

## Unlabelled photograph 1

Black and white. Silver frame. No mount. The woman is standing side on, arms thrown up above her head, her face turned towards the camera, smiling. A knitted swimming costume rides low on her thighs and a lace-edged cap skims her forehead. There is a beach and a stretch of sea behind her. It could have been taken anywhere.

The café walls are crammed: photos, cheap prints, badly painted oils, and the stuffed heads of deer. Clusters of lights hang from the ceiling – Victorian tassels; seventies pearled glass, retro-industrial metal. Outside, shoppers slot their cars into painted spaces on smooth tarmac. This used to be a place of industry, cotton and cloth. But the mill pond is gone, and the weaving sheds – with their roofs angled to catch the light – are gone too.

She is in the corner, below the speaker which plays the manager's ipod on shuffle – *Up Where We Belong; I Want To Be Adored*. She is next to the back door, the one the staff use, and there is always a moment, in between one of them pushing the door open and it slamming shut, when the scent of the river steals inside. She might be disappointed if she could see it, a rubbish-choked, half-forgotten scurry of water. Today there are two broken black umbrellas down there; a child-sized inflatable Swizzel-Stick; a once-white rag caught on a low branch; the back of a toy plastic car. Some things stay for months; some drift on; new ones arrive.

Nobody here knows who she is. Nobody thinks twice about it. And even if someone lifted her from the wall and turned the frame, they would find no label, no date, no name scrawled on the back. She is a piece of history and at the same time nothing at all.

She is smiling: at the breeze on her skin, at the sun, at the water, at whatever the person holding the camera has just said – *you are beautiful, I love you, let's run away*. And whoever it was – who had said whatever they'd said – snapped the shutter and captured her and the sand and the sea and the sky behind her. An exact moment. A thousand shades of light against film. And neither of them thought about remembering or forgetting. They thought only of the here and now.

## A New Mattress

He hadn't been stalking her. Not exactly. The house was still half his after all, at least until the paperwork went through. And it had only been a couple of times – driving past, maybe sitting with the engine running for a moment or two. Which is how he came to see the van, with *Snugbug* painted across the side, and two men carrying a plastic-wrapped mattress into the house. Which is why he's outside a warehouse, down by the rubbish-clogged river, with a crowbar.

He's never broken and entered before. The noise of it scares him – metal on metal – but no-one comes. It's just him and the door and he gets it open eventually, shines his torch across stacks of pale mattresses.

He used to be a light sleeper. A car would start outside, or his wife would cough, or turn over, and he'd snap awake, eyes wide to the dark. And once he'd done that, his head would fill up with thoughts – the leak behind the bath; the meeting notes he'd lost; the house insurance premium; the rattle in the car door – and it would be hours, sometimes, before he lost himself again. He can't work out why he got so worked up about things that didn't matter and failed to notice the stuff that would have been worth lying awake for. And then he thinks how that's just typical of him: learning lessons when it's too late.

These days he sleeps like a dead man.

Inside it's cold, airless. The mattresses are bound in plastic and when he brushes his fingers over them it makes him think of supermarket meat – the flesh chilled and soft and bloody beneath the wrap. He pulls one off the top of a pile and the dust from the floor sparkles in his torch beam. In the room which used to be theirs is a mattress just like this. His wife sits on the edge of it each morning and brushes her hair; at night she lies on it, her limbs curled around another man.

He won't do anything. He won't interfere. He is not a man to make a fuss. All he wants is to peel back the plastic and lie, face down, pressed against the firm new springs and the sweet smelling fabric, and sleep.

## Made in Glossop

He didn't really know her, he realised, that last week in the hospital, with all the wires and tubes and squeaking machines, the nurses in soft rubber shoes and the too bright fluorescent lights.

Take, for instance, the fact she'd flown on Concorde.

'I'm not dotty,' she said, when he implied the drugs might be playing with her memory. 'I know what happened and what didn't.'

He sat back in the grey hospital chair and considered her. This woman who looked less like his mother every day. And then he remembered.

'The toilet,' he said.

She frowned.

'Did you go to the toilet, Mum? On Concorde?'

She scrunched her nose, the way she did when there was something she didn't like talking about – sex, death, all the important stuff – then turned away from him and closed her eyes.

He let it go. She'd never been interested in his work anyway. A barn of a place full of dirty machines making a god-awful racket, she'd say. She wasn't interested in mixers and extruders, splitting machines and click presses. She thought making parts for other things wasn't a way to spend your life. She didn't know what a gasket was.

He looked at the back of her head, the hair worn thin, her scalp showing pink through the white, and he tried to imagine her as the young woman he'd never met, opening the toilet door on a Concorde, not noticing the soft rubber seal around its edge.

## Lemon Drizzle

He'd just broken the last egg into the bowl when his phone rang. Billy. Billy never called.

Pete's fingers slipped across the screen, a smear of albumen over the photo of his wife and son.

'It's gone.' Billy never called and when he did he didn't mess about with pleasantries. They'd worked together thirty years before the businesses merged and the factory relocated; they didn't need a whole load of fancy words to know what each other was talking about.

Pete stared at the eggs pooled across the creamed butter. The yolk of one had spilt sunset yellow through the white.

He has never wished the new business ill, whatever the decisions made, but he still dreams about those last months: the Glossop factory stripped bare. Everything shifted up the A1 to the new plant; or sold off to India, Spain, Scandinavia; the stuff no-one wanted smashed up for scrap. He'd gone down to watch men digging the presses out of the concrete. Broke his heart it did.

'Is that so?' Pete said. He tucked the phone under his ear and started stirring in the eggs, adding a spoonful of flour to stop the mixture curdling. It would be a lemon drizzle cake, his speciality and a favourite with the customers. His dad used to say making cellular rubber was like mixing a cake: you took your ingredients – rubber, carbon, fillers, antioxidants, blowing agents and the like – then applied pressure and heat.

The new lot had asked him to move, stay with the firm, but he couldn't leave. Pete folded the rest of the flour into the mix and watched the white gradually disappear. He imagined the same men doing the same dismantling a hundred miles north, and then the same slow rot settling in, windows smashed, ferns growing out from between the bricks. He was waiting to feel something – glee or righteousness or sorrow – but he found himself thinking instead about the lemon syrup he'd pour over the warm sponge, how he might try grating the peel a little finer this time, to get the balance between sharp and sweet just so.

## Zombie sweetheart

Karen's mother once told her that redheads should wear black. She took no notice at the time, but since her mother had died it had become a habit, most mornings, to pull on black tights, a black dress, slip her feet into black heels. They weren't the best shoes to go walking in, but needs must.

Karen and Stu had moved to Glossop three months ago. Stu had grown up in the town. Karen had not. That afternoon they'd argued about their wedding budget and she'd declared she was going 'up a hill', slamming the front door and striding off. Except she didn't know the way and ended up on a road which dipped steeply to the river, narrowing between two derelict mills. A rusted metal walkway reached high between the buildings, the word *Volcrepe* painted in blistered white. It sounded like something out of one of Stu's sci-fi movies, where everything was blue-grey and miserable.

Walking between the buildings was like entering a cave: the wind and the day's noises dampened by stone and brick. Nothing but the hack of crows from the rooftops, the soft cooing of pigeons, the slap of wings as one took off, and the click click of Karen's heels on the tarmac. The graffiti writers had restricted themselves to the boarded-up windows on the ground floor: *Ali, swinny, zombie sweetheart, RIP M.F.* – just the one word, *dickhead*, bleeding red onto the stone surround. A grubby estate agent's sign read *Mill To Let*.

She stopped and looked up through a broken window on the top floor to where light slipped through missing tiles, cutting geometric shapes across mould-stained walls and rusted pipes. She hated it, she decided: a place full of cracks and gaps where rain and wind and rot could seep in and wreck everything.

It was a short stretch to the stone bridge across the brook. Karen crossed and climbed the road on the other side, away from the water and the unwanted mills. Up until she could turn and see the hills to her right, tinged purple and brown; up further until she could spy the grey huddle of the town to her left. She ducked below a fence into a field and walked across, her heels sinking into the ground, the sky tall and bright above her. All she needed was some perspective.

There were other things to look at, but she kept returning to the broken, empty mill with its blank windows and sagging roof. Perhaps, she thought, she would wear black for her wedding, something with long sleeves and lace, gloves to cover her hands and a veil to hide her face.