

Alan Carmichael

The Gift

This frail engine,
we think,
and yet what murder is needed to take it down.

Light Years, James Salter

*I*s it real?

Is it real? Sometimes Angela asked herself this question, and she would feel a panic rising inside her at the thought that her personality was schizophrenically sundered. That though she took part in the world and had a career, though she went to shops and bars and worked in an office, a part of her was just off the map. At times like these, she closed her eyes and tried to recall everything that had happened in the months before her grandmother died. Every conversation, every gesture, word or sign. Because if the old woman had referred to it, at any time, however obliquely, then surely the gift did not exist in Angela's head alone.

'You and me, we're different,' her grandmother once told her.

'Different, grandma? Different from who?'

'From your parents. From all those others.' And then she added, 'Don't be frightened. You'll learn to accept it.'

Another time, when she was bedridden, 'You'll be there when I need you, won't you?'

'What do you mean, grandma?'

'There's no one else now. It's just you.'

And if Angela was at work, or out and about with friends, she would open her eyes, adjust her hair behind her ears, and smile her artful smile.

But sometimes, alone, she just squeezed her eyelids tighter still.

Is it real?

For when the old woman lost the ability to speak, or perhaps it was the desire to speak, it was Angela who seemed to understand what she wanted and who served up her soup and

prepared her medicine, it was Angela who told her parents that she was uncomfortable or unwell.

And finally, about the time it got bad and nothing really helped any more, there was the evening, just two days after her fourteenth birthday, when she was at her bedside arranging the pillows and the blankets, and she seemed to fall asleep and to have that dream where the two of them sat and talked for hours and hours in the drawing room of a house at once familiar and unknown and which ended when her grandmother took her hand and told her she was ready and then said goodbye. And later that same night her grandmother was dead, and she cried all the next day, not just because of the death but because of the fear, which gushed and sprayed up inside her as if from some severed artery, that she herself had caused it.

As he pulls in to the car park, Alex Westerman wonders whether he has time to stop at the cafeteria in the basement.

He is the tiniest bit late. He, who once counted punctuality as a kind of a measure of a man, he finds that he has got out of the habit of rising early in the morning. He suspects – he knows – it is a consequence of the nature of the work he is given these days, these latter days, the fag-end of his career. He no longer creates his own schedule, he gets given it. But in a way that suits him, he has come to accept that he should not want more.

He is stiff when he climbs out of the car. The October weather is not kind to him. He grunts and walks towards the swing doors. As he goes through he knows he needs to lose some weight.

‘Sorry, Alex,’ a uniformed man at reception says. ‘I need to see it.’

‘Of course.’ Alex fishes out an ID card from his pocket and pins it to the lapel of his jacket.

He does stop for a coffee, though he asks for it in a takeaway cup. But Vic and Corinne are suddenly either side of him as he picks up a sachet of milk.

‘No toast today?’ Vic says. They are going for a full order of bacon and eggs.

Alex pats his waist and sighs.

‘You’ve got a case,’ Corinne says.

‘I have?’

‘I saw the folder. One of those big red ones. On your desk.’

‘You’re in early.’

'Bigwigs from London. In at dawn,' Vic says. 'Meeting and greeting. That's our new speciality,' he jokes.

Alex looks at his colleagues, at their unlined faces and clear eyes. A cub-like playfulness hangs over them. It embarrasses him to think it, but he wonders whether they have ever slept together. He knows that inhibitions, tested by exposure to the modern face of crime, can evaporate with bewildering speed. As a kind of defence against the awfulness one sees out there.

'Don't worry,' Corinne says. 'We'll be wining and dining tonight.'

'Am I invited?' Alex says.

'You'll be too busy.'

'Too busy?'

'Your case.'

'Had a peek?'

Apart from the folder, a PC, and his own brief case, Alex's desk is empty. He likes it that way. He has come less and less to see the point of all the personal effects with which his colleagues mark out their workspace. The toys, the flowers. The silver framed photographs of wife and family. Perhaps some in the past have sensed a certain coolness in his attitude. Perhaps once it even held back his chances of promotion. But a desk is a desk. A job is a job. He wants no overlap. Work and play. Colleagues and friends. Day and night.

He lifts up the lid of his case and takes out a pad and a pen, and then he pauses. There is a large brown envelope there as well, unopened, with his name hand-written in large letters. It has no stamp or address, it has been delivered personally. There is something inside which resists folding. Vinyl, or card. It is probably important. He stares at the envelope for ten seconds, drumming his fingers on the table. Then he closes his case and lays it on the floor.

He opens the folder.

There are pages and pages of photocopies, frayed and misaligned, the correspondence between someone senior in the

Home Office and the Chief Executive of Oxford Social Services. Interspersed are replies and comments from the Chief Constable. And underneath them, a statement of intent from the Chief Superintendent of the Special Investigations Unit. His boss.

Skimming through a second time, Alex wonders whether there is really a case at all.

There is no crime. Not yet.

He reads on. There is another sheet of paper, with a list of names.

Margaret Manning. Age at death, 78. Place of death, Benbow.

Jack Forsythe. Age at death, 82. Place of death, Benbow.

William Cutty. Age at death, 61. Place of death, Benbow.

There are eleven more. Elsewhere, there are paragraphs about time and date – and cause – of death. He reads of heart failure, cancer, tumours of the brain, the liver, the lung. A catalogue of pain and physical malfunction. He will sift through these details later. He returns to the list, and reads the last name.

Archibald Curtis. Age at death, 74. Place of death. Oxford.

Some have coroner's reports, some do not. Alex pauses. *OK*, he thinks, *So what? Old people die*. There are pages of statistical analysis, life expectancy charts, trends around the country, best and worst regions in which to live or die. And then a psychological profile. It is ten years old and describes a Manchester GP, a respected member of the community, a trusted friend of the old and sick. A man who abused that trust. A mass murderer. Another Home Office memorandum, at the bottom of the folder. *How did it happen? Could it happen again? How can we prevent it?*

His boss is hovering by the door, coughing lightly. He stands on tiptoe. 'When you have a minute,' he says. 'And bring the folder with you.'

Alex waits a suitable minute, and walks across the corridor. His boss has a larger room, with a sofa, but he chooses to

remain at his desk. Alex sits opposite and waits for him to look up.

‘Well?’ The voice smooth, almost seductive, as if covering a yawn.

‘I’ve only had a glance so far.’

‘Here, can I?’ His boss stretches out a hand and Alex passes over the folder. His boss opens it, and then reaches for a pair of half-moon spectacles. Face taut, eyes narrowed, he squints down at the papers inside. After a minute, he closes it and hands it back.

‘What do you think?’ he says.

‘There’s not much to go on.’ There is silence for a few moments. ‘Are we sure we have a case?’

His boss looks directly at him, perhaps to re-assert a protocol. ‘Well, the Chief Constable seems to think so.’ He sits back in his chair. ‘You know him, don’t you?’

‘Who?’

‘The Chief Constable.’

‘We ... we once worked in the same team.’

His boss waits.

‘We were trainees together,’ Alex says. ‘A long time ago.’

‘I see.’ His boss looks down. ‘Tell me, Alex, what do you think? I’ve never asked you. What do you think about this restructuring? Merging of the forces. National directorates. Et cetera, et cetera.’

Alex sighs. ‘Well, it won’t affect me. I’ll be long gone.’

‘But you do have a view?’

‘It’s a different kind of policing, I suppose.’

‘Yes.’ His boss looks across at Alex. ‘Yes.’ He makes as if to get up, but doesn’t. As if snapping back to the here-and-now. He points to the folder. ‘Look, there is some concern about this at senior levels. It’s not what has happened, it’s what might. So much these days is about profiling, about trends. About engineering out the possibility of crime. To use that -’ the faintest of smirks ‘- that phrase. Take your time, but move

quickly. If you know what I mean. Use, what're they called, Pinky and Perky -'

'Their names are Vic and Corinne.'

'Yes, use them if you need to.'

His boss is already looking away and picking up a ribboned envelope from his in-tray. Alex pauses for a just a moment, and gets up. As he walks out, his boss says to his back, 'Keep me informed, Alex. Won't you?'

*

Good people don't need much policing.

There is a small grass area outside the office, with a few benches laid out at intervals. Alex Westerman sits alone at one of these eating a sandwich. He is idly counting the closed circuit TV cameras which are wired up on the walls, the roofs, the doorways of his building.

And bad people can never really be policed at all.

He is struck by a memory, a week he spent five years back on a conference in Tokyo. For the first few days he had felt an elusive calm, bordering on euphoria, as he walked the streets, evenings after the seminars, or strolled round the tourist sites in the hours he had free. He assumed it was the jetlag, or perhaps the air, the strangeness, the sights and sounds, or the young women streaming out of the high-rise offices at the end of the day. And then he had a curious revelation, which left him puzzled and finally depressed.

With a professional eye, he began to scan the streetlamps, the traffic lights, the buildings. Either they were not there, or they were hidden with a subtlety beyond his powers to lay bare. The apparatus of state, the CCTV, the cameras. There were none. And the police? Where were they? The patrol cars, the helicopters, the eye of authority observing, recording, regulating, judging.

Are we just bad people? He remembers an old acquaintance, friend and mentor from way back, lecturing to a fresh intake at

police college. Brought out of retirement, a few extra quid for his knowledge and experience. Alex sat at the back, amongst the youngsters and the sniggers. The two of them in the pub afterwards, a quiet rant. *It's just gone rotten. When they film you every bloody second of every day, even when you're going for a fucking piss, you know they've lost the plot.* Alex wonders whether his friend is right, whether the price of policing, of keeping a lid on it all, has become too great. And yet, what alternative is there?

*

An hour later, he is on the phone to a Home Office official. To introduce himself. To scope out the terms of the investigation. To pre-empt misunderstanding.

'It is the job of the Department to allay public concern about the proper discharge of duty by health care officials.' There is a lilt in the man's voice, or a hidden chuckle, as if he is laughing at a joke Alex does not get.

'Can you be, perhaps, a bit more specific?' he asks.

A pause. A sigh. 'We in the department must be mindful of the kind of laxity in oversight which resulted in certain cases in the nineties— of which I'm sure you are aware — where a number of the vulnerable lost their lives.'

Alex is struggling. He presses for names, for charges.

'Well, I think that's for you to determine,' the official says.

The voice, it occurs to him now, has something of the preacher or the bible salesman. *I won't go knocking on the doors of those not accused of any crime*, he thinks.

Perhaps the official guesses what is going through his mind. 'These people will have nothing to fear if they've done nothing wrong.'

A different kind of policing. Perhaps this man is right. He and his kind. Sleek, empty of doubt, accomplished in front of the cameras.

'It comes to this,' the man says. 'The Minister does not want to sit in his office one year from now and see headlines asking

why no one bothered to check. Why someone was allowed to get away with it for so long.'

Get away with what? Alex realises he must be patient. It is another ten minutes before a line of enquiry begins to emerge.

'We have had a number of communications from the Senior Coroner's office at the General Hospital. There have been a few changes at the highest level there in recent months. Perhaps you have heard. Dame Janet Spencer. She's the top dog now.'

A clumsy metaphor. But Alex has heard the name, though he cannot immediately remember the context.

'It is her contention that an unrealistically large number of old people are dying not in hospital, but at home. Or at the rest homes where their families have decided they will end their days.'

'This is a problem?'

'It is the case,' the official continues, 'in this modern age, where technology can keep people alive beyond the point at which, in previous eras, their condition would be deemed hopeless, that the majority of people spend their last moments in hospital. I quote from Dame Janet, "... most deaths occur in such specialised sanctuaries as intensive care units, oncology labs, research facilities, emergency rooms, and not at home ... they are surrounded, more often than not, by banks of machines rather than kith and kin.'"

Alex is struggling. 'This sounds a bit -' he wonders whether he may offend '- a bit vague. As a reason for suspicion, I mean.'

'Statistics. The hospitals have to do it these days. Stats, my dear chap. Deaths per thousand of population. Cause of death. Place of death. Time of death. And where those figures deviate from national norms we have to hear about it.'

'Are these people dying out of turn? Prematurely? Is that the suggestion?'

At that moment the name Janet Spencer floats into his recall. A House of Lords Ethics committee, something about living wills, euthanasia, the right-to-die.

'We're not jumping to conclusions. Yet.'

Alex waits for more, but the official drifts off into the metaphysics of function and duty once again. It occurs to Alex that there is one topic he should raise. Something which, more and more in the modern era, seems to underpin so much of the criminal activity his people face.

‘Drugs,’ he says abruptly. ‘What about drugs?’

The official is silent for a moment. ‘Eh?’ he says eventually.

‘Morphine. Painkillers.’

‘Well, it’s interesting you mention these things.’

‘Are there reports of chemists being robbed? Consignments going missing?’ And he adds, ‘These are the things we usually like to go on.’

‘Well, yes. But it’s not the way you might think. Wait, let me grab the, er, report, let me see.’

Alex waits. For the first time, he feels, he is on top of the conversation.

‘The thing is -’ the man grunts down the phone, as though he is reaching across for something ‘- it’s the exact opposite. Usage is, if anything, down. As you can guess, the issue of such substances is tightly controlled. But. The stats say, well, it’s quite singular, you should have it in your report, if not, I’ll fax it over, yes, here it is, usage well down on the national average ...’

Alex is up late. The pale glare of his laptop on the living-room table is not quite sufficient to light up the keys in front of him, and he stumbles with spelling, with returns, deletes and tabs, as he works the search engines.

He has known killers, he has interviewed them, arrested them, and sometimes kept in touch as they sulked or regretted, chafed or declined, in the long-stay maximum security wings. These men, and a few women, are drawn from the margins of society, they are people with little education or future of any kind, whose families and communities are themselves caught up in a generation-to-generation hopelessness.

But there are others who are different. Murderers who spring from the staid core of society. Professional, respected,

sometimes loved, even by their victims, they present a far less clear-cut insight into human behaviour. They kill with poison and pills, they plan and conceal. There is no burst of intoxicating passion, no desire for love or revenge. The financial gain is minimal. There is no answer to the question *Why?*

He scans blow-by-blow reports from the newspaper archives. He skims through macabre accounts in the tabloid style crime-interest websites, he reads sociological reports shot through with a class-war argot that mystifies and faintly depresses.

Alex pauses to stretch and to get up and close the window. It is quiet in the cul-de-sac where he lives, and has lived, alone the last five years. He stares out for a second, the curtain material thin in his hands. The lights are already out in the living rooms of the other bungalows.

He returns to his chair and switches on a spot lamp. Harold Shipman. The worst of the lot.

He is intrigued at Shipman's relationship with his mother. Alex speculates on the effect on the teenager of seeing the old woman waste away with cancer. Of seeing the impact of painkillers to relieve, perhaps for a brief while to return to her her humanity. He reflects on his own parents. His father dead, suddenly, from a heart attack, while he, Alex, was still a young man. His mother, the youngest of six, watching her brothers and sisters go one by one, until only she remained. A quick descent, after her seventy-third birthday, into inertia, blankness, and dementia, and then a few last days in hospital with complications brought on by pneumonia. If he had been in the position of alleviating, or accelerating, her decline, would he have done so?

He reads about motive. Shipman's love of power, his desire to control, to determine the moment of death. Later, his suicide in jail. Its purpose, to spare his wife. Its consequence, to cheat the authorities of their power over him. And the public of the retribution it craved.

He remembers himself at his mother's bedside at the end. The consultant stopping to whisper to him. His stumbling replies.

She is very poorly.

I shouldn't wish for her...

A duet of concealed meanings, of sentences which hinted and always deflected.

Very, very poorly.

... to suffer beyond ...

We may hope ...

If a decision needs to be made to prolong ...

... but we must consider every eventuality ...

... I would seek quality rather than quantity ... if you get my...

... every eventuality.

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Alex sits with Vic and Corinne in a café in the centre of Oxford. It is mid-morning, the shops outside are crowded. The three of them wear suits, they might be attending a marketing seminar. Only their shoes, flat, scuffed, comfortable, suggest a different enterprise. Alex's attention wanders as Vic tells a story of a stag weekend back home, his accent broadening with each bar and strip joint. Corinne fingers a crucifix round her neck, as if unsure whether to approve or tick off this declaration of his Glasgow roots.

A waitress squeezes by.

Alex interrupts. 'So. This same café? Three o'clock this afternoon?' They each have meetings and interviews lined up for the next few hours.

They nod. There are still a few minutes for them to finish their drinks.

'You still play?' Vic says.

'Sorry?' Alex is caught off-guard.

'We're making up a foursome this Saturday. Local tournament.'

'I'm sorry, I'm still ...'

'Tennis. You play, don't you?'

'Not for' - Alex shrugs - 'a few years now. Five years. More.'

Corinne looks at him, her eyes narrowing. Alex is for the briefest moment touched by her concern.

'You shouldn't let it slip away,' Vic says.

'Do you remember the last time you played?' Corinne says. And Alex can. It was with his wife. He says nothing. 'Is that really going to be your very last game?' She adds, after a few seconds, 'Ever?'

Alex sips his coffee. Last things. To know that that was the last time you would ever play tennis. Ever. In your life. To know the last time you got a promotion. Made love to a woman. Alex can remember the last - the most recent - time each of these things happened in his life. *Is that it?* he thinks, *Will I experience these things once more?* He remembers his mother - again - this time it is, perhaps, a few years after his father died, asking, half-joking, *Will I ever fall in love again?* She knew, he realises now, that she would not. Has he also reached that stage? Must he now accept the same featureless future?

Alex's eyes focus and he looks up at Vic and Corinne. They do not look back. They are staring at something outside. Their faces are taut, their eyes wide. Alex turns. He tries to see what they see.

Outside. Beyond the plate glass. A van backs along the street. A man in overalls shouts, bangs a fist against its side. A woman stumbles, her heel has gone. Six dogs, leashed, a single walker puffing behind, nose at the scrap of leather. A group of youths walk by, sunglasses flashing.

Vic is whispering. 'I recognise one of ...'

Alex takes in the street. A traffic warden stoops to examine a tax disc. A child clutches a doll and cries. 'What is it?' he says softly.

Three youths. Caps askew. T-shirts, despite the cool weather. Earrings, beer bellies.

'I'm sure I know those guys. From one of the ...' His voice trails off, his attention is not on what he is saying.

'One of the ...?'

'Bulletin boards.'

'Shall I call out the locals?' Alex says, but Corinne is already bringing something in her palm up to her lips, a compact mirror, he thinks absurdly for just a second. He sees the digital display light up. Her fingers hover on the number pad.

The youths are crossing the road. A swagger. A kick at a parked car. A fourth joins them. He has a tattoo on one arm, a dog's head, a bulldog - Alex strains his eyes - and the image triggers a memory. The waitress stands beside them. A memory he cannot quite recover. She says something about the bill. She waits, takes a cloth from her apron pocket and stares at the table-top.

'In there.'

'Where?'

'The shop.'

'Which one?'

'Across the street.'

'Which one?'

'The boozier.'

'Off-licence?'

'They're all in there.'

'All of them?'

'All four.'

'Alex, what do we do?' Vic and Corinne still do not turn.

And then it comes to him, the memory. A school friend, his name long forgotten, blown up on the streets of Belfast - 'Alex?' - the exact same tattoo, his pride and joy the day he signed up.

They're horsing around. He grips the table, he almost says it.

'What's that?'

A finger of spilt coffee creeps towards the table's edge.

'Alex?' Corinne looks at him.

He breathes in. 'You sure?'

They both nod.

The memory fades. 'OK. Let's go.'

They slide out from underneath the table. Without looking at her, he taps the waitress on the shoulder twice and the three of them move away. She stares after them, mouth open, pen and notepad in hand. A couple enter the coffee shop. The man holds the door open. Without thanking him, they move out onto the street. They stare at the darkened windows of the wine shop opposite.

A shout. Muffled. The door opens and two of the youths come bustling out. One lobs a bottle into the road. It smashes on a windscreen. They look left, right, and begin to sprint left. Two more appear, then a woman, middle-aged, staggering, clasp ing her throat with one hand. She reaches for the doorframe with the other.

'Stop.' Loud. Then Vic and Corinne together, louder. 'Stop. Police.'

They are running across the street. Their badges visible in their hands. They are shouting as cars brake and skid to a halt. They are belting down the pavement. Vic's arms are high, he clears a path. Corinne's legs are pounding. Her jacket blows in the wind, and then, a twist of the shoulder, drops to the floor.

Alex is wheezing when he reaches the woman at the shop. He kneels to help her, takes off his jacket, lays it on the paving stone. He sits her down on it.

He gets up and turns. Shouts again. 'Police.' He holds up his badge. He tells the gathering crowd to be calm, to remember what they have seen, to wait for his uniformed colleagues. He runs after Vic and Corinne.

Fifty yards ahead there is shouting and scuffling. People are in a circle, pressing in, backing away. There are sirens in the distance. Alex trots, he cannot go faster. Two of the youths back out onto the street from between two parked cars, crouching, looking about them, and disappear from view. Alex shouts as he runs, he commands, orders. To clear out the way, to let him through. He sees four people grapple with each other on the pavement. Vic has his knees on a man's back, his left

hand struggles with cuffs which swing to and fro with each spasm of the body on the ground. Corinne is buckling as she twists to get her hands round the shoulders of a second man. And then he punches her. Her face twists away and she screams. He punches her again.

Alex bellows. He is breathing heavily. He shouts again, accelerates.

Shoppers watch. Faces frozen. A siren, which has been bleating at the edge of awareness, explodes and echoes around them. A police van swerves into view, and the other youths spring out from behind a car and dart across the street and are gone.

Alex sees Corinne on her knees. He won't be there in time. The man stands over her. He roars, his fist is in the air. And Vic is at his shoulder, an arm around his neck, and Corinne is punching at his shins, his knees, his thighs. The man is down. Then over. On his front. Thrashing, and then, as the cuffs are placed at his wrists, inert.

Alex is at their side. Breathless. *Brilliant*, he whispers, and he looks at Corinne. She is still on her knees.

He gulps air. 'Are you OK?'

She stares at him.

'Are you OK?'

She nods.

'Say it.' He bends. 'Say it to me.'

And she smiles. 'Yes, I'm OK.'

Alex gets up. 'Stay with them. The uniforms are here.' He squeezes between two 4X4s and steps across the street. Policemen are flooding out of the van, another is on its way. They converge around the bodies on the pavement.

Alex moves off silently. Everyone's eyes, young and old, are on his colleagues the other side of the street. His are turned away. Towards shop doors, down alleys. He moves more quickly, he breaks into a jog, slows as he rounds a corner. The sounds have died away. His exhaustion as well.

He is still. They are there. Fifty yards distant. Hands in pockets, shoulders hunched, striding fast away from him. Striding, for some reason, not running. They stop. They wait, they huddle at a shop front. An unmarked car beyond them careers around a bollard and into view. And another. Abruptly, from nowhere, a siren, blue streaks of light bouncing off the plate glass.

The youths turn, they are running back. Towards him. Fast.

Alex twists a quarter circle. He thinks himself small. He thinks himself thin. He can track their run out the corner of his eye. The police car has barely stopped, but four doors are open. The youths do not look back. They are at thirty yards, twenty, ten.

Alex turns.

He steps out, he jumps out - he surprises himself - he *leaps out* with an arm stretched. One boy swerves, bounces off the other, stumbles. And in a single movement Alex leans into his path and enfolds him in the grasp of his right hand. The boy smashes into his shoulder. He gasps, runs, is dragged forward, trips. His right arm slips down to the boy's waist but he twists round to grab his thigh with his left, to take, and break, the momentum, and together they crumple. Skidding, Alex draws his knee against the boy's legs and they collapse, both, and Alex falls on top of him. The fourth youth slows, looks back then forward, and sprints away. One policeman, two, rush by.

The boy on the ground kicks and screams, and flails with his arms, his legs, his neck. But there is a hold that Alex learnt long ago that can incapacitate any man, however strong, and he shifts his weight and wraps both arms around the boy's neck and chest.

'I've got you,' Alex shouts. The boy screams abuse.

'Be still.'

The boy begins to wail and curse, and for a second Alex worries he may choke.

'It's no good,' he says quietly, adjusting his hold. 'There's nothing you can do.'

Vic and Corinne are sitting at the back of a police van, their feet trailing out the open doors. Its lights are still flashing. They drink from water bottles. Corinne has a bandage over her right eyebrow.

They are giggling.

Alex has to stop himself giggling as well. For the first time in an age he has made a street arrest.

They offer him water. He takes a swig. They make room and he sits beside them. He breathes out.

They examine each other's clothes. The tears, the dust, the missing buttons.

Vic turns to him. 'Well, I guess we have to reschedule our meetings.'

Alex sighs. He drinks some more. He pats Corinne on the shoulder, and then, reaching over, Vic as well. For the first time in an age he bursts out laughing.

'I guess we do.'

It is eight o'clock when something inside him ruptures. He is in the shower, and doubles up. He lowers himself onto the enamel floor and sits. Water sprays down on top of him. He waits, a minute, two. Eyes closed. After five, he stretches, gently probing, ring-fencing the pain, and kneels. He bows his head and thinks for a moment that he is going to be sick, but it passes. Another two minutes, and he reaches for the taps and hauls himself up. He switches off the water, finds a towel, and limps over to the bedroom. He sits on the bed.

He remembers the envelope, unopened at the bottom of his briefcase. He has left the case at work, and for a moment a worry nags at him that someone may find it, might check its contents. He shakes his head. They'll find out soon enough, he thinks. Whatever happens.

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Alex Westerman is led into the office by a secretary. Dame Janet Spencer does not rise, nor does she say anything at first. She has been studying a document on her desk, her pen is in her upraised right hand. She watches as Alex approaches, his arm extended. She waits a moment before putting her pen down and shaking hands. They are both silent as the secretary withdraws.

'Inspector Westerman,' she says when the door closes.

He places his case on his lap, opens it, and takes out some papers. He puts it down on the floor and observes her. Grey hair, short, severe. No smile. She gets up with a certain difficulty, retrieves a stick that leans against the window behind, and shuffles to a side table where there is a jug of water. He sees that she has the plumpness that comes with age. She no longer bothers to dress formally. Her skirt billows. She grunts each time she puts her weight on her right side.

He waits until she has placed two glasses on her desk and has sat down.

'Dame Janet,' he begins, 'you are aware of the purpose of my investigation?'

'I initiated it, I think,' she says.

'Perhaps we can start then by going over what it was that first began to concern you. I have here' - he passes across a page of graphs and text - 'some figures for deaths from natural causes in the region. These are from the Home Office.'

She looks at them briefly. 'Mr Westerman.' He notices the change of title. He suppresses an urge to reveal his first name. 'How much do you know about statistics?'

Alex smiles. 'Enough,' he says. 'In my job I have to be familiar with the basics.'

'Averages.' She hands back the sheet of paper. 'We expect, over large populations, things to average out. And yet we would not expect things to average out perfectly. That would be unreasonable. We expect variation. And, yes, we expect average variation from our norms. But some might argue that, by the above, it would be unreasonable to expect average variation in all cases. At all times.'

‘Do you follow me?’

Alex nods. He is in Oxford, after all.

‘So, perhaps, there is no case to answer,’ she says. Her voice takes a slight inflection on the final word.

‘Is that a question?’

She pauses. ‘I point out merely that the figures may not always point to intention.’ She waits. ‘Although, on the other hand, they might. Or, a third possibility, they might point to intention which has only a non-causal relationship with the variations that we see.’

‘I’m not sure ...’ Alex remembers abruptly that he has not switched off his phone. It would be too embarrassing to do so now. He prays that Vic and Corinne do not need to contact him.

‘Mr Westerman, do you have a view on the old idea of three-score-and-ten?’

‘Say again?’

‘Perhaps people are less religious these days. Or perhaps their education in these matters is lacking. Are you a religious man, Mr Westerman? No. Please don’t answer that. It’s none of my business.’

I was married in a church, he thinks.

The silence calls for a response, despite her exemption. ‘Sadly police work is a seven day calling,’ he says.

‘Hmm. I was. Once. And then, as a young woman, I wasn’t. Now, I, well, I don’t really know. I suppose that as the end heaves into view, one can’t help but reconsider these things. What does remain – for me at any rate – is, shall we say, a certain reverence for life.’ She is looking away. ‘For its mystery.’ Her voice is low, she is talking to herself. ‘To revere life. That’s the thing.’

He watches her, wondering whether he should say something. Eventually he does. ‘Dame Janet, in a way, to do that is my job description.’

She turns to him. 'Yes, of course. Well put.' She is nodding. 'Well put,' she repeats. 'But if its mystery remains, where does that leave science, Mr Westerman?'

She stops and looks over her shoulder. It is suddenly colder.

'Do you mind, Mr Westerman?' She rubs her neck and faces him. 'That window. Behind me. You're much taller.'

He is not. She is joking, he thinks. But he does get up, and as he walks round the desk he remembers from his googling the day before that she was prominent in the sixties women's movement. Perhaps over time the drive for equality has been tempered by a desire for good manners between the sexes. He closes the window. She speaks without turning as he walks back.

'I suppose you policemen love science. Its application in technology. DNA testing. CCTV. Databases.'

He sits down. 'There is always a place for -' he is aware, under her gaze, of falling into cliché '- for what the tabloids call old-fashioned police work.'

There is a brief intake of breath. Perhaps she has picked up the flicker of irony. 'What about hospitals? Mr Westerman? They have of course been transformed in my time. Respirators, cardiac machines, MRI. New drugs. Is this vast panoply of technological impedimenta always useful? Or desirable? I suspect that there are some doctors who think the same way as you. That there is always a place for old-fashioned patient care.'

'Some might agree, I imagine.'

'Many would. Many might say, thank God there is.' She laughs. 'I'm sorry. We're back to him again.'

Alex smiles.

'And if there is a choice?' she says.

'A choice? Of what?'

'Well. Between technology and, let us say, the more old fashioned way of doing things.'

'But ... should they be exclusive? Why one instead of the other?'

'Oh, come, Mr Westerman. If there's a choice, between, let us say, making your own enquiries by letter and, I don't know,

using email and the internet, you would be a fool to stick with pen and ink. Especially if somebody's life were at stake.'

'Perhaps ...'

'Exactly. Exactly.' She has misjudged his inflection.

'Perhaps in your field, here, it's not always so clear-cut.'

'Why so?'

'Perhaps the benefits of science are not always so desirable.'

'And who makes that judgement?'

Alex is silent.

'You see, there's the rub. That's the point. If it's not so clear-cut, if the mystery remains ... if we retain our reverence for that mystery ... then shouldn't we be doing everything possible to preserve what remains? Of a person's life, their hopes and dreams?'

'Even if ...'

'Even if what, Mr Westerman?'

Alex is silent. *Hopes fade*, he thinks. *Dreams come to nothing*.

Dame Janet Spencer looks down at her desk and takes a sheet of paper. She hands it across to him. There are listed the names of some surgeries and clinics. A few old people's homes. A number of doctors and their practices.

'Take this away. Study it.'

'Who are these people?' he asks.

'There are not that many of them. Just a few. And they are all based in small towns and villages a short distance from here. Half an hour by car. If you know the side roads.'

He sees the name Benbow. He has read about this place before.

'I would like to believe, no, I *must* believe, that these are not bad people. And they are making decisions, tough decisions, every day.'

He is collecting his things.

'Are they right decisions, Mr Westerman?' He prepares to leave. 'Are they?'

Alex drives through the countryside around Oxford. He sees small towns, villages, farmland. A few industrial estates. And some tourist coaches, despite the dampness in the air. The low cloud, uniform and dull, is pierced by a weak light. English weather. Perhaps that is what the coaches come for.

There is a place he is aiming for. A village. He has seen a few signs, it is not that far away. But he is happy to take the long way round.

Vic and Corinne will be interviewing at clinics, surgeries, retirement homes for the elderly. They are uneasy about their task.

‘What shall we tell them, Alex?’ A few hours before they had conferred at a breakfast meeting.

‘We need to give them a reason.’

‘We’re not the Gestapo.’

Alex shares their concerns. There is a quango which overseas care homes and facilities for the elderly, and he has arranged for one of their officials in Oxford to join them.

‘Take this fellow along with you,’ he told them over the toast and coffee. ‘You’re absolutely right. We don’t want to antagonise. Let him do the introductions. You’re there to monitor, observe. Then to ask the important questions. Use your intuition.’

‘Intuition?’ Vic had made a face.

Alex smiles as he recalls the morning’s conversation. He wonders whether there is a place for intuition in the new ways of policing, the type of things they teach at the colleges these days. At least, what he presumes they teach. He presumes - he fears - it has been ironed out of the system. Perhaps it is not what his old colleague the Chief Constable would be encouraging.

You knew him, his boss said. *The Chief Constable. Didn’t you?*

But it is a decade since they last met. More. It was a party. The impromptu office party the day his old colleague got the call, the promotion to the top job. Alex remembers it was mid-

summer. A decade ago, and more. He has not seen him face to face in the years since.

A party. To celebrate his success. Alex had left before the end.

He would have left earlier still, and yet to have done so might have seemed to indicate a lack to respect in the eyes of some. But walking towards the taxi rank over paving stones still wet with unseasonable rain he wondered whether he was imagining, or at least exaggerating, the offence that others might take. He was no longer one of the younger officers, it was quite acceptable to want to wake the next morning with a clear head. Still, it was true, he had lost any taste for the event after the toasts, the congratulations and the speeches, and he had looked for a suitable moment to escape.

His colleague would be leaving for his new post some time over the next few days.

That could have been you. Had he actually heard the whispers? Or was it his imagination, was it some grain of self-doubt, or embarrassment, even, at his own failure to reach for the highest prizes? He and the new Chief Constable had started out together, and for a few years their careers had progressed in parallel, touching and merging as cases brought them onto the same teams.

‘Give me a call,’ his peer and rival said as they met the day after the party in the lift. ‘If ever you need anything, just give me a call.’ As if easing already into his new responsibilities.

They had been young men of a similar mould. Grammar school boys with fathers who were products of the war years, youngsters who understood the meaning of duty and felt it their task to place a fair but firm arm of restraint over the tide of personal freedom that was coursing through society in the sixties and seventies. But something had changed.

He remembered visiting his sister in Sydney, eighty-four, eighty-five, the first time he had seen her since she left England five years before. They sat in the kitchen of her flat, drinking from the second bottle of wine.

'I thought you were always so stuck up,' she said. 'So uncool.'

'Uncool?' He laughed.

Alex's wife had gone to bed half an hour before.

'You know. The summer of love. Dropping out, tuning in, turning on. And you used to wear all those horrible, old-fashioned suits.'

'Well someone had to keep it all together,' he said, aping an imagined vernacular.

The doorbell sounded. And in that moment his concept of duty was stood on its head.

He had been cautious about calling on her when he arrived, their years of separation, her self-conscious role as the family wild-child. He had been nervous when they shook hands at the front door.

'That's Tony,' his sister said, and she got up from her chair.

Tony. Toni. He had never suspected or guessed. And when Toni walked in, and the two women kissed, he burst out laughing. They stared, his sister's partner cold and suspicious, and then, in a gesture which his sister would say was the only time he had ever, ever in his life, done something spontaneous, he stood up and hugged them both.

'What shall I tell my wife?' He grinned, and the two women began to laugh as well.

Had that been the moment when his career stalled?

Or was it his MA at the Open University? Or, before even that, was it his father's death, was that the moment when he came to learn that the world he was entrusted to protect might bend and still not shatter?

A sense of time, of the rhythms of history had begun to open up inside him, and also a sense of his own link to that history. A kind of Englishness. An appreciation of a thread, loose and barely visible, which had been spun hundreds of years ago and which now gently bound him to the people around him, in a manner which informed and qualified the nature of policing and the work he did.

Around that time his colleagues began to see things differently.

A confrontational prime minister. Inner city riots. The increasing burden of foreign legislation to which police forces were subject. But where he saw difficulty, others saw opportunity. Closer links with local councillors, with ethnic minority leaders. A finer grasp of the media.

The nature of policing shifted.

A boy was killed. A Turkish lad, walking through a white neighbourhood. There were calls for action. And yet he had four other cases on his books, four other teams to supervise. When he refused to talk to politicians or appear on television, when he refused to change, by the slightest degree, the care and attention given to any one of his enquiries over any other, the whispers started.

The subsequent review did not name him, and yet his conduct and handling of the investigation were somehow seen to be suspect.

‘What’s happened?’ his wife said to him after the force’s Christmas dinner. She had been sitting with the wives of his colleagues. ‘What have you done?’

He laughed. ‘What do you mean?’

But *her* intuitions had been right, and soon he knew it. His peers moved on and progressed and soon outpaced him. In a weary and progressive attrition he began to fall out of love with the force. And it with him.

Alex is on the outskirts of a village. He passes a rest home, set back from the road by a long drive. It is a mansion. He slows but does not stop, although he takes note of the darkening brickwork behind the modern façade, the extensive wings at either side.

As he moves on past it, he sees lawns and maintained grounds. A few figures in white walking with their minders. Others seated on benches, gazing into space.

He accelerates forward. Beyond the hedgerows, there are ploughed fields once more. And then a sign, *Welcome to Benbow*, not quite hidden behind overhanging leaves.

There are speed bumps, and road signs cautioning drivers to be aware of schoolchildren and the elderly. There is one main road through the town. He takes ten minutes to drive straight to the other side. Beyond, he sees warehouses, a reservoir. One small factory. He turns and drives back.

There is a row of shops, a mixture of the mundane – hardware, building suppliers – and the frivolous – boutiques, a French restaurant. Few people, but he is not surprised, it is one hour before lunch.

A lot of pubs, and one large inn in the centre of town, set back from a pond. He stops. Inside he finds a corner table, carries over a tray with a beer and a ploughman's.

He takes out a sheaf of papers from his briefcase and prepares to examine them once more. There is one incident which he has decided, by random selection, shall serve as the test case, the case to stand for them all. He knows that he needs to move beyond statistics and figures. He must take measure of some of the participants in his drama. The people.

Henrietta Sharp. Place of death, a house in a street which cannot be very far from where he is now.

He looks at the doctor's handwritten notes, which, photocopied and scanned, exist now as the woman's electronic tag line in some massive database in a far part of the country. The doctor, the woman's family, will have no idea that he is peeking into the closing stages of her life story.

He reads that she collapsed on her way to the post office in this town's high street. That she spent two days in hospital, and that her daughter discharged her and brought her home. That a week later she died there.

He notes that there was no one from the immediate family with her when she died. Instead, a family friend was present.

She sees a name. Angela Howarth. It was she, it seems, who called the doctor.

He looks at the death certificate. *Complications caused by liver failure.* The date is exactly eleven months before.

His eyes flicker back and forth. Angela. *Angie, Angie*, he mutters. He has known another Angela, and the simple repetition of the name under his breath induces a tightening of the muscles in his arms, his neck, his stomach. This name, its history, the associated pleasure and pain. *Don't*, he thinks.

He returns to the papers on the table in front of him. He sips his drink. He looks at the discharge notes from the hospital. *Why did they let her go?* And his mind goes back to his mother's bedside, a time twenty four hours before her death. Her skin folded and brown, her arms twig-like as they protruded, dead straight, over the unfamiliar sheets and blankets. The bed so large, too large for her body. As she trembled on the threshold of awareness, she sometimes whispered things, but he never understood what she was saying, even when he bent to listen.

Should she have been at home? he thinks. *Her final moments, in her own bed? Like Henrietta Sharp?*

After half an hour Vic and Corinne barge through the door. They have their functionary with them, a man with thin hair, bags under his eyes. A brown suit.

The three of them approach his table with orange juices, mineral water and crisps. Alex declines another beer. They stick to small talk until their intermediary, with a ringing mobile and a flourish of papers, says that he has to be back at the office.

'How did you get on?' Alex waits until he hears a car start outside in the car park.

Vic yawns.

'Three surgeries,' Corinne says, 'four doctors, two OAP homes, a priest and a vicar.'

'Here,' Vic says, passing across pages of handwritten notes.

'Hmm.' Alex riffles through them. 'OK.' He hands them back. 'Why don't you type these up, and call it a day.'

'You sure?'

'I would like to see these later. Can you email the docs to me? When you're done?'

A sense of urgency has gone. Corinne orders sandwiches. Vic leans back against the sofa and loosens his tie.

'So what do you think of this town?'

'Stepford Wives.' Vic mumbles as he wipes crumbs from his lips.

'No,' Corinne says. 'It's more farming types.'

'Commuter belt?'

'Yes,' Alex says. 'It's just about in range of Paddington.'

At seven o'clock in the evening he is back at the office. He has the report that Vic and Corinne have compiled. Ten pages. Lists of names, personnel, professional health carers. Statements of procedure and protocol. And some case studies.

He searches through their notes for the doctor who signed off the death certificate for Henrietta Sharp. Stimson. He does not find him. Perhaps Vic and Corinne have not yet had time to get round to this one. Dr William Stimson. Alex decides to call on him the next day.

He reads on. Two rest homes. One of them is the institution he passed earlier in the day. It is privately run. There is a trust in which local businesses seem to be the major shareholders. He looks at the roster of staff. Matron. Six nurses on rotas to provide twenty-four-seven care. Helpers, part-time assistants, some qualified, some not.

And ...

A name. He scans up the page. One name has caught his eye. There is she is again. Angela Howarth. Local resident. She comes Mondays and Fridays, some weekends. He sees no qualifications after her name. He pauses, thinks, and then examines rosters from one year back. From two. Five. There she is. She is persistent. Or has an unwavering sense of duty.

Henrietta Sharp. And now her name appears as a resident in the home for a single week. Three months before her death.

Respite, to provide her family with a break from the burden of her care.

Alex stares at the papers in front of him, and then looks out the window. It is late. He arranges them in a neat pile, places them in his briefcase, and switches off his desk lamp. This time he takes his briefcase home.

'I'm not sure why -' the doctor studies the card that Alex has handed across to him. He gestures towards a chair the other side of his desk '- why the police have been called in.'

Dr Stimson wears a waistcoat, which is amply filled. No jacket. There is a clock on his desk. As he adjusts the papers in front of him, he turns it to face Alex.

'Dr Stimson, I can understand your reservations. Believe me, this is not a criminal investigation.' *At least not at present*, he thinks but does not add.

'What is it then?'

Alex pauses. He is at first amused by this man. The brisk manner. But he finds himself liking him. The way he defends his corner. 'It is more a review of practice.'

'Practice?'

'Procedure. Whatever you wish to call it.'

Dr Stimson looks at him. 'Coffee?' he says suddenly.

Alex is distracted. But then he says, 'Why not?' It occurs to him that in other circumstances he might rather be in the pub with this man talking about the rugby or whatever it is that men discuss. But he cannot. He has his duty.

The doctor gets up and walks to a side table where there is a kettle and some sachets of Nescafé. Alex begins talking as the doctor's back is turned. He mentions his meeting with the Chief Coroner, and his phone call with the Home Office official. He edits both conversations, he selects a few of the concerns raised but he frames them in terms which are suitably vague. As the doctor turns and faces him, two cups in his hands, he enumerates a number of cases which he would like to cover.

Cases which, as he lists them, he knows could, perhaps should, have remained closed.

His cup is empty when he comes to Henrietta Sharp.

'Who?' the doctor says.

'Eleven months ago. She died at home.' Alex passes him a sheet of details.

'Yes.' The doctor reads. 'Yes, I remember now.'

'Tell me, doctor, did you approve of her going home?'

'Approve?'

'She was discharged from the hospital.'

The doctor appears to consider the line of questioning. 'So she was, I suppose.'

'Was that the right thing? Given her condition?'

'That's what her family wished.'

Alex looks down for a moment. 'Shouldn't you be the judge of that?'

'I'm sorry?'

Alex's voice has caught. He coughs. 'I'm sorry. Shouldn't you decide?'

'Why?' The doctor's tone is sharp. 'Why me?'

'You're the doctor.' He coughs again. 'You're the expert. You know more about her, her condition, than ...'

'... than her family?'

Alex says nothing for a moment.

'Tell me, Inspector Westerman. How should you wish me to act if it were you? If it were your father? Your mother?'

Alex stoops to pull from his case a half-inch thick wad of papers stapled together. 'There are guidelines -' he fumbles '- pages of them.' He begins to flick through. 'Ninety-four pages. Issued by. It's somewhere. The Department of Health. Doctor Stimson, somewhere here, I'm sure, it indicates' - two loose sheets fall to the carpet - 'best practice.' He looks up.

The doctor is staring at him. His round face, creased, slowly relaxes. He laughs out loud. 'Inspector, you're mumbling. I hardly heard a thing you said.'

Alex feels himself redden. He stretches to pick up the paper on the floor. After a few moments he says, 'You asked me how I would feel if it were me. Or my family. I can't say. But I would like to believe that procedures were being followed. Procedures which were, I don't know, tried and tested.' He looks up. 'Is that too much to ask?'

The doctor is still smiling. 'Inspector, I have the funniest feeling that somehow your heart is not in this.'

Alex stiffens, puts the manual down, and then is still. He wills himself not to swallow, he wills himself not to betray his thoughts. He knows he has lost the initiative, that the doctor has called his bluff. The momentum is gone.

'How long would she have survived?' he says.

'How long?'

'In hospital. If she had stayed.'

'There was no hope. She was dying.'

'We're all dying.'

'So we are. But we do not all know when it will happen. Or how.'

'But in her case you did?'

'Well enough.'

'Her condition was incurable?'

The doctor extends his hands and brings them together. 'I suppose there are always new techniques. New theories out there.'

'Shouldn't you be trying them?'

'If they don't work? If they make things worse?'

'Aren't there specialists who know whether they will work?'

'Where? In America? In Japan?'

'Here. In the General Hospital.'

'It's their opinion against mine.'

'You know more than them?'

'About the new techniques? No. About my patients? Yes.'

'Yes?'

'Sometimes.'

'Sometimes you don't?'

'There is my judgement.'

'Concerning your patients? Concerning their lives and deaths? The time of their death?'

'Sometimes ...' The doctor pauses. He looks carefully at Alex. 'Something tells me I should be calling my solicitor.'

Alex shakes his head. He flicks a hair off the front cover of the document in his hands. 'Don't be ridiculous,' he says.

The doctor thinks for a moment and nods. 'Sometimes, I judge that ... perhaps I may not have felt this way twenty years ago. Or ten, or even five ... I judge that it is time to let ... go.'

Alex stiffens again. He realises that he has just given an implicit assurance. He considers the doctor's words. He wonders whether his promise may one day need to be broken. 'To let go? To let them go?'

The doctor sighs. He does not reply. But then, as if playing back Alex's question in his mind, he repeats himself. Slowly. 'To. Let. Go.' Word by word. He looks at Alex. It is as if he is reaching a decision. 'Inspector, are you in a hurry?'

'What do you mean?'

The doctor leans over his desk and examines a diary. 'Look, I'm due to visit one of the OAP homes.' He flicks through the pages. 'I'm scheduled to do it today. This evening. I could go now instead.' He closes his diary and looks at Alex. 'Join me.'

'I ...' Alex thinks about it for a few moments. 'Fine. I will.'

They take Doctor Stimson's car. They manoeuvre out of his driveway and head back through the town. It is late afternoon, and Alex feels the heat of the autumn sun on his cheek as it slips out from behind a ball of cotton-wool clouds. There is a build-up of traffic, they get caught behind a tractor, there are people in front of the shops whose lack of custom, the other morning, had seemed to Vic so amusingly creepy.

Alex considers and discards the possibility of using a cover, some story about his reasons and purpose, which he and the doctor might contrive. That would be wrong. He knows this.

He may anyway have to see these people later in his capacity as a policeman.

As they pull into the long drive of the home, Alex recognises the building. He has seen it before from the outside. There is an elaborate PIN-controlled entry system, its usage and passcodes familiar to the doctor. He opens the door, walks in and calls out. He holds open the door with a trailing hand for Alex. A nurse appears. She greets him by name.

‘Hello, hello,’ Doctor Stimson says. ‘I’m early. I know.’ He fusses. She beams. ‘Is Patricia around?’ he says.

‘Matron’s not in till six.’

‘Father Brian?’

‘It’s just me and Barbara. Oh. And Angela.’

The doctor nods. ‘Good. Well, if I can just grab you for five minutes.’ The nurse leads them into a small office. She looks briefly towards Alex and back, but the doctor says nothing for explanation until they are all seated. ‘Vicky, this is Inspector Alex Westerman. He’s following me around today. Sort of jobswap.’ The nurse clutches at a pen in a blouse pocket. Alex waits for a comment or question from her, but she just stares at the two men facing her across the table, her mouth slightly open.

‘Right.’ The doctor straightens and re-arranges the papers in front him. He takes off his jacket and hangs it on the frame of his chair. ‘How’s it been since I was last here?’ He begins to go through the register of drugs, the patients’ health, their problems. After a couple of minutes Alex taps him on the shoulder.

‘Mind if I have a look round?’

The doctor looks up. The nurse’s frown has returned.

‘As you wish,’ the doctor says. ‘The main lounge is the other side of the corridor.’

Alex gets up and slips out. He cushions the slam of the door as it closes behind him. He walks across the hallway, and enters a large living area. There are ten, perhaps twelve men and women in armchairs spaced around the room, in an arc whose

focal point is a large-screen television placed on a wooden shelf at chest height. They are dressed in cardigans and scarfs, and have blankets over their legs. Their skin is mottled, their hair silvery and thin. They wear thick glasses. Some - not all - turn to look at him as he walks in, though the level of conversation, stuttering, irregular, continues unchanged. He looks from one to the next. Their bodies are lightened by their years, dried out and shrunk, as if the weight of the clothes they wear is all that remains to hold them to earth. One of them holds out a cup and saucer towards him, her eyes implore, though she asks for nothing in return.

He recalls another such home, his regular visits, the flowers and the chocolates. High windows, a conservatory at the far end. His mother's faltering recognition as he walked in, her memory and consciousness in slow retreat, territory by territory, from the landscape they had once inhabited.

Those in front of him, he knows that they are making the same journey, the same meandering disengagement, silent and unrecorded.

'Can I help you?' A voice, behind him.

Alex turns. She is not a nurse. At least, he thinks so, she is out of uniform. A sweatshirt, jeans, trainers. There is the slightest reddish glow on her cheeks, as though something has angered or flustered her. Or perhaps she has just been exercising. He notices the cycle helmet in her right hand.

'I'm fine, thanks,' he says.

'Are you visiting someone?' Her eyes hold his.

'No, I'm ...' He is not sure what to say. 'I'm with Doctor Stimson.' There is no smile from her, but its absence does not seem to him a sign of ill will. More of caution. Or reserve.

The other nurse appears. She stands on tiptoe to whisper something. The woman curls her black hair behind her ear as she listens. Alex picks out the word *police*. At the end she nods slightly, and says to Alex, 'Well, if you want anything, I'm in the kitchen.'

The old men stare after her. Some of the women as well.

There is one hardback seat in the room. He sits and waits. The nurse glides around, collecting plates, adjusting cushions.

The doctor emerges after a while, and moves amongst the residents. He spends a minute, two, with each one, asking a few questions, chatting. He holds their hands, surreptitiously feeling for a pulse. He touches their cheeks, he examines their faces, their eyes. He is oblivious to Alex's presence.

He takes half an hour to complete his round.

'Satisfied?' The doctor is driving them back.

'How many staff work there?'

'It varies. Three. At least. Usually more.'

'I saw two nurses.'

'There are the helpers.'

'Helpers?'

'Local people. Volunteers. You met one, I think.'

Alex picks up his car from the road in front of the doctor's surgery, drives back into town and finds the pub. There is a restaurant attached where they serve afternoon tea. As he sits at a table, his case on his lap, a coffee cup and a dozen typed up sheets of paper in front of him, he takes a call from Corinne, but she has nothing of importance to say. He makes a few notes, he records time and place of each stop in the afternoon's itinerary, and then his impressions of the people he has met during the day. He closes his case. It occurs to him that he would like to smoke a cigarette. He smiles at the thought, he has not had one for twenty years.

He considers some avenues to follow up the next day, and realises that there are none.

There is nothing to report.

No concrete evidence of wrongdoing, nothing on the surface that may constitute grounds for suspicion. He will need specialist knowledge if he is to proceed. Post-mortem examinations, medical expertise, he will need to call these in if he is reach a conclusive end to the task he has been given. If he

is to discharge his duty. He wonders whether there is a sufficiently strong case for exhuming one or more of the bodies.

Surely not.

He thinks back to the start of the case, and then through its various stages. The meetings he has had, the discussions with its prime movers. The Home Office bureaucrat, his boss, Dame Janet. And it seems to him that there is a consensus of opinion swirling out there, somewhere, a presumption to which he is not party. As if some hypothesis about human behaviour is just not obvious to him any more. Or perhaps it's that an assumption of universal suspicion – and this thought begins to grow inside him – has become the bedrock of policing, and this is a premiss with which he cannot be at ease.

The world has changed.

He finds himself performing the gesture of stubbing out a cigarette in an imaginary ashtray. He grins, collects his papers and finishes his coffee. There are two teenagers, boy and girl, at a far table, and for the briefest moment they both catch his eye. He feels a lightness as he stands.

Outside he smells rain, though the pavement is dry. He holds up a hand and stares at the sky. That period of acceleration in the drawing in of the evenings has started, and he knows that dusk will come soon. He has an odd sense of the preciousness of the light. And then an odder image. The light, in its brightness and colour, wrapping itself around every object. Like clingfilm. He walks to his car. He feels a subtle pleasure at the thought of the drive home. The technology under the control of each brush of his fingertips against the wheel and the indicators. Or each gentle touch of the leather of his shoes against the pedals. At ten yards, he presses a button on his key, and the locks snap open. At five he presses, twice, and the lights flash on and off. And again, twice more, before he opens the door. He eases himself into the driver's seat, lays down his case, fastens his belt, and waits. He stares out at the grass verge ahead, at the branches of an overhanging tree. He thinks of his meeting the next morning with Vic and Corinne, of the next

steps in their little investigation. He wonders idly whether they are sleeping together, has he asked himself this before? But he is glad for them. A fondness sweeps through him. Unaccountably. *The children I never had.* The thought wells up, and he suppresses it. But then he laughs to himself.

They are a good team. Protecting. Serving. Protecting and serving a village like this. Without its citizens even knowing. He contemplates this new thought, and its rightness seems just, and with that rightness and that justness comes a radiance in the light around him, and also a tiredness. A tiredness which sucks the energy out of him, from his feet and his fingertips, through his thighs, his arms, his chest. And now his face, his lips, his eyes. Tiredness. And light.

‘Are you all right?’

A tapping, somewhere.

‘Are you all right?’

He opens his eyes and stares straight ahead. He cannot see anyone. There is a ringing in his ears.

‘Are you all right?’ A woman’s voice. The tapping again, to his side. He turns. She is stooping at the driver’s window.

He means to say something but doesn’t. Instead he nods. He makes to open the window, but the ignition is off and nothing happens. He stares at the controls on the dashboard.

Let’s try again, he thinks.

‘I’m fine,’ he says, or tries to say, but his words sound blurred. He is still for three seconds, and then breathes in deeply and holds his breath. He tenses.

‘I’m fine,’ he says, shouts. ‘Yes. I’m fine.’ He turns the key and presses the window button. The left hand window comes down. He blinks. He opens the right side, closes the left. Looks at her. The features are somehow familiar. She stares at him. They say nothing. He yawns.

‘Sorry,’ he says. He closes his eyes, and then, gently, so as not to push her away, he opens the door. ‘I must get out and’ - she moves back and watches him as he grips the door and

heaves himself out - 'stretch.' He swivels his neck, he tightens and relaxes his shoulders. Clenches his fists.

'Long day,' he says. 'I must have dozed off.' He leans back against the chassis and looks at her again. The events of the day trickle into memory. After a while, he says, 'We met. Earlier this afternoon.'

'I saw you. As I was going past.'

'Yes. At the home. The OAP home.'

'I thought you were asleep.'

'I never introduced myself.'

'Or worse.'

'Alex. Alex Westerman.'

'How are you now?'

He can't stop yawning. 'I need to get home.'

'Are you OK to drive.'

'Of course. Of course I am.'

'Have a coffee.'

'I need to get back to the office.'

'Stay. Just five minutes. I'll buy.'

'No, I ... Vic, Corinne.'

'Alex.' She grips his jacket sleeve. 'Alex. I'll buy.'

They drink cappuccinos. At the first sip, he grimaces, and she tells him she asked for double shots. But he feels his strength returning.

'I don't know what happened to me,' he says.

She looks at him. Her hair is not quite under control. She pushes it back.

'We met,' she says. 'At the home. I'm Angela. Angela Howarth.'

'Yes. It was a long day.'

'You were with Doctor Stimson.' She moves her head fractionally from side to side, as if to examine his face more closely. Her eyes hold his.

'I'm OK. I assure you.' He sips again. 'So. Do you work there?'

'No. Yes. Well, I've helped out from time to time.'

'I see.' The steadiness of her gaze, which earlier he had thought defensive, now has a watchfulness which soothes. Which is almost hypnotic. He has misjudged her. Or she has softened.

'And you?'

'I think perhaps you heard.' He smiles. 'I'm with the police.'

'I did.' She smiles also. 'So what were you doing? With Doctor Stimson?'

'Not very much. Not much of any use, at any rate.'

She raises an eyebrow.

'I can't really say,' he says. 'As you might imagine.'

'Confidential. I understand.'

In the silence of the next few moments he feels a strange urge. To explain. To confess. But the opportunity passes.

She jokes. 'So when's the good doctor going to be dragged away in handcuffs?'

Alex laughs.

For some reason he does not want to leave. He looks across at the cake counter. 'You know, I think I might try something to nibble. You?'

She shakes her head. 'But go ahead.'

He buys a wedge of cheesecake, though back at the table his appetite wanes. He takes one bite and puts down the fork. 'Here.' He breaks off a corner, places it on a napkin and hands it across. Now that it is in front of her she changes her mind. As she eats he notices her sweatshirt. He observes that there is a small logo, with unreadable characters, script of some kind, Chinese or Japanese. 'Your top,' he says. 'What does it mean?'

Her mouth is full.

'I was in Tokyo once,' he says.

She swallows. 'Tell me about it.'

He knows she is humouring him, encouraging him to talk. But it is a pleasure to be so humoured and he does talk. About the police force over there, the way they do things, the different nature of crime. She listens, says nothing.

After a couple of minutes, he stops, sighs, is silent.
She wipes her mouth - 'the cake was good' - her eyes are on his.

'I must be getting back.'

'Are you OK to drive?' she asks again.

'Yes. Now I'm sure.'

Two minutes later he is stepping out into the car park once again. She walks ahead, but twice turns to look back, as though checking on him.

She has a bike leaning against a rail. It is getting dark. 'I've ruined your evening,' he says.

'Don't be ridiculous.'

He watches her switch on her lights, mount up, and look over her shoulder. A last glance at him as she pedals off. He returns to his car, gets in, starts up the engine.

Something's changed, he thinks to himself.