The Conditions of Unconditional Love

By Alexander McCall Smith

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The Conditions of Unconditional Love

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McCALL SMITH

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This book is for Sandra McGruther

1

'Modesty,' said Isabel Dalhousie, as she spread thick-cut Dundee marmalade over her slice of toast, 'is not quite the same thing as humility.'

This was not the sort of remark that one would hear at every kitchen table, but Isabel was, after all, a philosopher, and if there are any breakfast tables at which such statements might be made over cereal and toast, then they must be tables such as these, here in the intellectual latitudes of Edinburgh, where she lived with her husband, Jamie, a bassoonist, and their two small boys, Charlie and Magnus. And Brother Fox, of course, who lurked in the garden, although he was an itinerant, a temporary resident, having business in other gardens and nearby back streets.

Small children have an effect roughly equivalent to that of a minor tornado, leaving in their wake a detritus of abandoned toys, rearranged furniture, chocolate wrapping paper and crumbs. Isabel's kitchen table bore witness to the boys' breakfast with a half-eaten piece of bread, the teeth-marks still

clearly impressed in the layer of peanut butter; an unfinished bowl of cereal, soggy with milk; and several smears of jam, honey and something that had the appearance and texture of a mixture of the two.

Isabel was fortunate. As a working mother – she was the owner and full-time editor of a philosophical journal, the *Review of Applied Ethics* – she needed help in the house. This was provided by Grace, who had been housekeeper to Isabel's father, and who had stayed on after he died and Isabel took over his house. Grace was good at her job, although she had her moments when she unexpectedly, and for obscure reasons, took umbrage. Isabel handled those situations with tact, usually by saying, 'You're absolutely right, Grace.' Most people like to hear that – and Grace was no exception, particularly when she was absolutely wrong, as was occasionally the case.

Grace was cheerful about her provenance. 'I came with the house,' she said. 'I might have gone elsewhere, but somehow I didn't. So, here I am, I suppose. One of the fixtures. Part of the furniture.'

Grace liked walking the boys to school in the morning, occasionally posing as their mother when she engaged in casual conversation at the school gate. Isabel had heard about this from the mother of one of Charlie's friends, and had initially been discomfited by the pretence. But then she had found out that Grace never actually claimed that the boys were hers, but would simply let people believe this, doing nothing to correct the misapprehension. That, she thought, was innocent enough, and, anyway, we all fantasised about something from time to time, and admitted it – if we were honest.

On that particular morning, Grace had arrived early to take the boys to school, leaving Isabel and Jamie to enjoy breakfast in peace. And it was against such a domestic background

that this conversation about pride and associated concepts took place.

It began when Jamie, scraping the last of his boiled egg from its shell, remarked, 'You know I try to like people – in general – but there's this new violinist in the band who's just . . .' He hesitated, searching for the right metaphor. 'Who just gets up my nose. Right up.'

Isabel looked up in surprise. Jamie was usually moderate in his opinions and rarely expressed strong antipathy towards others.

'Pronoun?' she asked.

He looked puzzled. 'Pronoun?'

'I mean, is this violinist a him or a her?'

'Him,' he answered. 'Very much so. Alpha male. He's called Fionn. With an "o". Plain Finn isn't good enough for him, I imagine.'

This was not a tone that Jamie struck very often. Fionn must have made quite an impression.

'He's Irish,' he continued. 'He played in a chamber orchestra in Dublin before he did some sort of master's programme at the Conservatoire in Glasgow. Then he got the job here in Edinburgh. That's Fionn.'

Isabel listened to this. 'I like the name Fionn,' she said mildly. 'I haven't known a Fionn before – at least not one with an "o".'

Jamie looked dubious. 'I'm not sure that I like the name – at least not now that I've met this particular Fionn. He told me that he was named after a famous figure in Irish mythology – Fionn MacCool.'

Isabel knew about that. 'When I was a girl, I had a book on myths that was full of the exploits of Fionn. He crops up everywhere. In Scottish mythology too.'

Jamie smiled. 'People in the orchestra refer to him as MacCool – discreetly, of course. They think it suits him. And I must say he's pretty pleased with himself. On an ocean-going scale. He's a terrific player – extremely talented – but . . .'

Isabel interrupted him. 'You're not a tiny bit envious?' she asked.

'Envious of his playing?'

Isabel nodded. 'People feel envious of professional rivals. Or even of their own colleagues.'

Jamie was silent.

'We don't always like those who can do things better than we can,' Isabel continued.

Jamie thought about this. 'There'll always be players who are better than oneself. I can name three bassoonists in Scotland alone who are more technically skilled than I am. And there are probably plenty more. But I don't feel the slightest bit envious of any of them.'

'You're not an envious person,' suggested Isabel. 'You're lucky.'

'It's not that,' said Jamie. 'It's just that they're modest about their playing. They don't boast. That's what counts, I think. If you're modest about your abilities, then people don't resent the fact that you're better than they are.'

And it was at that point that their conversation about pride and its implications began.

'Would you call Fionn proud?' Isabel asked.

Jamie answered quickly. 'Yes. Definitely.'

'He's proud of his musicianship, then?'

Jamie nodded.

Isabel smiled. 'Would you expect him to say that he *wasn't* proud of it?'

Jamie looked puzzled. 'Of course not.'

'So, there's nothing wrong with being proud?'

Jamie frowned. 'There are different sorts of pride: is that what you're getting at?'

'Yes,' replied Isabel. 'There's defensible pride . . .'

'Which is?'

She thought for a moment before replying, 'Satisfaction in a job well done, for instance – a sense of achievement. Nobody objects to that. You're allowed to feel it – in fact, others may encourage you to do just that. And then there's hubristic pride, where you make too much of your achievements. This is where show-offs and the smug fall down, perhaps people like Fionn – not that I can pass judgement on him, never having met him.'

Jamie said that this was the sort of pride that he found so objectionable. 'Proud people are arrogant. They have a false idea of their own worth. They look down on others. It's not hard to spot them.'

'Pride,' Isabel said, 'has always been ranked well above the other vices – gluttony, lust, and so on – probably because it was seen as a challenge to the divine order of things.'

'Hubris?'

'Yes, hubris amounts to saying that you are *above* the gods in some way. And Nemesis is always on the look-out for that sort of uppitiness. Her radar is sensitive to that.'

'Better to be modest,' said Jamie.

'Distinctly better,' agreed Isabel. 'I know there's a lot of debate . . .'

'In philosophical circles?' interjected Jamie.

'Yes, in philosophical circles – after all, we have to talk about *something.* There's debate about whether modesty is a virtue. If you ask me, it is, although not everyone agrees. Hume was a bit iffy about it. He talked about the *monkish virtues* – things that he really did not like at all, like celibacy, fasting,

penance, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude. There were a few others.'

'Not an attractive list,' said Jamie.

'Humility is the interesting one there,' said Isabel. 'You can be too modest, I think. And then humility may become an issue.'

They sat in silence for a few minutes. It was June, a few days from the longest day, and there was warmth in the morning sun. Its buttery light fell slanting on the tabletop and the walls of the kitchen, across Jamie's shoulder, onto his forearm; sunlight like this, Isabel, thought, somehow slowed down time – or gave the impression of doing so. She and Jamie could sit there at the table for the entire morning, talking about pride and modesty, about orchestral politics, about all the small things that made up everyday life. And there was nothing wrong in sitting about and talking – so many people were afraid of inaction because they were addicted to doing things. And she, she decided, was one of them. She felt guilty if she passed a day without achieving at least something: that came from her protestant work-ethic genes, bequeathed her by cautious ancestors on both sides – the forbears of her *sainted American mother*, as she called her, and of her Scottish father were all believers in the virtues of hard work and prudence. Had they come from a Mediterranean culture of olive trees and siestas it might have been different, and she might have taken a more relaxed view of life.

Then Jamie said, 'Some of the players would like to get rid of Fionn. It's an open secret.'

Isabel was interested. 'How can they get rid of him? That's for management, isn't it?'

'Of course,' said Jamie. 'But there's a lot of ill feeling. And one or two of them have good cause, I think.'

Isabel pointed out that people muttered all sorts of things, and meant very few of them. What did he mean by good cause?

Jamie sighed. 'Fionn thinks he's God's gift to women. Handsome Irishman. Pretty good musician. Good singing voice too. They like him – a lot.'

'And?' Isabel encouraged.

'There's a flautist called Andrew. He had a girlfriend called Dawn. They'd been together for three years or so, but when Dawn saw Fionn, she couldn't contain herself. She flirted with him at some party and he was only too willing to go off with her – for a few months, at least. After that, he moved on to some other woman. Dawn was left homeless – she had been living with Andrew, but that ended when she went off with Fionn.'

Isabel rolled her eyes. Life was precarious enough – even for people of cautious habits. Those who allowed their heads to be turned by appealing Irishmen were at even greater risk of disaster. Sex was a dark, anarchic force in some respects, and was often at odds with reason and good sense. But she understood, as anybody who had ever fallen in love must understand. These things just *happened* to you – you did not choose to be struck by lightning.

Jamie continued the tale. 'Fionn asked her to leave his flat when he started his next affair – and she had nowhere to go. She ended up living in the box room at a friend's place down in Maxwell Street – a tiny cupboard, really, with just enough room for a bed – and nothing else.'

'Poor woman,' said Isabel.

Jamie looked thoughtful. 'Yes. But she made the choice to go off with Fionn. You could say she brought this upon herself.' He paused. 'She made the bed in which she chose to lie.'

He paused, adding slightly reluctantly, 'It really was her fault, I suppose.'

Isabel shrugged: yes, but no. 'Of course, anyone may find herself in a mess because of what she's chosen to do. But that doesn't necessarily mean they don't deserve our sympathy.' She paused. 'People who smoke may end up with – what do they call it? Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease? Like that poor man we see going into the bakery sometimes with his oxygen cylinders. They're left gasping for air. We still help them, even though smokers may have brought the whole thing on themselves.'

'Of course,' said Jamie.

'So, I don't think we should spend too much time thinking about *why* Dawn has ended up in her cupboard. The fact is – she's there. That's what counts.'

She lowered her eyes. She had sounded – even to herself – a bit censorious, as if she were giving Jamie a lecture. Now she said, 'I'm sorry. I'm not suggesting you're being harsh. I was thinking aloud.'

Jamie reassured her that he had not taken offence. 'It was just a thought,' he said. 'But of course, you're right.'

Isabel asked him whether he knew Dawn. 'I've met her quite a few times,' Jamie replied. 'I still see her now and then – she was always friendly with Robert, who's another flautist – and who was a good friend of Andrew – and still is. She's nice enough. She's a nurse. She works in an infectious diseases ward down at the Western General Hospital. That's why I think the accommodation issue is a problem. She has to work night shifts from time to time, and the flat's noisy during the day. Her box room has a small window on the common stair. She gets a lot of noise while she's trying to sleep.'

Isabel frowned. 'Can't she get something else?' she asked.

Jamie shook his head. 'It's really hard to find a flat in this city,' he said. 'And then rents are pretty high. It's not easy.' He paused. 'We're lucky.'

Isabel did not need to be reminded of her good fortune. She was comfortably off, and they lived in a large house. She was well aware of that – and took none of it for granted. And now that Jamie reminded her, it triggered something that was always just below the surface with her: the thought that she could do something to make things better. And not only *could* do something, but *should* do it. What counted was whether a person needing help had come within what she called her circle of moral recognition; once that happened, help needed to be given.

Isabel had become aware of Dawn's plight. She did not know her, but Jamie did, and that meant she was not a moral stranger: she was somebody who was now morally proximate – another term she used to set out the boundaries of moral obligation.

'I should meet her,' Isabel said quietly.

Jamie did not conceal his surprise. 'Dawn? You want to meet Dawn?'

'Yes. I think I might be able to do something – you never know.'

Jamie struggled. He had always discouraged Isabel from taking on the troubles of the world, and she had always found a reason why, in any particular case, she felt that she had to do something. Now he realised that in telling Isabel the story of Dawn and Fionn, he had evoked exactly such a response. He sighed. He wished she would not burden herself in this way, and yet this was what Isabel did. He could not change her – and he did not particularly want to change her. All that he might like to do, he decided, was to moderate her sense of moral obligation – that was all. But he rarely succeeded. Isabel

became involved irrespective of what he said, and then he was largely powerless to do anything but watch events unfold.

He was not surprised by what came next.

'I've been thinking of that room next to the attic,' Isabel said. 'It's comfortable enough, and it has that kitchenette. That needs to be cleaned up a bit . . .'

'I can do that,' said Jamie.

She smiled. 'You don't mind?'

He shook his head. 'It would be a good thing to do.'

'Will you speak to her?' asked Isabel.

'I will,' said Jamie.

He got up out of his chair and went round to her side of the table. He kissed her. He kissed her for her kindness. She kissed him back.

'You've left some marmalade on me,' he said, reaching up to rub it off his cheek. 'But I don't mind.'

Isabel finished her coffee and made her way into her study at the front of the house. This was her inner sanctum – not only the private domain in which she could sit undisturbed and think, but also the editorial office of the *Review of Applied Ethics*. It was a large room, at the end of which was a fireplace with a carved wooden mantelpiece. Jamie had rescued the mantelpiece from a scrapyard, suspecting – correctly – that underneath several thick coats of green paint was a delicate relief. He was right: paint stripper and gentle sandpapering had revealed a late Victorian tableau in which the figures of Faith, Hope and Charity dispensed advice to a number of attentive small children, their hoops and hobby horses laid to one side. The message of enlightened education was a clear one, and Jamie arranged for it to be given further cleaning and then installed. Isabel was delighted with the gift, and often stole a

glance at it across her desk while she was struggling with some demanding editorial task. How different an image it was from that which, as a student, twenty years ago, she had pinned to the wall of her study-bedroom: the tight-trousered rock star, almost shirtless, caressing an electric guitar. Tastes change, she thought, and smiled, although she understood what she had seen in the rock star. There would be countless student bedrooms in any university city where images of rebellion adorned the walls. At least she had not had a smiling Mao, as some of her acquaintances had.

It was here that the pages of the journal were put together, telephone calls made to the printer, proofs corrected, and books received for discussion and review. A number of these books – currently more than twenty – stood in piles at the end of the table near the window. Those were the titles that would be sent out to reviewers, but they were not the only ones in the office. On another table, tucked behind the door that led into the hallway outside, was a further stack of books, less fortunate than those in the other pile. These were the books that would not be reviewed but would, at least, be mentioned in the 'Briefly Noted' column towards the end of the *Review*, after the 'Forthcoming Conferences' section. A mention was better than nothing, Isabel thought, although she felt considerable sympathy for the authors of these less-favoured works. They would be the result of long hours of research and writing, of months, if not years, of work, and now, in publication, there was every chance that they would be read by virtually nobody. There were some books, in fact, that Isabel was convinced were read only by the author's close family: the mothers of authors are often a much put-upon group, having to struggle with the unreadable works of their offspring when there was so much more for them to do.

That was the case, Isabel was sure, with Christopher Dove's latest book, *Event Individuation in the Philosophy of Action: Critical Issues*. The oleaginous Christopher Dove was how she thought of him, although she was not sure whether the word *oleaginous* suited Dove. She had gone to the dictionary to check, and had discovered that there were two principal meanings: covered in oil, and obsequious. Dove was definitely not obsequious – in fact, he was anything but. Dove was pleased with himself, and his approach to others was to imagine that they shared that high opinion, particularly if the others were women. So if she was to continue thinking of Dove as oleaginous, it must be in the oily sense, and there she was not certain that the word was quite right.

There were oily people in the strictly physical sense – people whose sebaceous glands secreted too much oil and made their skin glisten. That was unfortunate, and was of course not a subject of moral comment. One could not criticise oily people of that sort, and Isabel would not do that. And yet there was that man behind the counter in the local post office who was terribly oily, poor fellow, and who could have been helped, she thought, by one of those lotions that reduced skin oil. But that was not something one could take up with a complete stranger, even if he might have benefitted from the suggestion.

Dove was not oleaginous in that sense. Dove had a good complexion, which somehow seemed to go with his self-satisfied manner. He was certainly good-looking, although, as Isabel had pointed out to a friend, he was also 'rather creepy'. He was oleaginous, then, in the way in which he slipped his way into things, usually with a patently obvious intention of benefitting himself in some way. Now he had written this book of event individuation, on the jacket of which there was a large picture of the author – too large to fit on the rear

flap and therefore plastered all over the back cover. She had extracted the book with some distaste from the padded envelope in which it arrived, and had held it away from her as if it were infected with some noxious chemical. And then she had seen the picture on its back, and her eyes had widened with surprise. There was Christopher Dove, in full colour, sitting back in an armchair in what could only be described as a deliberately seductive pose, the top three buttons of his shirt undone. Isabel had stared at this for a few seconds, and then burst out laughing.

Professionalism had triumphed, though, and she had turned to the description of the book's contents printed on the front flap. Event individuation was a recondite branch of philosophy in which events were dissected into their component parts. In this way the larger act of getting up in the morning could be described as a series of minor acts – putting one's foot out of bed and onto the floor; turning on the light; standing up; reaching for some item of clothing – and so on. It was all very tedious, Isabel thought, and she did not read beyond page three before the book was consigned to the *Books Received* pile.

But then her conscience had troubled her. Isabel's conscience was always asking awkward questions. Jamie was well aware of the problem, and had tried to persuade her to ignore at least some of its promptings. Isabel, though, had found that difficult, with the result that she often went back over a decision she had taken, subjecting it to scrutiny that it did not always survive. Now she wondered whether she had been too quick to dismiss Dove's book, swayed by her dislike for its author. *Never judge a book by its author* . . . The variation on the old saying about books and their covers seemed apt here – and persuasive enough to make her move the book to the review pile. More than that, she would ask Professor Robert Lettuce whether

he would review it – an outcome that would delight Dove, who had long been in Lettuce's camp and who could not hope for a more favourably biased reviewer. Her conscience would probably trouble her about this decision too; if Dove's book was to get a full review, then what about the other books in the unfortunate pile: did they not deserve to be given equal consideration? She sighed. She would ignore that possibility for the time being because . . . well, because she simply did not have the time to be as punctilious as she ought to be. *We are all imperfect*, she thought, *all of us, and the occasions of imperfection are too numerous to list . . .*

Now she sat at her desk and looked at the stack of letters in the old shoebox of her mother's that she used as one of her in-trays. The box had seen years of service and would not last much longer, but Isabel was attached for sentimental reasons. Her mother had used it for storing desk items that were not easily stored elsewhere – rubber bands, drawing pins, paper clips and so on – and Isabel had taken it over, jettisoning the detritus of the past and using it for letters. The box had originally housed a pair of Salvatore Ferragamo shoes – her mother's only significant weakness, although she also liked expensive bottles of cologne, which she ordered from a perfumier in Munich.

Grace had collected the mail from the front hall, where Graham, the postman, had pushed it through the letter box. There were seven or eight items – three letters, a couple of journals and a handful of bills. Isabel extracted the journals from their wrapping: there was the latest issue of *Ethics* from the University of Chicago Press and an issue of *Mind*. These were moved to the other side of the desk, to be dipped into at her leisure. She particularly enjoyed *Ethics*, in which she always found articles that caught her attention. *Neuroscience and*

Responsibility – she saw that this issue was a special one, and she could not resist the temptation of running her eye down the list of contributors. She knew one or two of them and had heard of some of the others. She would keep it as a treat, to be savoured later, perhaps in the precious half-hour of reading that she allowed herself before bed.

She picked up the first of the letters. It was from a reader of the *Review* who objected to the tone of her editorial in a previous issue. Isabel had written a defence of the free exchange of ideas which had not gone down well with this particular reader. 'There is absolutely no moral equivalence between those who would deny others their right to live as they wish and those who would stop the deniers from being heard,' the letter began. 'Freedom of speech does not include the right to make others uncomfortable.'

It does, actually, thought Isabel. That's one of the things, surely, that freedom of speech is all about. We *need* to feel uncomfortable from time to time.

She would reply politely – she always did – although she was wary about entering into correspondence with some of the *Review*'s readers, who seemed adept at perpetrating long arguments. She sighed: there were so many people now who seemed to be prepared to close down debate on the grounds that somebody, somewhere might take offence at what others might say. She was in that firing line, she supposed, and she would have to defend freedom of speech, although she did not enjoy the atmosphere of intolerance in which any exchanges on the subject tended to take place.

She picked up the next letter. The envelope gave no clue as to the sender: it was addressed to Isabel personally, but her name and address had been typed rather than handwritten. Inside was a single sheet of folded writing paper that, when

unfolded, identified the sender immediately. *Professor Robert Lettuce*, said the heading, and after the name came a string of letters, some obvious, others obscure. Isabel looked at them with amusement: *FRSE* (Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh). That was genuine enough – the Royal Society of Edinburgh was the national scholarly academy, and it was reasonable enough that Lettuce should be a member now that he was based in Edinburgh. Then came *D.Phil (Oxon)*, which, once again, she supposed Lettuce had earned at Balliol, his old college at Oxford. He was entitled to that, but then came *D.Litt. (Hon, Univ. Mult.)* That, of course, was a reference to the conferment of honorary doctorates from multiple universities. Once again, Lettuce might well have received these plaudits, but to mention them in this way was a breach of academic, not to say personal, etiquette. It would be different if Lettuce were German, which of course he was not: German professors were expected to list their honorary doctorates and to use *mult* if they had more than one. German *Professor Dr Drs* were a standing joke in academia, even if the joke was savoured fondly. British professors, along with their American, Canadian and Australian counterparts, never did this. In some cases, they even eschewed the title professor, and used nothing other than the honorifics available to the ordinary citizen – the Ms, the Mr, and so on.

But it got worse, decidedly so, and quickly. The next post-nominals were the icing on an already over-decorated cake: *Kt of the Order of St Lazarus* and *Chevalier d'Honneur (Palme d'Or)*. Isabel knew about the first of these, a twelfth-century crusader order that had been sporadically revived by enthusiasts in Malta and elsewhere, and now had a branch in Edinburgh. Members paraded harmlessly from time to time in robes and feathered bonnets, conferring on each other various medals, honours

and distinctions. Lettuce was clearly fond of ceremony, and would have enjoyed being a knight of such an order: she could imagine the heraldic devices he would use – a shield on which four lettuces would be painted in the green that heraldic artists called *vert*. And Dove, were he to be conscripted by Lettuce into the order, would bear an equally predictable device – a dove, in flight, painted in *argent*, which did for both white and silver in heraldic terms. She smiled as she imagined the two of them in some fanciful procession, in long *vert* cloaks, with Dove carrying some of Lettuce's doctorates for him as there were so many.

But what was this Golden Palm under which Lettuce claimed to shelter? She wondered whether she should ask him outright. 'What's all this about golden palms?' she might say, trying not to laugh. And he would engage in bluster as he always did, and go on about some obscure French academic order.

She stopped herself. It was easy to laugh at Lettuce and his pretentions, but she reminded herself that mockery was almost always cruel. Puffed-up people were puffed-up for a reason: they felt that they needed the boost. And Lettuce was the same as any of us: we wanted to be valued, to be loved, if possible, and sometimes the world did not provide them with what they needed. It had once been brought home to her that there had been sadness in Lettuce's life, and she had resolved to remember that. Now she reminded herself, and she put aside these delicious imaginings of Lettuce and Dove in full flood.

But then she read the letter, and her charitable feelings were quickly strained.

'Dear Miss Dalhousie,' he began – a bad start because even if she had never had any *palmes d'or* conferred on her, she was still Dr Dalhousie. She would never insist on that – and indeed

rarely used her doctoral title – but Lettuce *knew* she had a PhD and must have omitted it deliberately.

'You may recall,' Lettuce continued, 'that at a previous meeting we discussed the possibility of our holding a joint conference at some point, the idea being to bring out the conference proceedings as a special issue of the *Review of Applied Ethics*. You may further recollect that a possible topic for this conference was the role of the virtues in the modern world. I thought – and I may have suggested to you at the time – that a possible title for the conference would be *Virtues in a World of Vice*.'

Isabel remembered this – but only vaguely. She was guarded in her reception of any ideas from Lettuce, as he was, in her view, an inveterate plotter – of schemes that were always somehow to his advantage. Neither of them had taken the idea any further, but now Lettuce was bringing it up again. Why?

The answer was not long in coming. 'Since we spoke, I have been giving the matter more thought and now, I am happy to say, it seems that the auspices for such a project are looking increasingly favourable, and indeed I am tempted to say that, barring disaster, funding for such a conference will be readily available.'

'You may know,' he continued, 'of a trust established by a late and much regretted Scottish industrialist. He was a great believer in education – as these men of little learning often are . . .' This stopped Isabel in her tracks. Academic snobbery appalled her, and the condescension in Lettuce's reference was breathtaking. She thought she knew who the industrialist was – a self-made man, and self-educated, too, for which she thought he deserved every credit rather that this high-handed dismissal. He may have been a man of little formal education,

but he knew more about the world than Lettuce and Dove put together, and, moreover, was modest about his money and his success.

'I happen to know the person who runs this trust,' Lettuce went on. 'We are both members of a bridge club that meets fairly regularly. He has indicated to me that there is an underspend this year – one or two projects that they were supporting never got off the ground and another, a medical research programme, failed to get the approval of the relevant research ethics committee. Tut-tut, not that it's any of our business! Anyway. This has left them with surplus funds that they are keen to put to good use.

'I sent them a draft proposal that I am happy to say they accepted without quibble. I have suggested that they fund the conference in full, and that they also provide for the publication of the papers presented at it. I hope you don't mind that I told them that you could provide a suitable publication platform through the *Review*. They accepted all this and indicated that once they had a detailed budget, we could expect their approval. They very helpfully suggested a figure for the support they can give. It is a very generous one, as you will see in the budget I have attached.

'I think it is would be simplest if I were to chair this conference, perhaps using, for administrative purposes, the title of Conference Director. I hope that you will serve on the conference committee, along with Christopher Dove and one or two others, including my assistant, Gloria MacFarlane. Gloria has very kindly offered to be Chief Rapporteur – I know that you will find her very easy to work with when it comes to preparing the papers for publication.'

Isabel took a deep breath. *She* was the editor of the *Review of Applied Ethics*. Anybody called Gloria MacFarlane would have

no say in what appeared in the *Review*'s columns, and nor for that matter would anybody called Lettuce or Dove.

That was the end of the main body of the letter; now she ran her eye over the budget that Lettuce had attached, and if she had been shocked by what Lettuce had said in the main body of the letter, then her reaction to his budget proposals was even more marked. The overall budget of the conference was to be one hundred thousand pounds. The cost of hiring the venue, the provision of a conference dinner, and the travel and hotel expenses of the speakers came to fifty thousand pounds. That was what these things cost, thought Isabel, but then . . . But her eyes widened at what followed. 'Conference Director (Professor Robert Lettuce) honorarium and administrative fee: twenty thousand pounds. Administrative assistant fee (Ms G. MacFarlane): eight thousand pounds. Honorarium and administrative fee for Deputy Director (Dr Christopher Dove): five thousand pounds. Office and printing costs: three thousand pounds. Laptop computer purchase for Director and administrative staff: six thousand pounds. And so it went on until the grand total of one hundred thousand was reached. An item for five hundred pounds caught Isabel's eye: this was to be a publication grant to the *Review of Applied Ethics* to support the printing and publication of a special issue devoted to the conference papers. She thought: *five hundred pounds – one fortieth of what Lettuce was proposing to pay himself.*

She slipped the letter and its accompanying budget into a desk drawer. She would have to consider her response to Professor Lettuce, but that would take time. One thing was clear to her, though, and that was that she could never, under any circumstances, be part of what in her mind amounted to a criminal misuse of a supporting trust's money. She thought of Lettuce's share of the dripping roast: *twenty thousand pounds.*

Did he seriously imagine that the trust would not question that ridiculously inflated fee – or the fee being proposed for Ms MacFarlane, with whom Lettuce must be having an affair? *Eight thousand pounds* was going her way – and for what? For dancing attendance on Lettuce who, anyway, was being handsomely paid for such administrative work as the conference would entail – not that it would be overburdensome. This was fraud – even daylight robbery. It was brazen; it was unashamed.

The whole project was outrageous, thought Isabel. She would tell Lettuce as much – tactfully, she hoped, but in unambiguous terms. The conference, she imagined, could be put together for fifteen thousand pounds *at the most*. But that would not allow for a fee for Lettuce, and he would certainly not approve of that. She sighed.

She wondered how she might reply to Lettuce's letter. 'Dear Professor Lettuce,' she might write. 'How dare you? Yours sincerely, Isabel Dalhousie.' But the question mark worried her: was *how dare you* a question or an exclamation? She was not sure, and if you were going to write a letter quite as direct and unambiguous as that, one would want to get the punctuation correct.

She closed her eyes. Writing to Lettuce in those terms would constitute a declaration of war – and she wondered whether she wanted to make an implacable enemy of him. There was so much conflict and confrontation in the world: did she want to add to it, in her own, small circle? Lettuce was selfish and self-serving – she was in no doubt about that – but would going head-to-head with him in a no-holds-barred exchange do anything to change him? She doubted it. Would it not be better to point out, in a courteous way if possible, the grounds of her concern? If she told him that his budget was perhaps just a little bit overgenerous when it came to payments to him and

the undoubtedly very competent Ms MacFarlane, he might be more inclined to examine the issue and even to do something to correct the flaw. That was possible, she supposed, and it would leave her feeling less uncomfortable. Conflict made her feel raw – it dirtied things, she thought. She did not want to add to the already immense burden of conflict under which society laboured. It was all very well saying that this was a minor issue, but it was on these tiny local battlefields that the greater moral battle drama was enacted. Small, apparently inconsequential acts defined the greater moral climate; local discord, as every concertgoer knew, made a difference to the sound of the larger orchestra.

She got up from her desk and crossed the room to stand before the window. The day had started sunny, and the sun was still there, on the shrubs and on the hedge that shielded the front garden from the street. She now made a conscious effort to think positively of Lettuce. She would not retreat into the security of animosity, of hatred. Lettuce only wanted to be loved, to be given the recognition that he felt he was due. She should not laugh at that; she should not mock his parading of his qualifications and honours.

It was hard, but she did it. She returned to her desk and began a note, in longhand, on a piece of headed notepaper. There were no accolades listed on this paper – just Isabel's address. She wrote: 'Dear Robert, I was pleased to hear about your proposed conference. This is a wonderful idea and of course the *Review* will be pleased to provide a home for the papers. I have looked at your draft budget and it seems to me that you have covered all the foreseeable expenses. I am slightly concerned, though, about balance. I'm sure that you would wish to achieve that balance, and I wonder whether we should perhaps allocate less to administrative fees and a bit

more to looking after those who attend? Just a thought, but I am sure that it's one that you yourself will be only too willing to address.'

She reread what she had written – more than once. Words were such powerful things: a few words could end a world, or equally might heal one. Now she inserted, after the final sentence, 'I know how sensitive you are in the way you deal with such matters, and I am sure that you'll come up with something that deals with my concerns.'

She signed the letter, folded it, and inserted it in the envelope. Then she placed it in the other old shoebox that she used for outgoing mail. On the side of the box she could just make out an ancient, faded label: *Salvatore Ferragamo*, and she thought of her mother, as she often did. Then she thought of Jamie, and of the boys, and of Grace, who even now was making a cup of tea for her and would be bringing it to her study, the cup rattling on its saucer as she carried it. It was the sound that tea made, Isabel had decided. Everything had a sound, even those things that looked silent.

She gave the letter a final glance as it lay in the box. She sighed – she so longed for a few weeks somewhere warm, perhaps a small villa on an Italian hillside dotted with ancient olive trees. And with the smell of thyme and the sound of cicadas in the noonday heat . . . Scotland, she thought, had become far too cautious a place, riddled with self-reproach – to the extent that it was impossible to do anything without worrying about it. Italy was different; it would be a place of tolerance and freedom, and yet . . .

She heard the rattle of the teacup. Then there was the knock at the door – which occasioned further rattling. But Grace never spilled the tea. Isabel had a private horror of saucers into which the contents of a cup had spilled. It was a small and

ridiculous thing, but of such preferences and dislikes was life made up. *Get the small things right*, her sainted American mother had told her. *Get those right, and the rest follows.*

Grace came in. 'Tea,' she said.

It was what she always said. Just 'tea' – but what else, Isabel asked herself, was there to say?