THE ICE AGE

MARGARET DRABBLE

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ISBN: 0-445-04300-8

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Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant Nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks. Methinks I see her as an eagle muing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazl'd eyes at the full midday beam; purging and unscaling her long abused sight at the fountain itself of heavenly radiance; while the whole noise of timorous and flocking birds, with those also that love the twilight, flutter about, amaz'd at what she means, and in their envious gabble would prognosticate a year of sects and schisms.

—John Milton, *Areopagitica*, 1644

Milton! Thou shouldst be living at this hour:
England hath need of thee . . .
We are selfish men;
Oh! Raise us up, return to us again;
And give us manners, virtue, freedom, power.

—William Wordsworth, composed
September 1802

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Part One

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 instantly 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 goodwill 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