

SEVEN MEMORIES

1 Number Thirty Two

I used to live at Number Thirty Two, Whitehall Road. It was my grandparents' house, and was joined to their two small shops. One sold sweets and tobacco and that was where my mother worked; one sold fishing tackle and that was where my grandad spent most of his time tinkering with rods and reels. My parents and I lived in a two roomed flat above the shops but I spent a lot of time down there in Number Thirty Two, and I still dream about it. Sometimes it is warm and full of heavy furniture and the scent of baking, just as it was then. But sometimes it is empty and distressing. And sometimes in the dream it is more than derelict. It is an ancient house, richly ornamented, the stones older than I ever remembered, tunnelling deep under the bedrock of the city, and those are the strangest dreams of all.

Number Thirty Two was older than any of us realised. Many years later, I bought a facsimile map of the city of Leeds in the seventeen hundreds, and there was my grandparents' house, surrounded by open fields. So it must have been a house with a name, not a number, in those days. It had probably been a farmhouse before the city choked it . When I think about it, that tall thin house, the shops, the flat, a bunch of old stone outbuildings and a yard at the back where no grass grew must have been one whole farmhouse. It is only in my memory that they are quite separate entities. Petty's Printers had engulfed it. Factories whined and trains rattled all around it. The air was grimy and stank of rotten eggs. Only the rural names remained:- Whitehall, Springwell, Holbeck.

Long before I was born, my grandad had tried to dig a duckpond in the back yard for three ducklings he had bought on a fishing trip. He would bring all kinds of things back from his angling excursions: there were big field mushrooms that were cooked whole in a frying pan with bread cakes to sop up the dark juices, fresh strawberries, apples, sweet and misshapen, crumbly curd tarts, honey. We ate well in those days. He was fond of duck-eggs too. But he had been deceived as usual. The ducklings were much too young and drowned one by one. It was the sort of thing that happened to him all the time.

There were two rooms on each floor of the house. The front door opened straight into a living kitchen with a big black range where my grandmother baked her bread and a kitchen table with an orange velour cloth, and a cool marble topped side table for pastry making. This table had a middle cupboard and that was where my grandmother, my nana, kept cream crackers in an old coronation tin. She would eat them every morning:- three buttered cream crackers with her tea. She was always trying to persuade me to eat them too, but I hated the smell of them and refused. On fine days my nana would sit in the open doorway, next to the anaglypta dado and look admiringly at her front door step which she had decorated with soft yellow donkey stone. It was important that the step looked right, and that the net curtains were washed with Dolly Blue, or Dolly Cream to make them look the right colour. All these things mattered.

The kitchen sink was set deep into the wall beside the range and on the same wall was a big bank of cupboards and drawers like an inset dresser. That too must have been very old, part of the original furnishing of the place. There was besides a little brown loaf shaped stool that was called Rufty Tufty, like a proper name, like a person. Rufty Tufty sat beside the fire and I sat on it, like little Miss Muffett when I wasn't sitting on the floor. There was a cellar door in the kitchen, but I was never allowed to go down there. It was too dark, too dirty and home to far too many spiders.

At the back of the house was the good room with a highly polished circular table where the round Alice in Wonderland jigsaw puzzle, my favourite, was laid out every Christmas. There was one piece missing. I always used to think it might come back suddenly, so that I could see the whole picture. But it never did. We didn't use that room much and in my memory it is a cold room. I spent most of my time in the kitchen, sitting in front of the fire on Rufty Tufty or on the rag hearthrug my grandad had made, picking at the little flaps of coloured cloth or playing with my nana's button box and listening to the grown up conversations going on around me.

Upstairs were bedrooms, where my grandparents and my unmarried aunt Veronica slept. There was a big old fashioned bath in my grandparents' room, and a high bed where I sometimes rested in the afternoon though I could seldom be persuaded to sleep. Still I loved the clandestine feeling of

bed in the afternoon. My nana would rest too, but I would squirm, and wriggle and kick her and she would send me downstairs in very short order.

Upstairs again were empty attic rooms. Many years before I was born, my Irish great grandfather Michael Flynn had slept up there – a lovely man they said. If he met a beggar in the street and the weather was cold, he would give his coat away. He did it so often that his daughter, my nana, grew exasperated by his too literal interpretation of Christian charity. He was a pavier, a wiry man with a big moustache who built roads and spoke with the accent of his native Mayo. My aunt Nora remembered that he would make mouth music for the amusement of his grandchildren. The night after he died my uncle and aunt swore that they had heard him walk upstairs, and then just keep on going. Up and away. And who's to say they hadn't?

Nobody slept in the attic when I was young, but it was home to an old wooden toy called a Galloping Scooter. This consisted of a little carriage and a pair of horses with real horsehair tails. The horses pranced up and down when you pedalled. My grandfather had bought it for Nora in London when she was a small girl. He was never well off but he too was prone to occasional extravagant gestures.

The first time they had taken Nora out on the galloping scooter, they had been mobbed by curious children. Holbeck was the wrong sort of area for posh London toys. So it had been stabled in the attic and it had survived in good condition. I was not allowed to play with it at all, something which I resented but not very deeply. I was tantalised by the horses' malicious wooden faces, but afraid of them too. They did not belong to me or my time. Instead I had Teddy Robinson and Monkey who was a pyjama case, and woolly Brown Dog Dingo.

Number Thirty Two had an outside lavatory. You went across the yard with its old hut where my grandad kept his bits and pieces and then through the wash-house with a salvage bin full of old newspapers, a tub, and a mangle all surreptitious and hostile in the darkness, vibrant with the possibility of life. You passed the copper where the sheets were boiled and the lavatory was in at the back. It had a warm wooden seat and it smelled nicely of bleach but there was no light in it.

I was too small to go across the yard in the dark by myself. Sometimes my aunt Veronica would take me instead of my mother and I would watch the tip of her cigarette glowing red in the dark, as she stood there and talked to me about the “pictures”. The whitewash on the walls felt furry under my fingernails. It flaked off in satisfying lumps. I thought my unmarried aunt very glamorous. She wore make-up and jewellery and crimped her long hair to make herself look like Veronica Lake. She loved the movies, and collected books and magazines with pictures of film stars in them. I wanted to be a film star when I grew up. I would re-enact *Seven Brides For Seven Brothers* at least once a week, and I was always the heroine. “Oh the barnyard is busy...” I would sing, leaping out from behind the curtains, assigning other parts to my family, as well as Teddy Robinson, Monkey and Brown Dog Dingo.

Close to Number Thirty Two was a ginnel you had to go through to catch the bus to Kirkstall Abbey where we often went on a Saturday or Sunday. Sometimes my father would take me to the countryside, where we would catch tadpoles or listen to wasps’ nests and once we saw a grass snake curled up, sound asleep in a sunny hollow. On winter Saturdays, we would go to the little News Theatre next to Leeds City Station, to watch cartoons, and the *Three Stooges* and *Laurel and Hardy*. Ginnels were covered, snickets were open. We called this ginnel the Dark Arches.

When I was with my father, I was not afraid of the Dark Arches, nor the mushroom smell of the damp tunnel nor the wisps of straw that blew about and collected in odd corners. Later, when I was grown up, my mother told me that a flasher had once lurked down there, lying in wait to bare all to the factory girls who passed on their way to work every morning. Only one of them had told him to “put it away, love, I’ve left a bigger one than that at home in bed” and then all of them had burst out laughing so loudly that he had zipped it up and crept away, as advised.

Half way through the Dark Arches was a gap where sunlight flooded in and there was a metal bollard worn smooth and shiny by years of hands. Beyond that again was the gaping mouth of a side tunnel that led up to Holbeck station. Lights shone in the distance; clanking noises and voices drifted from it as we passed in the evening, on the way home. I thought it lead to another more mysterious world. My father went along it once and I worried

in case he should be enchanted and never return, but he came back alright. He had only been to London on the train. They closed Holbeck station while I was still very young. They drew heavy iron gates over that side tunnel and the whisps of straw piled against them and the smell of old smoke hung about them.

Beyond the Dark Arches was a forge: a vast brick building with empty windows and sparks flying through. A thunderous, ear splitting, ground shaking pounding surrounded it day and night.

“The devil lives there” said my mother one day. “Can you hear him stamping his hooves?” So then I knew.

Later she was repentant. “I didn’t know you’d believe me” she said. “How was I to know you’d believe me?”

Once, as a young woman, I went back to Number Thirty Two. It was empty and due to be sold. It seemed tired, leaning in on itself, cracks on the walls. There should have been a cat in the window. The familiar scents had gone. It had that moist smell, like the Dark Arches. And it had shrunk, there being no family for it to fit. Upstairs in the attic I found, not the Galloping Scooter which had gone to a museum, but Brown Dog Dingo thrown into a corner. I could not imagine why I had abandoned him all those years before. The moths had gnawed at him. He was untouchable, small and cold as the devil.

I remember everything about Number Thirty Two. I remember it waking and sleeping and in my dreams it has become a magical place, and the dreams grow more entrancing with each passing year. There is almost nobody that remembers it the way it was. The less I can share these memories, the richer they become

2 Wallflowers

There is a picture that comes to me from time to time. I can never quite remember the where and when of it. It is of myself, small in springtime in a belted wool coat with a scarf tucked around me against the chilly evening air. I know that my father found the scarf draped around the basin of a stone fountain in some park or other and we took it home. It was burgundy and yellow, hand knitted, soft. I am carried high on my father's shoulders so that I can see everything, even the small bald patches on passing men's heads, a precarious and thrilling position. My father has black curly hair. Polish hair, as foreign as he is. I run my fingers through it as I sit up there. Sometimes I hold onto his ears and sometimes I hold my mother's hand from up there, balancing, laughing. I love them without limit or condition. From the park as we stand in the road watching for the bus, drifts the scent of wallflowers.

And that reminds me of something else. Later. Or earlier. How can I tell what? Or even if? Did it actually happen? Memories are embedded in memories. If I try hard I can remember playing in a stretch of meadow on a hot afternoon. Singing something. A game.

Wallflowers, wallflowers, growing up so high,
We're all pretty maids and we all have to die.

It is so hot that even the insects are drowsy. There is a higgledy piggledy drystone wall with plants springing up in the crevices and beyond the wall more stones where I know that there was once a house. And from where there was once a garden, from beneath the old apple tree which sheds a snow of petals comes the scent of

Wallflowers wallflowers growing up so high.

I am always the youngest girl. Ah for shame, ah for shame goes the song. I cannot sleep for wanting to keep the moment to hold it fast like that small girl I am on my father's shoulders, clutching his ears for balance somewhere in a warm meadow.

That was then. This is now. Outside a bird signals dawn but I have temporarily lost my soul and cannot bear too much light. That was now, this is then. Everything changes. Wherever they are, they are not here. They are...

I wish. I wish I were still the youngest girl, small in springtime on my father's shoulders, holding my mother's hand.

Clear and sweet from the garden comes the scent of wallflowers.

Ah for shame

Ah for shame

Turn your face to the wall again.

3 Jimmy

Cats make me sneeze. My grandmother always had a cat; otherwise there would have been too many mice in the house. The one I remember was called Jimmy. He was fat jowled and stripey with long whiskers and tattered ears: a fighter, a mouser and a birder

One day we caught him with a sparrow clamped in his jaws. He had been tossing it from side to side between his paws. Now he was carrying it off to a quiet corner. My father, who could not bear to see things hurt, took Jimmy between his knees. The claws came out and struck uselessly at the air. He would not let go, squirmed, whiskers bristling. Nevertheless the reluctant jaws were prized open, the bird removed. Jimmy streaked off to sulk beneath the table.

We stood at the door. The bird was not dead. It lay on my father's palm for a while, warm and soft. Its breast heaved. Then it staggered up, claws scrabbling, moved its wings. A preliminary flutter and it was flying up between the grey buildings, up and away.

Later that day though, Jimmy came and sat in a rigid triangle at the foot of our stairs. From there he screamed and howled and wailed at my father. He had been robbed of his rightful prey and resented it truly, madly and deeply. He continued the harangue for hours. You could shoo him away but he would just come back. . At last my father brought his big black umbrella downstairs and opened it, something Jimmy loathed and feared. He ran off but was back again within minutes. How could we explain it to him? There was nothing else to be done

And then, all of a sudden, he grew tired of the whole one sided argument and walked away, tail stiff, just the small white tip twitching in righteous indignation.

But we were never comfortable with Jimmy after that. For we suspected that he never forgot and he never forgave us. Never.

4 Mary's Month

When I was four and a half, I started at the Holy Family Primary. We walked there each day, under the Dark Arches, across many roads and up the hill to Armley past the sooty castle of the jail, past the cemetery, and then in at the school gates. Except for that first day, mothers were not allowed in the playground. At Home Time they waited for us, leaning on the wall. On the first day I sat sobbing in a waiting room full of weeping children, watching parents lead their reluctant offspring through a door one at a time, and then come back childless. But the infant teacher had a smiling face and fat brown curls. She also had the gift of turning tears off. We felt safe with her.

The school itself was a long low building, a single corridor with classrooms leading off it. One of our number – more daring or more desperate than the rest of us - would go in the front door every morning, and from a standing start run straight through the school, out the back door and home.

I wished I had that kind of courage. In spite of the kindly infant teacher, I didn't like school. I didn't like the headmistress who was fierce and dumpy, and I didn't like the older girls who held us upside down over the brick wall until we squealed and I didn't like the boy who sat next to me and pinched me, pulled my plaits and called me names until my mother collared him in the playground and threatened to do unspeakable things to him, whereupon he ignored me for the rest of the year.

Religion loomed large in our school as it had not in my life until that moment. We were nominally Catholics but not keen church goers in our house. I knew all about Mary though. Mary was God's mother. God was kind. He sat up there in the sky and you talked to him. But how come if you died in the night and you had missed mass you went to hell? There was a picture on our classroom wall of a bridge over a flaming abyss and that was the road to heaven but if you fell off you tumbled straight into hell. So every night I tried to make an act of perfect contrition which meant not thinking of anything else at all while you were saying it and I said the short one because it was easier to remember:

ohmygodlamverysorrythatlhavesinnedagainststheeandbythehelpofthygracelwill
notsinagain.

On the other hand God lived in church but that was alright because I knew by then that God was Everywhere and saw Everything. Even if you had forgotten to put your knickers on. A terrible thought. Mary, being a mother, would not mind.

There were three persons in God: The Father, The Son and The Holy Ghost. I was apprehensive of the Holy Ghost, saw him lurking in a white sheet, hoo hooing behind every tree. No wonder the apostles had hidden away in an upper room.

I envied God his house. I liked the rich mixture of smells: incense, lilies, wax polish. I liked the high intoned prayers. I liked the statues with their benign pink faces: Mary in blue and white. We look to thy shining sweet star of the sea. There were carved wooden confessionals like miniature churches so that when the mass became boring I could imagine a congregation of people inside, all scaled down, in proportion: coughing, fidgeting, shuffling.

“If you turn around they’ll throw you out” said my mother. I pondered on who they might be. The men who carried around plates at collection time were called The Knights of St Columba. Disappointingly, they wore no armour. But I sat very still. You couldn’t be too careful.

The school year was marked by festivals and Holy Days of Obligation like Ascension Day which we loved, because you just went to mass and then got the day off. It seemed a small price to pay even when the sermon was a long one.

In December we had a nativity play and because I could sit on my hair I was Mary, in a long dress and a blue sheet for a veil, clutching my baby Jesus. I had a baby doll of my own with a black porcelain head – somebody had given it to me, digging it out of their own attic perhaps - but that was not deemed to be suitable. Oh no.

In May the statue of Our Lady was carried through the streets and crowned with flowers. The aisles of the church were strewn with dismembered petals. The spicy scent of stocks and carnations was everywhere.

Juliette was in my class. She was small and thin and dirty and her nose ran with green candles. She was often absent because she had terrible headaches and even the teachers did not like her.

“Juliette? What kind of a name is that?” said one of them scornfully. She was bullied, constantly. There was nobody to sort it out for her, as my mother had sorted out my neighbour. I remember just once standing between Juliette, whom I did not much like either, and a crowd of my jeering classmates.

“You won’t hit her!” I said, stamping my foot. “Go away. If you hit her, I’ll hit you *back!*”

I was a sturdy child, with my long long pigtails and my Polish temper. I don’t think I was that virtuous. But not a team player. Never a team player. I liked being on my own too much. Didn’t much care whether I fitted in or not. And I didn’t like injustice, ever. After a bit my friend Sandra, another Polish child with creamy skin and sleek hair, came to stand by me. And then the rest of them turned and went away. They had no leverage on me. I felt sorry for Juliette and guilty and irritated by her all at once. I wanted her to clench her fists and fight back, but there was a raw vulnerability about her and she just slunk away. What else could she do? She had bruises on her arms and legs and sometimes on her face as well. You could see them, slowly changing through purple, blue, yellow. All the varied stages of contusion were painted upon her skin. Much later I wondered how the teachers could pretend not to notice what was happening to Juliette. How could they teach us about God and the Devil and ignore the sufferings of Juliette? How could they?

Miss Edgemere taught the older children and had problems of her own. She threw books, and chairs and sometimes tables about the classroom. You could hear the shouts and screams, the thuds and whimpers from behind that door. They said that she went home every night to care for a sick mother. She was the ogre in our dark wood. My future held Miss Edgemere. What would I do? How would I cope? Children were known to have left the school on account of her. Nobody asked Miss Edgemere to leave the school. Nobody helped her either.

My father visited the school. My father had come through the war, from Poland by way of Monte Cassino, carrying a handful of photographs and nothing else. He had lost everything including his family. Now he had a new family. He was invariably courteous but nothing much frightened him, not

even Miss Edgemere or the fierce headmistress. A few days later, she visited our classroom.

“You won’t be going to Miss Edgemere’s class” she told me. “You’ll be skipping a class this year.”

Nothing more was said. But Juliette went in to Miss Edgemere’s class. And so did Sandra. Sandra was her widowed mother’s pride and joy. She always wore immaculate organdie dresses with white knee socks and black patent leather shoes and she had red satin ribbons tied in her dark hair. She lasted a couple of months and then had a fit of hysterics in the classroom and did a bit of book throwing herself, so she was moved up to join me. Miss Edgemere continued to howl and scream, to throw board dusters and books and chairs and sometimes tables about the classroom. Sometimes Juliette got in the way. It was inevitable I suppose. Later, my father regretted he hadn’t done more, but the war had taught him other things besides courage. Family first. It had taught him that the hard way. He had his own memories. His own ghosts. I know that now. We all compromise ourselves, our principles. Don’t we? It all depends what the stakes are.

“I’ll sing a hymn to Mary, the mother of my God” we sang, as we walked behind the statue, dressed all in white, hands joined firmly together, our heads bobbing in fierce unison at the name of Jesus. The springtime was in us. We had the dew on us and a bloom of which we would only be conscious long after Mary’s month was past .

5 Team Games

When I was seven, we moved from Whitehall Road up to suburban Woodhouse Moor, to a big, cold, high ceilinged flat, in an old vicarage. And it was here that I embarked upon my new career as a pixie. I was a reluctant member of the Midnight Court. We used to dance around a big plastic toadstool, bright red with white spots, singing:-

“Here we are the jolly pixies
Helping people when in fixes.”

We wore little brown woolly hats and brown cotton uniforms so that we could pin badges to them:- badges for making fires, for cooking and sewing on buttons and darning and knitting and many other skills that were considered appropriate to pixies and life.

We were pixies in a big dusty church hall, several bus stops up from our flat, where we gathered with elves and kelpies and other members of the supernatural hierarchy. My mother thought I was a solitary child and that it would Do Me Good. Brown Owl was brisk and loud. Tawny Owl had little to say for herself. On summer nights we were let out to play team games on the green sward around the church.

Among which was Sardines. A wicked game.

The rules are simple enough. One person hides. The place must be spacious but also elusive. Large alcoves, small cellars, spaces hollowed out among close set trees:- all of these are suitable. The other players must search, just like hide and seek.

But when they find the hidden one they don't call out and run shrieking their discovery. No. Not in this game. In Sardines, they stay. Quietly they join forces and they wait until they are all huddled together, pressed close, waiting.

We played Sardines at dusk around the old Church. And I did not find them. Their cries faded one by one.

If I listened hard I could hear my heart beating. If I listened hard I could hear them breathing. Soon, I knew, they would leap out at me, all of them together. So I did the only thing possible. I ran away. I ran out of the gates and through the city streets, past the suburban gardens. A bus pulled up and I

ran straight onto it. Two stops down the road and I was home early, far away from the pixies and the elves and the kelpies, who – for all I knew – still lurked in the damp space close beside the church wall where dead leaves collected. I had known where they were. I just couldn't bring myself to go in.

“I'm never going back” I told my mother. “Never.”

She didn't argue with me. I had always been a reluctant pixie anyway. I couldn't darn a sock to save my life. The brown cotton uniform was given away. And I never danced around a plastic toadstool again.

6 Love and Guilt

My grandfather went fishing in summer to Tadcaster and came back with bunches of lilac and baskets of cherries but with very few fish. When he wasn't fishing, he sat in his little shop. There was a picture of a goldfish in the window and a fearsome pike, stuffed, in a glass case. He sold maggots in jamjars to little fat anglers wearing cloth caps, watch chains and waistcoats stretched across their little pot bellies. They had names like Mr Sillitoe and Mr Peacock and called him by his first name, Joe. "Ey up Joe" they said.

The maggots were kept in a tin bath. If you ran your fingers through them they felt quite dry and not at all as distressing as their memory. He flavoured them with sawdust and curry powder for enigmatic reasons of his own. If they escaped, the house would be full of bluebottles later.

My grandfather loved me far more indulgently than he had loved his own children. He was a big man with failing eyes and grey hair that looked as though it had been stitched to his head in ridges along the back of his neck. "Who sewed on your hair gangad?" I would ask him. He had been a very young sailor aboard the last of the tea clippers and bore the intricate tattoos he had acquired in Singapore. I loved them and would trace them with my finger and ask him why he was coloured in like that.

He was a Methodist so I made him learn the Catholic Catechism. "Who made you, God made me, why did God make you?" Sheepishly he recited it in answer to my imperious questions. Sighing he took snuff and spilled it down the front of his waistcoat. It made me sneeze when he kissed me. He called me his "little queen" which is old Yorkshire for little woman. "Oh my little queen" he would say, tenderly.

I could wind him around the smallest of my small fingers.

"The wind, the wind, the wind blows high

The Wind comes scattering from the sky" I sang, blowing dandelion seeds between my starfish fingers, well aware of my power.

"She is handsome she is pretty

She is the girl of the golden city....."

In summer I sat with my grandfather at his workbench. He had a bottle of limeade, green and inviting.

“Please can I have some?”

He was at a loss, embarrassed. “But you know it makes you sick. “

They had all forbidden him to give it to me.

I snuggled up close to him. “Go on . Just a little bit.”

He relented as I knew he would. He found me irresistible. We drank limeade together and later I was very sick.

My grandfather hung his head in shame. “He gave it to me” I said, treacherously. “He knew it made me sick and he gave it to me.”

In future I would betray myself to lost desired lovers with retributions deeper and more shameful than sickness, forgetting that such unquestioning adoration is rare. Much too easy to learn those first paradigms of love, blackmail and guilt.

He grew very ill. He lost his sight. I was too young to take proper notice of his suffering. “Oh my little queen “ he would say, running his big hand over my hair.

“The wind, the wind, the wind blows high.”

He slipped between my own eager, lengthening fingers like dandelion seeds. An old man with so much love in his clouded eyes.

7 Hush Pussy

Nights held fearful incidents and fearful places. It was not so much the dark as what it hid. As a little girl, not more than a toddler, I woke screaming and sobbing for my father. He was out at the Night School he went to after work. I had to be brought downstairs to the light and warmth. My mother wrapped me in a scratchy blanket and we went down through the fishing tackle shop and the sweetshop to my grandparents' house at Number Thirty Two. The lamplight shone in from the street outside, on the big scales and sweet jars full of pear drops and creamline toffees. The shop smelled of mints and tobacco.

My grandmother gave me a little wooden figure of a man in a black and white suit and with a painted, befuddled face to play with. He lived in the kitchen drawer and must have been a bottle top. I have a memory of clutching the little man and of the shaky, empty feeling that comes after crying passionately for a long time and then being comforted. When my father came in, shaking the raindrops from his patched jacket, he took me on his lap. Nothing had happened to him and my tears had been needless.

They spoiled me a little because I was asthmatic, could not breathe properly. Illness seemed a normal condition to me. My mother put cool cloths on my head and sang songs to me for hours:-

“Go to sleep my baby, go to sleep
While the stars on high begin to peep
They're lighting the windows of heaven
May the angels watch over you.....”

In the warm, dim bedroom, her eyelids were drooping with weariness but she would not desert me.

“I will come and find you
Break the chains that bind you
When the buds peep through the snow....”

The drugs made my arms and legs jerk like a puppet. Sometimes I felt as if my limbs were growing large, ballooning out, or that the walls of the room had receded into some unimaginable distance. In the bedroom was a big mirror, fixed to the dressing table. When the light from under the door shone on it, it

glowed with a livid grey aura. I thought that it had turned into a giant mouse, and screamed. The walnut wardrobes had monstrous faces in them. Once, in a fever, I saw horsemen galloping over the foot of the bed. “Don’t you see them?” I asked my mother. “Don’t you?”

One foggy night when I was ill again and tucked up with plenty of pillows and blankets on the sofa, my father was late. My mother, cooking cauliflower cheese, grew angry because she was worried. The supper dried up and filled the room with the smell of burnt vegetables. Tongues of yellow smog crept under the door and curled around the light. When my father came in, he had a big wad of bandage and plaster over one eyebrow. His face looked green under it. A car had hit his bicycle in the fog and he had been tossed over the bonnet. My father had to have stitches in the cut, had been lucky, the doctor said. My mother’s anger dissolved into retrospective panic. I was dazed. Anything could happen. All your worst fears might be realised. People were fragile then, all blood and bruises. It could happen over and over again and probably would.

Ah for shame. I wish I were still the youngest girl.

When I was ill and struggling for breath, “Hush pussy” they told me. “Hush pussy, you’ll soon be through.”

It was what a little boy is reputed to have said as he put a cat through a mangle.

And I always was.

Catherine Czerkawska