

Once upon a time
a book broke
a family

Mr Toppit



'Witty, engrossing,
moving . . . one hot mess of
a family romance' *The Times*

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Mr Toppit
by
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Luke

And out of the Darkwood Mr Toppit comes, and he comes not for you, or for me, but for all of us.

It had taken Mr Toppit a very long time to arrive, and while the wait was not a problem, the brevity of his appearance clearly was for the small coven of dissenters who felt, frankly, short-changed by the fact that when he did turn up, it was only in the last sentence of what turned out to be the last book of my father's *Hayseed Chronicles*. But what I think is that the majority of the *Hayseed* faithful were secretly rather relieved not to have to face the almost certain anticlimax of a more definitive appearance by Mr Toppit. At any rate, there has never been any shortage of people telling me in numbing detail which side of this particular fence they sit, Mr Toppit-wise. In fact, I firmly believe that, throughout the world, wherever men gather to communicate and converse, from the *Kaffeeklatschen* of Vienna to the boardrooms of Wall Street to the rock churches of Ethiopia, someone somewhere will be discussing what the last sentence of the last book actually means. Personally, I have no idea.

If I could remember a time before *Hayseed*, I think it would seem so golden to me that I could only presume I had imagined it. The truth is that there is no Before. Although it was only some years after his death that my father was elected to the sainthood of children's authors, the sales of the books had always been steady, though modest, and the name of Luke Hayseed not unknown among more progressive parents, who felt their children should not be shielded from the cruelties and uncertainties of life – the very cruelties and uncertainties that were the stock-in-trade of the *Hayseed* books. But what is undeniable is that I was not, at that time, accosted by complete strangers in restaurants or pinned up

against walls during cocktail parties by people telling me how I had ruined their childhood or – much, much worse – how I had been an inspiration to them.

Our mother, Martha Hayman, always maintained that anybody could have known something extraordinary was going to happen. While the efficacy of Martha's dark powers was never in question, I doubt whether even she could have predicted that Laurie's spontaneous decision to add the 'Hayseed Half-hour' to her radio broadcasts in Modesto, California, would have been the catalyst for what subsequently happened.

But by the time Laurie had graduated from radio to television, I was still talking about *The Hayseed Chronicles* – not only the books themselves were all over the place but also a book *about* the books. *Hayseed Karma*, published by a small press in Modesto, whose biggest seller to date had been a guide to the bicycle trails of Stanislaus County, had sat on the *New York Times* bestseller list for forty-seven weeks. It was clear that it was time for the extended members of the Hayman family to acknowledge that something extraordinary had indeed happened.

I don't keep a complete set – why would I? I was there at the beginning. I *was* the beginning – but if you trawl book shops and gift shops and computer shops and duty-free shops and mail-order catalogues, and ads in this magazine or that magazine, and special offers on the back of certain cereal packets, you will find some of the following: the original five paperbacks (of course), the boxed set of the original five paperbacks, the activity book for older readers, the hardback deluxe compendium edition with the coloured (or colourized – the originals were black-and-white) illustrations, the board game ('A throw of the dice decides which entrance you take into the Darkwood'), the PlayStation Hayseed game ('Do you dare to be Mr Toppit?'), the Royal Doulton cereal-bowl set, the eggcups, the porcelain figurines of Luke, the DayGlo rucksack, the pencil boxes, the notepaper, the Christmas cards, the T-shirt with 'My brother went to the Darkwood and all Mr Toppit allowed him to bring back was this lousy T-shirt' emblazoned on the back.

(unauthorized, I suspect – I'll get the lawyers on to it), the baseball caps and the keyrings.

For me, it is a slow descent into merchandize hell, and whenever I find myself there, I think of Lila, for it was her drawings that had trapped me in it, those simple pen drawings she had done for love. The publishers had paid her a flat fee for them and, in signing whatever contract they had flashed before her, she had passed the copyright to them. It was a small price to pay to secure her position in the *Hayseed* Hall of Fame and, though I still find it hard to believe, she appears to feel no resentment even though so much money has been made by everyone other than her. What she feels, as she tells everyone she meets – now mostly television-repair men as she's waiting for her second hip – is simple happiness that she could be 'a small part of it all', *ein kleiner Teil des Ganzen*.

The *Hayseed* drawings and her life with the Hayman family are all the fuel she needs to keep her warm at night, to get her through the day. Her flat, which my sister Rachel and I called 'the shrine', *does* contain every piece of merchandize, jostling alongside scrap-books of press clippings and photographs in silver frames. She should break and tear and grind into dust every single one for what the books did to her. Now I can almost forgive her for pinning me down like a fly in aspic, trapping me on the page (on the mug, on the teacup, on the pencil box), dressed in those ridiculous pantaloons, secured almost up to my armpits with the cord from Mr Toppit's dressing-gown, the gardener's boots on my feet and a battered straw hat on my head.

She only added those details later – the drawings for the first book were much simpler, before my father had really created the world of the Darkwood. At the beginning, she kept me still on the chair in the kitchen with her legendary child-skills: 'If you do not stop fidgeting, I shall draw you with only one eye and no hair, and when you wake up in the morning that is what you shall look like.' I kept still. Her pen scratched, her eyes dared back and forth from the sketchpad to me.

From behind me Rachel would shout, 'Is it my turn next? Is it my turn now?'

And Lila never let me look. When I leaned over, she cupped her hands over the paper. I only knew the next morning how she had drawn me as I stared at myself in the mirror, touching my eyes, counting my fingers.

After the first book, she needed me less and less. She had created the template and she spun Luke Hayseed off in a direction of her own, taking him away from me (taking me away from me) and creating the likeness of a boy who would stride manfully up the lane to the Darkwood. He would always be eager to return to his quest to find Mr Toppit, to flush him out, even though – as Luke knew to his cost – Mr Toppit could be cruel and capricious, and never really did reveal himself, and even though the Darkwood, every leaf and branch and stone of which Mr T inhabited, was dank, terrifying place.

You wouldn't have caught me dead doing that.

When you were young, or maybe not so long ago, not very far from where you live, or perhaps a little closer, Luke Hayseed lived in a big old house. The woods behind the house were called the Darkwood and Luke Hayseed thought he owned them, that they were his, that they were in his blood. If trees and leaves and brown earth could travel through veins, they did so through Luke's. But if he thought he was the only one to have them in his blood, he was very wrong, wrong as it was possible to be.

Listen: there are some rules. It isn't that I object to my childhood being ransacked, my past being vandalized, my name being stolen – not only stolen but worse: diminished, scaled down – but there should be some sense of fair play.

First, the books should have sprung out of bedtime stories. Yes, that's the way it ought to be done – a story created to soothe a frightened child in a thunderstorm, say, or a fantastical tale woven round a favourite toy, or a fanciful explanation of why certain things in the world are as they are. These stories, simple but full

meaning, unstructured but truthful, quite clearly hit such a nerve in the child (the crying child, the wide-eyed child, the enchanted child) that their weaver knows, with unerring certainty, that children *all round the world* will respond in the same way.

Or what about this? Some modest note at the beginning, some disingenuous foreword implying that, despite the writer's natural diffidence, his children's lusty cries for 'More, please!' impelled him, reluctantly, of course, and with no great hope of success, to offer these humble scribblings to other children in the vain hope that perhaps they, too, would find some small pleasure in them.

Second, there should be some truth in the stories, some little nugget (at least) that rings true. The fact is, Luke Hayseed, *c'est moi*, and even I do not know where it all comes from, all that stuff in the books. I'm not saying precisely that nothing is truthful. I'm saying I don't understand the connections, and it is these connections, or whatever you want to call them – the links, the adapters, the conduits, the funnels, the transformers – that constitute the lie that became *The Hayseed Chronicles*, the lie that turned Luke into Luke.

For instance: when we were children there was a particular lavender bush by the corner of the house. In the summer the flowers were covered with bees, circling, humming and landing. I spent hours watching them, and there came a moment when I realized something important.

What I knew was this: they did not want to be there and they could not help themselves. What I did was this: I moved them from the bush and put them under the shade of a tree in another part of the garden. I picked them up, I held their wings together between thumb and forefinger, I laid them on my palm and carried them through the garden to put them under the particular tree I had chosen, which I knew, with unerring certainty, the kind of certainty I would kill for today, was where they wanted to be. And I was never stung.

In the second book, *Garden Green*, in which Mr Toppit's influence begins to be felt, this is what happens:

Luke Hayseed was not sure if night was drawing to a close or if day was drawing to an open. At any rate, he sat bolt upright in bed. He knew that Mr Toppit had been in his room.

Mr Toppit had not come through the window. Luke had left the window closed – he always did, not that Mr Toppit would ever have been so obvious as to come through the window, even one so high up that Mr Toppit could have been accused of showing off had he come through it – closed or open.

But he had been in the room – Luke knew that. He knew it because of the bee. On Luke's bedside table, beside the goose-necked lamp, was a dead bee with one wing off, its body curled up, its zebra-striped fur looking dull and dusty. Normally there were often dead insects lying casually around the house without a care in the world – flies or woodlice or silverfish or earwigs or sometimes even butterflies. But this particular bee did not have the air of not having a care in the world. It had a curious preciseness. Not for this insect was there the spontaneity of lying down and dying where it felt like it. This bee had been positioned for effect.

With Mr Toppit nothing was ever simple, and normally there was more than one clue to what he wanted. Luke got out of bed. The room was cold, and in his pyjamas he felt rather exposed, even though he knew that clothes alone were not a particular protection against Mr Toppit.

The giveaway – not that Mr Toppit ever precisely gave anything away – lay in the doorway and Luke found it in a second. Too easy, he was already thinking, but he could not help bending down and picking up the sprig of lavender that lay on the carpet. He brought it up to his nose, and smelled what was left of its smell, which was nothing much.

It clearly purported to have been lying there for some time, as if it had dropped casually from a vase of old flowers that was being cleared out of his room. Except there were never flowers in his room – actually, there were never flowers in the house, really, even though the garden was full of them. The flowers did not seem to travel, certainly not into the house. The garden was a different world, and the close – for Luke's liking – to Mr Toppit's domain of the Darkwood.

But Luke knew what he must do, for by this time he had begun to know what Mr Toppit wanted from him, even though he did not always know why. He knew what the connection between the bee and the lavender was. It came to him, as he stood in his pyjamas, as he stood in the doorway, as he stood knowing what danger he was in.

Actually, this is one of the most famous moments in the books – one that defines the warm glow of collective memory, particularly when shared between strangers on long-haul flights unfortunate enough to be hijacked by terrorists. ‘*Hayseed Kept Us Sane, Say Plane Hostage Survivors*’, one headline ran, after the plane that had languished on the runway of a disused military airstrip in the desert for three days had finally been liberated. And on the news the two survivors in question, a vet from Portsmouth and a lay preacher in a Seventh Day Adventist church, their faces shiny with relief, told the camera crew how they had coped with their ordeal.

‘Christ, I thought we were done for,’ the vet whoops, his face blurring as the cameraman tried to hold focus. The Seventh Day Adventist tries to compose himself amid the airport pandemonium and just manages to check a little grimace at the use of ‘Christ’, although I imagine being stuck on a plane for three days alongside 280 other passengers with ninety-degree humidity and four clogged lavatories would be enough to test the faith of any preacher, lay or otherwise.

‘When Mustapha – that’s what we called the head guy, the one with the big gun and the orange mask – took the old woman and shot her in the cockpit, we thought it was over for all of us. Everyone was screaming and Jonathan,’ he nudged his new friend, so we would know who he was talking about, ‘Jonathan turned to me, we hadn’t talked much, nobody had talked much since . . . you know, and he said, “Do you remember Luke Hayseed and the bees?” and it kind of broke the ice and we both creased up. It was just the way he said it.’

Jonathan, anxious for his moment in the sun, cuts in here: ‘Whenever I’m tested, I think of that moment when he’s crossing the lawn with the bees in his hand’ – the vet’s head bobbing up and down, ‘Yeah, yeah’ – ‘and somehow things don’t seem so . . .’ What, Jonathan, what? I need to know this, but at that very moment a stretcher, carried by a gang of medics, crashes into the frame at some speed, almost knocking the two men over.

You can’t hear what the interviewer says next, even though the

boom is hovering at the top of the frame like a mangy cat. The v leaps into action: 'My family, my kids, see my mum and dad. Hav a bath. And I'm going to get that video – show my kids.' The Jonathan and the vet beam at each other, friends for life, linked b their shared recollection of brave Luke and the Bees.

I watched gobsmacked: while it was true that the bee sequenc in the television series was frightening – much more so than in th book – it seems to me, as the one who did the transporting, that, perspective terms at least, a group of terrorists strutting up an down the aisle of the stranded plane brandishing a prodigious amount of firepower, which they had not hesitated to use, bot on the old lady in the cockpit and on two hapless Dutchme whose bodies had been dispatched through the emergency door marginally had the edge over the bees.

But what do I know? I'm only Luke Hayseed – and it's true th when the video of the TV series was first released, there had been brief flurry of excitement when a national newspaper had taken u a crusading teacher's campaign to ban any videos that containe sequences disturbing to children. Her blacklist included the *Hayseed* videos, at which her anger was particularly directed because h six-year-old son had apparently been stung by a bee *while actual watching that episode*. The absurd coincidence of this seemed t escape her, but the boy now screamed uncontrollably if he sa a television set because who knew what might come out of next and attack him? '*This could happen to any child*', she told a afternoon chat-show host, her voice trembling with indignation.

I loved it. Lila, our self-appointed archivist, scanned the pape daily for all references to this extraordinary debate and Xeroxe them in quadruplicate: a copy each for Martha, Rachel, me, an one – most importantly – for what Lila called 'The Big Book o Hayseed', leatherbound and stored always in her flat. I basked in warm glow: at last, some justice in the world – years of expensiv therapy for a generation of children weaned on the video, han over their eyes, just a crack open between their pudgy finger screaming, 'They're going to sting him! They're going to sting

him!’ as the buzzing reaches a crescendo on the soundtrack, if not in the very room they are sitting in.

And on the screen, Luke 3 – let’s get the pecking order right: I am Luke 1, Lila’s version is Luke 2, and Toby, the boy actor whose career took such a spectacular downturn after the series ended and who now has AIDS rumours circling around him like vultures (*‘Gaunt Appearance of TV’s Luke Hayseed – Shock Pictures’*), is Luke 3 – *teeters through the garden, his brave-but-frightened face intercut with closeups of superbees the size of rats, whose stings could clearly fell a giant.*

Spot the difference, spot the mistake. It is this: plucky, spunky Luke 3 overcomes his natural fear (knowing what danger he is in) to perform this terrifying and thankless task for the unsatisfiable (as it turns out) Mr Toppit.

Luke 1, for whom pluck and spunk are strangers from beyond Venus, performs this task without either bravery or fear. He does it because he knows it to be right, and the very certainty of the act gives it a dignity so lacking in Luke 3 that it takes your breath away.

But the point for me is this: they were my bees and I do not remember offering them up to the world.

There was a family. There was us. My father and mother, and Rachel and Luke, the Hayman children who became the Hayseed children. Rachel handled it quite differently from me but, then, her problems were quite different from mine.

The last time I saw Rachel properly, when she was in one of the many clinics she had got to know so well, taken like a favoured diner in a restaurant to her usual table, when she was in denial or in recovery or in remission or in relapse or hovering in a place she had made uniquely her own – the cusp between all of them – she had at last reached a state of complete impasse: she had stopped doing anything at all.

What she wanted, I think, was to stay in one place in her head. Claude said once, ‘Rachel has drug-dealers like other people have accountants or dentists.’ He knew because he had introduced her to them. For years, she was always going down or up, taking drugs

to feel good or taking drugs to stop feeling bad, conscious like a chess-player of each move, and each move beyond that, trying always to second-guess her body and altering her moves to achieve the perfect combination that would keep her in that one place. I think the permutations became too many for her to cope with, spinning off into space, dividing and subdividing with terrifying rapidity. Everything altered everything else – a cigarette smoked, a dress worn, a line snorted, a door opened, a preference stated, a road crossed – until the only way she could see of just *being* was to do nothing at all, to sit in a chair absolutely silent.

The nurse who took me to her room told me she was quite co-operative over feeding – would allow herself to be fed, that is, and was lifted in and out of bed with no resistance. However, she would not look at anyone, or answer a question directed at her. If forced to do something she did not want to do, she would cover her eyes and ears with her hands and curl up in a ball, but make no sound. I did not ask about the lavatory arrangements because I suspected that nappies might come into it.

It had been a long time since I had seen her. She was sitting in a straight-backed armchair staring out of the window, but when I knelt down in front of her and took her hand, I could see that her eyes were not really focusing on anything. ‘Are you going to talk to me, Rach?’ I asked her. ‘You don’t have to.’

Clearly, she was not going to, but maybe she made some small acknowledgement that I was there, a gentle squeeze of my hand. Or maybe not. It was hard to tell.

What a consummate theatrical pro, I suddenly thought. I knew and she knew. We were back playing a game – who can stare the longest without smiling: a game we had often played as children. But this was clearly not to be acknowledged. Now she was surrounded yet again by a phalanx of shrinks trying to coax her back into some semblance of normality, paid for – to my mother’s fury – by the cascade of royalties from the books, the pencil boxes and the eggcups.

‘We could call this chapter of your life “Homage to Catatonia”

What do you think?’ I said. No response. “‘Portrait of the Autist as a Young Woman’?”

Did the corners of her mouth turn up a little? I considered tickling her ribs – she had always been responsive to that as a child – but then I thought she should be allowed to keep her dignity, if that was the word for it.

Then I saw something odd. Under her chair, the corner of a book was peeping out and I recognized it instantly from the bit of the jacket I could see. It was *Darkwood*, the last of the series, with Lila’s illustration of Luke’s back and head bathed in a celestial yellow light, dwarfed by a huge and menacing wall of trees that was parting in front of him to reveal a strange glow in the darkness. Not difficult for anyone to guess what the book was, actually, because there was a pastiche of the illustration on the cover of a solo album, also called *Darkwood*, by a member of Yes, whose permed locks stood in for Luke’s pudding-basin haircut. Lila had sent me the album for Christmas with a yellow Post-it sticker attached to the front, saying, ‘Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery – Happy Christmas to the imitatee from the flatteree!’ with the dot under the exclamation mark being a tiny smiling face that looked suspiciously like Luke’s. Well, she didn’t get out much.

Anyway, I picked the book up and brought it to Rachel’s face. ‘Is this yours? Are you reading it?’ She did not reply. Now, this raised an interesting question: was Rachel only in her mute and immobile state behind closed doors? The moment the shrinks and doctors had left the room, did she dive into a secret life, reliving happy *Hayseed* days, turning the pages of the book with the kind of fervour she normally reserved for her other secret lives?

Or had one of the relief nurses, not knowing Rachel’s precise condition and believing she was dealing with an amnesiac, tried to surround her with familiar things to jolt her memory? If it had been somebody else, it might have been a favourite song, say, or a recording of a loved one’s voice on permanent loop, like a saccharine speaking clock, a selection of family photographs placed close to the bedside so that when those unseeing eyes eventually

focused, their gaze would fall on brightly coloured images of the summer or that Christmas, smiling babies or loving parents.

But Rachel did not want to wake up to her old life. The state she was in now was the good bit. She wanted, if she could, to wake up as someone else, somewhere else. Surround her with familiar things – strait-jacket her under the *Hayseed* duvet and pillowcase, blast the excruciating ‘Luke’s Theme’ down stereo headphones into her ears, force-feed her through a tube from the *Hayseed* cereal bowl and mug combo – and you probably couldn’t kick-start her to save your life. Put her on a spaceship, people it with beings from a different solar system who speak no known language, and you might have a chance.

Up the corridor there was a kind of recreation room where I waited to see Dr Honey, Rachel’s doctor. At the other end a circle of people was sitting on chairs. One of them was weeping rather noisily, and the others were staring at him in silence. I hated that place.

As I watched, a boy looked up at me from his chair. He must have been about eighteen. ‘Group,’ he said, with an apologetic smile.

‘Sorry?’

‘Therapy.’

He was almost staring at me and I turned away. Behind him on the wall, was a large pinboard. I couldn’t quite make out what was on it, but as I moved closer I saw that it was filled with neatly arranged rows of Polaroid mugshots.

‘Rachel’s there. You’ll see her if you look,’ he said.

I scanned them and, sure enough, there was one of Rachel. Her face was over-exposed and drained of colour. Her eyes were closed. A chill came over me: she looked like a corpse.

‘Before,’ the boy said. I turned back to him, unsure what he meant. ‘When we come in they take one. It’s the clinic version of being fingerprinted. They take an After one when you leave. There’s not always a lot of difference.’ He indicated the chair next to him. ‘You can wait here if you want. I’m Matthew.’

‘I’m –’

‘I know who you are,’ he said. ‘You’re Rachel’s brother. Luke.’ He paused significantly. ‘Hayseed.’

‘Hayman. Actually.’

‘Yeah. Cigarette?’

I shook my head.

‘We all smoke like chimneys in here. Except Rachel. She’s given up. Given everything up.’ He chortled. ‘I’ve been with Rachel before.’

‘Oh? Where?’

‘I was at Lakewood for a bit. Near Marlow. When she was there. Like youth hostels, these places. You run into the same people if you’re on the circuit. No, I really liked her.’ He looked away with a jerk, and started to bite the nail of his little finger with astonishing ferocity.

I began to get up. ‘I’d better go back,’ I said.

He put out his hand and, with surprising strength, grabbed my wrist. He leaned into me and said softly, ‘I’ve read the books. All of them. I can quote bits, if you like.’

I wanted to go, but something about him almost riveted me there. ‘What are you in here for?’ I asked.

Sheepishly, he held up his hands to me, palms out, and like a concert pianist about to play, he pushed his arms towards me so that the shirt-cuffs pulled back. On his wrists there was a mass of vertical scars. ‘I expect they’ll start on Rachel soon,’ he said.

‘To do what?’

‘They’re not going to put up with her being like a loony for long. See, you’re meant to confront yourself, change your behaviour patterns. They break you down. If you like wearing white, they make you dress in black. If you like to dance, they make you sit still.’

I heard myself ask, ‘And if you’ve stopped talking?’

‘Oh, they have ways of making you talk.’ He threw back his head and laughed so loudly that the group at the other end looked round briefly.

Then he stopped. 'I know Toby, too.'

I was confused. 'Toby?'

'Toby Luttrell. Who played you. In your TV series. We shared room at that place in St Albans.'

'It wasn't my TV series,' I said.

'I fucked him,' he added conversationally.

The appropriate response to this statement eluded me for a moment. As Matthew stared at me expectantly, I managed to conjure up, 'Well, bully for you.' I tried to mould my tone into something smooth and light, although I felt anything but. I felt as if I had stepped off a cliff, but had not yet begun to fall, like a character in a cartoon film. 'I have to go,' I said.

He looked me right in the eyes. 'You see, I know who Mr Toppit is. That's something we have in common.' He smiled as if he had just worked out something rather important. 'In fact,' he said, 'that's only one of the things we have in common.'

I got up so abruptly that my chair fell over backwards. 'Actually,' I said, 'I don't give a flying fuck who Mr Toppit is.' I headed for the doors.

'Don't worry about Rachel. I'll look after her,' Matthew called to me, and then he shouted, 'She's my *friend!*'

I wanted to put my hands over my ears, but they had the grace to remain at my sides.

I found Dr Honey's office at the other end of the corridor. I knocked, and a muffled sound came from inside. He was in the middle of his lunch. On his desk everything had been arranged with mathematical precision – a plastic cup of coffee, a KitKat, a bag of crisps and a sandwich placed exactly in the centre of a square of greaseproof paper, all equidistant from each other. He was probably an expert on obsessive-compulsive disorders.

'I want to take Rachel out of here,' I said.

Dr Honey nodded slowly. He cleared his throat. 'Do you think that should be your decision,' he said, 'or hers?'

'I don't think she's capable of making that kind of decision,' I said.

‘So you think you should do it for her? Impose it?’

‘Don’t you impose things here? In this place?’

‘As a matter of fact, we impose very little. We try to . . .’ he searched for the word ‘. . . *suggest* a structure under which a patient can confront the issues that concern them. Has something upset you?’

‘I’m not upset,’ I lied. ‘I’m worried about Rachel.’ I didn’t want to talk about Matthew yet, but I knew I had to come up with something quickly. Dr Honey had the air of a theatregoer waiting for a late curtain to rise.

‘I think some of the other patients are . . .’ And then I paused. I didn’t know how to go on and, to my amazement, the word ‘horrid’ limped out of my mouth, like a straggler at the end of a race.

‘Horrid,’ he repeated thoughtfully. He turned his head away from me briefly and looked out of the window. Then he swung back, fixing me with his eyes. ‘This is not an hotel or a health farm. Our patients are not here to improve their table manners. Nor, may I remind you, is it a prison. Anyone, including your sister, may leave when they wish. She is as free to go as you are.’

I struggled on lamely, now forced to play my remaining cards. ‘Matthew . . . I don’t know his last name . . .’

‘Sumner,’ he said.

I could feel my palms sweating. ‘He said some really strange things.’

‘Strange?’

I tried to lighten the atmosphere. ‘I don’t suppose you use that as a technical term much here.’

‘Not often. No.’

‘He seems to be obsessed with these books, my father’s books.’ It sounded impossibly feeble. ‘You know, they’re quite –’

He cut in: ‘Yes, I know all about them. Obsessed? My goodness, the books are famous. It can’t be a surprise that your father’s extraordinary creation of Mr Toppit might strike a chord in someone whose issues stem from an ambivalent attitude to authority

figures. You know, he has an almost iconic significance: his need to be obeyed, his withholding of approval. Naturally Matthew is interested. I doubt if it's obsession. Personally, I'm a great admirer of the books. They're as dark as Grimm but not so one-note. We use them sometimes in our group sessions. They're a surprising link: everyone has such a clear memory of when they first read them.'

'You mean like where you were when Kennedy was shot?'

He smiled wearily. 'We aren't strangers here to the children of well-known figures: film stars, politicians, the corporate world. The burden of an achieving parent can seem formidable,' he said.

I shook my head. 'He wasn't an achieving parent. He just wrote some books.'

'Rachel, if I may say so, seems more comfortable with that than you do.' He arranged a patient look on his face. 'Your sister – and please do not take this the wrong way – is not a well person, is not a *functional* person, to use our jargon. She identifies very strongly with the books – perhaps too strongly – but they represent a kind of golden age to her. That's an area we touched on in many of our sessions the last time she was here. She told me then that she was writing the official biography of your father. Has that progressed? It's important that she has a project, something that will build her confidence.'

'No, she's not writing his biography,' I explained patiently. 'She went to see the publishers and told them she wanted to do it. They've made a fortune from the books so they could hardly say no. If she's written half a page I'd be surprised.'

'I sense you have a sort of ambivalence about her work. Do you feel that it might be more appropriate for you to write the biography?' He seemed genuinely puzzled.

I couldn't help laughing as if it was the most ridiculous thing in the world. Which it was. 'It isn't "her work". It isn't anything.'

He seemed hurt. 'I can't help feeling you're competing with Rachel in some way,' he said. 'Surely you can both share in the

riches – I don't mean material riches – of your father's books. His extraordinary heritage, if you will.'

'It's not about sharing. That's the problem.' I stopped because I saw something now more clearly than I ever had before. 'You've read the books?' I said. He nodded. 'There's one omission from my father's heritage. The books are about me. I am Luke Hayseed. They're not really about me, but that's neither here nor there. The thing is, there's no Rachel Hayseed in them. Not a walk-on part, not a guest appearance. How would that make you feel? Don't you see? She just isn't . . . there. Somewhere in that area I think you might locate her issues. That's why she's not a functional person, to use your jargon.'

When I went back to Rachel's room, she was asleep, her head tilted up against the headrest of her chair. I leaned down and kissed her forehead.

As I said, her problems were quite different from mine.