

## ***The House on Fortune Street***

By Margot Livesey

The letter came, deceptively, in the kind of envelope a businesslike friend, or his supervisor, might use. It was typed on rather heavy white paper and signed with the pleasing name of Beth Giardini. Sean read the brief paragraphs twice, admiring the mixture of courtesy and menace. Perhaps it had escaped his notice that he was overdrawn by one hundred and twenty-eight pounds? As he doubtless recalled, the bank had waived the penalty last time; this time, regretfully, they must impose their normal fee. Would he kindly telephone to discuss the matter at his earliest convenience?

Sitting in the empty kitchen, surrounded by the evidence of Abigail's hasty departure, Sean understood that he was suffering from what his beloved Keats had called bill pestilence. When he was still living in Oxford, still married, most people he knew, including himself and his wife, were poor but their poverty hadn't seemed to matter. Of course he had yearned after expensive books and sometimes, walking at night, he and Judy had stopped to gaze enviously through the windows of the large lit-up houses, but for the most part his needs had fitted his income. In London, however, living with Abigail, the two had rapidly fallen out of joint, as Sean was only too well aware. This letter was not the result of any reckless extravagance. For six months he had been trying to cut back on photocopying and refusing invitations to the pub.

Now gazing at Abigail's plate, rimmed with crumbs and one glistening fragment of marmalade, he did his best not to dwell on all the steps, large and small, that had brought this letter to his door. Instead he concentrated on the hundred and twenty-eight pounds, not a huge sum but a serious amount to borrow and, realistically, he would need more, at least two hundred, to remain solvent. On the back of the envelope he jotted down dates and numbers: when he might receive his small salary from the theater, when various bills were due. The figures were undeniable, and irreconcilable.

He tried to think of people from whom he might borrow: his brother, one or two Oxford friends, his old friend Tyler. Much longer and more immediately available was the list of those whom he could not ask; his thrifty parents and Abigail jostled for first place. But then his second slice of toast popped up, and so did a name: Valentine. Sean had vowed, after their last book together, not to take on anything else until he had finished his dissertation, but such a vow, made only to the four walls of his study, was clearly irrelevant in the light of this current emergency. At once the figures on the envelope grew a little less daunting. With luck Valentine's agent would be able to find them another project soon. And if he knew he had money coming in, Sean thought, he could phone the bank and arrange a sensible overdraft.

He was reaching for the marmalade when he heard a sound at the front door. Thinking Abigail had forgotten something, he seized the letter, thrust it into the pocket of his jeans, and tried to impersonate a man having a leisurely breakfast. But it was only someone delivering a leaflet, one of the dozens advertising pizza or estate agents that arrived at the house each day. In the silent aftermath Sean couldn't help noticing that his familiar surroundings had taken on a new intensity; the sage-colored walls were more vivid, the stove shone more brightly, the refrigerator purred more insistently, the glasses gleamed. His home here was in danger.

Four days later Sean was sitting on Valentine's sofa, scanning the theater reviews in the newspaper, while across the room Valentine talked to his agent on the phone.

"So, it'll be the usual three payments?" The response elicited brisk note taking. Then Sean heard his name. "Yes, Sean and I are doing this together. He'll keep my nose to the grindstone."

Giving up all pretense of reading, he set aside the paper and studied his friend. In his gray linen shirt and expensive jeans, Valentine looked ready to hold forth, at a moment's notice, on some television arts program. His canary yellow hair had darkened in the last few years, and his features, which when he was an undergraduate used to crowd the middle of his face, had now taken up their proper places between his square chin and his high forehead. Even in June, Sean noticed, he was already mysteriously tanned.

"Excellent," said Valentine. Glancing up from the notebook, he twitched the corners of his mouth. After several more superlatives he hung up. "Well," he said, rubbing his hands, "I think this calls for an early drink."

He refused to say more until he had fetched a beer for Sean, and a gin and tonic for himself. Then he raised his glass and broke the news. His agent, Jane, had called to say that the Belladonna Society, a small but well-funded organization founded soon after the First World War, was commissioning a handbook for euthanasia. "They want to make the case for legalizing euthanasia and to give an overview of the medical stuff. They'll provide most of the material but there'll be some research and we'll have to do interviews with medical personnel, relatives."

As Valentine described the society's proposal, the number of pages, and the pay, Sean felt a cold finger run down his spine. "But isn't this like telling people how to kill themselves?" he said. "Isn't it better not to know certain things?"

"I don't think so." Valentine swirled his gin and tonic. "As I understand it the information is out there anyway. Our job is to present it in the sanest, most lucid form. Just because you give someone a gun," he added, his chin rising fractionally to meet Sean's objections, "doesn't mean they have to use it."

"I think people usually do feel they have to use guns," Sean said. "And I think whoever gave them the gun is partly responsible. Couldn't Jane find us something else?"

Feigning exasperation, or perhaps genuinely annoyed, Valentine popped his eyes, a trick that Sean had been observing for over a decade without being able to decide whether his friend could actually move his eyeballs, or if they bulged anyway and he merely flexed the lids. "Not immediately," he said. "And I don't see how I could ask her to. She worked hard to put this deal together. The society is paying surprisingly well."

Faced with the compelling argument of his finances, not to mention Valentine's, Sean was at a loss. How could he explain that any major decision had always felt to him like a kind of death, an irrevocable closing down of certain possibilities; he had no desire to spend his days in the company of people who really were making a fatal choice. Besides, Valentine had already changed the topic. Had Sean heard that one of their former tutors was doing a television series on utopian communities, beginning with medieval clerics and going all the way to Findhorn?