

Heads for land, tails for sea

By Sarah Evans

Old North Church, Boston, Fall

‘OK, everybody,’ the Lucy-person says. ‘We’re gonna to take a fifteen minute break. You might want to take a look inside the church. We’ll reconvene here at 4pm.’ Her face slides from its tour-guide hyper-cheer as she turns on her rubber heels, slipping away, her long dress and old-fashioned cap disappearing round a corner. Seeking out a coffee shop, perhaps, or a secluded spot to vape.

The two of us continue gazing at the church, its rectangular redbrick structure, its symmetrically placed round-top windows and unassuming double front door. A plaque summarises the tale we have just been told: lanterns and heroic midnight rides, marking out the start of war.

‘Kinda interesting,’ you say, your rising inflection balanced between comment and question.

‘The church itself, or the story?’ I ask.

You smile, your trademark winsome smile. ‘Both. Don’t you think?’

I shrug. ‘She isn’t bad, is she?’ I feel obliged to show willing. ‘Lucy whatsherface.’

‘Lucy Flucker Knox.’

‘Must get boring, same old spiel every day, having to dress up in that period garb.’

‘Can think of worse jobs.’

‘Like what?’

You laugh. ‘I need to find the john. See you inside?’

And, like Lucy, you are gone.

I take a last look at the church. The Georgian structure blends in with the other redbrick buildings along the road, except for the white-painted wooden spire, tacked on a few years after the initial build and lost to fire a couple of times. The architect was emulating Christopher Wren, so we were informed. *Nothing special*, I think, picturing Oxford, its colleges, chapels and churches on every street, the oldest dating back to Saxon times.

I head for the door; my leg muscles throb. We haven't walked far, but the slow stop and start, the standing round while Lucy runs through her routine is unduly exhausting.

Inside, everything is white: the walls and ceilings; the enclosed pews and colonnades. Splashes of colour appear in draped flags – the Stars and Stripes, the English Cross, the Union Jack – along with the altar's flash of gold. I choose an empty bench at the far side and sit, stretching backwards to ease my aching spine, listening to the tap of footsteps and murmured voices. I inhale the mustiness of old buildings, thinking over the story we've just been told, American patriots outsmarting the slow-witted Brits, sending a crucial signal from the bell tower which rises up behind me. *One if by land, two if by sea*.

I think of land and sea and our basic dilemma.

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Boston Common

Three hours earlier, we headed out into a mizzling autumn afternoon. We took one of the paths crisscrossing Boston Common, the expanse of green surrounded by high rise buildings. 'What d'you know about the Revolution?' you asked.

‘What Revolution?’ I said, thinking French or Russian. ‘Oh. You mean the American War of Independence.’ I tried to conjure the novel or film; nothing sprang to mind. ‘We didn’t cover that in school.’

My knowledge of US history was patchy at best: snippets of Civil War mixed with cowboys wiping out Indians and a sprinkling of slavery, Black Civil Rights and Vietnam.

‘The Freedom Trail should help then,’ you said. The story of a war between our nations told through sixteen historical sites.

Merton College, Oxford, Michaelmas term

A year ago, I wound my way through Merton’s ancient quads, Cotswold stone glowing in end-of-day light. It was the start of the academic year and graduates were invited to Dean’s drinks. I paused on the threshold of the wood-panelled room and picked up a glass of sherry from the proffered tray. An American accent rang out brashly, as if the speaker expected everyone would want to hear his views. I glanced across to the source, taking you in, your American soccer-player good looks, the dressed down style. I noted the left out consonants, dropped ‘r’s, and added ones, your rapid way of speaking as if you had more to say than there was time for. I raised my eyes as I joined up with familiar faces.

Later, midway through my third glass, on the verge of leaving, my former tutor in Old and Middle English intercepted me, ‘Ah, Kate, this is Mason, here on a Scholarship from Boston.’ Quickly the Fellow scuttled away, leaving us one on one. We covered off the obvious background. I’d studied here as an undergraduate and was continuing on with a PhD: gender in sixteenth century English literature.

‘Interesting,’ you said, but you didn’t seem interested as you launched into an overly detailed account of your own research area, the early modernists, including Henry

James, the son of Boston who had chosen to settle in England, from where he wrote tales of exile. Then, without pause for breath, you asked, ‘Are all you English this quiet?’

‘Are all you Americans this noisy?’ I replied, and then, unexpectedly, we both laughed and you slugged back the last of your pale sherry, grimacing at the super-dryness and said, ‘is there anywhere round here we can get a proper drink?’ And I found myself agreeing to show you the oldest pub in Oxford, the seventeenth century rebuild of an establishment that dated back eight hundred years – ‘as long as you’re buying’ – already feeling the throb of attraction, unwanted, but unmistakably there.

Boston Common

We arrived at the appointed place, George Washington and his horse set on a high plinth, surrounded by autumn reds and golds. Our guide was dressed up, ready and waiting. ‘I’m Lucy Flucker Knox,’ she said. ‘At least that’s who I was two hundred and forty years ago. Can I check your tickets.’

‘Who?’ I whispered.

You smiled an ironic smile. ‘Wait and see.’

The wind was decidedly chill, the drizzle thickening. Standing beside you, my hand enclosed by yours, a wave of melancholy shivered through. Time was disappearing and we had three days left before I would be returning home where no amount of Skyping would substitute for the warmth of skin on skin.

‘Well hello there,’ the Lucy-impersonator said. ‘I think that’s everyone I’m expecting.’ About a dozen of us were loosely clustered and she beckoned us in. ‘I hope everyone can hear.’ She started off with practicalities. We would be covering two and a half miles, going back over two and a half centuries of history. ‘Every step tells a story,’ she said, then proceeded to ask, ‘where are youse all from?’

‘Oxford,’ I said, then added, ‘England.’ No one else had come that far.

‘The enemy is in our midst,’ she declared, flashing me a vacuous smile to demonstrate she meant no offense. ‘Let’s have a big *huzzah* for the Patriots!’ The response was decidedly muted. ‘I didn’t hear that,’ she said, cajoling us like children. ‘Let’s try again.’ Everyone but me shouted it out and above the other voices I heard yours, full throated. You winked at me. ‘And *fie* on King George!’ she declared. I have never been pro-monarchy, yet I did not wish to join in.

I stood in my too thin jacket and tried to absorb the flow of information. We were near to where three brigades of Redcoats left to make their fateful trip to Lexington and Concord, where a waiting ragtag army dealt an early blow to Imperial might. The names she bandied around – places and people – meant nothing to me; *Redcoats* conjured images of cheap and cheerful holiday camp employees.

‘I’m going to tell you some of my history, too,’ the Lucy-person said and launched into the story of a seventeen-year-old girl from a wealthy background who met a lowly bookseller. ‘It wasn’t the books that took me to his shop so often.’ She pulled an arch face. ‘I made up my mind that I wanted Harry, and neither reason nor force would change me. My parents tried all they could to prevent us meeting, but I defied them.’ She raised her fist. ‘More of that later,’ she concluded, ‘let’s carry on. Please try to keep up.’

We moved forward, straggling behind her Pied Piper style across the common. ‘She seems to know her stuff?’ you said, keen that I enjoy this. Over the last two weeks, you had thrown yourself into giving me a great time, packing in meet-ups with your family and friends along with visiting childhood and cultural landmarks, all part of your campaign to win me round.

Oxford, Michaelmas term

Tipsy on sherry and real ale, I'd offered you my potted tour of Oxford. Early morning Sunday, we could avoid the worst of the tourist hoards, I said. We started with Christ Church's Gothic grandeur, viewed from its meadow, and continued onto 'the Bod' – the Bodleian – one of Europe's oldest libraries. Next door was Christopher Wren's Sheldonian Theatre where I'd taken my degree a year earlier, of neo-Classical design with its masterpiece of a domed roof, dating back to the mid sixteen-hundreds. And then the 'Bridge of Sighs', linking two sides of a college across a small road. We headed north, past the pubs where Hardy wrote Jude and Tolkien gossiped with CS Lewis. Cutting off west into the narrow lanes of Jericho, I tested out my anti-American jokes. 'So there was this American. And he stopped someone on Broad Street to ask, *which way is it to the University?*' I paused.

'So?' you dutifully asked.

'*Everywhere.*'

You half-laughed at my punch-line, and I wondered if you'd got the joke, or whether the cliché was correct and Americans have no sense of humour. I continued on, 'then there's the one about the American who asks, *how do I get to Oxford's oldest historical site?*'

'Well?' you said, playing along.

'Here. Port Meadow.' We had reached the edges of the flood plain, cattle grazing peaceably, the river Cherwell meandering through and dreaming spires spiking up through trees on the horizon. 'Bronze age people buried their dead here. It's been common land for over a thousand years and is mentioned in the Domesday Book.'

You smiled your all-American smile, flashing those perfectly straightened white teeth. 'The *what* book?'

I pulled a wide-mouthed face of mock-amazement, at just how ignorant you were.

Massachusetts State House and Park Street Church, Boston

The trail was marked out by rows of red bricks. We followed it to the edge of the green where we stopped in front of a large building with colonnades and a copper coated dome. We heard more about this long ago war. Then as distraction from too many worthy facts, our guide told us about the wood carving which hung inside. ‘I have a picture on my phone,’ she said, passing round an image of the five foot sacred cod, telling us about its three incarnations: the first burned in a fire; the second lost during the Revolution; the third ‘codnapped’ by pranksters from Harvard for three days. You laughed with gusto and squeezed my hand and I thought about you throwing yourself into Oxford’s quirky rituals, from racing tortoises, to walking backwards round the quad in full academic dress at one am; you loved all that stuff much more than I did.

We were on the move again. Lucy walked briskly, her long skirt tangling round her ankles and riding up to reveal her lime-green trainers. We could have walked alongside her and asked questions, or chatted to fellow tourists. Instead, we remained sunk in our world for two, chitchatting about trivialities, not talking, not here, not yet, about the only thing that mattered.

Lucy came to a stop in front of a church. ‘I think we still have everyone,’ she said. ‘So behind me is Park Street Church, a building that the novelist Henry James called *the most interesting mass of bricks and mortar in America*.’ We exchanged a smile at the reference to the author whose works you spent so much time dissecting. The church was another Christopher Wren rip-off and I thought, but didn’t say, that this kind of spired church was ten a penny in England.

Our guide continued on with Lucy’s story. ‘Well I ignored my parents’ warnings of poverty and ruin; I followed my heart.’ Cue the hand across her chest. ‘I married Henry Knox on June 16, 1774, just before my eighteenth birthday. Lord, was my father

displeased at my marrying a man in trade.’ She raised her eyes to heaven then levelled them to look directly at me. ‘But I had no doubts that I was making the right choice for my future happiness.’

Merton Hall, Oxford, Michaelmas term

We kept bumping into one another. The kitchen of our shared accommodation. The college library and the faculty one. Informal dinner in hall. We took to spinning out our incidental conversation. There seemed no harm in the buzz of a flirtation which very clearly was going nowhere. I took you on further excursions, moving on from the tourist highlights to the tucked away corners. We ate out in edge-of-town ethnic cafes, bought steaming pies from the market, watched films at the art-house cinema and went along to drama-soc plays.

We both signed up for Christmas Formal Hall. I moaned about the need to wear our academic gowns with their floppy sleeves; you rather liked yours. We headed to the thirteenth century hall, entering through the oak door, which had once welcomed Queen Elizabeth I. Scanning round to spot our mutual friends, we absorbed the stained-glass arched windows, the vaulted ceiling and waxed wooden floor, the portraits of previous Masters looking sternly down. ‘All very Harry Potter,’ you said. We made our way towards one of the long tables in dark wood with matching benches. High Table sat at right angles at the far end and a student stood for the back and forth of Latin Grace with one of the Fellows. We mingled with a vibrant crowd, eating, drinking and talking our way through three waiter-served courses. Then, after heavy pudding with jugs of brandy sauce, the two of us lingered on, finishing the dregs of wine.

Afterwards, we slipped our way along the cobbled lanes, cut through the High Street traffic to the pedestrian quiet of Catte Street, passing by the Bod, weaving our way

towards our modern accommodation block. The night was cold and clear, a full moon casting silver light over the centuries old stone. Our arms brushed together. Our footsteps slowed as you pointed out Orion's belt shining bright in the blackness, providing the excuse to pause, then turn and reach for a tentative first kiss, caught up in the wine-fuelled warmth of the moment, not stopping to think things through.

Granary Burying Ground and King's Chapel, Boston

Behind Park Street Church, we stopped at the Granary Burying Ground with its Infant's Tomb, where hundreds of children were interred. 'Cheerful stuff,' I whispered in an aside. Lucy pointed out the central obelisk that marked the grave of Benjamin Franklin's parents. I knew the name, of course I did, could not place with any certainty his dates or achievements. I thought how my references to Thatcher left you pretty blank, never mind Atlee, Churchill, and all the various Kings and Queens. How we watched different TV programmes in our youths and could not understand each other's education, health or political systems. It felt impossible to weigh the importance of those things against the language that we did share. The language of innermost confidences. The language of laughter and of touch.

We were marched on towards another church, King's Chapel, intended to be the equal of any church in England, though the steeple was never built. 'The finest example of Georgian church architecture in North America,' Lucy claimed, explaining how the exterior columns appeared to be stone, but if we looked closely we could see that they were painted wood, a cost-saving tromp l'oeil. Everything seemed bigger, better, more authentic at home.

Then we were back to Lucy's story. 'It was the spring of 1775, Boston was guarded by the British Army as fiercely as any prison, but Henry was determined to

escape and join the Revolutionary forces. I wasn't going to be left behind! I rode beside him late one night with his sword sewn inside my cape.' Lucy acted out tucking a sword under her arm. I pictured a woman several years younger than myself, her fear battling with her courage as she saddled up her horse, contending with impractical clothing and the heavy awkwardness of a sword, riding out into the dark unknown, this softly raised girl, knowing there was no return, determined to do anything to be with the man she loved.

Oxford, Michaelmas and Hilary terms

After that first kiss, we met in the cold light of a December morning. We went for a hangover cure walk round Port Meadow, the ground frozen, each blade of grass covered in a layer of white frost, our breath misting and mingling in the air. We discussed things sensibly. We'd given in to the impulse of the here and now, but we needed to be fully aware of the longer term complications. The holidays loomed and we would have some time apart to reflect. I was visiting my parents. It was too far for you to fly back, but you had American friends in London. An *Orphan Christmas*, you called it.

Both of us agreed that it was important to keep things light, not get too involved. We were perched at the top of the slide, but determined to proceed cautiously.

The festive season passed in a blur. We texted one another several times a day, we sent emails, talked and Skyped. Our kiss seemed to have unlocked a whole new world of things to say.

Back in Oxford, we found so much to do and see and talk about. It was easy to enjoy the present, to not think ahead, to forget that you were packing in as much as you could, making the most of your year abroad, before you would be returning home.

King's Chapel Burying Ground, Benjamin Franklin Statue, Old Corner Book Store,

Boston

We were directed to a second burial ground and encouraged to look out for particular gravestones, names you recognised, which meant little to me.

I was not normally prone to morbidity, but the weather, the creeping ache in my limbs, our situation, all these weighed me down. I thought how this was where we all end. How in the long run, the decisions we make do not matter. How all that mattered was that I tried to live my life as fully as I could, without regret. I could not see into possible futures. No red-bricked line pointed the way.

Then we were onto more walking, keeping up and not losing sight of Lucy's flying heels. We paused in front of a statue of Franklin where Lucy provided a résumé: one of America's greatest minds; one of its most notable dropouts. Neither of us intended to drop out of our chosen studies and that meant a separation of at least a year. Would time apart bring resolution? Or more indecision?

Onwards. Another pause. The Old Corner Book Store seemed to be of interest mainly for the memorial which lay across the street; I had travelled over three thousand miles to be lectured on the Irish Famine. You looked down with your wry smile and Lucy's gaze also seemed directed at me, my nationality under scrutiny again, as she talked about how a wind-born disease, brought to Europe on American ships, devastated the Irish potato crop and how British landlords watched and did nothing. 'Over a million people died of starvation and a million more immigrated to the United States,' she told us. 'With the majority of them settling here. Which is why Boston boasts the largest expatriate Irish population in the world.'

Plenty of people from my corner of the world have come here before me; they have settled and thrived. But no reason for things not to work the other way.

‘Ours was a happy marriage.’ Lucy provided the next instalment of her tale. She had numerous children, but this never stopped her being at her husband’s side, joining army camps through winter ceasefires, leaving again come spring. Henry was appointed Chief of Artillery and later rose to Major General. ‘From Bunker Hill to Yorktown, I remained as close to my husband as possible.’

I thought how basic the conditions likely were, with little by way of sanitation, warmth, or comfort, imagining the churn of mud, the stench of closely packed people and horses. Of malnourished soldiers and the spread of disease. And of being with the one man who mattered and that overriding everything else.

Magdalen Bridge, Oxford, May Morning

May morning and you were insistent that we should head for Magdalen College. You’d learned to pronounce it correctly by now: *Maudlin*. I’d told you about the tradition dating back to the days of Henry VII. ‘The fifteenth century,’ I added, because it was unlikely that you’d understand the timeline for dead English kings. I’d never done this before; I preferred my sleep.

You set your alarm for 4am. Somehow, we stayed up late talking, and by the time we went to bed the prospect of the early awakening kept me from proper sleep. I curled into you, my head nestling between your shoulder and jaw, mind drifting, reality merging with dream, your arms encompassing me, and I longed to remain within this bubble of time, never having to move beyond this warmth and softness.

The shrill of the alarm sliced through. You were out of bed before I could persuade you otherwise. ‘Come on. We’re awake now anyway.’

I didn’t feel awake.

We pulled on clothes, headed out into the dark, joining the slow stream of people

going the same way.

An hour still to go, but already others had gathered. You put your arm around me and pulled me close as I thought I would die of fatigue and cold. I pondered out loud why the hell anyone would do this and you just laughed. ‘The full Oxford experience,’ you said and I responded, irritably, ‘is that what I am too?’ You didn’t grace me with a reply.

High-spirited chatter filled the air. The bell began to mark out six o’clock and I caught movement through the arches at the top of the crenelated tower. ‘Shhh,’ several people said at once and the talking slowed then stopped, everyone craning their necks and straining their ears. Your fingers tightened around mine. A choir sang out, voices pure and strong, some religious song celebrating the start of summer and, despite everything, I found myself drawn inside the arc of music, poignant and joyous both. A spoken prayer followed and then the endless ringing of bells. The crowd dispersed and I felt the tug of let-down – ‘what was the point of that?’ – but you were in buoyant mood, accepting the custom for what it was, a further step in your Oxford journey.

We made our way back along the High Street, stopping to watch the Morris dancers, the sheer energy to them, then breakfasted in a hotel, before returning to your room and lying down together, burrowing into each other, the pale light of early summer filtering through the thin curtains. Time passed in dozing, touching, talking, touching. In the sleepy, post-sex haze, you said, ‘I love you,’ the first time either of us had said such a thing, and I felt a rush of happiness which was swiftly overcome by sorrow, the contradiction biting hard: the happier I felt, the more there was to lose. We were celebrating the start of summer; we had three months left.

Old South Meeting House, Boston

Onwards. On and on. I’d worn the wrong shoes and my legs were killing me.

‘And behind me is the Old South Meeting House, setting the stage for some of the most dramatic events leading up to the American Revolution,’ so Lucy told us, her histrionic manner getting on my nerves. I tried to absorb the names, places, times, to fix them in my mind. I wondered how long it would take before an outsider could feel at ease amidst this alien heritage. ‘The Patriots were determined that the ship-full of tea would not be unloaded. A secret signal was given and Sons of Liberty disguised as Mohawk Indians marched down to Griffin’s Wharf and dumped three hundred and forty crates of tea into the harbour.’

I tried to conjure the heart-pumping stealth, the smell of fish and brine, the terror of discovery, the sheer effort to lifting all those crates, the pulse of triumph at this act of defiant destruction, the conviction which made the risk worthwhile.

‘And as I guess many of you know,’ Lucy concluded, ‘this became known as the Boston Tea Party.’

A transatlantic squabble over the tax payable on tea: it seemed too slight a thing to trigger the full horrors of a bloody war, and although Lucy was focussing on brave and daring deeds, like all wars this one had its share of rape and plunder and atrocity – even I knew that – as two armies battled over sovereignty to land that rightly belonged to neither side.

‘Americans don’t even like tea,’ I said.

‘Exactly,’ you replied, ‘this is why.’

Then Lucy was continuing on, her own tale of love and derring-do. ‘I had a letter from my Harry,’ she said, fluttering her eyes in mimicked coyness. ‘He says he longs to fly through the air to be with me. Though with his portly form he’d look more like a tennis ball than a bird.’

The flight over here took eight hours. It took much longer when airport transport and hanging round were factored in. It was far from cheap. Flying provided only a

fleeting solution.

Oxford, Trinity term

It was too late to dam the flood of feelings, simpler to give in, to live the here and now, to pack in as much as we could into our remaining time. We strolled the banks of the Cherwell, stopping at riverside pubs. I taught you the rules of croquet and we played vicious games on college lawns. Hiring a punt, I demonstrated as best I could the whole impractical art of pushing a boat along via a pole, before handing over and sitting back to watch your lithe beauty as you tried to master the unwieldiness, both of us laughing as you repeatedly steered us into the bank or other boats. We walked round the University Parks, seeking the shade of trees which were as old as many of the buildings. We took the bus out to Bleinheim Palace and the train to Bath and London.

We bought tickets for a Summer Ball and I found an ankle-length dress in a charity shop on Little Clarendon Street – *little Trendy Street* – and for a single night only played the part of a long-dressed vision of femininity. We drank, ate and laughed, listened to jazz and danced, and in the bedraggled dawn light, under a blaze of fireworks, you kissed me softly. ‘I don’t want to lose you,’ you said.

Old State House, Site of the Boston Massacre and Faneuil Hall, Boston

The Old State House was more of the same and the Boston Massacre sounded overstated. Five lives cut unnecessarily short: awful obviously, but hardly what I’d have called a massacre in this country where mass shootings were all too frequent. I thought how I was so very grateful to live in the time and place I did and that, despite its shortcomings, Britain seemed a better place than most. How could I live in a country where dangerous

levels of gun ownership were enshrined by rights drawn up in such a far off time and circumstance, and where the obvious step of disarming the vast population just wasn't going to happen? Add in no NHS, high imprisonment rates, poor social safety nets, the insidious legacy of racism, little by way of employment rights, and a terrifying joke of a current president. I knew we had our own problems, they just didn't seem on the same scale. *Fly over to be with me*, I longed to whisper. Whose love was stronger? Whose roots deeper? Whose immigration rules easier to navigate? Which culture easier to adapt to? None of these questions had easy answers and both of us had different points of view.

By the time we reached Faneuil Hall moroseness had taken hold and I was set to quit. 'We'll be taking a break at the next site,' Lucy reassured us. Another red-brick building lay ahead, complete with draping flag. More stories about protests and getting het up about tax, providing an excuse for a repeat of the *huzzah* and *fie* stuff. Lucy pointed out the weathervane shaped as a grasshopper, perched incongruously on top. 'It was used as a way to spot spies during the War of 1812,' she explained, a later transatlantic spat I knew nothing about. Anyone who didn't know what lay on top of Faneuil Hall invited suspicion. 'So now you know,' you said. Lucy continued on with the present day. Twice a month, four hundred people took the Oath of Allegiance here and were sworn in as new citizens. I tried to imagine being amongst them, tried to picture my enthusiastic singing of a foreign anthem. I didn't even sing my own anthem. *God save the Queen*: two things I didn't believe in within the first four words. You always found my muteness strange. We found so many things strange about one another, and over the last year it had formed part of the fascination. Now, the novelty had worn thin. Were we one another's once-in-a-lifetime chance of love and happiness, or might we better cutting our losses and trusting we would, in time, find someone new, someone easier to comprehend?

How could we possibly know?

'I was essentially homeless throughout the war.' Lucy's story continued. 'When I

think of the fine houses in which I was raised.’ She rolled her eyes exaggeratedly. ‘I stayed many dreary months with friends or in strange rented lodgings, but it was worth it for the visits I snatched with my Harry.’

I thought of being not so much homeless as dispossessed.

Oxford, summer

In the heat of July, we could no longer postpone the question of how and where we saw our future.

‘I don’t want to live in America,’ I said and it sounded so stark. It was only now that we discovered the full depth to our transatlantic ill-feeling. To you, England was a quaint interlude, great to spend a year in, but now, tourist sights ticked off, time to return home. The US was the land of opportunity. You were sure I could find a job, a short term academic posting in the first place and longer term, well marriage would solve the visa problem. It wasn’t exactly a proposal; it came caveated by a vast *if*. *If* things worked out. You really did seem to believe that America was the greatest, not in the jargonistic way of presidential candidates, but fundamentally. The greatest in terms of opportunity and standard of living. We began to sense the depths to which we had not really understood each other.

Your flight back to Boston left at the end of the month. I went with you to Heathrow to see you off. You were looking forward to seeing family and friends, of course you were, but those feelings were overwhelmed by sadness.

We clung on tightly and it seemed impossible we could ever let go.

‘Come and visit,’ you said. ‘Come soon.’

An October conference came up in New York; I’d combine it with a visit, taking as much time off as I could, allowing me to view America firsthand, to see you on your

home turf. Perhaps it would help signal the way.

Old North Church, Boston

We followed the cold, damp streets and you slung an arm round my shoulder. Both of us were quiet, out of synch with the happy babble of the group and Lucy's chirpy commentary. I wondered how she could remain so determinedly upbeat, reeling out the same spiel time after time, never able to have an off-day.

We reached Old North Church: one of the highlights; where it all started. I thought about that chance meeting over sherry and how easily things could have taken another path.

Lucy got going again. 'We have here the oldest standing church in Boston, dating back to 1723. At 191 feet, the steeple is the tallest in Boston and its prominence led to it playing a key role in the Revolution as immortalized in Longfellow's poem. *The Midnight Ride of Paul Revere.*'

I had never heard of Revere or of Longfellow's poem. Lucy drew the drama out, her hands sketching images in the air, two men climbing steep stairs and sheer ladders up eight stories, carrying two lanterns to the very top from where the lights were hung for a few dangerous moments, a signal cast out into the dark. *Two if by sea.* The British were advancing by boat across the Charles River.

'But that isn't the only story associated with this church,' Lucy continued. *Pitcairn.* A Scottish marine officer who died leading his troops in the opening stages of the war. 'His body was buried beneath Old North. Later the body should have been sent home and reinterred in Westminster Abbey. There was a mix-up and another corpse was sent instead. So his body remains here.'

A forever stranger in a foreign land.

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I sit amidst the white hush, the plaque dedicated to Pitcairn at my side. The stiffness in my legs eases as I wait for you, my ears alert to the creaking open of the door. I hear the easiness in your voice as you exchange pleasantries with someone else on the tour, agreeing as to how fine the church is, how much you are enjoying the trail. Your footsteps follow and I feel the warmth as you slip in beside me, the line of your thigh pressed to mine. ‘What d’you think?’ you ask.

‘About the church?’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘It’s OK,’ I say.

‘Not quite Oxford.’ I hear the smile in your voice.

‘No.’

Your thumb caresses my palm. I wait for you ask, *what d’you think about us?* You won’t do, not here; we agreed that we would suspend that conversation until the end of the holiday. It is unlikely that we’ll reach a firm conclusion. We will agree to keep in touch and see how things go and hope that eventually the answer will emerge, a lantern will shine through the fog of indecision. I think of Lucy and of the history of a war, and how our tale does not belong to the same kind of story.

That we have doubts does not make our love less real. That we analyse and think through consequences does not mean our feelings are less profound. The architecture of other people’s ardour is not a blueprint for our own. These are the people we are, the times we live in, the dilemma we face. Last night you joked that we could toss a coin.

Heads for your vast expanse of land; tails for my sea-bounded isle.

But neither of us are gamblers. There will be no foolhardy midnight rides, no

impulsive marriage, no abandoning everything for passion, no patriotic do-or-die. We will measure our love by the pain of separation, by the force of longing in the night, and balance it against the weight of sacrifice, making a calculation whose fallout will unfold over the years, for happier or for worse. Our future direction remains unknown, and I try to exist within this whitewashed present, the shelter of the church, the haven of your hand, waiting for the moment when we must go back outside and rejoin the trail, every step telling its story.