

JO

I'll tell you a story.

It's what I do. Though the words would once have stuck in my disbelieving throat.

Long ago, you and I might have sat before a fire, haunch to haunch, the flames licking red and gold as my words meandered into your ears. Today, now, I tap each word on a plastic keyboard and watch the sentences flicker on the screen:

Long ago, I'd tell you a fairy tale - about an Ice Queen who melted, a Princess who kissed her Prince awake, a Magician who changed gold into lead. Today, now, I'll tell you a story about the so-called real world: about middle age and makeovers, counselling and cutting rooms; about my valiant friend Clara and how she found her heart; about me and how I lost mine.

There is a fire. He lit it for me earlier. It shifts and sighs and crackles, restless in its city grate, and my fingers tap-tap-tap and the clock wheezes and chimes and I hear his soft footsteps on the stairs.

And I'll tell you how I came to find my beloved. In time.

'Jo?' he says, from behind the study door. His voice is gravel and honey. Like his kisses, it rasps and soothes. He told his

own stories, once. Long ago and in a different language. It grieves me that he is silent now. Seven months, three weeks and a day I've lived in this house. Ten long years ago, he locked the door to the basement room and left his soul inside.

'Yes, my love?'

We hold our breaths. Oh, I could open the door and pull him in. Pull him down on to the faded Chinese rug before the fire or on to the old daybed with the grumbling springs and we could lose ourselves in one another, as we do. Only a recollection stops me, from our beginning: about passages not taken, doors left unopened and rose gardens never explored.

There's a clumsy, discordant sound, of wood cannoning against wall, and then his footsteps on the basement stairs, the rattle and click of an unaccustomed key as a door opens, creaking, and closes.

I breathe, and bend again to the keyboard.

I'll tell you a story of weakness (mine), and pride (Clara's), and stubbornness (his). I'll write of a time when Clara and I were half the women we are now, and of our search for what was missing.

Of how we came into our own.

And when the story's finished, I'll be able to say: I made this.

But the story will say: Ah, but I was the making of you all.

Far away, almost inaudible, the first, hesitant string of chords, and his hoarse voice, singing...