ruth

rendell

A SIGHT FOR SORE EYES

'A top-notch thriller that will, I promise, have you nibbling your nails'
Daily Mail

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About the Book

In traditional fairytales the handsome prince rescues the beautiful princess from her wicked stepmother, and the couple live happily ever after. But in Ruth Rendell's dark and damaged contemporary universe, innocent dreams can turn into the most terrible nightmares. Teddy Brex emerges from a loveless, isolated childhood as a handsome but autistic young man. Francine Hill, traumatised by the murder of her mother, grows into a beautiful young woman, who must endure the over-protectiveness of an increasingly obsessive stepmother. Teddy Brex does ride to her rescue, but he is a man who has already committed two murders.

About the Author

Ruth Rendell was an exceptional crime writer, and will be remembered as a legend in her own lifetime. Her ground-breaking debut novel, *From Doon With Death*, was first published in 1964 and introduced readers to her enduring and popular detective, Inspector Reginald Wexford.

With worldwide sales of approximately 20 million copies, Rendell was a regular *Sunday Times* bestseller. Her sixty bestselling novels include police procedurals, some of which have been successfully adapted for TV, stand-alone psychological mysteries, and a third strand of crime novels under the pseudonym Barbara Vine.

Rendell won numerous awards, including the *Sunday Times* Literary Award in 1990. In 2013 she was awarded the Crime Writers’ Association Cartier Diamond Dagger for sustained excellence in crime writing. In 1996 she was awarded the CBE, and in 1997 became a Life Peer.

Ruth Rendell died in May 2015.

ALSO BY RUTH RENDELL

OMNIBUSES:

COLLECTED SHORT STORIES
COLLECTED STORIES 2
WEXFORD: AN OMNIBUS
THE SECOND WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE THIRD WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FOURTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THE FIFTH WEXFORD OMNIBUS
THREE CASES FOR CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD
THE RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE SECOND RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS
THE THIRD RUTH RENDELL OMNIBUS

CHIEF INSPECTOR WEXFORD NOVELS:

FROM DOON WITH DEATH
A NEW LEASE OF DEATH
WOLF TO THE SLAUGHTER
THE BEST MAN TO DIE
A GUILTY THING SURPRISED
NO MORE DYING THEN
MURDER BEING ONCE DONE
SOME LIE AND SOME DIE
SHAKE HANDS FOR EVER
A SLEEPING LIFE
PUT ON BY CUNNING
THE SPEAKER OF MANDARIN
AN UNKINDNESS OF RAVENS
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SIMISOLA
ROAD RAGE
HARM DONE

THE BABES IN THE WOOD
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SHORT STORIES:

THE FALLEN CURTAIN
MEANS OF EVIL
THE FEVER TREE
THE NEW GIRL FRIEND
THE COPPER PEACOCK
BLOOD LINES
PIRANHA TO SCURFY

NOVELLAS:

HEARTSTONES
THE THIEF

NON-FICTION:

RUTH RENDELL'S SUFFOLK
RUTH RENDELL'S ANTHOLOGY OF THE MURDEROUS MIND

NOVELS:

TO FEAR A PAINTED DEVIL
VANITY DIES HARD
THE SECRET HOUSE OF DEATH
ONE ACROSS, TWO DOWN
THE FACE OF TRESPASS
A DEMON IN MY VIEW
A JUDGEMENT IN STONE
MAKE DEATH LOVE ME
THE LAKE OF DARKNESS
MASTER OF THE MOOR
THE KILLING DOLL

THE TREE OF HANDS
LIVE FLESH
TALKING TO STRANGE MEN
THE BRIDESMAID
GOING WRONG
THE CROCODILE BIRD
THE KEYS TO THE STREET
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ADAM AND EVE AND PINCH ME
THE ROTTWEILER
THIRTEEN STEPS DOWN
THE WATER'S LOVELY
PORTOBELLO
TIGERLILY'S ORCHIDS

A Sight for Sore Eyes

Ruth Rendell

arrow books

For Don again

Chapter 1

THEY WERE TO hold hands and look at one another. Deeply, into each other's eyes.

'It's not a sitting,' she said, 'it's a standing. Why can't I sit on his knee?'

He laughed. Everything she said amused or delighted him, everything about her captivated him from her dark-red curly hair to her small white feet. The painter's instructions were that he should look at her as if in love and she at him as if enthralled. This was easy, this was to act naturally.

'Don't be silly, Harriet,' said Simon Alpheton. 'The very idea! Have you ever seen a painting by Rembrandt called *The Jewish Bride*?'

They hadn't. Simon described it to them as he began his preliminary sketch. 'It's a very tender painting, it expresses the protective love of the man for his young submissive bride. They're obviously wealthy, they're very richly dressed, but you can see that they're sensitive, thoughtful people and they're in love.'

'Like us. Rich and in love. Do we look like them?'

'Not in the least, and I don't think you'd want to. Ideas of beauty have changed.'

'You could call it "The Red-haired Bride".'

'She's not your bride. I am going to call it "Marc and Harriet in Orcadia Place" – what else? Now would you just stop talking for a bit, Marc?'

The house they stood in front of was described by those who knew about such things as a Georgian cottage and built of the kind of red bricks usually called mellow. But at this time of the year, midsummer, almost all the brickwork was

hidden under a dense drapery of Virginia creeper, its leaves green, glossy and quivering in the light breeze. The whole surface of the house seemed to shiver and rustle, a vertical sea of green ruffled into wavelets by the wind.

Simon Alpheton was fond of walls, brick walls, flint walls, walls of wood and walls of stone. When he painted Come Hither outside the studio in Hanging Sword Alley he placed them against a concrete wall stuck all over with posters. As soon as he saw that Marc's house had a wall of living leaves he wanted also to paint that, with Marc and Harriet too, of course. The wall was a shining cascade in many shades of green, Marc was in a dark-blue suit, thin black tie and white shirt, and Harriet was all in red.

When the autumn came those leaves would turn the same colour as her hair and her dress. Then they would gradually bleach to gold, to pale-yellow, fall and make a nuisance of themselves, filling the whole of that hedge-enclosed paved square and the entire backyard to a depth of several inches. The brickwork of the house would once more be revealed and the occasional, probably fake, bit of half-timbering. And in the spring of 1966 pale-green shoots would appear and the leafy cycle begin all over again. Simon thought about that as he drew leaves and hair, and pleated silk.

'Don't do that,' he said, as Marc reached forward to kiss Harriet, at the same time keeping hold of her hand and drawing her towards him. 'Leave her alone for five minutes, can't you?'

'It's hard, man, it's hard.'

'Tenderness is what I want to catch, not lust. Right?'

'My foot's gone to sleep,' said Harriet. 'Can we take a break, Simon?'

'Another five minutes. Don't think about your foot. Look at him and think about how much you love him.'

She looked up at him and he looked down at her. He held her left hand in his right hand and their eyes met in a long gaze, and Simon Alpheton painted them, preserving them in

the front garden of Orcadia Cottage, if not for ever, for a very long time.

‘Maybe I’ll buy it,’ Harriet said later, looking with approval at the outline of her face and figure.

‘What with?’ Marc kissed her. His voice was gentle but his words were not. ‘You haven’t any money.’

When Simon Alpheton looked back to that day he thought that this was the beginning of the end, the worm in the bud showing its ugly face and writhing body among the flowers.

Chapter 2

ONE COLD SATURDAY, Jimmy Grex and Eileen Tawton went on a coach trip to Broadstairs. The year was 1966 and it was summer. It was the first time they had ever been on such an outing together. Their usual activities – Eileen called it 'courting' and Jimmy had no name for it – consisted of visits to the White Rose and Lion, and Jimmy occasionally coming round to Eileen's mother's for tea. But the pub came under new management, events were organised for regulars at the weekends and one of these was the Broadstairs trip.

It rained. A sharp north wind roared all the way down the coasts of Suffolk, Essex and Kent before blowing itself out somewhere in the Channel Islands. Jimmy and Eileen sat under a shelter on the front and ate the sandwich lunch they had brought with them. They bought seaside rock and looked through a telescope in a vain effort to see the coast of France. At teatime they resolved on a proper meal and went into Popplewell's restaurant on the seafront.

It was unlicensed, like most restaurants and cafés at that time, and Jimmy was dying for a drink. He had to be content with tea because the pubs didn't open till five-thirty. Even when they had finished their eggs, chips, peas and mushrooms, their apple pie and custard and slices of Dundee cake, they still had half an hour to kill. Jimmy ordered another pot of tea and Eileen went to the Ladies.

This was a tiny, windowless and – as was usual at the time, filthy – concrete-floored cupboard from which a single cubicle opened. A washbasin hung perilously from one wall, but there was no soap, towel, paper towel or, naturally, hand drier. One of the taps dripped. A woman came out of

the cubicle and Eileen went in. From in there she heard the tap running and then she heard the outer door close.

Eileen had no intention of washing her hands. She had washed them before she left home that morning and, besides, there were no towels. But she glanced at her face in the bit of chipped mirror, pushed at her hair a little, pursed her lips, and in doing these things could hardly fail to take the shelf below the mirror into her vision. In the middle of it was a diamond ring.

The woman who had been here before her must have taken it off to wash her hands and forgotten it. It just went to show what too much washing led to. Eileen hadn't noticed anything about the woman except that she was middle-aged and in a raincoat. She looked at the ring. She picked it up.

Even to the totally ignorant, to those with no knowledge or appreciation of good jewellery, a fine diamond ring is apparent for what it is. This one was a solitaire with a sapphire in each shoulder. Eileen slipped it on to her right hand, where it fitted as if made for her.

Walking out of there with the ring on her finger wouldn't be a good idea. She put it in her bag. Jimmy was waiting for her, smoking his thirtieth cigarette of the day. He gave her one and they walked along to the Anchor, where he had a pint of bitter and she a half of cider. After a while she opened her bag and showed him the diamond ring.

It occurred to neither of them to take the ring back to the restaurant and hand it to the management or to go to the police. Finding's keeping's. But other ideas were in both their minds. Or, rather, the same idea. Eileen put the ring on again, but this time on to the third finger of her left hand and she held her hand up, showing it to Jimmy. Why should she ever take it off again? This she didn't say aloud, though her thought somehow communicated itself to him.

He bought a second pint of bitter and a packet of crisps and, returning to the table, said, 'May as well keep it on.'

‘Shall I?’ Her voice was unsteady. She felt the seriousness of the occasion. It was an awesome moment.

‘May as well get engaged,’ said Jimmy.

Eileen nodded. She didn’t smile. Her heart was thudding. ‘If that’s all right.’

‘I’ve been thinking about it for a bit,’ said Jimmy. ‘Been thinking of getting you a ring. I didn’t reckon on this one turning up. I’m going to have another drink. You want another cider?’

‘Why not?’ said Eileen. ‘Celebrate – why not? And give me another ciggie, will you?’

In fact, Jimmy hadn’t thought of an engagement until this moment. He had no intention of getting married. Why should he marry? His mother was there to look after him and his brother, and she was only fifty-eight, there were years of life in her yet. But the discovery of the ring was too good an opportunity to miss. Suppose he’d done nothing and just let Eileen hang on to the ring, and then one day he did decide to get engaged, he’d have to buy her a ring, a new one. Besides, being engaged was just being engaged, it could go on for years, it didn’t mean you had to get married tomorrow.

Eileen wasn’t in love with Jimmy. If she had thought about it she would probably have said she liked him all right. She liked him better than any other man she knew, but she didn’t really know any others. No men ever came into the woolshop where she was assistant to Miss Harvey, the owner, and where she sold double-knit and baby-soft two-ply to an elderly female clientele. She met Jimmy when he and his boss came to paint Miss Harvey’s flat upstairs and put in a new sink unit. That had been five years before.

Though she was right-handed, Eileen served customers with her left hand for the next few weeks and held that hand up to her chin a lot and flashed the diamond about to catch the light. It was greatly admired. She and Jimmy went on

going to the pub and he continued to come to tea with Mrs Tawton. Eileen had her thirty-fifth birthday. They went on several more outings under the auspices of the White Rose and Lion, either alone or with Mrs Tawton and her friend Gladys.

Sometimes Eileen mentioned marriage, but Jimmy always said 'We only just got engaged' or 'Time enough to think of that in a year or two'. And they'd never be able to afford a place to live. She wasn't moving in with her mother or his. Their relationship was not a sexual one. Although he sometimes kissed her, Jimmy had never suggested anything more and Eileen told herself she wouldn't have agreed if he had, she respected him for not asking. Time enough to think of that in a year or two.

Then Jimmy's mother died. She fell down dead in the street, a laden shopping bag in each hand. Loaves of bread, half-pound packs of butter, packets of biscuits, hunks of Cheddar, oranges, bananas, bacon, two chickens, tins of beans and tins of spaghetti in tomato sauce rolled across the pavement or dropped into the gutter. Betty Grex had suffered a massive stroke.

Her two sons had lived in the house since they were born and neither considered moving out. Now there was no one to look after them, Jimmy decided he had better get married. After all, he had been engaged for five years. The ring, which Eileen wore day in and day out, was there to remind him. She wouldn't be lucky enough to find a *wedding* ring on a shelf in a Ladies but, fortunately, he had the one that came off his dead mother's finger. They married at the Registrar's Office in Burnt Oak.

The Grex home was a small semi-detached house, two up and two down with small bathroom and kitchen, its outside stucco-coated and painted yellow ochre, among rows of such houses near the North Circular Road at Neasden. Because it was on a corner, access to the garden was possible from the street and here, filling most of the small

area, Keith Grex kept his car. Or, rather, his series of cars, the current one at the time of his brother's marriage being a Studebaker, red and silver with fins.

Keith was younger than Jimmy and unmarried. Uninterested in women or sex of any kind, a non-reader, no sportsman, he was largely indifferent to everything except drink and cars. Not so much in driving them as in tinkering. Taking them apart and putting them together again. Cleaning and polishing them, admiring them. Before the Studebaker he had had a Pontiac and before that a Dodge.

For use, for going to work, he had a motor bike. When his car was in perfect condition and looking at its best, he would take it out and drive it up the North Circular Road to Brent Cross, up the Hendon Way, down Station Road and back along the Broadway. And when the Studebaker Owners' Club held a rally he and the car always attended. An outing for the car meant taking the engine apart and reassembling it. In the building trade like his brother, he had long ago laid a concrete pad all over the back garden for the car and the motor bike to stand on, leaving only a very small green rectangle, a 'lawn' of grass, dandelions and thistles.

In their mother's lifetime, and earlier in their father's, the brothers Grex had shared a bedroom. There, in the evenings, while Keith worked on his car, Jimmy had attended to his own sexual needs with the assistance of *Penthouse* magazine. Now he was moving out and into what had been Betty Grex's room, another transition must be made. Jimmy, who didn't think much, supposed it could be done with ease. As it happened, it took about a year and was never as satisfactory for Jimmy as his fantasy liaisons with those centre-folds had been. As for Eileen, she accepted. It was all right. It didn't hurt. You didn't get cold or made to feel sick. It was what you did when you were married. Like vacuum cleaning and shopping and cooking and locking the back door at night.

And, of course, having a baby.

Eileen was forty-two. Because of her age she had no idea she could be pregnant. Like many a woman before her, she thought it was the Change. Besides, she didn't know much about sex and still less about reproduction, and she had curious notions picked up from her mother and her aunts. One of these was that in order to be productive ejaculation had to be frequent, lavish and cumulative. In other words, a lot of that stuff had to get inside you before anything resulted. It was rather like the Grecian 2000 lotion Keith put on his greying hair, which only took effect after repeated applications.

In her marriage, applications had been infrequent and were growing rarer. So she didn't believe she was pregnant even when she put on a lot of weight and grew a big stomach. Jimmy, of course, noticed nothing. It was Mrs Chance next door who asked her when she was expecting. Eileen's mother knew at once – she hadn't seen her for two months – and expressed the opinion that the baby would have 'something wrong with it' on account of her daughter's age. Nobody talked about Down's Syndrome then and Agnes Tawton said the child would be a Mongol.

Eileen never went near a doctor, none of them did, and she wasn't going to start now. A common feeling with her was that if you ignored something it would go away, so she ignored her expanding shape while giving in to her food cravings. She developed a passion for doughnuts and for croissants which were just beginning to appear in the shops, and she smoked ferociously, forty or fifty a day.

This was the early seventies when the phrase 'getting in touch with one's body' was current. Eileen wasn't in touch with her body at all, she never looked at it or in the mirror at it and most of its sensations, with the exception of actual pain, she disregarded. But these pains were another thing altogether, Eileen had never known anything like them, they

went on and on and got worse and worse, and she couldn’t be out of touch with her body any more. Of course, the Grex family had no phone, it wouldn’t have occurred to them to have one, so, in the extremity of Eileen’s travail, Keith was despatched to the doctor’s to get help. He went in the Studebaker which happened to be due for its fortnightly outing.

There was no question of Jimmy going. He said it was all a storm in a teacup. Besides, he had just bought a television set, their first colour one, and he was watching Wimbledon. A doctor came, very angry, almost disbelieving, and found Eileen lying among her broken waters, chain-smoking. A midwife came. The Grex family, all of them, were furiously castigated and the midwife turned off the television herself.

The baby, a nine-pound-nine-ounce boy, was born at ten p.m. Contrary to Mrs Tawton’s predictions there was nothing wrong with him. Or nothing in the sense she meant. The kind of things that were wrong with him were unresponsive to any tests then and, largely, still are. In any case, it depends on whether you belong in the nature camp or to the nurture school. In the seventies everyone who knew anything at all believed a person’s character and temperament derived solely from his early environment and conditioning. Freud ruled OK.

He was a beautiful baby. During his gestation his mother had lived on croissants with butter, whipped-cream doughnuts, salami, streaky bacon, fried eggs, chocolate bars, sausages and chips with everything. She had smoked about ten thousand eight hundred cigarettes and drunk many gallons of Guinness, cider, Babycham and sweet sherry. But he was a beautiful child with smooth, peachy skin, dark-brown silky hair, the features of a baby angel in an Old Master, and perfect fingers and toes.

‘What are you going to call him?’ said Mrs Tawton after several days.

‘He’ll have to be called something, won’t he?’ said Eileen, as if naming the child was expedient, but by no means obligatory.

Neither she nor Jimmy knew any names. Well, they knew their own and Keith’s and Mr Chance’s next door, he was called Alfred, and their dead fathers’ names, but they didn’t like any of those. Keith suggested Roger because that was the name of his pal he went drinking with, but Eileen didn’t like this Roger, so that was out. Then another neighbour came round with a present for the baby. It was a small white teddy bear with bells on its feet attached to a ribbon you hung inside the roof of the pram.

Both Agnes Tawton and Eileen were quite moved by this gift, said ‘Aaah!’ and pronounced it sweet.

‘Teddy,’ said Eileen fondly.

‘There you are, there’s your name,’ said Keith. ‘Teddy. Edward for short.’ And he laughed at his own joke because no one else did.

Chapter 3

NO ONE EVER took much notice of him. But none of them took much notice of each other. Each seemed to live in a kind of non-clinical autism, doing their own thing, wrapped up in themselves. With Keith it was his cars, with Jimmy the television. Having sold the stuff for years, Eileen developed an obsession with wool and other yarns, and finding knitting unsatisfactory, took up crochet in a big way. She crocheted for hours on end, turning out quilts and mats and tablecloths and garments.

Teddy slept in his parents' room until he was four. Then he was moved in with his uncle on to a camp-bed. When he was little he was left for hours in a play-pen and his crying was ignored. Both Eileen and Jimmy excelled at ignoring things. There was always abundant food in the house and large meals of the TV-dinner and chip-shop variety were served, so Teddy was amply fed. The television was always on, so there was something to look at. No one ever cuddled him or played with him or talked to him. When he was five, Eileen sent him off to school on his own. The school was only about fifty yards down the street and on the same side, so this was not quite so dangerous and feckless a procedure as it sounds.

He was the tallest and best-looking child in the class. A Teddy should be rotund and sturdy, with a pink-cheeked, smiling face, blue eyes, brown curly hair. Teddy Grex was tall and slender, his skin was olive, his hair very dark, his eyes a clear hazel. He had the kind of tip-tilted nose and rosebud mouth and sweet expression that made childless women want to seize him and crush him to their bosoms.

They would have got short shrift if they had.

Aged seven, he moved his bed out of his uncle’s room. Nothing untoward had ever happened to him in that bedroom. There had been no encounters with Keith, not even the verbal kind. They had seldom spoken. If, in later years, Teddy Grex had had dealings with a psychiatrist, even such an expert would not have been able to diagnose Repressed Memory Syndrome.

All Teddy objected to was the lack of privacy and his uncle’s terrible snoring, the liquid glugs and bellows that seemed to shake the room and sounded like nothing so much as the water from ten bathtubs roaring down the drain when their plugs have been pulled simultaneously. And the smoke, he minded the smoke. Though he was used to it and had, so to speak, drunk it in with his feeding bottle, in the small bedroom it was worse, the air nearly unbreathable as Keith had his last fag of the day at half-past midnight and his first at six a.m.

He moved the camp-bed himself. Keith was at work, plumbing a new block of flats at Brent Cross. Jimmy was at work, humping bricks on his hod up a ladder in Edgware. Eileen was in the living-room skilfully performing five acts at once, smoking a cigarette, drinking a can of Coke, eating a Crunchie bar, watching television and crocheting a poncho in shades of flame and lime and royal-blue and fuchsia. Teddy dragged the bed downstairs, making a lot of noise about it because he wasn’t strong enough yet to lift it. If Eileen heard the bed bumping from stair to stair she gave no sign that she had.

Nobody ever used the dining-room, not even at Christmas. It was very small, furnished with a Victorian mahogany table, six chairs and a sideboard. There was barely room for anyone to get in there, let alone sit at the table. Everything was thickly coated with dust and if you twitched the floor-length indeterminately coloured velvet curtains, clouds of it billowed out like smoke. But because no one ever went in

there the room smelt less of actual smoke than any other part of the house.

Even then, even at seven, Teddy thought the furniture hideous. He studied it curiously, the swollen buboes, with which the legs were ornamented, the brass feet like the claws of a lion with corns. The seats of the chairs were covered in some forerunner of plastic, a black and brown mottled mock-leather. The sideboard was so ugly, with its wooden shelves and pillars with finials, its cubbly-holes and carved panels, its inset strips of mirror and green stained glass, that he thought it might frighten you if you looked at it for long. If you woke up in the half-dark or as it began to get light and saw its walls and spires and caverns looming out of the shadows like the witch's palace in a story.

That was something to be avoided. He drew patterns with his forefinger in the dust on the chairs and wrote both of the rude words he knew on the table surface. Then he stacked four of the chairs, seat to seat and legs to back, heaved up the last pair on to the sideboard to hide its horrors and made himself space for his bed.

Keith noticed, but didn't comment, though he sometimes came into the dining-room, smoked a cigarette and chatted desultorily at, rather than with, Teddy about his car or his intention of going down to the betting shop. Probably neither Eileen nor Jimmy knew where their son slept. Eileen finished the poncho, wore it to go shopping in and started on her most ambitious enterprise to date, a floor-length topcoat in scarlet and black with cape and hood. Jimmy fell off a ladder, hurt his back and gave up work to go on the benefit. He was never to come off it and never to work again. Keith exchanged the Studebaker for a Lincoln convertible in lettuce-green.

People down the street said that Teddy Grex started going next door because he was neglected at home. He wanted, they said, the affection, the hugs and the tenderness a

childless woman like Margaret Chance would give him. Conversation, too, someone to take an interest in him and what he was doing at school, maybe a clean house, proper cooked meals. Tongues were always wagging busily about the Grex family, those cars, Jimmy's being unemployed, Eileen's extraordinary garments and her smoking in the street.

But they were wrong. Neglected he might be, though he always had enough to eat and no one ever hit him, but he had no craving for affection. He had never received any, he didn't know what it was. That may have been the reason or he might have been born that way. He was quite self-sufficient. He went next door and spent long hours there because the house was full of beautiful things and because Alfred Chance made beautiful things in his workshop. Teddy, at eight years old, was introduced to beauty.

In the area of garden corresponding to where Keith Grex kept the green Lincoln, Alfred Chance had his workshop. He had built it himself some thirty years before from white bricks and red cedar, and inside he kept his bench and the tools of his trade. Alfred Chance was a joiner and cabinet-maker and sometimes, in special cases, a carver in stone. A tombstone on which he had done the lettering was the first example of his several crafts that Teddy saw.

The tombstone was granite, dark-grey and sparkling, the letters deeply incised and black. 'Death the Period and End of Sin,' Teddy read, 'the Horizon and Isthmus between this Life and a Better.' He had, of course, no idea what it meant, but he knew that he liked the work very much. 'It must be hard to get the letters like that,' he said.

Mr Chance nodded.

'I like the letters not being gold.'

'Good boy. Ninety-nine people out of a hundred would have wanted gold. How did you know black was best?'

'I don't know,' said Teddy.

'It seems you have natural taste.'

The workshop smelt of newly planed wood, a sharp, organic scent. A half-finished angel carved from ash, the colour of blonde hair, leant up against the wall. Mr Chance took Teddy into the house and showed him furniture. It was not the first house Teddy had been into apart from the Grex home, for he had been an occasional visitor at his grandmother Tawton's and had once or twice gone to tea with schoolfellows. But it was the first not furnished with late-Victorian hand-downs or G-plan or Parker Knoll.

The Grex house contained no books, but here were full bookcases with glass doors and moulded pilasters, with break-fronts and pediments. A desk in the living-room was a miracle of tiny drawers, an oval table of dark wood as shiny as a mirror was inlaid with leaves and flowers of pale wood equally glossy. A cabinet on shapely legs had painted doors and the design on each door was of fruit spilling out from a sculptured urn.

'A sight for sore eyes, that is,' said Mr Chance.

If there was something incongruous in housing all this splendour in a poky little north-London semi, Teddy was unaware of it. He was moved and excited by what he saw. But it wasn't his way to show enthusiasm and in saying he liked the lettering he had gone about as far as he ever could. He nodded at each piece of furniture and he put out one finger to stroke very delicately the fruit on the cabinet front.

Mrs Chance asked him if he would like a biscuit.

'No,' said Teddy.

No one had taught him to say thank you. No one missed him while he was next door or even seemed to notice. The Chances took him out. They took him to Madame Tussaud's and Buckingham Palace, to the Natural History Museum and the V and A. They liked his enthusiasm for beautiful things and his interest in everything, and cared very little about his lack of manners. Mr Chance wouldn't allow him to touch a saw or a chisel at first, but he let him be there in the

workshop, watching. He let him hold the tools and after a few weeks allowed him to plane a piece of wood cut for the panel in a door. There was no need to ask for silence as Teddy never said much. He never seemed to get bored either, or whine or demand anything. Sometimes Mr Chance would ask him if he liked a carving he had made or a design he had drawn and almost always Teddy would say, ‘Yes.’

But occasionally came that cold unequivocal, ‘No,’ just as it had when he was asked if he would like a biscuit.

Teddy liked to look at Mr Chance’s drawings, some of which were framed and hung on the walls inside the house. Others were in a portfolio in the workshop. They were meticulous line drawings, clean and pure, made with an assured hand. Cabinets, tables, bookcases, desks, of course, but occasionally – and Mr Chance had done these for his own amusement – houses. These houses were the kind he would have liked to own if he could have afforded anything better than his semi next door to the Grexes. Craftsmen who make beautiful furniture and produce exquisite lettering and paint designs on tables seldom do make much money. Teddy learnt this by the time he was ten, which was also when Margaret Chance died.

These were the days before mammograms. She felt the lump in her left breast and then she never palpated the place again, hoping that if she pretended it wasn’t there it would go away. The cancer spread into her spine and in spite of the radiotherapy she was dead in six months.

Mr Chance made a headstone for her grave out of pink granite from Scotland, and this time Teddy agreed that it would be tasteful and suitable to fill the letters in with silver. But the words ‘beloved wife’ and a line about meeting again meant nothing to him and he had nothing of comfort to say to Mr Chance, in fact nothing at all to say, he had already almost forgotten Margaret Chance. It was to be some time before Alfred Chance worked again, so Teddy had the workshop to himself, experimenting, learning, taking risks.

No Grex ever went to a doctor. Teddy had never been immunised against anything. When he cut himself in the workshop and Mr Chance took him to the hospital's casualty department in a taxi, practically the first thing they did was give him an anti-tetanus shot. It was the first injection Teddy had ever had, but he was silent and indifferent when the needle went in.

If Jimmy and Eileen noticed they said nothing about it. Keith didn't notice. The only person who did was Agnes Tawton. 'What have you done to your hand?'

'I cut off the top of my finger,' said Teddy casually, in the deprecating tone of someone admitting to a slight scratch. 'I did it with a chisel.'

Agnes Tawton had dropped in on her way back from the shops and found her grandson alone in the house. She wasn't a sensitive or perceptive woman, or particularly warm-hearted. Nor was she fond of children, but there was something in Teddy's plight that made her uneasy. It struck her that he was often alone, she had never seen him with a chocolate bar or a bag of crisps or a can of Coke, he had no toys. She remembered the play-pen, in which he had so often been coralled like a farm animal. And, making an entirely unusual leap of the imagination, unprecedented in her life – it tired her out, doing it – she somehow understood that almost any mother of a child who had lost the top of his finger in an accident would have told *her* mother about it, would have been on the phone, maybe in tears. If Eileen, as a child, had hurt herself like that she, Agnes, would have told everyone.

But what was to be done? She couldn't make a fuss, tell Eileen, tell Jimmy, she couldn't stick her neck out like that. It would be *interference* and she never interfered. There was only one solution. In her experience it was always the answer to everything. Money brought you happiness and anyone who said otherwise was a liar. 'How d'you get on for money?' she said to Teddy.

'Money?'

'Do they give you any, you know, pocket money?'

Both of them knew 'they' didn't. Teddy shook his head. He was studying his grandmother's physiognomy and wondering how it had happened that she had four chins and no neck. When she bent over to unclip the clasp on her big black handbag the chins became part of her chest like a bulldog's.

She produced a pound from a red leather purse. 'Here you are,' she said. 'That's for the week. You'll get another next week.'

Teddy took it and nodded.

'Say thank you, you little devil.'

'Thanks,' said Teddy.

Agnes had an idea that the occasion demanded she put her arms round Teddy and kiss him. But she never had and it was too late to start. Besides, she sensed that he would push her away or maybe even hit her. Instead she said, 'You'll have to come to my house and fetch it. I can't be running round here at your beck and call.'

Keith was a tall, heavy man who looked like the late David Lloyd George, with that statesman's square face, broad brow, straight nose, wide-set eyes and butterfly-wing eyebrows. He had longish yellow-grey hair and a drooping shaggy moustache. Lloyd George, when young, had been handsome and so had Keith, but the years and food and drink had taken their toll and by now, at fifty-five, he was in a state of serious decay.

There was something about him that suggested a half-melted candle. Or a waxwork left out in the sun. The flesh of his face hung in wattles and dewlaps. It seemed to have waddled down his neck and sagged from his shoulders and chest to settle in stacked masses on his stomach. He wore his trousers or jeans tightly belted under the huge curve of his rotund belly. The melting, or whatever had happened to

him, had left his arms and legs thin as sticks. His dyed hair had receded, but was long at the back and he had just begun wearing it in a pony-tail, fastened by a blue rubber band.

By the time Teddy went to the Comprehensive Eileen had become a notorious figure in the street, more like a bag lady with no home to go to than a housewife and mother of an eleven-year-old son. Dressed from head to foot in home-made woollen garments of rainbow colours – literally head to foot, since she crocheted hats and slippers as well as dresses and capes – her long grey hair fanning out from under the stripy cap to well past her shoulders, she strolled to the shops chain-smoking, often returning with only one item in her crocheted string bag. Then she would have to go back again, and sometimes stop to sit down on someone's garden wall, smoking and singing early Come Hither hits until coughing put a stop to it. The coughing maddened her, so she gave up the singing and hurled abuse at passers-by instead.

Jimmy went to the pub, he went to the Benefit Office to sign on and that was about all. He had emphysema, though without benefit of medical attention he didn't know it, wheezed all day and gasped through the night. Eileen and he and Keith all said smoking was good for you because it calmed the nerves. The walls in the Grex house, and particularly the ceilings, were tinted a deep ochre colour, very much the same shade as the stain on Eileen's and Jimmy's and Keith's forefingers. No one ever repainted the house and, of course, no one washed the walls.

At the Comprehensive Teddy did well. He showed particular promise at art and, later on, at the subject called Design Technology. He wanted to learn to draw, but there were no facilities at the school for actually teaching drawing, so Mr Chance taught him. He taught him precision and accuracy and to be *clean*. He made him draw, over and over, circles, and told him the story of Giotto's O, how when