

instructed, and there she was – who needs Skype? I could see her through her voice, her form solidifying in front of me as she talked.

She was a big woman, tallish and weighing around twenty stone. Surgical stockings, flat sandals, a Crimplene dress and a nylon headscarf. She would have done her face powder (keep yourself nice), but not lipstick (fast and loose).

She filled the phone box. She was out of scale, larger than life. She was like a fairy story where size is approximate and unstable. She loomed up. She expanded. Only later, much later, too late, did I understand how small she was to herself. The baby nobody picked up. The uncarried child still inside her.

But that day she was borne up on the shoulders of her own outrage. She said, 'It's the first time I've had to order a book in a false name.'

I tried to explain what I had hoped to do. I am an ambitious writer – I don't see the point of being anything; no, not anything at all, if you have no ambition for it. 1985 wasn't the day of the memoir – and in any case, I wasn't writing one. I was trying to get away from the received idea that women always write about 'experience' – the compass of what they know – while men write wide and bold – the big canvas, the experiment with form. Henry James misunderstood Jane Austen's comment that she wrote on four inches of ivory – i.e. tiny observant minutiae. Much the same was said of Emily Dickinson and Virginia Woolf. Those things made me angry. In any case, why could there not be experience *and* experiment? Why could there not be the observed and the imagined? Why should a woman be limited

