

En Saga

1: The Flying Dutchman

Her train was late getting into Paddington, and so she only just caught the last tube. Apart from the man in the seat opposite the carriage was empty. The man was wearing grey flannel trousers, heavy black brogues, a navy blazer with brass buttons. It was hot in the carriage and the collar of his shirt was wide open. A newspaper lay folded across his lap.

His eyes were deeply set under bushy brows. He stared at Lise openly, flagrantly, almost as if he knew her. Had there been other people in the carriage Lise would have found it easier to ignore him but as it was she found herself staring back at him, conniving at the game he seemed to be playing. She put him at fifty, perhaps a little older. He had fine hands: delicate wrists, and long supple fingers that might have belonged to a musician. Lise wondered what would happen if she approached him, if she left the train when he did and followed him home. She imagined standing outside his house, waiting silently in a dimly lit side street while he fumbled for his key and let her in. She wondered what she would do if he tried to kiss her. Lise shook her head to clear it, rubbed her eyes with the back of her hand.

The man got out at Hammersmith without as much as a backward glance. Her own stop was Stamford Brook. The station was deserted. She passed through the empty ticket hall and out onto the street. She took out her mobile and dialled Michaela's number. The phone was answered almost immediately. She heard Michaela's shallow breathing and somewhere in the background the sound of a child crying.

"I'm sorry," said Lise. "I've woken Christa."

"She was awake anyway," said Michaela. "I'm so glad you called."

"The train was delayed, that's all. I'll come over tomorrow. Is there anything you'd like me to bring?"

"We're fine." She paused. "I'm just going to make some tea."

Lise said goodnight to Michaela and broke the connection. By the time she got back to her flat it was almost one. There had been no rain for over a week and yet the sheets on her bed felt damp, as after a storm. She had been dropping with tiredness on the Intercity but as soon as she switched out the light she felt wide awake. She found herself thinking of the man on the tube, his strange clothes, old-fashioned and too warm for the weather, like something a provincial headmaster might wear, or a retired army captain. She remembered the way he had looked at her, his deep-set eyes appraisingly quizzical and more than a little flirtatious. She imagined him lying in bed somewhere beneath starched white sheets and a paisley silk counterpane. She imagined him lying alone.

A gipsy fortune teller in Warsaw had once told her she would marry a Dutchman. The man she was engaged to at the time had been born in Sydenham, a customs inspector named Stephen Knowles. A year after Lise's meeting with the fortune teller Stephen Knowles had left her for an airline stewardess and Lise had

wept for days, filled nonetheless with an unaccountable and momentous relief. The man on the tube had not looked like a Dutchman. She imagined the Dutch as small and neat and clean, although she supposed this was nothing but a racial stereotype.

As she finally began to drift off to sleep she imagined the man's hands, his graceful immaculate fingers exploring her thigh. She put her hands between her legs, gripping them tight with her knees. She wondered about Michaela, what she did when she thought about Dain.

When she arrived at the station the next morning both platforms were packed. There were tannoy announcements every few minutes, saying that services had been delayed due to an incident on the line. Lise knew that an incident on the line meant suicide, that someone had thrown themselves in front of a train. Lise took out her mobile and called the studio. The receptionist, Felicity Savage, picked up the phone. Lise told her she would probably be late.

"Don't worry," said Felicity Savage. "Rob's always late, even when he comes in a cab." She laughed, thanked Lise for phoning and then rang off. Fifteen minutes later a train arrived. It was already jammed with passengers but everyone on the platform still squeezed themselves in. Lise wondered where the suicide had been and what had been left of the body. She supposed it would be impossible to throw yourself under a train unless you didn't quite believe it would kill you. It wasn't annihilation people looked for in suicide after all, but a change in circumstances.

It was her first meeting with Robinson Vanner. He was very tall, with long curly hair. He looked younger than she had expected. He had enormous spade-shaped hands and bitten nails.

“I thought it was a damned good script,” he said. He gripped her hand briefly and smiled. Lise started to remind him that it was not her script after all but Selma’s, but Vanner’s attention seemed already to be elsewhere. She looked where he was looking, to where William Mathers the producer sat talking to a small honey-coloured woman in a cropped t-shirt. She was skinny as a pre-pubescent girl. Felicity Savage had introduced her to Lise as the script editor but Lise found she had forgotten her name.

It had been nothing more than a courtesy, them asking her here. She had been commissioned to translate Selma Jannisdottir’s script and this she had done. She would have no further influence on the film. Felicity Savage had told her that even the title would have to be changed.

“Rob can’t call it Thorunnssaga,” she said. “Not unless he wants his picture to die a death on the arthouse circuit.”

Lise had tried to tell her that Selma Jannisdottir had used the title ironically, that her screenplay was an attempt to confront the masculine bias of Icelandic saga by playing it out against a contemporary background. Just having a female lead went against the grain.

“But the general public won’t know anything about Icelandic sagas,” said Felicity Savage. “Bill wants to market it as a thriller.” She said the film would probably be called *The Suicide of Erwin Toch*. The main character was named Thorunn Gulbranssen. Selma’s cast directions said that Thorunn should be six feet tall and blonde but Lise noticed that the edited printout of her translation omitted this, as it omitted most of Selma’s notes on the set and cast. Lise supposed that Thorunn would probably be played by someone resembling the honey-coloured script editor. Nordic women, with their heavy limbs and their pale skin, were no longer in fashion.

Lise, whose own skin blistered whenever she travelled south of the Pyrenees, wondered why it was that even clever man like Robinson Vanner seemed uncomfortable in their presence.

“En saga!” Vanner said, and everyone laughed. It was obvious from some of the questions that not all of them had read the script. Most of the discussion was between Vanner and Bill Mathers, and was full of technical jargon that Lise didn’t fully understand. No-one asked her anything about the text. At two o’clock they went to the canteen for lunch, and Lise found herself sitting next to the honey-coloured script editor.

“Melanie Dryden,” she said. She was wearing a powerful scent. The air around her smelled musky and sweet.

“Lise Pilkington,” said Lise. “What did you think of the script?”

“It was hard to adapt,” said Melanie Dryden. “I had to make a lot of cuts.” She hovered over her food, making tiny inroads in the pasta with her fork.

“How well do you know the director?”

“Oh, Rob.” She rested her knife on the side of her plate, looping a stray wisp of hair behind her ear. “He comes over as a bit of a nerd but he’s all right. What on earth got you into Norse?”

“It was different from Spanish or French,” said Lise. “I was good at languages. I don’t really know.”

“I know someone who studied Russian but I didn’t know that Norse was still being taught.”

“Most people have never even heard of it.” She had started learning Norse because of the sagas. She had first come across them in an abridged edition for children, drawn to the book by the cover illustration of Thor wielding his storm

hammer. When she was fifteen she had discovered Magnus Magnusson's fully annotated translations and they had captivated her utterly. Sometimes she believed she had begun her university studies with nothing more in mind than to be able to read the sagas in their original language. As it turned out she was able to make a good living. There were not many native English speakers who were fluent in Icelandic and Norse. Lise didn't see the point in explaining any of this to the script editor. She was unlikely to see the woman ever again.

"It's all very dark though, isn't it?" said Melanie Dryden. "The screenplay, I mean. The bit when the child goes missing? I found that very difficult to take."

"The sagas are like that," said Lise. "They're the most powerful stories I know."

She twisted a strand of spaghetti on the tines of her fork. She wondered how Robinson Vanner felt about Thorunnssaga, whether he had discussed his feelings with Melanie Dryden. She wondered what had drawn him to the script in the first place. For a moment she thought of the man on the tube, with his heavy grey eyebrows and gilded buttons. He had seemed so full of knowledge, to be harbouring a secret that went beyond any simple sorrow. She had never come across anyone like him except in the sagas. She found herself filled with the irrational certainty that he would understand everything.

Michaela Fallon had been her friend since college. She lived on the Isle of Dogs, on the fourth floor of a block called Wilberforce House. It stood alone in the midst of a wilderness of discount supermarkets, used car dealerships and stubbly yellow grass. In summer the river beneath its windows gave off an unpleasant briny odour. In winter it became a muddy torrent that seemed to exacerbate the freezing

damp in all the rooms. The lift in Wilberforce house had broken down and whenever Michaela went out she had to strap Christa to her back and lug the buggy downstairs under her arm.

Even in the daytime Michaela kept the door on the chain.

“It’s only me,” said Lise. Behind her in the flat Lise could hear radio voices raised in argument and the sound of Christa Fallon’s crying.

“Hi,” said Michaela. She slipped the chain and opened the door. Once Lise was inside she closed it again, immediately setting the chain back on its hook. “Go through,” she said. “I’ll just see to Christa.”

From the hallway doors led off into the kitchen, the bathroom and the main living area. Beyond the kitchen there was a small inner hallway with doors leading to the main bedroom and the tiny windowless box room that had been made into a bedroom for Christa. In the living room twin picture windows overlooked the front of the building. Viewed from above the river looked almost motionless, a runnel of solidified fat. On the table by the window Michaela’s old laptop lay surrounded by drifts of printed papers. The voices on the radio continued to discuss the war in the Middle East.

Michaela came into the room with Christa perched high on one shoulder. Christa was four years old and looked so like her mother she could have passed for her baby sister. They both had the same high cheekbones, the same wide, anxious blue eyes. As soon as she caught sight of Lise Christa held out both hands and made a burbling sound.

“I could take her for a walk if you like,” said Lise. “We wouldn’t have to go very far.”

“It looks like it’s going to rain,” said Michaela. “We’re better off staying inside.”

Michaela had hardly been out of the flat in the last six months. In the beginning Lise had made strenuous efforts to get her outside but now she hardly bothered. Nothing she said or did seemed to make any difference. There were still days when Michaela would walk with her a little way along the river or down to the local supermarket but she no longer went on the tube and she had stopped letting Lise take Christa out by herself.

“Have you heard from Dain?” Lise said. She turned away before Michaela could say anything, not wanting to see the momentary flash of colour in her friend’s pale cheeks. Talking about her husband still did that to her even though she hadn’t seen him in over a year.

“Nothing since the postcard,” said Michaela. She spoke with a false brightness, as if the postcard from Istanbul had arrived only the previous week instead of eight months ago. It had been badly creased, and the date on the postmark had been illegible. It had been even longer since he’d sent a cheque. Michaela got by on the money she earned from proofreading scientific papers, work that she could do without leaving the flat. She also got Family Credit, although it was Lise who had to go and sign for it at the post office.

“How’s work?” said Lise.

“There’s some stuff here that’s almost finished.” Michaela glanced at her laptop, at the rickety table spread with papers and periodicals. “I’ll call you when it’s ready to go.”

“I don’t mean that,” said Lise. “I was talking about the poems.”

Michaela's work had been published in Montparnasse and Clare's. Laura St John, the editor of Clare's magazine, had called Michaela's work exceptional and asked her if she'd be interested in publishing a collection. Michaela had kept Laura St John's letter in the zip-up compartment of her handbag for almost a month before showing it to Lise. She lowered Christa into Lise's lap and clasped her hands together. The skin of her knuckles was so fine, so translucent it barely seemed to cover the bones.

"Christa isn't sleeping well," she said. "It makes it hard to keep awake during the day."

"Dain would want you to do this," Lise said. "Imagine how pleased he'll be when you tell him." Lise felt herself blushing, ashamed of what she'd just said. It seemed to do Dain a disservice, to go on talking about him as if he might still be alive, although until there was proof of his death she found herself unable to confront Michaela by forcing it on her. The child was warm in her arms and Lise wondered if she might not be feverish. Beyond the windows the sky was colourless, a blank mass of cloud.

In the beginning Lise had thought Christa would give Michaela the strength to contemplate a life without Dain. Now it seemed that the hope of seeing him again was the only thing that enabled her to carry on caring for Christa. Lise held the child close, stroking her fine yellow curls. Until she was two Christa's hair had been rust-red, like Dain's. More recently it had lightened to blonde. Christa opened her mouth in a soundless laugh then closed her eyes and snuggled into Lise's shoulder. In less than a minute she was sound asleep.

"How was the meeting?" said Michaela. "What was he like?"

“I hardly got a chance to talk to him,” said Lise. “I don’t suppose I’ll see him again.” She remembered the way Vanner had seemed to ignore her in favour of Melanie Dryden. She wondered if things would have been different had the script editor not been there.

“Why do you think Thorunn Gulbransen abandons her baby?” asked Michaela. “In the play, I mean.” She rested her chin on her hands. She looked scarcely any larger than a child.

“When Erwin kills himself she gives up hope,” Lise said. “She feels she has nothing left to live for, not even the child.” Erwin Toch had been a foreigner and an outcast. He had planned to kill Thorunn Gulbransen, but ended up killing himself instead. Christa made a mewling noise in her sleep. Her cheek seemed to burn against Lise’s breast, even through the thickness of her clothes. “She’s very hot, Mick. Do you think you ought to call the doctor?”

“It gets muggy in here, that’s all. It’s the double glazing.” She touched the window with her outspread fingers. “If you wrote a screenplay of your own, what would it be about?”

“A London girl, who falls in love with the Flying Dutchman and flees to the north,” she said. “Something like that.” They laughed. Shortly before Dain had left for Baghdad Lise had had dinner with the Fallons and told them she was thinking of writing a play about the Icelandic volcanologist Per Iansson. Michaela had been wildly enthusiastic about the idea, although she rarely chose to speak about it now.

The man’s picture was all over the news stands. Lise bought a copy of the Standard then folded it in half to hide his face. It wasn’t until she was on the train that she opened it again. The photograph was slightly blurred, but it was still his face, the

same deep set eyes, the same thick eyebrows and aquiline nose. He seemed to gaze at her with the same expression as the night before, the flagrantly familiar stare of a man who knew her well. There was a line of text beneath the picture that gave his name.

The headline said simply: Despair.

His name had been Willem Kees, and he had been an officer with the Amsterdam police. He had murdered his girlfriend Leone Langerhoef in the stairwell of the apartment block where she had lived. The article said Leone had been held down and suffocated with her own anorak. On the inside page was a photograph showing a girl with a high white forehead and fair hair drawn back off her face in a black bandeau. She looked young enough to be Kees's daughter. Looking at it, Lise felt faint. It was like looking at a picture of herself.

The report described how Kees's suicide had brought the whole of the western District Line to a standstill, how his identity had been confirmed by two fellow Dutch officers who had been contacted by Scotland Yard within the hour.

The train was half way to Ealing before Lise realised she'd missed her stop. She got off at Acton Town and doubled back. As soon as she got home she rang Michaela. It took a long time for her to answer and Lise wondered if she might have gone out. When she eventually picked up the phone the line crackled with static and Lise could hear her own voice coming back at her along the wires.

"I think I might have seen a murderer," she said. "Late last night, on the tube."

"What do you mean?" said Michaela. Her voice sounded slightly nasal, as if she had a cold or had been crying.

"His name was Willem Kees," said Lise. "He was in the Dutch police force." She wished Michaela wouldn't spend so much of her time listening to the news channels. The broadcasts told her nothing but they always reduced her to tears. She

carried on with her story, telling Michaela what she'd read in the paper. "The girl he killed looked just like me," she said. She remembered how Kees had looked at her, the tacit recognition in his eyes. Perhaps he'd thought he was seeing a ghost.

"But he's dead now, so what can it matter?" said Michaela. "You did just say he was dead?" Above the interference on the line her voice sounded panicky and strained.

"Have you got enough to eat, Mick?" Lise said suddenly. "Do you want me to bring something round?"

"There's stuff in the fridge," said Michaela. "Lasagne. Why did he kill her anyway? Did it say?"

"There was an argument. He lost control." She paused. "He smothered her with her own coat." She thought of his hands, the elegant, graceful fingers, the well-kept nails. She wondered how he had felt when it was over. She imagined him going back to his own apartment and phoning Leone's number, just to see if what had happened was real.

"Perhaps there was someone else and he found out."

"Yes, that was probably it." It came to Lise that murder, like suicide, was little more than a final desperate attempt to outrun a situation that had become intolerable. She knew it had been a mistake telling Michaela. It was exactly this kind of story that made her afraid to go out. "Don't worry about it," she said. "The man I saw was probably someone else." She said goodbye to Michaela and put down the phone, then took off her shoes and went through to the kitchen. She laid the newspaper face down on the counter and ran water into the kettle. The flat seemed unusually quiet. She realised that during the whole of her conversation with Michaela she hadn't heard a sound from Christa. She felt herself begin to fill up with a nameless deep-seated panic

then remembered what Michaela had said about the child not sleeping at night. She had probably been taking a nap when she called.

She switched on the radio. Two opposing politicians fought over the continuing bombardment of Iraq's major cities. Lise poured boiling water over a teabag and turned once more to the newspaper. She found it hard to believe that at the same time the evening before Willem Kees had still been alive.

"There are going to be civilian casualties," said one of the politicians. "Whichever way you look at it, people are going to die."

Lise read that Kees had been in London for over a month before killing himself, that he had lived in a rented flat above a betting shop in Hammersmith. She wondered what he had done with himself in all that time, what he had been looking for, alone in a city that could only have been foreign to him.

Hammersmith station was open again. On the news stands the picture of Willem Kees had been replaced with a new headline about the execution of captured British soldiers in Baghdad. She found it mildly curious that Kees had been living less than five minutes' walk from a police station. She stood outside the betting shop, looking up at the windows of the flat above. She could see the curtains, rust-coloured and grubby-looking, but that was all. The outside door to the flat was dark blue and looked as if it had been recently painted. Lise realised that in all likelihood Willem Kees would have tried to kill her if she'd followed him home. Not just because she looked like Leone, but because once you'd killed the first time it was easy to do it again. That was what people said, anyway.

She pulled her jacket more tightly around her. The time she moved in seemed borrowed, as if she had somehow bypassed the moment she'd been destined to die.

“Hello,” said a woman’s voice. “Fancy our chances?”

Lise started violently. It was a voice she recognised, and when she turned she saw Melanie Dryden, smiling at her and holding something wrapped in newspaper from the Asian supermarket. She looked at her blankly, wondering what she was talking about.

“Bill Hill’s,” said Melanie Dryden, nodding at the bookie’s window. “It’s the England game next week.”

Lise glanced at the window. Behind the green silhouettes of galloping horses dark shadows parted and met.

“No,” said Lise. “I don’t like to gamble. Not on things like that, anyway.”

“I didn’t know you lived round here.” She was dressed in a white knitted suit. The narrow skirt clung tightly to her buttocks and hips.

“I don’t,” said Lise. “I wanted to visit a friend but he was out.”

“Rob was asking after you,” said Melanie Dryden. “He wants you to meet up with him and discuss Icelandic pronunciation, or something.” She fumbled in her handbag, shifting the paper parcel to the crook of her arm. “Here’s his number. He asked Flick Savage to text you but I may as well give it to you now.” She handed her a scrap of paper torn from a spiral-bound notebook. “That’s his landline. His mobile’s on the blink or else he’s lost it, I don’t know which.”

Lise thanked her and walked away. Strangers passed her by without a glance. Close to the station she stopped, her eye caught by something glinting in the gutter. She thought it was a coin but when she bent to pick it up she found it was a brass button. It was slightly tarnished, and had a crest embossed on it that looked vaguely military. Part of the design was already obscured by dirt.

She slipped the button into the pocket of her jeans. She opened her phone and dialled Michaela's number. She counted the rings, willing Michaela to answer. The phone rang thirty times then the line went dead. She dialled the number again. There was no reply.

2: Christmas

The first time she saw it she thought it was a child. It had been at King's Cross Station hanging around the ticket barriers, attaching itself to one passenger and then another, the hood of its zip-up sweatshirt hiding its face. At first she had thought it was lost. Then it turned and looked at her and she had seen it for what it was, the pinched features and haunted eyes of the angel of death.

It had sidled away then, cheating the ticket barrier by tagging onto the coat tails of a large German businessman in an Armani suit. Since then she had seen it often: wandering the aisles of the larger department stores, kicking its heels on the swings in Millwall Park. It had never once tried to approach her. Perhaps the fact she could see it made her immune.

She knew if she wanted to capture it on film she would have to get the angle just right. It wasn't just a question of seeing. It was more a matter of catching it off guard.

The streets were empty, as in the aftermath of some disaster. She watched it sniffing the gateposts of the larger houses, smearing its spidery hands over the downstairs windows, over the locked front doors with their holly wreaths and flashing fairy lights. A hazy orange glow came through the curtains, lighting up its narrow-

lipped face. She crossed the road, trying to hide her camera. The thing pulled up its hood and scuttled away.

Christa took three photographs in quick succession: a hubcap at the roadside, a newspaper kiosk showing a headline from two days ago, a row of glasses on the pavement outside a pub. She went further down the street to where a travel agent's faced an empty shop front, angling the shot so that a poster in the travel agent's window was reflected in the blank glass of the unit opposite, filling the window with a town in some southern country: the dusty streets, the crumbling pastel tenements, the azure sea lapping at its outer edge.

It was a cheap shot but she knew she could sell it. People liked these trick shots, pictures that misled the eye. You could do the same thing more convincingly on a computer but that had further enhanced the value of the real thing.

Old photographs with a provenance were even more sought after, ghost photographs especially. She snapped the windows in the High Street, quickly, carelessly, without bothering to focus. She was often surprised by the things that such snapshots revealed. In any case she could manipulate the negatives to show whatever she wanted to: monsters or angels or distorted faces. A century ago she could have claimed they were the faces of the dead.

At an exhibition the year before she had seen a series of photographs showing a young man standing beside a bench in Waterlow Park. A girl sat at his feet with her back to the camera. The girl was out of focus and partly invisible, as if she were a trick of the light. The series was dedicated to the memory of the photographer's fiancée, who had been killed in a car crash in Spain.

The exhibition reminded Christa of the fake fairy photographs that had famously made a fool of Conan Doyle.

Her fiancé Tom had once said to her that there was no need to go out and hunt for a story, that it was more exciting to discover the stories that were right there in front of you.

“That’s why I love your work,” he said. “You have this way of getting people to look at what’s under their noses.”

The structural problems with Wilberforce House were supposed to have been cured years ago. Every five years a team of decorators came in to redo the paintwork and a gardener turned up each month to tidy the lawn. There was still nothing that could be done about the stench of the river.

Michaela Fallon suffered from rheumatism. She sometimes found the stairs difficult but had always refused to move from her fourth floor flat. Whenever anyone tried talking to her about it she insisted she’d never give up her view of the river. From the windows of Wilberforce House the Thames was always the colour of mud, even at the height of summer. From the waterside walkway you could smell the sour-sweet odour of stagnant water butts.

Dain Fallon had never even lived in the flat. He had been kidnapped by militant extremists and shot as a spy. He and Michaela had chosen the flat because it was what they could afford at the time. It was convenient for Dain because it had easy connections to Gatwick.

Christa had been four when her father died. She had no memory of him but she knew all his work by heart. Dain Fallon had photographed army encampments and wounded soldiers, towns on fire, street children brandishing guns. It was the kind of work you had to be prepared to die for, and Christa was wary of becoming too in awe of it. If she felt she had nothing to contribute she might not be able to work at all.

Her mother never seemed to get the hang of Christmas. Her preparations were scanty or nonexistent; the day itself often seemed to pass her by. When Christa let herself into the flat she found a couple of strips of gold tinsel criss-crossing the ceiling in the living room and a string of ancient fairy lights above the window. There was no tree. The cards that people had sent lay face down on the coffee table. Christa sat on the brown cord sofa and looked down at the muddy river. A bald yellow sun was trying to see its reflection in the intransigent water. The sky was an indigent mauve.

The sun burned. Christa breathed, feeling the silence tremble in the empty room.

When she put on the radio she found it was tuned to a news station. Christa hardly ever listened to the news. She didn't remember her father but she remembered the endless news broadcasts. She could still hum the signature tunes from all the old radio programmes, tunes that people always remembered when they heard them but never thought about otherwise.

Her mother always waiting for news no matter how bad.

Tom disliked the broadcast news. He said it was only interested in delivering the headlines. His own work always appeared towards the back of the newspapers he wrote for, somewhere between the travel features and the book reviews. The stories he filed were described by his critics as obscure and by his fans as iconoclastic or offbeat.

When Tom disappeared he became a headline in his own right. Christa found the worst thing about that was hearing complete strangers discussing him as if they knew him, seeing his face on the front page of every newspaper, common property, like the sanitised image of some politician or film star.

They replayed all the old execution videos and re-interviewed the lovers and friends of the people who had died in them.

Christa couldn't stand it. At the end of a fortnight she had packed her things together and took the first available flight to Istanbul. She booked in at the Palmyra, the ramshackle hotel close by the central station where Tom had been staying when he had last called her. She took photographs of the street cafes and the carpet sellers, all the usual things, shots she'd be able to sell once she got home. The rest of the time she spent in her room, making tea in the cheap aluminium teapot and watching German game shows on the satellite channel with the sound turned down. All the time she was there she felt Tom was trying to tell her something, that if she stayed long enough she would discover a clue that everyone else had missed. But by the third week in December she was almost out of money. She had no choice but to return to London, at least temporarily.

She switched to a music station and heard a jazz quartet playing Lush Life and then the charcoaled amber voice of Sarah Vaughan. She wondered where her mother was. There had been a time in Christa's childhood when Michaela had been afraid to leave the flat. Her friend Lise had done most of her shopping, and a woman called Charlotte Weir had taken Christa back and forth to school. Michaela had worked from home then, proofreading scientific papers. She had stopped producing work of her own for almost ten years.

Now she went out every day in spite of the rheumatism, taking long walks around Canary Wharf and across the river into Limehouse and Stepney. Sometimes she was gone for hours.

Christa slept. She was woken by the sound of the front door opening and then closing again.

“It’s dark in here,” said Michaela. “I found this out in the hall.”

She turned on the lamp behind the sofa and flicked down the switch that controlled the fairy lights. A chain of stars unravelled across black glass. Her hair looked damp and dishevelled. Christa supposed the weather had changed while she had slept.

“Has it been raining?” she said. “It was quite sunny earlier.”

“A bit,” said Michaela. “This is addressed to you.”

It was a small padded envelope sealed with brown parcel tape. It had originally been sent to the Palmyra but someone had scribbled over the name of the hotel with a red marker pen and crammed the London address into the space that was left over. In neither case did she recognise the handwriting.

Inside the jiffy bag was the bronze medallion that Tom always carried in his pocket. It was an icon of St Thomas, cast in old bell-metal. He had been given it by one of the medical students he had come to know in Warsaw. A lot of Poles still wore holy medallions, as a protection against evil.

There was also a folded sheet of paper with a picture on it, a grainy photocopy of a blurred snapshot. The photograph showed the grubby cobbled street that led from the Palmyra to what passed for its local shopping facilities: a couple of tawdry bazaars and a one-pump petrol station. A man was walking away from the hotel, his back to the camera. There was a child running after him, an oversized hooded sweatshirt hiding its face. The man had Tom’s height, his wiry build, his slightly stooping shoulders, but it was impossible to tell for sure if it was him.

Christa shivered, folding her fingers around the medallion. Its chain was missing. She found herself wondering if the chain might still offer protection by itself.

“What is it?” asked Michaela. “Anything interesting?”

“Just some stuff I left behind at the hotel,” Christa said. “Nothing important.”

Later, after Michaela had gone to bed, Christa pulled the jiffy bag to pieces in the hope that she might discover a note of some kind hidden in the lining. All she found was a messy grey fluff, a cross between dust and wool.