

The rain had been relentless the Spring that Fred Laister finally made up his mind about the land and the fields that surrounded his father's farm had flooded – the low, flat land turned to great standing pools, variously licked and scuffed up by the wind or wrinkled with peaking whiskers of scrubby reed and long grass that puckered and wavered with each passing breeze. The floods only added to the general surrealness of the flat, eastern reaches of middle England, so that strangers passing through and who found themselves driving, not so much along a tarmac road as a kind of long, sunken bridge, flanked by marshy, ruffled waters on either side, couldn't resist turning to their passengers and asking again, who on earth would want to live here?

Yet to Fred, and everyone else who lives amongst the drawn fields that spread out around Cleavelly town, the floods offer nothing particularly strange or new, so that when he wakes, in the small hours of Sunday morning, where we start this story, and crosses the room to get away from his wife, already propped up and reading in bed, the sight of the grey, shallow water rouses neither unease or satisfaction, only a kind of unsettled impatience as the anger that had been gathering pace inside Fred all morning continues to knock about his chest, then settle down feebly. With his brow bent against the frail, toneless light, Fred clenches his molars and stands there for several moments, staring out unseeingly at the low-hanging pylons standing serenely in the distance.

Rita had been up reading since five, and the yellow glare of her reading lamp – which was small and old and capable of such an outsized brightness that made Fred almost insane – had woken him a lot earlier than he would have liked. He had tried to

ignore it; had lain there awake with his eyes closed for some time, but the insolent little bulb had continued dragging those red and blue smears across the insides of his eyes, so that soon it was less the light, than a confused, gathering rage that had convinced Fred that he was indeed quite awake; that there was no getting back to sleep for him now, until all that was left for him to do was to tear back the duvet and march, with feeling, to the other side of the dimly lit room. He hated that little lamp.

Rita clears her throat and turns another page of her book. The sound, brief and subtle as it was, speeds straight into the back of his head and lodges itself there with a low, tormenting hum. He wants to turn round but he doesn't. Deciding that he might as well make something of his early start, Fred sketches out a slightly longer route for the dog than usual, then, with the gauze of his restless, too-bright sleep still twisted about his head, yanks on a pair of old overalls and heads downstairs to the kitchen. In the dim, half-light of the sunken room, Fred shrugs on his coat, lets the terrier outside and then follows her, head bent, out of the back door.

The morning air, though dry and clear, is colder than he'd anticipated and after a few short paces the backs of Fred's eyes warm with tears and his nose start to run. But the rain – the rain at least has stopped, for now, leaving behind a sheeny, dripping world, quite vivid in its morning dampness. Had Fred been in a better mood his eyes might have become pleasantly absorbed by the strange lucidity of the scene, by the dark tips of tangled bracken etched against the drained sky. But his mood being what it was, Fred sees none of this. And as he takes a left, passed the old silage barn and onto the first of the tough, springy fields that will carry him straight, as the crow flies, up to his mother's woods, Fred can only stare down grimly at the tops of his boots, his surliness sharpening slightly.

For the truth of the matter was, Rita's reading lamp wasn't the only thing that had been bothering Fred this morning. Just last night, Rita had surprised him by setting down his Saturday night tea of beans and eggs on toast a little earlier than usual, and asking, with a mixture of delicacy and frankness that Fred understood instantly as an expression of impatience, whether he planned on telling Andrew about the land soon.

Squelching sturdily through the sodden field, Fred sees again that fluent, docile, *assembled* look her features so often had, full of pity and tedious understanding, as if she could never again be surprised by his presence, as if she already knew exactly what he was going to say.

What Fred *had* said was that he was waiting until Andrew was on half-term when his son would have more time to come to the farm and they could discuss the matter in person instead. The conversation – trite, hesitant, unfamiliar – flickers momentarily in his mind before his insides recoil and Fred has to tense his brow and clamp down his molars.

He would do it tomorrow.

He would call Andrew up before tea-time tomorrow. No use starting something like this on a Sunday. Relieved somewhat by having reached this conclusion, Fred sniffs then pulls the zip of his jacket up to his chin, just in time for a sharp, north-easterly wind to come spurting up the back of his neck. He picks up his pace, walking with lengthening strides to the first wooden stile, all the while the wind carries on: scrambling northwards over the flooded fields, and through the back door of Number 35, where his son Andrew lives.

Lying very neatly as if she hadn't really been sleeping, Cazzie Laister wakes to the thin, rattling sound of the back door clapping back and forth on its hinges in the wind.

The room is lit, but the curtains are still drawn and the lob of leaky white light that's issuing through the pink fabric is bathing the room in a rosy, artificial glow. Her mind is in possession of something, its meaning *sensed* but not yet available to her. Clogged and twisted with sleep the movement of her thoughts seem more noticeable than normal. And though it all happens in a few seconds, maybe less, Cazzie can almost feel her mind being dragged, sliding forwards to meet the part of her that remembered, is now remembering – like two drifting magnets migrating slowly, then snapping together to a single point: *today*.

A fierce shudder of excitement shoots up the back of her neck. It had been several months since her last visit to her grandparents' farm and all that she can remember of it now is a large wooden table, or rather the top of the table, thickly veined and plotted with knots filled with dried crumbs that Cazzie had enjoyed trying to extract with the tip of her nail. And a fridge-chilled jug of very weak orange squash that was so delicious it had continued to rise vague and vast in her mind, becoming somehow the farm itself; so that as she lies in bed now, thinking only of the visit she'd been looking forward to all week, her mind is filled with something indefinably light and fresh, pale orange in her mind.

Heart kicking, Cazzie raises herself onto her elbows and peers across to her sister's bed. Lying with her back to the room, all that can be seen of Olivia is the crown of her dark head escaping out of her duvet. Cazzie cranes her neck, trying to listen to the sound of her sister's breathing, but the room lies silent; the house oddly still, hushed, observant.

It didn't feel at all like a Sunday – a day which Cazzie usually spends ferrying Tommy and Olivia to and from football practice and going to the big supermarket on the other side of town. Cazzie's too young to play football, but she quite likes Sunday's;

quite likes the long drive which, because her shoes are always clean, she can spend sitting in the front, watching the rape fields slip passed her window, their edges all blurry and diffused. And with her siblings in the back, Cazzie finds she is free to settle into her thoughts, where she always seems to find a kind of fluidity there, too. They slide over one another easily, getting checked and diverted by the smallest of things; tripping up on her father's nose and the tiny red wool hairs trapped beneath the skin, and that suspect way Christopher Jenkins says his s's, swerving suddenly into scenes and faces she'd forgotten until then. It's a state that always seems to leave her feeling kind of removed, so that when Cazzie leaves, stepping out finally into the hard, solid day, there is always a few moments, maybe less, when the material world seems very far away and yet still *here*; as if she were looking at everything – the sparse gravel drive with its froths of moss, the closed mouth of the letter box – through a pane of glass, one that both distorts and clarifies everything she sees.

But not today.

For today, Edith Mayhew, a very thin tall, very wall woman with sour, tickly breath that made Cazzie turn away, was to take her place in the front seat instead. And since there was only two seatbelts in the back, it was decided that on this Sunday, on this grey, overcast Sunday on the first week of May, Cazzie would leave the house a little earlier than usual and spend her first afternoon alone with Rita.

Stealing one last glance at the big soft mound rising above her sister's head, Cazzie extracts herself from her duvet, as quietly as she can, and hurries downstairs.

About the same time that Cazzie clammers, with difficulty, up to her bowl of Cheerios already waiting for her at the kitchen table, Rita Laister sets down her fresh cup of tea and settles herself at the head of her own kitchen table. She can tell by Meg's empty

mat that Fred has already left for Sylvia's woods and that, judging by the time (Fred didn't normally leave this early on a Sunday), her husband is still in a foul mood. Rita raises her mug to her lips. Steam coils weakly around her upper lip. She blows on the liquid and places it back down on the table.

She didn't know why Fred was being so difficult about the land. It was bad enough insisting that the conversation, which didn't really need to be a conversation at all, had to come from him, but all this *in-person* business was really starting to fray at her nerves. An involuntarily jerk appears in Rita's upper lip. How delusional Fred could be! She could tell by his abruptness, by the darting way he spoke, that this last suggestion had been a reflexive, defensive one. But telling Andrew in person? Well, she would like to see him try!

Rita raises her mug and takes a sip. The tea was hot, almost scalding down her gullet and she winces as the heat and irritation settles down inside her chest slowly. She places her mug down and stares into space for several moments, until she hears the grandfather clock inhale then cluck docilly eight times. Rita checks her own watch. Helen would be here in hour or so. She takes another, more conservative sip of hot tea and then squints absent-mindedly out of the window. Perhaps Fred was simply avoiding their daughter-in-law instead? He had a tendency to make himself scarce when his family was around and whilst he was much better with the grandchildren than he was his own (who still, even as adults, Fred couldn't really talk to unless Rita was around), he struggled to last more than a single clownish hour – the little boy in particular brought out this playfulness in Fred that she had not yet known – before he would leave, tired and triumphant, taking off for his mother's woods with the dog. Which did annoy Rita quite intensely. For she herself found her grandchildren a little trying. Oh, they were fine really. She just wished they didn't have to be so *loud*.

After a pause Rita stands, then walks with her mug to the sink to add some cold water. The tap comes out a little stronger than she had intended, spilling tea all over the rim. Rita stares down at the thin, grey contents, thinking.

If Fred was serious about calling Andrew this evening, as he said last night he would, it was unlikely to happen after Catherine had been round. For he was always so morose and short-tempered after the grandchildren left, sighing and snapping at Rita with a curtness she couldn't interpret.

No, this wasn't going to work. It wouldn't work at all.

Rita sighs and continues frowning at her mug for several moments, then, with a suddenness that almost surprises herself, she tips the tea down the sink and then walks back upstairs where she finishes the final chapter of her biography on Brahms, showers and gets herself ready for the day.

The sun has shifted to a spot directly in front of the window by the time Rita returns, pink and a little later from the bathroom than she'd intended. In the pale, slanting light she picks up the wide-tooth comb that's lying flat on her dresser, then runs it several times and a little too vigorously, through her thick, cropped hair. She places the comb back on the side, just in time to hear the distant sigh of an engine, the familiar crackle of gravel. Rita glances out of the window, where, sure enough, she sees her daughter-in-law's old Peugeot slowing to halt.

It was a little jarring to see it, the red car parked in the middle of her drive. And as she stares, Rita finds herself gripped by the sudden absurdity that she is suddenly looking at a different red car, or rather, looking at the same car, but from a different life. A life in which Helen was always toing and froing from the farm, for one reason or another. These possibilities arc and dissolve, until Helen slams the car door behind

her and Rita swims back into herself. Following now, the top of Helen's head as she hurries round the red bonnet, Rita watches as she unbuckles Cazzie from the back and helps her out onto the drive.

What a serious little thing her youngest grandchild was! Quite unlike the other two. The girl is standing quite still, but even from this height Rita can detect that slightly roving, absent way she had about her. But she was quiet at least. A self-contained kind of quiet that Rita liked instinctively; but then, she had that rather strange looking face. The skin there was very pale and revealed a tangle of blue veins that escaped into her hairline. It was pointy, too; pointy, in an imprecise kind of way, which seemed to come as much from her eyes as it did from her nose, and which Rita found a little off-putting.

Helen must be saying something to her daughter now, because Rita can see the crocodile clip, the same tortoiseshell clip Helen always wears, shaking slightly. Crouching, she smoothes out Cazzie's coppery hair – so long now she could probably sit on the ends – and with the girl's hand in hers, she stands, quite suddenly, and walks to the edge of the window frame, crunching sideways and out of view.

'That's the one...yes... yeah,' Helen says nodding slowly, 'I'd guess it would take about 20 minutes from town?'

The regular adult sounds hang above Cazzie's head without catching. They're standing in the hallway now which is dark and smells of stone and old dust. Coming from the thin light outside, it takes Cazzie's eyes a couple of moments to adjust, for the dark constellations migrating beneath her eyes to recede, revealing, in corners and pieces: the grandfather clock in its usual corner and next to it a wooden chair and boots and slippers abandoned at painful angles by the mat at her feet. She is still



holding her mother's hand, who is talking a little frantically now, all sorry's and sighs, about how long the journey will be, and what time they will leave time and when they're likely to get back. The adult noises show no signs of stopping so Cazzie focusses instead on the slipper in front of her, noticing, in minute detail, the bite marks in the heel, the mangled tufts that are splayed there, until the rhythms of their conversation shift. Helen places one hand on the top of her head and says with a kind of painful buoyancy,

'You be good now, missy,' she says and then, in a much lower voice, 'Look at me.'

Cazzie looks up. Helen shoves a firm thumb in the very corner of her mouth and then says, 'OK. I'll be back soon.'

Cazzie wants to say something, but the scene is moving too quickly now, and suddenly Helen is already leaving, is already closing the door behind her, leaving Cazzie alone in the dark, narrow hallway, watching Rita watching her.

She is wearing a smart blue jumper whose fabric is the exact same shade as the pencil case Olivia takes to school. On her nose she is wearing a pair of glasses that have, draped on either side, a thin gold chain running to her shoulders. The glasses are so unlike anything her grandmother usually wears and for a few moments Cazzie can only stare, transfixed, at those *exquisite* lenses, at the two shimmering chains dangling on either side.

'Right then,' Rita says, gesturing to the door on their left-hand side and baring a closed-lipped smile, 'this way.'

Until today, Cazzie had only ever been in the kitchen on their visits – which was dimly lit yet bright and fresh like orange squash, with that large wooden table where her and Olivia were left to do their colouring books on. Yet instead of turning right,

through the sunken, sitting room covered with dog hair, Rita leads her through to another dark room, with a table in the middle and six chairs tucked sombrely on either side. The table is too large for the room and Rita has to struggle round the head of the table on her tip-toes, before she makes her way to a second door, partly camouflaged with the same paint as the wall, and starts jamming down the handle sturdily. The door judders. Rita tuts and tries the handle again, forcing it down further, deeper, so that the arm is almost vertical and, with a shove of her shoulder, the tiny metal tongue is released, and the thin door swings open to reveal a room Cazzie has never seen before.

The morning room, known to everyone else simply as 'Rita's room', is an ugly looking thing: a poorly built, flat-roofed extension covered with pebble-dashed that Rita's father-in-law Arthur Laister added to the farm sometime after the war. North facing, with only one internal wall, the room is bothered by a discouraging chill for all but the two warmest months of the year. In winter it becomes more or less uninhabitable. Breath shows white against the fading walls and spreading tentacles of damp stalk the ceiling. But Rita rather likes it this way. She thought the cold was good for her circulation. And besides, she liked to have a quiet place, where she could sit and think in peace.

Today, the sky is clouded over, but the bleary lob of early summer sun, is still managing to stuff the room with a thick, uniform heat. Rita dabs away the beads dotting her upper lip, cranks open a window and then proceeds with the same routine she has been following every Sunday for – oh, years now, certainly before Andrew and Georgia were born. She walks over to a wooden desk in the corner of the room on which there sits, behind the crowd of photo frames, a paper weight, and an old ash tray, a dark green radio waiting squat and hopeful at the back. With her forefinger and thumb she

locates the signal for Radio 2. The voice on the other end of the speaker buckles then skids, smoothes out just in time for Rita to catch the introductions followed, a few moments later, by her favourite part – that peculiar, textured silence, the held breath before the music begins. Rita straightens, feeling, as she does, a small pulse of satisfaction. Perfect timing.

She turns around to confirm this with her granddaughter now deposited in the green chair next to her own, her small pink legs strung out like a ragdoll in front of her.

‘Perfect timing,’ she says, stuffing the beginnings of a smile into the corner of her mouth. She makes her way to Cazzie’s side, but by the time she settles herself down, she is already starting to think better of this last comment. Such needless chatter is the kind of thing she prefers to do without, especially when the classical hour is on. So, while there is plenty more that Rita could say about the piece (Sibelius she is sure) – which is surely too dark, too *dingey* to be enjoyed by anyone – Rita voices none of this, only stares out of the window in silence for some time. Only, about a minute and a half in there is this: some inner coil starts to tighten, to stir, to lift its heavy head. And as she stares, seeing without seeing the dank, bedraggled fields still bunged up with rain, Rita finds a part of her hoping for a certain symmetry to the piece – so that she might understand its arrangement. So that she might hear its mysterious workings all over again.

In the armchair next to Rita, Cazzie gapes in silence up at her grandmother. She needs to wee, but she isn’t sure of the way back to the kitchen where she knows there’s a mean little downstairs loo with a toilet seat that’s always freezing and which, though technically inside, always smells of *outside*: of wet flags and something indistinct and minerally. Besides, the thought of going alone, of walking back through that dining room, with its great gaping fireplace and its tongue smeared with black, is

enough to fix her to her chair. Her grandmother could come with her, she supposes, could walk on the inside and protect her from the fireplace. That would help, she thinks, and she settles down into this thought for a moment, imagining the silky swish of Rita's trouser until—suddenly, searingly—her mind jumps. The silent loo is interrupted by the tinkle-tinkle sound of wee against the bowl all the while her grandmother's great, poised head listens on the other side of the door. No. No, no, *no*. Shoving at this thought, Cazzie stuffs one hand to her groin and holds it there, while the strain, the heavy twinge that's dragging down on her bladder starts to ease.

She looks again around the room. The place is so crowded with objects, with loud lamp shades and bookcases and paintings jostling haphazardly on the walls, that still she keeps noticing things, like the green tiled, electric fireplace that has, she sees now, propped in its centre a picture of a whimsical looking woman with a head covered in flowers and one breast hanging out. It was making her feel a little bewildered and headachey, particularly because her grandmother didn't seem to share any of this, who had instead wasted no time in showing her the view and pointing out her favourite picture on the wall (a drooping dog with seeping, melancholic eyes that Cazzie thought looked truly terrible). And it was strange, really. She knew from her mother that Rita was 'just a bit miserable', but her grandmother seemed different in here. Cazzie turns and gazes up at Rita where she finds a tenseness bothering her lips and a searching air of interest building in her gaze. As if she was about to strike up conversation with the small table opposite them, or the bookcase next to that, or the lamp in the corner, or—

'It's rude to stare, Catherine.'

Cazzie's heart trips. Her grandmother had warned her once before about staring and on hearing the words again now, Cazzie feels like she had almost, *almost*

told herself of this, too. She starts picking at a loose strand of embroidery that's hanging on the arm of her chair, feeling sorry and frustrated for pushing her luck, for knowing better and staring anyway. Her mind scrambles, trying to find some other comment or question that could draw herself back inside her grandmother's orbit of affections once more, but her embarrassment has only made her feel reckless, so that instead all she says is,

'Why do you have this armchair?'

Rita flings one finger to the air and tilts her head slightly, listening.

Cazzie waits, staring at the finger hovering purposefully in the air. She gathers the warm spit on the tip of her tongue and holds it there, tentatively.

'I haven't heard one of those in a while,' Rita says finally.

The music has come to a close now and, in hushed, reverential tones, the voices on the radio are welcoming on their first speaking guest.

'Funny instrument. Sounds like a duck until you know how to use it and then it can be quite interesting.'

Rita takes a mint from a bowl on the side and starts unwrapping it noisily. 'Your dad used to play it at one time,' she says, popping the bright white ball into her mouth and holding it there between her molars. 'Or tried to – I never did like the sound of it much,' she says. The mint is constricting her voice and making her tongue jab around strangely. 'Do you know what an oboe is?' she asks, peering at Cazzie with a pocked chin.

Cazzie shakes her head.

'Your dad's gotten rid of it I suppose', she says, rearranging the mint from one side to the other. 'Or it could be in the outhouse. Lord knows what instruments he has in there.'

The word 'outhouse' snags in Cazzie's mind, drawing a thin line of uneasiness through her that settles in her toes.

She has no more questions now.

Cazzie removes the hand that's been stuffed between her legs and starts picking again at the loose thread, more intently this time, while the tight, dragging feeling in her bladder seeps back in, builds slowly.

Cazzie has little idea of what goes on in father's outhouse, only that they've got to be careful when the light is on, never playing too loudly outside or calling dad for tea before it's ready. One time, Tommy kicked a ball into its side wall and fell into a state of panic and guilt so quick and entire, he burst into tears right there and then. Cazzie mostly avoids it. Impatience and intrigue have dragged her there herself a couple of time, but she has never stayed inside for very long. For her father had hardly spoken to her on these visits. He'd kept his head down, his glasses on, his voice low and small. And watching him as he worked, Cazzie had found herself thinking about things; about this separate world which had no part in her. Her mind had hovered above this simple, terrifying fact for several moments, but beneath the pain of exclusion, she'd found the heat of something else. Of curiosity, perhaps, or desire. It made her want to stay, to try and find a place for herself in that adult, quiet place, but there was little room amongst all her father's things and her questions had gone unanswered. And since there was nothing else for her in here, none of her books to read or toys to play with, after a short while, she had only left again, hurrying back barefoot across the shadowed lawn, to try and find something else to do.

'I'm still not sure if I'd choose to listen to it,' Rita says, almost to herself now. 'But there we are.'

The murmuring voices on the radio are starting to build again into an urgent, cheerful patter. Rita rearranges her weight in her chair and says, with directness but without reproach, 'Right, no talking now.'

Cazzie sits in silence as she is told, hearing the strummy, plucky sounds of a dreary, stringed instrument as it slowly fills the room. It had been some time since she had last visited her father in his outhouse. Her mind strains, trying to imagine the inside of the room, but she can only seem to see paper, stacks and stacks of paper spread like giant confetti on the floor. She hears again her grandmother's voice, 'Do you know what an oboe is?' With a slow ballooning thrill, Cazzie pictures herself asking quite casually if her dad still owns his oboe. How impressed everyone would be! How brilliant and clever she would seem! A hot trickle spreads slowly though her pants, stinging her thighs. But Cazzie hardly notices. Suddenly, her mind feels very tired and very overexcited all at once. She sees her father's face shining with admiration, asking her how she knew that name; how she knew it all by herself! And there, with the giddy muddle of anticipation all thick about her head, Cazzie suddenly realises that a strange sound is trying to reach her, has been trying to reach her for a few moments now, and she turns again to find that the sound, the high, wavering sound is coming from Rita. That Rita is singing.