

# 1

**H**E WAS A handsome man. A handsome boy, his mother called him, because she started praising his looks when he was five. Before that, he received the compliments children necessarily get: “Beautiful baby” and “Isn’t he lovely?” His father was never there. The boy left school at fourteen—you could then—and went to work in a market garden, a slaughterhouse, and finally a cosmetics factory. The boss’s daughter fell in love with him. He was twenty by then, so they got married. Anita’s father said he would stop her having the money her grandmother had left her, but in the event he was too tenderhearted to do so. It wasn’t a large sum but it was enough to buy a house on the Hill in Loughton, twelve miles from London but almost in the country. Woody, as his mother and his wife called him, as someone at school had first named him, hated work and decided never to do any more as long as he lived. There was enough left to live on but whether for the rest of his life he didn’t know. He was only twenty-three.

In those days you had to get married. There were no two ways about it. Living together was not far short of a crime. They were happy enough for a couple of years. His mother died and he inherited her house as well as a small amount of money. Next Anita’s father died. People died at a much younger age in the 1930s. She

was an only child, so it was her turn to inherit a parental legacy, and it was much in excess of what Woody had got. Because he didn't work, Woody was always at home. He thought he "owed it to himself" to keep a close eye on his wife. She was always going to London to buy clothes, always having her hair done, going off for weekends to stay, she said, with girls she had been to school with and were now married. He wasn't invited.

A woman came in to do the cleaning. Woody thought his wife could have done that and he said so but he couldn't stop it. She paid. She didn't even look after the child, took little notice of it as far as he could see. He had read somewhere that once, sixty or seventy years ago, an act of Parliament was passed letting married women keep the money that was theirs. Before that, they had to hand it over to their husbands. He hated that act. How perfect life would have been when the men got all the money.

When the war came, he was thirty. The horrible possibility of being called up loomed. But he had a stroke of luck. He told the doctor he wanted to know if he was perfectly fit so that he could join up. The navy was his choice. He felt well, he always did, nothing wrong with him—unfortunately. But the doctor found a heart murmur, the result, he said, of pneumonia when Woody was a child. He remembered that pneumonia, remembered most of all his mother's anxiety and terror. But he was overjoyed, too thankful to dwell much on his heart. He put on a show of sorrow for the doctor and said in a regretful tone that he felt all right and would no doubt live to be a hundred.

A lot of his wife's friends were always in the house. One of them was in uniform. He wasn't as good-looking as Woody but the uniform was no doubt a great attraction. Another young man who was staying nearby was often to be found making himself tea in Woody's kitchen or drinking it in Woody's lounge with Woody's wife. He wasn't much to look at.

"You judge everybody by their appearance," said his wife. "That's all that counts with you."

“I judged you by yours. What else was there?”

If his wife wanted to be unfaithful to him, there was nowhere for her to go. But love or something will find a way. How did he know where she really was on these visits to old school friends he was supposed to accept? His wife had red hair and dark blue eyes; her friend, the one in uniform, had eyes the same colour and light brown hair. One afternoon Woody walked into the kitchen to get money out of the biscuit tin to pay Mrs. Mopp, who was really called Mrs. Moss. But Mrs. Mopp was a funny name and Mrs. Moss wasn't. She was just behind him, too greedy for her cash, he thought, to let him out of her sight. His wife was sitting at the kitchen table, holding hands with the one in uniform. Her hand was lying on the American cloth cover of the table, and the man's was lying on top of it, holding it there. They snatched their hands away when Woody came in but not soon enough. Woody paid Mrs. Mopp and walked out, saying nothing to the man and the woman, who just sat there, looking down into their laps.

FOR WOODY, ANGER was cold. Cold and slow. But once it had started, it mounted gradually and he could think of nothing else. From the first, though, he knew he couldn't stay alive while those two were alive. Instead of sleeping, he lay awake in the dark and saw those hands, Anita's narrow, white hand with the long, pointed nails painted pastel pink, the man's brown hand equally shapely, the fingers slightly splayed. The third member of the family Woody was usually aware of. He doubted that Anita was. She ignored the child. Once he saw her run along the hall towards the front door and not see the little boy. She ran into him in broad daylight, knocking him over, not hurting him, but leaving him there to pick himself up and start to cry. He wouldn't miss his mother, glad to see the back of her, no doubt.

Before Woody did what he meant to do, he took the rest of the

money out of the biscuit tin and put it in a smaller one that had once held cocoa. The biscuit tin had a picture of variously shaped short-bread biscuits on it and was quite big, maybe twelve inches by eight and three inches deep. It would be big enough, for their hands were small. Anita came and went, with the man in khaki and maybe also with the other man who wore civvies. Woody didn't care about him. He would disappear when Anita did and wouldn't call round asking for her. Mrs. Mopp came in and cleaned the house. She and Woody seldom spoke. There was nothing to say. The boy went to school and could go by himself; he knew he had to and arguing about it was useless. He talked to Mrs. Mopp and seemed to like her, but that was of no interest to Woody. He thought a lot about Anita's money; it took time, that thinking, and delayed his doing what he had to do. There had to be a way of getting her to transfer those thousands of hers, and there were quite a few thousands, into his bank account, but she had a suspicious mind.

"I'm not having a joint account with you, Woody," she said. "Why d'you want it? No, don't answer. It'll be some low-down thing, some monkey business. The answer's no."

Pity, but it wouldn't put him off. Nothing would do that. The best he could achieve was to get hold of her chequebook and write a cheque to himself for a hundred pounds. More would arouse suspicion. He had no problem cashing it and was rather sorry he hadn't made it out for twice as much. Now he had to do the deed before she got her bank statement.

Woody didn't think about their early days. He didn't think about what he had once called their "romance." He never harked back to even the recent past, saying to anyone who would listen, "It's over, it's not coming back. What's the point of dwelling on it?" However he did it, there mustn't be blood. Telling Anita he was going to stay with his auntie Midge in Norwich. She was ill and was likely to leave him her money—a motive for his visit his wife would be sure to believe. Once he was out of the way, he guessed Anita and the khaki

man would share a bed, very likely *his* bed. He would return in the small hours.

Of course he was right. They were there and fast asleep. Having locked the door behind him, he strangled the man first because Anita was a small woman who was no match for him. Then chasing her round the room, he knocked her to the floor and used the same leather belt on her. It was soon over. The only blood was his own where they had both scratched him, and there was little of it. His slaughterman's experience was of great value to him in removing the right hand and the left hand. Before laying the two hands in the biscuit tin he took off Anita's wedding and engagement rings. This was a bonus. He had forgotten about the rings when he was calculating what money he could forage. Of course he could sell the rings. He could go a long way away, down to Devon or up to Scotland, and find a jeweller who would give him a lot for that diamond ring. Anita had bought it herself. She wanted a diamond ring and he couldn't afford to pay for it.

It was October, better than summer because he need not hurry with disposal of the bodies. Now that he had removed the offending hands, the hands that had held each other, he hardly knew why he had. To look at them? To remind him of his vengeance? But the hand-holding was in the past, and now was the present. He knew he would scarcely want to contemplate those hands in a day or two's time. What he might do was bury them, and knowing they were there, hidden, and whose they were, would be enough. He wrapped the bodies in bedsheets and tied them up with garden string.

The child slept through it. He was only just nine, old enough to see everything that went on even if not understanding most of it. Woody knew he would have to get rid of him. Not that he intended the same fate for him that he had meted out to Anita and her lover. Michael was his son, he knew that, anyone would, for the child was lucky enough to look exactly like Woody. While not feeling anything like love for Michael, he nevertheless had a kind of tie of

blood with the boy. Michael was *his*, and now that his mother was gone, the nearest human being in the world to Woody. He could arrange never (or seldom) to see him again, but to shed his blood, as Woody put it, that was not to be thought of.

The bodies in their bedsheets shrouds he had stowed in the summerhouse and covered them with firewood. The lid on the biscuit box fitted tightly, so there was no smell. He kept the box in Anita's wardrobe underneath those dresses she was always buying, but he knew he must find some permanent resting place. He slept in the room where he had killed them, and sometimes he contemplated the box, but he never attempted to remove the lid. Decay would have begun and he was afraid of what he would see and smell if he prised open the lid.

He had known for a couple of months where Michael went when he was out playing with the Johnson boy and the Norris boy and those Batchelors from Tycehurst Hill and lovely Daphne Jones and the little kid Rosemary something. He knew they played underground. Their games were over, time was up. He watched Michael cross the Hill. Woody waited half an hour and then went across the road and up to the entrance to the tunnels. The children were inside but he couldn't see them from where he stood. He shouted out to them, "I know you're in there. Come out now. Your games are over. Time you went home and don't come back. D'you hear me?"

They heard him. One by one they came out. Daphne stayed behind to blow out the candles. She was the last to leave, and standing on the wet grass at the top, she gave him her mysterious smile, turning her head away.

Next day a policeman came. He wanted to speak to Mrs. Winwood. Woody gave him his prepared story. His wife had been ill and to convalesce was staying with her cousin in the country. The policeman didn't explain why he wanted to speak to Anita or if he was suspicious or what stimulated the request to see her. He went away.

Sending the boy to Auntie Midge was not to be thought of; she was too old and too poor, but how about a cousin of his own, his sort of cousin Zoe? She couldn't have kids and said she longed for them, God knew why. Never mind that, she was thinking of adoption but hadn't fixed on a child, had seen Michael a couple of times, and mooned after him the way some women did. Adoption was easy, more or less the parents' consent had to be secured and you just took the kid over. Zoe had just got married, a bit late in the day but never mind that, and there was plenty of money. She wanted the kid so much she didn't want to know where Anita was or even that she had gone. It was soon arranged.

When the day came, Woody was so anxious to get the house to himself that he took the kid to the station on the underground quite early in the morning and more or less pushed him into the Lewes train. The sandwiches Woody had made he forgot, left them behind on the kitchen counter. But the boy wouldn't want to eat sandwiches in the middle of the morning. Woody had only one regret at seeing the last of his son. It seemed a shame to lose sight of such a good-looking kid. Woody got on a bus and off it when it turned down Knightsbridge. A jeweller in a shop full of rings and pearl necklaces bought Anita's engagement and wedding rings off him for close on a thousand pounds. Enough to buy a fine house with, only he didn't want a house. He had one and would sell it as soon as the war was over. The jeweller asked no questions.

Woody was free. But was he? Not while the bodies lay under the firewood in the summerhouse. He was actually contemplating them from the summerhouse doorway when Mrs. Mopp came down the garden to tell him a police officer was at the door asking to see him. Woody shut the summerhouse door and locked it. Not one policeman this time but two. His wife was seriously ill, he said, and he was going up to Yorkshire later that day to join her. They seemed to accept that but made no answer when he asked them, inwardly trembling, what made them ask.

Not while he had the white hand and the brown hand in the biscuit tin. The latter was easily disposed of, secreted in a place where only he could find it when the time came to contemplate those hands again, to remind himself. Since he had driven that bunch of kids out, none had returned, and now it was winter, too cold and wet for visiting the tunnels. One cold, wet evening, pitch-dark in November, he had shone his torch down the steps into the tunnels and followed its beam of light, carrying the biscuit box. In spite of the tarpaulin covering, the whole place was growing waterlogged, the only sound the slow, steady dripping of water onto water. He must be careful. It would be a fine thing if he slipped and fell and, with those hands in his hands, had to shout for help. Would he ever be found?

Woody stood still, thinking, staring down a deep hole, from which the yellowish, clay-thickened water seemed to be draining away. He could hardly see its bottom, only knowing that down there the liquid was finding a way out. Resting the torch on the lip of the hole, he squatted down and slid the tin over the edge. The light showed him that it had slipped down into the muddy wetness, then by its weight pushing aside some obstacle and disappearing from view. He got to his feet, slipped a little, knocking over the torch into the hole. The darkness was absolute. He turned round, telling himself to keep calm, not to panic, and struggled, foot placed carefully in front of foot, hands clutching at the tufts of rank grass that grew here and there from the clayey walls. A little light showed ahead of him, light from the moon it must be, because there were no streetlamps. He clambered up the slippery steps, sliding back once, then again, until at last—and by this time he could see the source of light, a full, round moon—he emerged onto the grass of the field.

By the moonlight he could see that he was caked with mud, yellow filth, his hands and arms, his feet and trousers halfway up his thighs. No one was about. Few people ever were on these wartime evenings. And there was silence, not a light showing, not a note of music heard, not a word spoken, not a child's cry. As he opened



the gate and let himself into his garden, he glanced at the Joneses' house next door, at the faint strand of light showing underneath the blackout curtain from what he thought might be Daphne's room. Lovely Daphne—if only she were a bit older and had money, she might become his next wife.

He let himself into the house by the back door, taking a look at the summerhouse from the doorstep. What a way out of his difficulty that would be, to get those bodies, the man's and the woman's, across the road and slide them down the hole as he had slid their hands. But impossible. He would be seen. He had no car, he couldn't drive. The idea must be given up, and the only way would be to destroy the bodies by fire before the police returned to search the place.

Only after the fire had burned the bodies and wrecked the garden did he realise he could never inherit Anita's money because as far as anyone knew she wasn't dead. Officially, to the police or the lawyers or her relatives, she could never die. There was no death certificate, no funeral, no will, no death notice. He looked at himself in the mirror and thought, *My face is my fortune, always remember that.* A headline in a newspaper told him that a direct hit had destroyed the police station in Woodford, which was only a few miles from Loughton. A lot of officers had been killed, and Woody wondered if this was why the police failed to come back. They had forgotten about him and let him alone. No one ever called him Woody again.