, even though he was old and one of Lou's favourite pastimes had been looking with him at the albums full of images of someone tall and strong and good-looking. She said, 'I expect Constance has binned the ones that used to be here.'

Justin laughed. 'She reckoned books were dust-collectors. That's what she told me. I'm surprised she's kept the library as a library at all. She could have turned it into something else. I would have.'

Lou was shocked at this remark, but then she often found herself taken aback by some of the things Justin and Vanessa came out with. Perhaps that wasn't surprising, considering that they weren't related to her, not really. They were the children of her father's first wife, Ellie, by her first husband, who'd died very soon after Justin was born. Dad was Ellie's second husband. All her life she'd been taught to think of them, to behave towards them as though they were her elder sister and brother, and as far as she was concerned, most of the time, that was what they were. They even shared her surname, because Dad had adopted them as soon as he married their mother. But Ellie had taken one look at Haywards Heath, and the life she'd be living there, and had immediately done two things. She'd had an affair with someone who lived in London and then run away with him, leaving Dad holding the babies, who hadn't been babies but children. He'd married Phyllida, Lou's mother, a few months after Ellie's departure and once she was old enough to know about such things, Lou had sometimes wondered whether help with the shouldering of the childcare burden was part of the attraction.

But no, she knew that wasn't fair to either of her parents. Mum wasn't glamorous, like Ellie, but she was kind and good-humoured

and even if no one would have called her beautiful, her face was one you were quite happy to look at and if she smiled at you, you couldn't help smiling in return. Lou was born a year later, when Nessa was ten and Justin six. Now the three of them were killing time, waiting to be summoned for the reading of Constance's will.

'You can come through now,' Matthew, Lou's father, put his head round the door, looking flustered. They followed him across the hall to the drawing-room, and Lou looked down at the beautiful Turkish carpet with its pattern of blue and red birds on a fawn background, flying with rectangular wings in and out of glorious, imaginary trees covered in strangely-shaped leaves. There it lay on the parquet floor, looking just as it always had, welcoming every visitor to Milthorpe House.

How typical of Constance to have stage-managed this event, Lou thought as she looked around. Mum was being attentive to Dad as usual. She hadn't been too fond of Constance but would never have shown her true feelings. Lou felt most sorry for her father. He'd been completely devoted to his mother and it was clear he'd been crying, which wasn't like him at all. Poor Dad...Lou had been surprised at how sad she, too, had felt at the graveside. It struck her, all at once, that this really *was* the very end of someone; of everything they'd been. However hard she tried, she couldn't believe in a life anywhere else. *Imagine there's no heaven...* Lou had never thought there was one, even as a child. The tears that came to her eyes unbidden weren't about any residue of love for her grandmother. They had to do with her regret that they hadn't been closer in life; hadn't managed to get over the jealousy, or resentment, or whatever it was Constance felt that had come between them.

The weather (grey, windy, with occasional gusts of horizontal drizzle) had seemed appropriate for the way everyone was feeling. Some of Constance's elderly friends were in black hats with veils. Gareth, Nessa's husband, looked uncomfortable in his dark suit, his round, cheerful face not suited to this setting. Dad had seemed in some strange way *absent* during the service and burial; preoccupied, as though his mind were on something else. Even though his hair had been grey for some years, he still looked young: tall, and thin and with very blue eyes,

now slightly red-rimmed, behind his glasses. This must be such a sad day for him. What had he been thinking of while his mother was being put into her grave?

Lou sat down in one of the armchairs and felt ashamed as she acknowledged that she was feeling calmer now; even beginning to enjoy herself a little. There was a kind of closure about all this, a putting-away of a person's life, so to speak, and perhaps it was time for her to stop fretting about the bad relationship she'd had with Constance. If you looked at it in a positive frame of mind, the funeral meant a day off work, and a day and night away from childcare. Poppy was staying with Lou's friend, Margie, who, poor thing, was in for something of a culture shock, not to mention probable sleep deprivation. You couldn't *imagine* a one-year-old, you had to experience her, Lou had told her, and Margie announced gamely that she was ready for anything. Lou smiled to herself. The only question was: would she be ready for a repeat performance? Most likely not, but you could hope, right? Lou would have died for her baby, adored her beyond all reason and more than anyone else in the world, but how blissful it was to take a break from her for a few hours, even though she missed her.

It was good to be back here, too. Milthorpe House looked from the outside like one of the smaller hotels you saw as you drove here from Brighton, which was just a few miles away along the coast road. Someone had thought of adding turrets to the roof in several places. The front was cream stucco and there were balconies on the rooms that faced the sea. This was some way off, but still visible because the house was quite high up, built on a gentle slope that became the South Downs once you'd left Barrington land. It wasn't really *Barrington,* Lou reminded herself. Constance had brought the money and the property to the marriage. Her father's family had owned Milthorpe for three generations. John Barrington was a provincial solicitor and she was rich and very beautiful, and true to form, she'd never let him forget how lucky he was; how much further up in the world he'd travelled simply by falling in love with her. Lou felt tears coming to her eyes. She still missed her grandfather, who'd loved her and she'd never stopped loving him, even though he'd been dead for more than two years.

'Louise, darling...how lovely! Years since I've seen you! You've grown up surprisingly pretty!'

What was one meant to say to that? Ellie was well-known for speaking before she thought and even though her tone was quite friendly, what Lou heard was: *for someone who was such a plain child*! She stood up and kissed Ellie on both cheeks.

'And you look fantastic!'

That was true. It always had been true about Ellie. She had a flamboyant, exotic style that had seemed quite out of place in Haywards Heath, where Dad and Mum still lived. She was wearing a black velvet cloak over a short black satin dress, which caught the light and shone...rather inappropriately, Lou thought, for a sombre occasion. Her hat was wide-brimmed and black and covered in the feathers of a good few ravens. It would have been ridiculous on anyone else, but Ellie, with her wide red mouth and dark eyes looked terrific. One of Constance's memorable pronouncements was one she'd made about her first daughter-in-law. *'She's a flamingo who wandered into an aviary full of nothing more exciting than sparrows and thrushes.'*

Dear old Gran! Always ready with a neat belittling remark. And guess who the thrushes and sparrows were! The rest of the family, of course. Lou was the only person who'd ever called Constance *Gran* and she did it because she knew how much it irritated the old woman. The war between us, she thought, had been going on for so long. Am I sorry it's over? I suppose not, not really. But while Constance was alive, Lou had never shrunk from a fight, and she'd never changed her views, even though her father was obviously deeply unhappy that his darling daughter didn't get on with his mother.

The last time I saw Constance, Lou thought, I really let her have it. But she'd brought it on herself. It wasn't anything unusual. She'd been asked down to Milthorpe, to show Poppy off to her great-grandmother, and she'd been pleased to oblige. She'd thought the baby would offer some protection from Constance's sharp tongue but not a bit of it. *I'd have thought that for the sake of the child, you'd have made peace with her father...so important for a child to have a father...grow up wild without one, you know...any possibility of a reconciliation?*

You're very young you know...how old are you? Only twenty-three? A mere infant yourself. You should grow up and realize that life can't be a bed of roses all the time, dear…

And I answered quite politely at first, too, Lou remembered. Tried to explain what it was like to live with being on guard all the time, every minute. What it was like to be always waiting for the next blow to fall, the next overwhelming fury that came out of nowhere and made straight for her. How she'd found she couldn't stay with him once she discovered she was pregnant. He was a man who didn't see anything wrong with using his fists when he felt like it, and no child of hers was going to be exposed to someone like that. But how hard it was to leave him forever, in spite of the way he behaved. How awful it was to live somewhere that was too small and where she also had to try and do her work. How sad it was to be alone and frightened of meeting anyone new. How crippling it was to be anxious and panic stricken at the very thought of someone kissing you. Above all, how daunting it was to be responsible for a vulnerable creature she barely understood. She'd tried to convey what her life was like and then back Constance had come with *…are you sure you hadn't done anything to provoke him, dear? Some men are very jealous at the thought of a child and we have to understand that, don't we?*

She'd lost it altogether at that point. Sobbed, yelled at Constance, called her names, told her she had as much understanding of anything as a shriveled old onion, and stormed out banging the door behind her, and shouting at her that she was wicked and had no feelings that a proper grandmother would have. She didn't regret making a scene. She should have told her grandmother years and years ago that she was on to her; that she realized Constance didn't love her; quite the reverse. Constance would have denied it. She was good at lying and she'd have trotted out the *blood is thicker than water* clichés. But it was true. Constance hated Grandad and me being so close. She knew there was stuff we talked about that he wouldn't have discussed with anyone else and least of all her. She was just plain jealous.

A man Lou didn't recognize came into the room, and Dad coughed to stop everyone talking. He was very pale and there was a

tremor in his voice as he spoke.

'Everyone, this is Andrew Reynolds. He works for Reynolds and Johnson, solicitors. He's got something to say, I'm afraid.'

Afraid? What did that mean? Justin looked bemused. Lou saw Nessa glancing at him and giving the slightest shrug of her shoulders as if to say: *I've no idea what this is about either.* The man, who was gingery and skinny, was holding a large folder. He coughed, clearly embarrassed and his face went red.

'I was instructed by Constance Barrington shortly before she died to draw up a new will…'

'What on earth?' Justin interrupted him and Lou saw her father put a hand on his arm to shut him up. Justin looked like someone from a Calvin Klein perfume ad, and reckoned that because of that, he could do exactly what he wanted, when he wanted. He'd been like that ever since Lou had known him: relying on his charm and looks to achieve his ambitions. The strategy seemed to be working quite well so far.

'I know Matthew' - he nodded at her father - 'is her executor and had been in charge of his mother's legal affairs. There is a will, dated May 11th, 2003, drawn up by him shortly after the death of Mrs Barrington's husband, John, but I was called in to see her only two weeks ago, very shortly before her unfortunate death.'

The silence was so thick you could almost feel it in the room. Lou wondered whether it was the waves of a still-stormy sea she could hear, or simply a roaring in her ears. Mr Reynolds went on. 'This document is very brief. There's a great deal of the usual thing -being of sound mind, making all other wills invalid, etc etc but the actual bequests are very swiftly dealt with. I'll read them at once.' He coughed. 'I took this down at Mrs Barrington's dictation, you understand. And the will is witnessed by the two nurses who were looking after Mrs Barrington at the time of her death. 'This is my last will and testament. The will I made when my husband died is superceded by this one. I know what I'm doing and have not been influenced by anyone. This is what I wish to leave to my son and my grandchildren and others after my death. To my son, who owns his house outright and has control of the law firm, Barrington and

Son, I will not burden you with looking after a house you've never really liked and endless trouble with the taxman. Milthorpe House and the lands attached to it I am bequeathing to Justin Barrington, who is young enough to benefit from it for a very long time to come, even after taxes have been paid. To his sister, Vanessa née Barrington, now Williams, I leave half of my estate. The other half I leave to my only son, Matthew. This includes stocks, shares and so forth and I calculate that each of you will come away with a fairly substantial sum, again, even allowing for the present crippling rates of taxation. To Eleanor della Costa who has been like a daughter to me, I leave any of my clothes which take her fancy, and all my jewellery, which she has admired for years. She will wear it with style. To my granddaughter Louise, I leave the copyright in my late husband's books. To my daughter-in-law, Phyllida, I leave my collection of china and glass....'

Mr. Reynolds went on speaking, but Lou heard nothing. The roaring in her ears had subsided. She was sharply aware, as one is in a dream, of everyone looking at her, staring at her. Nessa had a hand over her mouth. She would just be coming to terms with the fact that Justin had done much better out of this than she had...no surprise there. Constance had been besotted with him since childhood. Justin was managing to look gleeful and horrified at the same time. Dad's face was chalk-white and Mum was holding his hand. Ellie's mouth was open. Lou thought: Copyright in Grandad's books....they'd been out of print for decades. They were worthless. Constance had disinherited her, and Lou could almost feel her grandmother's malevolent presence in the room. *I've won*, she'd be saying, from that special hell reserved for the unkind, the jealous, the unforgiving, the endlessly resentful. *I've punished you for years of not loving me. I've given everything to Ellie's children. She was closer to me than your father, or you, or anyone related to me by blood. Serves you right.*

When Mr Reynolds left the room, after what seemed like a very long time, everyone started talking at once.

'I'll fight it, Lou,' her father said. 'She must have gone mad. I'm sure that...'

'Oh, my poor child!' That was Ellie.

'I don't know what to say…' Nessa sounded tearful.

Lou heard her mother's voice cutting through the babble.

'What's the matter with all of you? Don't you understand what's happened here? I don't believe it…I simply *cannot* credit it…it's monstrous. The copyright to books that have been out of print for years and that no one wanted to read when they were in print…can you imagine a more worthless thing? It's deliberate. She's thought about this carefully. She's punishing my daughter from beyond the grave. It's a wicked thing to do! Quite wicked!'

And Lou watched as her mother, who almost never spoke her mind, who was terrified of making an exhibition of herself, burst into noisy tears and sank on to the sofa.

'Don't cry, Mum!' Lou ran to her side and put an arm around her shoulders. 'It doesn't matter.'

'But it does! It does matter. She's putting the knife in from beyond the grave…It's hateful and unkind. She's saying it loud and clear, Lou…can't you hear? *You loved him while he was alive, didn't you? Well, here are his books and you're welcome to them. No one else wants them.'*

'Never mind, Mum. Honestly.' Lou stared at them, her family, all talking, all tutting and shaking their heads. Suddenly, she had a longing to be somewhere else. To be with Poppy in the grotty flat. Anywhere but here, in Milthorpe House.

'I'm going home now, I think,' she told her mother. 'I'll see you soon.'

'Let me drive you to the station, darling.' Phyl wiped her eyes, and sat up straighter. She stood up and gave Lou her hand. For the first time that day, Lou felt as though she wanted to lie down and cry for ever. She nodded, unable to say a word.

*

'I thought you might need cheering up, that's all,' said Ellie, sitting down at the kitchen table. 'You stormed out of the drawing-room looking like thunder. Anyone could see you were about to explode or

something.'

Nessa went on washing up, taking care to rinse every single plate and cup and teaspoon in hot water. It never failed to amaze her how quickly the dishes mounted up whenever more than two people got together. Who'd used all this stuff? And when? She didn't bother to turn round to face her mother.

'I don't need cheering up. It's too late for anger.'

'Doesn't stop you from feeling like hell though, does it?'

Nessa decided that how she felt was none of her mother's business. She'd forfeited the right to be involved when she'd handed over responsibility for her children to a husband she'd tired of almost before the honeymoon was over and then later to his boring new wife. Nessa made an effort not to think along these particular lines now. It wasn't an appropriate time to go into every single grudge she held against Ellie. There were many of them and just at this moment Nessa was too furious with Constance to be able to attend properly to her mother's failings. And she could certainly do without this belated effort at cheering up. She said, changing the subject, 'This is the only house I know which doesn't have a dishwasher. It's quite relaxing really, all these suds and hot water.'

'You don't look relaxed, darling. I can see the knots of tension in our neck from here.'

'It's Justin's neck you ought to worry about. I could strangle him.' Why am I saying this, Nessa asked herself. I don't want to sound off to Ellie. God, I wish Mickey was here. She ought to have come to the funeral with me instead of Gareth.

Michaela Crawford was her best friend. They'd met ten years ago, when Mickey was working for the florist who was dealing with Nessa and Gareth's wedding. In those days, Nessa worked part-time in a bank and was going mad with boredom. When Mickey confided her ambition to start a business selling artificial flowers, it was Nessa who suggested that she might be able to help with the business side of things. Together they set up a company called *Paper Roses* which had been a bit of a struggle at first but was doing very well now, providing artificial flowers of every variety for businesses, for town-dwellers who didn't have a garden, and for anyone who loved flowers but didn't have the

money to keep forking out for fresh ones. She was the business expert and Mickey the creative brain, and for the last five years, Nessa had known that there was someone in her corner. Someone who'd support her whatever she did. Gareth was always, typically, mouthing off about Mickey's Lesbianism, but Nessa couldn't have cared less about that. She'd never talked to Mickey about her sex life. Her friend never discussed it and Nessa would have died rather than ask about it. Mickey's lover, Dee, used to live with her in the small and pretty house outside Hayward's Heath which was also *Paper Roses* HQ. She'd gone off with a Jamaican bikini-designer and for a while, Mickey was heartbroken. Nessa consoled her as best she could, but privately thought she'd had a narrow escape. Dee had always struck her as frivolous and selfish, happy to live off Mickey without contributing too much to the relationship. It didn't surprise Nessa in the least to discover that Dee was unfaithful. She'd even flirted with me a couple of times, Nessa thought, and I'm married. Good riddance to her.

Ellie had fallen silent. She screwed a cigarette into a long, black holder and lit it. Was it worth telling her to go outside? Probably not. As she thought of Gareth, a vision of his round pink face and chubby hands came into Nessa's mind and produced in her a wave of irritation. Even here in the kitchen, she thought she could hear his voice booming away in the drawing-room. What was the matter with her? What kind of wife was she? Gareth was cheerful. Pleasant. When they'd first met, she'd loved his jolliness, his bluff, ex-Rugby player's easy manners. She had fancied him rotten then and he was good company: generous and outgoing. He worked for an insurance company and Nessa was never quite sure what it was he did, but whatever it was he was quite successful at it. Now he was stockier and a lot less fun. He wasn't ... she couldn't really pin down what it was that annoyed her lately whenever she looked at him, but she was painfully aware that her misgivings were making sex - okay, not awful, but a hell of a lot less enjoyable than it used to be. She simply didn't find him as attractive as she used to. Perhaps that was normal when you'd been married for ten years. And there was Tamsin. She would always be grateful to Gareth for their daughter, whom she loved more than anything else in the world. The way she felt about

Tamsin from the moment she was born made it even harder for Nessa to understand Ellie's lackadaisical attitude to her and Justin.

She thought, blushing and hoping that her mother couldn't see her, of the fantasies she'd trained herself to conjure up the moment she felt Gareth's hand slide over to her side of the bed and rest on her thigh. Nowadays, when he touched her, she closed her eyes and summoned up stuff she tried hard to keep out of her head once daylight came. Things which - never mind. Just the memory of them made her shiver a little with remembered pleasure. Nessa shook herself to clear her head.

Concentrate on Justin, she told herself. That was what was making her angry. She said to Ellie, 'Why the hell didn't Constance sell the property and divide the proceeds? Why on earth should Justin get all this?' She waved a hand in the air to indicate Milthorpe House and everything that went with it.

'You heard that ginger lawyer. She thought, quite rightly, that you were taken care of already. You've got a husband who makes lots of money, a super house, a business which is doing better and better. What more could you possibly want? You'd never live here, would you? Count yourself lucky to be getting half the estate. It'll be a lot of money, you know. Much more than most people see in a lifetime.'

'That's beside the point!' Nessa was almost crying at the injustice of it. 'Just because Justin hasn't done anything with his life and is wasting his days showing people round grotty flats he gets rewarded with a property that must be worth over two million. Not fair. I *hate* things that aren't fair.'

'Oh, God, Nessa, you're always so hard done by!' Ellie laughed and leaned back in the kitchen chair.

'I *am* fucking hard done by…'

'Language, darling!'

'…and I always have been. First of all, my mother ups and dumps me with a husband she's obviously totally bored with and his wife. What on earth possessed you, Ellie? I can't even call you Mummy, can I? You've never been a mother. Not to me and not to Justin either. And just think: we always called Phyl and Matt by their names and not

Mummy and Daddy. From the very beginning, because Matt felt we should remember our real parents, at least notionally. What that means is: I've never had anyone I can call Mummy. Or Daddy.'

'Well, Heavens, Nessa, I'm sorry really, but change the record, sweetheart. We've been through this before, haven't we? Don't you think it's time to let it drop? I wasn't cut out to be a mother, that's all. I don't *do* little kids - you're okay now of course. You've turned out very pretty and I'm proud of how well you've managed with *Paper Roses* and so on but back then, well - I won't hide it from you, there's no point - I couldn't wait to leave. In spite of Constance loving me like a daughter. In spite of Matt's devotion - till he realized my attention was fixed on something else. Paolo was a ticket out, that's all.'

'And Constance was there to pick up the pieces. D'you know, I think you were the only person she really, really loved. I've often wondered why that should be, but she was a law unto herself, right? Maybe she'd been disappointed in Matt for some reason. I don't know. But she saw her chance with us. I reckon she encouraged you to go off with Paolo because she wanted total control of me and Justin. She wanted *us* to be her children. Partly because we were yours and she loved you but partly because, well, she seemed to like us, in those days anyway. You were too old. She could start over with us.'

'She *adored* you and Justin. She told me so, often. I was quite happy about leaving you because I knew, I just knew, that she'd look after you and make sure Phyl and Matt didn't squash the life out of you.'

Nessa said nothing. It was true that her grandmother had taken good care of them both, her and Justin. They'd never wanted for a single thing but at ten years old, she'd felt unloved and still did, sometimes. Her mother had chosen to go and leave her behind, so it followed, didn't it (that was the way the young Nessa had explained it to herself) that she wasn't really lovable. Nothing anyone had said and done in the years since then had altered this view, not really, not deep down. Deep down she wasn't worth loving. She wasn't worth staying with, and she worried often about what would happen if her world was to be blown apart by something. She was aware, more than anyone she'd ever met,

and much more than Justin, of the *precariousness* of everything; the fragility of so much that most people thought of as solid and fixed. She'd tried, early in their relationship, to discuss this with Gareth, but he was almost allergic to any kind of serious talk and had seemed so genuinely puzzled when she'd brought the subject up that she'd dropped it at once.

One day, when the business had started to do well, when things seemed to be on the up and up, she'd asked Mickey a question out of the blue. They'd been sitting at the twin desks that took up most of the space in Mickey's study and Nessa had suddenly said, 'What if we lose all this, Mickey? What if we fail?'

Mickey had looked up, surprised. 'We'll manage,' she said. 'We'll recoup what we can and think of something else to sell. Don't worry...folk are forever needing things, aren't they? We'll work out what and give it to them. Now, stop fretting and get on to Prague and see what they're doing about the silk orchids. Should have been here two weeks ago.'

'And do you think it's okay to call the business *Paper Roses* when so much of our stuff isn't made of paper at all?'

'It's fine - it's a song title for goodness sake - everyone knows that. And we're famous for the paper range anyway, aren't we? *Prettiest paper flowers in the world*...Look, it says so, right here in this catalogue! Relax, why don't you? I know you find it hard.'

Nessa took a tea towel from the drawer and began to dry the spoons and put them away. Nessa wondered what Mickey would say about this will and its implications.

'I'll talk to Justin,' said Ellie.

'It won't do any good. He won't let this slip out of his grasp. He's been after it for years. You've been abroad. You don't know how he's been sucking up to her - to Constance - in the last couple of years. He practically lived here. She had him running errands for her all over the place. And they were quite sickening together - *darling* this and *sweetie* that and forever kissing her and saying how beautiful she was still - that kind of thing. And, naturally, Constance saying he was beautiful too. It made me sick to my stomach listening to them sometimes.'