One

'Not right. Not thinking right. Dead. Dead very soon.'

Now here he is: Sam. He's such a massive man, he stands four or five inches taller than the crowd around him. He's huge. The crowd of villagers and tourists, about sixty or seventy of them, are gathered around the railings overlooking the beach. The curve of the bay reaches out to the left and right and joins at the horizon with a line of blue about a mile long, and now the bowl of water enclosed by the bay and ending here at the beach is roaring and frothing with the competing cross-currents and the waves are already breaking four or five hundred yards out.

There's a couple standing close to him. They are wearing colourful clothes, the ones you buy in the shop back home when you are preparing for your holiday. They are frowning at Sam, this big man. His words are inappropriate. Beside them stands a woman, holding the handle of a suitcase. She has dense, long blonde hair, and she has turned her gaze from the sea towards Sam.

There's someone dying out in the bay. He is being watched by this crowd on the beach. They urge each other on: 'He can make it, I can see him, he can make it,' and 'The kiddies are safe!' and 'Look, he's still swimming!' They nod to each other, stare at each other imploringly. Some say prayers out loud. The emotion heaves through them clumsily.

Sam's words aren't right.

He moves on, his gaze not specific. He should not have spoken aloud, he knows that. Just move on now, he thinks. Go quietly. He knows these situations, and although he never fully understands why, he knows that a crowd like this is not willing to be truthful.

The man, a tourist it seems, had been swept out by the rip tide trying to reach his two children – their rubber dinghy had been pulled out into the centre of the bay. Sam had seen immediately that he was going to die. When two strong currents meet each other in a powerful sea, they can create a rip, and the energy created by the rip can drive anything in its path out into the deeper water where the breaking waves will pound and pound. The children in the boat will survive – the waves aren't huge, and as long as they stay in the boat, they will be picked up by the coastguards soon. But their father is swimming, and he is frantically, hysterically smashing arms and legs into wave after wave, trying to fight the force of the rip.

Sam had seen it before. He had been caught in rips himself, and knew that they were not dangerous if you showed them respect. Just swim gently, let the rip take you, keep quiet. In half an hour, forty minutes, you'd be half a mile away, in stiller water, and you could swim slowly to the shore, a long way from the village by then. Never fight it.

He smiles. Fancy trying to fight an ocean! A man, and he tries to fight an ocean! Well, he can try, but he'd never seen anyone last more than twenty minutes. The man would be dead very soon.

He walks past the end of the crowd, notes the lifeboat being pushed into the crashing waves on the shore but keeps looking ahead, his face calm, his mouth kindly, his eyes looking quietly into the distance. He walks slowly, his big solid hands each cradling the handles of carrier bags which hold the provisions he has just bought from the village grocery. The handles of the bags barely make an impression on his woody fingers. The long, neat acrylic blue trousers he pressed with an iron yesterday, and into them is tucked a faded yellow short sleeve shirt. The steps he makes are regular, and the navy beach shoes make no sound as he walks. Sam has thick, sandy hair that once had been ginger but at 57 it has still not begun to recede.

At the end of the little seafront promenade, where the railings finish at the steps which lead down to the beach, and the road continues on past the last few shops and cafés up towards the steep hill leading out of the village, he sees a boy, perhaps eight or nine, sitting on a bicycle. The boy looks tired and unhappy, and his face is red. It is a hot day, the sun is very bright. The boy is upset. The chain of his bike is clattering badly against the gearing cogs and the bicycle stands still.

Sam pauses beside the boy, not looking straight at him but diagonally, at an angle as he has learned to do over the years and years of his life, so that he can see but not be drawn in.

He carefully rests the two carrier bags down on the pavement, and bends his knees so that he is crouching, eyes level with the seat of the bicycle.

'You're not supposed to be there,' he says, not to the boy, but to the oily black bicycle chain, and he gently pokes his thick first finger under the caught chain, stretches it upwards so that the sprockets spring clear of the cog, and then he replaces it once more, this time fitting the sprockets into each tooth, pulling the chain around the cog as he goes.

'You won't work like that,' he smiles, 'making all that commotion. Want to be easy, take each tooth, fit it in. Much better.'

He tugs at the chain guard, which has twisted causing the chain to miss its path, and then he stands up. The boy is staring at him, he doesn't say anything. Sam picks some leaves from the low hedge that runs at the foot of the railings and wipes the black oil from his fingers. The boy suddenly pushes down on his pedal and the chain grips and he races off back towards the crowd.

Sam picks up his bags and continues to walk, slowly and calmly, up the increasing gradient of the road that climbs out of the village. The noise of the surf on the beach grows quieter in the hot sunshine as he climbs higher and higher up the long hill, and out in the middle of the bay the man feels the last strength in his arms disappear into the violent water and he gulps one final whole mouthful of seawater and he drowns.

Standing on the seafront, Isobel watched the man die.

The noise around her was ugly. There were frantic screams coming from a group down on the sand, and Isobel thought this must be part of the family. The crowd around her were moaning and calling out now – 'I can't see him any more! I can't see him!' – and some voices were becoming angry, emotional. A man yelled: 'Why didn't they do something? Why was the lifeboat out so late?'

Isobel looked at him. He was red in the face, with sweat licking at the hair on his brow. She thought: I am sorry for him; he doesn't want to accept it, not like the man who had passed by them earlier. He had said something odd, she thought: something about not thinking. No, the man beside her now didn't want it to be happening, and in fact he was crying now. A woman put her arm around his shoulder, and he turned his head into her, weeping.

Ah, how can this be? Isobel felt very tired suddenly, and she realised she was still clutching the handle of her suitcase. She let go, and sat down on the rim of the case. She put her hands on her knees, and let her head drop. Somehow the noise seemed greater now: the crying, the talking, the beating of the surf, and here in the background the wail of an ambulance. She felt the heat again, and the stickiness of her clothes after the long journey.

She breathed slowly and deeply, and shut her eyes. She had learned about breathing recently, how to inflate your lungs calmly and open your chest to fill them. Then when you exhale, you push the air out through a little gap between your lips very quietly and slowly, and you keep pushing until your muscles below your lungs have emptied them. When she learned this, at a class back in the city last year, she was taught to think of a wave on a beach after it had broken, and to think of her exhaling breath as though it were the seawater flooding up the beach, still pushing and pushing further up the beach until the last energy of the wave is used up. Then the slightest of pauses, when the water on the beach looks completely still, and then the sea draws back once more and you begin to breathe in again.

Isobel sat like this for a minute or two. She opened her eyes and lifted up her head. Out in the bay she could see the lifeboat circling and the crew looking down into the sea, but it was rough out there and the boat was thrown about by the swell and the waves.

She had asked the taxi to drop her at the seafront only fifteen minutes ago. She was going to go straight to the hotel, but she had wanted to see why the crowds were gathered. It's a normal instinct, isn't it, to be drawn to the crowd? Then she had found out what was happening. She had seen people die before, and it was that which had suddenly exhausted her: it was familiar, all this emotion and bewilderment and fear. She had seen it before, time and again, as the curtains were drawn around a bed on the ward. Now here, again, in the village where she grew up.

It is not how she had imagined returning home after ten years.

Sam had reached the top of the hill now. The road from the village which he had been climbing levels out at about two hundred feet above the sea, and it swings off to the right at the point where the coast path begins. There was a walkers' guiding sign pointing down the path, and a thick wooden seat with a tarnished brass plate sunk into the middle of it with the words *For Angie, for she did love this view so*.

He placed his bags beside one of the stone seat supports and sat down, conscious that he was still breathing through his nose: one of the things which Sam worried about was physical decline, and he feared the time when he would have to open his mouth to seize more oxygen after the climb up the hill.

Not yet, he thought, and he nodded. Still strong.

From the seat you could see over the roofs of the village below. The buildings were huddled around the curve of the beach, perhaps three hundred or so buildings, and from up here Sam could see the alleyways which connected the few streets which ran back from the promenade. He looked down the steep hill he had just walked up, over the roofs and the streets, and over to the long white building set into the cliffs on the other side of the village. This was the hotel where most of the holidaymakers stayed. In the winter of course it was mostly empty, but now in August there were all the signs of occupation: towels hanging out of windows, umbrellas and tables laid out on the gravel at the front of the building. Framed in an open window, a wetsuit swayed black in the breeze, dangling from a hanger on a veranda.

Further to the east of the hotel, the cliffs became wild again up to the point of the headland, and Sam's gaze continued across the line of the horizon to the western headland, and back along the curve of the bay up to his vantage point.

He liked this position. He enjoyed the seat: it was well made, he'd guess about three inches, three and a half inches of maple. It had been put up a few years ago when the last one rotted away. He remembered there always being a seat here at the start of the coast path, even when he was a boy and he was racing back home after school, running along the path to find his mother with hot tea ready and a piece of bread with her damson jam smeared on it, the tea set out on the table and her standing by the window with a beautiful smile to hide the tiredness she felt from another day cleaning for houses in the village.

Sam looked down along the line of the cliff, focussing carefully on each outcrop of rock.

'There he is' he said, smiling again. 'Look out beetles, look out mice, he's here.'

Down below, a peregrine hawk extended its wings and lifted itself up from an edge, then swept over the heather and gorse of the cliff, gliding ten or fifteen feet over the ground to settle again on another rock jutting out of the red brown cliff face. The noise of the surf down below in the village was like a whisper, and the sun was high overhead now so that Sam could feel the heat of it working through the fibres of his shirt about his shoulders. High above him a starling suddenly sang.

'No good just sitting here,' Sam said. 'Work won't do itself Sam.'

He stood up, bent down to pick up his two bags again and began to walk along the rough coast path that took him away from the road and into the headland. The path was wide – four, four and a half feet perhaps if he measured it by stretching his huge arms out from one side to the other – but

after he had been walking along it for five minutes he turned right and began to climb again up a narrower path closely bordered by thick hedges of brambles.

Sometimes he didn't take this more difficult way but would continue on the coast path all the way around the headland, past the lighthouse at the tip, to his house which lay on the other side. But today he knew he should be home earlier while the sun was still strong so that he could varnish the wood of the new cladding he had applied to the north side of the house.

They always called this steep path the 'cut-through' when he was growing up, and it took you up another hundred feet over the brow of the headland so that at the top you got a view of the village and its bay to the east, the headland and the lighthouse due south, and to the west the huge spread of the next bay, probably four miles of clean sand and rock and sea, which had for Sam provided the backdrop to his whole life.

'It's over, they've found him.'

The lifeguards had radioed back to shore, and the crowd understood that they had not been in time to save the poor soul. There was more sobbing now, and the man beside Isobel renewed his choking cry, his wife patting him absent-mindedly on the shoulder as he wept. His continued reaction irked Isobel – she could see he was not a relative, you could always tell the relatives: they stayed quiet at the end. Why take on so?

She stood up. She should move on up to the hotel now. She had left the city soon after dawn this morning and had been on the train for hours. She would like to settle in to her hotel before she had to talk to anyone.

She extended the handle and walked on down the seafront promenade away from the crowd, her suitcase trundling behind her on its plastic wheels. The sun was high now, and her long, thick hair glowed like bronze as it flowed down her back. She wore jeans, a cotton shirt, and her skin was brown from sessions at the sunbed back in the city. She didn't wear make up, and two men running down below on the beach towards the crowds looked up at her as she passed.

Isobel didn't notice them. She scanned the little shops and cafés along the seafront road ahead of her. Everything seemed tiny, which is how it always is when you return to where you lived as a child. She couldn't recognise the shops, and the café with its tables scattered outside on the pavement seemed brash and new. She walked on, not conscious now of the churning sea on her right, wondering whether at the end of the row the little bookshop would still be there. It was always the last shop in the row, she was sure of that: the tiny second-hand bookshop with the dark, musty interior. Where she had spent so much time, so many years ago.

Of course, it wasn't there. As she turned the corner to begin the climb up the slope towards the hotel at the end of the village, the last shop was an off-licence. In the doorway stood a young man, no older than Isobel had been when she left home. She smiled, but he was looking out beyond her towards the sea.

She stopped in front of him.

'Hello,' she said. 'I haven't been here for such a long time. Do you happen to know, was this shop a bookshop once?'

The boy turned to look at her, frowning.

'What?'

'A bookshop. Was your shop a bookshop once, do you know?'

He frowned more, his lip curling up. 'It's an off licence. Drink.'

'Yes, I can see that. I was just –'

'Can't you see what's happening out there?' he snapped. 'You want to buy a book, and there's some poor bloke drowning out there.' He shook his head, and walked back into the shop, the bell on top of the door jangling.

She walked on, pulling her clattering suitcase.

That's all right. She understood. He was probably right.

Only it would have been nice, to have seen the old bookshop. When she was at school here in the village, twenty years ago now, she worked on Saturdays for the old man who owned the shop, arranging the books on the shelves, setting them straight and neat with a concern for precision which always amused him.

Isobel knew that the intensity of her feelings when she worked in that shop had stayed with her all her life. While the old man dosed in the back room, she sat beside the till at the counter in the bookish silence with the dust particles twisting in the shafts of sunlight coming through the dirty windows, and she read and read. Her parents thought it a 'good thing' that she earned herself pocket money, but they never asked her about the books, and she was always relieved about that. Even back then, she couldn't bear to have to talk about the books she read, the thoughts they inspired.

She was no different now, she thought. It would have been nice if the shop had been there. She could have stepped back into it, taken a book from the shelf, sat at the desk and begun to read in the silence.

She began to climb the short slope that led from the end of the promenade up to the hotel. As she reached the top, she thought of Héloise. It was in the shop that she had first read about Héloise.

'*I moderate what it is difficult or rather impossible to forestall in speech. For nothing is less under our control than the heart – having no power to command it we are forced to obey. And so when its impulses move us, none of us can stop their sudden promptings from easily breaking out, and even more easily overflowing into words which are the every-ready indications of the heart's emotions*.'

Isobel went into the hotel, intense in her heart's emotions.

From the brow of the hill the narrow stony path begins to descend again, and Sam could see his house now fifty yards away, the whitewashed stone wall around it making a bright line against the green and brown leaves of the hillside.

The house had been built by his great-grandfather in the late nineteenth century. He had been an entrepreneurial man who had carried stone and mortar and lead and copper pipes and glass over the brow of the headland from the village to build a house on the cliffs overlooking the great bay which could host an oil-burning light to warn ships off the reefs. In return for his back-breaking effort and initiative, Sam's great-grandfather had been granted title over the plot of his house, a deal brokered by the owner of the village's fishing fleet with the family that had owned all the land thereabouts.

Every night his great-grandfather would take a wax splint spluttering with dripping flame from the fire in the hearth, and would climb a ladder on the outside of the house to reach the big lamp which he had built on the flat, stone roof of the house, and he would illuminate the sky. Not only the village fishing fleet, returning at night or in fog with below decks stuffed with writhing bass, pilchard, cod, mullet, turbot; but also passing merchant ships and navy frigates would come to rely on the flickering yellow light alone on the cliff edge and would know to keep a distance and steer south east for another half an hour so that the reefs of the great bay would be missed and the headland could be cleared and the sanctuary of the village reached.

Sam had reached the house now, and he lay his bags down on the concrete yard which is bordered at the front by the low whitewashed wall that he could see so clearly from the brow of the hill. The wall protected much of the area around the house from the south westerly breeze which most often blows across the bay. He scanned the view. The currents that had created such a ferment in the smaller bay of the village were strong out here too, and he could see the lines of the currents like threads spinning through the water, pale twisting lines one after the other in the green

of the water and the waves cresting in white flashes all over the bay. The hot blue August sky was streaked towards the west with thin, wispy clouds that trailed off like fingers towards the horizon.

'Ah,' he said, nodding, 'that's what's doing it. That's brought the rip – rain coming tonight. Too much pressure before the rain gets out.'

He wasn't talking to himself: he was talking to his house.

'Devil's fingers, see?' he asked, pointing to the clouds' edges on the horizon. 'Only in August,' he explained, his rough hand brushing pebbles from the top of the wall. 'Be fine by the weekend.'

The knowledge of the rain to come reminded Sam that he would need to set about varnishing straight away if he was to allow time for it to dry by nightfall, so he turned back to the house, opened up the heavy wooden front door and then carried his bags into the low ceiling kitchen.

The room was much as it had been when his mother collapsed on the floor over by the window ten years ago, felled by such a massive stroke that by the time the paramedic team had reached the village and then scrambled after the distraught giant of a man who was charging ahead of them back to the house, her heart had given up and she lay cold and dead on the stone floor. Sam's only real alteration had been to replace the iron cold store with a gas powered fridge four years ago. This was powered by bottled gas he collected every month from the delivery van which stopped at the top of the hill out of the village where the coast path starts.

Now he unpacked the few items he needed to buy regularly – milk, butter, cheese into the fridge, two bars of soap and some toilet paper for the toilet outside at the back of the house; a newspaper. He never needed much more than this: all his vegetables he grew himself in a big patch to the west side of the house, protected from the salty wind by a thick hedge, and his meat he bartered in great chunks from two of the local farmers in return for labour. He grew tomatoes and cucumbers outside in a glass and lead hothouse, which was the old warning light which his grandfather dismantled from the roof of the house when the local council built the new lighthouse on the headland in the 1920s.

He checked the thermostat setting of the fridge.

'We can turn you back up next week,' he said. 'End of August, weather will be turning, you won't need so much of our gas, you greedy bugger.'

He lay the newspaper down on the long wooden kitchen table, and walked through the arch into the dark dining room where his mother used to sleep on a cot in the corner. She moved out of the little side bedroom at the back of the house when she felt her only child was of the age to need his own room, and Sam still slept there. In his bedroom he changed into his work overalls, and then he went outside to set about varnishing the new cladding.

Isobel had showered already in the little hotel room. She padded naked around the room, her hair wrapped up in one of the white hotel towels, her skin still with drops of water on it.

The room was big enough to take a double bed in the centre, with a desk against one wall with a television and phone and kettle grouped together. She walked over to the glass doors and pulled aside the net curtains, and the blue green water of the village bay was right in front of her. She opened the doors, and immediately felt the sun once more on her body. There was a veranda for the room, with a table and chair on it, but she stayed in the doorway for the moment.

The hotel – long, low and white – was built in the 1920s into the eastern cliff of the village, so that the rooms looked back out over the bay and across to the beach. She could see the lifeboat which had landed and had been brought up onto the beach, and there were still crowds there. She looked away from it, up to the western headland on the other side of the bay. She remembered it all so well. The one road out of the village rose steeply up to the headland from beyond the far

end of the shore, and at the top of the hill where the headland starts you could bear off onto a cliff path which would take you around the headland and over to the huge bay on the other side.

When she was about fifteen, about the time she was working in the bookshop on Saturdays, she would walk over to the big bay on her own to swim. She used to love the feeling of swimming alone in the water early on summer mornings before the crowds arrived, and the echoing silence over there, compared to the chatter of the village and its curved little beach.

She recalled now the last time she had been in the village. It was ten years ago, when she was twenty five. She had been home only three hours, and she and her mother had already come to blows, ending up staring angrily at each other in the little front room. She remembered it clearly, slamming the front door of the little cottage in the street two back from the beach and walking, furious, up to the hotel to sit in the bar and drink. She drank all evening, and almost went upstairs with a hopeful businessman who was staying in the hotel, but finally slipped away and stumbled back through the dark village streets . Her mother found her in the morning, asleep outside the front door, curled up under the Victorian glass porch. They had breakfast together, and then she left, and never came back.

Well, she was here again now, and this time staying at the hotel. She had never stayed in a room here before. She stood up and looked at herself in the mirror on the wardrobe door, pulled off the towel from her head and worked her fingers through her thick, damp hair. She felt sorry now for the businessman, he must have had his hopes up. She remembered teasing him with her party trick: putting out lit matches between her forefinger and thumb, and staying quite still with the extinguished burnt match on her skin. Each time he tried to do it, he yelped and dropped the burning match.

'How do you do that?'

'The secret,' she said, 'is not to care that it hurts.' She didn't tell him she had seen Peter O'Toole do this in *Laurence of Arabia*.

Isobel turned away from the mirror. For the last two days, ever since she had first heard, Isobel had imagined being here in the hotel, back in the village, with the sea and the silence and the great skies of her childhood.

She was here now. At last.

Sam had finished the varnishing now. He packed up the brush and the varnish pot in one of the aluminium sheds against the back wall of the house, and he looked back at the fresh cladding.

'That's a good coat,' he said encouragingly. 'Shrug off that easterly when it blows the rain down on you.'

He decided that he had enough time to go for a walk over the beach before his tea at six o'clock. He took the stone steps which led from a gap in the wall at the front of the house down about seventy or eighty feet to the top of the beach. The steps were laid by his grandfather and his father before the war, narrow concrete steps they had painstakingly made using wooden frames in which to set the concrete.

As he walked down, he looked out over the long, wide bay in front of him. The sun had shifted further over to the west and the clouds were banking darkly now above the far headland. The sea was a deep green, disturbed in its depths. He stepped patiently down each concrete ledge. He could see cormorants out on the surface of the water, ducking down occasionally and re-appearing further away after swimming black and wet through the water scavenging for sprats.

Once he was on the beach he walked over the rocks which were wrapped in bristling mussels. The sun created flashing mirrors from the pools of sea water left by the ebbing tide, and Sam looked about him both casually and specifically: greeting the flock of sea-finches and checking the depths of pools for evidence of crab and noting which people were on the beach today and glancing at the position of the sun over the far headland to see how much further west it was

sitting now as August came to an end. He looked out for anything which might have been usefully left by the retiring tide.

As he left the rocks and walked down over the sand towards the edge of the water where the surf was noisy now, he passed a group of people standing and listening to one person reporting the death of the holidaymaker in the next door bay earlier in the day. One of the group called out:

'Sam! You heard about it?'

Sam recognised the short man with the round belly pushing out from an old grey T-shirt. He was often on the beach at low tide, and came over the headland from the village with a net to scour the rock pools of the great bay for prawn and crab. He was retired, and he talked a great deal. His face was animated now as he gave the group of holidaymakers his views on the tragedy earlier in the day.

'Yes, I heard,' said Sam carefully, and he continued walking towards the shore.

He did not wish to discuss it, because he knew that the only thing he had to say about the matter – that the man had died because he had not had the sense to learn about the ocean and its ways before allowing first his children and then himself into it – would not satisfy or please the people. If he stopped to be with this group, he would just be quiet, because he would have nothing more to add, and it would be the sort of quietness which was disturbing, and there would be a sourness in the air.

He walked on, and saw on the sand a fishing line that had been washed ashore. He bent to pick it up: a garish purple lure made of rubber with two rusty hooks, probably snagged on the rocks by one of the bass fishing boats that trawled patiently up and down the great bay when the waters ran quicker and the bass were feeding. He would keep it, grease the rusty hooks and use it himself on those occasional dark evenings when he rowed his own little boat up and down the bay.

'Nothing more then?' he asked the beach.

Over the years the tides had littered this huge, wide bay with such a range of things, a great store-house of man-made things from all over the world, natural things, animals. Sam now felt so attuned to the working rhythm of the beach that when a fat seal was caught struggling in the dip of the sand he could see how the warmer currents of that particular year might have confused the seal's sense of direction and led him astray from the deeper waters to get caught on this shore. When a half-broken packing case lay splintered in a rock pool he could almost see it slipping off the deck of a merchant ship two hundred miles away because an idle hand had failed to secure the lashings firmly during a high wind.

Things didn't arrive here by accident. The world operated with quiet efficiency, and everything in it was linked together and was part of the world, and it was really only in the last ten years – when he had been living alone in the house and when he had stopped having to travel away to find paid work on building sites and he had found that he could live on what money he had or earned from occasional bartered labour – that Sam had become settled in his skin and felt such gentle happiness that sometimes he would stop what he was doing and would quietly sit wherever he was and let the salty tears trickle over his battered old face and into the lines of his smiling lips.

She didn't plan to leave the hotel room today. There would be enough time to do the things she had to do while she was here, there was no rush. And she had no desire to go straight back into the village with all the talk that there would be of the drowning.

It was late afternoon, and her eyes had just opened as she lay inside the white cotton sheets of the bed. It was delightful to know that she could lie here in the silence with the curtains shifting in the warm breeze and the sound of the surf outside. She could hear seagulls every so often, but no voices. She breathed quietly and gratefully.

Nobody knew she was here. She couldn't think of anyone who knew she was here. And she didn't have to tell her mother, who at this time of day would normally have been preparing a light supper for herself, the radio on in the kitchen, just a few hundred yards away, in the little house still in the street two back from the promenade.

In the front room where the television was and where her mother would probably have eaten, there might have been cards from Isobel on the mantlepiece. It was an unspoken agreement they came to, that they would keep each other informed occasionally about each other's existence. Isobel began it, sending a postcard a few months after the final argument, and a month later a postcard of the village arrived at her flat in the city. Isobel remembered the words: 'Dear Isobel, Autumn is upon us here in the village sooner than last year. The tourists now are all gone and the village is quiet. I have suffered a cold, but it is over now. The boiler in the kitchen has been replaced. Your loving mother.'

The card sat on Isobel's breakfast table for days and she would look at it every time she sat down to eat. Finally, she put it face down on a bookshelf, and now it sat there with a pile of similar cards stacked on top of it. She wondered whether her mother did the same, but she suspected not: she guessed that her mother put her cards out on the mantlepiece. She could imagine her talking about them to neighbours who dropped in for coffee: 'Oh look Jean, another card from Isobel. We had such a lovely chat on the telephone last night, she is doing so well. I am so proud of her. Such a shame that she has so little time to get back here, she works too hard.'

Or maybe she didn't. Maybe Isobel was wrong, maybe her mother never mentioned her to her friends. She doubted it. That proud, stubborn, awkward woman – she wouldn't have let a mere neighbour know that she hadn't spoken to her daughter for ten years.

Tomorrow, once she had picked up the death certificate from the registrar in the village, she would have to go through her mother's things. She would have to go through everything in the little terraced house, on her own.

But not yet. Let's leave her now. Isobel was still tired, and she would spend the rest of the day quietly in her room, ordering some room service, sitting out on the veranda as the sun went down over the eastern headland.

She was calm, and later on, as she lay in the darkened room with the windows open to the sea, she lay asleep with a pretty, faint smile on her face.

When Sam went to bed that night, the rain that had threatened began to patter down gently on the roof of the house. There had been a deep flush of burnt orange over the western headland at dusk that indicated drier weather would follow soon.

'Might be some mist tonight though,' Sam had said to the kitchen as he looked through the window washing up the supper dishes. 'So hot earlier in the week, all that condensation, I reckon it'll bring the mist out at sea. Could have some rollers by the morning too.'

Outside in the dark the rain stopped not long after Sam had turned off the gas light in his bedroom. The warm currents of August air that swirled and flowed miles out at sea took shape here and there and gradually a damp spray of mist settled on the water far out from the shore and began to exert slow heavy pressure on the ocean. Bass and pollack and mackerel and jellyfish and eels and dogfish and even a school of dolphins four miles south west of the lighthouse began to feel the sea slowly churn in reaction to the weight of the mist, and long, low rolling waves began to flow back towards the shore where, as the tide reached its height just before midnight, they swelled up to their peak, hesitated in their full, tumultuous weight and then burst down on the shallow waters with a roar.

Sam slept uneasily. The growing volume of the surf invaded his dreams and his heavy body twitched to some unknown discord. There was a noisy mingling of shapes and faces and water in

his dream, and it seemed like a voice calling louder and louder. At one point he sat up with a start and sweat on his forehead, saying aloud:

'What's this then? What's this?'

He sat still in the dark of his room, his eyes wide open and listening, but all he could hear were the waves. Still later in his dream the voice returned, but was joined by others, screaming it seemed, screaming with fear and panic and horror.