

Feet of Clay

Allis was getting ready to leave when Noel rang. He sounded guilty about something. Allis thought he was about to tell her he couldn't come to her grandmother's funeral, but it turned out he was calling to break up with her. He told her he had met someone else and they were getting engaged.

“Her name's Nelly,” he said. “I honestly never meant for it to happen.”

“I don't believe this,” Allis said. “I have to be at the service in half an hour.”

“Here we go again,” said Noel. He had reverted to the self-righteous tone she had come to hate, slipping into it as easily as a toad into a mud-puddle. “It always has to be about you.”

They said some other things, things Allis did her best to forget, and then Noel had put down the phone. Allis arrived at the synagogue with just minutes to spare. The place was packed. Hanne had been widely respected. She had lived through the Holocaust. Her death at the age of ninety was the end of an era.

Allis crept in at the back. Her father Jonas was already seated at the front of the hall. She had to push her way through the crowd to get to his side. Afterwards at the cemetery they stood together at Hanne's graveside to receive the mourners. Jonas Ganesh looked grey and drawn, a paler, more attenuated version of herself. She noticed her Aunt Rose was weeping openly, even though she and Hanne had never really got on. Rose Steenberg was her mother's sister. Hanne had always called her ‘the stupid one.’ Allis's mother Miriam shared Rose's outgoing temperament and sensitive nature but she had redeemed herself in Hanne's eyes by being academic,

graduating from Imperial College with a First in applied mathematics. Rose had left school at sixteen to become a nurse. Allis drew her gently aside and took her arm.

“Are you all right, Auntie Rosie?”

Rose stared at her with red-rimmed eyes and started crying again. Her Uncle Amos, Rose’s husband, shook his head.

“It’s not the funeral,” he said. “There was an attack on the centre this morning. Some hooligan chucked a petrol bomb through the kitchen window. We’ve just been to give our statements to the police. We almost didn’t get here at all.”

“How terrible,” said Allis. “Was anyone hurt?” Rose had retired from her hospital job some years before but both she and Amos were deeply involved in the voluntary work they did for a local refuge for foreign asylum seekers. Rose especially spent a lot of her time there. She had never been able to have children, and Allis suspected that the children at the centre were very important to her.

“Farrook was badly burned on both arms,” Rose said quietly. “She was right beside the window when it happened. Luckily some of the others were able to put out the fire before it did too much damage but the children were very frightened.”

“Farrook is from Afghanistan,” Amos added. “She was training to be a doctor, but the Taliban put a stop to all that. She came here because she thought she would be safe.”

“Are you sure you’re both OK?” Allis said. “Would you like me to stay at your place tonight?”

“Don’t be silly. We’re fine. You need to be with your father.”

Amos kissed her forehead, the way he used to when she was a child. They rejoined Jonas and went back to the house, where Allis and one of the cousins had laid on a funeral buffet. People stood around in the downstairs rooms, eating and

swapping stories about Hanne. There was a substantial crowd, and the atmosphere became quite cheerful. Only Jonas seemed distant and sad. Allis knew he found funerals difficult because of her mother. It was ten years now since her death but her father had never shown any signs of wanting to remarry. So far as Allis knew there had been no one else.

“Hey,” Allis said to him. “You ought to eat something.” She briefly touched his shoulder.

“I’ll eat later,” he said. “I can’t concentrate with all this noise.”

At around five o’clock the doorbell rang. Allis went to answer the door, expecting some late-running guest. Instead there was a man in a fluorescent jacket holding a parcel.

“Allis Ganesh?” he said. He was Pakistani and very good looking. “Sign here.”

She signed the form on his clipboard and he went away. The parcel was the size of a shoebox and addressed to her. The return address was Hanne’s. Allis felt her heart miss a beat. It was typical of Hanne somehow, to gatecrash her own funeral. Allis closed the door and took the parcel upstairs. The first floor of the house was entirely hers. It had been her father’s idea, to have the place converted into two flats. Allis had been uncertain at first, but with London prices the way they were she had agreed and in practice the arrangement worked well. She had worried what Noel might think about her living cheek by jowl with her father but the subject never came up.

Not that it mattered now. She left the parcel in her bedroom and went back downstairs.

“Who was that?” said Jonas.

“The DHL man. It’s just some papers for work.”

Both Allis and Jonas were geological surveyors. Allis’s mother used to call them the rock twins. Jonas had been in the same job for twenty years, working for the national survey. Allis was employed by a major petrochemicals company and was already earning more than her father. She knew some men would have minded this dreadfully but Jonas only ever seemed pleased for her.

Jonas reached out and touched the back of her hand. “Thanks for being here,” he said. “I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“You don’t have to,” Allis said. “They’ll be gone soon, don’t worry.”

Once all the food was eaten people began to leave and by eight o’clock they were on their own again. Allis began clearing the plates. All at once she felt close to tears. Now that the funeral was over there was nothing to distract her attention from thoughts of Noel. She couldn’t tell her father, he had enough to deal with already. He sat at the table, slowly shredding a napkin into tiny pieces. She wondered how he was feeling, what he was thinking. Suddenly he raised his head, as if sensing her eyes on him.

“Leave all that,” he said. “We can do it tomorrow. Let’s have some coffee and watch the news.”

This sense of a shared activity brought a resurgence of normality. Allis made the drinks and brought them through on a tray. The nine o’clock news had just started, and they were showing the latest footage of the war in Afghanistan. A bomb had gone off, wrecking the children’s ward of a hospital and causing multiple casualties. Allis thought how different the house felt now that Hanne was dead. She had never actually lived with them, but since Allis’s mother died the sense of Hanne’s presence, her

likes, her dislikes, her desires had become all-pervasive. Her absence was like the lifting of a cloud.

“I’m glad she’s gone,” said Jonas suddenly. It was as if he had read the thoughts right out of her head. Allis kept quiet, not knowing what to say in reply. Family wisdom said Hanne and Jonas were close. It wasn’t the kind of thing you questioned out loud.

“She should have married and had more children,” Jonas insisted. “I reminded her of things she would have been better forgetting.”

“Dad,” Allis said. “That’s ridiculous.”

“She never did tell me who my father was. I suppose I’ll never know now.”

Allis fell silent again. Rose Steenberg had told her the story years ago, how Hanne came to London soon after the war. She was already pregnant, but she never told anyone who fathered her child and nobody dared to ask because Hanne had been in Auschwitz. Everyone knew she had never been married, and there was talk that she might have been raped by one of the guards. No doubt Jonas had heard the same stories and then some. It was one of the many things they never discussed.

“It doesn’t matter where you came from, dad,” she said. “All that matters is that you’re here. Whoever he was, he’s not important. Let him go.”

She knew her words were facile but she wanted to get off the subject as quickly as possible. Talking about marriage and children would only make her think about Noel. Her father kept his eyes on the screen. It was impossible to tell what he was thinking. The local news carried a brief report of the attack on the asylum centre. There was film of the ambulance arriving, some of the volunteers sweeping up the broken glass. Allis couldn’t help thinking it could have been Rose in the ambulance instead of the Afghan woman. The glass sparkled on the ground like splinters of ice.

Allis stifled a yawn. “I think I’ll go to bed,” she said to Jonas. “Will you be all right down here by yourself?”

“I’ll be fine. You go up. You look tired.”

Allis kissed him quickly and said goodnight. It was only when she got upstairs that she remembered Hanne’s parcel. She thought again how like Hanne it was to make her presence felt, even now that she had no presence as such. She was nothing but the agglomeration of other people’s memories and the few possessions she had left behind. Allis wondered what could be in the parcel. She hoped it might contain a piece of Hanne’s jewellery, the agate pendant perhaps, or the garnet bracelet. She tore off the brown paper wrapping. There was an official-looking envelope containing a letter from Hanne’s solicitor. The letter said Hanne had left instructions for the parcel to be despatched to Allis immediately upon Hanne’s death. With the letter was a wooden box of the kind made to hold loose tea leaves, and suddenly Allis knew what was inside. She lifted the paper aside and slid back the lid. There was a rolled square of red knitted fabric, like a miniature blanket. Inside the roll of fabric was Jonny Clay.

Jonny Clay was Hanne’s golem. Allis had been about seven when she first saw him. He was a rough little pottery man about six inches high, his arms fused to his sides and his legs joined together down the middle. Allis thought he looked a little like a baby in a papoose carrier. Hanne said this was to stop him breaking apart when he was fired. He was hollow all the way through, and if you blew in through the slit of his lips he made a faint whistling sound. Hanne kept him in a wooden box at the back of the wardrobe.

“Do you know what a golem is, Allis?” Hanne had asked her. Allis shook her head, saying nothing. She didn’t know whether to like Jonny Clay or be afraid of him. “A golem is a monster,” Hanne said. “There are scholars who claim that the golem is

just a legend, a collective delusion, the will of the Jewish people rising up to throw off their oppressors. But most of us know the truth is much stranger than that. The golem is real, all right. The golem is the strength you call on when you've no strength left."

Hanne said that golems stayed quiet most of the time, hidden in desk drawers or kitchen cupboards or in tin boxes under the bed, but if you knew the right words and signs you could bring them to life. Hanne said she had made Jonny Clay to protect her when she was in Auschwitz.

"I scooped up some mud from the yard," she said. "The mud would not have been just mud though. It was also blood and filth and ash, the ashes of human flesh from the crematorium. I spread the mud on the stones behind the latrines to dry it a little and after about a day it had turned to clay. I knew how to work clay, because I had done it in school before the war started. All my friends were dead by then and I had no one to talk to. Jonny Clay looked after me. He kept me going."

Allis understood only a little of what Hanne was talking about. She heard the word blood, and the idea that Jonny Clay might have real blood inside him terrified her. Later, when she learned about the concentration camps at school, she became convinced that Hanne had baked Jonny Clay in the crematorium. She thought of her bribing a guard, or climbing inside after dark to rake through the ashes. She began to have nightmares. When finally she plucked up the courage to ask Hanne about it her grandmother simply laughed and said of course not, she had fired Jonny Clay in one of the cooking stoves in the prisoners' huts.

"Not that there was much to cook," she said. "Potato peelings if we were lucky. We used to mix them with muddy water and call it soup."

Jonny Clay had a gentle expression. It was difficult to think of him as a monster. Sometimes Hanne let Allis hold him. His outside was rough, with bits of

sand and gravel baked into it, like the currants in a gingerbread man. Sometimes, if both Jonas and Miriam were going to be out, Allis would go round to Hanne's straight from school. Once Jonas arrived earlier than usual to take her home and found her in Hanne's bedroom with Jonny Clay.

"Stay and have some coffee," Hanne said. "I'll go and put the kettle on, shall I?"

"We can't today," Jonas said. "Miriam will have her tea on. I'll wait in the car."

He left the room abruptly, closing the door with a bang. He didn't speak a word for the entire journey home. Allis wondered if she had done something wrong but her father seemed upset rather than angry. After that, Hanne told Allis that their games with Jonny Clay would be best kept secret.

Allis rolled Jonny Clay in his blanket and put him back in his box. Even after all these years the pottery figure still unnerved her, and she found she had a superstitious fear of breaking it. She pushed the box to the back of her wardrobe and tried to forget about it. Now she was alone in her room she could think about Noel. She supposed he was with Nelly somewhere, in bed most likely. They would shag each other senseless, and afterwards Noel would go over it all again, how terrible it had been for him, Allis's screaming and crying and making a scene. Nelly would pat his head and tell him it was over now, all done with, that at last they could get on with their lives.

Noel and Nelly, she thought. *They sound like a children's cartoon.* Allis choked back the tears that were starting; if she cried now there would be no end to it. She snapped on the radio to drown out the sound of her thoughts. There was an update

on the news story about the asylum centre: apparently the Afghan woman had been released from hospital.

She went to the bathroom to use the toilet and wash her face. The next morning her father said he had taken the rest of the week off work and was thinking of driving north to the Peak District.

“I wondered if you’d like to come with me?” he said. “We could go and see the Blue John cavern.”

Almost before she realised she was going to Allis said yes. The thought of driving away from Noel along the motorway was so liberating it burned in her like anger.

They booked into a small hotel on the outskirts of Bakewell. There were few modern conveniences and the place had a shabby air to it but the bed linen smelled wonderfully fresh and the high windows looked directly out on the encircling hills. Allis rested in her room for an hour then went down to meet her father in the hall.

“Is everything all right for you?” he said.

“It’s great, dad. It’s perfect.” She took his hand briefly and squeezed it. He seemed happy and at ease, as relaxed as she had ever known him. His eyes behind the round glasses gleamed like moss agates.

They found a pub that served home-made food, steak-and-ale pie and Bakewell tart. Allis ordered a glass of wine for herself but Jonas had a fruit juice and then afterwards stuck to water. Allis knew he rarely touched alcohol, though she had never heard him express any prejudice against it. They talked mainly about their work, a subject they both enjoyed and that could keep them happily occupied for hours. Neither of them mentioned Hanne or the attack on the asylum centre. At one

point Allis thought briefly of Noel, probing the subject gingerly with her mind as she might probe a cut or graze to see how it was healing. Pain rounded on her like an angry cat, as if irritated by her attention. She let it alone, wondering if she would ever escape her father now that Hanne was dead. Jonas was the least possessive, least worldly of men, yet there was an inevitability in them ending up alone together, growing old and brittle and grey like two sticks in a ditch.

So what if we do? she thought. *Would that be so terrible?* She listened contentedly as Jonas told her about the last time he had been in the north. She loved his quiet, slightly hiccupping laugh, the way he recounted inconsequential details just for the simple pleasure of telling a story. He was rarely so forthcoming at home.

They stayed in the pub until closing time then made their way back through the darkened streets to their hotel. The little town felt watchful and alive, steeped in the rich, lithe blackness of the surrounding moor. Allis fell asleep almost at once. When she woke it was past eight o'clock. She felt rested and renewed, as if the more difficult parts of her past had been erased overnight. She had not slept so well in several weeks.

The sky was blue as lapis. They drove out across the moor towards Castleton and Edale, where the Blue John caves were and where they planned to walk a short stretch of the Pennine Way. Allis was surprised at the confident way her father handled the car. In London he rarely drove, and when he did he often appeared nervous and despondent. The narrow moorland roads seemed to excite him, releasing from within him the hawkish, need-fuelled expectancy of a gold prospector. He hurried the Renault along, hauling it without ceremony over the potholed tarmac and steep passes, his elbow resting casually on the rim of the open window.

Allis saw that her father loved this country and knew it intimately. She wondered why, apart from one short week in Scarborough when she was ten, they had never been here as a family when she was a child.

They went on the Blue John tour, propelled in a wooden skiff through a low-ceilinged, water-filled passageway into the main cave, its walls shimmering with massed deposits of fluorspar and barite. Allis could not help remembering a piece of music Noel had liked, that he had sometimes put on in the evenings when they were alone together, Debussy's *Submerged Cathedral*. She had never much liked being underground, and was glad when they were out again, although her father seemed perfectly at ease, happy even, asking questions of the guide and reaching out to touch the gleaming bands of crystals in the surrounding granite.

They had lunch in a café in Castleton and then headed up into the hills. There was a sweet breeze, reminding Allis of the fresh, chlorophyll smell of the bed sheets in the Bakewell hotel. Every now and then the wind dropped and the sun beat down full strength, its heat vast and mauling as a copper furnace.

Eventually they stopped the car and got out. Allis rolled on her back in the springy grass, shading her eyes from the pouring sunlight with the back of her hand. The earth beneath her was powdery and dry, with a sharp, acrid aroma she found quietly intoxicating. Jonas stood on a granite boulder, looking out over the moors. Against the scintillating blue of the sky he looked gaunt and grey as a dolmen or a blasted tree. Aunt Rose and especially Hanne had made much of his thinness, his small capacity for food, yet he was seldom ill, and it had been her mother in the end who had died.

Jonas surveying the land was in his element.

“There’s yellow fluorite over there,” he said, pointing. They hiked towards a narrow ravine, clambering in and down among the jagged rocks. From the leg pocket of his jeans Jonas produced one of his extensive collection of geologist’s hammers. He bent to the ground, retrieving some shards of fallen granite and with practised taps of his hammer began splitting them along their fault lines. As he had predicted, the rocks were full of quartz, the clumps of yellowish crystals that were the more common variety of the Blue John fluorspar that was mined from the hillside below. Watching the careful, expert way he worked Allis felt a sudden flare of anger at Hanne, who had chided her father for his lack of ambition and who, or so it now seemed to her, had done her best to keep them divided.

It was Hanne who paid for Allis to go on school field trips, who had bought her her first laptop computer. She often said her most heartfelt desire was for Allis to make the most of herself. Her words made Allis feel both honoured and subtly pressurised. They carried within them the sense of Hanne’s belief that her father had *not* made the most of himself, that he had failed Hanne in some way. Allis disliked this unfair criticism of her father as much as she felt determined to show her grandmother that she would not fail, that she, unlike Jonas, could do what was required of her.

I must have been crazy, she thought. I let that mean old woman cast her spell on me, when I could have been out here every summer with my dad.

“Dad,” she said suddenly. “You know the package that came the day of gran’s funeral? It wasn’t from work. It was from gran.”

Jonas laid his hammer aside on a rock and brushed his hands briskly downwards over his jeans. Twin streaks of dust pointed raggedly towards his knees.

“What was in it?” he said. Allis was struck by how little surprised he seemed by what she was telling him. It was as if he had known or guessed all along.

“That pottery figure she used to keep in her wardrobe. You know, Jonny Clay.” She hesitated. “I got such a fright when I opened the box. I was scared of Jonny Clay when I was a kid.”

Jonas sighed. He sat down on one of the boulders and took off his glasses. He looked naked without them, and much younger. He also looked very like Allis. For a moment Allis felt as if she was standing in front of a mirror.

“Me too,” Jonas said. “I was terrified of that little clay goblin, and she knew it. She used to make me hold it and play with it. But the worst thing was the stories she used to tell me about it and where it had come from. The one she told most often was of how Jonny Clay saved her life one night, during the forced march across Poland. I was six when I first heard that story, but she must have repeated it to me a dozen times afterwards, a hundred. The details varied but the main story was always the same, how the SS knew they were losing the war and so they decided to hide the evidence of what they’d done in the concentration camps. The dead were incinerated, or buried in mass graves. The sick and the dying were simply abandoned where they lay. Those prisoners still fit enough to walk were taken out of the camps and made to set off on foot back towards Germany. It was winter, and even for the Germans food was in short supply. The prisoners had no proper outdoor clothing and they were all on the edge of starvation. Hundreds of them died every day. Hanne was ill and exhausted and the day came when she knew she had no more strength left, but Jonny Clay told her to hang on until evening. She was so cold she could no longer feel her feet. She knew that all she had to do was stop walking, and one of the SS guards would shoot her dead on the spot. She said the idea began to take her over. It became

as comforting and necessary to her as the idea of walking in through the lighted doorway of one of the cottages they glimpsed from time to time through the trees. But Jonny Clay told her to wait, and so long as she kept her fingers wrapped around him she was somehow able to find the will to keep on moving.

“In the end they were allowed to rest in a forest clearing. She knew from the night before and all the nights before that that the respite would only last a couple of hours, but on that night she didn’t care, because she knew she would be dead by morning. But soon after she went to sleep she was woken by a terrible outburst of screaming and gunfire. When she opened her eyes she saw that the camp fire the guards had made for themselves had grown to an enormous pyre. In the light of the roaring flames she could see the figures of the guards, darting about in panic as they tried to escape the monstrous thing that was attacking them. As Hanne watched, one of the guards was flung forward into the fire. He fell backwards, writhing on the ground, his raised arms already swarming with flames. He was squealing like a pig, she said, then something huge and black descended, crushing his blazing form into the ground the same way you might crush a moth that had set itself alight in a candle flame.

“The black thing was the vast, ash-booted foot of Jonny Clay, Jonny Clay grown so huge he blocked out the moon.

“Hanne closed her eyes after that, but she could still hear the sounds, the thrashing and shrieking as Jonny Clay tore the guards apart and roasted them on the fire. In the end though the screaming stopped. Hanne heard the leaves crackling as something enormous and heavy came out of the clearing towards her. Then she was lifted up and carried away. She was carried for what seemed like hours. Finally she was laid down gently on a pile of straw and dead leaves. She dreamed that Jonny Clay

was lying beside her, keeping her warm. When she woke up the next morning she found she was in a cow barn at the edge of a village. Someone had covered her with old grain sacks, and it was this that had stopped her from freezing to death during the night. Jonny Clay was in her pocket, just like always. There were black marks on his head and body, as if he had been rolled in the cooling embers of a camp fire.”

He was silent for a moment, looking out across the wild expanse of the surrounding moor. “The thing that scared me most was not what happened to the guards but the idea that I had been named after Jonny Clay, that somehow Jonny Clay was my real father. I worried about that for years. I never said anything to Hanne. I knew she would either laugh at me or else tell me that the thing I most dreaded was true. As I grew older the whole idea began to seem ridiculous, but I did wonder about my mother. I wondered if she had been driven insane by the things she’d seen.”

Allis was silent. She remembered how Hanne had laughed when she asked if Jonny Clay had been fired in the crematorium. She could not imagine what it had been like for Jonas, growing up in the shadow of Hanne’s terrible past. *He had no one to talk to*, she thought. *Whereas I have always had him.*

“What was the name of the village where Hanne was found?” she said at last.

“Przdyno. It’s in the middle of nowhere. No one could ever explain how she came to be there. The prisoners she was with ended up miles away. Many of them died from the cold but those that survived hid out in the countryside until the Russians arrived. Years ago, before I met your mother, I flew to Paris to talk to one of them. When I asked how they escaped from the guards the man told me they hadn’t needed to escape, because they woke up to find the guards dead. It looked like they had turned on each other.”

He fiddled with his glasses, opening and closing the frames and then polishing the lenses on the front of his T-shirt. "How are you doing, Ally?" he said suddenly. "Has something happened with Noel?"

Allsi glanced at him sharply, trying to gauge from his expression how much he might know, but his eyes were still fixed on his glasses. "We broke up," she said. "He left me. He's going to marry someone called Nelly. Apparently I'm selfish and self-obsessed."

"The man's a fool, Ally. You're too good for him."

"I know you're right." Something seemed to give way inside her then, and suddenly she was crying, the tears coursing down her face like liquid quartz. Then her father came to sit beside her. He took her hand, kissing the tensed, wet knuckles. She buried her face in his shoulder, weeping as she had not done since she was small. At last her grief wore itself out. She raised her head, blinking in the afternoon sun.

"I'm sorry, dad, you must think I'm an idiot."

"He's the idiot. You're better off without him. And it's me that should be saying sorry. I'm sorry about Hanne. I should never have let her fill your head with all that rubbish. I should never have left you alone with her."

"Don't be crazy, dad. She was just an old lady. She liked telling stories, that's all."

She smiled at him through the last of her tears. She felt an overwhelming joy that no matter what happened in their lives they would always belong to one another. *We're made of the same stuff*, she thought. *The rock twins, just like mum said.*

They went and found the car and drove back to Bakewell. That night she dreamed of Noel. He was kneeling above her, his hands grasping her hips, raising her body towards him, preparing to fuck her. But as he entered her she realised it was not

Noel's face looking down at her but the reddish, pockmarked mask of Jonny Clay. His expression was oddly tender, his full terracotta lips parted to reveal the shadowed emptiness of his hollow abdomen. She came as she woke, pressing both hands into her crotch, the tears starting again from her eyes. Her nipples felt sore, as if the starched sheets had been chafing her skin.

She lay awake for a couple of minutes and then fell back to sleep, glad it was Jonny Clay that she had been with and not Noel.

She knew Jonny Clay had a past, that the golem was once a powerful symbol in Jewish mythology, and once she was back in London Allis decided she would like to find out more. There were a surprising number of books on the subject of golems. In the stacks of the university library Allis found everything from arcane philosophies to pulp novels of the nineteen-forties. Many were just hearsay and folklore, overripe fantasies by would-be disciples of Gustav Meyrink and Elmer Shapiro. The books Allis found most interesting were those few that took a scientific approach. Especially fascinating was a pamphlet by a Lithuanian named Mical Velius, *The Golem of Prague and his Thousand Sons*. It went into some detail on the matter of clay, and in particular which kind of clay had the highest success rate when it came to activation. Velius maintained that the ordinary red clay golem was almost entirely without consciousness, a blunt instrument, and that for a golem with intelligence as well as strength it was necessary to utilize more refined materials. He recommended the feldspar clays of Lvov, or the highly plastic blue clay that could be dug only from the banks of a minor tributary of the Upper Volga. He added that the power of the golem could be further enhanced by mixing additional elements, such as iron and gold, with the basic clay.

In a chapter entitled 'Golems and War,' Velius stated that a woman who had lost her husband would sometimes call upon the golem in the service of providing her with a son.

Allis returned the books to the shelves and signed out of the stacks, wondering what she thought she was doing there in the first place. The books reminded her of Hanne, of her solitary obsessions and unhealthy beliefs. She wanted nothing more to do with them.

The Steenbergs had asked her to tea. As she hurried to the tube station Allis wondered if this was their way of checking up on Jonas, of finding out how he was coping after Hanne's death. She did not mind this subtle intrusion into their privacy. She knew her aunt and uncle meant well. In any case, there were some questions she wanted to ask Rose.

The Steenbergs' house was full of banners and placards.

"We're having an open day at the centre," Rose said. "We want to get people on our side, let them know about the work we're doing. We've got speakers coming from all over the country. I'm helping to organize the publicity."

"Do you think that's a good idea? What if that BNP lot turn up again?"

"They're the reason it's important that we do something, show them we're not afraid. Muslims, Christians, Jews, we've all got to stand together against these people. We already know what happens when we don't. You only have to remember what happened to your own grandmother."

"That's not going to happen here, Auntie Rosie. Things are different now."

"It happened to Farrook, just two weeks ago. Things are never different, anywhere." Her voice had risen in pitch, and Allis saw her hands were bunched into fists. "Please say you'll come and support us."

“I will if I can. I don’t want you to get hurt, that’s all.”

Rose laughed and some of the tension went out of her voice. “I’m a big girl now,” she said. She patted her substantial bosom. “I can look after myself. But you’re a dear child, Allis, and such a clever one. Your grandmother was so proud of you.”

Allis hugged her and kissed her cheek. In the brief moments of physical contact she caught the fleeting, fugitive scent of her mother Miriam. She thought how strange it was that Rose should speak of Hanne whom she had not liked instead of her sister Miriam whom she had adored. No one in the family ever talked about Miriam. It was as if the loss was too new, too raw. It was easier to speak of Hanne, who everyone had admired but no one had loved.

“Did gran have friends?” she said suddenly. “Friends she knew before the war, I mean?”

Rose’s expression became guarded. “I don’t know about that. Your grandmother was a very private person. I do know she had two sisters, and there was a girl they adopted too, a child whose parents died or something. She had the same birthday as your gran, I remember that now, though of course they weren’t proper sisters, they weren’t related. And there must have been a man too, I suppose, your father’s father.” She frowned. “She never really talked about the past. Coming to London for Hanne was like crossing the Rubicon. Everything she knew got left behind.”

Except Jonny Clay, Allis thought. Jonny Clay was all she had left. She thought of Farrook, the Afghan woman, who had escaped to England and what she thought was a new life, only to have a petrol bomb thrown at her by pathetic little tin-pot fascists.

Suddenly she felt angry and ashamed.

“I’ll come to the open day,” she said to Rose. “Of course I will.”

Later when she arrived home she found a package had been delivered for her. The package was from Noel, and contained the few odds and ends she had left behind at his flat: an amethyst ring, a book on fossils, a Bob Dylan CD. There was no note. It was the lack of a note that made her feel like killing him.

It also made her feel curiously free, as if she too had made a lucky escape.

In the end Allis missed the open day, because it clashed with a seminar she had to attend at Strathclyde University. She stayed up in Glasgow overnight and caught the train back to London soon after breakfast. It would have been quicker by air of course, but she was nervous of flying, and in any case the slow journey south was always a chance to become reacquainted with old friends: the rugged wind-chafed features of the border country, the hunched black back of North Cumbria, the grey-eyed vistas of Lakeland. All were a familiar source of joy.

She pressed her face to the glass, watching as the landscape narrowed, flattened towards the Midlands, became more populous. She realised once more how good it felt, to be anywhere that was far away from Noel. It was the first time she had thought of him in twenty-four hours. When her mobile went off suddenly she jumped, convinced for a moment that it would be Noel, that her careless thoughts had summoned him, like a demon. In fact it was her father. She picked up at once, surprised. Jonas hardly ever called her on her mobile.

His voice sounded tinny and distant.

“I’m sorry,” Allis said. “I can hardly hear you. The signal’s weak.”

He was telling her he wouldn’t be there when she got home. “I’m at the hospital,” he said. “Amos has had a heart attack.”

Allis drew in her breath. She had thought for a moment it was her father who was hurt or ill. She felt a flash of guilty relief that it was only her uncle.

“My God,” she said to Jonas. “What happened?”

“Some of those BNP thugs turned up at the centre yesterday. You know, at the open day? One of them got into an argument with Rose and knocked her down. I don’t think he meant to exactly. As soon as he saw what he’d done he ran away. Amos went haring after him, and you know Amos, he’s not exactly built for speed these days.” The line went blank, and for a moment Allis thought they had been cut off. When Jonas spoke again he sounded further away than ever. “He’s still critical, so they’ve got him sedated. I’ve told Rose she should get some rest but she won’t leave him. I’ve been here with her most of the night. I stepped outside for a minute so I could phone you but I ought to go and make sure she’s OK.”

“You go,” Allis said. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

She broke the connection, feeling numb. What she wanted most of all was to get out of the train at the next station and travel north again. She did not want to see Amos, lying unconscious and maybe dying in a hospital bed. She did not want to see Rose, her eyes reddened from crying and insisting it was all her fault. It was too much like *déjà vu*. She had told her father she would take a taxi from Euston but at the last minute she changed her mind and made for the tube. She reasoned it would make more sense to go home first, to dump her stuff and change her clothes.

The house was blessedly quiet. She went upstairs, stripped naked and stepped into the shower. The sound of the falling water was like the Pennine rain. In her bedroom the possessions Noel had returned to her still lay in a heap on the dressing table. Seeing them there was somehow awful, and she wished she had put them away

before leaving for Glasgow. As she dressed herself again in clean clothes she imagined she could hear Hanne's voice, speaking to her from inside the wardrobe.

These men are criminals, all of them, she said. *Are you really going to let this happen again?*

She remembered waking up in Bakewell, Jonny Clay's harsh embraces still hot on her skin. The old books said the proper way to activate a golem was with cabbalistic markings. These should be painted on to the clay with manganese oxide, which when dry was a reddish brown, and symbolic of blood.

Allis wondered if real blood might not be stronger, then remembered that Jonny Clay had real blood baked into him already.

In her mind she could see Jonny Clay, making one great bonfire of the whole of the city of London.

That should smoke them out, she thought. *The cowards.* She wondered how they would report it on the news.