A KIND OF MUSIC
‘Bite on this,’ Mavis said, and gave Adeline a half-moon of leather on a string that tied around the wrist: her own invention, she said. Adeline knelt, legs wide, arms thrown over the edge of the double bed, the top of her belly pressing into it. Mavis had rolled back the rug and put down newspaper topped with clean sheeting. Same on the bed. Bleach in the washing water. Cleanliness. Keep visitors away. She had boiled everything sterile, scrubbed her hands three times. ‘Bite,’ she said, ‘not long now.’

The second baby was supposed to come easier, but this little bugger had started off facing out. To bring it round, Mavis had made Adeline crawl up and down the tiled passageway on her hands and knees, time after time, then stand and lean on the end of the bed. Two days. Very little rest. But be grateful it isn’t a breech. And be grateful she isn’t at York Road: a filthy place, and half the mothers there come out in coffins. And no high-and-mighty doctor charging you the earth. Mavis cost fifteen shillings, however long it took.

Adeline groaned, bit down hard, and when the worst had passed, she spat the leather thing out and a bit of one of her back teeth went with it. She didn’t care.

‘On your side on the bed, if you don’t want to tear,’ Mavis said.

‘No,’ Adeline told her as the pain obliterated all remaining thought, and forced a grunt out between her clenched teeth.
Spit oozed out over the leather thing and ran down her chin, but Mavis got her up on the bed before the next one. A good thing. Her legs were shaking so much she might have sat on it.

‘I’ll be damned!’ Mavis said, minutes later. The cord wound three times round the baby’s neck – no wonder he was slow to emerge. She slipped her finger under one of the fleshy loops and tugged it free.

Male, unremarkable, Mavis wrote on the record. Father, Albert Edward Miles, lathe operator. Mother, Adeline Miles. They didn’t have a boy’s name picked, so Mavis recommended Harry: ‘Can be a Henry or a Harold. Works for a king, a ditch-digger or anything in between. Everyone likes a Harry.’ Albert’s grandfather had been the Henry sort so he was happy with that; Adeline was too tired to care.

Albert took a spade and buried the afterbirth in the square of yard out back, near the outhouse. Put in a tomato plant on top of that, Mavis advised him, though there was not enough light there for anything but the toughest weeds to grow. She brewed tea and waited two hours in case of bleeding and then he paid her the balance owing and a shilling tip for a good job done.

Adeline’s baby sister Josephine, seven years younger, was married, too. When Adeline turned weepy and couldn’t pull herself back together she came over, got her out of bed and brought her downstairs to sit in the small back room, its windows fogged with the steam from soup-bones boiling.

‘Come now, let’s count your blessings,’ she said. And there were plenty. Adeline was alive, hardly torn, full of milk. She had a healthy baby, despite the business with the cord, so thank goodness Mavis knew her business . . . She had a roof over her head and a younger sister who’d taken her first, George – almost
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four now – off her hands, and three more sisters who might do the same. A good crop of aunts. One uncle. Still had her mother. She had all that luck, and more. Good food. A husband in skilled work, who didn’t drink to excess – a fair, decent man who never hit her and never would.

It was a blessing to have any kind of husband, Josephine pointed out; the war had swallowed so many of them up. She and Adeline the only two sisters married out of five. Adeline and Albert were both fortunate: he to have been spared the trenches, she to be the one he selected, despite that she was twenty-seven and rather quiet. She could add, multiply and divide in her head. She spelled well, and wrote neatly, worked hard, showed no signs of religion, gave herself no airs, did not crimp her hair, or spend her time romancing. Albert Edward appreciated all that, and told her so.

It was the first time anyone had ever expressed an opinion about who Adeline was, so she didn’t disagree. He talked too much for her comfort, but that was a small thing. He wanted a better kind of life and studied how to get it. He was in favour of rational choice. Far better, he said, to have one or two children with full stomachs than six wraiths in one bedroom, half fed, always sick, and most of them ending up in tiny graves. Don’t you agree, Adeline? Of course it made sense, though at the same time, wasn’t it wrong to go against nature? Wrong, certainly, to talk so much about it? We must understand each other, he said. Was that what men and women did? Josephine’s Will never asked her opinion. Hardly spoke.

And surely it was better to have your children live, and grow up to work in an office or even teach. Yes. But she wished he would spare her the details of the means they’d use to limit their family’s size. And did they have to be so strict on the number? Education was the key, and knowledge, power. Yes. Also, Albert said, there was strength in the
understanding of numbers. Compound interest, especially. They saved every week. Though in respect of Harry, numbers had let them down.

‘I don’t understand what went wrong,’ he said when they realised she was expecting. ‘I’ve been very careful.’ He had everything written in a penny notebook: her monthlies, when he’d let himself go. ‘Day eight. Well before your egg would be released,’ he said, bringing their doings in the darkness of the bedroom right there onto the kitchen table, where they surely did not belong; still, the egg part put her in mind of chickens, and she laughed.

‘Well, I didn’t mean to be laying.’ Truth was, they’d done the same as the Catholics did. Plenty of them seemed to be making mistakes too. Perhaps some things couldn’t be controlled, and maybe it was better that way, but she didn’t say any of that because she had married him, for better or for worse.

‘We’ve money saved. But as for the future – ’

The future was what made Adeline weep, though for the life of her she couldn’t say why.

‘Cheer up now, dear,’ Albert said, while she was still weepy and good for nothing. They sat in the room off the kitchen, finishing up the shepherd’s pie Josie had brought. ‘I promise you won’t have to go through it again.’

And hearing that, Adeline, so very lucky as she knew she was, wept even harder, right into the food she was lucky to have.

‘So how’s he going to make sure of that?’ Josephine asked when Albert had gone to stand on the back step for his smoke. ‘Is he going to wear a “raincoat” in bed, now?’ Josie giggled and Adeline coloured right up.

‘We tried one of those,’ she whispered, leaned close. ‘Smelled like matches. Awful.’ She was too shy to mention the nasty look of the thing. The Paragon Sheath it was called, washed
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and powdered, in its box. Cost two and six. Surely, Albert had said, this was a thing that could be, would be, must be improved upon?

‘I don’t know what he’s planning, and I don’t want to. I hope he don’t send me to that clinic that’s opened up, I’d die.’

‘Will doesn’t go in for any of that. Best just use a bit of self-control and take what comes.’

Harry woke. He had a very persistent cry, would not be lulled. So she gathered him up, fed him, and wept some more.


‘I wish you didn’t tell your sister such intimate things,’ Albert told her when he came into bed. He spoke very low because Harry lay between them.

‘Oh, but I’ve got to talk to someone,’ she said, ‘or I’ll go off my rocker like cousin Nellie did.’

‘Maybe it could be someone more discreet,’ Albert said. And there again was luck: another man might have forbidden it outright, or struck her, or both.

But what would they do now in bed? Make sure to pull the kettle off before it boiled every single time? Stuff herself with some stinking sponge? Would he just leave her alone? No chance of a daughter, ever? Too much care and calculation surely took the pleasure out of things, the surprise out of life.

It helped to talk, to talk to someone not so rational and reasonable as Albert. And it was better to talk to Harry than to talk to empty air. To count the blessings aloud, numbering them, as she unpinned his nappy, scooped out and emptied its liner,
chucked the stinking things into the enamel bucket, wiped him clean and fit him up with fresh muslin and towelling.

‘So we’re both lucky buggers,’ she concluded, pushing the pin through the layers. ‘One day, I’ll stop blubbering like this, and that’ll be better still. You’re a good listener. You’ll be good to your wife. You’ll know what she wants.’ The blue-grey eyes fastened on her face. He had a thoughtful expression, she decided. Understanding. Didn’t judge. And so, while she could have left him asleep in his box when she popped out for ten minutes, she carried him with her to the shops, telling him on the way how she would cook a bit of beef, and then, when they got there, how no, it was too dear and they’d have neck of mutton instead. She set him on the table while she cooked, on the floor while she did the washing and hung it out. She told him exactly what she was doing even though he could see for himself.

At the end of the fortnight Josephine brought George back. He seemed taller and thinner. ‘Eating us out of house and home,’ she said. ‘Al was too damn right about keeping a family small! Besides, I’ve been throwing up. Must be expecting again.’

‘Now, if your brother doesn’t behave,’ Adeline told Harry, ‘if he’s rough or forgets you, or does the slightest wrong thing, scream. I know you will. And George, if you watch him well, then soon you’ll get to feed him a rusk, and I’ll buy you a string of liquorice.’

Two strong boys. George, Albert’s favourite; Harry, hers. These were likely all the children she would have. Her luck. Count your blessings, Adeline reminded herself many nights, awake, in the small bedroom with its two bedside tables and small closet, her body longing for something she had no words for. Two healthy boys. Rent paid. A decent man. She clenched her teeth, and a memory flooded her mouth, of leather, of how she kept the sound of the birth pains inside.