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Gayle writes her books from an old chapel in Norfolk where she lives with her husband, Christopher. She draws inspiration from abandoned buildings, the sea and very strange people.

Too Close

GAYLE CURTIS

twenty7



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For my parents, celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary.

To my husband, Christopher, with all my love.

Dedicated to my mother-in-law, Carol Mary Curtis.



PROLOGUE

The green suitcase resting on the purlin swirled around in Cecelia's mind as though it had turned to liquid and was curling its way around a basin towards the plug hole. It moved from one side of her mind to the other as she tried to hold on to it, but it was too late, she'd woken up and the dream was becoming nothing but a blur. She'd dreamt about the green suitcase on the purlin on many occasions but this time it felt different – this vision was clearer somehow, evocative of a distant memory. She knew the suitcase had been her mother's but she'd never discovered what it contained and these thoughts had haunted her ever since.

Waking up now, the dream becoming an unreachable memory as it wisped its way up to the high ceiling and burst on the Victorian cornice, she thought she heard movement coming from the other bedrooms. Climbing from her warm bed she tiptoed down the corridor to peer quietly into the room next to hers, but all was still as she'd expected. The house was motionless and quiet – empty, lacking the vibrancy and warmth it had once held within its walls.

Back in bed, Cecelia drifted off fairly quickly but soon found her mind returning to the green suitcase on the purlin. She was sitting in front of it, legs swinging like a gymnast on a beam. On the other side of the suitcase sat her brother, Sebastian, one leg bent up to his chest and the other swinging in time with hers. He stared at her, leant forward and tipped the case from its wooden rest and that's when she woke again, heart pounding in her chest, sweat forming on her brow. The uneasy feeling continued when she reached for her glass of water on the bedside table and saw her daughter, Caroline, standing by her bed. It was dark, apart from a glimmer from the open window, but she could make out the shape of her tiny frame.

'You startled me. What's the matter?' she said in a loud whisper.

'Come with me, I want to show you something.'

'It's late, go back to bed.' Cecelia pulled back the quilt, preparing to get out of bed so she could march Caroline back to her room.

'I need to show you something first,' Caroline said as she grabbed Cecelia's wrist before she'd even had a chance to stand up.

'You're so cold! How long have you been out of bed?' asked Cecelia. She followed Caroline out of the bedroom and was led to the top of the wide staircase by the small, determined child.

'Cold hands, warm heart,' Caroline whispered to Cecelia.

'Where did you hear that? Come on now, this is silly, get back into bed . . .' It suddenly dawned on Cecelia that Caroline could be sleepwalking – a habit that she seemed to have inherited from



Cecelia – and that she shouldn't really wake her. She pulled her wrist from the child's grip as gently as she possibly could and tried to steer her by the shoulders down the corridor and back to her bedroom, but there was no chance of manoeuvring her anywhere.

'Please, I need to show you this and then I promise I'll sleep.'

Cecelia decided to indulge her daughter, knowing if she did she'd only be minutes away from getting back into her own warm bed.

'Let me find the light switch –'

'No! Don't turn the light on, you won't be able to see it. There's light from the moon shining through the windows.'

She was right, there was just enough illumination to guide them down the stairs but Cecelia couldn't help feeling there was something odd in Caroline's tone of voice and it caused a cold draught to whisper across her skin. She shivered slightly at the sight of the silvery light that was shining across the kitchen floor below, adding to her feeling of unease.

'This is ridiculous; we need to get back to bed.'

A blanket of light suddenly lit the hallway causing Cecelia to squint and look above her. As her eyes began to adjust to the starkness she saw her husband, Samuel, on the landing, looking as bleary-eyed as she was.

'What are you doing?' His voice was a croaky whisper.

'You frightened me,' she laughed nervously, her hand reaching for her throat. 'I think Caroline's sleepwalking again.' She looked down and noticed her daughter had wandered off.

'What?'





‘Go back to bed, Samuel. I’ll find her and get her tucked up.’

‘Cecelia, there’s nobody there. Caroline’s in bed asleep, I just checked.’

Cecelia halted on the stairs.

‘You must have been dreaming,’ said Samuel.

‘But, she was just here with me . . . I was holding her hand . . . we . . .’ She noticed Samuel’s hand was on Caroline’s bedroom door, which was ajar.

‘You must have been sleepwalking. Come back to bed.’

‘Caroline’s down here, I know she is . . .’ Her heart began to thump harder as she spoke the words over and over in her head, the feel of the cold little hand still on her skin.

‘Cecelia, there is no one there. Please, sweetheart . . .’

She ran downstairs, flicking all the lights on so she could check in every room. She even went down into the cellar where Caroline rarely ventured because she found it too creepy. The rooms creaked with irritability as if they too had suddenly been disturbed from their sleep. The last place she checked was the garden room and that’s where she felt a change in the atmosphere. It was only very slight but it was almost as though there had been some sort of movement in there that had stopped suddenly. She switched the light on and off a few times to see if there was any change. After a few moments she realised how ridiculous she was being – she had just frightened herself. She turned to go back upstairs and let out a piercing scream as she ran straight into Samuel. Cold sweat prickled across her skin as he grabbed her arms and she tried to catch her breath.



‘It’s just me, silly. You’ve got yourself into a right state.’ He held her tightly and she felt the fear begin to disperse. ‘Go back to bed and I’ll bring you some tea.’

Cecelia didn’t argue with him; she was still shaking and was confused by what had just occurred. She went up the uneven staircase and into Caroline’s bedroom, pausing for a minute before returning to her own bed. Her daughter was fast asleep, entangled in the bedclothes. It did nothing to settle Cecelia’s turbulent mind though – she still felt uneasy. Maybe Samuel was right and she had been sleepwalking. But she wasn’t convinced and she could still feel the tiny hand she’d thought was Caroline’s in hers, her quiet whispering voice in the memory of her mind.

Hearing the kettle boil she went back to bed and waited for Samuel. They exchanged very few words and eventually he cradled her in his arms as he always did when she’d had a nightmare. She was glad of the comfort but as soon as she heard his deep level breathing she got up and went to sit in Caroline’s room, wanting to be near her. The words, ‘cold hands, warm heart’ repeated in her head until they became something quite different – ‘cold hands, cold heart’.



PART 1





1

1984

The dent in the veneered table was where Cecelia kept most of her thoughts. She often wondered where they all went as she rubbed the dark lacquered chink of wood. The veneer had been missing for so long on that tiny splinter, it was almost as though it had always been like that. But, of course, it hadn't. She had a vague idea how it had come to be in the first place, some broken crockery and jagged words. But she was fascinated by the way the pale lined, checked pattern had been interrupted and she liked to rub at this spot when she was thinking. It very often brought back memories of other times she'd sat at the table in the echoic kitchen. Radio Two would be playing in the background as she did her homework whilst her mother, Yvonne, cooked the family dinner. It would be warm, bright and filled with the smell of food, which always made her feel homely in the big cold house with just her twin brother, Sebastian, and their mother. The best of times was when it was just the three of them. The thought of her mother landed like a heavy stone in the sandy pit of her stomach.





Today was different. Today she sat at the table opposite Sebastian.

There were no lights on, or food smells to arouse their senses and no Radio Two tinkling in the background. The Aga was ghostly, having not been stoked up, and was a shadow of its normal robustness as it tried to push out a minimal amount of heat. Cecelia could hear the wind swirling down the chimney and whooshing into the flue. Without their mother there, everything was grey. The house was always like that when she was gone and it reminded her of the magic colouring books she'd had a few years ago, the kind you painted with water to make the colours appear. That's how she saw her mother, the magic liquid to colour her dim grey world. But today there was a heavy melancholic mist swirling with the wind outside and through the cracks of the windows and the mortar between the bricks and into the house. She'd known this day would come, although she'd hoped it wouldn't.

'She's left us,' Sebastian blurted across the table.

Cecelia paused in rubbing the veneer and watched his words skid towards her.

'Shut up. She hasn't left.'

'Where is she then?'

'I don't know, probably just held up somewhere . . .'

'I know she's gone because Roger told me. She's not coming back.' He leant forward, resting his arms on the table, interlinking his fingers, first one way, then the other. He was nervous, hiding something – she could tell.





Cecelia stared at him for a few moments but didn't answer. The dark marks under his eyes told her he was feeling a lot more hurt than he was letting on. She could tell that he also knew what had really happened to their mother. She continued rubbing the nick in the veneer and concentrated on wishing that their father, Roger, was the one who was dead instead.

Cecelia and Sebastian were close, although they bickered most of the time and sometimes Cecelia was loath to remember the bond they shared, especially on days like this. They had been one once and now they were two and, although their characters appeared to be different, deep down they were quite the same. Her little mice, their mother called them.

The trouble was she knew he was right about one thing and her irritability was laced with defensiveness. She knew it, as she sat with her brother, waiting for Roger to come in and talk to them both. Their mother wasn't coming back. Not because she'd walked out and left them, but because she was dead. She knew it like she knew she had to go to bed at seven thirty on a school night, had PE and maths on Thursdays and only had fish for dinner on Mondays.

Getting up from her chair, the words Sebastian had blurted out fell from her lap like crumbs.

Sebastian stopped the continuous movement of his fingers. 'Where are you going? Roger said we had to wait here.'

'I'm going upstairs.'

'You'll just make him angry if you leave,' he said, making her want to pinch the back of his arm. 'Stay. Please, Cece.'





Ignoring him she pulled open the kitchen door which led to the hall, hesitating briefly as a blast of cold, musty air hit her full in the face. She shivered and took the steps two at a time.

It was so cold in the rest of the house that when she ran her hand along the Anaglypta-covered walls, they felt wet. She walked the long corridor to her bedroom imagining, as she always did, the green-leafed swirling carpet engulfing her through the floorboards. She didn't go into her parents' bedroom to check if her mother was there; she knew she wasn't. And even though she knew she was dead, she was also quite sure that her side of the wardrobe would be empty. Roger would have made sure it looked like Yvonne had left again.

Once she'd escaped the carpet river Cecelia opened the door to her bedroom, the only place in the house she was allowed some colour. The walls were now plastered with posters of Duran Duran, A-Ha and Tears for Fears, her favourite bands. Sometimes, if she squeezed her eyes shut hard enough she could imagine she was in another house, far away from the fens. She had dreamt once that she lived in a huge modern house, like the ones her school friends resided in on newly built estates. Well-heated and dry with proper rectangular, fenced-in gardens, the local town within walking distance so she could have a social life like everyone else. Then she'd woken up, looked out of the window across the flat patchwork quilt that made up their fields, part of their farmland – which fed and clothed them as Roger liked so often to remind them – and had felt sad for the rest of the day.

A sticky, warm layer of fear rested in the pit of her stomach, as the enormity of what had happened began to reveal itself as a





reality. Even though she had Sebastian, she couldn't help feeling she was alone somehow. Something her mother had promised would never happen.

She stood for a minute looking at the pretty, soft green bedroom, with its white melamine furniture – ghosts from the past, reminders from her childhood. This had always comforted her before, but things weren't the same anymore. The intricate gold filigree around the handles and doors seemed dull and lacklustre. The tiny embroidered rose buds that littered the duvet cover appeared to have wilted. And the fluffy cream carpet was flat and unappealing; all of it felt sad and lifeless, unable to cheer her as it once had.

To the left side of her bedroom next to the window was a tiny door leading to a loft space that her father always forbade them to go into. But regardless of his stern lectures, she would often go in there and balance on the purlin, using the beams for support, and Sebastian would join her. It was mainly when their parents were arguing, which was most of the time. It was dark but always warmer than the rest of the house because it was above the kitchen, which had been added to the house in the fifties. As dark and dusty as it was, Cecelia felt safe and comfortable in there. She would sometimes take a cushion and book with her, and balance on the purlin like a gymnast on a beam; one leg stretched out, the other swinging. Roger had recently painted the door shut, more out of a desire for them to obey him than worry that it was dangerous for them to go in there. Bored with their defiance, he had pretended the wood needed protecting but Cecelia had known it was to stop them going through the door.





Unbeknown to Roger, on a particularly bad day of arguments, Cecelia had found her confiscated penknife and chiselled the door open. He'd not caught them in there yet.

Yanking open the stiff door, the smell of gloss still present in the cold draught where the paint had leaked through the cracks, she crawled inside the dark space. Pulling herself along the purlin, she balanced carefully as she drew one leg up to her chest, leaving the other to dangle in mid-air. Rolling up her school trouser leg she rested her mouth on her knee. Her smooth skin cooled her lips, her hard bone making her feel solid once again. She waited for some time, listening to the birds tweeting and scrabbling on the roof. She shivered – the loft space wasn't as warm as it normally was because the Aga down below in the kitchen hadn't been stoked. The damp, musty smell of the loft was prominent today without the usual cooking smells to mask it. Sometimes, when Roger was busy on the farm, Sebastian would hide in the loft with her. They'd take in freshly baked biscuits or pieces of cake straight from the oven and would sit chatting for hours. Sometimes their mother would creep in and tell them ghost stories, the excitement of knowing they shouldn't be in there making it all the more thrilling. These memories – never to be repeated – pained her now.

Thoughts of her mother caused tears to sting Cecelia's eyes, but her mind ran them like a projector she couldn't switch off. She bent forward, pulling her knee closer to her chest, trying to crush the images. They would no longer play board games before bed or watch films together. Then she thought about her and Sebastian's fifteenth birthdays, which were in two months' time.



Yvonne had promised she wouldn't miss their special day. She wouldn't let anything happen that would mean they couldn't be together, however bad it was. It had only been recently she'd told Cecelia that if she was to leave, they would be going with her. Cecelia had made her promise, an oath she knew Yvonne would never break, but now everything had changed.

The door to the kitchen slammed downstairs, vibrating the wooden structure Cecelia was perched on. Her father was home. Listening to the drone of his voice she gathered he was asking Sebastian where she was. Quickly, she slid back along the purlin, practice having made her nimble and, once she'd reached the door, she carefully turned herself round and climbed through the hole. Shutting the door tight behind her, she sat on the bed waiting for him to come up the stairs and into her room, her sore heart pounding in her chest. There was no way she was going downstairs to listen to the rehearsed words about how their mother didn't want to be a part of the family anymore and had left them for a new life. Cecelia knew they weren't true.

After quite some time waiting for Roger to appear, she took her shoes off, got under the blankets and cried herself to sleep.

Disorientated, she awoke to her bedside lamp being switched on and at first, through the haze of sleep, she expected to see Yvonne standing there, forgetting the events of earlier. To her great disappointment it was Roger. Her eyes were slightly sticky from crying and it took her a while to focus.

'I'm prepared to ignore the fact you disobeyed me. What with Yvonne leaving us. Again.' He paused for emphasis as he always did, looking at her, prompting her to go along with his



lies. 'Look at me, Cece. Are you listening? There'll be no dinner tonight, understand?'

Cecelia nodded in agreement, knowing this was mainly because her mother wasn't around to cook anything so it suited him to starve them. She wasn't hungry anyway and she was tired. Too tired to correct him and too tired to care about food – it was the least of her worries. There was a tiny spark in her mind telling her to shout at him, tell him she hated him, but she had become mute, something which often happened to Cecelia when she was upset. But she did hate him. She hated him for insisting they call their mother Yvonne – because in his mind, 'children who had reached double figures were too old to address their parents with infantile names'. Cecelia had no problem calling her father Roger but never referred to her mother as anything other than mother. She hated Roger as much as she loved Yvonne.

She stared at him now, more hatred pricking at her skin as he lectured her about what a disappointment she was and how he didn't want 'his girl' going down the wrong path.

He leaned towards her face and touched her cheek but she flinched and turned away. 'We both know what happened. If you hadn't interfered, your mother would be here now. I don't have a licence for that gun, so keep your bloody mouth shut,' he hissed. 'Just do what I tell you and no one will get into any trouble.'

She couldn't bear to look at his large, bald shiny forehead decorated with sweaty wisps of blond hair, the colour of which she'd inherited from him. His long nose and elongated face were his and his alone. She and Sebastian had inherited his dark blue





eyes and hair colour but their soft, small features belonged to their mother.

Leaning further forward he attempted to kiss her goodnight, something he didn't normally do, and she recoiled, wondering why he always smelt ever so slightly greasy. It made her feel sick and she tried to push the suffocating sensation away. As so often happened when Cecelia's voice failed her, she lashed out physically and caught her father in the face with her tightly screwed up hands. He restrained her immediately, pinning both her skinny wrists above her head with one of his giant hands. With his other hand he covered her mouth, making it hard for her to breathe. He pressed her head into the pillow, hurting her lips and teeth and then released her as if nothing had happened.

'Don't forget to read that letter . . . it's important you move on from this as quickly as possible. Accept what I've told you; it'll be easier for you to come to terms with, easier than pining for someone you can't have. She's not coming back this time. My mother was the same. I can still remember her walking out of this very house and not even turning back when she got to the gate.'

Trying to get away from you, Cecelia thought, but didn't, couldn't say. She concentrated on her chipped nail varnish, pretending she didn't care, desperate for him to leave. She couldn't believe he was trying to force feed her these lies, convincing himself it was the truth, when they both knew exactly what had happened that day.

'I've put it on your bedside table. Your brother has read his.'
Puzzled, she sat up and looked around.





Once Roger had gone she peered at the letter he'd left propped up against her night light. She'd ignored much of what he'd said and only vaguely remembered him mentioning it was from their mother.

She picked up the small brown envelope and read the typing on the front. It said simply Cecelia. She turned it over to see what was on the other side but there was nothing there other than an over-licked seal which was obviously Roger's handiwork.

Opening the tiny drawer to her bedside table she placed the unopened letter inside. She wasn't going to read something she knew to be a lie. She knew her mother couldn't have written this letter. She reached underneath postcards, beads and hair bands until she found the small soapstone hippo her mother had bought her for winning a medal at gymnastics club. In one of her many tempers, Cecelia had picked it up and thrown it at the wall, breaking its elongated snout. She could still see the crack where Yvonne had glued it back together. There were minute chips of it missing but she still loved it even though it was damaged.

Bizarrely, Roger had punished her that day for contradicting him and not Sebastian for putting his fist through a pane of glass on the utility door when Cecelia had shut him out. In a temper she'd broken one of her favourite things, regretting it later. There were a lot of moments she regretted.

She'd been made to stand with no shoes or socks on in one of the old World War Two hangars that were situated in the farmyard. However much Yvonne protested, Roger would always have his own way. He'd repeat over and over about what his father had done to him and how it had made him the man he





was today. On better days, Cecelia and Sebastian would mimic him behind his back, desperately gulping down laughter in case they were caught.

She hated this particular punishment the most: pitch dark, bitterly cold and filled with eerie whisperings from people past. These were Roger's winter recriminations, the cold being the core of the pain. The summer ones, Cecelia found easier, although they had become more traumatic, but she knew he wouldn't do anything that he could possibly be caught for. His latest reprisal had been making her sit on an old stool in the field while he fired his .22 rifle at rabbits behind her, laughing each time she flinched. Skinning and gutting the rabbits would follow but she'd grown used to this, hardened to farm life.

But the winter punishments involved physical pain. Sebastian would meet Cecelia in her bedroom afterwards and hold her tightly to warm her up while she cried, knowing himself how bad the punishments were. Occasionally they would be punished at the same time – it never felt as bad when Sebastian was by her side – but in the main Cecelia was alone. Her mother would then stand her in the bath tub, pretending everything was normal, as she ran tepid water to try and gradually warm Cecelia's feet and legs which would be covered in purple and orange blotches. Then slowly, so she didn't get chilblains, Yvonne would add more and more hot water. The relief was both painful and comforting. She never got used to these kinds of punishments and always cried, which upset her mother even more.

Closing the drawer, determined not to open the letter from Roger, Cecelia got a small amount of comfort from secretly





defying him, even in this small way. She'd just let him think she'd accepted his version of events but she knew he'd written two letters, one to her and the other to Sebastian, pretending to be their mother. It wouldn't have surprised her if he'd written one to himself to make it look even more convincing. Yvonne had never had much need to address anything to them in a letter unless they went to stay with family or friends during the summer holidays. But Cecelia remembered very well that her and Sebastian's birthday cards were always addressed *to my darling* or *my sweetheart*. Whereas the front of this envelope just read, *Cecelia*. And Yvonne never used a typewriter – everything was always hand written. Anyone who knew her and saw the letters would know they hadn't been written by her.

Opening the drawer and picking up the letter again, Cecelia hesitated, considering whether or not to read it. The sinking feeling of knowing the truth poured into her stomach and defiance prevailing, she put the letter back into the drawer. Her previous determination strengthened like drying concrete and she picked up the soapstone hippo, rubbing its smooth side for comfort. It was the only tiny bit of control she had over her father, as minute as it was, and she didn't want to open the letter and ruin that. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing her eyes had read over his pretend words.

Standing the hippo on her table, she turned out the lamp and lay there in the stark silence. Her mind quickly drifted to the previous night when she'd been lying there with her head on her mother's chest, listening to a story from when she had been a teenager. Yvonne had just had a bath and sweat from the hot



water still ran down her chest and the agate pendant she never took off was covered in steam. It was the necklace that Cecelia had always held as a child when her mother was telling her a story, a comfort, a stamp that was so familiar it represented Yvonne in all her completeness. It had fascinated Cecelia for as long as she could remember; one half of the stone was mottled dark green with a small portion of it striped pale sea-blue.

It had also been the previous night when Yvonne had told Cecelia she'd been saving some money and almost had enough for them all to leave White Horse Farm and to get away from Roger. Cecelia had told Sebastian later that night, when he'd sat on her bed before lights out, but he told her, as he always did, that Yvonne was just trying to appease her, to cover the guilt she felt for staying. But the words contained conviction, something she hadn't heard from her mother before and she held on to them. Those empty words had made her angry the following day, nasty spiteful letters that had snapped and bitten at her ankles.

2

Sebastian read the letter his father had given him – a minimal amount of words on some notepaper. He folded it once, twice, turned it in his fingers and repeated the process until he couldn't continue anymore. Then he squeezed the tiny lump of compressed paper in-between his thumb and middle finger, the events from earlier that day stuffed between every crease. Passing it to his left hand he repeated the ritual, squeezing it with what he deemed to be the same level of strength. Enough to ease the anxiety within him that always rose when he felt something wasn't equal and balanced out in the way he wanted.

Pictures from earlier that day flickered across his vision like a projector film, each time becoming increasingly jumbled. He couldn't remember who he'd seen with the gun first, his mother or his father. Roger's words penetrated his head, fading any memories he had about what he'd seen. It was irrelevant now. Somehow he'd managed to tell Cecelia what Roger had told him to repeat over and over again: Yvonne has left, she's not coming back.

Sebastian couldn't tell her the truth; she wouldn't be able to hide it and they would most definitely be put into foster care and

separated if anyone found out. If he'd gone to school as normal that day instead of staying behind to help Roger on the farm, he wouldn't have known anything about it. Sounds that he could still hear clearly now echoed in his ears. Noises that had brought him running into the house and into the kitchen. Roger had come up behind him and gently placed his large hands over his eyes and mouth, carefully removing him from the room. The last thing he'd seen was his mother's legs and feet from under the kitchen table. For a split second he'd had a comical moment where it had reminded him of the scene from *The Wizard of Oz*, and as Roger tried to erase the memories from his mind with his soothing words it was as if his mother's feet began to wilt and shrivel away. You didn't see anything, you didn't see anything, you didn't see anything, his father whispered into his ear over and over again. All he found himself thinking about as he shook with fear in his father's arms was the ridiculous observation that his mother's legs weren't lying at a level angle to the table. He wanted desperately to go in there and move her – his anxiety, the draught he called it, had risen in his gut, swirling like the wind coming across the fields. He'd experienced this strange sensation the first time his father had punished him for something he hadn't done. He was so indignant about the entire episode, so overwhelmed with angry tears that he thought his temper would rise out of his mouth and swallow him whole.

Before Sebastian could do anything, Roger ordered him upstairs to get changed for school and fetch his school bag, before sending him on his way, telling him all the time to act normally and that things weren't what they looked like. Upon



his return, earlier than Cecelia because she had detention, Roger had told him the story he was to tell her later, pretending that Sebastian hadn't seen anything.

There was one thing Roger couldn't erase and that was the foreboding atmosphere that had settled over the farmhouse during the course of the day; a cold and empty, almost tangible air had descended and Sebastian felt more unsteady than he ever had in all his years. Unsure. Unsafe. Yvonne had more of a presence on the farm than Sebastian had realised.

Checking the gun cabinet again on his way to the kitchen, Sebastian looked behind him, Roger's words so clear in his mind. If anyone asks about the gunshot noises, we were shooting rabbits, the stern words Roger had spat at him upon his return from school still marked on his face.

Placing the kettle on the stove, he tentatively sat on one of the kitchen chairs and stared at the space where his mother had been lying. So easily he could let go, the sickness in his chest threatening to bubble over into his throat, spewing the truth onto the floor. He couldn't do it, couldn't do this, whatever it was they were going to do. Carry on as normal he supposed. That wasn't going to work but he also knew that if Roger sensed any defiance, neither he nor Cecelia would get away from the farm alive.

He picked up an old cloth hanging on the back of the chair and began to wipe at a dark spot that was bothering him on the Aga. He pushed harder, wondering if it had been there before; whatever it was had been baked on by the heat from earlier that day. The stain became the focus of his concentration as he ferociously



rubbed it, equally with his left hand as well as his right, keeping the balance, maintaining the nature of his symmetry. He was trying to erase the pictures in his head but it made little difference to the way he felt.

The whistling of the kettle brought Sebastian back into the room, to the place he didn't want to be.