

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# The Editor's Wife

Clare Chambers

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## About the Book

When aspiring novelist Christopher Flinders drops out of university to write his literary masterpiece, his family is sceptical.

However, when he is taken up by London editor Owen Goddard and his charming wife Diana, it seems success is just around the corner. Christopher is captivated by his generous and cultured mentors ' but on the brink of realising his dream, he makes a desperate misjudgement which results in disaster for all involved. Shattered, he withdraws from London.

Twenty years on, Christopher has buried himself in rural Yorkshire, with a career and a private life marked by mediocrity. But then a young academic researching Owen Goddard seeks him out, and Christopher is forced to exhume his past, setting him on a path to a life-changing discovery.

## About the Author

Clare Chambers was born in Croydon in 1966 and read English at Oxford. She wrote her first novel, *Uncertain Terms*, during a year in New Zealand, after which she worked as an editor for a London publisher. She is also the author of *In A Good Light*, *Back Trouble*, *A Dry Spell* and *Learning to Swim*, which won the 1999 Parker Romantic Novel of the Year award. She lives in Kent with her husband and three children.

Also by Clare Chambers

*Uncertain Terms*  
*Learning to Swim*  
*A Dry Spell*  
*Back Trouble*  
*In A Good Light*

# The Editor's Wife

Clare Chambers



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# PART ONE

# 1

MY PARENTS' PHILOSOPHY was always 'aim low, keep your head down, don't make a fuss'. The worst of crimes, in their view, was 'getting above yourself'.

When my mother died, suddenly, three years ago, at the age of seventy, my father discovered amongst her belongings notebooks, ring binders, jotters and boxes of loose papers full of her poetry. Of course he knew that she wrote poems for pleasure: she would occasionally show him ones she was particularly proud of. But even he was astonished at the sheer quantity she had produced. There must have been thousands, going back decades, written in her distinctive looping script. To my father, for whom her death was a form of amputation from which he never recovered, this cache was precious beyond description. He was at once overjoyed and comforted to be able to read her thoughts and insights, but at the same time mortified that her talent (as he saw it) had gone uncelebrated. He wasn't a literary man, but he spent the rest of the time that remained to him (less than two years, as it turned out) reading, sorting, dating and attempting to catalogue this vast body of material.

I remember the first time I read one of my mother's poems. It was the Christmas Eve after her death and I had driven down from Yorkshire to London, through hail and flood, to be with Dad.

Almost before I had reached the porch and shuffled my overcoat off, he pressed a leather-bound book into my hands. It was a desk diary for 1992. 'Read that, son,' he urged me. 'Just choose any page.'

I did as he directed. The book fell open at a poem called 'Primulas'. Tears sprang to my eyes as I read. It was awful, just as I'd feared. I turned over to the next entry, 'Thrush in Winter', conscious of Dad's gaze, and his ravenous need for my approval. This one was no better. And so on, through 'Sunset over Ely Cathedral' and 'From a Train Window' to 'Advection Fog'. I couldn't read any more. I knew I wasn't going to find any flashes of brilliance: these were simple observational poems, without the benefit of any original observations or insights and occasionally disfigured by clunking imagery and leaden turns of phrase. Nothing unusual, in short. Absolutely standard homespun verse of the sort that gives great comfort and solace to its practitioners rather than its readers. Not, by any stretch, Poetry.

I closed the book gently and handed it back with a watery smile, as though moved beyond words. This was not sheer fakery: the sight of Mum's handwriting, so vividly hers, had brought a lump to my throat. All the same, I couldn't tell Dad what he wanted to hear: that these were works of great merit, richly deserving of a wider audience. Much as I loved my mother and honoured her memory, I couldn't do it. At the same time, I couldn't demolish Dad's faith in her gift - his chief comfort in his bereavement - with the unsparing language of literary criticism.

'What do you think?' he probed. 'They're special, aren't they?'

'Of course they are - to us,' I said, carefully. 'Anything Mum wrote would be special. She was a very special person.' I had managed to advance as far as the sitting room, where my brother, Gerald, was already installed, watching TV with the sound down, the better to eavesdrop.

'You're right,' said Dad. 'She just had this way with words. That one about the railway line: you feel as though you're there.'

‘She’d be very glad to think you appreciate them,’ I said. ‘A lot of husbands wouldn’t bother.’

‘But I want other people to be able to enjoy them,’ he protested. ‘I send them off and back they come again. *Sorry we can’t publish them blah blah*. And yet you go into any bookshop and it’s full of a load of old rubbish by people off the telly. It’s scandalous.’

I conceded that there was an awful lot of inferior material published and that the industry as a whole was best avoided. Mum was, I decided, a better judge of her own work than Dad: she had kept it in the back of the wardrobe.

‘Wouldn’t it be funny if it turned out to be Mum who was the literary genius in the family after all?’ said Gerald, without taking his eyes off the telly.

‘Hilarious,’ I replied. ‘Have you read any of it then, Gerald?’

‘I don’t understand poetry,’ he said bluntly. ‘But then I didn’t go to grammar school.’

It was going to be one of those evenings.

When Dad died, two years after Mum (a mild stroke, followed months later by the clincher), he left the house in Streatham, where we grew up, jointly to me and Gerald, an arrangement complicated by the fact that Gerald had moved into the spare room during one of his many bouts of homelessness and was in no great hurry to move out. It had always been understood, when Dad was still well enough for such things to be mentioned, that in the (unlikely, far distant) event of his death, the house would be sold and Gerald would, with his half of the proceeds, be able to buy a place of his own and put his troubles behind him.

A year on, he was still there and the house had not even been put on the market. Under normal circumstances I wouldn’t have been in any rush to see it sold, but I had just been made redundant, and money was sooner or later going to become an issue.

Gerald, however, is not a man who is easily hurried. When I'd gone down to London three months after Dad's funeral for the interment of the ashes, I'd called in at the house and been horrified to discover it in a state of Marie-Celestial abandonment. Dad's splayed toothbrush, whiskery shaving bar and razor were still on the edge of the washbasin in the bathroom, his flannel was bent crisply over the side of the bath and various items of off-white underwear were baked dry on the radiators. Mouldering in the fridge were the remains of Dad's last meal: half a squashed liver sausage, like an amputated penis, a jar containing a lone pickled onion, and an open tin of furry prunes. (Gerald's provisions were on a separate shelf, marked GERALD.)

After the service, I came back and bagged up these horrors and took them to the tip, along with the dregs of Dad's modest wardrobe. The decent stuff I carted round to Oxfam in a suitcase. The whole job took no more than two hours, during which time Gerald dithered over whether or not to throw out a packet of blurry photographs of the Gower peninsula, taken through a coach window. I left him still agonising over this task, but having extracted an assurance that he would put the house up for sale and start looking for a place of his own. He had been most apologetic about his inaction, when confronted with the evidence of it, and yet every time I rang for a progress report I would be met with nothing but evasiveness and excuses. 'I've had an ear infection.' 'There's not much on the market.' 'I've been to Scotland.'

The only things I salvaged from the house for myself were a box of photos and Mum's poems, because although I didn't intend to read them, I couldn't bring myself to destroy them either. There's something sacred about handwriting. It must be universal, this urge to put things down on paper, to leave some account of ourselves that will stand as a memorial. I suppose we all feel we've got a story worth telling, if only the world would sit up and pay attention.

## 2

MINE BEGAN WITH a letter from Gerald. always Gerald.

It was waiting for me on the mat when I got home from work on my last day with the Inland Revenue. Home is a small, unrenovated cottage on a sheep farm on the edge of the Yorkshire moors. When I first came up north in the eighties in my flight from London and its disappointments and disasters, I lived in a series of flats and finally a house in York. Initially that seemed rural enough, but at weekends and every available opportunity I'd head for the moors as if to put as much distance as possible between me and 'civilisation'. I must have walked every footpath in North Yorkshire. I made it my business to learn everything I could about the countryside I lived in, so that I could identify every tree, wild flower and bird. I even came to distinguish the many different breeds of sheep - creatures which to me as a city-dweller had once looked identical. After some years my York address, though convenient for work, began to feel oppressively urban, and I started looking around for something within the national park itself. One of my colleagues at the time had a farmer friend near Kirkby who wanted a reliable tenant for one of his cottages.

I drove out to have a look at it on a summer evening after work. The moon and sun were both out, facing each other across an expanse of milky blue - *bestriding the star-pricked velvet*, as Mum might have put it. There were Swaledales cropping the tussocky grass at the side of the road. At my approach they sprang to and fro with tremendous panic and energy, but no sense of purpose or direction, rather like Gerald on a squash court. The road wound down the hill to a

ford, the crossing point for a slack ribbon of barely moving water, then back uphill and eventually crumbled into a stony track terminating at a rusty gate. *Hartslip Farm*, announced a wooden sign gouged by an amateur hand. A dirty white horse stood squarely behind the gate, gazing at me through a veil of midges.

I abandoned the car and followed the footpath which, according to my OS map, led right through the farm. There was a strong smell of wild garlic on the breeze, and the only sound was the reproachful bleating of sheep. As I climbed the stile at the corner of the field, I could see the farm - and the cottage - below, its grey stone walls turned to gold by the late evening sunshine, and, beyond, the moorland stretching away, not bleakly, but enticingly.

I stood gazing at the scene in a kind of reverie, and then as I jumped down from the stile a pheasant burst out of the long grass at my feet and took off with a terrific beating of wings. The sudden explosion of noise in the stillness startled me into biting the inside of my cheek, so that it was in some pain, and with a mouthful of blood, that I approached my future home.

The farmer had, as arranged, left the key in the conservatory - a cedar-framed lean-to like half a greenhouse on the front of the building. The air inside was warm and there were upturned flies on the window sills, crisp and dead. The front door opened with only a little force from my shoulder, scratching a ninety-degree curve into the flagstones and releasing a gust of chilly air, and I found myself in a tiny ante-room with a staircase to my left and a row of coat hooks to my right. Straight ahead was a bathroom, offering a loo with no seat, a chipped enamel bath, cold and abrasive to the touch, and a porcelain basin, home to a fat spider. Just before the coat hooks was the door to the main body of the house, which turned out to comprise two rooms of roughly equal size: a sitting room - though not designated as such, since it contained nothing

but a fireplace - and a kitchen, unfurnished apart from a sink and a free-standing Calor gas cooker. The place had the distinctive old-building smell of swept stone and spent matches.

I climbed the steep stairs to the upper floor, nearly scalping myself on the low beams. The wood felt dangerously spongy underfoot. A tiny landing with an airing cupboard led onto a large bedroom with low windows front and back, facing the farm in one direction and the moors in the other. I could park my bed opposite the north-facing window and wake up every morning to that view of brown hills. In my imagination I was already starting to inhabit the place, furnishing it with phantom possessions. There was a second room, corresponding to the kitchen below, accessible through the master bedroom or, for the more adventurous, through a dwarf-sized door giving onto an unguarded flight of steps which ran down the outside wall to the garden.

With a little restoration work - new bathroom, new stairs, new kitchen, plaster, paint - it would be perfect. Without any work it was . . . perfect. I could hardly bear to leave it and return to the house in York with its power shower and satellite TV and all its other burdensome comforts.

The farmer was full of apologies for what he saw as the property's shortcomings and set a ludicrously low rent, which he tried to drop still further after misinterpreting my look of incredulity. There followed a bizarre scene of inverted haggling, where I had to beat him back up to his original price.

That weekend I hired a van and transported my belongings to the cottage - essentials like mattress, fridge, guitar, armchair first, fripperies later. The bed base had to be dismantled, carried up the outside steps piece by piece and posted through the dwarf hatch because the turn in the interior staircase was too tight.

That first euphoric moment of occupation, when I stood surveying my new lodgings, knowing that I wouldn't ever be returning to the York flat, surpassed even the moment four years later when I signed on the dotted line and became the owner. The farmer, Richard, by that time a good friend, needed to raise some capital for a new business venture, converting one of the barns into a workshop for making traditional hand tools. He knew that I was rooted in Hartslip Cottage and wouldn't commit the unforgivable sin of selling it on to some rich southerner to use as a rental property. In fact I promised that I would offer him first refusal if I ever came to resell.

Once it was mine, renovation became a possibility - a duty, perhaps. But by then I had grown so used to the crumbling plaster and the bare boards that I hardly noticed them, and if I did it was only with the friendly eye that sees more beauty in an old and interesting face than in a young and perfect one.

### 3

I HAD INTENDED to spend my first day of unemployment – the first day of exciting new career opportunities, as the Redundancy Reorientation Counsellor had urged me to consider it – taking one of Richard’s horses out for a canter, followed by a pub lunch at Hutton and then mackerel fishing at Whitby.

In the end I did none of these because I remembered Gerald’s letter, set aside the evening before, and made the mistake of opening it. He had used an old Amstrad with a dot matrix printer on the faintest possible setting to save ink, and green and white striped continuous paper with holes punched down the side. It reminded me of one of those optical illusions, where a page of black blobs conceals a picture of a Dalmatian: after a few minutes the apparently random smattering of dots reassembled itself into the following message:

*Dear Chris*

*Re: The estate of Derek Flinders (Dad) Before I begin the complicated and time-consuming job of selling 76 Gleneldon Road I was wondering whether you would consider splitting the proceeds 60-40 in my favour rather than 50-50 to acknowledge the fact that it was me who looked after Dad for the last year of his life when he was increasingly frail. There were various expenses. Also my status as a sort of sitting tenant. I know you are keen to see the house sold as quickly as possible – you mentioned millstones when you were here last – so perhaps we could resolve this as soon as possible.*

*Yours*

*Gerald*

*PS I haven’t taken any legal advice – this is just an informal suggestion at this stage.*

For a moment or two I thought *he's having me on. This has to be some sort of prank*, all the while knowing pranks of any kind to be outside Gerald's range. I read it again through a fog of rage. Of course the attempt to divert what would amount to nearly fifty grand from me to him was breathtaking, but it was his falsification of history that was the real outrage. To claim that he had 'looked after' Dad was a travesty: on the contrary Gerald's residency - a year of rent-free sponging - probably hastened Dad's death. As for his menacing allusions to 'legal advice', I got straight on the phone to my ex-wife Carol for some legal advice of my own.

Unusually I managed to catch her between meetings, and after preliminary civilities she was able to confirm that Gerald was pulling a fast one. On the question of his occupancy of the unsold house, the law was on my side, but evicting him would be complicated and possibly unpleasant.

'It's not his house,' I spluttered. 'He was just a sort of parasitic visitor who turned up and never left. You know what he's like.'

She'd never had much time for Gerald when they were in-laws, a stance which he reciprocated in full measure.

'I'll get back to you. I've got to see a client now,' she was saying.

'He knows he can't just squat there indefinitely. We had all this out when Dad was still alive. Dad was just putting him up as a favour when his last woman booted him out.'

'Gerald had a woman?' Carol was sceptical.

'I don't know about *had*. This Irish woman put him up for a while. Took pity on him, you know, until she got fed up with him, like they all do. God, he's got such a nerve. Listen to this -' I started to reel off some of the more irritating phrases from his letter but Carol cut me off, her reserves of sympathy quickly depleted.

'Yes, yes, save your indignation for Gerald. I've got to go. I'll call you back.'

'Ring me at home. My office number's no good any more.'

'Why's that?'

'I've lost my job.'

'Euw. That's bad luck. Or is it?' I could tell she was wondering how many precious seconds this conversational turn was going to cost her.

'I don't know yet. It was voluntary, sort of. My department merged with another one, so it was a choice of reapplying for my own job in competition with a colleague who's got a massive mortgage, a pregnant wife and two kids, or taking redundancy.'

'That was noble of you. What are you going to do now?'

'I don't know. Is forty-five too old for a Gap Year?'

'Ha ha. Look, keep your pecker up and we'll talk about it when I come to dinner. You're cooking for me next Thursday, don't forget.'

'Am I?'

'Yes. You can do that Thai fish slop you did last time. Bye.'

And she hung up briskly before I could reply.

I met Carol at a time in my life when I was vulnerable and disorientated. I'd moved up north to complete the degree that I'd abandoned years earlier and six months into my final year I still had no real friends. I was attracted by her energy and her outspokenness and flattered by her pursuit of me. And, of course, by a very physical promise that she seemed to exude around men. Subconsciously I must have decided that if I attached myself to Carol everything that was currently wrong with my life would be taken care of: her friends would become my friends; she would organise me and integrate me; I would be normal again.

So it proved at first. We got married six months after our first meeting, at that peak of compatibility where we had had time to reveal only the best of ourselves to each other. She was a solicitor, already established in her career, well paid and successful. I had just started to work for the Inland Revenue, and was not yet any of those things, and although

this imbalance meant little in those early, passionate months, it started to rankle once other, bigger differences came to light. If I dissect our life together, I suppose we had two very happy years, two average years with turbulent patches, and one rancorous, miserable year with frequent outbreaks of hostility.

The problem was that we had both come to marriage with different, but equally unrealistic expectations. She wanted her life to carry on exactly as before, with me in attendance. I had a model of family life in my mind, based not on my own parents but on a couple I had known in London. It was a collage of hopelessly idealised images: the angelic curve of a sleeping child's cheek on the pillow, the smell of home-made lemon meringue pie, a row of wellington boots by the back door, ranged in height order, the slenderness of a woman's waist, nipped in by a cotton apron . . . Of course, none of this was applicable to our situation. Carol was the main breadwinner: she wasn't going to be flitting around the house in a cotton pinny, whisking egg whites. She hated cooking and did it as seldom as possible, taking great pride in her incompetence. She preferred to eat out and, since it was her money, we ate out. Her social life was everything to her. If a weekend approached that wasn't fully booked up with parties and dinners she would fly into a panic and ring round everyone she knew until all the gaps were plugged. When I suggested that it might be quite enjoyable, refreshingly different, at least, to stay in, she would say, 'Fine. You stay in,' and go without me. I tried to explain that what I wanted was to stay in *with her*, but that made me sound unreasonable and repressive, as she was quick to point out. We argued over it regularly, always failing to reach a compromise, and every argument seemed to erode a little more of our affection for each other.

Then, overnight, the rows and silences stopped. Carol was happier, more attentive, more tolerant of my peevish moods and maddening habits. I knew she must be having an affair.

And I knew who with, too: one of her colleagues - Jeremy Standish - because his name used to come up often in conversation, and then suddenly not at all. I carried this knowledge around with me like a bomb, which I never had the courage to detonate. On the surface we were, after all, getting on better than for a long time. The idea of revenge infidelity didn't appeal either, even supposing a suitable candidate could be found. It wouldn't have inflicted anything like equivalent suffering. On the contrary, she would have been relieved to have me out of the way. And the infuriating fact remained: I wanted only her. And even though I knew that fate had dealt me exactly the hand I deserved, at the back of my mind, too, lurked the ghastly hope: maybe I'm wrong.

The manner of our separation was more of a farce than a tragedy. On the night in question I had arranged that I would be cooking, and Carol had seemed to be agreeable. I left the office promptly for once, as I wanted to stop off at a deli and pick up some wine and other ingredients for dinner. (I was in the habit of delaying my return home to avoid sitting too long in an empty house, but however late I left it, Carol contrived to be later.) I was halfway into the recipe, just chopping some fresh chillies and enjoying myself - a bottle of Barolo breathing on the side, *Don Giovanni* on the stereo - when she rang. There was a crisis at work; she had to stay. She didn't know when she'd be back, but too late to eat. Her tone was brisk, remorseless.

Deflated, I hung up and went back to the kitchen, in the process rubbing my face and transferring some chilli juice to the soft tissue of my eye, which didn't improve my temper. The beef was already browning in the pan, so there was no alternative but to press on with the cooking, but I had lost all enthusiasm now. From being a pleasure it was all at once a chore, bitterly resented. I felt mocked by the bunch of fresh coriander which had taken so much tracking down, the effort of acquiring it out of all proportion to its influence on

the meal, which would itself now go unappreciated. Nevertheless, I saved half the cooked chilli in a bowl, duly garnished, in case the great urgency of this legal 'crisis' had left Carol no time for eating, but I drank the wine myself and to hell with her.

It was after midnight when she sauntered in, smelling of the pub. The house was in darkness. Dusk and then night had fallen around me as I sat at the kitchen table, the remains of the meal in front of me, the mountain of pans and utensils that I'd deployed in its preparation still unwashed. She snapped the light on and started violently when she saw me.

'Oh my God. I thought you were in bed. Why are you sitting here in the dark?' She helped herself to a drink of water, wrinkling her nose at the mess. There was so much crockery piled in the sink that she could hardly fit a glass under the tap. 'It stinks of onions in here,' she muttered.

I ignored this remark, 'Everything sorted out at the office?' I said, with exaggerated cheerfulness. 'Crisis averted?'

'What? Oh, yes.' She shook her head impatiently.

'You must be exhausted. Work, work, work.'

She looked at me suspiciously. 'I am quite tired, actually. I think I'll go up.'

'I saved you some chilli,' I said, indicating the bowl. 'I thought you might be too busy to eat. Too busy working.'

'You needn't have bothered. I've already eaten,' she replied. She could tell from my tone that she wasn't going to get off to bed without a row, so fake gratitude was pointless. She took her coat off and slung it over the back of a chair, then stood waiting for it to begin.

'Jeremy all right?' I asked.

'What?'

'Jeremy. Standish. Your colleague. He was there, wasn't he?'

'He was there as it happens. What's your point?'

'I bet he's good in a crisis,' I said. 'Working away. Beavering away, I should say.'

'Can I look forward to this sort of reception every time I work late?' she enquired coldly.

'Are you going to be making a habit of it, then?'

'Possibly.'

'You can see more of these crises looming up but you can't do anything to prevent them?'

Carol exhaled sharply and folded her arms, exposing the long, ringless fingers of her left hand, with their bronze-lacquered nails. It was a moment or two before the significance of their nakedness hit me.

'You've taken off your wedding ring!'

Carol looked at her hand as if for confirmation. 'It was too tight,' she said, blushing through the lie. 'It was constricting.'

'I bet it was!' I retorted.

'Oh go and fuck yourself.'

'I don't have much alternative, do I, since you're out every night screwing your boyfriend.'

'Don't make me hate you more than I already do,' she said.

This exchange of civilities went on, at an increasing volume, and covering the usual range of accusations and counter-accusations, well rehearsed in previous rows: my lack of trust, her lack of trustworthiness, her selfishness, my control-freakery, inequalities in our contributions to household expenses and chores, and ever downward to the petty stuff of which divorces are made, until the neighbours could stand no more and called the police. Whether it was the shouting or the sound of the bowl of chilli being thrown through the (closed) kitchen window that had them reaching for the phone, I'm not sure. But our ranting was soon interrupted by the arrival of two uniformed officers. 'Thank God you've come,' said Carol, attempting to lay claim to the role of victim. 'He's being ridiculous.' She ushered them into

the kitchen, as if they were prospective buyers, come to view the property.

'We've had reports of a disturbance,' said the taller of the two, glancing around.

'Well, we're in the middle of an argument,' I explained. 'That's not illegal, surely?'

With one movement their eyes swivelled to the broken windowpane, through which the cool night air, faintly scented with onions, now streamed. I suppose with the tomato sauce dripping down the jags of glass it did look rather gory.

'What's all this about?' said the other one, surveying the damage.

'Oh, she threw a bowl of chilli at me,' I replied.

'I didn't throw it *at* you,' Carol objected.

'Look, we're not interested in your domestics,' said the tall policeman, over the chirping of his walkie-talkie. 'It's after midnight and people round here are trying to sleep. So are you going to keep it down or do we have to take this further?'

'I don't want him staying here,' Carol said shrilly.

'I don't want to stay here,' I retorted. 'If I wasn't over the limit I'd get in the car and go right now.' I turned to the policemen. 'I'll just chuck some stuff in a bag and sleep in the back of the car if that's allowed.'

This agreed upon, I snatched up an assortment of my belongings, dragged the duvet off the spare bed and went to doss down in the car, which was parked in the driveway facing the house. Then the policemen left, and from inside the house came the scrape and rattle of Carol locking me out for ever.

Of course there was no prospect of sleep. However I tried to dispose myself I was cold and cramped, my marriage was over and to add to my pain I knew that Carol would be warm and comfortable in our king-size bed, and moreover

sleeping peacefully, as she always seemed to after a row, her heart all the lighter for having evicted me.

I had never realised, until forced to spend the night underneath it, how dazzling our halogen security light was, and how easily activated. It burst into life at irregular but frequent intervals, to defend the property from passing cats, moths, falling leaves and motes of dust. On and off it went, for hour after hour, not only keeping me awake, but illuminating my predicament for the benefit of the whole street. I had no alternative but to try and disable it.

There was no lock on the side gate - a security lapse rather at odds with the unsparing vigilance of the arc lamp - so I was able to fetch a rake from the garden shed. Standing well back, I jabbed the wooden handle hard up into the glass. The halogen bulb exploded with a sound like gunshot, and I got back into the car, swathed myself in the duvet, and with that small victory under my belt, slept at last.

I was still in that deep phase of early sleep from which even a gentle awakening is a trauma, when the car door was wrenched open and I felt rough hands seizing me. All around there was a commotion of lights and shouting and running feet, and before I was properly conscious I found myself face down in the flower bed, my arms pinned behind me, someone's knee on my back, and my face pressed into a cold mulch of bark chippings and dead leaves. After a further mauling I was dragged to my feet and it was only then that I realised that my attackers were in fact policemen, kitted out in flak jackets and helmets as if for an armed siege, and with automatic rifles trained on me. This did nothing to subdue my sense of terror: one inadvertent twitch from me, a touch of the jitters from one of them and Carol would be on *Breakfast News* enjoying her fifteen minutes of fame as a grieving widow, the old hypocrite.

It's curious but, even years later, when we were divorced and back on friendly terms, and could laugh at our many differences and foibles, this was one incident I could never

comfortably discuss. It was an indignity too far, to have had my antics with the garden rake mistaken by those same well-meaning neighbours for the work of a deranged gunman, and it certainly played its part in putting our marriage beyond retrieval. For one thing, I could never show my face in the street again.

It was about ten years after our separation that I ran into Carol again. My department was investigating a local businessman for tax evasion, and Carol was the solicitor he'd appointed to stonewall us while he massaged his accounts. I recognised her name from the paperwork - Carol Standish - and she recognised mine, because she rang up and we arranged to meet for a drink after work. I no longer felt any bitterness or resentment towards her: we had by now been apart longer than we'd been together; she had remarried and I had had several relationships varying in intensity and duration. At that first meeting it came back to me what good company she could be. She had always been very sharp and funny, in a heartless, amoral kind of way - qualities much more entertaining in a friend than a wife. We began meeting every few months or so after that. Carol was living and working in Leeds and did not often need to come to York, but if for any reason work brought her that way she would call me, and I would buy her lunch or cook her dinner at Hartslip. Somehow, now that I wasn't her husband, she didn't find my exertions in the kitchen on her behalf nearly so oppressive. I didn't ask her what Jeremy made of this unorthodox friendship, or if he even knew of it, and she never said.

One evening, over a bottle of wine, the conversation turned to the subject of happiness. We agreed that we were neither more nor less happy than at any other stage of our lives, and concluded from this that an individual's day-to-day levels of happiness are fairly constant, and unaffected by changes in circumstance.

‘But you must be happier now with Jeremy than you were with me?’ I said. ‘Or what’s the point?’

‘I suppose I am,’ Carol replied, sweeping her bushy, wheat-coloured hair back off her face and adjusting the clips that held it in place, checking the result in a pocket mirror. She had always been one for public grooming: she had once waxed her legs on a crowded InterCity train, oblivious to the glares of her fellow passengers. ‘It’s the living with that’s difficult. The give and take. You know what I’m like.’

‘I certainly do.’

‘Why am I so crap at compromising?’ she asked, dividing the last of the wine between us and looking regretfully at the empty bottle.

‘I don’t know. Could just be plain old selfishness,’ I said cheerfully. She was looking very pretty, in a skirt and heels and a tight, stretchy shirt that strained across her chest, gaping between the buttons. She had even painted her nails, an adventurous shade of blue.

She laughed, unoffended at this diagnosis. ‘You’re so easy to talk to, Chris, because you know me so well. Nothing I said or did would shock you, would it?’

‘Practically nothing,’ I said, thinking of the leg-waxing incident.

She leant back, hands clasped behind her head, putting those shirt buttons under additional pressure. ‘I sometimes wonder if I’m cut out for monogamy,’ she sighed.

It cost me a pang to turn her down: repaying Jeremy deed for deed would have been a pleasure, but I had learned a lesson about married women in my London life, and I would never cross that line again.

She didn’t take my refusal to heart. In fact she seemed rather relieved, and admitted that she always felt rotten after her lapses, but couldn’t seem to help herself. ‘I must be such a terrible person,’ she lamented. ‘How can I be so awful? Poor Jeremy.’

‘Oh don’t worry,’ I said soothingly. ‘He knew what he was taking on. He knew from the off that you’re a woman who cheats on her husband.’

She took off one of her shoes and hit me with the spiked heel. It was excruciatingly painful, and I thought what a lousy masochist I’d make. Carol, on the other hand, would have made an excellent sadist, but I didn’t mention this while she was armed.

We parted affectionately, without any future arrangements to meet up, and it was four months before I heard from her again. It was the same story. She was visiting a client in York, could we have dinner afterwards? This was the pattern that we fell into, approximately three times a year, and the state that our rather too amicable divorce had reached at the time of the incidents that I’m about to relate.

I'D LOST MY enthusiasm for the horse riding and mackerel fishing, with the thought of a confrontation with Gerald hanging over me, so I decided to ring him and get it over with. I dialled the number for Gleneldon Road and got the answering machine which, a year after Dad's funeral, still disconcertingly bore his disembodied voice, apologising for not being able to come to the phone. I hadn't prepared what I was going to say, and was in any case thrown by hearing Dad's ghostly message, so I just said, 'Gerald. It's me. Can you ring me when you get this? Or I'll try you later or something.' I regretted it as soon as I hung up. Now he would be expecting my call and have armed himself against my objections. I had surrendered the element of surprise.

I picked up his letter to roll it into a spill for the fire, then noticed a hand-written PS on the back which I'd overlooked earlier.

*There was a pregnant woman looking for you here the other day. She left the enclosed.* Typically, he had forgotten to enclose whatever it was, and I was left to contemplate this intriguing development with slight unease. What a difference that one word 'pregnant' made to otherwise promising news. A review of my sexual history over the past nine months was reassuring (in one way, if not in another). There had been a one-night stand with a woman from the office, who therefore wouldn't need to go looking for me in London.

And then there was Patty. She used to come in once a week to clean for me, after I put an advert in the newsagents at Middleton. She was only thirty-nine but she

had one of those prematurely old faces, ravaged by smoking and rotten luck. Her husband had fallen into a canal and drowned while drunk, and her teenage sons appeared to treat her as little better than a servant and were regularly up before the courts. She had three jobs - domestic cleaning, bar work at the Crown in Hutton and general skivvying at a hotel off the A64 called the Open Arms - but in spite of putting in a sixty-hour week was always broke. I had coaxed all this information from her one morning over coffee. She was funny and easy to talk to, and there was something very attractive about her resilience, and before long we began sleeping together. Then there followed an awkward period when it wasn't entirely clear whether I was paying her for the cleaning or the sex, so I stopped paying and she stopped cleaning. Soon after that she met a bloke at Ceroc and moved in with him, so then I didn't get the cleaning or the sex.

In the afternoon I worked off my frustration over Gerald by helping Richard in the top field. He was taking down an ash tree that had been struck by lightning, so I took the trailer and loaded it up with branches and spent a happy hour with my chainsaw, reducing them to firewood. I stacked most of the logs, Swiss-style, against the side of the house, saving a few which I split for kindling with a brand new hatchet, bought from Richard's Traditional Farm Tools workshop. Then, to ring in my Gap Year, as I was starting to think of it, I used up the last of the daylight to walk to the Blacksmith at Lavington for a pint. I looked in at the crypt at St Mary's church on the way, taking care not to get caught up in evensong.

I love churches, as opposed to Church, which I avoid, no doubt as a result of my upbringing. My parents sent me to a grammar school in South London which was run by Christian Brothers. As such establishments are almost always mentioned nowadays in the same breath as allegations of sexual abuse, I should make it clear that I never witnessed