

RUTH RENDELL WRITING AS

BARBARA
VINE



THE
BIRTHDAY
PRESENT

'Barbara Vine is Ruth Rendell letting rip' *Daily Telegraph*



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The Birthday Present
by
Barbara Vine

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I

Thirty-three is the age we shall all be when we meet in heaven because Christ was thirty-three when he died. It's an interesting idea. One can't help thinking that the people who invent these things chose it because it's an ideal age, no longer one's first youth but not ageing either. It was Sandy Caxton who told me this when I sat next to him at Ivor's birthday dinner, his thirty-third of course, and Ivor said afterwards that he had a store of that sort of wisdom. My own opinion is that Sandy was just changing the subject because I'd asked him if he lived in London.

'I'm awfully sorry,' he said, 'but I can't tell you that.' And, noticing my mystified look, 'I used to be the Northern Ireland Secretary, you see, and we're not supposed to tell anyone where we live.'

I did see. I should have known. Ivor told me there was even a bodyguard somewhere at the party and wherever it was that Sandy lived the police with sniffer dogs searched the local church before he went to matins. Not that it did him any good in the end. They still got him at the time they chose. But more of that later. Iris had been sitting next to Ivor's friend Jack Munro, a favourite of hers, and it was rather reluctantly that she said goodbye to him as we had to leave before the others. We had a trustworthy babysitter but we wanted to get back to Nadine. She was our first child, the first of our four, and we were both so besotted that we fretted if we were away from her for long. Not even to celebrate her uncle's heavenly birthday. Not even when she was in the care of one of her grandmothers.

There was one person close to Ivor (in a manner of speaking) absent from the party.

'Ivor's girlfriend wasn't there,' I said as we were going up Fitzjohn's Avenue.

‘She wouldn’t have been asked. You know Ivor. In some ways he’s living in the distant past. One doesn’t invite the mistress to meet one’s friends.’ Iris made the face she always used to make when her brother’s peculiarities came up, her smile a little rueful. ‘Besides, having to spend an evening out with her instead of in with her he’d think a waste of time.’

‘It’s like that, is it?’

‘It’s probably only like that,’ she said.

Mention his name and most people will say, ‘Who?’ while the rest think for a bit and ask if he wasn’t ‘the one who got involved in all that sleaze back in whenever it was . . .’

Necessarily, because my brother-in-law was a politician through and through, I’ll have to talk about politics. But increasingly I find how ignorant I am and how much the minutiae of politics bore me. I shall gloss over a great deal of this aspect of Ivor’s life, only touching on what I hope are the interesting bits and, of course, because no one could speak of this period and leave them out, the departure of Margaret Thatcher, the coming of John Major and the general elections of 1992 and 1997.

I’m putting in Jane Atherton’s diary. Not just some of it but the whole thing as it was sent to Juliet. Ivor’s history and, come to that, Hebe Furnal’s wouldn’t be complete without it. The package arrived and then a letter under separate cover, as they say. Ivor never saw either. I don’t suppose he even knew of the existence of the diary. Too much had happened to him for any more risk-taking and he was keeping his head buried in the sand. Jane was a friend of Hebe’s and about as unlike her, it seems, as two female creatures belonging to the same species and living in the same time can be unlike each other. I suppose she was of use to Hebe. Whatever else she may have done for her, apart from filling a role as foil to her particular charms, she provided her with alibis. The chances are that if she hadn’t agreed to provide a certain alibi, none of this would have happened.

I never met Hebe. I never even saw her. Like the rest of the

world, I saw her picture in the papers after the accident, a pretty blonde, almost beautiful, with the looks of a model. And, also like the rest of the world, I confuse her with the other pretty blonde, the one the men thought they were taking when they took her, or the police or the press thought they were taking when they took her. The mystery of which girl was the intended victim was never publicly solved. How angry it made Ivor that anyone could mistake Hebe Furnal for Kelly Mason, though it seemed at first to his advantage that they did, as the assumption made by the police (or the press) moved the spotlight away from its search for him. And that's the way I see it, as if a torch was held in a hand which glanced probingly over dark corners, seeking for an instigator, its light once or twice nearly touching him before it shifted away.

Hebe Furnal, twenty-seven years old, a housewife with a degree in media something or other and a two-year-old son called Justin. Wife of Gerry Furnal and mistress of Ivor Tesham, MP 'Mistress' is a bit of an archaism, but Iris used it and Ivor himself did when, a week or two after the thirty-third birthday, he asked me if I thought he should buy a flat for Hebe and visit her there. He would occasionally ask my advice, though of course he never took any notice of it. People don't, especially when they've asked for it. Anyway, Ivor had already made up his mind.

'In some ways,' he said, 'the idea appeals. You can imagine in what ways. But I don't think I will. It's too much like some eighteenth-century rake setting up his mistress in apartments in Shepherd Market.'

'You can't afford Shepherd Market,' I said.

'True. But I could afford Pimlico, say. Only I won't. It would lead to other complications.'

There was more of this but I'll come back to it. As to Kelly Mason, she was the 'Checkout Chick', the 'Supermarket Cinderella', who had married a television mogul and was famous for doing nothing but wearing blue satin with sequins and *not* being kidnapped. Where is she now? Rumour has it that she's in a private psychiatric hospital, but a more likely story has her and her carers

in the isolated villa on the South Pacific island her husband bought for her. Whichever it is, it seems to be true that she is hidden away because she is too afraid to live in the world, and without Ivor's intervention in her life, unintentional though it was, she would be the happy occupant of a house in the Bishops Avenue and perhaps the mother of Damian Mason's children.

To introduce you to Ivor – you may not remember him from the days when he was a minister in John Major's government – I don't think I can do better than give you his entry in Dod's, the directory of Members of Parliament:

Ivor Hamilton Tesham, Born 12 January 1957. Son of John Hamilton Tesham and Louisa, née Winstanley; Educated Eton College, Windsor; Brasenose College, Oxford (MA law); Single; Called to the Bar 1980, Lincoln's Inn; Barrister specializing in Commercial Law. Contested Overbury 1987 general election; Member for Morningsford since by-election 27 January 1988. Committees: Foreign Affairs, Defence; PPS in 1989 to John Teague: as Secretary of State for Defence; in 1990 Under-Secretary of State in the Department of Defence; in 1992 Minister of State for Air Power Overseas in the Department of Defence; Recreations: Theatre, music, reading; Address: House of Commons, London SW1.

I've known him since he was a small boy in Ramburgh and I was five years older. Though we moved away when I was eight, I was born in that village, as were Ivor and my wife. They look a lot alike, Ivor and Iris, and he is three years her senior. They are both tall and dark and slender. Sandy Caxton said Iris had the face of an Israelite princess, Rachel weeping for her children, though the only Jewish blood she and Ivor have come into the family in the early nineteenth century. I'm told Ivor was very good-looking, but I'm no judge of that. When he and I walked into a restaurant or a bar together I've seen women turn and look, and I'm pretty sure they weren't staring at me.

When all this happened he had been 'seeing' (as he put it) Hebe Furnal for about a year. Prior to that an actress called Nicola Ross

had been his girlfriend and when the end came they parted amicably. I don't know why they did or why it was amicable, though Iris told me it had nothing to do with Hebe's coming on the scene. She seemed to think the Nicola Ross affair wasn't exciting enough for Ivor. They were both single and unattached. Some said they were made for each other. Nicola, who he always called Nixie, was a suitable woman for an MP to be going about with, a handsome blonde with an increasingly successful career, a year or two older than he. He had even taken her to Ramburgh House to meet his parents, but he had never quite reached the point of moving in with her or asking her to move in with him. That was his way, though. He had never lived with a woman. Then came the break-up and Hebe Furnal. When he asked if he could borrow our house (for a never fully explained purpose) he told me how they had met.

'It was at a reception in the Jubilee Room,' he said. 'I don't know if you've ever been in there. It's up a grim sort of flight of stairs at the far end of Westminster Hall. We were waiting for the seven o'clock vote and I'd nothing to do. Jack Munro said why not come along to this reception. It was being given in aid of a charity called HALT, the Heart and Lung Trust.'

'I heard someone make one of those appeals for them on the radio,' I said.

'Yes, well, Jack said I might as well come along and get a free drink, which means the gnat's piss which passes for Sauvignon in the Jubilee Room. Anyway, I went. The HALT fund-raiser's a man called Gerry Furnal, but I never met him. I met his wife instead.'

He smiled that little reminiscent smile of his.

'Go on,' I said.

'You know how these things sort of hit you. She's got the most amazing legs, as long as some women are high, if you see what I mean. And a lot of other things too. Her hair's a very pale blonde and it reaches to her waist. I didn't lose any time. I went up to her and said, "Ivor Tesham. How do you do?" and she said, "Hebe Furnal. I do very well, thanks, a lot better than I did five minutes ago." Here was a woman after my own heart, I thought, so I

pointed to the monitor up on the wall and I said, "You see that green screen up there? Well, in about five minutes a bell will come up on that, the word 'Division' will appear in white letters and I'll have to go and vote." "Then I'd better give you my phone number, hadn't I?" she said. "Have you got a good memory?" "Marvellous," I said, and just as she gave it to me the green bell appeared. I ran down the stairs and all the way across Westminster Hall, repeating that phone number over and over, with the division bell ringing, and I leapt up the stairs and along the corridor into the Members' Lobby. I was still saying that number in my head as I went to vote, but I picked up a bit of paper as I passed through and wrote it down.

'And that was the start of it. I phoned her next day. We manage to meet about once a fortnight and I'm going to have to do something about that, but meanwhile will you lend me your house for a Friday night somewhere around 17 May?'

'Sure,' I said. 'We always go to Norfolk on Fridays anyway.'

I hadn't hesitated. He wasn't just my brother-in-law but a great friend too. I didn't say to myself, this is a married woman living with her husband that you're encouraging Ivor to sleep with. By lending him your house you're facilitating an illicit love affair. Of course I didn't. I didn't say, you're helping to make an innocent husband unhappy and perhaps deprive a small child of his mother. One never does say things like that. I didn't even think them. Our house in Hampstead was very suitable for clandestine goings-on, ideal really.

He and Hebe Furnal usually met at his flat in Westminster. It was a long way for her to come from where she lived, somewhere up in West Hendon, the far side of the North Circular Road. The 'sticks', Ivor called it and sometimes the 'boondocks'. I never saw her house and nor, for that matter, did he. Before she left for their meetings she had to wait for the HALT fund-raiser to get home, because someone had to be with her little boy, Justin. Ivor told me on another occasion that he and Hebe had more phone sex than actual sex, every day in fact, and even this was sabotaged – his word, his PPS to a Defence Secretary's word – by interventions

from two-year-old Justin shouting, 'Don't talk, Mummy, don't talk.'

I've said I didn't hesitate about lending him our house, but did I approve? Did Iris? She certainly didn't and she told him so. I tried not to be judgemental and what I felt wasn't any sort of moral condemnation but rather something that was near to physical distaste. It made me squeamish to think of this girl, this young mother – I don't know why her being a young mother should make it worse but somehow it did – going from Ivor home to her husband in a taxi paid for by Ivor and deceiving her husband with tales of the cinema she'd been to or the meal she'd had with a girlfriend. Going perhaps from Ivor's lovemaking to her husband's within the same few hours. And I simply didn't understand. I didn't understand why he'd want to do this or she would. I'd have understood even less if I'd known then the kind of things they did, she and Ivor, their games and dressing up and enactments. Iris, who did understand without sympathizing, explained to me, or tried to, how it was as if Ivor and she had found each other out of all the world, two people with exactly the same tastes, the same feverish desires, the same breathless greed. Love? I don't think so. I only know it was nothing like what Iris and I had and have.

For the best part of the nineteenth century a Tesham had represented Morningford in Parliament. Then there was a long period of Liberal members until Ivor's grandfather had the seat from 1959, when Ivor was two, until 1974. The man who succeeded him died while at the Conservative Party Conference in 1987, Ivor stood in the consequent by-election and won by a majority of just nine thousand. He was thirty-two, young to be in Parliament, exceptionally so, and very ambitious. A former president of the Oxford Union, he was something of an orator, made a memorable maiden speech and would have been on his feet at every available opportunity but for Sandy Caxton advising him not to speak too often. Members notice excessive eloquence and remark on it, not always favourably.

In 1989 he was made PPS to the Secretary of State for Defence.

In case you're like I was and don't know what that means, those letters stand for Parliamentary Private Secretary and set the holder of the office on the first rung of the ladder of political achievement. With luck and hard work, he would next be made a whip and then junior minister. Ivor played down his functions, as people in his position usually do, and said it meant dogsbody, someone who ran errands and kept himself *au fait* with his minister's diary, but you could see he was elated by the appointment.

The media weren't quite so intrusive or so savage as they are today but they were watchful, especially of young Conservative hopefuls. There had been scandals and sleaze. Margaret Thatcher had been prime minister a long time and, as always when long terms seem to be endlessly protracted, coups are talked of and plots and rebellions. But you'll remember all this and whatever I'm telling you, it's not a political assessment.

It's an account of a rise and a fall.

A couple of weeks after the birthday, Ivor asked me to dinner in the Churchill Room, a Commons dining room on the ground floor off the corridor which leads to the terrace. He said no one else would be invited; he wanted to talk to me about a matter which had nothing to do with politics or the Commons. It soon emerged that my advice was to be asked about the Hebe Furnal affair.

As I've said, he'd decided against buying her a flat and to continue in the unsatisfactory way they were carrying on their illicit meetings. He had already asked to borrow our house at some time in May, which was four months ahead, and when he mentioned it again I was a bit apprehensive. I thought he might be going to ask if he could use it on a regular basis. But I soon saw that this wasn't what he wanted. He had his own flat. The difficulty was not that they had nowhere to go – he could after all have used a hotel – but that for most of the time Hebe was Justin-bound.

'It's supposed to be the way to keep a relationship from flagging,' I said. 'I mean, making it hard to meet and the meetings few and far between.'

‘I hate that word “relationship”,’ he said, looking peevish. ‘Sorry, but the very sound of it puts a dampener on things. Think of meeting someone you’re mad about, like I am about Hebe, and saying, “I want to have a relationship with you.” Do you think people actually say that?’

That made me laugh. I said I didn’t know, I wouldn’t be surprised.

‘Anyway, our affair isn’t flagging. It doesn’t get the chance to flag. I don’t think it would if we met every day. Not that there’s any prospect of that, the way things are.’ He paused and gave me a sidelong look. ‘I haven’t asked her yet, but I’m thinking about it – I mean of asking her to leave Gerry Furnal.’

‘And move in with you?’ Remembering his time with Nicola Ross, I was surprised, but it turned out that this wasn’t in his mind at all.

‘Not exactly,’ he said, looking at me and looking away. ‘I’ve decided against buying, but I thought of renting a place for her.’

‘You mean she’s to leave her husband and not live with you but live in a rented love nest? And what about the little boy?’

I was very child-conscious at the time; still am, but in a more level-headed way. In the spring of 1990, when Nadine was six months old, my eyes were caught by every baby and infant I passed in the street. I couldn’t read about child cruelty in the papers. I couldn’t look at those pictures the NSPCC put out in their publicity. Someone took Iris and me to the opera, it was *Peter Grimes*, and I had to go outside when it got to that bit about Grimes being at his exercise and he’s beating the boys. So my mind went at once to two-year-old Justin Furnal.

‘She’d bring him with her, you know,’ I said.

‘Do you think she would?’ he said. ‘I hadn’t thought of that. It would be a bit of a drawback.’

I’m very fond of Ivor but I wasn’t then. As sometimes happened, I came near to disliking him for a moment or two. I’d be aware of his charm and that sort of dashing reckless quality he had and then he’d say something to turn it all round, almost shocking me.

‘Even supposing she left her husband, and it doesn’t seem to me

you've any reason to think she would, what happens next? Furnal and she would get divorced surely and she'd get custody of Justin.' I used his name because calling him 'the child' was distasteful.

'But would she, Rob? I mean, she'd have been the one committing adultery.'

I told him he was supposed to be a lawyer and hadn't he ever heard of no-fault divorce? Unless she was practically a criminal or a druggie she'd get custody, never mind how saintly Gerry Furnal might be.

'I hadn't thought of that,' he said. 'I couldn't stand having that child around. It's bad enough when we're talking on the phone.' He seemed not to notice my slight recoil. I took a deep swig of my wine. 'If Gerry divorced her I'd have to marry her, wouldn't I?'

'Ivor,' I said, 'for someone so advanced in your sexual tastes –' I remembered in time I'd better not admit to knowing what Iris had told me in confidence – 'you're surprisingly old-fashioned. A mistress in a love nest, a clandestine love affair, and now you think you'd have to save her honour. Of course you wouldn't have to marry her, but I think you'd have to share your home with her. You'd have to live with her.'

'I hate that word "home",' he said. 'In that context, I mean. Ghastly Americanism. Can't you just hear some fat woman talking about her lovely home? Oh, I'm sorry, I'm a bastard.'

I asked him tentatively if he'd given any thought to what the press might make of all this.

'At least you didn't say the "print media".' He laughed. 'I may be a new PPS,' he said, 'but I'm still a very small fish in a huge pond. My God, I've just realized, that's what "small fry" means, isn't it? Small fish. We live and learn. There's a pretty awful play by Barrie that Morningford Amateur Dramatic Society put on. It's called *Mary Rose* and of course I had to go and see it. Someone says, "We live and learn," and the reply is, "We live at any rate." It's the only good line in the play.' He smiled his small half-smile. 'The press aren't interested in me having a girlfriend. Prurient they may be when it suits them, but even they allow for a bit of sex in people's lives.'

‘When the sex involves a girlfriend who’s married and living with her husband?’

‘They don’t know that, do they? They don’t watch her house or mine. If one of them happened to be passing on the relevant evening once a fortnight all they’d see is a beautiful blonde girl coming to my block. Might be visiting anyone. Might live there.’

‘I don’t know,’ I said. ‘I just think you ought to be careful.’

In the months to come I was to remember this conversation. It made me think about the unforeseen and how we walk all the time on that thin crust which covers terrible abysses. Things might so easily have been different from what they are if a word spoken or a word withheld hadn’t changed them. If Ivor, for instance, had said ‘no’ instead of ‘yes’ when Jack Munro asked him to that reception in the Jubilee Room.

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I get my surname, Delgado, from my grandfather, who came to this country from Badajoz in the 1930s, and I sometimes think it's a blessing I seem to have inherited a thin gene along with the name which is Spanish for 'slim'. It would be a liability for the overweight to be saddled with it. But I'm thin and tallish and otherwise inconspicuous, sallow and bespectacled – to please Iris I'm at last thinking of getting contact lenses – with an unexpectedly deep voice and, for some reason, an almost silent laugh. I laughed in my noiseless way when Iris said Ivor was borrowing our house because its raffish kitschy interior was appropriate for his purpose.

At that time we had a cottage in the country quite near Iris's family home in Ramburgh and another cottage or little house in one of cobbled mewses of Hampstead. This was the place we were to lend Ivor. It had been a wedding present from Iris's parents, who had bought it for us with all the decor and furnishings fashionable in the 1930s, when the Hollywood Moderne style was in vogue, and unchanged by the previous owners. Coming in from the mews, it was quite a shock. The outside of the house was nineteenth-century brickwork hung with clematis and roses, green shutters at the windows and a lantern over the front door. Visitors walked in on chrome, black and silver, scuffed white leather furniture (soon to be stained by Nadine and her younger brother coating it with raspberry jam and Marmite), a great mural of the New York skyline at night and a wall-size black and yellow abstract framed in aluminium. Upstairs was worse, or the larger of the two bedrooms was. Our huge bed – was this what appealed to Ivor? – was very low, its mattress almost on the floor, which was covered in once-white shagpile. Someone before our time had spilt about a pint of coffee on it, or that was one view to take. Iris said it was

more as if a former owner had given birth there. We meant to cover the stain with a rug, just as we meant to give the house a makeover when we could afford it. I insisted we keep the circular mirror which had light bulbs all round its frame and reminded me of an old film magazine photograph I'd once seen of Claudette Colbert's house in Beverly Hills.

I asked Iris what Ivor meant by 'appropriate for his purpose.'

"The right atmosphere", was what he said. I didn't ask what sort of atmosphere he wanted.'

'I don't suppose we shall ever know,' I said.

We'd been invited to the theatre by Ivor that evening and we looked on it as a celebration for him. He had just been made a whip. The play was *Julius Caesar*, with a famous theatrical knight as Brutus and Nicola Ross playing Calpurnia. After it was over we all went round to Nicola's dressing room to have champagne and take her out to supper. It wasn't my business even to wish it, but I couldn't help reflecting how much better it would be if she and Ivor were still together and it was she he was thinking of living with. After a minute or two the young black actor playing Casca put his head round the door and Nicola called him in. She introduced him as Lloyd Freeman and we were soon all talking about black people taking parts which were intended for white actors. Was it a problem? If audiences could suspend their disbelief in middle-aged women playing Juliet and fat divas singing tubercular Mimi, why not accept a black Mark Antony? Lloyd said he was lucky to have the part he had, but he'd only got it because it was a very small one. Could we imagine him in a Pinero revival, for instance?

We talked about black and Indian characters in books all being comic or evil up to the Second World War and beyond, and Othello the only serious role for a black man, and I was starting to wonder how Lloyd made a living, when he said he also drove for a minicab company in which he was a partner with a friend. Ivor was interested – Iris and I agreed afterwards that he probably wanted to use one

of these minicabs for taking Hebe home after their meetings – and Lloyd gave him a card. After that Lloyd went home and we went off to supper.

I never saw him again and I don't suppose I ever gave him a thought until the time of the accident. The papers had photographs of him too, though not so many as of Hebe. He was a good actor and whenever I see a play on the West End stage with black people in the cast I think of him. Because the impossible, which was the view he took, has happened. I saw a black Henry V last year and a black Henry VI last week and I thought how I might have seen Lloyd in *Julius Caesar* again, but playing Cassius this time. I never can because he's dead. It wasn't Ivor's fault that he died, but without Ivor he'd no doubt be alive today. He was thirty-two, so he'll have to age another year when he gets to heaven.

The other man, Dermot Lynch, I never met. I heard his voice once when I was in Ivor's flat. He had come round to collect Ivor's car and take it away for a service. 'I'll pop the keys through the door as per usual, guv,' I heard him say, and I wondered whether Ivor, who expected to be called 'sir', would object to being addressed like a police inspector in a sitcom. He can't have minded much, because Dermot Lynch was the other man he chose to carry out the birthday present.

I shall call it that now because it's as 'the birthday present' that Iris and I referred to it, rather than as 'the accident', whenever we spoke of it in the future. Back in the winter of 1990, of course, we had no idea what Ivor was planning, only that he wanted our house on the nearest Friday to 17 May and after a time we gathered this was Hebe's birthday. He bought her a present as well, a string of pearls, and, in an unusual display of openness, showed it to us.

'They're beautiful,' Iris said, 'but the trouble with pearls is that you have to be an expert to tell whether they're worth thousands or they came from a chain store.'

'That's not the trouble,' Ivor said. 'That's the point. She can wear them and Furnal won't know she didn't buy them herself.'

★

Ivor was a good constituency MP. Even after he got to be a minister he still went down to Ramburgh each week to hold his Morningford surgery on a Saturday morning. If the weekend he spent in London was usually free, the one in Norfolk wasn't. Especially in the summer, there would be an appearance to put in at some local festival or fête and often a dinner to attend and speak at in the evening. There was always a cause which needed his patronage or a concern one of his constituents wanted raised with the relevant minister. At the time of the birthday present or just before it was the proposal to close a local hospital, the kind of place they used to call a 'cottage hospital', he was opposing. He'd attended all the meetings of the Hands Off Our Hospital committee but he drew the line at taking part in the march through Morningford culminating in a mass demo in the town square. It was a Conservative government which supported the hospital closure and he was, after all, a Conservative whip. As he put it, he didn't want the wrong sort of limelight. He was very aware of this sort of thing, perhaps neurotically aware.

When he visited his constituency he stayed at Ramburgh House with his parents, a place considered by John and Louisa to be as much his as theirs. They had told him that when he married they would give it up to him and move into the lodge, quite an attractive but much smaller house at the eastern end of the estate. It seemed to me that they were safe for years as marriage was the last thing on Ivor's mind.

Ramburgh House was a biggish Queen Anne place, one of those manor houses which stand in the centre of the village, separated from its main street only by a narrow strip of grass and paving and approached through an arch in a high brick wall. All the land, the garden, the park and a couple of meadows and woodland were at the rear, and the lodge stood about half a mile away, at the end of what they called the East Avenue, a lane running between a double row of lime trees. It's a measure of Ivor's old-fashioned (and slightly absurd) sense of the dignity due to the landed gentry that he called the lodge 'the dower house'.

I don't suppose there is anything particularly remarkable about the grounds – the land is flat, its only distinguishing feature the little river running between rows of alders – and the house itself gets only a terse paragraph in Pevsner's *Buildings of Norfolk*. But Ivor was very fond of the place and, if his father behaved like a squire of old, he conducted himself a bit like the heir apparent, having the vicar and his wife to dinner and dropping in on the locals to hear their complaints about rents and repairs. Now, of course, most of the locals have died and the places they lived in have become weekend cottages for Londoners.

Our own cottage was ten miles away but well within Ivor's constituency. We voted in Hampstead and we had the right to vote in local elections, though not in parliamentary ones. It wasn't easy for us to attend any of those functions Ivor spoke at, but we did manage to get along to the Morningford Eel Feast, an annual thrash in the town hall whose origins were lost in antiquity. Traditionally, only local eels were consumed, but these had become scarce over the years and it was rumoured that half of those eaten at the April 1990 feast came from Thailand. I don't know if there are any eels in Thailand or if we import them if there are, but this was the story that went round the tables that year. Iris and I were able to go because the feast happens at lunchtime, so we could take Nadine with us in her carrying cot.

Ivor made a speech, a very good speech I suppose it was, with the requisite eel jokes and stories about the glorious past of Morningford and its even more illustrious future, nothing about the hospital closure but rather a lot about the benefits the then government had brought to the town. Just the same, I wasn't sorry when Nadine started to grizzle and then to scream and we had to take her out. I heard afterwards that there had been one or two sticky questions put to Ivor, the most awkward being how long would Margaret Thatcher remain prime minister. Apparently, he got round it by heaping praise on her.

Very unusually for him, he had no engagement that evening and he came over to Monks Cravery to see us. Iris asked him how Hebe

was and he said fine and he'd already told her about the pearls. This is a strange business, asking people how they are or someone close to them is. We all do it all the time, and now we're doing it even more than we did seventeen years ago. But the last thing we want is to hear about someone's state of health, and nothing is more boring than to be told in reply that they woke up feeling under the weather but they're a bit better now apart from a slight headache. No, what we expect is to hear news or details of some recent experience or escapade or even to be shocked by death and disaster. Iris wasn't anticipating anything like that, but nor was she content with Ivor's short response.

'Well, tell us, was she pleased?'

'Of course,' he said. 'Who wouldn't be? She'd been telling me for months how much she loved pearls. Of course she'd be pleased.'

I mention this because those pearls figured quite importantly in what was to come. Not for a long time, not until the quiet period when it seemed the birthday present (I mean the other one) was far in the past and Ivor had begun to think it was all over. Begun to think the terrible fear was gone for ever and nothing like it would ever come again, his sleepless nights and his dread of newspapers. Gerry Furnal was married to his second wife, Justin was growing up and was soon to have a half-sister. But through the years those pearls must have lain in their black leather velvet-lined case in a drawer somewhere in Gerry Furnal's house in his distant suburb or journeyed back and forth in Jane Atherton's handbag, their presence accepted by Furnal as he accepted Hebe's other jewellery, the stuff from Oxfam shops and Costa Brava market stalls. If they weren't worth a king's ransom (are kings ever held to ransom?) their value was probably the same as that of all the Furnal furniture and equipment put together.

Long afterwards, when it was confession time, advice time and desperate help-seeking time, Ivor told me about meeting Lloyd Freeman once more at a party given by Nicola Ross. Nicola was always giving parties; no reason such as an anniversary or Christmas

was needed to excuse them. Iris and I were invited but couldn't find a babysitter.

Shy people get to parties early because if they're among the first they won't have to walk in on a room full of unknown guests. Ivor wasn't shy, far from it, and on this occasion he didn't arrive until the party had been going for about an hour. He intended, of course, to stay late. Nicola always invited too many people and the place was crowded. Ivor pushed his way through the throng, avoiding those he didn't want to talk to because they bored him, and came face to face with Lloyd. They talked for a minute or two, the usual how-are-you-what-have-you-been-doing stuff, Ivor said, and then he thought he might as well put his proposition to Lloyd there and then. By that time, he had already spoken to Dermot Lynch and Dermot had agreed.

A waiter hired for the occasion was going round refilling glasses and both of them had some more Merlot. In those days quite abstemious, Ivor always drank a lot at parties, though he never showed a sign of it as far as I could see. Lloyd, he said, gave him the impression of being one who stoked up on free wine when he got the chance. Ivor reminded him of what he'd told him in Nicola's dressing room about his minicab business. Would he do a driving job for him? He needed a posh sort of car (his words), maybe a black Mercedes with blacked-out window in the rear. It was to pick up a girl and bring her to a house in Hampstead on a Friday evening in three weeks' time. There'd be a second driver if need be.

'It sounds OK,' Lloyd said. 'How far would it be?'

'Five or six miles. No more. Five hundred pounds.'

Lloyd went quiet. 'What's the catch?'

'No catch,' said Ivor, 'but complications.'

'Look, why don't you call me? I've got to go. My girlfriend's looking for me.'

She came up to them, took Lloyd's arm and pulled him away. That was the first time Ivor saw her, a very pretty dark-haired woman, but white like a Spaniard or a Portuguese, with magnificent breasts shown off in a low-cut top. The ankles weren't mentioned

at that time. Ivor noticed the breasts, as any man would, and the lovely face and full red lips, but she wasn't his type and he thought, he said, of Hebe's extravagant slenderness and delicate features and cascading fair hair. He asked himself too, in that moment, what the hell he was doing longing for a woman who ought to have been there at the party with him, a married woman who wanted the best of both worlds, a husband and a lover, and who couldn't escape more than once a fortnight. But longing and reproaching himself didn't stop him going on with the birthday present.

He phoned Lloyd the following week and arranged to meet him and Dermot Lynch in a pub in Victoria. He didn't know it and neither of them had ever been there before. That was the point, I suppose. Lloyd got there first and was businesslike about the 'complications', how he and Dermot were to buy balaclavas to wear, handcuffs and a gag for Hebe. Dermot, who was a great gesticulator, a man who talked with his hands, rolled his eyes at this, held up a thumb and winked when Ivor told them where they should go for these 'props' and handed them money to cover it and cover too the renting of the car. He repeated his offer of five hundred pounds to pick up a woman and drive her from a point north of the North Circular Road to Hampstead. Lloyd nodded and, though Ivor didn't ask him for any undertaking, said he wouldn't tell anyone.

Two hundred and fifty pounds each now, Ivor said, and the other two hundred and fifty in cash in an envelope on the hall table inside the front door of our house. Lloyd and Dermot wouldn't need a key as he would be there himself to put the door on the latch. They all had drinks, Dermot making his thumbs-up sign again and talking more than Ivor liked about the arrangements. He laughed a lot too.

'Where d'you get an idea like that from anyway?' He shook his head in wonderment at Ivor's powers of invention.

Lloyd was rather quiet. He had recently split up with his girlfriend, though Ivor knew nothing about this at the time. The two men left together in Lloyd's car.

3

Another thing Sandy Caxton told me was that they used to believe the weight of the soul when it leaves the body at the point of death is twenty-one grams. Or it may have been twenty-one ounces, I can't remember. The Neoplatonists thought the soul was located in every part of the body. I hope Sandy's fled the moment the bomb was detonated, because he was blown to unidentifiable pieces. Perhaps it became a snow-white bird and nestles under God's throne until the last day. I'm told that some Muslims believe that.

I expect you remember what happened, though perhaps not the details. Sandy had spent the night at his home in Leicestershire with his wife and their two children. They slept in the house and his resident bodyguard and his dog were in the flat over the garage, which was a converted stables. Sandy was going out on the Saturday morning to play golf with another Tory MP, a backbencher, and his agent, who lived in the next village. The bodyguard performed his usual security check at seven, scrutinizing Sandy's car, a Rover, searching the garage, his German Shepherd sniffing every corner. Because he knew his employer was going out, he fetched the car, closed the garage doors and left it on the paved area in front of the house.

Sandy got up at seven thirty, leaving his wife, Erica, and his boy and girl asleep. He made himself a cup of tea, ate a piece of bread and marmalade and left the house. The bodyguard had returned to his flat but he came downstairs again when he saw Sandy coming, said good morning to him and stood at a distance with his dog while Sandy got into the Rover. It wasn't when he turned on the ignition but when the engine started that the car blew up.

Flying metal and glass struck the bodyguard. Apparently, he didn't move but just stood there as if turned to stone. The dog,

covered with blood and trembling, began to howl. The bodyguard stayed frozen there until Erica Caxton came running screaming out of the front door and then he ran to her, crying, 'Don't look, don't look,' but there was nothing to see if she had looked, only metal and glass and bits of clothing and blood, blood everywhere. The children, aged fourteen and sixteen, slept through it all.

It was the lead item in all the news programmes that day and the lead story in all the Sunday papers and Monday's papers. An hour after it happened the IRA announced in their usual way that they were responsible. Ivor was very upset. I could say disproportionately upset, but perhaps not. Sandy Caxton was fifteen years older than Erica and, though not quite his contemporary, had been a friend of John Tesham's since before Ivor and Iris were born. Ivor and his parents went to the funeral, but I stopped Iris going as she wasn't well and she was relieved that I had.

The funeral was a highly emotional affair, attended by most of the country's great and good. Among the coffin bearers were three Cabinet ministers and two university vice-chancellors. Though May, it was a bitterly cold day, a north wind driving the rain and the trees in the little village churchyard swaying and lashing their branches like angry arms, as Ivor put it. They played 'The Dead March' in *Saul*, this being Sandy's favourite piece of music, and it seems he was particularly fond of the story of Saul, Samuel and the Witch of Endor. There's no accounting for tastes. Why, incidentally, do we always talk about Handel arias and other music being 'in' *Saul* or *Theodora* or whatever it is, when they are 'from' if it's works by Mozart, say, or Beethoven? Nobody has ever been able to tell me.

Ivor came up to Hampstead after the funeral, accepted a stronger drink than usual, brandy and with a splash of soda, and said in gloomy tones that he was so depressed by what had happened that he felt like postponing or even cancelling the birthday present. But he couldn't do that. He'd fixed it up with Hebe to see her on Friday the 18th and arranged things with Lloyd and Dermot.

Iris said surely he'd be better by that time, it was nearly two weeks off. And it was only his usual assignation with Hebe, wasn't it, apart from its taking place in our house and her being fetched by car?

'Not quite usual,' Ivor said, putting on his secretive look but not the little smile this time. 'There will be complications. But I'll tell you all about it when it's over.'

'Not *all* about it, I hope.'

'You know what I mean,' Ivor said, using a phrase I'd never heard from him before, his use of which I put down to his feeling low.

He didn't stay long but went off to Old Pye Street in a taxi, saying he had a lot of paperwork to get through before the following morning. After he'd gone Iris said, 'I do wonder about this Hebe, this mystery woman. What do you think she says to her husband when she goes off on these jaunts? Does she tell him she's going to the cinema? I should think she must do, because I can't think of anywhere else a *respectable* young woman with a husband and a child could go to on her own. I mean, could *say* she was going to on her own.'

I said I supposed she might say she was going somewhere with a friend. To have a meal, for instance, or even to a club.

'Then the friend must be an accomplice. The friend will have to be prepared with a story in case Hebe's husband meets her – it must be a her, mustn't it, or maybe a gay man – so that she can say how much they loved the film or the food. I can't imagine telling you I was going to the cinema when I was actually going to go to bed with another man. I don't think I could get the words out.'

'I hope you won't go to bed with another man,' I said.

'I'm sure I never shall, but if I did I'd tell you. Why does she stay with him? Because he keeps her? That's a bit low, isn't it?'

'The whole thing is low,' I said, 'and Ivor knows it. But he's fascinated by her. He doesn't love her but he wants to keep on with this. It may be that she stays with Gerry what's-his-name – Furnal – not because she loves him but because he loves her. For all we

know, he may have some idea of all this but begs her not to leave him. Do what she likes but not leave him.'

Iris looked doubtful. She couldn't imagine it. 'But to have that between them,' she said. 'For her to know she lies to him and him to wonder if she does but be afraid to ask, what kind of marriage is that? I don't think you can be right, Rob.'

I was wrong, as it happened. It was true that Gerry Furnal loved Hebe, but perhaps without knowing the kind of woman he loved. He seems to have put her on a pedestal and worshipped what he'd created. It's quite a common way of going on, but it wouldn't suit realists like me. Anyway, I doubt if I'm capable of that amount of self-delusion. I'm not well endowed with imagination. The truth came out grimly and shockingly in the end in poor Jane's diaries, if it was the truth rather than only what she saw through the distorting lens of her self-pity. As to Jane, she was the friend who agreed to deceive Gerry Furnal by supplying him, if these became necessary, with ostensible reasons for Hebe's absences, and it wasn't to be long before we heard about her from Ivor. It was Iris who first used the word, calling this then unknown person 'the alibi lady'.

'We all use it,' I remember saying, 'but do we know what it means? I don't. Alibi – strange word, a sort of police word, but do the real police actually use it?'

'It sounds Arabic.'

I looked it up and found it was Latin for 'elsewhere'.

'Well, that figures,' Iris said. 'The alibi-ist will tell Gerry Furnal Hebe was with her when in fact she was elsewhere with Ivor. And there'll be lots of times when she won't have to, because I don't suppose she and Gerry meet that often. I wonder how she feels about it.'

'I imagine she tells herself her loyalty is to Hebe and not to Hebe's husband.'

'Do you know, Rob, I'm beginning to take an unhealthy interest in all this intriguing and I think I'd better stop.'

And stop she did. We had other things to think about. We told each other so and made a kind of pact, which we stuck to fairly

well, not to speculate any more about Ivor and his clandestine affair. We would lend him our house as we'd promised and go away and leave him to it. I had given him the key the evening he came over after Sandy Caxton's funeral and he was to put it through the letter box after he left. That isn't to say we didn't involve ourselves much more closely when things developed. We had to. Otherwise he'd have been quite alone, bearing it alone – until, that is, Juliet Case came along.

That Friday was the first day something about poor Sandy wasn't on our daily newspaper's front page. Instead, the lead story was about the multi-millionaire Damian Mason's bid to buy some north of England football team, with a picture of him, a short heavy man with a little beard, and his wife, Kelly, in shorts and a tight T-shirt. Iris was beginning to get over her flu and I think that was the first morning she woke up feeling well. Nadine, on the other hand, was a bit fractious and cross but seemed well enough, so, after I'd made a couple of essential phone calls to clients, we set off for Monks Cravery. Before we left Iris changed the sheets on our huge low bed and, though I said not to bother, covered up the coffee or birthing stain with a rug from Nadine's room.

It was a lovely day, the first really fine day of spring.

4

I started writing this down because I had a premonition. It was when Hebe asked me to give her an alibi. She has been asking me to give her alibis for a long time and I always do, but this one was different. It was more important than any I had given her in the past. For one thing, I would have to provide it for longer than usual and the occasion was her birthday. I mean that where she was going and what she was doing were her birthday present.

When she said that I had a sense of foreboding. Things would go wrong. My premonition told me things would go disastrously wrong. I would have to be careful. That was when I decided to record events. I am not going to use a notebook but sheets of paper and clip them together as I go and put them in a shoebox, which I shall keep in the only real cupboard I have in this tiny flat. And if I move one day I shall take it with me. Shoeboxes are a nuisance and these days most shops ask you when you buy a pair of shoes if you want the box. Hardly anyone does want it, which makes one wonder what the shops do with all those hundreds, thousands, millions of boxes. The last pair of shoes I bought they made me take the box – I shan't go there again – and that's how I happen to have one to keep this record in.

Using this box is quite appropriate, because when I bought those shoes Hebe was with me and she bought a pair of boots. Maybe I should say I was with Hebe, because that's the way it always felt. The boots were black patent leather with very high heels and they laced all the way up the front to the knee.

'You won't be able to walk in them,' I said.

She laughed. 'I don't want to walk in them. I want to lie down in them.'

Remarks like that embarrass me. I don't know where to look.

We went to have a coffee and that was when she started telling me about the kinds of things she did with Ivor Tesham. Dressing up, acting out fantasies it was mostly, and that was all right, I suppose, but her descriptions of what after all amounted to S and M made me feel uncomfortable. Perhaps it was partly because it all seemed so distant from Gerry, who is a rather proper sort of person. Or so I thought then. I didn't really know. But nothing that's happened since has made me change my view. I asked her if she was in love with Ivor.

'I don't think so,' she said. 'But would I know if I was? I do fancy him like crazy. But as for love – I thought I was in love with Gerry when I married him and maybe I was, but it didn't last.'

I asked her why she stayed with him.

'I tell myself it wouldn't be right to take Justin away from his dad, but I don't know if that's really the reason. I've never had a job, you know. Well, of course you know. I married Gerry straight after finals and then Justin came along. What could I do?'

'Your degree's in media studies,' I said, another obvious remark.

'Like a million other people's. I wouldn't know how to get a job on a paper or in TV or whatever. I'm only good at one thing. I'd be a great whore, but I'd rather go on as I am.'

I reverted to the boots. Surely she wouldn't let Gerry see them? They had cost three times as much as my shoes.

'Oh, Ivor will pay for them,' she said. 'After all, they're for his pleasure,' and she drew out the soft sibilant of that sensual word, rolling it on her tongue. 'So would you be an angel and give me an alibi for 18 May?'

I said I would. 'But your birthday's the 17th.'

'I've got to go out with Gerry that night.' She made a face. 'You're babysitting – remember? It's a bore, but marriage is a bore. You have to face it.'

I had nothing to say to that. 'I've got a feeling that something bad is going to happen. Can't you make it another night?'

'Oh, Janey, you and your premonitions. Ivor wants to make it the 18th and I can't exactly tell him it won't suit *you*. Besides, I've already told Gerry you and I are going to the theatre.'

Without even asking me. I ought to be used to it, it's the way most people treat me. Starting with Mummy, they all know that if I am not with them I'm not likely to be going anywhere. It's a funny thing really. You read in the papers about young people going to raves and clubs, out every night, being promiscuous, drinking too much and taking drugs. Well, I'm young but I don't even know what a rave is. I could count on the fingers of one hand how many men have asked me out, and as for the number who have wanted to see me again – well, I won't go on. There's no point.

In actual fact, I have seldom had to give Hebe an alibi. I hardly ever saw Gerry, so I wasn't around for him to ask me if we'd had a good time at the Odeon or a nice dinner at the Café Rouge. He never actually checked. I mean he never rang up and asked if Hebe had really been with me. Probably he suspected nothing. Not then. It took a good deal to make him even mildly suspicious, for he had a trusting nature. Did my conscience trouble me? I used to have one, but maybe I don't any more. Spending so much of the time alone deadens things and one of the things it kills is conscience. It makes you simply not care any more.

I'd never done this sort of thing before and in fact I did very little of it for Hebe. Of course I promised various things, like not to answer the phone if it rang when she and I were supposed to be out somewhere but to put it on message, and to be aware of when and where Gerry thought we had gone so that if we did meet I could confirm our date. But that only happened twice, him asking what the film he thought we'd been to had been like and another time how Mummy was – she'd been in hospital – when I took Hebe to see her. I didn't even have to lie about that. I only had to say that my mother was getting on well.

So it wasn't too much of a strain and it only happened once every two or three weeks. I made myself take an interest in Hebe's love affair and I looked Ivor Tesham up in a directory called *Dod's*. I was working then in the Library of British History in Gower Street and it's full of directories and dictionaries, so there were plenty

of places where I could find his name, but *Dod's* was the most comprehensive. He sounded rich and the photograph which accompanied the short biography made him look very handsome, unless the camera lied, which it sometimes does. He had one of those sardonic faces which women find attractive, very dark eyes and black hair. Looking at his picture, I wondered if he would ever get to be prime minister one day and that face would be famous. Hebe said he was very ambitious, though as far as I could tell she knew nothing about politics and cared less.

But I was talking about 18 May. The play Hebe had told Gerry she and I would be seeing was called *Life Threatening*. I never got to see it. I don't even know what it's about and I can't remember who wrote it, except that it was some new, very young playwright and was supposed to be very sexy and crude. But the name I can never forget and every time I hear or read that phrase – 'life-threatening' comes in newspapers quite often – it resonates with me, so that I see Hebe's face and hear her voice again and think of the way she died.

She had picked that play because it's very long – it ran for about three hours – so Gerry wouldn't wonder what was going on if she didn't come in till after midnight. I asked her what the scenario was for that evening with her and Ivor that she was going to be with him so much longer than usual and she said he was fixing up a birthday treat for her, her birthday present.

'I thought the pearls were your birthday present,' I said.

She'd told me about them and said what a clever present this was because no one (meaning Gerry) would know whether they were valuable or if they came from some high-street jeweller's.

'I think I'll get them valued, though,' she said, 'and insure them, and then if they get pinched I'll get a lot of money.'

I asked her what they were going to do with the extra time on Friday night. She said she didn't know but she was to be picked up in a car as she was walking down the Watford Way. She had to be there at precisely seven. Hebe was famously unpunctual, so I couldn't help wondering what would happen if she turned up ten

minutes late. I supposed Tesham or his driver would wait for her. It was all a million miles away from things that happen in my life. But I think that's one of the reasons why she liked me, because beside me she showed up as beautiful and popular.

'But what's the point?' I said.

She didn't know that either but she was going to wear her new boots and a long coat over a low-cut top and miniskirt. Or maybe the boots and a long coat over nothing at all. It wouldn't be the first time.

The evening Gerry was taking her out to dinner I was babysitting. I am not very fond of babies, I may as well say that, though I like them better than older children. At least they are not rude or rough. But I never told her or Gerry that as I don't suppose they would like it. Of course I am competent enough with them. I can bath babies and I know about reading them stories and not leaving them to cry or not for too long. I don't suppose I shall ever have one of my own and that may be just as well. Like I have said, I have very few friends and I don't get out much, but I wouldn't like only being able to go out when someone else could manage to stay and look after my baby. I wouldn't like not being able to go for a walk without having a baby with me in a buggy.

Hebe and Gerry lived in a little terraced house in a street more or less between West Hendon and Edgware. HALT (the Heart and Lung Trust) has its offices in Kennington, which meant he had a long journey to work every day on the worst of all London tube lines, the Northern. First he had to get a bus to Edgware station or walk to Hendon. And though he left work at five he seldom got home before six thirty. I wanted to see Hebe before he got there, so I drove myself up to Irving Road on the 17th by six fifteen, wished her a happy birthday, checked that everything was still all right for the Friday and found Justin in his high chair eating very small amounts of mashed banana and yoghurt but flinging most of it about the room.

I set about cleaning it up and feeding the rest of it to him myself,

something he seemed to quite like. At any rate, he didn't protest but swallowed the spoonfuls obediently. Hebe had gone upstairs to dress as soon as I got there and came down looking as impossibly glamorous as she always did in a short tight black dress and the pearls. She kissed the top of Justin's head from the back, keeping clear of the yoghurt and banana mixture.

'Oh, God, I'm so tired,' she said. 'Justin's been an absolute devil all day. I'd absolutely love to stay in but not a hope and it will be a dead bore. The trouble with marriage is that after a time you've nothing left to say to each other.'

Gerry came in soon after that, saw the pearls and asked where they came from.

'British Home Stores,' she said.

'They look lovely,' he said. 'I wish I could afford to buy you real ones.'

That made me feel very uncomfortable and I'm sure I blushed. If I did neither of them noticed. Gerry went upstairs to wash and put on a tie and change into a better jacket than the one he was wearing and Hebe stood in front of the living-room mirror, adjusting her hair and applying more lipstick. I must say she seemed to take as much trouble over her appearance when she went out with her husband as she did when visiting Ivor Tesham. She was the sort of woman who would redo her face if she was going to her own execution.

I cleaned Justin up a bit, took him on my knee and began to read to him, *Spot the Dog* being his current favourite. Hebe and Gerry tried to creep out without his noticing, but of course he did and began to wail on the lines of 'Justin wants Mummy,' a phrase I was to hear a lot of in the future. I got him on to the cat and dog game which I'd successfully tried before and it worked like a charm, with him being the dog and me the back-arching, hissing, mewling cat. We had a quiet bath-time session, then more *Spot the Dog* and Justin went to bed, falling asleep within five minutes.

At ten they came in. I didn't stay, for I had to be at work in the morning. Hebe said very pointedly in Gerry's hearing that she'd

see me next day and I nearly asked what she meant but remembered just in time. They both came to the door with me and waved as I got into the car.

I felt the premonition very strongly as I drove home but if I am honest, and there is no point in keeping a diary if you are not honest, I didn't feel this would be the last time I ever saw her.