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Cornelius Winston Pitt, in the evening of his life, eyebrows white and wild, eyesight dysfunctional, moved with a dancy small-foot shuffle along his hallway, holding a pork pie. In the other hand was a cigarette shedding ash onto his route, over the slip mat, into the kitchen, where pausing he became freshly alarmed at the absence of his wife, an absence he felt most strongly in this room, its floor still sounding of her slippers, its toaster still evocative of her sadly buttered crusts. Where was she? Then he remembered. Kilburn. Was glad that he remembered, a whole crisp name. No chops anymore in this kitchen, no rice, rice being extremely complex, no Sunday chicken. Here in this land of the late and alone the menu was condensed. A pork pie was enough for a man, only it needed

Beetroot. Yes. That was why he was here. He opened the fridge immediately so that beetroot would not disappear again inside its name, 'immediately' being relative to his particular nonagenarian physicality: a moment of slight forward falling, the grabbing of the low-down handle, the haul posing threats to his spine. Inside was a hollow ice cave, mist. There was milk in the mist, and a tomato (also good with pork pie), two meals in foil from a daughter to the north, butter, and the purple thing. He took it out, the cigarette now balanced on his lower lip getting smoke in his eye, the one that worked, so he closed it,

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couldn't see anything, opened it again, and was struck by another requirement round and flat in his mind and useful for carrying food. The fridge he left ajar in this new venture, reaching up to the cupboard for a

Plate. Words were occasional boats, sometimish, coming at him brightly sailed then passing by. What Cornelius was learning was that they are not always necessary. Abstraction is peaceful, like twilight, wide swimming in a quiet colour, and you can exist in a place without names, where nothing is labelled, nothing flaunts itself, but instead the words wait, so quietly, for a time like this when you become in need of a – yes . . .

Beetroot is wet. It slopped around the pork pie on the dancy shuffle back to the chair, a primordial green throne of once-subject patriarchy positioned in the living room directly in front of the TV, where Cornelius spent most of his waking hours on this the ground floor of the house of many clocks. Around the chair were the apparatus of his daily proceedings. The table in front, individual-sized, for one eater, one smoker, one controller of remote control. Underneath the table the leather pouffe, for raising of feet when desired. To the left the dustbin, now half full, mainly with discarded post-its containing the names of fleetingly essential objects (WD-40, battery, sharpener, Adel – his daughter), and a shelf, also to his left, for beer coasters, glasses repair tools and the telephone, his conduit to the outside. Beyond all of this there were the clocks, everywhere, in every room, grandfathers, carriages, cuckoos, pendulums, collected over the course of his long working life in horology. The house ticked, and tocked, constantly.

At four o'clock today – it was Tuesday, sweltering, swollen at the windows the sick gold of a twenty-first-century June – he must call the tax office to find out about the implications of the recent changes to inheritance tax charges that might affect his

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will. The reminder was provided on one of the table's current post-its, phone number included. It was incumbent upon him, he felt, as he neared the milestone of a century (which of course would come with a congratulatory card from the Queen) to make sure his financial affairs were in order, what with the grandchildren, and his wife who was still his wife as far as money was concerned, and then the daughters and their wayward ways through the arts, Buddhism, break-ups and vegan behaviour. Money is messy and at the end of a century it should be neat, a nice scout's knot, not flailing around like a raging octopus. He wanted to go neatly, like his father, himself a horologist, who had died at exactly a hundred proudly in receipt of the royal note, leaving his family with only their grief to face, not an ensuing feud brought on by fiscal carelessness.

Before that, though, was this very adequate pork-beet lunch which did travel onto his shirt due to the additional forgetting of the floppy thing for residue that is called a serviette. Then there were ash streaks from the post-prandial smoke that didn't find the ashtray in time because he was watching a repeat of Natasha Kaplinsky on *Who Do You Think You Are?* He loved Natasha Kaplinsky. She was his favourite newsreader, always so well dressed and neat, always well powdered and matt. He'd missed her when she'd left ITN, had watched her on *Strictly, Have I Got News for You*, wherever she popped up, it was a shame she'd chosen to prioritise her family now but he understood that she probably had lots of ironing and washing to do while her husband was at work. Right in the middle of the show, annoyingly, sending more ash onto his trousers as it made him jump, the phone rang. Why did it ring at the most inconvenient moments, when he was busy? Why couldn't the world just leave him alone to enjoy the freedom of his retirement earned over more than fifty years of solid work, dutiful family-providing-for, tax-paying and pension contributions?

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'Hello?' he shouted.

'Hi, Dad, it's Adel.'

'Who?'

'Adel,' she said more slowly, though still sounding rushed. A boat sailed in displaying her haecceity: eldest, visits too much, bit of a nag, eats meat (he thinks).

'Ah right,' he said.

'Don't forget the carers are coming at five. And remember the dinners in the fridge in the foil. Just put one straight in the oven, no need to take off the foil, and don't forget to turn off the oven afterwards. Did you have one last night?'

'I've had a pork pie,' he said.

'When, last night?'

'No just now!'

'Did you have one of the foil dinners last night? Oh it doesn't matter, I've got to go, I'm still at work. Carers at five, ok? They'll help you with the dinner. Just show them it, in the fridge, in the foil. I'll come round tomorrow.'

He would like to say it would be all right if she damn well didn't come round tomorrow, seeing as the carers, those point-less people, were coming today and that would be too much visiting, he preferred it when they were more widely staggered, but he didn't want to be rude, she was doing what she thought she was supposed to do. Actually Cornelius had envisaged his old age in a home, sitting in a large lounge with light falling in and the other aged around him knitting, watching, waiting, drooling and playing draughts, but when it came to it the thought had seemed unattractive. What about his clocks? Where would he put them? The house was moulded around him. It was the shape of him. Moving somewhere else would be like trying to pour himself into another shape and at his time of life he lacked the liquidity to be poured. He would have to die here and that was fine with him. He just wished

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people didn't feel it was their responsibility to manage him and bother.

That was the reason, he remembered, for scheduling the tax call for four o'clock, to catch the afternoon lull before the busy lead-up to closing time and because the carers were coming at five (also stated on a post-it). He enjoyed the last few minutes of Natasha, and with infallible timing the grandfather clock in the hallway chimed four, a loud, reverberating gong, singing the hours, which after years of hearing he often easily slept through unless there was some appointment to keep that his subconscious was alert to. Likewise in the kitchen went the cuckoo. He tipped his ash, drained his stone-cold tea and picked up the phone with a quiver-prone beet-stained hand. The call was answered by a machine parading as a human, offering a list of options. Cornelius pressed two. No he did not want to take part in the questionnaire about his experience of calling HMRC.

'Ok. If you're contacting us following a death and you want to know what you need to do, press one. If you're calling about probate, confirmation, the online estate report, or inheritance tax, press two. For taxable trusts, press three. For non-taxable trusts, press four.'

Cornelius pressed two.

'Now. If you've already sent a probate or confirmation application and want to check the progress, press one. For help with the probate or confirmation process, the online estate report, or Forms IHT205, PA1 or C5, press two. If you're calling to find out if we have issued Form IHT421, Probate Summary, or Certificate for Confirmation, press three. If you need help with Form IHT400, press four. If you've sent in an Inheritance Tax form and are calling for an update, press five. Or for anything else, press six.'

Cornelius pressed five while muttering expletives.

'Just so you know, once we have received your form or

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request, it can take up to twenty-five working days for you to receive our response. Now, if you've been waiting longer than twenty-five working days, please hold to speak to an advisor.' Information followed on the routine recording of calls and the handling of personal data. Then some classical music, during which Cornelius lit another cigarette, having stubbed out the last one on the plate instead of the ashtray. The voice apologised for not yet answering his call and told him he was in a queue. In the midst of more music, and more high-octane swearing on his part, he began to suspect that option five was an empty office. It was the place for people with queries lacking in urgency and specificity, who therefore did not deserve to be answered. He slammed down the handset, resolving to try again tomorrow at 10.45. The post-it was amended accordingly.

They were strangers, these women who arrived at five, with their sandals and computer phones and cardigans around their waists and facial shine. Doreen and Emma, what did it matter there would be no boats. He wasn't even sure he hadn't met them before, they were interchangeable, he never settled on any of them with one eye. What right did they have to come in here and ask questions about his menu and domestic movements and tut at his ashtrays and empty his dustbins? Did they know him, who he was and where he had been? Did they know that he had served in the military ambulance during World War II and lost his brother whose name he just could not for the life of him remember which pained him, and that his father had fought in the first war and come back to Dewsbury crippled and partially blind in one eye but had never let that impede his horology? Did they know that Alice his wife whose name he could however always seem to remember which also pained him was still insisting on her new life in Kilburn when it was her duty according to their vows to accompany him on his journey to the final eclipse, and that he would much rather have *her* arranging his

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menu than these externals, these flat-eyed, borough-borrowed stand-ins from a town hall? Every fortnight or so he still telephoned Alice to tell her to come home, to end her sulky sojourn in Kilburn and return to Kingsbury, to reign with him in their empty castle, for wasn't now, in the cave of old age, the calling of marriage? To warm and shield each other from storms, inflation and loneliness? But she always refused, saying she couldn't live with him anymore, 'we visit each other sometimes', 'we keep in touch', as if that was enough, as if that was fair.

'It's very smoky in here, Mr Pitt, shall I open the windows?' Doreen or Emma said. 'It's always best to use the ashtray, for safety's sake. Have you tried cutting down a bit? Remember we talked last week about limiting yourself to, say, ten a day to begin with, then five, then three and so on?'

'Will you leave those boxes there, I need those.' Cornelius was appalled at the enforced tidying of the area, the bulldozing of his stacks of Lambert empties, used for extraneous butts to help with ashtray overflow, and the violent wiping of the table disturbing his post-its. A helicopter stormed in from the hallway affronting papers, lifting dust – the Hoover, whose existence he had forgotten about and only became reacquainted with via Adel or Melissa or the other one whose name currently escaped him. 'Will you mind my slippers!' he yelled, grabbing for them beneath the table which was no easy thing for his vertebrae. There was a crushed baby tomato by the table leg that was mostly hoovered up, and some butts, and some toothpicks which he was finding were so much more convenient than the overzealous conventional dental hygiene methods. He was not aware of his kaleidoscopic halitosis. He was not aware of his stainage or emissions or the moulding debris down the side of his chair. He was aware of feeling rather sleepy at his core, of how he had come to respect the efficacy particularly in hot weather of the afternoon nap, today not yet taken.

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‘Now, what about dinner,’ Donna said, her face shinier than before, her accent Irish, her sandals disconcertingly open-toed. ‘Will I prepare something for you?’ He told her about the foil food but that he wasn’t hungry yet as he’d had lunch late, a pork pie with

‘Still you’ll need a proper dinner, won’t you. Will I warm it up for a bit and leave it out for you to have when you like, put a cover over it?’ From the kitchen she called, ‘Don’t forget to close the fridge, Mr Pitt, all your food will go off.’

‘Ah right,’ he said. He was out of his chair, approaching the slip mat, registering through the kitchen window the empty garden where little girls had swung, their voices still resounding at the edges of the air and sometimes as a high frill in the clocks when they chimed. Emma tried to take his mug but he went and washed it himself at the sink, his castle invaded, this his effort to assert ownership, MY sink, MY kitchen, MY CUP. Soon the smell of meat began wafting from the oven – chops, it turned out, with sprouts and potatoes, a meal he understood Adel had thought about, his favoured foods, and flanked by these carers he felt moved at her knowing and her authentic familial care. That was what it came to at the end of a century, those lasting ones, the ones whom you engender and the ones from whom you come, the web of blood. How he yearned to see his brother again. He could see his face, his inner eye was sharpened by the dwindling of the outer. He could see the last time he saw him. ‘A bright day, like today,’ he said to Emma.

‘Yes?’ she said.

‘What was his name? What was it?’

‘Can I help you, Mr Pitt?’

‘He walked down the road and stopped when he got to the postbox, to tie his – his shoe . . .’

‘His shoelace?’

‘Yes. That’s it. Never saw him again.’

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The next time Adel was here he was going to ask her to write it down on a large post-it, his brother's name, because his inability to remember was like a deep dislocation from the roots of the earth. It was ok if you couldn't remember the name for beet-root or plate but it was different when you couldn't remember the name of your blood! He didn't belong here anymore! His tribe was extinct yet he lived in its wake, a ghost, faded into yesterday, his ticking house his only standing structure. Was that why he didn't like to leave it? If he went outside he would disappear, perish, be singed and swallowed by the uninhabitable heat and never get Her Majesty's card? Really it didn't matter, he could fall asleep happily in front of Natasha and never wake up again, but it was as if the clocks were inside him chiming, like a battery, automatically on the hour each hour encouraging him on to the end of his heart. There was nothing he could do about it but drift, and wait, and smoke, and sleep, until the last sleep.

He offered the women Eccles cakes, a delicacy he always offered visitors, but they declined, 'not a fan of raisins,' she said, 'I'm off wheat,' said the other, this he put down to veganism. He had one himself after they'd gone, before dinner, which she'd left covered on the table in front of his chair, knife and fork ready, oven officially turned off. On his final voyage back to the kitchen to put sugar in his tea (Adel would never have forgotten), he neglected to close the fridge again after opening it by mistake to look for sugar, and the dinner was left cold, a cigarette still burning on the edge of the ashtray, as he gradually entered an abyss of post-Eccles, post-post-prandial-smoke sopor, full of dreams and boats and clear crisp names that would evaporate as soon as he awoke . . . Sidney . . .

To the west of the city, in a bulging brutalist tower of twenty-four floors overlooking the electric London vistas, was another

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man's fridge, a Hotpoint, and some hours onward during that long June night of passing clouds and a five-mile-an-hour breeze, this particular fridge on the fourth floor of this tower would turn freakishly aflame. All around the burning fridge there were lives preparing for Ramadan, there were lazing dogs and tender sleeps and families rich in entreties of love, there were wars remembered and seas remembered, and sections of homework completed and other sections pending, and rows of dolls in children's bedrooms and rows of Moroccan cushions on high-up over-sized corner sofas, and rivers of futures flowing through the shared water pipes, and trails of fairy lights along mantels and bookshelves and wrapped around picture frames enclosing English landscapes, and artists dreaming new pictures, and mothers lying on their sides with their headscarves on and their eyelids moist and warm and gently flickering. The fire brigade would come and put the fire out. Then they left, unaware of the rest of the fire licking diagonally up the side of the tower, along its newly adorned cloak of combustible cladding acquired to make it look nicer amidst the wealthier dwellers and wandering tourists of the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea.

There were only two lifts in the tower, serving around three hundred and fifty people. There was one staircase (Britain being the only country in Europe whose building regulations allowed such a situation), no sprinklers, and no communal fire alarm. Such hazards were considered sufficiently unhazardous by the Kensington & Chelsea Tenant Management Organisation, which had been harangued and beseeched by residents of the tower to address these shortcomings in case there ever was an actual deadly fire a bit like this one and all those people had to safely get out. Safety was not a highest-priority requirement for a tenement block vastly occupied by immigrants, the working class and the no longer useful. Let them find their way down. Let them make ladders out of sheets and throw their babies out

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of windows. Let them stay in their flats and wait to be rescued by confused belated fire fighters and teasing helicopters. Let them organise little legions of finite survival on the upper storeys and unite in a peak of fruitless praying, and let them eventually slump inside their carbon-monoxide coughing, and hope that the terrible sleep would come before the terrible flames, particularly for the children. How to describe fire: without mercy, too fast, a horror of heat, a murderous orange sprint of thirsty arm-waving gods. How to describe this fire: a massacre by negligence, a criminal activity, a corporate atrocity, an obliteration of families.

Cornelius and Sidney were on the hillside overlooking the Welsh bay. They were visiting their grandmother who lived at the top of the hill. She was almost six feet tall and had been a schoolteacher. She called them inside as dark was coming and they walked upwards in the twilight towards the peak which was hotter. Inside it was hotter still and familiar in its furniture and its clocks, but the ticks were louder than the tocks, and there was another sound even louder than the ticks, a screeching, a wailing. At first Cornelius thought this was the sound of the tiny screams from the seventies that lived under the carpets and haunted him sometimes when he remembered his daughters as children and his patchy thunderous fathering of their little souls, but it was louder than that too, and he opened his eyes to see if his one eye could work out what his two ears could not. First of all he didn't know *what* he was seeing, or *where* he was seeing it. Was it the bombs in the fields? Was it the house on the hill? But he recognised things, the pouffe, the pouffe was on fire! The – the thing with the plate on it, the food on the plate, the fire was on the food, on the plate, on the thing over the pouffe. And *under* the pouffe, the *floor* was on fire, but *how* was the floor on fire? Now the sound announced itself clearly as the fire alarm, yes, and yes, fire, there was a fire, the *house* was on fire.

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More immediately affecting his person was the problem with the chair itself, his chair, the old decrepit throne in which he was sitting, and which he understood with the utmost clarity was in flames. *That* was why he was so hot. This chair is burning. Over the course of the blaze it would burn right down into the ground, so deep that when it was over you could look down into the soil and envisage a geographical tunnel to an opposite place like Australia or the South Pacific. But before it got that far Cornelius leapt up, his spine unregistering, uncomplaining, for there were more important things at stake like breath, and the beat of the heart, and the batting of his cardigan. This in his panic he managed to remove and cast away, but with another shock he also understood that the phone was withheld in the fiery vicinity of the throne, there was no getting to it, no calling the fire brigade with three numbers that he couldn't remember, no calling Adel whose number was on a post-it disintegrating with all the other flammables such as the straw dustbin and the Lambert empties and the tax office post-it and the newspaper which had been underneath the ashtray and was in fact the first thing to catch fire, when Cornelius's last cigarette had rolled off the edge of the ashtray at a soporific leg shudder from under the table. Who knew that would be his last one? Who knew tonight would be the night, like any ordinary night, the pavements quiet, the clocks ticking, the river shifting, Big Ben marking time, and the moon a hazy half, softly coral and distant above.

Rania knew. She had told her sister that death was coming and she prayed in the peak at the top of Grenfell. Jessica didn't know; at twelve you likely don't know. Khadija didn't know; she had pictures to make and was fresh from the waters of Venice that had set her future sailing, and her mother Mary Mendy didn't know, that it was tonight, this very June, and that her daughter would go with her. For sixty hours the tower burned, full of waving phone torches at the smoky windows, full of

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bodies capitulating on the dark stairway, the cladding crashing down into the trees along the walkway, the water hoses pivoted at the inferno like far-flung upward urinations. People watched. They watched the failure of seventy fire engines and two hundred and fifty fire fighters to save seventy-two lives. They watched from the neighbouring flats and houses and could not believe that this was their local earth, this blazing height, this next-door scene. There were rushes back inside by the brave trying at rescues, some of which succeeded, some of which did not, or almost did, until death came outside on the grass instead, from shock, from smoke, from the final chime of inside clocks. Those who remained inside were ashes by sunset, difficult to identify in the midst of each other.

The last flame inside Cornelius was smothered from without. He coughed and danced in fright as the curtains caught. His old hands rocked. The old veins pumped. He asked his mother what had happened but she wasn't there anymore there was only silence – and then, within the flare, like a parting of the waves, caught in the doorway leading out towards the hall, the image of a little girl in a pale green nightdress, with upward burning hair. She appeared, disappeared, appeared again. She was standing completely still, gazing at him. That was when he knew. He knew exactly what had happened. He had known for a long time what it was. It was the fires of hell.

Kilburn. Wednesday. Alice Pitt was in her kitchen surrounded by her daughters and those of their children old enough to digest the night's dark matter; Warren had just arrived, his sister Lauren was already seated at the table with her thin gold chains and strips of tattoo eyebrow. There was not much eba at this table today. There was barely enough for a few mouthfuls each and the accompanying stew lacked zest and seasoning, but this was overlooked. What fine stew came out of grief? What good judgement of salt, of Oxo cube simmer? A related issue was that Alice had lately started using potato in her recipe instead of yam, a development requiring less effort with the pestle and mortar but which did not bear the same creaminess, the same compatibility with gari.

Aside from that there were crisps, a bag of alfalfa, some carrots, some chocolate muffins and white bread rolls culled frantically from Asda by Adel on the way here, in case there was no eba, no food at all, just Alice, bewildered in widowhood. Was she a widow? Did widows arise from marriages ended in everything but paper? She was a paper widow, fluttering in the British air, newly stranded, the cord to Kingsbury finally broken and catapulting her out towards the ocean. There would be no more pressured evening phone calls from that way north. There would be no more taut Christmases with the family gathered

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together. Cornelius was Kingsbury. Kingsbury itself therefore no longer existed. Except for the house. It did, the black burnt hole of itself, and that was something to face.

‘We’re going to have to *go* there,’ said Carol, ‘and see.’ She pictured the rooms, with a shudder of fascination; hanging smoke, bad silence.

‘I’ll come with you,’ Melissa said, sitting adjacent to her.

‘You mean *go inside*,’ Adel burst into tears again, followed by Alice, more quietly, she had a private, silent way of crying, using her damp tissue, and Warren also resumed at the gravity of both his mother and grandmother overcome, he had never seen them cry in unison before. Lauren opened out another packet of crisps on the blue tablecloth in the communal fashion so that everyone could partake. ‘I was meant to go round there today after work,’ Adel said. ‘I *spoke* to him. The carers were coming. How could this’ve happened? They’re supposed to check everything, didn’t they check?’

‘We can’t blame the carers.’

‘Well who *can* we blame, Carol? When was the last time *you* visited him, huh? I’ve been doing it practically on my own. You don’t help. You didn’t help.’

‘That’s not true, I was there last week . . . or, recently . . . Anyway it’s easier for you, we’re across the river, you’re closer. It takes—’

‘Just because I’m *closer* it doesn’t mean I should do all the work. It doesn’t mean I should be responsible, as per usual, for everything. Bushey doesn’t really feel very close you know when I’ve been working all day and I’m tired and just want to get home. It’s not about location. It’s about making time. I have a full-time job and still manage to get over there almost every week. You teach pilates occasionally.’

‘Not occasionally, Adel, I run a business.’

‘Either way, your hours are flexible.’

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‘That’s not the point, though. The point is he shouldn’t even’ve been living there anymore,’ Carol said. ‘That house was too big for him. He should’ve moved years ago, and I seem to remember you not being very helpful when I tried to make that happen.’

‘Did you? Really?’ Adel scoffed.

Carol was about to reply but Alice interrupted. She was standing, leaning with her ringed hands on the edge of the table. She couldn’t bear them arguing. How could they look at each other and argue when their father was just taken in the night like that? Adel the oldest behaving as youngest, and Carol the middle always chatting back, even at a time like this. ‘Is an *accident*,’ she pleaded with them. ‘Nobody’s fault. Care for your sister. You cannot blame your sister – is me, only me . . .’

‘Mum, don’t cry.’

They put their arms around her, the little hunched woman, who seemed overnight to have shrunk, become weaker, some solidity of being had vanished. Here was the revelation that had greeted them this burning morning, the deliverance of her life into their hands, like a late and second birth, a switch in direction. Now she was their charge, as they had been her reason to remain on this island. They had lived enough to make a raft and carry her. They all felt this and momentarily it calmed and united them.

‘Mum’s upset,’ Lauren said.

‘I’m upset,’ Adel said.

‘We’re all upset.’

It would emerge, from the inquest, that Cornelius was discovered intact, not ashes, it was smoke, not direct flames that took him. This had been a briefer, lesser fire than the bigger fire still raging in Ladbroke Grove. The tears for this fire were also tears for that fire, for one was stoked by the other, the black smoke meeting in London sky drifts, in the eastward direction

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of the bleak gold breeze. ‘What happened last night?’ Carol said with her hands on her face, a slant-eyed architecture of jawline and cheekbone descended from her tall great grandmother of the Welsh bay. She was taller than her sisters, though they had all inherited their father’s stout muscle and robust arms, and from their mother a look of innocence across the brow – in Adel it was sterner, older, in Melissa, distracted, in Carol, wilder, and there was a regal aspect to the way she carried herself, upright and earnest. She seemed to be speaking partly to herself, as if trying to comprehend. ‘There must’ve been some evil, some vicious force in the air last night. What’s happening? It feels like the world is ending.’

‘The world *is* ending,’ Warren enthused, being prone to conspiracy theories, religions on the edge, stories of the dark centres of power. ‘It’s happening, man. *Slowly*. Right here in front of us though. They’re saying hundreds of people could be dead inside there by now. The media are downplaying it in case there’s riots.’

‘If there’s riots I’m rioting,’ said Lauren.

‘Not that it makes any difference.’

‘It does make a difference.’

‘Maybe it does. I don’t know,’ Melissa sighed and shook her head, closing her eyes.

‘Hey, have you eaten anything yet?’ Carol asked her. ‘You should have something even if you don’t feel like it.’

‘You want akara?’ Alice went quickly to her freezer, her city of ice, the chicken in reserve, the random renditions of rice (puddings, jollof). She had continued to inhabit her kitchen as if hungry mouths were waiting open. Every meal was badly attended, just her, aside from visits from family members, including Cornelius himself who had come on Wednesdays during the years of the after-marriage. He would kiss her dryly on the cheek in the hallway in the tradition of husbands, go on

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up into her single-occupancy living room and find things to criticise: flats are not as safe as houses, you know, these boilers they use are communal, aren't they, you can't control them yourself or turn them off when you want to. He had brought her for her seventieth birthday a porcelain Ansonia wall clock with a gilded rim, bright purple and flowered, which was positioned above the kitchen table and this morning had mysteriously paused, at 5.20 a.m. No one cared what time it was, it could be noon, three, five. Flames in their speed had taken time, all the ticks and tocks, and put them somewhere, perhaps given them to him, being an expert. Beneath the voices in the room, then, was a profound silence, no radio was playing, no music. Alice was finding it difficult to sit down. She had to keep moving, and what better reason than to feed a member of her clan, no matter how small a portion. 'This only one I found in freezer,' she said rising, holding a single, frosty akara in a corner-shop plastic bag. 'I take it out for you.' Now she must turn on the grill. Now she must get a small flameproof dish.

'Sit *down*, Mum, *we* can do that,' came Adel's officious tone. Her life-stress was carried in her lungs, in her sinus, in the puff of her loosened skin, she was at that moment hotflushing, a rush of sickening heat all through which started deep within her upper back and shoulders, went down her arms and legs and up her neck, a furnace. 'You need to *rest*,' she ordered in this clammy surge; at least as far as Carol was concerned it was an order, and it brought on more backchat.

'Just let her be, will you?' she said. 'Everyone has their own way of coping. If she needs to keep busy then let her keep busy.' She was about to add that Adel was just like their father sometimes in the way she spoke to Alice, instructing and infantilising her, but she managed to hold her tongue. Adel was angrily ripping off her red and black zebra-print cardigan before the surge became unbearable, her cheeks awash with the

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heat, she snapped back, 'Will you stop *arguing* with everything I say?'

Alice let them go on. She washed things, dried things. She switched on Radio 4. There was a programme on about Iraq in the wake of the US invasion. Awareness of such things leaked into her consciousness in passing segments, making a puddle of disconnected knowledge through which she noticed the world. 'Want some alfalfa with that?' Lauren said to Melissa as Alice placed the akara in front of her on a saucer, with salt, it always needed salt. Melissa declined and stared at the food for a while. She still didn't feel like eating, but did so to please her mother, hardly tasting it, only registering the texture, a moist, air-bubbled doughiness. Since last night she had had no appetite. The phone had rung just after eleven and Carol's voice had come slithering down the line, not crying exactly, but slippery, unleashed. 'Dad's gone,' she'd said with brave resoluteness. The earth shifted, tipped sideways. Melissa had sat down on a step in her hallway as a numbed sensation came into her legs. Almost immediately on hearing the news, she had thought yet tried not to think of Michael. He swam up, out of a deep sea where he was submerged, never wholly drowned, the tendrils of him, the long hands that would hold and comfort (only he would know, only he would be the right one in this moment). She had cried in an expected, mechanical way, then stopped. In the morning she and Carol drove across the river to join with the relatives of the north, stopping on the way to buy cigarettes, of which they'd smoked one each, Melissa on an empty stomach. The numbness inside remained.

It was Carol whom Adel had bought the alfalfa for, and the carrots, in consideration of her avoidance of dairy, wheat, gluten (was there a difference?), meat, additives, spinach (what was *wrong* with spinach?), red peppers, yellow peppers, oranges, sugar, and salt if it was not either Celtic or Himalayan. But no

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one, not even Carol, wanted alfalfa today. Warren just looked at it, whiskery and unappetising in its bag. Alice was now sitting down, on a stool by the window, away from the main thoroughfare of the table. She had started peeling the carrots and would not stop until they were all peeled. Solitary and oily-eyed in her apron, she tried to listen to what Adel was saying about the house, something about insurance and papers and mess to sort out.

‘The will’s probably been destroyed. We’re going to have to deal with the estate, the banks, household accounts, everything. Those insurance companies you know they’ll do anything not to pay a claim.’

‘Innit. Tiefs,’ Warren said.

‘We’ve got copies though, so at least that’s something.’

‘I don’t have a copy.’

‘You do. We all do, Melissa. He gave them to us, don’t you remember? You’ve probably lost it. Maybe you misplaced it when you moved. I know where mine is.’

Carol mumbled, ‘Yeah, I bet you do.’

‘What was that?’

‘How can you be talking about a will, already?’ she said. ‘How can you even be *thinking* about money and what you might get? There’s people out there looking for their families, their kids . . .’

‘I’m *talking* about *Dad*—’

‘I know you are but has it escaped your attention there’s an inferno going on down the road and how fucked up that is? Sorry for the language, Mum, but I’m just finding this so off-key. Where’s your sense of humanity?’

Here Adel tightened at the mouth, her face stony, seeming to contain all the rigidity of her efforts to pretend and appease, about to lapse. ‘Watch the way you’re talking to me, Carol.

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Someone's got to be organised. This is not a normal way to die. It's not straightforward.'

'No, it's not straightforward. What a shame. How inconsiderate of him not to die more conveniently.'

Warren and Lauren were looking from one sister to the other with objections on the tips of their tongues. They were aware that their aunt Carol was the argumentative one, always the rocker of the boat, the rebel against authority. In their eyes their mother could do no wrong, they could never turn on her, but they did see that Carol might have a point. Maybe it was too soon to talk about paperwork.

'Know what I think, guys?' Lauren said by way of tempering. 'I think at least Grandad died in his castle. He was at home, where he liked to be, where he was comfortable. So many of the old people at my work just want to be at home, and instead they're trapped in an institution with strangers. He went on his own terms. That's a positive thing, in a way.'

'It's true,' said her brother.

'Lauren, you have such a good heart.'

'Yeah all right, Mum, don't get gushy.'

'It *is* his castle, though . . . or – was. I liked going to see him there. I liked looking after him, even when he was being irritating and wouldn't listen or let me help. Whatever he was, however difficult, it was our duty to care for him.' Adel gave Carol a short slap of a stare, going on to say, 'Now it's our duty to manage his exit from this world, and we have to do it, all of us, together. I'm not going to be alone in it this time, that's all I'm saying. We have to deal with things properly and do it together. If you don't tie up the loose strings of your life when you go it makes for a bad time in the next world, in the after.'

'The after,' Carol said.

'The after, you know. After here.'

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‘How do you know there’s an after?’ Warren asked.

‘Déjà vu. That’s all the proof I need.’

Carol and Melissa glanced at each other but said nothing. Alice was thinking about her own next world and her own castle, which was not in Kingsbury or in Kilburn. It was far away from here, out in the fields near the edge of Benin City, a little house, long in the dreaming, which her relatives had been building for her for when it was time to go home to Nigeria. One day it would be time to go home, and perhaps now that time was closer than it was yesterday. She had never flourished in this UK. She had never been fully reborn or reconfigured as the immigrant must be in order to thrive, and leaving Cornelius had manifested less as a freeing actualisation of her whole self than as a greater yearning for the place where she began, so as to start again and reassemble, to remember herself before him, before the fog, before the children and the mountain of her life and everything it obscured.

She had left him slowly, with many suitcases. The same suitcases she had used for infrequent trips home over the decades. After one such trip, touching down at Heathrow Airport with the shine of the true country still in her head, in her cheeks, she had decided. Rather, *it* was decided. Her capacity for unhappiness was finite. If joy was so accessible from a short spell amidst her people, why wilt and decline in that old ticking house emptied of its children, with a man she had never understood and who had never understood her, often not even her voice, its thick Edo inflection? Carol had helped her, transporting the suitcases, arranging a room next to hers on Bantem Street in a shared house of women awaiting subsidised accommodation, where Alice became cherished for her akara and lemon sponge cakes and her plastic flowers. She was a mother to strangers and flailing girls, one or two of whom would come to visit sometimes once Alice had moved into her flat, all the suitcases finally unpacked, the parlour walls painted pink, the photographs and

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the horde of ornaments on her shelves, disparate and impermanent, like so many people waiting for a boat.

Pink as it was, and plastic flowers abounding, it was not the castle. When she walked out into the streets with her orange polka-dot trolley and her keys tied to the inside of her bag with a safety pin as she was always advising her children to do to guard against muggers and forgetfulness, she never felt that this Kilburn was the place to meet her lord. She had found a church, where she prayed on Sundays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. She was a member of the four-lady choir, and she could buy all the foods of Africa she wanted from bottled nuts to ground egusi to yams and okra at the grocers and market stalls, but it was not the same as walking the red-flecked paths of Benin, with the voices in the air being her own kind of voice, the loneliness and exclusion of foreignness erased. There, she did not have to remind herself who she was because she was absorbed into the surrounding multiple, and she could see and feel who she was. There, in her castle, when she went and did her shopping, she would say hello to neighbours and passers-by and they would not try to overcharge her for plantain at the market and the young boys would help her carry her bags and there would be no random British curse words flying past her ears. Then in the evening, because now she is an old, old woman, she would sit with her crochet and spend the quiet, trickling time with death. She would not be afraid. She would go towards it with her back straight and her head bent, ready to be enfolded in its great dark cloak, knowing that she was in the right place to receive it. Alice believed in the cyclical life. We must end at the beginning.

As far as she knew, the house was not yet finished. She had no idea how close it was to being finished. It had faded away, the dream of it. Her brother who had been handling things had died. No particular instructions had been left for someone to take up the reins and complete it. Suddenly the matter of the building of the castle

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and where this long-lapsed project now stood was urgent. She broke into the conversation, tilted forward on her stool.

‘That my house in Africa,’ she said, directing her question vaguely at Adel. ‘Is it nearly finish?’

The sunlight in the kitchen had shifted so that half of the table was in shade. As a result the shadow that passed over Adel’s face was not visible, but there was a hesitation, a testing in her voice.

‘The house? I don’t know . . .’

This response annoyed Alice. Her eyes flashed. ‘What do you mean? You don’t know? They must do it!’

‘I don’t *know* what’s happening with it, Mum, you haven’t mentioned it in ages. Why are you asking me? Why am *I* always the one people are always asking about everything?’

‘Weren’t you the one dealing with it?’ said Carol.

‘*Dad* was dealing with it.’

‘You had power of attorney.’

‘What’s that?’ Lauren said.

For some years Cornelius had sent money to Alice’s brother to make this dream of hers come true. He loved his wife, even as he did not know her. He wanted to make her happy, to obscure his shortcomings with a lasting gift. He had even pictured himself in this house on the other shore, the crickets singing outside, the great settlement of the evening over the wide and beautiful terrain. He had loved Nigeria also, during the few years he’d lived there, and long afterwards he had missed it and imagined going back there to live one day. It had given him another possibility, a place to be someone else.

The foundations had been laid. Alice remembered, from one of her visits, three rows of bricks and mortar and the beginnings of partitions between rooms, no windows yet, but a solid ground, the green of the field surrounding and the teaching hospital in the distance. She had sat down there in the dust at the

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