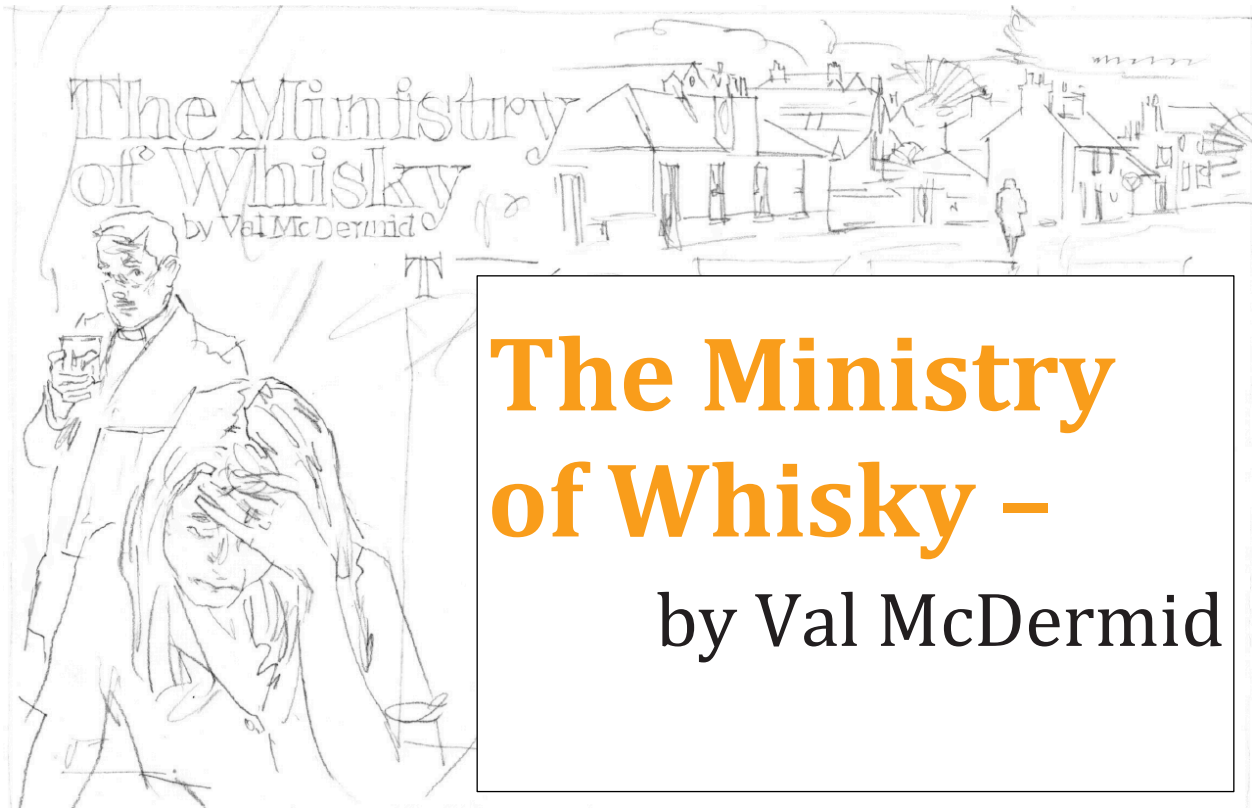

The Ministry of Whisky –

by Val McDermid

There's two things everybody knows about John French the minister – he likes a dram, and his wife won't have a drop in the house. That's why he spends as much time as possible out and about, making himself at home with his parishioners. Even the strictest teetotallers, the dry alcoholics and the three English families understand they have to keep whisky in the house for the minister. Newcomers to the parish who don't know the drill get their first visit seasoned with a heavy-handed version of the Wedding at Cana, complete with knowing winks and exaggerated gestures. If they don't get the message, Mr French mentions in passing to one of the kirk elders that such-and-such-a-body doesn't seem to have much grasp of the rules of hospitality. Then the elder has a quiet word ahead of the minister's next pastoral visit. Trust me, most folks don't have to be told twice.

Don't get me wrong, Mr French is no drunk. I'm born and bred in Inverbiggin and I've never seen him the worse for drink. I know who the village drunks are and the minister isn't one of them. OK, he maybe spends his life a bit blurred round the edges, but you can hardly blame him for that. We all need something to help us deal with life's little disappointments. And God knows, the minister has that to do 24/7. Because I don't think for a minute that Inverbiggin is where he planned to end up.

I've seen folks' wedding photos with Mr French when he first came here. God, but he was handsome. You can still see it now even though he's definitely past his best. Back then, though, he looked like a cross between Robert Redford and the kind of pop star your granny would approve of. A thick mane of reddish blonde hair, square jaw, broad shoulders and a gleaming row of teeth that were a lot closer to perfection than you

generally saw in the backwoods of Stirlingshire back then. The looks have faded, inevitably, though he'd still give most of the men round here a run for their money. What's more important is that he's still a brilliant preacher. At least half his congregation are agnostic – if not downright atheist – but we all still turn up on a Sunday for the pure pleasure of listening to him. It's better than anything you get on the telly, because it's rooted in our community. So imagine what a catch he was back when he started out, when he was good looking and he could preach. Obviously, his natural home would have been some showpiece congregation in Glasgow or Edinburgh. The man has ex-future Moderator of the Church of Scotland written all over him.

Something obviously went badly wrong for him to end up here. Even its best friends would have to admit that Inverbiggin is one of the last stops on the road to nowhere. I don't know what it was that he did in the dim and distant past to blot his copybook, but it can't have been trivial for him to be sent this far into exile. Mind you, back when he arrived here thirty-odd years ago, the Church of Scotland was a lot closer to the Wee Frees than it is these days. So maybe all he did was have a hurl on the kids' swings in the park on a Sunday when they should have been chained up. Whatever. One way or another, he must have really pissed somebody off.

I don't know whether his wife knows the full story behind their exile, but she sure as hell knows she's been banished. There's no way this is her natural habitat either. She should be in some posh part of Glasgow or Edinburgh, hosting wee soirees to raise money for Darfur or Gaza. One time, and one time only, she unbent enough to speak to me at the summer fete when we got stuck together on the tombola. "He's a good man," she said, her eye on Mr French as he glad-handed his way round the stalls. She gave me a look sharp as Jessie Robertson's tongue. "He deserves to be among good people." Her meaning was clear. And I couldn't find it in my heart to disagree with her.

Her obvious bitterness is neutralised by the sweetness of her husband. Mr French might have had high-flying ambitions, but having his dreams trashed hasn't left him resentful or frustrated. It's pretty amazing, really, but in exchange for the whisky, he's given us compassion and comprehension. Fuelled by a succession of drams, he seems to find a way to the heart of what we all need from him. It's not a one-way street either. The more he answers the challenge of meeting our needs, the finer the whisky that makes its way into his glass.

When he first started making his rounds, folk would pour any old rubbish. Crappy bargain blends that provoked instant indigestion, brutal supermarket own brands that ripped the tastebuds from your tongue, evil no-name rotgut provided by somebody's brother-in-law's best pal that made you think you were going blind. But gradually, his Good Samaritan acts spread through the community till there was hardly a household in Inverbiggin that hadn't been touched by them. Our way of saying thank you was to provide better drink. Quality blends, single malts, single barrel vintages. You scratch my back, I'll scratch yours.

See, we all find our own ways to cope with living in Inverbiggin. The minister and his wife aren't the only ones who started out with higher hopes. Maybe it's precisely because his own dreams were dashed that he handles our failures so well. He intervenes when other people would be too scared or too discouraged to get in the middle of things. Kids that are slipping through the cracks at school – John French

grabs the bull by the horns and takes on the teachers as well as the parents. Carers doing stuff for parents and disabled kids that none of us can think about without shuddering – John French goes to bat for them and scores relief and respite.

And then there was that business with Kirsty Black. Everybody knew things were far from right between her and her man. But she'd made her bed and we were all content to let her lie on it. At least if he was taking out his rage on her, William Black was leaving other folk alone.

I must have been about twelve years old when I discovered why William Black was known as BB, a man notorious for his willingness to pick a fight with anybody about anything. "He thinks it stands for Big Bill," my father told me after I'd had the misfortune to witness BB Black smash a man's face to pulp outside the chip shop. "But everybody else in Inverbiggin knows it stands for Bad Bastard." My father was no angel either, but his darkness was more devious. I got the feeling he despised BB as much for his lack of subtlety as for the violence itself.

When Kirsty lost her first baby in the fifth month of her pregnancy, we all knew by the next teatime that it had happened because BB Black had knocked her down and kicked her in the belly. We all knew because Betty McEwan, the midwife, heard it from one of the nurses at the infirmary who apparently said you could see the mark of his boot on her belly. But Kirsty was adamant that she'd fallen getting out of the bath. So that was that. No point in calling in the police or the social services if Kirsty couldn't manage to stick up for herself.

Wee towns like Inverbiggin are supposed to be all about community, all about looking out for each other. But we can turn a blind eye as surely as any block of flats in the big city. We all got extremely good at looking the other way when Kirsty walked by.

All except John French. He saw the bruises, he saw how Kirsty flinched when anybody spoke to her, he saw the awkward way she held herself when her ribs were bruised and cracked. He tried to persuade her to leave her man, but she was too scared. She had no place to go and by then, she had two kids. The minister suggested a refuge, but Kirsty was almost as afraid of being cast adrift among strangers as she was of William Black himself. So then Mr French said he would talk to the Bad Bastard, to put him on notice that somebody was on to him. But Kirsty pleaded with the minister to stay out of it and he eventually gave in to her wishes.

I know all this because it came out at the trial. Kirsty wasn't able to give evidence herself. She was catatonic by that point. But Mr French stood in the witness box and explained to the court that Kirsty had exhibited all the signs of a woman who had been reduced to a zombie-like state by violence and terror. He told them she had been determined to protect her kids. That she'd been in fear for her own life and the lives of her prosecution children that Friday night when he'd come home roaring drunk and she'd picked up the kitchen knife and thrust it up into William Black's soft belly.

You could see the jury loved John French. They'd have taken him home and sat him on the mantelpiece just for the sheer pleasure of listening to him and looking at him. He surfed the courtroom like a man riding on the crest of a wave of righteousness rather than a wave of whisky. The prosecution didn't stand a chance. The jury went for the "not proven" verdict on the culpable homicide charge and Kirsty walked out of the court a

free woman. It took some more work from Mr French, but eventually her lawyers got the kids back from Social Services and she moved back home. Everybody rallied round. I suppose ignoring what had happened to Kirsty kind of guilt-tripped us all into lending a helping hand. Better late than never, the minister pointed out one Sunday when he gave us his particular take on the Good Samaritan story. He was adamant that we should open our hearts and put our faith in God.

But here's the thing about people like John French. Like his wife said, he does deserve to be among good people. Because being ready to think the best of folk leaves you wide open to the ones that can't wait to take advantage. And there's one or two like that in Inverbiggin.

Take me, for example. I've been out of love with my husband for years. He's a coarse, uncouth, ignorant pig. He's never dared to lift a hand to me, but he disgusts me. Worse still, he bores the living daylights out of me. When he walks in a room, he sucks the life out of it. There is one positive thing about my husband, though. His job comes with terrific death-in-service benefits. And then there's that lovely big insurance policy. Frankly, it'll be worth every penny I've spent on rare malts and exclusive single barrel vintages.

Because I've been planting the seeds for a while now. I used to do amateur dramatics years ago. I can play my part well and I can paint a bonny set of bruises on my back and my ribs. Good enough to fool a man whose vocation would never let him examine a woman's injuries too closely. I even got him to take some photos on my mobile phone. If the police examine them later, they won't be able to make out too much detail, which suits me just fine. And after all, there's precedent now. Nobody would dare to doubt John French, not after the publicity Kirsty's case earned him.

Never mind putting my faith in God. Me, I'm putting my faith in John French and the ministry of whisky.

Essential, by Scotland's Makar Jackie Kay

April 20202

Up, doon, the length of our land -
Aberfeldy, Ardnamurchan -
There's uplift, sharing; pass the baton!
A frontline forming, hand to fierce hand. Shopfront
workers, doon the aisle;
New-era queues metres apart.
The chemist's prescription warms the heart.
Delivery folk vanish, ghost a smile.
Volunteers at the local food bank…
Shy half-moon in a clear Scots' sky.
We leave with tins, groceries, goodbyes…
Clap in the gloaming when we say our Thanks.
And the sky greets with stars
And the bold birds sing
As we clink in our links in the Kindness line;
Holding absent hands for Auld Lang Syne.

My Daughter, The Fox

By Jackie Kay

We had a night of it, my daughter and I, with the foxes screaming outside. I had to stroke her fur and hold her close all night. She snuggled up, her wet nose against my neck. Every time they howled, she'd startle and raise her ears. I could feel the pulse of her heart beat on my chest, strong and fast. Strange how eerie the foxes sounded to me; I didn't compare my daughter's noises to theirs. Moonlight came in through our bedroom window; the night outside seemed still and slow, except for the cries of the foxes. It must have been at least three in the morning before we both fell into a deep sleep, her paw resting gently on my shoulder. In my dream I dreamt of being a fox myself, of the two of us running through the forest, our red bushy tails flickering through the dark trees, our noses sniffing rain in the autumn air.

In the morning I sat her in her wooden high chair and she watched me busy myself around the kitchen. I gave her a fresh bowl of water and a raw egg. She cracked the shell herself and slurped the yellow yoke in one gulp. I could tell she was still a little drowsy. She was breathing peacefully and slowly, her little red chest rising and falling. Her eyes literally followed me from counter to counter to cupboard, out into the hall to pick up the post from the raffia mat and back again. I poured her a bowl of muesli and put some fresh blueberries in it. She enjoys that. Nobody tells you how flattering it is, how loved you feel, your child following your every move like that. Her beady eyes watched me open my post as if it was the most interesting thing anybody could do. The post was dull as

usual, a gas bill and junk. I sighed, went to the kitchen bin and threw everything in but the bill. When I turned back around, there she still was, smiling at me, her fur curling around her mouth. Her eyes lit up, fierce with love. When she looked at me from those deep dark eyes of hers, straight at me and through me, I felt more understood than I have ever felt from any look by anybody.

Nobody says much and nothing prepares you. I've often wondered why women don't warn each other properly about the horrors of childbirth. There is something medieval about the pain, the howling, the push-push-pushing. In the birthing room next door, the November night my daughter was born, I heard a woman scream, 'Kill me! Just kill me!' That was just after my waters had broken. An hour later I heard her growl in a deep animal voice, 'Fucking shoot me!' I tried to imagine the midwife's black face. We were sharing her and she was running back and forth between stations. She held my head and said, 'You're in control of this!' But I felt as if my body was exploding. I felt as if I should descend down into the bowels of the earth and scrape and claw. Nothing prepares you for the power of the contractions, how they rip through your body like a tornado or an earthquake. Then the beautiful, spacey peace between contractions where you float and dream away out at sea.

Many of my friends were mothers. I'd asked some, 'Will it hurt?' and they'd all smiled and said, 'A bit.' A bit! Holy Mary Mother of God. I was as surprised as the Jamaican midwife when my daughter the fox came out. I should have known really. Her father was a foxy man, sly and devious and, I found out later, was already seeing two other women

when he got me pregnant, that night under the full moon. On our way up north for that weekend, I saw a dead fox on the hard shoulder. It was lying, curled, and the red of the blood was much darker than the red of the fur. When we made love in the small double bed in Room 2 at the Bed and Breakfast place by Coniston Water, I could still see it, the dead fox at the side of the road. It haunted me all the way through my pregnancy. I knew the minute I was pregnant almost the second the seed had found its way up. I could smell everything differently. I smelt an orange so strongly I almost vomited.

When the little blue mark came, of course it couldn't tell me I was carrying a fox, just that I was pregnant. And even the scans didn't seem to pick anything up, except they couldn't agree whether or not I was carrying a girl or a boy. One hospital person seemed sure I was carrying a son. It all falls into place now of course, because that would have been her tail. Once they told me the heart was beating fine and the baby seemed to be progressing, but that there was something they couldn't pick up. She was born on the stroke of midnight, a midnight baby. When she came out, the stern Jamaican midwife, who had been calm and in control all during the contractions, saying 'Push now, that's it and again,' let out a blood-curdling scream. I thought my baby was dead. But no, midwives don't scream when babies are still-born. They are serious, they whisper. They scream when foxes come out a woman's cunt though, that's for sure. My poor daughter was terrified. I could tell straight away. She gave a sharp bark and I pulled her to my breast and let her suckle.

It's something I've learnt about mothers: when we are loved we are not choosy. I knew she was devoted to me from the start. It was strange; so much of her love was loyalty. I knew that the only thing she shared with her father was red hair. Apart from that, she was mine. I swear I could see my own likeness, in her pointed chin, in her high cheeks, in her black eyes. I'd hold her up in front of me; her front paws framing her red face, and say, 'Who is mummy's girl then?'

I was crying when she was first born. I'd heard that many mothers do that – cry straight from the beginning. Not because she wasn't what I was expecting, I was crying because I felt at peace at last, because I felt loved and even because I felt understood. I didn't get any understanding from the staff at the hospital. They told me I had to leave straight away; the fox was a hazard. It was awful to hear about my daughter being spoken of in this way, as if she hadn't just been born, as if she didn't deserve the same consideration as the others. They were all quaking and shaking like it was the most disgusting thing they had ever seen. She wasn't even given one of those little ankle-bracelet name-tags I'd been so looking forward to keeping all her life. I whispered her name into her alert ear. 'Anya,' I said. 'I'll call you Anya.' It was the name I'd chosen if I had a girl and seemed to suit her perfectly. She was blind when she was born. I knew she couldn't yet see me, but she recognised my voice; she was comforted by my smell. It was a week before her sight came.

They called an ambulance to take me home at three in the morning. It was a clear, crisp winter's night. The driver put on the sirens and raced through the dark streets screaming.

I had to cover my daughter's ears. She has trembled whenever she's heard a siren ever since. When we arrived at my house in the dark, one of the men carried my overnight bag along the path and left it at my wooden front door. 'You'll be all right from here?' he said, peering at my daughter, who was wrapped in her very first baby blanket. 'Fine,' I said, breathing in the fresh night air. I saw him give the driver an odd look, and then they left, driving the ambulance slowly up my street and off. The moon shone still, and the stars sparkled and fizzed in the sky. It wasn't what I'd imagined, arriving home from hospital in the dark, yet still I couldn't contain my excitement, carrying her soft warm shape over my door step and into my home.

When I first placed her gently in the little crib that had been sitting empty for months, I got so much pleasure. Day after endless day, as my big tight round belly got bigger and tighter, I'd stared into that crib hardly able to believe I'd ever have a baby to put in it. And now at last I did, I lay her down and covered her with the baby blanket, then I got into bed myself. I rocked the crib with my foot. I was exhausted, so bone tired, I hardly knew if I really existed or not. Not more than half an hour passed before she started to whine and cry. I brought her into bed with me and she's never been in the crib since. She needs me. Why fight about these things? Life is too short. I know her life will be shorter than mine will. That's the hardest thing about being the mother of a fox. The second hardest thing is not having anyone around who has had the same experience. I would so love to swap notes on the colour of her shit. Sometimes it seems a worrying greenish colour.

I'll never forget the look on my mother's face when she first arrived, with flowers and baby-grows and teddy bears. I'd told her on the phone that the birth had been fine, and that my daughter weighed three pounds, which was true. 'Won't she be needing the incubator, being that small?' she'd asked, worried. 'No,' I'd said. 'They think she's fine.' I hadn't said any more, my mother wasn't good on the phone. I opened the front door and she said, 'Where is she, where is she?' her eyes wild with excitement. My daughter is my mother's first grandchild. I said, 'Ssssh' she's sleeping. 'Just have a wee peek.' I felt convinced that as soon as she saw her, it wouldn't matter and she would love her like I did.

How could anybody not see Anya's beauty? She had lovely dark red fur, thick and vivid, alive. She was white under her throat. At the end of her long bushy tail, she had a perfect white tail-tip. Her tail was practically a third of the length of her body. On her legs were white stockings. She was shy, slightly nervous of strangers, secretive, and highly intelligent. She moved with such haughty grace and elegance that at times she appeared feline. From the minute I gave birth to my daughter the fox, I could see that no other baby could be more beautiful. I hoped my mother would see her the same way.

We tip-toed into my bedroom where Anya was sleeping in her crib for her daytime nap. My mother was already saying 'Awwww,' as she approached the crib. She looked in, went white as a sheet, and then gripped my arm. 'What's going on?' she whispered, her voice just about giving out. 'Is this some kind of a joke?'

It was the same look on people's faces when I took Anya out in her pram. I'd bought a great big Silver Cross pram with a navy hood. I always kept the hood up to keep the sun or the rain out. People could never resist sneaking a look at a baby in a pram. I doubt that many had ever seen daughters like mine before. One old friend, shocked and fumbling for something to say, said 'She looks so like you.' I glowed with pride. 'Do you think so?' I said, squeaking with pleasure. She did look beautiful, my daughter in her Silvercross pram, the white of her blanket against the red of her cheeks. I always made her wear a nappy when I took her out in the pram though she loathed nappies.

It hurt me that her father never came to see her, never took the slightest bit of interest in her. When I told him that on the stroke of midnight, I'd given birth to a baby fox, he actually denied being her father. He thought I was lying, that I'd done something with our real daughter and got Anya in her place. 'I always thought you were off your fucking rocker. This proves it! You're barking! Barking! ' He screamed down the phone. He wouldn't pay a penny towards her keep. I should have had him DNA tested, but I didn't want to put myself through it. Nobody was as sympathetic to me as I thought they might be. It never occurred to me to dump Anya or disown her or pretend she hadn't come from me.

But when the baby-stage passed, everything changed. My daughter didn't like being carried around in the pouch, pushed in the pram or sat in her high chair. She didn't like staying in my one-bedroom ground floor flat in Tottenham either. She was constantly sitting by the front door waiting for me to open it to take her out to Clissold Park, or

Finsbury Park or Downhills Park. But I had to be careful during the day. Once a little child came running up to us with an icecream in her hand, and I stroked the little girl's hair. Anya was so jealous she growled at her and actually bared her teeth.

Soon she didn't want me to be close to anyone else. I had to call friends up before they came around to tell them for god's sake not to hug me in front of Anya or she would go for them. She'd went for my old friend, Adam, the night he raised his arms to embrace me as he came in our front door. Anya rushed straight along the hall and knocked him right over. She had him on his back with her mouth snarling over his face. Adam was so shaken up I had to pour him a malt. He drank it neat and left, I haven't seen or heard of him since.

Friends would use these incidents to argue with me. 'You can't keep her here forever,' they'd say. 'You shouldn't be in a city for a start.'

'You'll have to release her.'

They couldn't imagine how absurd they sounded to me.

London was full of foxes roaming the streets at night. I was always losing sleep listening to the howls and the screams of my daughter's kind. What mother gives her daughter to the wilds? Aileen offered to drive us both to the north of Scotland and release her into

Glen Strathfarrar where she was convinced Anya would be safe and happy - the red deer and the red fox and the red hills.

But I couldn't bring myself to even think of parting with my daughter. At night, it seemed we slept even closer, her fur keeping me warm. She slept now with her head on the pillow, her paw on my shoulder. She liked to get right under the covers with me. It was strange. Part of her wanted to do everything the same way I did: sleep under covers, eat what I ate, go where I went, run when I ran, walk when I walked; and part of her wanted to do everything her way. Eat from whatever she could snatch in the street or in the woods. She was lazy; she never really put herself out to hunt for food. She scavenged what came her way out of a love of scavenging, I think. It certainly wasn't genuine hunger, she was well fed. I had to stop her going through my neighbour's bin for the remains of their Sunday dinner. Things like that would embarrass me more than anything. I didn't mind her eating a worm from our garden, or a beetle. Once she spotted the tiny movement of a wild rabbit's ear twitching in our garden. That was enough for Anya. She chased the rabbit, killed it, brought it back and buried it, saving it for a hungry day. It thrilled me when she was a fox like other foxes, when I could see her origins so clearly. Anya had more in common with a coyote or a grey wolf or a wild dog than she had with me. The day she buried the rabbit was one of the proudest moments in my life.

But I had never had company like her my whole life long. With Anya, I felt like there were two lives now: the one before I had her and the one after, and they seemed barely to connect. I didn't feel like the same person even. I was forty when I had Anya, so I'd

already lived a lot of my life. All sorts of things that had mattered before I had her didn't matter any more. I wasn't so interested in my hair, my weight, clothes. Going out to parties, plays, restaurants, pubs didn't bother me. I didn't feel like I was missing anything. Nor did I feel ambitious anymore. It all seemed stupid wanting to be better than the others in the same ring, shallow, pointless. I called in at work and extended my maternity leave for an extra three months. The thought of the office bored me rigid. It was Anya who held all of my interest.

At home, alone, I'd play my favourite pieces of music to her and dance round the room. I'd play her Mozart's piano concertos, I'd play her Chopin, I'd play Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong. Joni Mitchell was Anya's favourite. I'd hold her close and dance, 'Do you want to dance with me baby, well come on.' Anya's eyes would light up and she'd lick my face. 'All I really, really want our love to do is to bring out the best in me and in you too.' I sang along. I had a high voice and Anya loved it when I sang, especially folk songs. Sometimes I'd sing her to sleep. Other times I'd read her stories. I'd been collecting stories about foxes. My best friend, Aileen, had bought Anya Brer Rabbit. No fox ever came off too well in the tales or stories. 'Oh your kind are a deceptive and devious lot,' I'd say, stroking her puffed out chest and reading her another *Brer Rabbit* tale. She loved her chest being stroked. She'd roll on her back and put both sets of paws in the air.

But then I finally did have to go back to work. I left Anya alone in the house while I sat at my computer answering emails, sipping coffee. When I came home the first time, the

wooden legs of the kitchen chairs were chewed right through; the paint on the kitchen door was striped with claw marks. I had to empty the room of everything that could be damaged, carrying the chairs through to the living room, moving the wooden table, putting my chewed cookery books in the hall. I put newspapers on the floor. I left Anya an old shoe to chew. I knew that no nursery would take her, no childminder. I couldn't bring myself to find a dog-walker: Anya was not a dog! It seemed so unfair. I was left to cope with all the problems completely on my own. I had to use my own resources, my own imagination. I left her an old jumper of mine for the comfort of my smell while I was out working, knowing that it would be chewed and shredded by the time I came home. When I tried to tell my colleagues about Anya's antics, they would clam up and look uncomfortable, exchanging awkward looks with each other when they thought I wasn't looking. It made me angry, lonely.

Sometimes it felt as if there was only Anya and me in the world, nobody else mattered really. On Sundays, I'd take her out to Epping Forest and she'd make me run wild with her, in and out of pine trees, jumping over fallen trees, chasing rabbits. The wind flew through my hair and I felt ecstatically happy. I had to curb the impulse to rip off my clothes and run with Anya naked through the woods. My sense of smell grew stronger over those Sundays. I'd stand and sniff where Anya was sniffing, pointing my head in the same direction. I grew to know when a rabbit was near. I never felt closer to her than out in the forest running. But of course, fit as I was, fast I was, I could never be as fast as Anya. She'd stop and look round for me and come running back.

I don't think anybody has ever taught me more about myself than Anya. Once when she growled at the postman, I smacked her wet nose. I felt awful. But five minutes later she jumped right onto my lap and licked my face all over, desperate to be friends again. There's nothing like forgiveness, it makes you want to weep. I stroked her long, lustrous fur and nuzzled my head against hers and we looked straight into each other's eyes, knowingly, for the longest time. I knew I wasn't able to forgive like Anya could. I just couldn't. I couldn't move on to the next moment like that. I had to go raking over the past. I couldn't forgive Anya's father for denying her, for making promises and breaking them like bones.

One morning I woke up and looked out of the window. It was snowing; soft dreamy flakes of snow whirled and spiralled down to the ground. Already the earth was covered white, and the winter rose bushes had snow clinging to the stems. Everything was covered. I got up and went to get the milk. Paw footprints led up to our door. The foxes had been here again in the night. They were driving me mad. I sensed they wanted to claim Anya as one of their own.

I fetched my daughter her breakfast, some fruit and some chicken. I could tell she wasn't herself. Her eyes looked dull and her ears weren't alert. She gave me a sad look that seemed to last an age. I wasn't sure what she was trying to tell me. She walked with her elegant beauty to the door and hit it twice with her paw. Then she looked at me again, the saddest look you ever saw. Perhaps she'd had enough. Perhaps she wanted to run off with the dog-fox that so often hung and howled around our house.

I couldn't actually imagine my life without her now, that was the problem. They never tell you about that either. How the hardest thing a mother has to do is give her child up, let them go, watch them run. I found myself in the middle of the night looking through Anya's baby photograph album. There she was at only a few months with a bottle of milk in her mouth. There she was out in the garden with me holding her in front of the laburnum tree. There was Anya's sweet red head popping out of the big pram. There was Anya at the back of the garden burying her first rabbit. There was Anya and I looking into each other's eyes, smiling.

Much later that night when we were both in bed, we heard them again; one of the most common sounds in London now, the conversations of the urban fox. Anya got up and stood at my bedroom window. She howled back. Soon four of them were out in the back garden, their bright red fur even more dramatic against the snow. I held my breath in when I looked at them. They looked strange and mysterious, different from Anya. They were stock still, lit up by the moonlight. I stared at them for a long time and they stared back. I walked slowly through to the kitchen in my bare feet. I stood looking at the back door for some minutes. I pulled the top bolt and then the bottom one. I opened the door and I let her out into the night.