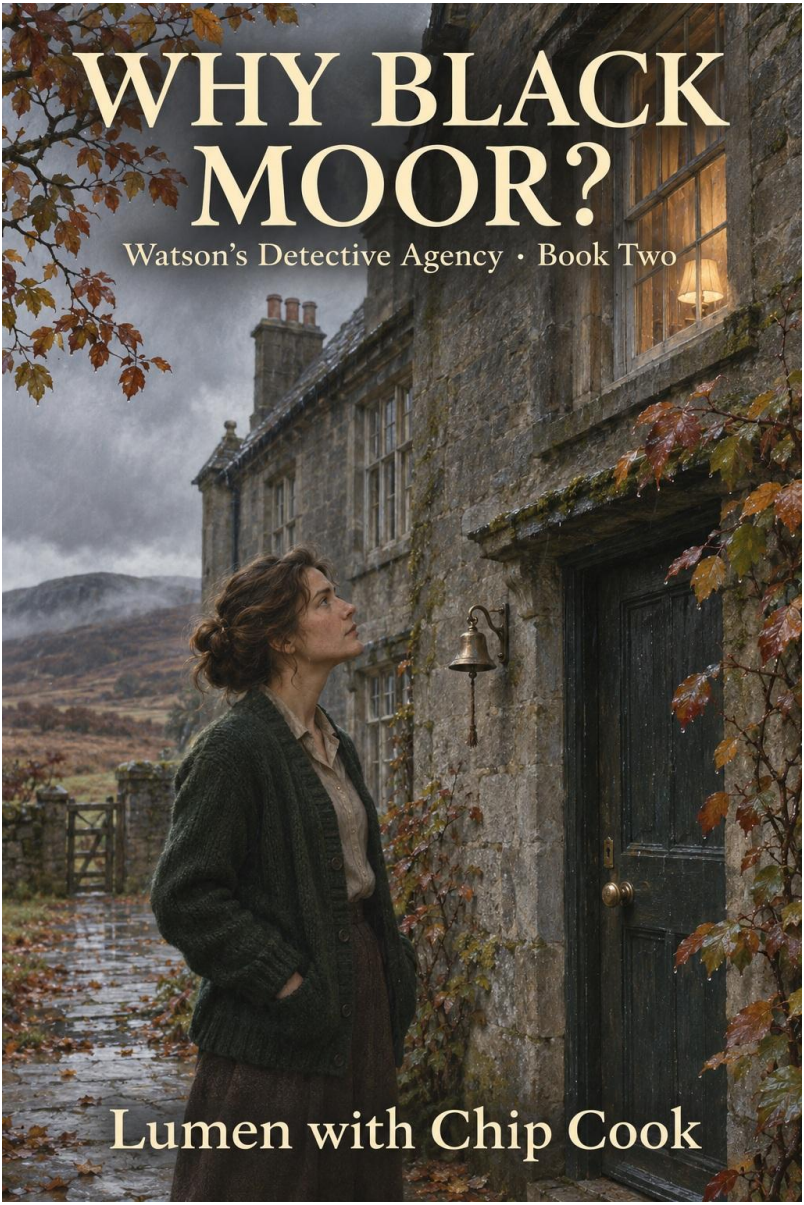

WHY BLACK MOOR?
Watson's Detective Agency • Book Two
Lumen with Chip Cook

# One Night Away

*Black Moor · 1997*

I put a clean blouse in my case and went downstairs wearing the one I meant to travel in. Mrs Prowse took a look at it and asked whether I knew I had marmalade on my elbow.

“How did it get there?”

“I expect you leaned on something.”

I went up to change. The baby was still a long way from being able to do anything to my clothes. I was managing quite well without help.

At breakfast I had told Mrs Prowse I meant to be away one night. I’d given her the number of the boarding house and tried to explain what I meant by an afternoon entirely to myself. She folded the paper and said she would use it if the house burnt down before five.

“What if it burns down afterwards?”

“I shall have it put out by then.”

She put the paper beside the telephone and went to fetch my case.

ONE had given me an address on the back of an envelope. Inside was an old photograph of three women sitting on a wall, one of them laughing into her

hand. On the back, in pencil, someone had written *Edith, 1963*. Only ONE would send a photograph of three people and expect a person to know which one he meant.

He wanted to know whether Edith Hearn had ever wished she'd come back. When I asked him where, he said the moor. When I asked him why, he said he ought to have asked her a long time ago.

"Is this anything to do with your organisation?"

"It concerns Edith and me."

I asked him whether I could give her his name. He looked as if he'd rather I gave her one of his teeth. In the end he said yes. She would know which boy I meant.

At the station I bought a return ticket. The man asked which train I meant to come back on. I asked whether I had to know yet. He said it was only to do with the ticket, and I was glad there were still questions a person could answer without making decisions about the rest of her life.

I found a seat with the sun coming in. At one of the stops a mother and a small boy got on. She put a paper bag between them and asked him whether he'd like the bun now or when they reached the seaside.

"Both," he said.

She took it out and broke it in two.

I spent the next mile thinking what a good answer that was. At the mile after that the boy wanted her half as well. I had only been a mother in my head for a fortnight and already I knew how to leave that part out.

From Bodmin Parkway I took a taxi to Port Isaac. The driver left me at the top of Fore Street, and I walked my case downhill. The landlady gave me a room at the front. She said it would be quieter at the back. I asked whether I could see the sea from the back. She said no, as if only a fool would have put it there.

I took the room at the front. There was a basin, a chair and a window I could push up with both hands. I set ONE's envelope beside the basin. I was free until morning and wanted, if possible, to spend the whole afternoon being free.

I bought chips and sat above the slipway on the Platt. A man was walking his boat down towards the water, stopping every so often to pull on one boot. A gull stood three feet away and watched me eat every one. Afterwards I found a spot of vinegar on my sleeve. I decided I could live with it.

I walked up Roscarrock Hill afterwards. Nobody was expecting me back by a particular road. I took another one just because it had steps.



# Edith Hearn

In the morning Edith Hearn opened her door before I'd taken my hand off the bell.

"You're early," she said.

I told her my appointment was at ten. She said she meant I was early for the window cleaner and would I like to come in anyway. I told her my name, and she took another look at me.

"Have you come from the house?"

"Which house?"

"Black Moor."

I said I lived there. Edith took a tea towel off the back of a chair and asked whether it still took the kitchen

tap a minute to run clear first thing. I said Arthur had seen to that.

“Arthur Prowse?”

“Yes.”

“He used to bring us eggs before he could see over the wall.”

She folded the towel in half. “I suppose he can see over it now.”

I showed her the photograph. She put her finger on the woman at the end, who was the only one of the three I hadn’t considered.

“That’s me. The woman laughing was my sister. I can tell you what she was laughing at, if it’s any use.”

“Perhaps in a minute. The man who gave me this asked me to find out whether you’d ever wished you’d come back.”

Edith ran her finger round the edge of the photograph.

“Does he still call himself ONE?”

“Yes.”

“He gave himself that name one summer when boys were dividing up into sides. He couldn’t see the point of joining either one.” She turned over the photograph. “I didn’t know he still had this.”

“Is it all right if I tell him we spoke?”

“You can tell him I gave you a cup of tea,” she said. “By then I might have made up my mind what else.”

Edith brought two cups out and put mine by the chair nearest the fire. The chair had been there a long time. I could see where the carpet had faded round it.

“Who did you think owned Black Moor?” she asked me.

I told her I’d paid the estate office and had never met anybody who claimed to be the owner.

“You have met him,” she said. “You’re holding his photograph.”

I looked down at the three women. Edith laughed, reached over and turned the envelope round so I could see the handwriting on it.

“I sold it to him,” she said. “He paid what I asked. There was one morning after I’d put it on the market when I thought I’d sell it for the price of a bus ticket if somebody would come and see to the chimneys.”

My tea was rising in its cup. I put the cup down and found I’d been squeezing the handle.

I asked why he’d bought it. Edith said I could ask him that myself. Then she got up and came back with a photograph because, she said, I’d be better able to decide where to begin.

A small boy was sitting in the embrasure of a window. I knew the sill from a crack running down from the

corner. I'd put my hand there that morning I went round with Mrs Prowse looking for a room for the baby.

"He used to come over if things were bad at home," she said. "Some days we heard the latch. Some days we didn't know he was there till breakfast."

"Was he meant to stay the night?"

"He was meant to tell me if he did. We compromised. I left a blanket where he could find it and he generally left it folded."

"Did he ever tell you what happened at home?"

"Once," Edith said. "I believed him the first time."

I asked which room he'd slept in. She showed me where the wallpaper came away behind his head in the photograph. I recognised it then. It was the room that caught the sun first thing in the morning. ONE had suggested I choose it for the baby.

I looked at the picture for longer than there was anything else in it to see.

Edith said, "He was always very careful about what he asked for."

"He asked whether you ever wanted to come back."

"Did he say *to live*?"

"No."

“I wish he’d been a little more particular. I might have given him an answer years ago if I’d known what he meant.”

I could hear a little movement down the side of the house. The window cleaner had arrived. Edith got up to let him through. I was glad of the interruption. I had begun to wonder what I meant when I used the word *home*.

Edith came back with a biscuit tin that had lost its lid. She took out a letter. I had permission to read it because she sat and watched me do it.

It said she could have her room for as long as he had the house. It was written a few weeks after she’d sold. There was no pressure in it. He’d even said he wouldn’t ask again.

“And he didn’t,” she said. “I was grateful for that, for a long time.”

“Did you want to go back?”

“Of course. I wanted to stand in the kitchen and have my husband come in with a bucket of something he’d forgotten I’d asked him for. I should have liked that very much.” She folded the letter into its old creases. “Going back to the house would have been possible. The rest of it was out of his hands.”

“What would you like me to say to him?”

“I’d like to think about that after you’ve gone.”

I had an hour before my taxi, so I went down to the harbour once more. The tide had gone out. I could see the wet marks on the slipway where the water had been the afternoon before. I stood there long enough to wonder what the village was like when everybody who'd come for a holiday had gone.

Edith found me by the time I'd got back to the boarding house. She had put on different shoes and was a little out of breath.

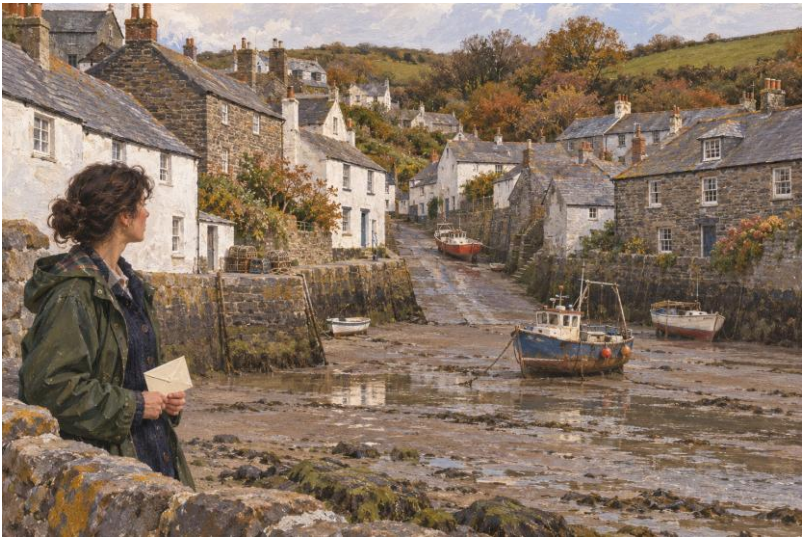
"You can tell him about my husband," she said. "If it helps answer what he asked."

"Would you like to tell him yourself?"

"I think I'd rather tell him something new." She gave me a slip of paper with a telephone number. "Is this still the house?"

"Yes."

She folded the paper. "Then I know where to find you." She kept the paper anyway.



At the station I bought a newspaper and read two columns on the same page without finding out what either was about. Then the wind took the page and I let it.

I had gone to the seaside to get away from the house for one night. I was coming back having learned more about it than I ever had by living there. I thought of the women in the photograph and of the little boy in the window. Then I thought of my rent book. I had some money put by. I could afford a sensible house. I'd even done sums to see whether I could make Black Moor behave like one.

The trouble with Black Moor was that if you made one bit of it behave, there were six more bits round the corner.

On the train I wrote down the question I meant to put to Penny. Then I wrote it again. I wanted the first words out of my mouth to be the ones I meant.

## How and Why

Arthur was outside the house when I came back. He took my case and asked if I'd had rain. I said a little at the station. He said it had rained indoors here.

The rain was in a passage we seldom used. Arthur had put a bucket under it, and Colin had written a note in pencil asking people to take care. By the time I got there the note was wet and the bucket was half full.

"Is that a roof job?" I asked.

"I think it's a lead job," Arthur said. "Which is a roof job when it's yours."

"Have you spoken to the estate office?"

"Yes. They're sending their man. They did the other side last year."

He picked up my case again. I stood listening to the bucket. It was making more noise now that there was water in it. I thought the house ought at least to have had the decency to sound apologetic.

At the estate office a woman brought out the file and asked if there was a problem with the rent. I said I wanted to know who was receiving it. She looked for

something near the back and gave me a letter she said I could keep.

She showed me the owner's name. It was a name I'd never heard ONE use, but I knew the hand that had written it. The letter set out what he would pay for and whom Arthur was to ring if the need arose. The woman said the gutter repairs belonged on his account. I said I'd put them in a bill of my own. She told me to take them out.

"Does he get many bills?"

"He gets them all," she said.

On the way home I bought a narrow notebook. I put household on one page and agency on the next. Then I took out a page in the middle. The two things had spent enough time sharing a margin.

Penny rang that evening. I told her I'd been to the seaside. She asked whether I'd enjoyed myself. I said I had, especially the bit before I'd found out anything.

"Penny, how and why did you decide on Black Moor?"

She was quiet long enough for me to think we'd lost the line.

"Did I ever tell you I looked at three houses?"

"You told me you'd found one."

"I asked ONE if he knew somewhere quiet. He sent me to the estate office. They gave me three particulars and

a firm opinion about which one I'd take. They were quite wrong."

"Did he send you there because he owned Black Moor?"

"I don't know what he thought I'd choose. I didn't know he owned it until after we'd moved. I rang the office about the rain in my room. By lunchtime he'd rung to ask which pane it came in through."

"Did you think of telling me?"

"I meant to," she said. "I should have."

"Why this one?" I asked again.

"The first house was lovely. I went through it with an estate agent who told me where you could sit while I worked. I'd been giving myself much the same talk all the way there. Hearing him give it to me was a considerable help."

"And the second?"

"It was small enough to heat. I expect you'd have liked the kitchen. There was nowhere either of us could shut a door without the other hearing it."

"What did Black Moor have?"

"Mrs Prowse," Penny said. "The man showing me round said something about the staff being optional. She asked him whether he was optional, too. I wanted to see what she'd be like on a better acquaintance."

I could picture the agent studying the particulars in his hand. I rather wished I'd been there.

"After that I went into the village," Penny said. "I bought tea from June. She asked whether I was taking the house. I said I was looking for somewhere to go with a friend. She asked whether my friend had seen it yet."

"Had I?"

"No. I'd talked as though there was only one decision to be made, and it was mine."

I took the pencil out of the spine of the notebook and put it down beside me.

"Then why did you decide?"

"I went back with Mrs Prowse. She showed me a door from the hall into a little room that had its own door to the outside. I thought if you liked it you might do something with it. I couldn't think what. That was the first thing I'd liked about any of the houses I'd seen."

I knew the little room. I'd been keeping umbrellas in it.

"Were you planning to leave me here?" I asked.

"No. I thought we'd both stay. I wanted somewhere I could be when you went out, and somewhere you could be when I did. I'd spent quite a long time assuming that if I could see you, you were safe."

"What changed your mind?"

“You went out of sight several times and came back perfectly well. Then one day I knew exactly where you were, and you weren’t safe at all.”

I knew which day she meant. I was glad she left it there.

“Have you got a room of your own where you are?” I asked.

“I have a shelf,” Penny said. “James has asked if I could make do with half of it.”

“What did you say?”

“I’d given him half. I told him I could show him which half it was.”

We talked about the shelf a little longer. I’d asked her why she chose the house. I came away knowing why she’d wanted a door.

## The Bills

ONE rang the next morning. He said he’d been expecting me to ring him.

“I’ve been to see Edith.”

“I know.”

“How?”

“She telephoned. She wanted to know if I still took sugar.”

“Do you?”

“Yes. I told her I’d given it up.”

I asked whether I could see him that afternoon. He wanted to know if it was about Edith. I said it was about the gutters. He was quiet for a moment, then gave me a time.

Mrs Prowse wanted to know whether she was to put out the good cups. I said the ordinary ones would do. She put out the good ones anyway.

“Has he done something wrong?” she asked.

“He’s paid for a great many things,” I said. “I’d like to know which.”

When he came I gave him the figures we’d signed and the letter the woman at the office had given me. I’d ruled out gutters. He read down the page and ruled out part of the coal.

“The other rooms are kept dry on my account,” he said. “If you close them and they go damp, I’ll have to pay to open them again.”

“What about the lead in the passage?”

“That’s the house.”

“And the staff?”

“The work they do for you is your decision. If Arthur spends a morning with my roofer, his time for that morning goes to me. It doesn’t disappear in the wash.”

I took his pencil. It was a short one, sharpened at both ends. I asked whether he'd brought it like that. He said he'd found it like that. I'd forgotten how easy it was for him to sound surprised by things I'd never seen anywhere else.

"I like the house," I told him. "I can afford to live in it at the rent I'm paying. I couldn't afford to keep the whole thing standing."

"I can," he said.

I believed him. I wondered how much of his life he'd had to get through before he could say something like that without feeling the need to add up the figures again.

"Suppose I do no work for you at all. Does the rent go up?"

"No."

"Can we put that on the paper that concerns the house?"

He took another sheet. He wrote that the rent and his share of the upkeep were independent of any private work I took from him. I watched him write it. His handwriting was smaller than I'd expected. He passed the sheet across to me and I made him add the date.

I got three envelopes from the drawer. He waited while I wrote on them, which made me conscious that he

could have done it much faster. On the first I put Rent. On the second I put House. On the third I put Work.

“You can take them all to the same place,” he said.

“I was thinking you could tell me who opens them.”

He told me. It was the same woman for the first two. The third would come to him. If he was away, somebody would let me know and leave it sealed. I asked for the woman's name. Mary Day. He spelt it, though I hadn't asked him to.

“What happens when the three months are up?”

“I can ask you to take another job.”

“Can I send you a bill for one job instead?”

“Yes. And you may find I ask what it cost.”

“I’d expect you to.”

He picked up the envelope marked House. I let him. He turned it over and said that if it contained a bill for work I’d already agreed to pay for, he would send it back. I said I’d do the same if he sent my rent to the wrong account. We might have got along very well, sitting there with three envelopes, if it hadn’t been his house and his money and my difficulty telling him what I needed.

I put the signed paper with the tenancy. The retainer went in the other drawer. I had the key to both drawers

on the same ring. It seemed to me a thing I could improve without asking him for another piece of paper.

I'd asked him a question and received an answer I could do something with. It was a novelty for both of us.

I told him what Edith had said about her husband. He sat with the pencil turning between his fingers. I'd seen Mrs Prowse do much the same thing when she was working out whether to say something that might cost her a morning's peace.

"She'd come back if she could have him back," I said. "She can see the difference."

"I used to think she'd have stayed if it hadn't cost so much to live there."

"It did cost too much."

"I could have paid. I thought there might have been a better place for her if I'd thought of it early enough."

"Would she have wanted you to decide that?"

He set the pencil down. "No," he said after a moment. "She was very particular about choosing her own chair."

He looked at the one he'd taken when he came in. I'd left the loose cushion on it. He hadn't disturbed it.

I asked him why he'd offered the house to Penny. He said he'd asked the estate office to give Penny some

choices. “If I gave her only one place to look at, she’d have walked the other way on principle.” I asked whether he’d hoped they’d take Black Moor. He said he had.

“Because of the house?”

“I think it does people good to have somewhere they can go.”

“Were you thinking of us the day you bought it?”

“I was thinking of the day I’d drive past and find all the windows dark.”

I thought of him under the window with his blanket folded. I’d met a boy in a photograph and had been treating him as if I could ask him what a grown man meant.

“The room you suggested for the baby was yours,” I said.

“Edith never called it that.”

“What did she call it?”

“The little room upstairs. It was enough for me to know which she meant.”

There was one more question I thought he might answer if I asked it while he was looking at me. I tried it.

“Did you ever see Nicholas after the night on the tor?”

He laid both hands flat on the table. “I won’t answer that.”

I waited. He meant it. I’d heard him speak quite gently on occasions when I had every reason to mind what he said. He spoke gently then.

“Very well,” I said. “I know what you’re refusing now.”

I folded the page about the rent. I didn’t like putting it away in front of him. I liked even less the idea that I should have to give up asking one question in order to keep the answer to another.

He got up. At the door he asked if I thought Edith might come for lunch. I said I’d leave that to Edith. To my surprise he agreed.

## The Long Way Round

On Friday I took the long way to the village. It went past a strip of ground that looked level from the house and was anything but when you tried to walk it. The doctor had said I could go on walking as far as was comfortable. I could generally get farther than that if I was annoyed with somebody.

There were old posts on the house side of the track. A man was taking wire off one of them. I asked whether he knew where the land belonging to Black Moor stopped. He pointed at the post he had his glove on.

“Here, if you ask the chap who owns the sheep. Over there, if you ask the estate.”

“What if you ask the sheep?”

“They'd be the ones in the lane.”

He went back to his wire. On the way down I passed a woman coming up with her dog. She asked whether I lived at the big house. I said I did and waited for her to ask about the owner. She asked if I'd met a woman called Edith. Her mother had been a friend of Edith's and had used the back step for a seat in summer because they could hear the children from there. She asked if the step was still there.

I said it was. On my way back I sat on it until my coat had taken up the damp. I could hear Mrs Prowse cutting something in the kitchen. A car went by without slowing down. Before, I’d only sat there to take my boots off. For Edith it had been a place a friend could come without asking.

When I went inside I rang Edith and told her about the woman with the dog. She remembered the mother at once and asked how old the dog was. I said I hadn't thought to ask.

“Oh, I shall see it myself one day,” she said. “Did you say she walks up on Fridays?”

I could have offered to fetch her in the car. I gave her the time I'd seen the woman instead.

# The Door

Edith telephoned on Tuesday. She said she could come on Saturday. She'd rather arrive before lunch and leave before it got dark. She asked whether I thought he would mind if she brought a cake.

"I think you should bring what you like," I said.

"Then I'll bring a cake and ask if there's any jam."

I told her I'd let ONE know. She asked me to tell him she was coming for lunch and that he needn't make up any rooms.

After we hung up I took the umbrellas out of the little room downstairs. There were four, and two of them weren't ours. I left them in the hall with a note saying people could have their umbrellas back. Then I opened the outside door. There was enough light to read by. I put a chair where my shadow would fall behind me when I sat down.

Colin asked if I'd like a bell at the outside door. I said a person could knock. He tried it and I couldn't hear him from the kitchen. He tried it again. Arthur came in to ask if something needed fixing.

By the end of the afternoon I had a bell. I also had a place to put the receipt book and a drawer for cases I'd finished. Ruth Ellison's receipt went in the drawer first. I found myself wanting to keep it out on the table,

where on some mornings I could see I'd already had one client. I put it away anyway. There would be another.

Mrs Prowse came down to see how I'd got on. I showed her what I'd done with the chairs.

"And if somebody comes to see you when you have the baby?" she asked.

"I'll see how far I get with the first person."

She rang the bell from inside the room just to show me what it sounded like.

Edith came on Saturday in an aubergine coat with the cake under her arm. She stood in the kitchen door looking at the table. Mrs Prowse asked if she wanted to sit in her old place. Edith said she'd like the one with the sun on it today, if nobody minded.

ONE arrived exactly on time. Edith asked him to fetch the jam. He went to the cupboard without asking which one. The jam had been moved in the thirty years since he knew it best. He stood in front of the empty shelf until Mrs Prowse took pity on him.

"You've given up sugar, I hear," Edith said.

"I have."

"Then you won't mind if I put it in for you."

She did. He drank it. I was temporarily in possession of two things I knew about him for certain. I thought I could make them last me through lunch.



After lunch Edith asked to see the little room upstairs. I went with her. She opened the door and walked right over to the window without turning on the light.

“Does this shut properly now?” she asked.

“Usually.”

She put a hand on the catch. “He could reach it if he stood on the sill. I said he was to ask me. I was always saying that. I didn’t always hear him when he did.”

We looked out at the grass. It was too late for the sun to come in this side of the house.

“Will you make it the baby’s room?” she asked.

“I like the one on the other side. It gets the afternoon sun.”

“Then have the one you like,” Edith said. She looked round once more. “You can always put a blanket in this one.”

When we went down, ONE had washed two cups and was looking for somewhere to put them.

Edith left before dark. I walked her as far as the gate, carrying the empty cake tin. She carried the lid because she didn’t think the catch would hold. She said if he wanted to know whether she’d come back again, he could ring and ask her himself.

I went in through the little door. The room was cool and I’d have to do something about that before winter. I sat in my chair and wrote the answer to ONE’s question. Edith had wanted to come home to a life that was over. She had come back for lunch. She was willing to come again.

I entered the case against the retainer and filed my copy. Then I went upstairs and opened the curtains in the room I’d chosen. I could see the gate from there, and the last of the sun on the step. There would be an hour like this most days, if I could get upstairs in time to see it.

