

Orphans On The Doorstep

There were orphans on the doorstep again. Two this time. There were some waiting most Sunday mornings.

Who knew who had left them. Who knew why love had failed, or never managed to appear, causing the bundles to be abandoned to this impersonal benevolence. And who, Helen thought, cared. She ignored them. Or rather: she allowed herself a quick sneer, her first sneer of the day, and stepped over them. Deal with the orphans later, she wrote in her internal diary. Nothing was allowed to interfere with her morning ritual.

The rites of first light. The Dance of the Keys; the magic of Opening Up. Which placed her above, or at least apart from, everyone else. To approach, alone, the shop from the back rather than the front. Know automatically which sliver of metal from the knotted ball of keys would open the daunting iron gates. Know which would also pry apart the back doors behind them. Be able to select this pair from all the others, most of which only opened doors long ago knocked down or padlocks long ago thrown away.

And by these actions to step, still alone, into the taboo spaces behind and below the shop floor. Shuffle through the comfortable darkness at an easy pace, bringing twitching shafts of light to the chambers by flicks of a hand guided by an indelible memory. Find another key, this one hidden in a cache so obvious it would be no protection from the dimmest burglar, let alone an invader as ruthless as Helen. Use the rod to uncork the holy of holies, the great safe forged in a remote century when metal was prized chiefly for its quantity. Take out the clinking plastic drawer. Check, with an eternal lack of trust, the coins inside intended to guide her through the coming day. Find several coins missing from the sacred sum of sixty pounds; one of the many little details which kept Helen's lack of trust so pure.

Finally to the shop floor. Transform it, with more instinctive stabs of her finger, from a crepuscular cavern into something bright and atonal. Put the drawer inside the jaw of the till, shut the latter with theatrical might. One more key to activate the till's glowing declaration. And then three final ones. To open the front door and admit whoever is outside; usually couples standing with the sheepish air of people conceding they should have found better ways of spending five minutes of their limited life than waiting for a shop to open.

Perhaps, Helen told herself, she should stop thinking "And it's all downhill from here" when she smiled a greeting at her first customers of the day. Nonetheless, it was. Those first fifteen minutes, the Dance of the Keys in the pre-noon light, were what she loved most. The feeling of privilege, of course. Of privacy too, of holding the only means to end her seclusion tightly in her own hand. That was the force which kept dragging her out of bed and back to the shop Sunday after Sunday for the past sixteen years.

It was a replica. Of course it was, Helen thought; she had reached an age which decided everything was a replica and almost always an inferior one. Two decades ago she used to tango a proper Dance of the Keys. During her early twenties, that wonderful period when dreams could still exist and were sometimes married to the means to achieve them. She had done the Dance through back rooms which were truly hers. Or rather, her husband's; and more specifically, the bank's. Those details, though, only became relevant later. She danced through the hidden passages of her own shop, she lit up its corners and opened it to the world. And as she did she knew she could say: yes, this is it. This is all I ever wanted.

Then she discovered her husband's skills in finance and philandering were the inverse to what she had hoped. The bank threw her out of her own shop and she, in the same week, threw her husband out of his own house. She was forced to get a proper job with proper pay and take this instead. The position which most people occupy and declares: well, it's not what I hoped for but it's something. And it was. Helen still felt a residue of past

pleasures every Sunday morning. Even though she knew that at precisely the same time women were doing identical dances in the hundreds of identical shops owned by the great corporation.

Even though, too, distractions had sullied the purity of the dance even as she performed it this morning. The newspaper clipping on the wall of the staff kitchen... Well, she would try not to brood on that too much. She was obliged to read the manager's note, however. Helen had served under five managers; or manageresses, technically, since all were female. Many aeons had passed since any one of them knew more about the shop than she did. None ever worked on a Sunday. That was Helen's fiefdom, to rule as she pleased with her co-workers effectively her personal servants. Each manageress seemed to accept this. Once every few months they 'just popped in' on some gratuitous excuse for an hour or so. They gave Helen little instructions which they knew would be ignored and morale-boosting speeches which they surely realised were pointless. Really they were auditing Helen's domain. She made sure they never found a reason to end her illusion, that of pretending the shop was really hers for a day a week.

Yet there were still the notes. One left every shift. Little hooks to remind Helen that she was actually skewered on the end of a line. That was surely the only purpose, for the instructions they contained were generally four parts absurdly obvious and one part impossible. Helen scanned the latest one. Her latest manageress, a loud and bubbly girl (and Helen noticed she was now using 'girl' to describe a woman who was almost thirty) was an addictive user of double exclamation marks. That was bad. And worst, she was also a sketcher of smiley faces. There was a big one at the bottom of the note and a smaller one in the dot of an 'i'. Actually, Helen realised as she peered closer, another one in that dot too. And a little flower drawn in the top right hand corner. Quite a lot of time had been spent making this hook resemble a letter between school friends. Or more accurately, one from a girl desperate to win the approval of an older, cooler classmate who would only despise her for the effort.

Helen threw the note away and allowed herself her second sneer of the day. She was trying to ration her sneers. She was, she knew, no longer at an age where her skin would spring back into place like a sheet of rubber. Creases were appearing. If she pulled a face for too long now then she really would be stuck with it, wind changing direction or not. And she was worried that if she sneered too long she would end up looking like one, perhaps all, of the Rolling Stones. Sneers were still allowed at special moments, though, and this note surely had supplied one. Please take the boxes stacked by the back door to the sorting rooms and, well, sort them. Yes, Helen replied to herself. I had assumed that was what we were doing with those boxes. Opening them and taking out the donations. Not using them as an avant-garde sculpture or an improvised stepladder. Remember, the note continued, we're having a special appeal for Darfur. This received not a sneer all of its own but a continuation of the previous one, with a few extra flourishes and a fanfare at the end. Yes, she decided, I needed reminding of that. Because she hadn't read a newspaper for the past fortnight or noticed the large cardboard display on the shop floor or seen the garish posters in the windows. Above all, she was unable to conclude that a charity devoted to helping Africa might do a little something for the thousands of Africans being displaced and starved and massacred.

She ignored the boxes for the moment. They could be dealt with later. (And the orphans on the doorstep, she reminded herself again.) She was trying to minimise the heaving and hauling sections of her duties. Nowadays she found that using incorrect lifting techniques made her back ache whereas using the correct ones made her knees ache. A radical alternative method was being gradually introduced, called Leaving It To My

Younger Assistant. Whenever the wretched girl chose to turn up, at least. So Helen completed The Dance and sat behind the till, pretending to not be slightly out of breath.

The first customers walked straight past the Darfur display, all their hopes focussed on the second-hand clothing racks. Almost everyone would copy them, Helen predicted as she studied the supposedly heart-wrenching photographs of screaming peasant women. The special appeals never raised much. The occasional cheque, a lot of spare penny pieces in the donation tin. The tsunami had been an exception. She could still vividly remember the Sunday after it struck. A deluge – an unfortunate metaphor but she had no better one – a deluge of generosity. Money from individuals, from schools and clubs, from hastily arranged events, from people pushing their overdrafts to unwise limits. Thousands of pounds in a single morning; and that just in one shop on the fringes of a small city centre.

The tsunami was an aberration, however. It materialised at Christmas, when most people were watching television and so couldn't escape the special broadcasts. It killed some westerners. It destroyed resorts which a lot more westerners could remember visiting. It was also a natural, and so pure, disaster. Most were not. And the great era of charity was growing stale. As Ethiopia became Somalia became Malawi became Zimbabwe became Darfur, the semi-liberals – the class which Helen belonged to – were starting to think, when *will* those Africans sort themselves out? How much more do they want? The semi-liberals, the quasi-humane, may not say this out loud but the accusation gave them enough inner justification to avoid the collection boxes. Helen herself didn't share their exasperation. She wasn't, however, sure about her charity's response to the Darfur crisis, which helped the innocent without punishing the guilty.

Five minutes passed. A few more customers wandered in, drifting to other parts of the shop as if blown on a gentle breeze; the books, the bric-a-brac, the feeble CD collection. None showed an interest in buying any of the objects. They wore the distanced interest of visitors to a museum and that was perhaps how they saw themselves. Sundays tended to start in this way. Helen made herself more comfortable on her stool. Her eyes pounced from browser to browser, hopefully not hostile, not suspicious, just giving the neutral message: you are being watched. Not intently, however. Her thoughts were inexorably descending a level. To the subterranean staff kitchen where coffee mugs clustered and bred and the fridge always held the same jar of mayonnaise, seemingly locked in permanent solitary confinement for some dread crime. The kitchen with the notice board, bearing a rare new addition cut from last Thursday's local paper.

'Pensioner Bows Out After A Decade's Good Work.' Helen had actually seen the story at the time. She had undertaken all the necessary sneering then. But she had hoped, albeit without much optimism, not to be reminded of it today. Stephanie, the septuagenarian volunteer who had finally decided to stop being useful and had somehow turned this into a newsworthy event. Who told the reporter that she had made some "terrific friends among the staff and customers" and would "miss all the lovely people." Photographed clutching the till for support, the manageress standing beside her and wrapping a possessive arm around her scrawny body. Good publicity for the shop, Helen reminded herself, or publicity at least. And they had to find *something* to fill a daily paper devoted to a small city where nothing really happened.

The point was though... There were many points and all of them, Helen conceded, were petty ones. The main point was, ten years. Not sixteen. Helen had been at the shop longer than anyone now; except Moira who, due to various unpleasant health problems, was only theoretically part of the staff. And Stephanie had only ever been an ordinary volunteer, content to follow the instructions of others. Not stuck out on her own on a day forsaken by all manageresses. Forced to make instant decisions when the darker facets of life battered through the floral walls of a charity shop, or on the many occasions when your co-workers

failed you. (Where *was* that damn girl anyway?) Moreover, working two shifts a week up to the age of seventy five was admirable but Stephanie did nothing else with the rest of her hours. She didn't have a full time job like Helen. A job which sometimes required overtime, forcing her to defy both God and the European Union by working seven days a week.

Stephanie had also done the occasional Sunday, when the need for staff on that perpetually unfashionable shift became especially fervent. The old woman didn't do any sorting or pricing or restocking or any of the shop's unseen but essential tasks. She just sat behind the till all day; and she wasn't even very good at that. She couldn't operate the card machine, for one. Helen suspected that she still hadn't absorbed the concept of a debit card – not vital in itself, except that it was worrying how Stephanie seemed befuddled by anything invented since 1970. She didn't even stand up to serve a customer, which Helen considered to be both unprofessional and rude. It was hard, really, to see how Stephanie had 'worked for' the shop for ten years, as opposed to 'been inside' it. After all, work-

All right. She was trying to limit those too, her tirades of exasperated malice. They probably left marks as well, less visible but just as indelible. It was simply a fact, one as old and inevitable as nature. The papers were interested in Stephanie. They didn't care about Helen. Not simply because somebody ceasing work was more of an event than somebody continuing it. Local newspapers couldn't afford to only report what was, in fact, new. When Helen finally collected enough excuses and vendettas and ailments to leave the Sunday shift to its wretched fate, there would still be nobody taking pictures of her. Because Stephanie had a face which fitted the cliché of a charity shop worker. Crumpled, weathered, gleams of mischief in her smile and senility in her eyes. Her face was correct and Helen's wasn't. Helen was not old yet, only in her early middle ages. (Although she acknowledged that she had been applying that term for quite a long time now). Even when she became truly aged, even if she managed to avoid metamorphosising into most of the Rolling Stones, she wouldn't look right. She wouldn't appear charitable enough. Her hair was too immaculate. Her lips were too thin. And there was that look in the centre of her face, caused by the sharpness of her nose and the hardness of her eyes, which reminded certain people of a bird of prey, others of a dominatrix.

Yet despite that, and despite that her expression of metallic ruthlessness was quite a good reflection of her soul, she could be hurt. And she did want something just occasionally. Not gratitude. She hoped she would never become that pathetic. Acknowledgement, she supposed, that sixteen years had a meaning, that the wrong face could perform the right tasks. She had been fantasising since she read the article. Trying to stop herself sometimes, but enjoying the fiction a little too much to try very hard. She drifted into the illusion again. As she completed the first sale of the day, whisking a tattered pair of jeans into the shop carrier bag with startling rapidity, she was seeing the reporter again. She was leaning towards him once more and declaring,

"It's not about making friends. It's not about being pleasant. It's not about being part of the community. We're in this shop for one reason only. We want your money."

She paused, wondering whether to launch a riff about the marvel of the capitalist ethos permeating a charity, supposedly its very antithesis. But she wasn't a student anymore. It had been a long time since she was surprised by, or even especially interested in, such abstracts. Instead she would say,

"We're here to suck money out of rich countries and spit it out onto poor ones. We're careful when we're spitting. We don't just gob sacks of grain straight onto the heads of starving Africans. We target. But when we suck, you'd better believe we suck with all our strength."

Helen smiled to herself. She wouldn't smile to the interviewer though, and pictured his startled expression as he studied her face for clues of levity. She could, in fact, imagine him with remarkable clarity already. Casual, almost scruffy clothes. She would prefer that. Partly for a rebuttal if he got snotty. ("Our clothes are quite smart but not ones you'd wear to work. Unless you're a journalist, that is.") She wouldn't attack him out of choice, however, and actually preferred a relaxed approach to attire. At work, in her proper job, every man wore the same white-shirt-black-trousers-coloured-tie combination and looked like they were assembled on a conveyor belt. She wanted the journalist to express himself a little. He had tousled hair too, she decided, but nothing covering his face unless it was a proper beard. ("Make your mind up!" she always wanted to shout at inveterate bearers of stubble). He would be in his mid-twenties. In the central section of that complex Venn diagram, a man she could find attractive with just a chance it might be reciprocated. Young enough, too, to listen to what she was saying while being experienced enough to understand it. That magical age again, the mid-twenties.

"You've got to have a professional attitude here," she would tell him. "That means doing things right. It also means doing them even if you don't want to. You have to think of this as just another job. You turn up the same time each week, you go home the same time. You get a routine. You bitch and grumble your head off and you *get on with things* while you're doing it. They're the best people I've worked with. The professionals, the dogsbodies. Give me them over the idealists any time."

Cassie finally pirouetted into the shop. A small, effusive girl with a lot of hair and a lot of makeup. Helen vaguely believed her style to be called emo, though perhaps only because that was currently the most prolific of the many youth culture terms she read without understanding them. (The final sign of middle-age, she supposed, not caring that she no longer understood.) Cassie danced around the till for a minute, scattering greetings and excuses. Then she sped into the back rooms. Twenty minutes late today, Helen noticed. And presumably her usual twenty extra minutes to remove her coat and put her handbag into a locker. Cassie had been an idealist. She arrived at the shop about two months ago filled with the inferno of righteousness, apparently expecting to see world poverty eviscerated before her very eyes. It didn't happen. Now she was getting later each week and doing less when she finally appeared.

"I worked with a racist once." Perhaps Helen *wouldn't* tell the reporter that story. She would be tempted though, partly because it was true. "For about four months. An out and out racist. He hated Arabs most, because that seems the fashion among racists. But he hated Africans too. A charity set up to help Africans and he comes and volunteers for us. God knows why. Maybe he thought that if we helped sort out their homelands, less of them would come over here. Though clear logic's never been too important for racists, has it?" A theatrical pause and then the punchline: "Now he was a good worker."

No, maybe not. She didn't want to raise the issue of motives. Any remotely competent reporter – and she liked to think this young man was capable, even if he was on a dreadful paper – would be quick to turn the question around. What were *her* motives? Not for coming in this week, which was easily answered with, "Because I came in last week." But for first volunteering. Helen would have to answer honestly, because why do the interview if she simply lied? She would have to talk about the bleakness of her weekends. Then the barrenness in two other places, her relationships and her womb. And they were not confessions she wished to make to a tousle-haired young man leaning closer to offer a cigarette.

No, she would divert the interview instead. Offer examples of the best co-workers over the years. There were actually quite a lot of them. She wasn't really as – actually, she *was* as judgemental as she pretended to be. Her judgements, though, could be surprisingly

generous. She would talk about Laura, the gregarious girl with the wisdom and cynicism of a pensioner crammed into her twenty year old mind. Mike, who had a slightly worrying fascination with the shop's tatty collection of archaic toys. Julie, the oversized American with no humour herself but who exploded into instant and genuine mirth at the slightest witticism from another. Chris, whose remarkably bland exterior hid interests and opinions of relentless eccentricity. Perhaps four or five others, all different but with one connection. Another narrow point in time, this one nearing or having just reached the end of college. When they finally realised that the world of work was both imminent and grim. That, unlike in the part time jobs they had held hitherto, they wouldn't be able to stay home when hungover or go home when bored. They needed training in the ethos as much as anything. So they came to the shop and turned to Helen. They let her scoop out any lingering passions and install the cogwheels which would drive them forward instead.

Most didn't stay long; six months on average. Whatever they vowed, they usually left shortly after landing their first proper job. Helen accepted this and in fact preferred it. After a year they often started assuming they knew the shop as well as she did; a challenge she could always vanquish but which was annoying while it lasted. Thinking back to the early volunteers she realised they would probably have families now, would be building careers, would be approaching their own middle years. None kept in touch. Maybe a few words immediately after they left, and then usually just to ask Helen's permission to use her as a reference. She liked doing that for the deserving cases. While telling the prospective employer that Peter or Sonia was a devoted, efficient worker she would always think: because of me. She straightened them up, taught them the right lessons and sent them out into the world.

No: she wouldn't make her feelings quite that explicit. This young man *was* intelligent, after all. He could make the rather obvious connection between her maternal affections for her best assistants and her apparent lack of children. It didn't have to appear in the article just because it was true.

"What about the worst ones?" she imagined him asking instead. "Do you ever fire anyone?"

"No. Not unless they've been stealing. And I've never caught anyone doing that. Though I had my suspicions in a couple of cases. The worst ones are lazy so they won't last long anyway." And she might just add, "I've ways of... making them know they're not wanted."

"Go and lurk at the back, will you?" she told Cassie when the girl finally re-emerged, almost shimmering with enthusiasm. It was an aura which lasted a decreasing amount of time each week and was already starting to collapse.

"Lurk at the back?" Cassie repeated. She was probably seeking a refutation rather than an explanation but received the latter.

"Keep an eye on the old man in the grey coat." Helen lowered her voice. "I know him. He steals stuff."

"Oh. Right. Er... can't you watch him on the cameras?"

"He's less likely to try if there's someone there. Just go and stand around, please."

Yes, the security cameras, Helen reflected. The shop floor was an awkward L-shape and the only till was placed near the front. That meant large areas were hidden when you were manning it. Helen had been relieved when security cameras were installed a few years ago, less so when she saw they did nothing to redress the broken lines of sight. Mostly they pointed at the areas around the till. Whenever she studied the tapes afterwards, hoping for proof of theft and maybe a face to pass to the police, she mainly got pictures of herself serving customers. And very nice she looked too.

Perhaps it had been simple incompetence. And her attempts to correct the mistake were just filed automatically by the manageresses in the very full draw marked 'Crotchety Old Sunday Woman Bitching As Usual.' She thought, though, the underlying cause was the same attitude which made the CCTV cameras so slow in arriving, which made general security in the shop so lax. They could scarcely accept that thefts were possible. Not from *this* shop. Not from one which performed such an important function. They assumed that all humanity was fired by the same benevolence, sometimes weak but always present, that they were. After all, stealing from the shop was effectively stealing from an African child – and who on earth would do that?

"But they do," Helen would tell the journalist. "Plenty do. And plenty more try." She had confronted some with the moral argument, she had even used the African child image. The few who bothered answering cited their own poverty in defence. As if a bedsit with a bit of damp was comparable to a refugee camp with absolutely nothing to eat. That point was irrelevant to the thieves, however. What they wanted would always be far more important than what others needed.

She wasn't sure whether to include the current suspect in their cynical ranks. A regular visitor, he also crossed into another large group problematic in very ways: the mentally challenged. His favourite 'trick' was to take a book from the racks, show it to you and pretend he had bought it on a previous day. Not much of a trick, however, especially as he never even removed the price tag. If you asked for money in a tone of voice usually employed for telling a dog to drop a stick, he would pay. Helen still had a grumbling suspicion that he was attempting a double bluff. Somebody that ingenious, however, would surely target more valuable goods than the children's picture books which he favoured.

So she probably wouldn't expose him to the press. She would, though, tell on another regular. The youth with the irredeemably scruffy demeanour which Helen thought deserved an ASBO from birth. Who always serenaded her with a cocky smirk and a cocky comment and was met with a frigid half-smile as they both remembered their history. Which included her once catching him trying to steal a rather expensive jacket, dragging him into the back room and giving him the starving African child lecture. Then the very next week, when anyone normal would have been shamed or frightened away forever, the youth loping back with the same smirk. And kept coming back, knowing she could neither evict him physically nor get the police round in time. The occasions, too, when he slipped under her monitors. And walked out of the changing rooms carrying less but wearing more than he went in with, and scampered right out of the door.

She would tell on him and on the others. The ones with the big coats or the big open bags. Who spent half their time rummaging through the racks and half spying over their shoulders for a chink. Sometimes, if a professional gang was in town and doing the rounds, Helen might receive a warning call from another store. Sometimes she recognised frequent suspects or just someone looking unquestionably guilty. Sometimes she caught them in the act or, her preferred outcome, watched them so blatantly that they never dared. And sometime she didn't. The 'customer' would leave and there was an accusing empty hanger, a gap on the bookshelf; and the rage which Helen felt every time never lessened in force.

It was not, really, food being wrenched from the lips of a starving child. The money lost was only a potential. All the goods were donations so the shop had actually sacrificed nothing. Helen, though, was furious because she had lost personally. Lost another fight in the endless war. And she knew the contest wasn't only with the thieves. They were simply the shock troops. It was with everyone on the other side of the till. Who never gave as much as she wanted and as quickly as she wanted. Each person who stepped into the shop,

each one who walked past, was her opponent. The Dance of the Keys was effectively her marching beat as she trod into battle.

"You see, the point about people is this. We're not nice. We're not charitable." She probably *would* say this, if only to give the boy an easy headline. "We can be but it's not our default setting. People don't come in here to help others. They're looking to help themselves. Not just the thieves. Everyone, in their own little way. That's why the professional approach works and the idealistic one doesn't. That's why we've got to be cunning. We've got to get a tiny bit more out of each person than they'd planned on giving."

And she would give examples if necessary from all along the unbroken line which connected the thieves to the honest. The bargainers, who seemed to have nothing better to do on the Lord's day than try to make Helen accept fifty pence less for a tattered scarf. They were usually students who urgently needed to buy clothes from anywhere except a charity shop, and who still found it amusing to say "You won't haggle??" in their best Life Of Brian voice. (And when, O God, Helen beseeched, will we finally get a generation of students who don't quote Monty Python?) There were the inquisitors, who demanded to know if a garment really was size 14, if it could be worn in hot weather, cold weather, weather which was a little bit overcast but looked brighter on the horizon, if it ran, shrank or grew in the wash and – above all – if they could get their money back if it failed on any criteria. There were the scrutinisers, who carefully read the reviews on the back of each book, the author's résumé, the first ten pages; then returned the volume to the shelves and selected the next one. There was – and Helen would reiterate this point – everyone. Everyone who came to get something cheap rather than help the suffering, who perverted the notion of charity by calculating how they could benefit from it.

"Aren't you part of that process?" the reporter would ask. And be told:

"I'm its high priestess. I'm not criticising it. I'm just telling you how it is. You asked why you can't be idealistic in this game. This is why. People aren't good."

He wouldn't have asked that. The 'interview' was essentially a diatribe. But she liked him to speak occasionally. He would have a deep and lightly accented voice, she decided. Just a little cracked by nicotine, a compliment to the faint but tangible seam of corruption which permeated him. And he wouldn't in fact be shocked by anything she said. He would be delighted; that he was getting such a lively story, that he wasn't having to endure some soft old bat blathering about the lovely people she met. Was her cynicism exciting him too? Maybe just a little. Maybe just enough.

Where would the interview take place? Certainly not in the shop itself. Even if the manageress didn't prowl across the background, its aura would make Helen censor herself. In a pub, she liked to think, one of the few left in the city centre old-fashioned enough to keep the music to a bearable volume and the bar stools next to the bar. They would sit at a corner table, on those lounge seats she found astonishingly comfortable both physically and morally. Not next to each other, not at first. At right angles. But the journalist gradually sliding closer and closer. A tactic he initially employs for the same reason he is giving her drinks and cigarettes. To burrow through her defences. However, when he realises the walls are only cardboard-thin anyway and the lightest blow will release the dammed waters of veracity straining inside her... He keeps inching closer anyway, and keeps giving her drinks and cigarettes. She has another need, aside from the determination to tell her story. Perhaps he will attempt to meet it; perhaps she will let him.

Even through the penumbral air of the corner seat she notices something curious. He looks like her first husband. The resemblance grows more vivid each time she frowns at him. The swarthy, quasi-Mediterranean sheen to his skin. The tangle of brown hair which appears to be three different styles fighting for supremacy. The way he sprawls boneless

into his chair. The way he lights cigarettes with sudden and surprising grace. The way he does everything, including the way he grins. Mischievous and hospitable, including her in a joke which he never quite explains.

He reminds her of her first husband yet she lets him squirm nearer. The husband who took her hopes when she was young enough to have some. Took her heart too, and she wasn't sure what he did to it but it wasn't in one place when he eventually kicked it back. And took her faith and finally her trust. He would have taken her money and kept it as well, were it not for his incompetence. Instead he took it and past it to their creditors and finally, after four years, took off. Leaving her sprawled on the ground, emotionally and legally bankrupt. Only good for her second, current, husband. A man who thought dreams should be confined to the sleeping mind. Who believed the proper condition of man was that of a salaried worker ant, to toil and save and toil and save and then die. Who never offered any part of his heart and wouldn't know what to do if given somebody else's, beyond hurriedly hand it back.

Helen had accepted all this. She found her own worker ant's job. They built their comfortable, solid nest in the suburbs. Maybe she was starting to believe her new husband's unspoken creed that the shortness of life meant risks should be avoided, not sought. And maybe not, but then it didn't matter. A real gamble, like a second shop of her own, would always need dependence on another person. She couldn't offer that trust any more and wasn't sure she even remembered how to.

She accepted this and still the reporter was becoming a replica of her first husband. Though she did not think she would trust him either. She would let him buy her three drinks but not four, the point where her intuition always started to disintegrate. She had taken total charge of the 'interview'. And she took it to such an extreme place that even a quote out of context could scarcely be more terrible than what she really meant. Even if the young man slid all the way towards her and then on top of her, she didn't think she would let him cross the final distance.

"Have there been many shop romances?" he would ask after getting her the third drink, parading that grin again.

"Well, most of them are pretty old. They'd probably be worried about heart attacks."

A stalling tactic. She knew he wasn't asking about the midweek workers, drawn almost exclusively from the ranks of the retired. He meant her fiefdom. Staffed mostly by students, all of them young, many of them male and some of them desperate. And herself, with her power over them.

"I could tell you stories," she might reply, though hadn't decided whether to say this in a deadpan or a coquettish style.

The potential shoplifter had departed five minutes ago. Without one of his curiously forthright attempts at theft, though in his normal uncoordinated meander which made the 'ordinary' browsers look nervous and remember they were, after all, in a charity shop. He had gone so where was Cassie? Helen waited a few more minutes until she became satisfied that the shop was sufficiently deserted and her temper was getting dangerously high. Then she switched the till off, pocketed the ignition key and strode around the corner. A procedure for emergencies only, she always told her disciples. Though working alone with Cassie qualified as a calamity all by... Because there the wretched girl was, fiddling about with the dresses. Not sorting them out, just browsing through them carefree. Checking that nobody was about to steal the whole till – and she had heard of that happening – Helen darted up to her.

"Can you do some sorting please?" Helen ordered, and her temper was thrust higher still by the vacant look she received.

"What of?"

"There's some boxes by the back door." Helen wouldn't mention the orphans on the doorstep. She always dealt with those herself. "Can you have a look through them and take them to the right places?"

And stop whingeing, Helen thought as she scuttled back to rescue the till from all its enemies. This is how it works when there's just two of us. We both take our turns. One spends a couple of hours sorting, pricing, hauling, doing the real work. The other sits behind the till, serving a customer every few minutes, glaring at potential miscreants but mainly just daydreaming a quiet Sunday away. Then we swap. I always do my share so don't turn me into an ogress when I demand the same of you.

"She didn't actually say anything," the reporter remarked with his grin.

"Neither did I. And are you here to listen to me or criticise me?"

"Tell me some of those stories."

Well, there weren't really stories as such to tell. Only confessions. Of desires felt but always suppressed. And she could only talk of hers. If any were reciprocated, they were pushed down so deep that she never even sensed them.

"Which ones did you desire?"

"Chris." Of course, she added to herself. Her favourite of her many assistants and the only one to ever stir emotions beyond professional approval. He had lasted longer than most. Over a year, spread over the end of his university career and the surprisingly long period of unemployment which followed. The length of time, allowing them to become fully intertwined, was the least of the reasons, however.

Chris looked like her current husband had when he was young. Or perhaps just how she always imagined her husband. A pale Anglo-Saxon face. Free of blemishes, but also of any hooks to catch a viewer and drag them closer. Brown, flat, almost unstyled hair. A build not exactly tall or short or heavy or thin. One of those people. The eyes of a farmyard animal too – she could never quite decide which one – which never displayed humour or anger or even intelligence. When she first met him she thought, Jesus, it's going to be a long Sunday. It was too. So were the next few. Chris' shyness kept him locked inside himself. Gradually opened all the doors, however, and she stopped thinking about her husband whenever they were together.

Chris liked Karl Marx. He liked Bolton Wanderers. He liked a gallery of barmy Eastern philosophers and a stable of tuneless alt-rock bands. In fact he loved them, but never with the fanatical flame which made him try to win converts or prevented self-mockery. He made jokes about all his passions, always with the same uncracked ice on his blank face. "It's no wonder we've no customers," she remembered him saying one dead afternoon. "The cosmic harmony of this place is screwed. We need to feng shui it all up." She remembered that because it was such a typical Chris comment, intended to entertain but not entirely a jest. He applied the same approach to the shop and, she thought, her lessons. She let him, whereas she demanded unconditional acceptance in most of her acolytes. Because Chris reminded her, at a time when she especially needed it, that competence didn't preclude personality. That it was possible to behave like a characterless drone without being one; that, essentially, there were choices other than the extremes of her two husbands. Chris made it fun to run the shop properly. Dangerously enjoyable, perhaps. Often it felt like her Sundays were bright poles which guided her through the long, long spells of turgid darkness in between.

But no, she would admit to the journalist, there's no story here either. Just more yearnings and more suppression. She became increasingly attracted to Chris. His appearance never improved. However, she came to see its importance. As a blank canvas on which his wonderful self could be painted with no rips or ripples to disturb the picture. So that featureless face did eventually stir her. And there was an opportunity. His

girlfriend left him nine months into his tenure. He never told Helen a great deal about the event. That part of him remained shut away. She studied him, though, sensed the loss and pain clawing inside him. His desperation and anguish towards a world which, as his spell of unemployment lengthened, seemed to be rejecting him totally. She could have had him. If she used the right strategies she could have taken him and-

She never tried though. It would have been sordid. She was thirty eight then, nearly twice his age. She was his mentor in certain respects, his friend in others. Oh yes, she recalled a little too late – and she was married. If she succeeded, perhaps she would have been able to ignore the squalor. She never could be sure of winning him, however. He kept those emotions hidden too. And she was always checked by the terror of pouncing and missing. The image of the old woman sprawled on the floor again, doubly pathetic now because this time her own lusts had toppled her.

Then Chris was gone. Back to his home town, where he had finally found a proper job. She never heard from him again, not even the brief request for a reference. So she stayed faithful. She stayed with her husband, entangled in her marriage of passionless amiability, in her bed only shared for sleep. Because, she would demand of the reporter, what are my other options? The daffy students who replaced Chris, most of them just exasperating and many, in any case, female. The legion of white-shirted drones in my paid job. And you. You, who keeps inching closer but, I suspect, will never come close enough. I don't think you're going to plunge that final distance, are you? I don't think anyone will ever again.

"Tell me about the orphans on the doorstep," the reporter would ask afterwards, probably following an uneasy pause.

"Chris was the only one who ever found that line funny, you know. Even when the others understood it, they never laughed. Even Julie didn't."

"Julie was the one who..."

"Who laughed at everything, yes."

"I don't think I really understand it yet."

"Look, to fully appreciate the orphans... you've got to know how the donation system works. You've got to see our back rooms."

Helen did her allocated two hours in the back rooms that afternoon, as per the unwritten pact. After Cassie had taken nearly an hour for lunch and finally returned bringing Helen a sandwich – turkey rather than the requested ham – which was consumed in about two minutes. Helen left the bright gleam of the shop floor, where everything was carefully spaced and immaculately placed and a veneer of modernity tried to camouflage the tattiness of the actual goods. And entered, with her usual wave of exasperation, the back rooms. Where nothing was bright or new.

They weren't even christened accurately. There was actually only one room behind the shop floor. The little 'office' where new donations were slung prior to being distributed. Which also held the Victorian safe and a desk where the cashing up was done; generally in about three square inches of space because donations were most commonly slung onto it. The sorting rooms were above and below.

First she ascended a floor. The shop had access to the storey above that too, though she really hoped they didn't pay rent for it. Most was occupied by a cavernous, barren room with a comically unsafe floor. She had only entered it once, years ago. The fire escape on the far side had somehow worked itself open. So she crept across the room, feeling the panels buckle beneath her, hearing the ancient beams creak awake. She had to stand on that floor for a long time, fighting to push back the rusted bolts of the fire escape. While

she battled she imagined having to explained red-faced to St Peter – or Lucifer, depending on how she was judged – exactly how she had ended up before them. The internal door to the cavern was permanently locked now, to prevent similar acts of intrepidity. Helen didn't know if the fire escape had ever sidled open again. If a burglar spotted it and dared the dangers inside, she decided, he deserved his loot.

So she got out at the first floor. Another large room, though anything but spartan. It was maybe fifty feet long, twenty feet wide. Two rails stretched across each of the longer walls. One was at shoulder height, the other closer to the ceiling and only accessible via a stepladder marked 'Warning: Do Not Use.' The rails curved round to continue along the shorter walls. The only breaks came at the door and two small windows which never admitted enough light. From every inch of each rail, packed as tightly as human ingenuity could achieve, hung a piece of clothing. Every item conceivable barring underwear; and some rather dubious suspenders tested even that rule to the limit. Representing every single fatuous fashion too, going back to the 1950's and sometimes earlier. Kaftans and trenchcoats and patched jeans and miniskirts and leotards and parachute pants and shell suits. And the sort of heavy skirts and staid trousers which have never been either in or out of style, just always *there*; and strange, indeterminate objects which once crawled out, entered an evolutionary cul-de-sac and quickly died. And some others.

There they hung. And waited, and waited. Waited for the blessing which Helen would grant to about twenty that afternoon. She had prowled the shop floor earlier. Looking for gaps made by the morning's little flurries of sales or perhaps, she conceded, thefts. They had to be true gaps as well, not simply a crack of air where a garment might conceivably be shoved. Goods should never be packed tight on the shop floor. The staff had to recreate the professional insouciance of a proper retailer; to avoid repelling the customers by revealing their desperation. Desperation was confined to the sorting room. Where only twenty received the fate which all the garments yearned for. Brought down to the bright lights of the shop floor. And then, hopefully, a final selection. Plucked up by a customer and feel a warm body inside them again. Filled once more with purpose and life. Granted the absolution which would let them forget how callously their former owners had abandoned them.

The thousands left behind watched sadly as she left with her select few. She wasn't fair. She chose according to what was smart, what might sell, not whose turn it was. She had passed over some garments hundreds of times. She would always pass over them; everyone would. And they could do nothing save hang and hope. A slaughterhouse freezer room was one image which sometimes presented itself to Helen. A dog's home was another. But the slabs of meat and the unwanted puppies were heading for one sort of ending or another. (Possibly the same type if you believed the jokes about the contents of beefburgers.) The rejected clothes would conceivably hang in the cool, moth-free air of the sorting room forever. Simply growing a little mustier as month followed month, a little mankier. A little less likely to ever be adopted. Helen could only really find one suitable metaphor: purgatory. And the clothes on the rails were the more fortunate.

Look to the far end of the room, behind the sorting table, for the others. A huge pyramid of bags leaning unreliably against the wall. Some festooned with the bright colours of boutiques, holding recent donations. Most just ominous, anonymous black plastic. The garments on the rails had been checked and declared free of any blemishes. Only that last decision separated them from the bright lights. Those inside the bags had not. Most likely they never would be.

Helen spent about an hour working through the bags. First came the separation of the sheep from the goats. Bodies, sleeves, lapels, cuffs, belts, all examined rapidly but rigorously for holes or stains. Some volunteers were charitable. Helen was harsh and the

slightest deformity would cast the whole garment into the waste bag and, ultimately, transportation to some unknown doom at a depot in Huddersfield. The survivors were then steamed. The shop steamer was another relic of a distant decade. Water was boiled inside its fat, oval body. From this stretched a thick, faintly bendable snake with a heavy metal head. Steam, and frequently a globule of scalding water, was spat from holes in the head, which was rubbed against clothes to, theoretically, remove all creases. It didn't work especially well. The older volunteers were too frail to use it and Helen felt she would soon be joining their numbers. But she saw the virtues of the steamer whenever it broke and she was forced to employ the logical substitute – an iron. An iron demanded perfection. You would pass it over and over every piece of cloth, not wanting to stop until all was pristine. And about five garments would be processed each hour. Perfection was impossible with the steamer. So you merely gave everything a quick brush, just enough to flatten the most glaring crevices and remove the aura of antiquity which might prevent an object from selling. Finally, the pricing. Another critical examination of the item. A quick consultation of the shop's price ranges and, in Helen's case, generally picking the lowest number allowed. Fastening the cardboard tag to any handy flap with the vicious gun which had impaled her fingers at least a hundred times. Then up on the rail to wait, and wait. Helen worked rapidly, competently, incessantly. And by the end of the hour she had made absolutely no discernable impression on the pyramid of bags. With the donations Cassie had brought up earlier, she reckoned the pile was larger than at the start of the day.

She rarely saw the tip of the pyramid lower than her breastbone, the base narrower than five feet. Just occasionally it shrunk perceptibly. A few summers ago, when a platoon of students were dragooned into service and she worked a whole sweltering day in the clothes room, she was given a vision of what lay beneath. She picked up yet another bag and saw... not the virgin floor, of course. That would be insane. But a squashed and battered wall heater, hidden for aeons. And beside it a sign saying "Radiator. Do Not Cover." She put the bag back, hoarding the revelation away as her own private joke. On reflection, she decided she wouldn't share it with the journalist either.

She would, however, tell him about the Summer and Winter bags. The shop usually put out clothes with little discrimination. They did, however, perceive that thin garments sold better in hot weather, coats in the cold. They were that astute. So each season another bag was hung beside the rejects' sack, for objects whose time had not yet arrived. Dozens were filled each month. They were hauled up to the second storey and stored in a smaller room whose floor was deemed more reliable. Possibly erroneously – Helen had never seen enough of it to check. At the start of a new season, four score of the sacks were dragged down and added to the main pyramid. Some were indeed opened, sifted through, steamed and hung up. Many more simply waited, buried by fresher, flashier donations. They sat there until their time ran out and they were removed again. And Helen had secretly marked some bags so that knew a number were simply taken downstairs at the start of a season, carried up once more at the end. Up and down, up and down, for year upon year.

"The ones I really feel sorry for," she told the reporter, though probably not while looking very distraught, "Are the bereaved relatives. We get them sometimes. A sad-faced couple giving us a dozen ancient suitcases. Inside, a whole wardrobe of old coats and tweed skirts. They never actually say but you always know. Somebody's mum has died. And you know what they're hoping too. That a little good can come of it. That Mum can help someone after she's gone. That... maybe Mum can go on herself, in some form. Nice sentiments. I wonder what they'd do if they knew. The death donations, they hardly ever go out, I'm afraid. The clothes that don't smell of lavender smell of damp. Or of old age – you know that special smell old age has? Even the stuff in good condition doesn't usually go out. They're clothes for respectable old women. And respectable old women don't buy

clothes in charity shops. So that's Mum's after-life. Hanging around forever in a back room. I wonder what they'd say if they knew.

"Any of them, really. Those giving normal donations too. You know, the bag or two of clothes they can't fit into anymore. You see it in their faces when they hand them over. A sort of shy benevolence. And expectation they'll get a stream of thanks. Well, I always thank them. It's only polite. But that's all I'm being, polite. Some pick up on that and seem to get offended. They don't know, you see. That there's ten thousand things just like this upstairs, I'll get another hundred each Sunday and maybe sell twenty or thirty."

"What do you think when *you* donate your old clothes?"

"I get proper use out of my clothes. Those too old for work get worn on evenings in. Those too old for evenings in get worn for housework and gardening. And when they're too tatty for the garden, they're not even fit for dusters."

"Are you saying that everyone should do the same? Donating to charity shops is a waste of time?"

She would look at him here, staring down the faint aggression which was creeping into his tone. "I'm saying, if the top floor collapsed and took out the whole sorting room, it'd be a blessing in disguise. And we'd be fully operational again inside a week. I'm saying that if you give goods to charity instead of money, don't *expect* to be doing good. Just hope that you *might*. Course," she would have to add, "I'm only talking about your standard, five year old tat here. New stuff, expensive stuff, that's special. We got given a fancy leather jacket last month. 1950's retro but barely worn. Damn awful it looked, but good for the middle aged man in a crisis. I put it out for seventy quid. It sold inside an hour. Seventy pounds. Most of our stuff is about a fiver. You should see us, in the back rooms, when we find something of proper quality. You should see us *pounce* on it. Maybe the sight would warm your heart. I doubt it though. There's real greed on our faces. As if the money was going straight to us, not the African children. That's how you start thinking after a while. And finding quality goods, something that can burst through the normal routines, that's part of what the orphans on the doorstep are about."

The journalist, she decided, looked even more handsome when he frowned. "In what way?"

So, glad to have regained full control of the interview, she would describe the normal procedure. The donor sidled into the shop and handed over the counter a few bright shopping bags or deteriorating cardboard boxes. Unless they were executors of a will, or a perceived will, there might be a short explanation of why the goods had been rejected. There would almost always be a summary of their character. Helen would glance inside to verify this and then give her never-quite-effusive-enough thanks. She was as polite as she claimed. So she waited until the donor had departed before conducting a proper examination and letting her face express its full dismay. A pair of flip-flops, some Dan Brown novels, one of those garments too substantial to be a bikini yet too skimpy – in Helen's opinion – to be a dress. The usual tat. Real reasons for donation: first, spring cleaning, second, because the charity shop was closer than the tip.

She knew almost immediately. That was the point. The initial assessment made within seconds, the confirmation a minute later. That was impossible with the orphans on the doorstep.

The orphans were donations she found waiting just outside the back door when she arrived in the morning. Again, she could guess the reasons why. Donors who didn't know that the shop opened later on a Sunday. They couldn't, of course, be bothered coming back. They already believed they were doing humanity an immense favour by using the shop as a municipal skip. So they left the bags outside and sped off, doubtless feeling virtuous. And Helen's guesses were probably correct in almost every case but they remained guesses. She

would never know. So while her prime emotion on spying the orphans was irritation – they spoke of the most selfish and dispassionate form of charity, a form which the shop tended to inspire – this was always laced with tiny droplets of excitement.

The donations were usually hidden. Even this sort of bequeather realised that goods drenched by a morning shower would not be appreciated. Zipped up sports bags, tightly fastened bin liners, cardboard boxes sealed with sellotape. So that instant look inside had to be deferred. Gone too was the view of the donors themselves. The little babbles of explanation, the apologetic expressions which often appeared as suddenly as a spasm and which told Helen a lot about the value of their largesse. There was just a sealed mystery. Lifting it might provide some clue. A tiny tinkle of glassware colliding, the intense heaviness which denoted books. This was very limited, however. Which books? What type of glassware? Anything might be inside.

Today the orphans were two supermarket bags, their handles knotted together. Helen knew she should have brought them in as soon as she arrived. Orphans rarely vanished as mysteriously as they appeared. Thieves preferred goods they could see on the shop floor, not caring greatly about the hurdles of badly positioned cameras and ruminating volunteers. The back door, though, ran onto a little courtyard surrounded on the other three sides by residential flats. Because they were close to the city centre the flats were expensive; and because they were expensive their inhabitants were snobs. They didn't like sharing their courtyard with a charity shop and grasped gratefully every chance to complain when it made their pristine courtyard untidy. And if Helen wanted to bicker with bourgeois neighbours then she could stay at home. Yet she still tried to delay the first lifting of the orphans. The clues may be tiny but they could nonetheless narrow the circle just a little, making its circumference perceptible.

The shopping bags, when she finally carried them in, were silent. Both medium size, one fairly but not excessively heavy. Satisfied, she put them on the table in the office-cum-dumping room and left them there. Cassie was chained to the till for the rest of the day. Nobody else could open the bags. Helen could deny doing so until the final minutes and that little sonnet of anticipation would sustain her through the shift.

"Why do you find them so exciting?" the reporter would ask.

"I told you. There might be anything inside."

"You mean they might contain something expensive? But I thought you said you pounced on any valuable donations. You get them onto the shop floor as quick as you can."

He still didn't understand. He didn't even look especially interested. Well, he hadn't seen everything yet. She took him downstairs.

Much of the volunteers' time was spent in the cellars. The staff toilet was down there, the kitchen, the pegs and lockers for their coats and bags. The bric-a-brac room, the book room, and a vast, damp cavern where electrical goods quietly decayed because the shop could never find a qualified tester to certify that they were safe to sell. Helen was mildly claustrophobic and disliked going into the basement of her own house. She rarely even noticed when she was underground at the shop, however. Few fears, few emotions of any sort, could resist the adamant strength of routine.

She walked through the kitchen, past the newspaper clipping which had so comprehensively conquered her day, and into the bric-a-brac room. The crip-a-crap room, a former assistant had once called it, and Helen hadn't found the conviction to chastise him. It was smaller than the clothes room but had a similar character. There were the same shadows, the same patina of dust and decay; and the same clutter so dense that it was almost solid. A similar ratio, too, of items waiting to travel to the shop floor to ones which had made the journey – approximately ten to one. In the clothes room, though, the mass

was simply horizontal. Here it was vertical as well. Glasses were balanced upon ashtrays upon boxes upon spectacle cases upon paperweights; a legion of precarious towers which could only exist in a land totally confident it would never suffer an earthquake.

Glasses and ashtrays, Helen thought as surveyed the two parallel sets of shelves. Most bearing the stamp of some dull, hackneyed tourist resort. Vases fashioned into a design popular for five minutes in 1975. Badly made straw camels hoisted onto unwary travellers by gregarious Moroccan peddlers. Little metal badges from inconsequential car rallies in Hertfordshire. Porcelain owls containing inside their bellies clocks which no longer worked. A ball of awful necklaces which nobody ever bothered trying to untangle. And so on. Crip-a-crap. The world no longer just produced goods which were requested or even which it thought might be needed. It made them anyway, in the vague hope that somebody somewhere might one day desire them. The room was one of the sewerage dumps of this perpetual gluttony.

"Here's what worries me," Helen would say. "Some of this stuff's from the death donations. But the generation that's dying now, they didn't have much. A few holiday souvenirs, some of those awful china shepherdesses. They were shaped by the Depression, the War. Even later, when they could afford to, they didn't buy garbage for the sake of it. But the next generation, they're different. They're the sort who fill their homes with junk and buy a bigger house so they can fill *that* with junk. The sort who buys from the Innovations catalogues. When *they* start dying... We're going to be swamped. We're going to be hit by a damn tidal wave." Another strategic pause, then, "Luckily I'll be too busy dying myself to notice it happening." Yes, why not say that, she decided. If the young man was not going to creep any closer, she needed to create reasons why. And this seemed the least painful one.

She prowled between the shelves again, looking to fill miniscule gaps on the shop floor. They did get reasonable goods too, she knew. Very occasionally something valuable; more often the sort of basic, sturdy item which a person with little pride or money might want. However, the covering which was draped across all the shelves was not simply made of dust. It was of tawdriness too. Beneath the blanket, the cut glass decanter seemed just as worthless as the pottery sphinx which stood beside it – or sometimes, on top of it. The infection was only temporary but made selecting the right item a difficult art.

Deeper into the basement there was a slightly different ambience to the clothes room. There was no sense of being watched expectantly by spaniel eyes. This was, after all, the fate of bric-a-brac. To be placed on a shelf and almost entirely forgotten about; and if a piece was ever bought then its life would barely change. Shop policy was also more ruthless towards them; or possibly, more kind. Bric-a-brac was not kept in a state of limbo almost forever, taken from one room to another and then cruelly whisked back to its first home. Most items rarely even reached the sorting room shelves. And they were only allowed to exist there for a limited time. The large skip which stood beside the back door ended up claiming almost everything.

"It's hard sometimes," Helen explained as she surveyed. "I've chucked things in that skip some weeks, found them back on the shelves the next. There's a mindset among some of our staff. If there's a chance, just a chance, something will sell, we should keep it. To hell with that. I'm not having rubbish taking up space upstairs, making the whole shop look bad. So you've got to throw things in the skip the right way.""

She would, she thought, be sifting through another box of dispiriting glasswear as she said this. So she could instantly demonstrate her trick. Take an especially odious item; a chipped and dusty sherry glass, maybe, or one of those dreadful 1970's beakers decorated with the silhouette of a gyrating bimbo. Wrap it dexterously in a sheet of newspaper. Pick up a heavy stapler. Bring the stapler down hard on the bundle. When the muffled clinks

had ended, turn and give her audience a menacing smile. She liked showing the trick to new volunteers, a demonstration that ruthlessness was a far more valuable asset than benevolence.

"There. We'll not see *that* again."

The far side of the bric-a-brac room was filled with toys, piled into another insane jumble. Helen rarely paid them any attention. Occasionally she gave them a brief glance and made the same deduction. That the colours of modern toys were far more garish than those made for past generations; that the shades of all toys became more subdued as the age range increased. And so children were becoming, or at least were being treated, more infantile over time. She shrugged. Then she turned away again and headed towards the books room. The reporter would probably linger, however, staring at the mounds of fur and plastic, his face displaying disappointment. Presumably he was hoping to hear about Helen's vicious treatment of the innocent Fingles and Transformers.

"I don't do toys," would be her curt response as she stopped, though still facing the books room.

"Why not?"

"I don't know anything about them. There's plenty here who do. The grandmas and so on. They can sort them out."

"It doesn't require much expertise, surely? No more than the rest of the bric-a-brac."

"I don't like them, if you must know. I don't like selling them. Second-hand toys, it's not right. I'm not blaming the mothers who buy them. You look at the poor cows and see they can't afford anything better. But kids deserve new toys. Or at worst, stuff handed down by big brothers and sisters. I know they'll make do with what they're given. That's no reason to give them the least possible thing, though. Just because they won't complain."

He *was* a journalist, she thought. He was paid to not accept what he was told, to push past the line which would check decent men. So he probably would insist, "Is that the only reason?"

And she would turn, glower and demand, "Why else?"

"Do you have children yourself?"

"Of course I don't. My Sundays wouldn't be free then, would they? My kids would be, what, eleven, twelve, thirteen by now. I'd be taking them to the seaside. To adventure playgrounds. Taking them pony trekking or walking or dry-slope skiing or... I'd spend my weekends with my kids."

"You wanted children then?"

"Brilliant deduction."

"Do you mind if I-"

"Yes. I do mind."

"OK, that's fine."

"I'm not telling you that. I'm not saying if it's psychological or physical or social. Animal, vegetable or mineral. Or if it's me or the others. Because I'm not having where you're taking that information. If it's my husband you'll be thinking, 'Loveless marriage, he can't even give her kids, why does she stay loyal? *Has* she stayed loyal?' And if it's me, well, I know what you'd be guessing about the break-up of my first marriage. You don't get to do that."

"I don't make those sort of assumptions-"

"You make some though. It's your job. Well, you've had all you're getting from me on the subject. Take it where you want. I don't care. It's a dead subject now anyway."

"What do you mean?"

"You know how old I am. Pretty much past what they call a 'biologically useful age.'"

"Not necessarily. The things which science can do nowadays-"

"It's not doing them to me. Science has *never* done me any good."

She glared at him a moment longer, realising she had just revealed what the fault was and who it was with. He didn't react. Purely, she knew, because he was too intimidated and too clever. So she turned again and stalked into the books room. After a moment she heard him follow. She wondered why, and why she was letting him continue to exist even though he had stopped giving her any pleasure whatsoever.

There was a hinterland between the two sorting rooms. Pictures tended to end up there, and picture frames and artificial Christmas trees and CDs. The latter were invariably tired compilations given free with Sunday magazines. Sometimes Helen would take them out of their cardboard wallets and skim them across the room like frisbees, frustrated that she was unable to shatter them. Today she refrained, however, and headed for the huge, intimidating skyscraper of shelves where the books were stored.

It was the one part of the shop which she actually liked. She usually spent about an hour of her shift with the books. Mostly working, of course, performing that immortal trilogy of sorting, pricing and restocking. Sometimes discretely correcting the categories; moving, for example, 'A Short History Of Tractors In Ukrainian' out of the Foreign Languages section. However, she admitted that she also entered the room to dawdle. Scan her eyes over the great shelves, looking for, amidst the thousands of famous and obvious and banal names, the obscure and fascinating. Ten minutes a week could be wasted but the shop generally profited. Rare indeed was the Sunday when Helen failed to find some prey, often a creature she wasn't aware she was looking for, and march it upstairs to the till. And had the interview being conducted in her home – but it wouldn't be, she decided eventually – she could have shown the reporter the consequences. The platoons of bookcases which were slowly filling the house, a new one having to be bought almost every year. Mostly holding these battered vagabonds which kept calling to some strange impulse of Helen's. It was one of her few habits which her husband ever dared criticise. That would be reason enough to continue it, to see crackles of emotion in his lifeless eyes. But the books would always have seduced her regardless.

The one type of second hand produce she would ever buy, the only one she thought worth selling. She felt contempt for most of her customers, pitying them for their desperation or despising their poor taste. That was really the barrier which separated them. They were settling for second best; and so they were, in one way or another, failures. Not the book buyers, however. Not even the majority, who picked some trashy thriller because it was half the price they would pay in the thousands of shops which sold it new. Because books alone could defy the sledgehammers of time. Clothes got holes in them, plates were chipped – and the whole item was effectively ruined. A book might be battered and creased and jaundiced and its quality was exactly the same. As long as its pages were still in the right order and not made illegible by stains then the words, the only important factor, remained immaculate.

A store of second hand books was not only impervious to time. It could actually defeat the passing of years. Or rather: the vacillations of market forces and their eternal campaign to obliterate writers forever. They were the tomes which she searched for especially. The third division novelists who earned a living income in their lifetimes and were forgotten as soon as they died. The breathless art theorists writing in an epoch when abstractism was still new and radical. Even the authors made to look foolish by history. The social scientists assured of the permanence of Empire; the natural scientists confident of mankind's rapid conquest of space. They all might find a place on Helen's shelves, where they doubtless reinforced their tottering confidence by jeering at their equally fatuous neighbours.

A few of her customers had the same habits. She saw them scanning the shop shelves for whatever obscurities she had missed or rejected. They often bought in bulk, with no connections whatsoever between their contents of the mound except their antiquity. A few were just eccentrics, she supposed, like she was. But most were dealers, professionals. Like she had once been, like she pretended she still was for one day a week.

It hadn't been a book shop when they bought it, she and her first husband. It was on a good street for second hand books, however. Located in the closest the town had to an artistic quarter, near to the university. Her neighbours peddled wind chimes and pot pourri and acupuncture and other such nonsense. And the building was hundreds of years old and hilariously impractical. The interior was a maze of tiny cells and vacillating corridors. Neither the floors nor the ceilings left any room at the same level they entered it. The place looked right for the purpose.

When they began, however, Helen was determined to run it on a professional basis. She wasn't yet fully formed but had started to mould herself; and she hated the sloppiness of most second-hand bookshops. Opening and closing when it suited the proprietors, putting the stock out in unwieldy, uncategorized stacks, virtually ignoring anyone trying to make a purchase. She would be customer focussed. Not a phrase she would ever want to use; but she was always aware of the dependency on her customers. And it was a relationship infused with warmth. There was no wall between them when she kept her own shop. No instinctive feeling that many were thieves and all were opponents. She welcomed each arrival with actual pleasure. Even those who looked and pawed for half an hour and then left without enriching her were not resented. They were united, Helen assumed, by their love of books. She even cultivated regular visitors whom she would chatter with. Some became – not friends, because she was reluctant to make new friends even then, but some category which inspired real fondness whenever she saw them and total amnesia whenever they were absent.

She didn't do a professional job, however. She knew that now. Her love of books deadened all her other senses. She didn't like selling authors whom she despised. Filled with the zeal of a recent arts graduate, she managed to despise almost all popular writers. She didn't like stocking the tired, second-rate textbooks which the neighbouring college students needed to buy. And while she read the trade catalogues, she didn't take them seriously. She never accepted that a badly written but beautifully bound tome might be worth more than a good novelist in a scruffy jacket. Most of her 'customers' were actually browsers. Her few regulars, those who inspired her affection, were dealers who consistently cheated her. They came to buy underpriced valuables which they sold on for many times the amount.

Most businesses lose money in the first year, her husband reassured her. While she ran the shop on a day-to-day business, he did the accounts and brokered the larger deals. He also kept a part-time job to pump funds into the shop until it became profitable. After the second year he could only tell her, we've not lost as much as we did the first. He said the same on their third anniversary. By the time of the fourth he was gone, unmasked and evicted a month earlier. Helen was forced to examine the shop properly and finally accept how large the losses were, how few funds he had supplied, how bad his deals had been. In his defence, much of his concentration must have been occupied by courting another woman. The affair had begun several weeks after his marriage. He remained faithful to his alternative, as far as Helen could discern afterwards, and eventually vanished with her.

That had been the period when she was happiest. The marriage which brought excitement and the job which gave her contentment. Both locked into a cycle of failure from the very start. So much so that the only mysteries left were why the disasters had

taken so long to manifest and why she received no augers at all that either were approaching.

And that left them nowhere to go. Nowhere but back upstairs, where the orphans were waiting. Two shopping bags. Not quite as mysterious as cardboard boxes, the most opaque of all the orphans. Deductions could be made by prodding and shaking techniques remembered from childhood Christmas presents which couldn't be opened until after lunch. One bag was soft, spongy. Clothes, probably, or towels or rugs or some other fabrics. The other was less yielding. Its weight suggested books of some sort. Of what sort, though – and what type of fabrics? Exclusions alone could be made and true knowledge could only be accessed by tearing open the wrapping paper.

"We've a catalogue of valuable ornaments somewhere," she said, still staring at the orphans. "Just in case. And I've still got a few about books from my shop days. I flick through it sometimes. Just imagining. What if."

"I heard about that diary from the 1920's which was donated and ended up getting published," the reporter ventured. "It sold quite a lot of copies. They marketed it as a historical Bridget Jones, didn't they?"

"Yeah. The antics of an Edwardian slapper. I read it. It was what you'd expect. That's not what I imagine. Originals. That's where the real gold is. The first manuscript of *Wuthering Heights*. Of Chaucer. The first King James Bibles. The one James himself owned, maybe."

"That's not very likely, is it?"

"Never under-estimate people's generosity. Or their ignorance. But I don't just think about books. That heavier bag? What else could be inside, do you reckon? Money. Stack after stack of fresh bank notes. The money's a more enticing fantasy. For some reason it leads straight to the thought: would I pass it on to the shop? Or would I keep it?"

"Enough money, maybe, to set up your own business again?" The more cynical tone had sidled back into the reporter's voice. "And this is what you seriously imagine will happen one day?"

"No. But it might. It's one hell of a thing, the might of might. And you've still not quite got it. When an orphan's sat there unopened, I think – it might *have* happened. Someone could have put it in a sack. Left it for us. And it could be sat there right now." She contemplated the bags a moment longer. "It's a common theme, isn't it? The unopened box. The mystery with only one solution. And while it's still a mystery, it could be anything."

"Schrodinger and his cat," the reporter murmured.

Helen was annoyed that he had used the only example she could think of immediately. For revenge, she turned and said, "You know what I'd target if I was a terrorist. A lazy terrorist, at least. A shop like this. Banks, offices, railway stations, anywhere else, they get a mystery package left on their doorstep, they call the police. We're supposed to open it. Easiest target you can think of."

"That's what you think could be inside as well? A bomb?"

"Why not? What are we going to do to stop them? I've had orphans before which have been ticking. Damn well ticking. All I thought was, there must be a clock in there." Wait one, two, three, four, then: "That's all they were too. So far."

"But why would a terrorist target a charity shop?"

"We're westerners, aren't we? To your Islamic madman that makes us legitimate targets. Anyway, terrorists are like racists. They don't have to follow logic." She tapped one of the bags, perhaps a little harder than she needed to. "Imagine," she continued. "A normal day. A cold, dull Sunday. You find a box. You start to open it. You're expecting to find a few

Catherine Cooksons and an old fondue set. And then, suddenly, nothing but light and heat. That's what I imagine sometimes."

There was no reply. She switched on the monitors for the CCTV cameras. Two battered, cannibalised television sets, one balanced uncertainly on top of the other amidst the scattered detritus of the 'desk'. And if you're still searching for a symbol of our approach to security, Helen sighed. Both monitors, of course, showed the till from different angles. The till and its attendant. Perhaps that was really the inspiration behind the shop cameras. Not suspicion of the customers but a different type of mistrust towards the volunteers. Helen put them to the latter purpose for a minute.

Cassie was sat on the stool behind the till with a book cradled in her hands. Well, Helen decided, that was acceptable. The shop was quiet. Slow to wake in the first half hour, it also usually fell into a steadily thickening doze for the last. And Cassie was not engrossed in her book. She glanced up every ten seconds or so, at one of the few groups of drifting customers. Just that, a look, to check where they were and what they were doing. With a peculiarly thorough blankness on her face too, so her targets could make no accusations of her intention. She wasn't taught that, Helen thought with approval. She learnt it by watching. Her opinion of Cassie became more benevolent. The girl wasn't lazy or disobedient, just a little tardy to adapt. She was getting there. Sadly, the slow learners might take months reaching the proper standard. Helen would have a couple of weeks of them at their best. Then they would be off to begin their proper lives, leaving only a thick smell of unfulfilment. And a new one would arrive and Helen had to start the process all over again.

"It might be a baby," she said suddenly. "An actual orphan. I think that too, sometimes. It could be a baby for me to keep."

She waited for the challenge. Though one failed to arrive, she answered it anyway.

"See, that's the difference between an open box and a closed one. After it's open, we've got to make do with what others have put there. While it's still closed we can fill it ourselves. It doesn't matter how fantastic. It can be anything. As long as it fits... And I reckon a new born baby would fit nicely into one of them bags." She turned, stared straight at him and demanded, "What do you say to that?"

He didn't say anything. Of course he didn't. He was a visible fantasy, unlike the unseen ones in the bags, so had limits. She had broken them and now he was starting to fade. She would have never made the last statement, however reckless she was feeling, however drunk he got her. Not to a reporter and probably not to anybody. It was a wish too far. The rules broken, the game was ending. She watched the slow disappearance of his young-but-not-too-young body with equanimity. It soothed her to say the wish aloud occasionally. Even to a rascally face with tussled hair who resembled the man she once believed would grant it. Who had now dissolved completely, leaving her alone in the office.

"I'd still have given you a good interview," she declared to the undisturbed air. "Even without the orphans. I'd have given you more than 'Pensioner Bows Out After A Decade's Good Work.' Oh well. Your loss."

Cassie had yet to eradicate her habit of jumping nervously when Helen appeared suddenly beside her. An anxious smile, a small flailing of arms which implied wrongdoing had been curtailed abruptly; even though Helen had seen on the monitors that it hadn't. Perhaps I'm just a bully, she thought, and the so-called 'professional' volunteers were simply the ones who could stand up to me. But Cassie had learned what the habitual question "How did the afternoon go?" meant. Not a polite enquiry into the girl's well-being but a request for a summary of the bottom line.

"We've not done too bad really. It's just sort of tailed off a few minutes ago. We sold a couple of those really hideous cocktail frocks. You know, those ones put out at fifteen quid apiece. I couldn't believe anyone would pay *anything* for those."

"Different strokes," Helen murmured; the mantra which all second-hand stores rested upon. If one throws it away, another will want it. Satisfied with the state of the front of the shop, she drifted to the back. A leisurely walk which she routinely conducted, always reminding her of a policeman pounding his beat. A voyage of precaution, checking nothing untoward had happened and nobody needed to be watched. The shop was almost deserted. Helen spent a few minutes restoring its pristine state, hanging up scattered clothes, shuffling ornaments back into line. As usual, a few abandoned hangers with their former charges missing inspired malevolent thoughts. Ultimately, though, she could only shrug. What had happened had happened, and the daydreaming cameras would have no record.

She would also make a final walk at closing time. The shop would doubtless be busier then. There was always a little surge just as she wanted people out. Her stroll this time resembled a publican bawling "Time, gentlemen, pur-LEASE!" She switched off the radio first. It played a mediocre local station at a low volume throughout the day, only intended to provide a welcoming background ambience. The music was only noticeable when it vanished. Now it vanished. In the sudden, hostile silence Helen jangled her keys somewhat ostentatiously. She stood a little too close to those final knots of shoppers intent on inspecting every piece of merchandise and not buying a single one. Sometimes she sighed or hummed a tuneless tune. Perhaps she should have simply announced that closing time had arrived. If anyone proved especially immune to her clues then she would do this. It always felt like another defeat, though, in that ongoing war of Them against Her. Usually her hints were registered, at least subconsciously, and she could empty the shop inside five minutes.

That little dance was to come, however. Now, she told herself, now was time to attend to the orphans. That was the bargain she always made. Extend the mystery for as long as she could, pile fantasy upon fantasy... but the job had to be done eventually. It was not, either, simply a matter of duty. Occasionally she forgot about the orphans completely. When she came in the next week, of course, they were gone, torn open and stored away by another volunteer. Helen would never learn their secrets; and the private hatred she felt towards her innocent co-workers was frightening.

So now she stood once more in the cool dankness of the mock-office. Alone and unobserved. Two shopping bags in front of her. There was not, really, infinite possibilities. Their size set boundaries. They couldn't, for example, hold a man she might love; the third segment of her missing holy trinity. She noticed her hands were shaking a little. They did every time. A lot was repeated each time. She stood alone with hands trembling, heart cantering, back and knees aching. Her mind both willing the moment to last an infinity and begging it to end. Each time meant a little less. Slowly this was declining into a ritual. Her hopes were deteriorating into clichés and the sanctity of the deed was draining away. And eventually it would be wholly empty and she would have to find another way of making the mundane special and bearable.

Not yet, however. As she reached forward to open the first bag she heard her hopes scream again. And there was still the confusion behind them, which made their voices especially shrill. The uncertainty of which she wished for most. The bag of money, the unwanted child. Or her world suddenly lost in the clap of light and heat.