

# Tessa's Place

**Barbara Latham**

Too many were crowding in, with luggage tied on the roof and high on laps and, as the vehicle moved slowly, people climbed in and out. A car came through the trees, on the same track, making it necessary to stop, then back down the hill. However, where the slope grew steep, the car gathered alarming speed. Perhaps the foot brake failed. More likely no one was taking full responsibility for it on this shared journey. She started yelling and pulling up the hand brake, and also woke herself.

It wasn't a good start to the day. Elizabeth lay wondering how it could be that she wasn't in better control of her vehicle at this point in life.

The four children had withdrawn and attached elsewhere. After decades first fully immersed, then half in-half out of motherhood, the main drama of it was over. Although she found herself caught still by the play of family life, it was in a supporting role, and even more so since stopping work. One adult daughter was bringing her family for lunch, invited ostensibly to meet New Zealand guests; Elizabeth having decided that, if she had to have a cluttered Sunday, she'd far rather see the faces of grandchildren than only those of women who had no place in her heart, and whose obvious ageing offered no consolation.

A worse prospect followed: Elizabeth was taking the two visitors on a trip she regretted. Tessa, who'd acquired a grand house in the French countryside, had invited the three, who had not all been together in the same room since primary school. And they had certainly not been friends with Tessa even then. Yet she seemed set on having them over, although Elizabeth had been the one to draw them in, as Tessa knew she could. Sonya and Alison would never have undertaken getting themselves to France without her encouragement and planning. Of course, Tessa's

generosity helped: the New Zealand dollar didn't go far and the travellers were careful with their too limited supply.

Having sorted them and the luggage, Elizabeth finally dropped into her seat and heard the sound of breaking.

"Damn," she said, assuming she'd sat on her own reading glasses, standard and replaceable, if not on the journey.

However, Alison quickly began her "sorry, sorry." She'd put down her essential and only pair of spectacles, with their complicated lenses, while looking for a tissue to clean them. That typical, abject apology pre-empted any voiced indignation at Alison overflowing her seat. Alison wasn't hugely overweight, she simply couldn't shape up to her own space and drooped everywhere. Elizabeth resisted an unpleasant urge to slap.

Alison's earlier gratitude convinced no more than the too ready apology. She seemed incapable of grasping what had actually been done for her; preoccupation with not losing her passport was as far as her attention went. She didn't appear to register what, if anything, truly pleased her, and for which she might be grateful, so empty thanks rolled out of her as easily as "Sorry, sorry, sorry."

Infuriatingly, replacing broken glasses would require Tessa's help as soon as they arrived, and thinking of her presence at the end of this journey was something Elizabeth wished to put off.

It couldn't now be helped if Sonya and Alison were in for being disconcerted: they were on their way, and inevitably Tessa would meet them at Poitiers.

Seeing the adult Tessa in London had been complicated enough for Elizabeth. Until this trip, she'd not accepted invitations into her domain and was wary of the price Alison, Sonya and she might pay for acquiescing to this one. Just visiting her, one time in hospital, and again soon after the horrible accident, had put her sufficiently at Tessa's mercy.

Not that she didn't admire Tessa's transformation. Who could help but be impressed? Elizabeth also felt guilt for the distant past, although thankfully, she was never relentlessly against Tessa the way Sonya had been.

Tessa's second, now dead, husband had been Alison's cousin, so Alison might convince herself it was a duty to be kind to the widow, whatever she made of her. Not that Alison tried to make much of anything, preferring all to roll by as amorphous as she'd become. Never-the-less Tessa was unlikely to show forbearance with that thick sediment of sentimentality and semi-oblivion.

Elizabeth had felt unprotected against Tessa's tongue on their last meeting, in the hospital nearly two years ago. Assuming the surgery was a consequence of the accident which had killed Tessa's

husband and hospitalised her in France, Elizabeth went to see her, only to discover she was in for an elective procedure to touch up an air of expensive glamour, as Alison and Sonya would discover. Tessa looked twenty years younger than either of them.

Until their recent arrival Elizabeth had not set eyes on Sonya since her own ghastly twenty-first birthday party, which her mother insisted must carry on, too soon after the sudden death of a beloved father. Alison she'd seen briefly, but barely registered, twenty-three years later at her mother's funeral in New Zealand.

Elizabeth's own looks may have been on the wane for years but the process drifted gradually, and she fought back with creams. She'd often considered these might be wasteful placebos till she saw the dramatic decline in her visitors, which gave her such a jolt.

Once the Eurostar was moving Elizabeth put up the newspaper as cover. Behind it, cross thought rushed to accuse emails as much as herself.

It had been the astonishment of seeing Tessa, at a function seven years ago, which first sent Elizabeth to the internet to find what she could about others from her school era. She discovered Sonya, collecting information, following a school reunion.

Online Sonya could be dry, her somewhat cutting tongue self-deprecating and funny, but the light, apparent self-mockery in type hid the oppressive weight of resentments and disappointments. Reading her emails Elizabeth couldn't see the hard set of Sonya's jaw, or that pugnacious look of one determined to order matters her own way. Those airy electronic exchanges, whenever it suited, proved very different from the strain of two people she'd not known as adults sitting at her table each morning and talking all through breakfast, chewing with mouths not fully closed, and with shoulders curling down towards the table. Her guests saw no need to spare anyone the sight of their deterioration. They flaunted bare arms pouring out of sleeveless tops in hard bright colours, exposing loosening and folding skin. Elizabeth was used to seeing stylish women; Tessa being one. Alison had probably never considered she might discreetly cover crinkling arms, but Sonya was more aggressive, declaring "take me or leave me" as a motto.

Wherever Sonya went, she presented an amusing enough version of herself to strangers, and invariably, on buses and in museums she found someone to engage. Watching the performance, Elizabeth noted with chagrin that she'd been exposed to the same routine and been taken in.

After having both of them in her home for nearly two weeks, Elizabeth felt ready to scream. But she found this increasing dislike ugly: she was not comfortable being ill-natured, and wondered why her usual, lighter touch and humour seemed to have deserted her. Possibly because she felt

not only cornered and thoroughly drained but in turmoil, as if clear water was becoming a stirred sludge of misgiving. The women shattered routines she and her husband were beginning to enjoy, disrupting a degree of contentment which reconciled Elizabeth to the life she'd shared. The leisurely start, with coffee exactly as she preferred it, and an undisturbed breakfast beside him, was a new, post work routine, which suited surprisingly. On good days the gentle present seemed to become the long past of the marriage. With only the pair of them, after their children each hauled themselves out of the nest, they could shape days and nights to their liking. There were longer escapes from shopping lists, from thinking ahead to plumbers, substantial meals or juggling the use of the car. Feet no longer hurrying somewhere else, stayed more firmly on the present. Without the pressure of things to be done, Elizabeth lingered on street benches, taking in the scene, or sat with her husband to catch sunsets, and in the quiet of that there were echoes of their beginning. If these were heard and remembered, being together made sense. But with hungry guests, greedy to be shown around, Elizabeth, harassed and hurrying, found only doubts as to what she'd done with her life.

Had she lived any of it better than these two who had started school on the same day?

It was possible to look at them and think she could see where the women were shut down, but hard to consider what had happened to herself. How little of that school promise had she fulfilled? Somewhere along the line hadn't she, too, ceased to live all out? If so, those years were not for replay.

Through day after day of organising her visitors to Kew and the British Museum, Elizabeth felt nagged by a question she could not answer, whether her life had been full enough. Not in terms of worldly ambition; she never had much of that, it wasn't what mattered to her. Sufficiency had given Elizabeth an ease, blunting appetite for more. Her powerful, dignified father kept days and nights in order, with a firm grip on family life as well as his successful business. Occasionally he would talk tough, only to teach a moral lesson, and suggest his children not assume his largesse. But of course they did. They knew any restriction he imposed was only a surface restraint and, with a cushion of funds underneath, there was no substantial reason to worry.

Back then, as everyone knew, Theresa Scott lived on welfare. These days Tessa was rich. If Elizabeth was still comfortably off, it was only just, and the other two lived a low budget, low key New Zealand lifestyle.

Tessa's dead husband had relied on her to bail him out of nasty trouble, when his dodgy dealings crashed. Through Alison's padding of protective clichés about her admired cousin Tim, it was extremely difficult to bring any disagreement to a head, and she simply refused to acknowledge his

failure. It was too big a down turn for Alison to accept that the handsome family hero was rescued from prosecution, fraud and mortification by the girl whose father, then brother, went to prison, so she simply ignored it. Sonya, too, remained astonished, with schoolgirl simplicity, that the much sought after captain of the rugby team, who once danced with her, could possibly have married Tessa. Well, they would both soon see the woman they hadn't known for decades.

Since her guests' arrival Elizabeth had woken from unnerving dreams: the last had a house with darkened rooms for solitude, and rambling space for guests, who were not free to pry, yet even locks seemed threatened by wandering eyes.

She had come to prize privacy; uncovering a life, supposedly put for all to see in autobiography, was for another breed entirely. The patterns she saw in her early years were a record of struggling against being an object for others. There were some bitter fights with her mother and older siblings, and a few admiring teachers also tried to tell her what she must do with herself. Only her father noticed how his daughter squirmed when told what was best for her. Tessa, who began life pigeon holed, was now the author of herself as well as the dead Tim.

Elizabeth had never felt drawn to Tim, who was two years ahead at school, and warmed to him less as an adult when they passed, spasmodically, at parties. Growing up his parents went to the same church as her mother, and in London they had a mutual New Zealand circuit. It was at a farewell drinks Tim turned up with a stunning, sexy woman, three weeks before she became his second wife. This was Tessa.

In shame at their schoolgirl treatment of her, Elizabeth sought online for news of others. She looked for details of those other innocents who'd been shoved into one class with Miss Tarana and her ruler, who had been clubbed around the head with tests and slaps, and been ruthless with each other.

Tessa, along with a pasty, unkempt few, who fainted or smelt, formed the outside, so those who were not excluded could succumb to belonging. How certain they were in their sneers that Tessa was worse than they could ever be. They might barely know what jail meant, except on the Monopoly board, but to have a father there must be an offensive disgrace. Then, to have a mother drinking too early and too much! And not caring that her empties piled up where she ought to put her garden. Bottles littered the exhausted grass, along with a broken toaster, rusting cycle frames and an old tin bath. Shared outrage defined their own acceptability, with mothers who grew roses out the front and fathers with lawn and a hedge.

Until she introduced herself, Elizabeth had not recognised the woman with loud Tim. She had no idea Tessa was living in Britain but why would she? Tessa sank out of sight at secondary school. However bright she was, there was no question of her being encouraged to go into the “professional stream”. Typing and shorthand were her lot, so she could soon begin earning her own living. Tessa moved off the radar of the girls she’d sat behind, and they failed to register the start of her improvement. By fourteen she decided to clear up the mess her family made public, and began planting cover. She showed force and drive, insisting an out of town uncle install a shower, having for two years saved part of the welfare cheque which, with the help of a typing teacher, she’d claimed as her own. She no longer had to wash in the cold water sink her mother refused to keep clean.

Elizabeth took a dim view of her own early smugness; Sonya might have been worse, but they had all accepted crude lines of good or bad, in or out, wanting to know where they belonged. And Tessa’s place was obvious.

Over wine Tessa was cool about those years. That was the way of it, she said, you could only be “in” if others weren’t, and she’d wasted too long being hell bent on making her way “in”. Now she didn’t give a damn. Or blame. “Unlike those of you who were supposedly right, while I was wrong, at least I didn’t live with the anxiety of being caught and exposed as faulty. I was flawed and culpable; that was my first base, I played from there, the rest of you could always fall from grace.”

That conversation continued when Tessa, still an invalid, arrived back from the accident in France. A badly loaded lorry, taking a corner too fast, overturned. The back lights broke and the injured driver was jammed in the cab, so there was no warning as Tessa and Tim came round the bend. Presumably, Tim drove straight into the truck.

Elizabeth took flowers and went, uncertainly, to Tessa’s place. Surprisingly, Tessa wept. “It wasn’t that I was ever sure Tim truly wanted me. I was never convinced he was capable of seeing anyone else for long, despite having fixed on acquiring me. But maybe attending carefully to the way I am wanted is one luxury I’ll never be able to afford. I married him, prepared to share everything, when he had only debts. I was ridiculously hopeful. Caught up in longing, that was what I let matter.”

A year before this exchange, when Tim was being loutish at a party, Tessa called him a boy-man. She claimed to have seen this about him straightaway and thought it made him seem safe. “After all, with such a boy how could things get out of hand?” But they had. As soon as Tessa felt compelled by wanting, she lost the controls, and told herself, by way of comfort, that it was her own desires consuming her, once Tim began dragging her through hurts, both old and new.

Despite his weakness as a man, Tessa had given Tim power to devastate her. And given that Aston Martin in which he died.

Elizabeth was reluctant when Tessa first suggested she bring Sonya and Alison to the place in France. After days of disruption and too much chatter, it was Elizabeth's husband who started pushing her to accept the offer. Sonya continued to flirt with him as she did with most men, and he preferred her to Alison, but he quickly gave up trying to make the best of either guest. At the start Elizabeth and her husband disagreed about those two; since she'd found herself talking too much to Alison, her first judgement was in favour of the fact that, "at least she listens."

"Save me from a passive aggressive" was his only answer, before falling into the night. Neither of them troubled his good sleep; it was Elizabeth who spent restless hours and crept to the sofa to stare at the dark, or to try chamomile tea before returning to bed.

Alison offended her husband's expectation that women make at least some small effort to be attractive; he took it as a denial of nature to show complete neglect for the elaborate sexual game. But Alison never looked aware of being a player. According to the acerbic Sonya, Alison's husband married her hoping to spare himself conflict, assuming such an acquiescent woman might not stir the complications in himself he couldn't face. Tim had spoken disparagingly of his cousin and the wet fellow she married, who wasn't up to rugby and kept his round, unmoulded, puffy face into middle age. And Sonya added that the husband kept away as much as possible, something to do with mining insurance in Australia. Alison stayed where she was born, to "keep an eye" on her parents, and he limited his exposure to women, yet didn't dare go far with any man. Even Sonya conceded there must have been some sex between the couple for Alison to conceive twin girls.

It took less than a week for Elizabeth to realise that Alison, in fact, drank blood. Although Alison said complacently of herself that she was known as a good listener, she didn't actually give anything she cared about; her time. Time she seemed not to want for anything else. She'd appear to listen, and probably gleaned a few titbits to pass on, yet one had no idea what she actually heard, because everything, herself included, got reduced to banal jelly.

Just as irritating was the comfortable way Alison saw herself as kind. Certainly she was obliging enough to avoid being confronted. She left all suggestions and planning to others and trundled along on any outing with "whatever you two like". She was liable to be profligate with fussy concern, which she took to be consideration for others, and called Elizabeth, who resented shortened versions of her name, "Lilibeth". Disconnected from her own life force, Alison weighed down anyone else's, and after a few days Elizabeth felt hushed into dumb suffocation.

Sonya set herself against her flabby companion as backbone for both. She was sharper and more knowing, though Tessa way outclassed her. No doubt Sonya would mock Tessa's efforts to keep attractive, pointing out "you'll be dust along with the rest of us just as fast." But Tessa would hold her own: she was never stuck for a response.

When younger, Sonya's spirited fight, if sometimes misaimed, was at least wide. But it had narrowed, grown brittle, and gained a crueller edge. Considering herself worldly, Sonya despised women who remained with boring husbands, or had themselves supported. "On life support and just subsisting," Sonya called it, expressing brisk relief at having extricated herself from such fetters. Never-the-less she had moved in close to Alison, who remained tied in both these ways, and when drunk, Sonya's tongue lashed her own lousy, leaving husband.

Elizabeth watched Sonya trying to overcome herself; saw attempts to curb expressing a palpable envy. Sonya's face went from sprightly to collapse once she stopped talking, and often flashed a look of grim disappointment, although she never spoke of sadness, or of feeling past the best. Her claimed triumph was full independence. She espoused a fashionable, curt satisfaction with herself, and having, long ago, aimed for control, was proud of an elective caesarean birth for her only son, forgetting this made her totally dependant on medical technology, and was fierce in asserting intention to kill herself as soon as serious deterioration began.

If decades of living had not cracked Sonya's conviction that life should be under her management, Elizabeth felt unlikely to do it. It was what she might possibly share of Sonya's view that bothered her. Of course Sonya's independence was a myth; she needed Alison to make this trip, she needed the soft and absorbent who put others first, and even on the Eurostar she apparently required an audience. From behind the paper Elizabeth could hear the familiar presentation. Whatever muddle Sonya's emotions might be in, she polished a self for show.

Sonya making such a virtue of pleasing only herself, as if that was what gave all human beings their greatest satisfaction, was unnerving. Until her arrival, Elizabeth had enthusiastically told others how recent retirement gave days where so much more was up to her and that she intended to make the most of it before this delight was eroded by increasing dependence in old age. But over the last two weeks Elizabeth began dropping into an ever expanding futility: so what if she could sit down and read when she liked? Wouldn't she far rather be caught up in the fullness of life? When engaged with work and a busy family hadn't she felt full hearted and pulsing with vitality, even when exhausted? Being shut up with oneself, even with good coffee, seemed overrated. Some mornings Elizabeth was late going out and almost startled to re-find the world still teeming with



riches. She might be shrivelling, but the profusion of blooms in her neighbour's garden continued to entice bees right inside their delicate texture, with explicit and bulbous invitation.

Elizabeth turned, looking across Alison dozing and out the train window, preoccupied, as she'd often been since their arrival, with where she'd shut down and whether it was inevitable.

Her husband, typically and maybe rightly, had grown impatient with unanswerable questions.

"You were stupid to agree to have people you didn't love and find you don't much like, but it isn't a life sentence. Picking out faults won't put them under your control, or diminish their presence. We can't shrink them, or the two and a half weeks."

But Elizabeth could neither stop assessing her visitors' characters, nor settle back to acceptance of how she'd lived. There was something she felt not quite able to name. It had to do with having begun life in the same pond as these two. Surely aspects of that particular water still shaped her as well? She might, as frog, have jumped far, yet they had shared their tadpole time. Some of what held her guests in place must also support her sense of herself. If only she could etch out what it was that remained in common. For, given these women hadn't flourished, or aged with grace, should her judgement of herself be any less harsh? Perhaps she still shared something of what was dislikable in them.

Childish scorn for Tessa was not the only tribal way they had all lived by.

What other collective game could yet be revealed as unacceptable? She might be caught out, continuing to play it unawares.

Once they were in the French countryside and speeding towards Paris, Elizabeth shed her irritation, thankfully leaving behind exasperation over Alison leaning too close, with that distinctive, slightly smoky, metallic odour, reminding her how her own had changed. How far they had all come from sweet, young breath and that delectably new skin. Elizabeth sighed gently, thinking of her grandchildren, then relaxed into the view. Great branches, covered in succulent summer leaves, swung dramatically in the breeze. Her life had once been as tossed, first by love and then by four new lives. Back then she'd believed all of her was heaving but hadn't she also remained rooted in her beginnings?

The air outside, which didn't penetrate the sealed train, rippled leaves and Elizabeth nearly wept over how little now stirred for her. Apart from death, adventures must be over, yet an ache to be shaken continued.

Those sometime flickering hopes for new understanding ahead could be quite extinguished. She would simply be nailed into her old life by the assumptions of husband and grown children that she wished to hold up the hollow nest and continue offering what she could.

After two weeks of Sonya and Alison's company, Elizabeth knew there was no prospect of telling any of this to them. The now snoring Alison would cluck concern yet be unable to let herself know what could swamp Elizabeth with sorrow. Sonya was likely to be gleeful with advice to leave her husband and give up every family obligation, saying it was her time to just please herself. What Sonya failed to recognise was that though the adult children had pulled thin the once thickened pulse, it remained the most meaningful connection. And though it was gratitude, more often than satisfied desire, which left her tranquil in the shared bed, perhaps that was what there could be now. At least her husband and children had overfilled her heart once. These two women had not even been true friends. It was too late to regret their intrusion, but if neither Sonya nor Tessa let themselves be put upon, at least she could assert herself.

There was no need to stay at Tessa's place. If there was going to be strain, or worse, why be subject to it? She had agreed to take them when they accepted Tessa's hospitality and tickets, but she'd insisted on paying her own way. Having got them this far, she'd do her best to lead the half-blind Alison and the chatting Sonya onto the metro and across Paris through vast Montparnasse, to find their train; although even this return to being carer seemed too much. That could not be quite true, she was cheered by short bursts with grandchildren. Whereas with Alison and Sonya frustration increased the sense of effort. Energy felt wasted on those she could not embrace. Wasn't it time to protect her limited supply? She could afford a hotel, so why not take them to Tessa at the station, then go off alone for four days, keeping to the booked rail return, before the pair went on to Alison's daughter for their final week, as already agreed.

Tessa and Alison were going to be an uncomfortable combination. Alison, with tears in her voice and double chins wobbling, had turned the dead Tim into her very, very favourite cousin, though the living one had had no time for her. She was able to re-write the past and obliterate what she had no wish to keep in view, but Tessa remembered in harsh detail. Alison, who had made much of the terrible shock of his death, would have to make of that what she could. Elizabeth had no way to rule over what happened between these two and Tessa.

On her visit to the hospital before Tessa's plastic surgery, Elizabeth had found herself fazed by Tessa's way of talking, several times giggling somewhat nervously and once almost tipping. Her eyes went out of focus, and she seemed dizzy.

Elizabeth believed the rumour that Tessa had set up a well endowed training foundation for young men in Tim's name. At the same time, what she said of that dead school hero he would never have said of himself, and it made uncomfortable hearing. "He took himself to be the picture he was sure others had of him, despite also knowing he failed miserably to measure up. He had nightmares though mostly couldn't catch his own fears." Tessa spoke of her husband of just over four years, now only ashes and at the mercy of her tongue, as an agitated man, who dreamt of being honoured after triumphs, with success bringing success, to roll on and on. However, he always faced some about turn. "One morning, after a night of rugby glory, all those around him began to run at the first bell. However he sauntered as a hero should, refusing to show he could be cowed. He walked in late and proud, until the master came for him, set to break this over confidence. The teacher led him by the ear from his seat, though he resisted, struggling to keep hold of desks, as he was pulled towards humiliation. Finally he collapsed to the floor, tears too near, and the teacher said, 'Can't you even be half a man? If you come late surely you accept we whack you. Go back to your seat.' And he did. Defeated."

"That," Tessa said, "was one honest thing Tim told me. But I paid for it later. How he twisted in regret after sharing any waking confidence, although I heard his cries in nightmares and he only spoke what I saw anyway. It was obvious to everyone he could not find his way to a satisfactory life and self-respect."

"But why do we women fall for believing we can give our all to help boys who can't become decent men? That probably killed him in the end."

Tessa was waiting in a lovely understated grey, three quarter sleeves and falling straight to set off her tall, trim body, though only Elizabeth recognised the finest elegance of a top designer. Her tailored hair, unlike theirs, was not grey. And while for them it had been a long, long day, she looked refreshed, as if that careful attention to body, hair, nails and eyebrows was as simple as stepping out of the shower. Effort, like expense, was rarely on show with Tessa. Whatever you made of her betterment, her rise in fortune was not thrown at you in gaudy display, although her taste, as usual, pleased Elizabeth's eye. The softness of that pearl grey gave Elizabeth a lift: beauty seemed refreshment after seven, tiring hours with a pair of frumps.

And Tessa could not have been more gracious, while even Alison was taken aback and Sonya affronted, by Elizabeth's proposal.

Of course Elizabeth should take time alone, if she wished, there was somewhere perfect, by the old mill about twenty miles away, not expensive, family run, good food. She could be dropped off

after breakfast, when they saw two new glasses for Alison. For now it was late, besides a special dinner was waiting, all prepared.

As charming hostess she suggested half an hour to unpack, wash or rest, before champagne. Their beautiful rooms, each so different, were festive with flowers, fruit and tiny toiletries.

After too much champagne and three wines, one for each superb course, Alison launched herself, the crying noisy and her running nose unchecked.

“Dear, dear Tim, it was truly tragic for us. We all loved him too much. But, of course, it must have been far worse for you. I’m so very, very sorry,” and she began patting Tessa’s hand energetically.

Elizabeth, who had known this would come, winced and tried to think of how to shift the conversation.

Too late! Tessa pounced, taking firm hold of Alison’s patting hand.

“Don’t kid yourself you cry for me, or for him. What is it? Youthful promise now lost? He might remain your family’s unfulfilled bright hope but Tim was 58 and a soured man, disappointed in himself; a man you barely knew. He was the one who brutishly fought his way to the touchline, not noticing a bloody nose. Actually, when he was Captain of Rugby and you saw me as a nothing, I must say his broken nose looked unprepossessing. As if the fine needle on a compass got bent and flattened to the surface, where it could no longer be responsive. It always offended me. Yet I also found his lostness endearing. I could give myself to a man of bad dreams who told me that much truth; even though I came to realise that Tim acknowledged his fears to me only because, somewhere, he still saw me with contempt.” When none of her guests had a response, Tessa went out to bring in coffee, then continued.

“Your cousin was not a nice man. He was stuck in knocking others off as if this gave him a try, but no longer knew what the game was supposed to be. He drank far too much and it made him nasty, as he raged that he should have made more of himself. He hit me that night as I was driving. He was far too drunk to drive the ridiculous car he wanted so badly, but could still aim a sharp slap which nearly sent us off the road. Instantly I steeled myself. That was it! There would never, ever be any further opportunity for him to hit me! I should immediately have chucked him out onto the road. I was considering it, in cold fury, as we turned that corner. I must have put my foot on the accelerator not the brake. It happened fast, yet one thought seemed very slow; I registered I was quite prepared to risk myself as well. Tim’s side took the impact and he, as always, had refused to wear his seatbelt. I’d done it up and he’d undone it. Petty rebellions fed his macho pride.”

The three guests avoided eye contact and brandy was passed round. After Sonya coughed but couldn’t quite find what to say, Tessa carried on as if there had been no pause. “Tim persisted in

such poses while despairing at his own posturing. I didn't quite see why he'd not slotted back to small town New Zealand, where strutting his manhood in the old way might have nearly carried conviction. Possibly he'd been away long enough to see through that option, yet he proved incapable of forging something different for himself. The better part of him was drawn to my having done just that, the worst preferred to drag me back to where he was the most admired boy and I was apparently dropping into a dead end. He was the one supposed to go somewhere for you, Alison. Shall I tell you where such hopes left Tim? Torturing mice. We had an infestation and I wanted them dead too, but Tim was intent on catching them alive. My son insists he put one in the microwave. Or was it the blender? I knew, then, to leave but he blubbed drunkenly at any mention of separation. Of course, if I hadn't let his playing pathetic get the better of me, he wouldn't have been killed. But 'ifs' are ridiculous. The fact is, we fought it out to the end."

There was silence. Even Alison's noisy sniffing was stopped and Tessa offered "More coffee, or another brandy, anyone?"

Six months after she had last seen her unwanted guests, Elizabeth stood with the card in her hand. She'd read it three times. Alison's daughter was asking for Tessa's London address, and added a note at the end:

*Presumably you know that when my grandparents died within two months of each other, Mum lost all her bearings and the doctor put her on pills. We both saw the consequence, but she has since got herself off them. She has decided to sell our old family home and is moving to Melbourne to continue with the French she studied at University. She is determined to speak it fluently, and she and Dad are accepting Tessa's offer of a stay in France all next summer. I can't thank you enough for taking Mum to Tessa's place.*