Miss Bristow was certain she had dreamed of a skull because on waking – gasping to the parlor and throwing open the curtains – the first face she had seen was skull-like, a man or woman looking directly in at her from the 49 bus. It verified her dream but was simpler and so more horrible, with staring eyes and bony cheeks and sharp teeth and the long strings of dirty hair they called dreadlocks. She went to the small cabinet and plucked at the doors with clumsy fingers before she remembered that Alison had the key. And then she felt abandoned in dismal terror, between the bedroom where she had dreamed the skull and the window where she had seen the face moving down Sloane Street.

She was still in her slippers and robe when Alison arrived at ten. Alison was an efficient girl with powerful shoulders, a nurse's sliding tread and humor in her whole body; the distress was confined to her eyes. She said, 'Have we had a good night?'

Miss Bristow did not reply to the question. She was tremulous with thought. Her arthritis gave her the look of someone cowering.

'You took the key.'

Alison appeared not to hear her. 'I hope you haven't forgotten that you have a lunch date today.'

She had forgotten. She saw the skull, the teeth, the cowl of hair grinning from the far side of a table in a restaurant where she was trapped. She said, 'Who is it?'

'Philippa – that nice girl from Howletts. She left a message last week.'

Miss Bristow was relieved. She said, 'The Italian.'

'Philippa is not Italian,' said Alison in the singsong she used when she repeated herself. 'Now you must put some clothes on. You haven't had your bath.' She opened the blue diary and said, 'She's coming here at twelve. She'll have news of your book.'

'In a moment you're going to say you've lost the key.'

Alison said, 'We promised we weren't going to be naughty, didn't we?'

The Italian, she thought in her bath. At the party, months ago, the girl Philippa had sat

at her feet and a sentence was fully framed in Miss Bristow's mind. 'I can remember,' she said, rapping the words on the arm of her chair, struggling to say them, 'I can remember when we were Romans.'

'And now we're Italians,' the girl had said quickly.

Miss Bristow peered at the girl's blank face. The girl scarcely knew how witty she had been, and so Miss Bristow felt better about appropriating the remark and making it her own: We are Romans turning into Italians.

The girl had been attentive, with a hearty dedication, saying, 'Your glass is empty again!' But the criticism in the words was not in her tone. Miss Bristow felt the need to sip; she panicked and became breathless when there was nothing to sip. But the girl had made sure there was something in the glass all evening. Miss Bristow sensed the girl's watchfulness as she sipped. How could she explain the paradox she herself did not understand? The contents of this glass worsened her fears, but made her better able to bear them.

'I take no pleasure in this,' said Miss Bristow. 'It is a necessity, like a splint on a fracture.'

Or, she thought, embalming fluid. At eighty-two, Miss Bristow felt like a corpse. A celebrated writer in the thirties, she had, after a period of obscurity, lived on to see her work rediscovered and treated – those angry and unhappy books – with a serene reverence. The critical essays about her had the slightly fraudulent forgiving tone of obituaries, publication days the solemnity of exhumations. She knew the talk, that people believed she had been dead for years. When it was learned (and this was news in London) that she was not dead, but had only fallen silent, living on gin in solitude in a tiny Welsh village, she was invited to parties. The books that were republished sold well. She was regarded as a survivor, a voice from the past. And part of her past, the earliest, was a small island in the Caribbean. For the first time in her life, she could afford to live in London. She could not remember when people had listened to her so keenly. She began to write again.

Philippa had asked all the predictable questions, and then they had started to discuss the country. Strangers meeting in London these days spoke of the condition of England as they had once spoken of the weather – cherishing the subject, as people did a harmless illness or a plucky defeat. England was in a pickle: they made it comedy, without consequences, as the girl had done: 'And now we're Italians.'

All evening Miss Bristow had been in the chair. Philippa had carried drinks to her, and a heaped plate of food from the buffet downstairs. Miss Bristow had eaten a pinch of watercress and some of the swollen raisins from the risotto. The ease made her reflective, and the girl relaxed, too.

‘I love it here,’ said Philippa. ‘So many literary people!’

‘Do you think so?’ Miss Bristow liked the girl’s dullness. Lively people required listeners and close attention.

‘Sarah’s fantastic.’

‘That woman,’ said Miss Bristow, indicating Sarah, the hostess, who was a poet’s widow. ‘She is to her late husband’s work what Anne Hathaway’s cottage is to Hamlet.’

Philippa moved her lips and laughed.

Miss Bristow said, ‘And I am a zombie.’

Miss Bristow was aware that her fame made bright people shy. But the girl was dull and bold. She was attentive without fawning. She was carelessly pretty, like a beauty in an old snapshot. Miss Bristow wanted to know the girl better, not so much to make a friend as to reacquaint herself with the person she had once been. Already she had seen the re-enactment of some of her own traits – going downstairs for the food the girl had flirted with a black man; she had a slyness in her stare; she knelt on the floor unselfconsciously; she had a frank laugh and a nervous cough – the sounds were harshly similar and seemed to give no relief.

Miss Bristow had been like this – hard and pretty and reckless in ways that had later, as memories, lessened her loneliness. She had emerged from her twenty years’ solitude whole, impatient, her imagination undiminished and with an added strength, a directness. She hated discussion, talk of terms, Howletts’ ritual respect whenever she turned in a new book. And memory: years of her life which she had thought irretrievable, when she had been as young as that girl, she recovered and wrote about. It startled her to remember these years – other lives in another world. She was glad that she had that girl to talk to. She was, she felt, speaking to her younger self.

‘I hope it’s not too strong,’ said Philippa returning again, the glass between two fingers. Miss Bristow noticed the physical difference in their hands. Her own, twisted with arthritis, was so shaped by habit that it snugly fitted the glass.

‘You are so right,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘Romans turning into Italians.’

Philippa looked baffled. Miss Bristow remembered: the girl had not said precisely that.

‘Oh, yes,’ Philippa finally said. ‘But no one has described it better than you.’

Had she? Perhaps – in a book or story long ago which had not enjoyed the revival. There had been so many books, too great a number for any disinterment to be complete. And now, like everyone else, she knew only the work that had been revived, that was spoken about. The rest was lost to her.

The girl said, ‘I admire your work enormously.’

It was not exactly what Miss Bristow wished to hear. She felt sisterly, but her affection was being returned to her more formally, as to a grandmother or great-aunt, and it obliged her with the impulse to do something for this girl – to help her in some way, if only to prevent her from squandering her attention on worthless people like Sarah.

‘Do you write?’ said Miss Bristow, dreading the girl’s reply.

‘I tried,’ said Philippa. ‘I spent a summer in the Caribbean. I wrote poems, part of a play. I started a novel. Then I came home and burned the lot.’

‘Ah,’ sighed Miss Bristow, seeing the flames – swift and yellow, they consumed the luxury of error and wasted time. It matched a memory of hers and was too much for her. She said, ‘And did you visit Isabella?’

Isabella had been Miss Bristow’s island.

‘Only for a holiday.’

‘A holiday?’ It dignified the place absurdly. A holiday there!

The girl coughed her nervous cough. She said, ‘More of a pilgrimage, actually. But I had been there so often already in your books it was as if I were simply returning. It is such a lovely island.’

‘It was lovely once.’ Miss Bristow thought a moment, and sipped, and said, ‘In Roman times.’

‘Changeless, like so many of those islands.’

Miss Bristow said, ‘The Romans became Italians. It has altered beyond recognition.’

‘You reckon?’ said Philippa.

Miss Bristow smiled at the expression.

‘You really ought to go back.’

‘I did. I couldn’t bear it. Everything has changed. I was lost – I went to the beach, for a stroll, for my sanity. It was ghastly.’

‘The hotels,’ said Philippa.

‘I like hotels,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘We built our share of hotels. No, it was the tidewrack, the detritus on the sand. Once, it was all driftwood and torn nets, barrel staves, rope – beautiful things. You expected to find pirate treasure, messages in bottles. Now it is all plastic beakers, tins and tubs, broken glass, bits of rubber. Junk. And oil. And worse.’

‘Pollution,’ said Philippa.

Miss Bristow glanced at the girl, wondering if with this idiot word she was satirizing her.

‘I must write about it.’

‘You will.’

‘Yes, encourage me,’ said Miss Bristow. She looked at her crooked fingers and she whispered, ‘I write so slowly now.’

‘No one writes about the really important things.’

‘Exactly,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘And what are you writing, my dear?’

Philippa said, ‘I think it is ever so important to realize that if one has no talent one ought not to waste one’s time in self-deception. I would rather help others, who really have a gift.’

‘You are so right.’

Philippa winced. ‘I am on the dole.’

Miss Bristow could not hide her shock. This pretty girl, this drawing-room, the talk of her holiday. For a moment, Miss Bristow thought this girl was speaking figuratively: rich parents, idleness.

‘I’ve as much right to it as anyone else,’ said the girl, and as she spoke of having lost her job selling antiques, of the Employment Exchange, Miss Bristow looked at the girl’s hands – the ring, the silver bracelet: the girl collected her money with these perfect hands.

‘Terrible,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘An American asked me just the other day, “How can you live here?” I said, “I can live here because I once lived on an island that was overrun by savages.’”

‘Actually,’ said Philippa, ‘I’d like to be in publishing. But there aren’t any jobs going just at the moment.’

‘They are the enemy,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘But if you are absolutely determined I might be able to help you. My publisher is looking for someone. Do you know Howletts?’

‘They’re awfully grand.’

Miss Bristow laughed. ‘I used to think that!’

‘But their list is –’

‘It is all trade,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘They are in business to make money, like everyone else. In Isabella, before the Great War, there were icehouses in the capital. Yes, water was a commodity! They sold it by the cake to planters who carried it upcountry, so they could have cool drinks. The ice merchants were on to a good thing – isn’t that the phrase? They might have been selling anything – cloth by the yard, soap, matches, motor cars.’ Miss Bristow pursed her lips and added, ‘Or books.’

‘You’re being a bit unfair.’

‘Am I? I mean it as praise. What a very great pity it would be if they were not interested in profit,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘But they are, which is why I have no friends there.’

‘Drink,’ said Philippa briskly. And before Miss Bristow could react, her empty glass was lifted from her hand.

‘You are very kind,’ said Miss Bristow.

The girl was immediately hired at Howletts on Miss Bristow’s recommendation. And Miss Bristow knew she had assigned the girl to the firm to approve her new book, to eliminate the ritual. Miss Bristow wanted an ally. Dull people mattered more than the spirited ones who mystified her with praise that sounded like mockery.

And now, rising carefully from the bath so she would not break her bones, and hating the feeble image that made the full-length glass seem a ridiculous distorting mirror, she thought how, in the months Philippa had been at Howletts, she had been able to work. She had her ally; and she wasn’t fooled: the girl knew very little of her, but how could she? The girl was as she had once been – bold and untruthful, undemanding,

generous, and a little foolish. But the girl believed, and the girl did not judge her – that was worth anything. Miss Bristow remembered that she had liked the girl for a phrase, a single observation – Romans, Italians. She had put this into a story and afterward had felt grateful and a bit guilty using words that were not wholly hers. The indebtedness was nothing compared to the fears she remembered and the faces she saw, sleeping, waking, so often now as she tunneled in the past, living in it more intensely now and blinking the zombies away to write about it.

The door chimes rang. Miss Bristow became eager.

‘Won’t you have something to drink?’ said Miss Bristow, entering the parlor, taking the girl’s hand. She kept her back to the window so as not to see any skulls. This fear made her seem prim, and even somewhat stately.

Alison said, ‘I have already asked her. She doesn’t want anything.’

‘Go on, my dear. A gin and tonic perhaps?’

‘Oh, all right,’ said Philippa.

‘You see?’ said Miss Bristow.

Alison reached through the neck of her jumper and brought out a blunt key on a thong. She went to the cabinet, removed the gin bottle, and made Philippa’s drink.

‘I will join you,’ said Miss Bristow. She smiled at Alison. ‘The usual.’

Alison mixed the gin and vermouth for Miss Bristow with a kind of defeated disregard.

‘I am feeling a bit shaky today,’ said Miss Bristow, slowly fitting herself into the chair and reaching for her drink. She sipped, gulped, sipped again, and said, ‘It was that film on the television about the mummy. They unwrapped it and I thought, “Oh, my, I must turn this off.” But I couldn’t. I just sat there while they unwrapped it. I thought, “I know I’m going to have a bad night if I watch this” but I kept watching and they kept unwrapping. Finally, I couldn’t stand it any more. I switched it off and went to bed. And I had a bad night.’

‘I didn’t see it,’ said Philippa. ‘I was at a party. A publisher’s thrash.’

‘It reminded me of something.’

‘The mummy?’

‘Something else. A face I knew, a face from the catacombs – a long time ago.’

‘I didn’t know you’d been in Rome.’

‘I have never been to Rome,’ said Miss Bristow.

Philippa looked at her watch. ‘I booked the table for one o’clock and the traffic’s pretty bad. We ought to make a move.’

‘I’ll just fetch my hat,’ said Miss Bristow. From the bedroom she heard Alison speaking to Philippa in a harsh accusing whisper.

‘We’ve got lots to talk about,’ said Philippa in the restaurant. ‘And I have two ideas for you.’

‘Before you say another word,’ said Miss Bristow, pushing down her hat, ‘I want you to get that young man’s attention and ask him for two drinks. There’s a dear.’

Philippa ordered the drinks and even began talking, but it was not until the gin and French was set before her that Miss Bristow’s eyes lost their vacancy and took on a glaze of attention.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Philippa was saying, ‘that it’s about time you wrote your autobiography. I don’t know why you haven’t done it before! What an absolutely marvelous book it would be. Of course, I haven’t mentioned it to Roger’ – ‘Roger’ to Philippa had been Mister Howlett to Miss Bristow for ten years – ‘but I know he’ll be fantastically sweet about it.’

‘My autobiography?’

‘Yes! It just occurred to me the other day,’ said Philippa. ‘I don’t know how I thought of it! What do you say?’

Not one day of my life has gone by, Miss Bristow thought, without that book appearing to me. The book was constant, not as a mass of papers, but finished, a hefty lettered spine, occupying a thick space in a shelf in her mind.

She said, ‘It is a nice idea. But who would want to read it?’

‘I certainly would!’ said Philippa.

The girl was being unhelpful. Miss Bristow wanted more than this.

Philippa said, ‘London in the First World War, Paris in the twenties, London again –’

‘My island,’ said Miss Bristow.

‘Of course,’ said Philippa, but seemed disappointed.

‘I haven’t been back to Paris since 1938. It’s such a long time ago. I wouldn’t go back, not now. People say it’s changed so much. I’d go back if I could do it – somehow – like being a fly on the wall, just watching and listening. But that’s impossible. How can one be a fly on the wall? And my island. It wasn’t what you might think. Some people think it was paradise – “That beautiful life you must have had there,” they say. I say, “What beautiful life?”’

‘You could explain,’ said Philippa. ‘In the book.’

‘Montparnasse was small, too. It was a village. One knew everyone who lived there. I saw James Joyce. This was at a party. We spoke for a while, and I thought, “What a kind man!” He had dark spectacles; he must have been nearly blind. I loved him – I don’t think I even knew he was a writer – and I felt that this was a man that one could depend on. Dependable, that’s what I thought. Gertrude Stein was very noble – a very noble face. And there was Alice B.’

‘What did she do?’ said Philippa.

‘Knitting – something of the sort. Just sitting there and knitting, while Gertrude looked great and noble. I saw Hemingway – I didn’t know him. But Djuna Barnes – how grand she looked! She had a huge cape on her shoulders, a huge black cape.’

‘So I was right!’ said Philippa in triumph. ‘It will be a lovely book. I’m sure Roger will be thrilled. I don’t know what gave me the idea, but I just knew it was a good one.’

Miss Bristow smiled and put her glass down and pushed it until it hit the ashtray. Hearing the clink, Philippa looked down and then searched for the waiter. Fresh drinks were brought.

Miss Bristow said, ‘Once, at a party, I met the lunatic Crosby. He wanted to talk and he noticed I was wearing a pretty ring. This ring. “I’ve been admiring your ring,” he said. “The boy who gave me this ring just got out of prison,” I said.’

Philippa lowered her head and frowned.

Miss Bristow said, ‘Crosby was very shocked. He looked at me and said, “And you mean you kept it?” That’s all he said. “And you mean you kept it?” And he went away.’

Philippa said, ‘That’s just what I had in mind. Funnily enough, I never thought of James Joyce as dependable.’

‘I am telling you what I felt.’

‘It would be a marvelous book.’

‘What was the other thing?’

‘What other thing?’

‘You said you had two ideas,’ said Miss Bristow. ‘You have told me only one.’

‘Oh, yes,’ said Philippa. ‘Would you like another drink?’

‘The same,’ said Miss Bristow.

Philippa’s glass was full: one drink was brought. Miss Bristow sipped and watched Philippa trying to begin. The girl was having difficulty. Miss Bristow said, ‘Is it my new collection?’

‘Partly. But first of all I want to tell you what a brilliant collection it is –’

With this preface, Miss Bristow thought, the news can only be bad. She was aware that it was an old woman’s book, rather a monochrome, all memory, without adornment or invention. But Miss Bristow had discovered this as her strength.

Philippa was still praising her: the news was very bad.

Instead of speaking, Miss Bristow drank, and the drink was like speech, calming her, relieving the apprehension she felt, so that by the time the drink was gone and Philippa had finished, Miss Bristow was smiling and had forgotten her initial uneasiness about the girl’s reservations. She heard herself saying, ‘Why, that’s all right then, isn’t it?’

‘Gosh, you’re quick.’ Philippa turned. Now the waiter was nearby and ready, anticipating the order. He brought Miss Bristow another drink.

‘Lastly,’ said Philippa suddenly, surprising Miss Bristow.

Miss Bristow peered over the rim of her glass.

‘The icehouse story.’

‘Rather short, I’m afraid,’ said Miss Bristow.

‘I have no objection to its length,’ said Philippa, looking very frightened.

‘Does it seem overobvious to you?’

‘Not that.’ The girl was lost. She looked around as if searching for a landmark and the right way through this confusion.

Miss Bristow said, ‘These waiters must be wondering what’s keeping us.’

Philippa took a deep breath and said, ‘Miss Bristow’ – the name alone was warning of worse to come – ‘Miss Bristow, some of us at Howletts think it will hurt your reputation.’

Saying so, Philippa sighed and squinted as if expecting the ceiling to crack and drop in pieces on her head.

Miss Bristow laughed hard at the girl in disbelief. And as she laughed she saw the people in the restaurant alter: they were skulls and bones and rags, and even Philippa was skeletal and sunken-eyed, with a zombie’s stare.

‘Who thinks that?’ said Miss Bristow, spacing out her words.

‘Roger – some others.’ Philippa used her teeth to clamp her lip and chafe it. ‘And I do, sort of. I mean, I can see their point.’

‘My reputation is no concern of mine. It is a figment in other people’s imaginations. It does not belong to me. You should know that.’

‘I’m not sure I understand,’ said Philippa. ‘But I think I understand the icehouse story. It’s easily one of the best-written things you’ve done, and maybe that’s why I think it’s going to hurt you.’

‘How can it possibly hurt me?’

Philippa said, ‘Well, it’s anti-Negro for one thing.’

‘Yes?’ Miss Bristow was incredulous; her eyes asked for more.

‘And for another thing –’ Philippa tried to go on, started twice, and finally said, ‘Isn’t that enough?’

‘If what you said were true it would, I suppose, be more than enough. But it is not true.’

‘It’s what some readers will think.’

‘I don’t care about “some readers.” It’s the others that I care about – and I do care, passionately.’

‘Roger thinks –’

‘Tell me what you think,’ Miss Bristow said sharply.

‘I think it presents the black people – oh, God, I hate people who say things like this, but anyway – I think it presents the black people in a bad light.’

‘It happened a long time ago,’ said Miss Bristow.

‘Still –’

‘Nineteen seventeen. The light could not have been worse.’

‘It worries me.’

‘Splendid. The story is a success.’

‘I’m sure it is,’ said Philippa. ‘Miss Bristow, would you like another drink?’ Miss Bristow said she would appreciate a small one. Philippa said, ‘It seems racial.’

‘It is not about race. It is about condition.’

Philippa said, ‘I hate to say this, but I think you should take it out.’

Miss Bristow said, ‘It is true from start to finish. It is a memory. “But they did not know that they were dying, like Romans becoming Italians” – the last line says it all. You are not interested, you do not want to know. Why won’t you see?’

‘You were so young then,’ said Philippa. ‘You might have been wrong.’

Miss Bristow said, ‘I was about your age.’

Philippa had not heard the sarcasm.

‘But things are different now. You said so yourself.’

‘Did I say that?’ Miss Bristow saw the faces – the dream skull, the one on the moving bus. And from a bus, on the street, six of them carrying placards, as savage seeming as long ago. She was not imagining those ghastly faces, the teeth, the red eyes, the

dreadlocks. She said, ‘I have seen them.’

And saw them now. The drink had come. She did not sip. She gulped from the glass, and spilled some.

Philippa said, ‘I feel terrible about this. Roger was fantastically sweet. Roger –’

In the restaurant, as in the dream and through the window, bony cheeks, dirty hair, and dusty bitten fingers. They were there, left and right, at the watery offside of her field of vision surrounding the men she saw; in shadow. They had swarmed like rats from the island and now they were here, lurking; they had gained entrance to this restaurant.

Miss Bristow said, ‘Perhaps you are right.’ She turned and no longer saw the ones in the corner. But there were others. ‘Perhaps.’ They returned in their rags, but still she said, ‘You are right’ and ‘Yes, yes,’ hoping the words would drive them away. Her agreement was merely ritual, like the effect of this glass: it made the fright worse but enabled her to bear it.

The young waiter hurried to Miss Bristow’s side, as if instructed, and said, ‘The same again, madam?’