‘Why exactly are you driving to Shetland, anyway?’ she asked.
And so I began telling her about Trevor, and Guest Toothbrushes, and Lindsay Ashworth, I told her about Lindsay’s ‘We Reach Furthest’ campaign, and the two salesmen all setting off in different directions for the extreme points of the United Kingdom, and the two prizes we were supposed to be competing for. And then I got sidetracked and told her about my detour to Lichfield to see my father’s flat, how eerie and desolate it had felt; about Miss Erith, and her fascinating stories, and her sadness at the passing of the old ways of life; her weird, solemn, almost inexpressible gratitude when I had made her a gift of one of my toothbrushes. I told Alison, too, about the bin liner full of postcards from my father’s mysterious friend Roger, which was now in the boot of my car, and the blue ring binder full of my father’s poems and other bits of writing. Then I told her about driving on from Lichfield and stopping in Kendal to see Lucy and Caroline, and how I’d planned to get the ferry from Aberdeen the next day, but Mr and Mrs Byrne had persuaded me to come to Edinburgh instead.

‘Well, Max,’ she said, holding my gaze for a few moments. ‘I’m glad you came, whatever the reason. It’s been too long since we saw each other—even if it’s only happened because my parents steamrollered us into it.’

I smiled back, uncertain where this was leading. Rather than responding to everything I had just told her about my journey, it felt as though Alison was getting ready to move the conversation into a different gear altogether; but then she seemed to think better of it. She arranged her knife and fork neatly on her plate and said:

‘We’re a strange generation, aren’t we?’

‘How do you mean?’

‘I mean that we’ve never really grown up. We’re still tied to our parents in a way that would have seemed inconceivable to people born in the 1930s or 1940s. I’m fifty, now, for God’s sake, and I still feel that I have to ask my mother’s… permission, half the time, just to live my life the way that I want to. Somehow I still haven’t managed to get out from under my parents’ shadow. Do you feel the same?’

I nodded, and Alison went on:

‘Just the other day I was listening to a programme on the radio. It was about the Young British Artists. They’d got three or four of them together and they were all reminiscing about the first shows they’d done together—those first shows at the Saatchi Gallery, back in the late nineties. And not only did none of them have anything interesting to say about their own work, but the main thing they talked about—apart from the fact that they’d all been shagging each other—was how “shocking” it had been, and how worried they were about what their parents were going to say when they saw it. “What did your mum say when she saw that painting?” one of them kept being asked. And I thought, you know, maybe I’m wrong, but I’m sure that when Picasso painted Guernica, with its graphic depictions of the horrors of modern warfare, the main thing going through his mind wasn’t what his mum was going to say when she saw it. I kind of suspect that he’d gone beyond that some time ago.’

‘Yes—I’ve been thinking the same thing,’ I said, eagerly. ‘Take Donald Crowhurst: he already had four kids when he set out to sail around the world, even though he was only thirty-six. You’re right, people were so… so grown-up in those days.’

‘What days?’ Alison asked; and I realized, of course, that she had no idea who Donald Crowhurst was.

Perhaps it was a bad idea to start telling her the story.