

When you wake in a warm bed in winter besieged all around by cold, for an instant you believe you have it in your power to stay right where you are for as long as you want.

Downstairs, the dog barks. He'll be at the master's door, puzzled and afraid, and looking forward to biting the postman.

But of course you don't have that power. Someone wants you, or your life does.

The dog's misery was all of ours. Hear him howl!

Some mornings I think Wessex will burrow through the carpet and right under the door. He's already made a terrible mess of the wood, pawing and leaning his teeth into it.

I try to block everything out, get another few minutes, but at Max Gate sleeping is its own insulation and fools you into believing the bed is a haven. The blankets are not that good after all. Nothing in the house is. The attic rooms which cook in summer, now collect the chill air through gaps in the roof no one is interested in fixing since it's only us two girls who climb the stairs each day, on our way to heaven of course...And Alice through the wall is banging about. 'Hey yup,' she calls.

'Hey yup,' I call out.

'Thac bleeding dog.'

'Thiccy, thaccy, thic! You need to go down and turn on the radio for him.'

They didn't even bother to hook a wire up here but

downstairs the dog has his own radio and a chair for listening in. For an hour or so, he's calm under the music and voices. The electricity, source of great suspicion for Mr Hardy, ends below us. Beside my bed are little mounds of candle-wax which some nights I chip at in the dark with my fingernail.

Remember the time we built a roaring fire downstairs to welcome Mrs Florence back one night she'd been without him to London. We found him on hands and knees with a pair of tongs removing individual coals from the grate as a saving.

I swing my feet from the bed. There's so much cold the floor feels damp. At the window, I can just see over the tops of the trees dotted with snow. In another year, it won't be possible. Not that we're likely to have another year. This height, I always tell Alice, is our one reward. Denied even to Mrs Florence, who must wade about below us, shadowed and shaded. Last month I asked her was there anything else I could bring her.

An axe, she said.

An axe, Alice and I say to each other after a bad day, an axe! Bring me an axe, would you.

Through the thin wall, Alice Riglar farts good morning: her usual sharp balloonish sound, pinched and complaining. She is from Rimpton Mill, apparently near Yeovil—I'll take her word for it—across the border in Somerset, where her father is a baker. She's a yeasty girl, apple-cheeked, fond of Dorset knobs, the dry biscuit we claim as our contribution to the culinary arts, and she often angles for the ride into town to get Mr Hardy's order—though it's more properly, in the all-rolled-up-into-one manner of Max Gate where

Cook says everyone does everything though Cook herself does only what's strictly required and sometimes squeezes out of that too, the parlour-maid's circuit. In exchange with Alice, who's a between-maid, I'll do the mail by bicycle to South Street, giving me a chance to look in on my mother for a few minutes.

I take a breath and splash the nightstand water on my face. I must have cried out too because Alice is at the door.

'Jesus, Nellie Titterington,' she says, 'ye yell out, I thought you was entertaining.'

'I'm very entertaining.'

'It's what I heard.'

'I'm famous, am I?'

Is it mention of famous that makes us stop?

'Anyone come to the house in the night?' I say.

'I weren't called,' she says.

'Nor me.'

'Business as usual then. Mr Cockerell here this morning and the Barrie maybe in the evening.'

'Right,' I tell her, 'then shake a leg.'

She hitches her nightdress and kicks me on the shin.

Some nights recently Alice has been overtaken by weeping and I go in. What are you crying about? Not him below us, I hope? No, she cries. Good, I say. Anyway, I know your problem. What is it? Not enough Dorset knobs. It's an old joke between us. Alice's chap has been away since before Christmas, visiting family somewhere in the North. Can one lose one's taste for it? she says. Never heard of it before. Changing the supplier is usually the remedy. She laughs but is immediately unhappy again and grasps my hand. Promise you won't go, Nellie. When the master

dies, promise me you won't go. But Alice knows as well as me, it won't be in our choosing. Once he's gone, I tell her again, it'll be every man, woman, cat, dog and hedgehog for himself. Alice buries her head and speaks into the pillow. And if she chooses you to go with her, which she will, she says, I know you'll take the offer and why wouldn't you since it'll mean London. I'd take it myself in a flash. And it'll be farewell Alice, nice knowing you, I know it will. Sweet, I say, nothing's decided and nothing's for sure. For one, the master might sit up today and say, what are you all mooching around for, bring me my slippers! She looks up. Really? I don't know, I say. No one does, and that's the beauty of the thing. Oh, Nell, there's nothing beautiful and if you think so, you're stupider than me, which can't be true, so you're a liar and I'm doomed. Comb my hair, will ye?

She has lovely hair, thick and almost golden, and a pain to comb. Sit up then, I tell her.

Alice and I like each other enough to confide, though she's wary of me finally and I understand this. She's twenty and on the make. I'm the older one but not so much older I don't get mistaken for her age and in a toss-up between us, my talents at this stage are greater. I can write and read to a good standard, and I can speak acceptably. In addition I'm Mrs Florence's own—she treats me sometimes as a friend, though not of course like a real friend. Alice is astonishing with her hands. Sewed her many sisters' clothes since she was nine years old. In the future, if not right now, we are competitors. She envies me my mind while not especially seeing its value, and this can make her sullen and less articulate with her employers than she could be and less appealing than her basically sunny nature equips her to be.