

## The Agency

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THE BEAUTIFUL INDIFFERENCE  
(2011)

The children had left for school an hour before. I'd cleared up after them, putting stray, dusty socks into the laundry basket, rinsing plastic yogurt pots and stacking them in the recycling bin. I'd had time to shower, dress, make myself some coffee, and was about to turn on the computer. On the display screen of my phone the number came up as Private. A polite male voice asked if he was speaking to Hannah, and if I knew where to come. I stuttered and hesitated. There was a long pause, unbearably long it seemed, filled only by the insectile pulse and tick of the satellite connection. I thought about hanging up, and switching off my phone, but finally I said, Yes, I have the address. Thank you. Thank you for checking.

Of course, he replied, his tone even, as if he was used to transactions of gratitude.

I remember thinking afterwards that the call had been well timed. It was considerate. In some small way this was reassuring, though I was still uncertain about following through. It was one thing to have found the nerve to call the number on the back of the card that

Anthea King had handed me. It was another altogether to dress myself smartly, as I knew I would, get into the car, and drive fifty miles into the city. For the sake of what? A change in my life to which I was not entitled, and was not even sure I wanted to make. I had no idea how long the appointment would last or what it would involve. And if it had not been Anthea who had made the recommendation, I probably would have put aside the idea.

But she had assured me that there was no chance of anything unprofessional occurring. The company was private and reliable, and she had been a member for over a year.

It's a nice term, isn't it, *member*? she had said during one coffee morning together. The Agency is like that. Everything feels very tight. Very secure. Life rarely offers us these opportunities without making a hell of a mess afterwards.

I'd looked across the table at her. Perhaps I was looking for excitement flinting at the back of her eyes, or desperation, because I felt myself to be increasingly desperate. Her hand was cupped around the china mug, her thumb stroking the dark smudge of lipstick on its rim. She was smiling. She appeared unruffled. She could have been talking about anything – a yoga club, a salon.

Don't look so tense, Hannah darling, she had said. Really. You deserve this. Everyone deserves contentment. You have to look after your health. It's amazing how truly discordant life seems if you feel wrong within yourself. If you feel lacking.

Her smile lengthened, and I thought, as I always did in her company, that she was a very attractive woman. Her hair was tawny and full, expensively fletched with auburn, and it sat brightly against her blazer. From behind she might have been mistaken for a young woman, trim and energetic as she was. But her face was heavily lined. If anything she looked older than her actual years, perhaps by almost a decade. Her attitude remained youthful, animating the mature, textured face, and it was this combined quality that was most appealing. Men flocked around her at parties, topping up her glass and listening to her upbraid politicians and culture ministers, as she did in her weekly newspaper column. Her laughter rang above the noise of any gathering, rich and inelegant.

I'd known Anthea since the children began primary school. The other mothers had probably assumed she was grandmother to the little girl, Laura, whose hand she was holding. And until the child said, Kisses Mummy, and pulled her down so she could reach her cheek, so had I.

Well, now we can all return to our bloody lives, she'd declared slowly, once the sons and daughters were beyond the school gate. She'd caught my smile and snorted, putting her hands to her mouth. A week later we had exchanged telephone numbers. Soon after we began socialising as couples – our husbands knew each other by sight, it turned out, from the university campus. She introduced me to a new group of women in the town, a vibrant artistic set of varying ages, who went into the city intermittently, to work, to attend book launches and ebullient, champagne-driven gatherings. A couple of them were journalists, one was married to a radio presenter, and one worked in television. They were all friendly and, if not uncommonly beautiful, were svelte, fine-boned, and bought rich, top-end cosmetics.

I liked them, and they in turn seemed to take me under their collective wing. Often we would meet on Saturday mornings, at one of the small pricey boutiques in the centre of town. Expensive shirts and gowns would be fitted, and occasionally bought. The women complimented each other, were honest about what was flattering and what was not. They were casual around each other when undressed.

Chesca, look at your perfect breasts. Can't quite believe you've had three children!

Darling, go a size down, that's hanging off you like a widow's frock!

The lunches afterwards were always wine-accompanied and there were confidential exchanges; often I would return home sparkle-eyed and flushed, and John would make coffee and tease me about my alcoholic friends. There were annual parties hosted at Christmas, New Year, and Midsummer, or held for charming aesthetic reasons, like the flowering each May of Tamar's red peonies; occasions strictly observed by the group, and around which other family holidays were planned.

At the first of the Saturday lunches I had been slightly shocked by the level of confession. John and I had become a self-contained unit; any upsets or difficulties were locked away, resolved internally, or not. As they skilfully deboned fish and forked their way through salads the women swapped not only old pieces of jewellery but medical histories and marital frustrations. Health scares. Stories of previously loved men. The desire for more rigorous forms of sex. Tamar spoke of an affair she'd tolerated, and her husband's eventual recommitment.

The thing is, he was stupidly transparent, she said, laughing and shaking her head. Edward thought I wouldn't know exactly what it meant when he was

sitting there in his chair moping. She hadn't rung him for a week. I ended up comforting him for whatever ridiculous reason he made up, missing the dead dog or something, but I knew full well why I was really comforting him!

Noticing my expression, she had smiled at me, waving away my sympathy and my concern.

Oh, don't worry, Hannah. Your John worships you. He isn't the type. And he certainly isn't an idiot.

I wasn't sure that she knew John, but her kindness and flattery touched me. Then her smile tightened a fraction.

Women can live far more comfortably with secrets, don't you think?

It was Anthea who replied. Yes. And may we remain unreadable.

She held up her wine glass and the others toasted the sentiment.

Afterwards, as we tottered towards the taxi rank, Anthea told me that each of the women idealised another in the group, for their looks, their vivacity, or their maternal skill. I wondered whom she most admired – perhaps Lizzie, who was fifteen years younger, was a successful playwright, and had had a series of overlapping, adventurous relationships that Anthea delighted in, calling them 'jolly friendships'.

Then I wondered if she was referring to me, and the way I would often study her during our coffee mornings. There was a fascinating Englishness about her, redolent of previous generations, of grandmothers who had been in their day industrious and spirited. Her fund of cheer was immense and remarkable, even in the face of her own divorce, which she strode through dauntlessly, it seemed to me, six months after I had met her.

Bloody men and their bloody egos, was her summary of the situation. They'd rather make love to themselves than their wives. Is it any wonder we're driven to acts of madness?

But there was something more to her than this gently decadent style. Early on I'd noticed an odd, recessive tilt to her personality, a watchfulness. When she was not joking or flamboyantly uncorking a bottle, she was extremely good at being dormant. She could sit at the end of the table, in almost predatory stillness, for an hour or more, while conversation went on around her. Everything seemed poised in her then, her handsome, mobile face set, and only her eyes moved as she surveyed the scene, marking, biding. She was usually the first to receive a phone call from anyone in the group having a crisis, perhaps because of her age and experience, but mostly



because she never issued judgement, merely good advice. And she was discreet. Gossip about the others never really came my way through her; though once aired she was happy to speculate. I'd always felt I could talk to her about the most difficult, painful things.

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She had not given me the business card immediately. It was not issued with the air of prescription, as soon as I'd confided in her, about the discontent, the affair with John's brother I had almost entered into. The morning she handed it to me we had been discussing something else entirely, something irrelevant – the latest atrocities in the war, or sugar in our children's cereal. At a natural pause in the conversation she reached into her purse and took out a neat white rectangle.

This is for you, darling, she said, passing the card to me. One shouldn't have to go on feeling so embarrassed about oneself. I am a great believer in private acts.

Printed in black ink, the listing simply read *The Agency*. There was a number below with a mobile phone coding.

Do ring, she said. This is for reception. Ask for an initial consultation. They can set something marvellous up for you, and then you'll have a direct line.

I must have appeared conflicted, because she reached out and laid her hand over mine. Her fingers were soft, but the grip was firm. She still wore her diamond engagement ring.

Darling. You must. It isn't what you might think. Not at all. These things consume us until we do something about them. Trust me.

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The first appointment was scheduled for eleven o'clock in the morning. I had arranged for another friend to collect Jamie from school, and keep him an extra hour, in case I was delayed. Katie had a swimming class and would be late home anyway. I wanted to give myself time to recover, if that was necessary. I could have asked Anthea to look after them, but for some reason I was hesitant to tell her where I was going, as if it would have furthered our conspiracy somehow, made her culpable.

I'd been planning what to wear all week. I'd settled on a burgundy suit that I almost never put on any more, bought from a boutique in London after I'd

received a surprisingly high severance package from my last job. It still fitted, though the waist was snug. Several times I'd taken it out of the wardrobe and hung it on the back of the door to admire it, only to rehouse it under the plastic dry-cleaner's sleeve. There was a black silk brooch pinned to the lapel of the jacket from a Remembrance supper that John and I had attended at his college the previous year. I'd bought some new black shoes, with a heel slightly higher than I usually wore. I'd also bought new stockings, which I left in their packet inside the shoe-box at the back of the wardrobe. It all felt slightly ludicrous, this fancy preparation. Half of me recognised it as such and was internally withering. I felt unqualified. I was not like Anthea King, did not possess her tailoring, her vigour and courage in life. I had always been a stiff dresser, never quite able to wear my best clothes with the sort of confidence she and the others had. But part of me was thrilled to think of the suit draped from its hanger, the silk sheaths folded carefully around their cardboard tongues, and the unscratched shoes facing each other in the box, their heels spearing the tissue paper. It was exciting to imagine I could step into the outfit.

The morning of the appointment passed quickly.

The children left for school, their books and lunch-boxes slung into their bags. I watched John wheeling his bike alongside the house, his rucksack on his back, his hair parted by the fresh breeze to reveal a seam of white scalp.

Blowzy old day, he called to me through the kitchen window, the gravel path crunching under his feet. I waved, and he was gone.

I had been awake for much of the night, lying on my back, staring at the orange glow from the street-lamp. Once I had reached out to touch my husband's leg, the crisp hair on his belly. I'd moved my hand down nervously, but he was sound asleep. I'd drifted off around five and the alarm had woken me with a start an hour later. The satisfying care with which I thought I would prepare and pin up my hair was absent. I dressed hurriedly and was ready earlier than planned, then felt unfocused, unable to concentrate on anything. I took two paracetamol and made more coffee. Then I cleaned my teeth again and reapplied lipstick. When I looked in the bathroom mirror my appearance seemed hawkish. I realised I had forgotten to apply concealer around my eyes. I took the silver tube out of my make-up bag, dotted it on and blended the cream.

It was not until I was in the car, on the bypass

heading out of town, that I started to consider the price of the excursion. Money had not occurred to me at all. I hadn't inquired how much the procedure would be and no initial fee had been given on the phone. Anthea had not mentioned money either, but of course she had fewer financial concerns. The divorce must have benefited her, or perhaps she had inherited; she owned the town house on Cloet Street, none of her jewellery was costume or paste, and though her weekly column brought in only a moderate salary there was never any talk of being stretched. I could stop at a cash machine and make a withdrawal, but this would create obvious problems later. If The Agency accepted cards I would be able to go into the personal savings that I kept separate from the joint account and used for birthdays. But then there would be a record. I tried to anticipate an appropriate sum, but it was impossible. As much as a year's worth of dental insurance for the family? A holiday, or a second-hand car? I had no idea what such a service cost. Heat bloomed through me and I felt suddenly nauseous. Aside from everything else, the thought of paying out hundreds of pounds without John's knowledge made my hands weak.

I lowered the window an inch or two, and took a deep breath. Air buffeted into the car. It was cool and

damp, and brought with it the tarry smell of the road. The wind was getting worse, and the brake lights of wagons in the inside lane began to flash on and off. A few heavy raindrops hit the windscreen, and then it began to shower. I slowed down. There was no rush. Volleys of leaves flew across the carriageway and stuck under the wiper blades. I imagined myself caught by a strong gust, losing control of the car, ploughing through the central reservation and across the oncoming lanes. I imagined them finding me, hanging inside a cage of crumpled metal, slack-necked and bleeding over the dark red suit. The family would not know why I had been going into the city, dressed as I was. I thought of John's face, stricken, his fingers pinching his hips, trying hard not to break down, just as he had at his mother's funeral before collapsing into grief. And an old memory came too, of the night John and I had met, our first time in an upstairs room full of coats, the music of the party below like another layer between the world and us, his face contorted as he moved, his hand gripping my throat, the rawness, and his breathless incapacitation when it was over. There had been a fierceness in the beginning, before we really knew each other, before we settled into our tender, more considerate patterns. I saw myself in those early years, holding the railings



of the headboard, braced, pushing against him, fighting for control of the space we were using. I saw John, pinning my arms down, his vast movements, the sheets pushed outwards and outwards like a ruined form. It was suddenly clear to me that this was madness. What I was doing could not possibly go unmarked. Surely some slip, some twist of fate, would give me away, and it would be impossible to explain. There was no explanation. Even I did not understand what I was doing.

I glanced in the rear-view mirror, indicated, and pulled over onto the hard shoulder. I took my hands off the steering wheel, squeezed them into fists and shook them. Wagons rumbled alongside the car, spraying the windscreen. Tailwinds made the car shudder. I glanced at the dashboard clock. It was nine forty-five. There was still time to think, time to reconsider. I took a familiar CD from the glove box, inserted it into the player and the first track began.

I had been married for fourteen years. There had been no crimes committed on either side. There was so little to regret. But in the end, thinking of our life together made no difference. It was as if love had become scentless, bloodless, it had somehow lost its vitality. I put the car into gear, waited for a gap in the traffic and pulled away.

After navigating the unfamiliar road system, I found a car park near The Agency's address. The building was on a quiet street. Its façade was unremarkable: three-storey, Edwardian, pale brick, like most of the others in the row. The door was heavy and black and looked newly painted, its lustre like liquorice. There was a brass plaque chased into the masonry with an engraved street number, and above that a bell and an intercom. There was no name, nor the name of any other company listed in the building. It looked like an ordinary corporate town house, containing any number of nondescript offices. I walked away, waited for a few minutes nearby, ridiculously holding my phone to my ear. No one entered or left the building. I walked the length of the street, looking up at the corners of the end buildings, and then I walked back and rang the bell. Almost immediately a buzzer sounded inside and I heard a heavy mechanical *click*. I pushed open the door, turned to look at the empty street, and quickly entered.

Inside the passageway there was a polished wooden side table and a painted glass lamp. The walls were eggshell-coloured. There was silence until a vehicle drove past on the road outside, its engine



muffled. My heart was tapping behind my breastbone. A bitter taste had risen in my mouth and I wished I had not drunk so much coffee before leaving the house. Ahead, at the end of the passageway, stood an elegant staircase with spiralled iron rods and an exquisite curving balustrade. I was about to move and go up it when a door to my right opened. A young dark-haired man in a suit came out. He extended his hand.

Hannah? You found us alright?

I nodded, took his hand, and he placed his other gently on the back of my wrist.

Yes, thank you.

He nodded. Of course. I'm Alistair. We spoke on the phone. Let's go into the office, shall we? That's a beautiful suit. Westwood?

He had a soft, burred accent, Scottish, perhaps pared from the Highlands. He held the door for me and I entered the room.

There was a large cast-iron fireplace with decorative tiles and trivets. A vase of white stargazers stood on the mantel. A desk was pushed against the far wall; on top were a slim white laptop and the intercom hub. An armchair and a sofa faced each other across a low table. The carpet was Regency blue, and the room had been wallpapered in a pale green

period design. It was a richer interior than the passageway, and smelled newly cleaned. The young man waited for me to catch his eye and then he spoke.

OK. First things first, welcome to The Agency. Thank you for coming.

There was a pause, and then he asked, Would you like a coffee? I shook my head. He brought his hands together in front of his chest, the fingertips steepled. It was a demure gesture, or it was artful; either way he seemed too young for such mannerisms.

Tea? A glass of champagne, perhaps?

He smiled and raised his eyebrows. I could feel a tiny muscle pulsing under my eye.

Oh, champagne! he said quickly. It's practically the afternoon, isn't it? Please, sit.

He moved to a side door and opened it. There was a small kitchen beyond; the corner of a refrigerator was visible and a cabinet door. I heard the dinging of glassware, a muted pop, and the wet crackle of the drink being poured. Alistair reappeared holding two tall stems. He set them on the table, sat down on the couch and held out a hand.

Join me?

The leather of the chair clucked and sighed as I sat.

I'm sorry, I said. I was referred by a friend and

it's all very new to me. I suppose I don't really know what I'm doing or what I should do. I think I haven't completely made up my mind, about anything. I'm sorry.

Alistair smiled again. His teeth were crowded, but white.

Please don't apologise. It's wonderful that you found us, even just as an option. Here.

He reached forward and slid the stem towards me. I lifted it to show willing, and then looked at him properly. He was clean-faced, with a remarkably good complexion, and his hair had been cut to fall one side of his brow in a sharp, stylish way. There was a classic, vintage tailoring to his suit, and he wore the waistcoat buttoned. He would not have been out of place in a pre-war television drama. He had obviously been created to go with the location, though his attentiveness and etiquette seemed unforced. He was attractive in a singular and imperfect way. Is this what women want? I thought. I took a sip. The champagne tingled against my lip, and was crisp and sour. I knew I would drink it too quickly if I kept it in my hand, so I set it back on the table.

Thank you, I said, and again he replied, Of course.

He leaned back against the upholstery and crossed his legs.

So, Hannah. Really The Agency prefers to consider this initial meeting as you interviewing us. We absolutely hope to be able to provide you with everything you'd wish, but it's entirely at your discretion, whether you think we're suitable for you, and whether you choose to engage us. We're versatile, and we operate a legal service, on and off the premises, but we understand that some special requirements also need to be met.

He paused a moment, as if to allow time for the words, and their meaning, to be metabolised.

We want to meet all possible needs. So it's best to be as specific as possible in these early stages. He uncrossed his legs and leaned forward. There was a sheet of paper on the table. He drew it towards him and lifted a corner.

Hannah. Would it be very boring if I offered you some literature, so you can get a sense of what we provide, and we can get a sense of what you prefer?

I was watching his mouth as he spoke. He was moderating his language, his politeness had escalated, and his lips were amplifying the shapes they made.

I'll let you have some privacy while you look through. There's no time pressure at all. Often people like to consider things *at home* again before committing to a further appointment.

The last phrase had been cleverly chosen. He had been cleverly chosen. The calibration was perfect. He slid the sheet of paper towards me, took a pen from his inside pocket and set it on the table.

Please don't worry. This is simply to help us identify your preferences. You can take it away after we're done. We don't keep any records here.

He pressed his hands together again and stood.

I'll leave you to it. There's a call button on the desk when you're done. Don't forget your champagne.

I took another sip, aware that for all his deference, I was being gently marshalled. There was something deliberately neutral about the meeting, but the young man standing over me was passively steering things. Alistair had been selected for his social skills and his intelligence. Or was the enterprise his, I wondered. Had he recognised a niche in the market and filled it? How old was he? In his mid-twenties? Only a few years ago he might have been one of John's Politics students. He moved towards the door.

Oh, and Hannah? he said quietly. I should just make it clear, the first question, gender, doesn't apply to you. We know you're female. All our members are, as you're probably aware.

He smiled. The door closed.

I felt as if I'd been holding my breath for the entire

discussion. I blew air out, reached for the glass and drank to the halfway mark. Alistair's glass had not been touched and it occurred to me that it had actually been poured and left for me as well, to make the proceedings as comfortable as possible. I stood and went over to the fireplace. The inlaid tiles were Arts and Crafts. The lilies on the mantel were real. Their scent was delicate, elative. The petals were austere white, but here and there were orange pollen stains. The stamens had not been removed and on their tips were gathered beads of sap. It was not just nerves or caffeine making me edgy, exciting me. I did not feel unsafe or exposed, as I had supposed I would. I knew that I could leave, easily, and without drama, while the reception room was empty. Alistair would not be surprised to find me gone when he came back. But I didn't want to leave. And I knew he also would not be surprised to find me still there.

I sat back down on the warm leather and picked up the sheet of paper. It was a form with a series of boxes to tick, not unlike the questionnaires found in beauty clinics. I scanned through. The term used was *companion*. There was brevity to the phrasing, options that I had perhaps anticipated, but some of the later choices were startling. *Film, Restraints, Doll, Defecation.*



Anthea had not gone into detail about her experiences. I tried to guess how she might have navigated the form, how straightforward or strange her choices. My life seemed so simple. I did not think what I wanted was unusual. I picked up the pen and struck a line through the appropriate boxes. Then I selected two more from the last section. I finished the champagne, went to the desk and pressed the call bell.

Alistair knocked and opened the door, greeting me warmly, as if we were old friends. He had removed his suit jacket. Underneath was a fashionably striped shirt. The waistcoat was still buttoned.

OK, Hannah. If you would like me to review the form now, and if you're happy for me to arrange an introduction, I most certainly can. Otherwise I can get in touch with you in a few days with a referral and a telephone number. Would you like me to top you up there?

He gestured to my empty glass. I shook my head.

I have to drive, but thank you.

There was a pause. I expected him to say it again, 'Of course,' but he did not. The veneer of professionalism remained but now I felt his keener interest. It was not flirtation, the way he was looking at me, but curiosity perhaps, as to my proclivities. The atmo-

sphere in the room felt low, as if the wind outside had relieved the room of its currents. I held the sheet of paper out. My hand was steady. If Alistair noticed the change he gave no indication. He sat opposite me again, crossed his legs, and read through the profile. His eyes flickered across the page, he nodded once, but his face remained expressionless. I tried to guess his age again. Old enough to front such a business and be intuitive. Young enough to seem coltish and, when necessary, submissive. How many wives had he hosted in this room? How much power did he hold? There was obviously money and experience behind the venture, though surely not his. However entrepreneurial he was, however philogynous, he could not be so knowing. Suddenly I was certain he had not orchestrated the enterprise. No. He was skilled, but he was, in effect, a drone. The Agency had been conceived by a woman. The rooms, the tidy gatekeeper, the subtle game; it all belonged to a woman.

After a minute Alistair looked up and smiled.

Hannah, there's a lounge upstairs that's very comfortable. It's free at the moment. Would it be convenient for you to wait ten minutes or so, while I make a quick phone call? That outfit really is beautiful.

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When I arrived home it was getting dark. I checked my emails, put a load of laundry into the machine and ran a bath. In the bedroom I took off the suit, covered it with the plastic sleeve and hung it up in the wardrobe. I sat on the edge of the bed and removed my shoes. I turned them over. There was slight scuffing on the soles, nothing more than if they'd been trodden across the gravel path outside the house to break them in. A ladder ran through one of my stockings, following its black seam. I unhooked the clasp and rolled the material down my leg, then took off the other. A bruise was spreading under my hip bone. If he noticed, I would tell John that the car door had swung shut against it in the wind. The marks around my wrists I would have to cover until they faded. I put the stockings back in their packet, took them to the rubbish bin in the kitchen and placed them underneath the topmost items. I reached inside the plastic drum and pushed the waste matter further down towards the bottom, then emptied a half-eaten container of yogurt over everything. I washed my hands, poured a glass of water and went back upstairs.

My skin felt tender as I climbed into the bath. I took my hair down, lay back against the enamel and closed my eyes. I could still see the patterns in

the green wallpaper at The Agency and the elaborate wrought-iron rosettes in the banister of the staircase. Those dripping orchids. I could see the interior of the cab that had driven me through the wet, leaf-strewn streets. The hotel foyer and the number of the room. The black petals of the brooch pinned to my burgundy jacket, and the jacket lying in a dark pool of material on the floor. He was not exact, not as I had imagined. He had asked for a phrase, to stop everything, and I had given John's mother's name, Alexandra, but it had not been used.

After half an hour in the bath I felt loose and hot, as if I were beginning to come apart, as if I was as smooth as the water. I stood up, pulled the plug out and turned the shower to a cool setting. When I had dried myself and dressed I went into the lounge to clear up the children's mess. Jamie's school jumper was stuffed behind the settee, there were magazines and books scattered about, a sweet stuck in the fibres of the rug. It was too late to think about work, so I shut the computer down. In the hallway my bag was open and inside it I could see the blue light on my phone flashing. There were three missed calls. The first was from John, saying he would be home about seven with Katie after her swimming lesson. The second was from Alistair, confirming my next

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appointment. I deleted both after listening. The last message was from Anthea King, asking if I could mind her daughter after school the following day. A note of distraction sounded in her voice, and I heard the rattle of the keyboard as she typed something. The message ended. I called her back and agreed to mind Laura. We spoke for a moment or two. There was a pause in the conversation, and then came her gay, indecorous laughter.

Oh, we must catch up soon. I do hope you had a jolly time in the city today.

I was just visiting a relative, I said.

She laughed again. Yes. Of course, darling. Of course.