## Mrs Peacock and the Broad Bean Baby

November has turned our house as cold as Sunday mass. A sharp, spiteful chill tugs at my ears and has stolen the end of my nose. I am wearing both my jumpers and an Aston Villa bobble hat as I sit at the dining table, fiddling with our battered Cluedo set. When I push the little silver dagger against the tip of my finger I feel nothing.

I shiver. And wriggle. There is a whiff of last night’s bonfire on my clothes but the memory of the flames doesn’t make me any the warmer. Still, Dad is going to put radiators in the downstairs rooms next year - ‘all being well’.

They say that a lot at the moment, Mum and Dad. It is like an ‘amen’ to our every prayer. We will go away at Whitsun, ‘all being well’, but the caravan has not been booked yet. Our rusting, clapped-out car will be swapped for a slightly newer one, ‘all being well’, but for now we rely on Hail Marys to start it as the mornings get chillier. The central heating will come. One day. For now Dad has cut down another tree to make the coal pile last longer and Mum’s lips are tight.

Next year… all being well.

‘What does it mean, though?’ I ask my brother. ‘All being well?’

‘No more strikes,’ he says, rubbing his fingers together, eyes on his essay. He has short spiky hair. With the dark red table cloth wrapped around him he looks like one of our toy roman soldiers.

‘He’s not on strike, he’s laid off.’ I repeat what Mum always says. My brother shrugs.

Dad has been sent home a lot this year; his car factory runs out of parts when the one in Birmingham comes out on strike. A man called Red Robbo says ‘stop’ and everyone has to do what he says. You’d think Dad would be pleased to stay at home but on the days he’s not working he still gets up early and does jobs around the house. He mends our bikes, spends hours on the car and tends the vegetable garden. We will have a lot of cabbage this year. And sprouts. I hate sprouts.

I put down the dagger and move Mrs Peacock off her start square so she can chat with Professor Plum in the Lounge. Of all the rooms in our house the lounge is the coldest, so we don’t use it much, except at Christmas. We have a room called the sitting room, where the fire is lit every day, and this one, the dining room, where there is a fire for Sunday lunch. Dad builds it up just as Mum is putting the hot food on plates and calling everyone to wash their hands ‘quickly now’. Sometimes our food is nearly cold by the time Dad sits on his special wooden armchair but the argument that follows has to stop while we say Grace. The gravy congeals on my sprouts and potatoes and I don’t feel at all like thanking God for giving them to me. For other meals we squash around the heavy blue formica table in the kitchen, where the cooker keeps us warm. I am the youngest so I sit in the middle, clashing elbows on both sides.

In the Cluedo house there is no Sitting Room. It has a Kitchen and a Dining Room and a Lounge - sometimes the murder is done in there - but there is no Sitting Room. When I ask my brother where it is he doesn’t know.

‘Perhaps it’s upstairs with the bedrooms’, he suggests.

But that doesn’t seem right to me. Why go upstairs to watch television when there are so many empty rooms on the board? Why is the Library in the house instead of on the corner of the road? And what is a Billiards Room?

‘Go away’, says my brother. ‘I don’t want to play with you.’

I roll the dice and leave, counting the squares between rooms. One, two, three, four… Today I will be Mrs Peacock. She’s my favourite. She has a blue dress like Our Lady and silver-grey hair like my teacher.