

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



You Can Live Forever

Julie Maxwell

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About the Author

Julie Maxwell was born in Southall and read English at Christ Church, Oxford. She has been a Fellow and Lecturer at both Oxford and Cambridge. *You Can Live Forever*, her first novel, won a Betty Trask Award.

for Marius, with love

JULIE MAXWELL

You Can Live
Forever

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

Chapter One

ALICE'S LIFE HAD been in peril from the very beginning. But she became fully mortal in her twenty-second year. Her father, William, was a part-time arsonist. He knew himself a man of cunning who placed his faith in two sayings. The first was, 'It's not an exact science.' This applied whenever petrol and a match were posted through the wrong letter box. The second was, 'I have it down to a fine art.' This applied whenever the same items went through the right letter box. William spoke often, with dazed satisfaction, of all manner of burnings. People say there is a connection between madness and arson. But it need not be arson solely. William told Alice he would happily dispose of a corpse in his incinerator – DIY or valet service. Five grand if the murderers used the incinerator themselves, ten grand if they wanted him to do it for them.

'Many people take you up on it?' Alice asked one afternoon, sitting in the passenger seat of his Ford Mondeo with its scratched grey plastic interior. William said not, but he was hopeful. Not long since, a car with mirror windows slewed to a halt in his yard, its three occupants asking for him. The yard was a site of greenbelt opposite a military airbase. As it happened, that day he wasn't around.

'Will be next time, though, I can tell yer,' he boasted shyly, as if the intention of criminal activity amounted to an accomplishment.

Alice waited for him to unchain the gates. Red, rusted metal sheets bending at the corners, they gave access, through the wild hedgerow, to the business yard. A brick building, in the style of a 1930s Underground station, commanded the centre. A gravel road encircled it like a moat. Bare black trees leaned over like candle wicks. On the grass verges, two caravans were perched on bricks. Green fields stretched in every direction. William owned four acres. He parked up beside some heavy plant machinery – a couple of long green cranes, seven stubby once-white mini-excavators with concrete breakers, three new muddy yellow JCB 3CXs.

‘Anyway, whaddyer think of my new machines? See the signwriting?’

Alice turned to look.

‘Environmental, isn’t it?’ he asked.

‘Very,’ she agreed politely. The slogans were forest green.

‘Well, I’m doing all right, yer know. I’m gettan there – even if yer mother doesn’t think so. Did I tell yer I made Henry a director of the company?’

Henry G. Shepherd, as his bank accounts, bank statements, credit cards and mortgage agreements designated him, was a dog. If anyone rang looking for him, William said, ‘Henry? Well, yer see, the thing is, he’s a bit tied up at the moment.’ And so he was – his tangled brass chain lay in the diesel dirt of the workshop floor. Henry’s fellow employees included, according to the tax returns, Tom Thumb, R. Sonist and Billy Shakespeare. Alice wondered why no one at the tax office had ever cracked any of these jokes.

Now she asked her father what was so special about nitroglycerine. He’d been keeping a small store of it cool and motionless, stowed away carefully in the yard. He had a plan for it that very afternoon. His eyes, the brown of strong tea, held her as he rehearsed the details. He was

going to release a few of the volatile oily yellow drops, by pipette, into the engine of an 804 excavator. Finally, he explained the particular brilliance of nitroglycerine: it left no trace. The fire brigade had heat-searching light, able to probe a raging fire and determine where it was started. Clever arsonists would start a fire in several places, but the heat-searching light was not fooled. Nitroglycerine, however, was different. Also, it was not a substance they would expect anyone to use nowadays.

How had he got hold of the stuff? Alice wanted to know. Old contacts, he explained, made when he infiltrated IRA cells for the British police. Done it for years, and never whispered a word of it to a mortal soul. The immortal ones he talked to, she knew about already.

‘I can see them now,’ he said, looking obviously delighted. ‘Firemen, forensics, not a hope. I’ll tell them – if they really want to know, they should try talking to Henry G.’

So, nitroglycerine, no trace. A few drops in the right places, her father said. They’d be well clear when the blast occurred, triggered by his mobile telephone. Listening to all this, Alice had her usual sense that her father had something crucial missing. As though one half of his brain had been sawn off, roughly, like a log, while the other half was modelled on a cockpit – full of neurotic dials, smart-clicking switches, nictating red lights.

‘You know me,’ he said. ‘I have it down to a fine art.’ William was always a great lover and praiser of himself.

‘But – “it’s not an exact science”?’

‘Exactly. Yer’ve got it now.’

He got out of the car and told Alice, ‘Whaddever yer do,’ to wait for him there. A panicky person as a rule, Alice sat stringently calm. Her mind began to float at the pleasant distance from reality it managed whenever she had to open her mouth for the dentist.

Several minutes later, she watched as her father made his way down a chalky track to the old water tank, which served as an underground garage. He walked with the limp that he rehearsed for hours. In company, it gained him sympathy. Alone, he took pity on himself. Hanging from his left hand was the black plastic briefcase with the worn corners that he carried everywhere. In his right, the metal canister containing the liquid explosive. He had the little pipette (he'd shown it to her on the way over) in the pocket of his grey navy anorak. Parked inside the tank, alongside the 804, were several other old machines and his bridal-white Bentley Mulsanne. Alice loved the Bentley. It had tiny, diamond-shaped mirrors set in tortoiseshell on panels above the back seats. You flicked a black switch at the bottom of the mirror's frame and a light came on. Suddenly she was mourning – to think of the cool 'champagne' leather blackened, the sparkling paint fried to matte, the bodywork a skull of scoured metal, the shrivelled rear lights like sun-dried tomatoes.

She felt compelled to get out of the car. She shouted urgently across to her father, who was limping rapidly into the blackness of the tank. 'Are you quite sure about the Bentley? Can't we save that? Especially as we know about Mum now?'

'Will yus stay in the fuckan car!' her father shouted back. 'And what do we know about yer mother anyway? That curse-it woman could have anything wrong with her at any time!'

When everything was over and the tank cooled down, he intended to haul the Bentley out with the lorry. Then he would leave the metal carcass, like a sculpture, in the grass.

'Just get in the car!'

So she did. Then, just as Alice was visualising what was going to happen to the Bentley, she heard a loud explosion. Her father was gone in a bang. William was bold and

cautious, vengeful and philanthropic. It was the combustion – quite literally – of his conflicting sides that had got him in the end. A couple of seconds later, Alice saw a clod of earth flying towards the windscreen. After that, she saw no more of anything at all. And there was an end of it. Dust she was, and by the dust of the earth she was returned. In the Year of Our Lord 1997.

Chapter Two

WILLIAM GAVE LIFE with no less enterprise than he took it. Alice had personal reason to be grateful: she was the by-product of a condom he sabotaged. Her mother, Oonagh, thought the Pill was making her ill and fat. William saw his chance and seized it. One Saturday afternoon she went out to the Church of the Worldwide Saints of God with her young son Peter. William waved them off, full of admiration for Peter in his three-piece tartan suit. Then he went to the bathroom. Taking a pair of tweezers from his wife's yellow, quilted make-up purse, he smiled to himself at this trespass. The first incision cut the small piece of tape on the back of the box of condoms. The second punctured the individual foil wrapper. The third created life. William held the condom up to the light bulb with satisfaction.

There was no need to unfurl it. He was not a Roman Catholic who would have made the hole safely away from the tip - salving his conscience about the use of contraception because the intention to procreate was still (just about) there. No, William made his hole right through the tip, like the scheming, paternally-minded member of the Church of Ireland he was. Then he put the condom back in the box and bided his time.

He feigned displeasure when the first split occurred. 'Sure Christ, the English can't make nothan.'

It seemed to happen on each occasion thereafter. Sometimes William made just the single hole, sometimes he

turned the rubber tip into a pepper pot or a flour dredger with the aid of a cocktail stick. Not one, but two pregnancies resulted. Oonagh became suspicious. After the second pregnancy miscarried, she began to defend her womb with multiple forms of contraception that included a more rigorous abstinence.

'You wouldn't be without her,' William would observe of his daughter.

'The ends do not in any sort justify the means,' she would reply. 'Just remember: one day, when I am a goddess, I shall come to Judge you.'

The child born of this parental deceit was compensated, however, by the Plain Truth. Her mother made sure of it, with the help of William P. Pope, apostle of the Worldwide Saints of God, who published a bimonthly magazine called *The Plain Truth*. Oonagh licked her fingers to turn its thick shiny pages.

She admired its candour because, long before, she had lived in trembling and evasion. She came from a tiny seaside town in the north-east of Scotland. A blar grey-blue world of rusting iron and wet slate. There was no beach. On the large pebble sea wall, the local children blew on their red hands and discovered their native tenacity. The chill wind was reliable and the rain drove at aggressive right angles, darkening the blondest hair and pasting it to the skull. There was a choice: harden, or dissolve. At first, Oonagh thought she could simply take shelter. Everyone called her the mouse because she hid under the furniture and never spoke.

But the hiding and the silence only brought her the notice of one of her uncles, who took her to the cinema, touched her in the dark and got her to touch him. He would never have touched Oonagh's sister: she was too plump, brazen and curly-haired to seem vulnerable. Whereas Oonagh looked as vulnerable as she really was – with her straight shiny satin bob and thin little legs. As the uncle

calculated, she would not speak of it. Not even when the police took her home from the cinema in their car with the armrest.

For a while no one went to her grandmother and aunt's house, where the uncle lived. When the visits resumed, it was the uncle's turn to hide and the turn of the grandmother and the aunt to be silent, to pretend nothing had happened. Whenever the children went to visit, Oonagh could hear her uncle making the floor creak as she sat downstairs with the old ladies, eating shortbread. She took her teacup firmly by its ear and refused to let her hand shake. She began to toughen up, to learn the lesson of the rain. She told herself the Scots were hardy people.

Oonagh moved to London when she was seventeen and lived with a deaf woman. She did window dressing for a clothes shop run by a Jewish couple who resented her for being taller than them. Obligated to shout in the ear of the deaf landlady, she found a voice at last. Obligated to make the window displays look pretty and looming helplessly above her employers, she found herself an identity. She decided she could be a tall beautiful woman as well as a hard one.

Then she went one step further. She wanted to be a goddess.

The means arrived in *The Plain Truth* and more especially in Pope's book, *The Unbelievable Potential of Human Beings*. By this time she was married to William.

The night he met Oonagh, William thought she was remarkable already. He could have wept; she looked so thin and beautiful in her only black dress. She had been living for two weeks on a packet of Jacob's Cream Crackers and a bottle of salad cream. Over the dress she wore a short black cape with three big silver buttons at the top and diamanté studding on the collar. Like a velvet cardinal or a camp copper, he thought to himself, as he sent his brother to approach her across the varnished, sprung floor of the

Kilburn dance hall. She was invited to go to the seaside on Sunday with the brothers. William had calculated correctly the flattering effect of this ambassadorial approach, and Oonagh behaved with due majesty.

At Brighton, they spoke without intercession. Standing on the pier, he asked if he might buy her an ice cream. She assented. Queuing, he smelt seaweed in the breeze and saw it in the tangle of her hair as the wind blew it around. As a boy he had gorged on seaweed, until his mouth hurt with the salt, because the sea did not charge him for it. Learning, halfway down the cone, that her parents lived in a council house, he countered with the news that his parents had always owned their own cottage. With his pale brown eyes he saw that she had green ones. He explained he had his own house too, although you had to be twenty-one to get a mortgage and he was only nineteen. He had pretended to the English bank manager – who took a gentleman at his word – he was twenty-one already.

‘It makes yer fear, don’t it?’ he suggested.

‘Fear what?’

‘Why, for the native. I fear for the native of this country, truly I do!’

William loved to call the English ‘the native’, as though they were the colonised. There was, he explained, only one way the English had ever had anything. They used Irish generals in the wars. The English, they were just the grunts, cannon fodder.

William imagined he was on safe territory here, with a Scot.

But then Oonagh said, ‘My mother is English. Personally, I was born in Portsmouth.’

‘I see.’

They began to walk along the shore and William watched the froth as it ran up the beach. To a man in love (or a very bad poet) it looked like a bride’s lace shawl.

Thrown down for an instant, it was withdrawn just as quickly. William did not hesitate. 'Will yer marry us?'

'I don't think so,' she laughed. 'I'm going to marry a Swiss gentleman.'

'Any in partickler, is it?'

'Oh, yes. It's one in particular.'

William said nothing, but then, near the end of the return journey, he pointed out the window. 'See that?' he asked his passengers.

Oonagh did not deign to look. William's brother saw a telephone booth.

'Not that. The bridge over yonder - I built that.'

William, then labouring on construction sites, believed verily that he had built by far the greater part of London. Whenever he looked at roads and bridges and buildings in which he might have had the most menial share, he said, 'I built that! I built that in 1962, so I did!' What if he *had* come from nothing - plenty of people had. He reminded his brother, for the benefit of Oonagh's ears, that he was going to drive a grand white Bentley by the time he was forty. Own at least ten houses. Have at least ten sons and ten daughters.

'Oh, aye. Are yus?'

'Yes. And I'm gonta call mesself a typhoon.'

'A what?'

'A typhoon. Yer know - not a tycoon.'

A typhoon - because then people would think the tycoon was simply ignorant, and marvel all the more at how well he had done for himself, and not realise it was actually the better description. In short, he was going to be as rich as Job - but not as religious, for then he might avoid the inconvenience of being stricken by Satan with a malignant boil that went from head to toe.

'Are yus, by Christ?'

But Oonagh, sitting in the back seat, had found these same arguments less than immediately persuasive. She'd

always had shoes on her feet as a child and was not the sort to run about with country lads who had not.

When Oonagh told William she was no longer seeing the Swiss man, he proposed again, with equally unsatisfactory results. Then it turned out she was lying. She was seeing both men. The third time a marriage proposal came around, it was Oonagh who got down on her knees to William. She had her reasons, expressed one night and then secreted in the same hole she had put the mouse. She said she wanted to propose a deal.

‘Yer a woman of the greatest beauty,’ William replied. ‘I’ll listen to whaddever yer haff to say.’

She explained that the Swiss man was no longer going to marry her. He had wanderlust. She was tired, disappointed, compromised. A fallen woman who, while she could not offer William her heart, was entirely willing to part with a new set of saucepans. Directly she opened up a large canvas bag she had brought with her and showed them to him. He would not have love, but he would have Tefal. Scots were straight and honest people, she said. She was just telling him it like it was.

‘Thanking yer kindly,’ he said, with the ziggurat of saucepans in his hand. ‘I think that’s grand now.’

And it might have worked, except – it didn’t. Things had just continued badly.

‘I’ll look after yus, yer know,’ William said, his voice brisk with love as he took in her suitcases. ‘I’ll do my damndest.’ Halfway up the stairs, he stopped. ‘I’m not so late.’ Meaning he was a worldly man who didn’t miss a trick.

‘I make no accusation about your timekeeping,’ she replied coldly. These were not the sorts of things the Swiss man would ever have said to her. William stared at her fiercely from the top of the flight. He *was* too late, or too early. At any rate he knew he wasn’t Swiss. On their honeymoon night in the Croydon B&B, they shared corned

beef sandwiches by a dim lamp and still she did not love him.

For several months in the first year of her marriage, Oonagh sat on a green corduroy sofa reading Pope's book, *The Unbelievable Potential of Human Beings*, and a Bible with a maroon cover. She sipped tea and contemplated further metamorphosis. A big-bang patterned carpet of green and blue nebulae swirled under her feet. The wallpaper was sombre and frenzied. A television in the corner was turned off. Another maroon Bible lay on the hearth. Oonagh held back the hard navy covers of the slim book.

Earth, wrote Pope, was soon to be the new headquarters of the universe. God would come to earth. Then the members of the Church would become gods themselves, create life on other planets, and rule over them as well as the earth. Oonagh liked the geocentricity of the arrangement very much. She had never been able to see the point of going to heaven. It was one reason she'd never got on at the Protestant church. They were very big on heaven.

'Who'd bother with it?' she would ask herself aloud, as she turned another of Pope's pages. 'With heaven and all that dying? When you can just stop here for all eternity. Stay young and beautiful and live forever.'

William argued that he'd married a member of the Church of England, that she couldn't just go and change herself into a goddess or anything else. But Oonagh dreaded the sorts of changes that might come if she left things too late. The mosquito net of white hair, inch-thick glasses, the mottled, crumpled skin put on in preparation for the coffin. Insolence, indifference, incontinence – she saw no point in a life beyond fifty. Bicentenarians might as well be put down, before things got any worse. Periodically she placed her drained cup of tea on the low, tiled coffee

table. There were great green swirls on these tiles too, and into them she gazed.

The evidence against old age was compelling. She'd seen the liver spots that appeared on the back of elderly hands. Then there were the soiled pyjama bottoms – a contour map, a desert drift of stains – drying on radiators. The pink blancmange on the plastic spoon that missed the mouth. She wanted none of it. She decided to be an immortal earthling instead. Whenever Alice asked her mother how old she was, she always got the same reply. 'Twenty-one,' the last birthday Oonagh ever celebrated – because birthdays were pagan, wicked and also untrue.

The Plain Truth made everything possible for her. The Plain Truth stood to reason. And, perhaps most importantly, the Plain Truth was extremely moral too. It was not merely a way to get godlike and immortal and achieve universal domination. It was *the right* way to do it. In the pages of *The Plain Truth*, no lies were ever told. Alice learned that other children were told there was a person called Santa Claus who came down the chimney and left presents for them at the bottom of trees. Or there was a tooth fairy who paid good money for the milk teeth deposited under pillows. Or they would one day grow up and go out into the world – get jobs and have children and grandchildren of their own. Die, if they were lucky, in contented old age.

Alice and Peter were spared all these lies. They were told the Plain Truth. And the plain truth of it was, the planet was on the verge of the most astonishing change. Before earth became the universal HQ, three and a half years of tribulation were coming to it. The faithful would be taken to a place of safety – protected from the abominable sights but still able to hear the faint screams of the sinners and the muted pounding of their fists as they begged to be let in. Then the Lord would arrive – that all flesh might not be entirely destroyed – and establish His Kingdom. It would probably happen before Alice was old enough to go to

school. It would certainly have happened before she was old enough to leave. God was giving everyone fair warning. In America, Pope had a radio station as well as his magazine. In Britain, he had Oonagh – who was, while not unduly concerned about what happened to William, always pleased to share the plain truth of things with other people too.

Then Alice began to pass on the knack of living forever too.

Then Alice began to lose the knack of living forever too.

Chapter Three

ONE SABBATH ALICE walked to the church, with twenty-one uncelebrated birthdays to her credit. Behind her mother, forty-eight. Ahead of her brother, twenty-nine, a deacon in the church, and his wife Maria, who was Spanish and exquisite and wore a mink stole. Alice carried a black Bible, a blue cloth notebook and a folded copy of the latest *Plain Truth*. Also a bag too small to hold any of these items. It had other virtues. Chiefly the definitive contours that were – Alice put it to herself, trying to keep her mind busy – so often lacking in baggier bags. She felt nervous. A few seconds later, she'd made it, to the nearest row in the left-hand flank of seats.

There were three seats. Oonagh sat closest to the aisle, her bag sat in the middle, while Alice sat closest to the wall. Oonagh always arrived twenty-five minutes early, so she and her bag would be sure to have those seats. She said she was agoraphobic and did not want people, including Alice, crowding her beauty. Alice compared it to the way her mother would never even drink out of the same cup as her children, as though they might contaminate her.

Peter put his briefcase down in the adjacent middle aisle. As there were still over twenty-three minutes to go, Oonagh and Peter and Maria were up and about, talking to other punctual Christians. Alice hung about on her seat, for a few moments, trying to look preoccupied rather than uneasy. She sneezed and welcomed this routine favour from

her nostrils with gratitude, for it allowed her to spend another couple of minutes absorbed by her bag. A tissue obtained and the blowing achieved, it then became difficult to make sitting still look like a taxing and purposeful business. She hoped for another sneeze. Quite often she had whole fits of them. The perfume and hairspray people wore to the church helped with that. Tissues themselves often contributed generously to the vicious cycle: bits of their fibre drifted up her nose and created further irritation. But this time the body said, 'There are *limits*, you know.'

An elderly lady called Mabel Day took a seat two rows ahead and Alice went to chat, trying to seem animated and pleased. As though she were a marionette in stilted competition with the real believers. Where possible, Alice preferred to talk to the old, the sick, the downhearted, or the children. As they were speaking, a young man of twenty-three called Jude came into the church by the back entrance. He turned two paces to the right, stopping beside two book racks that occupied a recess. He began leaning against the wall as though he needed its support.

Alice made her excuses to Mabel. She got up and walked over to him, head down, failing not to hurry too nervously.

'Going to sit down today?' she asked him, looking from his alert brown eyes to the swarf of copper on his chin.

'Maybe,' he said, smiling. Most people took Jude's failure to sit down in the church for a sure sign he was, like his father, Athenian and mad. They said it ran in the family. His greatgrandfather had been a poet and revolutionary.

'You going back to Oxford tomorrow?' he asked. She was a joint honours student - English and Fine Arts - at the university.

'Yes.'

'How'd you get there?'

'With difficulty.'

'Coach?'

‘Yes.’

‘Want a lift?’

‘To Oxford or the coach stop?’

‘To Oxford.’ He seemed surprised at the question.

He would pick her up at four o’clock. As the first hymn ended, she saw him sit down and felt slightly victorious.

There was not much to look at in the church. When Alice was younger, some of the building’s original features had still remained. Now the high peaked roof and its beams were hidden. Purified out of sight by the white plastic of the tiled Artex ceiling, whose other chief task was to stifle the air. Two curving white wooden alcove seats at the back were also gone. Effort had gone into making the church appear as little like a place of worship and as much like an office suite as possible. In the ceiling there were fluorescent tubes of light and regularly spaced fans, as though God might be found in a hole punch. Or perhaps in the photocopying machine sitting on the bay window in the back left corner. There was no ecstasy or holiness here. No possibility of floating to heaven. No icons or paintings whatever.

No reminders of the dead either. Except perhaps the nylon geraniums on the stand in the left corner of the stage, and the false red tulips in a blue vase on one of the right-hand sills. No plaques of passed-over worthy Worldwide members adorned the walls. There were two clocks telling different times. Funerals were sometimes conducted here, but the real business was done in the local crematorium. There was no burial ground outside the church, only a designated car parking area. All Alice could see, apart from the other Worldwide Saints, were windows with mismatched panes, Hessian-covered walls, rows of hard brown seats with low backs, a speckled carpet, thick fawn velvet curtains. The pastor stood on the slightly raised stage area, behind a carved rostrum with a fixed microphone. He wore a pale grey polyester suit and tinted

glasses that made him look shifty. To his right there was a table with a projector and a white screen between another set of the fawn curtains.

Alice tuned her mind to the pastor's voice. The suction of his tongue against the sides of his mouth was picked up by the microphone. It made a continual clack-click-clacking sound, as if he had swallowed an entire flamenco *artiste*, castanets and all. Today the theme of his sermon was, 'Science - Why It Has Not The Answers.' Scientists doubted the occurrence of Noah's Flood, he was saying. They put its effects on the earth's crust down to the Ice Age. But they were ignoring, he argued, the human cost of the Flood. Did he mean the people who drowned? (Alice's first thought.) No. He did not mean the people who drowned. He meant the increase in illicit sex everyone could see in the world of mankind today.

Why did God bring the Flood? he asked. Sex, he replied. Some angels flew to earth and materialised in human bodies, so they could make love to beautiful women. These women bore them a race of murderous giants, who filled the earth with bloodshed. Then the Flood came and washed them all away.

What were the effects of the Flood? he asked. Sex, he replied. The angels, no longer allowed by God to materialise, became voyeurs. It was why there was now so much illicit sex in The World. It was all for the viewing benefit of these minor devils, who treated it rather like a porn TV channel.

Alice unplugged her ears and looked around her. To her left, her mother nodded. To her right, Peter gazed ahead blankly. To Peter, the plain truth of it just *was*. Like marmalade, or the Grand Canyon. Undeniably there. In front of her Alice saw other people she knew also nodding and taking notes. She wondered which bits they were writing down.

She wondered if she was the only one to find this all a bit crazy.

Sitting on the chair, Alice began to be really preoccupied.

What the pastor said was nothing new to Alice. It was strictly orthodox. Her thoughts moved from the frustrated demons to the vilified scientists. The comments against them, like the comments about everything out there in The World, were so vehement it began to seem suspicious. Everyone in the church said everyone in The World was a drug baron or necrophiliac, or something of that order – so you could be glad to know the plain truth of things and be spared their company.

Twenty minutes later, she watched the pastor get down from the stage to a burst (she unblocked her ears again) of applause. The seventy-eight members of the church stood for the hymn. The pastor stood beside the projector, a recent innovation that threw the lyrics up on to the screen and made the old hymn books redundant.

Four minutes and three verses later, everyone sat down again. Alice heard announcements about the celebration of the forthcoming Festival of Joy. She concentrated on not flicking her hair or rubbing her nose. These nervous tics might be misinterpreted as her hand going up to make a remark. She often did make remarks, but not today. Today she wasn't even inclined to listen to anyone else's remarks either. She listened instead to stifled coughs and babies taken out to wail. A small girl, making happy humming sounds, got *sshhed* and *tssked* in return. A car outside protested its unwillingness to go anywhere. She listened to the wind and saw it stir the weeping willows she could see through a windowpane patterned with tiny palm tree shapes. It sounded like the rustling of a silver paper grass skirt she used to have. Next she found she was listening to herself sneeze, again and again. Typical. She tried to blow her nose as inoffensively as she could.

Playing with the used tissue in her hand, she began to think about what she might say to Jude. In her imaginary conversation, she held, not a tissue, but an imaginary cigarette. She didn't smoke. Never had. Never would. It wasn't allowed. But the imaginary cigarette calmed her down. Gave her a certain conversational coolness, a cinematic grace, she was otherwise unlikely to have. She liked particularly the way it punctuated her most pleasing sentences. Good sentence here – and a definitive flick of the ash followed. Excellent sentence there – and she might even boldly stub the cigarette out, halfway through. Just because she could.

'Jude's taking me back tomorrow,' she told her mother on the walk back home.

'Is he? Why?'

'He just offered.'

'There's something I want you to do for me.'

'What?' said Alice, a bit crossly, expecting unnecessary instructions about conducting herself with Jude.

'Type a letter.'

'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts,' William said, when Alice came into the living room and repeated the same information to him. 'The lad's not quite right, yer know.'

'Why, what's the matter with him?'

'Have yer met his father? He's a nice enough lad, Jude, don't get me wrong. But. It was that spell he had in London that really did it, I would say, messef personally. Whaddyermecallit, that place? St John's Wort?'

Alice tried not to think of the turquoise velvet hat with the gold trimming she had once seen Jude wearing in St John's Wood. She closed her ears to her father's speculation that Jude had 'gone funny' at this point because 'some arse-bandit' had more than likely had his way with him in a public lavatory.

'Oh, Alice,' he added with a sigh, 'if yer only *knew* what they did.'

It was a fiction preserved between them, that she did not know – had still not got things sorted out from the time when, during the Aids scandal of the early 1980s, she asked a dinner lady if girls who wore netball skirts over tracksuit bottoms were ‘homosexual’. She had been genuinely bewildered by the gender implications, but the dinner lady was furious.

‘Alice?’ her mother called. ‘Can you do the letter now?’

The letter was to Peter. He owed Oonagh a long outstanding £200 and she thought the formality of print might accelerate his conscience. There were certain rebuking and threatening phrases in the letter that Alice did not relish – ‘a deacon of the Worldwide Saints ought not to be a debtor’, and ‘if you do not pay I shall be forced to approach the pastor’ – but she was only the typist.

The next day at four o’clock Jude turned up. He sat down on the sofa with William, and cupped his hands behind his head as he spoke. Alice saw her father willing homosexuality into his every motion.

‘This child is my first and eldest and wisest daughter,’ he told Jude. ‘So drive carefully or I’ll cut yer balls off.’

Jude drove carefully.