Till Death us do Part

Iowa City

1931-32

1

Henry had been losing weight. Cal had noticed it, had worried silently about it for several weeks, and had finally decided to tackle him about it.

"I really think you ought to go see the doctor," he said one evening. "You must have lost at least twelve pounds in the last month."

"Nonsense," said Henry brusquely. "I'm perfectly okay. It isn't good for a man of my age to carry so much fat."

"It isn't good for a man of any age to lose a lot of weight when he isn't actually trying to," argued Cal, "and I don't like your colour either. You look a bit jaundiced."

"You're fussing like a woman, Cal. For heaven's sake, I had enough of that from Irene when she was alive. But all right, I'll go see Dr Ford if it'll make you feel better."

To his chagrin, Dr Ford took the matter very seriously and arranged for him to go into Cedar Rapids to see a liver specialist. He came home two days after his examination to an empty house. It was a weekday and Cal was out at work as usual. Henry could not bring himself to do any work that day although, only a few days earlier, he had been totally and happily immersed in his new biography of Benjamin Franklin; he sat numbly in his study, leafing through his father's war memoir, remembering many things.

When Cal returned in the evening, Henry embraced him and said quietly, "It's good to be home again." but offered no immediate information about what the doctor had said. He seemed abstracted and withdrawn. Cal did not ask what had happened, although he was in an agony of apprehension, but simply went into the kitchen and started to prepare supper. He knew that Henry would tell him everything as soon as he was ready to do so. To force the issue would show a lack of trust in his lover and perhaps damage Henry's sense of control over the situation. He had learned over the years that for Henry, the need to be in control of things was paramount; it was one of the few things he had in common with Lee.

Later that evening, after they had eaten and Cal had silently cleared the table, Henry suddenly spoke.

"You were right, Cal. It is more serious than I thought. No, let's not use euphemisms; the truth is it's a complete disaster. It seems there's a tumour growing on my liver – a malignant one, worse luck – and the upper part of the colon is involved too so apparently they can't operate. The consultant thinks it probably started on the colon; he told me primary liver cancer is quite rare in people who don't drink heavily."

"Cancer? Oh, *macushla*!"

"Well, it's a family tradition, I'm afraid." Henry did not look at Cal as he spoke. He stared at his hands, folded on the table top. His voice sounded dry and brittle, drained of emotion. "My father went down with throat cancer just like his old commander, President Grant. An odd coincidence, don't you think? Unlike Grant, he didn't actually die of it. He died of a drug overdose. Are you surprised? You shouldn't be. There are several things in our family history that never got into Lizzie's book. I never told her the real cause of her grandfather's death because I thought it was no business of anyone's except my mother's. She told me the truth years afterwards when she was dying herself but I'd already suspected it. Our family doctor probably guessed too; I doubt if he approved but he must have known. It happened all the time then. Sick people were mostly nursed at home by their families and you could buy laudanum on every street corner. Euthanasia only became an issue when people started dying in hospital under doctors' control."

He looked up suddenly and Cal saw the fear standing naked in his eyes, fear not just of death but of all that might come before it. In all the years of their marriage, he had never seen Henry really afraid before; there was something almost shocking in it, it seemed so out of character. Henry swallowed hard and said,

"Cal, I want you to tell me whether, if the worst comes to the worst, you would be willing to do the same thing for me."

Cal went very pale. He tried to speak but nothing came out. It was as if his voice had dried up. Henry said quickly, "I'm not asking you actually to do it, only to tell me if you would do it if it ever became necessary. My dear, you know I would never want you to do anything that went against your conscience, but I do need to know one way or the other. If the answer is no, I swear I'll never reproach you. Only in that case, I may have to take steps of my own. If I know in advance that you won't be able to help me, I shall have to make my own exit while I'm still strong enough to do that. I can't risk being trapped in a situation where life has become intolerably painful and miserable and neither of us is able to put an end to it. But I would rather stay with you as long as I can. After all, this is all the time we shall have together and I want it to last as long as possible."

"I can't tell you just like that," said Cal, looking everywhere but at Henry. "I need time to think about it."

"Of course, of course. Take all the time you need. It isn't urgent yet. And you know, in the end it might not even be necessary. I think I could put up with a lot of unpleasantness if I knew that there was a way out for me *in extremis* and that you would always be ready to hold the door open for me."

Cal came over and put his arms around Henry, gripping him tightly. After a few moments Henry reciprocated. They clung to each other as desperately as they had that first night nearly twenty five years ago when Cal had broken down in tears over Lee's final letter. But this time it was Henry who said thickly, "Take me to bed, Cal. Maybe you can make me forget."

2

A few days later, Cal came up behind Henry as he sat at his desk in the study and put his arms about him, resting his cheek on Henry's thick, grey hair.

"I've been thinking a lot about what you said the other day," he said. Henry tensed but said nothing. He too recognised the importance of letting his lover pace himself.

"I hope and pray that it will never be necessary, but if it is, I'll help you. I will, truly."

"Oh Cal, are you sure? It is against your religion, after all."

"It's against the teaching of Holy Church, that's for sure. But so is just about everything we've ever done together. Why do you think they excommunicated me? They can't do anything worse to me now and I might as well be hung for a sheep as for a lamb. Besides, I couldn't watch you suffering and know that I had the means to end it and not use that means. I just couldn't and that's the long and short of it. But as to it being against my true religion, I simply don't believe that. I've never felt there was any real clash between my love for God and my love for you, whatever the Church says. You are part of my religion, Henry, and my religion is part of our love. The vows I swore to you were sworn in the name of God and I still pray every day for grace to keep them faithfully. And I won't give up the faith that all we have known and done together was a blessing from God and a sign of his love for both of us – for you too, Henry, though you are a stubborn, ungrateful old freethinker and a pain in God's ass, I don't doubt." He was in tears now and smiling through his tears. Henry sighed and leaned back against him, closing his eyes.

"Bless you, Cal. You make it all worthwhile for me. Well, let's go forward together and endure whatever we have to."

"Are you going to tell the girls?"

"I'll have to eventually. But not yet. Why upset them so far in advance? I'm not going to drop dead in the near future or even get very ill for a while. I'll tell them when it becomes necessary. For the time being I want to continue life as normally as possible. I certainly want to go on teaching as long as I can. It'll be quite a wrench giving that up but I suppose the time will come when I won't have the energy for it any more. And then there's my Benjamin Franklin project. Isn't it ironic! I've wanted for so long to write his life story and now, when I finally get down to doing it, this has to happen! I just hope I have the time to finish the book but if not, I'll have to try and leave it in a tidy enough state for Lizzie to be able to carry on from where I left off. I don't doubt that she'll be able to do it; I have enormous confidence in Lizzie's abilities as a writer."

"You should after 'North and South'. Sure, that was a wonderful book. You know, I still remember so clearly the day you first brought her to see me – twelve years old and as fearless and spirited as a young boy.

And now she's the mother of three with a best-selling history book under her belt. We've come a long way, *mo chroidhe*."

"We've come no way at all," said Henry, pulling himself abruptly out of Cal's arms and reaching for his glasses. "We're still young, Cal," he continued as he put them on with hands that shook slightly." A week ago I'd have said I was in my prime. We could have had another twenty five years easily, time enough to see Lizzie's and Harriet's kids grow up, maybe even time to see society getting a bit more adult and able to recognise and respect our relationship. Instead of which it's all going to end now in a ghastly tangle of illness and indignity and pain. Why, Cal, why?"

"That's a question nobody gets the answer to, not in this life anyway," said Cal, pulling up the other chair and seating himself with a heavy sigh.

"There is no other life." Henry's mouth tightened as it always did when Cal spoke of his belief in an afterlife.

"We'll have to agree to differ on that one, *mo chroidhe*. But not even your precious Thomas Jefferson thought we had a right to more than life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. Not even to the attainment of it, so you and I have already had more than we had a right to, strictly speaking. And no-one at all gave us a right to explanations; we just have to play the cards as they lie and try to make the best game we can out of them. Easy for me to preach, I suppose. You'll have the worst of it for now and for the foreseeable future. My turn comes after you've gone and I have to find some way to go on without you. Maybe this is the real test of our love: sort of final examinations for both of us. Your students don't like those either, do they, but how else can we prove we've learned our lessons?"

"Look, don't do anything stupid after I'm gone, Cal. I don't mean physically; I know you better than that. But please don't retreat into a permanent widowhood or take some crazy vow of posthumous fidelity to me. Make a life for yourself. Find someone else to love if possible. If you can't do that, at least make sure you get regular sex. I'd much rather think of you curled up asleep in our bed, sweaty and at peace after a good fuck, than lying awake at three a.m. fighting blue devils. Promise me that you won't cripple yourself emotionally out of some misguided sense of loyalty to me."

Cal smiled faintly.

"I can't promise you anything except that I'll be there when you need me for as long as you live. What happens afterwards is in the Old Man's hand. Let's just take each day as it comes, make whatever plans we need for tomorrow, and not even think about the day after."

3

Lizzie telephoned a couple of months later and asked if she could bring the boys to stay with them for a while.

"Bernie can't make it right now," she told Henry. "We've got a measles epidemic here and he's being run off his feet, but he told me he wants the boys out of the zone of infection, especially Calum. Well, he is only a few months old after all and apparently premature babies are more susceptible to these things. Iowa City seems the obvious place to take them. Besides, it's ages since I've seen you both and you haven't seen Calum at all. He has hair now, the reddest hair you can possibly imagine and his eyes have gone sort of bluey-grey. I think they're going to be like yours eventually."

"Of course you can come," Henry answered. "Stay as long as you like. You know you're always welcome. Just see to it that you keep Nick and Tom out of my study while I'm working."

When Lizzie saw her uncle, she noticed the jaundice and the weight loss at once. They had become quite obvious. She concealed her alarm from him but tackled Cal about it in the kitchen the same evening as they cooked supper together.

"What's wrong with Uncle Henry?"

"Why don't you ask him?"

"I'm asking you."

"Oh come on, Lizzie!" Cal looked away uneasily. "You know I can't discuss Henry's health behind his back. That would be kind of disloyal. If you think there's something wrong, ask him about it yourself."

"All right, I intend to if you won't tell me."

She confronted her uncle in his study the next day.

"You look ill, Uncle Henry. Have you seen Dr Ford recently?"

"Yes, I have as a matter of fact. Don't fuss, Lizzie. Everything's under control."

"I see. You've lost a lot of weight, your skin has turned yellow, you pick at your food like a bird, Cal goes about with a face like a thunderhead and refuses to discuss your health, and all you can tell me is that everything is under control. I wasn't born yesterday, you know. Now you have a choice: you can either tell me the truth now or wait till you think I ought to know it, knowing that I'll be sick with worry until you do. Which is it to be?"

"I suppose," said Henry sourly, "that you haven't considered the possibility of being sick with worry because I *have* told you. Dammit, Lizzie, I wanted to spare you that."

"That never works – trying to spare people, I mean. I tried it with Bernie when I had those awful headaches before Calum was born and look what came of it! I damned near killed myself and Calum too. I realise now that if someone loves you, they're just bound to worry over you whether you like it or not. It's a part of being human. Look, just how sick are you, Uncle Henry?"

"Well, I'm not moribund yet. I'm afraid what I've got will probably kill me eventually but there's still plenty of time until it does. I plan on staying active for as long as possible and that may be months yet. I hope, by the way, that you don't pass this information on to anyone else just yet – not even Bernard or Harriet."

"Of course I won't. No more than Cal would. But you'll have to let Harriet know eventually, Uncle Henry. She loves you every bit as much as I do and it's not fair to keep her in the dark. By the way, I notice you don't give your illness a name. I guess that means it's the one they don't name in obituaries either, the one they always call just 'a long illness'. And as you obviously have jaundice, the tumour is probably on your liver. Right?"

"Exactly. I keep forgetting you're a doctor's wife. Does Bernard know that you read his medical textbooks behind his back?"

"Of course he knows. He expects it. He knows every mother is a hypochondriac for her sons so if she has access to a medical dictionary, she's bound to read it from cover to cover. Oh God, listen to me chattering. It's shock, I suppose."

She went round the desk to her uncle and hugged him fiercely.

"I want you to know," she said, "that if there's anything I can do to help, you only have to call me. That goes for Bernie too, I'm sure. Dr Ford may be a good doctor but obviously I think Bernie is a better one. If you ever need a second opinion – about painkillers or anything like that – just call us. And tell Cal that if he ever needs a helping hand with you, I'll always be there."

"As a matter of fact, I think I'm the one who may need a helping hand. Sit down, Lizzie, please. Now that you know the worst, I might as well explain what I may need from you in the future. You know how important this Benjamin Franklin book is to me. Now it looks as if I may not be able to finish it. I have all the references collected and the first six chapters are written in draft. I'm going to concentrate on writing detailed arguments for the others so that if I die before I can finish them, you can take over. I couldn't imagine a better person to complete my work; you're a meticulous historian and a lucid writer. But please, I don't want you to work blindly. If you think at any point that I've come to a wrong conclusion, I want you to add an endnote explaining why you think I'm wrong and providing documentary evidence. Remember, this will be a student text so it's vitally important that it be accurate and honest."

"But you're America's greatest living expert on the revolutionary period," exclaimed Lizzie. "It's not very likely that I'd be right against you, is it?"

"I'm not suggesting that you change my argument – I know you'd probably lack the confidence to do that. All I'm asking is that you add your own conclusions as a possible alternative wherever you think it appropriate. Remember, I've been practically living with Franklin now for several years and I've always admired the man deeply. I'm probably wildly prejudiced in his favour and liable to turn a blind eye to anything that reflects badly on him. You will come to this with a fresh eye and no prejudices. Will you promise me that when you inherit my work, you'll edit it without fear or favour?"

He leaned across the desk towards her, his grey eyes boring into hers. She reached over, took both his hands in hers and squeezed them.

"All right, Uncle Henry," she said. "I promise, since it obviously means so much to you. But I hope you'll get to finish the book yourself."

"So do I naturally. But if the worst comes to the worst, I know I can trust you. You'll inherit all my books and papers too, of course; they'll be of no interest to Harriet. You can decide what, if anything, you

want to keep. Larry Morgan would probably be glad to snap up the rest for the department. I dare say they'll make him professor after I'm gone; heaven knows he's been angling for it long enough. But don't let him have your grandfather's war memoir. I want Nick to have that in due course. The house, of course, will go to Cal. Cal will be my widower and it's fitting that he should live here, where we were so happy together, for as long as he wants. If he finds the memories too painful, he can sell it and buy something else with the proceeds, but I've asked him in that case to give you first refusal and Harriet second. He won't accept any money from me of course, not a brass cent; he's more stiff-necked than even your father was, so what little I have will be divided equally between you and Harriet."

"That seems very fair and I'm sure Harriet will think so too. Cal certainly has the best claim on this house of anyone, and Harriet and I both have homes of our own, don't we. All the same, I really don't know how he's going to manage without you. You've been his whole life apart from his religion."

"He's been the best thing in mine. Listen, Lizzie: when they bury me, I want you to speak out for me as I did for your father. You owe me that. Morgan will probably want to do it but I don't want him, I want you. You know just as much about my work as he does and a damned sight more about my private life. And don't be mealy-mouthed about it either! Tell them that I died a married man and that my marriage was a happy one. And see to it that I'm buried with Cal's ring on my finger. You know I don't believe in souls or any kind of afterlife so what happens to my body is that much more important. Will you do that for me?"

"Yes, Uncle Henry, I promise I will."

"Good. That's all right then. Now can I please get on with my work or are you going to sit here gossiping about my health all day long?"

4

By spring, Henry's condition had deteriorated badly. He was an avowed invalid now, had resigned from the university, and was working feverishly on his book. Cal had given up his own work to look after him. They had always lived very modestly, Cal's housekeeping skills having been honed by many years of poverty. Henry had squirrelled away as much of his salary as he could over the years in cautious but successful investments and had got out of the stock market and into government securities before the crash of 1929, convinced that the continuing rise in share prices had become a bubble about to burst, so they still had enough income to manage on, at least in the short term. Lizzie and Harriet organised a kind of two-woman rota of short visits to do as much of the housework as possible and take some of the pressure off Cal. They had offered to make a joint financial contribution to cover nursing costs but Cal answered shortly that you don't buy milk when you already have a cow. Lizzie, who knew him intuitively, guessed that nursing Henry with his own hands satisfied some need in him for increased intimacy in these last weeks of their marriage.

She and Harriet both thought that their uncle was taking the whole situation with remarkable serenity, considering that he had no belief whatever in any kind of life after death. He had never seemed to them more admirable. Though he had become weak and horribly emaciated, he insisted that he was in very little pain; he and Cal together had, by trial and error, devised a medication regime which involved administering morphia every four hours and it seemed to keep the pain at bay. Dr Ford did not approve. He kept saying that if they used the morphia so freely, it would lose its power and Henry would have nothing to help him through the last stages, to which Henry replied tartly that he would cross that bridge when he came to it. Privately, he admitted to Cal that he would never have dared to try the experiment but for Cal's agreement to help him to die if the pain relief really did stop working. Cal could not help seeing it as ironic, one of the many grim ironies in his situation, that by promising to do something which most of his fellow Christians would regard as very wrong, he might well have avoided the necessity of actually doing it.

At the beginning of May, Cal telephoned Lizzie and told her that, in Dr Ford's opinion, Henry probably had no more than a week to live. He had developed severe abdominal dropsy, and a terrifying hæmorrhage from somewhere deep in his gullet had sapped what was left of his strength. Though he refused to say anything about his own health, it was clear from his voice that he was physically and emotionally exhausted.

"Hold the fort!" said Lizzie. "Harriet and I have already made arrangements. I'll call her now and tell her it's time, then I'll come straight up."

She arrived in Iowa City the next day in the morning and Harriet breezed in from Virginia two days later. She was about seven months pregnant – an unexpected pregnancy, she said, but not an unwanted one. Unlike Lizzie, who had had a bad time with all three of her pregnancies, Harriet generally sailed through

hers. As it would, by common consent, be dangerous for her to do any serious lifting, she took over all the domestic chores and left the actual nursing to Lizzie and Cal. Cal still insisted on nursing Henry by night, but Lizzie now nursed him by day, allowing Cal to get some sleep. Henry slept most of the time, no longer ate, and could only with difficulty be persuaded to drink. When they first arrived, he was still quite lucid when awake and spoke of his coming end without fear and with a certain dry curiosity. He told Lizzie that he had arranged and even paid for his own funeral in advance as he did not think it right for Cal to be burdened with such things when he was freshly bereaved. Within two days however, he had slipped into a state of clouded consciousness akin to stupor, the mark of terminal liver failure.

On a stormy night with the rain beating on the windows, Lizzie was awakened by urgent knocking on the wall that divided her bedroom from her uncle's. She knocked back three times to show she had received and understood the message, and went across the hall to wake Harriet. When they entered the sickroom together, they found Cal kneeling on the bed supporting Henry, who was slumped back against Cal's chest, breathing loudly and stertorously through his open mouth. There was no rhythm to his breathing any more; it was as if something that had once been automatic had now become a conscious effort, and one that he kept forgetting to make. For quite long periods his chest did not move at all, then he would give a long rattling gasp and begin a series of noisy sighing respirations that gradually died away again into silence. His eyes were closed and Lizzie was quite glad of it. She knew only too well what they would look like if they were open: grey on white, the pupils reduced to pinpricks by the morphia. Like her father's. Her only clear memory of his deathbed was those unnaturally shrunken pupils – that and what he had told her about Henry: "You can trust your Uncle Henry with your life. And if there's anything more important to you than your life, you can trust him with that too."

Harriet slipped onto her knees and took one of her uncle's limp hands in both of hers. She was weeping – but then she always had wept easily. Lizzie knelt, dry-eyed, and took the other hand. Henry slowly opened his eyes and moved them from side to side. He did not seem able to move his head any more.

"Lizzie?" he croaked, "and... Harriet?"

"Yes, we're both here, Uncle Henry. And Cal is holding you. All the people who love you are here."

Another long period of difficult breathing. His lips were blue now, his face transparently pale. Then he whispered, "I... have... been... so much... loved."

"You've deserved it," said Lizzie fiercely.

He closed his eyes and there was a long silence. Lizzie thought he had finally gone but then he started breathing yet again. His eyes opened and now they seemed to be sharply focused on a point somewhere in front of him. He suddenly said, almost in his normal voice, "Lee! What the devil are you doing..." Then his head slumped sideways and he gave a convulsive shudder. His breathing stopped and this time it did not start again. Cal slowly lowered him onto the bed and passed a heavy hand over his eyes, closing them. Harriet turned to Lizzie, her eyes shining with tears and hope.

"Oh Lizzie, do you think –"

"I don't know what to think. Probably it was just an old memory surfacing in a dying brain like a bubble of marsh-gas in a swamp. But if you want to think that Pa came for him, go right ahead; it can't hurt."

She helped Cal to arranged her uncle's body decently, lying on his back, his hands folded across his bony chest. She bent and kissed his cheek, then made way for Harriet to do the same.

"You'd best get back to bed for your baby's sake," she told her. "Cal, what are you going to do?"

"I'm staying here. I won't leave him as long as he's still warm."

"Are you sure you'll be all right on your own?"

He gave her a mirthless grin.

"I won't lay hands on myself if that's what you mean. But I must be with him. He's still my lover, you know."

He seated himself by the bed, placing one hand on Henry's clasped hands. Lizzie could see their two rings side by side, touching, Henry's heavy gold signet on Cal's fourth finger and Cal's silver interlace ring on Henry's. Then she turned, put one arm around Harriet and eased her out of the room and back to her own.

Back in her bed, she listened to the rain falling endlessly on the roof and wondered if she would ever get to sleep again. But, surprisingly she did, and when she woke, it was morning. The rain had stopped and the wind had died down but it was still a grey dreary dawn with a blanket of low cloud that looked ready to start weeping again at the slightest provocation. "Appropriate!" she thought as she shuffled grimly into her

slippers. She went down to the kitchen and found Harriet, moving slowly because of her pregnancy, making coffee and toast, and boiling eggs. The table in the back room was already laid.

"Where's Cal?" Harriet asked. "Is he all right? I've been worrying about him, you know. We shouldn't have let him stay in that room with Uncle Henry's body. It's creepy!"

"Well, there's nothing we could have done to make him leave. I haven't gone in this morning because I didn't want to disturb him in case he's asleep. God knows he could do with it after what he's been through. But you're right, I'll go check up on him."

She went back upstairs and waited for a few moments outside the door of her uncle's bedroom, uncertain quite how to proceed. In the end she knocked cautiously and, hearing no immediate answer, called softly after a moment or two, "It's me, Lizzie. Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course," Cal answered in a dull tone. When she entered, he was sitting more or less as she had left him the night before, leaning forward a little as if in earnest conversation with the dead man, Henry's left hand clasped in both of his. He was not crying at that moment, but his eyes looked very red and swollen.

"I think you should come down and have some breakfast," she said. "You probably won't feel like eating anything right now but I guess a cup of coffee would do you no harm."

He sighed and put Henry's hand down, grimacing a little as he did so.

"He's beginning to stiffen up," he said. "He felt like he was just sleeping before." He made no move to rise from his chair so she took his hand and gently tugged it. He rose then and followed her step by step across the room and down the stairs as if without any volition of his own. She felt as if she were manipulating a giant puppet. When they reached the back room, Harriet came out of it, her big blue eyes swimming with tears.

"Oh Cal," she said, "I am so sorry!" Then, to Lizzie's surprise, she walked up to Cal and put her arms about him. Up till then, she had always avoided physical contact with him as if his very touch could somehow contaminate her. If Cal was surprised, he did not show it. He put his arms about her clumsily and rested his cheek for a moment against her hair, just as he might have done with Lizzie herself.

"Thanks, Harriet," he said hoarsely. "It's appreciated." Then he pushed her gently away, walked in and sat down at the table. Lizzie at once poured him coffee.

"I'd better have some toast too," he said. "It will probably taste like straw but he wouldn't want me to neglect myself, would he now." Harriet buttered a slice of hot toast, spread it with the English marmalade that Henry had always insisted on, and passed it over to him in silence.

"I'll have to wash him and lay him out," he said as if to himself.

"Cal, no!" Lizzie exclaimed. "The funeral director's people will do that."

"They will not! I won't have strangers doing intimate things with Henry's body. You know how he would have hated that. I'll do it myself; I do know how to. It's an Irish tradition to lay out our own dead. I can't give him a proper Irish wake – he wouldn't want that, I know – but I can do this for him and I will."

"All right, then. We'll do it together."

"There's no need for you to be involved," he said. "I can do it by myself."

"No, you can't. You won't be able to handle him all by yourself."

"I've washed him often enough before now."

"He was co-operating with you then. Now he'll be a dead weight." She winced as she heard what she had just said, but continued firmly, "I'm not going to argue with you, Cal. We do this together or you don't do it at all. You won't be doing him any favours by rupturing yourself or putting your back out."

The fight suddenly seemed to go out of him.

"All right, if you insist. It'll have to be done now, before he stiffens any further. We'll need hot water, soap and flannels. And towels."

Half an hour later, they were stripping the bed and removing Henry's pyjamas. Lizzie wrinkled her nose at the ammoniacal smell of dried urine.

"That happens," said Cal. "The bladder is only a muscle after all. It usually relaxes in death. But you see now why I didn't want a stranger involved in this. Henry was so fastidious."

They washed him, Lizzie sticking to the upper half of the body and leaving the lower half to Cal. Some things, she felt, came better from a lover than from a kinswoman, however close. The dropsy made his naked body look grotesque, more pregnant than Harriet. They dried him and dressed him in the clothes that Cal had laid out: underwear, a white shirt, a maroon tie with a hexagonal interlace pattern in dull gold. Lizzie's eyes

widened as Cal took a pair of gilt and garnet cuff links out of his pocket and slipped them into Henry's shirt sleeves.

"Are you sure you want to give those up?" she asked.

"Quite sure. Your father would have wanted him to have them. And I chose the tie to match, didn't I?"

He had also chosen a three-piece suit in ash grey with a faint pin-stripe. As they manœuvred her uncle's arms and legs into it, she asked Cal if he had said he wanted to be buried in this suit.

"Not particularly. I did ask him once if he had any preferences, but he just said to choose something I liked. And I always did like him in grey; it showed off his eyes so well."

"Yes, he did have beautiful eyes, didn't he. What a pity no-one will ever see them again."

There was no way of buttoning up the trousers over the inflated belly so Cal used two large safety pins to fasten them together. To Lizzie, there was something chilling in the way he had apparently thought of everything. It was as if he had been rehearsing this operation in his mind for weeks. He arranged the dead man's hands on his breast again, then took two silver half-dollars out of his breast pocket and placed them gently on the closed eyelids.

"They'd have been pennies in Ireland," he said, "but our American pennies aren't heavy enough to weight a dead man's eyelids down."

Lizzie surveyed the body for a few moments, then asked, "Do you think we ought to put his glasses on? He looks kind of naked without them."

"Yes, I suppose he would to you. I was used to seeing him without, of course, and not just when he was asleep. He always used to take them off to make love. When he wanted me, he would take them off slowly and fold them up, looking at me the whole while. He was too prudish to actually say what he wanted but he knew I always –" His voice suddenly choked and he flung up his arms blindly. In two steps she had reached him and was holding him close while he sobbed wildly and burrowed into her body like a frightened child. She found that she was crying too. After a while, he lifted his head and croaked, "I love you, Lizzie."

"I love you too, Cal," she said. "Always have and I always will. Now, are there any handkerchiefs in here? I think we could both do with one."

"In... in the closet. Second drawer on the left."

She took out two handkerchiefs, gave one to Cal and wiped her own eyes with the other. Then she led him back down the stairs to where Harriet waited.

"We've done everything we can in there," she said. "Could you look after him for a while, Harriet? I've got some phone calls to make."

She called Bernard first, told him that Henry had died peacefully in the night and reassured him that she was coping. Then she called Dr Ford, who said he'd be along as soon as possible, and old Clay Travis, who promised to tell the rest of the Virginia people. Next on her list was Professor Morgan, as he now was; he immediately suggested the college chapel for the funeral and offered to say a eulogy for Henry. She answered tiredly that Henry had wanted her to do that for him but that he would surely be pleased if Morgan did one of the readings. She explained that her uncle had chosen the readings and music himself and that it would not be a religious service. He blenched slightly but agreed to take part all the same. They both agreed that he would be responsible for informing the academic community; there were people – mostly historians – all over America and some abroad who had corresponded with Henry and might like to attend the funeral. Then she contacted the funeral directors her uncle had chosen and asked them to come and collect the body as soon as Dr Ford had seen it.

When she got back to the living room, she was surprised to find Cal and Harriet sitting side by side, her arm wrapped comfortingly around his shoulders. Even more improbably, he had his open hand resting lightly on the raised curve of her stomach. He lifted his head and gazed at Lizzie with an awe-struck expression.

"I can feel it! Something hard and round like a doorknob! And when I pushed it, it pushed right back at me."

"That's a fist," said Harriet, "or a heel, maybe."

"It's a miracle," said Cal. He gently removed his hand. "Thank you, Harriet. Thanks for showing me that life goes on in spite of everything. Have you decided yet what you're going to name it when it's born?"

"Well, if it's a boy, he'll be named Henry of course. Henry Charles. Charles after my husband. If it's a girl, we'll probably name her Caroline. But a lot of Southern Carolines shorten their names to Callie."

"Do they now!" Cal sounded more alarmed than pleased at the thought of one of Harriet's children being practically named after him. He had been happy enough when Lizzie named her third son Calum but

for Harriet to do something similar after such prolonged hostilities was clearly going a bit too fast in his opinion.

Lizzie intervened and told Cal what she had agreed with Professor Morgan.

"I want you to do the final reading, Cal. It's the only biblical one so you're the obvious person."

"Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3," said Cal dreamily. "A time for everything and everything in its time. Henry really liked that and there wasn't much in Holy Scripture that he liked. But are they really going to let me read it after all the scandal you're going to cause with your speech?"

"What scandal? Most of them won't be hearing anything they haven't known about since way back. You know Uncle Henry never made any secret of his homosexuality or of his marriage to you. He didn't exactly ram it down people's throats but they all knew. He was very proud of you, of all you two achieved together, and of the way you stood up to your priests for him. Heck, he knew better than anyone what that cost you. He wanted there to be some public acknowledgement of all you were to him and he knew it couldn't do you any long-term harm as most of the people there will be academics and you don't move in academic circles. But in any case, when you stand up to read, nobody will know who you are; my eulogy comes after that. Now have you got that disc he wanted played?"

"The one Bernard gave him as a birthday present? Yes, I've got it safe. It's a wonderful piece of music, isn't it! Henry wasn't all that musical himself but that Song of the Earth thing really moved him. I'd best give it you now so you can pass it on to whoever is running things at the chapel. Wait a minute while I find it for you."

He rummaged in the sideboard and after a while extracted a heavy shellac gramophone record in a brown paper sleeve, which he handed over reverently to Lizzie. It was an extract from a work that she and Bernard had fallen in love with when they heard it in full at a concert during their honeymoon in Vienna, an extraordinary hybrid of a symphony and a song cycle by an Austrian composer called Gustav Mahler whom she had never heard of. Nor had anyone else in the US, it seemed; when they got back to America, she had tried to obtain a recording of some part of it without success. In the end, one of Bernard's relatives in Vienna had tracked down a German recording of the final passage of the work. She had sent them two copies, heavily padded and under separate post in case one got broken, but both had arrived safely and Lizzie had triumphantly played the piece for Henry and Cal one evening when they were visiting Chicago. Henry, who understood German quite well, had said at once that he would like to have it played at his funeral and Bernard had later made him a present of one copy.

"Thanks, Cal," she said. "I'll give it you back afterwards of course, though I wouldn't blame you if you found you couldn't bear to listen to it again for a long time. After the service is over, we'll go on to the cemetery and just bury him quietly, family only. That means you, me and Harriet, Bernie and the children, and Clay and Bethany. Their children probably won't want to come, they hardly knew Uncle Henry, but Cousin Clay knew him well. What about your family, Harriet?"

"Of course we'll all be there. I'll see to it." She turned and faced Cal squarely. "Cal, I haven't been kind to you in the past, I know. Or fair. I still don't approve of everything that you and Uncle Henry did together but I do believe now that you truly loved him and I know you made him happy too. Will you forgive me?"

"There's nothing to forgive," said Cal. "You had to follow your conscience, just as I did. Sure, I wouldn't have expected anything less of your father's daughter. Henry always understood that too; he never blamed you. And I guess a lot more Christians would agree with your point of view than with mine. But if you feel you owe me anything, then count it as paid."

They solemnly shook hands. Afterwards, Lizzie said to Harriet, "You see! I told you you'd feel different when you really got to know him."

5

Professor T. Henry Pascoe's non-religious funeral service in the chapel of the University of Iowa was a surprisingly well-attended function. Most of the people present were unknown by sight to Lizzie, though several of them turned out, on introducing themselves, to be well-known names in the field of American historical studies. Some had travelled a considerable distance to be there. In addition, most of the Iowa University faculty staff had turned up, and many of Henry's former students. Some of the latter were quite visibly upset. Lizzie had always thought of her uncle so much in the context of her own family history that it was quite a shock to her to realise what an important role he had played in the outside world. Several

national newspapers had published obituaries on him, discussing his work and his place in American historiography, and various literary and academic figures from a wider field than history had written letters of condolence to Lizzie and Harriet.

Naturally none of the obituaries had mentioned Cal as a survivor. It was as if there was a kind of benign conspiracy to ignore this technically illegal aspect of Henry's life. It had been quite widely known among academics that he was homosexual and his closer colleagues in Iowa had long known that he had a permanent male partner, but the matter was being treated as a kind of personal misfortune which it would surely be in bad taste to mention now. It made Lizzie furious, not just on Cal's behalf (she knew he was probably too wretched right now to care what anyone thought), but in a strange way on behalf of the dead man himself. It had been important to Henry that his life should be integrated and consistent, with his sexual orientation taking its proper place as one more fact about himself, needing no more concealment or apology than the early greying of his hair. That had been a matter of self-respect for him, and she thought he would probably have preferred outright prejudice and condemnation to this hypocritical silence. Admittedly, she had been equally silent about the whole matter in 'North and South' but that had been with his agreement and she felt that this was a different situation altogether. These people all knew the truth on some level; they just did not want to admit it. Well, they were going to have to do so for once because she was definitely not going to pass over it in silence a second time.

The commemorative service that her uncle had designed for himself was dignified and restrained. It began with an organ toccata by Bach, followed by translations from Marcus Aurelius and Montaigne on the inevitability of death and the necessity of meeting it with courage and acceptance. A third year history student made a short but moving speech on behalf of the whole student body, saying how much Henry would be missed by all those whom he had taught. This had not been part of Henry's original plan, but when a student representative had rung up the day after his death and asked earnestly if they might make this contribution to the service, Cal and Lizzie had agreed that they should and that this was the most appropriate point for it.

Then Professor Morgan read Ralph Waldo Emerson's definition of the successful life, which Henry had loved to quote and which was in many ways almost a portrait of him:

To laugh often and much;
To win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children;
To earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends;
To appreciate beauty, to find the best in others;
To leave the world a bit better,
Whether by a healthy child, a garden path or a redeemed social condition;
To know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived.

This was followed by the recording from the Song of the Earth, a rapturous contralto meditation on the continuance of life after the death of the individual. Every year, the singer declared, there would be another spring and the earth would grow green again under a blue sky that stretched out forever... forever... forever. As the final dreamy "*Ewig... ewig...*" died away into silence, Cal rose from his seat beside Lizzie and walked up to the lectern. He was wearing a rather ill-fitting black suit which emphasised how pale and thin his once-chubby face had become; to Lizzie's anxious eyes, he looked quite ill. Above his hollowed-out cheeks, his brown eyes were enormous, red-rimmed, tragic. He cleared his throat and began, his Irish brogue sounding much stronger than usual:

"A reading from the Book of Ecclesiastes, Chapter 3. To everything there is a season and a time to every purpose under the heaven. A time to be born and a time to die..."

Some of the audience looked as if they were puzzling out who this obviously working-class Irishman was and why he was taking such a leading role in the funeral of a prominent academic. Others had already guessed and were leaning forward to study him with a mixture of overt moral disapproval and prurient curiosity. Cal seemed indifferent to them all, his whole being absorbed in this final duty to the man he had loved.

"A time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, a time to get and a time to lose..." His voice, which had been rock steady until then, shook violently and, for a moment, Lizzie feared that he would break down. Then he steadied again and continued quietly to the end: "...A time to keep silent and a time to speak." He closed the Bible and walked with dignity back to his seat, leaving Lizzie amazed at the way the elements

of the service had dovetailed together – the final reading picking up the theme of the continuing cycles of life from the Mahler record and leading inexorably to her own contribution. It was indeed time for her to speak about matters that had long been kept silent. Had Henry guessed, she wondered, that Cal would be the one to do that reading? She had not fully realised when she asked him to read it that it was so appropriate to his own role in her uncle's life. But then she had to admit that she knew very little of the Bible. She walked up to the lectern in her turn, arranged her notes, drew a deep breath and began.

"Henry Pascoe was my uncle. He was also a second father to me and my sister. My own father was murdered by the Ku Klux Klan back in Georgia in 1907 and, from that time onwards, Uncle Henry took over the care of my mother, my sister and myself. He gave us girls just about everything that a father can give his children: love, protection, economic support, encouragement and affirmation, constructive criticism and moral guidance. He was our teacher, our example of the right way to live in this world and, later on, our friend too and our children's friend. I guess that, for him, we were the family he could never naturally have.

"It wasn't easy for us growing up as Southerners here in Iowa City. A lot of folks at school, teachers as well as other kids, did their best to make us feel ashamed of what we were. Uncle Henry made us feel proud of it. He nurtured in us the self-respect that he believed and I believe too to be the foundation for all serious moral living. And I think, looking back, that there were three main reasons why he was able to do that for us, reasons that together sum up the kind of man he was.

"First, he was half Southern himself so he was free of a lot of the prejudice that the Civil War left behind it. He often used to say that he was the child of a mixed marriage. His father, my grandfather, was an Iowa farm boy who joined the US Army in 1861 without any clear idea of what he was going to war for except that it certainly wasn't the abolition of slavery. I guess a lot of young men of his generation felt much the same at the outset. But the things he suffered in that war made him dig down deep into himself to find out if he could believe in anything that would make that kind of suffering worthwhile. And so he developed a new and more thoughtful kind of patriotism that led him to go south to Virginia after the war to find out what made Southerners tick and what it actually meant to be not just an Iowan or a Virginian but an American. He married into an old Virginia tobacco-growing family and so his sons, my uncle and my father, grew up half Yankee and half Southerner in an age when that was pretty unusual. Uncle Henry always identified more with the Yankee side of his inheritance but he respected and understood the Southern mindset which we'd grown up with as I think no pure-blooded Yankee ever could have done.

"Secondly, he was a historian and he thought like one. He often told me that he was inspired to study history by the memoir that his father, Tom Pascoe, wrote for his sons, describing his experiences in the war and after it in Virginia. It wasn't a particularly well-written work because Tom was mainly self-taught, but it was thoughtful and totally honest and very different from the heroic myth of the war that Uncle Henry had heard at school. So he made it his life's work to find out and explain what really happened in the past as against what people liked to imagine had happened. He often used to say that it was the real past, not the imagined one, that had made us and every other nation what we are today and that we had no sound basis for action unless we knew how we had gotten to where we are now.

"Of course, he became famous for his studies of a very different period, the Revolution and the War of Independence, but what made his book 'The Legacy of the American Revolution' so ground-breaking was just the way he was able to show again and again how features of our American character and political habits, including some that had been contributing causes to the Civil War, arose out of the real triumphs and failures of the American Founding Fathers and couldn't be understood in terms of the oversimplified version of their work that's generally peddled in school history textbooks. And he applied the same logic to the Civil War too, showing my sister and me that it wasn't just a crusade against slavery with heroic Northern abolitionists versus villainous Southern rebels and slave-owners – nor the other way around as a lot of Southerners believe to this day – but a fight for the soul of America in which two different ways of running a society clashed, both of them with good and bad points, and that there were losses as well as gains arising from the final victory of the North.

"Thirdly, my uncle had a deep-down fiery anger and indignation at any kind of irrational prejudice and any attempt to make people feel small about themselves and what they were, because he was the object of that sort of prejudice himself. He knew what it was like to have other people look down on you, not because they'd done anything better than you had but simply because of some quite arbitrary difference between them and you that they had decided made them your superiors. Whether it was white folks looking down on coloureds or Christians looking down on Jews or Yankees looking down on Southerners or the reverse, he

knew what it felt like from the other side and he was having none of it. He knew this because, as many of you already know, he was homosexual and because he spent a lifetime proving that homosexual men like himself could live lives as honourable, loving, chaste and decent as those who, through no merit of their own, happened to have been born normal and used that fact as a ground for feeling unjustly superior to some of their fellow men."

She fell silent for a moment, giving them all a chance to absorb this. Many were looking shocked, much more (she suspected) at her actually telling the bald truth about her uncle's homosexuality than at the fact itself. She continued mercilessly, "When my uncle was dying, he asked me to speak out for him here today and he told me, 'Don't be mealy-mouthed about it. Tell them that I died a married man and that my marriage was a happy one.' The relationship that he always thought of as his marriage might not have been recognised as such by the State of Iowa but it was a true marriage in every other respect: a mutual lifelong commitment sealed by solemn vows in the presence of a witness and faithfully maintained by both partners for twenty five years. My uncle was proud that he was able to sustain such a relationship and I guess he would be furious right now at the thought that some people would want to sweep the whole thing under the carpet simply because his chosen partner was another man. So I want to pay tribute today to Cal McCarthy, who is not only a very good friend to me and all my family, but is the guy who made my uncle happy for more than two decades and who nursed him single-handed through his final illness with a devotion that I don't think any wife could have bettered.

"My uncle was an atheist for most of his life and he died an atheist. He had no belief in any kind of afterlife; he saw nothing awaiting him beyond death but the void of non-existence. And, believing this, he still was able to face his death with a courage and serenity that impressed just about everyone who saw it. I think he could do that because the mainspring of his life was not ambition, or greed for money or possessions, or the desire to be admired by others, all things that become meaningless in the face of death; it was personal integrity, a desire to find out the truth and to live and die honestly. That's something, I guess, that never loses its meaning.

"We're all going to miss him more than I can say right now. His students are going to miss him as well, especially those he taught most recently, because in a way, they were his children too. His colleagues are going to miss talking and discussing things with him and sharpening their wits against his. And I think America will be the poorer for his passing because there are not that many men in any nation who can interpret that nation's past for it the way he did for us. But that's something we'll all have to come to terms with in the days ahead. What I want to do now is thank you all for the kindness you've shown me and my sister in our loss and to ask you to remember him with gratitude as we do. That's the only kind of immortality he believed in and the only kind he ever wanted. Thank you very much."

She returned to her place and slipped in between Cal and Nick, feeling drained and numb. The choir began to sing, quietly at first but with a slowly intensifying crescendo, the final item in the service. It was a chant that was also biblical in origin (but Henry had said with a sniff that it was from the apocrypha and therefore didn't really count). "Let us now praise famous men and our fathers that begat us..." He had described it as an excellent summing up of the historian's task: to recover from the past not only the famous rulers, the eloquent speakers, the poets and artists, but those "who have no memorial, who are gone as though they had never been", the forgotten people who form no part of the past as it is usually remembered but who together made up the past as it was lived. Like Ben-Sirach, he had believed that because those people had lived and done the things they had, their descendants' lives were different, even if no-one consciously remembered them. And, as the final words thundered out, Lizzie felt that in a way they summed up her uncle's life too, both as her and Harriet's adoptive father and as a distinguished professor and writer: "With their seed shall continually remain a good inheritance and their children are within the covenant. Their seed standeth fast and their children for their sake. Their seed shall remain forever and their glory shall not be blotted out. Their bodies are buried in peace but their name liveth forever more!"

6

After the service, the crowd of academics and students dispersed gradually. Professor Morgan was one of the last to leave. He hovered around Lizzie and Harriet, murmuring condolences and reminiscences of Henry, and pointedly ignoring Cal, until Lizzie felt she wanted to scream at the man's pomposity and insensitivity. Finally though, he bustled off, leaving the family alone. It had turned out to be quite a

respectable family gathering in the end with a surprising number of children present: Nick and Tom, little Calum in his pram, and Harriet's three boys and two girls. Clay and Bethany had come from Lexington with Jonty, whose Travis Face made him look more like Lizzie's brother than her second cousin, but Lizzie thought he was probably there more in support of Harriet than to mourn Henry, whom he had barely known. She knew that Jonty had always been very fond of Harriet. None of his younger siblings had turned up but Clay's two elderly sisters, Marcia and Laurette, were both present.

A little apart from them stood Abraham and Serena Laporte who had come all the way from New York. Lizzie had never met either of them before, since they had moved away from Lexington while she was still a small child, but she knew that there had always been a special bond between her uncle and his black 'twin' and that they had corresponded regularly, so she had thought it only proper to write and invite him to come. He and his wife made a strange contrast, for he was tall and impressively built while she was quite tiny. They were the only black people present and were being treated rather coolly by the Travis contingent. Lizzie pointedly went up to them and shook hands, telling them how pleased she was that they had felt able to come.

Most of the Virginia people had never met Cal before though they all knew about him. Lizzie performed such introductions as were necessary, naming Cal as her uncle's partner – lover seemed a rather provocative word in the circumstances – and her own dearest friend. Jonty and Charles both greeted him with studied politeness, but were clearly a bit uncomfortable about shaking hands with him although they did their best to conceal it. Lizzie wondered drearily if they thought he might be covertly sizing them up for their sexual attractiveness. They were both good-looking men but Cal surely had other things on his mind right then. He did not even seem to notice Jonty's resemblance to her father, and that was enough to show her how deeply sunk he was in his grief.

Clay, surprisingly, held Cal's hand in his for a long moment, looking thoughtfully into his ravaged face, and then said, "I guess it's harder on you than it would be on a woman. A widow gets more sympathy, don't she. And she has the name and the wedding band and the widow's weeds and the children her man left her. All you got is an empty house and a passel of memories. But you sure made Henry happy while it lasted. He often told me as much. I thought a hell of a lot of Henry and I'd be pleased enough if you'd consider me a friend."

Cal mumbled his thanks but it was clear that he was beginning to find the whole occasion a tremendous strain and was becoming quite desperate to have it over with. Lizzie and Bernard took charge of him and he sat between them in the hired limousine all the way to the cemetery with his arms wrapped tightly around Nick and Tom, who sat one on each of his knees, their heads leaning against his chest, as they often used to do when he told them stories. The boys were too young to really mourn for Henry, though he had been something of an avuncular figure to them both, but they obviously sensed Cal's distress and they pressed close against him in an anxious silence.

"I thought your reading was beautiful," said Lizzie after a while. "I felt somehow you were the right person to read that passage though I feel a bit grim now about asking you to do it, seeing what it must have cost you. But I think Uncle Henry would have been pleased. And it seemed to give a proper shape to the whole service."

"It was a beautiful service altogether," said Bernard, "much nicer, I think, than a religious one would have been. Did you and Henry design it together?"

"No, not really. I did suggest the opening music. We both agreed that it was best to start with music to give people a chance to settle down and I thought something by Bach would be appropriate: a kind of musical picture of the way Henry's mind actually worked. Bach isn't about emotion, is he – more like an illustration of what Henry used to call the beauty of logic. And I found that tune for the Ecclesiasticus chant right at the end. I know a little bit about church music, having sung in the choir once. Henry did everything else. In a queer sort of way, I think he enjoyed working on it, getting everything just so. He was always so... what's the word I want now? Meticulous! I keep having this weird feeling I ought to ask him if it all came up to scratch. When I get home I mean."

"Do you believe you can do that?" asked Lizzie. "I know you do believe in life after death. Maybe you should go on talking to him."

"Ah, no! I'd be talking into the air. Sure I believe that Henry continues to exist but not in any place where I could reach him. The Catholic Church doesn't encourage that kind of thing, you know. You can pray for the dead but you can't make any contact with them or they with you. You just have to learn to go on

living without them. And I suppose they have to learn to get along without you too. You never hear anyone talk about that aspect of it, certainly not in church, but I guess it's as much of a problem for the dead as for the living. If they've been as close as the two of us were, I mean."

When they got to the cemetery, they waited for Harriet, whose car had been right behind, to join them. Without being asked, she moved to Cal's side and took his hand silently, giving it a little squeeze. Lizzie took the other hand and they walked forward slowly behind their uncle's coffin. Bernard and Charles came behind, shepherding their various offspring, and then the Virginia cousins. Henry's grave had been dug out not far from that of his father. As the coffin was carefully lowered into it, the family instinctively fanned out into a circle. Cal stooped, took up a handful of earth and moved forward to the edge.

"It's customary to say prayers at a moment like this," he said, "but we all know that Henry wouldn't have wanted that. Not formal prayers said out loud. What he had to say about death and his attitude to it was said at the service, which he put together himself, and I won't say or do anything that would add a false note to that. Still, I think some of us might want to pray for a man we all loved before we lay him to rest. I know I do. So we'll keep silence for a moment or two, shall we, and go over whatever memories or prayers we have in our hearts and then each of us can cast a bit of earth over him and say goodbye."

In the silence that followed, some people bowed their heads and clasped their hands in the traditional attitude of prayer, others put their arms around each other. Cal stood rigidly, his eyes tightly closed and his lips moving, but Lizzie could see tears beginning to seep out from under his eyelids. The silence deepened. Then, just as the children were beginning to fidget, Cal opened his eyes, drew a deep breath, and dropped the soil he was holding onto Henry's coffin. It made a little dull thud as it landed. "Goodbye, *cuisle mo chroidhe*," he said. "Rest in peace until we two meet again."

He took a step backwards and Lizzie in turn stooped, picked up some earth and dropped it into the grave.

"Rest in peace, Uncle Henry," she said. Harriet echoed the gesture and the words. Then all the others followed in turn, murmuring their goodbyes. Workmen began to fill in the grave and Lizzie tugged at Cal's sleeve but he shook his head without turning and continued to stand motionless, watching with tears rolling down his cheeks as his lover's coffin disappeared under mounting layers of clods. He seemed determined to spare himself nothing. At last this final grim task was done and they stood in silence together, looking down at the raw patch of clay, now piled high with wreaths. Then she asked him, "Have you thought at all about what you want to put on his gravestone?"

"Shouldn't that be your privilege?" he responded. "You're his next of kin, you and Harriet."

"In the eyes of the law, maybe. Not in my eyes. You're his widower, Cal, he said as much himself. I'm sure he'd want you to choose the inscription. What kind of words do you think he would have liked?"

"Sure, Henry wouldn't care if he had no monument at all. That wasn't the sort of thing he cared about. Tombstones are really for the benefit of the living, not the dead. But if there was one, I guess he'd want it to be something very plain and simple. No polished marble or anything like that. A slab of unpolished granite or some other plain, rough stone. And I think just the simplest inscription: 'Thomas Henry Pascoe, 1878-1932. A Seeker after Truth.' Because that's what he was."

"Oh Cal, that's beautiful. It just about sums him up. But please, you must let me and Harriet pay towards it so we can feel we're contributing our bit. Oh God, death is horrible, isn't it! You'd think they'd find some way to make the tidying up afterwards less grim. Would you like us to go home now? I really don't think there's much point in us hanging around here any longer."

Cal sighed and wiped his eyes with his handkerchief.

"Sure. We might as well. But what about the people from Virginia? Will they want to come too? I suppose we could all have a drink and some sandwiches together in his memory."

"I don't know. We'd better ask them. But how would you feel about having them? Do you think you'd be able to cope? You've already had a very difficult day. And would there be enough food for everyone? I know you baked yesterday..."

"Yes, I thought baking some bread would take my mind off things. I've found over the years that kneading dough is often a very restful thing to do. It didn't work for me this time, but there's enough for them all if they want to come. I think we ought to ask them. It seems the appropriate thing to do."

"Bernie and I are going home with Cal now," Lizzie announced, raising her voice a little. "Does anyone else want to come back with us for a cold meal?"

There was a silent exchange of eye contact around and across the circle of relatives, then Charles Rider said, “Thank you, Lizzie, but I think I’d rather get Harriet and the kids back to our hotel. She’s had a very tiring day for a woman in her condition and I think she ought to rest now and put her feet up.”

“It’s kind of you to offer us hospitality, young man,” said Marcia Travis, “but we’d rather not bother you any further. Come on, Clay, Laurette. I think it’s time we were going.”

As they all dispersed, Lizzie snapped, “They’re all such bloody hypocrites! Why can’t they say what they really mean? ‘Thank you very much but you’re an open homosexual and a reminder that he was one too and we’d rather not be reminded of that right now.’ I think Cousin Marcia was downright insolent. ‘Young man’ indeed!”

“Well, I suppose I could seem like that to her.” Cal scrubbed at his eyes again with the increasingly sodden handkerchief. “The old biddy must be nearly sixty and I know I don’t look my age. Or I didn’t up until now anyway. Henry always used to say how I looked so much younger than he did. But you mustn’t tar them all with the same brush, Lizzie. Her brother spoke very kindly to me after the service, didn’t he?”

Nick piped up suddenly from beside him: “Is Uncle Henry a ghost now?”

“No, of course he isn’t,” exploded Lizzie. “Whatever gave you that idea? There are no such things as ghosts outside of stories. When people are dead, they’re dead and they don’t come back. Some people like Uncle Cal and Aunt Harriet believe that there’s another world where the dead people go to live but they certainly don’t come back to this one. Where did you learn all that nonsense about ghosts, anyway?”

“At school,” answered Nick with irresistible logic. “That’s where you learn things. All the other kids know all about ghosts and they tell stories about them. They’re real as real, Mommy. And Rosie Eriksen says her mom’s a spitralist and can talk to them. She calls them up and people ask them questions. I want to be a spitralist when I grow up so’s I can talk to Uncle Henry and ask him what it’s like to be dead.”

“A spiritualist!” Lizzie rolled her eyes in disgust. “Is that what I send my kids to school for, to have their minds filled with that sort of garbage? Wouldn’t I just like to give that Rosie Eriksen a piece of my mind!”

Bernard put a gentle arm around Nick.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear in the playground, Nick,” he said. “Even teachers don’t always get it right but at least they know things. Rosie, whatever her mom is, probably doesn’t know any more about ghosts or dead people than you do. She just wants to make herself sound important. And you’ll upset Uncle Cal, talking like that about Uncle Henry being a ghost. He’s already got enough to make him sad without that sort of dumb talk.”

Immediately Nick turned to Cal and said earnestly, “I don’t want you to be more sad than you are, Uncle Cal. You’re my bestest friend.”

This was too much for Cal; his tears overflowed again and he pulled out his handkerchief and tried to wipe his eyes and blow his nose at the same time.

“Now look what you done,” said Tom in a loud voice. “You made Uncle Cal cry.”

“I didn’t! Honest I didn’t! He was crying anyway.”

“Hush now, both of you,” scolded Lizzie. “Cal, give me that handkerchief; it’s soaked. Here’s a fresh one for you and there’s plenty more where that came from. Let’s get home, Bernie, for God’s sake. Cal’s almost at the end of his tether and I don’t know how much more I can take either. All things considered, I think it may be a blessing that Harriet and the Lexington crowd decided not to come back with us.”

She turned and saw with surprise that the Laportes were still standing there: Mr Laporte looking rather diffident and awkward, Mrs Laporte with her big brown eyes fixed on Cal and such an unselfconscious warmth of sympathy in her face that Lizzie immediately decided she liked her.

“Would you two like to come home with us?” she asked them on impulse. “Cal baked some soda bread yesterday and I can make sandwiches for us all.”

“We sure would feel honoured, Mrs Frick,” said Mr Laporte in a deep voice still coloured with the Virginia drawl despite his long residence in New York. He took off his hat as he spoke and made her a courteous little bow that seemed to belong far more to the nineteenth century in which he had grown up than to her own. He had a shiny bald patch, the colour of caramel, around which his crinkled hair grew in a thick tonsure-like circle, still jet black, not grey like Henry’s. In spite of his baldness, he was a good looking man, and she thought he must have been very handsome when he was young.

Little Mrs Laporte went straight up to Cal, took both his hands in hers and said, “I sure do feel for you. I know if my man died, I’d want to be in that grave right alongside of him. I never really knew Mr Pascoe

though I did get to meet him once or twice back in Lexington when he was visiting his ma, but Abe has told me such a lot about him and what a fine man he was. And I believe you're a good man too, never mind what Church folks say about men like you, 'cause I heard what Mrs Frick had to say about you back there in that chapel and she knows you for sure. I'll pray all I can that the Good Lord will comfort you and find you new people to love."

"Sure, that's a beautiful thought, Mrs Laporte," said Cal, making no attempt to withdraw his hands from hers, "and it's always a pleasure to meet a fellow-believer. I'm truly grateful. And after all, where am I likely to find comfort now if not in Our Lord's sacred heart? Please, what Lizzie just said goes for me too. I'd love to have you and your husband come home for coffee and sandwiches with us."

7

The meal proved much less fraught than Lizzie had anticipated. Cal seemed to have put his grief on hold for a while, his old pleasure at being able to show hospitality coming to the fore. Abe Laporte had a wealth of stories to tell about Henry's boyhood and some about Lizzie's father too; he broke off twice to remark on how closely she resembled him. Mrs Laporte sat next to Cal and engaged him in a mutually absorbing conversation about unanswered prayers and the difficulty that they raised for faith. Lizzie thought that Mrs Laporte must surely an expert on the subject as she had lost both her sons in the Spanish 'flu pandemic and had only one daughter left. Henry had referred to the matter more than once as an example of the kind of thing that made it impossible for a rational person to believe in a powerful and benevolent God, but Serena Laporte had apparently come out of the ordeal with her faith intact. She and Cal seemed to have no problem in understanding each other's point of view either, despite the fact that they came from two quite different religious traditions. At one point, Abe leaned across to Bernard and said quietly, "I never woulda thought my Serena 'ud get on so fine with a fruitcake. She knew Hank of course, but I never told her the whole truth about him, 'cause I was purty sure she wouldn't approve. But jes' look at her now, yackety-yackin' away! It's like they've known each other since forever."

"That suggests to me that your wife is a very wise woman," answered Bernard. "Not a particularly common virtue in the devout, unfortunately! My wife has often told me that Cal is the sweetest-natured man she's ever met and I have a high opinion of him myself."

After the Laportes had left, with many promises to keep in touch, Cal excused himself and went upstairs to his room – whether to brood, pray, cry or sleep Lizzie did not know and preferred not to ask. Nick and Tom had become bored and restless so Bernard took them out into the back garden to play a ball game. The attention span of small children is short and it seemed to Lizzie that they had already forgotten their great-uncle, at least for the time being. She was left alone to feed Calum, a task she normally enjoyed. But now that the funeral was over, the energy that had buoyed her up all through it was deserting her. Instead, a kind of numbness descended on her, a dark sense of futility. There was nothing more to do, nothing that needed doing.

"I should be mourning," she told herself. "This is when I should begin to mourn him properly. I haven't really had the time until now. Maybe I'll cry. They do say that tears are healing." But no tears came to her eyes. Only the bleak thought that one day Cal would die too. And Bernard. She would die too eventually, and all three of her sons. And then what would have been the purpose of it all?