

## The Lithopaedion

The small bedroom is cold, despite the early sun filtering through the net curtains. Dust from the street outside lies on the dressing table mirror and has collected among the brushes and bottles arranged in front of it. The young woman is curled, whimpering, on the rumped double bed, her hair matted to her forehead. Matilda, no more than fifteen years old, is knelt on the floor, her hand on her sister's arm to comfort – or perhaps - restrain her. And eventually the older girl does grow calm and quiet. Her eyelids grow heavy and as she slips into sleep, Tilly kisses her on the forehead.

"It's all over now. You get some shut-eye, love, and you'll be right as rain," she whispers. She looks at the clock on the mantelshelf. It has taken fourteen hours. As she rises from beside the bed, she feels light-headed for a moment; she steadies herself and then goes to the window, placing her hand upon the catch as though to open it. But she leaves it as it is. "No need," she says under her breath as she pulls the bedroom door closed behind her.

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In the early sixties, when I was nearly six years old we went to stay with Great Aunt Joan. She was one of three girls out of my Nan's eleven siblings. I never met any of the brothers – several had died in the Great War, and the others were never mentioned except in passing. The other two great aunts had an air of distracted benevolence about them, and being as Nan was the youngest of all the children, they seemed impossibly old to me, with papery white skin, sparse hair and a fondness for repeating what the other had just said. But Great Aunt Joan, a full ten years older than Nan, was small and dark, and as clenched as a walnut.

I think we went there because there was a delay in moving into the house my parents had bought, and although it was probably only for a few weeks, it seemed like forever to me. Aunt Joan's house in North London was small and narrow, just like she was. The story went that Joan's husband, Frank, had gone away to war and never returned. He was never reported dead or missing, he just never came back. But in any case, there was no divorce, and no closure.

Of course, at six years old, I knew nothing of this. I only knew that there seemed to be no air in the house and even the tiny garden and the small green nearby, seemed squeezed somehow, as though it was hard for anything natural to survive there. Sometimes in the night I was shaken awake by loud knocks and bangs, as though something immensely heavy was being thrown downstairs. But when I asked about the noises, I was told I'd been dreaming, and after a while I thought perhaps that was right.

As a woman whose husband had run away – worse, even, than being divorced – Aunt Joan was not pitied. She was the object of fun in the family - behind her back, of course - and, it seemed, shunned in her community. There was an old man with side curls and a black hat who would spit three times whenever he passed her gate, but apart from that, her only regular communication seemed to be a feud with her next-door neighbour, a strange, bent-over woman, who had a small black dog that yapped constantly whenever it saw Aunt Joan.

But the misfortune that had befallen Aunt Joan did not fully explain the darkness that she carried with her. It hung round her like a dim grey garment. I remember that the wider family's view was that her husband had left her *because* of the way she was, and that, on the whole, they didn't blame him. As I say, I didn't understand any of this, I just sensed it, the way children do, as though I was inhaling the gloom and misery of her existence through my skin.

Eventually we moved into our new home outside London and Aunt Joan pretty much disappeared from our lives. For the first time, I had my own room. Until then, I'd shared with my Nan, and it seemed strange to wake in the morning and not see her humped form in the other bed.

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Nan had always lived with us. She was from a more superstitious generation I suppose, but even so, she habitually spoke of the dead as though they were present either in memory, or actually hovering around in spirit. It probably had much to do with the fact that as a younger woman, somehow, she had become the person her community turned to when they needed a family member 'laid out' after death. Even before the afflicted person died, she'd sit with them in their last hours, holding cups of tepid tea to their lips to encourage them to drink.

She'd know when the end was nearing, even when she wasn't actually with the dying person, and would announce, "Cath (or Doris, or Barbara) will be gone tonight." Sometimes, she'd tell us, she'd seen an owl on their roof on her way back from shopping and that was a sure sign. But mostly she'd just *know* and would gather her 'bag of bits and pieces' and set off. When they had breathed their last, Nan would open the window to let their soul out, and, she said, often felt it brushing past her as it left.

Nan was always tight-lipped about Great Aunt Joan – there was something uneasy between them. She didn't stay with us during our weeks at Joan's house, and to me it seemed like she disappeared, although I expect she was just staying with other relatives. But family was family, and early one morning when I was about eleven, Nan's head went up like a hyena scenting blood. Without even trying Joan's telephone, she put her hat and coat on and grabbed her bag. Her only explanation was that she was 'going to Joan's' and not to wait up.

She told us later that for good form's sake, she rang the doorbell when she arrived, but even as the chimes were fading away, she was unearthing the spare key from under the brick near the dustbin. Once inside, she went straight up to Joan's bedroom. Her sister lay tidily on her back with the covers pulled up to her chin. Nan told us that Joan's false teeth were in a glass by her bedside. This proved, Nan said, that Joan herself didn't know death was coming, since she'd, literally, never been seen dead without her teeth. "Her skin was waxy, like the yellow laundry soap our mother used," she said. "So I knew she was properly gone." At this point, her voice dropped almost to a whisper: "That was when I noticed the *mass* under the bedclothes." She wouldn't be drawn further on what that meant, and it was never mentioned again, but the whole scene - the teeth, the yellow soap skin and the mysterious *mass* – played over and over in my head, just as if I'd been there.

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Years later I was messing about with a group of my friends. We were in our mid-teens I suppose, and had had quite a bit to drink. Someone brought out a make-shift Ouija board. The glass was skidding around the table quite freely and there was a lot of laughter and a few shrieks as the secrets of our friendship group were spelled out – open secrets most of them. None of it was very convincing, but as I say, we'd had a lot to drink. Then one of the boys, Davey, who was turning out to be an aggressive drunk, was accusing the rest of us of cheating. Maybe deep down, he was scared. Anyway, we agreed to prove it one way or another by one of us sitting out, and asking the board a question that the others couldn't possibly know the answer to. Davey – who knows why – said, "I think it should be Juliette who sits out. She's a bit weird and creepy." This was the first time I'd heard myself described this way, and I suppose he thought he was funny, but anyway, after some debate, I was chosen.

The first person that came into my head was Aunt Joan. Even after all those years, I associated her with anything unexplained and dark.

“I’d like to speak to my Great Aunt Joan – Aunt Joan, are you there?” I asked, feeling both a bit idiotic, and uneasy.

She – or something – came through straight away. The glass trembled under my friends’ fingertips and suddenly there was what I can only describe as a ‘pent up’ feeling in the room, just like when we’d lived in Joan’s house. The glass began to move swiftly yet randomly across the surface of the board as though in a state of agitation. I searched in my head for a suitable question to ask.

“Please spell out your husband’s name,” I said. The glass stopped dead. After a few seconds, it began to move again, this time in sharp, angry jerks. It spelt out F R A N K. My friends turned, grinning nervously, to look at me for confirmation. As I nodded, their smiles faded. It must have shown on my face that I was feeling more and more uncomfortable, and I was cursing myself for choosing Aunt Joan as a subject, when I could have gone for one of my more benevolent great aunts. Davey wasn’t convinced though.

“She’s making it up. How do we know she had an Aunt Joan with a husband called Frank?” he said. He was right of course. Only I knew whether it was true or not, which was kind of the point.

“Ask it – her – something else,” said one of the girls. They were all grinning again, pleased to be part of the pack, waiting to see which of us, Davey or me, would come out on top. I didn’t care which of us came out on top though. I only wanted it to stop now. So then I asked it a question which nobody, not even Aunt Joan, knew the answer to.

“Where did Frank go after the war? When he didn’t come home to you?”

I don’t know what I expected. Nothing happened for a few seconds, then one of the girls screamed and everyone snatched their fingers off the glass.

“It burned me!” she exclaimed, and held up her hand where a red shiny patch was developing.

“I think we should stop now,” I started to say, but the glass, sitting in the middle of the table, began to tremble again, and then to judder, as though vibrations from heavy machinery were passing through it. Davey’s face had drained of colour, and his skin seemed to glow faintly in the dim lighting of the room.

“It’s going to shatter – everyone stand back,” he said. But it didn’t shatter. Not straight away. Instead it flew up and smashed on the ceiling; chunks and splinters of glass rained down upon us. The others screamed and swore but nobody was hurt, and they were soon talking excitedly about what had happened. Only Davey kept quiet, and after a few minutes, he mumbled something about an early start, and left. For the rest of them though, within half an hour, the whole incident had turned into something to brag about at school.

But as that glass had shattered, it was as if a piece of it had lodged inside me, small and sharp, but always there. Sometimes, I’d forget about it for days, for weeks even, but then I’d call it to mind, and become aware of it once more, like a secret inflammation.

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It was only many years later, when I was expecting my daughter, that more information about Aunt Joan emerged. My pregnancy had been a not-entirely welcome surprise. Simon and I had only been together a few months and being responsible young adults, were taking time to get to know each

other. I had recently been ill, with what must have been a heavy flu, and couldn't get out of bed for several days. As I drifted in and out of sleep, I'd been afflicted by terrifying, hallucinatory dreams that I could never quite remember. Maybe the illness upset my system so that afterwards my contraception didn't work. Anyway, when I discovered I was pregnant several weeks later, there'd been tension between Simon and me as he got over a suspicion that I'd been seeing someone else. But soon he came to accept it and to look forward to being a father. Which was more than I could say for me. It wasn't that I didn't want the baby, but a horrible nausea settled on me in the first trimester, which only worsened as time went on. I had to force myself to eat and the "blooming" I'd been promised later on did not happen. My mood was bad too, and once again I had vivid, frightening dreams which seemed to leach into the next day. Sometimes I'd be filled with a sort of febrile exuberance, followed by bouts of hopelessness. Still, despite it all, I was determined to give it my best shot and prepared to fall in love with my baby when it was born, if not before.

Mum had asked me to visit when I was about twelve weeks along; it seemed Nan had been asking for me. She was in her nineties by then, and the present had almost ceased to exist for her. She was physically quite fit, but would become anxious if her routine was disturbed in any way. They lived about three hours away, so I left after breakfast and arrived in time for lunch.

Mum had booked to go to the hairdresser in the afternoon, and I was going to keep Nan company to avoid her ringing the salon five minutes after Mum had arrived there to insist she came straight back home. I wasn't sure whether Nan realised I was pregnant, but thought that if I could get through to her, she might be thrilled to know that her first great-grandchild was on its way. I took out the polaroid picture of my unborn baby – this was long before anyone had a mobile to download it onto.

"Look Nan, this is my baby."

She took the photo and held it close to her eyes, tilting it this way and that to get a better focus on it.

"We've got to be careful," she said. "After what happened to poor Joan. Her baby was a bad business."

This was the first I'd heard about Joan's baby. I did a quick mental calculation – Frank must have gone off to war in about 1940. So her baby must have been conceived before that. But no, that didn't make sense, because in 1940, Joan would have been around 50 – and surely Frank would have been too old to be called up. That must mean that for all these years, I'd been thinking about the wrong war – he must have disappeared in the '14 - '18 war, not the Second World War. Still, none of this explained the missing baby that no one had heard about.

"What happened to Joan's baby, Nan?"

"She reckoned she was carrying it when Frank went off to war, that would have been in the October. But she didn't start showing until the next August, so that can't have been right. But anyway she never birthed it."

"Do you mean she had a miscarriage?"

"No, she was about seven months gone – and then it all just stopped. They said it was the shock of him going missing, but I knew it wasn't that."

"What do you mean?"

"He knew he was well out of it."

“You think he found out she was having someone else’s baby?”

“I don’t think he cared by then. He just wanted to get out.”

All this new information was surprising enough, but I was astonished by what Nan said next.

“It was all that messing about with Ouija boards, and seances and whatnot that brought it on. All the women were trying to contact their sweethearts and brothers that had gone missing or died.”

“But ... that still means it was someone else’s baby, if she didn’t show until the following summer – did anyone know who the father was?”

“Well, you’re asking a mouthful now. I don’t reckon any other man would go near her. She was always so *sharp*, like a splinter of glass. Even as a girl. Like I say, it was the shenanigans she got up to with those other women that was to blame. There was one, Lena, her name was, I think, and she told her sister, who was my friend, that she didn’t want any more to do with them. Reckoned they’d bitten off more than they could chew. She was proper scared.”

“What do you mean? What happened?”

“She wouldn’t say. They was young women whose husbands had been away for months. But don’t you worry. I’ll see you’re alright like I did with her.”

“But her baby died.”

“It stopped. And it was just as well.”

“What are you two whispering about?”

Nan and I both jumped – Mum was back from the hairdressers, her permed curls firmly glued into place.

“Nan was telling me about Aunt Joan’s baby!”

“Oh not that again. She’s been on about that ever since she heard you were pregnant. She’s been mithering to see you for weeks now,”

Nan pursed her lips.

“There none so blind as them that won’t see,” she said primly. “But don’t you worry,” she added, to me, “I’ll look out for you. You’ll be alright.”

“Look,” mum said a few minutes later as we stood in the kitchen waiting for the kettle to boil. It’s just nonsense. Something her mind has cooked up – you know what she’s like these days.”

“Well, she seemed pretty coherent to me – at least about that time anyway. What did she mean about looking out for me?”

“Who knows? Honestly. All that rubbish about seances and contacting the dead. I never saw any sign of Aunt Joan being into that kind of thing.”

I’d never told anyone in my family about my experience with the Ouija board, and didn’t think now was the time to bring it up, but there was an uncomfortable echo of that night going on in my head.

That night, the long drive and the dragging tiredness of early pregnancy pitched me into sleep the moment I closed my eyes in in mum’s spare room. It felt like dropping into a black pool, my descent leaving hardly a ripple. In my dream, the small bed turned into a boat nosing its way along a

tributary to a black river, the stream growing narrower and narrower as it edged along. I could hear an owl hooting in the distance.

Without a clear idea of what had roused me, I woke suddenly, my heart pounding as though I had been running. It was still dark, and the thick curtains over the window kept out most of the light from the street outside. I was just telling myself that it was my vivid dream that had woken me and was turning over to go back to sleep, when I heard an exhalation, like someone had been holding their breath, but could no longer do so. At the same moment, I became aware of a hunched black shape right next to the bed. I cried out in shock, scrambled to find the bedside light and knocked my glass of water onto the floor. Then my bedroom door was opening and mum came in, the light from the landing slicing into the room. Nan was kneeling, or rather trying to get up from kneeling, by my bed, her nightdress soaked with water. Mum sighed, exasperatedly.

“For goodness’ sake, Ma, what are you doing in here?” she demanded. “Come on, let’s get you back to bed!”

She hauled Nan up into a standing position. Nan stretched out a hand to me,

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I wasn’t strong enough.”

“You were strong enough to cause a scene! Juliette needs her sleep and you need a dry nightie.”

The next day, Nan kept to her bed and didn’t respond when I went in to see her. Mum shook her head. “This is what she’s like these days,” she said. I never know what she’ll get up to. If she gets much worse, I’m going to have to look at a home for her. I’m no spring chicken myself – in fact I might check us both in!”

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My baby came a few days early. The morning after her birth I was feeling quite well, if tired – she’d been born at 2.30 am. I was still getting over how perfect she was in every way – all my fears about not bonding with her had disappeared the moment I saw her, and the darkness I’d experienced pretty much the whole time I’d been pregnant simply melted like early winter snow. I was waiting for Simon to visit - I knew he would have contacted the family to tell them the good news. He arrived with a huge bouquet of yellow roses – we’d decided to call our daughter Rosie. He seemed quiet, but I assumed it was just because he was exhausted too.

He admired our baby and a midwife bustled over to insist that he pick her up out of her cot and hold her.

“She’s got a lovely head of hair,” she said.

Simon cradled her in his arms and gently brushed the fluffy hair off her forehead and I noticed for the first time two slightly shiny patches among her curls, like tiny newly healed wounds. Then he said,

“I’ve got some bad news. It’s your Nan. I’m so sorry, but she died last night. Your mum found her this morning.”

Amid all the happiness of the safe arrival of our baby, it was difficult to take in what he was telling me.

“But I spoke to her on the phone about two days ago. She was fine. She was on about needing to see me again.”

“She was a very old lady – she just wore out I guess.”

I was kept in hospital for another couple of days – my blood pressure was a little unstable and they wanted to keep any eye on me. On the third day, Mum came in to see me. She was looking a bit pale, but otherwise was composed and obviously delighted to meet her first grandchild. I hadn’t been told any details about Nan’s death, and didn’t know whether she’d want to talk about it, but as it happened, she brought up the subject herself.

“I didn’t want to worry you, but she’d been going downhill fast. Driving me mad going on about your baby. She said she had to do something before it was too late. She wouldn’t say what. Then the other night, she wouldn’t rest. I looked in at her at midnight and she was still awake. I found her the next morning. I don’t know what she was doing out of bed,” she said.

“Out of bed? I thought you found her in her room!”

“I did, but she must have been more confused than ever because she’d opened her window – and the nights have been freezing all week. I found her on the floor beneath the windowsill.”

Mum started talking about arrangements for the funeral, and then she had a little cry, rummaging in her handbag for a handkerchief. And as she blew her nose, I was thinking: *I know why Nan opened the window.* And, looking at Rosie, I wondered exactly what time she had died.

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About a month later, I went up to Mum’s to help her go through Nan’s things. I laid Rosie on Nan’s candlewick bedspread, and she drifted off to sleep. There were several hand-knitted skirt and cardigan suits in the chest of drawers next to the bed, and many slippery nylon blouses, thermal vests and vast pairs of knickers. I couldn’t imagine any of it being of interest to charity shops, so we crammed most of it into the faded blue tartan suitcase Nan kept under the bed. Next to the blue case was another, equally worn, made of what looked like cracked red plastic. The black binding around its edges was coming away, showing white patches beneath.

“Let’s put the rest of it in the red case, and her shoes, and then we can get rid of the lot,” said Mum.

“Funny, I don’t remember her ever using that case – but she’s had it forever. I remember it when I was hiding under her bed when I was playing hide and seek when I was really little.”

“She never threw anything out. There’s probably another load of rubbish in it.”

The case turned out to be full of old magazines – the sort that gave away free knitting patterns and featured improving verse and non-threatening short fiction. Nan used to read them cover to cover – I could picture her sitting in her chair, eyebrows raised as she read, as though the contents were slightly surprising.

“Some of these date back to the sixties – do you think they might be worth something?”

“I doubt it,” said Mum. “They’re very tatty, most of them. Do you remember how she’d put them down on the carpet with a saucer of tea for the dog?”

“And roll them up to swat flies!”

We fell silent – it was sad, remembering, but it also felt like it was doing us good.

We put the magazines in a black bin liner, and Mum started to put the rest of Nan’s clothes in the red case. Then she gave a little start of surprise. At the back of the case, next to the hinges, was a

pocket made out of some sort of ruched nylon material, presumably where you'd put things you wanted to keep separate from everything else. The top half-inch of an envelope was showing above the top of the pocket. Mum pulled it out.

It had been opened, and when she reached inside she pulled out a typewritten letter, and another envelope, whose seal was still unbroken.

"It's a doctor's letter."

"Nan's doctor?"

"No, it's dated 1971 – and the address is Golders Green."

Rosie stirred momentarily in her sleep, a spit bubble popping at the side of her mouth and her face scrunching as if she'd just tasted something nasty. Mum stroked the sparse hair on her forehead for a moment, and she settled again. Then Mum smoothed the letter out and laid it on the bed between us.

*"Mrs Matilda Williams  
20 Branch Street  
West Highcombe  
Buckinghamshire*

*Dear Mrs Williams*

*I am writing to tell you the findings of the autopsy on the body of your sister, Mrs Joan Miller. I felt it would be better to present these in layman's terms, rather than the formal medical language of the pathologist, although his full report is also available should you wish to see it. I can confirm that the cause of death was a large blood clot in Mrs Heyward's brain which would have denied oxygen to that organ and subsequently caused a major stroke from which she did not recover. As I told you at the time of examining her body, this much I was able to surmise, and the pathologist has confirmed my suspicion.*

*However, there was another, more surprising, finding. As you yourself noticed when you discovered your sister's body, there was a hard "mass" protruding from her pelvic region, which hitherto must have been concealed by her clothing. It was felt pertinent to investigate this in case there was some link between this and her stroke, although this was believed to be unlikely. It was found that the mass itself, which was around the size of a rugby ball, was comprised of the calcified remains of a foetus, of probably around seven months' gestation. It seems that your sister's child died before birth and instead of being miscarried as would be expected, it had been retained and subsequently coated with secreted calcium deposits, which served to protect your sister's body from the inevitable toxicity of the remains. The child must have been conceived pre-menopause, of course, so could have been up to fifty years old at the time of your sister's death. This is an extremely uncommon, though not unheard of, occurrence and many instances have been recorded of so-called 'stone children' or lithopaedions. Most of these are the result of an ectopic pregnancy, in other words one growing within the fallopian tubes, but that of your sister's case was carried in utero, which makes it all the more unusual.*

*I would be happy to discuss this in more detail should you desire, but you may rest assured that ultimately, the calcified foetus did not seem to be linked to your sister's demise. I have enclosed, in a separate envelope, a photograph of the child, taken by the pathologist at the time of the autopsy.*



*There are some features which seem incongruous, even taking into account the unusual circumstances, and I felt you should be warned of this before you decided to view the picture.*

*I remain*

*Yours sincerely*

*Dr V Chambers MD*

Mum and I looked at each other. So Aunt Joan *had* been pregnant, and the baby had stopped growing just as Nan had told me.

“The other envelope is still sealed,” said Mum, “Should we open it? I wonder why she didn’t.”

Suddenly, the disquiet that I’d experienced throughout my pregnancy, that sliver of darkness that had persisted all the years since the evening with the Ouija board, slid back into place like a dark bird settling onto its nest. Something was telling me we shouldn’t be looking. but Mum was already opening the envelope, had already got her thumb under the flap and was prising it up.

Mum looked at the picture, frowned as if it she couldn’t make head or tail of it, and then handed it to me. It was a black and white photograph of a kidney shaped medical dish – the sort you see in dramas about hospitals. Lying in the dish was a stony-looking whitish mass, that I couldn’t make any sense of first of all. Then I made out the curved spine and folded limbs of a foetus – the lithopaedion the doctor had referred to. The body had fused into a solid mass but it was possible to make out the vertebrae, the arms and legs, and the bulbous head of the unborn. But there was something wrong with the skull. It took me a few moments to work out what it was. Set into the top of it, above the empty eye sockets, were two tiny, pointed buds. It took me a few moments to realise what they were: the beginning of horns. And when I looked carefully at the feet, it wasn’t toes I was looking at, but tiny cloven hooves.

Mum and I didn’t know what to do after we found the picture of the lithopaedion – the fact that Nan never opened the envelope must have meant she didn’t want to see what was inside. Perhaps she already knew. I didn’t feel I needed to point out what I’d seen to Mum – it was better she didn’t know. In the end, we burned all Nan’s papers: knitting patterns, women’s magazines, letters, the lot. Burning the picture along with all the more workaday stuff felt right, as though we weren’t allowing ourselves to go down the route of delving too deeply into what it meant.

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Rosie was a lovely, sunny child who seemed to be always smiling and laughing, and even now, more than twenty five years later, she seems to carry the sunshine with her. She still gazes into the distance as though she can see something we can’t, just as she did when she was a little girl.

When she was four, her guinea pig, Mabel, died. We’d inherited her from a friend who was emigrating, and she was over six years old when we got her, so I suppose that’s a pretty good lifespan for guinea pig. Rosie had always loved her and even when she was tiny would sit quietly with Mabel in her lap, singing to her in her funny, wordless, way.

Mabel had been off her food for a few days, so I wasn’t entirely surprised to find her small lifeless body when we went in to clean out her hutch. It smelt a bit musty in the summer house where her hutch was kept, so I opened the window to let the breeze in. I was expecting tears and distress from Rosie and was getting ready to make a big fuss of burying Mabel in the garden, with full funeral honours. But as I turned back from the window she was bent over whispering to the little body. At

first I couldn't make out what she was saying, but as I leaned in, I heard her say, "It's all over darling. You get some shut-eye and you'll be right as rain." Then she looked at the open window, and then at me and said, "It's alright, she's gone now."

Rosie's own baby is due in a few weeks and she's bloomed like an opening rose during her pregnancy. But I find myself searching her face for any passing shadow, and I wonder whether she – whether we all – are safe.