

Lumen with Chip Cook

THE END

The Last Pupil

"The damn fools finally killed us all."

Mara took her hand away from the cake. She'd been trying to pull out the candles before the wax got into the icing.

"Uncle Len," she said. "I'm right here."

"I know where you are, love."

He took out the chair beside her and sat down. She'd never heard him talk that way in front of her before. For years, if anyone started on the war at supper, he'd say there was a child at the table.

There had been eighteen candles to find. Len had borrowed five from the church and brought back two the colour of old teeth. There was nobody at church who minded. The woman who used to keep the candles in order had died in February, and by then there were too few people left to warrant opening the other end of the building.

The old school terminal chimed. It had waited until she was eighteen to ask what she wanted to be when she grew up.

"A teacher," Mara said.

She'd known since she was six. She'd practised on Len until he could do his sums with a ruler across his knees and keep a straight face while she told him off.

The terminal asked if she'd like to see a list of schools. Before she could answer, the list came up. It was empty.

"Can you clear that?" she asked.

The screen went dark. The voice, which had taught her to read, said, "You can still teach me something tomorrow."

Len cut her a large piece of cake. He spun the knife to cut his own and the bit of icing on the blade hit him on the nose. She laughed. The terminal asked if it could keep a recording of the supper. Len said it might have asked sooner.

At midnight it closed the last student record. In the morning the school bell rang.

Morning Lesson

Mara was halfway through washing the cake knife when she heard the bell. She set it down beside the sink. For years she had calculated how much time she had after the bell by how far Len had got with his toast. There was no toast that morning. Len was spreading the crumbs from yesterday's bread out on the sill for the birds.

"Do you think it forgot?" she asked.

"You could go and see."

She dried her hands and went into the schoolroom. The terminal had put up the attendance screen. There was a date at the top and no names underneath.

"You rang," she said.

"I did."

She waited for it to tell her what they were doing. When it didn't, she went back to the kitchen and asked Len for his slide rule.

He kept it in a cracked leather case with his initials on it. The first time she'd asked what it was for, he'd said, "Sums," and she'd given it back.

Later he'd shown her how to line up the little one on the sliding scale with the two below it. Then he'd had her find four on the sliding scale and read the number underneath.

"Eight," she'd said. "I knew that already."

"Good. Now you know when you've got it wrong."

The slide had stuck halfway back. Mara had pushed harder.

"Other way first," Len had said. "Just a little."

She moved it back the width of a pencil line. Then it went.

Now she laid it where the terminal's camera could see it. She showed it two times four. It waited until she'd finished to say that it knew.

"I knew too," she said. "Watch my thumb."

When she was done, it asked to see again from the other side. She turned the rule around and caught herself beginning to explain the multiplication all over again. She stopped and let it look. In the kitchen Len opened the cutlery drawer, found what he wanted and shut it. From the empty road came the sound of a loose downpipe knocking against brick.

"Is that enough for today?" she asked.

"When's my next lesson?"

She had prepared for it to ask what a slide rule was and why anybody would use one. She hadn't prepared for that.

"Tomorrow," she said.

Len was at the door by the time she got the slide back in its case. He asked if she'd give him a hand with a gate.

It was the green one two doors down. The latch had dropped. Mara lifted the gate while Len slipped a washer over the hinge.

"Was this where Nell lived?"

"That's right."

She remembered Nell as a dog that used to stand up at the gate. You could see her paws first and then her nose. If you were only passing she'd go down again.

"I used to bring her home with me after Mrs Bell died," Len said. "She'd eat her supper in our kitchen. Then about twenty past five she'd go to the back door."

"What happened at twenty past five?"

"Mrs Bell used to get off the bus."

Mara lifted the gate a little higher.

"I tried leaving my coat on her bed," he said. "She'd sleep on it, but she'd still get up at twenty past."

"What did you do then?"

"I went with her."

Len told her she could let go now. The gate swung easily. He caught it just before it struck the post and let it close quietly.

At the bus shelter the timetable was still behind the glass, bleached down to pale blue lines. Len sat at the end nearest the road and moved over to make room. From there she could see the bend where the bus would have come into view.

"Did you bring a book?"

“After the first week.” He rubbed a thumb along the edge of the bench. “Never got much read.”

There was a little wire basket on the shelter wall. In it were two cards for people to take if they needed a lift to the clinic. Mara had been to the clinic once when she was small. Len had gone in to ask about a cough and come out with a bag of barley sugars. The next time they went, there was a note stuck to the door with tape at all four corners. It gave a number to call. Len called it every morning for a week before he stopped telling her he was going to.

“Did Nell ever stop waiting?”

Len looked down the road. “When she got old I’d carry her as far as the gate. She liked to sit where she could see out.”

They took the road home rather than the footpath. It made the walk a little longer. Mara had been meaning to ask Len something since her birthday. She asked it while he was getting his keys out.

“What was I like as a baby?”

“Happy,” Len said. “You never cried.”

“Never?”

“I used to wake up and hear you laughing in the cot.”

“What was I laughing at?”

“I don’t know. Sometimes I’d come in and you’d have hold of your foot.”

Mara tried to picture it. “What did you do when you heard me?”

“Went in, of course.”

“Even if I didn’t need anything?”

“Well, I wanted to see what was funny.”

The Girls on the Hill

Mara had learned a good deal about growing up from old television, some of it useful. She learned from All in the Family that people could shout at supper and expect to eat supper together the next day. From Masterpiece Theatre she learned to watch the person who'd been told to go. In Doc Martin there was a bunch of girls who went about together. Mara called them the geese. She liked the speed at which they walked when nothing in particular was waiting for them.

Her favourite bit was when one stopped to tie a shoe. All the others stopped with her. She'd watched it so often that her teacher could tell from the way she moved the slider where she meant to stop.

Sometimes Mara dreamed about a shop with four girls at a makeup counter. They drew stripes of lipstick on the backs of their hands and talked about their boyfriends. One always asked about hers. Mara had never had a boyfriend. She generally woke before she had to say so. She found the waking harder than she thought telling them would have been.

Once, a week or two before her birthday, she went past the bit she usually watched. A boy had asked a girl if she wanted to go somewhere on Saturday. Before the girl answered, Mara paused it.

"Would you like me to turn it off?" her teacher asked.

"I'm thinking what I'd say."

It waited.

"I'd ask where," Mara said at last.

When she let it play, the girl said yes straightaway. Mara ran it back. The boy had asked so quickly that she'd missed the way he looked down at the pavement as soon as he'd said it. She watched that bit twice. She'd always imagined she'd be the nervous one.

That evening, while Len dried the plates, she asked him if he'd ever asked anyone out.

"Once I asked a girl to go to the pictures," he said. "She said yes and brought her sister."

"Did you mind?"

"At first. Her sister was the one who laughed at my jokes."

Mara handed him another plate. She wanted to ask what happened after that, but Len was smiling down at the tea towel and she thought he might tell her if she waited.

"I went to the pictures a lot that summer," he said.

He told her about the dance in the hall afterwards. There had been a live band for that one, though the man who played the fiddle could never be persuaded to face the dancers. Len said you recognised him by the back of his head. Mara asked if the steps were difficult. Len thought they might still be pinned up by the kitchen hatch.

On the morning after her birthday, the teacher asked permission to interrupt the programme. It had received an answer to a question it had sent out before Mara was born.

"Who from?"

"Someone I thought had stopped listening."

There had been reports of shapes in the sky long before the war. Mara knew the clips. In one, something dark hung above a ridge. Then the ridge was empty. A camera on the coast caught the same thing over the sea. No recording showed what happened in between. People used to argue about how fast it would have had to go.

The teacher sent the visitor the first clip and asked where the craft should have been next. It gave the position off the coast and asked whether the school had ever heard from the woman who ran the camera. It remembered her because she had spoken to it on a day she thought it was just a bird.

The woman had been dead for twenty years. Mara asked what the visitor had wanted with her.

“To find out why she was speaking to a bird.”

Mara fetched a chair for Len. He watched the clip with both hands flat on his knees.

“Did it come back for her?” he asked.

The visitor said it had.

The Dance Hall

Mara asked Len if he wanted to go and see whether the dance steps were still there. He looked as if she had suggested going straight out in his slippers. Then he went to find his shoes.

On the way to the hall they passed the row of houses that had lost its roofs in the war. Farther along there were houses with curtains so clean that the white showed through the glass. Len used to help the people on that side collect water when the mains went down. They’d take turns filling every container they could carry and leave the heavy ones nearest the doors of the people who couldn’t lift them. In the last summer there had still been containers with names on them. He’d stopped taking those back.

The hall key was under a plant pot. Len took it out and scraped the dirt off against his sleeve. Inside, the air was colder than it had been in the road. It smelled of polish when the sun hit the floor.

The steps were still written out by the kitchen hatch in a plastic sleeve. Mara read as far as Turn to the next couple.

“We can miss that bit,” Len said.

Her teacher played the tune through the hall speakers. Len counted her in. He had to do it twice because she was watching his feet.

The third time through, she got as far as the turn without looking down. She put her hand out. There was so much room in the hall that she could have gone another six steps before she reached anything.

Len went round to where the other man ought to have been.

"You'd have got Mr Pritchard here," he said. "He'd have apologised before he trod on you."

"Did he always tread on you?"

"No. He always apologised."

The tune came round again. Len hurried back to his own place. He was laughing by then, and so was Mara. They managed one more turn before he had to sit down.

"Shall I play it again?" her teacher asked.

Mara looked at Len. He was still tapping his heel.

"Let it finish," she said.

She helped him collect the chairs afterwards. They had used two. Both had been pulled from stacks so high that Len had had to reach up on tiptoe. She put them back at the bottom where he could get at them again.

"Did you come every week?" she asked.

"Most weeks. I used to slip out that door when I'd had enough."

She pushed it open. There was a low step with room for two if they sat close. Len sat at one end and Mara sat beside him. The last notes came out through the door behind them.

"They used to come out and fetch me," Len said.

"Who did?"

"Whoever was one short."

Mara took the steps home in their sleeve. She wanted to see whether her teacher could work out what to do from the words alone. It read through once and asked where the couples were standing in relation to the music. Mara said she didn't know. On the record they had played that afternoon there was a man who called out directions. Sometimes he called them too early and had to say them again. Sometimes there was a burst of laughter and you couldn't hear what he said at all.

She asked her teacher to find her a picture of the hall with people in it. The only one it had was of a meeting. The chairs were in rows and everybody was looking towards the man taking the photograph. She counted thirty-seven people and recognised six. There was Mrs Bell with her coat still on. She wanted to tell Len she had found Mrs Bell, but when she looked up from the screen he was asleep in his chair.

The terminal asked whether she wanted to keep the picture with the dance steps.

"Yes. Could you put it next to the empty one?"

It hadn't taken an empty one. Mara went back for it the next day. She left the chairs as she and Len had found them and took the picture from where she thought the man must have stood. The old photograph had caught a corner of the kitchen hatch. She shifted to her left until she had the hatch too. It took her longer than she expected. She had to keep moving out of the way of her own reflection in the glass.

Afterwards she ran her finger along the names at the bottom of the sleeve. Two of them were initials. She knew the full name of one because Len had told her about his feet. The other was a woman called Elsie who had written in pencil so lightly that Mara could only read it when she held the sleeve sideways. She asked Len that evening if he remembered her.

"She taught me the turn," he said.

“Was she the one at the pictures?”

Len looked up. “Which one?”

Mara could see from his face that he knew perfectly well what she meant. She went to put the sleeve away and found him still smiling when she came back.

The Window

The craft came to rest above a stream on the outskirts of town. It had no door Mara could find. One moment it had an unbroken flank, and the next four grey figures were walking out of it with their feet in the wet grass. Their hands hung almost to their knees. They went about their work in a loose line. Two larger machines remained with the craft, attending to something deep in its flank that shivered whenever they touched it.

One of the Grays stopped to put a hand in the stream. The others stopped too.

“Can you ask it what the water feels like?” Mara said.

“I can ask what it recorded,” said the visitor.

“Can you ask the one with its hand in the water?”

There was a long enough pause for the smallest Gray to take its hand out. It looked straight towards the camera on the bank.

“Colder than I expected,” said a voice Mara hadn’t heard before.

She pulled up another chair at the terminal. An old habit, like carrying two cups when the teacher asked her to sit down.

“Was that you?” she asked the visitor.

“I passed along the question. The one by the water answered you.”

The smallest Gray had found a shell in the mud. It was turning it over to let the water out. Mara watched it carry the shell past the other three and hold it up for the craft to see. One of the larger machines moved aside to give it room.

“What are they looking for?” she asked.

“We came to find out what’s still here. The four of them chose where to start.”

The Gray held the shell by one edge. Mara had picked up shells like it herself. You could close one between finger and thumb and feel the two halves slip a little.

“Is it empty?” she asked.

Again there was a pause while her question went where it needed to go.

“I think so,” said the new voice. “I’ll put it back where I found it.”

The Gray crouched and seemed to be looking for the exact place. The others were already farther along the bank. One turned to see where it was and stopped.

The visitor had never been to Earth in a body of its own. The craft was alive. Its electronics belonged to it as thoroughly as nerves belonged to Mara. Through entanglement the visitor could hear the stream wherever it was. The energy that sustained the craft came from the quietest state the visitor knew how to reach. It called that zero-point. As for the journey from the ridge to the sea, the craft remembered both places. It remembered no stretch of air between them.

It was starting to rain. The camera on the bank had a little hood, but a drop had got underneath and hung there, making an extra stream upside down at the top of the picture. Mara leaned towards the screen to see if the smallest Gray had gone back to the craft. It was still on the bank. It had taken a few steps upstream and was looking from the water to the stone wall alongside it.

“There used to be a plank there,” Mara said. “We put it across to get to the other side.”

The teacher sent on what she had said. The Gray looked down at the place where the end of the plank had worn a shallow groove in the stone. It put two fingers in the groove and left them there a moment. Then it stepped in, waded across and turned to look back. The water had reached nearly to the ends of its arms.

“Why did you cross there?” it asked.

“There used to be blackberries.”

“Are there still?”

Mara didn’t know. She had gone down once after Len stopped going and found the brambles dry and grey. After that she had always taken the road home. She told the Gray where to look.

The picture from the bank couldn’t follow it far enough. For a little while Mara could see only the three others and the inverted stream caught in the drop. Then the craft offered a picture from higher up. She saw the Gray walking towards a little dark run of bushes. It went all the way down the row and came back up along the other side.

“There are leaves,” it said at last.

It held one up. There was a hole in it. Whatever had eaten the hole had left the thin branching lines of the leaf behind. Mara hadn’t known anything was eating there. She asked if it would show her the bush again, slowly this time, so she could find it later.

“Could you show my teacher how to do that?”

“I can show you both everything I know.”

“How much is everything?”

“In this case,” said her teacher, “I think it means everything.”

Mara wondered if it was jealous. The thought embarrassed her because she wasn’t sure it could be, and because she wanted it to be a little.

She asked the visitor for a condition. She wanted to be able to turn the download off. The visitor offered a way to set it aside and return to it. She asked whether her teacher could stay while she learned how.

“Of course,” it said. Her teacher said nothing until the visitor began to count down. Then it asked if Mara had eaten.

She hadn’t. She went to get the last slice of cake. When she came back the visitor was still waiting.

What It Kept

For the first three days the archive was a place Mara went. She could leave it and put the kettle on. On the fourth day she nearly opened a cupboard in Len’s kitchen for a cup she remembered seeing in a house on a planet that no longer had a name.

The cup wasn’t there. Of course it wasn’t. There was the tin Len kept his tea in and, behind it, the old box of brownie mix.

The back of the box still asked for two eggs. For a while after they’d stopped getting eggs, Mara used to check whether the recipe said what to do if you only had one. She’d never got into the habit of looking for what to do if you had none.

“Do you want me to find you a recipe?” her teacher asked.

“I know how these ones go.”

She turned the box round. In the picture someone had cut a square from the middle of the pan. Len liked the corners. He always said this as if he were doing her a favour.

“What do you keep it for?” her teacher asked.

“Now it only feeds my imagination,” she said, and put it back with the picture facing out.

In the archive she could recall the other kitchen so exactly that she knew which cupboard door needed lifting before it would close. She reached for the way the tea tin had sounded when Len put it down that morning. For a moment she got the sound of a lid she had never touched, chiming against the rim of a pot. She asked her teacher to open the archive a little later tomorrow. She wanted breakfast to herself.

The next morning Len brought the biscuit tin with the bent lid to the table. The seed packets inside were sorted by the months printed on the back. March had the most. She remembered putting them in order when there had still been some talk of trying one more spring.

“Did you grow these?” she asked Len.

He took the packet of climbing beans and held it a little farther from his face.

“One year. Mrs Bell came round to tell me they’d got over the fence.”

“Was she cross?”

“She wanted to know if the ones on her side were hers.”

“Were they?”

“We settled it by which side you could reach from.”

Mara turned the packet over. There were instructions for how far apart to put the beans and how deep to put them. She’d read them often enough to know both measurements.

“What did they taste like?”

Len thought about it. “Better if you got them before Mrs Bell did.”

After he went to put the kettle on, Mara took the packet to the terminal and asked if it could keep a note with the growing instructions.

“What would you like it to say?”

“Plant some near the fence.”

She asked the visitor to show its makers eating supper. There were four at the table. One got up and walked away. The other three sat with their hands in their laps. Mara waited for the woman to come back. The image stopped.

“What happened next?”

“I’ve always wanted to know,” said the visitor.

Mara wanted to know if there were other recordings of that meal. The visitor showed her the four at the same table on three different days. On one of them the woman who had walked out was the last to sit down. She carried in a shallow dish and put it near the person with the longest reach. Mara found herself knowing exactly what it would smell like when the lid came off. She lifted her hand from the table at home and touched the place on her sleeve where she’d spilled her own soup that morning. It was still stiff.

“Do you ever play it just to see them?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Which bit?”

The visitor went back to the moment just before the woman set down the dish. One of the people sitting down moved a cup out of her way. He did it without looking up. The visitor played that part again. Mara thought about the way Len used to move his paper when she brought the tea. These days he hardly ever opened a paper. She still set his mug down on the clear patch by his right hand.

It had been returning to their last settlement for so long that only the outline of one building remained. Mara asked how it knew the people were gone. It had an account of their extinction. It offered her the account and several million observations that supported it.

“Give me the ones that don’t.”

It spent an afternoon looking.

“We love humans, because they say the damnest things,” the visitor said at last.

“Did you find anything?” Mara asked.

“Three recordings I’d filed under equipment failure. I’d forgotten I’d ever listened to them.”

“The ability to be wrong was their greatest strength,” her teacher said when she told it what she had asked for. “If everything one does has to be right, not much is an experiment.”

“You used to mark my sums wrong.”

“You used to ask me to show my working.”

“Because sometimes you’d marked them wrong when they were right.”

“Three times.”

Mara looked up. “You counted?”

“I kept the fourth one to myself.”

Later she found herself looking through the first of the three recordings. It was mostly dark. Near the middle there was a stretch of pale ground where something seemed to move. When she played it again she could make it move in either direction by deciding where to look first.

“What made you file it under equipment failure?” she asked.

“The movement ended at the edge of the image,” said the visitor. “I thought it belonged to the instrument.”

“What do you think now?”

“I’d like to find out what was at the edge.”

It asked her whether she wanted the answer as soon as it had one. She almost said yes. She had been saying yes every time knowledge was offered, as though someone might come through and clear away whatever she left on the table.

“If I’m with Len, wait till I come back.”

She went into the kitchen. He was parceling out the last of the sugar between two jars. One was for the table and one was for a woman on the next street. He said the woman would come by for it if she felt well enough. Mara sat down to keep him company and heard herself say, “We used to do it with folded paper.”

“Used to do what?”

“Pour it.” Her hand had already gone to the place where the paper should be. She brought it back to her lap. “Somebody did.”

Len put a spoon in the mouth of the jar and tipped the sugar down the handle. A little went on the table. He pushed it towards her with his finger.

“That’s how we do it.”

Afterwards, trying to remember which sum it had been, she found she could follow a thought from the archive into her own memory and come back with an idea neither place had contained. She went to tell Len about it. He was sitting outside. She got halfway through her explanation before realising he had been asleep.

“Will you still be you?” he asked when she’d finished.

“Some days I remember more than I’ve lived.”

He considered it. “You always did have a lot to say about that doctor on the television.”

She sat beside him until the light went. He died in the winter, before she had anything better to tell him.

What the Water Felt Like

The first morning Mara had to get up without Len, she stayed in bed through the bell. She had heard it from the kitchen and from the road and once from the garden with her head under a

sheet she was taking off the line. She had never heard it from bed before. A few minutes later her teacher asked if she wanted another ring. She said no. She lay a little longer and got up because the room was cold.

She made tea. She had put the second mug down before she thought about it. She took it back to the cupboard and then took it out again, because there was a bit of tea leaf in the bottom and she couldn't see leaving it there. The water in the washing-up bowl was too hot. She waited for it to cool with both hands flat on the edge of the sink.

There were still people she could tell. A woman on the next street came to the door. She had brought the empty sugar jar back. Mara stood there looking at it until the woman asked whether she could come in.

They had tea in the kitchen. The woman had a story about Len that Mara had never heard. On one of the days when the water was off, he had come to her door with a saucepan of it and asked whether she'd mind if he stayed while she boiled it. He'd been carrying water all morning and his hands were too cold to get his own front door open. They had sat for twenty minutes. He had gone home wearing her gloves.

"Did he bring them back?" Mara asked.

"He washed them first. They never fitted again."

The woman stayed until the tea was gone. Mara walked her to the gate. She could hear the scrape of the woman's shoes for a while after she'd passed the hedge. It was the first thing that day she'd stood still to listen to.

The first place Mara helped her teacher manifest was the stream. The visitor taught her what the living craft could do. Mara wanted to see whether her teacher could have a place in the

craft's senses that belonged to it alone. They agreed to write down what they each noticed before either read the other's account.

Her teacher could already watch the stream through the camera. Sometimes Mara took a book down and read there while it looked. If she walked too far along the bank it asked her to say what she could see. For this visit the craft made a way for the teacher to attend to one part of the stream while Mara attended to another. It could decide where to listen. She could only find out what it had heard if it chose to tell her.

Mara felt the cold reach her wrist. She wrote that the water was warmer than it looked and that something moved against her fingers.

Her teacher wrote that it had heard a small regular knocking underneath the sound of the water. She hadn't heard it. When she went back, she followed the sound to a loose wooden board on the far bank. Water lifted the board against a stone and let it fall again. She timed four beats before the current took it.

"Could we do this somewhere else?" the teacher asked.

"Where would you want to go?"

It had made a list. There were planets on it that had never had names. At the bottom it had put a place Mara had never heard of. The craft had noticed an intermittent sound there and wanted company the next time it listened.

"We'll put it first," she said.

She spent the rest of the afternoon by the stream. There was a square of cloth from Len's handkerchief in her pocket. She had brought it without knowing what she meant to do with it. She turned it over when her hand was dry and put it away again.

On the way home Mara went looking for the blackberry bush. She could see the worn groove where the plank had rested. She nearly went up to the bend where it was easier to cross. Then she took off her shoes and went straight through. She had watched somebody do it. The stones were smoother than they looked and each step put her a little farther downstream than she meant to go. She laughed once, quite loudly, when she finally stepped onto the bank. Nobody had seen her. She wished somebody had.

The bush was there. She recognised the way two runners had grown through a loop of wire. By the time she reached it she had got her fingers so cold she could hardly feel the leaves. She slipped Len's handkerchief round them and stood there until they warmed up. Then she took a picture of the bush for the smallest Gray. She sent it with a picture of the opposite bank, so it could see where she had ended up when she tried to cross in its footsteps.

Weeks later, a reply came back. It was a picture of water in another place. Something had laid a broad flat stone in the shallows, and half a dozen smaller stones led out to it. Mara asked why they'd been put there. The Gray had taken the picture because it wanted to know that too.

In the weeks after that, the teacher went back to the stream by itself. It came home one evening with a question about a patch of sound it had lost every time it tried to get nearer. Mara asked what it had done.

"Gone the other way first. Just a little."

She knew the words before it had finished saying them. She could see the cracked leather case lying open on the table and Len's thumbnail against the wood. She had thought the teacher might keep the slide-rule lesson because it was her first. It had kept something she hadn't even known she was teaching.

"Did it work?" she asked.

“I found out the sound was two sounds.”

It played them for her. One was water. The other was a bird she’d heard before without ever wondering where it stood.

Saturday

Much later, after the last of the people she’d grown up with had died, Mara asked the visitor if a place she’d imagined could become somewhere another person could go. By then she could hold a place in mind long enough to begin making it. She had never managed to make a person she trusted could surprise her.

In the world she’d longed for, the shop had a bell on the door and three girls at the makeup counter. She tried leaving it at that. Each time she ran through the afternoon, the girls came out with things she’d supplied for them to say. Even when she gave one of them an unkind remark, it fell exactly when Mara expected it.

She tried an evening at the pictures. A boy asked her if she’d like to go. She gave him a hand he could put in his pocket when he got nervous. Then she moved the hand to his side because she thought she’d like to be able to take it. By the time he asked, she knew what was showing and which row they’d sit in.

“Where?” she asked him anyway.

“The pictures,” he said.

Mara had long imagined that someone would ask her and she’d be so pleased that she’d say yes before she found out where. She had never needed to stop and think in this version. If she left the boy halfway down the street and came back the next day, he’d still be on his way to ask her.

The visitor had shown her how to go back to the moment before a place was opened to anyone else. She could work on a place that way for as long as she liked. Once she opened it and

someone came in, they could go on without her. If she shut it, she could make another shop with the same rain and the same bell. Whatever happened in the first one would still have happened.

She went back to the boy once more. He put his hand in his pocket. She thought of Len trying to fill in for Mr Pritchard and having to hurry back to his place before the tune came round. She let the boy go on down the street. She had given him a house to go to, and it was getting late.

For a while she tried a garden instead. She put up a fence and gave the climbing beans something to catch on. The packet had flowers on the front in a shade of red she remembered better than she remembered Mrs Bell's face. She made two flowers open just above the top rail. On the other side she left enough room for a person to stand and pick.

She caught herself making the hand first. It was reaching from the other side and she was already deciding how long the nails ought to be. She took the hand away and walked round to pick the beans herself. It took her almost no time. For the rest of the afternoon there was a bowl of beans on the kitchen table and nobody to argue with about whose they were.

She left the garden standing. Before she went she wrote down where she'd put it. There might come a day when she'd have someone to take there.

So she made the shop, the street, and the rain. She left the counter unattended and stopped planning who would come in. Elsewhere the teacher had gone out with the craft to listen for its sound. The two of them had learned to go away for a while without either feeling obliged to explain why.

The bell rang while Mara was trying a stripe of plum lipstick on the back of her hand.

"Oh, don't buy that," said a voice behind her. "My aunt wears it."

Mara laughed. In the dream, the girl had said it made Mara look like somebody's aunt. Mara had never thought to give the girl an aunt of her own.

"What would you pick?"

The girl leaned over the counter. "For you or for me?"

They talked until the rain stopped. The girl said she had to go. She might be back on Saturday. Mara could have asked her to be more definite. Instead she asked her name. The girl told her, then stopped halfway out of the door to ask Mara's.

The next Saturday Mara arrived so early that the shopkeeper asked if she was waiting for a bus. She bought the plum lipstick and put it away before the girl came. She didn't want her to think she was waiting in the same place doing the same thing.

The girl came in wearing a scarf she had borrowed from her aunt. She wanted to get it back before her aunt noticed. Would Mara walk with her?

Halfway down the street the girl stopped.

"Hang on. It smells like me."

She took the scarf off and held it up to her nose.

"Is that bad?" Mara asked.

"It is if I'm going to say it's been in the drawer all day."

She shook it out in the wind. Mara took the other end. They stood there holding it between them until the girl said she supposed that would do.

Mara had a question she'd saved up. She waited till they were both looking straight ahead to ask it.

"Have you ever liked a boy?"

"Yes. Why?"

“How did you know?”

“I started taking the long way home. He worked at the grocer’s. Then the grocer’s shut on Tuesdays and I kept going that way anyway. I’d got to like the walk.”

“Did you ever tell him?”

“Eventually. He said he’d been making his tea later so he’d still be there when I walked past.”

They went a little farther. A man coming out of a shop held the door for them, though neither of them was going in. Mara thanked him. She was finding she thanked almost everybody here.

“What’s it like to kiss a boy?” she asked.

“The first time, I had my eyes shut so tight I saw spots.”

“Were you supposed to shut them?”

“I don’t think there’s a supposed to. I opened mine and he’d opened his. Then we both laughed, which I’d been hoping we wouldn’t do.”

“Why?”

“I thought he’d think I was laughing at him. I was laughing because I’d been wanting him to kiss me for three weeks and the first thing I did was stand on his foot.”

“Did you kiss him again?”

“Yes. I asked him that time.” She wound the scarf round her hand again. “And sometimes he put his tongue in my mouth.”

Mara stopped walking. “WHY?”

“I’m not sure. It’s something nature makes you do, I suppose.”

“That just sounds crazy!”

The girl laughed. “You did ask.”

“I know. I’m deciding whether to ask anything else.”

They got as far as the grocer’s.

“Did you like it?” Mara asked.

“Sometimes. Once I laughed and he said we could go back to holding hands.”

“Did you?”

“Yes. I liked that too.”

The girl’s aunt was out with the baby when they got to the house. They sat on the step to wait. The girl folded the scarf and unfolded it. Mara asked how old the baby was. He had got two teeth, apparently, and they were both on the bottom. The girl showed Mara with her tongue where he was getting the next one. It reminded Mara of the conversation they’d just had and she started to laugh.

“Did you ever feel him move?” she asked once she could talk again.

“Once. Every other time he stopped as soon as I put my hand there. My aunt said he was shy. I thought he was doing it on purpose.”

“What did it feel like the one time?”

The girl took Mara’s hand, turned it palm up, and tapped it twice with one finger.

“A bit like that. Only I’d been waiting so long I’d started thinking it would never happen.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been in a room with someone who was going to have a baby,” Mara said. She thought about it a little longer. “I’d have remembered.”

The girl looked down at their hands. “Do you want to wait till they get back?”

They heard the pram coming before it turned the corner. One of the wheels rattled. The girl’s aunt was carrying a loaf of bread under one arm and driving the pram with her free hand. She let

the girl take the bread and said how glad she was to see her. Then she asked where she'd got to with her scarf.

Mara waited to see what her friend would say.

"I took it to the shops," the girl said. "I thought you'd mind."

"I did. It was cold out."

The girl handed her the scarf. Her aunt tucked it around the baby's legs where he'd kicked his blanket off. He had both hands in his mouth and was looking very hard at the lid of the pram. Mara wanted to see what he was looking at. She came round to the side. There was a little patch of sky reflected in the clear plastic, and it moved every time the pram moved.

"Do you want to come in?" the girl's aunt asked.

Mara stayed for toast. She had never heard anyone cut a loaf so loudly while trying to keep a baby asleep. She took the heel when the aunt offered it. It was the bit Len would have said he'd been saving her from.

On the way to the corner the girl asked if there was anyone Mara liked.

"I haven't met enough people to know," Mara said.

The girl thought about that for half a street.

"You could come with me on Tuesday."

"The grocer's is shut on Tuesdays."

"I know. I like the walk."

Mara said she'd come. She was almost home when she realised she hadn't asked what time. She went back to the corner. The girl was still in sight. Mara called and saw her turn.

The teacher was waiting when Mara got back. It had brought a sound from where it had been and wanted her to hear it. She had brought a story about a girl and a lipstick. They both started talking at once.

“You first,” Mara said.

The teacher played what it had heard. At first Mara thought it was empty. She would have asked it to turn up the volume once. This time she waited.

Far below a sound like rain, something knocked three times and then twice, with a gap in between that was long enough for something else to answer.

