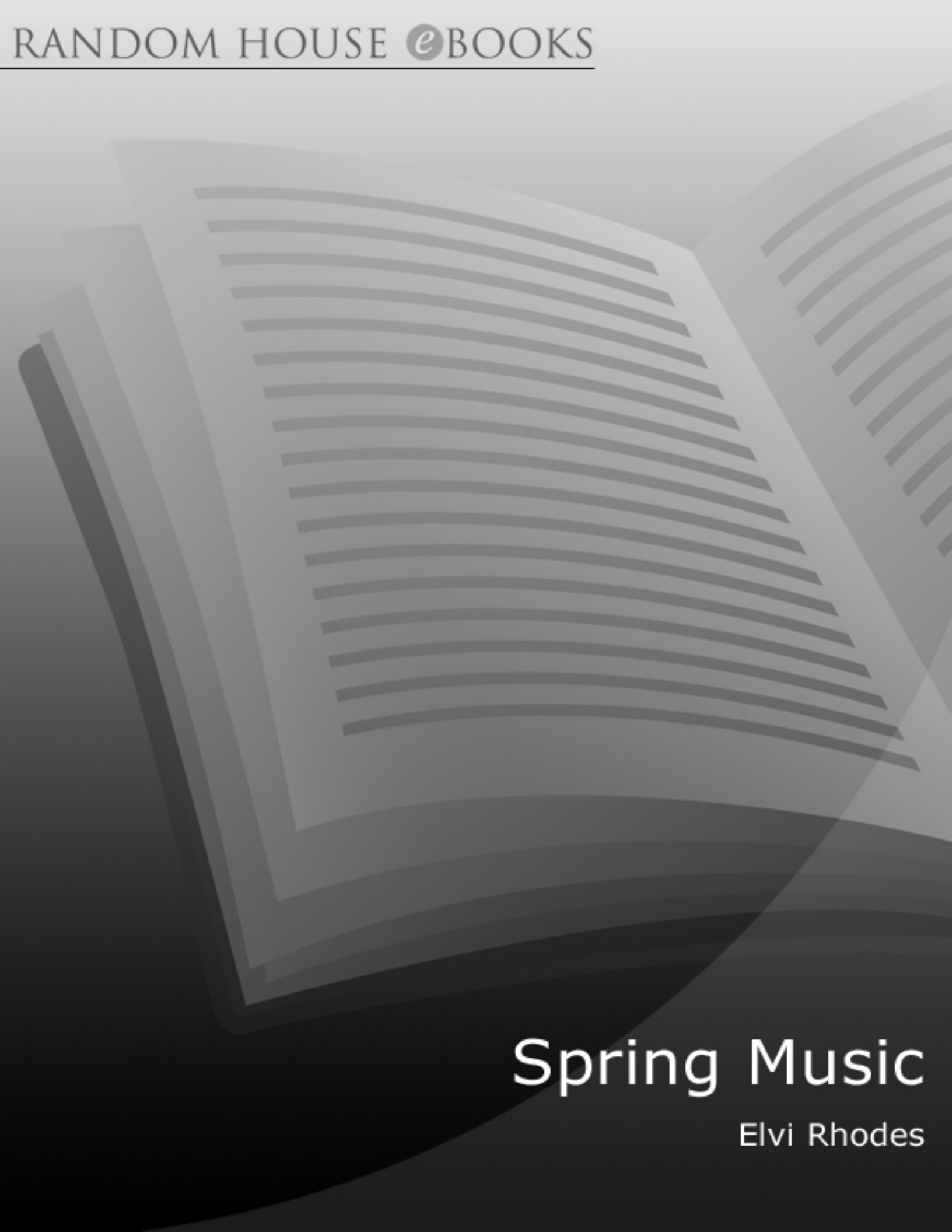


RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS



Spring Music

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

Naomi had been contentedly and, she thought, happily married for nearly all of her adult life when her husband Edward explained kindly to her one day that he had fallen in love with a twenty-six-year-old and wanted a divorce. She had to leave the comfortable home she had shared with Edward and their three children, now all grown-up, and move into a small flat in the middle of Bath. The dramatic change in her lifestyle threatened to overwhelm her.

But gradually Naomi began to appreciate the changes, and even to enjoy them. For the first time in her life she could do what she liked, and make her own friends. If these included men friends - well, why not? Unfortunately her children could think of many reasons why not, and Naomi began to battle to establish her own independence, and to persuade her family that she had moved into the springtime of a whole new life.

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About the Author

Also by Elvi Rhodes

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SPRING MUSIC

Elvi Rhodes



CORGI BOOKS

*This is for my granddaughter, Emma Rhodes, with
much love*

Acknowledgements

I am greatly indebted to Olwen Holmes, friend and musician, for telling me about teaching the piano to children. Also for our discussions about what music Naomi would choose to play. Thank you, Olwen.

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‘That’s it then, madam! We’ll be off!’

The foreman of the removal firm stood in the doorway, his two assistants behind him. Aside from the fact that they were all three dressed in white overalls with the company’s name, MoveAll, embroidered in red across the breast pocket, they were an ill-assorted trio: the foreman tall, thin, hungry-looking; the middle one stocky, with huge hands and a red face; and the third, the one who had carried in, single-handed, the oak chest which Naomi hoped would fit in the hall, was small and puny-looking, as if a strong puff of wind would blow him over.

‘You’ll soon have everything in order!’ the foreman said encouragingly.

She nodded, not because she agreed with him, she doubted everything would be in order again, but she was too tired to dissent. Also, she had discovered, he was one of the world’s talkers and she didn’t wish to encourage him any further.

‘We’ll be off then,’ he repeated.

She said nothing lest a single word should set off a further conversation. She had given them a reasonable tip with which they’d seemed pleased. There was nothing more, was there?

‘Thanks for the tea!’ he said. ‘Cheers!’

To her great relief he turned and led his small posse out of the flat.

Without rising from her seat she watched them through the window which, she noted, needed cleaning, as they

fastened up the back of the van, climbed into the front and drove away into the late afternoon traffic.

They'd been all right, she supposed. Agreeable, good-tempered, though not very clever. But then she had almost no experience of removal men, she'd lived in the same house all her married life. Perhaps none of them were good at putting the right furniture in the right rooms? Perhaps she hadn't instructed them properly? Maybe it was her fault that she was sitting on what was manifestly a kitchen chair, and shabby with it, in the middle of her sitting room? Not yet *her* sitting room, though. She and the room, indeed the whole flat, were strangers to each other. She hadn't, either on first viewing it or subsequently, by any means fallen in love with it. She'd had to find something quickly: it was a place to live.

Why am I here? What am I doing here? she asked herself. 'I don't believe it!'

She said the last words out loud. So am I now going to start talking to myself? she wondered. Or will I talk to the walls, like Shirley Valentine?

The telephone rang, the sound in the unfamiliar room startling her so that her whole body jumped and she leapt up from the chair. She had arranged for the phone to be connected yesterday and checked first thing today that it had been done, but since then it had remained silent, and now, in the untidy mess which had accumulated, she couldn't even remember where it was. She searched frantically for the source of the ringing, calling out, 'I'm coming! I'm coming!' until she found it on the floor behind the sofa. She bent down to it and, as she clasped her hand around the receiver, the ringing ceased.

'Damn!' she said. 'Damn, damn!'

It could have been Isobel. Though if it was, she thought, it would not have been to ask about me. How are you, Mummy? How are you getting on? Is there anything I can do? No, it would have been something about the baby. Sure

to be. Harry was four months old and filled Isobel's horizon almost entirely. His feeding, his sleeping, the colour and consistency of the contents of his diapers, every movement of his hands, feet, eyes were of consuming interest to his mother. The small windy quirks of his mouth were *not* caused by wind, they were full-blown smiles at the world around him. Any day now, Naomi expected to hear he had taken his first steps, said his first words, and cut half a dozen pearly teeth. If they had had a video camera, it would all have been recorded. Not, of course, that Naomi didn't adore him! Of course she did.

Sometimes she felt sorry for Patrick, Isobel's partner – if anything as definite as the word 'partner' could be applied to him. He got short shrift these days, not because Isobel held anything against him, not even the fact that he'd made her pregnant before she'd hardly got to know him, but simply that the baby was all. Patrick's crowning glory was just that he had fathered this wonderful child. Isobel would think further about Patrick, about whether they would or would not get married, as he sometimes suggested, when she had time; which was not now.

If it had been Isobel, she would ring again.

Naomi picked up the phone and placed it on a shelf which, when she had unpacked them, would hold books. She had no idea where the books were, except that they were in tea chests. They could be in the bathroom, or the larder; they could be anywhere.

She looked beseechingly at the phone as she put it down, begging it to ring again so that someone, anyone, could briefly inhabit the room with her. Even a wrong number would do. One could prolong a wrong number into a short conversation. It looked back at her, mute, silent.

She would make a cup of tea. Not that she wanted one, she was awash with tea, had been all day. When the removal men had arrived at Four Winds at eight o'clock this morning it had been plain that they couldn't start the

day without strong tea to get them going, and thereafter they had hinted about it, or asked outright, every hour on the hour. A week or two ago she had read an article about moving house. 'Pack a basket with everything essential for tea-making,' it advised. 'See that it's last to go on the van before you leave and first to be unloaded at the new place.' There'd been other advice too, stuff about putting coloured stickers on the furniture and corresponding ones on the doors of the rooms for which it was intended, but she couldn't be bothered with all that. And now I'll pay the price, she thought.

Nevertheless she would have yet another cup of tea and then she'd make up the bed so that she could fall into it when she wanted to. *Our* bed. It was how she still thought of it though for many months now she had occupied it alone, still keeping to her own side as though Edward might at any moment join her after sitting on the edge, his back to her, for several minutes, which he did every night. She had never liked to ask him what he was contemplating. He was not praying, she knew that, since Edward did not believe in God. God was not logical. Sometimes she wondered if he was contemplating his rather nice feet.

Did he do it now? she wondered. Now that he had a new and younger bedmate. Did he keep her waiting while he locked every door and window, turned off every light? Or did he drag her upstairs by the hair of her head, throw her onto the bed and jump on her?

She had been thunderstruck – 'gobsmacked' as Cecily would have put it – when Edward, coming home late one evening and finding her sitting up in bed, had told her, in his mellifluous, beautifully modulated voice, that he no longer loved her, well, not as he *had* loved her. He had, he explained, fallen in love with someone else. Her name was Helen. She was twenty-six.

'*Deeply* in love!' he'd emphasized. 'So you see ... But don't think,' he had added kindly, 'that I don't respect you,

don't like you. Of course I do! You are an eminently likeable woman!'

'Thank you,' she'd said automatically, because she was on auto-pilot, so astonished, so disbelieving, that the agony had not hit her until he'd left the following morning after spending the night in the guest room. She had had to wait until the evening to ask the questions which had hammered at her all day.

They sat on either side of the dinner table while he explained his position, which he did in a kindly, matter-of-fact manner as if she might be a client whom he was advising on the niceties of making a will. It was not unlike discussing a will.

'I shall not shirk my obligations,' he'd said. 'I shall, of course, provide for you. I will give you a modest allowance and when we sell Four Winds your share of the proceeds will buy a flat, or a small cottage.'

'Sell Four Winds? You mean I can't live here?' They had moved into Four Winds straight after their honeymoon. It was a solid, Edwardian house, the kind of house where the children had brought their friends and would, eventually, as she saw it, bring their own offspring. She had expected to live there for the rest of her life.

'Of course not!' Edward had said patiently. 'I shall have to make economies. In any case it would be far too big for you!'

It was she who would have to make the economies, Naomi quickly discovered. Since Helen's father was the owner of a large department store in Bristol and she was his only child, there would be no need for scrimping and saving there.

'And then there's ...' Edward had hesitated slightly '... and then there's the baby.'

'The baby? What has Harry to do with this?'

'Not Harry! Helen is expecting a baby. My baby! Which is why I want a divorce quickly.'

She'd stared at him. Edward Fletcher, upright, straightforward, kind, conventional, a little bit dull but she hadn't really minded that. Even his profession fitted him. A square peg in a square hole. Yet suddenly, it seemed, he was none of those things! Had she never quite known him? For how long had this other self been bubbling away beneath the unremarkable surface before it had erupted? Falling for a younger woman was one thing, though in Edward's case quite out of character; fathering a child was mind-boggling. Though regular and consistent, and giving and taking moderate satisfaction in his sex life, he was so careful, so controlled that he would seem capable of deciding which day of the week any child of his might be born. He was not given to mad passion, or moments of abandonment. Or at least not with me, Naomi thought. So what did this other woman have, to have wrought this change in him?

'You do see that, don't you?' he'd persisted. 'You do see why I need to settle this quickly?'

'Oh, I see! Well you would, wouldn't you!' She'd tried to keep calm though now her whole body was trembling. She'd gripped the sides of her chair, trying to keep control of herself. 'And who better than you, a family solicitor, to know the best way to go about such a thing?'

Don't do this to me! she'd wanted to shout. Don't do it! Come back to me!

She'd looked down at her plate. They were eating, or, rather, not eating, Dover sole with a shrimp sauce, one of his favourite dishes. Fierce anger swept through her. She wanted to pick up the plate and land the contents full-square on his face. She looked up at him and saw, in her imagination, the fish caught in his hair, the sauce dripping down his face, tiny shrimps caught in his neat beard.

And that was another thing, she'd thought frantically, wildly. Why had he, who had always been somewhat suspicious of men who sported beards, considered them

raffish, suddenly over the last months grown one? Why hadn't it alerted her?

It was, stupidly, the sight of his beard which had brought the tears to her eyes. She'd opened her eyes wide, held them rigid so that the tears shouldn't fall.

The moment passed. She pushed her plate away, steadied herself.

'And what about your own children? I mean the ones you already have?'

'I shall do my duty,' he said. 'Of course I shall. Hugh seems to be scraping along in the theatre, though it's a precarious career, as I warned him at the time, but if ever he wants to set up in a proper business then I'll listen to him.'

'And Isobel and Cecily?' she prompted.

'Isobel has made her own bed and she must lie on it!' he said. It was an unfortunate metaphor in the circumstances, Naomi had thought. And not only for Isobel.

'As for Cecily,' he'd continued, 'of course I shall look after her as long as she's in university. After that we'll see. But she'll be all right, I promise you!'

'I'm sure!' Naomi said. Cecily was Daddy's girl, always had been. She probably thought that what he was doing was perfectly in order, the thing to do. When the music stops everybody change partners. The University of Sussex, though it might approve of them, couldn't be blamed for giving Cecily her ideas. She had always had them.

There had been practically nothing else to say to Edward. He was besotted. Totally besotted.

And the first economy, Naomi realized, as she began to look in estate agents' windows, take home sheaves of details, was that no way could she afford even the cheapest house. Not if she wished to live in or near to the centre of Bath, which she had decided was the only thing to do. She must at least make an effort to be where the action was. Indeed, it was at this point that she'd realized that to stay

at Four Winds, situated in the stretch of country between Bath and Bristol, was not the best possible idea.

She had friends of course, and they would be kind. They would invite her to things, especially at first, though she would be the extra woman at the dinner table. She would upset the seating, even causing two women to have to sit side by side. *Quelle horreur!*

They would start asking her to female tea parties instead of to dinner. She would be an appendage on the edge of their lives – at which thought she wiped away a tear and then pulled herself together, squared her shoulders. No-one must be sorry for her; nothing could make her feel more of a failure than that. No! She would pull up her anchor and sail into new waters, even if it was only in a small houseboat on the Kennet and Avon canal!

To be practical, and with an effort she had talked herself into a practical mood, she had faced the fact that she must look for a flat, and not too expensive at that. She tore up and threw away all the agents' details which didn't fall into that category, including the description of a house in the Royal Crescent, wildly beyond her means, which she had kept to read as a sort of fairy tale.

This flat, which at the moment resembled a council tip, had been chosen because the living room was roomy enough to have her piano and, being on the ground floor, included the garden at the back. It was also no more than a ten minute brisk walk from the town centre, in the hinterland behind Pulteney Street and close to Sydney Gardens, so that when she got a job she would be able to walk to work. No bus fares.

She went into the kitchen and put on the kettle. It was such a small kitchen. 'Compact' the estate agent had called it, in the special language they used.

She poured the boiling water into a mug, swished the tea-bag around in it until the liquid was exactly the right strength, then scooped it out again. Then she cut a slice of

wholemeal bread and a piece of Cheddar cheese and took the whole lot back to the sitting room. This kitchen was not a place in which to eat, even if she could have found a chair which was not piled with objects.

Four Winds had had a roomy kitchen with a large square table in the centre, at which, when the children had come in from school, they'd always had tea. She had strong memories of beans on toast. But what did she want with a large kitchen? Here, she argued, she could conveniently reach almost everything without moving more than two or three steps.

Stop it, she ordered herself, you are beginning to *think* like an estate agent!

Of course, there was no reason why she should be perched on a corner of the sofa, eating this frugal meal. There were plenty of cafés nearby. That was one of the good things about Bath, everything was more or less within walking distance. But she wasn't in the mood for eating out nor, she realized, having caught sight of herself in the mirror which the previous owner had left behind in the hall, was she fit to be seen. She was pale and dishevelled and her sweatshirt and jeans, though good enough for moving house, had seen better days. No, when she had eaten she would make up the bed, take a shower and call it a day. Not the best day of her life so far, but tomorrow would be different. She would make it so.

She was in bed and reading the new Inspector Morse she had saved especially for now, something absorbing, when the telephone by her bedside rang. She grabbed it.

'I rang earlier. I didn't think you'd be out!'

'Edward! What? Why?' He was the last person she'd expected to hear. 'I wasn't out,' she said. 'I just couldn't find the phone!'

'Couldn't find the phone?'

She felt ten years old, and incompetent. On the other hand, what had it now to do with him?

‘Did you ring for anything special?’

‘I just wanted to make sure you were all right,’ Edward said. ‘Naturally.’

Naturally? Was this the way things were conducted, then? He sounded so damnably civilized, which was not at all how she felt. She felt full of primitive passions; furious!

‘Are you settled in?’

‘Settled in?’ She looked around the bedroom. Except for the large square of her bed it was chaotic. And how dare he telephone her in this calm manner? Why wasn’t he lying right here beside her? He was hers!

‘Not quite,’ she said. ‘Not yet.’

‘We’ll pop across and see you as soon as Helen’s able.’ He made it sound like a treat in store. ‘She’s not too well at the moment. She finds the cold trying.’

I find the whole of life trying, Naomi thought. What in the world did he mean by all this? Were they all to be cosy friends together? Was that what he expected? Was she to be asked to *sympathize* with Helen in her pregnancy? Would she, later on, be requested to babysit?

‘If there’s anything at all I can do for you ...’ he was saying.

‘You mean like the bathroom tap needs a washer and the kitchen sink’s blocked? And yes, and I shall need new shelves putting up all over the place? Is that the kind of thing?’

‘Not ... precisely,’ he floundered. ‘But if there *is* anything ... And in the meantime take care of yourself!’

‘Take care of myself!’ she shouted. ‘You should be taking care of me!’ But she didn’t say it until after she had slammed the phone down.

She went back to her book, but it was no good, she couldn’t concentrate, the words ran together. Even Inspector Morse failed her. She had been thoroughly upset by Edward’s call. When she found herself reading the same

sentence for the third time she gave it up, closed the book and switched off the light.

I will think about tomorrow, she decided. And the day after and the day after that. I will make plans. She would give herself two weeks to put the flat to rights, to walk around Bath at leisure, to visit her mother. She would have her hair done and then she would look for a job.

When she wakened next morning for a moment or two Naomi did not know where she was, and assumed that she was still asleep and dreaming. After all, every morning for twenty-five years, give or take a few holidays away from home, she had opened her eyes to a pastel-coloured wall, the shade changing occasionally when the room was redecorated, and meeting her eye had been the watercolour of the harbour at St Ives which Edward had bought for her when they were on honeymoon there in 1969.

Her first, incoherent thought was that the picture had been stolen by thieves in the night, but quickly following that came the realization that it was not the picture which had been stolen from her – that was around somewhere – but her husband. And as her eyes travelled around the bedroom there *was* the picture, leaning against the wall, waiting to be hung. Well, she wouldn't hang it that was for sure. She would give it to the Help the Aged shop. Did they take pictures? Never mind, someone would, if only the dust-man.

She got out of bed – the rugs had not been laid and the floor was cold to her feet – crossed to the window and drew back the curtains which had kindly been left by the previous owner. 'You might as well have them,' she'd said. 'No curtains ever fit any other window. It's a rule of life!'

Looking at the garden was the first thing she had always done every morning, but it was strange now, seeing this one almost on a level instead of from a first-floor window. It

was strange, but rather pleasant since there was a feeling of being in it. Not that there was much to see on this chilly, damp February morning. Close to the house, purple *Iris reticulata* were in flower and there were yellow crocuses in a wooden tub. On the wall to the left, winter jasmine was breathing its last. The grass, waiting for its new spring growth, was dull and tired-looking, but would not be so much longer. Spring came early here. Already the daffodil spears were several inches high, with the buds starting to swell. But in spite of the signs, it was not yet spring. It was not even one of those days which, with deeper colour in the shafts of sunlight, offered a tantalizing foretaste of what was to come. Beyond the bottom wall the mist took over, blotting out the view which she knew, from a previous visit, included the abbey. If she went into the town today perhaps she would pop into the abbey.

Shivering a little, she turned away from the window, put on her dressing-gown and went into the kitchen. She looked forward to doing something with the garden when she had the time. It was small, but that was not the chief thing against it. The trouble was that it was dull and conventional, with a rectangular lawn, straight, too-narrow borders planted in rows, like soldiers on parade. It needed imagination, it needed redesigning and she would see that it got both.

As she made coffee and put a slice of brown bread in the toaster, she couldn't help but think of the garden she had left behind at Four Winds. That had been the achievement of a twenty-five-year labour of love; with its lawn, an arbour smothered in the springtime in *Clematis Montana*, the pale pink one; a small statue, half-hidden, of a boy; trees now grown to maturity. There was a pond where six koi – she had given them all names of poets – swam with goldfish too numerous to name, and into which, and it was the delight of her life, a small waterfall tumbled. On summer evenings,

waiting for Edward to come home from Bristol, she would sit close by, glass of wine in her hand, enjoying the sound.

She pushed the thought away from her. There was no mileage in looking back and she would not do it.

Needing only to make a right-angled turn, she placed her coffee and toast on the ledge which was an extension of the window-sill. 'Integral breakfast bar,' the agent had described it as. She fetched a sheet of paper which she firmly headed 'THINGS TO DO!' and then stared at the blank sheet while she ate and drank. In the end she wrote down:

Phone Mr Betts
ditto Isobel
unpack music

And then gave up. The rest she would do as it came to her. The surrounding chaos would supply all the inspiration she needed.

First things first! Mr Betts was the piano tuner. Her poor piano, in spite of the fact that she had hired, not the Three Stooges, but a specialist firm that had known how to deal with it carefully, to bring it over the day before the general move, as befitted its station as a Bechstein, must be suffering from disturbance. Much as I am, she thought. But where is the Mr Betts who will retune me?

Mr Betts, who lived close to Bristol, promised to call in two days' time.

'First thing in the morning!' she reminded him.

On the day her piano was newly tuned she always followed the same routine. She lovingly washed its keys with milk then indulged herself by sitting down to play for the rest of the morning, answering neither the telephone nor the door.

'Very well, first thing,' Mr Betts agreed. 'But let her settle down until then. She'll be all the better for it!'

Perhaps *I* would be all the better for settling down first, Naomi thought, clutching at a straw, looking around at the appearance of the room. Maybe I shouldn't even attempt to get everything into place quickly, perhaps I should take it a little at a time? After all, there is no-one to stand over me with a stopwatch, no-one other than me to give a damn what it looks like.

She would phone Isobel next. She would not wait for Isobel to phone her, partly because her daughter, unprompted, might not do it, partly because, Naomi told herself, though with little conviction, my daughter might be needing me. After all, she had a young baby, she was inexperienced. Mostly, she admitted, she would phone her because she simply wanted to talk to someone, and someone with a little more conversation than Mr Betts. True, both he and Isobel had one-track minds, pianos or babies, take your pick, but Isobel was the more articulate.

'He's just gone off to sleep!' Isobel said quietly. 'Bless him!' She added this invocation to most things she said about Harry.

'Bless him!' Naomi replied dutifully, forbearing to add that babies sometimes did go to sleep. 'I thought I might pop in and see you. This morning?'

'Aren't you too busy, Mummy?' Isobel sounded doubtful.

'Not really!' Naomi lied. 'Everything's under control.'

'Well I'm sure Harry would like to see you,' Isobel said. 'I'm sure he'd say so if he was awake – in his only little way, bless him! And I know you'd like to see him.'

'Of course! I'll be down later, then!'

And before I go, Naomi thought virtuously, I will unpack my music. Well, not all of it, there was too much of it to do all at once, but at least she would see to her music cabinet which always stood, and still would, not far from her piano. The top drawer housed what she was currently working on, in this case Grieg's 'Remembrances' and Liszt's 'Consolation Number 3'. Unlikely bedfellows, Grieg and

Liszt, she thought. Yet perhaps not in another way since, if she remembered rightly, Liszt had been very helpful to Grieg.

There was no way she should allow herself to sit down at the piano right now. There were far too many things screaming for attention, and in any case she ought not to use the piano until Mr Betts had ministered to it. All the same she was going to. She was going to sit at the piano and she was going to play, 'Remembrances' first and 'Consolation' afterwards. She had chosen both pieces shortly after Edward had left her, so that by now she knew them well. But she would not be able to let them go, not just yet; they had come to mean something more than the music.

In the untidy, rather chilly flat she played the piano with confidence, and knew she was playing well. They were well-named pieces. She wondered under what circumstances Grieg and Liszt had composed them. Oddly enough, she thought, when you were down, to play sad music *was* consoling. When the last notes had died away she sat for a minute. Then she closed the lid. 'That's the last time I touch you until you've been tuned!' she promised. And that was also her last ration of sadness for the day. Next stop, Isobel and Harry!

I shall walk to Isobel's, Naomi decided. It was to be yet another feature of her new lifestyle that she would drive around less, take more exercise. In any case, parking in Bath was hellish. Yesterday only by the skin of her teeth, seizing the opportunity the second someone else moved out, had she sneaked her Peugeot into a space reasonably close to her flat. And if she moved it would she ever get the space back again? She pushed aside the question of what use a car was if it only existed to fill a space.

Edward had considered it somewhat common to park one's car permanently in the street. The place for a car, when not in use, was in the garage, and that was where he

drove his dark blue BMW every evening when he arrived home, not leaving it, which she suspected he did with a little goodnight pat, until it was safely tucked away.

Isobel lived in a flat part-way up Bathwick Hill, over premises occupied during the day by a firm of dentists, Brane and Manners. It was not ideal, or so Naomi thought, but Isobel seemed happy enough with it. The sound of traffic, and it was muted a little because she was a storey above it, didn't worry her, and the position was handy for Patrick, who was an assistant in the university library. The number 18 bus – he earned a pittance and could not afford a car – stopped right outside the dentists' door.

It was in the last year of Isobel's degree in English that Patrick had joined the library staff and it became the year in which she spent a great deal of time working in the library. She was not alone – females, arts or science, it made no difference – were strongly attracted to this new young man who, they agreed, was a cross between Byron and Heathcliff, but more outgoing than either. Isobel it was who won him. The fact that she was having his baby, even though she wouldn't agree to marry him, gave her the edge over those who would have married him like a shot, and waited for a baby.

'We shan't always live here, Mummy,' Isobel had said in answer to Naomi's look when she had first set eyes on the flat. 'It's a starting place. When Patrick has passed his exams we shall move on.'

And who am I to criticize? Naomi asked herself now, as she turned the corner past the church and began to climb the hill. My flat is a finishing place, it's what I've come to in the end.

She let herself into the building, peeked into Harry's pram which was parked in the hall, though of course he couldn't possibly be in it, not out of his mother's sight, and climbed the stairs to the first floor. A smell of disinfectant mixed with anaesthetic hung about the stairs, which made

her dicey back molar, which should have been attended to a month ago, jump with guilt. She really must go into Bristol to see Mr Fanshaw before he sent one of his polite reminders. But he wouldn't know where to send it, would he? And perhaps with all this new life business she would strike out with a fresh dentist? She would ask Isobel about this one, Mr Brane or Mr Manners as the case might be.

Harry's cries came loud and strong even before she rang the bell. Isobel came to the door with him in her arms. He was puce in the face.

'What do you know about four-month colic?' Isobel asked by way of greeting. 'He just goes on and on! Bless him!'

'All I ever want to know,' Naomi said. 'But including the fact that it does pass. Eventually. Let me get rid of my coat, then I'll take him.'

She held him over her shoulder rubbing his back. For a moment his cries ceased. He belched loudly, then started to cry with renewed vigour.

'Does he need feeding?' Naomi enquired.

'I fed him half an hour before you arrived.'

'Then that's it, he has indigestion!' Naomi said.

'Indigestion?' Isobel bridled. 'How can his mother's milk give him indigestion? It's perfected by nature for its purpose!'

'It's easy enough to thwart nature, dear. You've only got to eat pickled onions, for example.'

'Oh Mummy! As if I would! I'm extremely careful what I eat. I know my responsibilities.'

'I didn't say you would, darling. I only said you *could*.'

Harry gave a final whimper, then stopped crying. A self-satisfied expression crossed his face.

'Anyway,' Naomi said quickly, 'perhaps you'd better have him back. His nappy needs changing. Babies are so primitive, aren't they?'

'Who's a clever boy, then?' Isobel cooed.

While she dealt with Harry's little offering her mother stood by the window, looking out onto the road. Does she really like babies? Isobel wondered. *Really* like? Did she like us? Impossible to say. One couldn't remember anything at all about being a small baby, and if asked her mother would say, 'Of course I did!'

She'd been a perfectly satisfactory mother; caring, fun-loving, encouraging them to do all manner of things which the mothers of their friends wouldn't allow. She'd helped them with their homework, chauffeured them to Brownies, parties, dancing classes. Perhaps she liked us better when we were older, Isobel thought.

She massaged cream into Harry's bottom before putting on his fresh nappy, carefully, so that not even the slightest crease could irk him. It was quite sad, really, that unless she told him later he would never know just how much she loved him at this moment. And it wasn't something you could tell a grown boy, was it?

'There!' she said brightly. 'All done! A nice clean boy, bless him!'

Naomi turned back into the room. 'It still looks misty down in the town.'

'It's a misty place,' Isobel said. 'Especially down by the river. Have you settled in then, Mummy?'

'More or less,' Naomi said vaguely. 'I might go and see your grandmother this afternoon.'

'Well, give her my love. And Harry's. I know she'd just love to see him but I'm not sure it's the place to take a young baby.'

'Oh, I don't know!' Naomi said. 'It might do the old folks a world of good. And it wouldn't hurt Harry. They're not infectious. Just old, and some of them a bit dotty.'

Isobel smiled at her mother.

'But that's what I mean, darling. I wasn't thinking Harry would catch something nasty ...' She broke off, suddenly uncertain. 'But I mean ... well ... I mean, babies are so

impressionable, aren't they? I do think they should be with people who are *whole* and *sound* and, well, *beautiful*! Don't you?'

'I think babies are as tough as old boots,' Naomi said.

Isobel looked uncertain, then laughed.

'Oh Mummy, you are so funny. Sometimes you say the oddest things!'

'Do I, dear?'

Or is it, Naomi wondered, that you and I don't speak the same language? The thought saddened her. She needed, at the moment, to be closer to her family, not more distant.

She stayed for another hour, during which time Harry slept the sleep of one whose bodily functions were at last in total harmony.

'How is Patrick?' she asked. Her visits, though not by design, seldom coincided with Patrick's presence.

'Very well. Working hard, studying hard.'

'And are you and he ...?'

'He does want us to marry,' Isobel said. 'But really I have to concentrate on Harry. Marriage is such a big production, but having a baby is even more so.'

And you have got them the wrong way round, Naomi thought. Or perhaps it was she who was wrong? It would be quite nice, though, to have one child conventionally married, one grandchild with legally bound parents. Hugh showed no sign whatever of settling down and no-one in the world could foretell what Cecily would do.

'I would quite like to see you married.' She spoke as casually as she could; no pressure, no hectoring.

'Oh, I expect we'll get around to it one day,' Isobel said.

And why would I wish to rush anyone into matrimony? Naomi asked herself. Where has it landed me? But quick as a flash the answer came: it has landed you with three children who, though they might not be entirely as you would have designed them, are yours to love and to be

loved by, and with that dear little infant, sleeping like an angel in his crib.

She stood there, Isobel beside her, both of them looking down at Harry.

‘He has a distinct look of you, Mummy,’ Isobel said. ‘Dark hair, and those well-defined eyebrows.’

‘I hope my hair’s a little less sparse,’ Naomi said. ‘Though of course he has the advantage of no stray grey bits.’ As far as her eyebrows, well it was better to have handed those down than her rather short tilted nose, which would have been all right on a baby but was not serious enough for a grown man.

‘Fortunately,’ she said, ‘he has inherited your father’s aquiline nose. Anyway I must go!’

‘What are you going to do?’

There was no doubt what she should do, she should go back to the flat and tackle the mess.

‘I think I shall walk into the town,’ she said. ‘There are one or two things I need.’

The day was fractionally brighter than it had been as she set off down the hill. At least the mist had dispersed. Though she eventually found herself outside the abbey, its west front almost totally obscured by scaffolding, she didn’t go in. The mood to do so had left her, she would wait for another day. As she crossed the abbey churchyard lunch was being served in the Pump Room, but today she would seek somewhere simpler. She turned right and walked towards Milsom Street.

Eating her cheese-and-tomato sandwich, which was tastefully garnished with a few strands of cress and half a lettuce leaf, Naomi wondered whether she would or would not visit her mother this afternoon. When living at Four Winds she had driven over once a fortnight or so. Many of the relatives of the guests at River View, she knew, visited on the same day at the same time each week, a regularity appreciated by their elderly dependants, who liked to think

they could set the clock by them. It had not been so with her mother for some time now. Though physically fit and seemingly happy she seldom knew which day of the week it was or even which year she was living in. Time had lost its meaning. She would greet Naomi with surprise, saying, 'But you were only here yesterday, dear!' or with reproach because she believed she had not been near her for months.

So this afternoon or tomorrow, Naomi thought sadly, what difference will it make?

Her mother had moved into River View less than three years ago after almost eighteen years of not unpleasant widowhood. Indeed, it had turned out to be the most pleasant period of her life, since her husband, Ronald Campbell, had proved soon after their marriage to be bad-tempered, bullying, oppressive and mean. He had, however, by working all hours in his native West Yorkshire, made a deal of money as a builder who could and did turn his hand to anything, especially in the immediate post-war years. There was so much to be done and if materials were short Ronald Campbell always knew where to lay his hands on what was needed. Whether he found it on the black market or not, no-one wanted to know. Builders were as Princes of the Blood.

Naomi could not remember a time when she hadn't disliked her father, mostly because he was so nasty to her mother. In turn, he disliked Naomi. Apart from the fact that she was not a son, who could have followed him into the building trade, she was too spirited. He couldn't squash her. Women should be capable of being squashed.

It had been a godsend to Naomi - quite apart from the fact that she was head over heels in love with him - when Edward met her when he was in Leeds, married her, and whisked her off to his native Bristol. The pity was that when Ronald and his wife Doris visited the newly-weds a year later, Ronald fell hook, line and sinker for the West

Country. He went back to Yorkshire, sold his business at a substantial profit and returned, aged sixty, to buy a house in Cheltenham. There he darkened their lives, and the lives of all who met him, for no more than two years before he died of a heart attack.

What a pity, Naomi thought, not for the first time, that Mother hadn't married again. She'd been eligible enough – a lively sixty, slim and pretty, owner of a mortgage-free detached house and in receipt of a substantial, well-invested income.

But what I know now that I didn't know then, she thought, moving to the cash desk to pay her bill, is that older men would rather have two women of thirty than one of sixty!

She decided as she left the café that she would put off the visit to her mother until tomorrow. She had, after all, made one family visit today. Passing Jolly's store, she nipped in, not because she needed anything but because it looked so bright and inviting. Could I get a job here? she wondered. She knew nothing of salesmanship, but then what *did* she know anything about? Whatever she decided to do – or more likely whatever she could find to do – she would have to learn about it from the ground up.

She bought a lipstick – Red Passion – it seemed mean to buy nothing, then left the store and walked back through the chilly afternoon to her flat. Turning the key in the lock, walking in, for the first time coming back to it, she suddenly thought, This is my home!