PROTEST. STORIES OF RESISTANCE (ed. Ra Page)

May Hobbs

Maggie Gee

I.

ANNA IS READING A tattered *Vogue* which has a feature about travel-writing. Something has enraptured her, a paragraph about the last remaining virgin forest in Siberia. '...Human foot never trod', she whispers. Birch, larch, shivering poplar. White. No-one had ever seen it, but in her mind she stands there, silent.

Her mother is going on from the kitchen. 'May Hobbs. She's like a watchword for me.'

'I've heard enough about May Hobbs,' sighs Anna, as the white leaves shiver.

'Everyone should know about May Hobbs. She said we had rights just like the blimmin' men.'

Anna leaves the Siberian *taiga*. In a second, she's back in Seabridge, on the old battleground with her mother. 'What did she go to prison for?'

This was a sore point, with Ma.

'Nothing, really. It was a stitch-up. Like the FBI and Hillary Clinton. This was Hoxton, remember, last century. They were always in and out of each other's houses. A feller dumped those coats on May... She was innocent, like Hillary is. Property is theft, in any case.'

'You should leave our front door open, then.'

Anna likes to have the last word. Her mother has got

worse since she started doing a politics degree for the Open University. All information makes her indignant: the weather, the gap between rich and poor, the growing lack of respect for education 'before I've had a chance to finish mine', and now Trump standing for president. Anna's ears burn. She longs for quiet, or anything that would stop Ma talking. Besides, it's influencing Kim, who is only ten, but getting stroppy. 'Let's put the TV on.' Anna grabs the remote.

But there he is, the yellow-gold quiff, the unsmiling face staring down at the crowd as if he is picking out tomorrow's dinner.

'That man's a wolf,' her mother says. 'You think he's funny, but mark my words…'

'Come on, he's a joke.'

'We won't be laughing.'

Sometimes Anna swam back in time, as the beloved, relentless voice went on, to twelve years ago, when she had left home 'for ever'. For ever turned out to be a couple of years. Just after the millennium. She was twenty-one. Everything... shone. She was going to be a poet, then.

The best thing about the flat Anna shared with Sven had been the shower. New, expensively imported from Sweden, with slats of pale wood transfigured by the light, the white, pure light from the frosted sun on the long window on the left. The rush of bright water, which was easy and ceaseless, stopped her hearing any noise the child made. In the first year of little Kim's life, Anna and Sven were going to get married. At first Anna's life with him was heaven: she had escaped the muddle of home, the stress of exams, Ma's expectations, she had her own child and her wealthy lover, though her mother disliked him on principle, for being Swedish and having money. The water poured down her straight pale limbs. She never wanted to leave that lit space, just stood there staring at her shrinking belly rinsed clean by the silvery sound of the water, and she was still a girl and Sven would stop shouting and start to call her his

princess again, and her life would continue, a pure strong line with the power to go anywhere and everywhere.

Now, ten years after Kim was born, she and Sven have long parted, and Anna is heavier and slightly sadder, though she laughs a lot more, with a dry bright sound, and she is a woman in her thirties, no longer sure what to dream about.

Anna still writes poems, and lives with her mother – she never meant to, but 'It makes sense, Ma.' Her mother helps out with Kim, of course. But Ma has lots of course-work to do for her Open University degree, which she reminds Anna is 'no joke'. 'Politics, philosophy and economics'. Ma likes to say the words, with their clicking consonants and polysyllables and soft, important, brainy 'S'es. Her essay this month is on 'Politics of Protest'. May Hobbs is going to get dragged in. Anna laughed out loud when Ma told her the title: 'You'll get a distinction, you're always protesting.'

Ma will have a degree before her daughter does, for which Ma blames Sven, who was 'a middle-class wanker' who 'effed up your life because you had no sense.'

'He was the father of my child.' They bicker gently, mother and daughter, and sometimes savagely about Kim (Ma thinks Anna could make more effort), or bitterly about politics.

At the moment, it's the US Election. 'Stop going on,' Anna begs her. '*Obviously* Trump won't win.'

But Ma believes her daughter is 'clueless' about the way the world is run. 'He's going to win because he's a celebrity. Not that he's ever done anything. I'm ashamed of you. You just don't care. Your whole generation. You don't know you're born.'

'Have you changed the world, Ma?'

'At least we tried. I haven't given up, and nor should you.'

'Could I change the world?' Kim asks from the sofa where she is trying to do her homework.

'No,' says Anna.

'Yes,' says Ma.

The house they share is a Georgian terrace which one day might sell for decent money – 'silly money', Ma likes to say, though she has no evidence it's true. The house was gutted by the council in the eighties, with most of the original features removed: the Georgian banisters, the panelled doors. Ma bought it cheap as a sitting tenant from the life insurance when her husband died, though they still have a mortgage to repay which never seems to get much smaller. What is it now, twenty, thirty? There is no garden, just a yard, which Anna complains about: she loves flowers, and brings back a succession of pots which most of the time she forgets to water. She loves the names: amaryllis, lily. The stairs are too steep for Ma's arthritic knees and weren't easy for Anna when Kim was a toddler but they're used to it, all of them, though Ma and Anna both always say: 'It's just temporary.'

It was Anna who Ma had expected to move, her clever daughter, away and upwards, not into a flat with an 'effing Swede', but away, overseas, on her own account, flying, flying, far from Seabridge, with jobs, doctorates, fame, riches, the glittering prizes her daughter deserves as the second cleverest girl in the class – the cleverest one, Wendy, had gone off to Oxford and now makes millions in the City.

Ma reminds Anna about Wendy sometimes, and Anna is always quick to reply. 'Well you wouldn't want me to do that, because then I'd be an exploiter, right?'

'A few millions might come in handy.'

But Anna is dreamy, and a cleaner, like Ma, or as Ma was before her elbow got bad and she had to claim disability benefit (she still earns a bit as an Avon lady – walking's OK – and she likes the women to whom she sells cosmetics and 'affordable perfume' door to door, Sparkly Citrus Eau de Toilette or Rare Amethyst Eau de Parfum; she could sell more if she'd only pretend she used some of the goods herself.)

Ma isn't happy that Anna is cleaning but that's because she is 'old-fashioned,' as Anna kindly explains to her. 'It's a normal thing. Lots of my other friends do it, who could have *good jobs*,

but they prefer this, they like the freedom. I'm not like you, it's not for ever.'

And yet, Anna is thirty-three. Day by day can turn into 'for ever'. Not all Anna's claims are to be trusted. What are those 'good jobs' her friends decline?

Anna still has plans, but they are as misty as the sea-view at the end of the road. It's October, and today she's off for an interview with 'this new lady' as Ma calls her, scornfully, a woman recently moved 'Down From London', a 'DFL', as Seabridge calls them.

2.

Irina Nemirovska is indeed a lady. Her great grandparents came to England after the Russian Revolution, having survived a long, expensive, zigzag flight through Europe during which they were forced to spend a lot of their money, so her great-grandfather hated Bolsheviks. His children rebelled by voting Labour and kicking out Churchill after the war, so *their* children, naturally, voted Tory, while Irina, by the blind logic of opposites, is a left-leaning former academic and writer. She would 'rather not have a cleaner', but she's 'lazy', she laughs, though she 'works all the time' – (she expects her friends to deny she's lazy) – and she can afford one, so why not? Besides, she likes to spread money around. That's how society should function, she thinks. Irina likes to help things along.

So far, she hasn't had a good morning. She's writing an article about 1970s activism. She knows her stuff, she used to teach it, she's assembled all her materials, but the voice to write it in – that eludes her. She's watched, once again, *Nightcleaners*, the black and white film about the office-cleaners who came out on strike in 1972. A little too 'arty', she thought, at first, but the more she watches it, the more it haunts her: the tired, wise faces of the women workers, or their figures, in long-shot, framed in lit office windows as they dusted other people's desks

or emptied other people's waste-bins: moments of geometric beauty. She re-reads the transcript of what they said. One particular exchange burrows inward, unsettling.

Voice Over: What would socialism mean to you?

Cleaner: ...it's a life for the people. Yeah, it's a life for the working-class people. If that was possible, but that wouldn't be, could it? It couldn't be.

Voice Over: Why not?

Cleaner: Ohhh, it's asking for the moon, isn't it?...

Voice of shop steward: If people are strong enough, this is the thing.

The way they talked. The way they hoped. Irina knows she can't catch that. And maybe she feels, obscurely, excluded. She copies the paragraph on to some paper and stares at it, shaken, stirred. What would socialism mean to you? It's a life for the people. Yes, it's a life for the working-class people. Ohhh, it's asking for the moon...

She walks around the house with the piece of paper, restless. Maybe Irina needs someone to talk to, but Seabridge is hardly likely to supply that. Not that she's lonely: or is she, actually? No, but she'd like – a kindred spirit.

History. It is so hard to catch. Looking backwards, it all looks obvious, the way the workers won their rights. But at the time, everything hung in the balance. Even the women didn't know it would happen. No, it was asking for the moon. And now, she thought. Brexit, Trump. Brexit happened, so maybe Trump...? No, impossible. Of course not. Is she getting old? She doesn't feel strong enough. Maybe the human race is doomed.

It's a relief when the doorbell rings. She opens it: there is a pale, dark girl. Oh yes, of course, the girl for the job. Irina has felt naked without a cleaner. What if one of her friends came down from London?

'Hello, I'm Anna' – the girl's shaking off rain. Intelligent face. A bit round-shouldered.

'Come in to the warm,' Irina says.

'Oh yes thanks, I'll just change my shoes. I wouldn't like to dirty your carpet –' but somehow, a leaf blows into the hallway.

Soon Anna's balanced on a gilt *fauteuil*.

'Do you have children?' Irina asks. She herself is the last in her family. The house is full of gold-framed photos, recently unpacked, thick on the surfaces as gleaming scales on butterflies' wings. She hopes the cleaner won't knock them over.

'One girl. Ten. That's why I'm doing this. So I can be there for her.' Anna smiles a virtuous smile, but secretly knows it's not true any more – Kim comes home and goes straight to her bedroom and stays on her phone until supper-time. She is putting on weight, and looks secretive, but Anna can't worry about everything, she will leave it to Ma, who worries for Britain.

'Good, of course.' Irina's sizing Anna up. Should she ask about her education? You didn't need it, though, to clean. 'I have a lot of books. I don't expect you to dust them – the most important thing is not to touch the ones I'm actually working on.'

'Are you a writer? I like books. And writers.'

'Do you? Why? A lot of them are ghastly,' Irina laughs, but thinking *Good*. 'I do write things. Articles mostly. A few books of political history.'

'Mum's always saying I should have been a writer. I did come top of English at school. But I didn't go to university.'

'You don't need to go to university to be a writer.'

'I still write poems, and other bits and pieces.' Anna can see Irina has lost interest. The old lady might have been a beauty, once. Under short white hair, her dark eyes slant upwards. High cheekbones and red lipstick. Gold chain, gold necklace. Anna's mother never wears lipstick, despite selling it to others for Avon.

'If you want to write, just go for it,' Irina says, with an air of finality, and puts her reading glasses back on.

Easy enough for you to say, Anna thinks, concealing irritation with a grateful smile. *You want me to be your cleaner, not a writer. You want to keep writing while I clean your loo, and I don't blame you, but don't pretend.*

'This woman,' adds Irina, indicating the paperback lying face down on the walnut table with a smiling, sturdy woman on the cover, 'wrote a brilliant book about her life, and she had no education to speak of. She was a cleaner, like you, but she became a writer...' (Her voice tails off. The girl's face was almost... hostile. None of her generation cared about history.)

'Ummm.' Anna's only half listening. 'My mother's into politics. But –'

'What does she do?'

'Well, she used to clean. Now she works for Avon.' Anna feels obscurely ashamed. 'But she's doing an OU degree in politics.'

'The Avon Foundation?' says Irina, smiling, though somehow the name doesn't sound quite right. 'They run creative writing courses, don't they? Several of my former pupils have been.'

'Do they? Ma never mentioned that.'

'They are a splendid institution.'

'Ma's more on the selling side.'

Something Irina said earlier has got under Anna's skin. About the woman who was 'a cleaner, like you'.

'I think of myself as someone who cleans,' she says, with a spurt of animation.

'Yes?' says Irina, not understanding.

'Not – a cleaner,' Anna explains. 'I don't define myself as a cleaner. I do lots of things. We're all, you know, players in the gig economy.'

(It is a phrase she has only just learned. It caused an argument with her mother, who shouted 'No, you're wrong, you're WORKERS. You have forgotten you are all WORKERS. You're not just, like, separate molecules.' Later she heard Kim shouting in the bath, just trying it out: 'I'm a WORKER, right? I am a WORKER.')

'So I'm not, you know, just a cleaner.'

'No, I see.' A longer pause. After all, a cleaner was what Irina wanted, someone who would really do the work. 'You do

like cleaning, though?' she probes. There's something dreamy about the girl. Also, an edge of discontent.

It's not a fucking hobby, Anna thinks. But 'Of course,' she replies, 'I like to do a good job.' There's some truth in that. It's nice when it's done and the whole house smells of synthetic citrus. Summer breeze: lemon trees.

'That's reassuring,' says Irina drily, and laughs to show she has a sense of humour, then tries to cover her face with her hand.

Beautiful ring, Anna notices. Heavy gold, with a ruby-red stone. 'How much do you pay?' she blurts, slightly rudely, but the woman doesn't look offended and, after an infinitesimal pause, names a sum one third above the going rate. 'That'll be fine,' Anna says quickly.

Of course, she thinks, she is a DFL, they are all mad, but she can afford it.

In fact, this isn't strictly true. Guilty that the girl's a would-be writer, Irina has added over a pound to the hourly rate she had meant to offer. It's a hefty slice from her academic pension.

Not that she has to live on that, but her father told her, 'Never touch your investments.' The new house is another investment – Seabridge is said to be coming up. But she has kept the house in Chiswick.

'When could you start?' Irina asks. 'I do like a really clean kitchen and bathroom.' She knows she should have said that before she made the offer.

'Course,' says Anna. 'I'm really clean. Have you read my references?'

In fact, she hasn't sent any. Not all employers are reasonable... occasionally there have been disputes. 'I posted them first class,' she adds. 'But you know, the post is hopeless here.'

'Oh, I don't tend to bother with references,' Irina says. 'I follow my instincts.'

(Does she? In fact, she is questioning her instincts, which are to say 'Yes' and get this over. There's a glint of hunger and

recognition in the way the girl looks around the room, at the polished wood and the wall-to-floor bookshelves Irina has built at great expense.)

She would like the tables to be turned, Irina guesses: she should be writing, and I should be cleaning. Her generation want to inherit. They hate the baby boomers, clinging on. She doesn't understand I'm *Russian*, so I'm not part of all that nonsense. I grew up in Chiswick, 'little Russia'.

'So I'll start Wednesday,' Anna says as she leaves, and gives a specially dazzling smile.

'Er, wonderful. But no sprays,' says Irina. 'And nothing that turns the loo orange.'

'Course,' says Anna, though all her stuff is sprays (so much faster, and they scent the air, giving the clients the 'feel-good' factor. Irina will never know the details: most of Anna's clients, embarrassed, stay well out of the way while the cleaning happens.)

'Did you see that monstrous thing Trump said?' Irina asks, as Anna dallies on the doorstep, putting on her outdoor shoes. 'About molesting women?'

'Oh him. He's nuts,' Anna says happily. 'See you soon! Have a great weekend!'

That was an odd thing to say, her new employer muses, because it's only Thursday. Some of us work harder than others, she thinks.

She closes her front door on the November rain and goes back to reading May Hobbs's *Born to Struggle*. Such a brilliant memoir! Such a splendid story! Yet the young woman seemed to have no interest.

3.

'What's she like?' Ma asks, when she and Anna are unwinding over a property programme on TV (*Escape to the Country*: they both love it, because for once they feel they are ahead, both of

them live in the country already, and it's fun to watch clapped-out bankers from the City who are gagging to live in places like Seabridge. Though is Southwold, Suffolk, *entirely* like Seabridge? – Ma has a momentary twinge of unease.)

'What's *who* like?'

'The DFL? Your interview?'

'Oh. All right. Good money. Feels guilty.'

'I know the type. Can't be bothered with them.'

'She was OK. The house was lovely.' Anna is gazing at the screen, where a beautiful Victorian gothic tower is going for a million pounds even though it is falling into the sea. *I might never have a home of my own.* She pushes this desolate truth away. 'Lots of books. Political.'

'Political? Do you mean UKIP?'

'Socialist. Doesn't like Trump.'

Ma chokes on her pizza, personally affronted. *She* is the political one. How could someone employing her daughter as a cleaner claim to be a socialist?

'Hypocrite,' she says, her mouth open, tomato on her upper lip, and Anna, repelled, looks back at the screen.

'Well I like her,' she says, untruthfully. 'Maybe we'll be friends,' she adds for good measure.

'Pigs might fly,' Ma says, with finality, but stung with jealousy, as Anna intends.

Three weeks went by, which meant nine hours of cleaning. Everything was going smoothly. It was always best to make an effort at first, so clients were favourably impressed.

Besides, Irina seemed nice. So far there had been no complaints. She offered Anna coffee on arriving and leaving, and thanked her profusely when she left.

Last week she'd been about to throw away a red leather coat, only slightly worn but too small for her, beautifully cut, with a red leather hood, and she offered it to Anna, instead. 'It looks so much better on someone young and lovely,' Irina said, and her eyes were happy. 'By the way, I liked what you did with

the cushions.' Anna had sloped the cushions on the bed in gentle, graduated mounds of cream, whereas Irina just piled them on at random.

'I like to make a room look pretty,' said Anna. She'd have liked her own bedroom to look like that, with everything creamy, and soft lighting, and orchids growing, palest pink and vanilla. Whereas her own bedroom was still painted the purple she'd demanded as a teenager. Ma had insisted they do Kim's room first. Sometimes Anna fears Ma loves Kim best. They have identical, determined jaw-lines.

'You have an artist's eye,' said Irina, remembering the girl wanted to write. She thought, on the whole, the arrangement was working, but one slightly odd thing had happened that morning. She'd found Anna sitting on the striped chair on the landing, holding a piece of paper in her hand. It was the sheet on which Irena had written the haunting paragraph from the transcript: '... a new life for the working-class people. But it wouldn't be, could it. It couldn't be.'

The girl had jumped like a guilty rabbit. 'Just having a tiny rest,' she said. 'I was reading this. I like the words.'

'Really? Well, you could copy it out. I mean, as soon as you've finished the cleaning.'

Yes, the girl was a dreamer, and slow. By the time she had finished, it was long gone lunch-time, but Irina still offered her a drink, and Anna seemed keen to sit and talk. Eventually Irina had to say something.

'Have you finished your coffee? I've got to get on.'

'OK if I copy that bit of paper?'

'Yes, but do it now, I've got a deadline.'

'What kind of deadline?' Anna asked, miffed. She wasn't quite ready to go back to Kim, who had been acting up at school, but she swallowed her coffee, burning her throat, and started to put on the leather coat.

'Oh, I have an article to write about this woman. She was, you know, an activist –' Irina briefly wondered, would she know the word?

Anna was pulling the hood over her head, admiring herself in the heavy gilt mirror. She'd been thinking of selling the coat in the market. But it did suit her. She thought, *I'll keep it.* Yes, it was a fairy-tale coat.

'See you next Wednesday.' She smiled her best smile.

'Thank you so much. That'll be US Election Day... No, the day we get the results. Honestly, I really am nervous.'

'Americans aren't lunatics,' Anna asserted. 'It'll be fine. Have a lovely weekend.'

'Oh. Yes... But it's only Wednesday.'

4.

As Irina closes the heavy front door, she notices she's not wearing her ring, the beautiful, high-carat ruby ring she inherited from her great-grandmother. It is the creation of a jeweller famous for making tiaras for the Romanovs. She isn't worried: she often slips it off when she's writing, because sometimes her fingers swell and stiffen, and she longs to take everything off that confines her. Where did she leave it though? A moment of panic. Of course it will be by her laptop.

But the ring isn't by her laptop. Irina doesn't want to start worrying, so she goes on writing for half an hour. May Hobbs's face, dauntless, ruddy, firm jaw, bright eyes and regular features, gives a half-smile from the cover of the book.

'May Hobbs's role in the politicisation of the 'night cleaners' of the 1970s cannot be understood without reference to Hoxton, the working-class district of East London where she was brought up by a series of substitutes for her parents, ending up, after getting into trouble with the police, with a foster mother, Jenny, she adored. This seems to have given her an undying belief in the community life of that part of London, where "no-one had much, but what you had, you

shared." "We were always in and out of each other's houses..." When at one point in her peripatetic existence (she often had to flee her debts and struggled to keep a roof over the heads of her six children) May managed to get a large flat for them all far from her roots, she became depressed and pined so much for home that after only three weeks she went back to Hoxton. "One person's slum is another person's community," as she wrote in *Born to Struggle*. The feminists from "Women's Liberation" who took up the cause of the night cleaners when the male trades unionists failed to help them, came from a different social background...'

And so do I, Irina thinks. And so did my parents, and grandparents. I can't imagine what it would be like to have people always coming and going, helping themselves to food from the kitchen.

Do I believe in the common people? I am a socialist, I ought to. (*Am I a socialist? Of course I am.*)

Then she notices, again, her empty finger. With a sigh, she goes off to search for the ring, looking, at first, quite light-heartedly. She wears her jewellery every day – a pair of gold earrings, this ring, her chain – and not infrequently mislays the ring because of those urges to take it off. When she was younger, it didn't happen. Maybe she's worn it all too long.

But the ring is worth tens of thousands of pounds: 18 carat gold, exquisitely worked with a coiled snake and lotus flowers, the ruby cradled in a dew of small diamonds. Five years ago she'd asked a jeweller, a former lover, what he'd value it at, and he'd got out his watch-glass and turned it, squinted, turned it again, squinted, sighed. 'I'd buy it off you for twenty-five, even thirty, *daragaya*. But you'd get more if you went to auction.' £30,000! But she'd never sell it. It means that she is still someone special with a history that stretches from St Petersburg like a trail of stars near the north pole (she'd flown over it, once, on the way to a conference), not just an outsider in an English resort where most of the inhabitants supported Brexit. The ring

is proof she is European; to her Russia means Greater Europe, the land of Pushkin and Nabokov, although she's been exiled for several life-times. But no, she is Russian, her soul is Russian, and like the ring, she is one of a kind.

After three hours of searching, she is desperate. It is seven o'clock. On the radio, Trump is farting out rage against liberals and praising Putin's leadership. How hateful to hear her country's name on his lips! She switches him off so hard she hurts her hand. She's looked everywhere. In her handbag, in her pockets, in the kitchen, in every one of her three bathrooms, on the book-shelves, under the book-shelves.

Without it, she can't settle to writing. In the next few seconds she will certainly find it. But the regular rushes of hope grow weaker.

At 8pm, without prior thought, Irina rings the new cleaner's number, which Anna had written on the telephone pad. Midway, she has doubts, but continues dialling.

'Hello?' Anna sounds sleepy and surprised.

'Did I wake you up? I do hope not.'

'No, we were watching *The Apprentice*. Everything all right?' Anna asks.

'Yes. Er, no. Not exactly. It's nothing, really – I just wondered...'

The pause extends. Anna starts sweating. Has she left a tap on, and flooded the house?

'I've mislaid a ring. I'm, well, fond of it, it was handed down from my great-grandmother. I just wondered if you'd happened to spot it? It's quite... striking. With a red stone.' Irina becomes bolder as she goes on. After all, this isn't an accusation.

Oh God she believes I stole it, thinks Anna. 'No,' she says, 'sorry. I wish I had.' She racks her brain. Has she seen any jewellery? 'I think I know the one you mean. I saw it on your finger when I came for the interview.'

'Oh well, don't worry, it will turn up,' says Irina gallantly. 'Sorry to bother you.'

'No, I'm sorry,' Anna says. Her mother is listening. 'I'll come Wednesday. Bye, Irina. Hope you find it.'

'What's up with her?' Ma asks at once.

'Oh, nothing.'

'You don't look happy.'

And it all comes out, the missing ring, her embarrassment. Predictably, Ma is enraged. 'How dare she ask you? How dare she?'

'Look, Irina wasn't accusing me. I expect she will have found it by Wednesday.'

By the time they've finished rowing *The Apprentice* is over and Trump is on the news again. The BBC has photos from inside Trump Tower. The doors are made of solid gold. Everything gleams golden-yellow. And Trump has ruffled a lot of feathers by praising Putin's actions in Syria. 'Switch it off!' Ma shouts, scornful. 'He's a murderer!'

'What's wrong with him being friends with Putin? I don't want Kim to get blown up.'

'Why would I get blown up?' It's Kim's voice, anxious. They have forgotten she's in the room. 'Is Donna really a murderer?'

'Take no notice of your grandma,' says Anna. 'Stop eating sweets and go to bed.'

'She should know about Putin. And Trump,' Ma asserts.

'No she shouldn't. What's the point?'

This time the row deteriorates, even though Kim is listening. 'It's not *appropriate*', Anna shouts. She rarely shouts, so this is quite shocking.

'But she should know things,' Ma insists. 'We've got the American election next week.'

'She's a LITTLE GIRL,' Anna screeches.

'I'm not a little girl,' Kim says stoutly.

'Why do you always take your grandma's side!'

They stare at each other, the three of them, stuck, till Kim, unbearably torn between the two people she loves most, starts

to sniffle, and clutches Ma's hand.

That's the last straw for Anna, who now feels like a bad mother. 'I won't be ganged up on, I won't! We need our own place, we need our own place! I'm going out,' she cries, and leaves, snatching up the red coat, slamming the front door.

Ma hugs Kim. 'Never mind,' she says. 'I shouldn't have annoyed Mummy, should I?'

'Will she come back?' Kim asks, afraid. Once her mum had run away for a week. 'Is it my fault?'

'No, course not. I expect she's just gone down the street,' Ma says. Together, they go and peer between the curtains, through the first floor window, at the misty night and the street dwindling into nothingness, and they glimpse her in the distance, in her red hooded coat, flying along the white treeline of street-lights.

Kim thinks, my mummy is beautiful and special, as she vanishes beyond the last moon of white mist. 'Will she be all right?'

'Course she will. I expect she's gone to write one of her poems.'

But Ma doesn't sleep till she hears her come in.

5.

When Wednesday arrives, Anna gets up early to make herself a cup of tea and finds Kim crying in the bathroom. The truth comes out: she is being bullied. A boy stuck his pencil in the back of her neck during maths, which Kim is very good at, Kim protested and actually thumped him, and ended up in the headteacher's office.

'I don't want to go to school,' she sobs. 'Can I stay home? I've got a pain.' They sit and cuddle on the landing. Anna is counting the stains on the carpet, which Ma has steam-cleaned without success. She kisses the hot, greasy top of Kim's head. Ma must have been too busy to wash it.

Before Anna can point this out, Ma bursts from her bedroom with a bright red face, clutching a blaring radio. 'You won't believe it. You won't believe it!' – and stomps into the bathroom, slamming the door.

Kim almost stops crying. 'What's the matter with Grandma?'

'I don't know. She's got an essay to write. And I've got to clean for the new lady. I think you'll have to go to school.' Kim starts crying loudly again. Anna stands up to go downstairs. As she does, the door of the bathroom opens and her mother yells, 'Trump's bloody won!!!'

Anna looks over her shoulder and misses a step, the shoddy 1980s banisters crumple and she plunges headlong with an unearthly scream, landing on her right shoulder. The pain is unbelievable.

'I've got to go to work,' she keeps wailing as the paramedics check her over. 'My boss will think I've done a runner.'

The young man is focused on her collar-bone. His eyes are kind. 'We'll have to take you in, all the same. I'm afraid it's broken in two places.'

As they help Anna towards the door, Kim is torn between crying in case her mother, being broken, dies in hospital, and crying in case she has to go to school.

'Kim, you're going, it's EDUCATION,' Ma insists, at the end of her tether. 'Otherwise you'll be a cleaner, like her.' She loves her daughter; she hates her daughter.

'But what about the ring,' Anna wails. 'She'll think I've done a runner with…' But the door closes with finality, and they hear the ambulance drive away.

'It isn't education, it's Own Clothes Day for charity. None of mine fits,' Kim sniffs and sobs. 'And I haven't had any breakfast. And I hate Coco Pops, in any case. I told Mum, but she never listens.'

'Right,' says Ma. 'Good girl for saying. I'll do toast, then you come with me. You'll learn a few things by the time I've finished.'

And this is why, when at 10am Irina opens her front door, headachey from staying up for the misery of the US election, and sure the loud doorbell is the cleaner, she's surprised to see a hot-eyed old woman and a fat, pretty child standing on her doorstep. Jehovah's Witnesses? 'Yes?' she snaps.

But it's Ma, who leaves Irina in no doubt. 'I've come to clean in place of my daughter. She's fell downstairs and broke her collarbone. This one's off school' – indicating Kim – 'but she hasn't got anything infectious, OK?'

'Oh,' says Irina. Her headache sharpens. 'So sorry to hear about…' Her mind goes blank. She gestures vaguely in the air.

'My daughter's name is Anna,' roars Ma.

'But it won't be necessary for you to clean. I mean, very kind of you, but honestly…'

However Ma has screeched over the threshold – 'I'll get on with it. I've brought my kit. Have you got a telly for her to watch?' – pulling Kim in after her willy-nilly. Irina follows them, twisting her hands, her helpless hands with the naked fingers: her Russian ring has not turned up. She wishes she had never come to live in Seabridge, and soon she wishes it even more, because Ma has something on her mind, and offloads it in the drawing-room, which says to her, loud and clear, 'money'.

'I know about your ring, we've heard all about it, I know you rang up and asked my daughter, I can tell you straight away SHE HASN'T NICKED IT, I've brought my daughter up to be honest, but I'm going to have a look for it, OK? And I've got GOOD EYES' – Ma shoots a glance of scorn at Irina's rimless reading glasses – 'so I'll probably find it.' This is delivered at very high volume. Irina starts speaking, but Ma has gone, finding the vacuum as if by instinct and dragging it, deafeningly, into the room. 'Behave,' she yells at Kim. 'Say PLEASE and THANK YOU.'

Kim and Irina stare at each other. Finally Kim, impressed and emboldened by her grandmother's frontal assault, says in a rush: 'Where's your telly, please?' Irina, speechless, leads her next door, and Kim sinks down on the leather sofa and flicks, flicks,

from channel to channel, a bewildering succession of hideous sounds. She has sunk so far down into the sofa that only her feet are visible, and her plump pale legs like small Fairtrade bananas, the only ones Irina will have in the house.

'Do you want...?' Irina tries. But what could she give her? Anyway, Kim's in a world of her own.

6.

Three hours of fear ensue for Irina. Is it even true, that Anna's had an accident? Have they just come to rob her home? She can't call the police, too embarrassing.

That lazy young woman stole your ring, whispers a small, furious voice in her ear. *You saw her face. You knew she wanted it. And now the others have come like vultures. They will take everything away.*

No, I refuse to think that thought, another voice counters, adult, rational.

Irina moves her laptop up into her study, but because there is never any room on her desk, she leaves May Hobbs's book on the drawing-toom table. She closes the door upon her visitors and goes back to her article.

She'd been writing about Chapter 6 of May's book, which was titled, 'Cleaners of the World, Unite'. With that termagant down below, Irina finds the slogan galling, though of course there's really no connection. She flicks back through her box of file-cards, looking for quotes from May to insert, but the first card she settles on makes her feel empty. 'The community was united against the world outside it. It was as if you were all relations – and we probably were through intermarriage... No-one was pulling forelocks to anyone else... No-one even locked their doors – not that anyone had anything worth nicking.'

Irina feels alone in the world.

She can't work, she can't settle, and she switches on the

radio to hear post-election pundits, stupid with sleep, whipping themselves into self-righteous frenzy about the likely end of the world now Donald Trump has been elected. The old woman is banging about on the staircase, then the vacuum roars on below.

Irina decides she must go downstairs. Otherwise they might stay for ever. The stair carpet is very clean, and Ma has polished the brass stair rods. But when she opens the drawing room door, she sees Ma standing motionless, outlined against the light through the lace curtains, for the rain has stopped, and there is thin sunlight.

'This book,' Ma says. She sounds puzzled and accusing. 'This book was on the table. How did you get hold of it?' It sounds as though she thinks Irina stole it.

'I bought it, obviously,' Irina says stiffly.

'Did May Hobbs... did she actually write it?' Ma is cautious. She is out of her depth.

'Yes. It's her autobiography.'

'Autobiography. Is that fiction?'

'No, of course, it's about her life. Why are you interested in May Hobbs?'

'I knew her, didn't I.'

'What, in person? I don't think it can be the same one.'

'It is the same one. Who led the strike. It says so here. Against the government. Ministry of Defence, for one. I did know her. She was all right. May would have a laugh with you...'

'You actually knew her?' Irina can't believe it. 'The same May Hobbs that led the cleaners' strike?'

Ma realises she has an advantage. Irina is staring as if Ma is Jesus. 'Yes, I was in it. I was part of it, I don't know if she put our names, but I was one of them, the night cleaners, I cleaned with May, I went to her meetings.'

'Well, this is extraordinary.'

There is a pause in which they gaze at each other, seeing each other for the first time. The ornate Russian clock on the mantelpiece ticks loudly in the silence between them. Time has

just changed, and space, and power. For a few seconds, it's all up for grabs.

Ma starts talking, and can't stop.

'We had no time, we worked from 10pm till 7am, then we all went home, got the kids off to school and did the housework, maybe two hours' sleep before we picked up the kids and soon it was evening and off we went to work again. For that they paid us less than the daytime cleaners. But somehow or other we got to May's meetings, they would have gone on treating us like dirt for ever.' It's wonderful for Ma to have an audience; Anna never listens to her.

'Would you like to sit down?' Irina interrupts her, but deferentially, and tries to take her duster.

'I haven't finished dusting.'

'No, please, I insist.' Irina tugs away the duster and points Ma ceremoniously towards the *chaise longue*. Ma inspects it with care before sitting down.

'We once had one of these, I got it in a junk yard, but then it turned out to have woodworm –' She blushes deep red, then tries to recover, she has always prided herself on good manners. 'Of course, yours wouldn't have come from a junkyard.'

'It actually belonged to my grandmother,' Irina says. 'We were very fortunate. My family was Russian.' She waves apologetically around the room.

'The Russian Revolution! Brilliant country!'

'Quite,' says Irina, awkwardly.

Kim rushes in from the room next door, shouting 'Grandma, the murderer is on the television!'

Both of them gape, not understanding. 'The mad man you said about! Donna Something! With the scary yellow hair! The one who's going to blow up the world! With his scary son! Don't you want to see him?'

'Oh him,' says Ma. 'No, we're busy.' After a short pause, she continues. 'Nobody told me May had written a book. I wish I'd known, I would have read it!' Her voice is wistful. Why wasn't she told? The educated kept good things to themselves.

'It was a great victory, wasn't it?'

'Was it?' Now it all spills out, Ma's memories, not in order. 'It seemed like a victory at the time. The women were earning £12.50 a week, and that went up to £16.50, with 50p extra for 'unsocial hours' – that bit did feel like a victory.'

'Don't say another word, I have to get us coffee.' Irina practically runs to the kitchen and makes coffee with the door open, calling through 'Filter or *cafetière*?'

'I like a latte really,' says Ma, keeping her end up, feeling happy. Irina comes back in while the kettle boils, and Ma continues, 'Was it a victory? I don't know. See the cleaning industry was all contractors. So first we got the workforce unionised, well I say "we", but really it was May. She persuaded us we could hope for better. But soon as we got a place unionised, the employer just goes with another contractor. So the worker never even met the employer. Well we never really HAD an employer. It's the same thing, isn't it, this "gig economy" my daughter goes on about as if it's cool. The profit goes to the parasites who set themselves up between the workers and the payers... In the end we ran a strike against the civil service. They gave in because everyone supported us, the post office unions, the electricians. The postmen wouldn't deliver any letters, and the GPO engineers blocked the phones. I've loved postmen ever since! That's what happens when people, you know, stand together.'

Irina delivers her attempt at a latte and watches Ma anxiously to see if she likes it. This is so exciting! She must take notes. Seabridge has wonderful characters, she realises. A friend of May Hobbs – she is in luck. Ma skims off the wrinkled milk skin from her coffee, smiles forgivingly, and drinks it. 'Very nice, thank you.'

'Good! You stood together and it worked,' says Irina, gazing lovingly at Ma. 'May Hobbs must have been so happy.'

'Maybe on the day. We all went and got drunk. But in the long run – I don't know. They only got in different contractors. May Hobbs got driven out of the country. The powers that be

threatened her, 'You'll never get a job in this country again.' She'd caused a row in too many places. She already had to dye her hair whenever she went for a job interview...'

Irina keeps nodding her crest of white curls as the marvellous revelations continue. Kim is listening intently. Every now and then she taps Ma's hand, but Ma doesn't feel like being interrupted.

'So what happened to May in the end?' asks Irina.

'She went to Australia, believe it or not. The whole family took off and left. I stayed in touch with her son for a bit. He said they didn't ever settle, not really. But then, she was always a bit of a gypsy. They don't have possessions, do they, gypsies? When they die they burn the caravans with everything in it, they don't pass stuff on. So the gypsy world doesn't get all cluttered – '

Ma catches herself back. This room is cluttered with lamps, books, photographs. 'She ended up reading tarot cards, would you believe it? For money, I mean. I saw her just before she left the country. I said, "May, you ought to be a politician." She wasn't interested. She said, "It's not me. They all make compromises, don't they? I'm not going to play the political game." People courted her. May turned them down. Which is all very well, but we needed her. We need some decent politicians...'

Kim has been waiting patiently for her grandmother to run out of steam. At last she draws breath, and Kim tugs her arm, then whispers something in her ear. Ma pushes her away, frowning, then freezes as she understands. 'WELL, GIVE IT HER BACK THEN!' she shouts, stentorian. Kim jumps up meekly, goes over to Irina and holds a round plump hand out towards her, facing downwards, closed like a nutshell.

'It was under the cushions on the sofa,' she said. 'Grandma said you lost it. *I* found it!' And she drops the gold ring on to Irina's lap, proud. Irina stares, then smiles and smiles, clasping her old white hands around it. 'This is a happy, happy day,' she says. She has forgotten about the election, it's far away, and *carpe diem*.

Seabridge is no longer lonely. May Hobbs's friend! And now this blessing! It lifts her up, a great wave of emotion, shining gold, like beauty, fairness, her long-lost Russia, and love itself, glowing at the ring's red heart, and as she soars along the crest, she decides to give the poor child the ring – she has others, and this one hurts her hand. It's always been too big and heavy. And it will be a magnificent gesture!

At last, she can be part of it all.

And yet, there's history, and common sense. 'It's very special. My great-grandmother's.' And she is so attached to it. This is the moment: but the wave ebbs, leaving her back on her feet in the shallows. The child must be rewarded, though.

'Can we go home now? Will Mum be home?' Kim asks. She has always known she must look after her mother, and now bits of her are actually broken.

'We'll go and see her at the hospital,' says Ma.

'I will get you a taxi,' Irina offers. 'And you, little girl, you should have a reward.' She bustles upstairs to her bag in the bedroom and unfolds two twenty pound notes. Reward people for honesty, that is what her mother taught her. But then she thinks, she can't be more than eleven. Forty pounds would be too much for her. Money can corrupt you, she thinks, sadly. She re-folds a twenty and takes out a ten. Thirty pounds seems... appropriate. And then, of course, there are the wages, though it seems impolite to pay someone she knows.

She gives Kim the reward, and Ma looks contented, and takes Anna's wages without comment. 'I'll call you a cab now,' Irina says. 'But I hope you'll come back for a coffee soon.'

'We could go on the bus,' says Ma, half-heartedly, more from politeness than anything else, and is taken aback when Irina agrees 'If you're sure, darling. I know it's not far.'

They look back at her as they reach the pavement. She stands in the doorway with the light behind her. Quite tiny really. Getting smaller.

7.

It's cold at the bus stop and Kim feels low, but Ma is happy and boisterous, remembering how she impressed Irina.

'What are carrot cards?' Kim asks her gran.

'Carrot cards? What are you on about? – oh, TAROT cards. They're nonsense, really.'

'Why did that May woman have them, then?'

'Because people want to know the future. Tarot cards are supposed to tell you.'

'Can I have some?'

'No.'

'Why not? I want to know about Donna Trump.'

'You can change your own future, Kim, you know. You don't have to look at a pack of cards. May was just tired, I expect. She'd fought so much she had a right to be. You're not tired. You've got your life ahead.'

The bus arrives with its golden windows, each one framing a pair of passengers, and lifts them out of the rainy afternoon which is just beginning to get dark. They are back in a world of warmth and people. Someone gets up so they can sit down. Some language students sing, badly, in English, a song they learned this afternoon. When they hit a duff note, people groan and laugh.

'Why did I have to give the ring back?' Kim asks, suddenly. 'You said Rinna was a thief.'

'What?'

'You said, "Property is theft." When we were walking to the house. You said, rich people are all thieves.'

'That was before I knew her, though.'

'Why is it different when you know people?'

'Well it just is.' Ma is slightly impatient. Her elbow, unused to polishing, is gip. Why had she tried so hard with those stair-rods? Pride, really. She needn't have bothered. Then she makes an effort to be nice to Kim. 'Irina's Russian, any way. She gave you thirty quid, didn't she?'

'How much did the ring cost?' Kim asks her. 'Was it, like, you know, a hundred pounds? I wish she'd given me a hundred pounds.'

'Ungrateful...' But Ma is pleased, and laughs. 'You're a bright one. You'll do well.' She thinks about it. 'Probably more. Maybe a thousand, two thousand.'

'She should have given me two thousand pounds.'

'That's enough talk about money. We've got enough, more or less.' Unless interest rates go up, Ma thinks. And if they do, how will we pay the mortgage?

'But you said it was good to get more money. You did a strike to get more money. One day I'll do a strike, too.' Kim isn't quite sure what a strike entails, but she wants to be brave, like Grandma was. She's going to buy a house for her mother.

'Good girl. You do that. Now we'll go and see Mum.'

8.

In hospital, the sheets are white and clean. They have kept Anna in in case she has concussion, but she will be allowed to go home soon. However, Anna is in no hurry. She loves the hospital's antiseptic smell. It's quiet until visiting hours begin. She is dreaming of never having to clean again.

It's a very strange job, really, she thinks. I do things other people shrink from doing. Things they prefer not to think about. What they want from me is magic. She gets out her notebook and thinks about writing.

What is it we do? It's...

She has to pause. And then she knows. *It's miraculous...*

A woman comes slowly into the ward with a big spray, and starts spraying the surfaces. She is small, and bowed, in her overall, and looks as though a million years ago she came from China, or the Philippines – somewhere a long way away, in any case – and has been here for another million. Nobody looks her in the eye, or says 'Hello', or 'Please' or 'Thank you'. She works

methodically, and sees no-one. Her progress is infinitely slow. She is bowed so low, she is almost on the floor.

Anna's looking down from her high, hard bed. Something suddenly grows from her centre, unfurls like the tongue of an amaryllis towards the woman, who never looks up: a green-gold thread, a magical tendril. Anna floats round the room beside her.

I am like you, Anna thinks. All of us women, cleaning and cleaning. And everyone looks down on us. I pretend they don't but I know they do.

'Thank you,' she whispers to the woman, who flinches, and frowns, craning up to hear. 'I'm a cleaner, too,' Anna says, louder, and the tiny woman gives a tiny nod. Anna returns to the thread in her head.

What is it we do? It's miraculous. We make time run backwards, that's what we do. The kids' sticky fingers didn't touch the banisters. The dying man didn't piss on the floor, just floated peacefully out of the window. The drunk dad didn't spill his beer. That's what we do, we undo touch. We're special people, time travellers. We're here to make the world new again.

There are thousands of us. Hundreds of thousands. All over the world, there must be millions. If we all stood together in one place, we'd make a whole country. A continent. All standing up like trees in the sunlight. Birch trees, yes, all white and clean, birch trees, aspens, trees like that. Like the trees in that Siberian forest. Thousands of miles of birch forest, untouched by anyone, untrodden.

No-one could get to us, all together. And it would be cold and fresh and bright. Nothing dirty anywhere near us. Just standing in the sunlight all together.

All the cleaners in the world. The straightest, now, in the light. The cleanest. And there would be a life for us. A better life. Could it be? Could it?

Kim comes sprinting down the ward.