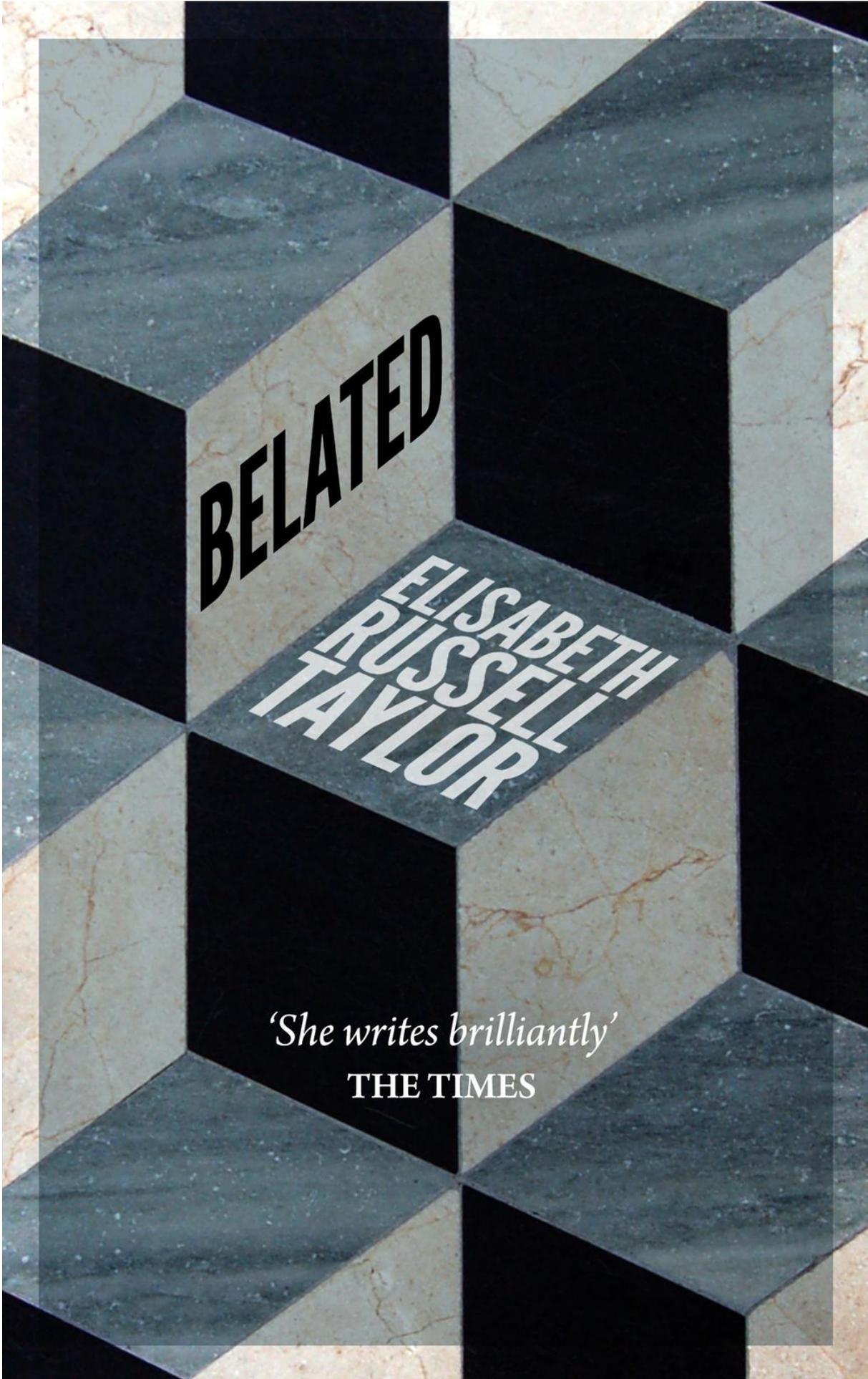


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RUSSELL
TAYLOR**

'She writes brilliantly'

THE TIMES

ELISABETH RUSSELL TAYLOR is the author of six novels, including two

Virago Modern Classics and three short story collections. She has also written for children and published numerous articles and reviews. Her stories have been broadcast on BBC Radio 4, and her writing has been translated into French and Dutch. Elisabeth has been awarded a Wingate Scholarship and grants from the Authors' Foundation and the Arts Council. Her writing has been shortlisted for the Mind Book of the Year, the Jewish Book of the Year, and the Jewish Quarterly-Wingate Prize for Fiction. She lives in London.

PRAISE FOR ELISABETH RUSSELL TAYLOR

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Present Fears
Will Dolores Come to Tea?

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Marcel Proust and His Contexts

CHILDREN'S FICTION

The Gifts of the Tarns
The Loadstone
Tales from Barleymill
Turkey in the Middle

Belated and Other Stories

Elisabeth Russell Taylor

Kimblewood Press

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Les Amants

*But, oh! as to embrace me he inclined
I waked, he fled, and day brought back my night.*
after Milton

The village of Les Amants de Ste Agathe is infamous for being the site of *un crime passionnel*. At the time, and it was many years ago, the effects of the crime were not confined to the three families whose lives were most closely touched by it. Questions of fidelity and betrayal haunted the whole population of three hundred souls, and succeeding generations continued to bear the weight of a tragedy that had led to the knifing of one young man, the drowning of his lover, and the death through heartbreak of his wife. Eventually the villagers, in an act they hoped would both consecrate and purge the affair, added the words Les Amants, and the new name was a continual reminder of the past. Even today, when gathered in the Café du Marché, villagers have a tendency to talk as much about passion as about fishing, rising prices or the perfidy of their government.

Les Amants is perched high above a bend in the river Seine, its houses gouged out of the chalk cliffs. At the front of each house small platforms of land provide space for potted plants, a table and a couple of chairs from which to marvel at the spectacular view over the contortions of the river below and the forests and plains beyond.

The road that curls from the banks of the river is steep, with a gradient of one in three, dictated by the altitude of the cliffs and the outcrop of scars round which it had to be cut. In the winter months of snow and ice and the autumn months of dead leaves soaked in rain, villagers look up at the sky, consult old-fashioned lore and contemporary weather forecasts before setting out, for the way is hazardous. The modern road follows the bends of the old lane and makes no accommodation for vehicles to pass.

Fleur Cortot, aged seventy, lived at the summit where the exhausted road falls short of the plain. Behind her house, in an orchard of cherry and plum trees where hens pecked, a large barn had been converted to a studio. Fleur had lived in Les Amants since she was eighteen when Léon Cortot, the painter, brought her from Paris to be his model and mistress. Now, Fleur was somewhat stooped, her once flawless complexion the texture of crumpled linen and her once gold-red hair the colour of thin cream. She was tired. She had not ventured down to the river since Léon died; she had not taken *le thé* with her neighbour; she had no appetite to eat alone, and at night she barely dozed. When old friends telephoned, she turned them away. How to invest life with meaning when the heart had been torn from it?

It was so different when Léon was alive: there was laughter 1

and good living. Like Bonnard's Marthe, Fleur sat to Léon in the orchard, at table and in the bath. They walked together, they talked together. Theirs was happiness *à deux*.

Léon worked obsessively. His only recreation was fishing. This he enjoyed in the company of the ferryboat man at Roc. For years the two men sat in silence together, sharing their wine and sausages and their catch. And when Léon needed help in stacking pictures away, weatherproofing the studio, digging the ground or locating supplies, he would turn to Jean, the son of the ferryboat man. From time to time, the old man wondered to Léon whether his son would not have made more of his life had he not felt responsible for his disabled father?

Fleur stood at the kitchen door looking out through the cherry blossom to a corner of the orchard where Jean was sawing rotten branches for firewood. In the past she had taken no notice of Jean, dismissing him as someone merely practical. Since living with Léon she had never bothered with other men. Now she noticed how tall Jean stood, how well proportioned he was, how harmoniously his body and person combined in his labours. He leant into his tasks, working silently, involved in detail most would consider too trivial to consider. Jean was never inconvenienced by changes in the weather. Rain suited him as well as shine, heat as well as cold. It was not mere indifference; it was acceptance. She wondered whether he had ambitions? Perhaps it would be impertinent, even upsetting to enquire.

He was courteous but taciturn. It seemed he laid claim to nothing. Whereas most young men had some sort of vehicle on four wheels, Jean had a bicycle. Whereas others had gadgets – mobile phone, iPod – and some money, Jean's pockets were empty; Fleur always had to advance him what was needed to buy her provisions and materials to maintain the house and outbuildings. On one occasion, while Jean was reglazing the greenhouse, Fleur offered him a beer. He took it without a word, just a nod of thanks. To break the silence, she asked him whether he had ever been to Paris. He had not. Was there nothing about Paris that tempted him, nothing he would like to see? There was not. He had all he needed to hand: the river to fish, the plot to dig. The odd jobs he did in the village covered his and his old father's needs, and left him time. Time was what he required. 'For what?' 'To think.' Fleur was astonished and felt a little ashamed; it had never so much as crossed her mind that Jean would have needed time to think. She had observed that thinkers were not normally suited to action, yet Jean was always on the go, applying himself physically to one thing and another and often in advance of his being asked to do so. One day she would find an appropriate moment to slide a question to him, imperceptibly, and ask him what he thought about.

One monotonous day followed another. Time lay barren: Fleur felt shackled to leaden hours, manipulated by an unseen force that overlooked her grief and robbed her of her ability to act. She had become an automaton, imprisoned in the past. She was frustrated, she had no more influence over her mind,

and her ardent longing for Léon's flesh, his touch, frightened her. She became aware of danger. She knew that disaster lay ahead and that an unexpected disaster would kill her.

The last thing Fleur wished for was visitors. But they turned up unwanted and unannounced during the summer months. They had heard of Léon Cortot and of *Les Amants* and of its unsurpassed beauty, its unique situation. It would be such a pleasure to combine a visit to the locality with the purchase of a picture by a local artist! And would that not mean they could avoid the gallery's commission?

Then there was Léon's gallery owner, M. Geier. He planned to hold a commemorative show of Léon's work the following year. He was counting on Fleur to select paintings for him to view, to date them and sort out the framing and produce a biographical piece for the catalogue. Now that the painter was dead, there was an excellent chance that the exhibition would be a financial success. M. Geier laid his plans before her enthusiastically. She could have three weeks in which to assemble the work.

She had not opened the studio door since he died. She dreaded entering the studio and discovering dilapidations that her neglect might have occasioned. She did not feel able to confront the work. It was all too personal; she was a part of every picture. She would be reminded too powerfully of the last sight she had had of Léon, a lifeless, waxen effigy, who had ignored her entreaties: 'Come back! Don't leave me! Don't die!'

But she found everything in order. The holes in the roof had been plugged, the floor scrubbed, the old pots of paint stacked in a corner, the brushes cleaned, and the canvases neatly stacked. Clearly Jean had not liked to throw away anything without consulting her, and had gauged that the time was not yet ripe. Files of papers, boxes of photographs, letters and catalogues were ranged on the table that had served Léon as a desk. It all looked as if, just a matter of seconds ago, the painter had risen from his work and slipped out to go fishing.

Fleur felt faint. She dropped into Léon's chair, laid her arms on the table and her head in her arms. She closed her mind. She must not look back; memories should only be revived in happiness. She had not been happy since he died. Her thoughts had been stuck in the featureless wastes of absence.

Jean lifted the canvases from the stacks and slowly, one by one, propped each against the back wall of the studio for Fleur to consider. There, the heavy curtain of willows dipped their elegant branches in the water; there the radiant cherry tree, where Léon listened to the larks; there a laundered sky; a table with a basket of peaches; Fleur and Prune, the cat, at breakfast; barges chugging towards Le Havre; launches at dusk with their lights flickering; Fleur stretched out naked on the chaise longue, a book slipping from her hand. Years of intimacy in paint. She was filled with inexpressible longing. The still atmosphere of death imprisoned her. The work did nothing to fill the void; indeed, it was a calumny. She would be glad to see the back of it all.

M. Geier arrived in full spate and made straight for the studio. 3

‘This road of yours is truly treacherous, my dear. I wouldn’t like to have to negotiate it under snow!’ He flicked through paintings as if through a sheaf of papers. ‘Come, we need luncheon.’ Fleur did not need luncheon, although she avoided saying so. She was not dressed for Le Château Vert, but that was where Geier intended they should eat so there they drove. Geier did not notice Fleur’s attire; she was no longer a woman in his eyes. He talked and talked, barely pausing for breath and certainly without engaging his guest. ‘You do not alter.’

‘Oh, but I have.’

‘Yes, when Léon died. But not since.’

‘That’s true. Once love died, my spirit was consumed. I’m in the clutches of something malign.’

‘I always wondered why you and Léon never married?’

‘We did not feel the need for the town hall in our love.’

‘You were very beautiful once, with that red-gold hair, that flawless skin, those curves! But you never so much as gave me a chance.’

‘No, I suppose I didn’t.’

‘Why was that? Am I not a fine figure of a man?’ Geier laughed, and when he laughed he seemed to do so in German, a language Fleur did not trust. He muttered under his breath several times and turned his thoughts elsewhere. This old woman was beginning to bore him.

‘Now,’ he said, wiping his face with the ample damask napkin, ‘we must go over the sketch books.’ He drove at speed back to Les Amants, continuously complaining about the gradient on ‘her’ road, the early hour at which he had had to leave Paris, the cost of printing the catalogue and Fleur’s lack of conversation. ‘I shall put on a *vernissage* to beat all *vernissages*, my dear. *Le tout Paris* will fight to be invited.’

‘Thank you. I am sure they will.’ Fleur, on the other hand, knew she would not be attending.

It was late November. The carters had been and the pictures were delivered to the gallery. Fleur locked the studio door and dropped the key into her apron pocket. How love congeals around ordinary things! Jean would post her letter to Geier with the summary of Léon’s life: ‘I Belong to No Movement.’

Jean was burning the last of the detritus of autumn. He had recently demolished the chicken run; for the next months the surviving hens would be safest in the shed. A lowering sky hung over Les Amants. Smoke filled the air. Snow was on the way.

During all the years Jean had worked for the Cortots he had never once initiated a conversation with Fleur, so she was astonished when he entered the kitchen and without preamble proposed that she could do with a rechargeable battery lamp and some plastic overshoes. She had to make an effort to bring herself back into a world where objects had utility. Now he was reminding her that the electricity lines had been driven down by the weight of the snow last year, and that she had twisted her ankle on the icy path because she was wearing unsuitable shoes. She registered Jean’s thoughtfulness and

thanked him and said yes, she would be grateful if he bought both items for her. She was seated at the kitchen table under a low, overhanging light. She pushed her purse towards him. He took the money he needed and pushed the purse back to her side of the table and turned to leave. He had not dwelt on her face, just brushed it with a glance.

When Jean returned and handed Fleur a lamp and some overshoes, Fleur examined them as if they had been objects for use in some far-flung ritual in which, for cultural reasons, she should express interest. She wondered how a lamp got itself recharged but set the query to one side when it became obvious to her that Jean would know. The overshoes were extraordinarily ugly, the colour and texture of cheap jellies. She tried putting them on over her slippers but they would not go; Jean told her they would fit over her lace-ups. And then he left the room; he was going to do some draught-proofing at the windows and see that the water tank and one exposed pipe were thoroughly well lagged. The chicken could do with some grain and the log pile needed to be built up.

Snow was falling gently as Jean wheeled his bicycle into the shed. Fleur could hear the chickens complaining. Really, she thought, Jean should go home right away. She called to him but he did not answer. When he came back into the kitchen she insisted: 'You must start for home!' No, he said, he had other matters to attend to in the house, there was plenty of time, she should not worry. However, the blizzard was gathering force and the snow was falling silently and inexorably across the land. When the only light rose from the whited ground, Fleur insisted Jean ring his father and explain he would have to stay the night in Les Amants. She listened to him while he spoke tenderly to the old man. There was no need for anxiety, he would ring again at daybreak and get back to Roc as soon as the road was negotiable. He advised his father on what to eat and recommended that he go to bed, well covered, with a hot-water bottle.

When Jean worked at the house, he generally ate from Fleur's larder as he had done when Léon was alive: he preferred to do so alone, in the orchard or the shed. That night, however, he put out plates and glasses for two, heated soup and piled a plate with sausages and cheese. They ate in silence. After the meal Fleur busied herself unloading the oak chest in the sitting room of blankets, pillows and a patchwork quilt she had made during long hours of sitting to Léon. Jean would sleep on the sofa. She showed him his coverings and advised him to keep in the fire.

She climbed the stairs to the bedroom. She was not aware of anything that disturbed her mind but she registered some sense of half-formed, half-hidden experiences so long past they might have happened in another incarnation, deep as the forces that work beneath the earth at this time of year. From time to time, the silence of the world snow-bound was interrupted by bursts of sparks from the fire in the room below. Obscurely comforted by the sound, Fleur recognised its succour in her unconscious. She might sleep that night. She might even dream.

It was night's high noon. The blackness and the quiet enveloped her and effaced her grief as the snow concealed the ironhard ground. Perhaps he would return? *But if he did, would I hear his steps?*

She sensed a sudden little draught as the covers lifted. A soft, smooth body, wood-smoke scented, slipped in beside her. A hand enclosed her breast. A face pressed against the side of her face and warm breath at her ear formed coaxing words. She was ready. He lifted himself over the length of her body and gently bore down on her, crushing her. She gasped. In due time, they turned together, 'close as two pages'.

Fleur woke to frozen silence. No bird sang in the still air. She was in the grip of a transformed white world in which the evergreens took the weight of the snowfall and their branches bent helplessly.

The Meaning

*M*y God, I'm bored! Maurice Levine dawdled along Hempstead Gardens towards home, a journey he had been making every day for over fifty-five years, ever since his marriage to Gina Jacobs. The appearance of number 16, identical to every other house in Hempstead Gardens, was the one sight he could rely upon to arouse in him instantaneous feelings of boredom, loneliness and entrapment.

'Gina! I'm home.'

'How's it been?' she asked, backing into the kitchen to pour boiling water over the tea bag. Maurice lifted his right arm to hang his coat on the stand and with his left hand removed the *Standard* from the pocket. He mooched into the lounge, crossing to the bay window, where he fingered the claret velour curtain while he stared out on to thirty feet of grass bordered by identical beds of flowers whose names he neither knew nor cared to know.

Gina placed the glass of lemon tea on a plastic mat with a picture of the Knesset on one side and the Mount of Olives on the other.

'Take care!' she said, as she always did. 'Hungry?' she asked, as always, and not waiting for an answer added, 'I've got a nice fowl in lemon sauce.'

Maurice had no reason to attend to details of the menu: he knew it by heart, oh yes! Instead, he turned from the window and stationed himself in front of the glass-fronted bookcase with its single, undisturbed row of books: English classics of even size, bound in navy Morocco. The set had been a Bar Mitzvah present to his son Aubrey.

Maurice remembered that day. It had cost him a bomb. Gina had insisted on a four-course menu and French wines . . . and she would not have the reception in the synagogue hall. She insisted on somewhere 'up west'. 'It's more convenient for the people,' she said. It hadn't been.

He would have liked Aubrey to be a doctor or a lawyer. A property developer in Westchester County was one up on estate agenting in north London, but it did not impress Maurice as much as he pretended to his friend Solly.

'He's a lot better off than he would have been staying here. He's got a fine place with a tennis court . . .' But the boy had never studied. It was the same with Linda. She'd been a good girl to her mother and she was a respected fundraiser, but what's a secretary, tell me that? He hadn't liked to ask. Once or twice when the conversation veered towards the subject, Gina turned away and took a *shtum* powder.

No one's so much as touched those books, let alone leafed through their pages, Maurice thought while he gulped his tea noisily. *The whole of England may be summed up there and I'll never know.*

'Gina! Gina! Come here a moment. Tell me, how many books have you read in your life?'

The Meaning

‘What a question! Don’t bother me now with your questions. I’ve got the matzos *kleis* on the simmer.’

It’s certainly all in books, Maurice mused. *I never had the chance to find out for myself . . . I never got the time. The button and braid business keeps you on the go fifty weeks a year – fifty-two, if the workers hadn’t insisted . . .* And he thought back to his own holidays. As soon as he had been able to afford it – it had meant foregoing a Rover and keeping the old Vauxhall far too long – he had taken his two weeks in the south of France. Every year they had gone to the same comfortable hotel in Cannes, with Solly and Ruth. He remembered sitting on the terrace of the hotel in the sun watching the lovely young, slim, scantily dressed ladies go by. *Better than reading any day*, he had thought at the time. And what other time had he had? Once Aubrey had married and left for the States they had gone there for the Easter break. *Where’s the time gone? Monday to Friday, eight to eight, driving to and from the city, stuck in traffic, synagogue on Saturday mornings. Linda and that husband of hers for lunch. I wish she’d married one of the other boys.* A show with Solly and Ruth or Becky and Gordon in the evening. And then on Sunday, the papers, a nice sleep in the afternoon in front of the TV and before you knew it, it was Monday again. *When could I have read books?* The trouble is – and of this he was quite sure – it was all there in books: the Meaning. *It’s the Meaning that’s escaped me*, he lamented.

‘Gina!’ he called out. ‘Gina, does Linda read books?’

‘Such questions. How should I know? Why don’t you ask her yourself?’

Maurice sighed. ‘I should never have retired. I was better off working.’

‘You may have been better off,’ his wife allowed, ‘but you would have been dead better off.’ She was standing at his side, duster in hand, waiting to mop up the tea he was bound to spill. ‘You know what Dr Foreman said, he said “rest”. He said your heart wouldn’t stand the pace you set it.’

‘I’m bored, Gina. The other men play golf all day and bridge all night. They don’t want me around. I’ve got no interests. I worked all my life since I was fifteen. I’ve not had the time. It’s different for you: you’ve got the house and the garden and Linda ...’

And much too much else to sit and listen to your kvetching, his wife thought.

Maurice did not know how to fill the lines of time between the stops for meals. He was like a dog, wandering aimlessly, unable to settle for long in one place but not liking any of the alternatives better. ‘Maybe I should buy a dog to take me walkies.’

Gina expressed her disapproval by ignoring this reflection.

It was warm and soft in bed. Maurice put his arms round his wife. The flesh of his stomach met that of her buttocks. Now he felt at peace.

‘D’you mind, Gina?’

‘Go ahead!’ And he did. In silence. His mind drifted in

the exquisite pleasure that was his own. This was what he had to live for. Filled with the matchless delight this experience occasioned in him, he ceased thinking, consumed by a single sensation. Unaware of its primacy, however, he made no attempt to prolong it. This he regretted when, spent, he rolled on to his back and faced the terrifying fact that this was his sole pleasure in life. *I could have kept it up a bit longer*, he mused. *I'll try next time.*

But when Maurice woke at 6.30 next morning, Gina was up. After fifty-five years of preparing his breakfast for 7.30, she had not accustomed herself to the new circumstance.

Oh my God! he thought. *Another dull, brown day.*

'There's a couple of rollmops to finish and some soured cream in the fridge. Save the tinfoil . . . And there's some fruit wanting finishing in the Pyrex bowl. I'm going up to Brent Cross with Linda to look at microwave ovens.'

Maurice did not feel inclined to picnic at the corner of the kitchen table. He felt the edges of the abyss crumbling. He needed to get out before they fell in on him.

He wandered into Golders Green Road and looked aimlessly into shop windows. He could not help noticing the new Rover in the showroom. He had always wanted a Rover. He wondered whether, if he knocked on Mr Klein's door, the dentist might fit him in? He'd been meaning to do something about that broken back tooth. He'd call in at the bank and see how much he had in his current account. Then, passing the salt beef bar, the idea of a sandwich occurred to him.

He drew himself onto a bar stool at the counter. The man in the white coat cutting the beef might pass the time of day. But the man was too busy slicing. Maurice stared at the jars of pickled cucumber and the tins of olives, chewing on a sandwich he no longer fancied, unable to gather his melancholy thoughts. Why was he feeling so low? Perhaps it was medical. Perhaps he should find a specialist. Maybe it was his heart. Before he had the opportunity to develop that line of thinking, however, he was relieved by a diversion: raised voices at a table just behind him, a little to the right. A petulant child was driving his parents mad. Without turning to see, Maurice strained to hear what was going on.

'Drink your lemonade!'

'Don't want to'. The child sounded plaintive. Maurice could not resist the temptation. He turned. The child – a boy of about six – was starting to cry. Real tears. He was gulping down sobs. His nose was running.

'Drink your lemonade!' his father shouted again.

'Don't make him do what he doesn't want to do, dear,' the young mother pleaded softly, placing her hand over her husband's. Maurice saw she hadn't a chance of influencing the man. He was scarlet in the face. He was ready to explode.

'He can't go through life doing what he wants!' the father shouted. 'Take me! Have I ever done what I wanted?'

His mouth filled with salt beef and rye, Maurice found himself having to concentrate to swallow. He was not enjoying this sandwich. He slid off the stool, took his wallet from

The Meaning

his back trouser pocket and paid at the till. As he slipped back into Golders Green Road, he found himself muttering aloud, 'Never done a thing he wanted in all his life. Like me. I've never done what I wanted. Never!'

He did not have to consider where he was going. His feet did the thinking for him. There, in the newsagents, he sorted through the shelves until he came to the sports section. He picked out the *Racing News*, the *Racing Times*, the *Racing Gazette*, the lot. A frisson of excitement shot through him as he felt the thick, warm bundle under his arm press against his side.

'Gina! I'm home!'

'How's it been?'

'Fine. Just fine.'

Gina appeared not to hear the more optimistic note in her husband's voice. Calling from the kitchen, she informed him that Linda had bought a microwave.

'And for your information, she says to tell you she's been reading books all her life.'

'Did she say what she got from them?'

'No. But I can't say I enquired.'

Gina was at his side, setting down his lemon tea. 'I hope you're not thinking of doing the horses,' she said ominously, noticing the pile of racing papers. 'We can't afford that.' Looking at him intently, 'You've always had that hankering, haven't you?' Receiving neither confirmation nor denial: 'You know what Father said before he gave his consent: "No horses, not if it's my daughter you want."' He only gave us the house because you promised. So don't you go starting now he's gone.' And she turned on her heel and went back into the kitchen.

He thought the ninety days before he could remove his savings from his building society account would give him the time he needed to draw up foolproof plans. There were only two routes out of his desolation. Both brought him out in sweats and palpitations but things couldn't go on the way they were. He could play the horses and if he won he could disappear. He had seen a programme on TV and read two accounts in the papers of men – quite important figures – who had done this: left the house to buy a packet of cigarettes and never been seen since. He'd lay his plans very carefully, make it seem he was dead. He'd disappear to the south of France and find himself one of those slim, bronzed young ladies.

And if he lost? A lump formed in his throat. He could hardly breathe. Well, in that case he'd have to end it all. Gina would have the house; it was hers, after all. And she'd have the pension.

It was a peculiar peace that descended on him when he left the bookies in Golders Green Road for the last time, his wallet empty, his pockets too. *Well*, he said to himself, *at least I did something I wanted to do*. The familiar, brown, tired wave of boredom broke over him. The bronzed young lady on the promenade disappeared in the undertow. The peace of oblivion dissolved. Everything was back where it had been. Risk-free. The menu would be the same, the words exchanged would be the same. The routine ... The English classics in their navy Morocco bindings would stay forever unopened behind their glass doors.

Maurice found it an effort to put one foot down in front of the other as he climbed the stairs to bed. Gina was rubbing cold cream into her face. While she fixed a hairnet over her newly permed, dyed blond hair, she watched Maurice through the looking-glass on her kidney-shaped dressing table.

'Fold your trousers over the chair! Don't just drop them on the floor. How many times . . . Really!' Everything was happening in agonisingly slow motion. In his mind he heard the thundering finality of doors shutting out the thrill of what might have been.

Gina hung her eau-de-Nil candlewick dressing-gown on the hook behind the door and kicked off her mules. She was getting into bed. She had her back to him. When he slipped in bed beside her she was turning off the bedside light and settling down to sleep.

Maurice moved into position.

'D'you mind, Gina?'

'Go ahead,' she replied.

The Inquest

The silence in the courtroom is made palpable by the ticking of the clock on the wall above the coroner's head. There is something wrong with the mechanism, something that has proved irreparable, nothing so simple as a loose screw or want of lubricant. With each tick, with each tock, the case rattles. But whatever the irritation it arouses in witnesses, the press and other members of the public congregated to hear a good story unfold, it passes unnoticed by the coroner. His head is down; he is writing. When he has finished noting an observation and is ready to address the witness, he does so without preamble.

'Your name?'

'Albert Hodges, my lord.'

'Sir will do.'

'Sir.'

'And your address?'

'The flat, 2 Paddington Buildings, Harrow Road.'

'That would be W9?'

'W10, sir.'

'And your occupation?'

'Caretaker, sir.'

'Caretaker. Perhaps you would elaborate: what precisely are your responsibilities in your capacity as caretaker?' The coroner is writing. Still he does not take his eyes off his notes.

'I take things in, sir.'

'You take things in! And what exactly do you mean by that?' Now, for the first time, the coroner looks up and stares at the witness.

'Well, sir, when parcels and letters come, I sign for them, take them off the delivery man, sort through them and put them in the right cubby holes. Sometimes I deliver things personally to the doctors. I keep the waiting room and the doctors' rooms clean and tidy. I sweep up, even scrub where necessary. Some patients are given to throwing up and wetting themselves. I'm there to keep things shipshape. And then I see to it that the windows are closed fast at night and the doors all locked. I get there first thing in the morning to open up. I'm very safety conscious; you can't leave things unattended, not in the Harrow Road, you can't, it's never safe.'

'And for how long have you been employed in this responsible capacity?'

'Thirty years, sir, since I was demobbed in '46. I took the job for the accommodation. My wife Bess liked the flat the minute she clapped eyes on it. Just after the war we couldn't be too choosy. "We'll be cosy here," she said. We'd got no kids, just the cat, and it was convenient for him what with it being at ground level.'

'Thank you, Mr Hodges, I think I have the picture.'

The coroner is now staring at the witness. Whereas some seek inspiration from a distant horizon, the coroner seeks his in the gap between the limpid tick and the turbid tock. What can thirty years of scrubbing, locking and unlocking, signing and sorting have done to the man before him?

The reporters in the gallery are becoming impatient; they rustle their papers. The public is shifting on the benches. The noise of papers and of feet scraping the floor is accompanied by the peculiar, unyielding complaints of mackintoshes.

‘Would you be so good as to tell the court what you knew of Miss Alton?’

‘How do you mean, sir? I didn’t know her – not really, not personally.’

‘No, Mr Hodges, but you saw her regularly, did you not?’

‘That I did, sir, every day, Monday to Friday, at ten minutes to three when she arrived and at four o’clock when she left. She was Dr Neustadt’s patient and I’ll tell you a peculiar thing, sir: she’d even come when the good doctor was on his holidays. She’d sit in the waiting room for exactly fifty minutes, as she would have sat with the doctor had he been there. She was a lovely young lady, about thirty years old, I’d say. Stood out from the rest, she did. Her name was Magenta. I’d never heard that name before. She was exceptionally tall, had long black hair and big blue eyes. She was always polite and thoughtful. Our patients come in all shapes and sizes, but the odd thing is they tend to look alike. Dr Neustadt explained to me why that was. It’s what their problems do to them, make them bent and slow and out of control of their mouths.’

‘What do you imply by “out of control of their mouths”, Mr Hodges?’

‘Well, sir, for one thing they tend to dribble. For another, they often shout without warning and use terrible language. Some of the rough sleepers and druggies come out with words I’d not even heard uttered in the forces. Some think they’re Jesus Christ and want to wash everyone’s feet, others think they are King this or that and expect to be bowed to, and if no one does respond, all hell breaks out.’

‘And was it part of your responsibility to control this mayhem?’

‘It was in the waiting room. I’d frisk the dodgier ones for sharp instruments and syringes, but I never interfered in their nasty personal habits, the nose-picking and scratching of one another. I was firm with the ones who took off their clothes, or unbuttoned to expose themselves, that sort of thing.’

‘Did you experience difficulty in keeping order?’

‘Yes and no, sir. One of the other doctors showed me how best to deal with the violent ones and the awkward ones: not to get involved physically but to “catch them by the eye”. It worked with most. It was the women who tore off their clothes I found the trickiest. And I didn’t want Miss Alton to be upset.’

‘And was she?’

‘Funny thing was, she didn’t seem to notice what was

going on, seemed to be in a sort of dream. She sat quite quiet in a corner. I think she must have known I was keeping an eye out for her.'

'Indeed, that would have given her confidence. Tell me, in what other ways was Miss Alton different?'

'Well, she was an educated lady. Spoke nicely. She made quite an impression on me, the first day I saw her. She came in carrying a bunch of daffodils tied with grasses. She had a jam jar with her and she asked me whether I could fill it with water. She smiled and thanked me. Later that same day, Dr Neustadt asked me whether I had seen his new patient. Said he was going to make her better. I was struck by this: he never said that about the others.'

'Really? A fine pass it has come to when a psychiatrist does not so much as imagine he is going to improve the mental health of the majority of his patients. Hardly a consoling thought for the rest of us.'

'Beg pardon, sir?'

'Just an aside, Hodges. You carry on!'

'She wore pretty things in the modern manner, two or three skirts one on top of the other, shawls over her shoulders. And hats! Straw in summer with flowers pinned at the brim; velour with silk bows in winter. Quite a stunner, she was. But later she got to wearing grey and black like the other patients, and her skirts got torn and a bit dirty. It was sad to see the change.'

'So, despite Dr Neustadt's confidence, Miss Alton went downhill?'

'She did. It started when she read on the noticeboard that he was going to retire.'

'So, to sum up: this was an attractive woman in her early thirties who, during the course of her treatment and before she was apprised of her doctor's imminent retirement, maintained herself, was somewhat withdrawn – aloof even – well mannered, and apparently well disposed towards yourself. Would that be a fair résumé?'

'I think that sums it up, sir.'

'But you understood that Miss Alton could not have been entirely well balanced, or she would not have been attending the clinic? And despite Dr Neustadt's confidence in the permanence of his healing powers, she deteriorated.'

'Well, sir, it's not for me to say. I don't understand these things.'

'Quite so. What can you tell me about Dr Neustadt himself?'

'First and foremost I'd say he was a proper English gentleman for all that he's a foreigner. For twenty odd years he was my boss, and it was a real pleasure to work for him. Always remembered his pleases and thank-yous, treated me same as everyone, not like some of the other doctors – I'm just a workman to them: "Bring me this! Take that! I've not got all day! The room's a mess, Hodges, hasn't seen a mop or duster in weeks!" Some used to try to get my Bess to do a bit of washing and ironing for them when their wives were on

holiday. But that's something I'll not stand for, them making use of my Bess.'

'All right, Mr Hodges, those details are more than I need to know. Let us get back to Dr Neustadt.'

'He treated me more as a friend, talked to me, told me ever such a lot about himself and his past. He's what they call a survivor. All his family was killed in the war, in Germany, and all their property was stolen. He's got no one of his own. He lives in two rooms, as we do, just has a bed, a table and two chairs: nothing superfluous, he explained to me. It's been his patients who are important to him since them days.'

The coroner looks up at Albert Hodges and slowly considers what he sees: a man who will report things as he found them, as he had them reported to him, would see them with an unimaginative eye. Not a man to indulge in flights of fancy. It was the police reports that had not made sense; the witness seems straightforward enough. An ordinary working-class man. A Londoner. Salt of the earth. A man whose western horizons would stretch to Slough and whose eastern horizons would terminate at Clacton-on-Sea.

'Mr Hodges, would you remind me how old you are?'

'Seventy-five, sir.'

A man of seventy-five, living in the caretaker's flat in a concrete, custom-built, council-provided slum on the Harrow Road, a drab neighbourhood ignorant of any natural feature. No greensward, blueberry-clad hills, no dew pond, no carpet of bluebells, no stream glistening with trout. Distant from the song of the lark and moan of cattle. And every working day within both sight and sound of the mentally deranged. Yet here is a man who can cope, an uneducated man neither shocked nor threatened by the uncertainties of mankind.

'Do you attend the cinema, Mr Hodges?'

'Not these days, sir, we don't. It's become too expensive. We watch the telly.'

'And do you do much reading?'

'The *Mirror* most days and the *People* on Sunday.'

'No books?'

'No time for books, sir.'

'Quite so. I don't mean you to think I am suggesting you ought to read books. It is only that I have been impressed, even confused by the extravagance of the descriptions of all that took place at the clinic as you recounted each event to the police.'

'Extravagance!'

'Should I perhaps have said "imaginative"?''

'I don't have imagination, sir. I don't hold with it. I keep my feet firmly on the ground.'

'I'm sure you do, Mr Hodges. However, I am also somewhat bewildered by the fact that Dr Neustadt, himself, in accordance with the strict rules governing doctor-patient relations, has refused to verify the evidence you provided the police.'

'I don't lie, sir.'

'No, Mr Hodges, nor am I accusing you of lying. It is

simply the case that it is unusual for a man of your type to come forward with the particular class of narrative you have unfolded. Let us say, the stories you have told the police.'

'They are not stories, sir. I don't tell stories.'

'Allow me to rephrase: tales.'

'There you go again, sir! I don't tell tales. I can't make up stories and I don't lie. I leave imagination to them that can afford it.'

'That is what I like to hear, Mr Hodges, for what I need are facts. These descriptions of yours that I have before me in the police reports strike me as being more highly coloured than I would normally expect from a man such as yourself, a man whose feet are set firmly on the ground, a man who does not invent, a man who does not lie. At best they strike me as fanciful delusions.'

'Delusions? What are delusions?'

'Well, we need not go deeply into that. Shall we say dreams? Certainly not the sort of happenings normally associated with daily life in the Harrow Road. In addition to which, I am bewildered by the account of the close relationship you formed with Dr Neustadt. Surely you would admit that what you had to report of both Miss Alton and Dr Neustadt was unusual?'

'They are not your usual sort of people, sir.'

'Quite so. Perhaps I meet fewer unusual sorts of people than you, although I doubt it. However, let us leave that aside for the moment. I have to get to the heart of this matter. That is what I am employed to do; like you, I have to take things in and sort them out and deliver each to its correct cubby hole. Now, I think, we should adjourn for luncheon. We shall take up where we left off at two-thirty. Be back on time, Mr Hodges!'

Reporters hurry to the Canal Inn. Members of the public gather to compare notes. Albert Hodges walks out of the court slowly, alone, and settles on a bench he finds overlooking children's swings set in a concrete square where pigeons loiter to be fed by the old and the lonely. He takes a packet of sandwiches from the pocket of his coat and eats, if only because it is time to eat. And when he has finished, he stands up and stretches, and then, because there is nothing else to do, sits down again. Bess believes him. And the good doctor is not a man to lie. He himself has not discussed Miss Alton with a living soul bar Bess, with whom he discusses every item of the day because what else is there to talk about? It is only in the peculiar circumstances of the deliveries that he is in court. And, of course, Miss Alton's passing.

Albert Hodges closes his memory against things unpleasant, things that cannot be borne and things that defy description, and picks his teeth. Why don't these bloody NHS dentures fit? He looks about him for a bin into which to throw the greaseproof bag in which Bess packed his sandwiches. Having found one, his thoughts turn back to those matters that have defied the imagination of the police. How is he going to tell it

as it was, pass on what he saw and heard and get the coroner to believe he is telling the truth? People don't believe what you tell them if they haven't had it happen to them. Take the young: they don't want to know, because they weren't there and the war's been over thirty years. Same after the first war: no one wanted to know. Not those who hadn't been in the trenches. They passed by those poor men on crutches, a tray of matches round their neck and didn't give them so much as a good-morning. He does so wish he didn't have to go back into the courtroom.

In fact, he is among the first to return. As others follow and the small room fills, he feels caught by the incoming tide. Now the coroner is shuffling in, returning in the same mood in which he recessed.

'Well now, Mr Hodges, I hope you feel replete and can provide me with your full and honest description of the events that occupy us here in this court. You do understand how important it is for your testimony to cleave to the facts? Perhaps I may take you back to the first day on which British Rail unloaded a mountain range at the clinic. It was the Alps, was it not? And it was British Rail?'

'It was, sir. Only British Rail had the capacity.'

'Quite so.'

'It was a nice morning. The sun was up. It was about seven-thirty. The British Rail driver sounded his horn for me to open the gates. Soon as he was into the yard, he jumped down. "This the Klein Clinic?" he asked. I said yes, it was. "You got a Dr Neustadt here?" I said we had. "Well," he said, "the delivery's for him." "What am I signing for?" I asked. "Mountains," he said. "Beg pardon," I said. "You heard," he said. "And where d'you think I'm going to put mountains?" I said. But I wasn't really speaking to him, more thinking to myself out loud. Then he started to get nasty because he thought I was going to refuse to take them off him. "All right," I said, "you unload them here." And that's what him and his mate did: unloaded the range on my yard. I went straight to my lodge and rang Dr Neustadt at his home, because it being so early, it wasn't time for him to be at work yet. I told him about the delivery cluttering my yard. "Have it put on the roof, Hodges!" he said, as if it were nothing more than an aerial or two, or some lagging. I rounded up three of the porters that do our rough work and they got the thing onto the roof. I had other jobs to do, to get ready for the early appointments. But I did worry about the weight and whether the sun might melt the snow and we'd have the problems with leaks we get when there's thunderstorms. No amount of buckets was going to cope with an avalanche. I could see that. These buildings were put up after the war, sir; they're not sound, not sound at all.'

With dutiful indifference the coroner finds his voice. 'So, Mr Hodges, we are now faced with a mountain range, the Alps no less, on the roof of the Klein Clinic in the Harrow Road. That is what I understand you to be asserting?' *They do say that dreams move mountains*, he mutters to himself. His patience is being tried beyond the obligations of his profession.

‘And did you attempt the climb?’

‘No, sir. But that evening before Dr Neustadt left the clinic, he thanked me for the trouble I had taken and gave me a bunch of those blue flowers that grow in the mountains, said to give them to my Bess. Said when he was a boy he used to climb those mountains with his father. So when I got back home and told Bess the whole story she said I was daft, that I’d been working at the clinic so long I was getting like the patients.’

‘Following this delivery, I believe there were others?’

‘Oh yes! Every week things came: books, pictures, musical instruments. Miss Alton sent the doctor all the things that had been stolen from him in the war. It was to show her appreciation, Dr Neustadt said.’

‘And you saw all those things with your own eyes?’

‘Not exactly, sir, I just took in the containers, saw what was written on the outside, signed for them and had them put where the doctor wanted. I never unpacked anything. I don’t go rummaging about in other people’s belongings.’

‘Did Dr Neustadt remark on Miss Alton’s generosity?’

‘He told me it wasn’t a question of generosity, said he and Miss Alton gave back to one another what they could of the past.’

‘And what did you understand by this enigmatic reply?’

‘I didn’t, sir.’

‘Nor, may I say, do I.’

‘But he made a point of always telling me what was in the containers. Said there were sights and sounds and places, not to mention treasure. There was no point in my looking into these crates. I wouldn’t have recognised such things. You see, sir, I have very little in the way of knowledge: I had no education. I needed the good doctor to explain things. On one occasion he told me about trees turned into ordinary men and women, and wild creatures that gave birth to human babies. There is nothing that’s impossible, he told me. He and Miss Alton had experienced wonders.’

The coroner’s thoughts derail. Hodge’s testimony has moved him by a frank simplicity that delivers much more than words. It arouses in him memories of what had been of substance in his own life many years ago – and what might have been. Who and what is this decent man whose youth has been devoured by the enemies of war and whose adulthood confined to the soiled streets and mephetic fumes of west London, among the destitute and insane? Like himself, would Hodges not have been better served returned to his long lost peasant roots, that of bodger or charcoal-burner, farm labourer with time to hang on a five-barred gate to watch the horses stamp the ground? He, too, might well have been open to the messages of nature.

The tick-tock of the clock asserts its influence and the coroner casts his attention back to his list of questions.

‘And now we must come to that sad day in November. Would you kindly explain, clearly and accurately, what it was you experienced?’

‘I came into the clinic as usual at seven o’clock, but as

soon as I turned the key and stepped into my lodge I knew there was something had happened, something not right, you could say.'

'Different?'

'Yes, sir, very different in the atmosphere. It was all quite dead.'

'Was that not the usual atmosphere you experienced first thing in the morning, before the patients and the doctors arrived?'

'No, sir, that is, not since Miss Alton and her presents for the doctor started coming. I'd turn the key and get the sweet scent of spices and the gentle sounds of music and all about me a friendly presence.'

'What do you mean by "presence"?''

'As if all were in the hands of something that meant well. The morning you are referring to I knew at once all was not well. Something was terribly wrong and bad. The silence was alarming. My first thought was we'd had burglars. Then that there had been a fire or a flood, some accident or other. I got very agitated.'

'What action did you take?'

'I don't remember taking action, sir. I think I might have slowed down a bit and told myself to pull myself together and just carry on as usual. I took the keys from the safe in my lodge, opened up the waiting room and tidied the magazines, watered the rubber plant in the entrance hall, that sort of thing. I just kept to my routine.'

'Very sensible, Hodges. And were you still feeling agitated, as if something dreadful had happened?'

'I certainly was, sir. It was that that made me go and check to see there were no broken windows, no forced doors, no leaking taps, no trouble with the boiler ...'

'And did you find any problems?'

'None, sir. It was that that drove me to climb the stairs right up to the roof. I never go up there normally. The roof's not part of my job. And I certainly wasn't going up there once the containers for Dr Neustadt started to arrive. It would have looked as if I were being nosy.'

'So, most uncharacteristically, Mr Hodges, you went up to the roof that day?'

'I did, sir. And what a shock I got! Never experienced anything like it. There was nothing there! Not a single container! Nothing! Nothing at all.'

'Nothing?'

'Nothing! Just the bare lead spattered with pigeon droppings and the remains of their sodden, empty nests. And, of course, the water tanks. They looked a sight with their insulation escaping. The pigeons use the wool for their nests. I stood up there in a daze, deafened by shrieking traffic. It seems to collect up high in the petrol fumes and soot. I was in a sort of nightmare. I couldn't put things together, I was so confused. What was I going to tell the doctor? Had everything been stolen? I was stuck to the ground, as it were. I wanted to get away, but I couldn't move my feet.'

'For how long were you stuck up there?'

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'I couldn't say, sir. It seemed a very long time. Eventually I got my legs working, but I remember I took the lift down. Still very shaken. It was not long after that I heard the unmistakable sound of a British Rail lorry at the gates to the yard. I rushed out to unlock and I could see the driver was the same man as usually came, but he was on his own. He beckoned to me, mouthing he wanted me to give him a hand. Once he'd stopped, I went to the back of the lorry and helped him pull out a long, narrow box addressed to Dr Neustadt. The box wasn't heavy, but it was an awkward shape for one man to handle. I had the driver come and put it down on the carpet in the doctor's room.'

'That was not your usual practice, was it? Do you think you had some premonition of what was in that box?'

'I don't know that I did, sir.'

'Well, in that case, why did you not have it sent up to the roof as you had done with the other deliveries?'

'It must have been because of what I'd seen. The roof looked so ugly, so dirty and deserted. And there may have been robberies up there and it may have gone missing like the rest. Anyhow, I wouldn't have wanted the good doctor to have seen such desolation.'

'Once the box was in the doctor's room, did it occur to you to lift the lid to see what was there?'

'It did. I wanted to drive out the horrible thoughts that were coming to mind, so I reminded myself of a patient who always came to the clinic carrying a violin case with him. It turned out that there was no violin, just his washing. It was something along those lines I was hoping for.'

'But in your heart you knew otherwise?'

'I did, sir.'

'And subsequently the police were called and you were interviewed over the course of several days and, therefore, in much greater detail than we have had time for today?'

'Yes, sir.'

'I want you to know, Mr Hodges, that I am completely satisfied both with your account to the police and what you have reprised here. I am grateful to you for the straightforward manner in which you have accounted to me. Court Dismissed!'

**SAMPLER
NOT FOR RESALE**