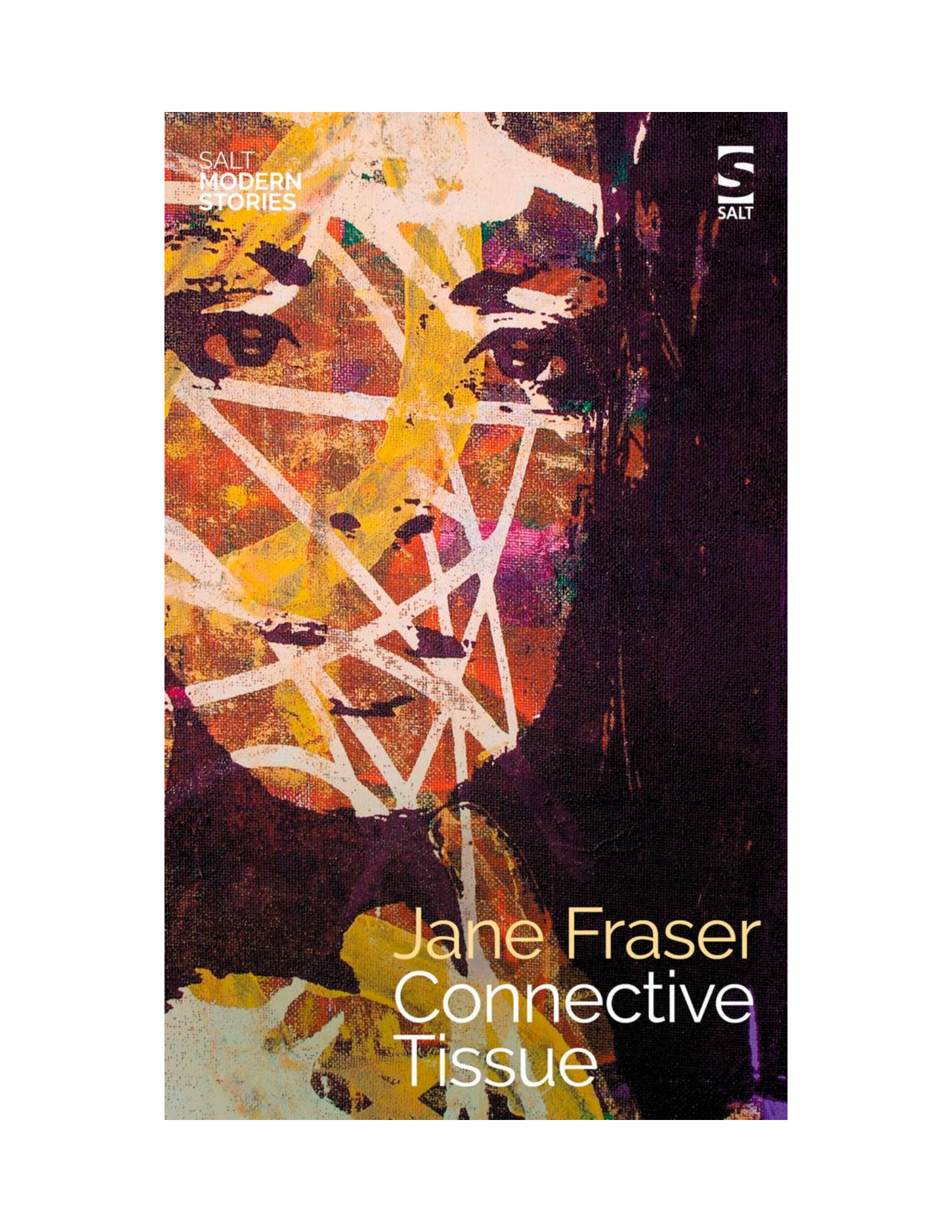


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*To my husband, Philip, for his constant support
and honest criticism of my work.*

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CONNECTIVE TISSUE

The Sausage Maker's Daughter

MY BED VIBRATES with the force of the chopping down below. An alarm call of sorts. Six o'clock on the dot, six days a week and Dad's already marking time with monotonous thuds, his maple block bowing in the middle with the weight of the years. There's comfort in the rhythm, and the smell of sweet meat that pervades this house above the shop.

As usual there's no stirring from Mum in the bedroom at the front. Dad tells me she likes to have a little lie in of a morning, that she hasn't had it easy what with one thing and the other. So at eight o'clock Dad leaves his chopping for just long enough to bring us both a cup of tea so that we can come-to nicely. He takes Mum a Marie biscuit to settle her stomach. He asks if I'd like a slice of toast when I come down, but I'd better not be too long as he has to open up at nine. It's Saturday. *They'll be queuing outside the door, he laughs, shopping bags at the ready.* He tells me Mum's having one of her days so she's going to have a bit of a rest, stay put. I tell him I'll give him a hand in the shop. At sixteen what else might I be doing?

Dad sets me a place at the red Formica table with the drop leaves in the back kitchen. I sit on the old settle but he stands with his back to the Rayburn, as if he's trying to absorb enough warmth into his body to keep him going. His hands are always so cold, fridge-cold, tinged blue at the nails, cut short and scrubbed clean. I have the urge to cry as I look at him in his freshly starched white coat, his blue and white striped apron on top, ties crossed

at the back, wrapped around him twice, and double-knotted at the front.

"Why's she not getting up again, then?" I ask.

"Leave it now," he says, "no point in getting all worked up about things."

Don't go upsetting your mother is the mantra we live by in this strange house where Mum is the semi-present butcher's wife, who spends half her life tucked up in flannelette sheets, curtains drawn tight against the rows of identical grey, terraced houses.

I clear the dishes for Dad and then walk along the long, dark passage towards the shop. The frosted glass door that separates it from the house is three-quarters open. It's kept ajar by a large, iron meat-hook that hangs from the stainless steel bar suspended from the ceiling. Dad likes to keep the door open so that he can keep an eye on things, listen out for any movement if, and when, it comes.

Once inside, I greet the carcasses he's had delivered from the local slaughter house. There's a side of beef, the lights, hearts and kidneys of the scarf attached; a pig, snout down, front trotters crossed, remains of bristles and hair that have escaped the scald and the shave visible; and two skinned lambs.

I glance at the round walnut clock above the door: one minute to.

"Better let them in before they break the door down," he says.

I unbolt the shop door, top and bottom, pull up the white blind. There's no one waiting on the other side, just the empty pavement and the rain nailing down. I reverse the sign from *closed*, written in black by Dad's magic marker, to *open*, written in red.

Armed with an empty liver tin, I climb up onto the white marble slab inside the shop front and unhook the sheets of greaseproof paper that hang from a brass bar

running the full length of this window to the world. I place the hooks carefully into the tin. *One hook, two sheets*, says Dad. *Overlap them. Don't waste.* I smooth each of the ten sheets into a pile and put them in the back room ready to be used again at closing time whatever time that might be, when Dad says: *That's it. Don't think there'll be anyone else now.*

"Shall I do a bit of a display?" I ask.

"You can try," he says. "Stuff's in the cold room."

I turn the handle to raise the iron bar and heave open the dense door of the walk-in fridge. The automatic light comes on inside. Even though I should be used to it by now, I'm afraid the door will slam behind me, the light will go out, sealing me in the chilled darkness. Recently the fear is more intense.

I leave the heavy stuff for Dad, but as for the stainless steel trays with the beef pieces all cut up into evenly sized cubes, the loin chops and the minced beef, I can carry those. *What would I do without you?* Dad says every day. *Especially the way things are.* I trundle the trays back and fore to the shop window, position them in the hope that they'll catch the customer's eye. The passing trade.

When I've done that I ferry what Dad calls the *extras* so they're in full view of the street: homemade faggots, pressed tongue, brawn, the roast pork that he's wrapped in foil and lovingly tended in the Rayburn, crisped the crackling in the top oven to finish off.

He tells me not to forget the burgers. He's invested in a little manual press lately, circles of greaseproof paper to separate the finely ground beef – *no muck in these like the bloody new-fangled supermarkets are selling.* *Tesco won't last*, he goes on. *You mark my words.*

In the back room of the shop, he works late into the evenings, pressing out the burgers in defence of his corner shop, a lonely one-man assembly line. As he keeps

telling me, it's all he's ever known. And when he's done with that, he stuffs raw sausage meat and a little rusk into the barrel of a red iron sausage-making machine and gently eases the emerging pink meat out of the metal tube like toothpaste into the white-lace intestines of lambs. Try as I might, I can't loop the sausages like Dad. *It's easy*, he says, *just press and twist*. But it isn't easy. Any of it.

I finish off my window display with a length of Raymond Williams' famed homemade sausages, draped from a hook. In between the sparkle and shine of the steel trays, I place imitation orange-red tomatoes and lime-green plastic lettuce leaves. But I doubt if this will change things.

Behind the counter, facing the wall, we stand at our blocks. He has the large one for chopping, dissecting, slicing – the intricate work, and I have an offspring version for the small stuff that's not too dangerous: liver and the like which I can slice and weigh on the Avery scales. When I've done that I wrap in greaseproof paper and then enclose in a single sheet of yesterday's newspapers which I've cut along the folds with one of Dad's knives. They dazzle against the shiny, white surface of the tiles of the wall behind the block, left to right in ascending order of blade-size: six inchers, seven inchers, ten and twelve inchers, straight blades, curved blades, scimitars, skimmers, boners and breakers. He likes to keep things in order, everything in its place, where it should be, where it's always been.

I watch him as he peels back the fat with a knife to expose the aged flesh of beef beneath. He throws the trimmings into a large meat tray on the floor, ready to boil and make dripping once it's full again. The rusty smell doesn't bother us at all, though it's not to everyone's taste the way it's always in the air. Gets under

the skin, Mum says. Can never wash the grease completely out of Dad's apron however hard she tries.

He works with concentration, pride even, etched into his face which is looking a lot older than his forty-two years. He deals with the sinew and the tendons, gets rid of the guts and the offal. Then he breaks down the beast into its named and manageable parts just like the jigsaw diagram of the cow in the alcove: topside, silverside, hind quarter and forequarter. He moves around the dead animal like the Master Butcher he is. He has a certificate to prove it hanging on the wall and a sign in an old-fashioned font, full of loops and swirls, above the shop front outside, for all the world to see: Raymond Williams Purveyor of Fine Meats.

"Did you ever want to do anything else apart from being a butcher?" I ask.

"Never had the chance," he says, "had to come out of school at fourteen to help with the business after the war."

"And what if the war hadn't happened? What if David hadn't been killed?"

"Surgeon, I think. Passed the 11+, you know. Not much difference really between a surgeon and a butcher."

"Only the money," I say.

"Yes. Only the money," he says. "Things might have been different then."

He slices up the sirloins and puts them in an orderly row in the tray in the window, stabbing one of the thick steaks with a price sign that says 7s/6d per pound.

"What's really wrong with her, Dad?" I ask.

"Up and down a bit, that's all. What with the business being slow. She's not one for change, your mother. Likes the *idea* of being in business. All she's ever known, see," he says.

"Can't go on like this, Dad," I say.

"No choice. Pity she hadn't married that bloody dentist," he says. "Called it off because he was always telling her what to do. Doesn't like being told, your mother."

We stop talking as we hear the creak of the stair treads. We turn from the blocks as Mum wafts into the shop. She's dressed up to the nines in her pale-blue two-piece and matching court shoes and bag, her dark hair coiffed, and made-up and ready for the off. I smell her distinctive Yardley perfume as she click-clacks past the counter. It smells out of place among the sweet stench of dead meat.

"Up and about, then?" Dad says, smiling. "Feeling a bit better?"

"Mmm ... thought I'd go into town for a couple of hours, have a little look around the shops," she says.

"Go you, love. Give yourself a bit of a fillip," says Dad. "Get yourself something nice."

I give her one of my looks; but she doesn't respond.

She totters around to our side of the counter and offers us each, in turn, her cheek to kiss before opening the till. In goes her gloved hand, deep into the back of the drawer, reaching for the car-keys and a couple of fivers.

It's here in the compartments at the back, beyond the notes and the coins, that Dad keeps his precious things safe: the last letter from his brother before he was shot down, my first milk tooth, a curl from my hair, and a black and white picture of his wedding. In the frozen image, their skin is unlined, their lips upturned.

"See you later," she says.

After she's gone we stand together behind the counter; waiting mostly. From time to time I glance at the clock, wondering when Dad will decide to shut up shop so I can hook the sheets of greaseproof paper back up and block the world out for the weekend. He keeps smiling at me