

# *Chapter 1*

“**S**HHH!”

Violet Speedwell frowned. She did not need shushing; she had not said anything.

The shusher, an officious woman sporting a helmet of grey hair, had planted herself squarely in the archway that led into the choir, Violet’s favourite part of Winchester Cathedral. The choir was right in the centre of the building – the nave extending one way, the presbytery and retrochoir the other, the north and south transepts’ short arms fanning out on either side to complete the cross of the whole structure. The other parts of the Cathedral had their drawbacks: the nave was enormous, the aisles draughty, the transepts dark, the chapels too reverential, the retrochoir lonely. But the choir had a lower ceiling and carved wood stalls that made the space feel on a more human scale. It was luxurious but not too grand.

Violet peeked over the usher’s shoulder. She had only wanted to step in for a moment to look. The choir stalls of seats and benches and the adjacent presbytery seats seemed to be filled mostly with women – far more than she would expect on a

Thursday afternoon. There must be a special service for something. It was the 19th of May 1932; St Dunstan's Day, Dunstan being the patron saint of goldsmiths, known for famously fending off the Devil with a pair of tongs. But that was unlikely to draw so many Winchester women.

She studied the congregants she could see. Women always studied other women, and did so far more critically than men ever did. Men didn't notice the run in their stocking, the lipstick on their teeth, the dated, outgrown haircut, the skirt that pulled unflatteringly across the hips, the paste earrings that were a touch too gaudy. Violet registered every flaw, and knew every flaw that was being noted about her. She could provide a list herself: hair too flat and neither one colour nor another; sloping shoulders fashionable back in Victorian times; eyes so deep-set you could barely see their blue; nose tending to red if she was too hot or had even a sip of sherry. She did not need anyone, male or female, to point out her shortcomings.

Like the usher guarding them, the women in the choir and presbytery were mostly older than Violet. All wore hats, and most had coats draped over their shoulders. Though it was a reasonable day outside, inside the Cathedral it was still chilly, as churches and cathedrals always seemed to be, even in high summer. All that stone did not absorb warmth, and kept worshippers alert and a little uncomfortable, as if it did not do to relax too much during the important business of worshipping God. If God were an architect, she wondered, would He be an Old Testament architect of flagstone or a New Testament one of soft furnishings?

They began to sing now – “All ye who seek a rest above” – rather like an army, regimental, with a clear sense of the importance of the group. For it was a group; Violet could see

that. An invisible web ran amongst the women, binding them fast to their common cause, whatever that might be. There seemed to be a line of command, too: two women sitting in one of the front stall benches in the choir were clearly leaders. One was smiling, one frowning. The frowner was looking around from one line of the hymn to the next, as if ticking off a list in her head of who was there and who was not, who was singing boldly and who faintly, who would need admonishing afterwards about wandering attention and who would be praised in some indirect, condescending manner. It felt just like being back at school assembly.

“Who are—”

“Shhh!” The usher’s frown deepened. “You will have to *wait*.” Her voice was far louder than Violet’s mild query had been; a few women in the closest seats turned their heads. This incensed the usher even more. “This is the Presentation of Embroideries,” she hissed. “Tourists are *not allowed*.”

Violet knew such types, who guarded the gates with a ferocity well beyond what the position required. This woman would simper at deans and bishops and treat everyone else like a peasant.

Their stand-off was interrupted by an older man approaching along the side aisle from the empty retrochoir at the eastern end of the Cathedral. Violet turned to look at him, grateful for the interruption. She noted his white hair and moustache, and his stride which, though purposeful, lacked the vigour of youth, and found herself making the calculation she did with most men. He was in his late fifties or early sixties. Minus the eighteen years since 1914, he would have been in his early forties when the Great War began. Probably he hadn’t fought, or at least not till later, when younger recruits were running low. Perhaps he had a son who had fought.

The usher stiffened as he drew near, ready to defend her territory from another invader. But the man passed them with barely a glance, and trotted down the stairs to the south transept. Was he leaving, or would he turn into the small Fishermen's Chapel where Izaak Walton was buried? It was where Violet had been heading before her curiosity over the special service waylaid her.

The usher moved away from the archway for a moment to peer down after the man. Violet took the opportunity to slip inside and sit down in the closest empty seat, just as the Dean stepped up to the pulpit in the middle of the choir aisle to her left and announced, "The Lord be with you."

"And with Thy spirit," the women around her replied in the measured tempo so familiar from church services.

"Let us pray."

As Violet bowed her head along with the others, she felt a finger poke at her shoulder. She ignored it; surely the usher would not interrupt a prayer.

"Almighty God, who of old didst command that Thy sanctuary be adorned with works of beauty and cunning craftsmanship, for the hallowing of Thy name and the refreshing of men's souls, vouchsafe, we beseech Thee, to accept these offerings at our hands, and grant that we may ever be consecrated to Thy service; for Jesus Christ's sake. Amen."

Violet looked around. Like the choir's, the presbytery chairs were turned inwards rather than forward towards the high altar. Across from her were ranks of women in facing seats, and behind them a stone parclose decorated with tracery in the form of arches and curlicues. On the top of the screen sat stone mortuary chests containing the bones of bishops and kings and queens – unfortunately jumbled together during the Civil War when

Cromwell's men apparently opened the chests and threw the bones about. During a tour that Violet dutifully took after moving to Winchester, the guide told her the soldiers threw femurs at the Great West Window and destroyed the stained glass. Once Charles II had been restored to the throne in 1660 it too had been restored using saved shards of glass, but it was remade higgledy-piggledy, with little attempt to recreate the biblical scenes originally depicted. Yet it looked orderly, as did the mortuary chests – so tidy and certain, resting above her head now, as if they had always been and always would be there. This building might look permanent, but parts of it had been taken apart and put back together many times.

It was impossible to imagine that such bad behaviour could have taken place in so solid a building, where they were now obediently reciting the Lord's Prayer. But then, it had been impossible to imagine that solid old Britain would go to war with Germany and send so many men off to die. Afterwards the country had been put back together like the Great West Window – defiant and superficially repaired, but the damage had been done.

“In the faith of Jesus Christ we dedicate these gifts to the glory of God.” As he spoke the Dean gestured towards the high altar at the far end of the presbytery. Violet craned her neck to see what gifts he was referring to, then stifled a laugh. Stacked in even, solemn rows on the steps before the altar were dozens of hassocks.

She should not find them funny, she knew. Kneelers were a serious business. Violet had always been grateful for the rectangular leather kneelers the size of picture books at St Michael's, the church the Speedwells attended in Southampton. Though worn and compacted into thin hard boards by years

of pressing knees, they were at least not as cold as the stone floor. She had never thought they might require a benediction, however. And yet that appeared to be what this special service was for.

She glanced at her watch: she had left the office to buy a typewriter ribbon, with the tacit understanding that she might stop en route for a coffee. Instead of coffee Violet had intended to visit the Fishermen's Chapel in the Cathedral. Her late father had been a keen fisherman and kept a copy of Izaak Walton's *The Compleat Angler* on his bedside table – though she had never seen him read it. Now, though, she wondered if kneelers were worth being late for.

The prayer over, she felt another sharp tap on her shoulder. The service might take longer than a coffee or a pilgrimage to Walton, but she could not bear to be bullied by this woman. "I've joined the service," she muttered before the usher could speak.

The woman frowned. "You are a *broderer*? I haven't seen you at the meetings."

Violet had never heard the word and was not entirely sure what it meant. "I'm new," she improvised.

"Well, this is a service for those who have *already* contributed. You will have to wait for the next service in October, once you have actually taken part and put in some *work*."

If the usher hadn't then glanced down at Violet's left hand, she might have accepted that the service was not for her and departed. She should have done so anyway – gone for the typewriter ribbon and returned to the office in a timely fashion. Besides, services were often dull, even in a cathedral as magnificent as Winchester's. But she hated the judgement that the usher was forming from her not wearing a wedding ring. She couldn't

help it: she glanced in return at the usher's left hand. A ring, of course.

She took a breath to give herself courage. "I was told I could come." Her heart was pounding, as it often did when she rebelled, whether on a large or a small scale. When she'd told her mother six months before that she was moving to Winchester, for instance, her heart had beat so hard and fast that she'd thought it would punch a hole through her chest. Thirty-eight years old and I am still afraid, she thought.

The usher's frown deepened. "Who told you that?"

Violet gestured towards one of the fur-wearing women in the front choir stall bench.

"Mrs Biggins said you could come?" For the first time, the usher's tone faltered.

"Mabel, shhh!" Now others were shushing the usher, who turned scarlet. After one last scowl at Violet, she stepped back to her place guarding the archway.

The Dean was midway through his address. "This magnificent Cathedral has been blessed with many adornments over the centuries," he was saying, "whether in stone or wood, metal or glass. The effect has been to lift the spirits of those who come to worship, and to remind them of the glory of God here on Earth as in Heaven.

"To this abundance can now be added the kneelers you see before the altar – the start of an ambitious project to bring colour and comfort to those who come to services in the choir and presbytery. The Winchester Cathedral Broderers group was formed by Miss Louisa Pesel at my invitation last year. The word 'broderer' is taken from the Worshipful Company of Broderers – a guild of embroiderers established in mediaeval times. This new group of Cathedral Broderers reflects the noble

history of this craft, brought forth by Miss Pesel to unite the past and present. Many of its members are here today. You have clearly been very busy with your needles, embroidering these splendid hassocks for the presbytery, and soon to commence on cushions for the seats and benches in the choir. Not only will we see glorious colours and patterns amongst the more sober wood and stone, but worshippers will find it easier to kneel as they pray.” He paused, with a smile that indicated he was about to make a small, Dean-like joke. “The cushions may well make it easier for congregants to sit and listen to my sermons.”

There was a sedate collective chuckle.

As he went on, Violet glanced at the woman next to her, who had laughed more openly. Her face was thin and angular, like a long isosceles triangle had unfolded between her temples and chin, and her brown hair was shingled into another triangle whose points stuck straight out from her cheeks. She turned to Violet with eager dark eyes, as if the glance were the calling card she had been waiting for. “I haven’t seen you before,” she whispered. “Are you from the Monday group? Is one of yours up there?”

“Ah – no.”

“Not done yet? I managed to finish mine last week – just before the cut-off. Had to run clear across town to get it to them. Miss Pesel and Mrs Biggins were that strict about it. Handed it straight to Miss Pesel herself.”

A woman in the seat in front of them turned her head as if listening, and Violet’s neighbour went quiet. A minute later she began again, more softly. “Are you working on a kneeler?”

Violet shook her head.

“What, your stitching wasn’t good enough?” The woman made a sympathetic moue. “Mine was returned to me three times

before they were satisfied! Have they put you on hanking instead? Or straightening the cupboards? The cupboards always need that, but it's awfully dull. Or maybe you keep records for them. I'll bet that's what you do." She glanced at Violet's hands as if searching for telltale signs of inky fingers. Of course she would also be looking for the ring, just as Violet had already noted that she didn't wear one. "I said no straight away to record-keeping. I do enough of that the rest of the week."

The woman ahead of them turned around. "Shhh!"

Violet and her neighbour smiled at each other. It felt good to have a partner in crime, albeit one who was a little eager.

By the time the service dragged to its conclusion with the end of the Dean's address, another hymn ("Oh holy Lord, content to dwell"), and more blessings, Violet was very late and had to rush away, her thin-faced neighbour calling out her name – "Gilda Hill!" – after her. She ran across the Outer Close, a patch of green surrounding the Cathedral, and up the High Street to Warren's stationers, then hurried with the typewriter ribbon back to Southern Counties Insurance, arriving flushed and out of breath.

She needn't have run: the office she shared with two others in the typing pool was empty. When Violet had worked in the larger offices of the same company in Southampton, the manager had been much stricter about the comings and goings of the workers. Here, where the office was so much smaller and more exposed, you might think Violet's absence would be noted. But no. Though she didn't want to be reprimanded, she was mildly disappointed that no one had noticed her empty chair and her black Imperial typewriter with its cream keys so quiet.

She glanced at her office mates' vacant desks. Olive and Maureen – O and Mo, they called themselves, laughing raucously

about their nicknames even when no one else did – must be having tea down the hall in the staff kitchen. Violet was desperate for a cup, and a biscuit to plug the hole in her stomach. For lunch she'd had only the Marmite and margarine sandwiches she'd brought in. They were never enough; she was always hungry again by mid-afternoon and had to fill up with more cups of tea. Mrs Speedwell would be appalled that Violet had a hot mid-day meal only once a week. She could not afford more – though she would never admit that to her mother.

For a moment she considered joining her colleagues in the kitchen. O and Mo were two local girls in their early twenties, and although they were nice enough to Violet, they came from different backgrounds, and treated her like an African violet or an aspidistra, the sort of house plant a maiden aunt would keep. Both lived at home and so had a more carefree attitude towards money – as Violet herself had once had. One sexy, one plain, they wore new dresses as often as they could afford to, and lived for the dance halls, the cinema dates, the parade of men to choose from. There were plenty of men their age; they didn't walk into a dance hall as Violet had done a few times after the War to find the only dancing partners were old enough to be her grandfather, or far too young, or damaged in a way Violet knew she could never fix. Or just not there, so that women danced with each other to fill the absence. As they typed, O and Mo talked and laughed about the men they met as if it were assumed men should be available. They had each gone through several boyfriends in the six months Violet had worked with them, though recently both had become more serious about their current beaux. Sometimes their high spirits and assumptions made Violet go and boil the kettle in the kitchen, even when she didn't want tea, waiting until she had calmed down enough

to go back and carry on with her rapid typing. She was a far more efficient typist than the girls – which they seemed to find funny.

Only once had Mo asked her if she'd had a chap, "back then." "Yes," Violet clipped her reply, refusing to make Laurence into an anecdote.

This week had been worse. Even the prospect of tea and a biscuit did not outweigh the dread Violet felt at having to watch tiny, buxom Olive straighten her fingers in front of her face for the umpteenth time to admire her engagement ring. On the Monday she had come into the office walking differently, pride setting her shoulders back and lifting her tight blonde curls. She had exchanged a sly, smug smile with Mo, already installed behind her typewriter, then announced as she shook out her chiffon scarf and hung up her coat, "I'm just off to speak to Mr Waterman." She pulled off her gloves, and Violet couldn't help it – she searched for the flash of light on O's ring finger. The diamond was minute, but even a tiny sparkle is still a sparkle.

As O clipped down the hall in higher heels than the court shoes Violet wore, Mo – smarter than her friend but less conventionally attractive, with colourless hair, a long face and a tendency to frown – let her smile fade. If she were feeling kind at that moment, Violet would assure Mo that her current boyfriend – a reticent bank clerk who had stopped by the office once or twice – was sure to propose shortly. But she was not feeling kind, not about this subject; she remained silent while Mo stewed in her misery.

Since that day and O's triumphant display of her ring, it was all the girls talked about: how Joe had proposed (at a pub, with the ring at the bottom of her glass of port and lemon), how long they would wait to save up for a proper do (two years),

where the party would take place (same pub), what she would wear (white rather than ivory – which Violet knew was a mistake, as white would be too harsh for Olive’s complexion), where they would live (with his family until they could afford a place). It was all so banal and repetitive, with no interesting or surprising revelations or dreams or desires, that Violet thought she might go mad if she had to listen to this for two years.

She lit a cigarette to distract herself and suppress her appetite. Then she fed a sheet of paper through the typewriter rollers and began to type, making her way steadily through an application from Mr Richard Turner of Basingstoke for house insurance, which guaranteed payment if the house and contents were lost to fire or flood or some other act of God. Violet noticed that “war” was not included. She wondered if Mr Turner understood that not all loss could be replaced.

Mostly, though, she typed without thinking. Violet had typed so many of these applications to insure someone’s life, house, automobile, boat, that she rarely considered the meaning of the words. For her, typing was a meaningless, repetitive act that became a soothing meditation, lulling her into a state where she did not think; she simply was.

Soon enough O and Mo were back, their chatter preceding them down the hall and interrupting Violet’s trance-like peace. “After you, Mrs Hill,” Mo stood aside and gestured Olive through the door. Both wore floral summer dresses, O in peach, Mo in tan, reminding Violet that her plain blue linen dress was three years old, the dropped waist out of date. It was difficult to alter a dropped waist.

“Well, I don’t mind if I do, *Miss* Webster – soon to be Mrs Livingstone, I’m sure.”

“Oh, I don’t know.” Mo looked eager, though.

Olive set down her cup of tea by her typewriter with a clatter, spilling some into the saucer. "Of course you will! You could marry sooner than I do. You may end up my matron of honour rather than my maid!" She held out her hand once more to inspect her ring.

Violet paused in her typing. Mrs Hill. It was a common enough name. Still . . . "Does your fiancé have a sister?"

"Who, Gilda? What about her? She's just a warped old spins—" Olive seemed to recall whom she was talking to and bit her words back with a laugh, but not before Violet took in her dismissive tone. It made her decide to like Gilda Hill.

## Chapter 2

VIOLET LIVED FIFTEEN MINUTES from the office in an area called the Soke, on the eastern side of Winchester just across the River Itchen. On a single typist's salary, she could not afford the nicer areas in the west with their larger houses and gardens, their swept streets and well-maintained motor cars. The houses in the Soke were smaller yet had more inhabitants. There were fewer motor cars, and the local shops had dustier window displays and sold cheaper goods.

She shared the house with two other women as well as the landlady, who took up the ground floor. There were no men, of course, and even male visitors other than family were discouraged downstairs, and forbidden upstairs. On the rare occasion there were men in the front room, Mrs Harvey had a tendency to go in and out, looking for the copy of the *Southern Daily Echo* she'd left behind, or her reading glasses, or feeding the budgies she kept in a cage there, or fiddling with the fire when no one had complained of the cold, or reminding them to be in good time for the train. Not that Violet had any male visitors other than her brother Tom; but Mrs Harvey had given him this

treatment until Violet showed her a family photo as evidence. Even then she did not leave them alone for long, but popped her head around the door to remind Tom that petrol stations shut early on Saturdays. Tom took it as a comic turn. "I feel I'm in a play and she'll announce a body's been found coshed over the head in the scullery," he remarked with glee. It was easy for him to enjoy Mrs Harvey as entertainment since he did not have to live with her. Occasionally Violet wondered if in moving to Winchester she'd simply exchanged her mother for another who was equally tricky. On the other hand, she could go upstairs and shut her door on it all, which was harder to do with her mother. Mrs Harvey respected a closed door, as long as there was no man behind it; in Southampton her mother had sometimes barged into Violet's bedroom as if the door did not exist.

Back now from work, she declined tea from her landlady but smuggled some milk up and put the kettle on in her own room. This was her seventh cup of the day, even having been out part of the afternoon at the Cathedral. Cups of tea punctuated moments, dividing before from after: sleeping from waking, walking to the office from sitting down to work, dinner from typing again, finishing a complicated contract from starting another, ending work from beginning her evening. Sometimes she used cigarettes as punctuation, but they made her giddy rather than settling her as tea did. And they were more expensive.

Sitting with her cup in the one armchair by the unlit fire – it was not cold enough to justify the coal – Violet looked around her cramped room. It was quiet, except for the ticking of a wooden clock she'd picked up at a junk shop a few weeks before. The pale sun sieved through the net curtains and lit up the swirling red and yellow and brown carpet. "Thunder and lightning carpet," her father would have called it. Fawn-coloured

stockings hung drying on a rack. In the corner an ugly battered wardrobe with a door that wouldn't shut properly revealed the scant selection of dresses and blouses and skirts she had brought with her from Southampton.

Violet sighed. This is not how I was expecting it to be, she thought, this Winchester life.

Her move to Winchester last November had been sudden. After her father's death Violet had limped along for a year and a half, living alone with her mother. It was expected of women like her – unwed and unlikely to – to look after their parents. She had done her best, she supposed. But Mrs Speedwell was impossible; she always had been, even before the loss of her eldest son George in the War. She was from an era when daughters were dutiful and deferential to their mothers, at least until they married and deferred to their husbands – not that Mrs Speedwell had ever deferred much to hers. When they were children, Violet and her brothers had avoided their mother's attention, playing together as a tight gang run with casual authority by George. Violet was often scolded by Mrs Speedwell for not being feminine enough. "You'll never get a husband with scraped knees and flyaway hair and being mad about books," she declared. Little did she know that when the War came along, there would be worse things than books and scrapes to keep Violet from finding a husband.

As an adult Violet had been able to cope while her father was alive to lighten the atmosphere and absorb her mother's excesses, raising his eyebrows behind her back and smiling at his daughter, making mild jokes when he could. Once he was gone, though, and Mrs Speedwell had no target for her scrutiny other than

her daughter – her younger son Tom having married and escaped years before – Violet had to bear the full weight of her attention.

As they had sat by the fire one evening, Violet began to count her mother's complaints. "The light's too dim. The radio isn't loud enough. Why are they laughing when it's not funny? The salad cream at supper was off, I'm sure of it. Your hair looks dreadful – did you try to wave it yourself? Have you gained weight? I am not at all sure Tom and Evelyn should be sending Marjory to that school. What would Geoffrey think? Oh, not more rain! It's bringing out the damp in the hall."

Eight in a row, Violet thought. What depressed her even more than the complaints themselves was that she had counted them. She sighed.

"Sighing makes your face sag, Violet," her mother chided. "It does you no favours."

The next day at work she spied on the notice board a position for a typist in the regional Winchester office, which was doing well despite the depressed economy. Violet clutched her cup of tea and closed her eyes. Don't sigh, she thought. When she opened them she went to see the manager.

Everything about the change was easier than she had expected, at least at first. The manager at Southern Counties Insurance agreed to the move, Tom was supportive ("About bloody time!"), and she found a room to let at Mrs Harvey's without much fuss. At first her mother took Violet's careful announcement that she was moving to Winchester with a surprising lack of reaction other than to say, "Canada is where you should be going. That is where the husbands are." But on the rainy Saturday in November when Tom drove over with Evelyn and the children and began to load Violet's few possessions into his Austin, Mrs Speedwell would not get up from her armchair in the sitting

room. She sat with a cold, untouched cup of tea beside her and with trembling fingers smoothed the antimacassars covering the arms of the chair. She did not look at Violet as she came in to say goodbye. “When George was taken from us I never thought I would have to go through the ordeal of losing another child,” she announced to the room. Marjory and Edward were putting together a jigsaw in front of the coal fire; Violet’s solemn niece gazed up at her grandmother, her wide hazel eyes following Mrs Speedwell’s agitated hands as she continued to smooth and re-smooth the antimacassars.

“Mother, you’re not losing me. I’m moving twelve miles away!” Even as she said it, though, Violet knew that in a way her mother was right.

“And for the child to *choose* for me to lose her,” Mrs Speedwell continued as if Violet had not spoken and indeed was not even in the room. “Unforgivable. At least poor George had no choice; it was the War, he did it for his country. But this! Treacherous.”

“For God’s sake, Mum, Violet’s not *died*,” Tom interjected as he passed by with a box full of plates and cups and cutlery from the kitchen that Violet hoped her mother wouldn’t miss.

“Well, it’s on her hands. If I don’t wake up one morning and no one discovers me dead in my bed for days, she’ll be sorry then! Or maybe she won’t be. Maybe she’ll carry on as usual.”

“Mummy, is Granny going to die?” Edward asked, a puzzle piece suspended in the air in the clutch of his hand. He did not appear to be upset by the idea; merely curious.

“That’s enough of such talk,” Evelyn replied. A brisk brunette, she was used to Mrs Speedwell, and Violet admired how efficiently she had learned to shut down her mother-in-law. It was always easier when you weren’t related. She had sorted out Tom as well, after the War. Violet appreciated her sister-in-law but

was a little too intimidated to be true friends with her. “Come, give your Auntie Violet a kiss goodbye. Then we’ll go down to the shops while Daddy drives her to Winchester.”

Marjory and Edward scrambled to their feet and gave Violet obedient pecks on the cheek that made her smile.

“Why can’t we come to Winchester?” Edward asked. “I want to ride in Daddy’s car.”

“We explained before, Eddie. Auntie Violet has her things to move, so there’s no space for us.”

Actually, Auntie Violet didn’t have so very much to move. She was surprised that her life fitted into so few suitcases and boxes. There was still space on the back seat for another passenger, and she rather wished Edward could come with them. He was a spirited little boy who would keep her cheerful with his non-sequiturs and shameless solipsism. If forced to focus on his world, she would not think of her own. But she knew she could not ask for him to come along and not Marjory or Evelyn, and so she said nothing as they began to pull on their shoes and coats for their expedition in the rain.

When it became clear that Mrs Speedwell was not going to see her off as she normally did, watching from the doorway until visitors were out of sight, Violet went over and kissed her on the forehead. “Goodbye, Mother,” she murmured. “I’ll see you next Sunday.”

Mrs Speedwell sniffed. “Don’t bother. I may be dead by then.”

One of Tom’s best qualities was that he knew when to keep quiet. On the way to Winchester he let Violet cry without comment. Cocooned by the steamed-up windows and the smell of hot oil and leather, she leaned back in the sprung seat and sobbed. Near Twyford, however, her sobs diminished, then stopped.

She had always loved riding in Tom's handsome brown and black car, marvelling at how the space held her apart from the world and yet whisked her efficiently from place to place. "Perhaps I'll get a car," she declared, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief embroidered with violets – one of Evelyn's practical Christmas presents to her. Even as she said it she knew she could afford no such luxury: she was going to be dreadfully poor, though as yet that felt like something of a game. "Will you teach me to drive?" she asked, lighting a cigarette and cracking open a window.

"That's the spirit, old girl," Tom replied, changing gears to climb a hill. His affable nature had helped Violet to cope with her mother over the years, as well as with the War and its effects. Tom had turned eighteen shortly after news of his brother's death came through, and joined up without hesitation or fuss. He never talked about his experiences in France; like Violet's loss of her fiancé, they took a back seat to their brother's death. Violet knew she took Tom for granted, as older children always do their younger siblings. They had both looked up to George, following his lead in their play as children. Once he was gone they had found themselves at sea. Was Violet then meant to take on the role of the eldest, to assume command and set the example for Tom to follow? If so, she had made a poor job of it. She was a typist at an insurance company; she had not married and begun a family. Tom had quietly overtaken her – though he never gloated or apologised. He didn't need to: he was a man, and it was expected of him to achieve.

After they had moved her things in under Mrs Harvey's watchful eye, he took her for fish and chips. "Mum's a tough old boot, you know," he reassured her over their meal. "She got through George, and Dad too. She'll survive this. And so will

you. Just don't stay in your room all the time. Don't want to be getting 'one-room-itis', isn't that what they call it? Get out, meet some people."

Meet some men, he meant. He was more subtle than her mother about the subject, but she knew Tom too wished she would miraculously find a man to marry, even at this late age. A widower, perhaps, with grown children. Or a man who needed help with injuries. The War might have ended thirteen years before, but the injuries lasted a lifetime. Once married, she would be off Tom's hands, a niggling burden he would no longer have to worry about. Otherwise Violet might have to live with her brother one day; it was what spinsters often did.

But it was not easy to meet men, because there were two million fewer of them than women. Violet had read many newspaper articles about these "surplus women", as they were labelled, left single as a result of the War and unlikely to marry – considered a tragedy, and a threat, in a society set up for marriage. Journalists seemed to relish the label, brandishing it like a pin pressed into the skin. Mostly it was an annoyance; occasionally, though, the pin penetrated the protective layers and drew blood. She had assumed it would hurt less as she grew older, and was surprised to find that even at thirty-eight – middle-aged – labels could still wound. But she had been called worse: hoyden, shrew, man-hater.

Violet did not hate men, and had not been entirely man-free. Two or three times a year, she had put on her best dress – copper lamé in a scallop pattern – gone alone to a Southampton hotel bar, and sat with a sherry and a cigarette until someone took interest. Her "sherry men", she called them. Sometimes they ended up in an alley or a motor car or a park; never in his room, certainly not at her parents'. To be desired was welcome, though

she did not feel the intense pleasure from the encounters as she once had with Laurence during the Perseids.

Every August Violet and her father and brothers had watched the Perseid showers. Violet had never said anything to her father during those late nights in the garden, watching for streaks in the sky, but she did not really like star-gazing. The cold – even in August – the dew fall, the crick in the neck: there were never visions spectacular enough to overcome these discomforts. She would make a terrible astronomer, for she preferred to be warm.

The Perseid showers she remembered best were in August 1916, when Laurence had got leave and come to see her. They'd taken a train out to Romsey, had supper at a pub, then walked out into the fields and spread out a rug. If anyone happened upon them, they could be given a mini-lecture by Laurence about the Perseids, how the earth passed in its orbit through the remnants of a comet every August and created spectacular meteor showers. They were there in the field to watch, merely to watch. And they did watch, for a short while, on their backs holding hands.

After witnessing a few meteors streak across the sky, Violet turned on her side so that she was facing Laurence, her hipbone digging into a stone under the blanket, and said to him, "Yes." Though he had not asked a question aloud, there had been one hanging between them, ever since they had got engaged the year before.

She could feel him smile, though she couldn't see his face in the dark. He rolled towards her. After a while Violet was no longer cold, and no longer cared about the movement of the stars in the sky above, but only the movement of his body against hers.

They say a woman's first time is painful, bloody, a shock you

must get used to. It was nothing like that for Violet. She exploded, stronger it seemed than any Perseids, and Laurence was delighted. They stayed in the field so long that they missed any possibility of a train back, and had to walk the seven miles, until a veteran of the Boer Wars passed them in his motor car, recognised a soldier's gait, and stopped to give them a lift, smiling at the grass in Violet's hair and her startled happiness.

Only a week later they received the telegram about George's death at Delville Woods. And a year later, Laurence at Passchendaele. He and Violet had not managed to spend more time properly alone together, in a field or a hotel room or even an alley. With each loss she had tumbled into a dark pit, a void opening up inside her that made her feel helpless and hopeless. Her brother was gone, her fiancé was gone, God was gone. It took a long time for the gap to close, if it ever really did.

A few years later when she could face it, she tried to experience again what she'd had with Laurence that night, this time with one of George's old friends who had come through the War physically unscathed. But there were no Perseids – only a painful awareness of each moment that killed any pleasure and just made her despise his rubbery lips.

She suspected she would never feel pleasure with her sherry men. She had laughed about them with scandalised girlfriends, for a time; but some of her friends managed to marry the few available men, and others withdrew into sexless lives and stopped wanting to hear about her exploits. Marriage in particular brought many changes to her friends, and one was donning a hat of conservatism that made them genuinely and easily shocked and threatened. One of those sherry men could be their husband. And so Violet began to keep quiet about what she got up to those few times a year. Slowly, as husbands and children took

over, and the tennis games and cinema trips and dance hall visits dried up, the friendships drifted. When she left Southampton there was really no one left to regret leaving, or give her address to, or invite to tea.

“Violet, where have you gone?” Tom was studying her over the remains of his chips.

Violet shook her head. “Sorry – just, you know.”

Her brother reached over and hugged her – a surprise, as they were not the hugging sort of siblings. They walked back to Mrs Harvey’s, where his motor car was parked. Violet stood in the doorway and watched his Austin hiss away through the wet street, then went upstairs. She had thought she might cry when finally alone, in her shabby new room, with a door she could shut against the world. But she had cried her tears out on the trip from Southampton. Instead she looked around at the sparse furnishings, nodded, and put the kettle on.