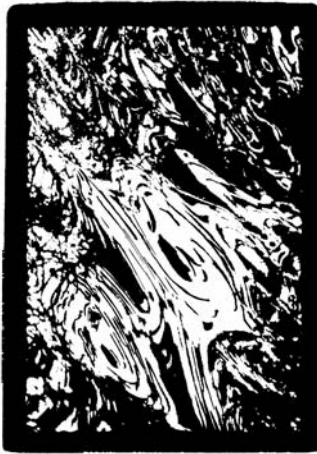


Llanfihangel

Elizabeth Brown



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LLANFIHANGEL

Elizabeth Brown

It was perhaps an hour into the evening that I first really noticed Sally's friend, James. He was a large, fleshy, almost bald man who tried to hide his weight by wearing a white linen suit that was perhaps two sizes too big for him. He hadn't said a great deal over the dinner table, at least, nothing that I remembered as very interesting, but now I couldn't stop looking at him and suspecting that I had seen him somewhere before. My interest had been aroused, I know, by the fact that I had caught him, several times, looking in my direction and then lowering his eyes to his food, or suddenly switching his attention to one of the many other guests he had not previously been speaking to.

He was now in an armchair opposite me as I drank a second cup of coffee and he was enjoying one of our host's large liqueurs. With the conversation fragmenting between the different guests around the room I said:

'We weren't properly introduced before. I'm . . .'

'Stop!' he insisted. Then, slowly, 'I know you already. You're Christopher Turner.'

'Yes.'

He smiled, and shook his head slowly:

'You don't recognise me, though, do you?'

'I decided there was something familiar about you before we sat down to dinner.' I don't know why I immediately lied, but something about his manner put me on the defensive.

'But you don't know where you've seen me before?'

'No, it's been annoying me all evening,' I continued what was, after all, only a partial untruth.

'James? There was nobody at your school by that name?'

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‘Of course,’ I said, hesitantly, trying to remember anyone from thirty years ago by that name. ‘There was a James Wilson? . . .’ I said, getting ready to list as many of the Jameses that I could remember from the distant past.

‘Could I perhaps be James Wilson?’ he asked, a slightly sardonic pleasure evident in his cold smile.

‘No, I saw him just a couple of years ago.’

‘So who else was there?’

‘James Tobin?’

He raised his eyebrows, and I was annoyed. I felt intimidated; only an old school-friend could bring back all the lack of self-confidence that had afflicted me as a boy.

‘You’re James Tobin?’

‘Imagine me rather slimmer, and with more hair . . .’

James Tobin had always been rather large, but I wasn’t going to be rude. I remembered him as rather more sharp-featured, but many years had passed, after all. He also looked older than I thought he should have done.

‘Well I never,’ I said, feigning an instant remembrance. ‘It all comes back to me now. Didn’t you go off to university, to study advertising?’

‘Yes. But I have to admit I’ve forgotten what you did?’

‘Polytechnic. In Brighton. Electronic engineering.’

‘Did I know that?’ he asked genially. ‘I’m sure I did. And you were with that pretty girl at the time?’

‘Julie? No, we split up before the end of the sixth year. She decided that Neil Priest was likelier to succeed in life and hitched up with him. They’re married, living not far from where I live now. I keep in touch, but...’

‘Do you remember Sara?’

‘Sara who?’

‘You went out with her as well, didn’t you?’

‘No, not with a Sara. My only other girlfriend was Cara Penrose.’

‘Ah, I was getting around to mentioning Cara. Have you seen her in the last few years?’

‘No, not since school, actually. I’ve no idea what happened to her.’

‘I met her recently.’

‘Really, how is she?’

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‘She’s not been too well. She’s had a bad time of it, poor thing.’

‘That’s rather sad. I’ve always had a soft spot for her. I didn’t treat her too well. You know, I left her for Julie, which was a mistake.’

‘Well, I met her in Wales. Like you, she didn’t recognise me at first. (Perhaps I’ve changed more than I think?) You know, you’re the only two from school I’ve met subsequently, and you were once a couple.’

‘That’s a coincidence.’

‘Well, you know what they say about coincidences? Statistically speaking, they have to happen from time to time. You have to start getting worried when they don’t happen . . .’

‘I suppose so. But, what’s happened to Cara?’

‘She’s been ill. She had been married to some chap, I don’t recall the name. He met her after school and she didn’t want to dwell on him. He knocked her about a bit.’

‘That’s awful.’

‘Yes, and they were together, married, for quite some time. Anyhow, he died, apparently, a few years back, and for all his faults, which were many, he left her with a rather magnificent house in Wales; borders country, near Hereford. It was in Hereford that I met her. She is really rather attractive, you know.’

‘She was somewhat plain when I knew her.’

‘She’s blossomed. Handsome might be the word now. And this chap’s money and background obviously brought out an elegance in her. You know, she dresses well, and obviously looks after herself. She’s got a good figure, but that might be the illness . . .’

‘What’s wrong with her?’

‘She didn’t say exactly, and I didn’t like to pry, but I assume it’s cancer. She’s been having treatment, and apparently it’s working. She insists that she isn’t going to die, or anything like that. But it’s been costly. She went private, because that’s what she’d always done with her husband, and one day she discovered that he hadn’t left her with as much money as she’d thought. It turns out that she’s actually in debt, thanks to some very incautious investments he made just before his death.’

‘And she hadn’t realised this when they’d wound up his estate?’

‘No, it’s a complete cock-up, apparently. She’s furious with the solicitors, and she’ll try and sue them, once she’s well again.’

‘She’ll have to sell the house, I assume?’

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‘That was my immediate reaction as well. She told me that she’d put it on the market for the best part of a million pounds. And then a prospective buyer had had a survey done, and it’s got subsidence. She hadn’t noticed the cracks, apparently. She got quotes for remedial work, but it’s so bad that the recommendation is to tear the place down and rebuild it. The house is actually a liability.’

‘Poor Cara!’

‘The stupid thing is that the house isn’t about to fall down. It’ll stand without being any danger to it’s occupants for another fifty, perhaps a hundred years. But the engineers reports make it unsaleable. She’s effectively penniless . . . And she can’t work because of her illness . . . And she can’t even get social security because they argue that she’s got the asset of the house, which, at the moment, they refuse to believe she can’t sell.’

‘So what’s she doing? Is anyone helping?’

‘She hasn’t a family to help, and there’s nothing left of her husband’s family. She’s no friends to talk of—*he* wouldn’t let her have friends.’

‘Is nobody helping?’

‘Well,’ James Tobin coughed, embarrassed. ‘I have given her some money.’

‘That’s very good of you.’

‘It’s a little awkward. I have some savings, not much, and I haven’t been able to tell my wife.’

‘Oh, she doesn’t know you’ve helped Cara?’

‘No, well, I gave Cara two thousand pounds. It’s a big chunk out of our savings, and how do I explain to my wife that I gave it to an old school friend, who I didn’t even know well at the time? In fact, she needs twice the amount again, soon, or she’ll end up in court, or worse. My wife would ask where I met her, and I’d say on a business trip, and then she’d ask if she’s good-looking, and I’d have to lie and say no. And she’d think that I was getting something in return . . .’

There was a pause, and then I asked the obvious question:

‘And are you?’

‘Cara’s been very grateful. And I know that she’s desperate, and I know that from the outside it looks like I’m taking advantage . . .’

I sat back in my chair. At some point in his story I had moved forward in the seat, but now I wanted to put some distance between this man and myself. I had noted that he looked old and fleshy, and

now I noticed the red veins on his nose that suggested too much alcohol, and the curdled look to the whites of his bleary eyes. He was obviously rather vain, wearing flashy cufflinks, but looking for flaws I saw the dirt under his fingernails, and a stain from the evening's food on his rather ludicrous cravat.

And, of course, all this was against the picture that had been drawn of poor Cara, attractive and helpless, and preyed on by this bloated and unpleasant man. I'd never liked him at school, in fact I suddenly remembered various instances at school when I had been rather revolted by him. It also seemed creepy that a person I didn't know well, many years ago, still remembered my old girlfriends as pretty. He had mentioned a Sara, and must, I now decided, have meant Sara Howard. We'd only been good friends, but he was probably envious of that friendship as well.

'Would you give me Cara's address?' I asked, businesslike, taking a pen from my pocket and wondering what he could write it on.

'I'm afraid not, old friend,' he said.

'Why not? I'd like to write and offer to help.'

'Well, although she's desperate, she's very embarrassed about her present position. I actually suggested that she might have some old friends who could help out. I wasn't necessarily thinking of old school friends, but she insisted no. It's pride, I assume. She said that the few people who'd remember her wouldn't remember her fondly.'

'Well, that's rubbish,' I said, feeling my way carefully and cautiously. This monster of a man, her so-called 'friend', held the secret of her whereabouts, and had to be played carefully. I was at a loss to know how to get the information out of him.

'I have a friend,' I started to make up the story as I went along, 'who is a lawyer, who could help her. He's very good, and as a favour to me he could at the very least deal with the social security people. And he could certainly help her realise some value in her property. . . .' I was noticing the flaws in this story as I went along, but decided that confidence might just get me through. 'What's her married name, and address. A phone number would be useful.'

'I'm sorry,' he shook his head heavily. 'She has a new firm of solicitors on the case already. It wouldn't be possible to bring someone else in just like that.'

'Look here. I want to help. I can't bear the thought that she's in such distress.'

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‘Who’s in distress?’ asked Sally, our hostess, who had abruptly turned her attention away from the small party looking at a pile of records on the coffee table.

‘An old school friend of ours,’ I said.

‘Oh, James was asking about you earlier because he said that he thought he was at school with you! What a wonderful surprise.’

‘It turns out that a mutual friend is in a terrible state at the moment,’ I explained. ‘James has very kindly been helping her out, and I want to do my bit too.’

‘Of course you must!’

‘All I have to do is persuade James to let me know her address.’

‘It wouldn’t be quite right,’ he explained patiently, ‘to give out such personal details when I’ve been particularly asked not to.’

‘Rubbish!’ Sally exclaimed. ‘If she needs help, you’ve got to both help. After all, you are all old friends.’

‘Exactly,’ I agreed.

‘Well,’ he said, reluctantly. ‘Now isn’t the time, or place, really. It’s late, and I ought to be going soon. Perhaps we should meet tomorrow? I’m only in London until the weekend. I could sound her out about your offer by phone in the morning. And at lunch decide where to go from there?’

And that was the end of the party. James Tobin left with the promise to let me pay for the meal the next day, and Sally was inordinately proud of her achievement in reuniting old friends who would be able to be such a help to each other. I asked her how she had met James.

‘A wonderful coincidence. We met on the train coming up from Devon, and we got into conversation. It seems that he was a good friend of my late brother when he was in the army!’

After a good night’s sleep, and with a full morning before I met with James for lunch, I should have had time to question quite what had happened that previous evening. To a dispassionate outside observer, one who was not desperate to chivalrously help out an old girlfriend, and rescue her from a rather repugnant dragon, it seems obvious that I should have been more cautious. Coincidences were natural, as he had explained, but that he should also have known Sally’s late brother was extending the lengths to which coincidence could comfortably be pushed.

But he played his part so well. At the café the next day he appeared in a hurry, and apologised that he could only stay for a short time and would only have a starter with me, and no wine. It was me who suggested the writing of the cheque for four thousand pounds, and he who was very unwilling to take it. He told me that he had talked with Cara on the telephone that morning and she was very uncertain about accepting help from me. He explained that he would pass on a cheque from me made out to her, with a note of my address, and then it was up to her whether she bank it and get in contact. He played the part of grudging go-between very well, and I came away from our brief meeting believing that I had managed to get around his attempts to block direct contact with Cara. For the rest of the day I was rather pleased with myself, and that evening I dug out of the attic my old photograph albums. It was then that I realised what had probably happened.

I had no formal class or year photographs, but I had several of a school play, and quite a few taken on the very last day of school. There was Cara, in two photographs, and I admit that I went rather misty-eyed over them. And then, in another photograph, there was James Tobin in the background. It was unmistakably James Tobin, and how I had accepted the man at the party and in the restaurant as him was beyond me. Yes, James was quite a large boy, and his sharp features would undoubtedly have become blurred if he had gained further weight, but the profile of his nose was unmistakable, and it was not the nose of the man who had recently claimed his identity. The more I thought about it, the more the impostor also seemed too short, and too old.

I couldn't sleep that night. I kept replaying our conversation over in my head and realising that he had offered very little information, and had expected me to guess his name, and to suggest who my girlfriends had been. And yet I didn't want it to be so. I wanted his story to be true so that I could play the gallant friend to Cara, and, less selflessly, not have been the dupe of a con-man's trick. Ungallantly I was unable to believe how much better it would be if it was just a trick because then it would mean that he had never met Cara, and that she was probably happily married, living in Surbiton with three children.

I did not really need to lose any sleep because as soon as the bank opened in the morning I could arrange to have the cheque stopped—it would be that easy—and indeed that's exactly what I did.

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My account was untouched, and I never heard from ‘James Tobin’ again. It was a curious sensation; like narrowly avoiding a car accident.

Of course, I alerted Sally, who told me that she had very much doubted that ‘James’ had ever been in the army with her brother (‘he was obviously not a military man’), but she couldn’t see that he had gained anything from her apart from a free meal and entertainment.

The incident appeared to be effectively ended. I didn’t tell Sally, or anyone else about the cheque I had written and then had to go to the bank to stop. I was not defrauded, and if I was to be honest, I felt a complete fool for ever having been taken in. I considered going to the police, but made the excuse that there was no way that I could do anything but give a vague description of a fat man in a white linen suit. It was a pathetic excuse, of course, because the real motive was my embarrassment. I should have considered the possibility that I might be able to stop others from being defrauded by him, but I preferred to try and forget the whole thing. And I did, for about a month.

The handwritten envelope appeared on my doormat with the other mail and I didn’t even stop to look at the handwriting or the postmark. I started reading without looking at the ‘Nr Hereford’ address at the top of the page, and was baffled by the first couple of lines and had to look at and decipher the signature before it all came back to me, and my heart started pounding horribly. It read:

Llanfihangel House
C—H—
Nr Hereford

Dear Christopher

I think that I understand why you did what you did. I know you offered help for all the right reasons, and then withdrew that help with equally as valid motives. I immediately tried to bank your very generous cheque for £4,000, and would have replied with great thanks, but other pressures kept me from writing. And then I was informed that the cheque would not be honoured.

Dear James has been so kind, and so generous, and if I come through this unscathed it will be him that I have to thank. He tells me that you remember me fondly, and that is more than I can hope for.

With love,
Cara.

Guilt overwhelmed me. How could I have doubted the man calling himself James Tobin. Hadn't Sally said that he had never tried to defraud her? Perhaps he was just as stupid and socially inept as he had been at school and I had misread the whole situation. There was a phone number on the letter and I phoned it, unhesitating, to try and put things right with Cara. The line was dead, though, and I wondered if it had been cut off. Pathetically I noticed that the letter had been sent with a second class stamp. How could I have been so fanciful and dramatic as to believe that I would have been the target for a confidence trickster? I wanted to rectify my appalling mistake there and then, but I couldn't just leave everything and drive up to Hereford.

Perhaps a little explanation of my own situation is required at this point. I am married to Judith, and have two children, Trish and Tom. I manage an electrical goods shop in the west of London, and I desperately want to find another job without such demanding employers. At the time of the dinner party at Sally's my family were on holiday in Norfolk without me (I had already used up my annual holiday entitlement by taking time off when my mother had died earlier that year.) Judith and the children were back home when I received the letter from Cara, and I have to admit that I hid it from my wife. I hadn't told Judith about meeting 'James Tobin' because I was embarrassed, and I decided not to tell her about the letter because it seemed to put me in an even worse light. I hadn't wanted to tell her that I had been taken in by a con-man, and now I didn't want to admit that I had believed an old friend was a con-man and that I had acted so badly towards Cara.

I should have explained it all to Judith as soon as she returned from Norfolk. Not doing so made it harder to tell her now. With the arrival of the letter I should have insisted on taking the day off work and driven straight up to Hereford to put things right. But I was a coward. There are no other ways of explaining myself. That day I sat in my little office at the back of the shop and wrote several letters to Cara, apologising, explaining, and either enclosing or not enclosing a replacement cheque. I had got myself into a stupid state. With hindsight the best thing would have been to have written and explained everything, and said that I still wanted to help. As I drafted and re-drafted letters a sentence crept in which said 'I think that it would be best if we met so that I can give you a replacement cheque in

person.’ I kept reusing the same line, word for word, and then I suddenly saw how creepy it might look and excised it. On some level I wasn’t admitting to myself, wasn’t I doing just what I accused James of? And by doubling the amount of the gift was I just trying to look more impressive than him?

My thought processes were getting more and more convoluted, and the next thought that lodged itself in my mind was that we would really have to meet because her letter might just be a further flourish of the confidence trickster. Simply sending her a cheque in the post, an accomplice could bank it tomorrow and after the minimum number of days had passed they could simply withdraw it all.

But doubting Cara’s existence made me feel inordinately guilty again. Believing in her made me certain that I was being tricked. I didn’t think that I could tell anyone, and I continued to prevaricate and sent no reply. The days passed and I slowly got on with my life. I always intended to tackle the problem, but I kept putting it off.

I hate to admit that it was six months later that I finally went up to visit Llanfihangel House. My shop is a part of a chain and our Birmingham store had been experiencing problems which had led to the dismissal of the manager and under-manager. I was sent up there for two weeks to straighten things out while decisions were made on new appointments and possible in-shop promotions. I started off up the motorway as planned but almost immediately took off on a very long detour. In Hereford itself I telephoned the shop to say that my car had broken down and that I’d be unable to make it in that day. For good measure I phoned Judith and complained of the same thing. She was sympathetic, picturing me hanging around some midlands garage while I waited for the fictional fault to be mended.

From the letter Llanfihangel House was in a hamlet called C—H—, some ten miles inside the Welsh border. The place was marked on my map but the black dot seemed to represent an area of very scattered houses without any centre, and I didn’t find the house without first getting lost in a maze of high-banked lanes and odd-looking hills. It was a huge Victorian pile on a rise, surprisingly hard up against the narrow road. I parked in the weedy drive and walked around to the front door which was boarded up and with a ‘Condemned’ notice stuck to it, and a further sign saying that the site was patrolled by a security firm from Welshpool (though this seemed

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very unlikely). By climbing through a very overgrown flowerbed I could see through the front room window that it was empty. It was so still and quiet, but that was probably the impression any townie would have received in that part of the countryside.

At a loss to find any local person walking around the lanes who could tell me the story of the house and its owner, I even tried at the doors of a couple of houses that could hardly have been called neighbouring, but nobody answered except some vicious-looking dogs at one farm. I drove to the local pub, perhaps two miles from the house, and though they provided me with a decent lunch, neither the landlord nor the patrons could give me any information whatsoever.

I returned to the empty house and parked once more in the driveway. Looking at the outside walls from inside the car I realised that I was examining them for the cracks that, Usher-like, threatened to topple it. It was an impressive brick-built Victorian affair, out-of-keeping with the local architecture. The driveway ended in garages that would once have been a stable-block, and these were joined to the house by a long wing that must have been kitchens and store rooms. When I finally got out of the car the place seemed even more unnaturally quiet than it had before.

I don't know what I expected to achieve by returning to the house, but I found myself aimlessly walking around its choked gardens, looking up at its big empty windows and various, changing rooflines. It was missing a few slates, and the woodwork was in sore need of new paint, but it did not appear to be in bad repair. Without realising what I was doing I was peering in through an old conservatory which housed only a few broken remains of cane furniture. The door had another 'Condemned' notice on it, with the smaller print explaining that it was private property, that trespassing was forbidden, and that the owners had no liability if anyone was injured by it. I tried the handle and the door opened.

In London, of course, they would have had to completely board-up the windows to deter vandals, and not just the downstairs windows. I'd seen some houses where they'd even bricked them up to stop people from getting inside and lighting fires, or turning it into a squat. I suppose it was well out of the way here. And Llanfihangel House didn't have anything inside worth stealing, or vandalising. There were no period fittings or furnishings. It was bleak and lacking in any character. My footsteps on the bare, wide boards echoed off the

pictureless walls, and a smell of damp was almost suffocating. It was bright without any curtains at the large windows, and dusty. I passed from room to room downstairs not seeing anything of any note whatsoever, and stood in the hall wondering whether there was any point in climbing the stairs to the next floor. What was I there for?

It was dark there, with the front door boarded up, but the sun was coming in through the etched glass fanlight above and slanted brightly across the wall forming a strange, stretched shape. Without the light at this angle I wouldn't have seen the ridge under the wallpaper that travelled from the floor to ceiling. I followed it with my hand, and then with my fingernail I scored the paper along the edge and it tore. It wasn't a crack that I could see into, but a ridge where something had shifted fundamentally in the wall.

In the depression by the front door that was meant to take a mat there was a debris of ignored post. It looked like impersonal stuff, mainly, but on the top of it I could see a printed invitation to the opening of a local gallery, addressed to Cara Penrose.

So she had lived there. And she had still been using her maiden name. It was more likely, I decided, that she had reverted to her old surname after her husband had died. But whatever had been the case, I could have contacted her without using James Tobin as a go-between! If only I had simply telephoned directory enquiries the whole thing could have been clear. How many Cara Penroses could there have been living in the Hereford area, just inside the Welsh border?

The only thing that was certain was that James was right: Cara had lived here in a house suffering from subsidence. I looked through the rest of the post and saw that those at the bottom of the pile had not been moved since the 21st November. That seemed odd. And then I noticed, poking out from the envelopes and leaflets a familiar piece of stationery. It was my letter to Cara. It was the letter I had given to James Tobin containing my note and the cheque. He had scrawled 'By Hand' in the top left hand corner. So he had delivered it, but it was not opened.

I was sitting on my haunches by the front door with my back to the dark hall when I suddenly had the idea that someone was behind me. It was absurd, of course. Nobody could have walked around in the house without their footsteps making a din on the bare boards, and I had been in that position by the door, motionless, for perhaps a half-minute. An unpleasant tingling at my spine and a feeling of cold rushed

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over me and for several seconds I wasn't able to move. I was listening. In fact, all my senses were straining for the least suggestion that I was not alone in the house; that there was something there. I didn't move, but far from being paralysed, I was forcing myself to be still, so that if there was anyone behind me in the empty house, I might not cause anything to happen until I was ready to move! Finally my muscles screamed at me to change my position and with a dread fear such as I've never before experienced, I turned my head and looked back in horror at the completely empty hallway. There was nothing at all there, but I could not shake off the feeling that threatened to overwhelm me.

I stood up gingerly. And without looking anywhere other than straight ahead I walked out of that dark space, and through the lighter rooms into the conservatory and made my way outside. At no time did I look back, and even when I was in the car and had reversed out of the drive, I did not once look in the mirror as I drove away.

I was too disconcerted to notice that I was low on fuel, and it was only when the light started flashing on the dashboard that I realised I must find a petrol station. Being stranded out in that tangle of lanes did not appeal to me. I wasn't quite certain of where I would find the main road and had a horror of finding myself back at Llanfihangel House; perhaps doomed to keep coming across the same lane and landmarks, with the great Victorian house inevitably appearing at the rise in the road.

It did not happen. Almost immediately I discovered the road I wanted, with a sign showing Hereford as seven miles distant. There was also a petrol-station. It was an old-fashioned, slightly intimidating 'attended' service, and I was asked by a dour old man in overalls if I was in the area on holiday. I said, no, and added that I had been trying to look up an old friend, and he insisted on knowing who. I decided to tell him, and he replied that the lady who'd lived there was dead.

'Killed herself,' he said without any consideration for any feelings that I may have had. My stomach lurched.

'About a year ago,' he said.

'Surely not that long ago?'

'Oh, it must be. Hanged herself from the banisters in the hallway. Postman saw her though the front door one morning. Her husband

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had died a couple of years earlier and left her with huge debts, so the local paper said.'

'It must have been some time in the spring,' I insisted. Arguing over when it had happened was a good way of deflecting the conflicting feelings of guilt and confusion.

'No, it was definitely before Christmas, because at Christmas the house didn't have its lights out around the windows, like it used to do, even when she was there on her own.'

'You're wrong,' I insisted. 'She wrote to me only this year.' I had her letter burning a hole in my inside jacket pocket.

'If you say so,' he said, as annoyed with me as I was with him.

I still had not told anyone any detail of this story, though there was not a day when aspects of it did not surface in my mind, when questions did not appear before me, or waves of guilt pass through me. Twelve months on from the dinner party at which I first met the man calling himself James Tobin we received another invitation from Sally, and this time Judith was able to come too. At the last minute a fear that 'he' might have been invited made me suggest us not going. However, baby-sitters were on their way, taxis were booked to take us there and collect us afterwards, and Judith had not seen some people from that circle of friends for two years and was eager to go. I had no choice but to agree.

As we sat down to dinner I was relieved to see all the seats taken and that there was no balding, fat man present in his white linen suit. I began enjoying the evening, having had a couple of cocktails before starting on the wine, and had the added comfort of knowing that a taxi would be taking us home. I relaxed and put everything from my thoughts but the trivial chatter of the dinner party. It was as I was being served with the sweet that Sally asked me, from the head of the table, what had happened to my friend in distress from a year ago. Completely unprepared, I simply gawped at her, unable to think of what to say. My inability to reply meant that in a matter of seconds the whole table had their heads turned to me. Even those who had not heard what Sally had asked were expecting me to say something.

Finally I excused myself:

'It's, well, a little distressing. Do you mind awfully if I tell you later?'

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It was Sally's turn to be embarrassed, and she apologised for saying the wrong thing, and everyone tactfully started or resumed talking among themselves. Only Judith continued to stare at me. Naturally enough she was rather perplexed, and I mouthed the word 'later' across the table to where she sat.

The moment we moved out of the dining room, before even Judith had the chance to come over to me, Sally was by my side and apologising profusely.

I told her that it was nothing. Over the last course of the meal I had had time to think of what to say to Judith, and decided to keep it simple:

'I met an old school friend here last year,' I explained to her, as Sally continued to stand with us just outside the living room. Everyone else had gone through and were being offered drinks. 'He told me of another friend who was in financial difficulties, and though I offered to help, he wasn't very willing. I don't quite know what happened. It was a bit of a muddle. I had no contact address for him, or her.'

I looked at Sally: 'James Tobin, that's what he said his name was, wasn't it?'

'Oh, you silly!' she exclaimed. 'All you had to do was ask me. You know, a month or so ago he brought me some of my late brother's things, the sweet man.' She was directing this at Judith now: 'By coincidence Christopher's school friend was in the army with my brother. Though if you saw him you wouldn't believe he could ever have fitted into a uniform.'

'So you've got his address?' I asked, warily.

She frowned. 'Actually, no. He just turned up one day with a box under his arm, as he had said he would. I was going to write to thank him, but didn't know where to write. What did you say his name was, Tobin?'

'So, not only do you not know his address, but you don't know his surname?' I pressed her, receiving frowns from both women.

'I gave them lunch . . .'

'Them?'

'Him and his wife, a quiet woman . . .'

'His wife?'

'Yes. She was very quiet, a little odd, called Cara, I think . . .'

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I didn't want to hear anything else. I just didn't want to think about any of it. The last time that I had been to Sally's for dinner I hadn't availed myself of her husband's wonderful liqueurs, but this time, knowing that a taxi would take me home, I got really rather drunk.