

have crossed the street to avoid Maudie.

Judith thought about Jack's father grieving away to nothing. Beryl's version of things.

'What about the husband?' she asked. He was a sick man and the children were remote.

'They took him into hospital. He found her. Had to phone and all. It's a wonder that didn't kill him. He won't be around long now, you watch. It's on'y *she*'ve held him together this last couple of years, running round.' She paused, timing the next comment carefully, punctuating in this way to make it clear that this was only a guess. 'I think she knew he didn't have long and that she would have gone soon after, and she couldn't —' Beryl hesitated — she couldn't finish him off like, so she knew that if she — she gestured towards her own chest to indicate suicide — 'that he'd go after.' She stared at Judith. 'You know Doreen Griffiths's eldest daughter do work down the hospital. She said when they took him in he was six stone.'

Judith thought about this on her own at the window. How Maudie's home had been worked at and feathered and was now a shell. The children would sell the house and somebody else would start again, probably never knowing anything about who built it. Their lives had been locked together until one way or another they would be destroyed together. Maudie was the one who had held them together so she had had to make the decision.

Judith had tried to find out about central heating and some firms were going to give estimates. She looked at the front garden, drenched and dirtied with thawed snow and the low cloud fraying into drizzle. There was all of spring and summer to go. A supermarket was the best idea yet. She would find out, too, about that.

Although the nights were drawing out, he had almost left it too late again. In the waning light he stood on the banking behind the condemned houses of Buchan Row. The bank, which was an old tip long overgrown, fell straight into the backyard of the house with dark green windowframes.

Probably, it had been built before the tip was started. There

was no telling what kind of hillside the first crammed tenants would have seen from their backyard a hundred and forty years before.

He put his glasses back on. The roof had been covered with pitched tarpaulin probably by the last occupiers, but the rain had got under it and one corner had come away exposing the slipped and loosened slates. Most of the windows had been smashed.

Ungainly, and feeling his gut bouncing inside his coat, he worked his way crabwise down the steep slope into the flagged yard. It was damp and moss followed the joints of the flags. The back door had been boarded, but the planks nailed across had all been torn away or kicked in. He stepped into the semidark of what had been the scullery. There was a smell of urine and the staleness of damp wood, rotting wallpaper. Where the range would have been was a neatly cemented recess. The house had been modernized. A boiler for gas central heating had probably replaced the old fireplace and oven. Now that was gone. The sink too. The floor was strewn with broken laths, glass, bits of slate, pages from women's magazines. He stepped through to the middle room. It was tiny. Seemed smaller, somehow, than it might have been had there been furniture. There was a tiled fireplace. Originally there would have been, perhaps, something in cast iron. A fire had been lit quite recently using the rubbish lying around, not in the hearth but on the floor in front of it. The buff tiles were blackened. Damp had come down the chimney breast and he could see the wallpaper, layer after layer, curling away. The sour smell of paper that had been burnt and then wet.

The rest of the downstairs was very dark, heavily boarded at the front where it faced the street, except for the fanlight above the front door, which the thrown stones had missed. In the splay of light from it he could see the dusty electricity meter, the mould-mottled wall of the passage, and dimly the stairs. Some light came down them, from open bedroom doors on the landing. The stairs were sound. He trod them carefully, aware of his own breathing in the silence. Two doors at the top. Toilet and bathroom downstairs somewhere, then. He had missed them.

The front bedroom had a panelled door, painted brown and combed to affect unconvincing woodgrain. The colours were greyish in the going light. Nothing. Empty space. The floor-