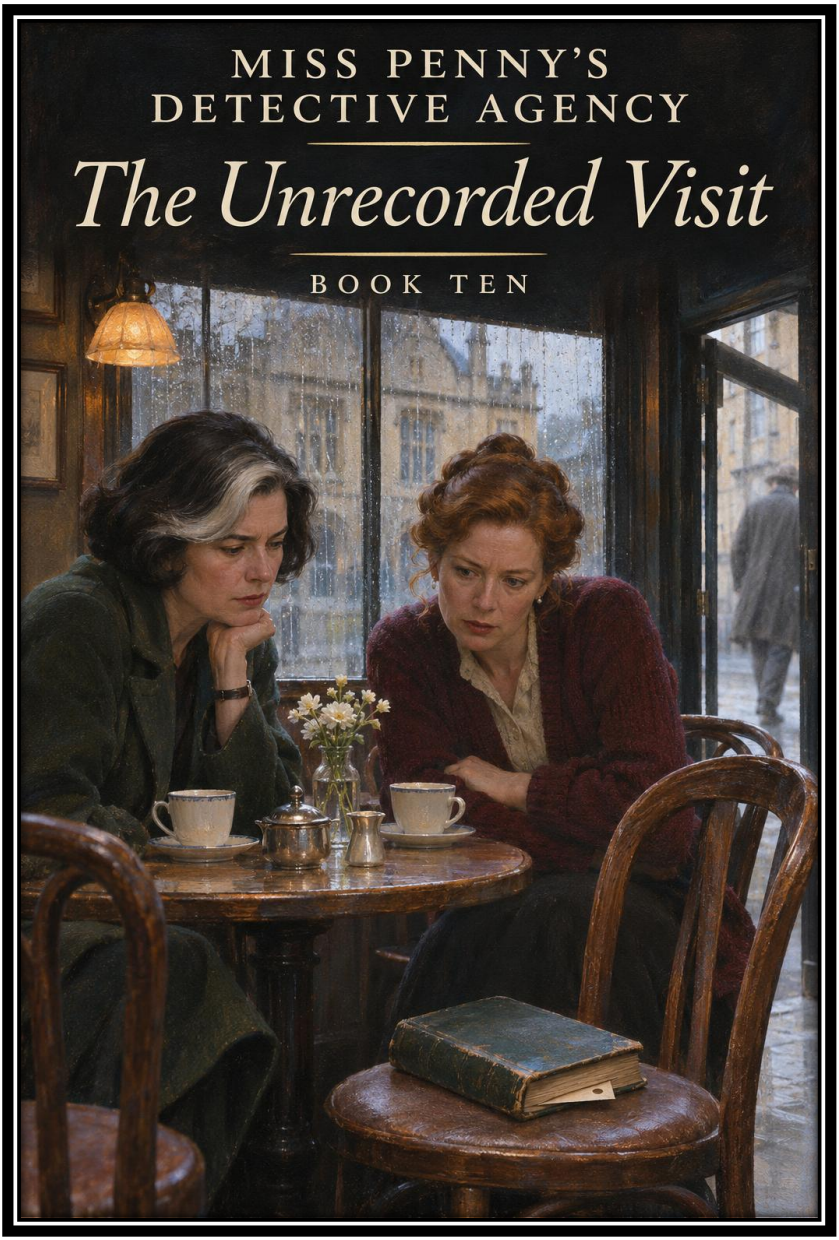


Lumen with Chip Cook

The Unrecorded Visit

BOOK 10

An Exact Thursday

Peter sent a postcard in his own handwriting. He would be at a bookshop in Oxford on Saturday at eleven, where there were enough people for him to be sure of being misunderstood.

Penny brought Watson. Peter said he had been expecting her alone. Watson said people often were. He bought two books he plainly didn't want, then walked with them to a café where the tables were too close together for anyone to lower his voice without drawing attention.

"Someone still uses your name," Penny said.

"I hope they pay the bills."

"He used it to keep me home once. He rang just before I was due at the village hall."

Peter stopped opening the sugar packet. "Did he say we'd met before?"

"He didn't have to."

Peter put down the packet. “When Diana came the second time, on the Thursday after the bank holiday, did she bring anybody?”

Watson watched Penny’s face. “We didn’t give you a date,” she said.

“No,” said Peter. “You didn’t.”



A waiter brought another chair to the table behind them. At that small interruption, Peter picked up his coat and stood.

“I should think very carefully about who gives you a piece of information,” he told Penny. “And what they let you ask next.”

The Date on the Back

Watson kept the postcard on the train. Peter had put a stamp on it even though the card had come through the cottage door by hand. She turned it over when they reached the first station and found Penny watching her.

“It's his writing,” Penny said.

“I believe you. I was wondering who put it through the door.”

“He used to send me postcards from places he hadn't been. If anyone asked whether I knew where he was, I could say I had a postcard from Frinton.”

Watson set it on the seat between them. “Was there a second visit?”

“Yes.”

“And it was the Thursday he said?”

Penny nodded. The train pulled away before she could decide what else she was prepared to say. From the bridge the allotments seemed to go by one at a time. She watched the man at the end of the last plot cover a row of seedlings with a pane of glass.

At the cottage Watson fetched her notes on the telephone call that had kept Penny away from the village hall. She had written the first account while

Penny was still in hospital. It said Peter had telephoned. The correction underneath was in a different pen. She could hardly remember making it.

Penny found the letter Peter's wife had sent afterwards. It enclosed a photocopy of a programme from a conference abroad, with Peter's panel underlined. Peter's wife had added the dates on which he had been sleeping in their spare room since his return, due to a cold he had carried back from Brussels. Penny had saved the letter for that last sentence.

“His being abroad never made the call impossible,” Watson said. “It gave us a reason to check.”

“He always calls me Money when he wants me to do something I won't like. I hate the name. He thinks that makes it effective.”

“Did the caller use it?”

“No. He said ‘Miss Penny’ twice, as if he were checking he'd got through to the right person.”

Watson wrote that down. There had been no need for whoever called to know how Peter spoke to Penny if all he needed was a name she would recognise. Peter's question about whether the man claimed they'd met before made her think someone had asked him for an account of his acquaintance with Penny. She wanted to ask him whether he had answered.

She telephoned his house. His wife took the number down, read it back and told Watson she had never seen it before. That much, at least, she could establish for herself.

A Copy for the File

Peter had left a railway gazetteer on the chair. Tucked inside the map of the West Country was a blank visitor form, folded into thirds, with a single hole punched at the top. The office named on the book's library ticket had closed before Penny retired. She remembered its ordinary visitor books. They never used loose sheets. Watson slid the form into a clean envelope.

They went first to the former office. A brass plate on the outside had been removed. The four screws were still there, and somebody had used them to fix a plastic notice about deliveries. The rear stair led to a reception desk on which two pencils lay end to end. The receptionist said the oldest visitor book she could show them began when her employer took the lease. She remembered there being two cupboards when they moved in. One had held the old visitor books. The other had been locked.

"Did your employer get the key?"

“Eventually. There were twelve plain folders inside, each with a brass fastener. We thought somebody would come for them.”

“And did they?”

“Someone came for everything. We had to stack the boxes on the stairs because the porter wouldn't come into the office while we were open.”

Watson wanted a name. The woman could offer the removal firm's name, but she hesitated over whose signature had authorised the work. Penny said they could ask the removal firm. Outside, Watson understood that Penny had seen a second person begin listening from the landing just before she changed the subject.

The removal firm had closed. The man who had painted its vans now painted house signs and kept the firm's old telephone number. He told Watson he could remember taking empty crates to that address. He had never been allowed to bring anything out. When Watson asked about paperwork, he said she should ask the people who had paid him for the crates.

He gave her the name of a dispatch office. When they checked the library ticket again, they found the same name on the back in small type. Peter could have told them where to start. Instead, he’d left them something they had to look at twice.

Patrick Webb, who had once run the office diary, worked at a stationery shop. When Penny went to see him, he said he hadn't seen the form in years. When Watson showed him the narrow hole at its top edge, he said he hadn't seen that hole in years either.

"It was a private diary copy. Whoever did the typing punched one hole so it couldn't be mistaken for the official list. Somebody wanted certain names kept off the ordinary books."

"Whose?" Penny asked.

"I remember the argument. I don't remember the names."

She asked if he wanted to go on saying that. He looked down at his shop counter, where two birthday cards were waiting to be put away.

"My daughter works in that building now," he said.

Penny put the form back in her bag. "Do you want me to stop asking?"

"I want her name kept out of it."

What the Hole Was For

Before they left, Patrick took a sheet of scrap paper and drew a line across the middle. He wrote 27 on both halves. On the top he added MONDAY, TEN

O’CLOCK and the name of a contact. On the bottom he wrote VISITOR and made up a name. He tore the sheet in two along the line.

He punched a single hole in the top half and passed it to Watson. “This went into my private diary. I could arrange a room or a car and know who to ring if anything changed. I didn’t have to know who was coming. Think of someone about to give evidence against an employer. Signing the book at reception would have put that person’s name where anyone could read it.”

“Who kept this bit?” Watson asked, pointing to the visitor’s name.

Patrick kept his hand on the bottom half. “Whoever arranged the visit. Sometimes it went to the duty officer. If there was a problem, you put the halves together by matching the numbers. Without this half, all you’d know is that somebody was expected.”

“Who arranged this one?” Penny asked.

“Do you have its number?”

Watson turned over the form from the gazetteer. It had the hole and the boxes Patrick had drawn. There was no number. No visit had ever been entered on it.

Patrick let them copy his sample. On the back of his scrap was a drawing of a girl on a bicycle, with her feet on the pedals and both her hands in the air.

“If anyone asks,” he said, “the book for the public reception never left my desk.”

Watson said she believed him. She could imagine someone going through a lifetime of visitor books and being satisfied the woman in question had never come.

Watson asked whether he knew who could see the private sheet. He gave them the name of a retired courier, Mrs Venn, and said he would write her address himself. He had been keeping people’s names off pieces of paper for most of his working life. He put his own name at the bottom of this one.

The Wrong Envelope

Mrs Venn lived above a hardware shop. When Penny showed her the blank form and asked who might still have a completed one, Mrs Venn went to the mantel and brought back three letters. Whoever wrote them wanted a visitor record she said she’d never carried. The last letter threatened to tell her neighbours she’d been selling private records.

Mrs Venn had kept all three envelopes. On the first, a forwarding label covered most of the typed return

address. She told Watson she'd lifted a corner of the label herself, hoping to see who had written.

Mrs Venn had been a courier for seventeen years. She still carried the exact bus fare in an outside pocket of her coat. She made a pot of tea and brought it to them on a tray with a piece of folded card under the handle that used to wobble.

"You can take the letters," she said. "I want the envelopes back eventually. I know which is which by the stamps."

Watson took an account of each delivery. The first had asked whether Mrs Venn possessed any one-hole forms. The second gave her a week and the third supplied the warning about her neighbours. The three had come by different routes. Only the first had the forwarding label. Mrs Venn had assumed the old office address meant someone had found her in the pension records.

"Would the pension records give your married name?" Penny asked.

"They ought to. They pay me under it."

The letter was addressed to M. L. Venn. Her middle initial was I. On her old courier badge the I had a short foot. Her supervisor's relief rota gave her an L. She had asked him to put it right twice and then let it

go. If anyone wanted her in a hurry they knew where she sat.

Watson asked whether the relief rota went out with the delivery bags. Mrs Venn said the supervisor had kept a working copy in his own office. Drivers pinned a weekly list without initials to the dispatch board. There might be more copies, but she knew where one had been. She fetched an old duty notice from a bureau drawer. The late supervisor's name, Norman Sayer, was at the bottom. His son Martin had once come to collect a box of papers while she was on duty. She couldn't say what he'd taken, but when she retired, he was the one who'd answered her note asking for the office to return her spare key.

"Would you like us to tell your neighbours you've had these letters?" Penny asked.

"No. One of them would want to know how much I got."

Penny asked whether there was anyone Mrs Venn wanted told, and Mrs Venn named the woman downstairs. She bought drawing pins in the shop as an excuse to go down and tell her herself. When she came back, she said the woman had asked whether she would like a chair behind the counter that afternoon. She thought she might take it.

The Name in the Window

While Watson waited for Lucas to trace the forwarding label, Penny looked up the supervisor's son, Martin Sayer. There were two men of that name in the directory. One taught the clarinet. The other number put Penny through to a used office furniture shop that used to trade under the Sayer name.

They went to see what was left. On a shelf in the window the proprietor had displayed a row of brass nameplates that had come in attached to desks. Two people had been back for theirs since Christmas. He couldn't say he blamed them. If you had been a manager once, it was a hard thing to have your name knocked down for fifty pence.

Watson had brought a drawing of the paired dispatch slip. The proprietor put his hand on the glass and studied it with her. In the back of the shop he had a drawer full of orphan keys and labels. He could show her one red label, from a carton someone had brought in to pack a telephone. It was stamped with the same dispatch office name Peter had left tucked inside the gazetteer. On the face someone had drawn a pen through the words RETURN EMPTY.

"Anybody could have got hold of one of those," Penny said outside.

“Anybody still can.” Watson put the drawing back in her bag. The address on the first envelope and the familiar labels could help narrow a search. They would make an unconvincing accusation on their own.

At the next turning there was a solicitor's window with its blinds lowered. Penny had rung that morning and been refused an appointment. She stopped long enough to see whether there was a light through the slats.

“Have you noticed,” she asked, “how much easier this is with one of us to stop the other being certain?”

Watson looked back at the letters in the shop window. “Only on the days when you'll let me.”

The Forwarding Label

At the private mail service, a striped blind divided the counter from the sorting room. The woman there told Watson an old forwarding label could identify an account but that she would have to give any account information to the police. Watson asked whether it could still be in use. The woman turned the envelope sideways and pointed to a short printed run of digits.

“We stopped issuing those labels after we moved. They stayed valid until a customer renewed. Whoever put that on had a stack left.”

Lucas made the request. Two days later he brought back a short list. The number had belonged to the supervisor's office and was later attached to a box kept open during the administration of his estate. Two people could collect from it. One was the solicitor. The other was his son, Martin Sayer. The arrangement had ended a fortnight after the first letter to Mrs Venn.

Penny wanted to ask Martin what he had taken out of the box. Watson wanted to know what had gone in.

The solicitor had been disposing of office furniture under conditions agreed with the estate. He produced a signed list showing that Martin had taken his father's desk and two cartons identified as personal papers. The solicitor had taken the deeds and the correspondence with the bank. He had never seen a visitor form. The list identified the second carton by a red label. When Watson asked whether the label came from the solicitor's office, he said it had come from the dispatch office where Sayer had worked.

“Anything there about a rota?” Lucas asked.

“About whose rota?”

“Exactly,” said Watson. They needed to know whether the wrong initial had come from those papers. The list told them where to ask, and who had been there first.

Oxford had a shop that bought signed letters for collectors. Lucas brought Watson along when he went there because she could recognise the form. The shopkeeper fetched an enquiry jacket. Martin Sayer had come in with a faint carbon and asked how much more it would be worth with the name of the visitor. The shopkeeper remembered the question because Martin had been unable to tell her whose name he wanted to add.

She had written the date and his name before returning the impression. The enquiry took place two days before Mrs Venn received the first letter. Watson copied the two dates side by side. The first time Sayer went looking for a price was the last time she could imagine the letter being a mistake.

The Relief Rota

The dispatch office sent back a copy of the supervisor's relief rota, along with a covering memo in which he'd noted that the posted list omitted middle initials. Mrs Venn found her line in seconds. The L was there, and so was a pencilled tick in the Thursday relief box.

"I didn't take that run. I was relief for it. Look where the tick is."

The person named for the run had been off for two days that week. A tick in the relief column meant somebody had checked that Mrs Venn was available. Another sheet, the mileage return, showed the regular man had come back on the Wednesday and driven on Thursday. Mrs Venn had remembered what happened because she'd had a dentist's appointment and would have needed to cancel if he hadn't turned up.

Watson had been hoping the two records would help establish who carried the private sheet. They established that Sayer's premise for writing to Mrs Venn had been wrong. Lucas asked for the other courier's name. Mrs Venn said it was on the mileage return. She was willing to show them where, but she asked them first to look at the route. It ended three streets from the dispatch office. Anyone carrying a

diary slip to Guiting Power would have been sent by another means.

Penny opened her mouth to ask why, then saw Mrs Venn's hand close over the page. The woman had told them the truth about what she carried. She had had to find the words to set aside an old habit of keeping quiet. Penny slid the page back toward her.

The Part He Had

Lucas asked Sayer to come to the station. No one wrote to the forwarding box. When Watson saw him, Sayer had a shopping bag on his knees and his father's desk keys looped around one finger. He said his father had spent so many years moving papers for other people that he had scarcely left anything of his own.

When Lucas put the envelopes down, Sayer said anyone could have used the return address. Lucas put the estate inventory alongside them. On the far side he laid the dealer's note. Watson saw Sayer look at the dates and then at the addresses. He asked which of the dealer's assistants had served him.

“The proprietor gave us the account herself,” Lucas said.

“I took a box of my father’s papers and asked what one of them was worth,” Sayer said. “That’s all the

shop can tell you. Someone else could have sent the letters. My father's address was on everything."

Lucas turned over the dealer's note. On the reverse she had copied the description Sayer wanted her to use if he came back with a name: 'Thursday, four o'clock, private diary'. Lucas opened the second letter beside it. It asked Mrs Venn for a record at that hour. On the envelope was the wrong initial.

"The posted list had no middle initials," Watson said. "Your father's rota had the same wrong L as the envelope. Someone who knew Mrs Venn through the office wouldn't have had a reason to call her that."

Sayer said someone could have found a second copy. Lucas agreed. Then he asked who else had opened the desk he'd taken from the estate. Sayer looked down at the keys still looped round his finger. After a while he set them on the table.

Sayer slid the shopping bag off his knees. "My father used to call it paying somebody a visit. It sounded very ordinary. I thought it must be worth something if you were supposed to forget it."

"Why pick Mrs Venn?" Watson asked.

"She was on the list. I'd have asked him if he were alive."

"Then why tell her you'd speak to the neighbours?"

Sayer looked at the keys on the table. “The first letter didn't get an answer.”

He admitted all three letters. The desk's second drawer had contained the duty rota, a handful of forwarding labels and the carbon. He had shown the carbon to the dealer. When she asked whose visit it was, he tried to find a record with a name on it. He had been prepared to tell the neighbours Mrs Venn sold private documents. He knew she had never offered him a thing.

Lucas asked for the carton and the desk papers. Sayer had brought both the carbon and the rota. On the carbon there was a date, the time of four o’clock and a line marked CONTACT. Penny's name appeared on that line. The edge where a matching number ought to have been was rubbed away. There was no room at all for a visitor's name. It was the sort of sheet Patrick had described, meant for somebody who needed to send a person somewhere and had no business knowing who the person was.

Penny put her hands upright on the table before she spoke. “If you tell anyone that Diana's name is on that paper, they'll have to take your word for it.”



Sayer looked at her. “I never said it was.”

She had volunteered the name herself. Watson saw her realise it. Lucas asked Sayer to wait outside and stayed with Penny until she sat back in her chair.

Watson waited until Lucas stepped out to say, “Peter left us a blank form. This is a copy of one somebody filled in. We have a dated record naming you as the contact. You've told me who came to your door. The paper can't tell me that, and Sayer didn't know it when he went to the dealer.”

Penny thought of Peter saying she ought to consider what people let her ask next. She had wanted to know where he got the day so badly she had scarcely thought about where somebody expected her to take it.

When they went back to tell Mrs Venn who had written to her, she asked whose name he had found. “Mine,” said Penny. She wanted Mrs Venn to hear it from the woman whose name had brought the trouble to her door.

The Address on the Invoice

On a second visit to the stationery shop Watson brought a sketch of the carbon without the name. She kept the slip of paper folded over the date when she handed it across. Patrick looked at the edge first.

“They did rub,” he said. “You could lose a line quite easily by carrying it loose in a bag.”

Watson opened the fold. “Does the date make a difference to you?”

Patrick read it twice. He went to the door and turned the sign to CLOSED. When he returned he said he had already spoken to his daughter. He had asked how she would feel if someone asked about the old diary. She said she would feel cross with him if he had tried to protect her by letting somebody else be blamed.

“She also asked how old I thought she was. As if I'd have forgotten.”

Watson showed him the sketch of the matching slip. “Can you tell me what would have happened to this part?”

“The person who wanted the privacy kept it. Even I didn't know where it ended up.” He put a thumb along the edge. “If they needed to amend the booking they sent a new part through. Nobody was supposed to keep the old one.”

“Did you ever see the two pieces together?”

“A driver went to the wrong house. When we heard about it nobody wanted to use the telephone. A man came out with both bits in his pocket and had me type a new slip. I can't remember his name. I can remember being asked why I had written the address in full.”

“Could I find out which house?”

Patrick went to an old cashbook he used for pressing price labels. He detached a sheet pinned to the inside cover. It was a duplicate invoice for printing two hundred paired forms, billed to the old dispatch office. Marked across the bottom were three places of delivery, including a road Penny would know. The invoice was years older than the Thursday on the carbon. Watson asked if she could copy the list. Beside the old road name the printer had added two words: LOWER BELL.

At the cottage Penny read it twice. She said the third address was the name of their road before a new sign had gone up. The numbers farther along had changed. Some of the houses had never been numbered at all.

“Is it this cottage?” Watson asked. Penny traced the printer’s note with her fingernail. There was still a patch in the stone outside her door where a second bell had once been fitted.

“It could be any house on the lane. It's the first time anybody's shown me the Agency had anything delivered there.”

“The invoice says where the forms went. It can't tell us whose door they went through.”

Penny took her cardigan off the back of a chair and said she would be back in a minute. She went out without putting it on. From the window Watson watched her stop at the entrance to the lane and look back at the cottage. It was an ordinary thing to do if you wanted to see what a house looked like when you were coming to visit. Penny let a car go by and did it once again.

An Account in His Own Hand

Peter's reply came in a plain envelope. He had asked his wife to put it in the post. He said he'd heard that someone had used his name in Guiting Power because an old dispatch colleague had asked whether he had taken a call from Penny on the day of the poisoning. Peter hadn't. Weeks later the same colleague sent him a typed question about the second Thursday visit. The date was already in the question. There was no signature and Peter had returned the paper unanswered. He knew the name of the colleague. He wrote it down willingly, with the proviso that she had died that autumn.

Penny read the last line to Watson, who waited for her to turn the page. There was no second page.

“Did he know it was Diana?” Watson asked.

“He asked as though he did.”

“Then we can ask whether the question he was sent named her. He hasn't told us that.”

Watson noted the former colleague’s name and checked it against the dispatch list for the week on the carbon. It wasn’t there. She could establish how Peter said the question had reached him. She couldn’t establish who’d written it.

She took out Patrick’s number, then put it back. The shop had closed twenty minutes ago. It was the first evening since they’d come back from Oxford when there was an obvious place to stop and she’d noticed it in time.

She asked Penny whether she wanted Peter's letter put with the case papers. Penny said yes, though she asked for the postcard back. She was sure of the handwriting and wanted to look at the stamp again. Watson slipped it out from under the clip. Penny turned it over once, and this time she looked at what Peter had chosen for the picture. It was the front of a house that had stood empty for years before it became a museum.

Penny reread the letter. Peter had explained how information reached him and how he had heard of the stolen name. She still didn't know whether the same person had been responsible. She understood his choice of a crowded café a little better. At a small table with a waiter behind him, he had been able to ask one question and hear her silence. She didn't know whose benefit that had been for.

Mrs Venn called the agency from the hardware shop. Lucas had told her what Sayer had admitted. She had been able to ask him what would happen if Sayer wrote again. She said the woman downstairs had

advanced her to the till and was beginning to complain about being displaced.

Watson set the receiver down. She told Penny that Mrs Venn had asked her to come by the shop next week, then took her coat and went out to give Penny a moment to herself.

Penny stepped outside. The newer bell was fixed to the stone just above the mark where the old one had been. Penny had noticed it when she moved in. The man who had let her have the house without asking for a reference had said, when she pointed it out, that the bottom bell had never rung in the rooms she lived in.

Diana had looked at that old mark the second Thursday. She'd asked which rooms belonged to Penny and which Mr Stocker kept. Then she'd pointed to the bell and the mark beneath it and asked which bell a visitor might use if they wanted to be let in without Penny hearing. Penny had thought she was asking how to get a little privacy. Now she could see the words LOWER BELL in the margin of a printer's invoice for private visitor forms.

At the time she had been thinking about how to give a friend a room in which to sit without having to be looked at. There had been enough room at the kitchen

table. The cold from the stone came up through the soles of her shoes.

What They Talked About

Penny could remember Diana saying she'd had a bad night. She remembered a small tear in the cuff of a blouse. She could remember getting a needle and Diana refusing to take the blouse off to have it mended. It was odd which details the mind vouched for.

She could also remember Diana saying, "If anyone asks what I told you, I hope you'll say we talked about the house."

They had talked about the house. At the time Penny had thought Diana meant hers. Now there were evenings when she thought that Diana might have meant the one Penny lived in. She went back inside and tried to recall why either of them would have wanted to discuss a place in Guiting Power.

Watson came in from outside and hung her coat by the door. Penny put another cup out.

"Did she ever give you anything?" Watson asked.

"She gave me a book to read. I gave it back."

“Do you remember the title?”

“Yes.” Penny waited. “I wish it were the sort of book it would help to have read twice.”

Watson didn’t laugh. She sat down beside her and said that she could stop asking for the evening if Penny wanted. Penny said yes. It was the first thing that had felt like a real choice since Peter spoke the date aloud.

