


MARK  
HADDON



THE  
RED  
HOUSE



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## About the Book

*Family, that slippery word, a star to every wandering bark, and everyone sailing under a different sky.*

After his mother's death, Richard, a newly remarried hospital consultant, decides to build bridges with his estranged sister, inviting Angela and her family for a week in a rented house on the Welsh border. Four adults and four children, a single family and all of them strangers. Seven days of shared meals, log fires, card games and wet walks.

But in the quiet and stillness of the valley, ghosts begin to rise up. The parents Richard thought he had. The parents Angela thought she had. Past and present lovers. Friends, enemies, victims, saviours. And watching over all of them from high on the dark hill, Karen, Angela's stillborn daughter.

*The Red House* is about the extraordinariness of the ordinary, weaving the words and thoughts of the eight characters together with those fainter, stranger voices – of books and letters and music, of the dead who once inhabited these rooms, of the ageing house itself and the landscape in which it sits.

Once again Mark Haddon, bestselling author of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* and *A Spot of Bother*, has written a novel that is funny, poignant and deeply insightful about human lives.

## About the Author

Mark Haddon is an author, illustrator and screenwriter who has written fifteen books for children and won two BAFTAs. His bestselling novel, *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*, was published simultaneously by Jonathan Cape and David Fickling in 2003. It won seventeen literary prizes, including the Whitbread Award. His poetry collection, *The Talking Horse and the Sad Girl and the Village Under the Sea*, was published by Picador in 2005, and his last novel, *A Spot of Bother*, was published by Jonathan Cape in 2006. He lives in Oxford.

Also by Mark Haddon

Fiction

*A Spot of Bother*

*The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time*

Poetry

*The Talking Horse and the Sad Girl and  
the Village Under the Sea*

To Clare

with thanks to Mary Gawne-Cain

# The Red House

Mark Haddon



JONATHAN CAPE  
LONDON

Friday



COOLING TOWERS AND sewage farms. Finstock, Charlbury, Ascott-under-Wychwood. Seventy miles per hour, the train unzips the fields. Two gun-grey lines beside the river's meander. Flashes of sun on the hammered metal. Something of steam about it, even now. Hogwarts and Adlestrop. The night mail crossing the border. Cheyenne sweeping down from the ridge. Delta blues from the boxcar. Somewhere, those secret points that might just switch and send you curving into a world of uniformed porters and great-aunts and summers at the lake.

Angela leant against the cold window, hypnotised by the power lines as they sagged and were scooped up by the next gantry, over and over and over. Polytunnels like silver mattresses, indecipherable swirls of graffiti on a brick siding. She'd buried her mother six weeks ago. A bearded man in a suit with shiny elbows playing 'Danny Boy' on Northumbrian pipes. Everything out of kilter, the bandage on the vicar's hand, that woman chasing her windblown hat between the headstones, the dog that belonged to no one. She thought her mother had left the world a long way back, the weekly visits mostly for Angela's own benefit. Boiled mutton, Classic FM and a commode in flesh-coloured plastic. Her death should have been a relief. Then the first spade of earth hit the coffin, a bubble rose in her chest and she realised her mother had been ... what? a cornerstone? a breakwater?

\* \* \*

The week after the funeral Dominic had been standing at the sink bottle-brushing the green vase. The last of the

freak snow was still packed down the side of the shed and the rotary washing line was turning in the wind. Angela came in holding the phone as if it was a mystery object she'd found on the hall table. *That was Richard.*

Dominic upended the vase on the wire rack. *And what did he want?*

*He's offered to take us on holiday.*

He dried his hands on the tea towel. *Are we talking about your brother, or some entirely different Richard?*

*We are indeed talking about my brother.*

He really had no idea what to say. Angela and Richard had spent no more than an afternoon in each other's company over the last fifteen years and their meeting at the funeral had seemed perfunctory at best. *Where's the exotic location?*

*He's rented a house on the Welsh border. Near Hay-on-Wye.*

*The fine sandy beaches of Herefordshire.* He halved the tea towel and hung it over the radiator.

*I said yes.*

*Well, thanks for the consultation.*

Angela paused and held his eye. *Richard knows we can't afford a holiday of our own. I'm not looking forward to it any more than you, but I didn't have a great deal of choice.*

He held up his hands. *Point taken.* They'd had this argument way too many times. *Herefordshire it is, then.*

*Ordnance Survey 161. The Black Mountains/Y Mynyddoedd Duon.* Dominic flipped up the pink cover and unfolded the big paper concertina. He had loved maps since he was a boy. Here be monsters. X marks the spot. The edges of the paper browned and scalloped with a burning match, messages flashed from peak to peak using triangles of broken mirror.

He looked sideways at Angela. So hard to remember that girl on the far side of the union bar, her shoulders in

that blue summer dress. She disgusted him now, the size and sag of her, the veins on her calves, almost a grandmother. He dreamt of her dying unexpectedly, rediscovering all those freedoms he'd lost twenty years ago. Then he had the same dream five minutes later and he remembered what poor use he'd made of those freedoms first time round and he heard the squeak of trolley wheels and saw the bags of fluid. All those other lives. You never did get to lead them.

He gazed out of the window and saw a narrowboat on the adjacent canal, some bearded pillock at the tiller, pipe, mug of tea. *Ahoy there, matey*. Stupid way to spend a holiday, banging your head every time you stood up. A week in a boat with Richard. Think of that. They were in the middle of nowhere, thank goodness. If it all got too much he could walk up into the hills and yell at the sky. To be honest, it was Angela he was worried about. All that hard-wired sibling friction. Do not return once lit and so forth.

Richard's hair, yes. Now that he thought about it that was where the evil was located, this luxuriant black crest, like the tusks of a bull walrus, a warning to beta males. Or like a separate creature entirely, some alien life form that had pushed suckers into his skull and was using him as a vehicle.

The children sat opposite. Alex, seventeen, was reading *Main Force* by Andy McNab. Daisy, sixteen, was reading a book called *The Art of Daily Prayer*. Benjy, eight, had swivelled so that his feet were on the headrest and his head was hanging over the edge of the seat, eyes closed. Angela poked his shoulder with the toe of her shoe. *What on earth are you doing?*

*I'm on horseback beheading Nazi zombies.*

They looked like children from three separate families, Alex the athlete, all shoulders and biceps, off into the wide blue yonder every other weekend, canoeing, mountain-

biking, Benjy a kind of boy-liquid which had been poured into whatever space he happened to be occupying, and Daisy ... Angela wondered if something dreadful had happened to her daughter over the past year, something that might explain the arrogant humility, the way she'd made herself so ostentatiously plain.

They plunged into a tunnel and the windows thumped and clattered. She saw an overweight, middle-aged woman floating out there in the dark for several seconds before she vanished in a blast of sunlight and poplars, and she was back in her body again, dress pinching at the waist, beads of sweat in the small of her back, that train smell, burning dust, hot brakes, the dull reek of the toilets.

*Carter placed his boot on the man's shoulder and rolled him over. This couldn't be happening. He'd killed Bunny O'Neil. They'd trained together in the Cairngorms ten years ago. What was an ex-SAS captain doing in the middle of Afghanistan, armed with a black-market Soviet rifle, trying to assassinate a billionaire head of an international construction company?*

Further down the carriage the ticket collector was squatting beside a bird-frail woman with long grey hair and spectacles on a red string. *So you've come on the train with no ticket and no means of payment?* Shaved head, cloudy blue tattoo on his meaty forearm.

Angela wanted to pay for her ticket and save her from this bullying man.

She was trying to pick something invisible from the air with her tiny liver-spotted hands. *I can't ...*

*Is someone meeting you at Hereford?* A tenderness in his voice which she hadn't heard the first time. He touched the woman's arm gently to get her attention. *A son, maybe, or a daughter?*

The woman clawed at the air. *I can't quite ...*

Angela felt a prickle at the corner of her eye and turned away.

Richard had remarried six months ago, acquiring a stepdaughter into the bargain. Angela hadn't gone to the wedding. Edinburgh was a long way, it was term time and they'd never felt like brother and sister, just two people who spoke briefly on the phone every few weeks or so to manage the stages of their mother's decline. She'd met Louisa and Melissa for the first time at the funeral. They looked as if they had been purchased from an exclusive catalogue at some exorbitant price, flawless skin and matching black leather boots. The girl stared at her and didn't look away when Angela caught her eye. Bobbed chestnut hair, black denim skirt almost but not quite too short for a funeral. So much sheen and sneer at sixteen. *Melissa's directing a play at school. A Midsummer Night's Dream.*

Something slightly footballer's wife about Louisa. Angela couldn't picture her going to the theatre or reading a serious book, couldn't imagine the conversations she and Richard might have when they were alone. But his judgement of other people had always been a little wobbly. Ten years married to the Ginger Witch. The presents he bought for the kids when he last visited, so much effort aimed in the wrong direction. Benjy's football annual, Daisy's bracelet. She wondered if he was making a new version of the same mistake, whether she was simply not-Jennifer, and he was another rung on the social ladder.

*I'm going to the loo.* Benjy stood up. *My bladder is so awesomely full.*

*Don't get lost.* She touched his sleeve.

*You can't get lost on a train.*

*A sick pervert could strangle you,* said Alex, *and throw your body out of a window.*

*I'll punch him in the crutch.*

*Crotch*, said Alex.

*Critch, crotch, cratch ...* sang Benjy as he made his way up the carriage.

*Eventually we find that we no longer need silence. We no longer need solitude. We no longer even need words. We can make all our actions holy. We can cook a meal for our family and it becomes prayer. We can go for a walk in the park and it becomes prayer.*

\* \* \*

Alex photographed a herd of cows. What was the point of being black and white, evolutionarily? He hated real violence. He could still hear the snap of Callum's leg that night in Crouch End. He felt sick when he saw footage from Iraq or Afghanistan. He didn't tell anyone about this. But Andy McNab tamed it by turning it into a cartoon. And now he was thinking about Melissa unzipping that black denim skirt. The word *unzipping* gave him an erection which he covered with the novel. But was it OK fancying your uncle's stepdaughter? Some people married their cousins and that was acceptable, unless you both had recessive genes for something bad and your babies came out really fucked up. But girls who went to private school were secretly gagging for it, with their tans and their white knickers that smelt of fabric conditioner. Except she probably wouldn't speak to him, would she, because girls only spoke to twats with floppy hair and skinny jeans. On the other hand, normal service was kind of suspended on holiday and maybe they'd be sharing a bathroom and he'd go in and open the shower cubicle door and squeeze her soapy tits so she moaned.

A man is trapped in a hot flat above the shipyard, caring for a wife who will live out her days in this bed, watching this television. Twin sisters are separated at seven weeks and



know nothing of one another, only an absence that walks beside them always on the road. A girl is raped by her mother's boyfriend. A child dies and doesn't die. *Family*, that slippery word, a star to every wandering bark, and everyone sailing under a different sky.

And then there was her fourth child, the child no one else could see. Karen, her loved and secret ghost, stillborn all those years ago. Holoprosencephaly. Hox genes failing along the midline of the head. Her little monster, features melted into the centre of her face. They'd told her not to look but she'd looked and screamed at them to take the thing away. Then in the small hours, while Dominic slept and the ward was still, she wanted that tiny damaged body in her arms again, because she could learn to love her, she really could, but the points had switched and Karen had swerved away into the parallel world she glimpsed sometimes from cars and trains, the spiderweb sheds and the gypsy camps, the sidings and the breakers' yards, the world she visited in dreams, stumbling through dogshit and nettles, the air treacly with heat, lured by a girl's voice and the flash of a summer dress. And this coming Thursday would be Karen's eighteenth birthday. Which was what she hated about the countryside, no distraction from the dirty messed-up workings of the heart. *You'll love it*, Dominic had said. *Inbred locals surrounding the house at night with pitchforks and flaming brands*. Not understanding, in the way that he failed to understand so many things these days.

Dominic wiped the sandwich crumbs from his lip and looked over at Daisy who smiled briefly before returning to her book. She was so much calmer these days, none of the unpredictable tears which spilt out of her last year, making him feel clumsy and useless. It was bollocks, of course, the Jesus stuff, and some of the church people made his flesh crawl. Bad clothes and false cheer. But he was oddly proud,

the strength of her conviction, the way she swam so doggedly against the current. If only her real friends hadn't drifted away. But Alex wouldn't look up however long you stared. If he was reading he was reading, if he was running he was running. He'd expected more from having a son. That Oedipal rage between two and four. *Stop hugging Mummy*. Then, from seven to ten, a golden time, filling a buried cashbox with baby teeth and Pokémon cards, camping in the New Forest, that night the pony opened the zip of their tent and stole their biscuits. He taught Alex how to play the piano, theme tunes arranged in C Major with a single finger in the left hand. *Star Wars, Raiders of the Lost Ark*. But he grew bored of the piano and gave Benjy the key to the cashbox and went camping with his friends. Devon, the Peak District.

He wondered sometimes if he loved Daisy not because of the strength of her belief but because of her loneliness, the mess she was making of her life, the way it rhymed with his own.

Behind everything there is a house. Behind everything there is always a house, compared to which every other house is larger or colder or more luxurious. Cladding over thirties brick, a broken greenhouse, rhubarb and rusted cans of Castrol for the mower. At the far end you can peel back the corner of the chicken-wire fence and slip down into the cutting where the trains run to Sheffield every half-hour. The tarry sleepers, the locked junction box where they keep the electricity. If you leave pennies on the rail the trains hammer them into long bronze tongues, the queen's face flattened to nothing.

Pan back and you're kneeling at the pond's edge because your brother says there are tadpoles. You reach into the soup of stems and slime, he shoves you and you're still screaming when you hit the surface. Your mouth fills with water. Fear and loneliness will always taste like this.

You run up the garden, sodden, trailing weed, shouting, *Dad ... Dad ... Dad ...* And you can see him standing at the kitchen door, but he starts to evaporate as you reach the cracked patio, thinning in waves like Captain Kirk in the transporter room, that same high buzzing sound, and the door is empty, and the kitchen is empty, and the house is empty and you realise he's never coming back.

*Have you not got anything else to read?* asked Angela.

*Yep,* said Daisy, *but right now this is the book I would like to read if that's all right by you.*

*There's no need to be sarcastic.*

*Ladies ...* said Alex, which would have escalated the row to flashpoint if they hadn't been interrupted by Benjy running down the carriage and pinballing off the seat backs. He'd been standing in the toilet when he remembered the werewolf from the Queen Victoria episode of *Doctor Who*. Eyes like black billiard balls, the heat of its breath on his neck. He squirrelled himself under Dad's arm and rubbed the silky cuff of Dad's special shirt against his upper lip. Dad said, *You all right, Captain?* and he said, *Yeh,* because he was now, so he took out his Natural History Museum notebook and the pen that wrote in eight colours and drew the zombies.

When he re-entered the world they were changing trains at high speed, sprinting to another platform to catch a connecting train which left in two minutes. Halfway across the footbridge he remembered that he'd forgotten to pick up the metal thing. *What metal thing?* said Mum. *The metal thing,* he said, because he hadn't given it a name. It was a hinge from a briefcase and later on Mum would call it a *piece of rubbish* but he loved the strength of the spring and the smell it left on his fingers.

Dad said, *I'll get it* because when he was a child he kept a horse's tooth in a Golden Virginia tobacco tin, and Mum said, *For Christ's sake.* But Dad came back carrying the

metal thing with seconds to spare and gave it to Benjy and said, *Guard it with your life*. And as they were pulling out of the station Benjy saw an old lady with long grey hair being arrested by two policemen in fluorescent yellow jackets. One of the policemen had a gun. Then there was another train travelling beside them at almost exactly the same speed and Benjy remembered the story about Albert Einstein doing a thought experiment, sitting on a tram in Vienna going at the speed of light and shining a torch straight ahead so the light just sat there like candyfloss.

You hate Richard because he swans around his spacious Georgian apartment on Moray Place four hundred miles away while you perch on that scuffed olive chair listening to Mum roar in the cage of her broken mind. *The nurses burn my hands. There was an air raid last night*. You hate him because he pays for all of it, the long lawn, the low-rent cabaret on Friday nights, *Magic Memories: The Stars of Yesteryear*. You hate him for marrying that woman who expected your children to eat lamb curry and forced you to stay in a hotel. You hate him for replacing her so efficiently, as if an event which destroyed other people's lives were merely one more medical procedure, the tumour sliced out, wound stitched and swabbed. You hate him because he is the prodigal son. *When will Richard come to see me? Do you know Richard? He's such a lovely boy*.

In spite of which, deep down, you like being the good child, the one who cares. Deep down you are still waiting for a definitive judgement in which you are finally raised above your relentlessly achieving brother, though the only person who could make that kind of judgement was drifting in and out of their final sleep, the mask misting and clearing, the low hiss of the cylinder under the bed. And then they were gone.

M6 southbound, the sprawl of Birmingham finally behind them. Richard dropped a gear and eased the Mercedes round a Belgian chemical tanker. *Frankley Services 2 miles*. He imagined pulling over in the corner of the car park to watch Louisa sleeping, that spill of butter-coloured hair, the pink of her ear, the mystery of it, why a man was aroused by the sight of one woman and not another, something deep in the midbrain like a sweet tooth or a fear of snakes. He looked in the rear-view mirror. Melissa was listening to her iPod. She gave him a deadpan comedy wave. He slid the Eliot Gardiner *Dido and Aeneas* into the CD player and turned up the volume.

Melissa stared out of the window and pictured herself in a film. She was walking across a cobbled square. Pigeons, cathedral. She was wearing the red leather jacket Dad had bought her in Madrid. Fifteen years old. She walked into that room, heads turned and suddenly she understood.

But they'd want her to be friends with the girl, wouldn't they, just because they were the same age. Like Mum wanted to be friends with some woman on the till in Tesco's because they were both forty-four. The girl could have made herself look all right but she hadn't got a clue. Maybe she was a lesbian. Seven days in the countryside with someone else's relatives. *It's a big thing for Richard*. Because keeping Richard happy was obviously their Function in Life. Right.

*Shake the cloud from off your brow,  
Fate your wishes does allow;  
Empires growing,  
Pleasures flowing,  
Fortune smiles and so should you.*

Some idiot came past on a motorbike at Mach 4. Richard pictured a slick of spilt oil, sparks fantailing from the

sliding tank, massive head trauma and the parents agreeing to the transplant of all the major organs so that some good might come of a short life so cheaply spent, though Sod's Law would doubtless apply and some poor bastard would spend the next thirty years emptying his catheter bag and wiping scrambled egg off his chin.

*Dido and Aeneas*. Groper Roper made them listen to it at school. *Pearls before swine*. Probably in prison by now. *Don't let him get you in the instrument cupboard*. It was a joke back then. *Interfering with children*. Looking back, though, it's Roper who feels like the victim, the taunts, those damp eyes, the kind of man who hanged himself in isolated woodland.

Louisa was slowly coming round. Classical music and the smell of the cardboard fir tree on the rear-view mirror. She was in the car with Richard, wasn't she. So often these days she seemed to hover between worlds, none of them wholly real. Her brothers, Carl and Dougie, worked in a car factory and lived six doors away from each other on the Blackthorn Estate. Not quite cars on bricks and fridges in the grass, not in their own gardens at least. When she visited they faked a pride in the sister who had bettered herself but what they really felt was disdain, and while she tried to return it she could feel the pull of a world in which you didn't have to think constantly of how others saw you. Craig had revelled in it. The two worlds thing, Jaguar outside the chip shop, donkey jacket at parents' evening.

Wales. She'd forgotten. God. She'd only met Richard's family once. *They liked you and you liked them*. Had they? Had she? She'd trumped them by wearing too much black. Benjamin, the little boy, was wearing a *Simpsons* t-shirt of all things. She overheard him asking his father what would happen to his grandmother's body *in the coming months*. And the way the girl sang the hymns. As if there might be something wrong with her.



Richard had been seated next to Louisa at Tony Caborn's wedding, on what she correctly referred to as *the divorcees' table* in the corner of the marquee, presumably to quarantine the bad voodoo. Someone's discarded trophy wife, he thought. He introduced himself and she said, *Don't chat me up, OK?* She was visibly drunk. *I seem to be giving off some kind of vibes today.* He explained that he had no plans in that particular direction and she laughed, quite clearly at him rather than with him.

He turned and listened to a portly GP bemoaning the number of heroin users his practice was obliged to deal with, but his attention kept slipping to the conversation happening over his shoulder. Celebrity gossip and the shortcomings of Louisa's ex-husband, the wealthy builder. She was clearly not his kind of person, but the GP was his kind of person and was boring him to death. Later on he watched her stand and cross the dance floor, big hips but firm, something Nordic about her, comfortable in her body in a way that Jennifer had never been. *No plans in that particular direction.* He'd been a pompous arse. When she sat down he apologised for his earlier rudeness and she said, *Tell me about yourself,* and he realised how long it had been since someone had said this.

Mum was smiling at Richard and doing the flirty thing where she hooked her hair behind her ear. It made Melissa think of them having sex, which disgusted her. They were in a traffic jam and Mika was singing 'Grace Kelly'. She took out a black biro and doodled a horse on the flyleaf of the Ian McEwan. How bizarre that your hand was part of your body, like one of those mechanical grabbers that picked up furry toys in a glass case at a fair. You could imagine it having a mind of its own and strangling you at night.

*Mine with storms of care opprest*

*Is taught to pity the distress.  
Mean wretches' grief can touch,  
So soft, so sensible my breast,  
But ah! I fear, I pity his too much.*

He was thinking about that girl who'd turned up in casualty last week. Nikki Fallon? Hallam? Nine years old, jewel-green eyes and greasy blonde hair. He knew even before he'd done the X-rays. Something too malleable about her, too flat, one of those kids who had never been given the opportunity to disagree and had given up trying. Six old fractures and no hospital record. He went to tell the stepfather they'd be keeping her in. The man was slumped in one of the plastic chairs looking bored mostly, tracksuit trousers and a dirty black t-shirt with the word BENCH on it. The man who'd abused her, or let others abuse her. He stank of cigarettes and aftershave. Richard wanted to knock him down and punch him and keep on punching him. *We need to talk.*

*Yeh?*

Richard's anger draining away. Because he was hardly more than a teenager. Too stupid to know he'd end up in prison. Sugar and boiling water thrown in his face on kitchen duty. *If you could come with me, please.*

Melissa rolled up the sleeves of Dad's lumberjack shirt. Still, after all this time, the faintest smell of him. Plaster dust and Hugo Boss. He was an asshole, but, God, she looked at Richard sometimes, the racing bike, the way he did the crossword in pencil first. There were evenings when she wanted Dad to ride in off the plains, all dust and sweat and tumbleweed, kick open the saloon doors and stick some bullet holes in those fucking art books.

*Land of hope and glory, sang Mika. Mother of the free ride, I'm leaving Kansas, baby. God save the queen.*

Hereford, home of the SAS. Richard could imagine doing that, given a Just War. Not the killing so much as the derring-do, like building dams when he was a boy, though it might be thrilling to kill another man if one were absolved in advance. Because people thought you wanted to help others whereas most of his colleagues loved the risk. That glint in Steven's eye when he moved to paediatrics. *They die quicker.*

Louisa had squeezed his hand at the graveside. Drizzle and a police helicopter overhead. That ownerless dog standing between the trees like some presiding spirit, his father's ghost, perhaps. He looked around the grave. These people. Louisa, Melissa, Angela and Dominic and their children, this was his family now. They had spent twenty years avoiding one another and he couldn't remember why.

Melissa pressed *pause* and gazed out of the window. Bright sun was falling on the road but there was rain far off, like someone had tried to rub out the horizon. That underwater glow. There'd be Scrabble, wouldn't there, a tatty box in some drawer, a pack of fifty-one playing cards, a pamphlet from a goat farm.

Real countryside now, the land buckled and rucked. *A sense sublime of something far more deeply interfused.* Blustery wind, trees dancing, flurries of orange leaves, a black plastic sack flapping on a gate. The road a series of bends and switchbacks. Richard driving too fast. Low pearly cloud. Turnastone. Upper Maescoed. Llanveynoe. They broached the top of a hill and the view was suddenly enormous. *Offa's Dyke*, said Richard. A dark ridge halfway up the sky. They made their way into the valley on a single-track road sunk between grassy banks like a bobsleigh run. Richard still driving too fast and Mum gripping the edge of the seat but not saying anything and ... *Shit!* yelled Louisa, and *Fuck!* yelled Melissa, and the Mercedes skidded to a

crunchy halt, but it was just a flock of sheep and an old man in a dirty jumper waving a stick.

Two gliders ride the freezing grey air that pours over the ridge, so low you could lean a ladder against the fuselage and climb up to talk to the pilot. Spits of horizontal rain, Hay Bluff, Lord Hereford's Knob. Heather and purple moor-grass and little craters of rippling peaty water. By the trig point a red kite weaves through the holes in the wind then glides into the valley, eyes scanning the ground for rats and rabbits.

This was shallow coastal waters once, before the great plates crushed and raised it. Limestone and millstone grit. The valleys gouged out by glaciers with their cargo of rubble. Upper Blaen, Firs Farm, Olchon Court. Roads and footpaths following the same routes they did in the Middle Ages. Everyone walking in the steps of those who walked before them. The Red House, a Romano-British farmstead abandoned, ruined, plundered for stone, built over, burnt and rebuilt. Tenant farmers, underlings of Marcher lords, a pregnant daughter hidden in the hills, a man who put a musket in his mouth in front of his wife and sprayed half his head across the kitchen wall, a drunken priest who lost the house in a bet over a horse race, or so they said, though *they* are long gone. Two brass spoons under the floorboards. A twenty-thousand-mark Reichsbanknote. Letters from Florence cross-written to save paper, now brown and frail and crumpled to pack a wall. *Brother, my Lungs are not Goode*. The sons of the family cut down at Flers-Courcelette and Morval. Two ageing sisters hanging on through the Second World War, one succumbing to cancer of the liver, the other shipped off to a nursing home in Builth Wells. Cream paint and stripped pine. The fire blanket in its red holster. *The Shentons - 22nd to 29th March - We saw a deer in the garden ...* Framed watercolours of mallow and campion. Biodegradable

washing-up liquid. A random selection of elderly, second-hand hardbacks. A pamphlet from a goat farm.

Dominic had asked for a people carrier but a Viking with an earring and a scar appeared in a metallic green Vauxhall Insignia. They had bags on their laps and the windows were steamed up and spattery with rain. Benjy was squashed between Mum and Daisy which he enjoyed because it made him feel safe and warm. He had been lonely at home because he wasn't allowed to play with Pavel for a week after the fight and getting blood all over Pavel's trousers, but he enjoyed being on holiday, not least because you were allowed pudding every night. He had never spoken to Uncle Richard but he knew that he was a radiologist who put tubes into people's groins and pushed them up into their brains to clear blockages like chimney sweeps did and this was a glorious idea. An articulated lorry came past riding a wave of spray and for a few seconds the car seemed to be underwater, so he imagined being in the shark submarine from *Red Rackham's Treasure*.

Alex totted up how much the holiday was going to cost him. Two missed shifts at the video shop, two dog walks. A hundred and twenty-three quid down. But the hills would be good. Lots of kids thought he was boring. He couldn't give a fuck. If you didn't earn money you were screwed. He'd get through college without a loan at this rate. He rubbed his forehead. Tightness behind his left eye and that sour taste in the back of his throat. Fifteen minutes and the pain would arrive, flurries of lime-green snow sweeping across his field of vision. He opened the window a crack and breathed in the cold air. He needed darkness. He needed quiet.

*Oi*, said Dad, but when he turned he saw the expression on Alex's face. *Do we need to pull over?*

Alex shook his head.

*Ten minutes, OK?*

They turned off the main road and suddenly they were out of the rain, the world cleaned and glittering. They roller-coastered over a little summit and Offa's Dyke hove into view, a gash of gold along the ridge, as if the sky had been ripped open and the light from beyond was pouring through.

*Holy shit, Batman,* said Benjy, and no one told him off.

Beeswax and fresh linen. Louisa stood in the centre of the bedroom. A hum from deep underground, just on the limit of hearing, a chill in the air. Hairs stood up on the back of her neck. Someone had suffered in this room. She'd felt it since childhood, in this house, in that corridor. Then Craig bought Danes Barn and she couldn't bear to be in there for more than five minutes. He told her she was being ridiculous. A week later she heard about the little boy who'd hidden in the chest freezer.

Melissa walked down the cold tiles of the hall and into the bright rectangle of the day. She took her earphones out. That silence, like a noise all by itself, with all these other noises inside it, grass rubbing together, a dog yapping far off. She dried the rain from the bench with a tea towel and sat down with *Enduring Love*, but she couldn't hang on to the words because she'd never spent more than five consecutive days in the countryside before. Kellmore in Year 11. Ziplines and Bacardi Breezers. Kasha's epileptic fit in the showers. There really was absolutely nothing to do here. She had two joints at the bottom of her bag but she'd have to smoke them up there with the sheep. Richard stoned. Jesus. Imagine that. *Goodness, I don't think I've realised how amazing this Mozart Piano Concerto is. We haven't got any more biscuits, have we?* But it was beautiful, when you thought about it, this huge green bowl, clouds changing shape as they moved, the smell of



woodsmoke. A banana-yellow caterpillar reared up like a tiny question mark on the arm of the bench. She was about to flick it away when she imagined it having a name in a children's book, but suddenly there was a green taxi bumping through the gate and Alex and his little brother spilt from the door like clowns from a circus car.

*... stunning views of the Olchon Valley ... Grade 2 listed ... sympathetically restored ... a second bathroom added ... large private garden ... shrubbery, mature trees ... drowning hazard ... mixer taps ... a tumble dryer ... no TV reception ... £1,200 per week ... all reasonable breakages ... American Express ... the septic tank ...*

Dominic helped the driver unload while Benjy retrieved the briefcase hinge from a crumb-filled recess. Richard hugged Angela with one arm, his mug of tea at arm's length. Post-rain sparkle and the dog still yapping far off. Daisy shook Richard's hand and unnerved him slightly by saying, *It's good to see you again*, as if she was a colleague, so he turned to Benjamin. *And how are you doing, young man?*

Melissa held Alex's eye for two seconds and he forgot briefly about the nausea. *Unzipping*. Maybe normal service really was being suspended. But Melissa saw how much he wanted her and how naïve he was and the week seemed no longer empty. She walked slowly towards the front door, his gaze like sun on her back. *Bitch*, thought Angela, but Alex could see the first flurries of green snow and had to get to the bathroom. She had that glossy, thoroughbred look, thought Daisy. Hair you shook in slow motion. Leader of some icy little coven at school. But being fashionable and popular were shallow things which passed away. Daisy had to remember that. Shallow people were people nevertheless, and equally deserving of love.

The Vauxhall Insignia did a four-point turn and drove off scraping its manifold on the ruts and there was silence in