White Crows

by C. P. Boyko

I

"I know what you're thinking," said Joad, chuckling and scratching at his beard. "You're thinking, Hell, it doesn't much look like the epicentre of the next scientific revolution."

Plummer smiled thinly. What he had been thinking was that Carter Joad's office only confirmed the image he'd formed of England's leading parapsychologist from his book, articles, and, most strongly, his series of ripostes to Plummer's piece in the May 1939 issue of *Pseudoscience*.

The shelves were crammed with everything but books; the tables were heaped with papers, none of them clipped or stapled; the walls were as crowded as the horizontal surfaces and plastered with cheap reproductions of portraits of Schopenhauer and William James, hand-drawn diagrams and charts, covers of old issues of *Science* and *Nature*, scraps of newsprint, and everywhere scribbled quotations: fragments of poetry ("There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio"), hackneyed proverbs ("By filling one's head instead of one's pockets, one cannot be robbed"), inspirational platitudes ("Without rain there can be no rainbows"), and sonorous aphorisms. . .. Plummer could not see a degree or diploma anywhere; instead Joad had framed and hung, in a place of honour above his desk, that famous paragraph of Bacon's:

> It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception; for when one body is applied to another, there is a kind of election to embrace that which is agreeable, and to exclude or expel that which is ingrate. And sometimes this perception, in some kind of bodies, is far more subtile than sense; so that

sense is but a dull thing in comparison of it . . .

Plummer could quote a few aphorisms himself, but he did not need to hang them on his walls like trophies. He called to mind Darwin: "False facts are highly injurious to the Progress of Science for they often endure long; but false views do little harm, as every one takes a salutary pleasure in proving their falseness." It was not Joad's views that worried Plummer, but his facts. He had come to prove that they *were* false, not facts at all—but he had begun to doubt whether he would take any pleasure, salutary or otherwise, in the undertaking.

"It's not much to look at," said Joad, wading past boxes that appeared to be full of coat hangers, "but with the Blitz, of course, basements have become rather coveted real estate."

Yes, here was a man, thought Plummer, whose mind was as muddled as his desk; a man who did not pursue truth so much as collect bits of borrowed wisdom and wield them like talismans; a man, above all, who yearned for *meaning*—for a more magical reality, a reality stirred by unseen forces, veined with esoteric significances, peopled with ghosts and sorcerers. His type was familiar to Plummer: Smart enough to see the picture that science presented, not strong enough to accept it. And so he had set out on this Children's Crusade to vanquish science, armed with nothing but his talismans and his faith. Epicentre of the next scientific revolution, indeed.

With a pang of homesickness, Plummer thought of his own office: the bookshelves he could have navigated in the dark; the filing cabinets whose locks he oiled monthly; the neat stack of boxes, labelled "University Mail," "Outside Mail," "Assignments Uncorrected," "Articles Needing Review," and "Miscellaneous"; the schedule of his hours posted to the door; the ordered ranks of pencils, pens, and markers lying ready in his centre drawer; the calendar whose days, now, would have no one to cross them out.

He remembered the first time Ev had come to see him in his office, how she had teased him for putting his X's through the day's date before it was finished, as though eager to be done with it.

He clamped down on that—he had not come all this way just to think about Ev.

"Well," burbled Joad, "shall we proceed to the lab?"

As Plummer turned to follow Joad to his laboratory, he was eager, suddenly, to be done with it.

There was, as Plummer knew from his extensive reading, nothing very impressive about the average psychical researcher's laboratory. Indeed, as if to compensate for the outlandishness of their claims, the parapsychologists (as they now preferred to be called) seemed to have designed their experiments to be as boring as possible. In one room, an agent (the sender) looked at an object; in the next, a percipient (or receiver) tried to divine what it was. That was all. There was, of course, the standard array of complications and safeguards in place to prevent both the subjects and the experimenters from cheating; but, in essence, ESP research was nothing more than sophisticated card-guessing.

Joad's experiment was no exception. His only innovation, as far as Plummer could see, was that instead of cards he was using photographs. "We've improved on the Zener paradigm here," he said boastfully. "No boring circles, crosses, and wavy lines for us. *These* targets have real emotional impact." The photos were of an ocean, a forest, a mountain peak, and a desert; Plummer did not feel emotionally impacted.

It was not the experiments that were astonishing; it was the numbers. Some of the results, when analyzed statistically, revealed odds against chance of one thousand to one, 2,500 to one, 50,000 to one—in one famous case in America, several millions to one. Joad himself had reported a series of experiments with one percipient, a "Ms. Meadow," who had made something like 23,000 correct guesses on 80,000 trials—3,000 more than would be expected by chance alone. Even this seemed pretty meagre evidence for the existence of telepathy—until you calculated the probability to be 0.000007, or 142,857 to one against chance.

Plummer had no gripe with the numbers; he had checked them himself.

What he questioned was not the parapsychologists' math, but their research methods. If their experiments yielded results so contrary to probability, so astronomically unlikely to be due to chance, then Plummer was compelled to conclude that, yes, something other than chance was causing the results. He and Carter Joad were in agreement on this point. Where they parted company was in their belief as to what that "something" was. Joad said ESP, telepathy, clairvoyance. Plummer thought human error the more likely culprit.

"Well, all right," said Plummer, getting down to business with reluctant relish. "The aperture in the screen, for starters. The experimenter—*you*—could get a glimpse of the pictures through it—if not directly, perhaps reflected in the sender's spectacles. Or the pictures themselves—there's nothing stopping the sender from putting them in any order they fancy, or reordering them at any time. As for the little green light—well, isn't that a potential channel of communication between the second experimenter and the sender? And the rooms being next door to one another—"

"The walls are perfectly soundproof," said Joad. "We tested it. Didn't we, Henry?"

Joad's student assistant nodded his little turnip-shaped head. "Even if someone shouts, all you get is *buzz buzz buzz*—you can't make out a single word."

"So it's not *perfectly* soundproof," said Plummer.

"But no one ever shouts, obviously." Joad, flustered, pulled at his beard and grinned fatuously. "None of us shouts. We're not quite *that* wild, Plummer. We're not having *that* much fun, old man."

"Besides, it needn't be words. Inflection, pitch . . . the number of syllables. All these carry information."

"But honestly, Dr. Plummer, you can't hear *anything*."

"No doubt you can't—not consciously. But just because *you* can't, and *I* can't, and Dr. Joad can't, and whoever else can't, doesn't mean no one can."

"Come now, Plummer, *really*. Aren't you being just a little bit captious? Correct me please if I'm wrong, but for all that, any of that, to make a difference, what we're actually talking about is the actual, premeditated, cold-blooded, as it were, intentional intention to commit—let's not mince words, Plummer, old fellow—what you're suggesting is fraud?"

Joad's face crinkled in an impish grin, like someone prompting a child to say a dirty word. Plummer was astounded. What did Joad think all the precautions, all the rigamarole with screens and observers and duplicate copies was *for*, if not to rule out fraud? If he had such faith in the essential honesty and propriety of his fellow creatures, why didn't he simply sit with a friend and a deck of cards in a comfortable parlour and ask his friend what card he was looking at? "Hmm, let's see. Seven of clubs?" "Seven of hearts! Close enough, old man!" Would *that* experiment be scientifically rigorous enough to satisfy him?

"Carter, darling."

Joad's wife had angled herself in between the two men. Next to her burly, red-faced porcupine of a husband, she seemed a mousy, insubstantial wisp of a woman—a sheet flapping in Joad's hot dusty breeze. Yet at the sound of her voice, Joad turned to her instantly, his dilated eyes glistening blackly. What fools women make of us, thought Plummer.

"Darling, I bet you haven't even asked Dr. Plummer if he's eaten since his train."

Joad wiped his hands on his beard in a pantomime of mortification.

Joad's wife sighed, rolled her eyes, and shook her head affectionately. "Would you care to join us for dinner, Dr. Plummer?"

"Yes, Plummer, do join us."

"I appreciate your kindness, Mrs. Joad, but I wouldn't want—"

"I can't promise much, you understand. But we'd be delighted to have you."

"She's being modest, Plummer. There's always too much food. You've got to come. You'd be doing us a favour, really."

"And call me Melanie, please."

Plummer had felt himself weakening, but this presumption of intimacy

bolstered his resolve. And yet he could not bring himself to refuse two of her requests at once; so, using her Christian name, he told her that he was not hungry, that he was exhausted from his trip, and that to be quite frank he wanted nothing more than to check into his hotel room and turn out the light.

"Another night, perhaps?"

"I don't honestly know how long I'll be in town."

"Well, that's settled," grinned Joad, as though they'd just shaken hands on it, then went on in his playful, chiding tone: "Now tell us, Plummer. Come clean. Which of us do you suspect, hmm? Which one of us is in on the trick, in your expert opinion? Is it me? Is it Melanie? Henry, perhaps? Or is it our dear Ms. Meadow, after all?"

Plummer only shook his head. That was precisely what he had come to find out.

Back at his hotel room, Plummer unpacked his suitcase immediately. There was just enough room on the single bed to lay out all his shirts and trousers. His pens, he was pleased to see, had not come to any harm on the train (there hadn't been time to wrap them in plastic before leaving). His toiletries he arranged on the bathroom countertop according to size and frequency of usage, so that his toothbrush, for instance, was close to hand, while the bulkier bottle of headache pills was out of harm's way. He unlaced his shoes, dropped his watch into one and his keys into the other, and slid them under the bed.

There was a knock at the door. "Just a minute," he called.

That was when it struck him: he'd forgotten to pack his slippers.

Grumbling, he put his shoes back on to answer the door.

"I'm sorry, sir. The ARP fellow has told me that we've got some light showing through on this floor." The porter's head moved laterally, as though independently of his neck; he peered past Plummer's shoulder. "If you could just double-check, see that you've drawn your curtain properly . . ."

Plummer went to the window, cursing his stupidity. Where was his mind? At home he was always so fastidious about the blackout procedures. Ev had teased him, at first, as she'd teased him about the gas mask tests, but then Aunt Meredith had died in a raid, and the teasing had stopped teasing.

But he was not at home, and not thinking about home.

He could not see past his own dim reflection in the pane. It would not have been much of a view, anyway. Even if the city had been alight, he couldn't have seen much more than the side of the building across the way. The hotel was not renting rooms above the third floor. A sensible precaution; though he had heard—everyone had heard—stories of bombs with delay mechanisms punching through several floors before going off . . .

Ev was right, of course: it was a pointless nuisance. Did anyone really believe that one little chink of light could be seen from the air? Did anyone really think that one glowing window out of millions was enough to bring the entire city, the entire nation, to its knees?

He frowned and shook his head in apology at the ARP fellow down there in the street somewhere, then drew the heavy cloth across the window and fastened it tight.

"Look," said Plummer, clutching the ring of keys in his pocket in one hand and the stem of his wineglass in the other, "to hold that there is a soul in addition to the body, or some immaterial mind-stuff above and beyond brain-stuff, is like Dorothy in that silly movie drawing aside the curtain, finding the little man at the controls, and explaining him away as a mere coincidence. We have in the first place the most staggeringly complex three pounds of matter in the known universe, and in the second—lying right on top of the first, as it were—we have consciousness. Considering their intimate proximity, their demonstrable interrelatedness, that these are two facets of the same miracle seems a reasonable enough hypothesis."

"Maybe consciousness," said Melanie cautiously, "is not something that is produced by the brain. Maybe it's shaped, or restricted, or limited by the brain. Maybe the brain acts as a sort of valve that allows certain things to

seep through, while keeping others out—most of the time."

At this there were a few sly nods and shared half-smiles. All eyes in the room were on Plummer. He felt like some exotic bird that Carter, plumped with pride, had acquired for his menagerie. "Alan Plummer, the famous skeptic," as Carter had introduced him. For not the first time that night, Plummer regretted having come. Melanie and Carter had promised a quiet evening: "a few friends, a few drinks, some good conversation"; but Plummer should have foreseen that the Joads' friends would all be believers of one stripe or another, and that he, as not only the newcomer, but also that great rarity, the dyed-in-the-wool doubter, would naturally arouse their polite but hungry curiosity. They kept asking him idiotic questions: But don't you believe in *free will*? But surely you believe in *a soul*?

Perhaps Plummer would have turned down the Joads' third invitation, as he had done their first two, if not for the fact that, after nearly a week in London, he had rather begun to lose sight of the purpose of his presence in the basement of the Academic Complex (a building in which little seemed to be going on that Plummer would have called either academic or complex). Once he'd registered his initial criticisms of the experiment's "imperfections"—which he'd only done out of a nebulous sense of duty, and not in any real belief that they were responsible for Carter's results—there seemed little for him to do but stand by and observe. One fact about psychical research that had been insufficiently impressed upon him by his reading of the journals and books was its shocking tedium. Carter said he'd found that most percipients were only good for about three or four hours a day before their powers waned; though inclined to be dubious, Plummer had to admit that his own powers, such as they were, waned even sooner. He could watch Carter flashing cards or Henry staring at pictures or, in the next room, Melanie silently writing or Ms. Meadow the great mystic sitting and doing her impersonation of someone concentrating for only so long before his patience utterly left him. For the first few days he had taken copious notes, pages brimming with the most irrelevant of minutiae, in the optimistic belief that, as in detective stories, it was always one little thing, some *prima facie* innocent detail, that provided the key to the entire mystery. But on looking

back over what he had written he could not imagine that even the great Father Brown could find a needle in such a mountainous haystack. He continued jotting in his notebook only to appear attentive, and then finally to prevent his mind from wandering. But soon even this expedient failed, and during the long hours in the lab he'd found his thoughts turning, despite all his efforts, to Ev…. And in the evenings, of course, alone in his hotel room or sitting at the dusty counter of the basement "*café*" (more accurately a refectory) down the bombed-out street, there was even less to distract him. And so this evening he had come to the Joads'.

Having seen Carter's office, Plummer had come prepared for chaos and squalor. It was much worse than he had expected. The Joads' flat existed on a separate plane of filth, one for which Plummer had no point of reference. Like a backyard botanist dropped into a teeming rain forest, he felt overwhelmed, utterly unequal to his task; he couldn't even begin to categorize, let alone label, the alien species of rubbish and disorder that flourished in such suffocating profusion all around him. Ev had always found exposition tedious; when pressed to describe some scene or person or event to someone who'd lacked the foresight or courtesy to have been present in the first place, she most often limited herself to one salient and, to her mind, sufficiently illustrative detail: "You know the kind of chap I mean—he parted his hair down the middle." "You know the sort of restaurant I mean—French onion soup with every meal." If pressed to describe Carter and Melanie's living space, Plummer supposed he could have done worse than to say, "You know the kind of place I mean—there were charred cigarette butts stamped into the carpet."

Most of these had apparently been deposited there by Ms. Meadow, the putative psychic, who chain-smoked as though conducting an experiment of potentially global humanitarian significance. Over the last few days, Plummer's suspicions had gradually lifted from Carter and settled in a flock upon the head and shoulders of this unbearable woman. Carter may have had the off-putting intensity of the proselytizer, the bloodied-but-unbowed smugness of the precocious visionary, but Plummer no longer thought him quite capable of outright fraud. He was, it seemed, at worst, tragically misguided.

It was, indeed, almost a shame; he might have made a competent researcher. But this parapsychology stuff was a dead end, both scientifically and, *a fortiori*, academically. They had let it into the universities in America, which was not such a surprise; now, like a black mould, it was beginning to infiltrate the musty basements of England. But it could hardly last. Carter, in his misplaced enthusiasm, had backed the wrong horse. It was Melanie, however, that Plummer felt sorry for. Could she know what her husband was getting them into? What if, when the war was over, she wanted to start a family? You could hardly support a child as a disgraced former professor. It did not make Plummer's task any easier, either; for wasn't he the one who'd come to drive Joad and his colleagues out of the academy and into disgrace? But the truth must out.

"Who was it at the door, darling?" asked Melanie.

Carter had at some point returned to the cramped, stuffy little room, and now stood behind his wife, holding in one hand a fresh bottle of the only moderately vile merlot and three or four glasses, and balancing on the other a plate heaped with cubes of cheese, pale sausages, hunks of black bread, dollops of what could only be called "spread," and other bite-sized boluses speared with toothpicks. (Where had the fool managed to find *toothpicks*?) Plummer's stomach, rather unnecessarily, clenched in protest.

"Oh, just the ARP bloke being a bother again."

"He's just doing his job," said Plummer, clutching his keys.

Ms. Meadow, exhaling twin trails of cigarette smoke from her nostrils, said, "Tell me, Professor. It must really be terrible not to believe in *anything*."

Plummer could not suppress an impatient sigh. "Of course I believe in things. Many things. Mathematics, for instance. Evolution. The special theory of relativity—though I don't profess to entirely understand it, mind you."

"Ah-*ha*," said Carter. "So you admit to having faith."

Plummer shook his head sadly. "If belief in the special theory of relativity is a kind of faith, then it is a faith in great minds, minds greater than my own. And it is a faith in the scientific method, in man's ability to test ideas

by subjecting them to analysis and rigorous testing. I believe in truth, and I believe fundamentally in man's ability to discover truth—through science, not intuition or inspiration."

"Man and woman's ability, you mean," added Ms. Meadow.

"What bothers me," said Carter mildly, splashing wine less into the glasses than over them, "is the way so many scientists—myself included, old boy—have used the progressive, self-correcting nature of science to justify our refusal to progress or to correct ourselves. 'Science is superior to all other methods of inquiry,' we say, 'because of its empiricism, its divine adaptability, its willingness to test theories in the crucible of the universe and jettison outmoded ideas,' and so forth and so on. But that's just what makes us so unwilling to jettison outmoded ideas or countenance new ideas. We're willing to change—until we've got it right. And, hmph, perhaps we've got it right already. Who are *you* to say we haven't? It's our very non-dogmatism that makes us dogmatists."

With a sigh and a wink, Carter held out towards Plummer a very full glass of wine. Plummer had to stand to take it. The room pitched and rolled like the deck of an ocean liner, but for a moment only. Did this make four, or five? He had lost count.

Ms. Meadow leaned forward to tap the ash from her cigarette. She did this in what Ev called the feminine manner: by extending her slim index finger and bringing it down near the ash end.

There were, as Ev liked to say, two kinds of people in the world: lumpers and splitters. Lumpers said, "There is only one kind of person in the world: Splumpers." Splitters said, "There are two kinds of people in the world: lumpers and splitters; but there are also two kinds of lumpers, and, of course, two kinds of splitters . . ."

Ev was always a splitter. "There are two kinds of people in the world" was one of her favourite sayings. One of her favourite equators was the one that separated the male and female hemispheres. She wondered why, for example, in French, an arm was male but a leg female, or a footpath male but a lawn female, or, in German, morning, afternoon, and evening were male but night, only night, was female. Sometimes she detected chauvinism be-

hind these distinctions. But for the most part she simply relished the anthropomorphization. That the word *pencil* was masculine lent each pencil a boyish mischievousness. That *flower* was feminine endowed flowers with a maternal dignity.

She went further than most languages, however. She ascribed a gender to not only nouns but also prepositions, adjectives, colours, smells, days of the week, months of the year, numbers and mathematical concepts. Verbs, too, had sexes—and not just those simple human activities that could be summed up in a single feminine word like *climb* or a masculine word like *jog*, but complex actions, elaborate behaviours. To look at your fingernails by extending your fingers was feminine; pressing them against your palm was masculine. Checking the sole of your shoe by bending your leg back and looking over your shoulder was feminine; lifting your foot sideways, in front of the other leg, masculine. Tapping the ash from your cigarette with your index finger was feminine; flicking the filter-end with your thumb was masculine. Blowing out a match was feminine; shaking it out, with a flick of the wrist, masculine.

"Tell me, Professor," said Ms. Meadow. "Do you believe in an *afterlife*?"

Yes, if there was a fraud here, it was Clara Meadow. She certainly had all the outward markings of the professional charlatan. She waved her arms and flapped her hands when she spoke; even platitudes about the weather she uttered with oracular flamboyance. Her eyes were too large for her skull, so that her merely impudent gaze appeared carnivorous, engulfing. She seemed always to be watching him, but her gaze never met his. Her short blonde hair was cut into strata and made her head look like an onion. She wore lipstick and trousers. She smoked like a wood stove but seemed to never eat. She wore more scarves than any coat rack, yet was always shivering. Indeed, she was, like all impostors, a brittle bundle of contradictions. She tapped ash in the feminine manner, but extinguished her matches in the masculine manner. She checked the soles of her boots in the feminine manner, checked her long unpainted fingernails in the masculine manner.

"I have no reason to believe in anything like an afterlife," said Plum-

mer at length.

"But doesn't that sadden you?" Ms. Meadow's eyes grew cloudy and she grasped his elbow, as one might grasp the elbow of the recently bereaved.

A jolt went up his arm, but he did not pull away.

Perhaps it was not wrong, after all, to think about Ev in this way—that is, to remember her, to reminisce about their life together. Because the past still belonged to him; in the past, *she* still belonged to him. Memory did not have to be a mausoleum, he decided. It could be a kind of shrine.

"I've had some time," he said, "to grow accustomed to the idea."

II

She had been told not to use the elevator.

Normally she wouldn't have needed to be told. She hated elevators. All of her nightmares were of being trapped in small spaces.

She'd assumed they didn't want the regular guests to see the girls going in and out, and she'd assumed that during an air raid such rules were suspended. Anyway, it didn't matter. Once she heard the siren, she didn't need to be dreaming: all she had to do was close her eyes to see walls collapsing, glass shattering, bricks and mortar tumbling down on top of her.

Now, she didn't even need to close her eyes. She was trapped in the elevator in the dark. They had told her not to use it.

It was just like this. This was how she'd pictured it. The darkness, heavy as packed soil, closing in on her, squeezing her in its fist, turning her inside out.

Clara pulled at the grille but, as she'd known, it would not budge when the car was between floors. There must have been a latch or switch that would release the mechanism but she was blind and her fingers were clumsy.

Someone would come. There were procedures, procedures that would require someone to come check the elevators. Someone would probably come within thirty seconds. Well, she could count to thirty.

How fast should she count? Simple. She would count her breaths.

The only problem with this plan was that she could not hear herself breathing over the seashell roar of blood in her head; nor, when she felt her diaphragm with her fingers, could she feel anything but the erratic, fidgety stirrings of panic. With the swift, inexorable logic of nightmares, it occurred to her that she had already stopped breathing.

The fact that she could hear herself muttering did not disprove anything. One could speak without air in one's lungs. It happened all the time in her dreams. One could even scream.

Voices. She held her breath and listened. In holding her breath she was able to regain some control, some reason: holding her breath meant that she had breath to hold. And now that her eyes had begun to adjust she could see that the blackness was not absolute. She could make out the argyle crosshatching of the grille against the panel behind it.

The voice came again, surprisingly close. "Can you hear me?"

"Yes," she called, "I can hear you! I'm in here! Hello?"

"Are you . . . all right?"

"I can't open the gate."

"Yes, but are you . . . You're not hurt?"

He'd heard her screaming. She was not embarrassed but, rather, annoyed. She felt that he had trespassed on her momentary anguish. She had not exactly been calling for help.

"I'm afraid of the dark," she said—then *was* embarrassed. Because that wasn't it at all. She was ashamed of her childish lie, her childish simplification.

He said something she couldn't hear. A moment later, he was tugging at the outside grille.

"Can you . . .?"

"It won't—"

The power came back on. As the light returned it seemed to bring with it a draught of oxygen.

"Oh, thank God."

"There," he said, as though taking credit. "Will it open now?"

The lever was still in the down position. She pushed it back to the upright STOP position and tried the OPEN button. The gate purred but would not disengage.

"I'm still between floors," she cried.

"Which floors?"

"I don't know." Irritated by this irrelevance, she looked at the indicator, which showed the bottom half of a "4." "Three and four."

"Well, come down to three."

She did, and the gate opened.

"Oh," she said, pleased but not exactly surprised. "So it was you."

Before the professor could say anything, she strode past him, intent on the stairs.

He followed her out into the street, one hand, as always, in his trouser pocket, the other dangling uncertainly at the end of its arm. She gulped air for a minute or two, then smiled at his silhouette.

"I feel much better now. Thank you."

But he did not go back inside. "Should you be out here?" he asked.

She laughed bitterly. "Better than being trapped indoors. Half these buildings collapse if you sneeze on them."

"I meant, rather, in the dark."

She could see now that he had been as upset as she by the ordeal, perhaps more. He had heard her screaming, after all. She had cast him, she supposed, in the role of rescuer, but had given him no real opportunity to discharge his duty. The fingers of his free hand fluttered, like those of a pianist before a recital. He seemed to need something to do.

"Where are we, anyway?" Under the pretense of getting her bearings, she looked around, watching him with the edge of her vision. In the blacked-out street, she could not make out his features, but she could see his flicker. Tonight it was clear and stable, as reliable as a metronome. It soothed her. How he would have laughed, or scoffed, if she'd told him that she felt safe in his presence. She did not want him to leave her yet.

"I understand there's a public shelter in the park, next block but one."

"No," she said softly, pulling her scarves around her and shivering. "I can't stay in those filthy things."

She smiled at the tremor of frustration that appeared in his flicker; the impression was of a child pouting impotently. What a strange bird he was.

Perhaps she had gotten on that horrible elevator for a reason, after all. If Mr. Empson had not missed his appointment; if she had not lingered in the room, unwilling to go back to the club so late to arrange another appointment; if the air-raid siren had not sounded just then; if the elevator had not come as soon as she'd called it—if all of this had not unfolded in precisely such a way, she would not be here, alone in the street with Professor Plummer, the famous skeptic. How marvellously odd that he had come into her life, at this moment, in this fabulously roundabout way.

Didn't everything happen for a reason? Like all coincidences, this one was surely significant; but what was it telling her? No, she did not want him to leave yet.

"Come, I know where there's an Anderson," she said—perhaps too imperiously. He hesitated, so she tried to sound less sure of herself. "Won't you come? It *is* rather dark."

She took his arm to guide them, while letting him seem to lead the way.

They walked down the black streets, shadows navigating among shadows. The sky was clear, as always on air raid nights, but there was no hint of a moon. The stars stood out more distinctly, without appearing any brighter. Occasionally, a searchlight's beam scraped across them like a dragnet, leaving them looking washed out and ashamed. One could discern the buildings they passed only by contrast: they were the starless patches of darkness.

Every second street lamp was lit, and these were covered, so that only narrow cones of light fell down from them. You could just about read your watch if you stood directly beneath one. Lorries occasionally trundled past, their headlights smeared daubs of blue. Otherwise they seemed to have the street to themselves.

The night was far from silent, but the sound of the attack came from a distance, and in its impersonal persistence only strengthened the impression of solitude. The rumble of explosions, the susurrating crackle of fires burning, the deceptive buzz of the circling planes carried by the fickle winds, sounding near, then far, now near, now far, like darting insects—this ongoing cacophany seemed no more threatening or purposeful than the mindless churning of the ocean or the respiration of some forest.

Now that they were safely out of doors, she felt almost exuberant. She loved the city like this. Under blackout it was an alien planet. She was brimming over; she had to speak. But she doubted whether the professor would understand her enthusiasm. She did not want him to think her frivolous.

"I didn't realize you were staying in the hotel," he said, his voice strained, as though from effort or embarrassment.

"Yes—that is, no, I'm not," she gushed in gratitude; he had needed to break the silence as much as she. "I was visiting a friend, you could say."

"I thought they'd closed the upper floors. What with the . . ." He shook his fingers vaguely at the sky.

"My friend wasn't in, anyway. How lucky for me that you just happened to come along."

"Someone else would have, I daresay. Even if the power hadn't—"

"But it wasn't someone else. It was you. Tell me, Professor, what are the odds of that?"

"They could never be calculated," he muttered.

"That's what I mean. A million to one!"

He grumbled but did not object. She felt almost dizzy with triumph. They walked another block in silence.

"I suppose I should apologize for the other night," she said.

"Eh? Apologize?"

"I felt like we sort of raked you over the coals a bit."

"Nonsense," he said, then clicked his tongue thoughtfully a few times and again fell silent.

Closer now, there came the distinctive snoring whistle of falling incendiary bombs; instinctively, though quite uselessly, they stopped in their

tracks and ducked their heads down between their shoulders—much as they would have done if someone had crept up behind them and blown a birthday-party noisemaker in their ears. How pathetic the war had made everyone.

She counted as the bombs fell, measuring their distance, as she'd measured the distance of lightning as a girl by counting until the thunder came.

The whistling ceased at "four." There followed no hissing explosion. More duds. She almost hated these more than the effective ones. Like the fellow in the radio joke, she kept waiting for the other shoe to drop. And she was possessed by the idea that these undetonated shells could go off at any time, at the slightest provocation. She could not bear even to pass by a cordoned-off street, and could not imagine what it must be like for the men whose job it was to drive around each morning and collect the horrid things like oversized Easter eggs.

"I suppose," said the professor kindly, "if they've fallen from planes and punched through the roofs of buildings and whatnot, they're rather unlikely to be set off by some poor chap picking them up with his hands."

She clutched his arm more tightly. "You aren't frightened?"

There blossomed in his flicker a little whirlpool of self-satisfaction; it lasted only a moment.

"It's fatalism, I suppose. I will be hit or I won't be hit. But the odds, I think," and here he paused, perhaps in ironic acknowledgement of their different interpretations of that concept, "are in my favour."

It was hard not to hear in this admirably philosophical detachment a critique of her own comportment. "I know," she said, accepting the unstated indictment. "A million to one. But I can't help thinking that the odds drop with the number of bombs. The longer I go unscathed, the worse my chances—like steam pressure building up in a pipe."

That, he said gently, as though dispelling some illusory bogeyman by turning on a lamp, was just the Gambler's Fallacy: the idea that if a number hasn't come up for a while, it's "due." The roulette wheel in Monte Carlo had once hit black twenty-six times in a row. "After about the fifteenth time, people began rushing to put all their money on red. A lot of people lost a lot

of money."

"But sometimes," she said, gripping his elbow urgently, "I feel the exact opposite. As though the longer I survive, the more of this war I live through, the more invincible I become. It can't be any more sensible to keep playing black, can it?"

"Black or red, odd or even—you can't predict what comes next from what's come before. Which is why I don't gamble," he said, with a glimmer of that same self-satisfaction.

"Coming here wasn't a gamble?"

"They drop bombs in Liverpool too."

"But all it takes is one. That's what gets me. No matter how good your luck, for no matter how long, no matter how smart you play it, all it takes is that one time being in the wrong place . . ."

"To disprove the law that all crows are black, one white crow is enough. Yes."

She watched with the edge of her vision as a complex turbulence, rich in overtones and patterns within patterns, swelled in his thoughts, then slowly subsided.

Memories. Unhappy ones?

"There," she pointed. "Isn't that the old Commerce building?"

"I don't know how you can see a damned thing."

"It's not far now."

She steered them around the corner and into the narrow alleyway that would take them to the courtyard behind Patrice's place. The blocks of flats here towered over them, further stifling the distant noise of the air raid.

"What did bring you here, Professor? And please, don't say the train."

"Eh? Well, Carter invited me. That is, it was his idea. He seemed to think he needed a skeptical observer to come in and poke his nose about, as it were, presumably to bestow an air of legitimacy or rectitude to the whole . . . business."

"No no no. *That's* what I mean by the train. I mean, how did you come to be sort of caught up in all this business, as you call it, when obviously you're so, if you don't mind my saying . . ."

"Skeptical?"

"Yes."

"I suppose it began last year. I wrote an article, you see, rather polemical in its way, I suppose, which our friend Carter, for obvious reasons, rather took exception to. Well, there followed something of a duel in print over the next few months—"

"No, that's still the train. I mean, what brought you around to ESP in the first place?"

"You mean, I suppose, why am I a skeptic?"

"Of course not. I *am* quite able to grasp the arguments against mind-reading or telepathy or whatever your universities prefer to call it these days, Professor. I've used most of them myself. I know perfectly well why people disbelieve in things that shouldn't be possible. Skepticism is not such a great rarity as perhaps you believe. What *is* unusual, in my experience, is the skeptic who dedicates himself so passionately to studying the very thing he doesn't believe. What I *mean*, is—if you don't mind my asking—what possessed you to become such a *professional* skeptic?"

He made the sound—a sort of drawn-out snort with falling inflection—that she took to signify annoyance or uncertainty.

"Marvin Vlastnikczy," he said at last.

"*Gesundheit.*"

"Marvin Vlastnikczy was one of the most highly respected, most brilliant mathematicians of his day. Laid much of the groundwork for what is today modern statistics. Formalized and shed a great deal of light on what is meant exactly by words like *probability* and *chance* and *randomness*—revolutionary work without which men like de Broglie and Heisenberg could never have built their theories. A giant, in other words, on whose shoulders many giants have stood.

"A couple of years ago I came across a rather obscure paper, published posthumously, called 'Notes On the Statistical Challenges Peculiar to Psychical Research.' Well. It was a short paper, rather densely technical, and as far as I could tell it had gone largely unnoticed by either statisticians or parapsychologists." The professor paused. "But it had an effect on me. This

man—one of the great minds of our century, one of the grandees of mathematics, one of my heroes, you might even say—had written his little paper as though he quite took it for granted that this ESP business had already been established . . . And I remember thinking: Wouldn't it be awful. Wouldn't it be awful if it were true. Because it would change everything. The entire edifice would crumble. It would mean starting over from scratch."

It seemed to her that she knew exactly what he meant. But there was no time just then to investigate the sense of recognition: the strip of sky overhead had suddenly turned pale green; the entire street was bathed in a uniform, sickly sheen, so that everything—buildings, doorways, lamp posts, dustbins—appeared to be made of, or carved from, the same chalky, sulphurous material. It gave her the overwhelming sensation of having entered some giant set or Hollywood sound-stage, where nothing was real—a beautiful, masterfully constructed, hermetically sealed illusion. She felt almost light-headed with excitement.

"Parachute flares," she said, her voice trembling. "So they can see what they're bombing."

"Makes the blackout nonsense all rather pointless, doesn't it."

"Come on," she said, tugging on his arm affectionately. "They'll be dropping here soon."

The courtyard had once been a rock garden. There had been a fountain, statuary, benches, and, because no flora would reliably grow where the sun never quite reached, all manner of burnished rocks and stones. Now, all of that had been torn up and pushed to one side, so that a new kind of garden could take its place. The courtyard had been replanted with Anderson shelters.

As they crept through the shantytown of corrugated sheet metal and dirt, they could hear voices and even what might have been the plucking of a ukelele. The Andersons, of course, were notoriously ineffective when it came to keeping sound out, or in.

Clara picked up a brick and bashed at the door of Patrice's Anderson.

The professor looked horror-stricken.

She laughed. "She's a heavy sleeper." She listened for a few seconds, then said, "She's not in."

Some of the shelters had locks on the doors, but Patrice thought it immoral to lock up an empty shelter. You never knew who might need it.

And, indeed, there was someone inside after all. Sitting up, stiff as a plank, in the lower bunk on the right side. She could just discern the whites of his eyes, and could smell the candle he'd just blown out—which meant he would not be able to see her.

"Hello there," she said from the threshold in her most neighbourly voice.

His flicker was faint, but she recognized in it the heat-haze shimmer of fear. Ridiculous that he should be afraid of her, with the Nazis that very moment dropping fire down on both their heads. What fools the war made of them all.

Then she saw the second set of eyes in the bunk above, and understood.

"Daddy?" said the girl.

"It's all right," said Clara. "Are you friends of Patrice's too?"

"Hold on a minute," said the man. His flicker grew stronger, steadier. "I'll light a candle for us."

Before, the man had been a veterinarian. Clara was delighted.

"I love animals. I wanted to be a vet myself, for a while." She spoke openly, to dispel the lingering tension, addressing the daughter as much as the father in her bright clear voice. "I've always thought: What a noble cause. Helping animals. When we tend to forget that we're not the only creatures on the planet." She smiled at the professor. How ridiculous he looked in this cramped place, folded up like the starched napkins at the club, his bony knees almost in his face. "Maybe someday we'll get our priorities straight, and instead of shooting each other we'll try talking to each other. And then maybe we'll try talking to the animals. God knows there's a

lot we could learn from them. They're right to be wary of us, of course, with the way we've treated them in the past. But we did it with horses, and dogs and cats, didn't we? Wouldn't it be wonderful to have a pet fox, or a pet bear? It's been years since I've had a pet. Maybe when all this nonsense is over

. . . A little doggie, I think. Something to take care of." She leaned towards the little girl, who had come down to join her father on the bottom bunk. "Do you have a pet? A little puppy or kitty?"

The child buried her face in her father's side.

"We . . . lost our pet." The man looked meaningfully at her, then the professor. "She ran away," he said slowly, emphasizing each word, so that even the child must have understood that he was speaking in code. "Many pets had to run away because of the war."

The man sighed; his eyes, filled with candlelight, went blank. Forgetting his daughter, he murmured, "So many, they were piling up outside my clinic."

"Dear God," said Clara, making no attempt to hide her disgust.

"So you see," said the man, wrinkling his lips as though delivering a punchline, "it's not such a noble occupation these days."

She pulled her scarves around her and pursed her lips. She did not believe that a veterinarian could do such things, in wartime or not. People were never what you expected.

The bombing did not come closer. This, too, drove her mad, this absence of rhyme or reason. How could you ever hope to go about your life if you never knew what to expect? She felt flushed, anxious, restless. She took the cards out of her purse to give her hands something to do. She shuffled the deck a few times, then noticed the girl watching her.

"Would you like me to read your cards, darling?"

The girl said nothing, but her eyes remained fixed on the deck. The father glanced at the professor; Clara ignored him and spoke to the girl.

"They're tarot cards. See the pictures? They help me to see people's fu-

tures. Do you want to look at your future with me? Do you want to know what you will be when you grow up?"

The father bristled. "She's not interested in any of that occult eye-wash."

"Oh for God's sake," said the professor in his cold, blaring voice. "It's only a harmless card game."

"She's not interested," said the former vet, holding his arm in front of the girl protectively, as though Clara or the professor might lunge at her.

"Here," said Clara, "the professor and I will demonstrate. Won't we, Professor?"

She began to lay down cards in the foot or so of space between them on the mattress.

The professor looked aggrieved. Then he glanced at the girl, who was clinging to her father, afraid of the sounds coming out of the sky as well as those coming out of the grown-ups around her. His expression softened.

"Of course," he said.

"Now, as everyone knows, before you can read the future, you must read the present, and before you can read the present, you have to read the past. Right? So, what I need the professor to do is pick his past card."

"What, any card?"

"Oh ho no," she cried. "Not just *any* card. You must choose *very* carefully. Concentrate, my dear sir. Think *only* of the past—of your life leading up to this moment in time. Then, with the past firmly in your mind, choose the card—or, rather, let the card choose itself."

She smiled at the girl, but her attention was on the professor's flicker at the edge of her vision. For several seconds the pattern seemed unchanged; then, slowly, faint ripples began to appear.

"This one? Very good."

Turning over the card, she allowed a gasp to escape her lips. She held the card up so the girl could see, and so that she herself could continue to watch the professor's reaction.

"The Fool," she intoned. "A very interesting card. You can see that he is carrying a rose in one hand—a symbol of life, and also of love—and in the

other, a long traveller's staff. His head is up in the air—perhaps deep in contemplation of the finer things?—and he is blissfully unaware that he's about to walk over a cliff. There, you can see in the bottom corner his little doggie trying to warn him. But he is oblivious."

The professor's flicker had grown turbulent; she had struck a chord. So, the professor had stepped over some cliff—as who hadn't? Something had happened that he had not anticipated; and because he had not anticipated it, he felt that it had been his fault. Regret. Loss.

She instructed him to select his second card. This time there was no need to gasp. She could not have chosen a better card if she had chosen for him.

"Don't worry," she said. "It's not a bad card. An end, remember, is also a beginning. And a beginning is also necessarily the end of what came before. I know what you're thinking—but it's not as foolish as it sounds. It's fundamental. What *is* death? The end of life. And what is life? Movement, change, creation. But the end of change is permanence, eternity, life everlasting. Birth is novelty, newness, invention, but nothing can be new unless you measure it against the old—that is, what it's replacing, what it has killed. Death and birth, movement and stasis, habit and change—they're just the imaginary poles of an infinite spectrum."

His flicker was reverberating in response to her words. She could make out the shape of his loss—a woman, of course. She could almost discern her name. She proceeded softly, with light step, pausing for confirmation.

"You've lost something. Someone." Yes. "And you miss them. You miss her." Yes. "That's natural. We all lose things. It's the condition of our existence. Life didn't begin in the Garden of Eden. It began with the expulsion, with the flaming sword. Without loss, there can be no progress, no forward movement. Adam and Eve only came to life with the Fall."

Again, something had struck a chord. Eve? Could it be that easy?

"She isn't dead, your wife—your Eve. She isn't gone. She's only undergone a change."

At the name, his flicker suddenly went rigid, becoming claustrophobically involuted, like the hothouse hallucinations of fever-dreams. He hadn't

been prepared for this.

"Don't be alarmed. It's natural. The names of loved ones often leave behind an echo, you know, clanging on the heart like a hammer on an anvil . . ."

His thoughts went silent. He'd clamped down, shut her out. All that remained was the calm, reliable metronome.

"All right. That's enough."

But it was not the professor who'd spoken.

"We've heard enough," said the man, propping his daughter up on her feet. "We're good Anglicans."

Clara was too bemused, and the professor, it seemed, too stunned, to object; before either could think of a word to say to stop them, the pair had gone out into the night.

Amazing. He'd rather risk both their lives than risk seeing something his faith wouldn't allow him to understand.

"All right," said the professor, grinning with false mirth and false confidence, like a boy asking a bully for his lunch money back. "You can tell me now. How do you do it? What's the trick?"

What should she tell him? What did he want to know? She gathered the cards and handed him the deck.

She didn't read the cards, she explained; she read the person. He'd been to the cinema, she assumed; he knew how film projectors worked? They flashed a lot of pictures on the screen, twenty or thirty pictures every second—fast enough that you couldn't tell it was a series of still pictures at all, fast enough that the image looked like it was moving. But if you looked at the screen indirectly, out of the corner of your eye, you *could* see the flash of the individual pictures, the flicker of light and dark.

That was sort of how it was for her. She could see people flickering.

"In other words, you read people's thoughts," he said blandly.

"But it's not like watching a film. I don't see the thoughts so much as the spaces between the thoughts—the speed or movement or pattern of thoughts."

"Even if they're in the next room, hmm?" He spoke with so little em-

phasis, so little surprise, that he must surely be mocking her.

"No." She sighed. "It's different in the lab. I don't know how it works —*if* it works. All I know is I try to clear my mind and let impressions come to me. Sometimes they do. Mostly they don't."

He stood up, seemingly without any conscious intention of doing so, then, as though formulating a plausible motive, said that he thought it was time he was getting back to the hotel.

Just then, as if his words had invoked it, the all-clear signal sounded.

Seeing that he was embarrassed, even unnerved by his prescience, she let him go, without even reassuring him that it was, after all, only a coincidence.

"By the way," he said on his way out, almost smiling; "Her name isn't Eve. And she isn't dead."

She smoked two cigarettes, then made her way back to the club. With the air raid over, the streets had lost their menace, but also their magic. The blackout struck her now as nothing but an idiotic inconvenience, a childish conspiracy, a monumental game of dress-up or make-believe. She stumbled in the dark, and twice lost her way.

Wouldn't it be awful if it were true? It would mean starting over from scratch.

Because the truth was black or white: Either the universe was predictable, or it wasn't. Either nature was governed by laws, or it wasn't. Either science could provide an adequate description of the way things worked, or it simply could not. Either everything was right, or everything was wrong.

She had been the same way with Gordon: *Either he is good for me, or he is not.* And the thought of starting over from scratch had been too much for her to bear.

She now saw that the problem with black or white was that it made you inflexible. And inflexibility also made you brittle. Unable to bend, you could only break. To disprove the law that all crows are black, one white crow was enough.

And when the balance finally tipped in the other direction, you were condemned, by your premises, to a total renunciation. If one crow was not black, no crows could be black! *I thought he was good for me but he was bad for me; whoever might seem good for me can only be bad for me; no one can ever be good for me.*

Only now that she had seen it reflected in the professor could she recognize her own muddled thinking. Not that she had been wrong to leave Gordon; she'd been wrong to stay with him as long as she did, wrong to go on sweeping the grey under the rug, wrong to stick around until the one sure indisputable demonstration came—and lucky that when it did, it had not been worse. But she had been just as wrong to give up, to conclude that all men were Gordons. She'd behaved as though an exception to a rule *reversed* the rule—and, indeed, so great was the compulsion to make laws, one reversed rule reversed *all* rules. Because if laws weren't *laws*, what good were they?

She understood now why she'd been attracted to the professor. At first, perhaps, the metronome-like calm she'd seen in his flicker had tantalized her with its promise of reliability, of stability. But, in fact, the reason he had come into her life was to show her that nothing was reliable, nothing was stable—not even her wounded conviction that nothing was reliable, nothing stable. That was what the professor had been sent by fate to teach her. That was the significance of this episode in her life.

All she could say for certain was that not all men were good for her; at least some men were bad for her. Whether or not *any* man was good for her remained, for the time being, an open question.

If she'd hoped to be left alone with her drink and her thoughts, she should have known better than to come to the club. There weren't many other girls around this late, and she was soon joined at the bar by a fidgety bloke in a bowler who seemed to mean business. In lieu of introductions, and without first asking if she'd like one, he bought her a second drink; in lieu of small talk, he asked abruptly, and quite guilelessly, if she wanted his company.

Normally she would have given him the same answer she gave any of

the men in whose flickers she read desperation, or anger, or hate, or pain. With this one, though, she could get no read at all. Hiding something? If so, it was hidden even from himself. There was nothing coming off him, not a glimmer. This was surely a first. It was bewildering.

She decided to make an exception, to play it by ear, to see how things went. Stepping back out into the black street with his hand at the small of her back, she felt quite reckless; the feeling of not knowing what to expect was intoxicating. Nor was it even really so reckless. There was no danger in waiting and seeing what happened next. After all, she had been doing this for years, and had never had a problem.

III

She fumbled for the phone in the dark. She knew it was him before she picked up.

But that wasn't so extraordinary. Only a coincidence. She'd been thinking about him, and the phone had rung. Not even such a coincidence, really. He hadn't called all week, and the longer he was away, the more she thought about him, naturally—about why he'd left so suddenly, about when he would be back. All he'd deigned to tell her was that something had come up in London. But he hated London, even in peacetime. And it was altogether unlike him to do anything on the spur of the moment. He'd been running away, then, she supposed—from her, from what she'd done, or what he thought she'd done.

"Ev," he said, "do you remember that Joyce poem? The one we memorized together?"

"Who *is* this," she found herself teasing from force of habit—it was the greeting she reserved for him when he bypassed his greetings.

"You know: 'They come shaking in triumph their long green hair,'" he quoted. "'They come out of the sea and run shouting by the shore.'"

"Yes." She thought back. "'My heart, have you no wisdom thus to despair?'"

He said nothing, allowing her to finish. She went on with reluctant relish:

"'My love, my love, my love, why have you left me alone?'"

"You remember."

"I *had* forgotten all about it."

The effortlessness with which they'd slipped into the old modes of talking to each other made her feel both guilty and hopeful. Guilty, because it failed to acknowledge all that had happened—the accusation, the argument, his sudden departure, the week of silence; hopeful, because it conjured a future as ignorant of such things as their past. But hope was premature, and made her feel guilty all over again. She heard herself say, in the loud, brassy voice of someone trying to conceal from the greengrocer that he has given her too much change, "What on earth made you think of that?"

"Did you ever tell anyone else about it?"

"What, about James Joyce?"

"Never mind. It's a popular enough poem, I suppose."

She said nothing. She was afraid to ask for clarification, afraid to scrape at the surface of his words. Anything might lie beneath them.

She was limited by the length of the phone cord to the chair or the window. She stood and looked out the window. With Alan away, she'd stopped bothering with the blackouts, and simply never turned on the lights after dark.

The rain had stopped. The Henkley boy was still out there. Like a caged moth, his torch cast fluttering wings of shadow across the dome of the tent. She was surprised his mother didn't consider this a breach of national security.

A part of her remembered what it felt like listening to the sound of rain pattering on canvas. The memory made her throat ache.

The telephone line sputtered and hissed—the sound of distance compressed into time—then suddenly went quiet.

"Alan?"

He was gone; the connection had been severed.

Then: "Ev?"

She said nothing.

"Ev?"

"Yes?"

She remembered the dog, but not its name. Alan had had it since he was a boy. And as a boy, he'd believed it was a mark of distinction, a gesture of respect and affection, to give a pet a human name, a grown-up name. Pets were named silly things like Rex, Spot, Killer, Shadow. Friends were named Arthur.

She remembered, but only as she remembered the tattered armchair or the finicky radiator in that gloomy old house where her mother had sent her to learn French the summer after Mr. Plummer, Alan's father, had died. The warm, snoring, flatulent rug called Arthur had disappeared from the floor of the library by the time Ev returned, several summers later, to visit not Mrs. Plummer, whose French had been significantly less advanced than her own, but Alan.

"He was old," said Alan. "It was painless, I suppose."

Among the things that his father had left behind was a big orange toolbox. Alan emptied it out and placed Arthur inside. Then he dug a grave at the edge of a small clearing where he had taken Arthur to chase squirrels, though he'd never caught a single one. He put the toolbox in the hole and put the dirt back on top. He covered the mound with branches and leaves and moss. Feeling stupid, he muttered a promise to visit often, then walked home.

He did return, a few times, before the visits began to seem pointless. A week after he stopped going, he had a dream. Not a dream, really. A hallucination.

It terrified him. He didn't know why it should have. But then, even as a boy he'd never understood why the people in the Bible should have been afraid of the angels that came to visit them, either. Weren't they *angels*?

She realized now that he was speaking with a slight lisp and, as though to make up for this, he was taking more than his usual care to enunciate. So

he had been drinking. This frightened her, though she could not say why. It felt like he was armed, or driving them down a dark road; she thought he should have his wits about him.

What he had seen that night was Arthur. He didn't know if his eyes had been open or closed, whether he had been awake or asleep or someplace in-between, but he saw the dog's shape, his form, standing in the shadows of the far corner of his bedroom. Mixed in with this illusion, overlaid with it, in the palimpsest fashion of dreams, was the knowledge that Arthur was there, had come to *him*, because *he* had decided to stop going to Arthur.

There was a pause. Then Alan said, "I've never been so scared in all my life."

This was not how she had wanted the conversation to go. She had expected bitterness and reproach, and had prepared emoluments for these; she had expected direct attack, and had prepared defences; she had expected indictment, and had prepared justification. She had prepared for a discussion, cold, perhaps, but rational, even mechanical, ratcheting them by degrees closer to mutual understanding, closer to some truce. She had not expected this formless, murky stream of association and remembrance, beneath which she could but faintly detect a riverbed of threat, and in whose sludge, in any case, she could find no purchase. She had been prepared to dig in her heels. She did so now.

"Alan, why are you telling me all this?"

"Because," he said, "this is something I've never told anyone before."

There was a pause.

"Don't you think we should always tell each other everything?"

Here it was at last. The direct attack. She closed her eyes.

"It was more than just fear, though," he went on. "It was disgust. *Repulsion.* Like I'd been poisoned. Like my mind was retching. Now, does that make sense? That dog was the first thing I ever loved, and the thought that he had come back to me, back from the dead, made me *sick* with fear. Does that make any sense?"

She did not know what to say. She supposed that now he would demand his *quid pro quo.* Now that he'd told her something, it was time for her

to tell him something.

And she'd intended to. She'd had all week to build her resolve. She had planned to tell him everything, as much as there was to tell. But now, at the critical moment, her courage left her. Now that the direct attack was coming, she was unable to meet it as she'd planned, and could only take cover, could only flee. It was instinctive, like ducking and hunching one's shoulders at any loud noise.

She could *not* tell him the truth. She knew that she would only deny, all over again, that anything had happened, that she had done anything wrong.

And as soon as her resolution had faded and this counter-resolution had sprung up in its place, she recognized immediately that it was the right thing to do—indeed, the only thing. Because Alan would never understand. He would hear the words, but not grasp their significance. He would jam the square peg of truth into one of his preconceived round holes. The one labelled "unfaithful," perhaps. The one labelled "betrayal." The one labelled "the end."

Let the attack come now. Please, let it come now. Now she was ready.

"Ev?"

"Yes."

"The next day . . . I dug him up. Stupid . . . But I had to know. I had to make sure. Didn't I?"

The smell, when he'd opened the toolbox, had made him vomit.

Arthur was crawling with bugs. They'd eaten away his eyelids.

"Ev."

"Yes?"

"I don't want you ever to die."

IV

In the empty lot across the road, Nat Henkley turned off his torch, gently unzipped the tent's flap, and watched as the lights in his neighbour's house came on, one by one.

He closed his eyes and listened for raised voices, crying, breaking glass, gunshots—any of the noises his imagination associated with domestic distress.

But the only sound was rain pattering on canvas.

He tied his boots and ran up to the house in search of his mother, who had become, since the war, good friends with Standish, the blackout warden.