VINTAGE

THE WORLD IN THE EVENING

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

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At a party in the Hollywood Hills, Stephen Monk finds his wife in the arms of another man. Betrayed and furious, he packs his belongings and returns to the home he was born in. There he begins to retrace the steps that have brought him to this crisis. He is reminded of his own betrayals and weaknesses. But most of all, the memory of his lost love, Elizabeth Rydal, haunts him. Can he forgive his wife, and most importantly, himself?

About the Author

Christopher Isherwood was born in Cheshire in 1904. He began to write at university and later moved to Berlin, where he gave English lessons to support himself. He witnessed first hand the rise to power of Hitler and the Nazi party in Germany and some of his best works, such as *Mr Norris Changes Trains* and *Goodbye to Berlin*, draw on these experiences. He created the character of Sally Bowles, later made famous as the heroine of the musical *Cabaret*. Isherwood travelled with W.H. Auden to China in the late 1930s before going with him in 1939 to America which became his home for the rest of his life. He died on 4 January 1986.

ALSO BY CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

All the Conspirators
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Goodbye to Berlin
Prater Violet
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Down There on a Visit
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With W. H. Auden
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TO DODIE & ALEC BEESLEY

CHRISTOPHER ISHERWOOD

The World in the Evening

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

PART ONE
AN END

1

THE PARTY, THAT evening, was at the Novotnys'. They lived high up on the slopes of the Hollywood hills, in a ranch-style home complete with Early American maple, nautical brasswork and muslin curtains; just too cute for words. It looked as if it had been delivered, all ready equipped, from a store; and you could imagine how, if the payments weren't kept up, some men might arrive one day and take the whole place back there on a truck, along with Mrs Novotny, the three children, the two cars and the cocker spaniel. Most of the houses Jane and I visited were like that.

It was quite late already and several people were drunk; not acting badly, just boastful and loud and thick-voiced. I was about halfway; which was the best way for me to be. As long as I was sober, I sulked. If I went on drinking, I was apt to turn nasty and say something embarrassing, or else fall asleep and snore. Jane was always worried about that, and yet she never could tear herself away until the end. 'Why in hell don't you go on back home, if you're so bored,' she sometimes whispered to me furiously, 'instead of drooping around like a Goddam martyr? What's the matter? Afraid I might do something *you* wouldn't do?' I used to grin at her without answering. That was exactly how I wanted her to feel: unsure of me and uneasy and guiltily aggressive. It was the only way I knew of hitting back at her.

I was alone, now, at the uncrowded end of the living-room. A mirror on the opposite wall showed me how I appeared to the outside world: a tall blond youngish-oldish man with a weakly good-looking, anxious face and dark, over-expressive eyes, standing in a corner between a cobbler's table and a fake spinning-wheel, holding a highball glass in my hand. A miniature brass ship with a fern growing out of it was fastened to the wall beside my cheek. I looked as if I were trying to melt into the scenery and become invisible, like a giraffe standing motionless among sunlit leaves.

I was wearing my usual crazy costume, the symbol of my protest against this life I was leading: a white tuxedo jacket, with a crimson bow tie and carnation to match my moiré cummerbund. Elizabeth, if she could have seen me, would have said: 'Darling, what on *earth* are you supposed to be? No—don't tell me. Let me guess—' In a way, I think I did dress like this just because it would have amused Elizabeth. Certainly, no one here saw the joke, not even Jane; my masquerade as a musical-comedy-Hollywood character passed entirely unnoticed. And why, after all, should any of these people notice it? This was the only way they knew me—as I appeared, night after night, at Jane's side, in the doorways of their homes. (We never stayed home alone together in the evenings, any more; it would have been unthinkable.)

If you had asked who I was, almost every one of them would have answered 'Jane Monk's husband', and let it go at that. It had been the same right from the start, when we'd first arrived in California, the previous year. Even the society columnists decided I was no fun and had better be ignored. They never mentioned me directly if they could avoid it, though they bubbled with items like: 'Saw Jane (Mrs Stephen) Monk looking gorgeous (as usual) in white satin with some stunning antique Brussels lace. They're here from New York, via Nassau. Plan to settle for a while.

Jane tells me—' etc, etc. Jane loved it. She never seemed to get tired of being talked about, no matter how bitchily. She even told me once—taking it as a huge joke—how a man at Chasen's had been overheard saying: 'Well, he may be a Monk—but, brother, she's no nun.' That was one of the things about her I still found charmingly innocent and touching.

'Out here on the Coast,' someone declared, in the group nearest to me, 'you just don't know what the score is. Why, back East, we're practically in the war already.' Someone else agreed that F.D.R. would get us in as soon as he could find an excuse. There was talk about the London Blitz, and Rommel and the fighting in Africa (this was April, 1941), but you could tell that none of them cared very much. Their fears and their interests were elsewhere. Sid Novotny was a screen writer, and this party was just in case the studio might be hesitating to take up his option. Alice Faye, who was to have been the guest of honour, hadn't shown up. However, several of the front office executives were present, a couple of second-magnitude stars, and a lot of young actresses and actors. Such as Roy Griffin, for instance.

A man disengaged himself from the conversation and came over to me. I'd been watching him preparing to do this for several minutes. We'd been introduced to each other earlier in the evening; I knew he was a producer, though I'd forgotten his name. He had a crew-cut, clean hairy hands, inquisitive eyes and a very sincere manner.

'Say, Mr Monk, you know I've been wanting to get together with you ever since I heard you were out here? It was quite a thrill, meeting you tonight. It really was. Believe it or not, I'm one of the old original Rydal fans. Yes, I'll bet I was one of the very first in this country.'

I made a suitable noise.

'*The World in the Evening*: Jesus—that's a great book! One of the truly great books written in our time.' The

producer lowered his voice, as though we were just entering a church. ‘You know something?’ He glanced quickly at the group he had left, afraid, apparently, that they might be listening. ‘Somewhere in that book, there’s a great movie. *One hell* of a movie. Most people wouldn’t be able to see that. But I can. I can give you my word that it’s there … Did anyone ever buy the rights?’

‘I don’t think so.’ I was looking over the crowd at the other end of the room. I had just noticed that Jane wasn’t there. ‘I could find out, if you’re interested.’ Roy Griffin wasn’t there, either.

‘I’m definitely interested. Definitely … Say, supposing we manage to work something out, would you possibly consider helping us on the screen-play?’

‘I’m not a writer, you know.’ Jane might be in the bar, of course. Or with Mrs Novotny, admiring some new clothes. Maybe she wasn’t with Roy at all.

‘Not a writer, Mr Monk? Come now—let’s not be so darned modest! What about that introduction you did to the *Collected Stories*? I read that over and over. You did a beautiful job. Fine. Sensitive. No one but yourself could have written that way. No one else was in a position to known her as you did.’

‘Well—I’m glad you liked it, but—’

‘And it’s not a question of movie experience. Let me put it this way—we’d need you as a sort of a, well, an artistic conscience. Someone to tell us when we’re getting off the beam. You’re the only man who could tell us that. And we’ve got to watch our step clear through, from start to finish. Got to watch every darned little nuance, or we’re sunk; Every word Elizabeth Rydal wrote is sacred to me. Sacred. I’m not kidding. I’d want to make this picture just as she’d have wished it—catch that wonderful delicate style and preserve it in celluloid, if you get what I mean—’

I’ve got to find them, I said to myself. Now, at once. I can’t stand any more of this. This time, I’ve got to be

absolutely sure.

The producer's voice faded in again: '… say, how about lunch, some time? Say, why don't I call you around the first of the week?'

'All right.' I tore a leaf from my notebook and scribbled the telephone number, substituting one wrong digit; a favourite trick of mine. If they finally track you down you can always pretend it was a slip.

'And Mrs Monk too, of course. If she'd care to join us.'

'I'll ask her.' I thrust the paper into his hand and walked away before he could say another word.

At the entrance to the bar I ran into Mrs Novotny, dainty and haggardly bright, in a dirndl costume with slave bangles.

'Getting yourself a drink? Good!' She smiled brilliantly, squeezing the crow's feet around her eyes. 'I like a man who knows how to look out for himself.'

I grinned at her numbly. ('Your dying-Jesus grin,' Jane called it, when she was mad at me.)

'Sid and I were both so glad you could come, this evening. Jane's such a lot of fun. She enjoys herself so. She always gets a party going. She's such a *happy* person—'

'Yes,' I said.

'Excuse me—' She gave me another smile, touched my arm lightly and headed eagerly back into the crowd. I'd been getting ready to ask her if she knew where Jane was. It was so hard to hit on exactly the right tone of voice; casual, but not too casual. Now I felt glad that I hadn't tried.

The bar was three steps down from the living-room. Here, the duelling-pistols and the ships' compasses, the Toby jugs, the clay pipes and the Currier and Ives prints clustered around a gay altar of coloured bottles, and the air was thick with smoke and chatter. I stood on the top step, looking down. A couple of men recognized me and nodded, and I nodded back; but I knew very well that none of them

really wanted me to join them. A cold, bored, boring highbrow: that was how I seemed to them, no doubt. Or else a snooty, half-Europeanized playboy with a Limey accent and a Riviera background, who knew Italian princesses and French counts. An alien, in any case, who didn't belong to their worried movie world, where you lived six months ahead of your salary and had to keep right on spending lest anyone should suspect that your credit wasn't good. I had no part in their ulcers and anxieties, their mortgages and their options. I had never sweated it out at a sneak preview or a projection-room post mortem. And so, when these people thought of me, they certainly envied me my unearned money but probably also despised me for my irresponsible, unmanly freedom.

I came near to startling them all, at that moment, with a great bellow of despair, like an animal trapped in a swamp. Somehow or other, I'd wandered into this gibbering jungle of phonies and now here I was, floundering stupidly in the mud of my jealous misery and sinking deeper with every movement. I hadn't even the consolation of being able to feel sorry for myself. I wasn't in the least tragic or pitiable; no, merely squalid and ridiculous. I knew that, and yet I couldn't help myself. I couldn't get out of the swamp. I tried to think of Elizabeth and what she would have said; but it was no good. Elizabeth wasn't here. I was all alone. I should go on struggling and sinking. I had no control, any more, over what was going to happen.

Jane wasn't in the bar. Neither was Roy Griffin.

Turning from the steps, I walked quickly along a short passage, opened a glass door and stepped out into the garden. It was cut from the steep hillside in two terraces; a dichondra lawn above, and, below, a small kidney-shaped swimming-pool. The water of the pool must have been heated for it steamed gently in the beams of submerged lamps, its green-lit fumes rising theatrically against the enormous cheap-gaudy nightscape of Los Angeles which

sparkled away out to the horizon like a million cut-rate engagement-rings.

There was nobody in the garden.

I came to a halt at the edge of the pool. It was brilliantly clean; not one leaf floating on its surface, not one speck of dirt on its tiled floor. God curse this antiseptic, heartless, hateful neon-mirage of a city! May its swimming-pools be dried up. May all its lights go out for ever. I drew a deep dizzying breath in which the perfume of star jasmine was mixed with chlorine.

So this time was going to be like all the other times. I wasn't going to find her. I wasn't going to know for certain. Later, she'd walk into the living-room quite casually, smiling as she said: 'We took a ride. I felt like I needed some fresh air.' Or else simply smiling and not bothering to explain at all. And Roy would either be casual too, as some of the others had been, or else embarrassed and in need of a stiff drink, avoiding my eyes. And I'd look at Jane and she'd look right back at me; and there would be nothing to say about it because I could prove nothing.

She and Roy had probably driven off into the hills together, the way the high-school kids did. The other day, at another party, a man had told us how he'd had a flat tyre on Mulholland Drive, and how he'd gone over to a car parked nearby, after suitable warning coughs, to borrow a jack, and surprised a couple of them—the boy around sixteen, the girl maybe less—stark naked. 'Holy smoke,' the boy had said, 'for a minute I thought you were a cop!' They hadn't seemed the least ashamed of themselves … Jane's comment on this story had been: 'Well, good for *them*!'

I became suddenly aware of my hand, and the glass in it flashing green with the magic light of the water. The glass was empty, asking to be filled. I would have to go back into the house to fill it. I'd fix myself a huge drink and then sit down somewhere and figure out a very clever way to trap her once and for all, and be sure.

Wait, though. What was that?

Not the distant noises from the house. Not the crickets, which were chirping all over the hillside. Not the beating of my own heart.

There it was again. Quite close.

But—of course! I had entirely forgotten about the doll's house.

It was a playhouse, actually; fixed up to look like the Witch's candy cottage in *Hansel and Gretel*, with curly pillars that were supposed to be sugar-sticks and shingles painted the colour of toffee. The three Novotny children were still just small enough to squeeze into it together; Mrs Novotny thought it was cute to make them demonstrate this to her guests, on Sunday afternoons. All you could see of it now was a black outline, standing back among the shadows of the oleanders around the pool.

I set my glass down very gently on the paving and tiptoed across to it, holding my breath.

Small but unmistakable sounds. Out of the darkness, right at my feet.

And then Jane's voice in a faint gasping whisper: 'Roy—!'

I stood there, death-still, clenching my fists. But I was grinning.

For now, suddenly—now that there was never again to be any more doubting, dreading, suspecting—here, right in the brute presence of the simple unbelievable fact—I felt what I had never guessed I would feel; a great, almost agonizing upsurge of glee, of gleeful relief.

Caught. Caught her at last.

At my first boarding-school in England, on winter evenings, we had played hide-and-seek sometimes, turning out the lights and hiding all over the big house. When you were He, you tiptoed around holding your breath and listening, until your ears grew so keen it seemed you could hear every sound within miles. I had always hated being He, but it was worth bearing the tense, spooky loneliness

just for the sake of that one intoxicating, gleeful instant when you knew you'd caught them, those whisperers lurking and mocking you in the darkness.

A funny thought flashed through my head: I've been He for nearly four years. What a long game—

Right at my feet, Jane giggled: 'Roy—you sonofabitch—'

And, as if this were the signal they had been waiting for, my clenched fists jumped from my sides and pounded thundering on the doll's house roof.

Then, light and quick as a murderer, I turned and ran laughing up the steps from the pool, jumped a flower-bed, burst through a line of bushes and was out on the driveway. Luckily, my car was parked some distance from the front door of the house. I fumbled frantically for the key, started the engine, backed out like a rocket, smashed into another car—crumpling the fenders, probably—bounced off it, whirled the steering-wheel around, and was away.

After that, everything came unstuck. The car bolted headlong with me down the road, squealing and skidding around the curves. My left hand wanted to swing it over the edge and plunge it to a blazing wreck in a gully; but my right hand refused, and was stronger. My voice was yelling dirty insane words about the things it would do to Jane. My mind sat away off somewhere, calm and strangely detached, disclaiming all responsibility for this noisy madman, just watching, listening and waiting for what would happen next.

And then I was up in the bedroom of our house. I had found one of her lipsticks and scribbled the mirror and the walls with the words I had been shouting, in big scarlet letters. Now I was throwing stuff into a suitcase as if the place were on fire. Reaching into the closet for clothes, my hands touched an evening gown, gripped and crumpled it and dragged it out, and it was Jane I was going to kill. 'Rip her up. Rip her wide open,' I muttered, hunting for a razor-blade in my shaving-kit. The blade was double-edged,

awkward to hold. I cut my thumb deeply as I slashed with obstinate rage at the dress; the silk was amazingly tough. But it was done at last. Sobbing, I flung the poor beautiful harmless thing into a corner, all gashed and bloodied and spoiled. How horrible! I was going to vomit. I stumbled into the bathroom with my bleeding thumb in my mouth and reached the toilet bowl only just in time.

When I had washed myself, I came back into the bedroom for my suitcase, feeling weak and shaken and nearly sober. It was then that I remembered Elizabeth's letters. They were in a file, standing on the desk in the room I called my study but never used; I hadn't looked at them in months. I couldn't leave them, alone with Jane. She might burn them. She might even read them. I should have to take them along with me—wherever it was that I was going.

At the front door I paused and turned for a last look at our little hate-nest. Perhaps I had never seen it properly until this moment; my feelings about Jane had reduced it to a sort of flat, colourless backdrop. Actually, it had considerable comic possibilities. The hall was Hollywood-Spanish, with decorated beams and a staircase of curlicue ironwork and tiled steps gaily painted with birds and flowers. High up the wall, which had a surface like very expensive cream notepaper, there was a balcony draped with an Indian blanket. 'Romeo and Juliet,' I said aloud. Then I noticed a bottle of whisky standing unopened in a paper bag on the carved Italian dower-chest. I picked it up and ran down the crazy-pavement to the car, leaving the door ajar and all the lights burning.

In the darkened hotel lobby, only the reception-desk was illuminated. It was quiet here and calm like a chapel, with the desk clerk keeping his vigil amidst the shadows of big sleepy indoor leaves. I signed the guest-card, saying to myself as I often did: After all, I suppose I do actually exist. Anyhow, I seem to have a name, just like anybody else.

‘Stopping with us long, Mr … Monk?’ the desk clerk asked, with an instant’s glance at my signature. His manner was perfect; correct yet discreetly understanding. It was as if he knew just what I was thinking. You can trust us, his reassuring smile seemed to say. We shall accept you for what you tell us you are. We shall assume that you are a real person. All our guests, by definition, are real people.

‘I’m not sure about my plans, yet.’ (But, even as I said this, I knew suddenly what I was going to do.)

The clerk nodded pleasantly and wrote something in a book. He was dressed for this death-watch job as if for a lively party; his suit, shirt, tie and teeth were immaculate, and his handsome sunburned young face showed not the least sign of fatigue. How is it, I wanted to ask him, that you can sit there, hour after hour, so calm and alone? What’s your secret? How did you learn to inhabit the Night? I would have liked to stay and talk to the young man, telling him everything exactly as it had happened, without shame or excuse, as you might tell a doctor or a priest. But already the porter stood behind me with my suitcase; and the clerk was saying: ‘Four Sixty-two, Sir. I hope you’ll be comfortable.’

‘Will you put a call through for me, please?’ I said. ‘Long distance to Dolgelly, Pennsylvania. You’ll have to get the number from Information. It’ll be listed under Pennington; Miss Sarah Pennington. The house is called Tawelfan. T-a-w-e-l-f-a-n. It’s on Boundary Lane.’

‘Surely.’ The clerk was scribbling this down. ‘Goodnight, Mr Monk.’

The call came through very quickly; only a few minutes after the porter had left me alone in my room.

‘Go ahead, Los Angeles. Your party’s on the line.’

‘Hello—’

‘Yes—?’ Sarah’s voice sounded faint and anxious and old. I could picture her—with her hair in pigtails, probably—

startled from sleep in the grey of dawn and fearing news of some disaster.

'Aunt Sarah, it's me, Stephen … I woke you, didn't I? I'm so sorry, but I had to tell you this at once. I—'

'*Stephen*! It's *you*! Where are you?'

'Still here. In California. But listen—'

'I'm sorry, Stephen dear. I can't hear you—'

"What I want to know is—could you possibly have me at Tawelfan? I mean, right away?'

'*Stephen*! You mean to *stay*? To *live* here?'

'Well—it might be only for a day or two. Or maybe longer. I'm not sure, yet … But are you quite certain it won't be inconvenient?'

'Inconvenient! Listen to the man! He expects *me* to tell *him* that it's inconvenient to have him *here* … Oh, Stephen dear, I'm so excited I can hardly believe it! When do you suppose you'll be coming?'

'I ought to be with you tomorrow. That is, if I can get on a plane sometime later today. I'll send you a telegram when I know for sure.'

'Oh, how wonderful … Stephen, I'm not dreaming, am I? You really *are* coming?'

'Of course I'm coming, Aunt Sarah. Now you go right back to bed and finish your sleep.'

'Oh, I shan't sleep another wink. Besides, it's getting light already. I must be up and doing. Goodnight, Stephen, my dearest. I suppose it *is* still night, with you? How odd that seems! God bless you.'

'Goodnight, Aunt Sarah.'

I hung up with a sigh of pain and relief. Her joy made me feel sad and guilty, as though I had somehow cheated her. But what a relief to know that it was done, now; I had taken the single, necessary irrevocable step. And now I knew what I hadn't realized or admitted to myself until this moment—that I'd taken it only just in time. The least delay in getting that phone-call through, and perhaps—no, it was

certain; I'd have gone back to the house. Back to Jane, on her own terms, any terms. That was the simple, miserable truth.

'But it's done now,' I repeated aloud. I opened my suitcase and took out the whisky-bottle. First I would get into bed, then drink until I slept. Very soon it would be morning. Things would start to happen of themselves, and Life would begin to carry me slowly, slowly away from the wreck.

But the whisky nauseated me. I couldn't touch it. Instead, I lay there staring at the ceiling and was shaken by another trembling-fit of hate. Grinning savagely, I thought of Roy Griffin, that film-fairy, that pansy male-impersonator who fooled nobody but himself, stuck with a very expensive nymphomaniac. Stuck with her, and not knowing how to wriggle out of it, and scared silly because of his career. Maybe he'd even have to marry her. Ha-ha, what a laugh! The poor miserable little pansy bastard, married to a bitch who's been accustomed to spend more on herself in one week than he earns in six months. Or did he think he was going to live on alimony? Well, if he did, he certainly had another guess coming. Not one cent would that whore get. Not one single cent. Not even if she took the case to the Supreme Court. I'd go to jail, first.

But I got hot, then, thinking of them together; two mating giants filling the dwarf world of the doll's house, and nearly bursting it apart with their heavings and writhings. I played the scene over and over to myself, elaborating every detail, until it left me sick with disgust and exhaustion. And so, toward dawn, I fell asleep.

2

WHAT ARE YOU doing now, Jane? What are you thinking? Aren't you wondering where I am? Aren't you amazed? Aren't you angry? Aren't you sorry? Aren't you a bit scared? Oh, Jane, why did you make me do this to you? I hate you for that. I hate you for making me hate you.

I hate you for going your own way always, and not giving a damn. I used to lay plots and set traps; but you never worried and you always won. I hate you because I couldn't hurt you.

I hate you for what you made me do to Elizabeth. It meant nothing to you. It merely tickled your vanity. You never understood how I felt about all that. I hate you for making me hate myself.

You've never known me, really. There's such a lot you just couldn't be bothered to explore. Sarah and Tawelfan are part of what you don't know. Elizabeth is another part. I never could tell you properly about any of that, because you were never really interested. At first, I used to make all sorts of little tests to find out if you wanted to share any of it with me. And you didn't. You didn't even realize what I was doing. You were much too tightly wrapped up in your own cocoon. Watch out, though; it's getting thicker all the time—as you'll discover one day, when you try to break out of it and find you can't.

I minded then. It hurt me more than I'd admit to myself, that you didn't care. But now I'm glad. Christ, I'm thankful

I've got something of my own to take away with me, that hasn't anything to do with you. Something you haven't touched and made cheap and stupid and rotten.

Look, Janey—it doesn't really matter any more—but now that this business is all over, there's just one thing I would like you to understand, and that's—

Stop it.

Stop talking to her. Stop thinking about her. You only give her power. You're making her stronger and stronger.

What's the matter with you, for Christ's sake? No wonder she despises you. You make me sick.

Come on, relax. Unclench your fists. Lean back in your seat. Breathe in deeply. Breathe out.

That's better.

Let's see if you can't forget all about her for a whole minute. Think about nothing but Now. Look out the window.

Our plane was over the desert, somewhere near the Arizona state-line, and the sun was setting directly behind us, making every tiniest crumb of rock on the littered floor of the wilderness stand out black against the last blinding beams of level light. The hills, which at midday look like pale crumpled sandpaper, now showed the most unearthly mineral tints of violet and green and orange, with deep-scooped crimson shadows. It was the sort of super-spectacle which makes some people think of God or Michelangelo, and which others find merely disgusting and dull because it seems to exclude their egos so completely. Jane had reacted to the desert like that, on our trip out to the Coast; she had buried her nose sulkily in *Vogue* and told me to tell her when we sighted civilization again. And I knew just how she was feeling.

But now, the aloofness, the absolute otherness of this country made me almost happy. These are real badlands, ruthlessly untidy and austerely useless. A world fit only for

hermits, reptiles and military manoeuvres; prehistoric, posthistoric, timeless, strictly neutral; proving nothing, disproving nothing. A simple geographical demonstration of Jane's total absence.

I should have remembered this more often, I said to myself, looking down. I should have remembered that it is out here, always, beyond their dirty coast of movies and oil-wells and advertisements and unreal estate. Beyond their swimming-pools and their doll's houses. This would have been a place to come to, in my mind. She couldn't have followed me here.

And now the lights snapped on, making the long tubular upholstered cabin seem falsely snug, as we climbed toward the sierras and the night. Closing my eyes, I could see the crumbling whirl of a snowstorm, feel the air grow deathly cold, hear the sputter of a failing engine, as we buckled our safety-belts and the plane nosed down into white nothingness, tiny and lost. Then, at the very last instant, right ahead, the terrible, declared face of the precipice … Days later, the search-party would reach the wreckage and the scattered bodies. Myself, of course, lying unscarred, relaxed, beautifully dead, faintly sneering. The Picture of the Week in *Life* magazine. Jane would keep a copy of it beside her bed. She would see it in her nightmares and wake screaming. 'It was all my fault. I failed him. I sent him to his death. I shall be punished as long as I live.'

But there was no snowstorm. The engines were running smoothly. The night was going to be clear and full of stars. And there was no Jane. Only the cute little hostess emerging brightly from the Charm Room (as they call it) and smoothing her uniform as she advanced along the gangway. Bending over each chair in turn, smiling her Big Sister smile, she murmured to her charges: 'I bet you're hungry? Sure, of course you are! Well, now I'm going to fix your supper right away.'

This is what you always expected, isn't it, Elizabeth?

(It was very late, now; maybe over Kansas. I was falling slowly asleep, somewhere away high up in the thin cold air. So high, so far. In the nowhere of space and night. I felt almost disembodied.)

Oh sure, you'd have warned me. You were always warning me against something. And you were always right. But why couldn't you ever let me make my own mistakes? Then I wouldn't be so helpless. Then I wouldn't ever have gotten into this mess.

Well, now that it's happened, I hope you're satisfied.

Naturally, you hate Jane. I don't blame you for that. You couldn't help it. She gave me the one thing you never could give me; the thing you talked all around and were so brilliant and wonderful and funny about, and didn't have. I realize now how you must have hated the others, too. Only you were much too clever to show it.

Is that what you want—that I'll be alone, always, from now on? Always looking for someone and always having to admit that there's nobody, anywhere, to take your place? Can you really be so vain and cruel? What do you expect me to do? Go into a monastery? Or spend the rest of my life keeping up your precious cult—editing and annotating and explaining you, until people get sick of the sound of your name?

Yes, I admit it, you invented me. Until you'd told me who I was, I didn't begin to exist. I was the most lifelike of all your characters. People admired me, and that pleased you. But I don't believe you ever cared for me at all.

No, Elizabeth. No, forgive me; I didn't mean that. It wasn't your fault; it was my own selfishness. It was I who used you. I clung to your strength. I insisted on your being perfect, and got scared and angry when you weren't. I never considered how you must be feeling. I never helped you through your bad times. But you didn't complain, not

even at the end. Even then, you were helping me. You were the bravest person I'll ever know.

Now I'm going to need you more than ever. I hope you know how much I need you and love you. Without you, I'm lost. I'm nothing.

Goodnight, Elizabeth. Help me to feel that you're with me. Help me to remember.

On Broad Street Station, Philadelphia, next afternoon, there were a lot of uniforms among the crowd. Here already—faintly still, but unmistakably—you could smell the War. Every man and woman in that crowd could smell it; and you could see how it scared and yet excited them. Through the weeks and the months ahead they would run sniffing alertly after it, muttering: 'How dreadful! How dreadful! We'll be in it soon! We'll be in it soon!' They wouldn't rest, now, until they found it, or it found them.

The War smelled of blood and dirt and sweaty bodies and the fumes of engines and explosives. It was filthy and evil, but at least it had nothing whatsoever to do with feelings about Jane. It would accept everyone, like a brutally dogmatic but completely reassuring religion which imposed terrible penances but guaranteed, at the same time, to take away your guilt; the guilt of having dared to indulge in private misery in an exclusive Beverly Hills home, rented at four hundred dollars a month.

All through this last year, the War had existed merely as a loud, ugly appropriate background music for my expensive private hell. Why shouldn't London blaze, why shouldn't Jews be tortured, why shouldn't all Europe be enslaved, as long as the great tyrant Me was suffering? It had seemed no more than natural.

I suppose that's exactly the way people in madhouses feel. I must have been very near to going insane, I thought. Maybe I *was* insane for a while. But here, amidst the hurrying afternoon crowd, the word was just a word. It

didn’t frighten me. I would be all right, now; I knew it. Even though it was tainted by the war-smell, the outside everyday air was deliciously refreshing. I breathed it in, inhaling deeply, like a convalescent.

And then the local electric train arrived, to carry me out of the city into the smugly pretty, vivid green country of the Main Line. Little towns, golf-courses, gardens, discreet prosperity adequately insured. A landscape without secrets, inhabited by people whose every word, thought and action would bear thorough investigation by the F.B.I. I didn’t exactly remember any of it, but the feeling it gave me was familiar.

I looked my fellow-passengers over, trying to pick out the Quakers amongst them. I thought that I could. Their men are tall, bony, big-shouldered, deliberate and healthily pale. They speak slowly and prudently, selecting their words. They seem quietly harassed. Their women are energetic and bright. They comb their hair back and twist it into a knot. They use no makeup. They wear flat heels, cheap sensible dresses, and, in summer, straw hats which somehow resemble sunbonnets. Everybody knows everybody. Everybody is married.

If War has a smell, the Quakers remind you of a taste; the taste of plain home-made bread. It is always obtainable and ordinarily you take it for granted, crumbling it wastefully in your fingers and eating a little of it between mouthfuls of Lobster Newburg and sips of Liebfraumilch, hardly thinking of what you are doing. But sometimes, after a long illness, when the tired stomach recoils from every kind of sauce, spice or sweetness, you ask for that bread and you munch it humbly and gratefully, admitting sadly to yourself that this is your sane and proper diet, that all those fancy dishes were unwholesome and that you had better eat more wisely in the future. Well, here I was, at the beginning of my convalescence from Jane; and the Quakers and Aunt

Sarah and Dolgelly were going to be my diet, maybe for months to come. So I had better make up my mind to it and swallow it down somehow. It was certainly wholesome. It was so wonderfully horribly drearily wholesome that the mere prospect of it made me want to weep.

Dolgelly Station came sooner than I'd expected. I started out of my thoughts to find that I was staring at its signboard, and I had to hurry to get myself off the train, which only stopped two minutes. The station was just like several of the other stations we had passed, and the drug-store opposite to it was shiny and new. Nothing to recognize there. A taxi was standing at the bottom of the station steps. I asked the driver if he knew Tawelfan. When he said that he did, I felt surprised. It was as if I hadn't quite believed, until this moment, that the place really still existed.

When we turned into Boundary Lane, I did start very dimly remembering. It was a proper lane, like the lanes of southern England, with high-banked hedgerows and overarching trees. The fresh foliage was thick already; and, by full summer, the houses along it would be mostly hidden. Tawelfan, I knew, was at the top of the hill, standing far back from the road at the end of a driveway with a long white gate. Sarah had often told me about that gate, and how I'd loved to ride on it, and how I'd been forbidden to because it was set rather crooked and swung violently open by its own momentum, banging against the gatestone hard enough to throw you if you didn't hang on tight. Finally, it seems that I was thrown off and landed on my head. I didn't remember the accident, but I still carried a faint scar on the right temple, where they had put in the stitches.

However, the gate had gone now, and the driveway was shorter than I'd expected. There was no time to register a clear total impression, a real image I could superimpose on my memories of the yellowed photographs in Sarah's album. But, as far as I could judge, everything seemed to

be more or less in place: the tall maple on the lawn, the dark firwood to the left, the great barn to the right and, in the centre, the whitewashed, lopsided stone house. Tawelfan was actually two houses of different ages and sizes, joined together. The smaller and older building, a severely plain little early-nineteenth-century farmhouse, had a porch and a high brick chimney; the larger and newer was a pretentious copy with slightly bogus additions —shutters that were too fancy, dormer windows that were overly picturesque. As was only natural, there were two front doors.

The newer front door was standing half open, and a little one-eyed dog, a Boston Bull, dashed out barking, as the taxi stopped. He barked around my ankles while I paid the driver, and meanwhile Sarah herself appeared in the doorway; a small compact resolute figure, eager and girlish, despite her white untidy hair. Sarah's hair had always been untidy; and it seemed to me that the only thing about her that had changed was its colour, in all the years I'd known her. Her eyes and spectacles shone with excitement. 'Stephen,' she cried, 'welcome home!'

I bent my knees slightly and she threw her arms around my neck, pressing my face against her soft wrinkled cheek. She smelled very clean. I just stopped myself in the act of patting her bottom—a conditioned reflex.

'Stephen, my dearest boy! How was the journey? Not bad, I hope? I was getting anxious. I expected you hours ago.'

'We had to wait a while in Chicago. There was a storm somewhere around.'

'Well, let me look at you. My, but you're so *thin*! I'm sure that isn't Jane's fault. Too many late nights, I expect? Tell me the truth, now! I've heard all about those Hollywood parties.'

'Why, Aunt Sarah! You've been reading those mean old gossip columnists. They all exaggerate.'

‘And look—you cut yourself! What were you doing? Fixing yourself a midnight snack, I’ll be bound? That’s what comes of letting a man inside the kitchen.’

‘Oh—that?’ I looked down, somewhat disconcerted, at the sticking plaster around my thumb. Sarah had eyes like a hawk. ‘That’s nothing. I scarcely felt it.’

We got ourselves into the house; not without difficulty, for Sarah tried to help me with my bag, and the Boston Bull was jumping and snapping underfoot.

‘Thee doesn’t know thy Uncle Stephen, does thee, Saul?’

‘Hello, Saul.’ I stooped down and held out my hand. But the dog backed away from me, growling. That was a strange thing about Sarah’s pets; they were nearly always ill-natured. She seemed to be drawn instinctively to problem-animals.

‘Saul and I found each other last year, in New York. That was a terribly hot summer, you know, and I working up in Harlem, at the Friends’ Centre. Well, one night I came back to my room—I was so weary that I was walking in my sleep, almost—and he followed me. At first, I tried to shut him out, thinking he must belong to someone in the house. But he stood before my door and barked and barked. And then—well, I’m afraid I said something dreadfully profane—’

‘What was that?’

‘I said: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?” I just cannot imagine what brought the words into my mouth; but that’s how he got his name … Of course, I don’t tell that story to everybody—’

‘I should hope not! They’d put you out of Meeting.’

Sarah giggled: ‘Why, Stephen! You wouldn’t tell on me? I can trust *you*, surely?’

‘I’ll have to think it over. At any rate, I’ve got something on you, now.’

It was like talking a foreign language again after a long time, a language you thought you’d forgotten. The Sarah-Stephen language had its limitations; there were many