



Conto:

“It is lonely being a young man sent abroad to fight” she said

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Introduction

Readers of Kirsty Gunn’s fiction, whether the novels or short stories, are well accustomed to encountering overt and playful acknowledgement of the horizon or scene of writing in the story, to feeling like a co-creator or accomplice in the making of the story. The reader is let in on the story. And this new story, **“It is lonely being a young man sent abroad to fight” she said**, which begins with a dream reported to the narrator by her sister, very soon primes the reader: “Everything that happens must be followed by a conversation – it’s always event plus discussion, event plus discussion – even if the ‘everything’ is just some rag bag of images hauled up from her unconscious and set before her while she is asleep”. This story, rather like a dream, compresses so much into its swerving narrative. Fasten your seatbelts as “event plus discussion” becomes event *as* discussion; language is both event itself *and* event-making, and *vice versa*. Language produces events, this story makes clear, sometimes death-dealing events, perhaps the fate of that “young man sent abroad to fight” reported in the sentence that folds in and back on the story from its final line to its title.

Gunn takes the epithet of “contemporary modernist” as a compliment, recognising that her own unique form of self-conscious, self-referential and dialogical making arises from a space cleared by great “modernist” writers, not least Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield, along with Muriel Spark and later technicians of what we might term “the modernist sentence”¹. Modernism for Gunn is a living mutating mode, not a historical literary era, nor is it a form of realism. In our foreword to this issue of MATRAGA, we ask what “modernist” experimental prose might look like in the 21st century. We hope that the question reverberates as the reader encounters the precision-engineered sentences, the lyrically-cut paragraphs, and the significant gaps that structure Gunn’s short story, which we are proud to publish for the first time as a final piece in this issue on “Modernist Prose in Contemporaneity”.

¹ Read Jane Goldman’s critical interview with Kirsty Gunn at literaturainglesa.com.br

"It is lonely being a young man sent abroad to fight" she said.

By Kirsty Gunn

My sister called to tell me about a dream she'd had. "I have to give you all the details while they're still fresh in my mind" she said. Sophie is like that. Everything that happens must be followed by a conversation – it's always event plus discussion, event plus discussion – even if the 'everything' is just some rag bag of images hauled up from her unconscious and set before her while she is asleep. It was about animals, she said, the dream, and it took place in a stable – "but not a stable, actually" she corrected herself, "the building the animals were sheltered in was really the ruins of a once grand house."

"That's pretty detailed" I said. "The part about the house..."

"Yes. And it was beautiful, Mary. Queen Anne, I think, or something like that but it had fallen into disrepair and now it was full of cows and sheep and some kind of long legged llama, though a llama with the stubborn snout of a pig."

"Another detail" I said, "of your dream."

"Exactly. And there were animals with beaks – or bills, rather, as though they were geese, but they were nothing like geese because they were tall. Like an extinct New Zealand moa, that tall and flightless bird, but with wool, not feathers. Do you see what I'm getting at, Mary? The dream was strange."

"Strange" I said. "I'll say. What had you been thinking, during the day, I mean, before you went to sleep? Had you had a strange encounter? Met someone? Had you eaten something funny?"

"Funny?" said Sophie. "No, no" she said. *No, no...* In that cross, impatient way she has, that doesn't mean she's cross, only that she wants to get on with things and can't bear any diversions." No, no. It was just a dream full of animals, that's all. It hadn't come *from* anywhere, it was an imaginary figment... About domestic animals, herds or flocks or whatever, crowding this stable, I mean, the place was dense with livestock, *dense*, Mary. Yet I walked right through them. "

"Is it something to do with Christmas?" I said, though Christmas was a while off. "Stable, animals..."

"I simply walked through them" my sister said, as though she hadn't heard me. "I walked into the centre of this herd of animals, into the middle of the group. I went right in and then..."

"Then?"

"Well, I turned around and came out" she said. "There was a dear little calf who was eating some kind of gruel from a pink bowl and it gave me a wild eyed and frightened look as I walked past but of course I wasn't going to hurt it."

"Goodness" I said. "What does it all mean, I wonder?"

"Who knows" Sophie said. "Only I wanted to tell you because it was all so interesting, so visual. Like one of your stories, Mary. At first the animals seemed scary, one of the llama creatures with the pig's nose tried to butt me, but I just kept moving carefully through them all. I'd been intimidated, of course, so many of them, you know, in such a tightly packed crowd –"

"Crowd?" I said. "That's a strange way to describe –"

"Oh well, flock then. Herd. What I said before... Whatever. Don't be such a damn *writer*, Mary. Why must it be always 'words, words' with you? Getting everything down in just the right, the exact, kind of way..."

I laughed then. My sister often makes me laugh. Her somehow brutal take on life. Her impatience with Art. She's a dentist, an orthodontist, actually, and the idea that someone might write stories, that one might do this for a living, is as ridiculous to her as the idea of looking inside people's mouths all day is ridiculous to me. Sure, my sister is a total success at what she does – she has her own practice; that's her name on a brass plate on the door and I'm always hitting her up for loans and she always seems to have money to spare – but I have to say, apart from the massive income generated by people's crooked and overcrowded teeth, I can't understand for a minute how she is able to do what she does, and, for her part, she can't begin to get her head around why I would do nothing but sit in front of a laptop all day writing articles and advertisements and the occasional short story for magazines that generally don't want to publish them. Still, there's something about us both that makes people think we're kind of similar. Her dream, my words. It's all there in that phrase "Event plus discussion", I suppose.

We talked a bit more. It was our mother's birthday and we were planning to take her on a surprise trip to Rome – and Sophie also told me about her new boyfriend who she'd decided she was going to break up with because there "wasn't much to him", as she put it. And then she'd asked about my husband and me and the boys and I said we were all fine.

"Bye, then. Give Robert my love" she said.

"I will" I replied. "And talk to Mum again, will you? About that hotel? I think the bells will drive her crazy even though she does want to be that close to St Peter's. They'll start ringing them really early in the morning and I don't think she's factored that in. Also the processions. Catholics are mad for that sort of thing."

"I'll talk to her" Sophie promised. "And you think about my dream, will you?" she finished by saying. "There's something going on there and I'd like to get to the bottom of it. I've never given any kind of animal a moment's thought before, as you know."

"Fine" I said, and then we hung up and I went off to the kitchen to tidy up after the rampage that is Hamish and Davey going off to school, but all the while, it's true, I was thinking about my sister's dream, that stable – sorry, "house" – the herd of animals and so on – and sure enough, I couldn't help it, I started thinking, too, about a story that might come from all that...

A few weeks earlier, my dear friend Alison, who I hadn't heard from in ages had come around to the house in a kind of panic. "The people next door have a cat and they're not taking care of it and they've abandoned it is what I think" she'd said – all in a breathless rush because her car was double parked outside my front door and she'd wanted me to get straight into it and drive back with her to our old neighbourhood so that we could confront the situation that very morning. "It's not even a cat they're mistreating, Mary" she said. "It's a kitten, a tiny, tiny kitten. They leave it on its own in the flat all day. When I'm up on the roof terrace I can hear it, through a window

which they keep open. It's in there, crying and crying. Then I woke up this morning and it was the first thing I could hear, this desperate little sound, like –" she composed her face and closed her eyes. "Mi-aow" she said, drawing out the vowels so that she sounded like a sad and desperate little kitten herself. "Mi-aaa-ow!" she cried again, piteously. "We have to do something, Mary. Come over to the flat with me now."

Alison is someone I have known for a long time. The flat to which she was referring was my old flat, the flat I'd bought in another life it may as well have been, before I'd met Robert and had the boys – when Alison and I used to be neighbours. We used to see each other most days back then, discuss various ideas for the future, plan a range of different projects and events. The day I'd moved in I'd gone up onto the roof terrace – which was the reason I'd decided to buy the flat in the first place – to look at the view and Alison had been up there on her terrace, right next door, watering the plants.

"Oh, hello" she said.

Some friendships start that way: Oh, hello. Well, hello back. And off you go as though someone has fired a gun. So it was with us: Two roof terraces, two flats... We were like kids with jam. All we had to do to see each other was go upstairs and call over the wall. "Do you want to come next door?" "Yeah!" "Shall we have a party?" "Why not!" Just thinking about that chapter of my life makes me see how it could be another whole story in itself – a book of stories, or a tv series, even: "Alison and Mary on the Roof with Friends." "What Alison and Mary Did Next" etc. etc. The whole set up was made for fiction.

This story, though, the one I'm writing down now, has me standing there at my front door with Alison's car double parked outside the gate and Alison's voice high and strained with worry because of a kitten she has heard though never seen – still she knows it's "tiny" and it's been "abandoned" and it's "crying and crying"... And oh yes, I get it. I totally get it. One of the first things Alison and I talked about when we met that day on the roof was how we loved pets – cats in particular – and how she'd had an extremely affectionate old tom cat called Walter who had died five years ago but she still missed him.

"Listen," I said to her in the car as we were driving over there, to my old flat, so that we could figure things out, "how do you know they're neglecting the kitten, really? There could be someone in the flat all day, playing with it, feeding it, and the kitten just likes to mew. Some cats are like that. They like to make a sound. Siamese cats, for example. And Charlie, you know, she gives me little miaows all day, in greeting, when I'm working and she jumps on the desk –"

"This is nothing like Charlie" Alison said with great certainty, her eyes fixed on the road ahead while rummaging on the dashboard for cigarettes and driving very fast. She could speak with that kind of authority about my cat because Charlie was given to me by Alison years ago as a birthday present, a black and confident little rescue kitten from the local PetsWatch with whom Alison is in constant contact. She'd found out from the manager there that a ten week old kitten was about

to be put down because of an asthma condition – and we had a garden, I was home all day, the boys were gentle with animals... It wasn't even that close to my birthday, actually, but things were sliding with my writing and I was having trouble getting back into it once the boys had started school and Alison knew all along that Charlie would help. She's a lucky black cat in every way; even that asthma condition that so threatened her life disappeared within days of her moving in.

"Nothing like" Alison repeated emphatically now. "This young cat is MISERABLE, Mary. The people next door are NEVER in. In fact, sometimes they are not in for days and days at a time. I know that because I've been watching the flat. I see people leave..." She paused, as though for effect, but in fact she was inhaling and exhaling a cigarette. "And I DON'T see them return."

I knew, of course I did – and I didn't need any of her talking in capital letters to tell me – by the smoking, the smoking in the car and the smoking while driving, that this was a pretty serious situation. Alison only ever smoked if she was very worried about something or extremely excited. Now she drew heavily on her cigarette, held her breath dramatically, and, after a beat, exhaled again, all the while driving in her expert way. "I am talking DAYS at a time..." she said, flicking the ash out the open window and not taking her eyes from the road. "DAYS, Mary."

By now we were just about back in the old neighbourhood. We're not that far apart, Alison and I, though, because we are no longer exactly next door to each other, we feel the difference. Still, it had taken only five minutes or so to cross the space between where I live now and where I lived then and the time had passed without us coming to any sort of conclusion.

"Maybe they have someone come in?" I said. "To feed the kitten? A person who who you don't see arriving...?"

"I hardly think so" Alison flicked her cigarette out the window and pulled into a parking space right outside her building. "No. Your tenants have simply left an animal on its own, to fend for itself. It's thoughtless and wicked and that's why you and I are here now. We're going to go in there and confront them. It's your flat, after all, Mary. You have the right to be authorial in this situation."

Authorial, eh? I thought. Well that's an interesting word. Writer. Author. Event. Discussion. Etc, etc, though all I said was, "Yes, but –"

"Come on" Alison said, commanding me. There were two spots of high colour on her delicate cheekbones. "It's not negotiable, this situation. I know you feel about this the way I do."

She was right, of course. The minute Alison had told me about the kitten I'd felt sick. Who could do that sort of thing? Be careless? Cruel, even? And it was true, too, as Alison had said: It was my flat. After getting married, Sophie and Robert and my mother had told me not to sell and to hold onto the place as an investment, sort of. It was the practical thing to do. I'd managed to buy at a time when property prices weren't so crazy in London and I'd thought I was going to have a successful career in advertising so I could afford the down payment and monthly mortgage costs. Then, by the time I'd left the agency, I'd met Robert and published a little collection of short

stories and life seemed to have changed. Robert and I decided to get married; I started writing articles and advertorials as my day job; we decided to move to somewhere with a garden. “But you shouldn’t sell that flat” everyone had said, Alison included, because she had Sophie on the phone to her all the time telling her how much sense it made for me to keep it. During that entire period Sophie had been in training, first as a dentist, then orthodontist, and was getting herself set up in her own practice. Already it was clear she was going to have a very successful career and would manage the practical side of her life with a great deal of foresight and efficiency. My not selling the flat, I know, is the only thing I’ve done that Sophie thoroughly approves of. She loves the flat herself, and she and Alison adore each other.

“Let’s go around there now” Alison said. “It will be necessary to use your keys.”

There comes a time in all short stories when the register of the narrative shifts: a character is introduced who changes things, or the mood alters, the tone, the story has a different feel. Up until now, everything had been quite straightforward – the conversations, the explanations – but at this moment, the paragraph above sitting out there on its own like that... I suppose you could say this was the moment in this story when I realised things were coming together in a way that a reader might find quite alarming. Because the idea of me using my keys, getting them out and exercising – what? – my landlord’s rights? My – as Alison had put it – authorial rights? Well, it changed things, that’s for sure. Things now coming together with a view to – what? Breaking and entering? Trespassing? Alison and I wilfully letting ourselves into a property that was legally tenanted and behaving as though it was our own? Letting ourselves into someone else’s home with no consideration of their own position of legal entitlement, but thinking only of cat rescue, animal rights? Yes. Breaking and entering. That was what Alison was proposing, alright. Though we had keys, my set of keys, still: We would be involved, completely, in what could only be described as a criminal act.

“I can’t use my key” I said. “The Taylors are tenants. They live there. They’ve been there for years. I can’t just let myself in –”

“Knock on the door then.”

“Well...”

“Knock on the door first, then. For goodness’ sake, Mary!”

By now we were at the front door of my flat and Alison’s voice was high and wild. “For goodness’ sake!” she said again. “It’s a tiny kitten! All rules are off!”

“Well...” I repeated, sounding uncertain when really I wasn’t uncertain at all. There was no way I’d been talked into this. I knew exactly what Alison meant and I was in full agreement. I knocked three times. “It’s a desperate situation” I said. Then I put the key in the lock and turned it, opened the door. Alison and I stepped inside.

So “Broke”. So “Entered”. In fact those exact words had come up in an article I’d been writing earlier that week. It was a piece about cars for weddings, very well paid, for a certain kind of

newspaper that ran pages on that sort of thing, at certain times of the year, more of an advert, really, for car hire companies that had already paid the paper a substantial fee for the opportunity to be featured in a quite glamorous page that would look like editorial. I’d created an exciting angle that gave the wedding transport theme a lift by describing it as something racy, as though weddings were a kind of illicit or even illegal activity that might require a getaway car. I’d created subheads along the lines of “Hit and Run” and “Leaving the Scene of the Crime” and I’d written a sentence that ran something like – “Now you’ve gone for broke and entered the wild world of matrimony, fixed those vows in ink and headed back up the aisle, you’re gonna need the kind of car that can get you out of that place quick, baby. Rushdons of Harpenden have a damn fine Ferrari in traffic stopping scarlet that you can really break bad in...” etc etc. It was all very “Tatler”, a magazine I’d worked at before going in for advertising that had trained me in a certain kind of writing style that I could pull out whenever I needed to – a sort of fizzy, fast sentence that went down well across most of the broadsheets for any style piece that they might want to run. So “broke” and “entered”... Yes. These were, that week, particularly familiar words to me.

Alison and I went into the narrow hall, and straightaway, there it was, we heard it, a forsaken little miaow. “See?” said Alison, and again she was right. For that sound wasn’t anything like the miaow from Charlie when I’d picked her up in my arms that morning, as I picked her up every morning after the boys had left for school, just to hold her for a moment, look into her clever little black face, and say hello. Charlie’s miaow was like a one-stop open-your-mouth-wide-and-show-me-all-your-teeth kind of miaow, perfunctory and polite all at once – which is what it was. Miaow: Hello to you as well. Now put me down. This other sort of miaow, that I was hearing was pitiful and insistent and thin, a needy, mournful sound repeating over and over: Miaow. Miaow. Miaow. The sound of a young animal in trouble.

“See?” Alison said again. “Aren’t you glad we’ve come?”

I was. In fact, I was more than glad, I was shockingly relieved. Quite apart from my immediate concern about the kitten’s welfare, I’d seen straight away that there was something very, very wrong here, in my flat. It was just as well Alison had had this idea. As we walked up the stairs what I can only describe as material detritus was piled thick and high around us, boxes, clothes, bags of paper rubbish and books and magazines, shoes and boots strewn everywhere. There was electrical equipment, televisions and stereos. There were packages of unopened clothes, t-shirts and jerseys and trousers, still in the cellophane wrappers in which they’d been delivered or else half unwrapped and left strewn amongst cardboard packaging. Thank goodness I’d listened to my dear friend and come here with her. This flat wasn’t like my flat at all, the flat I’d rented years ago to the responsible and orderly Taylors. It was like the repository of some second hand shop or warehouse or storage unit with everything just dumped any old how; stuff piled all the way up the stairs, and, as we got to it, in the kitchen and in the living room as well, and more so. There, I could see boxes stacked up against the walls, against the windows, like a barricade, like a defense, with more plastic crates sitting on top of one another, big boxes, little boxes, some open, with more brand new electrical items inside – toasters and cd players and radios – and

others with books and gardening implements, some of the boxes closed fast, and unopened even, others split wide and full of what looked like breakables, all wrapped in crumpled newspaper as though someone were trying to pack up and leave. There was barely a foot of space on the floor on which to stand – and all the time, as I was seeing all of this... chaos.... There was the sad insistent mewing of a kitten in distress, coming from... where? From upstairs or inside or under one of the boxes? From behind one of the piles of books or shoes? Who could tell? My stomach lurched. This was no kind of place to leave a pet. This was no kind of place for anyone.

On top of all this, I was having another kind of strange, lurching feeling that came from being back in the flat in the first place. It had been many years, many, many years, since I'd packed away my things and had gone to live with Robert and then married him. Since then, I'd had a lettings company managing the property for me and they took care of every single aspect of running the place. They had introduced the tenants to the property, organised their move in, and for years at a time I would hear nothing at all. Occasionally, the agency told me, they were replacing this, or the Taylors had asked for that, and all I had to do was say "Yes, that seems fine" and the rental went straight into my account every month after they'd deducted their fee. And all those years had passed, and I'd been away, not thinking much about this flat, living my life with my husband and my two boys, yet now here I was, back inside the rooms of what had once been my home. My first-time buy – as the estate agents used to call all the flats like mine back then – one of those endless conversions that run the length and breadth of London, making of an Edwardian or Victorian two-storey terrace house a set of two or three flats, of the grand stucco fronted villas and mansions even more. All those flats, those homes. And all of them pretty much the same when you got into them, and most of them quite a lot like mine, probably, with nice rooms and big windows – only my first-time-buy had that roof terrace. And the roof terrace had changed everything. That "Oh hello" of Alison's, remember? The first day I moved in? And my "hello" back. Miaow. Miaow. As neat as my own little black cat's greeting in the morning.

Only look at it now. The flat was barely recognizable as a place where I had once lived. That sense of stuff everywhere, the amount of that stuff... It meant something sad and awful and desperate, something lingering and out of control was being enacted within those once-lovely rooms. Something was very, very wrong. Alison and I stood side by side, not speaking even. We couldn't speak. And all the time there was the pitiful crying, the mewing, of a young cat inside something, or under something, caught in something? We went through the kitchen and sitting room calling and looking, though we could barely get into these rooms for boxes and boots, army boots, I could see, maybe ten pairs of them in the sitting room and all brand new. What was going on here? I felt sick. In the sitting room, by one of the long windows, was a stairmaster – a stairmaster for goodness' sake –, and next to it a rowing machine... Alison and I couldn't really get into that room at all, into that once pretty little sitting room. It looked like no kind of room I'd ever been in before in my life, no kind of room anyone could live in. It looked like a wreck of a room, an abandoned blown up place, a disaster zone. For a few moments, standing there on the landing I was so stunned by all that I'd seen that I couldn't move, couldn't think

what I was there for, even. Then I heard that little squeaky miaow again and Alison gripped my forearm and there in front of us, sitting on a box, was a very, very young cat. She looked up at us and opened her mouth as though she was going to let out a loud extended yowl but instead gave just a little squeak. “Well, hello” Alison said. Her voice was very low and calm and soothing. “Just look at you” she said, and the kitten closed her eyes and opened them again, quite slowly. “Just look at you” Alison said to her again. “Aren’t you pretty?”

The kitten can’t have been more than four months old. She was pale ginger and black with a white bib, a dainty little tortoiseshell with four long white socks and a black patch over one eye and a ginger nose that gave her a jaunty and clever appearance. She regarded Alison and then me for a moment, that “Oh, hello” had interested her, then turned, bounced up onto another box and in a blink she was gone, hidden – underneath the same box or tucked in between the fixings of one of the machines behind it – a liquidiser or a juicer or magimix. We heard a squeak from somewhere there in the darkness created by that piled-together stuff, then another long pitiful miaow that made me cry out “No! No! No!” and a voice came down from upstairs:

“Who’s there?”

Alison and I looked at each other.

We’d forgotten all about the tenants. Since I’d knocked on the door, turned the key and gone inside I hadn’t given another thought to “Breaking and Entering”. I’d forgotten all about being the landlord, who should have phoned first, via the lettings company, to arrange for an appointment to meet; I’d forgotten all about the rules for that sort of thing. And now, here we were: two people, illegal. One of them the proprietor, who should have more of a feeling of propriety about breaking and entering than anyone. One, a person who lived right next door to the house being broken into and entered, and who would from then on be known forever, by the victims of the crime, no longer as a neighbor but as a criminally oriented person who could not be trusted.

“You WHAT?” Robert would say. “You just let yourself in without knocking?”

“I did knock.”

“And walked right in? It’s not your flat, Mary! You don’t live there! You rent it out! To your tenants, good tenants, who’ve been there for years. You broke into their home, you and Alison, and all because of some notion about some cat. Your behaviour was frankly illegal.” By now he was repeating himself – that phrase: “Frankly illegal”... It would come up in our many discussions about the situation, over and over again. Robert shook his head. “You two” he said.

This conversation, me telling Robert what had happened, describing the many details of the incident and in full, would take place days later, when the whole issue of the kitten had been resolved and her story could be spoken of freely and without fear of consequence.

“It was a rescue mission, remember” Alison said to Robert then. And she tweaked his nose. “You silly” she said. “You would have done the same...”

"I certainly would not have" Robert said, but he was smiling. He and I were both over at Alison's for drinks and she'd made margaritas. She and Robert were both smoking away like it was the eighties, and with an air of great recklessness – he, because he'd given up, she, because she was excited, very, having achieved such a satisfactory outcome, a most happy and successful ending, to the story of a little neglected cat for whom, quite easily, things may not have turned out so well.

"You would have done the same" Alison said again, taking a slug from her margarita and a great big puff from her Marlboro Light.

"The kitten is adorable and needed a new home. That," she said, "was clear."

"And that," I chimed in, "'is what has happened. She now has a new home. A loving lovely home. All's well that end's well. Although..." I looked at Alison. "Well, not quite..."

"Not quite" she agreed, suddenly sober. "Not quite at all..."

Because nothing is quite as simple as an ending, is it? Not quite as straightforward as "event plus discussion, event plus discussion", not quite as clear cut as that – even though people like my sister are keen on such ideas, that everything can be figured out. So it was that when that voice had come down to us from upstairs, the "Who's there?" that Alison and I hadn't been expecting, well, things took a turn then, over the next few minutes and days that followed, took a very different turn, really, events casting a different light on the particular story we'd been involved in so far that changed it – another of those moments I wrote about before when "the register of the narrative shifts."

"You're just a kitten yourself" Alison would say to him, when some weeks had passed and she had got to know him better, the young man who came down the stairs that day when he heard the voices of two strangers in his home. "You need someone to look after you" Alison would say.

For he was no more than a boy, the young man who had been living in my old flat, who had been there for just under a year, he said, first as a guest of the Taylors, and then, when they'd moved away for a period, as a tenant of theirs, living alone pretty much all of the time in preparation for going overseas, to Iraq, though why there, I have no idea, when I thought that war was supposed to be over and all the soldiers had come home. He had been in the flat on his own for all that time and month by month had been gathering around him the things that he thought he would need. Buying things. Collecting things. Accumulating, stockpiling. And yes, Alison had been right, he'd been out of the flat for long stretches, going on military exercises with his unit, going out in the country to barracks somewhere so he could learn to be able to pick up a rifle and a pack and go back into Iraq for some kind of "activity", the newspapers were describing it as, "a period of training and preparation", they said, and know what to do. The Taylors hadn't been there for more than ten months, it turned out, they were away in Brussels for work, and so in that time the stuff in the flat that we'd seen that day, so much of it army stuff – the boxes of boots, uniform supplies and kit – and other stuff that he thought he might need... It had proliferated, accumulated... All those things that he'd been buying and collecting, ordering on-line every day, stuff, more stuff... It had built up around him, all around him... And here he

was, and here was all this stuff – and he was about to leave. The sublet from the Taylors was only good for the year they were in Brussels, his stay was only ever going to be temporary, he said. Because he was in the army and due for deployment; any day now he’d be sent off.

“Don’t worry” he’d said. “The Taylors are still officially your tenants, they’re coming back... Don’t worry about that –”

By then he was down the stairs and we’d all introduced ourselves and taken seats on various boxes. The kitten had come out from where she’d been hiding and was sitting in his lap, purring.

“It’s not the tenancy I’m thinking about right now” I said. “All that’s fine, the flat... No. What I’m worried about...” My voice trailed off, it was an awkward situation. I didn’t have a right to be there, let alone make personal remarks about the circumstances I’d uncovered on my visit, and the kitten, it has to be said, seemed very happy, sitting on his knee. It was hardly my role to intervene. But Alison simply asked him, in a forthright way, “Who is going to look after your kitten if you’re going away?”

The young man, the boy – he was only a boy, his name was Anthony, his mother had named him Anthony, after a saint, as I now know from my mother, when I was describing the whole situation to her, because she’s so familiar with that sort of thing, saints and churches and the Catholic faith and so on, there was that trip to Rome being planned, remember? – gave me a look. I thought for a minute he was going to cry.

“Can I say here that not for one moment did that young man make me feel like a criminal” I said to Robert, when Alison and I were explaining everything to him over cocktails that night. For, not for one moment, after we’d broken into his home and behaved “frankly illegally”, as Robert had described it, after Anthony had called down the stairs “Who’s there?” and I’d replied, trying to make the situation seem quite usual and ordinary, by calling back up the stairs “Don’t worry, it’s just me. The landlady”, “Not for one moment did he make Alison and me feel awkward about our situation” I said.

“He welcomed us being there” Alison said. “It was a relief, you see. That he had people to talk to, that we’d come in and now he had people helping him decide what he was going to do. Up until then he’d been confused, you see. All those things he’d collected, sitting there, pressing in around him...”

And to this extent, writing this down as some kind of a story, I think of my sister Sophie’s dream... Those animals packed in tightly, as she dreamed them, penned in at the forecourt of some grand house or whatever, her feelings in the dream, of both fear and of fearlessness, being enclosed herself with strange creatures and then going in to be amongst them... So my old flat with stuff everywhere, so tightly packed in that I could barely get to the sink in the kitchen for water, after I’d said to Anthony, “Where is your kitten’s water bowl and I can fill it?” and, more firmly, “Where is her food?”... For here was a situation not unlike a dream, maybe: Fear and fearlessness in the midst of confusion; a kitten in the arms of a lonely boy who, in a few days, was due to be shipped abroad to one of these wars of ours that never seem to be over. “A period

of training and preparation” – what does that even mean? When you think of it, the whole thing is like some kind of strange unbelievable story that takes place at night.

“My mother has been coming in to feed her while I’ve been away” Anthony said to us. “And sometimes a friend of my mother’s...”

“But when you’re gone?” Alison pressed him.

“I don’t know” he admitted. He looked down at the kitten’s face and tickled her between her ears.

“You will have to let us help you” I said, gently then.

“Will you?” Anthony turned to Alison. “Can you?”

Alison nodded, mouthed the word “Yes”, in a calming, soothing way. Yes. Yes. Yes.

“And that “yes” was the beginning of a process that lasted for several days” I said to Robert, putting the whole thing together in sequence for him, that night at Alison’s, when we had the margaritas. I told him all about the various conversations and deliberations, first between Alison and everyone at PetsWatch – “They were brilliant, of course, and had loads of advice” said Alison. “They told me we’d done absolutely, absolutely the right thing” – then between Alison and Anthony, obviously, figuring out exactly what they’d do – “I had to take it very slowly” Alison said, “because she was his kitten, naturally, and he loved her” – and then, yes, there were the conversations between Alison and me... Long and detailed discussions that ended, as I explained to Robert, with Alison announcing to me, “Hurrah! Success! We have Happy Ever After!” – when Anthony had by now left for Iraq and “Squeaky” now renamed “Dot” was gifted by Alison, just as, to me, Charlie once had been so gifted, to my sister Sophie who had said that, though she thought she never liked cats, that she’d never thought she wanted one, she could now see that she did, from the moment when Alison gathered her up, this little tortoiseshell of ours, and placed her in my sister’s arms, and my sister looked down at the kitten and then up at Alison and smiled.

“Remember, he was only lonely” Alison reminded me when we were talking about everything again, as a kind of coda, and I was telling her that I was thinking about writing a short story all about what had happened, about Anthony and the flat and even the dream. “I’ve told him about Sophie, of course” Alison said. “I text him, and he texts back. And I’ve been sending him lots of pictures by phone to Baghdad” – and she described them: Dot sleeping in Sophie’s garden, chasing a butterfly. Dot chasing her tail, drinking milk from a dish... “Doing things cats should do” as Alison had said to Robert, as she poured him another margarita, taking a drag from her cigarette. “Not being alone in a flat all day. The pictures comfort Anthony, I think ” she said.

Which is about where I get to by the end of all this: her saying that to Robert, and saying then, just as she was topping up his glass, that line that I have used for the title of this story. That, to her mind, that’s what the whole thing had been about, – the buying of everything, the getting in of all the stuff, the piles of boxes and the mail order and keeping it all close...

"He loved that kitten" Alison said. "He was lonely and the kitten helped him. Of course he didn't want to think about the day he was going to have to leave her. To leave. So he didn't think about it."

"But that's where we came in" I said.

"That's where we came in" Alison answered.

And Sophie, when I called her today, and read her this whole story out loud agreed. "I can see, weirdly, why you started everything with my dream as well", she said. "Of course he needed to gather those things around him and couldn't let any of it go. And of course, too, you both needed to go in there and sort it out. She's right, Alison is right. It is lonely being a young man sent abroad to fight", she said.