

The
Other Side
of the
World

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‘Nostalgia (from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one’s own fantasy. Nostalgic love can only survive in a long-distance relationship. A cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of home and abroad, past and present, dream and everyday life. The moment we try to force it into a single image, it breaks the frame or burns the surface.’

Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

‘But of course the dream-England is no more than a dream.’

Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*

FOR THE NEXT few weeks Charlotte hears nothing of Henry's plan. She doesn't know whether this is because he has given up on it, or because he is keeping his thoughts secret. Either way, she thinks it better not to ask. The winds come and disperse the clouds, making the autumn crisp and fresh, cold and breezy. In the absence of rain they resume their morning walks through the fields, heading out early before Henry leaves for college, sometimes walking in the dark, little Lucie rugged up in her pram under the blanket that Charlotte's mother knitted. They walk at Charlotte's insistence. Henry would much prefer to stay warm under the bedcovers, but Charlotte begs him: Come on, Henry, please, you know you'll like it. And while he hates the cold he likes to be near Charlotte, likes to see her flushed and happy, out in the open air, at dawn. He knows

these walks are her favourite thing and so says yes even when he doesn't really want to.

So they head out, the blue of day just lighting the edge of the fields, the trees hung in hoarfrost, the pale path curving around the grass. In an odd way Charlotte feels she has come to live for these walks, for this place. For Henry's quiet company – their voices drifting back and forth, gentle, unhurried. For the sky all about them. The land flat at first, all horizon, while the wind buffets, pushing them into the day, then the light breaking as they reach the top of the hill. She is closest to the sky then, the blue-grey air cascading down either side of the slope. Rabbits hide in the hedge shadows come springtime. Blackberries grow on the hilltop in summer. Foxes lurk. But never another human soul at such an hour as this, just after dawn, midweek, heading into winter. Now there is just the sound of their boots slipping, crunching, the wind over the grass and in the hedges. Thin branches knock and scrape.

They buried her placenta here. Carried it up in a bucket in the dark of dawn just a few days after Lucie's birth. Henry took a small shovel in his knapsack while Charlotte pushed the pram through the mud. At the top of the hill Henry crouched down and began to dig a small hole, the trees leaning towards him in the wind. 'How deep should it be?' he asked, the wind carrying his voice away from her. She didn't know. As deep as he could make it. But the ground was frozen and it was difficult to work a decent hole with the hand shovel. 'There,' he said after a while, dropping the shovel and brushing his hands against his trousers. He pushed himself

up, palms against his knees. ‘It’s ready.’ He stepped back towards Charlotte. She nodded, and he took hold of the pram, jiggling it to keep Lucie asleep, her little round cheeks red in the chilly air. Charlotte took the bucket and knelt down beside the hole. It was only shallow – no doubt the foxes would soon catch the smell of it and dig the bloody organ out. But they were burying it, that was what mattered. Marking her place, their place, together. Charlotte scraped out the loose dirt at the bottom of the hole then put her hands into the bucket and lifted the placenta; it was slick, and heavier than she expected, the colour of liver. It slipped against her fingers as she placed it gently into the earth, putting her hand to it one last time before she pushed the dirt over, covering it up and tamping down the ground as if planting seeds.

‘Come,’ Henry said then, ‘we should go.’ He was worried someone might see them. See his wife with her bloody hands.

Charlotte knelt there a moment longer, looking out through the empty branches, down to the town below. Small ancient buildings, the line of the path through the fields, the horizon beyond. She had walked up here every day when she was pregnant, the child wobbling and drifting inside her. She’d walked this way when the contractions began and thought she’d happily birth the baby out here, in the wild grass. She patted the soil down one more time. Her hands were freezing. This thing. The memory of the child moving inside her. The feeling of it turning. The weight. ‘When I die,’ she said, ‘I’d like my ashes scattered here.’

‘Darling,’ said Henry, thinking her morbid.

But isn't this what one wants from a place of happiness? Such a desire is a sign of something good. Charlotte stood, smacking her hands together to rid them of dirt. From the top of the hill they could just see the roof of their cottage, the church steeple to the north of it. 'All right,' she replied. They held hands a moment, then Henry hooked his arm around Charlotte's waist and they traipsed down the hill.

That was less than a year ago, Charlotte realises now, as they make their way down the same path. A few more weeks and it will be winter again, too cold to go out so early. They must make the best of these autumn mornings. Today the furrows in the eastern field are filled with frozen water, air bubbles preserved beneath the ice. They walk over them, feeling the plate of ice splintering, the sound sharp in the air. Alongside them cows eat rosehips and apples from the low branches, their breath steaming. 'The cold is on its way,' says Henry. The cows will move and snow will arrive.

'A white Christmas, maybe,' she replies. That's what she always wants. She'd paint it this year, like Cézanne, rugged up in his fur coat, the easel sunk in snowdrifts. The different whites and greys. They always surprise her, the colours a cloud can make. She reaches out and laces her fingers through Henry's. 'I love you,' she says. He squeezes her hand. The fields always make her happy.

But when she comes inside this feeling vanishes. The cottage is small and messy, the day ahead lonely and full of chores. She turns quiet while she prepares Lucie's bottle. As Henry leaves for

work he passes her a brochure. 'Here,' he tells her, putting it in her hand, 'just take a look.'

'Henry—'

'Just look.' Then he kisses her, closes the door behind him, gets on his bike and rides away.

Once he is gone the house seems very still. The baby nuzzles her face against Charlotte's chest. She puts the brochure down and moves the baby to her hip. Henry won't be home until dinnertime. The days with a baby are longer than she expected. She thinks she should know how to look after a baby by now, but does not. Lucie's body is slippery in the bath. Poo often leaks from her poorly folded nappy. Charlotte's milk didn't last. Henry says he's tired of eating baked beans on toast for dinner and can't she make something else? But she doesn't know what to cook, she has forgotten.

She makes tea, then lays the baby down on a blanket on the floor and watches it. From the corner of her eye she glimpses the brochure: women in swimsuits, on waterskis. The baby wriggles and drools. She can roll over, and tosses herself back and forth. Today Charlotte has dressed her in pink stripes. Everyone says Lucie looks good in stripes. The woman at the grocery shop. The old lady at the post office. Charlotte sits staring at her daughter for a long time. It is like watching the sea from a high window. Hypnotising, and, after a while, soporific. She knows that when he gets home Henry will ask if she has looked at the brochure and she'll say she really didn't have time, although she knows very well that this is because there's

too much of it. The hours blur and stretch, refusing to break down into smaller units of action: one thing, then the next.

She reaches up and touches the hair at the nape of her neck. It is ropy, matted. Why is this? These details of her life are still new to her, unfamiliar. Then she remembers: the gush of milky vomit in the night, some of it in her hair. She has never known the nights to be so long: the endless cycle of feeding, crying, vomiting. Henry has fashioned himself a pair of earplugs from candle wax and tape, and so sleeps on, oblivious. While he snores, Charlotte rocks the baby, jiggles it, does what she can to soothe it until she realises she cannot soothe it and so just holds it tight and close while it cries. In these moments she is neither awake nor asleep but something in between, and in her mind's eye strange visions surface. There is an image of the cars parked outside the shopping arcade, of the train station in Milan where she and Henry once stood. The blue metal gate at the front of her mother's house, the bus stop on the main road, the queue for bread and cabbages on market day. All images, she realises, of places where she has waited for something to happen, for something to change. She must bathe, she thinks, looking down and seeing the same blue dress that she has worn for months now. She wore this dress in the last days of pregnancy. She wore it during the early hours of labour, and it was the first thing she put on after Lucie was born. The dress is navy and covered in small white spots. When Lucie feeds, her eyes graze the dress and she stares at the patterned fabric. It is soft with wear and smells of milk.

Meanwhile Lucie kicks; Lucie smiles. She flaps her arms in her mother's direction. Charlotte doesn't say to herself, I am a mother. Instead she finds herself thinking, riddle-like, I am a woman with a child. She reaches down and puts a pair of socks on Lucie's fat feet. They are stripy socks to match her stripy suit. Her daughter flaps at her again, gurgles. Charlotte tries to make gurgling sounds in return but she is so tired. At the edge of the field, trees bend back and forth, but she cannot hear the wind. The cup of tea beside her has turned cold. She sits a while longer then lies down next to her baby and closes her eyes. There is the feeling of her body sinking. It is not like falling asleep. It is heavier. Darker. Like being sucked into something.

When she wakes she has forgotten where she is, the time of day. She thinks for a moment that it's early morning, a new day, the next day, then remembers. Her cheek is wet with spit and itchy from the rough carpet. She knows she cannot stay in the house until dinnertime and so goes back out to the fields. She can spend hours this way, pushing the pram through the grass. Always happiest, it seems, when surrounded by these acres of open space. She does not know why, she just knows that she is. It is something about the sky, the empty stretch of ground. About being alone with her child outside. The smell of the air. It is as if the place has chosen her. The leaves on the poplar trees are flickering, silvery in the wind. What time is it? Noon, perhaps. Or later; she doesn't know. Storm clouds gather in the distance. She painted this once, a fen storm, wrapped in her black coat, her easel set up in the mud of

the field. The clouds were tinged with purple, slouching diagonally down towards the hill. Roiling, Henry called it. Between the hill and the clouds a yellowish sky glowed.

She stands there, in the wild grass, rocking the pram. Lucie calls at the sound of a bird. They are fine, out here, she thinks, she and Lucie. They are peaceful together. She won't tell Henry. He doesn't like all this tramping. 'You shouldn't take her out for so long,' Henry says. 'Not in this season, she'll catch her death.' She bends over to stroke her daughter's face and Lucie smiles. Such soft cheeks. Everyone says Lucie looks like Henry – *Isn't she her daddy's girl*, they say. And it is true, already Charlotte can see that the child has his fine features, his dark hair. But she still finds this strange, to look at her child and think of her husband. The likeness is in the bones: in the slope of cheek and jaw, in the broad spread of the forehead. When they met it was what she noticed first – the beauty of him. Tall and slim, with warm, heavy-lashed eyes like those of a deer.

It was the summer of 1958: Henry was completing his degree at King's College London and she was in her final year at the Royal College of Art. Charlotte's mother, Iris, took regular holidays to India to visit a favourite student of hers who'd married an Indian man, and after Iris retired from teaching she opened up the extra rooms of the house to Anglo-Indian boarders. Henry rented the ground-floor room, directly beneath Charlotte's bedroom, and she took to making them both tea in the afternoons, when she returned from the studio. At first she simply knocked at his door and passed him the teacup, but then one day she glimpsed what was inside: the

floor covered in sketches, papers pinned to the wall, books piled in a circle around the armchair like a corrugated fortress. She hadn't known what he was studying, and assumed it to be medicine or engineering – that was what most of them came for. But it turned out that Henry was writing his thesis on the use of illustrations in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*, and the sketches scattered about the room were from that – dark little pictures of women with their faces hidden. The papers on the wall – above the bed and by the window – were drafts of poems Henry was working on. They stood in the doorway and talked fiercely about their studies and Henry gave her a chapter of his thesis to read. Charlotte brought it back the next day, covered in notes, and they took their tea out into the garden, where they sat beneath the fruit trees and talked until dinnertime. After this they were inseparable, and soon enough Henry proposed. Charlotte knew it was coming. She knew it was what she wanted, discovering this one winter night as she sat in the back row of the audience while Henry read from his first poetry collection, published earlier that year. It was the sound of his voice, how it soothed her; no one else had a voice like his, dark and breathy, the vowels coasting on the body's subtle expulsion of air.

'And what will you do, when you've finished your studies?' Iris asked her daughter when she announced her engagement.

'I'll paint – what do you think I'll do.'

'Yes, but I mean what will you do for money?'

Charlotte thought this such an annoying question. So irrelevant. 'I suppose I'll sell my paintings,' she said.

‘And will that be enough to live on?’

‘People make do.’

‘One wants, I think, to do more than just make do,’ Iris replied.

Henry and Charlotte waited until he’d finished his thesis and then they married in a registry office. After their honeymoon – a wet week camping in Devon – the two of them moved to Cambridge, where Henry had been offered a college lectureship. They signed the lease on Fen Cottage in July of that same year, and three years later Lucie was born. Charlotte had been desperate for a child but didn’t fall pregnant easily that first time. The wait made Lucie extra precious somehow: a gift that was meant to perfect them.

Charlotte comes in from the fields as dusk settles. Lucie’s cheeks are cold to the touch, and that night she begins to cough. Charlotte hopes it is nothing, just a dry tickle, but it quickly worsens and over the coming days the cough grows louder, short fits turn into long ones, Lucie gasps for breath. She coughs so much after feeding that she vomits. She coughs so much that Charlotte cannot sleep – the sound terrible, the incessant bark, then the pause when there is neither coughing nor breathing, Lucie’s eyes bulging and watering, her face turning pink then red, the edges of her lips darkening to blue, and only then, just when Charlotte is about to shake the child from worry, or put her over her shoulder and hit her back to get her breath going again, just then comes the long, moaning, wheezing, sucking sound of an inhalation, followed by dry-retching

and the first explosion of sour milk from Lucie's mouth, her tiny body squirming and shuddering with the effort.

The doctor comes and leaves a bottle of red medicine, instructing them to keep her warm. 'I told you so,' says Henry. 'I told you not to take her out in the cold. You've been doing it again, haven't you.' She needs a warmer climate, he says, beginning once more with his plan. The cure is sunshine. Life would be better. *Australians spend their weekends relaxing in the sun.* On and on he goes – rabbiting, Charlotte calls it.

Two weeks later Lucie still hasn't improved and Henry grows more determined. He travels to Australia House in London, where he watches promotional films and gathers more pamphlets. He makes enquiries and reads books, plans dates and marks places on a map. He ponders weather reports like an explorer about to embark on the greatest of journeys. 'I don't know what you're doing with all that,' Charlotte says when she comes upon him late at night, hunched over the kitchen table peering at documents and flyers.

'I'm just making investigations.'

'Nothing will come of it,' she replies, stoking the fire.

'You know it would be for the best,' he says, putting the piece of paper down and trying to meet her eye, but she slips away from him. 'Whose best?' she wants to say, but doesn't. Lucie is his excuse.

'You haven't even glanced at these pictures,' he says. 'You haven't read the pamphlets. If you'd only look—'



For days Charlotte paces the cottage with the sick child limp over her shoulder, Lucie's cough exploding in wet, phlegmy barks. When Lucie refuses to eat, the doctor comes again, diagnosing pneumonia. He peers at the child, taps her ribs and listens to her breathing. He weighs and measures her. Then he looks out through the window, towards the damp fields. 'This winter wouldn't be helping,' he says. 'These days each winter seems colder and wetter than the last. Keep her rested. Keep the house dry. I'll be back to check on her tomorrow.'

After the doctor leaves, she and Henry argue. 'You don't know,' Charlotte says. 'You don't know that it will be any better over there.'

'Well it jolly well can't be worse.'

'Don't exaggerate,' she replies. 'The summer will be here soon.' Red poppies will sprout out of nowhere. Teasels and cow parsley will sway in the grasses. The farmlands will be full of broad beans and wheat and yellow flowering rapeseed that grow as tall as her. There is a path running through these. The summer before last, Henry lifted her up so she could see over the top of them. On and on they went, acres of yellow. Everywhere the sound of bees.

'Is there an English summer?'

'Oh, Henry. Please.'

'Well, if you'd stop being so damn cheerful.'

'That's not fair.'

'No, of course not – because you're miserable, you're exhausted, which is why we should go, why we can't stay. Don't you see that?'

Tell me you can't see that. Think of the coming baby. Of Lucie.' As if that's not all she thinks of.

She looks away from him. On the far side of the room the washing hangs over the radiators. On the wall next to this the paint flakes and peels with damp. Just the week before, Henry discovered a starry pattern of black mould on the wallpaper behind the armchair where Charlotte nurses Lucie. Henry phoned the landlord and asked him to see to it, but the man explained that it was just the climate and nothing could be done. Their neighbour said he was just a miser. 'I saw him,' she told Charlotte. She'd heard Lucie was ill and so brought her a small stuffed animal. 'I saw him just before you two moved in, painting over a whole wall of black mould. Covering it all up with that glossy paint. Straight over the wallpaper, he did it. I'd come to the door for something, I can't remember what. "You can't do that!" I says when I saw him, and he says, "But look here now, it looks all bright and cheery this way!" and on he went. You just scratch that wall there and you'll see it. The nerve of some people,' she said as she stood at the front door, holding out the yellow toy and jiggling it at the baby's face. The child went cross-eyed trying to focus on the moving object. The neighbour paused a moment and glanced up, nose in the air. 'You can smell it,' she said, her pink nostrils twitching. 'Take one sniff and you can smell that mould. I'd be looking for somewhere else if I was you.'



Henry does what he can. He fills the hot water bottles. He gathers wood and keeps the fire burning. He makes endless pots of strong tea. Soon the roads are so bad that he can't ride his bike to the university. Charlotte shovels snow off the garden path. The water in the toilet freezes at night and they have to smash it with a crowbar in the mornings. Then the wind comes up, whistling in beneath the front door. Henry plugs the draft with a towel, but it's too late – that night Lucie's fever worsens and she vomits again. In the morning Charlotte washes the sour-smelling sheets, but there's nowhere to hang them outside, so she drapes them over the dining table and chairs and over the doors. She has a painting to finish, but it's too cold in the shed, so she sets up her easel in the kitchen. In the living room Lucie crawls towards the front door, wailing, then stops and bangs her head against the ground, over and over again. Henry picks her up and tries to calm her. 'Shoosh now, shoosh now,' he says.

He knows he has to get out of the house. The smallness of it, the damp, the feeling – so real – that at any moment he might explode. If it were summer he'd just open the door and plunge into the fields, Alfred running after him. But the house is freezing even though the fire burns. He holds Lucie to his chest and ruffles about in the box by the back door, searching for hats and mittens. Everything is a tangle of black and grey. Three mittens in different sizes. Four hats, none of them Lucie's. Henry runs back and forth, fetching, carrying, searching. He puts Lucie in the pram and she starts to cry. It is cold. It is early. He has not had enough tea. He

needs his scarf and a handkerchief. Alfred needs his lead. But Henry is already outside when he remembers these things. He will not go back for them now and instead marches out towards the path.

They travel a loop, down through the fields of Manor Farm, then Rectory Farm and over the grounds of Thrift. They pass the old barn, the line of ancient pear trees, the green pond and the wet black meadow ditches. He walks fast, trying to warm himself. The pram bumps along and Lucie whimpers then falls asleep. Henry puts his jacket over her. It is bright outside. Fresh and gusty. Cold and white.

When Henry returns he parks the pram by the back door and collects an armful of wood. Balancing the woodpile with one hand, he opens the door and slips in sideways, careful not to make room for Alfred, all wet and muddy from the walk. Henry kicks the door closed as he steps inside, ducks through the low doorway between the laundry and kitchen, then drops the wood by the stove. But the back door didn't close properly and Alfred runs in behind, catching Henry by surprise as he bends over, stoking the fire. Henry stands and spins round, trying to block the entrance to the living room, but as he does so the new wood, just catching alight, falls to the floor. Henry kicks this towards the hearth tiles as he lunges for the dog; he doesn't see the teapot – a smudge of blue and white – until it's too late, his forearm striking the side of the pot and sending it skidding off the bench. It smashes on the kitchen floor, hot tea spraying across the walls. Alfred leaps into the living room, runs happily towards Charlotte, jumps up and streaks her dressing-gown with muddy paws.

‘Henry!’ Charlotte cries, when she sees what has happened in the kitchen. Henry looks down, frozen with alarm, the marbled linoleum covered now in tiny pieces of blue and white china. Half a cornflower here. A leaf and stem over there. The teapot belonged to Charlotte’s grandmother and is part of a set that Charlotte inherited. It is the only thing her grandmother left her and is, Henry knows, Charlotte’s most cherished possession.

‘How could you not see it?’

‘I did see it, I’m sorry, it was—’ He wants to explain that it was an accident, that he was trying to catch the dog, that he had been distracted by the fire, but instead says, ‘You shouldn’t have left it there, perched on the edge.’

‘If you hadn’t let Alfred in—’

‘I *said* I’m sorry – it was a mistake.’

‘You could have closed the door.’

‘I thought I had.’

Lucie, still outside in her pram, wakes up and begins to wail. In the kitchen Alfred spins in circles of joy – his long pink tongue hanging out the side of his mouth and his wet tail whacking the doors of the kitchen cupboards. Henry kicks the wall. ‘Damn this house,’ he spits. ‘If it wasn’t so small this wouldn’t have happened. Look at us,’ he says, spreading his arms, ‘we’re like rabbits in a burrow.’ Henry can’t swing out his arms without hitting something, breaking something, doing damage. Even the furniture is too large and cumbersome for the space. There is the chesterfield lounge that once belonged to Henry’s father, the little round feet knocked

off to get it through the door. And the grandfather clock given to them by Charlotte's mother, now relegated to the small damp alcove that functions as the laundry, because it is the only space where the ceiling is high enough for the clock to stand.

Charlotte doesn't reply. The pot is broken. It can't be fixed. What more is there to say? Henry's right, though. The house is too small: Charlotte finds herself permanently blotched with bruises – arms, shins, knees, thighs – where she's bumped into protruding corners of furniture. The drip-dripping of the hot water tap in the kitchen can be heard in every room. Everything in the house is too close. The ceilings are too close. The walls are too close. The doors and windows are too close. The very air is thick and stuffy and too close.

Charlotte crouches down and begins to gather up the pieces of china. The baby is due in three months and she feels it shift. She'd once been consoled by the smallness of the place. It meant there was less to clean and less room in which to make a mess. Now it means that everything just gets dirty faster. Charlotte hates this; she's comforted by order – neatness calms her. The clutter sets her teeth on edge – the narrow kitchen bench crowded with jars of tea and coffee, sugar and biscuits. But it is the filth she can't stand. She sees it now as she scuttles about low down, gathering up the last shards – unidentifiable grime on the linoleum, hard bits of dropped vegetable, the drips of food on the cupboard doors, the residue of oil and tomato sauce on the surface of the cooker.

The spat-out and regurgitated food, the flakes of dried mud from the soles of boots, the windows smeared with thin, greasy finger marks, the debris scattered over the carpet – breadcrumbs, sand, black grit from the chimney – the grey murk of dust condensed along the skirting boards, the brownish hem on the side of the white kitchen door, opened and closed so many times by hands coated in oil, butter and flour that it has developed a varnish-like layer of filth.

Henry stands above her, too close. ‘I could get another one, very similar, better. You could choose it, we could—’ Charlotte feels her scalp tighten with irritation and senses the first flush of rage blooming on her neck and spreading to her cheeks. She lifts a hand to silence him. ‘Just shut up, Henry,’ she says, tight-lipped. ‘Just shut up.’

Henry closes his mouth and looks on. Alfred has been put outside and now whines at the door, scratches. Charlotte’s newly washed hair drips onto her pink robe, leaving a round stain of darker pink across her shoulderblades. Henry can smell the light scent of shampoo – lemon, lavender – a sweet, fruity aroma that cuts through the stale air of the kitchen.

Charlotte blames Henry for the broken pot. Henry blames everything else: the country, the house, the weather. Charlotte stands up with her back to him and tosses the china into the dustbin. He takes a step towards her, reaching out a hand to touch her shoulder, but Charlotte turns as he does so and he misses her. ‘If we had more space,’ Henry says, ‘this wouldn’t have happened. If we move—’

Charlotte looks away and twists her hair into a wet knot. He is blocking her exit, his body filling the space between the sink and the bench, and she thinks quickly about how to leave the room without touching him, without being touched.

‘We could have a huge house in Australia,’ he says. ‘A garden. Imagine. We could start again, start over. We could—’

Charlotte pushes past him and takes the stairs to the bedroom. ‘Fine,’ she says, as she disappears into the narrow stairwell. ‘Fine, I’ll go.’

The day passes, hectic, apologies withheld on either side. In the evening Henry and Charlotte sit in the living room by the fire. They’ve managed not to speak since morning, since Charlotte said those words – *Fine, fine, I’ll go*. Now Henry does a crossword and Charlotte knits. A yellow cardigan for Lucie, the collar fiddly. She’s found some lovely brown leather buttons for the front and is looking forward to seeing them stitched neatly in a row and fastened tight over Lucie’s little belly. But now she peers at the row she has just completed, sighs, unstitches, knits again. Charlotte is afraid of what she said. She didn’t mean it. She didn’t quite not mean it. She doesn’t understand the new difficulty of life and wants somehow to escape it – the difficulty, that is, but not the life. The mess, the exhaustion, but not the place. She is tired of him nagging. How to unsay what she said? She is afraid he will take her statement as a clear yes. *Fine, fine*, she’d said. They each wait for the other to speak. To address the question.

It is Henry who breaks the silence. ‘Clothes and linen collected before marriage. Nine letters.’ He has T something O something S something. ‘Any idea?’ This gap bothers him – he needs to solve it before he can reach the next answer.

Charlotte never had one of those things, the linen chest. At least he doesn’t think so. But maybe she did. That nice damask tablecloth now stained with gravy.

26 down: Wise man (4). *Sage*.

He drifts over the cryptic, his mind bouncing off the clues. Bury lost letters in an earthy way. Chop hard wood. Forced out. Weathers outburst. Lapse. My other. Windy, half heard. He prefers them as hints of a poem. What’s the point of an answer?

‘Trousseau,’ says Charlotte. Very good. They sit close together, the armchairs at a slight angle, facing the fire. Their feet rest on the same footstool, clover-shaped, covered in carpet, turquoise with pink roses. Henry bends his foot to touch Charlotte’s, the two of them wearing the woollen socks she knitted by that very fire some winters past. Henry’s socks are blue and brown striped, Charlotte’s plain red. She leans her foot towards Henry’s. A strong gust of wind rattles the windows.

‘I do love you,’ he says quietly, catching her foot between his. She reaches over, picks up his hand, kisses it. This is the apology. His skin smells of smoke from the fire, soap. She puts his hand down and knits a little more. After a while she says, ‘If you find a job. If you find a job, I’ll go.’