The Ice Age

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Part One

On a Wednesday in the second half of November, a pheasant, flying over Anthony Keating's pond, died of a heart attack, as birds sometimes do: it thudded down and fell into the water, where he discovered it some hours later. Anthony Keating, who had not died of his heart attack, stared at the dead bird, first with surprise—what was it doing there, floating in the duckweed?—and then with sympathy, as he guessed the cause of its death. There it floated, its fine winter plumage still iridescent, not unlike a duck's in brilliance, but nevertheless—unlike a duck's—quite out of place in the water. It gave rise to some solemn reflections, as most objects, with less cause, seemed to do, these solitary and inactive days. He fished the bird out of the pond with a garden fork and stared at it with interest. It was large, exotic, and dead, a member of a species artificially preserved. It had had the pleasure, at least, of dying a natural death.

Anthony's hand, in his pocket, closed over the letter from Kitty Friedmann, which had thudded onto his doormat that morning. He had opened it over his cholesterol-free breakfast, but had been unable to make himself read more than the first sentence. He would have to read it soon, but not now. Now, he would bury the pheasant: that would postpone Kitty for a while. And digging a grave would be good exercise. He was supposed to take a certain amount of exercise.

There were, at least, plenty of places one could bury a pheasant in, on the new Keating estate: indeed, one could easily have buried a large dog or even a sheep. In his London home, there had been few corners suitable for burials, and those that were suitable had been well stacked over the years with the small bones of mice and fish and gerbils. The sour London soil had been thick with bones and plastic beads and indestructible nuggets of silver paper. On the other hand, in London, pheasants did not fall from the air onto one's property.

As he dug the hole, he thought of the first sentence of Kitty Friedmann's letter. *These are terrible times we live in,* she said, with her loopy unused middle-aged script.

He heaved the pheasant into the hole. It occurred to him that perhaps he ought to have plucked and eaten it instead, but he did not much fancy a bird that had died in so tragic a manner. He buried it beneath a hawthorn bush, a windbeaten bush that leaned at an angle, in perpetual acknowledgment of its situation. He identified with the pheasant, and covered it gently with the dry chalky earth. A cock pheasant. He had been forbidden sex as well as butter, nicotine, and alcohol. Not that the prohibition, in present circumstances, had much relevance.

Kitty's letter, he knew, would be full of an unbearable goodness, in the face of a tragedy too horrible to think of, a tragedy that made his own problems look manageable and dull.

He kicked some dry leaves over the grave. Then he walked, slowly, up the garden, through the gate, and slowly up the hill to the view. Ah, the view. Was it worth it? Was it worth what? Anthony Keating, property developer, had paid a great deal for this most undeveloped view. A Yorkshire view, of a Yorkshire dale. From his hillside, if he looked down the valley instead of back toward the house and the village, he could see no buildings, no houses at all.

Surveying this empty space, in the bright blue autumn sunshine, he read the letter of Kitty Friedmann.

Kitty's husband, Max, had been killed by a bomb, as he sat eating his dinner in a Mayfair restaurant. Kitty had been injured, and had lost a foot. Amputation, at St. George's Hospital, Hyde Park Corner, where she still lay, in a private bed. Kitty wrote:

Dear Anthony,

These are terrible times we live in. It was kind of you to write. I am getting on fine you will be glad to hear, and all the family are being wonderful. Poor Max, he died in-

stantly you will be relieved to know. I know that for a fact, not just what the doctors always say, some comfort! We were enjoying ourselves at the time, it was our Ruby wedding anniversary, and that seems a good way to go. We must all go one day. We had a good life and I am getting on as well as can be expected, and of course I am always thinking how lucky I am, I have a good family and they look after me. Max was sixty you know and I am fifty-eight, it still surprises me. Don't feel too sorry for me dear it is terrible as you said, and I don't know what Max ever did to deserve it, if he were alive he would be crying out for hanging and capital punishment, but I don't think that is the answer do you? You will be pleased to hear they say I will be able to get around quite well by myself in the end though of course the children say I will never have to!!! They are good children.

My writing is not what it was, I am sorry. Don't worry about me my dear, you have enough worries of your own. I see from the paper Alison is still in Wallacia. What a terrible year. Look after yourself, put yourself first, that is the only way.

Sincerely,

Kitty

Anthony Keating looked at the view and thought of Kitty Friedmann. Without a foot and without a husband, she lay in her bed at St. George's and thought herself a lucky woman. Put yourself first, said Kitty, who had never put herself first in her life. They are good children, she said: and so, perhaps, some of them were, though Anthony would never have trusted them. Kitty had dyed red hair, and wore a great deal of carelessly applied makeup, and diamond brooches, and fur coats that dwarfed her, and she saw no harm in anybody. She would be finding it hard now, as she lay there, to blame the I.R.A. She would be finding it hard to believe

that they really meant it. How could they have intended to kill Max Friedmann, as he ate his smoked salmon? Perhaps it was a good thing that it had been an Irish bomb and not a Palestinian one. (Max had donated liberally to Israel.) Even Kitty, who had been heard to plead the Zionist and Palestinian causes in the same sentence, unaware of any contradiction, might have been forced to blame the Arabs, if she had been made to think they were really after Max. Which, of course, they had not been. The whole thing had been a ghastly, arbitrary accident. The bomb simply happened to have blown up Max and Kitty, a random target. This past year had been so full of accidents that they had begun to seem almost normal.

Terrible times. Still, I would rather have had a heart attack than lose a foot, thought Anthony. He remembered a foolish discussion he had once had at a party, years ago, about feet, during which several people claimed that they had so little interest in their own that they doubted if they would even recognize them, severed on a slab, presented after a rail crash in a policeman's plastic bag. Anthony had been surprised by this lack of sense of ownership. He would have known his own feet anywhere, attached or unattached. But his heart was another matter. It beat in his chest, soft and treacherous. It was invisible. Nobody had ever seen it. He had been unaware of it, most of the time, until it had reminded him of its existence, and now he thought of it often, he nursed it carefully, as though it were a baby or a bird, a delicate creature that must not be shocked or offended. Now that he was growing accustomed to its presence, he was learning to feel affection for it, as he felt for his hands, his feet. He would not like to have this new awareness removed. His own heart had complained, of neglect, perhaps. And now he paid it attention.

Nevertheless, it was puzzling that so many dreadful things had happened in so short a space of time. Why Kitty, why Max, why Anthony Keating? And why had the punishments been so unrelated to the offenses? Max and Kitty had nothing whatsoever to do with the Irish, and Kitty had never offended anybody in her life, unless there were some cynics who found her universal good-

will offensive. The maiming of Kitty seemed a particularly outrageous accident. It was like the maiming of a child. Kitty represented for Anthony everything that was generous, innocent, unsuspicious, trusting. He was particularly fond of her because she so little resembled the Christian patterns of virtue he had been reared to admire. She was a living proof of the possibility of good nature. There wasn't even any point in testing her good nature, if that had been God's plan, for, as her letter indicated, there was no possibility of her failing the test. God had wasted his time, maiming Kitty.

Anthony's own destruction was more logical: at least there was that to be said for it. He had the satisfaction of knowing that it was all his own fault. He had brought it on himself. Though that, in a way, simply made the general sense of accelerated doom more puzzling. He could rationalize his own misfortunes, but there was no rational explanation for the sense of alarm, panic, and despondency which seemed to flow loose in the atmosphere of England. There was no one common cause for all these terrible things. Or if there was, Anthony had not yet grasped it.

It was partly to escape panic and despondency that he had bought this house, this view. London was growing unpleasant, everyone agreed, and Anthony, like many others, had decided to leave the sinking ship. The view extended along the valley: harmonious, glittering, distant, dry, nature at its best. He gazed at it, at the pale greens and grays of the far limestone, the hard blue of the sky, the black trees in the lane, the gray-green roofs of the village beneath. The colors themselves spoke of an orderly composite life, slowly accumulated. It had seemed safe, a place where one could avoid the disagreeable intrusions of London life, the people, the garbage, the traffic. But they had not moved quickly enough. His timing had been wrong. He remembered the day when he and Alison Murray had stood here on this hillside, months ago, contemplating the promised land that they had just purchased: it now seemed that they had been aware then, in their bones, that they would never enter it. They had waited too long—for children to grow up, for ex-husbands and ex-wives to settle; they had

waited to make enough money, to find the right house. And they had found the right house: even Alison, a Southerner, had agreed that it was a remarkable house. He looked down on it now: there it stood, as it had stood for nearly three centuries, High Rook House. Below it, the rooks which had provided its name cawed in the elm trees. Its roof was gray, covered with green moss, and on the barn grew house leeks for good luck. The windows were mullioned, and strange little fantastic finials topped its pediment. "Something of an architectural folly," Pevsner described it, and Anthony Keating's folly it had certainly proved to be. For, from the point of purchase onward, as though in revenge for his overweening presumption, everything had started to slump and slide and crack. He had bought the house at the top of the market, and suddenly, overnight, the property market collapsed. It was almost as though it had been waiting for him to sign the contract.

The collapse had been dramatic, and had affected others more severely than Anthony Keating. He, a mere novice in property, watched events with dismay and mounting alarm. What had happened to those days of easy money in the early seventies, what had happened to the boom, to all those spectacular profits? Why had all the confident experts been so taken by surprise? Anthony had been seduced and corrupted by these confident experts into believing that profits would go on multiplying forever, unlikely though that had always seemed. Go for growth, had been the slogan, and everybody had gone for it. Now some were bankrupt, some were in jail, some had committed suicide, and only the biggest had survived unscathed. Casualties of slump and recession strewed the business pages of the newspapers, hit the front page headlines. Old men were convicted of corruption and hustled off to prison, banks collapsed and shares fell to nothing. Anthony could not quite believe that the whole slump had been caused by his own desire to buy himself an expensive country house, but was nevertheless aware that it could not have happened at a worse time, from his point of view. He was appalled. However had he got himself into this nightmare world, and however was he going to extricate himself? He was so far in that there was no way back to the safe little

debts and overdrafts of earlier days. His imagined fortune, on the strength of which he had bought the new house, had dwindled into a tangled mess of unsaleable liabilities: at the time of reckoning, he and his two partners were the proud owners of an office block that nobody would rent, and of an undeveloped stretch of Riverside property that nobody wanted to buy, and which nobody could afford—with present building costs and interest rates—to develop. He himself owned two houses: High Rook House, and his old London house, which stood empty, squatted in, unsaleable. He was at last free to sell the latter, his first wife having finally been remarried, to a man with a proper job, and moved out, but it was too late, he had been too late getting it onto the market, had spent too much time with Alison messing about looking for somewhere else, and now it stood there, useless, incriminating, costing him four hundred a year in taxes, not to mention the price of the bridging loan. Nobody wanted it. Nobody wanted anything any more, the game had come to a full stop. And Anthony Keating, as he would have been the first to admit, was caught in a trap of his own making.

It was quite neat, in its own way. He could see the poetic justice of it, and wished at times that he could survey the disaster from a more detached position. But it is hard to be detached about one's own debts. (And anyway, what is the point of perceiving the poetic justice of the property crash when a man like Max, who had carefully put his eggs in many baskets, and had survived undamaged, survived only to die over dinner on his Ruby wedding anniversary?)

Anthony recognized that he himself had been particularly ill-placed. Not as ill-placed as Stern, or Lyons, or Poulson, or his good friend Len Wincobank, who was doing four years for fraud in Scratby Open Prison. But ill-placed, nevertheless, in that he had nothing behind him, no other strings to his bow. He thought of his partner, Giles Peters, who would doubtless survive the whole affair, unless a bomb got him too.

At times, Anthony thought it would have been far more appropriate for Giles to have had a heart attack. It would have served

him right. It was his enthusiasm for adding the final touches to the Riverside site that had proved the fatal slip: Anthony himself would have been content with a more modest (though not particularly modest) scheme. But Giles had wanted those last few properties, and had bought them, and borrowed for them, against the swing of the tide, when the writing was already on the wall, when building costs were beginning to soar and interest rates to rise, when office rents were ceasing to soar. He had persuaded Anthony that it would be safe. And they had borrowed too much. Anthony had been weak, allowing himself to be persuaded, but it was Giles who had suffered from hubris, and it was Giles who ought to have had a heart attack. Anyway, physically, he was more the type: a fat man, a heavy man, a heavy drinker and a heavy smoker, a man who took no exercise of any sort. Whereas he himself, though admittedly once a drinker and a smoker, had been extremely fit, light, energetic, if anything underweight, a walker and a squash player: indeed, he had been so far from suspecting that he might ever have a heart attack that when he suffered one, late on a Friday night, he had persuaded himself that the peculiar pain in his left arm and shoulder and in his chest was tennis elbow, and that he had pulled a muscle playing squash. He had gone to bed, got up the next day, walked around all weekend in pain and perplexity, and finally visited a doctor some sixty hours later, when a suspicion that something might be wrong had begun to nag at his mind. The doctor's views had astonished him. A heart attack, at the age of thirty-eight?

After the event, he had rationalized it, unwilling to let anxiety take the blame. (Does anxiety give one a heart attack? Shock can kill, but what about incessant strain? Ulcers, surely, would have been more likely?) His mother had always had a bad heart: indeed, some years earlier she had had an operation, and a new plastic valve. His own must be hereditary.

It would have done Giles good to have a heart attack, reflected Anthony. It had certainly taken the edge off most of Anthony's other anxieties. For a while at least, the fear of death had made his financial anxieties seem insignificant. There is no point, as many have observed, in being rich and dead. The desperate strug-

gle to avoid smoking and drinking had proved an absorbing diversion: one's capacity for anxiety is not endless. There were times when Anthony would willingly have exchanged his entire prospects for a cigarette or a whisky. (At times he regretted that his debts were so enormous that these enforced economies would not make the slightest impression.)

But even the heart attack had not been the final blow aimed by fate at Anthony Keating. The heart attack had proved to have compensations, the chief of which was Alison, who stood by him, slept by him, diverted him, and paid him more attention than she usually thought his due, making him, for once, her first priority. Anthony enjoyed this, and began to imagine that there might be some agreeable future ahead for both of them, even without any money. Alison was very good at looking after him, when she chose to be. (His ex-wife, Barbara, had offered to return to him to look after him, but he had told her that she was more likely to kill him than cure him: humbly she had agreed, and relapsed into the prolific mess she created around her wherever she went. At thirty-eight, Babs was pregnant yet again, expecting her fifth baby. Anthony was glad it was not his. He felt sorry for Babs's new husband, a civil servant, previously unmarried, used to a quiet life. But at least he had a good, stable, decent government salary. Short of revolution, nothing too terrible can happen to a civil servant, unless, of course, he becomes greedy and accepts bribes. But Babs's new man didn't sound as though he was that kind of person at all.)

So, with Alison, the illness had been endurable, acceptable, and there had still been the hope that finances would improve, there had still been the house in the country. They planned to move after the summer, when Alison's younger daughter, Molly, went back to school. It was to be their first home together. Folly though it was, there it was. They had already sent up some furniture, when the coup de grâce was delivered. Like the bomb that killed Max Friedmann, it had no connection with Anthony's finances, so he did not feel responsible for it. But that was cold comfort.

The final blow was the arrest of Alison's elder daughter, Jane.

Jane, aged nineteen, was arrested and incarcerated on her way back from her summer holiday, in a Balkan country well behind the Iron Curtain and one not known for its tolerance of Western teenagers. Details of the charge were at first vague: dangerous driving, possession of drugs, both? Telegrams full of alarm and confusion arrived from the embassy, finally establishing that Jane had been involved in a fatal traffic accident, and that she was now in the prison hospital, lucky to have suffered no worse injury than a broken leg. Alison would have packed her bags and flown out at once, but it was difficult to obtain a visa: Wallacia had only recently started to issue traveling visas for tourists and was very cautious about visitors. But the Foreign Office had agitated, and the press, possibly counterproductively, had agitated, and after weeks of waiting she had received one and had gone out to see what was happening. She was still there. Anthony had offered to go with her, but he could tell that she did not want him there. It would be bad for his health, she said. Nor did he much want to be there. Secretly, he had never much liked Jane.

The British press had made much of Jane's imprisonment, portraying her as an innocent schoolgirl in the hands of vindictive Communists who had never heard of the concept of bail. They had pestered Alison before her departure for photographs and interviews: Alison was photogenic, and she could easily be made into a good news story. TRAGEDY STRIKES AGAIN, they declared. THE TRIALS OF A BRITISH MOTHER, they announced, and went into details about Alison's previous self-sacrifices. Others dwelled lovingly on the barbaric sentences passed on dangerous driving in Eastern Europe. None of this went down very well with Alison, who did not like the idea of her daughter being turned into a martyr for driving badly, whatever the consequences: journalists tried to persuade her that international support and protest would be the best hope for Jane's acquittal and return, but both Alison and the Foreign Office doubted this. Though, as Humphrey Clegg at the F.O. said, one can never be sure. Wallacia had not hitherto shown much sensitivity to world opinion on these matters, but it was changing, slightly. There was some hope.

Anthony did not like to imagine what it must be like for

Alison in Wallacia. She had written to him, saying that Jane looked very bruised, and that she was refusing to speak to anyone, including her mother, that two people had been killed in the crash, that the boyfriend with whom she had been traveling had simply disappeared. She said the best that could happen would be a speedy trial, but there were innumerable little delays and obstacles placed in their way, it seemed deliberately. She said the consul, Clyde Barstow, was very kind, but not optimistic. She said she was allowed, somewhat to his surprise, to see Jane twice a week, in the presence of witnesses. She said it was depressing, seeing Jane, because Jane would not speak.

So, there it was. A terrible year, a terrible world. Two of his acquaintance in prison, one dead by assassination, himself in debt by many thousands. It had all looked so different, four years ago, three years ago. So hopeful, so prosperous, so safe, so expansive. In those days, the worst injuries he had ever known had been a broken ankle, children's measles, Babs's cervical ulcer, a bout of flu that might have been pneumonia; the worst accidents had been a broken windshield, a flooded basement. The frequency and the intensity had changed. He had never thought of himself, when younger, as an optimist; now he realized that this was what he had been. It could not surely be the natural onset of middle age? It was too severe, too sudden, too dramatic. It was as though he had strayed into some charged field, where death and disaster became commonplace. Once, such things had happened to others. Now he was the person to whom they happened. They were attracted to him, they leaped toward him like iron filings to a magnet, they clustered eagerly around him.

There was no point in thinking these thoughts. They led nowhere, to no illumination. He stood up, and stretched. It was too cold to sit long, despite the bright sun. He would dig over the vegetable patch: the pheasant's grave had reminded him of his resolve. By digging, we stake our claim to the earth, and Anthony Keating felt that his claim needed some reinforcement. He doubted whether he would be able to hang on to the house for long enough to see the potatoes and leeks and carrots of next spring: unless there was a turn of fortune, a reversal, a remission, he would have

to sell, when the creditors finally closed in—and for much less than he had paid, no doubt. Nobody could afford a house like his any more. He could not afford it himself: it was doubly mortgaged, offered as a security, tied up with a personal guarantee. When the final crunch came, if it came, High Rook House would be swallowed up as though it had never been, a mere crumb in the vast empty maw of debt. So it seemed an act of faith, a warding off of ill fortune, to dig the vegetable patch, to plan ahead. Also, there were no vegetables to be had in the village shop. One of the laws of country life is that one cannot buy fruit or vegetables in the country. So Anthony would grow his own. But first, he would walk along the footpath, along the edge of the scar, down by the nameless brook, into the valley, and back by the road. The water in the brook ran brown and clear and busy, sharp with its own newborn purity, uncontaminated, without a history. It collected on the high fell and rushed and bubbled downward, over moss and stones. The water from London taps has been through six pairs of kidneys. This had fallen straight from the sky. He liked it. He liked walking. It was a consoling pastime, monotonous, safe, unproductive. And the countryside, though riddled and mined with its own limestone secrets, with potholes and swallow holes, caves and underground rivers, was stability itself compared with the explosive terrain of the London property market.

It was, of course, his own fault that he had strayed into such a minefield. Whatever else had been accidental, this had been his own choice. He had rarely done the sensible thing in his life: his whole career had consisted of careless gambles and apostasies, most of them springing, no doubt, from the first—from the denial of his father and all his father had expected of him. The usual story. His father had been a churchman and a schoolmaster, teaching in the cathedral school in an ancient cathedral city: he had sent his three sons, on a special scholarship for clergymen's sons, to a more distinguished public school, and had expected them to do well for themselves. He was a worldly man, who despised the more obvious ways of making money: throughout his childhood Anthony had listened to his father and mother speaking slightingly of the lack of