

Chapter 1

Louise Case glanced up from the screen of her word processor to her window, and beyond, to where the cameo-pink blossom of the apple orchard should have been visible, lilted in the wind. It was a familiar sight, which she had enjoyed many times this spring while working at her desk. She blinked. Her view of the apple blossom and the green hills beyond was completely obscured by the roof of a big blue van. A shiny steel chimney poked rakishly from one side, there were three long rusting scratches along the roof. Louise stared at in incomprehension for long moments. Then, not taking her eyes from it, she reached out her hand to the telephone and dialled a number.

‘Toby Summers please, sociology department,’ she said.

The big blue roof rocked slightly. For an instant she thought hopefully that the van might be about to move, to disappear as suddenly as it had arrived. But it was someone moving inside that made it rock. It remained, obstinately present, in her orchard, blocking her view of the apple blossom.

Toby’s extension rang. Louise rose to her feet and could see more of the van. There was a small door cut in the side, which stood open. There was a stand of two steps leading up to it, planted firmly in the grass where last autumn Louise had hopefully scattered mixed meadow flower seed. A large mongrel dog was tied on a long piece of string to a bracket beside the door. The inside of the van was in shadow. Louise could see nothing of the owner.

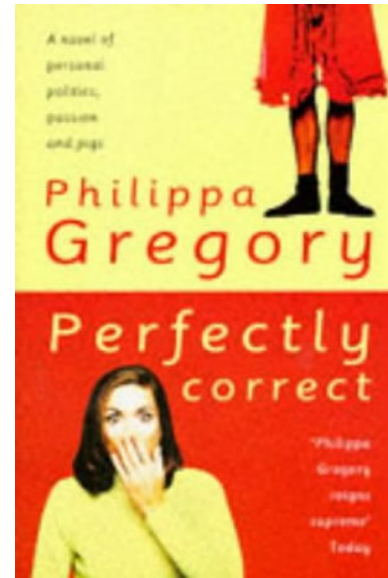
‘Toby Summers.’

‘It’s me.’ Louise had the right of the long-term lover to have her voice recognised at once.

‘Hello,’ Toby said.

‘I’ve got the most extraordinary thing in my orchard. A big blue van. It must have just arrived. I was working in my study and I looked up and there it was.’

Toby chuckled. Since Louise’s impulsive move to the country there had been a number of small crises. Toby preferred to take them as lightly as possible. If Louise was ever in real need both Toby and his wife Miriam would exercise their considerable powers to help her. But they had agreed that the move to the country was so eccentric – so unlike Louise, who had lived in Brighton since her first year at university, through MA and then PhD – that problems were inevitable.



‘Very appropriate,’ he said. ‘Were you working on your Lawrence essay?’

Louise glanced at the screen, blank save for the heading ‘D.H. Lawrence: *The Virgin and the Gypsy*’. ‘Yes.’

‘And now you have your very own gypsy to research,’ Toby said, smiling. The graduate student in his room rose and moved towards the door. Toby shook his head and waved her back into her seat. His affair with Louise had been conducted so discreetly for so many years that it had attained the status of respectability.

‘What should I do?’ Louise asked. ‘Someone can’t just park in the middle of my orchard. It’s private property. He’s trespassing.’

Toby considered. ‘Why don’t you stroll out and ask him politely what he thinks he’s doing? Maybe he’s just pulled of the road for lunch.’;

‘He can’t have lunch in my orchard!’ Louise protested. She realised she sounded peevish and she lightened her tone to match Toby’s detached urbanity. ‘He *looks* rather settled. There’s a dog tied up by the door, and he’s put some steps out.’