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Lovers and Newcomers

Written by Rosie Thomas

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ROSIE THOMAS

Lovers and Newcomers



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SEPTEMBER

ONE

The old house has been cold and empty for so long, but now it's stirring. A joint of the oak stair treads releases a sudden sharp snap, a window left open for air rattles in a gust of wind, and the scent of baking rises from the kitchen.

The place is coming back to life around me.

I am making cakes for tea, and already I have looked into each of the guest rooms at least three times in order to enjoy the sight of folded towels and the little jugs of flowers placed on chests of drawers. Meadow flowers from Mead fields; oxeye daisies, and cow parsley, which has shed a faint dust of grey pollen on the waxed wood. I reach out to sweep away the powder with my little finger, before deciding that it looks pretty as it is.

Not that my old friends will be guests, of course.

They will belong here, they *do* belong here, that's why they are coming. I'm excited at the prospect, the pleasure of anticipation tautened with nerves, like a child before a birthday. This thought makes me laugh as I close the bedroom door. Childhood is a very long way off, for all of us. That's part of the story.

It's already four o'clock. A hot afternoon, for September. Only the angle of the sun, which has altered from full day to the first suggestion of evening just while I have been lingering in a doorway, suggests that autumn stalks not far off.

They'll be here soon.

As I walk down the stairs the longcase clock that stands in the hall chimes the hour, echoed today by the faint, damped note of the village church bell. You can only hear the church bell ringing when the wind blows from the south-west, Jake told me that when he first brought me here.

My late husband would be pleased with what's happening at Mead. I'm sure he would. I whisper to him in my head, as I sometimes do, in the way people who have become used to living alone conduct imaginary dialogues.

We lived our time here just the two of us, Jake, and came neither to want or need any other company. But without you there is too much time and silence. The house withers, and so do I.

From today there will be a new order, and different voices in the old rooms and outside under the heavy trees. The novelty, though, will have a retrospective glimmer that suits Mead, feeding it like wax polish on old wood. Selwyn and Amos and the others are your old friends as well as mine. Although this plan of mine will throw us all into new alignments, we have years of history between us.

In the kitchen I lift the tins out of the oven and turn out my cakes to cool on wire racks near the open window. A huge bumble bee flusters against the glass so I find a muslin-covered frame to place over them. But I find myself standing, lost in thought, my fingers still gripping the harmless frame as the bee escapes into the breeze.

I want this experiment to succeed. *I want it so much*.

From three different directions, three vehicles were converging on the old house in its cradle of fields and trees.

Selwyn Davies cursed as he ground the gears of the borrowed van yet again.

'This thing is a heap of shit. It's knackered. It's about as old as me, and just as useless.'

His partner didn't look up from the newspaper she held in

two hands, braced at chest level. *Partner* is a gruesome bloody word, Polly would say, but what are you supposed to call the person you never married but have lived with for thirty years and have three kids by?

'You're not old, or useless. Stop saying you are.'

'Is there any more tea in the flask, Poll?'

She sighed. 'Do you want to stop?'

'No. I just want some *tea*.'

'You're driving.'

'Am I? Oh, right. Thanks. Might have overlooked that if you hadn't reminded me.'

Polly smiled. 'It's not far now. I'd offer to drive, if I thought you'd agree to change over.'

'This gearbox. You wouldn't want to tangle with it, my love, believe me.'

Polly roughly folded her newspaper and rummaged in the Tesco bag at her feet. She brought out a dented Thermos flask, wedged it between her knees to remove the cup lid and unscrew the cap beneath, then poured the last dregs of beige tea. She nestled the cup in Selwyn's outstretched hand.

'Ta.' He drained the tea at a gulp, gave the cup back without looking at her. He shifted from buttock to buttock and stretched his neck in a futile attempt to ease the perennial ache in his back, then wound down the window and rested his elbow on the sill. Draught tore through the cab of the van, harrying Polly's newspaper and blowing his hair into a demented-looking crest. They reached the crown of a low hill and gathered speed. Selwyn tapped the dial and crowed, 'Look at that. Fifty mph.'

'Downhill, with a following wind,' they both added.

They often said the same things at the same time. Studying Selwyn as he drove, his teeth bared in a grimace and his fists locked on the wheel, Polly thought he looked like a pirate. She still found him attractive, even after thirty years. He made her laugh, and at other times the stab of love for him made her catch her breath.

'You know,' he said as they slowed to a crawl up the next hill, 'I never thought I'd end up going to live with her.'

'You live with *me*, Sel. Having her next door is a domestic technicality, not a contract in the biblical sense.'

He seemed to turn this over in his mind.

'It's her place. She's milady of the manor, isn't she?'

'It's our place. We're making it ours, from now on. That's the whole idea.'

'We'll see how it turns out. Anyway,' he added with a flash of a grin, 'it's too late now, eh?'

Selwyn loved the whiff of burning boats, and the wild leap for freedom out of the snapping jaws of disaster. It made him a tiring companion, but an interesting one.

'Yup.' Polly disentangled her newspaper, and seemed to concentrate on the arts pages.

In one of the two cars that were heading towards Mead, a silver Jaguar driven very confidently by her husband at unnecessarily high speed, Katherine Knight imagined how an eye in the sky might see them all. Three specks of metal, flashing an occasional point of light when chrome caught the sun, moving through a chequerboard of pasture and crops. Where they were going there was only farmland, and a scatter of villages, and then the white-laced edge of the land where it broke off into the sea. Katherine let out a small gasp, as if she were thinking so hard about what was to come that she had actually forgotten to breathe. Amos Knight glanced at her. He was wearing a blue shirt, crisply ironed, the cuffs folded back.

'Are you happy?'

It was an unusual question, for Amos. She said at once, 'Yes. Excited, too. What about you?'

He changed down with a dextrous flick and accelerated past a muck-spreader that was leaving a trail of brown clods on the crown of the road. He raised a hand, flat-palmed, in a magisterial salute as the other driver dwindled to a speck in the rear-view mirror.

'Good, good. That's what I like to hear.'

He concentrated on her answer and ignored the question. It had always been a trick of his to act as if he bestowed everything upon her, as if her life itself somehow flowed from its source in him and its abundance was his generous gift.

Katherine let her head fall back against the leather of the seat headrest.

It was rather impressive, in a way, that he felt he could still do this to her. Of course, she acknowledged scrupulously, in the economic sense he did provide. Amos was a barrister specializing in tax matters, whereas she was the administrator of a small medical charity. He earned per year – or rather *had* earned, she wasn't quite sure what would be happening in the future – rather more than twenty times her annual salary. That was a lot of money. He paid for their handsome house, deposits on flats for their two boys, holidays in the Caribbean or the Maldives, the various bouts of their joint entertaining, most of her clothes.

But, she had taken to telling herself, his money and recent professional status didn't mean that he owned her, nor that she had no existence apart from him. Not now, not any longer. Katherine now knew that as a person, as a good human being with solid worth, if she were somehow to be placed in the opposite pan to him on a pair of moral scales, her metal might not shine as brightly as his but she would still outweigh him.

Yes, she would.

Out of the corner of her eye Katherine looked at the chino-clad bolster of his thigh and wondered why it was that her attempts at self-affirmation never quite succeeded, even in her own estimation.

Amos was Amos, and she tended to get washed up on the granite cliffs of him like a small boat driven in a gale on to the Chilean shore.

They were driving through a village, its main street set with small grey stone terraced houses that broke up in places to reveal vistas of new bungalows set behind them. A group of

resentful teenagers stared out from a glass and steel bus shelter like ruminants from a pen at the zoo. Amos patted the palms of his hands on the wheel, then brightened.

'Are you hungry?' he asked, which meant that he was.

On a corner of the long street he had spotted a teashop. He braked and the Jaguar slid in to the kerb.

'We said we'd be there for tea,' Katherine remarked. Amos got out of the car, came around and held open the door for her.

'There's no hurry. We've got a lifetime at Mead ahead of us.'

For a moment, she imagined he had said life sentence.

The teashop was cool, with a stone-flagged floor and a cluster of mismatched chairs and tables. Amos sat down at the table in the window and Katherine took her place opposite him. He chose scones and cream for both of them, and wedges of Victoria sponge and fruit cake, chatting with the waitress as she took the order. He had always had a big appetite, and lately he seemed even hungrier for food.

'We don't have to eat it all,' he laughed at her protest, 'but you know I love cake.'

Katherine acquiesced. It was restful sitting in the window of what must once have been the village shop, with the traffic trickling by outside. The country was a slower place, they would both have to learn that. Gripped by affection as well as happy anticipation, she leaned across and put her hands over Amos's.

'We're at the beginning, aren't we?' she said. 'A new place, a different way to live, but still with the benefit of everything we have learned. That's all right, isn't it?' Then, knowing that what they both knew really couldn't be construed as all right, she added hastily, 'Remember what we were like, all of us, when we met?'

'Only vaguely, thank God.'

He withdrew one hand, then the other, and as soon as the waitress put the plate in front of them he started work on the scones. He began to talk about their rather famous architect.

The woman had promised to send a revised set of drawings for part of their magnificent new house, to be built at Mead on a plot of land purchased from Miranda, but had failed to do so before they left for this inaugural weekend.

The teenagers had broken out of the corral of the bus shelter. Now they lurched up the street in a mob, arms and legs shooting out of the central mass. They enveloped Amos's glimmering silver Jaguar and one of them tweaked the nearside wing mirror, which instantly lent the car a comical lop-eared appearance. Amos was concentrating on loading jam onto the second half of scone and didn't see what was happening, but Katherine watched. Without feeling much concern for the car, she hoped that they would move on before her husband noticed the assault on his property and caused a scene.

One of the bigger boys glanced up and caught her eye. He bounded across the pavement and pressed himself up against the café window. He had a broad red face, hummocked with pimples, which he brought up against the glass, misting it with his breath. His mouth opened wider and suckered itself to the glass, lips paling as his tongue licked a trail through the dust in a lingering smooch. Katherine gazed with interest at this spectacle as Amos bit into his scone. Behind the window boy, the rest of the group were pulling the wipers of the car to the vertical, rocking on the rear bumper and trying to prise open the doors.

She coughed slightly as the boy doing the kissing formed a tube with the fingers and thumb of his right hand and waggled it at her.

Amos did look around now. The boy immediately detached himself and ran, leaving a wet smear on the window like the trail of a giant mollusc.

'Bloody feral kids, same everywhere,' Amos growled, through crumbs and jam. The other boys dashed after their leader, hooting as they went.

'Christ, look what they've done,' Amos roared, suddenly noticing.

Katherine tucked away a smile as she looked at the car, wing mirrors drooping and wipers standing erect.

'More tea?' she asked.

Selwyn negotiated a lane lined with trees that looked leaned-upon by the wind. He swung the wheel sharply and steered the van through a pair of lichenous gateposts topped with stone balls twice the size of a man's head.

The drive curved under more trees, then straightened, and Mead revealed itself against its ancient green backdrop. At its heart was an old flint building with bigger Georgian windows than the original farmhouse construction had featured, which gave it a slightly startled aspect. A modest porte cochère, also a later addition to the fabric, framed the double front door. The plaster was falling in chunks from the bases of the fluted pillars. On either side of the original house, short, unmatching wings had been added at later dates, partly in reddish-orange brick and partly in flint. The overall effect was harmonious but not at all grand, as if the house had quietly expanded according to requirements over several hundred years without any particular design having been set or followed.

The van coasted over the gravel and came to rest at a tangent to the circular flowerbed that formed the centrepiece of the front courtyard. The scent of lavender flooded the cab.

Polly looked through the insect-spotted windscreen at the russet and grey façade of the house. There was moss growing beneath broken sections of lead guttering, and the paintwork of the front door was faded, but the size of it and the almost magical seclusion of the setting never failed to impress her. Mead was a beautiful place to end up, she reflected. If ending up was actually what was happening.

In the front doorway, framed by the pillars, Miranda Meadowe appeared. She held open her arms.

Selwyn vaulted out of the van and trampled through lavender and leggy roses. He wrapped his arms around Miranda's narrow torso and swung her off her feet, laughing and kissing her neck.

'Babs, darling Barb, we thought we'd never get here.' He took in a great breath of air, 'Ah, smell that countryside, will you? It's ripe with pure cow. Or is it sheep? Now we *are* here we're never going to leave. Are we, Poll? So you'd better get used to it. I hope it isn't all a mistake, is it, Barb? You haven't changed your mind?'

Polly followed behind him, skirting the flowerbed. Her hips and buttocks and breasts made a series of globes, tending towards one circular impression as she moved.

'Put me down, Sel,' Miranda protested. 'No, of course I haven't changed my mind. Hello, Polly, love. Welcome to Mead. Welcome *home*.'

The two women kissed each other, hands patting each other's upper arms where the flesh was soft.

'Thanks, Miranda,' Polly murmured. 'Here we are. I'm very glad.'

Selwyn called Miranda Barbara mainly because he could. They had known each other since their first term at university, the almost prehistoric time when Miranda had still been Barbara Huggett, fresh from her divorced mother's semi in Wolverhampton. When Barbara took the part of Miranda in the University Players' production of *The Tempest*, in which Selwyn played Trinculo, she decided that as a name for a black-haired siren with a future in theatre, Miranda had a lot more going for it than Barbara ever would.

It was a considerable number of years after that that she finally met and married Jacob Meadowe, farmer and landowner.

'Come on in,' Miranda beamed.

She danced her way through the house, past the handsome staircase and the doors opening to the drawing room, and a shuttered dining room where the table was already laid with six places for dinner.

'When are the others getting here?' Selwyn called, peering in at the glimmer of silver candlesticks.

The final establishment of the new households would take some more time, but with her developed sense of theatre

Miranda had decreed that there should be a weekend gathering to mark the beginning of their new association.

'Now,' Miranda said, with her wide smile. It was nearly five o'clock.

This was the weekend.

The kitchen was warm, with one of the solid fuel ranges that Polly thought a country living cliché and quite impossible to cook on, and which Miranda claimed to love like a dear friend. The floor was red quarry tiles, starred and pocked with a history of dropped saucepans and tracked with the passage of generations. There was a built-in dresser running the length of one wall, its shelves crowded with mismatched china, and a scrubbed table in the centre. Polly lowered herself into a Windsor chair painted some shade of English Heritage blue to match the legs of the table.

'Tea coming up,' Miranda said happily. She brought the kettle back to the boil, poured and stirred, and then began to slice sponge cake.

'Just a small bit for me,' Polly murmured.

'Oh, come on. I made it.'

Selwyn had bounded straight to the back door. He unlatched it and stood on the threshold, rocking gently on the balls of his feet and staring out into the cobbled back courtyard. Chickweed sprouted between the stones and clumps of nettles grew against the flint walls. There were two short wings projecting from the rear of the main house as well as from the front, giving it the profile of a broad but stumpy and irregular H. These two wings were smaller and more dilapidated than the forward-facing pair, having been used in the past partly as barns for the farming that no longer happened at Mead, and partly as garaging for long-vanished cars. The right-hand wing had been converted years before for holiday lettings, but now stood empty and waiting. The left-hand one was much more tumbledown. A section of the roof stood open to the rafters, the panes in some of the windows were broken and patched with cardboard, and a barn-sized door hung open and let in the weather.

It was this most sorry portion of the old house that Selwyn and Polly had recently bought from Miranda, using quite a large slice of the capital that remained from selling their own house and paying off accumulated debts. Despite her unworldly air, Miranda – or her financial advisors – had driven a hard bargain.

'We should get some of our stuff unloaded,' Selwyn said. 'Set up camp. Polly?'

He vibrated with so much eagerness and seemingly innocent energy that the natural response would have been to go along with whatever he suggested. The two women knew him better, and gazed back at him.

'We've only been here ten minutes,' Polly observed.

'Camp? What do you mean? You can't be thinking of sleeping across there tonight?' Miranda wailed. 'Have a rest first.'

Selwyn rubbed his hands. They were big, broad, and scarred.

'Rest? Rest from what? There's a lot to do out there. We want to get started, Poll, don't we?'

Polly looked from one to the other.

'Tomorrow,' she said.

The Jaguar purred between the gateposts, accelerated past the bend in the driveway and came to a halt beside the abandoned white van.

Amos nodded at it. 'That'll be Selwyn's.'

He and Katherine sat in the quiet and looked across at the front of the house.

'I always forget. It's lovely,' Katherine breathed.

'It's falling down.'

'That, too.'

'Come on. Let's go inside and at least get ourselves a drink before the place collapses.'

Amos sprang out and immediately buried his head in the Jaguar's limited boot space, then emerged with a box in his arms. The evening air was rich with the scent of lavender and agriculture. Miranda appeared once more in the doorway, framed by the pillars. Burdened with his case of champagne

Amos could only boom a greeting at her, but Miranda and Katherine embraced.

'You look well,' Miranda murmured in Katherine's ear, as if she had been expecting otherwise.

'I *am* well. You know.'

'We'll talk. Amos, give me a kiss.'

He leaned over the box and kissed the cheek that she turned to him.

It was Amos who led the way inside. Katherine pulled down the ribbing of her heather-coloured cardigan and followed, carefully placing her feet on the uneven paving. Miranda came behind, light on her feet in her worn ballet flats.

The kitchen boiled with noisy greetings.

'*Bollinger?* Amos, you're still a flash fucker.'

'Right, you'll be sticking to tea, then,' Amos grinned as he dropped a weighty arm on Selwyn's shoulder. 'Mirry, glasses for the rest of us. We'll drink a toast to the new order.'

'Ah, Katherine, come here. Your husband's a prat, but you are gorgeous. And you smell divine.'

'Do I? It's Jo Malone. I thought it might be a bit young for me . . .'

'Now, listen. I don't want to hear the *y* word, not from any of us, now or for the rest of our years at Mead. Or the *o* word, either. Definitely not that one.'

'Shouldn't we wait for Colin?'

Everyone was talking at once. Miranda moved happily between them.

Colin was the sixth member of their group. 'He'll be here in a minute, I'm sure.'

'Polly, my darling. How do you bear living with this man?'

'How do I? You're going to find out, aren't you?'

'Christ. Yes. What have we all let ourselves in for?'

'I don't seem to have any champagne glasses. Or not matching ones. Not much call for them lately.'

'It doesn't matter about matching. Any glasses will do. Just don't give Amos the biggest one. Here, let's use these.'

Selwyn applied strong thumbs and the first cork popped. Miranda swooped a glass and caught the plume of silver froth. The five of them stood in a smiling circle, between the dresser and the scrubbed table with its litter of mugs and cake crumbs.

'A toast,' Amos proposed. 'Here's to Mead, and to Miranda, and the future.'

'Here's to all of us,' Miranda answered. 'Long life and . . .' she searched for the appropriate word, then it floated into her head, 'harmony.'

'Harmony. To all of us,' they echoed.

The words came easily enough. They had known each other for the best part of forty years. For some of those decades the friendships had seemed consigned to the past, but now there was this late and intriguing regrowth.

Polly put down her empty champagne glass. 'Where *is* Colin?' she asked.

The third vehicle, a small German-made saloon, had reached Meddlett village. It passed the church and the general store-cum-post office on the corner, and skirted the village green. It had passed the pub too, where the lights were coming on as the daylight faded, but then the driver braked quite sharply. A car following behind hooted and accelerated past with another angry blast on the horn. The first car reversed a few yards, then made a dart into the pub car park.

The bar was yellow-lit. It had been slightly modernized, which meant that the horse brasses, patterned carpet and tankards had been removed and replaced by stripped wood. Various jovially phrased notices warned against hiking boots, work clothing and requests for credit. A list of darts fixtures was pinned to the wall next to a cratered dartboard. The window table was occupied by a young couple with a dog seated on the bench between them. They each had an arm wrapped around the dog, and over its smooth black head they were talking heatedly in low voices. An old man in corduroy trousers sat on a stool at the bar, and two younger men stood next to him with

pints in their hands. Their conversation halted as their heads turned towards the door. Colin ducked to miss the low beams and made his way to the bar. The barman put down a cloth and rested his weight on his knuckles.

'Evening,' he said.

Colin smiled. He felt about as at home in this place as he would have done in the scrum of a rugby international, and wondered why only a minute ago it had seemed like such an excellent idea to call in for a solitary, sharpening drink before turning up at Mead.

'Evening. I'll have . . .' A cranberry martini? A pink champagne cocktail? He ran his eye along the labelled pumps. '. . . ah, a pint of Adnam's.'

'Coming up,' the barman nodded. The conversation to Colin's left resumed, being something to do with reality television.

'If they will pick monkeys, they'll get gibberish, won't they?' the older man observed.

'Do better yourself, Ken, could you?' one of the others laughed.

'I could,' Ken said flatly. He drank, then stuck out his lower lip and removed a margin of beer froth from the underside of his moustache.

Colin carried his drink to a table facing the dartboard. He centred the straight glass on a circular beer mat, drew out a chair and sat down. He was very tired, not just because of the drive to Meddlett. He resisted the urge to tip his head back against the dado rail and close his eyes on the saloon bar. Instead he took a mouthful of beer. A man in checkered trousers, white jacket and neckerchief looked in through the door. He was dark, eastern European, perhaps Turkish, Colin guessed. The chef briefly met his eye, then withdrew.

There was a laminated menu slotted into a small wooden block on the table in front of him. Colin studied it.

'Why not try our delicious smoked haddock hotpot?' it queried. 'Served with chips and salad.'

He wondered, if he were going to eat here, whether he would

choose the hotpot over the Moroccan-style lamb tagine or the hot and spicy Thai noodles. There wasn't much hope of getting away from the chips. He wondered how life would be if he didn't move forwards or backwards but took a room right here at the Griffin, eavesdropping on the conversations of strangers and submerging himself in a lake of Adnam's.

Miranda and Polly and the others would come looking for him. However he tried to evade them they would search him out and take him by the arm, kindly but unstoppably, and lead him to Mead. In his present directionless state this thought was vaguely comforting. He didn't want not to be at Mead any more strongly than he wanted not to be anywhere else. He would occupy one of Miranda's several spare bedrooms, listen to the conversations of his old friends, and his external inertia would secretly mirror the other lack of function that he had yet to come to terms with.

Miranda had been a bright, unsteady flame when he first knew her.

He could see her as she had been, as vividly as if that early version of her had just danced into the room. She wore her black hair in thick ropes, pinned up anyhow, and the tangled, reckless volume of it made her thin arms and legs and narrow waist seem all the more elegantly fragile. She had appeared like some newborn quadruped, all unsteady limbs and wet eyelashes, but with a healthy young animal's instinctive hold on life. Miranda had been at all the parties, all the Hunger Lunches and demos and concerts and poetry readings, dressed in her tiny skirts and suede jerkins and velvet cloaks and dippy hats. He didn't think she had been to all that many lectures, but that wouldn't have mattered because Miranda was going to be an actress. She had scaled the university's various social ladders, hand over hand, and perched near the top rung of all of them. She had been, decidedly, a success.

Colin was almost sure that he could remember the actual party where they had all joked about their commune-to-be.

There had been a small room, probably somewhere up

Divinity Road, every wall and hard surface painted purple, filled with mattresses and candles and joss sticks, the reek of joints and half-cured Afghan coats.

Amos had definitely been there. Amos was a somewhat marginal figure in those days. He had been to a public school, while the rest of them took pride in the fact that they had not. He played rugby and would disappear slightly shame-facedly on weekday afternoons to train at the university sports ground, often vanishing on Saturdays as well to play in college matches. Like the rest of them he wore loons and tie-dyed vests, but his hair never seemed to grow quite long enough to eradicate the school prefect's neat side-parting and razor-clipped neck. Amos was loudly a member of the University Communist Club. When he got drunk he liked to link arms with his friends and zigzag home chanting 'Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh'.

Selwyn had been there too, laughing and skinning up, all red mouth and lean, flat belly. Selwyn's little jumpers and shrunken vests tended to ride up and away from the tops of his velvet pants to expose disconcerting, lickable expanses of his smooth skin. It was Selwyn who would have been responsible for the music, most probably at that time precisely on the groovy cusp between the Yardbirds and Led Zeppelin. Colin acknowledged to himself that he had no real idea; even in those days he had preferred Verdi. But Selwyn would have known. Selwyn ran a mobile disco called Blue Peony out of his Dormobile van. He often played at student balls and big parties, standing at the decks in headphones, dappled by the bloom of strobe lights and enclosed within a three-deep ring of girls.

Polly had been there too, talking hard and gesticulating and prodding the air to make a point. Not Katherine, though. Katherine came along later.

And Miranda of course. Wherever Selwyn was, in those days, Miranda went. Miranda had got up to dance between the tangle of legs. She made vine-tendril twisting motions with her small white hands, swaying with her eyes closed, hair falling down her back in a thick dark river. Colin watched Selwyn who

watched Miranda who was wandering happily in her own universe.

'It's not going to happen,' Polly said. 'Not to us. Never. We've got the Pill now, they'll have developed a magic medicine bullet by the time we're fifty. We'll all take it, we're going to stay young and beautiful.'

'If you want to be loved,' Colin hummed, but nobody heard him.

'That's rubbish,' Amos scoffed. 'Medical and technological advances haven't quite got to the point where they can stop you hitting fifty, Polly, and then sixty and seventy, and then you'll die. But we're young now, that's what counts. We're going to start making a difference as soon as we can.'

'What difference?' someone yawned.

'We'll bring down the old order, establish the new. Attack the morbid old institutions, the BBC, the party political system, the monarchy . . .'

This was not a previously unheard speech of Amos's.

'The class system, the public schools . . .' Polly patiently and amusedly listed for him.

Colin stirred himself. He had smoked enough of Amos's hash to realize that he knew secrets and understood mysteries, and should concentrate on those insights instead of dissipating precious energy on worrying about his clothes and the exams.

'Listen, man. Before long, Americans will be standing on the moon. Think of that. Why can't there be a cure for old age?'

'There is. It's called *death*,' Amos snapped.

Miranda had gyrated to the window. She leaned her hot forehead against the cool glass and then gave a little cry.

'Look. Oh, look. Everyone.'

Heads turned. The moon was a pale, perfect disc sailing through streamers of cloud.

Miranda breathed, 'Imagine it. Men on the moon. How . . . beautiful. Their footprints will be up there in the dust, you know, for ever and ever. I'm envious. I'd like that to be *my* epitaph.'

'If Polly and Colin are right, you won't be needing an epitaph. You'll still be here, cluttering the place up.'

'Oh, I don't think I want that at all. What I'd like when the time comes is to be a magnificent old lady. With a brilliant, scandalous history. Frail of course, rather grand, *greatly* loved. Deeply mourned, when I go.' She lifted her arm, the trumpet sleeve of her velvet dress falling back to leave her wrist bare. 'You know what? I've got the most amazing idea. When we are all old, if it *has* to happen, we should live together in a fabulous, outrageous commune. We should all come back together again, at the other end of our lives, when we've achieved everything we want to, and just refuse to do what old people do.'

'Old people being like my gran, you mean?' a boy interrupted. 'She sits in a chair all day waiting to be taken to the toilet, and begs for her cup of tea because she can't remember she had it five minutes ago?'

Miranda looked on him with pity. 'It won't be like that. Not for us,' she said. 'Polly's talking about it all being different by then, not about actual immortality.'

'Christ,' Amos said. 'What is all this? There's so much to be done *now*. Why are we talking about what's going to happen to us in a hundred years time?'

'I like my idea,' Miranda insisted.

Selwyn stirred himself. He reached up to grasp Miranda's wrist, and drew her back into the circle. She had stuck sequins along her cheekbones and they flashed in the candlelight.

'Then you shall have what you want,' he told her. Most of them laughed. Selwyn was joking, but the joke was in part a reference to his acknowledged supremacy and power in the group. What Selwyn decided usually came to pass.

Silence had fallen after that. In their different ways they were all thinking about the conversation and peering, into the chinks between the phrases, at the remote and chilly landscape of their old age. It had seemed no less distant than the moon.

Or perhaps it was just me who was contemplating it, Colin thought now.