RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

The Apple Tree

Elvi Rhodes

About the Book

When Frances, recovering from a broken love affair, moves with her mother to lonely Beck Farm in the Yorkshire Dales, she is going into uncharted territory. Planning to open a guesthouse, she encounters only friendliness from the villagers, but there seems to be some mystery about the previous owner of Beck Farm, Ben Thornton. What has happened to his wife – and why is she still so bitterly resented?

Both the ancient and neglected house and its old but magnificent apple tree are badly in need of care and attention. As she brings them both back to life Frances is to discover the history of the house and its occupants – and at the same time rebuild her own life.

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CORGI BOOKS

This book is for Olwen Homes,
in gratitude for many years of
enduring friendship

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The landscape of the beautiful Yorkshire Dales is real and unchanging even when I change the names. The events and characters exist only in my imagination.

FRANCES

ONE

Frances turned in at the gateway – there was no longer a gate, just the posts where it had once hung – and drove across the flagstoned yard, pulling up at the gabled porch that sheltered the front door of the house. The yard itself sloped upwards from the low stone wall which divided it from the lane in front of the house. From the level where the river ran along the floor of the U-shaped valley, scoured out by glaciers eighty thousand years ago, everything sloped upwards in Cordale, and continued to do so with varying gradients until whoever climbed them sooner or later, and almost certainly out of breath, reached the highest tops of the fells.

From there, if one turned away from the long, wide vista of Cordale, though it narrowed and closed in towards the north, and turned one's back on the view of green terraced slopes, on the long limestone escarpment to the east, the scattered villages, the hillsides dotted with ewes, which seemingly wandered at will at unlikely heights and into awkward places, and from the flat meadows on the floor of the valley where both sheep and cattle grazed, if, standing on the highest ridge of Cor Fell, one made a rightabout turn, then spread out to the west was Tendale. It was the same kind of landscape, yet subtly different, since no two dales in North Yorkshire are alike, especially to those who belong there. It is not correct to say Tendale spreads out. Tendale is closed in, steeper. It has no settlement large enough to be called a village, only two small hamlets, one of which, surprisingly, has both a church and a pub. The meadows bordering its river are narrow, there are more frequent

outcrops of rock, and the river Ten runs faster and deeper, more often darting underground than does the Cor.

But all this is essentially sheep, not cattle, country: sheep for wool, sheep for meat, ewes' milk for the cheese for which they have been famous for longer than the memory of even the oldest inhabitant can possibly stretch back. The months of the year, the lives of the inhabitants, follow the rhythm of the lives of the sheep.

What is common, however, to both Cordale and Tendale – and to the dales that join up with them – are the dry-stone walls which run from the valley straight up the hillsides, crisscrossed at random angles by yet more walls of the same pale limestone, making strangely shaped fields all over the slopes; walls which shine like gold and silver when the sun comes out. There is more than one theory as to why and for how long the walls have been there. What is for sure is that bits of them are constantly in need of repair and those who know how to do it are these days few and far between. Meanwhile, the sheep get through the holes, and stray.

Frances switched off the engine, got out of the car, then paused, looking up at the house, savouring the moment. There it was, Beck Farm, stone-built and solid, all hers (except for a modest mortgage with the Shepton Building Society). It had stood for nearly two hundred years and there was no visible sign that it would not still be standing two hundred years hence. Viewed from the front it was nothing special: a plain, symmetrical Dales house, no frills. A long frontage, two windows to the left of the front door, one to the right. Four windows above – one was over the front door – exactly in line and exactly the same size as the lower ones. And then on the right of the original house an extension, one window downstairs, one up, and in line with the rest of the house so that the whole building was balanced. The extension had been built a long time ago and of the same local stone, which had weathered almost to

match the original. The windows were not so small that one couldn’t see who – friend or foe – was approaching, but were not over-large, because of the need to keep the cold out in the winter.

It was exactly the kind of house, Frances had thought when she set eyes on it for the first time, that she used to draw as a small child, except that hers had had diamond-lattice windows, which were to her, then, the height of desirability, and roses and hollyhocks in full bloom round the door.

Everything was quiet, so still that she could hear the sound of the beck, from which the house took its name, as it rushed down the east side of the building before it went under the road on its way to join the river. From her handbag she took out a massive key – quite separate from the enormous bunch of assorted keys the estate agent had given her – then walked through the porch, inserted the key into the lock of the heavy-looking front door, and turned it. The action was as smooth as silk. A turn of the knob, a slight push, and the door swung open. Stepping into the hall, she bent down to pick up two square white envelopes from the floor. No catalogues, no offers of new window frames, bargain-price painting and decorating, no take-away menus. Was it possible that junk mail had not reached Cordale? She opened the envelopes: both contained cards from friends in Brighton, wishing her well.

Brighton seemed so far away, already a foreign country which eventually she would perhaps remember with some affection but had no plans to visit again, yet it was no more than twenty-four hours since she had left it behind. She had waited until the removal men had packed the last of her furniture into the van, which had called first for her mother’s things, and she had waved them off down the road. Then she and her mother had at once got into the car and she’d driven away – on her part, without a backward glance. Her mother had been all but silent, hardly speaking at all until

the M23 and the M25 had been left behind and they'd stopped at a service station on the M1 to fill up with petrol.

'I think we should have something to eat here,' Frances had suggested. 'It's a fair way to the next one.'

They'd looked at the menu board, from which Madge had chosen fish and chips.

'You find a table,' Frances said. 'I'll see to the tray.'

'Haddock and chips, bread and butter and a pot of tea,' Madge said a few minutes later, tucking in, 'and I feel I'm up north already. I dare say this will be a decent pot of tea as well.'

Thirty years of living in the south had never totally eradicated Madge Fraser's West Riding accent, but now with her nose pointing due north it was already strengthening, the vowels spreading out and flattening as if she was getting herself ready for what was coming.

'We're still a long way off, Mother,' Frances warned. 'Well over two hundred miles to go. We're hardly in the Midlands yet.'

'We're going in the right direction,' Madge had said. 'That's what counts. From here on it's straight up.'

I hope I'm going in the right direction, Frances had thought as, fed and watered, they drove on again. I hope it's right for both of us. It suddenly all seemed so final; that last locking of the door, taking the keys around to a neighbour, as arranged. And am I right, she'd asked herself – though it was really too late to ask – to be bringing my mother all this way? Letting her, encouraging her, in her seventies, to sell up, leave her home and start again? Or am I being incredibly selfish?

She'd put the question before, out loud. 'You could look at it this way,' her mother had said: 'you could say I'm returning home, going back where I came from. Well, not Cordale, of course. When your dad and me went up there at bank-holiday weekends and so on – on our bicycles, we went, before you came on the scene – I never thought I'd

end up living there. I never thought I'd live anywhere outside the West Riding. And look where I got to!'

When the shipping firm Tom Fraser had worked for since leaving school closed down in the fifties – it had never quite recovered from its wartime losses – and he was left with a moderate pay-off but no job, he had reached the biggest decision of his life, possibly the only decision of any consequence he had ever made (and as it turned out, ever would). 'Why don't we . . .' he'd said to Madge – it was towards the end of a particularly cold winter with a prolonged fuel crisis – 'Why don't we sell the house and take a little business down south? I'm bloody sick of Bradford.'

Madge had been so flabbergasted by his boldness that it had never occurred to her to argue. Before the end of the year they had bought a small café and baker's shop, sight unseen, in one of the less fashionable small towns in Surrey. The fact that the only qualifications they had between them for running such a business were that Tom fancied himself as a man who would get on well with the customers – and he was not wrong about that – and Madge had always been a dab hand at cooking and baking did not deter them. To the surprise of everyone, especially the friends they left behind in Bradford (for even those who had served in the war as far afield as the jungles of Burma still thought Surrey was on a par with Outer Mongolia), Tom and Madge succeeded.

Seven-year-old Frances was not asked for her opinion on the move. If she'd had the spirit she was to acquire as she grew older she'd have been dragged kicking and screaming from Bradford. As it was, she tagged along, comforted on the journey by the sight and sound of Beauty the budgerigar in her cage and Korky the cat in his basket, both of whom would have been confined to the guard's van had not an animal-loving attendant turned a blind eye.

The train journey was one of the few things Frances still remembered of the north. There'd been so much going on in the south; new things to learn, new friends to make, even a

new way of speaking. Unlike her mother, thirty years of Surrey, followed by Sussex, had wiped away almost every trace of Yorkshire from her voice. She took to saying ‘barth’ and ‘larst’ and ‘arfter’ like a duck to water.

Now, standing in the hall, Frances took a few seconds to glance around. Only twice before had she been in the house, and each time with Mr Walter Birkett, scion of Birkett, Birkett & Lance, the estate agents, but she had carried in her mind what she had seen then, and here it was, very much as she remembered it: the oak staircase rising from quite close to the front door; to the left, the door to the sitting-room; and, further down the hall, doors to the other ground-floor rooms, which she would put to her own uses. The large kitchen and a smaller scullery, together with two walk-in pantries, were at the back of the house, and, behind them, the back door led to the yard with its various outbuildings: stable, cowshed, henhouse, dairy – for this *had* been a working farm, though not for some years now.

She went into the sitting-room, put the two greetings cards down on one of the deep windowsills – all the windowsills in the house were deep because of the thickness of the walls – and allowed herself to sit there briefly, looking at the view. The narrow road, not much more than a lane really, sloped away from the front of the house and then when it made a left bend was temporarily lost to view behind the stone walls and a bank of trees. There were not many trees in the dale, so beyond these few the village was visible. Grey stone houses, with shallow-pitched sandstone-tiled roofs and squat chimneys sitting on the roofs at the gable ends, huddled together, and rising up from somewhere in the middle of them was the square tower of the church. The whole village seemed protected by the height and steepness of the hill behind it, thought Frances. Kilby was ten minutes’ walk going away from Beck Farm but at least fifteen minutes coming back because of the gradient.

In the end she made herself turn away from the view. She had no business to be mooning about here, it was self-indulgent to have made this visit, but it was one small thing she wanted to do on her own, in advance of the bustle she knew the rest of the day – more likely, the whole of several days – would bring. She wanted to walk round all the rooms in the house, to get the feel of them again, perhaps decide where some of the larger pieces of furniture would go, after which she would hurry back to Shepton – it was a thirty-minute drive – to pick up her mother, whom she'd left at the Heifer, where they'd spent last night after the long journey north. ('What exactly is a heifer?' Madge had asked. 'I was never quite sure. I know all the names of the joints in the butcher's shop – you couldn't fault me on those – but not the animals.') I was a bit mean this morning, Frances thought, feeling guilty. I almost sneaked away. Her mother had been understanding, though, and said it was quite all right, she'd amuse herself looking round the town while waiting for Frances to return. The plan was that they would lunch in Shepton, then check out of the Heifer before going to the house to await the arrival of the furniture van, due some time in the afternoon.

At the top of the stairs – the stairs were one of the things she'd liked at first sight; solid oak, polished by years of wear, and to cover them with carpet would be an insult – an L-shaped landing led to four double bedrooms and two smaller ones, one of them hardly more than a boxroom, though it might have looked more roomy had it not been cluttered with everything that the firm who had cleared the house after the owner's death had thought not worth taking.

'Mr Thornton died sudden, poor man,' Walter Birkett had informed her when he'd brought her to see the house. 'It was very unexpected. The house was a bit of an untidy mess when we first took it on, but Alice cleaned it through before she left.'

‘Left?’ Frances had said. She’d heard about Alice, who had worked for Ben Thornton, but not that she had left. She had looked forward to Alice giving her a hand with the myriad things that would have to be done. ‘Why did she leave?’

Walter Birkett had then told her that Mr Thornton had willed Alice a sum of money. ‘Not a lot, and, as I told you, everything else, including the proceeds from the sale of the house, went to charity. He had no family. But it was enough to take Alice off on a long holiday to visit her sister and brother-in-law in Australia. If you ask me,’ he’d said, ‘I doubt she’ll return.’

Frances looked briefly now at the contents of the small room – a couple of chairs, two tea chests filled to the brim, a table piled high, a chest of drawers, various boxes, an old TV (probably black-and-white) and an even older radio – then she shut the door firmly and left it. That sorting out would have to wait until the very last. There were far too many other and more important things to do.

Farmhouses in the days when Beck Farm was built had clearly catered for large families, she thought as she went into one room after another. The double bedrooms were spacious: two of them, she judged, large enough to take a single bed in addition to a double. They could be let as family rooms. Each double room had a large, floor-to-ceiling cupboard and a wash basin with hot and cold water, which, by its design, she judged had been installed when the house had begun to be used as a bed-and-breakfast place rather than as a farmhouse. Water was not laid on to the two smaller rooms but there was a spacious bathroom and an extra lavatory at the far end of the landing.

But all this will have to change, Frances thought. She had done her homework and she knew that a B&B that didn’t have showers, lavatories and basins en suite would get nowhere. It would cost a pretty penny but it would have to be done, among many other things, and she had budgeted for it. For now, she looked at the rooms with an eye to what

furniture she and her mother had between them would fit in best, what she should tell the removal men to do this afternoon. In any case it would probably all have to be changed around before she started taking guests, which, if she got her advertising right, would be next Easter.

Back on the landing she took another look out of the window at the back of the house. It gave onto the walled garden, which appeared unkempt and neglected. Its only redeeming feature was the apple tree, large and venerable. When she had first viewed the house the apples, green, tinged with red, were on the tree; now they were mostly lying on the ground, bruised, decaying, part eaten, presumably by birds. She had asked Mr Birkett then what kind of apples they were but he hadn't been sure. 'I think Bramleys,' he'd said. 'Normally they don't like the frost – it kills the blossom – but I suppose the tree's protected by the wall. This could be a nice garden if someone looked after it.'

'I'm no gardener,' Frances had admitted, 'but of course I'll clear it up.' Fleetingly, she saw the garden as an area where she might serve teas in the summer.

Now she went back downstairs and walked around there. She loved the sitting-room; long, with two windows to the front, it was light and airy. She wouldn't like giving this up to guests but she supposed she would have to. It was the largest room on the ground floor and would become the breakfast room. But never mind, she consoled herself, we'll have it to ourselves right through the winters. She couldn't imagine many people choosing to spend winter weekends in Cordale.

The two windows facing out to the other side of the front door belonged to two smaller rooms, the larger of which, in the extension, also had a window to the side, in the gable end. Perhaps that could be her mother's, and the smaller one hers. Or vice versa, since her own might also have to double as an office. Perhaps, she thought, she might so arrange her mother's that when the house was, all being

well, full in the summer season it could function as a bed-sitting-room. They had agreed that whenever possible they would each have their own bolt hole, but that in the tourist season they must be flexible, squeeze in wherever. Once they had settled in, she would also have to give a lot of thought to the various outbuildings at the back of the house. She was sure that something could be made of them but that would need more money.

But now, she thought, pleasant though it was to dream and to plan, she must return to Shepton. They'd arranged to have an early lunch and be back at Beck Farm by two o'clock.

TWO

Madge was already waiting when Frances arrived back at the Heifer; she was sitting in the lounge, clasping her large patent-leather handbag while at the same time reading a copy of the *Dalesman.*

‘You should put an advertisement in this,’ she greeted Frances. ‘I mean, when you’re ready for visitors. It’s got lots of ads for B&Bs, and hotels of course.’

‘I will,’ Frances promised. ‘Sorry I’m a bit late. Shall we eat, or would you like a glass of sherry first?’

‘Not in the middle of the day,’ Madge said. Her voice hovered on the edge of disapproval. ‘Perhaps this evening before we have our supper. But if *you* want one now . . .’

‘You know it’s not my tipple, Mother. Anyway, I’m driving,’ Frances reminded her. ‘Let’s go in.’

The dining-room was already busy. They seated themselves at a small table in the corner. Madge picked up the menu and studied it carefully.

‘Did you do any shopping in the town?’ Frances asked.

Madge shook her head. ‘Not what you’d call shopping. I bought a few postcards and some stamps. Just in case they didn’t have any in Kilby.’

Frances laughed. ‘Mother, it’s not the back of beyond. They do actually have a post office, *and* a village store.’

‘I wasn’t to know, was I?’ Madge protested mildly. ‘I wanted to be on the safe side. I’ve got friends and neighbours who’ll be waiting for a line from me – waiting to hear I’ve arrived safely.’

Most of them had thought she was mad, and hadn’t hesitated to say so. ‘At your time of life!’ was the most

frequently used expression. ‘Are you sure you’re doing the right thing?’ and ‘What if it doesn’t work out?’ were among several others. Well, it had to work out, didn’t it? She’d have to make sure it did. There was no going back. She was seventy-two, she’d sold her home and put most of the money – quite willingly – into the bed-and-breakfast venture, and packed her bags. But what alternative had there been? Frances had been set-on leaving Sussex, and who could blame her? She hadn’t had the best of times there over the last few years. And why would I want to stay behind in Brighton with Frances two-hundred-and-fifty miles away? Madge asked herself. ‘What’s the point,’ she’d said to the critics, ‘with only me and Frances left in the family, of us living at opposite ends of England?’ It didn’t make sense. But that didn’t take away the trepidation that sometimes came over her when she wakened in the night. ‘Did you have to go so far?’ she’d tentatively asked her daughter.

Frances had been certain about that. ‘It’s not just the distance,’ she’d pointed out. ‘Where else would we go? Yorkshire is, after all, where we connect with, if anywhere. I’ve thought it out and reckon I could make a living there. You know I wouldn’t be happy leaving you behind.’

‘I just don’t want—’ Madge had begun, but was interrupted.

‘Don’t give me all that “don’t want to be a burden” stuff,’ Frances had said. ‘We’ve done all that! I’ve told you, and I mean it, I want you with me. Apart from wanting you, you’ll be a help to me – and I don’t just mean financially.’

It was the realization that Frances needed me that in the end made me decide, Madge thought now. Wasn’t it the best thing in the world to be needed, especially when you were old, and particularly by someone younger? And your own flesh and blood. Not that she spoke her thoughts out loud. Neither she nor Frances said that sort of thing.

‘Right,’ she said, putting down the menu. ‘I’ll have the steak-and-kidney pudding, followed by the apple tart. We

can’t be sure when we’ll get the next proper meal.’

Frances sighed. ‘There’s a pub in Kilby, Mother, and they do serve food. I’ve only seen it from the outside, when I came to view the house, but it looked OK,’ Frances assured her. ‘We won’t starve. And tomorrow we can shop in the village.’

‘If you say so, love,’ Madge said. ‘How long will it take us to get there?’

‘Not long. But I wouldn’t like the removal van to arrive before we did,’ Frances said.

When they’d eaten, Frances said, ‘I’ll get the bags down and pay the bill. You wait for me in reception.’

‘Shall I give you a hand?’ Madge asked.

Frances shook her head. ‘I can manage.’ They had brought only overnight bags to the hotel. Everything else was in the removal van.

Madge watched her daughter as she left the dining-room. She was so tall and slender, her dark hair, now tied back, so thick and glossy. She moved gracefully, but then she got that as well as her looks from her father. Six foot three, he’d been, and he’d never put on an ounce of spare flesh from the day she’d met him until the day he died. Handsome too. She didn’t know what he’d seen in a little roly-poly like herself; five foot nothing and as plump as a robin. ‘What I saw,’ he’d said, paying her a rare compliment, ‘was your lovely skin, the way your eyes screwed up when you laughed, and how you enjoyed things. Will that do for you?’

It had had to. He’d not been one for repeating such things, but what he’d said had set her up for a long time. When she looked in the mirror, often dissatisfied, she still remembered it with pleasure.

She left the table, and moved into reception just as Frances was coming down the stairs, carrying the overnight cases.

‘There!’ Frances said. ‘All done. Off we go!’

There was no sign of the removal van when they arrived at Beck Farm, which pleased Madge. ‘I’d like a chance to get my bearings before they arrive. I’m keen to see where I’m going to sleep, for one thing.’ She was out of the car now, gazing up at the house, giving it a quick appraisal. ‘I must say, it looks quite big.’ It was difficult to know whether she considered that good or bad.

‘It’s the right size for what we want,’ Frances said. ‘Though I admit the two of us will be rattling round in it until the guests start coming. But we’ll have plenty to do before then.’

‘Well, what are we waiting for?’ Madge demanded. ‘Let’s go in. Let’s be seeing it.’

Frances unlocked the door and they stepped into the hall. ‘I’ll show you which room I thought you might like to have for your bedroom, though if it’s not what you want there’s a choice. You must just say . . .’

‘Oh, you’ll not find me too fussy,’ Madge assured her. ‘You know me, love. And I don’t need anything big. Just enough to take my bedroom furniture, which I’ve had since I was married and wouldn’t want to part with. And near to the bathroom, for when I have to get up in the night. That’s all I’m asking.’

For the moment, Frances thought. But, to be fair, her mother wasn’t a demanding woman, except from time to time and almost without knowing it. And it will be my duty to see that my mother settles happily. I owe her that, at the very least, she reminded herself. ‘So do you want to go straight to it, or do you want to look around the rest of the house first?’ she asked.

‘Oh, let’s do things properly,’ Madge said. ‘Start at the bottom and, when we’ve done that, go upstairs. That way I’ll know where I fit in.’

They did exactly that, though not including the outhouses: those could wait. ‘You might also be able to have your own sitting-room downstairs – at least, when the house isn’t full,’

Frances said. ‘Somewhere you can be on your own if you want to.’

Madge nodded briefly. She wasn’t too sure that she wanted to be on her own. It was one of the things she’d most disliked after Tom died. She liked to look up and see someone there, someone sitting opposite, even if there was no conversation going on. Talk didn’t matter. Tom had always had his head in a book anyway. Just the odd word, or a glance, and then at the end of the evening a hot drink and going up to bed together. Well, those times were gone, they wouldn’t come again, but she hoped she wasn’t going to live too separately from her daughter, not in a place where she knew no-one. Following Frances around from room to room, and then up the stairs to the bedrooms, she said nothing of this.

‘I reckoned this might suit you as your bedroom,’ Frances said, opening a door from the landing. ‘It’s right next to the bathroom – though that won’t matter when we get the loos and showers in—’

‘I’m not gone on showers,’ Madge interrupted. ‘I like a bath. You can’t have nice soak in a shower. But of course the lavatory will be handy.’

‘Come and look at the view,’ Frances said, crossing to the window. ‘This being the back of the house, you can see right up the dale. ‘It’s a stunning view.’

Madge joined her, and they stood together, looking out. The large meadow closest to the house was on level ground, and though the summer was over and autumn well set in, the short grass was still bright green, and even now was being cropped closer by black-faced sheep. The confines of the meadow were marked by dry-stone walls, and beyond them further meadows sloped up the sides of the fell. To the left of the view the land dropped gently down towards the road that ran along the floor of the valley, and beyond that more fields climbed up again on the other side of the dale. And in almost every field there were sheep.

‘It’s beautiful,’ Madge said. ‘Your dad would have loved it. It’s views like this we used to come up to the Dales for all those years ago. Don’t you remember?’

‘I can’t say I do – at least, not much,’ Frances admitted. ‘The near meadows on this side of the road once belonged to Beck Farm. The owner sold them off to the neighbouring farmer. He just kept the house, which the neighbour didn’t want in any case.’

‘Why on earth did he do that?’ Madge asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Frances said. ‘I don’t know much about him, except that he died, and this house came on the market. I was told he’d run it before that for a while as a bed-and-breakfast. I don’t know how well.’

‘What about his family? Didn’t they want it – I mean either the farm or the B&B?’

‘It seems he didn’t have any family,’ Frances said. ‘As I told you at the time, it was an executors’ sale. Everything was to be sold and the proceeds were to go to charities. That’s why I got the house more cheaply than I might have done. That’s all I know.’

‘It’s just that I’m interested in people,’ Madge said.

Frances smiled. ‘You mean you’re nosy! Well, I dare say as soon as we get to know one or two people in the village we’ll be told everything – if there’s anything to tell, that is. Shall we look at the rest of the rooms? I don’t think the removal van can be much longer. I hope not, or we’ll be emptying it in the dark.’

Five minutes later, looking out of the window of the room on the opposite side of the landing that she had mentally marked out as hers, Frances saw the removal van being driven slowly up the main street of the village and then following the road round to the left towards Beck Farm. She ran down the stairs, calling out to her mother, ‘They’re here!’ Madge had gone downstairs to explore the kitchen cupboards, to see if by any chance there was as much as a pan left behind in which she could boil water to make some

tea. She had taken the precaution of buying a packet of tea and a pint of milk in Shepton, unsure that her daughter would think of such things. Now she rushed to join Frances, who was opening the front door.

‘Not before time,’ Madge said as the van slowed to a halt. ‘I only hope they’ll know where the kettle is. I’m dying for a cup of tea, and I dare say they are.’

‘The first thing they’ll see when they open the van’, Frances said patiently, ‘is a packing case containing the kettle, tea, milk, sugar and mugs – as well as a loaf of bread, butter, and some boiled ham and tomatoes.’ She had asked them to pack it last so that it would be handy. ‘Don’t worry, we always do,’ the foreman had said. ‘We can’t start work till we’ve had our cup of tea.’

‘You’re very organized,’ Madge told her.

‘It’s not the first time I’ve moved house, is it?’ Frances called out as she walked down the path to meet the men.

It certainly isn’t, Madge thought. Her daughter had left home for good when she’d first gone to university. No-one had said it would be for good at the time, but Tom had said it was all you could expect, she had to fly the nest. Well, she’d flown in several directions since then, to at least three different places even while she was at university, and before she’d finally moved in with Malcolm in her last year there. ‘It’s all right, Mother,’ she’d said. ‘Don’t look so disapproving. We’re going to be married as soon as we’ve got our degrees over with. We don’t have the time right now.’

Madge remembered what she’d replied. ‘In my day we got married first. Your dad and me courted seven years.’

‘Good for you!’ Frances had said. ‘If that’s what you wanted. I certainly wouldn’t.’

It hadn’t been what they’d wanted, Madge thought, remembering how most of that time she’d longed, body and soul, to be married; and so had Tom, but it wasn’t possible. She’d met Tom, ten years older than she was, at a dance

when he was home on embarkation leave from the army. She was sixteen and her mother had thought she was too young to go to a dance, but Madge had defied her. ‘And thank goodness you did,’ Tom had said, ‘or you and me would never have met and you’d have been snapped up by someone else.’ But all she’d known of him from then until the end of the war was in the slim, blue air letters she received spasmodically from somewhere in the Far East. He wasn’t allowed to say where, just that it was hot and damp and there were more and bigger insects than she’d have thought possible, and they had an old gramophone on which he constantly played the record she’d given him as a not very convenient parting present. They’d married as soon as Tom was demobbed, though from the ending of the war in the Far East to the day when he walked up the path to her parents’ house in his newly acquired civilian suit seemed the longest period of her life so far. They were blissfully happy together, but several years went by before she became pregnant. No doctor – and she and Tom had consulted several – could say why this was. It appeared it was just bad luck. But when at last she did become pregnant, and Frances was born – a healthy seven-pound baby – then that made up for everything.

So she’d bitten her tongue and said nothing more to Frances on the subject of her living with Malcolm. Looking back on it now, and given the chance with Tom, she’d have done the same. And she’d quite liked Malcolm. Tom hadn’t, but she’d reckoned that was because he was taking his lovely daughter away. Since then, both with Malcolm and later on without him, Frances had made several more moves, some willingly, some forced upon her. ‘But this time is the last,’ she’d said when she’d found Beck Farm. ‘This time it’s for good.’

As Frances had predicted, the removal men brought in the chest with the kettle and its accompaniments first.

‘Did you have a good journey?’ Frances asked them.

‘Tolerable,’ the foreman answered. ‘We did an overnight stop, as we’d said we would, but today we got held up in Harrogate, or we’d have been earlier. I think there was some sort of show on.’

‘If you’ll carry this chest into the kitchen I’ll get on with the tea. You must be ready for it,’ Madge said.

‘Always ready for a cuppa,’ the foreman said. He signalled to his young assistant, who picked up the case as if it weighed no more than two ounces, and followed Madge into the kitchen.

It was amazing, Frances thought, how rapidly, once they’d made a start, the men emptied the van of its contents, far more quickly than she could decide where everything should go. ‘The important thing’, she instructed them, ‘is that we get the beds, my mother’s and mine, and the bags with the bedding in, into their respective rooms. Everything else we can sort out as and when.’

One of the things she *had* learned, thanks to her previous moves, was that you made up the beds while you were still reasonably fresh so that you could fall into them when you became – inevitably – exhausted beyond measure. She’d learned a great many things since she’d first moved into Malcolm’s cramped little furnished flat, in Whiteladies Road near to the university in Bristol. They’d been so happy there. It hadn’t mattered that it was tiny, the bed was too narrow – it was no barrier to their lovemaking – nor that there were noisy students on the floor below. They were students themselves, living for the moment. It was when they’d graduated and, soon after that, married that they’d made the big move.

When this came it could hardly have been more different. They had moved to Sussex, where Malcolm’s parents owned and ran a successful prep school. Both Malcolm and Frances, it was planned, would teach at the school – she English and Malcolm mathematics – until eventually, several years ahead, it would all become his. In the meantime Malcolm’s

parents bought their son a house, not far from the school gates, since he had no wish to live in the school with his new bride.

We were happy there, Frances had thought many times since, but everything had changed two years later when Malcolm's parents, a week into their summer holiday, were killed when their car ran off a mountain road in Spain. At the start of the autumn term Malcolm found himself Head of the school, and Frances the Headmaster's young wife, both of them inexperienced in these new roles. Nevertheless, barring a few hiccups, it had gone reasonably well for another couple of years – or so Frances thought, until the evening Malcolm informed her that he'd had enough of it, he wasn't cut out to run a school, it had been his parents' idea, not his, and he was putting it on the market as a going concern. Moreover, he told her, getting it all over in the same breath, he was sorry but he no longer loved her – 'Well, not as I once did' – because he had fallen in love with the French mistress and they were going to start a new life in France. 'Bergerac,' he said. 'It's in the south-west.' 'I know where Bergerac is!' was all Frances could say at the time.

He would be quite fair with her, he pointed out reasonably. The school business would sell at a good price and she'd have half of it, as she would have of the house nearby, which they still lived in. He would like to put that on the market at the same time as the school; it would be an added attraction. He wanted a quick sale because he and Michelle were anxious to make the move to Bergerac. He was truly sorry about all this but he felt sure she would understand. They had married too young, that was the top and bottom of it. Didn't she agree?

She didn't; nor had she understood. None of it made sense to her. She loved him and she'd thought he loved her. She'd thought things were rubbing along well enough but now she found herself in a state of almost blind obedience

to his wishes, too numb to fight. She moved out, found a flat and a temporary job in a state school, both in Brighton, where her parents now lived. The flat and the job were the first of the several moves that followed, largely because she couldn’t settle, and they were all in the Brighton area. She had this feeling of wanting to be somewhere near her parents, though no way would she have gone to live with them. As time went by she had made some friends through work, had a few temporary relationships – discovering along the way that most men were married anyway, and, though that was no bar to them, it was to her. She would have liked to have settled down with someone but it never happened.

And now here she was, thirty-nine years old, in a place of which she knew next to nothing; all her worldly goods were being carried in and strewed around a house to which, if she added up the hours she had spent in it, she was almost a total stranger; and she was about to embark on a business of which she knew nothing at all. Moreover, she had dragged her elderly mother – who had been living a contented life in Brighton, surrounded by friends – into all this with her. For a brief moment, standing there in the hall, she was terrified for both of them. How could she have done this? She must be out of her mind.

The moment was interrupted by the two removal men carrying in a dresser she had known in her mother’s kitchen since she was a small child. It had always contained jars of dried fruit – currants, raisins – from which as a child she had sometimes been allowed to help herself. Somehow the sight of it, with its long association, its familiar shabbiness, calmed her down. Not everything was strange. All right, it was a new life, but she had brought something of her old life with her. And, she thought, looking at the dresser, so had her mother. They would be OK.

The men put the dresser down. ‘This is a solid piece and no mistake,’ the foreman said. ‘They don’t make them like this these days. Where do you want it to go?’

‘In the kitchen,’ Frances said. ‘I’ll show you.’

Madge was already in the kitchen, unpacking a box of pans and dishes. She smiled broadly when she saw the dresser being carried in. ‘That’s more like it,’ she said. ‘Now I can put this stuff where it belongs. Make it seem a bit more like home.’

‘We’ll be through in half an hour,’ the foreman said. ‘Mostly bits and pieces now.’

‘I’ll make you another cup of tea while you’re finishing off,’ Madge said, ‘and I’ve found the toaster, so I could do you some toast.’

‘A quick cup of tea but we’ll not bother with anything to eat,’ the foreman said. ‘I’d like to get as far down the road as possible before the light goes. We’ll have a meal on the motorway. It’ll be the early hours before we’re home, but my wife’s used to that. And the lad here doesn’t have a wife, so he’s no-one to answer to.’

When they had left, having been handsomely tipped by Frances – he would never know what it had meant to her the way they’d brought in the dresser exactly when they did – she and her mother waved them off, then went back into the house. And now, Frances thought, though it was in a state of disarray that would no doubt take weeks to sort out, she felt, closing the door, as if she was in her own home.

‘How do *you* feel?’ she asked her mother.

‘Grand,’ Madge said. ‘A bit tired – well, quite a lot tired, to be honest – but grand.’

‘Then I suggest we get our bedrooms ready – I’ll give you a hand with yours – then we go down to the pub for a meal, and back here to bed. An early night. Everything else can wait until tomorrow.’

The Shorn Lamb came as something of a surprise to Frances. At least, the inside did. For a start, though the rough plastered walls, the low, beamed ceiling yellowed by tobacco smoke, the unevenness of the floor, and the huge