

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Home Truths

David Lodge

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Author's Note

This novella is based on my play of the same title, which was first produced at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in February 1998, and subsequently published as a playtext by Secker & Warburg. I have revised some of the dialogue, restored lines that were cut from the play for various reasons at various stages of its composition, changed a few details, and added some new material. But it is essentially the same story.

DL

To Leah

'home truth: *a wounding mention of a person's weakness'*

Shorter Oxford English Dictionary

Home Truths

A Novella

David Lodge

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

1

THE COTTAGE STANDS all on its own at the end of a rutted cart-track that leads off from the main road to the village, about a mile away. It is easy to drive past this gap in the hedgerows without seeing the small hand-painted wooden sign, faded and weathered, which is nailed to a post, bearing the name 'Ludlow'; and without realising therefore that it leads to a human habitation. A slight hump in the terrain and a stand of beech trees screen the cottage and its outbuildings from the road.

This is not one of the more picturesque parts of Sussex, but a little pocket of slightly scruffy agricultural land situated between the main roads from London to Brighton and Worthing. Gatwick airport is nearer than the South Downs. The cottage itself is quite old, but not architecturally distinguished. It looks as if it originally consisted of two small semi-detached cottages, probably occupied by farm-workers, which have been converted into a single dwelling in modern times with many improvements and modifications. The front door is actually on one side of the house, where a gravel drive has been laid out for car parking, and the long frontage has windows where there were once doors, overlooking a pleasant, unpretentious garden of lawn and shrubs and flower-beds. At the back a one-storey extension has been added, accommodating a modern kitchen and a white-tiled shower suite. There are other outbuildings, including a kind of lean-to providing shelter for a small kiln, and what looks at first sight like a garden shed, except that it is constructed of rather superior

wood and has only one small square window, set into the door and glazed with dark, opaque glass.

‘Did you know’, said Adrian, reading from the carton, ‘that cornflakes are eighty-four per cent carbohydrates, of which eight per cent are sugars?’

Eleanor, absorbed in her newspaper, did not answer. Adrian picked up another packet and scrutinised it.

‘All-Bran is only forty-six per cent carbohydrates, but eighteen per cent of them are sugars,’ he said. ‘Is eighteen per cent of forty-six better or worse than eight per cent of eighty-four?’

Eleanor still did not answer. Adrian did not seem surprised or offended. He picked up another packet. ‘Shredded Wheat seems to be the best bet. Sixty-seven per cent carbohydrates, of which less than one per cent are sugars. And no salt. I suppose that’s why it doesn’t taste of anything much.’ He put a portion of Shredded Wheat into his bowl, and poured on semi-skimmed milk.

It was nine o’clock on a Sunday morning in the summer of 1997. Adrian and Eleanor Ludlow were in the living room of their cottage, in dressing gowns. It was a large, low-ceilinged, comfortable room, with a dining table at one end and a sitting area at the other, where there was an open fireplace. The walls were lined with densely packed bookshelves, which seemed to lean inwards in places – an effect of the irregularity of the walls, which made the house seem like a rather civilised cave dwelling. Spaces had been left in the shelving for the display of several ceramic vases, jugs and bowls with a family resemblance in their design; and there were more such objects on occasional tables in the room. The bookshelves also incorporated an expensive hi-fi system, which was silent at this hour, like the television set pushed into a corner of the sitting area. Adrian was at the dining table. Eleanor had finished her breakfast and was sitting on the sofa reading the Sunday papers. She did this