SHORT STORY

HOW TO TALK TO Girls at Parties

Neil Gaiman

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A SHORT STORY

headline

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About the Author

Neil Gaiman has spent his adult life making things up and writing them down. He lives more in America than he does anywhere else. He has written books and films and children's books and television. He has a blog over at www.neilgaiman.com. He's won more than his fair share of literary awards, was voted twenty-first equal on a recent poll of Great British Authors, and has no idea where he put his keys.

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‘A very fine and imaginative writer’
The Sunday Times

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Independent

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About the Book

‘How to Talk to Girls at Parties’ is a short story by Neil Gaiman, and was previously published in FRAGILE THINGS. This ebook-only edition also contains an exclusive preview of THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE, a new novel about memory and magic and survival, about the power of stories and the darkness inside each of us – available in June 2013.

How to Talk to Girls at Parties

‘Come on,’ said Vic. ‘It’ll be great.’

‘No, it won’t,’ I said, although I’d lost this fight hours ago, and I knew it.

‘It’ll be brilliant,’ said Vic, for the hundredth time. ‘Girls! Girls! Girls!’ He grinned with white teeth.

We both attended an all-boys’ school in south London. While it would be a lie to say that we had no experience with girls – Vic seemed to have had many girlfriends, while I had kissed three of my sister’s friends – it would, I think, be perfectly true to say that we both chiefly spoke to, interacted with and only truly understood other boys. Well, I did, anyway. It’s hard to speak for someone else, and I’ve not seen Vic for thirty years. I’m not sure that I would know what to say to him now if I did.

We were walking the back-streets that used to twine in a grimy maze behind East Croydon station – a friend had told Vic about a party, and Vic was determined to go whether I liked it or not, and I didn’t. But my parents were away that week at a conference, and I was Vic’s guest at his house, so I was trailing along beside him.

‘It’ll be the same as it always is,’ I said. ‘After an hour you’ll be off somewhere snogging the prettiest girl at the party, and I’ll be in the kitchen listening to somebody’s mum going on about politics or poetry or something.’

‘You just have to *talk* to them,’ he said. ‘I think it’s probably that road at the end here.’ He gestured cheerfully, swinging the bag with the bottle in it.

‘Don’t you know?’

‘Alison gave me directions and I wrote them on a bit of paper, but I left it on the hall table. ’Sokay. I can find it.’

‘How?’ Hope welled slowly up inside me.

‘We walk down the road,’ he said, as if speaking to an idiot child. ‘And we look for the party. Easy.’

I looked, but saw no party: just narrow houses with rusting cars or bikes in their concreted front gardens; and the dusty glass fronts of newsagents, which smelled of alien spices and sold everything from birthday cards and second-hand comics to the kind of magazines that were so pornographic they were sold already sealed in plastic bags. I had been there when Vic had slipped one of those magazines beneath his sweater, but the owner caught him on the pavement outside and made him give it back.

We reached the end of the road and turned into a narrow street of terraced houses. Everything looked very still and empty in the summer’s evening. ‘It’s all right for you,’ I said. ‘They fancy you. You don’t actually *have* to talk to them.’ It was true: one urchin grin from Vic and he could have his pick of the room.

‘Nah. ’S not like that. You’ve just got to talk.’

The times I had kissed my sister’s friends I had not spoken to them. They had been around while my sister was off doing something elsewhere, and they had drifted into my orbit, and so I had kissed them. I do not remember any talking. I did not know what to say to girls, and I told him so.

‘They’re just girls,’ said Vic. ‘They don’t come from another planet.’

As we followed the curve of the road around, my hopes that the party would prove unfindable began to fade: a low pulsing noise, music muffled by walls and doors, could be heard from a house up ahead. It was eight in the evening, not that early if you aren’t yet sixteen, and we weren’t. Not quite.

I had parents who liked to know where I was, but I don’t think Vic’s parents cared that much. He was the youngest of

five boys. That in itself seemed magical to me: I merely had two sisters, both younger than I was, and I felt both unique and lonely. I had wanted a brother as far back as I could remember. When I turned thirteen, I stopped wishing on falling stars or first stars, but back when I did, a brother was what I had wished for.

We went up the garden path, crazy paving leading us past a hedge and a solitary rose bush to a pebble-dashed façade. We rang the doorbell, and the door was opened by a girl. I could not have told you how old she was, which was one of the things about girls I had begun to hate: when you start out as kids you're just boys and girls, going through time at the same speed, and you're all five, or seven, or eleven together. And then one day there's a lurch and the girls just sort of sprint off into the future ahead of you, and they know all about everything, and they have periods and breasts and makeup and God-only-knew-what-else – for I certainly didn't. The diagrams in biology textbooks were no substitute for being, in a very real sense, young adults. And the girls of our age were.

Vic and I weren't young adults, and I was beginning to suspect that even when I started needing to shave every day, instead of once every couple of weeks, I would still be way behind.

The girl said, 'Hello?'

Vic said, 'We're friends of Alison's.' We had met Alison, all freckles and orange hair and a wicked smile, in Hamburg, on a German exchange. The exchange organisers had sent some girls with us, from a local girls' school, to balance the sexes. The girls, our age, more or less, were raucous and funny, and had more or less adult boyfriends with cars and jobs and motorbikes and – in the case of one girl with crooked teeth and a raccoon coat, who spoke to me about it sadly at the end of a party in Hamburg, in, of course, the kitchen – a wife and kids.

'She isn't here,' said the girl at the door. 'No Alison.'

‘Not to worry,’ said Vic, with an easy grin. ‘I’m Vic. This is Enn.’ A beat, and then the girl smiled back at him. Vic had a bottle of white wine in a plastic bag, removed from his parents’ kitchen cabinet. ‘Where should I put this, then?’

She stood out of the way, letting us enter. ‘There’s a kitchen in the back,’ she said. ‘Put it on the table there, with the other bottles.’ She had golden, wavy hair, and she was very beautiful. The hall was dim in the twilight, but I could see that she was beautiful.

‘What’s your name, then?’ said Vic.

She told him it was Stella, and he grinned his crooked white grin and told her that that had to be the prettiest name he had ever heard. Smooth bastard. And what was worse was that he said it like he meant it.

Vic headed back to drop off the wine in the kitchen, and I looked into the front room, where the music was coming from. There were people dancing in there. Stella walked in, and she started to dance, swaying to the music all alone, and I watched her.

This was during the early days of punk. On our own record-players we would play the Adverts and the Jam, the Stranglers and the Clash and the Sex Pistols. At other people’s parties you’d hear ELO or 10cc or even Roxy Music. Maybe some Bowie, if you were lucky. During the German exchange, the only LP that we had all been able to agree on was Neil Young’s *Harvest*, and his song ‘Heart of Gold’ had threaded through the trip like a refrain: like him, we’d crossed the ocean for a heart of gold …

The music playing in that front room wasn’t anything I recognised. It sounded a bit like a German electronic pop group called Kraftwerk, and a bit like an LP I’d been given for my last birthday, of strange sounds made by the BBC Radiophonic Workshop. The music had a beat, though, and the half-dozen girls in that room were moving gently to it, although I only had eyes for Stella. She shone.

Vic pushed past me, into the room. He was holding a can of lager. ‘There’s booze back in the kitchen,’ he told me. He wandered over to Stella and he began to talk to her. I couldn’t hear what they were saying over the music, but I knew that there was no room for me in that conversation.

I didn’t like beer, not back then. I went off to see if there was something I wanted to drink. On the kitchen table stood a large bottle of Coca-Cola, and I poured myself a plastic tumblerful, and I didn’t dare say anything to the pair of girls who were talking in the underlit kitchen. They were animated, and utterly lovely. Each of them had very black skin and glossy hair and movie-star clothes, and their accents were foreign, and each of them was out of my league.

I wandered, Coke in hand.

The house was deeper than it looked, larger and more complex than the two-up two-down model I had imagined. The rooms were underlit – I doubt there was a bulb of more than forty watts in the building – and each room I went into was inhabited: in my memory, inhabited only by girls. I did not go upstairs.

A girl was the only occupant of the conservatory. Her hair was so fair it was white, and long, and straight, and she sat at the glass-topped table, her hands clasped together, staring at the garden outside, and the gathering dusk. She seemed wistful.

‘Do you mind if I sit here?’ I asked, gesturing with my cup. She shook her head, and then followed it up with a shrug, to indicate that it was all the same to her. I sat down.

Vic walked past the conservatory door. He was talking to Stella, but he looked in at me, sitting at the table, wrapped in shyness and awkwardness, and he opened and closed his hand in a parody of a speaking mouth. *Talk*. Right.

‘Are you from round here?’ I asked the girl.

She shook her head. She wore a low-cut silvery top, and I tried not to stare at the swell of her breasts.

I said, ‘What’s your name? I’m Enn.’

‘Wain’s Wain,’ she said, or something that sounded like it. ‘I’m a second.’

‘That’s uh. That’s a different name.’

She fixed me with huge liquid eyes. ‘It indicates that my progenitor was also Wain, and that I am obliged to report back to her. I may not breed.’

‘Ah. Well. Bit early for that anyway, isn’t it?’

She unclasped her hands, raised them above the table, spread her fingers. ‘You see?’ The little finger on her left hand was crooked, and it bifurcated at the top, splitting into two smaller fingertips. A minor deformity. ‘When I was finished a decision was needed. Would I be retained, or eliminated? I was fortunate that the decision was with me. Now, I travel, while my more perfect sisters remain at home in stasis. They were firsts. I am a second.

‘Soon I must return to Wain, and tell her all I have seen. All my impressions of this place of yours.’

‘I don’t actually live in Croydon,’ I said. ‘I don’t come from here.’ I wondered if she was American. I had no idea what she was talking about.

‘As you say,’ she agreed, ‘neither of us comes from here.’ She folded her six-fingered left hand beneath her right, as if tucking it out of sight. ‘I had expected it to be bigger, and cleaner, and more colourful. But still, it is a jewel.’

She yawned, covered her mouth with her right hand, only for a moment, before it was back on the table again. ‘I grow weary of the journeying, and I wish sometimes that it would end. On a street in Rio, at Carnival, I saw them on a bridge, golden and tall and insect-eyed and winged, and elated I almost ran to greet them, before I saw that they were only people in costumes. I said to Hola Colt, “Why do they try so hard to look like us?” and Hola Colt replied, “Because they hate themselves, all shades of pink and brown, and so small.” It is what I experience, even me, and I am not grown. It is like a world of children, or of elves.’ Then she

smiled, and said, ‘It was a good thing they could not any of them see Hola Colt.’

‘Um,’ I said, ‘do you want to dance?’

She shook her head immediately. ‘It is not permitted,’ she said. ‘I can do nothing that might cause damage to property. I am Wain’s.’

‘Would you like something to drink, then?’

‘Water,’ she said.

I went back to the kitchen and poured myself another Coke, and filled a cup with water from the tap. From the kitchen back to the hall, and from there into the conservatory, but now it was quite empty.

I wondered if the girl had gone to the toilet, and if she might change her mind about dancing later. I walked back to the front room and stared in. The place was filling up. There were more girls dancing, and several lads I didn’t know, who looked a few years older than me and Vic. The lads and the girls all kept their distance, but Vic was holding Stella’s hand as they danced, and when the song ended he put an arm around her, casually, almost proprietorially, to make sure that nobody else cut in.

I wondered if the girl I had been talking to in the conservatory was now upstairs, as she did not appear to be on the ground floor.

I walked into the living room, which was across the hall from the room where the people were dancing, and I sat down on the sofa. There was a girl sitting there already. She had dark hair, cut short and spiky, and a nervous manner.

Talk, I thought. ‘Um, this mug of water’s going spare,’ I told her, ‘if you want it?’

She nodded, and reached out her hand and took the mug, extremely carefully, as if she were unused to taking things, as if she could trust neither her vision nor her hands.

‘I love being a tourist,’ she said, and smiled hesitantly. She had a gap between her two front teeth, and she sipped the tap water as if she were an adult sipping a fine wine. ‘The

last tour, we went to sun, and we swam in sunfire pools with the whales. We heard their histories and we shivered in the chill of the outer places, then we swam deepward where the heat churned and comforted us.

‘I wanted to go back. This time, I wanted it. There was so much I had not seen. Instead we came to world. Do you like it?’

‘Like what?’

She gestured vaguely to the room – the sofa, the armchairs, the curtains, the unused gas fire.

‘It’s all right, I suppose.’

‘I told them I did not wish to visit world,’ she said. ‘My parent-teacher was unimpressed. “You will have much to learn,” it told me. I said, “I could learn more in sun, again. Or in the deeps. Jessa spun webs between galaxies. I want to do that.”

‘But there was no reasoning with it, and I came to world. Parent-teacher engulfed me, and I was here, embodied in a decaying lump of meat hanging on a frame of calcium. As I incarnated I felt things deep inside me, fluttering and pumping and squishing. It was my first experience with pushing air through the mouth, vibrating the vocal cords on the way, and I used it to tell parent-teacher that I wished that I would die, which it acknowledged was the inevitable exit strategy from world.’

There were black worry beads wrapped around her wrist, and she fiddled with them as she spoke. ‘But knowledge is there, in the meat,’ she said, ‘and I am resolved to learn from it.’

We were sitting close at the centre of the sofa now. I decided I should put an arm around her, but casually. I would extend my arm along the back of the sofa and eventually sort of creep it down, almost imperceptibly, until it was touching her. She said, ‘The thing with the liquid in the eyes, when the world blurs. Nobody told me, and I still do not understand. I have touched the folds of the Whisper

and pulsed and flown with the tachyon swans, and I still do not understand.'

She wasn't the prettiest girl there, but she seemed nice enough, and she was a girl, anyway. I let my arm slide down a little, tentatively, so that it made contact with her back, and she did not tell me to take it away.

Vic called to me then, from the doorway. He was standing with his arm around Stella, protectively, waving at me. I tried to let him know , by shaking my head, that I was on to something, but he called my name and, reluctantly, I got up from the sofa and walked over to the door. 'What?'

'Er. Look. The party,' said Vic, apologetically. 'It's not the one I thought it was. I've been talking to Stella and I figured it out. Well, she sort of explained it to me. We're at a different party.'

'Christ. Are we in trouble? Do we have to go?'

Stella shook her head. He leaned down and kissed her, gently, on the lips. 'You're just happy to have me here, aren't you, darlin'?'

'You know I am,' she told him.

He looked from her back to me, and he smiled his white smile: roguish, lovable, a little bit Artful Dodger, a little bit wide-boy Prince Charming. 'Don't worry. They're all tourists here anyway. It's a foreign-exchange thing, innit? Like when we all went to Germany.'

'It is?'

'Enn. You got to *talk* to them. And that means you got to listen to them too. You understand?'

'I *did*. I already talked to a couple of them.'

'You getting anywhere?'

'I was till you called me over.'

'Sorry about that. Look, I just wanted to fill you in. Right?'

And he patted my arm and he walked away with Stella. Then, together, the two of them went up the stairs.

Understand me, all the girls at that party, in the twilight, were lovely; they all had perfect faces but, more important

than that, they had whatever strangeness of proportion, of oddness or humanity it is that makes a beauty something more than a shop-window dummy. Stella was the most lovely of any of them, but she, of course, was Vic's, and they were going upstairs together, and that was just how things would always be.

There were several people now sitting on the sofa, talking to the gap-toothed girl. Someone told a joke, and they all laughed. I would have had to push my way in there to sit next to her again, and it didn't look like she was expecting me back, or cared that I had gone, so I wandered out into the hall. I glanced in at the dancers, and found myself wondering where the music was coming from. I couldn't see a record-player or speakers.

From the hall I walked back to the kitchen.

Kitchens are good at parties. You never need an excuse to be there and, on the good side, at this party I couldn't see any signs of someone's mum. I inspected the various bottles and cans on the kitchen table, then I poured half an inch of Pernod into the bottom of my plastic cup, which I filled to the top with Coke. I dropped in a couple of ice-cubes, and took a sip, relishing the sweet-shop tang of the drink.

'What's that you're drinking?' A girl's voice.

'It's Pernod,' I told her. 'It tastes like aniseed balls, only it's alcoholic.' I didn't say that I'd only tried it because I'd heard someone in the crowd ask for a Pernod on a live Velvet Underground LP.

'Can I have one?' I poured another Pernod, topped it off with Coke, passed it to her. Her hair was a coppery auburn, and it tumbled around her head in ringlets. It's not a hairstyle you see much now, but you saw it a lot back then.

'What's your name?' I asked.

'Triolet,' she said.

'Pretty name,' I told her, although I wasn't sure that it was. She was pretty, though.

'It's a verse form,' she said, proudly. 'Like me.'

‘You’re a poem?’

She smiled, and looked down and away, perhaps bashfully. Her profile was almost flat – a perfect Grecian nose that came down from her forehead in a straight line. We did *Antigone* in the school theatre the previous year. I was the messenger who brings Creon the news of Antigone’s death. We wore half-masks that made us look like that. I thought of that play, looking at her face, in the kitchen, and I thought of Barry Smith’s drawings of women in the *Conan* comics: five years later I would have thought of the Pre-Raphaelites, of Jane Morris and Lizzie Siddall. But I was only fifteen, then.

‘You’re a poem?’ I repeated.

She chewed her lower lip. ‘If you want. I am a poem, or I am a pattern, or a race of people whose world was swallowed by the sea.’

‘Isn’t it hard to be three things at the same time?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘Enn.’

‘So you are Enn,’ she said. ‘And you are a male. And you are a biped. Is it hard to be three things at the same time?’

‘But they aren’t different things. I mean, they aren’t contradictory.’ It was a word I had read many times but never said aloud before that night, and I put the stresses in the wrong places. *Con*tradict*ory*.

She wore a thin dress, made of a white, silky fabric. Her eyes were a pale green, a colour that would now make me think of tinted contact lenses; but this was thirty years ago; things were different then. I remember wondering about Vic and Stella, upstairs. By now, I was sure that they were in one of the bedrooms, and I envied Vic so much it almost hurt.

Still, I was talking to this girl, even if we were talking nonsense, even if her name wasn’t really Triolet (my generation had not been given hippie names: all the Rainbows and the Sunshines and the Moons, they were only six, seven, eight years old back then). She said, ‘We knew

that it would soon be over, and so we put it all into a poem, to tell the universe who we were, and why we were here, and what we said and did and thought and dreamed and yearned for. We wrapped our dreams in words and patterned the words so that they would live for ever, unforgettable. Then we sent the poem as a pattern of flux, to wait in the heart of a star, beaming out its message in pulses and bursts and fuzzes across the electromagnetic spectrum, until the time when, on worlds a thousand sun-systems distant, the pattern would be decoded and read, and it would become a poem once again.'

'And then what happened?'

She looked at me with her green eyes, and it was as if she stared out at me from her own Antigone half-mask; but as if her pale green eyes were just a different, deeper, part of the mask. 'You cannot hear a poem without it changing you,' she told me. 'They heard it, and it colonised them. It inherited them and it inhabited them, its rhythms becoming part of the way that they thought; its images permanently transmuting their metaphors; its verses, its outlook, its aspirations becoming their lives. Within a generation their children would be born already knowing the poem, and, sooner rather than later, as these things go, there were no more children born. There was no need for them, not any longer. There was only a poem, which took flesh and walked and spread itself across the vastness of the known.'

I edged closer to her, so I could feel my leg pressing against hers. She seemed to welcome it: she put her hand on my arm, affectionately, and I felt a smile spreading across my face.

'There are places that we are welcomed,' said Triolet, 'and places where we are regarded as a noxious weed, or as a disease, something immediately to be quarantined and eliminated. But where does contagion end and art begin?'

'I don't know,' I said, still smiling. I could hear the unfamiliar music as it pulsed and scattered and boomed in

the front room.

She leaned into me then and – I suppose it was a kiss … I suppose. She pressed her lips to my lips, anyway, and then, satisfied, she pulled back, as if she had now marked me as her own.

‘Would you like to hear it?’ she asked, and I nodded, unsure what she was offering me, but certain that I needed anything she was willing to give me.

She began to whisper something in my ear. It’s the strangest thing about poetry – you can tell it’s poetry, even if you don’t speak the language. You can hear Homer’s Greek without understanding a word, and you still know it’s poetry. I’ve heard Polish poetry, and Inuit poetry, and I knew what it was without knowing. Her whisper was like that. I didn’t know the language, but her words washed through me, perfect, and in my mind’s eye I saw towers of glass and diamond; and people with eyes of the palest green; and, unstoppable, beneath every syllable, I could feel the relentless advance of the ocean.

Perhaps I kissed her properly. I don’t remember. I know I wanted to.

And then Vic was shaking me violently. ‘Come on!’ he was shouting. ‘Quickly. Come on!’

In my head I began to come back from a thousand miles away.

‘Idiot. Come on. Just get a move on,’ he said, and he swore at me. There was fury in his voice.

For the first time that evening I recognised one of the songs being played in the front room. A sad saxophone wail followed by a cascade of liquid chords, a man’s voice singing cut-up lyrics about the sons of the silent age. I wanted to stay and hear the song.

She said, ‘I am not finished. There is yet more of me.’

‘Sorry, love,’ said Vic, but he wasn’t smiling any longer. ‘There’ll be another time,’ and he grabbed me by the elbow and he twisted and pulled, forcing me from the room. I did

not resist. I knew from experience that Vic could beat the stuffing out of me if he got it into his head to do so. He wouldn't do it unless he was upset or angry, but he was angry now.

Out into the front hall. As Vic pulled open the door, I looked back one last time, over my shoulder, hoping to see Triolet in the doorway to the kitchen, but she was not there. I saw Stella, though, at the top of the stairs. She was staring down at Vic, and I saw her face.

This all happened thirty years ago. I have forgotten much, and I will forget more, and in the end I will forget everything; yet, if I have any certainty of life beyond death, it is all wrapped up not in psalms or hymns, but in this one thing alone: I cannot believe that I will ever forget that moment, or forget the expression on Stella's face as she watched Vic hurrying away from her. Even in death I shall remember that.

Her clothes were in disarray, and there was makeup smudged across her face, and her eyes—

You wouldn't want to make a universe angry. I bet an angry universe would look at you with eyes like that.

We ran then, me and Vic, away from the party and the tourists and the twilight, ran as if a lightning storm was on our heels, a mad helter-skelter dash down the confusion of streets, threading through the maze, and we did not look back, and we did not stop until we could not breathe; and then we stopped and panted, unable to run any longer. We were in pain. I held on to a wall, and Vic threw up, hard and long, into the gutter.

He wiped his mouth.

'She wasn't a—' He stopped.

He shook his head.

Then he said, 'You know … I think there's a thing. When you've gone as far as you dare. And if you go any further, you wouldn't be *you* any more? You'd be the person who'd

done *that*? The places you just can’t go … I think that happened to me tonight.’

I thought I knew what he was saying. ‘Screw her, you mean?’ I said.

He rammed a knuckle hard against my temple, and twisted it violently. I wondered if I was going to have to fight him – and lose – but after a moment he lowered his hand and moved away from me, making a low, gulping noise.

I looked at him curiously, and I realised that he was crying: his face was scarlet; snot and tears ran down his cheeks. Vic was sobbing in the street, as unselfconsciously and heartbreakingly as a little boy. He walked away from me then, shoulders heaving, and he hurried down the road so he was in front of me and I could no longer see his face. I wondered what had occurred in that upstairs room to make him behave like that, to scare him so, and I could not even begin to guess.

The streetlights came on, one by one; Vic stumbled on ahead, while I trudged down the street behind him in the dusk, my feet treading out the measure of a poem that, try as I might, I could not properly remember and would never be able to repeat.

Read on for an exclusive preview of the new novel

THE OCEAN AT THE END OF THE LANE

NEIL GAIMAN

Coming from Headline on 18th June 2013

It was only a duckpond, out at the back of the farm. It wasn't very big.

Lettie Hempstock said it was an ocean, but I knew that was silly. She said they'd come here across the ocean from the old country.

Her mother said that Lettie didn't remember properly, and it was a long time ago, and anyway, the old country had sunk.

Old Mrs Hempstock, Lettie's grandmother, said they were both wrong, and that the place that had sunk wasn't the *really* old country. She said she could remember the really old country.

She said the really old country had blown up.

Prologue

I wore a black suit and a white shirt, a black tie and black shoes, all polished and shiny: clothes that normally would make me feel uncomfortable, as if I were in a stolen uniform, or pretending to be an adult. Today they gave me comfort, of a kind. I was wearing the right clothes for a hard day.

I had done my duty in the morning, spoken the words I was meant to speak, and I meant them as I spoke them, and then, when the service was done, I got in my car and I drove, randomly, without a plan, with an hour or so to kill before I met more people I had not seen for years and shook more hands and drank too many cups of tea from the best china. I drove along winding Sussex country roads I only half remembered, until I found myself headed towards the town centre, so I turned, randomly, down another road, and took a left, and a right. It was only then that I realised where I was going, where I had been going all along, and I grimaced at my own foolishness.

I had been driving towards a house that had not existed for decades.

I thought of turning around, then, as I drove down a wide street that had once been a flint lane beside a barley field, of turning back and leaving the past undisturbed. But I was curious.

The old house, the one I had lived in for seven years, from when I was five until I was twelve, that house had been knocked down and was lost for good. The new house, the one my parents had built at the bottom of the garden,

between the azalea bushes and the green circle in the grass we called the fairy ring, that had been sold thirty years ago.

I slowed the car as I saw the new house. It would always be the new house in my head. I pulled up into the driveway, observing the way they had built out on the mid-seventies architecture. I had forgotten that the bricks of the house were chocolate brown. The new people had made my mother's tiny balcony into a two-storey sunroom. I stared at the house, remembering less than I had expected about my teenage years: no good times, no bad times. I'd lived in that place, for a while, as a teenager. It didn't seem to be any part of who I was now.

I backed the car out of their driveway.

It was time, I knew, to drive to my sister's bustling, cheerful house, all tidied and stiff for the day. I would talk to people whose existence I had forgotten years before and they would ask me about my marriage (failed a decade ago, a relationship that had slowly frayed until eventually, as they always seem to, it broke) and whether I was seeing anyone (I wasn't; I was not even sure that I could, not yet), and they would ask about my children (all grown up, they have their own lives, they wish they could be here today), and work (doing fine, thank you, I would say, never knowing how to talk about what I do. If I could talk about it, I would not have to do it. I make art, sometimes I make true art, and sometimes it fills the empty places in my life. Some of them. Not all). We would talk about the departed; we would remember the dead.

The little country lane of my childhood had become a black tarmac road that served as a buffer between two sprawling housing estates. I drove further down it, away from the town, which was not the way I should have been travelling, and it felt good.

The slick black road became narrower, windier, became the single-lane track I remembered from my childhood, became packed earth and knobbly, bone-like flints.

Soon I was driving slowly, bumpily, down a narrow lane with brambles and briar roses on each side, wherever the edge was not a stand of hazels or a wild hedgerow. It felt like I had driven back in time. That lane was how I remembered it, when nothing else was.

I drove past Caraway Farm. I remembered being just sixteen, and kissing red-cheeked, fair-haired Callie Anders, who lived there, and whose family would soon move to the Shetlands, and I would never kiss her or see her again. Then nothing but fields on either side of the road, for almost a mile: a tangle of meadows. Slowly the lane became a track. It was reaching its end.

I remembered it before I turned the corner and saw it, in all its dilapidated red-brick glory: the Hempstocks' farmhouse.

It took me by surprise, although that was where the lane had always ended. I could have gone no further. I parked the car at the side of the farmyard. I had no plan. I wondered whether, after all these years, there was anyone still living there, or, more precisely, if the Hempstocks were still living there. It seemed unlikely, but then, from what little I remembered, they had been unlikely people.

The stench of cow muck struck me as I got out of the car, and I walked gingerly across the small yard to the front door. I looked for a doorbell, in vain, and then I knocked. The door had not been latched properly, and it swung gently open as I rapped it with my knuckles.

I had been here, hadn't I, a long time ago? I was sure I had. Childhood memories are sometimes covered and obscured beneath the things that come later, like childhood toys forgotten at the bottom of a crammed adult closet, but they are never lost for good. I stood in the hallway and called, 'Hello? Is there anybody here?'

I heard nothing. I smelled bread baking and wax furniture polish and old wood. My eyes were slow to adjust to the darkness: I peered into it, was getting ready to turn and

leave when an elderly woman came out of the dim hallway holding a white duster. She wore her grey hair long.

I said, ‘Mrs Hempstock?’

She tipped her head to one side, looked at me. ‘Yes. I *do* know you, young man,’ she said. I am not a young man. Not any longer. ‘I know you, but things get messy when you get to my age. Who are you, exactly?’

‘I think I must have been about seven, maybe eight, the last time I was here.’

She smiled then. ‘You were Lettie’s friend? From the top of the lane?’

‘You gave me milk. It was warm, from the cows.’ And then I realised how many years had gone by, and I said, ‘No, you didn’t do that, that must have been your mother who gave me the milk. I’m sorry.’ As we age, we become our parents; live long enough and we see faces repeat in time. I remembered Mrs Hempstock, Lettie’s mother, as a stout woman. This woman was stick-thin, and she looked delicate. She looked like her mother, like the woman I had known as Old Mrs Hempstock.

Sometimes when I look in the mirror I see my father’s face, not my own, and I remember the way he would smile at himself, in mirrors, before he went out. ‘Looking good,’ he’d say to his reflection, approvingly. ‘Looking good.’

‘Are you here to see Lettie?’ Mrs Hempstock asked.

‘Is she here?’ The idea surprised me. She had *gone* somewhere, hadn’t she? America?

The old woman shook her head. ‘I was just about to put the kettle on. Do you fancy a spot of tea?’

I hesitated. Then I said that, if she didn’t mind, I’d like it if she could point me towards the duckpond first.

‘Duckpond?’

I knew Lettie had had a funny name for it. I remembered that. ‘She called it the sea. Something like that.’

The old woman put the cloth down on the dresser. ‘Can’t drink the water from the sea, can you? Too salty. Like

drinking life’s blood. Do you remember the way? You can get to it around the side of the house. Just follow the path.’

If you’d asked me an hour before, I would have said no, I did not remember the way. I do not even think I would have remembered Lettie Hempstock’s name. But standing in that hallway, it was all coming back to me. Memories were waiting at the edges of things, beckoning to me. Had you told me that I was seven again, I might have half believed you, for a moment.

‘Thank you.’

I walked into the farmyard. I went past the chicken coop, past the old barn and along the edge of the field, remembering where I was, and what was coming next, and exulting in the knowledge. Hazels lined the side of the meadow. I picked a handful of the green nuts, put them in my pocket.

The pond is next, I thought. I just have to go around this shed, and I’ll see it.

I saw it and felt oddly proud of myself, as if that one act of memory had blown away some of the cobwebs of the day.

The pond was smaller than I remembered. There was a little wooden shed on the far side, and, by the path, an ancient, heavy wood-and-metal bench. The peeling wooden slats had been painted green a few years ago. I sat on the bench, and stared at the reflection of the sky in the water, at the scum of duckweed at the edges, and the half-dozen lily pads. Every now and again I tossed a hazelnut into the middle of the pond, the pond that Lettie Hempstock had called …

It wasn’t the sea, was it?

She would be older than I am now, Lettie Hempstock. She was only a handful of years older than I was back then, for all her funny talk. She was eleven. I was … what was I? It was after the bad birthday party. I knew that. So I would have been seven.

I wondered if we had ever fallen in the water. Had I pushed her into the duckpond, that strange girl who lived in the farm at the very bottom of the lane? I remembered her being in the water. Perhaps she had pushed me in too.

Where did she go? America? No, *Australia*. That was it. Somewhere a long way away.

And it wasn't the sea. It was the ocean.

Lettie Hempstock's ocean.

I remembered that, and, remembering that, I remembered everything.