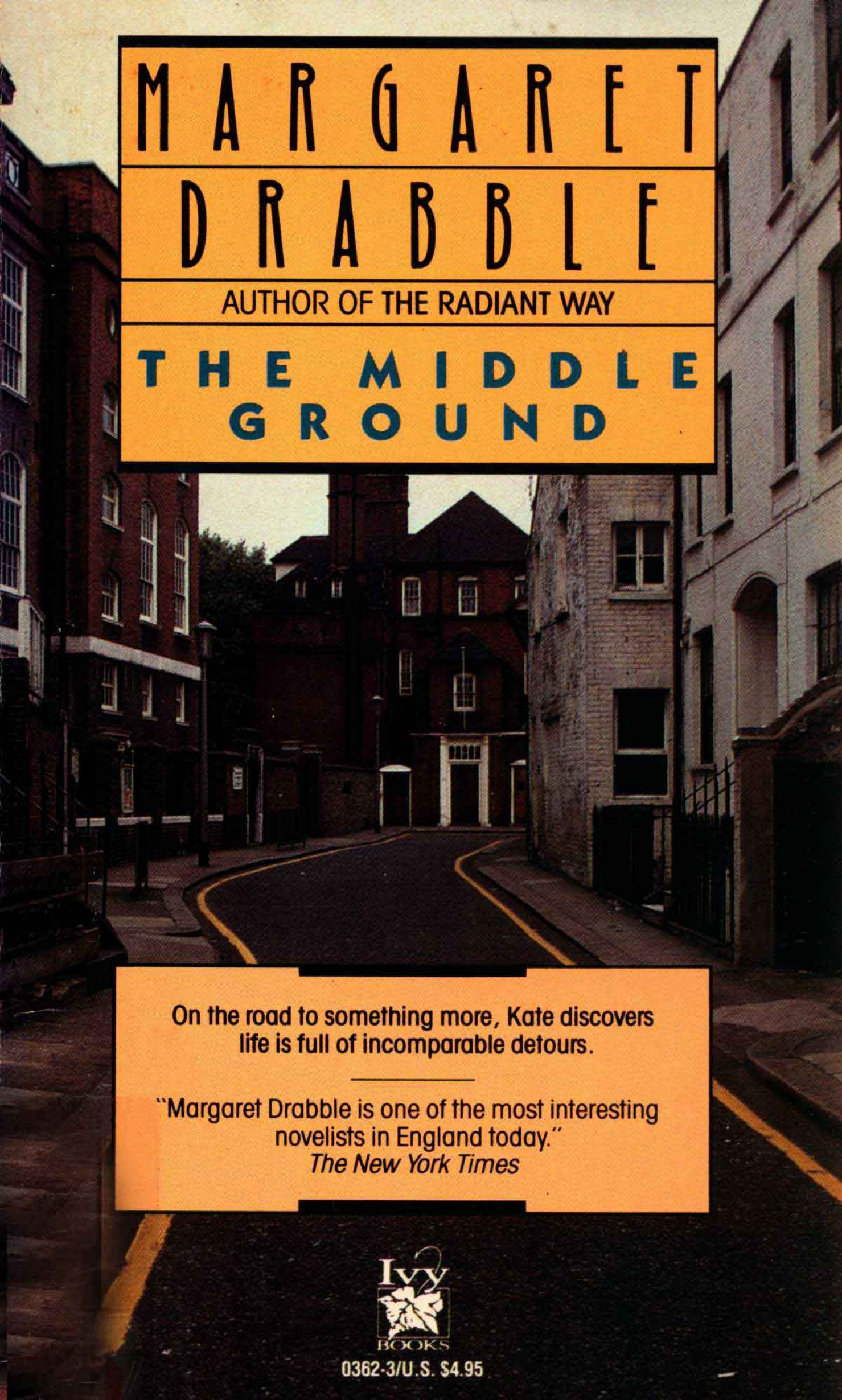

# MARGARET DRABBLE

AUTHOR OF THE RADIANT WAY

# THE MIDDLE GROUND

On the road to something more, Kate discovers life is full of incomparable detours.

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# THE MIDDLE GROUND



Margaret Drabble

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Thoughtfully, Kate cut up Hugo's steak and spread each piece with a dab of mustard, then started to turn over her own spinach with her fork, as though inspecting it. Hugo watched her, and then said (for many things that Kate did were little performances, requiring applause, enquiry or comment), "What are you looking for?"

"Ladybirds," said Kate.

"Why?"

"Once I had lunch here and ate a ladybird without noticing it."

"If you didn't notice it, how did you know what it was?"

"Because there was another one, in the spinach. So I thought back, and realised what the crunchy thing was that I'd just eaten. Anyway, I'd kind of half seen it out of the corner of my eye." Satisfied with her investigation, she looped up a mouthful, and ate it. "It was during that ladybird plague year," she said, "do you remember? They were all over the place, swarming on beaches, biting old ladies on the tops of buses. How's your steak?"

"It's fine. But the courgettes taste of chlorine."

Kate leaned over, helped herself to one, ate it.

"Yes, so they do. Funny, isn't it? I wonder why I go on coming here, it's a terrible restaurant. Loyalty, I suppose."

*"Did you send the spinach back?"*

*"No, of course not. Women never send things back in* restaurants, didn't you know?"

And she smiled at him, her wide, infuriating double-edged smile, her smile full of duplicity.

Hugo spiked another piece of steak, and continued to look at her while he ate it. She continued to smile, the smile turning into a sort of bland, mask-like, Medusa defiance, but good-natured still, for Kate was after all relentlessly good-natured, that was one of her problems: and how well she looked, how pink and shining with health, although he knew that she was not particularly well at all, but on the contrary had been rather ill and was now rather miserable, with some cause. Kate had often complained, in the past, as a joke, that the worse she felt, the better she looked, and now she did indeed look healthier than ever, her pale brown hair escaping bouncily from beneath her green headsquare, her white teeth munching the spinach; as though the surface of her resolutely refused to acknowledge any interior difficulties, as though the glow on the surface emanated in direct contradiction from within, in order to confuse, perplex, and throw spectators into disarray. Hugo knew her well enough to stare her out, and would have done so, but she came back to the attack without dropping her eyes.

"Look, Hugo," she said, "it's all very well for you, and I'm as bloody sick of bloody women as you are, I'm sick to death of them, I wish I'd never invented them, but they won't just go away because I've got tired of them. Will they?"

"You could switch to industrial relations. Or Middle Eastern affairs, perhaps," said Hugo, for Kate had just been complaining about her latest visitor, a student from Iraq, who had arrived unannounced and seemed to be intending to stay indefinitely.

"Don't be silly, Hugo. I know my limitations," said Kate.

"That's a very unfeminist remark," said Hugo, provocatively.

"Look," said Kate, ignoring this new angle, and returning to an earlier point in their conversation, "look, do you want to see my morning's post? You don't, do you? But you're going to have to, just the same. Here" —and she started to delve around in the large kitsch carpet-bag she'd been carrying around on her shoulder for years—"here, take a look at this lot"—and she slammed down on the table a great untidy wad of letters and envelopes and brochures, which, when sorted and expounded, proved to contain:

1. A letter from the American Express, addressed to her ex-husband Stuart, asking him why he didn't give his wife the freedom of an Express card. The letter was illustrated by a photograph of an expensive-looking woman in a black evening dress and strings of pearls, standing in an expensive hotel foyer with a lot of shining matching luggage. (Kate had been a card holder for some years: Stuart's credit, as she had no need to explain to Hugo, was not good.)

2. An advertisement for a fire extinguisher, portraying a hysterical woman in a provocative nightdress, shrieking amidst a lot of flames, and asking: "Do You Protect Your Loved Ones?"

3. A life-insurance leaflet with much the same message, but less sensationally portraying a happy family sitting over its cornflakes, the wife in a striped apron, the unsuspecting husband with a heart attack just round the corner, despite the fine executive panache with which he was reading his upmarket newspaper.

4. An invitation to attend a fashion show.

5. A letter from the Post Office addressed to Stuart, requesting his signature on her application for a new telephone extension.

6. An invitation from a women's group in Birmingham, asking her to speak to them on the subject of "Women Today."

7. A letter from a BBC producer, asking her if she'd ever thought of writing a play about the liberated woman of today, and if not, why not.

8. A pink letter from a militant American feminist announcing the birth of a daughter, and sending good wishes to dear Kate from Sandy, Steve, Baby, Wiggles, and Mustapha. ("I think calling your car or dog Mustapha qualifies as racist, don't you?" was Kate's comment on this offering: "and pink notepaper is certainly sexist, wouldn't you agree?")

9. A brochure for expensive Italian shoes, with underage models posing in Victorian underwear, offering a Try-at-Home Service for Professional Women.

10. A request that she should appear in a fur coat in an advertisement for fake fur, in aid of wildlife conservation.

"Well," said Kate, having thoroughly displayed this interesting selection. "You see what I mean? What else can I do but write *yet another* piece about the image of women in advertising? This was a bit much, all in one post, don't you think?"

"Was that all the post you got?" asked Hugo, chasing an elusive chip around his plate, and finally cornering it against a lump of fat.

"What do you mean, all? How many letters do you get a day? And this was all home stuff, not counting the office."

"I meant, don't you get any nice personal post?"

"Well, no, not today, actually." She leaned forward, widening her pale bright-blue give-away impenetrable eyes at him. They were full of the hard glitter of deep sympathy, deep interest, deep devouring self. "And you, Hugo, how much personal post do you get?"

"Oh, not so much these days," said Hugo. "But then, I realised I'd finally grown up when all I was interested in getting through the letter box was cheques."

Kate laughed.

"Anyway, Kate," said Hugo, "you ought not to complain about a post like that. It's a tribute to your Social Class B Economic Status."

"I'm not really complaining," said Kate. "I'm perfectly complacent, as you know. But it's my social conscience at work. I ought to be worrying about everyone else, oughtn't I?"

"All those women who didn't have your peculiar

advantages?" said Hugo: again provocatively, for Kate's past advantages would have taken some subtlety to discern.

"Oh, shut up," said Kate. "You know what I mean."

"No, I don't, as a matter of fact," said Hugo. "But I know we're not likely to agree, on this particular subject."

"Shall we talk about something else? Shall I light you a cigarette?"

"You are so solicitous, dear Kate, you will ruin my health. But yes, please. Have one yourself. Help yourself."

Kate lit a cigarette, and handed it over.

"Did you know the statistics for women smoking have risen by some horrific proportion?" she said. "Smoking women, violent women, what is the world coming to? Freedom is very bad for people." She started to stack up her letters again, casting a look of lingering regret at the fake leopard and mink.

"Anyway, I'm too old and fat to model a fur coat," she said.

"Of course not," said Hugo, gallantly, while thinking that in fact she, marginally, was.

"You know, it's all very well," she said, "but I've been thinking lately, every single bad thing that's happened to me happened to me because I'm a woman. There's no point in pretending it's not so. Even my illnesses. Apart from tonsils when I was ten."

"And colds, and chickenpox, and measles, and mumps, and flu."

"I've never had flu. I don't believe in flu."

"You could argue that all the bad things that have happened to me happened to me because I was a man."

Kate took this suggestion seriously, reflected on it, and nodded, blowing out smoke.

"Well, that all goes to show that I must have been mad to try to pretend that the sexes were much the same; if that's what I used to say. Is that what I used to say?"

"How should I know?"

"I don't suppose I ever had what you might call an ideology. But I certainly used to believe in freedom. And progress."

"Yes, I do seem to remember a few columns of newsprint on those topics. But I hadn't noticed that you'd abandoned them."

"I haven't abandoned them, they've abandoned me. I can't afford to abandon them officially, anyway. I've got to pretend to stick by them." She sighed, heavily. "You know, looking back, I realised I felt as light as air, all these years. I felt as though I was walking on air. I did feel free, I felt so—so undetermined, so unforced, so unpushed in every way. And now I realise it wasn't like that at all. It was all an illusion."

"I don't see why it has to be called an illusion, just because you feel differently now. And you probably only feel different temporarily. It's your age, that's all."

"It's worse than that. Though God knows that's bad enough. Oh dear, what a bore I am these days. How very patient you are, I don't know why you put up with me."

"I don't find you boring."

Depressing, then?"

"No, I don't find you depressing, either. Perhaps I should, but I don't."

"That's nice of you."

"It's only because I'm an unfeeling cold-hearted creature. I don't really care enough about you to get depressed by you. Anyway, I'm sure you're going to cheer up again one of these days. You're bound to. You can't not."

"That's what I tell myself. But I don't think I believe myself."

"Well, I believe you."

She smiled, dispiritedly, then tried again, and smiled more brightly.

"You know," she said, "I'm beginning to think I feel the same way about women that my father feels about the unions. That it was a good cause in the old days. And that's treachery, isn't it? I've sold out, like my Dad. I thought I was a revolutionary, but I'm not."

"That really *is* age, what you're describing. Don't we all feel the same?"

"Maybe we do, but that doesn't make it any better. Yes, you're right, it *is* age. I used to enjoy the smell of

battle, but I've got sick of it, I'm really sick of it. I'm worn out."

"You've done your bit. You can retire."

"What to?"

"I don't think you're tired of fighting, you're bored with finding yourself on the winning side. It's all got too easy for you. That's the real problem."

"Do you think so?" This analysis seemed to cheer her, and she stirred her coffee with a new access of energy. "Do you think I'm just fed up with everyone agreeing with me?"

"You're fed up with them pretending to agree with you. You should find some wonderful new line and annoy them all. Start again, with your back to the wall."

"How can I, when I believe in the old line? Perhaps I should join a group and get my consciousness raised."

"Your consciousness needs lowering, not raising, if you ask me."

"Oh, don't be silly, Hugo. Anyway, I'm too busy to go to a group. I haven't time." She looked at her watch, put on her busy expression, waved for the bill. "Now, look, Hugo, you promise you'll help me out with Mujid? Friday, we agreed. You can talk French to him, and ask him about Iraq. His English is awful, and my French is worse, so you can imagine what a nightmare it is trying to talk politics after a hard day's work."

"I don't know why you take such people on."

"I don't. They just arrive. And I don't know how to say no. Do you know, Mujid believes that not a single nation in the twentieth century won its independence without the support and intervention of the Soviet Union? At least, I think that's what he thinks. It can't be right, can it? I mean, what about Iran? But I just don't know enough to answer back. I'm an ignorant fool."

"I suppose you think men are better than women at saying no."

"I don't think it, I know it. And I also know that when men have other men to stay with them, they don't run around cooking them meals like I do for Mujid, and worrying about whether they like them or not. Do they? So you see, I do need a consciousness-raising group after

all." She started to fish in her bag for money. "Is it your turn to pay, or mine? I think it's mine."

"I thought you paid last time."

"No, I'm sure you did, don't you remember, you only had a tenner and he was bloody rude about the change." Kate counted out three notes and some silver, and began to struggle into her coat.

"Actually," she said, "saying yes is my special technique for preserving myself. I know it doesn't sound very logical, but it works. I don't know *why* it works, but it does. It's my way of keeping the upper hand."

"I don't think a group would like the sound of that."

"No, it wouldn't. That's why I don't go." She said this with an air of triumph, as though she had scored a point, though what the point was neither of them could have said.

They walked back to the office in silence, in the October sunshine, for the traffic was too noisy to permit conversation, and Kate reflected, not for the first time, that it was very shocking of her to be pleased that Hugo had lost half his arm in Eritrea buggering around drunkenly with a stray grenade, and indeed pleased wasn't quite the word, for she'd been very upset when the news came through, but nevertheless she was pleased in some wicked corner of herself, for now she could look after him and cut up his meat once or twice a week, and make him duly grateful, without feeling she was imposing on him in any way. A horrible, manipulating, dominating, castrating, busybody woman, that's what I am, she thought, I like everyone to depend on me, why ever is that? And Hugo, for his part, thought of Kate and her history, of their long friendship, of her recent misfortunes, and wondered how she was getting on, really, inside herself, and whether or not she was managing to put herself together again. It wasn't an arm she'd lost, but a baby, and it had shaken her more than he'd believed possible. She had gone to pieces in the strangest way, though not many people knew her well enough to notice. At first he too had been obscurely pleased by her misfortunes, to note that she too was weak, vulnerable, a victim of circumstance, for her high-handedness in her good years had occasionally annoyed even him, as it had

certainly annoyed many of their friends and colleagues; it had been interesting to see her waver, make mistakes, make a fool of herself, stop looking so bloody pleased with herself all the time. But this satisfaction had given way to a worthier though equally selfish regret. He wanted her to cheer up, because she was more amusing when she was up than when she was down. She wasn't boring yet, but she would be if she went on like this about women and groups. He knew enough angry, disillusioned, bitter women. Kate had been light relief, of a high quality. Always good for a laugh. He didn't like to see her sink into seriousness. Let her be happy, let her recover, let her be a freak escape from the general doom. Her life had been freakish enough so far, surely she could find a way out of this particular trap?

Hugo thought that he knew exactly how Kate felt about his own accident, and he liked her for it. Secretly, he was quite pleased about the accident himself, in some ways. It had its compensations, and one was that he'd never have to pretend to be a war correspondent again, he'd never again have to pretend that he liked the sound of gunfire, he'd never again have to fly off to some disaster-stricken zone with an air of calm indifference. He could retire from that particular field of masochism, honourably, with decorations. He had done his bit, more than his bit. Nobody expected him to play at being a limbless war hero. He was writing his Middle East book. A much more suitable occupation.

He'd never confessed this feeling of relief to anyone except to the surgeon at the hospital, who had looked at him oddly, and told him an extraordinary story about a patient who had taken it into his head that he was destined by God to model artificial limbs, had studied surgery from a medical textbook, and had amputated his own right leg at the knee one night in his Knightsbridge flat; he didn't make a bad job of it either, said Mr. Pethwick, but he passed out before he quite finished and would have bled to death if his boyfriend hadn't dropped in unexpectedly at the crucial moment. Very strange people are, said Mr. Pethwick, the ways they devise of mutilating themselves.

Hugo had thought this response rather over-sophisti-

cated, but guessed he had asked for it, and took it in good part.

Hugo had no desire to model artificial limbs. So far he had refused even to consider acquiring one for his own use.

Kate can never decide whether she is a special case, and as such of little general relevance, or whether she is on the contrary an almost abnormally normal woman, a typical woman of our time, and as such of little particular interest. Sometimes she thinks one thing, sometimes the other. There is plenty of evidence on both sides. She doesn't even know which she would like to be. At times she feels a sense of womanly solidarity, for the things that have happened to her—marriage, children, love, divorce, illness, ageing parents, lost love, rejection—are the things that happen to many, if not most, people. At other times she feels a giddy solitude, and a sense of strength from this solitude. She used not to worry about this uncertainty, but worry has been forced upon her by what Hugo has not entirely seriously labelled her mid-life crisis. She doesn't even know whether or not to welcome this label, with its suggestion of inevitability. And if it is a mid-life crisis, such as everyone suffers, what on earth is on the other side of it? She has no idea. For the first time, she feels, she has no idea of what will happen next. She has run through what she now recognizes were the expected phases of life, though some of them seemed surprising, not to say miraculous, at the time, and she doesn't know what will happen next, nor how to make it happen, and, being an energetic and active person, she strongly dislikes the feeling of helplessness, the lack of direction, that this uncertainty generates. She looks at the component parts of her life—her children, her ex-husband, her ex-lover, her work, her parents—and doesn't know what to do or to think about any of them. Her implacable progress has been halted, a link has been broken, and the past no longer seems to make sense, for if it did, how would it have left her here, in this peculiar draughty open space?

Here is an account of Kate's past history, some if not

all of which must have led her to wherever she now is.

Kate Fletcher was born on 7 February 1937, in what is still picturesquely known as the Lying In Hospital for Mothers and Infants, on the Old Pinstead Road in Romley, East London. It was a district where many mothers had their babies at home, both through choice and necessity, but this possibility was not extended to Mrs. Fletcher, who was classified as a health risk. She was extremely overweight, suffered from high blood pressure, and through peculiarities of temperament had none of the little network of friends and neighbours that makes home confinements pleasant. Also, unlike many women of her class, she had no fear of hospitals; rather she enjoyed them, enjoyed being the centre of professional attention, enjoyed the relapse into enforced inertia. She even enjoyed being asked questions about her weight, questions which to most fat people are a torment of shame and a temptation to mendacity. Oddly, despite sporadic attention from the medical profession, Mrs. Fletcher managed to reach the age of fifty-five before anyone thought of asking the question that elicited the information that she was a butcher's daughter, and had been throughout her life in the habit of eating too much meat, meat which she never declared when questioned by doctors and dieticians, not because she wished to deceive, but because she genuinely believed that meat was not fattening. Cholesterol had not then been invented; and she never came to believe in it.

Both Kate and her elder brother Peter were in contrast, at least in infancy, extremely skinny children. They did not seem to thrive as other children did, but suffered from chest complaints, bronchitis, asthma, even eczema. Mrs. Fletcher blamed the bad air of Romley. She was not a woman given to blaming herself, or if she did, it was in the recesses of her spirit, unobserved. Mrs. Fletcher did not like Romley or the neighbourhood of Romley in which, for the early years of her marriage, she was obliged to live. She considered it, with little justification, beneath her; she strove to set herself apart, to cut herself off, and succeeded. She also succeeded in making herself a figure of fun, an achievement for which both her children suffered.

They also suffered on their father's behalf. Walter Fletcher was a man of character, by no means the henpecked shadow he inevitably appears in photographs beside his massive wife, but he was an eccentric, and looked it. He was as small as his wife was large, a little, undernourished, grey-faced man, self-educated, self-made, a working-class intellectual with a passionate interest in his work. He and Florrie Fletcher were, physically, a very odd couple, and attracted attention whenever they went out together, which was rarely. But worse than his appearance, from the children's point of view, was his interest in sewage. He worked at the Blackridge Pumping Station, not half a mile from Arblay Street where the family lived when Peter and Kate were little; his father and grandfather had been in the same line of business, over the river at Crossness, and had worked on the ships that used to disappear secretly up the Thames and out to sea to dump their in those days untreated load. Walter's father had been a keen union man, protesting energetically against the supreme and dictatorial authority of the Old World top-hatted manager; he had been one of the select band that had been born, reared, and educated on the works. Walter had inherited his militancy, and had taken it north of the river with him. He had also developed a lively interest in the science of drainage, sewage, and pollution, was forever writing letters to the local paper and the *Sewage Workers' Gazette* about the overloading of drains with new-fangled tampons and contraceptives and indestructible detergents, about fluoridisation and the dangers of water-born viruses.

Kate's feelings about this inheritance are very mixed. On the one hand, she cannot fail to feel respect for her father's achievements; his work, as he was fond of pointing out, was essential, even more so than the work of miners, and he had himself been vocal in campaigns for better pay, better working conditions, better status. His speech at his retirement, during the strike of 1970, was a fine piece of oratory, invoking the great pioneering names of Chadwick and Bazalgette, Simon, Godwin, and Snow, conjuring up the Dickensian horrors of the polluted Thames, nostalgically recalling the heroism of three flashers lost during the great flood of 1953. By 1970, Kate

was well placed to appreciate such points, but as a little girl she was much more conscious of the ridiculous aspects of her father's enthusiasms, aspects which caused her and her brother much trouble at school.

Looking back now, she realises that there was no reason why her father's job in itself should have been the cause of so much teasing; many of the children had fathers employed in pursuits that were positively disreputable, whereas her father's position was secure and respectable. And her cousins over the river certainly didn't suffer in the same way. Uncle Bob, who worked at Crossness, was a jolly man, always ready with a joke, full of good stories about rats and diamond rings. He had a ring of his own, of which he was very proud, made from a gold sovereign he'd found in the old King's Pond Sewer; he and his mates were a friendly lot. But Walter was a different matter altogether. There was something purposefully, provocatively irritating and alienating in his manner; he would harangue neighbours about their drains and cisterns and faucets, he was a busybody, aggressive, interfering, self-righteous, and utterly lacking in human tact. Whenever Kate saw him talking to anyone in the street, her heart would sink, for she could catch all too quickly the expressions of bored impatience and sulky resentment with which his temporarily captured audience would listen to his lectures.

He was a useful man, of course. Those whom he had not too deeply offended would call him in when pipes burst or blocked, when ballcocks misbehaved. And Kate is herself a dab hand at washers and plumbing. She cannot bear to waste water, and has been known to leap up from other people's dining tables to turn off a dripping tap, to return smiling defiantly and apologetically with an amusing account of the price of each wasted drop in man hours and money. People always assume that her father instructed her in these skills, but that, she says, isn't so—why should she have needed to learn these things when he was around to do them? No, she learned the hard way, when she got married, from a do-it-yourself book. But the neurosis, if such it be, is inherited. She doesn't think it's neurosis, she thinks it's common sense. She gets very annoyed when people own

up to the range of things they flush down the lavatory. Just think, she says, of the people on the receiving end. Luckily, she manages to say these things in a manner that people find endearing, acceptable, even charming. Unlike her father.

Walter Fletcher was useful in other ways. He loved committees, and sat on as many as possible. Local government, the Co-op, the local Sports Association, the local primary school, the local Labour Party—he was involved in them all. He had been shop steward, before his promotion. (They promoted him, Kate later found, to shut him up.) The only thing he kept clear of was religion. His grandfather had been a Plymouth Brother: his own father had defected, in favour of the Municipal Workers' Association, and Walter had inherited his father's deep dislike of anything to do with church, chapel or God. This also used to annoy his neighbours and embarrass his children: not that many of them were in any way devout, but the least devout of them objected to being accosted by virulent rationalism while waiting for a bus or trying to buy a packet of cigarettes. Walter was a proselytizing atheist, and he was stunned by the poor logic of those who claimed to believe in God. He was good at producing definitive arguments against the Diety, and saw religion (with some reason, it must be said, in view of his grandfather's affiliations) as a conspiracy to keep the working man in his place. Kate and Peter must have been amongst the few children who had to plead with their parents to be allowed to attend prayers and assembly and scripture lessons. All they wanted, in these early years, was to be inconspicuous.

So Walter Fletcher, as we see, though in many ways an admirable man, was not an easy father, nor was Mrs. Fletcher an easy mother. The children lived precariously, nervously, subject to teasing, mockery, contempt, outcasts in their own community. It was not, Kate recalls, a very pleasant community anyway, and her mother may have had good reasons for spurning it, but that did not make life any more agreeable. Kate has said several times that she can imagine no way of life more cramping, painful, and pointless than the life of the lower-middle-class family aspiring to be better than it is. Their house itself,