

Kaeti's Nights

KEITH ROBERTS

This isn't one of Kaeti's nights. So I can get a bit of work done.

Wind's getting up again, blustering round the pub. Sign starting to creak a bit in the big gusts. That means Force Eight, Nine. We've got our own Beaufort scale here. Raining again too, hard. Hear it rattle on the windows. Been a funny old year for weather. Trees didn't drop their leaves till near on Christmas. Fields were still green too. Vivid. Sort of sickly.

Just seen to Chota, got her her bits. Saucer of milk and that. Funny little beggar. Born the wrong side of the door, I reckon. Any door. Some cats are like that. I never thought Kaeti would rear her. She did though. Kept on. Even after we'd all written her off. Even her Mum. Used to come back midmornings, give her her feed. Never knew how she got away with it. That's Kaeti though.

Kaeti's my daughter. She's dead, by the way. Just three weeks before Christmas, it was.

Funny. Me writing. Not my sort of thing at all. Couldn't see the point at first. Kaeti explained all that though. About actions. Said we weren't *supposed* to see the point. None of us. She said—let's get this right—she said what matters about actions is just that they're *done*. She said if she, well, spilled a glass of milk or scratched her knee or anything, anything at all, then it was always true it was *going* to happen. At that place, and at that point of time. Very particular about that she was. Because there are other Points, apart from those in Time. She said it was always true it *would* happen, no matter how many millions of years you went back. And it would always be true it *had* happened, no matter how far you went forward. Something about going on from where Gotama stopped. Sitting right across from me she was, curled up on the settee. And looking solemn, solemn as I'd ever seen her. She'd lost me a bit by then. She said that didn't matter though, nobody could get it all first time off. What mattered was that I believed. Another sort of belief. Something quite new.

She talked a lot about Time. Said you could *feel* it passing, if you tried. The minutes, all the seconds in 'em, all those actions going on, getting themselves recorded. Building something that was huge and getting bigger, something that could never be stopped or hurt. It doesn't *need* us, it never needed us. But we all belong to it. She said it was called the One, that everything belongs to it. The atoms in a chair leg, all whistling about. They're Events as well. Sometimes one explodes, and that's a Nova. She said to read the neo-Platonists, they knew a bit about it. I wondered where she'd had time for stuff like that. I thought Sixth Form College was nothing but skiving and Business English.

Doesn't make sense? That isn't important. Not really. Because it makes sense to me. Just in flashes. When a pendulum swings, there's shadows. Like those trick titles you see now on the Box. Some are in the future, some are in the past.

It's the bar clock I can hear. The big one in the saloon.

Funny how you can hear it right up here. Sort of trick of the building.

Came from Pete's Dad's place, that clock did. His pride and joy. Parliament clocks, they call them. Go back to the days when some silly blighter put a tax on timepieces. Seems governments weren't any smarter then. All that happened was they all chucked their clocks out, had one thundering great big thing everybody could see. Worth a packet these days. That bent little sod from the brewery offered me two hundred cash to knock it off the inventory. He must have been joking.

That's another funny idea. *Worth*. Value, price. If you knew the half of what I do—but maybe you will one day. If you get the time.

Looked in on Pete on the way up. She's asleep. Real sleep, not that halfway, floating stun you get from pills. Hair spread on the pillow, looks about twenty. As if the years don't matter. But they don't, not really. That's what's so bloody marvelous. They don't matter at all.

Asked Kaeti what I should write *about*. She just grinned though. "Anything," she said. "You, Mum. The pub. It's all Actions. Anything you like." So I'll start with me.

I wasn't born in these parts. London, that's where I hail from. The Smoke. Only they shifted me out. Five or six I was, and the Blitz just really starting to warm up.

Funny how clear some of it still is. The sirens going and us trailing out from school, lining up in the yard Then down the shelters, shoving and pushing, and the whistles going and all us with the gasmasks on our shoulders. We used to sit sometimes and hope there'd be a raid. Like holidays they were. Half days off, courtesy of old Adolf. We didn't know of course. Not really. Bombs don't mean anything to kids. They're just something that happens on the films.

I remember the shelters too. Lines of slatted seats, and the voices everywhere. Puddles on the floor, and that stink there always was of wet cement. And the lamps in their wellglasses, lines and lines of little yellow bulbs.

Funny, thinking back. The school was a damned sight better built than those bloody shelters, we'd have been better off staying where we were.

That's what my old man reckoned. We'd got an Anderson out the back, they all had. Only, we only ever used ours the once. After mat, if there was a raid on, he'd sit downstairs with his mates and just play cards. You'd hear the rumble of voices and the laughing. Sounded louder than the bombs sometimes. They'd always get me up though, make me dress. I'd got a siren suit made out of bright blue blankets, just like old Churchill. They'd get me into it and zip the front, then Jerry could do what he bloody liked. That was all we bothered.

I was only ever really scared once. And that wasn't at anything that could hurt. Typical. Mam put the bedroom light out one night and opened the curtains and took me to the window. "Look, Bill," she said, "we'll be all right now. It's the *serchlie*!" I didn't know what she meant, not to start with. Then I saw these two beams of misty blue, reaching up there miles across the housetops, and for some reason, God

knows why, they looked like horns on the head of a bloody great ghost. Then they swung and dipped, and I knew the *serchlie* was nosing about looking for me and started yelling the place down. Poor old Mam, she never did understand it. They tied the labels on our coats next morning and shipped us out. Evacuation, they called it. Sis kept bawling but I was just glad I was getting out, where the *serchlie* couldn't get me. Ghosts were a lot worse than bombs. That's where we all went wrong of course, years and years ago. Teaching kids a load of muck like that.

That's how I got to Blackwell the first time. Blackwell, Hants. Just over the border, on the edge of the big common. Queer little place it is. Not much to it, not even a church. Just little red-brick cottages scattered about and a couple of pubs, and the lane up to the farm. There's one big house, at the other end of the village. That's where we all stayed. The Stantons have got it now, had it for years, but in those days it was owned by an old biddy called Olivia Devenish. Left over from the Raj, she was. Indian stuff all stood about, and a big old overgrown garden that even had canebrakes in it. You could play lions and tigers through there a treat. Or Spitfires and Messerschmitts. We did too, me and Sis and about a dozen more. Right little perishers, we were. Mrs. Devenish never bothered though, just sat in the middle of it all and mended socks and clipped ears when she had to. I reckon that was her War Effort. Auntie we called her, and we all got on fine. Knew when to stop of course. Not like these days.

It was a bit queer to start with, green fields all over and the birds every morning. Most of us never took to it. I know Sis didn't, she was off back to London first chance she got. It suited me though somehow. They'd got ack-ack guns on the common then, and a searchlight unit. I knew what they were by then of course. Used to hang round every chance I got, scrounge off the soldiers. Got to be a sort of company mascot in the end. Even had my picture in the paper once, sitting at one of the guns complete with oversize tin hat. Plus some bloody drivel about the next generation and Building for the Future. Still got it somewhere.

Nobody ever bombed Blackwell though; and after a while the unit was moved out. It was real quiet after that.

I could have gone back, I suppose. A lot of them did. I probably would have if I'd had the chance. But Dad always said no, not till they blew the whistle. Reckoned Jerry had still got some stuff left up his sleeve. As it turned out, he was right. V-2 it was, took the whole row out. The war finished a few weeks later.

I lived with Auntie May and her lot till I finished school. I got myself a garage apprenticeship then. Used to hang round Duggie Caswell's old place in the village, I'd got used to the smell of motor oil. After that it was national service of course. For some reason they decided I wasn't quite A-1 so it was the pay corps and like it. Two years counting plasters, watching camels float down the Sweetwater bloody Canal. When I got back to London, there was nothing to stay for any more. What mates I'd had had ail drifted off; Sis had married and moved out, damn near to Epping, and the Council had really got their teeth into our neighborhood. I reckon they finished Jerry's job for him. All the stuff he hadn't had a go at, they did. My old

man would have turned in his grave. If he a ever had one. Auntie was slated for a high-rise block, and there wouldn't have been room for me even if I'd wanted to go. That's how I turned up again one bright day in Blackwell. I've been here ever since.

Always liked the common. Not that there's all that much to see. Just flat ground, undulating a bit, the tussocky grass, big stands of gorse and bramble. Swarms with adders in the summer, the cottage hospital always used to keep the serum. Lazy little beggars, bite rather than move, the kids would step straight on 'em. Autumn's the time to see it though. Autumn, and early winter. It sort of comes into its own then. The pub fronts it square-on, you can see the mist lie on it like milk, the humps and bushes sticking up out of it dark. The mist's nearly always there, hanging low. Till the wind gets up and shreds it. They say it's to do with the subsoil. Which I suppose is as good a story as the next. Sometimes it comes creeping across the road, big blue tongues that push out sudden, no more than a toot or two off the ground. It was a night like that old Teddy saw the ghost. Tall swirling pillar it was, come squirting straight out the ground. I can remember him saying it. "Swirling," he kept on saying. "Swirling, it was." Took half a bottle of Scotch to set him to rights. But Teddy was an old trooper, sarn't-major farrier in the Bengal Lancers. Never needed much in the way of excuses at the best of times.

I first met Pete on the common. I used to walk there whenever I had the time. Which wasn't all that often. I was working for Douggie Caswell then, been with him getting on Tour years. He was at the garage all hours himself so if an urgent job came in, which they often did, I never bothered much about staying on as well. Not much else to do in Blackwell anyway. But I used to stroll that way when I could. You could still see the pads where they stood the anti-aircraft guns, and close by were some concrete bunkers they'd never got round to knocking down. Even some rusty coils of wire, with the weeds all crowing through them. I'd sit and smoke a fag and think about the old times. Mam and Dad, what he a have made of it all. I suppose I'd turned into a bit of a loner. I was like it in the mob, they always reckoned I was a funny sort of blighter. Even for a Londoner.

Pete was a bit the same. Though to start with I never realized why. She's got this scar on her face. Down one cheek and across her chin. Pulls her lip up one side, into a little pucker. Pony did it, when she was a nipper. Must have nearly split her in half, poor little devil. They'd make a better job of it now. But those days plastic surgery was something not even money could buy. Took us a war to really find out about that.

Funny, but that first time I never even noticed it. Maybe because she had a knack of keeping her face half turned away. She was very good at it too, never made it obvious. All I saw was this tall blonde piece in flat slippers and a belted mac, mooching along on her own. Her collar was turned up against the drizzle, her hands were rammed in her pockets. But, do you know, I fancied what I saw. When I finally did see the mark—well, it was just a part of her, wasn't it? It didn't worry me one little bit, not ever. I sometimes think I thought more of her because of it. But perhaps I'm funny that way.

Her Dad kept a ramshackle old pub the other side of Camberley. The Hoops, it was called. Been knocked down for years now, to make way for a by-pass. Her Mum was dead and there weren't any other kids, so Sunday afternoons were about the only free time she had. That's when we used to meet, up on the common. Meet, and just walk. Sometimes we'd talk, sometimes we wouldn't bother. I expect you'll think that's a funny sort of courtship. But then I never looked on it as courting. I don't think she did either. I'd tell her about Cairo and the army, and being in London in the war, and she'd come out with bits about herself. Her great grandparents were Norwegian, which was where she got her figure and her looks. Proud of it too, in a funny sort of way. She still spelled her name the same, "Petersen" with an "e." She hadn't got much of a life though. Just the pub really. Her Dad enjoyed the gout, he'd got pills for it but the awkward old blighter wouldn't take 'em. They didn't do much trade, not enough to run to bar help. So the nights he couldn't hobble, she'd got the place to run on her own. That's why I took to dropping in, latish sometimes, to do a bit of cellar work for them. Rack the barrels for tapping, get the empties into the yard. I suppose they got to rely on me. But we didn't think too much about that either.

It was over a year before I popped the question. Even then I don't think I would have, only I'd had just one or two over the odds. Christmas it was, they'd asked me over to stay, help out with the bars because for once they were going to be busy. Anyway, when we finally got the doors shut and the old man had tottered off for some kip, we just flopped out, both of us, either side the fire. Turkey was on, there wasn't anything else to do. We watched the windows bluing for a while; then she fetched another drink and we got to talking. She was really tired. I knew because she was nibbling the scar, a thing she never did. Sliding her fingers along it, touching at her lip.

I don't know why but I felt a sense of urgency. As if a moment was coming—an Event—that would never come again. Not ever, not in a thousand million years. I'd never imagined myself marrying anybody, let alone *asking*. I'd thought about it odd times, I suppose everybody does, but the image had just refused to form. But now I somehow knew it wouldn't wait. Every second was precious and they were rushing past faster and faster, all the while I sat. So I just came out with it. No time even to be scared.

I'll never forget the look on her face. "What?" she said. "What?" As if she hadn't heard right. So I said it again. Told her some other things as well, that had been waiting a very long time. They all came out in a rush. I wasn't any bloody capture, not for anybody. Let alone a girl like her. It was a cheek even to think about it, and I told her that as well.

She still looked sort of dazed. "Me?" she said. "Me?" I found out then what that silly little mark on her face had come to mean to her over the years. Because she grabbed my hand, pressed my fingers on it. "You'd be marrying this as well," she said. "This. Wake up every morning, have to look at it."

I knew I'd had too much then because I just got blazing mad. Not *at* her though.

Sort of for her. "Yes," I said, "and aren't I the lucky one? Think of all the fun I'm going to have, trying to kiss it better."

She started laughing at that. Then she was crying, then we were both laughing again. "Why not?" she said. "Why bloody not?" Then I think we both went a bit mad. All that lot bottled up, then the cork came out the bubbly. Afterwards she said, "I love you, Bill, I love you," and I said, "I love you." Silly bloody words, aren't they? But words are all we've got. We lay and said them and said them and the radio was playing in the lounge because we hadn't turned it off, and there's a carol that still stands my back hairs straight on end. I was the King of Bethlehem that night, because I'd just been born; and she was the Queen.

We made part of the top floor of the Hoops into a flat. It wasn't ideal but there really wasn't anything else to do. Kaeti was born just over a year later. That wasn't a good time either. Pete got her second scar. Afterwards, she could never ever have any more.

They say it never rains but what it bloody pours. A few weeks later Douggie called me into his rabbit hutch of an office. I'd been expecting it. I'd lost a lot of hours, work was piling up, we were going to have to sort something out. It wasn't that though. He beat about the bush for a while, which wasn't like him; then he came out with it. He hadn't been feeling too good for a year or more; he'd been thinking it was time to call it quits. Now he'd had an offer he couldn't turn down. So he was selling up.

He'd started to look his age, I granted that. I'd seen it, so had one or two more. But the first thing in my mind was Pete and the kid. I said, "Who to?"

He looked away again. Finally he said, "Jacobsons." Then he looked back. He said, "I'm sorry about it, Bill, I know just how you feel. I feel the same. But that's the way it's got to be."

A by-word in the district, they were. Right crowd of Flash Harrys. Made it pay though, got a big place out on the A-30, couple more down Frimley way. Believed in fast turnover. Small profits, quick returns. Or so the saying goes. The fast turnover included staff. I couldn't imagine what they wanted our dump for. I found out fast enough though. First thing in was the time clock. Second was a smartyboots little manager. His main job was corner-cutting. If there was a fast way round anything, that was the way you took. Not sawdust in the axles, rubbish like that; they were far too smart. But some of the bits were bloody near as bad. There were four of us by then. Five including the foreman. Which naturally wasn't me. They extended the old workshop, pushed an ugly great prefab across what used to be the Waterfords' greenhouse. General consensus was, it spoiled the village. Which in fact it did. There are such things as planning authorities of course, but a bob or two in the right place always did work wonders.

Maybe I should have got out before I did. But jobs in my line weren't all that thick on the ground. I did prospect a couple, but I couldn't see myself being any better off. And it had to be local because Pete was tied to the pub. Her old man was worse than ever, in addition to which he'd started hitting the bottle. We'd had to take on a

fulltime girl, and another to cover her days off. The combined wages made a hefty dent in the family income. All in all, we'd got ourselves into a right bloody tangle.

I stood it for a year. Then Douggie rang one night with a proposition. I didn't fancy it at first. I'd never seen myself as a shopkeeper, I don't now. But the way he put it, it made sense. "You know the trade's changing, boy. It's not repairs any more, it's just replacements. You don't *do* any bloody engineering, one month's end to the next. Why not face facts?"

He'd got property all over, bought in the days when you could get a nice little cottage for a couple of hundred quid. Nice little shop it was too, just off Camberley High Street. Caswell Autospares. Did well right from the start, I was surprised. Leather steering wheels, poncy little car vacs; lot of stuff I wouldn't have bothered with myself. I always stopped short at Dolly Dangers though.

Funny, sometimes when you hit a bit of rough. It seems you cop for the lot. Then you get through it and it all goes smooth and straight and you know it's going to stay that way, for a little while at least. Though I expect Kaeti would have a smart answer for that as well. Something to do with Perception of Reality.

She was seven when we came up here. Right little tomboy, spitting image of her Mum. Darker coloring, but the same big grey-Blue eyes. Her Grandad had been dead five years or more. We brought the big clock out and an old carved box full of family letters, and that was the last I wanted to see of the Hoops. We settled down to build the business up and make ourselves a home. The first real one we'd had.

Pete was over the other thing as well. About never having any more kids. It hit her hard to start with. She never said all that much, but I could tell. I knew she was over it when she stood in front of the mirror one night. "You know," she said, "I think it's working."

I couldn't think what she meant, not to start with. I said, "What's working?" and she grinned at me. She said, "What you told me that first night. It must be mind over matter."

I'd been going through some of the papers and they'd given me an idea. "Pete," I said, "have you ever been home?"

"What?" she said. "I am home."

"No," I said, "I didn't mean that. I ment Norway." It didn't sink in for a minute. Then her eyes started to change. She said, "We can't afford it."

"No," I said, "we can't. When shall we go?" She didn't answer straight off. Just sort of swallowed.

Then she said, "It'll have to be a ship. Grandad always said it had to be a ship." And so a ship it was. Kaeti and Pete and me, all on a great big ship. And Norway?

It's funny, but it's a place where there's only Now.

Because the winter's coming and it's dark, it lasts forever.

So you live a marvelous, vivid Now. And there's the mountains, the huge

mountains, and the sea. It's a place to be in love. On a ship, under the Midnight Sun.

Wind's dropped a bit. Rain's easing too. Put the light out just now, stood till my eyes got used to the dark. Nothing to see though. Dim gleam of the lane and the common stretching out, big humps of bushes. Nothing moving at all.

Dougie died in sixty-nine. I'd been expecting it but it still came as a shock. After all, I'd known him most of my life. I got a bigger shock a few days later though. He'd left us the shop. The lot, lock, stock and barrel. I knew there weren't any relatives, just a sister somewhere down Brighton way; but I still never expected that. About the same time the word went round the Greyhound would be changing hands, old Bill was going to retire. Good old boy he was, ex-copper. Had it since just after the War.

Pete grinned when I told her about it. She said, "Going to have a go then?"

"A go," I said, "what do you mean?" and she looked at me. "The pub," she said. "You know you want it."

I think my mouth must have dropped open. I *did* want it, I wanted it a lot, but till that minute I don't think I'd faced up to it. I said, "Haven't you seen enough of pubs?"

She started clearing away. "We're not talking about me," she said. "We're talking about you."

"We're talking about both of us," I said. "You wouldn't want to go back into a pub, not after what you put up with."

She leaned on the table. "Look, Bill Fredericks," she said, "I've never told you what I want, one way or the other. So don't go putting words in my mouth." She looked thoughtful "Matter of fact, I wouldn't mind running a pub," she said. "*Running* one. My way. And you could make that place go."

"But there's nothing up there," I said. "Only the village."

"There's the new estates," she said. "And that other one they started up Yately way. Came by the other day, there's people in already."

"They're no good," I said. "Up to here in mortgages. Anyway we couldn't afford it, the ingoing's bound to be sky high. It'd mean selling up."

She looked scornful. "Course it wouldn't," she said. "Get it off the bank, you've got collateral now. Then put somebody in here. I don't see how you could lose."

And that was the first time I realized Pete's got a far better business head than me.

I didn't think we stood much of a chance. Heard later they had twenty couples after it. But Pete got herself done up to kill and that was the end of it. Perhaps the brewery thought they owed her a favor.

I suppose the Greyhound isn't everybody's idea of a country pub. Big gaunt red-brick place it is, stands back on its own facing the common. Wood-paneled

walls, vintage nineteen twenty, and the two big bars. There's more to it than meets the eye though. Had a horse in the Public one night, new pony from the riding school. Old Teddy's fault, that was. Little lass on board couldn't get it past; then he clicked to it and in it came for its ale. Reckoned later he could tell it was a beer drinker by the look in its eye. And there it was plunging about with the little lass looking distraught and Teddy up the corner having the croup. He got it back outside finally with the lure of a pine, after which of course it never would go by the pub. Used to have to hack along the other road.

Thursdays were the highlights. They were the barter nights; unspoken thing it was, among the locals. They'd all slope in, starting about eight, dump polythene sacks on the long bench just inside the door. Peas and beans, cabbages, onions and spuds, cauliflowers. Looked like a budding harvest festival sometimes. They'd have a pint or two apiece, not hurrying, then it would start. "Nice-looking collies you got there," Jesse Philips would say, and somebody else would take it up. "See your beans done all right then, Jesse." After a while the swap would be made, and that would set the tone for the rest. Peas would change place with cabbages, potatoes with onions, till everybody was suited. The incomers from the new estate cottoned after a while and tried to join in. But all they brought were bunches of flowers. Jesse Philips summed it up one night. "Can't eat bloody chrysanthus," he said, after which they took the hint and tried for vegetables. But the new plots couldn't compete. The builders dumped the rubbish from the footings, they'd lost their topsoil. The ring closed up. They'd sell, at fair Camberley prices, but they would not trade. So Blackwell became two villages. We watched that happen as well.

We made our mistakes of course, like everybody else. But they weren't too serious. We kept the old trade and built on it. The lads from Jacobsons started dropping in when they heard I'd taken over. And there was the new place, the annex to the Agricultural College. Weekends they'd bring their wives and girlfriends, and so the word spread round. Sundays there were the trippers and hikers. We catered for them, forty or fifty at a time, so the word spread that way too. After the first couple of years we could afford bar help two or three nights a week, and we were taking holidays again. Never get rich, not from a pub like the Greyhound; but we were comfortable. And of course there was the shop as well.

I've heard people say bringing up teen-age boys is bloody murder. I wouldn't know. Ail I can say is, try bringing up a teen-age girl. I can't remember noticing the change as such, but suddenly it seemed we hadn't got a pretty little kid any more. Instead there was this gawky twelve- or thirteen-year-old, all knees and elbows and Woody bad temper. Tantrums every morning, tears every night. Or so it seemed to me. And never a reason for it, not that I could see. She'd got all the things most kids of her age want, but it was never enough. So-and-so had got this, somebody else had got that. Such-and-such was going on a school exchange to Germany, why couldn't she? So we sent her to Germany, though she didn't seem much better suited when she got back. Then it was a pony, she had to have a pony. Horses morning noon and night, six months or more. So we got her a pony, rented grazing from old Frank the diddy. The fad lasted another three or four months, after which she never

went near. So there was trouble over that as well. Her mother got fed up in the end, sold the thing over her head. The row that followed was the best so far. I left them to it, opened up on my own. The public bar was beginning to seem more and more a haven of rest.

Then it was boys of course. First was young Davey Woodford from the farm. Nice enough kid in his way, but, oh Gawd, teen-age romance! "Wasn't you ever young, Mr. Fredericks," he asked me once. "Wasn't you ever *young*?" I'm afraid I made things worse, laughing the way I did. Course I was young, but I can't remember any episodes like that. Never had time, to start with. His age I was out in the bundu, counting bloody shekels.

Got worse rather than better when the thing with him blew up. She attracted 'em, from as far away as Frimley. Acted like a magnet. She was starting to be a looker, I granted that. But some of 'em weren't very wholesome types at all. I could see our nice clean reputation taking a sudden dive. That finished when her mother turned her out the bar one night. "Get upstairs," I heard her say, "you're not coming in here like that." After which there was a constant grinding of rock from her room till supertime, at which we had the row to end all rows.

That was also the first time in my life I saw Pete really lose her temper. She didn't stop at one either, she beat the daylights out of her.

I'll admit it, I got out. Made myself a John Collins, went and sat in the snug and had a smoke. There's something about voices raised in anger that I've always found chilling. Not so much the violence, the pointlessness. We act, sometimes, as if we're all immortal. It reminds me, or reminded me, of the shortness of life.

Pete came through about half an hour later, got herself a drink as well. She looked at me a minute, then came and put her hand on my shoulder. "Sorry," she said, "but it had to come. I wasn't being spoken to like that."

I said, "What's happened?" and she smiled. "Nothing," she said. "She'll be all right. She's gone to bed."

I said before, sometimes you seem to cop for the lot. Then you come through it and it all seems to sail along again. Just as suddenly, or so it seemed to me, Kaeti was a young woman. Taller than her mother, couple of inches with her heels on, and just as pretty. Same mannerisms, same turn of the head, same po-faced sense of humor, like turning the clock back somehow. All the rest was behind her. She was smoking but not too much, she liked a drink, she was going to Sixth Form College. Knew just what she wanted and how to get it. Mornings when she had a free period, Pete would nip down to Camberley, have coffee with her there. They'd come back together. Two women, joking and laughing. Close. I suppose we were a family again. Though this time we didn't have very long to enjoy it.

April it was, when she first got ill. She'd been looking off-color for days; finally she didn't come down to breakfast. Said her throat was bad, she couldn't hardly swallow. Didn't clear up either. So finally I called Doc Jamieson. He came down shaking his head. Said it was thrush, first adult case he'd seen in years. He left her

some stuff, but it didn't seem to do much for her. She was off a couple of weeks. When she finally went back she just seemed listless. Preoccupied. You'd speak to her, and odds she wouldn't answer. Sometimes have to speak two or three times, then she'd come round with a jump. But she wouldn't know what you'd said. The other thing was starting by then of course. But at the time we didn't realize.

It was the most perfect summer I can remember. Day after day cloudless, the nights warm, with the breeze bringing the scents in off the common. Made it even more ironic. Kaeti lying upstairs there, dozing or staring out at the sky. I rigged a television for her, put the control where she could reach it without moving her arm. But she never bothered with it. "I'm all right, Dad," she kept on saying. "Just a bit tired, that's all. Don't worry, I'll be all right." She wasn't all right though; she was far from all right. She looked bloodless somehow. Like a marble statue.

Doc Jamieson was worried as well. I could see that. Had a drink with me one night just before we opened. Said it was the listlessness that had got him bothered more than the rest. There wasn't much physically wrong at that stage. Touch of anemia certainly, but that did sometimes happen after a bad infection. He finally said he'd like her taken in for tests. Asked him what sort of tests but I might as well have saved my breath. Lawyers and accountants can both be vague enough when it suits their book. But the medical profession leaves 'em at the post.

I don't know how many tests she did have. We both lost count. They were all inconclusive. Or maybe there were too many conclusions. Agranulocytosis without ulceration. She'd got the experts thoroughly baffled as well. So I did a bit of reading for myself. Afterwards I wished I hadn't. There's a lot of words for it but they all add up to one thing. If it goes on long enough, the blood turns yellow-green, like pus. I still don't like to use the phrase they have for it. Even though I know by now they got it wrong.

The mist came back with the autumn. Long white tongues of it, creeping round the pub. Even then though she wouldn't have her windows closed. It was the only thing that roused her. The Doc shrugged finally and said to let it be. The rest was left unspoken but I had a horrible feeling I knew what it was. Nothing would do much harm now; she was past any help he thought he could give her.

The locals were very good. There were always thins being left for her, jam, preserves, whole load of stun. We'd got a cupboard full. Not that she ever touched it. Wasn't eating enough to keep a mouse alive. She'd ask sometimes how they all were, Jesse and old Teddy and the rest. And they'd ask after her of course. All except Frank Smith, which was odd. Funny little bloke he was, a lot of gypsies are. But he'd always been one of the most concerned. Till I told him, quite early on, there was a touch of anemia but the Doc thought she'd be fine. After that he didn't come in again. I didn't give it much thought for a couple of weeks; then I asked Jesse if he was bad. I thought he gave me a funny sort of look. He said no he was fine, been talking to him that morning in the village. Saw him myself a couple of times after that, out on his rounds, but he wouldn't speak. First time he looked the other way; second time he whipped the horse up. Which was a thing I'd never seen him do. His place

was put up for sale a Tew days later; we didn't see him again.

Last thing they tried was x-ray treatment. I didn't like the idea of it, neither did Pete. But Kaeti just laughed. "That's all right," she said, "it won't matter, I shall be back for Christmas, you see." Funny, but she looked really perky. Sitting up with a woolly on, brighter than she'd been for weeks. Made a fuss about having all her bits and pieces, books to read and such. Even got her mother to do her hair. Two days later the hospital phoned. I knew It somehow before I picked the damned thing up. Our daughter was dead.

They all said afterwards how good we both were. You know, carrying on. It wasn't like that at all though; there was nothing good about it. When a thing like that happens, it turns all your ideas upside down. You carry on because you've got to. Would you mind telling me what else there is to do?

It was a big turnout. Sis came down of course, and Auntie May's Tot, and some other cousins I hadn't seen for years. Plus the brewery outside manager, and nearly everybody from the pub.

It was raining. People always say it rains on days like that. And somehow it nearly always seems to. I don't remember very much else about it. I know I stared at the wreaths laid out on the grass and caught myself wondering what I was doing there. And there was a little chapel set among the graves, and a trolley with rubber-tired wheels that didn't squeak. That didn't get to me either though. It was like acting in a film somehow, it was nothing to do with us. Me and Pete and Kaeti. I was waiting for somebody with a megaphone to jump up and shout cut. Then we could all go home. But the film kept grinding on.

Sis stayed a fortnight, helped out with the bars. Then she had to get back. I didn't blame her. She'd already done more than most.

Hardest thing was convincing myself it had really happened. I knew I'd got to of course, but in a queer way I still couldn't believe it. Kaeti's life just stopping like that, a breath that went in and didn't come back out. And letting the box down on its webbings, and going home for tea. It couldn't be all there was to it; it just wasn't possible. So none of it had really happened; I was in some sort of dream. I kept trying to wake up but I couldn't. Coming to terms, they call it. What a bloody phrase. Though you can't blame them for that. Like I said before, words are all we've got.

Nights were the worst. I was tired and getting tireder, but I wasn't sleeping worth mentioning. I'd doze off sometimes toward dawn, get an hour or two. Then it was daylight, and I'd wake up and realize the dream was still going on and just want to go to sleep again, and sometimes I'd manage it. Then I'd be late for the dray or the Cash and Carry, and the bottling up wouldn't be done by opening time. I remember thinking sometimes it had to have an end. But there's never an end to anything. Any more than there's a beginning. We went to London for the Christmas, just one night. Then back again first thing to open up. Another year would be starting soon. That

was beginning to get to me as well.

Pete was worrying me too. The day after the funeral she stripped the display units in both bars, washed them down. The morning after she did it all again. And the morning after that. We always used to do them pretty often. You've got to, the smoke gets to them mirrors. But not every day God sent. Then she shampooed the carpets. Scrounged one of those big industrial units from a little bloke who used to come in now and then. After that it was the kitchen's turn. She scrubbed it down, walls, floor and ceiling. Then the upstairs bathroom. Then a load of paint arrived from the brewery. I thought the van driver looked a bit shifty. Turned out she'd fixed it without telling me. The upstairs had to be done up. All of it, right through. She started on it in the afternoons. Which meant she was working eighteen hour days. And she wasn't sleeping either.

I thought at least she'd leave Kaeti's room till last. She didn't though. Went up one day, found all her things parceled in heaps. Ready for the jumble. She just shrugged when I said about it. Asked what was the point of keeping them, they weren't any use to us. I said, "But, Pete," and she turned and looked at me. Nothing behind her eyes, not any more. They looked—well, sort of dead. So I didn't say anything else. But it still hurt plenty.

It had to end of course. Nobody can just keep on going like that, week after week. I was in the Public when it happened, talking to Jesse and one or two more. Dick Stanton had come down with his sister-in-law, the one who used to be an opera singer. I could hear his distinctive voice in the saloon. There was quite a crowd in, mostly youngsters from the college, but Pete had shoved me out. Said she could cope. So I left her to it. She was always better working on her own; we saw too much of each other the rest of the time.

I wasn't really registering the buzz of voices till it stopped. There was a crash then, like a bar stool going over. I half turned, and Pete was standing in the doorway. I've never seen a face like it. There's a phrase for it they use in lousy novels. *Blazing* white. Well, it was. She opened her mouth, sort of half pointed behind her, then she just crumpled. I jumped forward, but I was nowhere near quick enough. Bottles went flying, then Dick ran through. He said, "My God, Bill, what happened?"

We got her to the bedroom somehow, and his sister-in-law came up. I left them, ran to call the Doc. I thought she was a goner, straight. But by the time he arrived she was sitting up. Still looked pale as death but she swore she was all right, she just passed out. He left her some stuff, and I followed him down. "Doc," I said, "what's wrong?"

He shook his head. Nothing, apparently, that he could find. He said, "How's she been? Since..."

I told him what had happened and he nodded. He said what I'd been thinking, that nobody could keep on indefinitely. It catches up with them. He said, "Can you get some help in?"

"Sure," I said, "George Swallow will always do an extra night. Glad of the cash."

He opened his car door. "Get him then," he said, "and try and keep her in bed. It would do you both good to get away for a few days. I'll look in again tomorrow." He drove off and I went back inside. Good bloke, is Doc Jamieson. After all, we were only ever NHS.

I got the bars closed finally and went upstairs. I thought she was asleep but she opened her eyes when she heard me. They were huge and dark. "No, Bill," she said. "I don't want no pills." She grabbed my wrist. She said, "Bill, I *saw* her..."

"What?" I said. "Saw who?"

She swallowed and tightened her grip. "Kaeti," she said. "She was in the bar..."

Things seemed to spin round a bit for me as well. I sat on the bed. "Look, Pete," I said, "you've got to face it. Kaeti's dead..."

She pushed her hair back. "You don't understand," she said. "I *saw* her, it *was* her. Don't you think I know my own daughter?"

I got her a bit more settled after a while and went back down. I got myself a stiff drink and sat and smoked a fag. I didn't know what to do. Or think. But I had to talk to somebody. Finally I rang Dick Stanton. He's always been a late bird. I didn't think he'd mind. He said at once, "How is she?"

I hesitated. I said, "She's fine, the Doc thinks she'll be OK. Just been overdoing it, you know what it's been like."

"Yes," he said, "I think I've got the picture."

I hesitated again. "Look, Dick, *did* anything happen? In the other bar? The way she came through..."

He didn't answer for a minute. I sensed he was puzzled as well. Finally he said, "Not that I saw. She was talking to us, seemed quite OK. Then suddenly... it was as if she'd seen a ghost."

Level-headed man is Dick. I've always had a lot of time for him. And he knows how to keep his mouth shut. I swallowed and took the plunge. I said, "She did."

The phone said, "What?"

I said, "She thinks she saw our daughter. She saw Kaeti."

A pause. Then he said, "Just a minute." I stood and listened to the atmospherics on the line. They were bad that night. like voices nearly, whispering and hissing. Finally he said, "Hello? You still there?"

"Look, Bill," he said, "there was one funny thing. There were some youngsters in, looked like students. Over in the far corner, I didn't pay 'em much attention. They'd just got up to leave. Jilly says there was a girl with them. Tall, brown haired."

So that explained it.

"No," he said, "not quite. When Pete ran through like that, Jill went out after them. She thought they might have done some damage or nicked something. She was only a second or two behind. But there wasn't anybody outside. No cars moving either."

"What?" I said. "There must have been."

I could sense him shrugging. He said, "It's probably not important. Like you said, she just made a mistake. She's been under a lot of strain." Another pause. Then he said, "Look, Susan's at the college. My eldest. I'll get her to ask round on the quiet. See if anybody was there. If they remember."

"Thanks," I said, "thanks a lot. And, Dick... keep it under your hat, will you? I wouldn't want it getting about."

He said, "I didn't hear a thing. Take it steady, Bill. I'm sure she'll be OK."

Oddly enough, for once I got a good night's sleep. When I woke up, Pete wasn't in the room, I ran downstairs but she wasn't in the pub either. I was just starting to get really worried when the side door clicked. She came in looking different somehow. Brighter. She said, "I went for a walk on the common. It's a lovely morning. I think spring's coming."

I've never seen anybody perk up the way she did. She went down to Camberley that same day, came back with an armful of flowers. She made up bowls for each of the bars, and one for the sitting room upstairs. When Doc Jamieson arrived she was dashing about like a two-year-old. He raised his eyebrows but he didn't say anything. I'd have given a lot to know what he was thinking though.

That night I heard her laughing in the saloon. Just like the old times. That hurt as well, deep down. She couldn't have forgotten Kaeti already. Not as quick as that.

She didn't touch her bedroom again. The fad seemed to have ended as quickly as it started. The clothes she'd sorted out had vanished, but I hadn't seen her take them anywhere. I slipped in on the quiet one morning. They were all back in the chest of drawers, and sprigs of lavender to keep them fresh. Apart from some she took down to the kitchen. She washed and ironed them, did some mending; then she put them with the rest.

She didn't stop the redecorating. Instead she worked harder than ever. Seemed to have got fresh strength from somewhere. I argued with her about it once, but she just smiled. "Got to have it looking nice," she said. "Never know, somebody might come."

"Who?" I said. "There's only us." But she carried on regardless. So I got stuck in as well. It was April by the time we'd finished, nearly May. And the common brightening with the new spring grass.

I thought she'd forgotten our daughter. She hadn't though. Far from it. After we closed one night, I caught her taking a cup of tea upstairs. I asked her where she thought she was going and she grinned at me. "Where do you think?" she said. "It's for Kaeti."

I opened my mouth and shut it. Couldn't think of anything to say. Next day I made an excuse to go out, called on Doc Jamieson. After that the pills changed color. She said she didn't need them. She took them sometimes, when she couldn't get out of it, but most of the while she just flushed them down the loo. Those were

the nights she took to wandering. I'd see the light on under Kaeti's door, hear her talking inside and laughing. I never interrupted her, because I couldn't face what was happening.

I won't say that was the worst part of all because it wasn't. But it did come near to being the last straw. She was in a private world of her own, somewhere I could never go. We were drifting apart as well, and there wasn't a single thing I could do.

It's been a funny old year for weather. Trees didn't drop their leaves till near on Christmas. Fields were still green too. Vivid. Sort of sickly.

The mist we sometimes used to get hung round right through the summer. Mostly by the pub. Jesse remarked on it more than once, said it was clear up by his place. Which was only a couple of hundred yards along the road. Teddy noticed it too. Only he wasn't coming in so much. He'd had a bad go of asthma; he said it played his chest up.

Used to sit and watch it sometimes. When I didn't fancy sleeping. Long tendrils, white as milk, and always moving. Flowing. Organic almost. I'd moved my desk into the sitting room, so I could hear if Pete got too restless. I'd finish the day's booking, then put the light out, just sit and smoke a cigarette and stare. Get hypnotized almost. Sometimes I'd doze. I'd always have bad dreams then. Only they weren't bad at the time. Just when I woke up. I'd be talking to Kaeti, remembering little things. All sorts of things. Then I'd sit up and the room would be empty again. Sometimes I'd think I could still hear her voice, that she was still there. Sitting across from me, curled on the settee. But it was only patches of moonlight on the wall.

Pete bought her a skipping rope once. Just after she started college. Kaeti swore she was getting fat, went on and on. I even dreamed about that.

Real jute it was, it said so on the carton. With handles made from old loom spindles. There was a booklet too, all about children's rhymes. It became her prize possession. She'd play with it for hours, up in her room. Clear all the stuff away first so she could get a good swine. The bumping and thumping would echo right through the pub. Like the old clock ticking. And you'd hear her chanting, getting steadily more out of breath. "Salt-mustard-vinegar-pepper, salt-mustard-vinegar-pepper..." Then an extra thump as she tried for the big one, four turns under, and usually a faint "*Damnit...*" After which she'd start all over. Right nut case she was, I told her so more than once. But it never had any effect.

When I opened my eyes that time, I could still hear the scuff of her feet. Even the faint whistle of the rope. The sounds took ages to die away. When I went out onto the landing, the door of her room stood ajar, and the light was on again. I reached in, turned it off and pulled the door shut. I didn't look back, because if it came back on I would have to go and see. I did turn by our bedroom. The room had stayed dark of course.

Next night I was seeing to Chota. I'd got her her bits as usual, saucer of milk and that. She had a good drink, thought about the meat, then changed her mind and ran

to the back door. "Oh, no," I said, "you can't want out this time of night." But she was mewling, scratching at the frame as if her life depended on it.

"All right," I said, "be quick then." I was wasting my breath though; I opened the door a few inches and she was through it like a streak and away.

I swore and went to fetch a torch. I walked outside and called but there was no sign of her. The mist was moving fast, streaming toward the pub. I flicked the torch about but it was useless, the beam just refracted back. I thought I heard her again somewhere ahead. I walked till I could see the common stretching out vague and blue-white. Then I heard the door slam shut behind me.

I gave up and went back. First thing I saw was the cat, finishing the saucer as if nothing had occurred. Ears laid back, really tucking in. I called her a few names under my breath, shot the bolts on the door and went upstairs. It was late but I didn't want to sleep. I went into the sitting room instead, sat down at my desk. I watched the mist flow in after me under the door. For some reason I wasn't really surprised.

There wasn't much of a crack but it had found it. It swirled round my ankles, spread across the room. Once I put my hand down to it. I expected it to feel cold but it didn't. Not much sensation from it at all.

More came, and more. There seemed no end to it. I thought for a while the room would fill right up. It didn't though. It was as if it was congealing somewhere, out of my line of sight. I watched the pattern on the carpet become visible again, heard the soft footsteps pad across the room. My old dressing gown was slung across a chair.

I heard it rustle, then the steps came back. Finally I looked up. Kaeti was sitting on the settee with the dressing gown wrapped round her. It was too long by a foot or more. She said, "Hello, Dad." Then she smiled. She said, "You always was a gent."

My cigarettes were lying on the desk top. I picked the packet up and opened it. But I didn't really want it. So I put it back. When I looked up again she hadn't gone away. I said, "What's happening?" I don't know quite what I meant by that. Some sort of a time-slip idea I think.

She pushed her hair back. She said, "Don't tell me you didn't know." She got up, walked toward me. She said, "Hello" again and held her hands out. I took them. They were warm.

I said, "It is you, isn't it?" and she said, "Yes." Then she scotched on my lap, put her arms round my neck. She hadn't done that since she was about eight. She said, "I know it's a bit of a shock. But I did try and warn you. You must have heard me the other night."

I said, "I couldn't be sure." Then it got to me. "Kaeti," I said, "it was raining," and she said, "I know," and hugged me. "Don't, Dad," she said, "it's all right," and I said, "Kaeti, oh my God." We said a lot more then, the both of us, but I don't remember any of it. Neither did I care. I'd got her back, you see, I'd got my kid back. And she was warm.

Afterwards I said, "Kaeti, what about your mother," and she put her head back and laughed. "She knows," she said, "she's known for ages. We were only worried about breaking it to you." I did pull away a bit then because I'd seen the faint hypertrophy of the eyeteeth, the lovely little pearly fangs she'd grown. But she only laughed again. "Dad," she said, "you are a twit. I'm not going to *chumph* you, that's only on the films." She sat up then and looked at me solemnly. She said, "You look as if you need a drink. And I'd like something too, it don't half make you thirsty. Can I make some tea?"

I said, "Can you *drink*?" and she giggled. "What do you think I do," she said, "pour it in my ear?" She got up and I caught her hand. I said, "I'll get it," but she shook her head. "It's OK," she said. "You've been dashing about all day."

I still didn't want her out of my sight though. I stood outside her bedroom and waited. She came out pulling a woolly over her head. "I'm sorry about Mum," she said, "I gave her a right turn that first time; you'll have to make it up to her." I said, "I thought you'd killed her," and she turned back looking troubled. "I know," she said, "but there was nothing I could do. I had to stop her getting rid of all my things. I wouldn't have had anything left to wear..."

She put the kettle on, fetched the bottle of Paddy I keep for special occasions. Broke me up a bit that she'd remembered. She mashed the tea, stood the pot on a tray, then scooped Chota onto her shoulder. "Let's go back upstairs," she said, "it's warmer." And so we sat and talked, till there was grey light in the sky. And that was the first of Kaeti's nights.

Those teeth were the only thing that worried me. But that always sent her into fits. "Come on, Dad," she used to say, "they're kinky. Don't you think they suit me?" They did too, in a funny sort of way. Made her look, I don't know, like a healthy young animal. Which I suppose was what she'd always been. I think I was seeing things clearer. A lot of things. Hard to see straight, when you're trying to earn a living. Deal with bloody VAT and all the rest.

That's what I mean, about seeing straight. We had the VAT boys in a few days later. Played hell because I'd been supplying Dick with spirits by the crate; it had knocked my profit margin back a bit. Part of their job is keeping inflation on course though. Or perhaps you knew. There was a time when I'd have blown my stack. But not any more. I don't think I even listened very much; they were like radio static a long way off. All I could think of was Kaeti was coming back; it was going to be another of her Nights. Horses in blinkers, that's what we'd ail been. Anger is for mortals.

She told me early on, the legend's wrong. Cocked up from start to finish. It's not what's taken from you, it's what they *give*. And they don't leave marks, any more than an acupuncture needle leaves a mark. "It's a sort of Contact really," she said. "It changes the flow. It all goes on from there..." I asked her what flow she meant, but she only grinned. "Ask a Chinaman," she said. "They knew a bit as well. Everybody knew bits. Even the bloke who wrote the book. But nobody ever got it all together."

She pulled a face. "Then they found out about those grotty little bats in South America, the ones that bite the donkeys, and that was that. It's just a different lifestyle, Dad, that's all..."

It did take a little while to get used to. But that was OK too; she said I'd got a million years of prejudice to get rid of. Atavism, that was the word she used. Her vocabulary was going up by leaps and bounds; she'd left me standing. "Bashing saber-teeth over the head with hatchets," she said. "That's why you're scared of the night. It's the days you ought to be frightened of though really. That's when the bad things happen..."

Sometimes she'd come three or four nights together. Then we wouldn't see her for a week or more. She said there were long resting periods, there had to be; but she was never too clear about that. I don't think myself it was that at all. She was being considerate. After all, we'd still got the pub to run. It worried me a bit sometimes. Her not being there. I'd sit and stare out at the common and watch the rain and wonder what she was doing, where she was. But she put me right about that as well. "Look, Dad," she said, "if I'm not here with you I'm not *anywhere*. Well, nowhere you could understand just yet. What do you think I'm doing, running about getting soaked?" In any case, they don't experience Time the way we do. "I'm always here," she said to me once. "I never went away. Think of it like that..." Also, she warned me about Desire. It seemed a queer word somehow for her to use, but she didn't mean it quite the way I thought. "You mustn't *want* me to come every night," she said. "You mustn't *want* anything. Then I'll be here." That's what she meant, about going on from the Gotama. "He knew as well," she said. "They all knew really..." After that I'd go down to the kitchen afterwards and pick her clothes up where they'd fallen and bring them back upstairs and put them away and just not think of anything at all. I reckon I'd reached stage one of the Enlightenment.

She never let me see the transformation except for that first time. Not that there was anything horrible about it; she was very clear on that. It was just that there were certain things I wasn't ready for. And watching her turn to protoplasmic mist was one of them. "It might give you the wrong idea," she said. "You might start thinking about those grotty films again..."

That was funny too, coming from her. She always used to be a sucker for them. Even badgered us into getting a color telly so she could see the blood better. Gruesome little devil. But now it just seemed sad. I mean, that anybody had bothered with rubbish like that. "Think of a chrysalis," she told me once. "You crawl out on a branch and hang yourself up and squidge down into a sort of porridge. Then you wait a million seconds, and out you come a butterfly. Those were the things we should have been looking at..." It was one of her metaphors; she'd developed quite a knack for them. She was the butterfly now, riding high night.

I'll tell you what it was like. It was like being in love. I don't mean with *her*, that sort of thing. It was like the first time ever, waking up and seeing colors, the atoms of things vibrating. And knowing there are textures, your feet are pressing the ground, things are *real*. And you send up thanks. Not unto the Lord, that sort of

stuff, just thanks. For being. That's when you see the One. Only there's gravity, it all falls away. And you can never get it back. I lived it every day though. Like a dream that didn't stop. I told her that too once, and she grabbed my hand. "That's *right*, Dad," she said "You're coming on. Everything's a dream, they all knew that. Jesus, the Gotama, everybody. They're all One." I said, "*The One?*" and she nodded. "That's right," she said, "*The One...*"

They know so much more than us of course. They're *homo superior*, they have been all along. The next stage on. Only we got confused. Couldn't see the wood for a few spooky trees. We hounded them, wherever we thought they were. That's why there's still so few of them. But mats going to change a bit. She made that very clear.

She raised the subject herself one night. Her birthday, it was. We hadn't forgotten, we were hardly likely to. But she made sure anyway. Talk about nudge nudge, wink wink. Pete made her a cake, and didn't she tuck into it. I'd seen some healthy appetites before, but that was a classic demo. No weight-watching problems any more, you see. They trade off excess molecules the same way they take in nutrients, usually while passing through earth. The age enzymes go with them, which is why they're immortal. They don't really need to eat at all, not in the ordinary sense. She finished with a cuppa nonetheless, then asked if she could have a cigarette. She was looking thoughtful. "Dad," she said, "I want to talk to you. It's a bit serious."

I didn't have much doubt what it was about. I'd been reading the papers, watching the whole world getting ready to tear itself to bits. We hadn't got very long.

I thought when she did finally raise the matter, I'd at least need time to think. I didn't though. Funny. Or maybe it's not really so odd. I didn't want to be parted from her again, you see. But now it was me that was at risk. The only thing that worried me was having to go through what she'd had to first. And that was honestly more for her mother's sake than mine. But she shook her head. "It's nothing, Dad," she said. "It looks worse than it is; you really don't feel a thing. I was a bit scared right at the start, but you'll know what's happening. Anyway, it takes different people different ways. You won't have the time I had." They remember the future too of course, in bits and pieces; so I knew she wasn't talking without a book.

There was still one other thing though. I didn't know quite how to put it. She waited, grinning, and finally I said, "Kaeti, will it... be you?" The grin got broader then, and she shook her head. "No, Dad," she said, "it won't be me. Be a bit intimate, wouldn't it? Don't worry about it though, somebody'll come."

Nice young kid she was too. A few years older than Kaeti. And really pretty, jet-black hair all done in sort of ringlets. Looked up-to-date enough apart from that, jeans and a sweater. But they were Kaeti's things of course, picked up from just next door. She knew a lot about the Thirty Years' War, said they tied one of her brothers across a cannon mouth. She wasn't bitter about it though; she wasn't bitter about anything. Of course she was looking at things from a different point of view.

I didn't really know what was expected of me. Not till she suddenly popped a finger into my mouth. It went through me then like an electric shock. She needn't have done it that way, I'm pretty sure. It was just to make things easier. Maybe she

kissed me sometime, I can't remember. I think she must have, because suddenly I wasn't on the earth at all. I was out in space, and there were stars and suns, and mountains and a rubber-tired trolley going by, and a bank of flowers bigger than a planet. Everything was expanding, but it was shrinking too, all at the same time, reducing to a tiny shining dot. That was the One as well.

She talked a lot afterwards about love. Said what we know can only be a shadow. When two clouds merge, that's Joining. I said they must be Gods and Goddesses then, but that was muddle-headed. She said there was still something outside, they were still looking. So nothing really changes. Afterwards I laughed so loud I woke Pete up. Because I'd never left my bed, that was for sure. So it was still the dream. There was a disco running. Somewhere in the village. Been thumping and crashing nearly all the night. I ask you, when Folk nave to be up by six.

But that's the human race all over for you. I sometimes think it deserves what it's going to get.

We had a letter in the post next morning. First time I'd actually seen copperplate handwriting, it was just a phrase before. Done on some sort of parchment too, though the English was modern enough. It begged an interview on a most urgent matter, said that the writer would call that afternoon at three.

I know what I'd have said about that in the good old days. Afternoons are sacred for a publican; it's the only chance the poor blighter has to get some kip. But the way we were living that sort of thing had ceased to matter, and Pete was curious as well. Mainly because of the writing. She asked who it was from, but we could neither of us make it out. Address was a good class London hotel, but the signature was the only indecipherable part. It was just a florid scrawl, it could have been anything.

He was punctual to the minute. I heard the taxi pull up and went to the door. Tall, bony-looking bloke he was, wearing one of those funny old-fashioned Inverness capes. His suit looked dated too; good tweed, but with a queer-looking cut to it. And he was wearing a cravat and one of those high stiff collars, the sort you only see now on the films. "Good afternoon," he said, "it is kind of you to see me. My name is van Helsing. You may perhaps have heard of my great-grandfather. He was a man of some renown, in his own highly specialized field."

It didn't ring a bell with me at all. Not to start with anyway. I sized him up instead. His hair was pale, so pale I took it to be white at first. Then I decided it was the color of bleached-out straw. His eyes were indeterminate too, pale-lashed and with an odd sort of sunken gleam. I started to wonder just what sort of a nut case we'd lumbered ourselves with. His voice was pleasant enough though, deep and well modulated, and his manners were impeccable. As old-world as his style of dress.

Pete looked at me. She said, "Van who?" and he said "Helsing" again and gave a little bow. She glanced back to me, then shrugged and turned away, got busy with the teapot. I said, "So what can we do for you?"

He was staring round, chin raised in a searching sort of way. And snuffing, for all the world like a dog looking for a scent. Finally he nodded. "Yes," he said, "this is

indeed the place. I sense it..."

I toyed with the idea that he might be from the Council after all, that somebody had made a complaint about the drains. I dismissed it straight away. He just hadn't got the right air of petty officialdom. There was something about him though. Sort of an authority. He turned to me gravely. "First," he said, "let me commiserate with you in your time of loss."

Pete froze in the act of pouring a cuppa. She said, "We don't want to talk about it. It's over and done with."

He leaned forward earnestly. "But, Mrs. Fredericks, it is not over," he said. "You know, and I know, that it is far from over..."

"Bill," she said, "have we got to listen to this?" But I shushed her. "All right," I said, "let him have his little say." I turned to the van Whatsit bloke. "And you'd better make it good, my friend," I said. "Wishing yourself on us like this, upsetting my wife. Who the hell do you think you are anyway?"

He said, "I have told you who I am." He shook his head, and I swear his voice was vibrating with sympathy. "Believe me," he said, "I do understand. Nothing would normally induce me to intrude on such a time of sorrow..."

"Look," I said, "get to the point, or get out." The name was still going round in the back of my mind. I was beginning to have a nasty feeling I had heard it before.

He got to the point. His way. It took a bit of time. He used a fair few high-flown words, but phrases like "the undead" were never far away. "To bring peace to that poor tormented soul," he said finally, "that is truly my only aim. It will be unpleasant, I realize that. Repugnant perhaps to any thinking being. But mercifully it is soon ended, and your child will be at rest. My apparatus is in the village, but I must have your consent..."

I think it was the word apparatus that did it. I remembered all the films I'd seen then. The mallets and pointed stakes. I didn't think I was hearing right at first. I couldn't speak for a minute; then I was on my feet. "Let's get this straight," I said. "You want to *open* our kid's grave. ..."

Pete was ahead of me though. She was always quicker on the uptake. A knife lay on the draining board; she snatched it up. "I'll give you graves," she said. "Get out that door, you bastard—"

He'd jumped up himself. "Mrs. Fredericks," he said, "you are making a terrible mistake—" That was as far as he got though. I yelled at her, but she'd already lunged.

How it missed him I shall never know. He eeled back somehow; then he was making for the door. "Deluded souls," he said. "You poor deluded souls..."

I grappled with Pete but she wrenched away. He didn't wait for anything else; he was through the door like a long dog. Next minute he was legging it down the lane. He didn't look back either, not till he turned the corner out of sight.

I went back. "It's all right, love," I said. "We shan't be seeing any more of him." Pete threw the knife down, sat back at the table. She put her face in her hands, then and started to cry. Later she said, "Bill call the police."

"The police," I said. "What do you think they could do?"

"Stop him," she said. "There must be something they can get him on. Whoever he is."

"They wouldn't believe us to start with," I said. "Just think we'd been watching too much late-night telly. Anyway, think what he could do us for if they did catch up with him."

She stared at me. She said, "What do you mean?"

"Well," I said, "assault with a deadly weapon for a start."

"But it wasn't like that," she said, "It wasn't..."

"So you got upset," I said. "That's no reason to start waving knives about though. Leastways, that's how they'd see it."

She sat and looked at me miserably. "It's Kaeti," she said. "I was only thinking of Kaeti." Then the tears welled up again. "Bill," she said, "I'm afraid. I've never been so afraid..."

Kaeti laughed about it when I told her. "Oh, him," she said. "We know all about him; he's been mooning round for days. He's out of his tiny Chinese; there isn't a van Helsing. There never was. His real name's McMorrow or something. He's cleared off now though; we don't know where he went. I reckon Mum put the frighteners on him for good."

I hesitated. "Kaeti," I said, "you know what you told me once. About everybody knowing little bits. Would it... is it a sort of formula? The stakes and that?"

She looked me straight in the eye. "Well," she said brightly, "look at it like this. If somebody rammed a dirty great spike through you, then cut your head off, you wouldn't be feeling too chipper, would you? Not to mention the garlic..."

I must admit I'd never looked at it like that.

After she'd gone I watched the dawn come up. I knew if I went to bed I wouldn't sleep. She'd been airy enough, dismissed the whole affair; but there was something at the backs of her eyes that I just didn't like. She was scared as well.

I went down to Camberley in the afternoon, had a look at the grave. I'm ashamed to admit I'd never been near before. At first I couldn't face it; then later there never seemed a need. Everything was neat, the marble curbs in place and the new lead lettering, KAETI LINDA Fredericks, it read. 1962—1979. And on the other side something Pete had dreamed up later, a line from a Roman poet, lie lightly on her earth, she never lay heavy on thee. It brought it all a bit too close again. Even—well, knowing what I did. I walked back into town, bought a bunch of flowers, arranged them for her in the little zinc pot. The sun was shining, there were birds all over. Bit different from last time. I wondered if she—no, I didn't wonder anything. Anything

at all.

It all seemed ridiculous, going back to the car. People with spades and dark lanterns. I mean, not in the twentieth century. I had a word with the old boy in the gatehouse nonetheless. He said the gates were padlocked seven sharp, he saw to it himself. There were nigh stout railings, and, anyway, the main road ran outside; there were streetlamps every few yards. Nobody would break in *there*.

All the same, the unease didn't go away. It stayed with me right through the day. By the time we got the bars shut I felt flaked out. Pete was looking tired as well; we decided we'd have an early night. Well, early for us. I was asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

I had the most appalling dream. About van Helsing. He was stooping down, doing something near the ground. I couldn't see what. I shouted at him, but he didn't take any notice. So I shouted again. It seemed my voice went rushing out over a huge empty space. He turned at that and held something up. I still couldn't see. So he clicked a torch on for me. It was Kaeti's head. She was grinning, but her eyes were terrified. Her mouth was stuffed full of what looked like leaves, and a dreadful vivid beard ran down her chin. I grappled with the bastard then, tried to choke the life out of him. He fought back. He was stronger than he looked. I threshed about; then Pete was yelling at me. She said, "Wake up, for Christ's sake. Bill, *wake up!*"

I sat up. I felt groggy. I said, "I had this Godawful dream," and she yelled again. "It wasn't a dream, don't you know anything yet? Bill, *for Christ's sake. . . .*"

She was dressing already. I said, "What is it love, what's wrong?" and she glared at me. She said, "She's in trouble. He's already there. The bastard's *there. . . .*"

That sort of fear is infectious. I grabbed for my trousers and a shirt, flew downstairs and rammed a pair of shoes on. I still didn't believe it was happening to me. I ran the car back and she dived onto the front seat before I'd finished braking. She'd got the big old shotgun I bought once from Dick Stanton when I fancied trying my hand at a bit of rough-shooting. I said, "Jesus, what do you want that for? We can't take that..." But she just shouted at me. "Bill, get *going. . . !*"

The main gates of the cemetery were standing open. Padlock hanging from one of them, and a length of chain. I slewed the car through thinking I'd woken the street. The headlights jizzed on obelisks, stone angels. I hauled the wheel again, slashed beneath an overhanging tree. Then I was running two wheels up on grass, along a tarmac path. She yelled, "Right, go *right. . . .*" A wire basket flew up in the air, a watering can went bowling across the path. Then I saw him. Just a glimpse, his head and shoulders as he straightened. Behind him the headlamps lit the mound of fresh-turned earth. He took one look and ducked out of sight again. I knew what he was doing somehow without seeing. He was wrestling with the fid.

Pete was out again before I'd stopped, and running. Her shadow went jumping ahead across the grass. I followed, leaping over graves. A curbstone caught my foot and I measured my length. It knocked the breath out of me for a minute. I could only watch.

It was as if it was all happening in slow motion. She yelled at him, just like I'd done in the dream. He showed his teeth but he didn't stop what he was doing. He raised the mallet; then the gun exploded. Both barrels. Among the echoes there seemed to be a tinkling. He was flung backwards, and the lamp that stood at the grave rim went out abruptly. Which was just as well. I'd never seen anybody hit at close range with a charge of shot before. I don't want to again.

I jumped down. God, but she was looking pretty. Like a rose, complete with scent and thorns. I lifted her. She was limp and warm. I looked at Pete and we didn't have to speak. No way was she going back down there again. Not ever.

One thing you can say for graves. They're great for getting rid of bodies in. Neither did I feel too much remorse. I reckoned he'd got about what he deserved. Even to the second-hand coffin.

We worked like demons, the pair of us. I knew we couldn't possibly fill it all back in, get it squared off by daylight. There wasn't a chance. We did it though, somehow.

Pete drove us back. I was seeing to Kaeti. I kissed her once and she opened her big eyes. She said, "Thanks, Dad," and went to sleep again.

The roads were all deserted, no lights showing anywhere. The one car we did meet had its headlamps masked to slits. I wondered what they must have thought of us. I didn't pay that much attention though. Not till we got back in sight of Blackwell. I did look out then. Dawn was in the sky, sort of a pale grey flush. It showed me the outlines of the ack-ack guns, the long slim barrels pointing up. I looked the other way, to the sullen glow low down that meant London had had its nightly pasting again.

I went back in the morning. Didn't know quite what I would see. It was all right though. Just the lines of graves, the bright, tidy grass. All signs of the disturbance had long since gone. Nor did the gatekeeper say anything about the padlock. But I hardly expected he'd remember a little thing like that. After all, a lot of stuff went missing in the blackout.

She woke a few times crying after that. There was always one of us on hand to soothe. She tried to tell me once what it was like. Hearing the spade, from wherever she had been. Scraping coming closer, then the thumping on the lid. "I never did no harm to him," she said. "None of us did..." I held her till she was quiet. "It's all right, love," I said, "it won't come again, not ever. It's over..."

Next night she wasn't there. Gone out to recharge. Only now she had her own place to come back to, a room where we always kept the curtains drawn. The locals thought it was a sudden sign of mourning. Only Dick Stanton guessed. Or maybe it was more. He hasn't been too well this last couple of weeks. Throat infection that doesn't seem to clear. I heard they had the Doc the other day.

I think Time's wearing thin for all of us. Sometimes I hear the guns now, from a war I don't remember. Sometimes there's other things. The mushroom clouds all rising, and the fireballs. The walls of the pub all glow then, like bright glass. It

happened a minute ago. In the old reckoning of Time. It didn't worry us though. I took Pete by the hand, and Kaeti, and we floated down, stood and watched the common light up and burn. There were others coming and then more, a great big crowd. There was one we called the Master. Not Vlad the Impaler though. He'll give the signal, when he's good and ready; and we'll all be away and gone. Headed for the dark side of another World. It won't take long. Because there isn't really Space, any more than there's Time.

There. It happened again. The paper I was writing on was burning, curling and blackening at the edges. But that don't matter either. All it means is that the One has grown a bit bigger. By something short of fifteen thousand human words. And a boat is setting sail, but not for Norway. And we stand on it and see the atoms dance, locked in a sort of brilliant, breathless Now.