

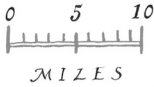
If I could choose
Freely in that great treasure-house
Anything from any shelf,
I would give you back yourself . . .

Edward Thomas, 'And You, Helen'

Contents

Prologue	1
Eshwood Hall	3
The Grey Lady	27
The Chapel	49
The May Queen	65
Tell Me True	97
The Green Man	115
The Predator	137
The Bud	155
Precious Little	183
Epilogue	211

NORTHALBION



Prologue

1962



This is the story of a girl called Isabella; but no one ever called her Isabella: they called her Izzy. She didn't like being called Izzy but didn't suppose there was much she could do about it – she was only thirteen and small for her age. It was an embarrassing name because it rhymed with 'frizzy' and 'dizzy', and when Mrs Hartop said one of these words (and Mrs Hartop, of course, had such a loud voice!) then Izzy would jump in her seat because she'd hear the sound of her name and think she was going to get wrong. Once, Mrs Hartop had told the class that they should be hard at work, and that they should be 'Busy, busy, busy!' and Izzy felt her face go bright red. It was silly, really, because Izzy was a good girl and stayed very quiet and hardly ever got wrong for anything. And anyway, she didn't go to school at all any more because she had to look after Mam.

This is also the story of Izzy's mother, Geraldine. Not

that she let anyone call her that. You had to call her Gerry. What her parents were thinking when they decided to burden her with a name like Geraldine she'd never know. To be perfectly frank, she didn't like 'Gerry' much either, but it would have to do.

Izzy had a younger sister called Annie, who was eight and wanted a horse, and a baby brother, whose name was Raymond, but, because he was the youngest, everyone just called him the Bairn. He'd been named after his father, who will also be in the story.

Most of all, though, this is the story of the Green Man of Eshwood Hall, whose name, supposing that he had a name, nobody ever learned – not even Izzy, and she came to know him better than anyone.

I

Eshwood Hall



I

The Whipper family's Humber Hawk, luggage tied to its roof, wobbled on its jammy springs up the poplar-lined driveway towards Eshwood Hall. It was a March morning, and the first day of spring according to the almanacs, but this was the North where the winters don't let go easily: patches of stubborn snow clung to the verges. The snowdrops were out but little else. The Whippers saw glimpses of the River Esh, now far off in the grassy bends between trees, now snaking close by the car. All around them was Eshwood Forest, and deep within Eshwood Forest stood the Chapel, though the Whippers weren't to know this yet. Every now and then a robin flicked to a hedge-top to take a look at them approaching, and then flicked away again.

The Humber Hawk had been bought new five years ago, and had in that time been subjected to various improvements at the hands of its owner, Ray: if you were to look under the

bonnet, you would see that the Hawk had the components of a number of other makes of car in addition to its own. Next to Ray, who was driving of course, sat Gerry. Gerry didn't drive and didn't work because of her weak heart. She was holding the Bairn close to her breast, as though she expected to be greeted by someone who might try to take him away from her. The lasses were in the back of the car. Annie stared through one window and then another, as excited as her dad. Izzy spent her time watching her parents, trying to gauge the mood.

They had passed the abandoned lodge house at the gateposts, and now they passed the rose garden, sun-dappled and deserted, and now, rounding a corner, they were met with the great blank stare of Eshwood Hall. At the last crunch of the gravel, a hush fell over the Humber Hawk like a veil; no sound but the distant murmurings of the River Esh and the wind in the trees.

The Whippers looked up at the Hall that loomed before them: fluted columns; corbie-stepped gable; rusticated quoins and pilasters . . . Izzy would have described it as 'ancient' – a word she liked – but in fact it had stood for less than two centuries, built on its three-hundred-acre site in 1776 by a mine-owner named Wallis whose pretensions had led him to reinvent himself as a banker; by this means it had taken him a little under forty years to lose his riches, whereupon he sold the Hall and land to John Brooks, an ironmaster from Oldshield. Brooks had held on to it for half that time before it bankrupted him. In fact, although the Whippers would not learn this until much later, the Hall had brought nothing but bad luck to each of its owners as it passed to and fro between the newest of the

new wealth and the last of the old. Presently it was owned by the Claiborne family, old Colonel Claiborne having washed up there after fleeing Glendale Hall in Co. Wexford during the rising – the rebellion, as he'd have put it. The Claiborne family now consisted of one aged spinster (the Colonel's only surviving daughter) and a fleet of interested second cousins. Ashlared, green-slated, seven-bayed, the Hall must have been grand in its day, but now, swaddled in ivy, it was slipping back into its preferred state of disrepair, and even Izzy could see that her dad was going to have his work cut out for him.

Annie leapt from the car straight onto her imaginary horse and trotted towards the steps that led up to the main entrance. 'Is this really where we're going to live?'

Ray got out of the car and stretched his stiff limbs in the chilly sunshine. He pulled on his cap. 'This is the Hall all right. Very canny, eh? Fancy, eh? Didn't I tell you? Now, do you want to see your room? What about you, Izzy, do you want to see your room?'

Izzy took this as permission to leave the car. Gerry climbed out warily, holding the Bairn close. She regarded the north wing of the Hall where the servants' quarters were; its wonky roof and unwashed windows – obviously the part where the skivvies were kept. Home, sweet home! The roof was the real worry, though. Gerry, indulging her habit of finding fault, had spotted the missing tiles when they were driving up to the place.

Ray, following her gaze, said, 'We'll get that fixed up soon enough, no bother . . .'

And then Ray was guiding Annie's imaginary horse away

from the main entrance and towards the more modest door that they would use, down at the far end of the north wing, with Gerry hurrying after them, still carrying the Bairn. Izzy, unexpectedly left alone, looked around and felt the reality of the move break over her in a wave. They moved house every year or so, following whatever work Dad could find, and then upping sticks when Mam couldn't take it any more. Izzy had never known it to be any other way, and moving around wasn't so bad, apart from having to change schools all the time, though of course that was all done with now that she had to look after Mam full-time. Still, this move felt different, more daunting. They'd be living in the biggest house she'd ever seen.

Izzy stepped back and considered Eshwood Hall, and, for all she knew, it considered her. To a child, which is what Izzy was, after all, an imposing old house always has an air of excitement mixed with sadness, and so this one had for Izzy. Likewise, children always see faces and attitudes in houses, and so Izzy did in the sullen facade before her: Eshwood Hall, she thought, was shrugging its wings, hunching its shoulders, raising its palms to heaven. *I'd like to, but I can't*, it seemed to say. She pushed some gravel around with the toe of her shoe. There were weeds sprouting up here and there all along the driveway – once you'd noticed them, you saw them everywhere, little signs of neglect. She looked up at an oak tree, and then up, higher, through the branches that swayed gently in the river of wind, then up again into the pale sky . . . The cold had crept through her clothes already; her face was numb.

Annie threw open one of the second-floor windows and stuck her head out: 'I've already picked which bed's mine. My coat's on it now so I've got dibs.'

Ray appeared in the window beside Annie, tugging her back inside playfully. 'It's all right, Izzy, you've got the window bed anyway.'

Izzy felt another wave breaking over her: they didn't have rooms of their own. She made her way into the Hall and up the stairs to confirm this.

Ray caught her look of disappointment and, because he had already decided that he liked the place and wanted everyone else to like it too, he said, 'Sorry, pet. But it's a big room. Annie'll drop down between the floorboards. You'll hardly notice her.'

But the room *wasn't* big. People shouldn't be allowed to say a room was big when it wasn't. There were two small beds, and Annie was lying determinedly on one, trying to make herself as heavy as possible in case Izzy tried to turf her off. Izzy went to the next room – that would be her parents'; there was a double bed in there and Mam was sitting on it, nursing the Bairn and watching Izzy steadily. Izzy turned away and opened the last door. This room was tiny, with one very small window through which the sky was just visible.

Izzy returned to her room and sat down gently next to Annie. She asked Annie if she'd seen the little extra room. Annie nodded cautiously. Izzy said that she thought that was the best room in the place, because it was so small it was hidden and secret.

‘Why don’t you ask for it to be your room, then?’ asked Annie.

Izzy said that she could, but she had thought Annie might like it for herself, and as she’d had first dibs on the bed, it was only fair for her to have first dibs on the room. But Annie wasn’t that daft, and said Izzy was just trying to get her to take the little room so she, Izzy, could have the big room to herself. This had, in fact, been Izzy’s wish. She changed tack.

‘Ok, *I’ll* have the little room. I’d rather have the little room. I think it’s excellent. But you should ask Mam and Dad if I can have it: you know they’ll say no if I ask.’

Annie saw at once the deep injustice in being asked to do something she didn’t have to do. ‘Why should *I* ask them? If you want the room, *you* should ask.’

‘Because if *I* ask they’ll say *no* like always, and then we’ll have to share this room. But if you ask *for* me, they might say *yes*, and then you can have this room to yourself, you see?’

Annie thought about this for some moments.

‘And anyway, Dad *promised* us that we’d have our own rooms this time, so it’s only fair.’

Annie clambered from the bed and trotted through to her parents’ bedroom. Izzy listened as the request was made . . . and struck down at once, as Gerry said that the little room was to be the Bairn’s room.

‘But he doesn’t *need* his own room. He’s always with you!’ Annie improvised.

‘He’s your *brother*,’ Gerry reminded her.

‘Dad said we could have our *own* rooms this time. He *promised*. I don’t *want* to share with Izzy!’

‘Ray, you didn’t . . .?’

‘I said I’d do my best to make sure you got your own rooms. Look, we’re not even moved in yet. There’ll be something I can do.’ Ray could feel the peace unravelling already. He reflected, not for the first time, that there was little point in trying to keep things on an even keel, with three women in the house and all of them impossible.

Gerry, who could see where this was going, put an end to it by telling Annie that she’d be sharing a bedroom with her sister and that was that.

With a last accusing glance at Ray, Annie pushed out of the box room and ran back in to see Izzy. She shrugged; Izzy nodded. It had been a long shot.

Izzy lay on her bed, gazing out of the window, aware of her mother’s voice following Ray as he potted from their bedroom down to the parlour-kitchen, pointing out that he was forever making promises he couldn’t keep, and that he’d be making the Bairn a cot before he started clarting on dividing up rooms. The parlour? He wasn’t doing anything to the parlour. He was going to get the electric working first of all, that’s what he was going to do. Jesus Christ. A Hall this size and she gives us three and a half poky little rooms. She must be all heart.

*

And so, as the hours creep by, the Whippers move in. Picture them carrying boxes and dragging bags from the car into

the Hall – from the servants’ entrance, making their way up an old-fashioned oak staircase (their rooms being on the first and second floors), and joining a long dim passage, at one end of which lay the great door which communicated with the rest of the Hall. On one of their first trips from the car to their apartments, Ray tells Izzy and Annie in no uncertain terms that they were not to go playing in the Hall beyond this point, and if they did ever have to go through that door for any reason, they would need to be on best behaviour, else they’d get a hiding. Here’s Ray carrying armfuls of bedding upstairs; there’s Izzy in the parlour, raking out the clinker and ash from the fire and polishing the metalwork with black lead; and even little Annie is helping, sweeping out the bedrooms.

Gerry is arranging her collection of china figurines on the Welsh dresser. Gerry has almost twenty figurines, mostly women in various approximations of the fashions of the last century; some are mothers with babies in their arms, but most of them are young women doing nothing but pose wistfully, gazing with a mysterious smile into the middle distance, perhaps waiting for a gentleman caller who will never come since Gerry doesn’t own any male figurines. All of the figures are made of white china with details picked out in a slightly faded royal blue glaze. Having no toys of her own, Izzy has made a careful and secret comparison of them, and she knows their every detail and tiniest flaw. They are, she supposes, very expensive. They are certainly the most expensive thing the family owns, after the car, and maybe Dad’s record player. And now Gerry – who, it

need hardly be added, has strictly forbidden her children to touch her figurines – has finished arranging them, with the mothers holding babies given pride of place at the front, for she has her favourites, even among these.

2

From the kitchen window Izzy watched her dad moving boxes of tools and other apparatus from the car into his work-shed, which was just visible at the far end of the north wing. Dad was a friendly sort. Mam said he was too friendly and ‘givish’, which meant he was the opposite of selfish but just as bad. Izzy saw him hail a man who was weeding. This man, the gardener presumably, jabbed his hoe into the earth and ambled over to Ray. The gardener was just shy of fifty years old, and though he wasn’t quite as tall as Ray, he was much stockier, all neck and shoulders. Ray looked even more slender and less real by comparison. Together the two men unstrapped the last and biggest piece of luggage, a long wooden crate, from the roof of the car and lifted it down carefully. Annie popped up beside Izzy at the window. On tiptoe she could just see out.

‘Who’s that?’

Izzy didn’t see how she could be expected to know this, and said so.

‘He looks dirty. I bet he smells. You smell.’

‘I think he’s the gardener. I think he’s been digging,’ said Izzy, not unreasonably.

‘What’s he been digging?’

Izzy didn’t see how she could be expected to know this, either.

‘Dirty potatoes!’ shouted Annie, and squealed with laughter at her joke. They both watched Ray and the gardener carry the crate into the long, rickety shed that stood adjacent to the Hall, where they disappeared out of sight.

‘Where are they taking it?’

Knowing that there would be no end to Annie’s questions if she was in the mood, Izzy volunteered to go and find out, and report back afterwards.

The shed would be Ray’s workshop, his centre of operations; if anyone wanted him, this would be the first place they’d look. Its doors stood open, and seemed as if they had been standing open for so long they had put down roots. Izzy could hear her father’s voice from inside: ‘That’s it, that’s it, just set that end down. Now, if I just pivot – oh, nearly! Hold on, hold on – I’ve got to get this end over here. You steady it for me – that’s it – perfect – no!’ There was a crash, as something fell over and knocked something else over. ‘It didn’t catch you, did it? Thank goodness. No, I’m right as rain, just . . . You’ll be wondering what’s in here, won’t you? Well, not today, but one of these days, once we’re all unpacked, I’ll give you the tour . . .’

Izzy had noticed this about her father, that he could talk for two when necessary. She had also noticed that few grown-ups seemed interested in his inventions, which was puzzling when you considered how many of them there

were, and how amazing it was going to be when one of them worked. Now he was telling the gardener about the modifications he'd made to their car.

'The Macpherson struts rusted, obviously, so I welded those. And I swapped the engine with one from a Sceptre. It's an overdrive, so when you let your foot off the throttle, it doesn't slow down, it just cruises along, because the balls only slowly fall out of the cone, so it doesn't have the retardation of an ordinary gearbox, you see? It all works by pressure, which is created by the pump in front of the overdrive, and once that's engaged by the electrical coil, the lever opens a valve that transfers the pressure that's built up to the pistons that engage the cone clutch, creating the overdrive position. Proper bastard to start, though but.'

Now she'd heard Dad say a rude word, so she'd get wrong if he caught her listening . . . She looked through the gap between the doors and saw the gardener looking without much interest at the paraphernalia already collected in the shed. Now Dad was talking about energy, and how it was all around us all the time, and how once we'd found a way to capture it, no one would have to work any more. This was one of his favourite things to talk about. He was pointing at something on his latest project: 'Now, when the oscillators are connected in the circuit the condensers only slowly fill up – they don't take the charge right off, you see? And the longer the current charges them the more charge they'll take. And these lights are red hot, what with the incandescence of the gas in the globes here, under the VHF. And this is the interesting thing: if it was an ordinary current, the size

of wire in the transformer would never carry the amperage passing through it: it would burn to a frazzle – but here the wires stay perfectly cool and it doesn't matter how long the machine's been running. Now, isn't that interesting?'

Izzy stepped out into the sunlight again, and ran back to the Hall. On her way up the stairs she startled a short, large-bosomed woman who wore a funny sort of bonnet that looked too small for her head, and which had the effect of making the rest of her body seem even more stout and solid. The woman clutched her side, pretending to be startled, and asked who Izzy was.

'I'm Izzy. Isabella.'

'Make your mind up.'

'Izzy.'

'Izzy. Right. You must be Izzy Whipper. I'm Sheila. You var-nigh knocked us over! Now, then. Where's your mam and dad?'

Ray appeared at the foot of the stairs before Izzy could answer. 'Here, I'm here: Raymond Whipper . . .'

'So you made it all right?' said Sheila.

'Oh, aye, very well, thank you. Just getting our things unloaded and that . . .'

Sheila introduced herself as the Chief Cook, and named some of the other staff that the Whippers would meet in due course: Wilkes, the footman, and Mr Henderson, the keeper, and so forth. Sheila lived in the rooms next door to the Whippers, with her husband, Bob, and her daughter, Bidy. Then she broke the news: 'Miss Claiborne was expecting you to call on her this morning.'

Ray, seeing that he'd made an error on his first day, and a bad first impression, looked stricken, and offered to go up to see her there and then.

'No, she's no good in the afternoons – best leave it till the morn. The doctor's out then, though, so I don't know . . . I'll tell her you're here. You're best off just waiting to be called.'

'Is there something I should be getting on with in the meantime?'

Sheila laughed. 'I don't know, *is* there?'

'I'll have a look around.'

She fixed him with a slow, flat gaze, before taking pity on him: 'You might make a start in the kitchen. The flue's stenshin'. Dead bird, no doubt.'

At this, Ray looked relieved, and thanked Sheila heartily. He really was a friendly sort.

3

The electric was down throughout the north wing, so that evening Ray rigged an extension cable through the window which meant he could power up his Pye Black Box, his most treasured possession. A house without music could never feel like home. He selected a favourite 78 of 'Tennessee' Ernie Ford, and soon while Izzy prepared the meal she could hear the familiar strains of 'Chicken Road' uncoiling through the parlour:

Once I got a splinter
In the joint of my little toe
And a garter snake bit my knee
By the bend of the little St. Joe.
Honey, that's misery . . .

When Gerry and Ray had started courting, the Victory Day bunting had still been up on the Town Hall. Ray had once said – he'd had a drink on him at the time, yes, but still, he'd meant it seriously enough – that people should just leave the bunting up permanently, and never stop celebrating victory. Why not? Who decided when a victory was over? People needed something to keep their spirits up, what with rationing and strikes and what-have-you. In time, of course, the bunting had come down, but by moving around so much, fresh start after fresh start, the Whippers had preserved something of that sense of make-do and merry befuddlement that everyone seemed to feel back then. Gerry and Ray could still be childlike. They could be childish. They took no interest in things that didn't interest them, which is a habit more usual in folk wealthier than they. Back in the day, they had liked doing new things – going to the pictures, dancing, or going to a show – and nowadays they liked getting new things, like the telly, which they'd had to sell in the end so they could afford the record player.

While Izzy prepared their tea at the range, Gerry nursed the Bairn. Annie was keeping quiet for once, concentrating on her crayons. For their first proper meal in their new

home, Izzy was making tinned salmon rissoles followed by marmalade pudding. On account of her mother's heart condition, Izzy took care of almost all of the cooking for the family. It was Izzy who, each morning after she'd fetched the coal from the bunker, made the pot of porridge, or boiled the eggs, or fried the bacon and tomatoes for breakfast; and for tea she could make cheese and potato flan, or spam fritters, or leek pudding, or panacalty, which was bacon and potatoes plus cheese and whatever else was there to be had. And then, for afters, they might have stewed fruit, or, if there had been time for to make it, bread and butter pudding, or something like that. At bedtime, it was Izzy who, after she'd done the dishes, made the cocoa and filled the hot-water bottles for Annie and Gerry, before she banked the fire with slack last thing.

Once I had a scorpion
On the lobe of my good right ear
And a great-great grandma
Who could hear what she wanted to hear.
Honey, that's misery . . .

'Hey there, *honey*,' intoned Ray from the other room, imitating Ford's bass-baritone, 'you know he isn't saying "that's *misery*"', he's saying "that's *Missouri*". Mih-zoo-ree. It's a place in America, like.'

Izzy, who hadn't realised that she'd been singing along, blushed furiously.

Without taking her eyes off the Bairn, Gerry said, 'Nitwit.'

The potatoes were coming to the boil, juggling against the saucepan lid and making it tremble and chatter. That was good. Izzy had been worried the range wouldn't be hot enough.

'Ray,' said Gerry, 'that Sheila . . . what's her story, do you reckon?'

'Oh, I hardly know . . .' said Ray, getting up, though he'd only just sat down, to go and leaf through his 78s again. Not that he'd have admitted it, but Gerry's tone had made him jumpy. It was the tone she used when she was looking for a problem. Ray was as sensitive as an elliptical stylus to Gerry's tone. All he wanted was a nice evening relaxing after a long drive. Maybe he should have put on Johnny Cash instead. He held up an LP: 'Hey, do you remember when we got this . . .?'

Bubbles and starchy foam were breaking out from the sides of the lid as the potatoes jostled in the pan. It was a good boil, but it just kept building.

'I mean, she took her sweet time coming around here, didn't she? And then she's one word to you, and that's it, she's off. That's not what I'd call a welcome. I can't say I felt welcomed at all.'

Water splashed over the side of the pan onto the hotplate, where it hissed and scattered a mad panic of dancing drops, the pan-lid chattering like crazy, foam bulging and bursting from the rim.

'Jesus Christ!' Gerry cried.

'The hotplate's too hot . . .'

'Well, turn it down, then!'

But Gerry knew that there was no way to turn it down. The hotplates were heated by the fire, which couldn't be stoked or cooled very rapidly at all. Izzy took the lid off the pan to let the steam out, and up it flew in a great white plume that closed around her wrist. She dropped the lid with a crash as she gasped with the shock and the pain.

'For Christ's sake!'

'Izzy, pet, you can't startle your mam like that . . .'

The Bairn, who had woken when Gerry jumped, began to cry, his high wail mixing uneasily with 'Tennessee' Ernie Ford's rumbling voice. But the job was done: the water rolled but didn't rise, the potatoes bustled happily. Izzy flashed her wrist under the tap.

'There, there,' Gerry said, jiggling the Bairn on her lap. To Izzy she said, 'You've not got the brains you were born with, I swear. They fell out when the midwife slapped your arse.' She had said this many times before; Izzy paid it no mind. 'And when will this triumph be ready?'

'I'm *starving*,' Annie said.

'We're all starving. After the day we've had, carting all our goods and chattels about, and then not even a glass of water offered us when we arrived. That Sheila could've spared us a bite from the kitchen, couldn't she? Not even a sandwich! Please, Lady Muck, spare us an HP Sauce sandwich, for pity's sake!'

'I had a bit something,' Ray said, 'when I was there . . .'

'Oh, yes, and what did you have?' Gerry held the still-crying Bairn out to Ray, who hastily put down the record he was holding.

Izzy buttered the sliced bread and slathered some marmalade on top, then broke an egg into a bowl of milk, trying not to include any shell, mixed it up and poured it over the bread. This went in the oven and would be ready in forty-five minutes. The potatoes were waterlogged now. When she drained them in the colander they looked half-mashed already. She opened two tins of salmon and scraped the grey-pink chunks into a bowl with the potatoes and worked it all together with a fork. So much for shaping them into rissoles. When she dropped wet spoonfuls into the hot lard in the frying pan, they spread and merged together to form one huge fritter that sizzled and spat. She flipped it once, and then hacked it into quarters with the wooden spoon.

The Bairn was stopping crying: he gulped a few choppy breaths, and then his face cleared, and all was well once more. Ray was about to hand him back to Gerry when Izzy called that their tea was ready, so the Bairn was put down in his cot and the rest of the family sat down to eat. Their plates were so close on the drop-leaf table they were almost touching.

Gerry said to Izzy, 'You'll give your dad a bit of yours – and Annie will too if she doesn't eat up.' Izzy shovelled some of the rissole-fritter off her plate and onto Ray's. Ray stole a look at Gerry, half-wondering if he'd done something to annoy her.

There were tinned mushy peas on the side, and tea to drink. They poked and chewed in silence for a minute or two, listening to the music and the crackle of the fire, until

Gerry said, ‘Well, you’ll not be running Sheila out of a job, that’s for sure.’

‘Don’t be too hard on her,’ Ray said, and then, ‘I could use this for grouting the chimbley!’

‘Can I wait for pudding?’ Annie asked.

But the pudding, when it emerged, was blackened across the top: the oven had obviously been hotter than Izzy had realised. She chipped the burned layer off and tipped it into the bin, but there remained a faintly smoky taste in the milksoppy bread underneath.

‘Well, this is *champion*, as your father would say, isn’t it . . .’ said Gerry, picking up her spoon then setting it back down in the bowl. ‘I’ll bet a finer banquet was never had at Eshwood Hall. Wouldn’t you say so, Ray? Don’t you think we’re spoiled?’

Just then, the Bairn started to cry again.

4

That night, Izzy lay in her bed by the window. The moon was full, and she could see a fine mizzle falling on the thousand spires of Eshwood Forest, threatening to turn into snow. The room was uncurtained, and the moonlight fell upon her possessions arranged on the windowsill – her books and her hairbrush – and on her alert face as she gazed up and out at the void. It was her first night in Eshwood Hall, and tired as she was it seemed impossible to sleep.

Annie, in her bed, was also still awake, and found her mind returning to its favourite topic. 'Do you reckon they've got any horses here?'

'Don't reckon they've got much of owt.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean the place is falling to bits.'

Annie thought on this for a spell. 'You've got to have horses when you live in the country. It's the *law*.'

'What law?'

'The law of the *land*.'

Next door, Gerry was sitting up in bed. Ray was taking an absolute age to get ready. If he kept faffing about, the Bairn, who was asleep at her side, would wake up, and then who would have to get him back to sleep? Not Ray! Gerry would be very upset if that happened. In fact, she could feel herself getting a bit upset at the prospect of this happening. And another thing: 'You didn't introduce me to anyone today. How am I meant to meet anyone round here?'

'There's time for that, pet. We're here now. You'll be sick of them afore long. You'll meet everyone soon, and we'll get into the village and all. Maybe not tomorrow, though but. Kitchen flue's in a right state.'

'There's a surprise . . .'

Ray finally got into bed. Gerry looked slightly annoyed to have him there with her. Ray reached out tentatively towards his wife and touched her sternum gently. 'How's my pretty ticker?'

'Just the same.' That was what Gerry always said when

someone asked her how she was doing or how she was feeling or how things were. 'Just the same,' she'd say. She had a fond hope that some day they might take the hint. That was the worst thing about being ill: people were constantly asking how you were, hoping you'd say that you were feeling better so that *they* could feel better. So she made a point of always telling them she felt just the same. Unless, of course, she felt worse.

'You need sleep. You're tired out. Lie down properly, pet. Lie down . . .'

Ray was soon asleep. He fell asleep as easily as a child, letting go of whatever cares he had. In the morning he'd wake up just as quickly, and be up and off, whistling something or other, for he'd ever a tune in his head. Gerry sat in the bed, drowsing with open eyes. Her nerves were jangled from the long drive, and when she closed her eyes she felt like she was still hurtling down the road in that bloody car. It was like being tipsy, except she hadn't had the pleasure of a drink. Eventually, thinking such thoughts as these, she drifted into sleep.

In the girls' room, Izzy was the only one left awake. The moon had moved away from the window and the room was darker now. In the gloom, the encircling forest seemed to have pushed up closer to the Hall, and the gardens and the driveway looked like frivolous gestures made against the encroaching shadows of the trees. The wind moaned cheerlessly. Izzy imagined the moon sailing in the sky, shining bright over Eshwood Forest, and wondered if there were deer in the woods. To see a roe in the moonlight would

be a grand thing. Surely there must be deer out there, and other shy beasts – foxes and otters and red squirrels and pine martens even – but would she get to see any? It was pleasant to think of walking in the woods at night, the cypresses blue in the moonlight, the birches showing white as bone, all other colours lost in the vast purple and black skirts of the mother forest – it was pleasant to think of, but it was spooky as well.

These musings were interrupted by a distant scratching sound, so gentle at first that Izzy had been listening to it for some time before she became aware of it. It was a swirly, scratchy sort of a sound like something being hollowed out, like a curved knife carving and scooping out a soft, fibrous piece of wood. Izzy knew that old houses could make creaks and groans as they settled, especially at night after the fire was out and the stone and the wood were cooling, but she had never heard anything like this before. Queer how she couldn't tell whether the sound was inside or outside her ear, the sort of uncertainty that would keep anyone awake; it had to be close, somewhere in the house, anyway, because its arrival had made the sound of the distant faint rush of the Esh disappear altogether. There it was again – a little louder, or a little nearer, and this time it was a more describable, horrible, intimate sound; it was testing and picking, like someone peeling a potato an inch from her ear. Izzy threw herself down in the bed and pulled the covers tight about her head, but it was no good, she could hear the noise even there.

Suddenly, she recognised it: it wasn't possible, but

she recognised it. It was the sound of Dad's Black Box, endlessly playing the dead wax on a 78, but at full volume and, apparently, from inside her bedroom. To judge by its sound, it must be at her bedside; but, once she had steeled herself to poke her head out from under the covers and take a look, there was nothing there to be seen. There was nothing amiss in the room at all. And then the air burst to life with Ernie Ford's long-drawn bass-baritone. Izzy gasped with fright, jumping rigid in the bed like a bolt slammed in a lock.

Once I . . . got a sunburn . . .
On the back of my . . . itchin' neck . . .
Took a ride with a girl in a Model-T . . .
And died . . . in a wonderful wreck!

And then, with an ear-splitting rake of noise, the stylus swept across the 78 – and finally, mercifully, silence flooded back into the room. Izzy was holding the covers over her mouth with her fists. Her throat had all but closed in fright. At length, she managed to look over at Annie's bed. Incredibly, Annie had slept through it all. There she lay: eyes closed, mouth open, face blank as a turnip. How had it been possible for her – for anyone – to sleep through such a racket? Why wasn't the Bairn awake, and wailing at the top of his lungs? Why weren't Mam and Dad up and running about? She could hear Dad snoring even now . . .

Although she didn't think she would sleep at all that night, what with her nerves thrilling in the cavernous aftermath of

the noise, and nothing for company but the mice and the moon, she supposed she must have drifted off at some point before dawn rolled around.