

I was lying dead in the churchyard. An hour had crept by since the mourners had said their last sad farewells.

At twelve o'clock, just at the time we should otherwise have been sitting down to lunch, there had been the departure from Buckshaw: my polished rosewood coffin brought out of the drawing room, carried slowly down the broad stone steps to the driveway, and slid with heartbreaking ease into the open door of the waiting hearse, crushing beneath it a little bouquet of wild flowers that had been laid tenderly inside by one of the grieving villagers.

Then there had been the long drive down the avenue of chestnuts to the Mulford Gates, whose rampant griffins looked away as we passed, though whether in sadness or in apathy I would never know.

Dogger, Father's devoted jack-of-all-trades, had paced in measured step alongside the slow hearse, his head bowed, his hand resting lightly on its roof, as if to shield my remains from something that only he could see. At the gates, one of the undertaker's mutes had finally coaxed him, by using hand signals, into a hired motor car.

And so they had brought me to the village of Bishop's Lacey, passing sombrely through the same green lanes and dusty hedgerows I had bicycled every day when I was alive.

At the heaped-up churchyard of St Tancred's, they had taken me tenderly from the hearse and borne me at a snail's pace up the path beneath the limes. Here, they had put me down for a moment in the new-mown grass.

Then had come the service at the gaping grave, and there had been a note of genuine grief in the voice of the vicar, as he pronounced the traditional words.

It was the first time I'd heard the Order for the Burial of the Dead from this vantage point.

We had attended last year, with Father, the funeral of old Mr Dean, the village greengrocer. His grave, in fact, was just a few yards from where I was presently lying. It had already caved in, leaving not much more than a rectangular depression in the grass that was, more often than not, filled with stagnant rainwater.

My oldest sister, Ophelia, said it collapsed because Mr Dean had been resurrected, and was no longer bodily present, while Daphne, my other sister, said it was because he had plummeted through into an older grave whose occupant had disintegrated.

I thought of the soup of bones below: the soup of which I was about to become just another ingredient.

*Flavia Sabina de Luce, 1939–1950*, they would cause to be carved on my gravestone, a modest and tasteful grey marble thing with no room for false sentiments.

Pity. If I'd lived long enough, I'd have left written instructions calling for a touch of Wordsworth:

A maid whom there were none to praise  
*And very few to love.*

And if they'd balked at that, I'd have left this as my second choice:

*Truest hearts by deeds unkind  
To despair are most inclined.*

Only Feely, who had played and sung them at the piano, would recognise the lines from

Thomas Campion's *Third Book of Airs*, and she would be too consumed by guilty grief to tell anyone.

My thoughts were interrupted by the vicar's voice.

'... earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust, in sure and certain hope of the Resurrection to eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ; who shall change our vile body ...'

And suddenly they had gone, leaving me there alone – alone to listen for the worms.

This was it: the end of the road for poor Flavia.

By now the family would already be back at Buckshaw, gathered round the long refectory table: Father seated in his usual stony silence, Daffy and Feely hugging one another with slack, tear-stained faces as Mrs Mullet, our cook, brought in a platter of baked meats.

I remembered something that Daffy had once told me when she was devouring *The Odyssey*: that baked meats, in ancient Greece, were traditional funeral fare, and I had replied that in view of Mrs Mullet's cooking, not much had changed in two and a half thousand years.

But now that I was dead, I thought, perhaps I ought to practise being somewhat more charitable.

Dogger, of course, would be inconsolable. Dear Dogger: butler-cum-chauffeur-cum-valet-cum-gardener-cum estate-manager: a poor shell-shocked soul whose capabilities ebbed and flowed like the Severn tides; Dogger, who had recently saved my life and forgotten it by the next morning. I should miss him terribly.

And I should miss my chemistry laboratory. I thought of all the golden hours I'd spent there in that abandoned wing of Buckshaw, blissfully alone among the flasks, the retorts and the cheerily bubbling tubes and beakers. And to think that I'd never see them again. It was almost too much to bear.

I listened to the rising wind as it whispered overhead in the branches of the yew trees. It was already growing cool here in the shadows of St Tancred's tower, and it would soon be dark.

Poor Flavia! Poor stone-cold-dead Flavia.