RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Door

Magda Szabó

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About the Author

Magda Szabó was born in 1917 in Debrecen, Hungary. She began her literary career as a poet. In the 1950s she disappeared from the publishing scene for political reasons and made her living by teaching and translating from French and English. She began writing novels, and in 1978 was awarded the Kossuth Prize, the most prestigious literary award in Hungary. Magda Szabó died in 2007.

Len Rix's translations include three novels by Antal Szerb, including *Journey by Moonlight*, and one by Thomas Kadebó. In 2006 his version of *The Door* was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize and was awarded the Oxford-Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

Magda Szabó

The Door

TRANSLATED FROM THE HUNGARIAN BY
Len Rix

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THE DOOR

I SELDOM DREAM. When I do, I wake with a start, bathed in sweat. Then I lie back, waiting for my frantic heart to slow, and reflect on the overwhelming power of night's spell. As a child and young woman, I had no dreams, either good or bad, but in old age I am confronted repeatedly with horrors from my past, all the more dismaying because compressed and compacted, and more terrible than anything I have lived through. In fact nothing has ever happened to me of the kind that now drags me screaming from my sleep.

My dreams are always the same, down to the finest detail, a vision that returns again and again. In this never-changing dream I am standing in our entrance hall at the foot of the stairs, facing the steel frame and reinforced shatterproof window of the outer door, and I am struggling to turn the lock. Outside in the street is an ambulance. Through the glass I can make out the shimmering silhouettes of the paramedics, distorted to unnatural size, their swollen faces haloed like moons. The key turns, but my efforts are in vain: I cannot open the door. But I must let the rescuers in, or they'll be too late to save my patient. The lock refuses to budge, the door stands solid, as if welded to its steel frame. I shout for help, but none of the residents of our three-storey building responds; and they cannot because – I am suddenly aware – I'm mouthing vacantly, like a fish, and the horror of the dream reaches new depths as I realise that not only am I unable to open

the door to the rescuers but I have also lost the power of speech.

It is at this point that I am woken by my own screaming. I switch on the light and try to control the desperate gasping for air which always seizes me after the dream. Around me stands the familiar furniture of our bedroom, and, over the bed itself, the family portraits, ikons in their high starched collars and braided coats, Hungarian Baroque and Beidermeier, my all-seeing, all-knowing ancestors. They alone are witness to the number of times I have raced down during the night to open the door to the rescuers and the ambulance; and they alone know how often I have stood there while the silence of the early-morning streets slowly gives way to the sounds of restlessly tossing trees and the cries of prowling cats that flood in through the open door, imagining what would happen if my struggle with the key proved in vain, and the lock failed to turn.

The portraits know everything, above all the thing I try hardest to forget. It is no dream. Once, just once in my life, not in the cerebral anaemia of sleep but in reality, a door did stand before me. That door opened. It was opened by someone who defended her solitude and impotent misery so fiercely that she would have kept that door shut though a flaming roof crackled over her head. I alone had the power to make her open that lock. In turning the key she put more trust in me than she ever did in God, and in that fateful moment I believed I was godlike – all-wise, judicious, benevolent and rational. We were both wrong: she who put her faith in me, and I who thought too well of myself.

Now, of course, none of that matters, because what happened is beyond remedy. So let them enter my dreams, the Kindly Ones, whenever they choose, with their high-heeled emergency-service buskins and tragic-mask faces beneath their safety helmets, to stand like a chorus with

double-edged swords round my bed. Every night I turn out the light to wait for them, for the bell of this nameless horror to clang in my sleeping ear, for its ringing tones to lead me towards that dream-door that never opens.

My religion has no place for the sort of personal confession where we acknowledge through the mouth of a priest that we are sinners, that we deserve damnation for breaking the Commandments in every possible way, and are then granted absolution without need for explanation or details.

I shall provide that explanation, those details.

This book is written not for God, who knows the secrets of my heart, nor for the shades of the all-seeing dead who witness both my waking life and my dreams. I write for other people. Thus far I have lived my life with courage, and I hope to die that way, bravely and without lies. But for that to be, I must speak out. I killed Emerence. The fact that I was trying to save her rather than destroy her changes nothing.

THE CONTRACT

WHEN WE FIRST met, I very much wanted to see her face, and it troubled me that she gave me no opportunity to do so. She stood before me like a statue, very still, not stiffly to attention but rather a little defeated-looking. Of her forehead I could see almost nothing. I didn't know then that the only time I would ever see her without a headscarf would be on her deathbed. Until that moment arrived she always went about veiled, like a devout Catholic or Jewess sitting shiva, someone whose faith forbade her from venturing too near the Lord with an uncovered head.

It was a summer's day, but by no means one to call for or even suggest any special need for protection, as we stood together in the garden, under a twilight sky tinged with violet. Among the roses, she seemed thoroughly out of place. One can tell instinctively what sort of flower a person would be if born a plant, and her genus certainly wasn't the rose, with its shameless carmine unfolding – the rose is no innocent. I felt immediately that Emerence could never be one, though I still knew nothing about her, or what she would one day become.

Her scarf projected forward, casting a shadow over her eyes, and it was only later that I discovered that their irises were blue. I would have liked to know the colour of her hair, but she kept it covered, as she would for as long as it remained synonymous with her inner self.

During that first early evening we lived through some important moments. We each had to decide whether we

could live and work together. My husband and I had been in our new home for only a couple of weeks. It was substantially larger than the previous one-room apartment which I had managed without help, not least because for ten years my writing career had been politically frozen. Now it was picking up again and here, in this new setting, I had become a full-time writer, with increased opportunities and countless responsibilities which either tied me to my desk or took me away from home. So here I stood in the garden, face to face with this silent old woman, since it had become clear that if someone didn't take over the housekeeping there would be little chance of my publishing the work I'd produced in my years of silence, or finding a voice for anything new I might have to say.

I had begun enquiring about domestic help the moment we finished moving our library-sized collection of books and our rickety old furniture. I pestered everyone I knew in the neighbourhood until finally a former classmate solved our problem. She told us there was an old woman who had worked for her brother for more years than she could remember, and whom she recommended wholeheartedly, assuming the person could find the time. She'd be better than a younger woman, being guaranteed not to set fire to the house with a cigarette, have boyfriend problems or steal; in fact she was more likely to bring us things if she took a liking to us, as she was a relentless giver of gifts. She had never had a husband or children, but a nephew visited her regularly, as did a police officer, and everyone in the neighbourhood liked her. My former classmate spoke of her with warmth and respect, and added that Emerence was a caretaker, someone with a bit of authority; she hoped the woman would take us on, because frankly, if she didn't warm to us, no amount of money would induce her to accept the job.

Things got off to a less than encouraging start. Emerence had been rather brusque when asked to call

round for a chat, so I tracked her down in the courtyard of the villa where she was caretaker. It was close by – so close I could see her flat from our balcony. She was washing a mountain of laundry with the most antiquated equipment, boiling bedlinen in a cauldron over a naked flame, in the already agonising heat, and lifting the sheets out with an immense wooden spoon. Fire glowed all around her. She was tall, big-boned, powerfully built for a person of her age, muscular rather than fat, and she radiated strength like a Valkyrie. Even the scarf on her head seemed to jut forward like a warrior's helmet. She had agreed to call, and so now we were standing here, in the garden in that twilight.

She listened in silence while I explained what her duties would be. Even as I spoke I was thinking that I had never believed those nineteenth-century novelists who compared a character's face to a lake. Now, as so often before, I felt ashamed to have dared question the classics. Emerence's face resembled nothing so much as a calm, unruffled, early-morning mirror of water. I had no idea how interested she might be in my offer. Her demeanour made it quite clear that she needed neither the job nor the money. However desperate I might be to employ her, that mirror-lake face, in the shadow of its ceremonial scarf, gave nothing away. I waited for what seemed ages. When she did finally respond, she didn't even raise her head. Her words were that perhaps we could talk about this later. One of her places of work was proving a disappointment. Both husband and wife were drinking too much, and the grown-up son was going to the dogs, so she wasn't going to keep them on. Assuming that someone could vouch for us, and assure her that neither of us were likely to brawl or get drunk, we might perhaps discuss the matter again. I stood there dumbfounded. This was the first time anyone had required references from us. "I don't wash just anyone's dirty linen," she said.

She had a pure, impressive, soprano voice. She must have been in the capital a long while – had I not at one point studied linguistics I would never have known from her accent that she came from our part of the country. Thinking the question would please her, I asked if she was from the Hajdú area; she just nodded, and agreed that she came from Nádori, or, to be more exact, from its sister village, Csabadul. Then she immediately changed the subject, in a way that made clear she had no wish to discuss the matter, she was in no mood to reminisce. It took me years to realise – as with so many other things – that she found my question pushy and prying.

Emerence had never studied Heraclitus, but she knew more about these things than I did. Whenever I could, I would rush back to my old village to seek out what had gone, what could never be brought back, the shadows that the family house had once cast on my face, my long-lost former home. And I found nothing, for where has the river wandered whose waters carried away the shards of my early life? Emerence knew better than to attempt the impossible. She was saving her strength for the time when she might actually do something about the past, though I would not understand what this meant until much later.

What I did gather that day, when she first pronounced those two names, Nádori and Csabadul, was that they were never to be mentioned, that they were for some reason taboo. Right, I thought, let’s discuss the business in hand. Perhaps we could agree her hourly wage; that should mean something to her. But no, she didn’t want to rush her decision. She would decide what we were to pay her when she had some idea of just how slovenly and disorderly we were, and how much work we’d be. She would set about getting references – not from the old schoolmate, who would be prejudiced – and when she had, would give us her answer, even if it was no. I stared after her as she calmly strolled away, and there was a moment when I dallied with

the thought that the old woman was so odd it might be better for all concerned if she turned us down. It wasn't too late – I could call out after her that the offer no longer stood. But I didn't.

A mere week later, Emerence reappeared. We had in the meantime bumped into her more than once in the street; but she had greeted us and passed on, as if she wanted neither to hurry the decision, nor slam a door shut before it had even opened. When she did at last call round, I noticed at once that she was dressed in all her finery. I instantly understood this language of clothes, and shifted about awkwardly in my scanty little sun-frock. She wore black – a finely-woven long-sleeved dress and gleaming patent-leather shoes. As if our previous discussion had never been interrupted, she announced that she would start the next day, and would be in a position later in the month to say what her wage was to be. As she spoke she stared stiffly at my naked shoulders. I took comfort in knowing that my husband would escape censure, sitting there, in thirty-degree heat, in his jacket and tie. Even in a heatwave he never wavered from the habits he had acquired in England before the war. The two of them beside me, thus attired, must have looked like a demonstration of dress code created for a primitive tribe, to which I belonged, inculcating the respect for external appearances considered appropriate to human dignity. If a single being in this world ever approached Emerence in his attitudes and values, that person was my husband. Naturally, for that reason, it was many years before they truly took to one other.

The old woman held out her hand to each of us in turn. Thereafter, she never touched me if she could avoid it. If I offered my hand, she would brush my fingers aside as if waving away a fly. She didn't enter our service that evening – that would have been unworthy, improper: she enlisted in it. As she was leaving, she said to my husband: "I wish the

master good night.” He stared after her. There was no man on the planet to whom this magnificent word might less apply. But that was how she addressed him until her dying day. It took a while for him to get used to his new title, and answer to it.

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No formal agreement dictated the number of hours Emerence spent in our house, or the precise times of her arrival. We might conceivably see nothing of her all day. Then, at eleven at night, she would appear, not in the inner rooms, but in the kitchen or the pantry, which she would scrub until dawn. It might happen that for a day and a half we would be unable to use the bathroom because she had rugs soaking in the tub. Her capricious working hours were combined with awe-inspiring accomplishments. The old woman worked like a robot. She lifted unliftable furniture without the slightest regard for herself. There was something superhuman, almost alarming, in her physical strength and her capacity for work, all the more so because in fact she had no need to take so much on. Emerence obviously revelled in her work. She loved it. When she found herself with free time, she had no idea where to begin. Whatever she took on, she did to perfection, moving around the apartment in almost total silence – not because she was over-familiar or snooping; she simply avoided unnecessary conversation. She made demands, more than I had expected, but she also gave a lot. If I said we were having guests, or visitors turned up unannounced, she would ask if I needed help. Usually, I declined. I didn’t want it known among my circle of friends that in my own home I was a person without a name. It was only for my husband that Emerence had found a title. I was neither “the lady writer” nor “madam”. She didn’t address me directly until she was able to place me in her scheme of things, until she

had a clear sense of who I was and what title was appropriate for me. And in this too she was right. Until your attitude to a person is clear, any such defining term will be inaccurate.

Emerence, alas, was perfect in every respect; at times oppressively so. Her response to my timid words of gratitude was to make it clear that she didn't want constant approval. There was no need for praise; she was fully aware of what she had accomplished. She always wore grey, reserving black for holidays and special occasions. An apron, changed daily, protected her dress. Paper tissues she held in contempt, preferring snow-white linen handkerchiefs that crackled with starch. It came as a pleasant relief to discover that she did have some weaknesses after all. For example, she might stay silent half the day, for no apparent reason, no matter what I asked her. And I couldn't fail to notice that she was terrified of storms. The moment thunder and lightning approached she would drop whatever she was holding and, without a word of warning or explanation, rush back home to hide. "She's an old woman," I told my husband. "They don't come without manias." He shook his head. "This phobia of hers is both more and less than a mania," he said. "Clearly there is a reason for it, but it's not something she considers our business. When did she ever tell us anything significant about herself?" As I recall, she never had. Emerence wasn't much of a talker.

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She'd been working for us for over a year when one day I had to ask her to take in a parcel for me, which was supposed to arrive that afternoon. My husband would be out examining and it was the only day on which the dentist could see me. I tacked a note on the door, telling the messenger who to seek out in our absence, and where.

Then I ran over to her little flat. I had forgotten to mention it while she was tidying up. She'd just finished at our place and could only have been home a few minutes. There was no response to my knocking, but I could hear someone rummaging around inside, and the fact that the handle did not budge was hardly surprising. No-one had ever seen Emerence's door standing open. Even when she could (with great difficulty) be entreated to come out, the moment she was back inside she bolted everything up again. The whole neighbourhood was used to it.

I called for her to be quick. I was in a hurry and there was something I wanted her to do. At first my words were met with the same steady silence, but when I rattled the handle she shot out so fast I thought she was going to hit me. She came out, slamming the door behind her, and screamed at me not to pester her outside working hours. She wasn't paid for it. I stood there, scarlet down to my neck with humiliation. It was an extraordinary outburst, totally uncalled-for. Even if she did, for some strange reason, feel demeaned by my summoning her out of her private domain, she could have said so a little more quietly. I mumbled what I had come to ask her. She made no reply, but stood there glaring at me, as if I'd plunged a knife in her arm. Right. I bade her a polite farewell, went back home, phoned the dentist and cancelled the appointment. My husband had already left; I was the only one free to stay and wait for the parcel. I wasn't in the mood to read, I just dawdled around the flat. I kept wondering what I had done to deserve such a deliberately insulting and hurtful rejection. Besides, it was so untypical of the old woman. Her behaviour was usually so formal as to be almost embarrassing.

I was a long time on my own. To complete the ruin of my day, the package didn't arrive. I had waited in vain. My husband didn't return at his usual hour either, but stayed on with his students after the exam finished. I was leafing

through a book of reproductions when I heard the key turn in the front door. It wasn't followed by the usual words of greeting, so I knew it wasn't my husband. It was Emerence, the very last face I wanted to see on this evening of torment. By now, I thought, she will have calmed down, she's come to apologise. But she didn't even glance in. Not a word was said. I could hear her busy with something in the kitchen. Shortly afterwards, the door slammed and she'd gone.

When my husband arrived I darted out to fetch our usual supper of two glasses of yoghurt. In the fridge I found a cold platter of rose-pink chicken breasts that had been cut into slices and then reassembled with the skill of a surgeon. The next day I thanked Emerence for her conciliatory treat, and held out the newly washed plate. There was no "My pleasure, and good health to you." She denied all knowledge of the chicken and refused to take the plate back. I still have it today. Much later, when I telephoned to chase up the undelivered parcel, I discovered that I'd hung around the whole afternoon for nothing. The package was in the pantry, under the bottom shelf: she had brought it in with the chicken. She'd stood there waiting at our front door, given my message word for word to the courier, brought it in without telling me, and disappeared off home.

It was a major event in our lives. For a long time afterwards I thought her slightly insane and felt that we would have to make allowances for the idiosyncratic ways in which her mind functioned.

Many things served to strengthen this belief, not least the details provided by the local handyman who lived in the same villa as Emerence and was widely respected. He filled his spare time by doing odd jobs and collecting payments. I gathered that since he'd lived there – about a thousand years – not one of the residents had got beyond the porch that fronted Emerence's home. Guests, he said, were never invited in, and she took it very badly if anyone

unexpectedly called to her to come out. She kept her cat inside, and never let him out. You could sometimes hear the animal mewing, but you couldn’t see what was in there. Every window was boarded over with shutters that were never opened. What else might she be hoarding in there, beside the cat? Even if she did have expensive things, locking them away like that was a very bad idea. Anyone might think she was hiding something of real value. It could lead to her being attacked. She never went out of the immediate neighbourhood, except perhaps for the funeral of someone she knew. She’d walk with them down that last road, but always scurry off home, as if in constant fear of danger. So there was no need to take offence if you weren’t allowed in: her brother Józsi’s son and the Lieutenant Colonel were also entertained on the porch, summer and winter alike. They had long accepted that entry was forbidden even to them. They laughed it off. They were used to it.

Hearing all this produced a rather alarming picture in my mind, and I became even more troubled. How could anyone live in such a shut-off way? And why wouldn’t she let the animal out, if she had one? The villa had its own little patch of garden, with a fence around it. I thought, in truth, she must have been a little gone in the head. That idea lasted until one of her longstanding admirers, the laboratory technician’s widow by the name of Adélka, revealed, in an epic narrative, that Emerence’s first cat, a great hunter, had decimated the stock of a pigeon breeder, a tenant who had moved in during the war. The man found a radical solution. When Emerence explained that the cat was not a university professor amenable to reason, and that it was, unfortunately, in his nature to enjoy killing even when well-fed, the pigeon breeder wasted no breath suggesting she keep the beast under lock and key. He tracked the noble hunter down, grabbed hold of him and strung him up from the handle of Emerence’s front door.

Returning home, the old woman had to stand there, under her own porch roof, while he gave her a formal lecture: he had been forced, regrettably, to defend his family's only guaranteed livelihood, with the instruments of his choice.

Emerence said not a word. She released the cat from the wire, the 'instrument' the executioner had chosen over ordinary rope. The corpse was a shocking sight, its throat gaping wide. She buried it in the garden, where she had buried Mr Szloka, and that led to the man being later exhumed, which brought more slander on her name, because the cat-hangman called in the police. Fortunately the matter was smoothed over.

But none of this brought much joy to the pigeon-breeder. He could never get her involved in an argument; she looked straight through him; and on official matters she communicated through an intermediary, the handyman. However, the animals remained linked in some sort of dark bond. One after another the pigeons fell over, dead. So the police returned. The Lieutenant Colonel was then only a Second Lieutenant. The pigeon-breeder accused Emerence of poisoning the birds, but the autopsy found nothing in their stomachs. The local vet decided that they had died from an unknown bird virus. Other people had lost pigeons too, so there was nothing to be gained from pestering his neighbour and the police about it.

At this point the whole house ganged up against the cat-murderer. Mr and Mrs Brodarics, the most highly respected couple in the building, made a submission to the local council that the ceaseless coo-cooing at dawn was disturbing their sleep. The handyman declared that his balcony was constantly covered in droppings. The lady engineer complained that the birds triggered her allergies. The council didn't order the pigeon-breeder to destroy his stock, but they made it clear to him that people were disappointed, and wanted retribution, a proper punishment for the hanged cat.

Punishment duly arrived. The cat-murderer suffered a fresh disaster. His new consignment of birds perished as mysteriously as the old ones. Once again he tried to lay charges, only this time the Second Lieutenant didn't bother with an autopsy, he tore a strip off him for wasting police time. The hangman finally got the message. He hurled abuse at Emerence on her porch and, as his final act, despite a complete lack of incriminating evidence, did away with her new cat, before moving away to one of the leafier suburbs.

Even after his move, he continued to irritate the authorities with a stream of fresh charges against the caretaker. Emerence bore this persecution with such gentle serenity, and so much good humour, that both the council and the police came to like her very much. Not one of the allegations was taken seriously. They had come to realise that the old woman's character would always provoke anonymous accusations, the way magnetic mountains attract lightning. The police opened a special dossier on Emerence. In it they filed away the many and varied depositions, dismissing them with a wave of the hand. Each time a letter arrived, even the newest man on the job could recognise the pigeon-breeder's private lexicon, his rambling, baroque turn of phrase. Policemen regularly dropped in on her for a cup of coffee and a chat. As he rose steadily through the ranks, the future Lieutenant Colonel took each new recruit aside at the first opportunity and introduced him to her. Emerence prepared sausages, savoury scones, pancakes, whatever took his fancy. She reminded young men from the country of their old village, their own grandmothers, their distant families. They in turn never troubled her with the fact that the charges against her included murdering and robbing Jews during the war, spying for America, transmitting secret messages, regularly receiving stolen goods in her home and hoarding vast wealth.

Adélka’s revelations eased my concern, especially after I had to call in at the police station about a lost certificate of identity. While I stood dictating my particulars the Lieutenant Colonel passed through the hall. Hearing my name, he had me sit with him while the new document was being made out. I thought the reason for his interest must be that he knew my work, but it turned out I was wrong. All he wanted to hear about was how Emerence was and what she was doing. He’d heard that she was still working for us, and was anxious to know whether her nephew’s little girl was back home from hospital. I hadn’t even known the child existed.

I think at the beginning I must have been rather afraid of Emerence. Although she looked after us for over twenty years, during the first five of them it would have taken precision instruments to measure the degree to which she permitted real communication between us. I make friends easily and chat away to complete strangers; Emerence imparted only what was essential. She finished her jobs quickly and carefully, always aware that she had countless other things to do and other calls to make. The twenty-four hours of her day were crammed full. And yet, even though she allowed no-one within her four walls, news raced to her door. The front porch of her flat was like a telex centre. Everything about everyone was reported there – death, scandal, glad tidings, catastrophe.

She delighted in providing for the sick. Almost every day I would meet her in the street, carrying a covered dish on a tray. I could always tell from its shape what she was holding. It was a large christening bowl. From it she served up food to anyone the local grapevine pronounced in need of a good meal. Emerence always knew exactly where she was needed. She inspired trust because people knew they could open their hearts to her without expecting her own confidences in return; they would get only commonplace remarks and well-known facts. Politics didn’t interest her,

the arts even less. She knew nothing about sport. She was aware of her neighbours' marital problems, but she never passed judgement. What she most enjoyed was studying the weather, since her visits to the cemetery depended entirely on her fears of a possible storm. She was terrified of them, as I have already said. The weather dictated not only what qualified as her social activities but, in autumn and winter, her every waking hour. Once the bitter cold arrived, everything was dominated by what fell from the sky. Her jobs included clearing the snow from almost all the larger houses around. She never had a moment to listen to the radio, except late at night or in the early hours, but she could tell what the next day would bring by walking down the street and looking at the stars to observe the brightness or fading of their fires, as her distant ancestors had done long before weather forecasts existed. She even used the names given them by her forefathers.

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She was responsible for clearing the snow from eleven different buildings. On the job she was unrecognisable, her meticulously groomed person disguised as a sort of giant rag doll, toiling away in heavy rubber boots rather than her usual gleaming shoes. In a particularly severe winter you could imagine her permanently on the streets and never at home, and think that, unlike other mortals, she did not rest. This was indeed more or less the case. Emerence never actually lay down. After washing, she merely changed her clothes – her furniture did not include a bed. Instead she took short naps on a tiny couch, a so-called "lovers' seat". She claimed that the moment she lay down she became weak. Sitting gave her proper support for her aching back. Lying down, she felt dizzy. No, she didn't need a bed.

Of course, in the real snow storms she even went without the nap on the lovers' seat. By the time she'd

finished at the fourth property, the driveway to the first was again thickly covered. She ran from one house to another in her huge boots, with a birch broom that was even bigger than she was. We became used to the fact that on days like these she wouldn't look in on us at all. I never raised this with her. Her unstated reasons were perfectly clear: we had a roof over our heads; she cleaned for us on a reasonably regular basis; we could wait until she had time again, when she would make it up to us. And anyway, a little bending and stretching would do me no harm at all.

Once the snow had finished asserting its authority, Emerence would reappear and impose miraculous order on the apartment. And without saying a word, she would leave a sweet pastry or pan of honey cakes on the kitchen table. These smuggled gifts of food carried the same message as the first we had received, the sliced chicken that followed her incomprehensible rudeness. "You have been good," the dish announced, as if we were schoolchildren (and not both on a diet!), "and good little boys and girls get their due reward."

I still don't know how she fitted so much living into one life. She almost never sat down. If she wasn't wielding a broom she would be bustling about somewhere with the christening bowl, or tracing the owner of some abandoned animal, or, if she failed in this quest, attempting to foist the poor waif on someone else. Mostly she succeeded, but if not, then the creature vanished from the neighbourhood, as if it had never nosed hungrily around the rubbish bins.

She worked long hours in a great many places, earning extremely well, but she refused to take tips in any form. Somehow I could understand that, but why she refused to accept presents was beyond me. The old woman was interested only in giving, and if anyone tried to surprise her with something, she never smiled, she flew into a rage. Over the years I tried, again and again, to make her gifts of various kinds, thinking that from me at least she might

accept one. I never succeeded. She would inform me rudely that there was no extra charge for whatever she had done. Cut to the quick, I would put the envelope aside. My husband laughed at me. He told me to stop buttering her up and trying to change the way things were. She suited him very well, this fleeting shadow who, despite her ridiculous sense of timing and total disregard for normality, saw to all our needs, and wouldn't accept even a cup of coffee. Emerence was the ideal home help. If what she did wasn't enough, and if I had to have a deeply meaningful relationship with everyone I met, well, that was my problem. It wasn't easy for me to accept that, as with everyone else at that time, Emerence was determined keep us too at arm's length.

CHRIST’S BROTHERS AND SISTERS

THE TRUTH IS, for many years we mattered very little to her. This changed suddenly, when my husband became ill, so ill that his life was in danger. Since the old woman had appeared to show no interest whatever in what happened to us, I was convinced that if I told her the full, terrifying truth it would impinge on her emotional life to the extent of a consolatory plate of food, at most. So I took my husband off to his operation for a pulmonary abscess without a word to her. No-one in our building or the wider neighbourhood knew where we were going, and this included Emerence. The pre-operative visits had all been made without her knowledge and she had no idea what was afoot.

When I finally arrived home, she was sitting in the armchair cleaning silver, with a tangled pile of teaspoons in her apron. The operation had lasted nearly six hours. Anyone who has sat staring at the emergency light over the door of a surgical theatre, knowing that the patient might never regain consciousness, will understand the state I was in when I stepped into the apartment. Emerence began by telling me that she’d been left out of the single most important event of my life; that I shared only transitory things with her, in the most general way. She was positively glaring at me. I’d shut her out, like a stranger, from all my terror of an operation that might well have proved fatal. No, she wasn’t offended, she was furious. I replied that I’d never before known her show the slightest interest in us, so how was I supposed to guess that what was happening now

would affect her in any way? Meanwhile, no offence intended, but would she kindly leave me alone? I wanted an early night; it had been a difficult day and things weren't over yet.

She left immediately. I thought I had offended her so deeply that she was gone for ever. But about half an hour later I was startled out of a shallow, troubled dream by the sound of her moving about the flat, and then she appeared with a steaming goblet. It was a real work of art, made of thick, royal-blue glass, borne on an iron tray. A pair of hands were carved around it in the shape of an oval garland. On the woman's wrist was a bracelet, on the man's, lace trimming. Together they held a gold plaque inscribed *TOUJOURS*, in blue enamel lettering. I lifted it off its base and held it up to the light. It contained a dark, fuming liquid, smelling of cloves.

"Drink it!" she commanded.

I didn't want to drink. All I wanted was some peace and quiet.

"Drink," she repeated, as to a badly brought up, half-witted child. Then, when she saw me putting the cup down and refusing to open my mouth, she seized it and splashed some of the scalding mulled wine down my front. I screamed. She grabbed my hand and rapped the mug against my teeth. If I didn't want her to tip it all over me, I had to swallow it. And, despite being unbearably hot, it was wonderful. Five minutes later the trembling had gone. For the first time in her life, Emerence sat down beside me on the sofa, took the empty cup from my hands and waited for me to speak, to talk those unknown six hours, and whatever was still to come, out of my system.

But I couldn't talk, or begin to explain what I had been through, or in any way convey the horrors that had led up to it. Also, the wine was having an effect: I had downed it in a single gulp. I know I fell asleep because at one stage I woke suddenly to find the light on, as it had been when I

returned home, but with the clock now reading two a.m. She must have uncovered our bed, because I was lying under a light blanket which she could only have taken from it. In her usual calm, everyday voice she stated that there was no point spending the night brooding about things. I should stop worrying. Everything would be fine – she could always sense death. None of the neighbourhood dogs had given any sign. No glass had been broken, either in her kitchen or in mine. If I didn't believe her, that was my right. Perhaps I'd rather turn to the Church? In that case she'd bring me a Bible. There was no obligation to speak to her at all.

At that moment I wasn't thinking of the mulled wine, or even her long vigil beside me. All I could feel was her mockery. Once again, her words had stung me. Wasn't it enough that every Sunday I went a roundabout way to church to avoid her comments? How, when she showed no desire to understand, could I explain to her what the act of worship meant to me; or how many unseen presences thronged the pews around me, who down the centuries had all shared my beliefs and prayed as I did; or how those sixty minutes of the service constituted the one hour when I could be sure of communing with my late father and mother? Emerence understood nothing of this. She rejected it. Like the leader of some primitive tribe she flew her standard – a sequinned evening dress – against the banner of the Lamb of God.

The old woman opposed the church with an almost sixteenth-century fanaticism; not only the priesthood, but God himself and all the biblical characters, with the single exception of Joseph, whom she revered for his occupation: her own father had been a carpenter. I once saw the house where she was born. From behind a hedge its warm glow radiated a simple dignity. The sturdy pillars of the veranda, under the twin-peaked roof, made you think at once of a baroque peasant dwelling and a Far-Eastern pagoda. Its