

First Session

I can talk for as long as you like, no problem. You'll just have to tell me when to stop. How far back do you want to take it? Because Lily is what it's about, in my opinion. And the mother is part of the story too. Father too. Goes without saying. But maybe better to pick them up later. Shall we start with the crash? Seems an obvious place.

[Pause]

Terrible thing is, Curtis would have been on his way home the next day. He'd been gone a week, going around Vietnam and Thailand, inspecting the factories. Cambodia was the last stop, and he'd done what he needed to do there, so he decided to go to Angkor Wat. That might have been the plan all along. I don't really know. If you've flown halfway round the world you can't come back without seeing it, can you? Even if you've only got time to see a small part of it. You need days to explore the whole place, apparently. So he flew from the capital to this other town, right by the temples. Can't remember the name. And that's where the crash happened. He hired a driver to take him out to some part of the site that was fifty miles away. More or less. A good distance. They set out in the dark. That's the thing to do – see the temples as the sun's coming up. They were almost there when they hit a lorry, or the lorry hit them. Head-on, in the middle of the road, on a bend. I don't think they ever worked out who was to blame. Curtis couldn't remember anything about it. One minute he's in the car, next thing he knows

he's in hospital with all these tubes coming out of him and his head full of staples. The driver – Curtis's driver – was killed. Don't know about the chap in the lorry.

[Indistinct]

Six months before we saw him again, up in Scotland. You could see he'd taken a real battering. Asil brought him up in the mighty Mercedes, the battleship. More on Asil later, and the cars. I was in the garden when the battleship came in, and Asil went round to the passenger's side to open the door, which was unusual. With people in that world, it's par for the course. You no longer have to trouble yourself with opening a door. Big politicians, film stars, royalty. They don't open doors. But that wasn't Curtis's style. He didn't have to make a point about his status every minute of the day. We worked for him, but we weren't his servants, if you know what I mean. Staff is what we were. Staff and servants are not the same thing. The people I was working with in Scotland, some of the places they'd worked, what their employers really wanted were slaves. Curtis wasn't like that.

[Pause]

Right, so Asil opened the door and gave an arm for Curtis to grab onto. And when Curtis got out, he clearly wasn't the person he'd been before. It was obvious, within seconds. The way he looked around. It was like he was having to refamiliarise himself with the place. Fix his bearings. He could have been a patient arriving at some super-deluxe clinic. Then he noticed me, and the smile was

a good sign. But all he said was ‘How are you?’ Something like that. He didn’t use my name. Before, Curtis always used your name. It was a kind of courtesy. ‘Hello Jeannie. Hello Viv.’ Some people, you could be there a year and they still wouldn’t know you from Eve. But I had the feeling that my name hadn’t occurred to him immediately. He was having to search his memory for it, and it wasn’t available. The next time I saw him, though, in the morning, he knew my name then. And he knew Rosa’s name right off. She managed the household. The chosen one. Captain of the palace.

[Inaudible]

I didn’t get to speak to him properly for a couple of days, so it was the physical changes I noticed at first. For one thing, he’d lost weight. Quite a few pounds. And the way he walked. He had a stick for a while, and he had to concentrate on where he was putting his feet. Things that should have been automatic weren’t. He was uncertain rather than unsteady, like the ground wasn’t completely even. You’d see him stumble now and then, for a few months after he came back. There were headaches as well. Terrible headaches. I mean, the scar was not small. Like a parting, all the way from front to back. He’d get these head-splitters that could go on for hours and nothing would make them go away. He’d fill a sink with iced water and keep dunking his face in it. What Rosa told me. Dizziness too. He’d be sitting down and suddenly he was bobbing around on the sea. It got him down. You could see that. Someone who’d always been on top of things, on top of everything, and then this was happening. His brain had hijacked him. That’s what he said to Rosa. Hijacked by his own brain. The worst was when

he couldn't find the right word. Not just names. Random words, simple words. He just couldn't get hold of them sometimes. That went on for some time. And he'd get angry about it. He'd never had the longest fuse, mind you. Read any of the articles about him and they'll say something to that effect. Lara got that right. We'll come on to Lara in a bit. Not suffering fools gladly. That's how they put it. Being angry with himself, though – that was new. The tiredness as well. Not the kind of tiredness you get at the end of a hard day. It was like being hit by a wave. That's how sudden it was. It smashed him. And for a time he had this sensation of trickling water, in his head. That must have been hard to live with. As if there was cold water trickling inside his skull, like a small pipe was leaking in there. It stopped, after a year or so. But still, it would have driven me round the bend.

[Indistinct]

Same with a stroke. My grandfather, Les, he was a mild sort of chap. Never exactly Mr Sunshine, but not what you'd call a gloomy character either. A bit dull, to be honest. Took things as they came. Then he had his stroke, and from that point on he was a miserable sod. Forever complaining. Finding fault. His speech was damaged, so sometimes you didn't know what he was moaning about. One arm was completely useless too. Some people, they come out the other side of something like that with a sense of how precious everything is. A new urgency. Engagement. They've come close to the edge, and they've been pulled back, so they start to rethink their priorities. They realise they only have one shot at life and they'd better not waste it. Seize the day and all that. That wasn't

the way Les took it. No silver linings with granddaddy's clouds. He was always getting depressed. He felt vulnerable, like the switch might go off at any moment. It affects different people differently. It's amazing what can happen. Weird stuff. I'm not talking about just going from cheerful to miserable or miserable to cheerful. Sometimes the brain gets completely rewired. Harry, the maintenance man, he did some reading, after what happened with Curtis. Found some weird stuff. One woman, she had an accident when she was skiing. Fell and hit her head on a rock, and she went into a coma. And when she woke up, she could speak a language she hadn't been able to speak before. Spanish, I think it was. She must have learned some Spanish at school and the knock jogged her memory. That's what I thought. But Harry said she'd never studied it. She knew two or three words, from cookbooks and recipes. But when she came round she could speak whole sentences. Phrases, anyway. She'd picked up a language the way you pick up a virus. I'll ask him where he read it, then I can send you a link, if you like. We're still in touch. I'm in touch with most of them, which tells you something, doesn't it?

[Indistinct]

What I want to say is that I always liked him. Curtis, I mean, not Harry. But I liked Harry too. Some of us thought Curtis was nicer after the accident, and maybe he was, but he was always a good employer. I've never worked for anyone nasty, and being in the garden you don't have the kind of contact that someone in the kitchen has. You follow me? A gardener, you tend to get respect. It's your special area. Your domain. But some of the others, they'd