

Stay

The great revelation had never come... Instead there were little daily miracles, illuminations, matches struck unexpectedly in the dark...
Virginia Woolf, To The Lighthouse

The past is in us, and not behind us. Things are never over.
Tim Winton, The Turning

Sunday afternoon drop-off

London, 2007.

Adam has his own keys. Claire had them cut for him, said it made sense. He remembers her putting them in his hand. The locksmith hadn't filed the burrs properly. The two small pieces of metal had felt strange in his palm; cold and rough and heavy. He keeps them loose in his glovebox.

He stands on the cracked concrete stoop of the Edwardian mansion house and buzzes anyway. No reply. Along the street's terraced rooftops cawing crows, drawn here from the heath to nest, manage to make even the onset of summer sound ominous. This will be Adam's twelfth year in London. He still gets a kick out of its crows and foxes in summer, its sludgy snow and half-light in winter. Where he comes from there are possums and gulls and an ever-reflecting brightness.

Two more unanswered buzzes tell him Claire can't be bothered traipsing downstairs to let him in. Or that she's out. He turns the key in the sticky lock, pushes the heavy door, holds it open as Lucy, excited to be home, presses past him. She's always so excited to get home.

Can we say hello to Beetle, daddy, Lucy asks, with her mother's vowels. Lucy's grandmother says she has a voice like an angel. She chortles every time Lucy speaks to her down the phone line, across the oceans. Now Lucy skips through the foyer without waiting for an answer. Beneath the stairwell, a little wooden trap door opens to a small cavity. Three of its walls are painted green. Lucy peers through the fourth, a see-through perspex wall with air holes drilled into it. Beetle, a small brown tortoise, sits on a hay-covered floor. Beetle belongs to the reclusive woman in flat A. They're permanent fixtures, Beetle and the strange woman. They were both here when Adam and Claire moved in more than seven years ago.

Sure sweetie, he says, absently, redundantly. He puts Lucy's bag down on the foyer floor and leans against a shelf that's covered in unclaimed mail and flyers and four telephone books with curling covers that nobody's bothered to claim. A note is scribbled on the back of some junk mail and sticky-taped crookedly on the door:

ATTENTION TENENTS. CLOSE THE DOOR **PROPERLEY** BEHIND YOU!!!

Claire's: he recognises the writing. And the spelling. And the exuberance—the capitals, the exclamations. The way she writes is so far removed from her elegance, her calm way, that it always surprises him. He used to tease her, tell her that whenever she picks up a pen she releases her inner teenager. She'd ignore him, add more swirls, bigger circles over her 'i's, and god knows what else to whatever she was writing.

He looks around the foyer. Grubby walls. Leaf-strewn floor. Dusty sills. Depressing shatter-proof glass windows, frosted to keep the light out, with the thin grey grid lines that always remind him of school. The building has four flats. Why the tenants don't get together and sort out a cleaning roster for the entrance is beyond him. When he lived here, he used to do it. And that was before there was a kid in the building.

Daddy! He's eating! Look!

Adam crouches beside his daughter. Beetle the tortoise beak-wrestles in slow motion with a piece of cabbage.

He is, too. He must like cabbage, Luce. Just like you, eh? Cabbage is your favourite too, isn't it?

No dad, Lucy says, scornfully. Cabbage is yuck. Yuck, yuck, yuck.

Cabbage makes me fart, he says and pulls a face. Lucy giggles. He figures he has about two more years before his daughter outgrows his sense of humour.

Come on, he says. Let's say bye-bye to Beetle and go and see mummy. Bye-bye Beetle!

Bye-bye Beetle, I hope the cabbage doesn't make you fart! Lucy laughs over her shoulder as she makes her way up the stairs.

At the first floor landing they knock. Still no reply. He unlocks Claire's door and feels like he's breaking in. Lucy pushes it open and Adam follows his daughter into the silent flat's tiny hallway. He puts the bag down and goes into the lounge where Lucy is already calling for her mother.

Claire, he calls. Nothing. It's the second time in a row she's been late. Last time, when he'd called her, she'd said she was ten minutes away. An hour later they'd still been sat there watching *SpongeBob* when she'd finally swanned in. She'd stunk of smoke and booze. Her cheeks had been flushed with the flare of rosacea and her clothes had been different. More sophisticated. Tighter. More like she'd dressed when she met him.

Where's mummy? he says to Lucy and makes his confused clown face: big eyes, raised eyebrows, upside-down smile. He hopes she doesn't catch the strain in his voice. Lifts her little frame—but she's getting so long now, proper kid now, nothing toddler about her—and plops her down on Claire's huge, old, indigo sofa. It used to be their sofa. It was the only one in the shop they'd been able to fit on together, horizontally, so they'd taken it. He takes off Lucy's *Dora the Explorer* trainers and goes to the hallway and puts them where he usually puts them. In the spot where the coat stand and shoe rack should be. When he comes back in, Lucy is curled on the sofa, sucking her thumb.

You watch some telly sweetheart. I'll find mummy, he says, switching on the television. An E! Logo appears on the screen. Lonely men watch porn. Lonely women watch celebrity news. He switches over to Playhouse Disney.

Thanks daddy, his daughter says.

The old teak coffee table seems more stained and battered every time he visits. In the middle of the table is a big square candle. Five inch-wide holes are depressed in the wax, each with a tiny black wick and several wizened charred matches half-caught in the wax. Beside the candle is an empty Smirnoff bottle. Slung around the bottle's neck are half a dozen of Claire's thin silver bracelets; the ones he bought her in Bali, the

ones that used to annoy him by jangling in the cinema. Another few bracelets litter the top of the table. A drunken game of horseshoes.

An ashtray, the retro plastic kind, is filled with butts, overflowing onto the table. He sweeps the bulk of the ash into his hand and empties it back into the ashtray. He wishes she'd give up. He has. He picks up the ashtray and the bottle and heads for the kitchen.

On the bench beside the sink, a half-gone foil of Berocca tablets sits outside its tube. Beside it, a glass, its bottom lined with dried, powdery orange sediment. On a crumb-covered plate rests a knife with the remains of a scraping of Marmite on it. Adam puts the vodka bottle in the overflowing recycling tub, washes his ashy hand, rinses out the dishcloth and starts back to the lounge to wipe the coffee table down. Halfway there he stops and goes back to the recycling bin. It doesn't look good. He pulls the top layer of bottles out, stands them on the floor, and counts. Five empty wine bottles. What Claire gets up to when Lucy isn't here is Claire's business. Two Grey Goose hip flasks. She is a good mother. Two more bottles of Smirnoff, plus the one he's just added to the collection. One peanut butter jar.

What's going on, Clairey, he murmurs. Straightening, he opens her little fridge. Half a wrinkled red capsicum grins toothlessly up at him from the middle shelf. In the door compartments is Claire's usual collection of once-used-then-forgotten curry pastes and exotic sauces. For a fridge that is expecting to be catering for a four-year-old, there's a distinct lack of dairy products and fruit.

Daddy, can I watch Handy Manny too? comes Lucy's voice.

Sure honey, he says, shutting the fridge.

Claire kept their deco oak dining table with the turned legs and square top that he always loved and she was indifferent about. He always thought she kept it to punish him, but it is just about the only sort of table small enough to fit into this kitchen. He pulls out a white plastic chair and sits down at the table. He used to sit here in the mornings and feed Lucy mush as his marriage disintegrated. Between spoonfuls he'd gaze out the

window and up, distracted and lost and miserable. He'd stare at the casual geometry of the loosely-slung power lines that criss-crossed against the leaden sky of his adopted home. Then Lucy would make her little noise for 'more' and snap him out of it. He runs his finger along one of the table's panel joins. Claire's phone sits on the table beside a small waterless glass vase filled with brittle, faded lavender. The phone is dead too. Doesn't matter if it's on or off anyway. It's not with Claire.

Molly Dolly! Lucy says, in the lounge.

He pokes his head around the kitchen's door-less frame. Lucy is standing on her tip-toes on the hearth, reaching up to the mantle to where her favourite doll sits. Claire hadn't been able to find it when he'd picked Lucy up on Friday afternoon. He'd had to deal with Lucy grizzling at bedtime because she didn't have Molly Dolly to sleep with. She was scheduled to stay two nights as usual, but one without Molly was traumatic enough for everyone, so on Saturday morning he'd bought her a new soft toy. It didn't offer Lucy the same comfort, but at least the novelty of it had off-set the insecurity she'd felt without her Molly. Now Lucy grabs one of the doll's legs that dangles off the mantle. She pulls Molly down and kisses her enthusiastically, several times. Hugging the doll, Lucy looks around for her father.

Molly Dolly! she says, grinning, triumphant.

There she is, he says. See? I told you she'd be okay.

She's been very lonely, Lucy says, serious now, holding her doll at arm's length and looking at her. She doesn't like being on her own. She missed me very lots.

Poor Molly, he says.

Poor Molly, agrees Lucy, and hugs the doll to her chest. She climbs back on the sofa. Once within striking range of the digital babysitter, she turns instantly back into a zombie. One hand tucks Molly to her side like a rugby player holding a ball. The other hand is at her mouth, her knees pulled up to her chest.

He checks his watch. Half an hour's passed. Give it a while yet. If last time was anything to go by, she'll turn up soon. Still sitting at the oak table, he turns Claire's phone in his hands and wonders what to say to her when she turns up. Wonders what to say about the bottles. About leaving his daughter here.

He takes off his jacket and hangs it on the back of the chair beside him. Reaching into the pocket he pulls out his phone, wallet and keys and puts them on the table. He moves them around the table for a few moments, lining everything up straight and in size order: his wallet, his phone, Claire's phone, his keys. He decides to call his girlfriend.

Where are you? I'm at yours, Jane's voice says in his ear. Let myself in, hope you don't mind.

No, course I don't. I'm at Claire's, he says, and pushes Claire's phone away from his stuff.

Still?

She's not turned up yet.

Jesus. Where is she this time?

Don't know. Her phone's still here. I think something might be wrong.

What do you mean?

Her bin's full of booze bottles, he says, and he can hear Jane breathing into the phone. He sighs. Another woman in his life who's not replying.

Jane?

So what? Yours is too. Why are you snooping in her bin, anyway?'

I was tidying up.

Are you going to wait for her?

I was going to, yeah.

Why don't you bring Lucy back here. I'll make supper.

I'll give her another few minutes, Adam says. Jane is quiet again.

Adam can feel her deciding how to respond.

Up to you Adam, she says after a moment, in a thin-edged voice, and rings off. He listens to his phone beeping angrily in his ear. In the few months they've been seeing each other, Jane's become increasingly impatient of his dealings with Claire. About a month ago she gave up the pretence of tolerance. Since then he's twice had to stop her slagging Claire off while Lucy was in the room.

Back in the lounge Lucy is lying on the sofa with Molly. She's asleep. At four o'clock in the afternoon. He sits beside her and gently rubs her shoulder. Lucy raises a fallen thumb back to her mouth, but otherwise makes no response. Claire'll be pissed off, he knows, with a wakeful daughter come seven-thirty, but Claire isn't here. He decides to let her doze.

He picks up Lucy's bag. Takes it to her tiny room, the room that was once his and Claire's study. Now it's completely dominated by a pink, frilly mosquito net that hangs unevenly above an unmade bed (pink sheets, pink quilt, pink throw). Even in the space where there's nothing the room looks pink, reflecting off the every pink surface. It's like a fantasy inside of a bubble-gum bubble. Lucy loves this room. She always complains that her room at his house is too big. Not snug and cosy and pink like this one. He puts the bag at the end of the bed and straightens the bedclothes.

He lingers, trying to stop himself doing what he knows he's going to do next. He's pulled like a fish on a reel to the other side of the hallway, to Claire's room. Their room. He crosses the hall, and leans on the doorframe for a second. He listens; there's no noise from Lucy in the lounge. He crosses the line. He steps into the room.

The air feels thicker and stiller and dustier in here, like church air. He hasn't been in the room for more than three years. It's a mess. It smells of Claire, of the perfume she's used forever. It smells of the good times. His head floods with images of her laughing, kissing him. On the floor beside her bed (also unmade, half the white duvet slumped on the floor), is an empty coffee mug, upright, and wine glass, on its side. He sits on the end of the bed tentatively, breathes in deeply and soaks in it all. Candles fill every

horizontal space; the dresser, the chest of drawers, even the window sills. He misses candles. He misses candlelight in bed with Claire.

From where he's sitting, he can inspect the dresser. The hairdryer fights for space with pendants and earrings and bracelets. Lip glosses, and brushes, and other tubes and trays that Adam has no name for poke haphazardly out of a glittery black bag beside a hair brush—the same old hair brush. He pulls Claire's top drawer open. He does it then he pulls his hand away quickly; it's as if he found it like that, open. He looks without knowing what he's looking for and doesn't disturb. Underwear. Bras. Tights. Camisole. Under the camisole, the edge of a small black picture frame. Here we go. A photo she obviously doesn't want Lucy to see.

He feels the tang of jealousy. Must be a new bloke. Explains a lot. He's almost relieved. He'll give Claire some leeway. Starting a relationship is hard enough with a kid, god knows. She doesn't need her ex whining about sticking to drop-off times and quizzing her about alcohol. He pulls out the frame gently to look at the photo. Let's be seeing you then, son.

Inside the frame is a drawing. Lucy's. It's of three figures standing together, holding hands and smiling big red half-moon felt tip smiles. Even though Lucy's artistic skills are rudimentary, it's obvious who's who. One of the figures is big, with thick black hair, like him. One is smaller, with a triangle skirt and several bracelets around its arm. Another, the smallest of all, also has a triangle skirt—a pink one, of course.

Someone, no doubt a stand-in kindy teacher with no clue, has written, in tidy print, at the bottom of the picture:

This is a picture by Lucy of her family visiting a cafe. Lucy enjoys going to cafes with her mummy and daddy, especially ones that have ginger bread men and apple juice.

He pushes all the air out of his lungs. Puts the picture down on the dresser. Clamps his palm over his mouth. Puts his elbows on his knees. Clasps his hands together and lets his head hang down. Closes his eyes and feels the immense weight of gravity.

He breathes.

He breathes.

He blinks.

He sits up, runs his hand through his hair and looks at the ceiling. Putting the picture back carefully, he shuts the drawer. He stands. He leaves the room.

Back in the lounge he sits beside sleeping Lucy. He watches her, Dora the snorer. He flicks off the television and the room is swallowed by a screaming silence. He pushes the play button on the stereo remote to drown it out. Jeff Buckley's angelic voice fills the room and it's so fucking sad that he laughs. He's got a new one to add to his list now. It's a fine, strong list of regrets.

1. What if he'd handled things better after Lucy was born. What if someone had said to him, hey, don't worry, you'll get your wife back soon.

2. What if he hadn't met Bridget at that wedding.

3. What if Claire had been able to forgive him.

4. What if he hadn't been so lonely and hopeless when he'd met Jane.

And now, number five: What if he'd dared to believe that Claire might still love him.

He strokes Lucy's cheek. It's so soft. He tries to distract himself by counting her eyelashes, but they're too thick.

It's a cold

Adam weeps.

And it's a broken

I made this mess, he thinks. This is my fault.

Hallelujah

Daddy? Lucy is waking, looking at him. He pulls back from the brink of the mother of all mea culpas.

You have tears, she says, and gently wipes his cheek with her sleep-warmed little palm. He swipes his eyes with the back of his hand and tries to laugh but it comes out as a sob.

Mummy must have been cooking onions, eh, he says. It's lame, but it works. Or at least he thinks it does. Lucy climbs up onto his lap and puts her arms around his neck, kisses his wet cheek. He buries his head in his daughter's hair and feels his hand span from one side of her ribcage to the other. He's not sure who's comforting who.

Let's go back to daddy's for a bit, he says.

Bad luck

Te Awamutu, 1958.

Because you're ten, you scamper. You leap off the school bus and hit the ground running. It takes just ten minutes to get all the way down the back of the farm. It's the unused land, hilly, covered in weeds and Waikato boulders. It's on the other side of the creek. It's further than you're allowed.

Lizzie tails you, annoyingly. She can't keep up, but she knows where you're headed because you told her and Peter on the bus. You shouldn't have told them. You thought they'd want to help. Peter didn't even answer. He just hoicked on the bus window and rubbed the spit into the grime in circles. As if you hadn't said anything. All Lizzie said was: she won't like it. All knowing. As if anyone who's seven knows anything. And now she's following you. Sometimes you wish she wasn't your little sister, you think, and then you feel a wave of pity for Lizzie and regret the thought. She's not so bad.

You find a little hill where there are a lot of broom bushes. It's flowering intensely. The bushes are spheres of vivid yellow, studding the mound between the boulders and the ragwort. The dirt between the bushes is cracked, sparsely covered in dry brown grass. And it's only the start of November. You choose a broom bush and set to work.

Because you're small, you can get behind the yellow veil to the base of the bush. From underneath, you snap off flowering branches. It's a prickly, bristly business, so you roll down your shirt sleeves and pull up your socks. Some of the branches won't snap, so you bend them back and forth until just the most stubborn sinews are left, which you twist until they tear apart. You wish you'd thought to bring a knife up. You carefully put each branch in a pile on the ground. Some of the flowers fall off and when they do you curse under your breath.

You think broom flowers are beautiful. The size of peas and the colour of sunshine. Mum is like the sun: warm, everything, light, life. These are the perfect flowers for her. As you work there under the bush, you try to remember back to when you were small enough to be held the way she holds little Joy now. You imagine being curled up on her lap, with your ear on her heart and her arms around you tightly. You listen to her gentle song. You're so close that you hear it muffled, and deep, and rich, and mixed up with her heartbeat.

You are sweating now, dusty, dirty and itchy. You'll have to get a wriggle on if you want to get back before Mum finishes with the calves. You can't wait to give her these flowers. If you could, you'd tell her about how you love her so much that when you think about it the feeling twists out of you, like water wrung out of a flannel. So much that it hurts. But only a drongo would say something like that.

Lizzie sits on a rock, scraping patterns in the dust with a dry bit of broom stick. She's singing quietly as she watches you work. You're still cross with her. And Peter. They wouldn't have even known it was her birthday today if you hadn't told them. And now you've told them, what have they done about it? Nothing. Peter will be at home now, drinking all the milk, or eating green plums again and giving himself the shits. Joy's too young to know anything; she'll be in her cot, crying as usual. And here's Lizzie, following you around doing nothing useful. You wish she'd stop staring at you. You wish she'd stop singing.

In the distance you hear the dogs. It's Thursday: Dad will be finishing up and heading to the pub. You wonder if Lizzie will tell on you for coming out this far. Whether you'll get a hiding if she does. Whether he'd even care. You never know what'll make him angry. Two weeks ago you got the strap for putting your hands in your pockets on the way home from church. You always put your hands in your pockets. Did he only just notice?

It must be getting close to five now. With a bit of luck it is. Even Dad can't come home with a skin-full if he's only got an hour before closing

time. You hope he doesn't, anyway. Not on Mum's birthday. Not when the last bruise is just a whisper of yellow on her cheekbone and she looks so pretty. You wonder if she knows how beautiful she is. If you could, you'd tell her she's the most beautiful lady you've ever seen.

You reckon you need just one more piece of broom. Then you'd better high tail it back to the house. You'll decorate the mantle, make it as beautiful as her, festooned in glorious amber flowers.

Bad luck, she won't like it, sings Lizzie when you emerge from the scrub with bleeding, itchy arms.

Shut up. She will so. You don't know anything. You wipe your eyes, cheeks and forehead with the grubby shirt sleeves, and rub your sweaty hands on your shorts. Carefully you pick up the branches. The wild bouquet wobbles a little, and a few more yellow flowers drop to the ground.

Damn.

You can't say that. I'm telling.

Shut up. Come on.

You want to run home, but the flowers are too delicate. Even walking, you lose some every few steps. Lizzie trots beside you with a long spindly broom stick between her legs, pretending to fly.

It takes a full quarter hour to get home and you're anxious Mum will be back before you. But when you arrive, the house is still; even Joy is asleep. The clock says almost five. She must be on her way. You work quickly, moving your parents' silver-framed wedding photograph, rigid and unsmiling and black and white, to the top of the wireless. You put the branches down on the hearth. You gently extract each branch from the pile and lay them on the mantle. Only about half the flowers have survived the journey, but you can't let yourself be disappointed. There are still plenty. As you place the flowers, the arrangement begins to look a little like what you'd had in your mind's eye. You lay them staggered on top of each other. Like a Christmas wreath, but straight. Running the length of the fireplace. Some of the branches are a yard long, and you don't have a

vase big enough to hold them, so it had to be this way. Besides, it looks impressive, all spread out like this. You want it to be impressive. You want it to make her smile. If you could, you'd tell her that it makes your heart hurt that she has such sad eyes.

The arrangement is complete. You can't stop to admire it. You start sweeping up the mess on the hearth. You hear her coming. She's calling out to Peter, who must be up in the plum tree, time to come in for his bath. You panic a little that she's so close and you're not finished. You empty a shovelful of little flowers and twigs out the nearest open window. You put the brush and shovel back and then there's a moment spare so you take a look at your masterpiece. It's good. It's wonderful. Wait: you snap off an ugly brown twig that's protruding, and shove it in your pocket. There. You spit on your hand and smooth it over your cowlick like she does. You stand beside the fireplace with your shoulders back and your hands straight by your sides, just how she likes you to stand when you're out in public.

She won't like it, whispers Lizzie, and you realise with irritation that she's been sitting on the piano stool all this time watching you work and doing nothing to help.

Will so, you hiss, and you scowl at your sister.

Your mother is in the kitchen now. She calls to you and Lizzie, are you there? The shout wakes Joy, who starts her hungry wail.

In here, you say. You don't want to go get her. You want her to walk in and see it, her surprise. But she calls to you again.

Come and take these scraps to the pigs, love. Lizzie, go and start the bath.

Can you come in here for a second Mum? Please? you call back.

What is it? she says, weary and impatient, and then she's standing in the doorway, wiping her hands on her apron. You watch her eyes move to the mantle and you thrust your shoulders back as far as they'll go.

I got you some flowers for your birth—

The words disintegrate in your mouth like candyfloss. Your mother makes a face like she's screaming, but no sound comes out. She's across the room in seconds. She picks up all the branches, runs through the kitchen wildly, throws them on the ground outside. She runs back to the fireplace, grabs the brush and shovel, sweeps the debris from the mantle. You watch the violence of it all. Your eyes start to sting and your eyebrows are shocked into an upside-down V. Without saying a word, your mother furiously brushes away your bouquet. The only sounds are the short sweeps, the scrape of shovel on brick and Joy's howling. Finally, it is all gone, and she shouts.

Who brought broom into this house? she shouts, and she shakes you by the arm. Was it you? Was it?

You nod, ashamed. Accused. Confused. You look at Lizzie on the piano stool. Bad luck, she mouths silently, smirking. She pokes out her tongue at you. Peter has heard the noise and stands in the doorway watching you, curious and excited, his eyes gleaming with pleasure.

It's bad luck, says Mum, shaking you by the arms and shaking herself, at the same time. You must never do that again, do you hear me? Never bring those flowers inside. You've brought misfortune on this house.

You nod. Your shoulders slump when she lets you go and your eyes burn and you look at the ground. A tear splashes on the hearth beside the last remaining yellow flower.

I'm sorry Mum, you try to say, but your breath is jagged with sobbing and you mangle the words. She puts her hand under your chin and lifts your face until you look at her in her eyes, and when you do you see the anger is gone. You look at each other for a few seconds, as your chest heaves in staccato bursts. Peter, sensing the conflict is over, loses interest and disappears outside again, evading his bath. Lizzie looks from you to Mum and back again with wide eyes.

Thank you Malcolm, says Mum, gently and eventually. You meant well. Now take those scraps out.

The old man

Hamilton, 1976.

On his first visit to the palliative care unit, Malcolm's wet footprints merged with others' on the grey-flecked lino of the Main Entrance. Further in, a stinging smell of pine or eucalypt battled to overpower other, more uneasy scents. Still further in, the final corridor was empty and he walked up it slowly. Stopped at the ward door. Saw the name. Took a deep breath. Went in.

Inside the ward, one of the beds was vacant, tightly-pulled sheets waiting to be disrupted by their next inhabitant. On the other, crumpled bed sat his father, coughing at a TV.

For a moment, he kept his distance and watched his father. The wrinkles were deeper, the skin more mottled and loose. The hair, what there was left of it—a thin hammock hanging from temple to temple around his head—was still the colour of ash, but cropped close. The porous skin on his face was redder than ever. The cough was deep. He waited for it to subside, then spoke.

Dad.

Eh? the old man turned his head. For a second, two identically-shaped pairs of eyes locked gazes, one set clear, the other yellowed and watery. His father turned back to the television. Didn't think you'd come, he muttered.

Neither did I.

The ward clock ticked, unheard beneath the shrieking television. Outside the ward, a nurse and trolley rumbled down the lonely corridor. He leant his still-dripping umbrella against his father's metal bed end and sat on the little green plastic chair provided for people like him. Visitors. Friends and family.

They won't even bring me a transistor so I can listen to the racing, can you believe it? Bloody cheapskates.

Dad.

Want a banana? Bit old, but better than nothing, eh? His father reached over to a bowl of wrinkled fruit, picked up a freckled banana and stabbed the air with it. The skin surrounding the hospital tag on his wrist was bruised purple.

I'm fine. Mind if I turn that down?

His father wheezed in response. Bloody thing. Never anything worth watching on it anyway, he said. Malcolm reached up to the television, which was strapped high on the wall. He clicked the dial to off. The ward clock's ticking flooded the room. Malcolm took his chair again, and the two men sat without speaking.

Got me letter, then? his father said eventually, and his gaze skittered across Malcolm's forehead, down to his chin, then his chest, then turned and rested again on the blank television screen.

You didn't say what's wrong.

Was cirrhosis. Then it was liver cancer. Now I'm just buggered. Riddled. That'll teach me, eh?

How long do they reckon you've got?

Don't muck about do you?

Well?

They don't know. Weeks, maybe, Maybe months. Getting down to the business end of things.

Sorry.

Are you?

His father folded his aged arms, and the skin by his elbows pulled into tight brown lines and looked as though it would bruise just from the motion. He coughed again, theatrically this time.

Dad.

Christ in a basket, what kind of question is that anyway? How long have you got. Jeez.

I shouldn't have come. I'll go.

Suit yourself. Turn the telly back on, will you?

He switched on the TV and the room filled with noise. He picked up his umbrella, and left his father alone in the ward.

On his second visit the day was so cold he wore his greatcoat. When he entered the unit his breath became invisible. He took the steamy coat off and slung it over his arm. The ward corridor was a little busier this time; an orderly and two nurses mumbled over a clipboard. It had been a week since his last visit. The ward was still empty, aside from his father, but his father had spread his presence in the room: a half-eaten packet of dried apricots, a pair of ancient plimsolls and a brown leather belt were strewn on top of the second bed.

Didn't expect to see you again, said his father, who was sitting on top of his bed in a pair of grey tracksuit pants and a grubby navy sweatshirt. The old man closed the tabloid he was reading, folded it on itself twice, and put it on the table beside his bed.

Malcolm sighed. I came to see how you're doing, he said. He put his coat down on the end of his father's bed and sat down on the plastic chair. Are you doing alright?

Fine. Better than last time. Haven't heard boo from your sisters. Or your brother.

They're good. Pete's running 350 on the farm. Lizzie's pregnant with her second. Joy's in Sydney.

Good for them. The fragile arms folded over themselves again.

I've been thinking about you, Dad. Been wondering why you wrote that letter.

I wanted to see you before I kick the bucket. That's all. Ten years is too long.

Twelve.

Twelve then. Too long. I haven't touched a drop in ages you know. Nearly four years. Damage was done though. His father's eyes flickered,

with fear, or guilt, or possibly just embarrassment, as he recognised the double meaning of his words. He searched the room for a new topic, then brightened. Listen, my friend was just here. You just missed her. Have you met my friend Gracie?

No.

You'd like her. She visits me most days. Or I visit her. She's a few wards over. Don't know what she's got, but if she's in here it can't be good, can it.

I suppose not.

We don't talk about what's wrong. Nobody does. No point. But that Gracie, jeez she's great. Full of life... full of beans, most days. She's a good girl, that one. His father's brow relaxed and his eyes crinkled, an approximation of a smile.

They did a special tea for us in the lounge last week. Gracie and I sat beside each other. It was a corker dinner. Roast beef, all the trimmings, gravy, everything. And Gracie said to me, halfway through, she says, 'They forgot to give me spuds, can you believe it!' She loves her spuds, see, Gracie does. And she didn't have any! We both laughed and we laughed! His father tried to laugh now, but ended up sputtering instead.

Did she get some?

What?

Potatoes.

Well I went and fetched her some, didn't I. His father's frown was fleeting. Do you want a cup of tea? I can call a nurse.

No, thanks. Listen, I have to get home.

Well, thanks, boy. For coming.

He picked up his coat. It was warm from lying over his father's legs. On his way out, he heard his father sighing and wheezing. He went home to his family.

On the third visit, it was still cold out, but the first few foolhardy blossoms were braving the cold. He decided it was clement enough to leave his umbrella in the car.

On the way up the corridor, he heard voices: his father's, and a woman's. He walked quickly to the ward, to the sound, rounding the corner and standing in the doorway.

Here he is, his father said, as though he'd been expecting him. This time the old man wore an ancient woolen cable-jersey that Malcolm recognised from years past. The bed next to his father's had been pushed up close, and on it an old woman was propped on her side supported by cushions, leaning toward his father. She turned awkwardly toward Malcolm, still smiling from the last joke shared. Her white hair was short and thin and patchy, but what there was of it clung stubbornly to her head. Her eyes were deep, brown and full of faith.

Gracie, this is my boy, his father said.

G'day Malcolm, Gracie said, beaming. I've been hoping I'd get to meet you. Her voice was a soft wave in the room.

Nice to meet you too, Gracie. As he said it he realised he meant it.

Well listen, love, I'll be off. Help me into my chair, Malcolm?

You don't have to go, Malcolm said.

Stay for a bit Gracie, his father said at the same time.

I'll let you two handsome fellows catch up, Gracie said, and held her arm up to Malcolm. Give us a hand, dear.

Up close, she smelled of washing powder. Leaning on Malcolm's arm, she sat heavily in the wheelchair. Can I take you somewhere, he asked.

No, dear, I'll be fine. Do this every day. Gracie carefully straightened her cardigan. Visit this old bugger every day, don't I, eh? Her smile warmed the room and caused both men to mimic the expression. She turned her wheels toward Malcolm. He's been so looking forward to seeing you, she said, and wheeled herself out into the corridor, still smiling.

Malcolm stood grinning at his father, who grinned back at him. Nobody said anything and the grins became parodies of grins, then grimaces, then faded awkwardly. Malcolm pulled out the plastic chair and sat down.

How are you doing, Dad?

Fine, boy, fine. That's Gracie. What a woman, eh? She's taught me a lot. Hell of a lot. Her idea that I write to you kids. She helped me find your address. Never too late, she said—

Both men looked at the dull grey television screen blankly.

She's got grandkids too, Gracie has. Can't stop her raving about them. They're in here all the time. Rowdy bloody lot. Wear her out, but she loves it. Always gets the sweeties in for them.

Dad.

I'm just saying.

Save it.

The room felt chilly. Malcolm stood up and walked out of the ward. Once out, he stopped, leaned a heavy hand against the corridor wall and looked at the floor.

Malcolm, you still there? His father's feeble voice ricocheted gently around the corridor.

Malcolm walked back and stood in the doorway.

What about it? Next time? Or even just a photo or two?

Malcolm turned and walked down the barren passage.

The fourth visit was on the kind of clear day in early spring that makes people smile and call it 'glorious'. Between the car park and the Main Entrance, all the trees that lined the pavement had gotten together overnight and decided to sprout tiny green shoots.

Malcolm carried a small plastic bag with him into the hospital. Inside the bag, he, his wife Hannah and his three young children smiled out of a wooden-framed photograph. In the foyer of the Main Entrance, a

small uniformed woman was watering pot plants that Malcolm had always assumed were plastic.

The corridor of his father's ward was unusually busy. At the far end, a group of people stood or sat on a row of chairs, talking quietly to each other, drinking tea, hugging. A couple of toddlers were being held and a few kids sat in a circle on the floor eating chips.

Malcolm went in to his father's ward. His father was watching the television.

Do they ever put anyone else in here with you? Malcolm asked, in his jolly voice. It's like a bloody hotel. He sat down at the end of his father's bed.

G'day, his father said.

Malcolm turned off the blare. He put the plastic bag with the photograph inside on his father's lap.

She's dying. Today, his father said, ignoring the bag.

Gracie? The family in the corridor: Gracie's rowdy lot.

His father nodded.

I'm so sorry Dad.

Are you, said his father, looking over Malcolm's shoulder. The old man's voice was shrill and weary and it pierced the room. Agitated, he tried to sit up straighter in his bed, and as he did, he knocked the plastic bag off his lap and onto the floor. A sharp crack sounded. I don't even know why you bother. No one else does. Why don't you just piss off?

Dad.

Go on, piss off, leave me alone. I'm not a bloody charity case.

Malcolm picked up the tinkling bag carefully. A few slivers of glass had sliced the plastic. He left the building. As happens so often in spring, the bright morning had clouded over and a drizzle had begun. Malcolm wished he'd been sensible enough to take his umbrella.

The fifth visit wasn't a visit at all, but a telephone call. Malcolm's father telephoned him at home, to apologise, and to ask if Malcolm would

please take him to Gracie's funeral the following day. Malcolm took the call on the phone in the study, with the door shut. He couldn't remember the last time he'd heard his father's voice made sibilant by a phone line. It sounded like a feeble playback of a recording made decades ago. After the call, he sat awhile, alone, thinking about his father's request. He had things to do tomorrow. He couldn't just drop everything.

There was a sixth visit, after all. It wasn't on the day of Gracie's funeral, to Malcolm's everlasting regret. It was two weeks later, on a too-still day with a mercury sky. It was after the hospital called Malcolm and carefully suggested that he might want to get the family together to come and say goodbye.

No one else would come, so when Malcolm walked up the hushed corridor for the last time it was alone, as usual. The old man was dripped up and doped up, drifting in and out. The television, irrelevant now, was off. His father's clothes were sitting on the shelf of the table beside his bed, neatly folded. Outside in the corridor, he could hear the ordinary, comforting sounds of people making their way around the hospital. Malcolm went to his father and pulled the bedclothes higher over his chest, folding the sheet softly back over the blanket and smoothing it. He sat beside his father on the bed and waited.

After few minutes, his father opened his eyes and rested a panicky, watery gaze on Malcolm.

Where's Junie, he said, his voice hoarse and weak. Where's June? She's left me, hasn't she.

Dad, calm down, Malcolm said. Mum's... not here.

Where is she then? Has she left me? Has she taken everything? Is this the poorhouse? Is that why I'm here? Are we all here? When we all rolled in there was a lot of shelling. Some of the yanks were such young fellas.

His father's eyes, already watery, spilled over.

We held them in the caves on the beach and they cried for their mothers. Poor jokers. Are we all here? Squadron... I can't remember just now. It's a while ago now, I expect. While ago now. Junie will remember. Where's she gone? She was here a minute ago.

She's not here just now Dad, Malcolm said.

Take me home Junie, I'll stop drinking. I swear I won't lay a hand on you or the kids again. Can we just go home? I never meant to walk off the land Junie. I just couldn't... I couldn't...

Malcolm winced. His father's eyes closed and his body relaxed. The steadfast clock ticked on.

I do love you Dad, Malcolm said, and took the old man's hand in his.

How we used to be when we used to be

Coromandel, 1985.

There's a three-quarter-full tide swelling in the bay. The sand, flushed pink, is emptied of sunbathers. All the day's castles and volcanoes have been erased. Now there are just gull tracks and paw prints and footsteps. The sea spray sparkles as it flies off the back of the waves, catching the last of the light. The almond-shaped moon, already high, looks out of place in the pale blue sky. It lurks casually. Later it will shine proudly. It will light the phosphorescence in the bay, and change the waves from acoustic to electric.

Laura's twelve. Nearly thirteen. In a month she'll start high school. The big kids have let her tag along tonight. She's with the gang. She wants a tee-shirt: I'm with the gang. She likes being the youngest. The gang are all here in the dunes, nestled on plaid rugs or bright beach towels. Laura's big sister Emma is sitting with Amber, who is strumming her guitar, playing *One Love*. Adam, Laura's little brother, is back in the caravan getting ready for bed. At the sheltered base of the dune, three boys are building a fire. Soon the sun will set. When it does, Amber will play and sing on her own and her voice will soak into the still-cooling sand.

Laura's got a torch to help see her home. She has her sweatshirt tied around her neck in case it gets cold. Shelley's laid her rug out on the sand and the two girls lie on it. Laura's on her stomach, resting on her elbows, looking through the tumbleweeds that salt the dunes. Shelley's on her back, looking up at the sky. Shelley's six months older than Laura. She has the most beautiful skin Laura's ever seen. An olive complexion, Laura's mum calls it. Hasn't she got the loveliest olive complexion. Shelley's got a pink Skin Jeans sweatshirt and white piping on her tight jeans. She hasn't made fun of Laura's dumb kids' jeans, and Laura's grateful. Laura watches the sky change colour and looks out over the peaceful bay.

When Laura collected pipis this afternoon the surf was messier. Criss-crossing, it splashed in her eyes and left white salt crusts on her face and her shoulders. It broke and foamed and sucked as she dug in the sand with her fingers to pull out handfuls of grumpy old pipis. They spat and swore at her as they pulled in their creamy tongues. Dad did them on the barbeque. Laura dunked hers in white vinegar and popped them, cool on the outside, warm on the inside, straight in her mouth. She drew all the tart off them before biting in to a sweet explosion of ocean and grit. The old fella who lived in the shack on the edge of the estuary told her dad that he'd buried a couple of beached pilot whales during the winter. Since then the beds had gone crazy. Laura doesn't want to think about how her afternoon tea had been sucking on dead whale. She screws up her nose and puts her forehead on the sand.

'What you doing, Spaz?' Shelley says.

'Nothing.'

The horizon is crimson now. In the middle of bay there's interference in the air: a patch of grey static. Gulls after sprats. Kahawai chase them too, making a little bit of ocean boil black. Laura watches the hunt move along the surface of the water and is glad she's not a sprat.

Hannah sits on the dry sand high on the beach, watching out to sea where gulls bomb and swoop. The disturbance breaks the oppressive calm of the bay. She imagines sprats darting for safety and their instinct for escape clangs inside her. Now the sun is falling she's chilly. She rubs her bare arms to warm them. She sent Laura and Emma off with their sweatshirts and forgot to take one herself.

Emma and Laura. Off up to god knows what in the dunes. It wasn't so long ago the girls and Adam were wobbling around on pudgy legs with no knowledge of what it meant to be hurt, what it meant to be betrayed. They were the best years of Hannah's life. She gave and gave and gave and she loved every moment. These days she finds she has nothing left to give.

Malcolm is a good man. He loves her, and the children, in a fierce and pure way. They have done the hard yards together. Now they should be happy. Malcolm seems content. Hannah watches him in bed at night. When he sleeps he looks younger. He sleeps deeply and calmly. Complacently. Hannah lies beside him and tosses and sweats and tries to pull herself together and fears she will end up a bitter old woman.

On the horizon line the islands are darkening. The tops of them are still clear, their deep green ridges in sharp relief. Lower down they are blurred, obscured by a purple pollen haze. Hannah puts her hands behind her on the sand and leans back.

Laura burps a velvety burp. It tastes like the sea. Dad paid Robbie five bucks for a whopper cray today. Robbie lunged at her with it in his hand while she was sitting at their outside table reading. She drew up her knees to her chest and squealed with delight and fear and something else she can't name.

'Crayfish for tea Laura?' her dad said, after Robbie had gone. 'What do you reckon?'

'Yep, choice,' Laura said. She bit her lip. 'Hey dad, how old is Robbie?'

'About eighteen I suppose,' her dad said, touching the cray's head with the point of his knife. 'Why?'

'Just wondering how old you have to be to go diving,' she said. So there's only six years between her and Robbie. Laura's dad is three years older than her mum.

'Few years yet, love.' Her dad sliced the flailing crayfish between the eyes. Laura blushed. Her father didn't notice. 'Gotcha,' he said.

Laura looked up the hot gravel lane. Her brother's zinc-covered nose was coming toward her. He was eating a cola popsicle. Beside him, her mum and Emma carried brown paper bags straining with groceries. Her mum's face was hidden behind a brown straw hat and enormous

sunglasses. Her sarong was tied on like a halter-neck dress. Laura didn't have a sarong or sunglasses yet.

'Robbie been round?' her mum asked.

'Yep,' her dad said, as he dropped the dead cray in a pot. 'Reckon you could make a potato salad?'

'I suppose so,' her mum said, sailing past into the awning and up the caravan's scratchy steps, followed by Emma. Adam sat down beside Laura and sucked his sticky brown ice block with exaggerated glee. Laura ignored him. Her dad was screwing up newspaper for the barbeque.

'Go and fill that pot up will you Laura?'

'Why can't Adam do it?'

'Because he's halfway through his ice block. And I need a big kid for this job.'

'I am a big kid,' Adam said.

'Go fill it up then,' Laura said.

'Laura,' her dad said, without looking away from the piece of driftwood he was trying to snap over his knee. Laura looked at her brother and pushed her tongue in front of her bottom teeth. Adam poked his out.

'Is it dead?' she said.

'Yes it's dead,' said her dad. 'Go on.'

Laura held the pot at arms' length in front of her all the way to the kitchen. She half-expected the cray to resurrect and attack her nose with its mottled brown pincers. The camping ground's communal kitchen was starting to fill up. Mums peeled spuds and the smell of dirty water boiling married with the smell of dishwashing liquid. Laura put the pot in a sink, pressed the tap on and looked around the room. On the far side Shelley stood beside her mother, ripping the pale leaves off an iceberg lettuce and dropping them into a yellow plastic colander. Shelley raised her eyebrows at Laura, and Laura returned the greeting. When the pot was full one of the women helped Laura lift it out of the sink and down onto the damp concrete floor.

'You be right with that, love?'

'Yep. Ta.' Laura's ears burned crimson. She lugged the pot out of the kitchen in front of her, trying not to slop water. Every few metres she put it down on the grass and shook her arms.

'Thanks love,' Laura's dad said as she dropped the pot heavily beside him. He was crouched beside their three-legged barbeque, blowing on a pyramid of splintered driftwood that was billowing smoke. Her mum was wrestling with a silver wine bladder, persuading the last of the Muller Thurgau into her glass. Adam was grabbing handfuls of chips and raking them through a Tuppaware bowl full of dip that was attracting flies. Emma had disappeared off with her friends as usual. Emma hardly spent any time with them anymore, and when she did she was permanently pissed off.

'Adam, slow down. Leave some for everyone else,' her mum said.

The barbeque burst into flame.

'You beauty,' her dad said, and picked up his bag of coal.

Hannah dreamed last night that her favourite jersey had a pull that began to unravel, faster and faster. The fine wool was crinkled, its fibres split and ruined. It fell softly, so light it was almost impervious to gravity, in a useless pile on the floor. There was nothing she could do to stop it and no way to put it back together. She woke with wet cheeks. She tried to tidy the tears away but they threatened to spill out of her the whole day.

She doesn't know the way forward. They have been together for seventeen years, married for sixteen, for nearly half of Hannah's lifetime. Emma will be fifteen this year, and even Adam's nearly a teenager. Hannah can't see a way to carry on. She resents Malcolm's dumb loyalty, the way he takes the continuation of their marriage for granted. She resents the way he's been waiting patiently for sixteen years for her to love him as much as he loves her. When Hannah married Malcolm she congratulated herself on choosing a good man. Malcolm certainly is that. He's determined to be better man than his father was. He's a loving husband. A devoted father. But now all's said and done, the busy years almost behind

them, Hannah doesn't know what to do with her better man. Doesn't know how to love him the way he deserves.

Laura turns over and sits up and takes a look at the gang. There's Robbie there, over on the far side of the dune, with his cut-off denim shorts and his black tee-shirt with the hole just under the shoulder seam. Laura can't believe she's allowed to come to the same bonfire he's at.

Shelley sits up too and her big plastic earrings shake from side to side. She pulls out some chapstick and smears her lips. She offers Laura the gritty stick and it feels like sticky sandpaper and smells like strawberry. The bonfire is crackling. There's a classroom worth of people here, sprawled on the sandy slopes surrounding the fire, pockets of kids between pockets of dune grass. Laura and Shelley sit highest on the dune as if to compensate for their age.

The older kids' faces are familiar from the beach, but Laura doesn't know many names. Shelley's big sister Rachel, who got drunk on Jim Beam and vomited all through the toilet block on New Year's Eve, is sitting with Amber and Emma. There is another group of older girls on the other side, and the two rival groups sit ignoring each other and preening. During the days, these girls lie on the beach, limbs spread over towels, disdainful and bronzed, in sunnies and low-cut, high-legged togs. They don't speak, except to swap cassettes, which they listen to on Walkmans with closed eyes. Laura walks past them each day on her way back from swims. She loves the way the girls smell of coconut oil from two metres away. Laura still uses her mum and dad's Coppertone.

Then there's Robbie's lot, laughing and drinking beer on the far side, a galaxy away. Over there the girls and the boys are talking together. Robbie looks a little like MacGyver. When Laura looks at him she hears the theme tune in her head. She imagines Robbie would be able to get out of any scrape with a Swiss Army Knife and some duct tape. She imagines Robbie has a new girl fall in love with him every week.

The sun sets. Amber sings, and even the surfer boys drop their talk to a murmur.

Laura lies down on her back and closes her eyes. On her last day of school they'd written a story about what they'd be doing in the year 2000. Laura will be almost thirty years old. Both the year and the age seem impossibly distant. She imagines she will be living in a house just like her mum and dad's, but perhaps in a bigger city. Maybe even Auckland. Everyone will eat vitamin pills instead of food and everyone will fly around with jet packs on their backs. Laura will be a doctor, and she'll fly off on her jet pack to Africa each day to work with Bob Geldof, if he's still alive in the year 2000, to help save the children. And she'll be married, of course, with three kids. Just like her mum.

When the song finishes and she sits up, Shelley is opening her bag and getting out a couple of wine coolers she nicked from the chilly bin in her awning. She passes one to Laura.

'How are we going to open them?' Laura says.

'Ask him.'

'Who?'

'Him.' Shelley points at the nearest surfer. 'Dare you.'

'Nah.'

'Scared?'

'Not even. You do it.'

'Nah, you.'

'Nah, you.'

'Nah, you.'

Laura sighs and stands and steps and slides down the dune. As she approaches the boys one of them whistles. She feels a creeping burn that starts in her chest and spreads up her cheeks and all the way over her forehead into her hair. It's so violent that her eyes water.

'Can we borrow your opener?'

Someone throws a bottle opener to her and she has to move fast to catch it.

'Ta.'

'Bring it back, eh.'

'Yep.'

She makes her way back up the slippery sand to Shelley.

'You're taking it back,' she says as she opens her bottle and passes over the opener. Shelley snorts. She gives Laura her bottle to hold while she returns the opener.

Laura takes a sip of the drink. It's her first Miami. It's not as bad as wine or beer. Sweet. It smells a bit like Laura's hair conditioner. Her hair conditioner is her most prized toiletry item, with the exception of her Cool Charm spray, of course. She washed and conditioned her hair in the shower earlier tonight, the far shower, the one that doesn't go cold after five minutes like the rest. Laura's suds had joined the suds being sluiced from women in the other three showers, bobbing past along the open drain. The tepid water had made the sunburn on her shoulders sting where the strap of her too-small togs had been digging all day. She'd lathered her legs and the hairs had been dark and thick and she'd wished she was allowed to shave them like mum. Shelley had been in the queue when Laura had left the shower block.

'Party in the dunes later,' she'd said to Laura. 'Robbie and them lot are going. I'm going.'

'Can I come?'

'Free country,' Shelley had said, shrugging.

Laura watches Shelley now, clumsily climbing back up the dune, and knows she is glad of the company. There's a commotion over the other side. The biggest kids are on the move, folding up blankets and putting on jerseys. They're going to the pub. Laura can hear them talking about who's got fake ID and who's going in who's car. Robbie leads them in a magical march, laughing and shoving each other, back towards the camping ground. Laura wants to run after Robbie and tell him that she can do eight forward rolls in the water without coming up for air; she beat her record of seven today. But she knows this is childish. It wouldn't impress him.

Hannah lies for a while on her back. This holiday is giving her too much time to think. She did love Malcolm, once. Perhaps she still does, in some smothered part of herself. Very occasionally she still feels something, but it's elusive. It's like a distant comet, only visible in peripheral vision, impossible to see if you try too hard. Eventually she stands. Her back hurts as she does and her knees creak. Hannah is frightened of getting old. She'll walk the beach; it takes half an hour each way and Malcolm will be in bed by the time she gets back to the caravan.

Her feet sink and make perfect prints in the damp cool sand. She sees Robbie, walking toward the campground with some of the other kids. His shoulders are broad like a swimmer's. A youth's. He's so carefree and beautiful. He's just a kid, but she always tries to make sure she's in the caravan when he comes around. Today she missed him. She waves as he passes, further up the beach. He waves back respectfully. Hannah sees herself through his eyes; a middle-aged woman, alone, wandering aimlessly along a tame stretch of beach.

There are about twenty kids left now. They close in on the fire. Laura and Shelley move closer and Laura can feel the heat on her face. The gang sits in a circle. *Children behave*, starts Amber, playing it slower than the radio song. *That's what they say when we're together*. The surfer boys are bolder now that Robbie's gone, and they sing. Adam'll be going to bed now, thinks Laura. He'll be wandering back from the toilets with his wet toothbrush. Trying not to kick any tent pegs in the failing light. Putting his sandy feet into his already gritty sleeping bag. Flicking on his torch to read Asterix by. For a second she wishes she was in the awning too, with minty teeth and a flannel-washed face, safe and warm and reading by torchlight.

Someone puts an empty wine bottle beside the fire. The embers reflect in the glass. It looks like there's a genie inside it.

Laura looks up, into the bleached indigo sky. She taps Shelley on the arm and points.

'First star.'

'Make a wish then, Spaz.'

Laura wishes for world peace and no nukes. She's been to the Peace Centre. She's seen what that bomb did to those Japanese kids all those years ago. She has a little badge with a peace sign on it that she wears sometimes. She sometimes wakes in the night terrified that Mr Reagan or Mr Gorbachov will blow them all to smithereens. Down here is far enough away for a slow painful death, she learned at the Peace Centre. She tried to tell her dad how scared she was once, bringing it up when he was washing and she was drying. She asked him if they could build a bomb shelter. He said no one was going to blow anyone up and that she worried too much. Laura didn't persist with the bomb shelter idea. She looks at the star, and wonders if there are any people in its galaxy. She feels very small. Small like an atom.

Hannah looks at the sky as she walks. The first star is out. Hannah enjoys the feeling of insignificance. She enjoys the possibilities infinity provides. Make a wish. She wishes she could feel hope again. She is more certain every day that she is on a mudslide to a joyless future. Three days ago she made her New Year resolutions. They were unhappy and desperate and she was too embarrassed to share them with Malcolm. She will learn macramé. She will step down from the PTA and take a self-defence class. Or perhaps an assertiveness class, she's heard they're good. She will stop furtively watching *The Young and the Restless* each day, hunched over her Cup o' Soup and her toast.

She won't do any of these things. And if she did, would it really make a difference? Hannah doesn't think so. Things have gone beyond a quick fix.

Laura's lips are sticky and sweet from the wine cooler. Everyone is sitting in a circle now, a circle of jumpers and blankets and glowing faces. One of

the impossibly tanned older girls goes to the bottle and holds it above her head.

'Everybody in?' she asks. Nobody answers. Some of the kids smile, some look bored. Laura feels somewhere between frightened and exhilarated.

'You in?' The girl looks at Laura.

'Um, yep,' Laura says, lowering her eyes against the girl's direct gaze.

The girl puts the bottle down on a chilly bin lid. The bottle gleams. The girl spins it. Round and round and round she goes. It becomes not a bottle but a motion, a deep green circle on a white canvas.

The bottle slows. The genie doesn't materialise. The bottle's nose passes Laura three times before it finally stops, pointing away from her, and rolls off the chilly bin to slump into the sand. Laura gulps the last of the wine cooler in relief. The girl that the bottle points to sighs and rolls her eyes theatrically.

'Sam,' she says. One of the boys gets up. He goes to her and kneels in front of her and the girl kisses him slowly. Their mouths are locked for a long time. Their lips are parted like in the movies. There is something going on between them that no one else can see. Laura can't look away.

The girl pulls away and laughs and wipes her mouth with the back of her hand. Sam does the same. He jumps from his knees to his feet and ambles back through the light to the boys in the darkness.

'Got a new girlfriend, bro?' one of them calls.

'Spare it, dickhead,' the girl says. 'You're just jealous.' She gets up and spins the bottle. This time it lands on a boy Laura knows is called Scott, who's here with his big brother and is not much older than her. Scott looks terrified.

'Gotta pash someone,' the girl in charge says. 'Her.'

She points at Laura.

Scott doesn't move. Laura looks at Emma, but Emma is ignoring her, facing away from the game, talking to her friend.

'Go on, Der-brain,' the girl in charge says.

'Go on Scott,' the surfer boys say.

'Far out,' Shelley whispers.

Hannah picks her way over pohutukawa roots in the dark. When she gets back to the caravan there are no lights on. She unzips the awning door as quietly as she can and shuffles inside, her feet rustling the tarpaulin floor. She can hear Adam breathing. She goes to him and kneels beside his camp stretcher. He's so big now. Eleven years old and always too busy for cuddles. It's dark in the awning and Hannah listens to his breathe and remembers his face at two, at three, at four. There are little things about him, faded but unchanging things, that are invisible to everyone but her: the trace of the stork mark he had between his eyebrows; their matching toe nails; the remains of his lisp. She finds Adam's forehead with her hands, and kisses him and tries to block out the overwhelming surge of guilt that crashes over her. Adam turns over and pulls his sleeping bag around himself.

Hannah collects her toilet bag from the table at the other end of the awning and sneaks out. As she crosses the grass to the toilet block, she can see, clammy damp and shiny in the moonlight, a rectangular patch of dirt. It's all that's left where a caravan stood yesterday, this bare patch covered thinly in yellowed grass like an old man's comb-over. Hannah and Malcolm have been here a week. The grass under their awning floor will be dead, too.

In the bathroom mirror Hannah examines herself as she brushes her teeth. She grimaces as she pats her face dry after washing it. Her crows' feet are more frightening than ever under the unforgiving fluorescent lights. She zips up her toilet bag and wanders back through the quiet camping ground.

Scott stands and walks over to Laura. He sits in front of her; they both cross their legs. Laura doesn't know what to do. Scott puts his hands on her shoulders. He leans his face toward her.

'Ready?' he asks. Laura smells Juicy Fruit. She nods.

Scott leans in and puts his lips on hers. Laura's lips are pursed. He stops and leans back.

'Open your mouth,' he whispers. Shelley sniggers.

'Okay,' Laura whispers back. She closes her eyes and opens her mouth. Scott's lips are on hers, pushing her mouth open further. She starts as his tongue wriggles its way into her mouth. She's surprised at how slippery it is. Slippery and raspy, his tastebuds on her tongue like stubble. She opens her eyes and all she can see is nose and forehead and eyelashes, so she closes them again. Just when she's getting the hang of it, Scott pulls away. Laura feels the night air cool the wetness around her mouth. Scott gets up, and saunters back past the fire to the boys.

'What was that like?' Shelley asks, big-eyed and as breathless as Laura.

'Alright,' Laura says, and leans back on her elbows with tingling lips. She grins at Shelley who's grinning at her. Even Emma lifts her eyebrows in approval. Laura looks at Scott, his face cast by the fire. He smiles at her, or smirks. Laura doesn't know him well enough to tell which. One of his friends punches him in the arm.

Scott's actually quite good-looking, Laura thinks. He looks a bit like MacGyver.

'Shit,' Shelley says, and jumps up. 'I was supposed to be back at ten. Come on.'

Hannah undresses in the front of the caravan and slips into bed beside her husband. The bed is smaller than their one at home. She struggles to make enough space for herself.

'Nice walk?' Malcolm asks. His voice is drowsy: trusting and contented.

'I suppose so,' Hannah says. She hates this. She feels toxic, that she is the place where all pain begins. Malcolm turns to her. He puts his hand between her thighs. He buries his face in her neck and kisses it. His hands are hopeful, exploratory, undemanding. Hannah is sad. How many times has he done this? How many times has she rejected him? She is amazed at his calm resignation. The awning zip opens and closes.

'I'm back,' Laura whispers through the caravan door.

'Off to bed, then,' Hannah says.

'Night.'

Hannah's thirty-six. Nearly thirty-seven. In a month, she'll leave her husband. Laura will take the split the hardest, and when she sits Hannah down, in years to come, and asks her why she did it, Hannah will have no proper answer. That was just how it used to be, she'll say. We fell out of love. We didn't have all this marriage guidance rubbish back then, we didn't know what to do. We were only kids when we got married. Anyway, she'll say, how many of your friends' parents are still married, eh? That's just how it used to be. Then she'll shut the conversation down. Laura's resentment will seep into Hannah slowly over the years, like tar on a hot gravel lane.

In the dark Hannah kisses her husband on the cheek and turns her back on him. He draws his hand away. The caravan is silent.

Maximón incarnate

Guatemala, 1994.

James peered past his snoring neighbour's head and out the window. Nothing much yet. A too-bright sun. A piercing blue semi-circle. Far below, a thick ocean blanket. His mind slipped to black umbrellas, sober briefcases, oyster skies, slippery footpaths.

He recrossed his legs. It was a poor substitute for the need to run and stretch. The movement woke his neighbour, who snorted abruptly and looked around as if to remember where he was. He was in his fifties, James guessed, red and puffy, with lips too big for his face.

'Going on holiday?' the man asked, with a rasping accent and rank breath and bloodshot eyes locked on James's. Bloody Americans. James had managed to avoid a conversation so far. He wasn't about to join one now.

'Yes,' he said, and stood and walked unsteadily to the back of the plane. Through the emergency exit window, he saw something new: coastline, stark and clear and inviting. He watched awhile. The seatbelt light came on. He seesawed back to his seat. His neighbour, now looking out the window, didn't acknowledge him.

The plane sank through the blue. The descent curdled James's stomach and popped his ears and jangled his nerves. He closed his eyes and thought instead about the walk he'd taken in Regent's Park last week. He'd pulled up his shirt sleeve to feel the weak springtime warmth on his freckled arm, just a trace of a sensation. For the next year he would know a far fiercer sun.

He stared past his neighbour's ear and out the window. Mountain and river contours became patchwork fields and hills, then buildings, roads, cars. It all looked ramshackle and dishevelled. It was morning here. The sun was already high.

The plane made a sudden drop. James clenched his jaw and clutched the armrest. No one else looked alarmed. He pulled his guide book out and opened it. It was reassuringly bookmarked with yellow scribbled-on Post It notes. As the plane slowly plummeted, he distracted himself with the ruins of Tikal.

Two hours later, his damp shirt was stuck to a hot, hard, vinyl bench seat. In the midday heat he was full of a journeyman's over-stimulated energy. He felt sick, as if he'd drunk too much coffee. His wallet and passport were stuffed in a flesh-coloured envelope that was belted to his waist. Its rough nylon stitching scratched a doughy patch of skin. He'd shifted the belt a few times, but it kept wriggling back to the same soft bit of underbelly.

The bus he was on was painted in lurid primary colours, inside and out. It had the sinister vivacity of a fairground carousel. Luggage, including James's tightly-packed backpack, was strapped precariously in a pile on the roof. A boy of about ten or eleven was riding up there too, ready to bash and holler if anything went overboard. Inside the bus, bodies were jammed, all covered in the same thin film of dust that James was. People crammed into every available space: sitting; standing; wearing Stetsons; clasping covered baskets of produce; breastfeeding; holding clumps of terrified chickens by their feet.

The man beside James, chewing something, looked at him and grunted. He pointed to James's pink and white speckled knees, which were jammed against the iron bar of the seat in front. James guessed that the man's upward inflection was sympathetic. The bus, in a former and less flamboyant life had been a standard issue US school bus. This didn't bother the diminutive Guatemalans, but it wasn't ideal for a six-foot tall Englishman. He grunted resignedly back, raising his palms in a 'what can you do?' gesture. The man smiled, and resumed his chewing.

Half a foot from James's face, a sleeping baby's head hung backward, mouth open, throat exposed. A bright red blanket, slung on its mother's back, encased the rest of it. The baby's head lolled violently as the broken-

seated bus laboured over potholes and rocks. No one else seemed alarmed. He watched the mother. She held the rail above her head with one hand, swiping wiry black hair off her face with the other. She talked, rapid-fire and staccato, to the woman jammed in front of her. Several women wore similar slings, carrying children like sheaths of corn. Everywhere, there was colour and dust. James tried to ignore the infant's swinging head.

The other few tourists sat beside the glassless windows. In the brightly-coloured throng they stood out like murky plastic bottles in glossy seaweed. They'd been the only passengers to catch the bus from the terminal; everyone else stood on litter-strewn verges and waved it down.

Up the front, a winged Elvis swung from the rear view mirror, holding a guitar and wearing dark glasses. Above the driver, painted in swirling letters, were the words: 'Jesus es mi piloto, nada mi paseran': with Jesus as my pilot nobody shall pass me, James guessed. Various stuffed Simpsons were stacked on the top of the dash. They must have been secured somehow because they weren't rolling and heaving and juddering like the rest of the passengers.

His eyes were closing. He fought them open.

The driver was reflected in the rear view mirror. Sweaty and fat, he was leaning forward in a habitual pose of concentration. His aviator sunglasses hid his eyes, just like his Elvis doll. He glanced over the top of his glasses, in the mirror. Intimidated, James looked away quickly, and felt his usual instinctive loathing of this despised, papered-over timidity.

A stream of familiar pop songs blared out as the bus rumbled along: Spice Girls, Cher, U2. He listened to it all gratefully and watched the dusty shacks and dirty children roll past. The bus's irregular shudders began to feel gentle and hypnotic, like the roll of the Piccadilly line. He closed his eyes, and smells drowned the noise; hot diesel, ancient dust, dank human closeness, poverty.

When he came around, the bus was stopped at a village. So far, then, no machete-armed *banditos* to hijack them, and no AK47-toting police. The damned 'Safety and Security' section of his guidebook had a lot to answer for. The driver was, incredibly, letting more people on. The commotion reverberated like a wave through the bus.

Outside, a boy of four or five ran from window to window, standing on his tiptoes to place melting tubs of glistening white ice-cream into hands that dropped coins in his palm. The hands reminded James of the Once-ler in *The Lorax*. A boyhood memory, tinged with fear.

James stuck his nose out. 'Agua?' he asked, but no sound came. He coughed, and his throat burned. 'Agua?' he repeated.

'Solo helados,' said the boy, and scampered to the next waiting hand as the bus began to move off.

James watched coffee groves and cornfields roll past, recording the sights mechanically, blinking his grit-filled eyes like a camera. Soon enough the bus started down a near-vertical cliff. The driver negotiated hairpin bends on the narrow gravel track with laborious five-point turns, reversing to the very edge of the face. No one else seemed alarmed. James focused on the view, ignoring the drop as the bus belched its way down.

Lago Atitlan revealed itself around a corner, abruptly and all at once. Three absurdly conical mountains framed the still blue lake of unknown depth. James felt light-headed, sick and enthralled.

Slowly the road levelled out. A settlement began to piece itself together. Hand-painted Pepsi logos on cracked concrete walls. Pockmarked plain concrete structures pretending to be restaurants or bars. Bougainvillea. Chickens. Tzutujil kids playing on the roadside. Everywhere, dust, and the washed-out mustard hues dust gives a place. Everywhere, the smell of coffee beans drying in the sun.

A man with long beige dreadlocks wandered in the street, wearing a shabby waistcoat made from the same rich material as the bus women's skirts. A woman with arm tattoos, sitting on the chipped paint of a collapsing step, looked up as the bus stuttered past. Tribes of young

travellers sat in the bars, baring teeth and draining bottles. The bus lurched to a stop. With numbed buttocks, rubber legs and clogged bowels, James gasped at this final jolt.

‘Panajachel!’

He watched the driver holler the word from far away over the bus’s dense chaos. The driver’s gold chain glinted. The angel Elvis grinned savagely. Right, James thought with a weak determination. How do I get the hell off?

Two days later, in the afternoon, he sat in a shaded bar on the village’s main lane, beside the lake. He stirred his coffee. In the shallows, two Tzutujil women washed children and clothes. An old woman hitched up layers of dirty skirts and pissed in the gutter. A waiter went after her with a broom, and she muttered off. James watched the dark stream of urine meandering toward him. The long life milk swirled in his cup, resisting the inevitable mix with the thick Guatemalan brew. James was rested now, clean and hydrated, but still jumpy, still at sixes and sevens, searching his guide book for a sense of adventure.

‘*Lonely Planet?* Are you kidding?’ a voice invaded. Antipodean, James suspected. He looked up into the face and into the sun.

‘Sorry?’ James wasn’t sure if he was asking or apologising.

‘*Lonely Planet.* Jesus, you’d better put that thing away or you’ll be paying triple for everything.’

‘Ah.’ James felt himself close the book and put it away in his rucksack against his own will. He sipped his coffee, trying to look nonchalant yet highly interested in something in the middle distance. Despite this, the Antipodean sat down, turning a chair around and leaning over the backrest in an annoying show of daring and dash: a pirate swinging on to deck, a duke of hazard.

‘You’re new?’ The man tilted his head to get a different perspective of James, then tipped a cigarette out of a battered packet and tapped it twice on the table.

‘Yes.’

‘Well bienvenidos, amigo! Welcome to Gringotenango.’

Gringotenango: James hadn’t heard that before. The sulphuric bite of lit matches, combined with the man’s vague aroma of cheap anti-perspirant, momentarily overwhelmed him. He stared at the table, fighting to control his saliva glands. It would not do to vomit in a cafe.

‘Thanks.’

‘Where’re you from?’ The man waved his Lucky Strikes at him. He shook his head. Surely he would give up and go away soon.

‘London.’ Emboldened by this reminder that he hailed from the epicentre of the commercial world, James looked at the man directly for the first time. Or more precisely: he looked at himself, indirectly. In the man’s mirrored Oakleys he could only see his distorted face gawking back at him, slightly alarmed as usual. The man’s lips, curled in a half smile and surrounded by a good few days’ worth of dark stubble, gave away nothing except his youth—he was probably not yet twenty-five. James wanted to meet people his own age. He pushed the coffee away and started to zip up his rucksack. ‘Look, it’s nice to meet you, but I really—’

‘You haven’t.’

‘Sorry?’

‘You haven’t met me, amigo. I’m Adam.’ Adam’s faded green cap had ‘Cartagena’ embroidered on it in cursive, which was outright showing off. It might as well have read ‘Seasoned Traveller of the Americas’. Outside the bar, a swarm of midges, three metres in diameter, was in a holding pattern.

‘James.’ A dribble of sweat escaped from the back of James’ knee. His bag was packed, the strap in his hand.

‘Beer o’clock, James?’ Adam smiled.

James relented. He released the strap. ‘If you’ll stop calling me amigo.’

‘Sure thing.’ Adam’s voice dropped a semitone. ‘As long as you relax that stiff upper lip, eh?’

Adam swung off the chair, bold and lucid. James watched him put his sunglasses on top of his cap so he could flirt with the girl at the bar. He had the looks to match his confidence. James had never had either.

The two men went round for round, sharing dirty quarts of cerveza that tasted like a cross between Carlsberg and battery acid. Adam had the kind of laid-back charm Australasians were renowned for. His sentences all ended with an easy, questioning upward inflection, and he'd made an art form out of comedic understatement. Like many of the contractors from Down Under who'd worked at James's company, Adam's slow-drawled 'yeahs' and 'nahs' belied an agile, practical intelligence. Rather than brandish their smarts with language, the Antipodeans tended to keep theirs hidden under flat vowels and dim-sounding colloquialisms. James had always found this vaguely noble, somehow, but perhaps they just liked the element of surprise. He decided Adam was alright, for a kid.

The vista of the lake and mountains was perfect and still and unreal; a cinematic backdrop to the afternoon. James began to feel high: the high of being liberated from a scheduled life, the high of talking to a stranger in an unfamiliar country. The sun poured through the dust and stilled the wild dogs in the street.

The bar slowly filled up and began to buzz. James learned that Adam was on what he called his 'big O.E.', bound ultimately for the hard currency and visa opportunities of Britain. He was in no hurry to get there, and had spent the last six months stumbling through the poorer Americas, helping out the odd NGO and doing a bit of bar work here and there. Adam thought that by living in a flea-ridden apartment and teaching five-year-old Tzutujil kids how to count in English he was making a difference. James found himself wishing he had Adam's untroubled relationship with his own idealism.

Out on the street, the big-lipped man from the plane appeared. He carried an expensive-looking camera and was negotiating with a bored-looking shop owner. He looked out of place here; over-ironed and

aggravated, swatting at invisible bugs. James drank his beer and watched him walk past.

James told Adam about his recent release from financial district captivity; how his interest-bearing redundancy windfall was about to be blown on a year's travel, starting in Guatemala, the land of inexpensive Spanish tuition, Mayan mysticism, toucans and over-the-counter Prozac.

'I hope you're not planning on staying in this dive for long,' Adam said. 'Pana isn't Guatemala. It's a bottleneck of tourists buying shitty keepsakes to prove they once had an adventure. You should come with me and see some of this snotty-nosed country for real.'

With an alcoholic objectivity, James considered afresh his delirium of two days ago. He cringed to think about his arrival at his hostel, pale and sweating, groping at his door with the unfamiliar key. Exhaustion and a minor case of culture shock had turned him into an embarrassment.

The pecking order at the plank-walled hostel made him self-conscious too, with its frat boys and eco-warriors, the alpha males claiming the largest hammocks and the best-looking girls. Many of the travellers seemed to be long-stayers, and their inscrutable coolness had leeched any remaining swagger out of James. He'd avoided the shady communal courtyard yesterday and sat in his room instead, reading the same few paragraphs of the Hemingway collection he'd bought at the Waterstone's at Heathrow. He'd imagined the book would make him look sophisticated and glamorous. He'd forgotten that Hemingway always left him feeling inexplicably anxious. Something about the lack of commas unnerved him.

Now he felt bigger. The well-worn Gringo trail, with its full moon parties, haki sacks, cheap weed, ancient ruins and present-tense Spanish wasn't even the real Guatemala. He was backstage, access all areas with a real traveller. Adam was infusing him with his abundant self-assurance, the confidence of youth and beauty. James was flushed with bravado and beer.

'Where are you going?' he ventured. Perhaps the lakeside Spanish tuition could wait.

'Up to the north-west, the highlands. I heard about a project up there, building a school house.'

'Tempting.'

'I'm not going for a few days. Think about it. These outfits can always use extra hands.' Distracted, Adam looked up from his beer and called, 'Hey, Charlie! What's up, bro?'

A man in his sixties with a long grey beard was limping down the street, using a six-foot long piece of serpentine driftwood as a staff. He was wearing a blue- and red-striped cape around his neck. The overall effect was part Christ, part Superman, part train jumping hobo. The man stopped, placed his staff deliberately into the earth, and then raised his head slowly to look up into the bar. James thought of Yoda, and suppressed a snigger.

'Charlie! Up here, dude!' Adam called. 'Come up here and meet my friend James!'

Charlie scanned the bar, left to right, without moving his head. After a moment he saw Adam, lifted his staff in recognition, and climbed the decaying steps. He sat down heavily at the table, nodded at the two men, then picked up a slice of lime and began to suck. This had a sobering effect on James. Adam went to find another glass.

'Hey there,' Charlie said eventually, blinking away the dust, watching James.

'Hi,' James said, fiddling with his beer label.

'Where you from?' Charlie said after a few moments.

'London. You?'

'Oh, round the lake a little bit there. London, huh? I bumped into Lucifer there once. On Regent Street. He looked terrible, real terrible. Godawful limp. I said to him: "Satan, what's wrong? Has there been a revolution in hell? Do you need a place to stay?"'

James laughed. Charlie watched him. James stopped laughing and pretended to cough.

'I... see. Were you... did you live in London then?'

'Naw, I was living in Paris. I was just visiting. Great town though, London, great goddamn town.'

James stared at Charlie, who stared back with his infuriating benign smile. Eventually, Adam returned, the scrape of his chair jarring in James's collarbone. Charlie kept smiling.

'Charlie lives a few bays round,' said Adam.

'So he said.'

'Been here since the seventies, haven't you Charlie?'

Charlie was a vet who'd dropped out and ended up in Guatemala, unable to run as the civil war raged brutally around the lake. But these were better days. His regular US social security cheque, along with the bit of cash he generated from selling skunk to tourists, if not a fortune, went a long way in peacetime Atitlan.

The lake was glazed pink with the sunset, the three volcano silhouettes standing sentinel. The view was, like a mouthful of honey, almost too much of a good thing. Charlie, apparently bored of trotting out his potted history, abruptly changed the subject.

'How long have you been enjoying our Mayan paradise?' he asked.

'Two days. So did the war here affect you?' James asked. He'd had enough condescension for one day.

'Oh, sure.'

Charlie had the vague, bewildered certainty of someone with painful memories only just kept under lock and key. James imagined kidnappings, extortion, threats, disappearances. Charlie suddenly looked even more haggard and beaten. James was chastened. The three men sat quietly, refuelling on the view.

Adam sipped his beer and to James he looked as though he was marinating in his own contentedness. Envy, James realised, had trapped

him this afternoon, so slowly that he hadn't noticed until now, when it was fizzing like acid in his innards.

James sighed.

The feeling disappeared.

James wondered where it had gone. He felt light, untethered, without its unpleasant weight to anchor him. What would he do without it? Float off over the lake?

'Cheerio Lucifer, old man,' Charlie said quietly, in a perfect British accent. James jumped. Charlie had his head tilted back and was watching him, smiling.

'What?' James said.

Charlie chuckled and stood up, attracting stares. 'Well, thanks for the beer,' he said. He pointed his staff at James, lowered his chin and stared out from under his steel-wool eyebrows. 'Don't look back,' he said.

He began to limp down the steps. For a moment he was Jesus, perfect and in living colour, selling ganja in a picturesque outpost in Guatemala.

'I'll come. Up north,' James said to Adam as the old man disappeared around a bend.

Adam laughed. 'Tell me again tomorrow morning and I'll believe you.'

James had no doubt. He was going to build a school house. 'I like your hat,' he said after a moment, giddy with the view, the beer, the hot air pressing on his face, the strangeness of the afternoon.

Adam took it off and put it on James's head fondly. 'It's yours, amigo.'

Ecstasy and agony

London, 1994.

Leaning against a corridor wall with just the crown of her head touching it and everything else pleasantly arched, Claire Rafferty wonders whether she'd rather sleep with Damon Albarn or Liam Gallagher. Neither, she decides. It will always be Weller. With her eyes closed, she hums the chorus to *Girls & Boys* over and over, slower and slower. Her languid melancholy humming can't compete against the thumping bass of the main party room next door. Her cup of vodka spills up her arm. Opening her eyes, she sees brown outlines of damp, like map topography, colouring the ceiling. Her thoughts are still soggy and heavy in her head, but at least they're innocuous. She should be feeling more of a buzz by now.

'Clairebear, you okay?' says a voice and with an effort Claire tilts her head down and lets her shoulders slump against the cool sticky wall. It's her new friend Mole. Claire has never been called Clairebear before. Especially not by a skinny, dark-eyed boy who looks like he should be in a heroin chic spread in *The Face*. Claire smiles at him.

'Why do people always ask me that at parties?' she asks, slurring a little. 'Do I look like a mardy cow?'

Mole takes his incongruously oversized, nail-bitten hands and cups either side of her face, and Claire feels tiny and wonders if Mole has east European ancestry, with hands that sturdy. He leans toward her and kisses her on the tip of her nose.

'You look like a princess. A beautiful ice princess out here on her own in the nasty bright corridor,' he says. 'A princess who needs, at the very least, another drink.' Mole produces from his back pocket a hip flask of vodka and screws the top off with flick, like a bartender, then bows. 'Your highness?'

'You haven't got much left.'

'This is just my portable supply. For when I'm helping damsels in distress.'

'I'm not in distress. I was just taking a breather. I was thinking about Damon Albarn.'

'There you go then. A state of distress if ever I heard one.' Mole fills Claire's polystyrene cup with the nibbled rim two-thirds full and replaces the bottle. 'And to complement the bass notes of potato, may I recommend...' he pulls out of his breast pocket and holds up, like a magician, a little plastic bag, chalky on the inside. There are about a dozen pills left in it.

'I had one already,' Claire says.

'I've had three. I'm fine. Don't worry about it.'

'Go on, then.'

She holds open her palm and when two little pills fall into it she takes a swig of her drink and swallows them straight away. A second later, she is almost retching with the sting of neat vodka in her throat.

'Jesus! Forgot!' she says, gasping, and Mole laughs slowly, pats her on the back and together they glide back into the noise.

The lounge is dark and stained. Two sofas, both covered in tattered white sheets artlessly spray-painted with neon squiggles, are pushed against the walls. The remaining furniture, a couple of armchairs with faded velvet upholstery, is spread through the overgrown garden where a few forlorn fairy lights are flashing. The DJ is hunched over records behind the decks in the corner, headphones pressed against his ear, surrounded by chemically emboldened wannabes making suggestions. He looks pissed off.

Mole takes Claire's cup from her, puts it on a sill and pulls her to the centre of the room where strangers are dancing. What the hell, thinks Claire, and the music is lovely. Swaying her arms feels lovely, and her hips, and her head. The trap door has opened. She swims through it, makes the divine escape from her sad and mundane mind. Eyes closed she dances. She doesn't know how long she's like this for but when the music lifts to a

crescendo so do her arms and she opens her eyes and everyone is dancing with their arms in the air and everyone is grinning. Claire looks at the DJ. He doesn't look pissed off anymore.

'Thank you Mole!' she shouts in his ear just after the beat breaks.

'What for?'

'For coming to get me!'

'You're welcome, princess!'

She smiles broadly at Mole and kisses him on the cheek and he smiles back and kisses her on the cheek and she thinks this is genuine warmth between humans, why aren't we all like this all the time? This is her high. Right now. And they dance and they dance.

Water. Mustn't forget. She spins. A girl behind her has a bottle.

'May I?' she shouts. The girl smiles at her and passes her the bottle and Claire drinks greedily. The girl offers her a stick of gum.

'Thank you so much!' Claire shouts.

'I'm Lou!' the girl shouts. 'I like your skirt!'

'Thanks, I like your eye make up!' Claire shouts back. 'My skirt swishes—want to see?'

'Yeah!' shouts the girl, as though Claire has just asked her if she wants a free holiday. Claire bends her knees one way, then the other, then pirouettes, and the girl claps her hands in delight. 'Again!' she shouts, and Claire obliges.

'What are you doing?' Mole shouts.

'Showing Lou my swishy skirt! It's amazing! Want to see?'

'Go on!'

Claire does her knee bends and her pirouette and Mole is suitably impressed.

'Amazing! Smig! Watch Claire's skirt!'

And so Claire works her way around the room, swishing and spinning, the fluid fabric of her amazing skirt flaring and draping round her legs obligingly, delighting each partygoer in turn. She doesn't see Amanda in her travels. Amanda is the friend she came with. Well,

acquaintance really. They both work at a clothing store in town while they look for real jobs. Worked. Claire got fired last week for turning up drunk. It wasn't the first time she'd done it, just the first time someone complained. Amanda is always up for a party, unlike Claire's sober and fast-diminishing group of university friends. Amanda knows Mole. Or Mole's friend. Or something.

Claire is sweating. Everywhere.

She plonks down on the nearest sofa and closes her eyes and the crook of the back of her neck fits exquisitely well on the top of the sofa. Her legs keep jittering, unable to stop now, but she doesn't mind. She just needs a moment and she'll be back up. Someone takes her hand and begins to rub it with both of theirs. Claire sighs and lets them, the sweat on both their hands surprisingly effective as a massage lubricant. The tiny webs of flesh between her fingers are being manipulated and it is incredibly satisfying.

'Wonderful,' she murmurs to her anonymous masseuse.

'Enjoy it,' a woman's voice says softly and hotly in her ear. 'You look so relaxed, it's beautiful.'

'Bit monged,' Claire says.

'You're alright love,' says the voice in her ear. Two thumbs make rhythmic circles in Claire's palms and then her hands are clasped, held aloft, rocked back and forward. Hands grip her shoulder then slide down her arm, pulling down to her fingertips. Stretch, thinks Claire. I am a cat.

'This is healing,' the voice says. 'Getting rid of negative energy.'

Claire doesn't want to think about negative energy right now. This is a fragile euphoria and one she intends to maintain for some time. She wishes the massage was over now. It feels like her and her masseuse are jammed in a small tent that's hot and dripping with condensation.

'Wake up darling, you're a bit too sweaty. Open your eyes.'

Claire opens her eyes slowly. A woman with oversized false eyelashes, reckless amounts of black eyeliner and a feathered trilby is

staring at her with concern. Claire takes the bottle the woman holds out to her, gulps down water, then turns and vomits down the back of the sofa.

The woman holds Claire's hair as she retches and spits vodka-infused mucous from her mouth.

'Alright love?' the woman says, rubbing her back. Claire nods, eyes closed.

'Might go garden,' she mumbles. She stands and sways and skitters her way through the crowded room, out the side door and into the garden. The night air cools the sweat on her face and body and Claire breathes deeply and shakes her hands. There are people being killed right now in Sarajevo and Rwanda. Not to worry, she giggles. Not to worry. Everything's fine.

There are only a few people in the garden: one couple meshed together, lying in the grass, and two girls, sitting cross-legged on the paving tiles, smoking a joint. None of them notice Claire. She finds a dark patch in the shadow of the flat where nobody will see her. She slowly puts her hands on the ground, then her bottom, then slumps her back against the wall. The sweat on her legs and the clingy synthetic fabric of her skirt form an uncomfortable alliance. Her gum has gone and she clenches and reclinches her jaw, eyes rolling back in her head. She's shivering, she notices, but she's not cold. There's a water bottle lying on its side a few metres away in the grass. She crawls over to it, slowly, and takes a cautious sip. It's water. She crawls back to the wall with the bottle and draws her shaking knees up to her chest and feels the cold air hit the sweat on the backs of her thighs.

Where's Amanda, she wonders as she drinks. Her knees bounce up and down violently. Where the hell am I? She closes her eyes and nods her head in time with the muffled music. How long she does this for, she has no idea.

Someone is saying her name. It sounds as if she is deep underwater. It becomes crisper and clearer. Gradually she becomes aware

of a slight shimmer in her shoulder, which becomes a shake, then a jostle. Claire opens her eyes, annoyed.

‘There you are,’ Mole says, his face close to hers.

Claire is lying on her side on the concrete. She blinks and her vision skips and time skids backward by a second. She blinks again and it does it again. She blinks again and the same thing happens. That’s three seconds now. She flashes her eyes wide open and decides not to blink anymore.

‘Come with me, I’ve got a treat for you,’ Mole says, holding out his hand. Claire takes it, and clammers to her feet. Each step takes an inordinately long time. Alice Cooper she thinks, aware her make-up must have run. As she crosses the threshold and goes inside she’s hit by a wave of heat and noise. There are only a half dozen guys left dancing now, shirts off, hands in the air. A few more people are scattered around the edges of the room, smoking, leaning on each other, exhausted. The room was packed last time Claire was in here. A blurry projection is playing on the side wall. It looks like porn in togas.

‘What’s that?’ she says, then repeats herself twice before Mole understands her.

‘*Caligula*,’ he says. ‘Come on.’ He drags her through to the corridor, then starts to go into a bedroom. As he pushes the door open, an arm blocks the way in.

‘Not tonight,’ a man’s voice says. Claire doesn’t turn to see who’s talking. She peers into the dark room. A half-dozen people are splayed, still and silent, against the walls.

‘She’s alright. She wants to,’ Mole says. Claire’s eye is caught by a flash of light in the room. Time skips backwards by one second and she can see that the flash was a teaspoon catching the light from the hallway, with a lighter held underneath it. Beside the person holding the lighter, a skinny boy is tightening a tourniquet on his arm. Everyone else in the room is staring blankly at the lighter except one girl, who is gazing dully at Claire through half-closed eyes, head tilted back, mouth tilted down. The

door closes firmly in Claire's face. A second later she jerks her head back, eyebrows raised in delayed surprise.

'Not tonight,' the voice says again. Claire frowns.

'Fuck. Come on,' Mole says, and takes Claire back to the main room.

'Where's Amanda?' Claire says, pleased her voice has come back.

'She went into town a couple of hours ago,' Mole says irritably.

'I might head off too,' Claire says, as casually as she can. 'Where are we again?'

'Kilburn.'

'Very nice.' Claire says. She lives in Queen's Park. Mole kisses Claire roughly on the mouth.

'Sorry,' she says, pulling her head away. She feels like a bad sport, like she's being difficult, like she keeps ruining Mole's night. 'Sorry, Mole,' she says again. Mole's face distorts into some terrible thing from a thrash metal album cover as she looks at it. She looks guiltily at the wall behind him.

'Best be off,' she says, but Mole has already disappeared down the corridor.

As the front door shuts behind her, Claire is enveloped by the safety of the cold windless night. She's forgotten her coat, but she doesn't need it. Time skips and slurs in her wake as she stumbles down the street, still high enough to be unafraid of what might lurk in the shadows she passes. If she keeps walking long enough she'll recognise something. Back at her flat, Sonja will be sleeping restlessly until she hears Claire deadbolt the door behind her. Sonja holds the lease on the flat and she's just given Claire two weeks' notice. Claire doesn't mind. Sonja's too much of a Horlicks and Corrie girl for Claire anyway. Claire is making new friends now. People who like to have a good time.

She'll always remember that arm tonight, barring her way, the door slamming in her face, the voice beside her that she didn't turn to. Perhaps she should straighten out her act like her friends keep telling her, one by one, before they stop calling. But she's willing to try anything to stop her

mind dragging her down all the time. She can't go to the doctor, what would she say? That vodka and anything Class A seem to be keeping the blackness at bay quite nicely? That she just needs something to take the edge off those creaking few hours of sobriety each day?

Claire shudders as the cold breaks through her skin. She looks to the sky and sees the moon hanging in the concrete dawn and realises that she's being ridiculous. She's just having fun. There's nothing to worry about. It's the comedown talking. It's going to be a long, numb day. She needs a drink.

Y2K

London, 1999.

Adam Lang turns on BBC1 at ten-thirty in the morning on the last day of the millennium. Keeping one eye on the telly, he makes himself a plunger of coffee, and some marmite toast. The commentator tells him that the first major city to see in the new year will be Auckland, New Zealand, and that they'll be crossing there live, just before eleven, for the big moment. Adam realises that Terry Wogan calling Auckland a 'major city' is largely for dramatic effect, but he still feels a whisper thrill when he hears his little homeland mentioned on telly for something that doesn't involve Jonah Lomu. There's no time for a shower, so he settles down on the sofa with the toast, the coffee and a fizzing glass of vitamins. James and Kate, his flatmates, file in and slump beside him in their pyjamas. Together they watch a parrot in South Wales who can squawk the chorus to 'Millennium' by Robbie Williams, a voluntary fire brigade in Cornwall that's on standby should the impending Y2K computer failures result in Exeter going up in flames, and three members of an Irish boy band talking about their celebration plans, which, by the sound of them have already involved several pints of Guinness. Finally, says Terry, they're crossing to Auckland.

'Here we go,' Adam says, leaning forward.

'How long ago did you make that cafetiere?' Kate asks. Adam ignores her.

'Is it still hot?' Kate asks, touching the side of the plunger.

'Shh,' Adam says. 'Auckland.'

'Aw,' Kate says, putting her arm around him. 'Look, he's all excited. Bless.'

A young man appears, talking to camera with a robust kiwi accent. The new millennium is about to begin, he shouts, and down here in New Zealand, they're kicking it off in style.

'Show us then,' Adam says.

The camera pans around. Sleet rain the colour of lead fills the screen.

'Telly ont' blink again?' James asks in his faux northern git accent. Kate giggles into her stolen coffee. The reporter babbles about the Sky Tower and Split Enz. Adam can just make out a chant, backwards from ten, amidst the fuzzy noise of the rain. At 'one', a faraway cheer rings out, and a tiny spark of light zips across the screen.

'Spectacular!' shouts the reporter as the shot changes to him standing in a sea of grinning, waving people in raincoats. 'Not sure if you can see that Terry, but the new millennium's off with a bang. Heppy new year!'

'Heppy new year!' shouts the eager crowd around him.

'Back to you Terry!'

'Thanks Rob,' the commentator says. 'And as Y2K celebrations officially kick off around the world, we're getting ready for the big one... that's right, we'll be crossing live to Sydney in a couple of hours.'

Adam tunes out as the commentator starts reciting the obscene amount of money Australia has spent on ensuring it outdoes the rest of the world in the ostentatious party stakes. James has virtually disappeared under the duvet, the beginnings of a snore emanating from him.

'Wow. Auckland,' Kate says. 'So, uh, you related to any of those people in the background?'

'Shut up,' Adam says, smiling. 'And make me some more coffee.'

Claire Rafferty walks, scarf and gloves on, with her friend Esther. They're on their way from Claire's flat in Kensal Rise, where they both stayed last night, to Golborne Road. The mid-winter light and spindly bare tree branches are easy on their eyes.

Heading for their last custard tart of the millennium from the Lisboa Patisserie, they amble through the angular shadow of Trellick Tower. The screams of the A4 are being blown in the opposite direction by

the slight breeze, giving the neighbourhood a tranquil feel. The Golborne Road is still dishevelled, wiping sleep from its eyes and rubbing its hair. Claire and Esther walk past grocers, where crates of produce are being set up on the pavements. Past an antique dealer rolling out his heavy unstealables to entice passing trade. Second-hand clothing stores belch endless rails of retro apparel onto the street and a Halal butcher proprietor searches his bag for the keys to open up. A Moroccan man carefully places tagine pots in neat lines on trestle tables, and smiles at Esther when she stops and rubs the leather of his pyramid-shaped lampshades. Claire revels in the scene. She has lived in west London since she arrived here from Leicester seven years ago, just another insecure and earnest graduate. As often happens to insecure and earnest graduates trying to make it in the city, she'd fallen into a deep depression, waded through it drunk and high, barely scraping enough together for the next packet of Marlboro Lights, bottle of vodka, gram of charlie, bag of pills. Eventually, calling on her last remaining self-preservation instincts, she'd come out the other side a teetotaller with a proper job in marketing, a fierce nicotine addiction and the occasional panic attack as souvenirs of her lost years.

The little tiled cafe, wedged snugly between a dental surgery and a Portuguese gift shop, is still empty, so Claire and Esther claim an outdoor table and settle in under the red plastic awning. An intergenerational collection of people from around the planet is beginning to bustle in the street, a little more self-consciously than usual, Claire thinks. People acknowledge each other, nodding as if to note the importance of this unique day. Toddlers cruise past in strollers, old men in black hats walk slowly with their sticks. Claire and Esther take their gloves off to smoke, revealing cold red fingers.

'You still keen?' Claire says. 'It'll be utter madness. We'll have to walk home.'

'Absolutely,' says Esther. 'We're doing this.'

Adam leans backwards on the railings over the Thames and looks at Big Ben. Just after eight. His bottle of vodka is two-thirds empty. James's transistor is blaring tinnily, the announcers providing constant updates on the capital's riverside celebrations. Adam can hear bass notes of loud music coming from up on Victoria Embankment. Surrounded by cosy couples and the odd brave family, Adam has the distinct feeling that down here on the sedate riverfront, he's missing the party. And with vodka-and-lemonade fizzing along his veins, a party is what he is looking for.

'Might go for a walk,' he says. James frowns.

'You won't get back down here if you leave now. Radio says the River of Fire's coming up soon.'

'I'll take my chances.'

'Adam,' says Kate, as he turns to leave. He turns back to face her.

'Happy new year, kiwi,' she says hugging him, unusually affectionate. She kisses him on the lips, lingers unexpectedly, tastes salty.

'Easy tiger,' Adam says, grinning and pulling away. Kate looks hurt. 'Happy new year gorgeous,' he says, bending close to her ear.

The security guard waves him through the barricade, off the Thames path and up onto the embankment. It takes Adam ten minutes to push his way through the crowds leaning on the barricades. There's no way, he realises, that he'll get back down to the riverfront tonight. On the way to the sound stages, he sees a phone box with, miraculously, nobody in it. He jumps in and closes the door. The operator puts through his collect call to his father in New Zealand. Adam can hear a low rumble hanging in the air.

'Dad! Happy new year! I'm just under Big Ben! They're going to light up the Thames with fireworks in a minute!'

'They already did.'

'What?' The rumble is getting louder.

'The River of Fire. I just watched it on TV. Didn't really work, unfortunately. Fizzer of Fire, more like! Happy new year anyway son. Having a nice time?'

‘Eh? But I was just—’ The rumble is so loud now Adam can’t hear himself speak. He stops talking and looks out the window as the deafening roar continues. It’s coming from above, but Adam can’t see anything making the noise.

‘What the hell is that?’ he shouts into the mouthpiece. He hears the timbre of his father’s voice but can’t make out any words with the roar ringing around.

‘Can’t hear anything dad. Call mum for me, tell her I’ll ring her tomorrow,’ he shouts before hanging up and stepping out into the roar and looking skyward like everyone else.

‘What the hell is that?’ Claire shouts to Esther.

‘What?’

‘What’s that noise? It’s hurting my ears!’

‘Concorde! Fly over!’ shouts Esther, pointing to the sky with one finger and swigging from her plastic bottle filled with pinot grigio. Claire looks into the dark sky.

‘What? Where is it then?’

‘Concorde! Three hundred metres!’

‘I can’t see it.’

‘Concorde!’ Esther stretches out her arms like wings. ‘Big plane! Flying low!’

‘I know what Concorde is. I just can’t bloody see it.’

‘What?’

‘Where. Is. Concorde.’

‘Clouds!’ shouts Esther. ‘Clouds too low!’

Claire opens her mouth to reply, but decides instead to wait for a minute, until the noise diminishes. She looks around and sees that everyone else is doing the same; people are standing, mid-gesticulation, waiting for the noise to stop so they can carry on their conversations.

‘Jesus, I thought that was going to burst my eardrums,’ Claire says as the noise begins to recede. As she speaks the salsa band on stage counts

itself back in and the dancing recommences as though everyone has been released from a naughty fairy's spell.

'Loud alright,' says Esther, taking another swig and bursting into an amateur merengue. Claire bursts out laughing at her friend.

'You look like you need the loo.'

'Syncopation,' calls Esther over her shoulder. 'Everyone'll be doing it next millennium. Come on!'

Claire takes her friend's hand and follows her into the throng.

The major benefit of a year spent bumming around the Americas, thinks Adam, is that you pick up Latin dancing by osmosis. He flew into Mexico City with two left feet. When he flew out of La Paz twelve months later, he'd somehow had the steps and the rhythms beaten into him so that he could hold his own with the locals. Even in Columbia, where they took their salsa very seriously indeed. Now that's broadening your bloody horizons, he thinks, as he twirls a delighted Gerri from Clapham under his arm. He's not sure how many women he's danced with in the past few hours, but including Gerri from Clapham, he must be in the double digits.

Adam waves defeat at Gerri and moves to lean against a bench to watch the sweaty, heaving mass of people dancing under the floodlights in the foggy air. He gulps down the last of his vodka. Kate and James don't know what they're missing, down there listening to the bloody radio and shivering in their coats. Adam looks around, and can see a New Zealand flag held aloft in the crowd, and a few Australian ones, and Canada's maple leaf here and there. He checks Big Ben again, and realises with a start that it's already ten to midnight. He thought he'd have some sort of internal alarm clock that would go off and release an appropriately momentous sense of occasion. He tips his bottle upside down and shakes it to make sure it's empty, and as he does he sees a woman laugh at him. She has dark, dark hair and her eyes glitter.

'I think it's empty,' she says, and laughs.

'I think you're right,' he says. 'Bugger.'

'Where're you from?'

'Hammersmith. You?'

'No—I mean your accent. Where are you from?'

'Oh. Auckland. New Zealand. First major shitty to see in the new year.' Quite drunk now, he thinks. Hope she missed the slurring. He turns his megawatt smile on, the one that gets favours, to distract her, and she smiles back and looks kind and beautiful. He'll do anything to get her to stay with him for a few more minutes.

'Happy new year, New Zealand.' She turns away, and taps her friend on the shoulder. Her friend, like most people here, is dancing with nobody and everybody. The woman says something to her friend, who raises her arms up into the air and whoops.

'Hey what's your name?' Adam shouts, and she turns back and he is relieved. They both cheer the band, which has just finished its set with a dramatic flourish on the congas.

'Claire,' she shouts as they both clap, arms above their heads, side by side.

'Adam. Happy new year, Claire.' As Adam says this the opening bars of Prince's 1999 clang out. Someone has turned up the volume.

'Oh! God!' Claire says, and takes Adam's hand. 'This is it! Esther! This is it!'

Esther turns to Claire. 'This is it!' she yells, eyes shining, pointing at Big Ben. 'Look! Two minutes!'

Claire laughs. The three of them dance, grinning like maniacs, watching each other, the crowd, the clock. Esther plays air guitar, Adam points his fingers to the sky like an idiot, Claire shimmies and pretends to hold a microphone and sings the chorus. As the minute hand on Big Ben begins to creep to the twelve, a countdown comes echoing up from the river, reaching Adam and Claire and Esther in time for them to join in the last few seconds. The three of them hold hands, and form an impromptu circle with another group of strangers. At midnight the chimes vibrate through the cold air and cheering breaks out across the embankment.

Claire and Esther hug each other, squealing like children, then Claire puts her arms around Adam's neck. He puts his arms around her waist and lifts her in the air. As she slides down his body, she kisses him, and the noise of the crowd disappears for a long moment. Claire leans back and regards him, still grinning. She leans forward until their noses and foreheads touch. Adam kisses her again and knows that something important has just happened.

'Cigarettes,' he says. 'Happy new year.'

'Alcohol,' Claire says, smiling. 'Happy new year.' Adam is struck, again, by how kind she looks, before her expression changes to panic. 'Shit! Esther!'

They break apart, holding hands, and see Esther a few metres away, kissing and hooraying in turn with each member of a group of girls wearing stars-and-stripes face paint.

'She's absolutely pissed. I mustn't lose her,' Claire says.

'We won't lose her,' Adam says.

Forever now

Auckland, 2001.

It's a summers' afternoon in Ponsonby. Two women climb into a late model Audi hatchback on Richmond Road. The car moves thirty metres up the street and stops. The two women get out. The car makes a noise, bleep-blop; its doors are locked. The two women who've emerged from its interior are young. Ish. Early thirties. For a moment the smell of car leather on them is strong. Then it fades, and the floral notes of their perfumes emerge. One of the women smells of jasmine. She has pursed lips, it is her natural expression. She carries her whip-thin frame purposefully; this tells us she's in charge. Her dark blue jeans are tucked in at the knees, to a pair of black boots. Her blouse, pale in colour, has elaborate pin tucks that shape it in at the diaphragm and feathered sleeves that ruffle, like tiny flags, in the breeze. The other woman smells of rose. Her jeans are baggy at the knees. Her cotton shirt is crumpled, pulling at the buttons, and around her upper arms the fabric is stretched tight.

The women walk toward a messy pyramid of junkyard rubble lying on a verge. It's one of many piles dotted along the street. Pursed lips walks first. She quickens her step when she sees a rusty ute, its trailer laden with scraps of metal, slowing to approach the heap from the opposite direction. She reaches the pile and bends to inspect an ancient armchair with faded velour upholstery. She tucks her poker-straight hair behind her ears, shakes the armchair to extract it from the pile, and turns it upside-down on the roadside verge.

Bonus, she says. No borer.

The other, crumpled, woman has stopped. She is looking at a feijoa tree in somebody's front garden.

The ute makes a loud u-turn in the wide street and pulls up. A family tumbles out. The parents quickly scan the pile. The father spies an old

barbeque. He rips the gas burners from the frame and lobs them into the truck trailer. Pursed lips scowls in the direction of the noisy intrusion. The children roam up the road. The crumpled woman watches them.

The man drops the gutted barbeque back onto the pile and casts his eyes over the rest of the junk. He snorts and shakes his head, walks back to the ute and starts it.

Oi! the mother shouts to the children.

The children scuttle back to the ute and shuffle into the back seats.

The Audi bleep-blops; its doors are unlocked.

Em, says the pursed-lipped woman. The crumpled woman doesn't hear; she's watching the ute rattle up the road in first gear.

Em, she says again. She is frowning very slightly, which, combined with her lean frame and feathery blouse, gives her the appearance and demeanour of a distressed emu. Give us a hand, she says.

The crumpled woman lets go of a feijoa branch, covered in red flowers, that she's holding. Sorry, she says, and hurries to where the woman with pursed lips is trying to heave the armchair into her boot.

The women try the chair first at one angle, then at another. Finally it is in. They shut the boot and get into the car. Up they speed, along the wide winding avenue, past the piles of junk and the people combing through them, toward the Waitakeres, toward the sun, toward Westmere.

Look at you, you're horrified, Laura says, and she laughs. Emma isn't at all horrified. She's watching the graceful way Laura's arms move when she drives. That grace... Laura got it from their mother. Emma didn't inherit. Laura's movements are incongruous with her harsh laugh.

Horrified? No. What about? Emma says.

Listen, I know people who've decorated entire houses with stuff other people were throwing out. That chair'll look amazing with the right print fabric.

Oh. Right.

Laura seems to be making some oblique point about the virtuosity of scavenging for second-hand household items. Or perhaps she's congratulating herself on finding a diamond in the rough. Emma can never tell what her sister is trying to say any more.

The Audi overtakes the ute family. The mother is expertly examining another collection of flotsam and jetsam. The children have found an old toy motorbike and they're riding it on the footpath. The father is deconstructing a coffee table, removing and discarding the glass top, tossing the metal frame into the trailer. Emma turns her head to watch them out her window. One of the kids waves at Emma. Emma waves back.

I don't know where I'll store it though, Laura is saying. Thank god Al's away. I'll slip it into the garage with the others. Hopefully he won't notice.

Hmm, Emma says. She'd better say something else, show interest. It'll look nice when it's fixed up, she says. Laura ignores her.

Ooh, look at that, Laura says, pointing at an old shipping trunk in one of the piles. A well-dressed woman is lifting its lid, checking the catch. Bitch, Laura says as they drive past, but she says it in an admiring, almost sing-song voice. Emma supposes this means that Laura would like to have found the trunk. This is Laura's turf they're on, as usual. Laura calls the shots, Emma is here by invitation only, behaving, deciphering, responding.

Laura's phone rings. Laura makes a 'tch' noise but she bends down to where her handbag is, beside Emma's feet, finds her phone with one hand, and looks at the number. A public transport devotee, Emma hardly ever drives these days; she's impressed by Laura's acrobatics.

'Work,' Laura says. 'Sorry.' She puts the phone to her ear as she rounds a sharp bend.

'Hi. Yeah. No... No, next week... No. I'll do it... Okay. Bye,' she says in a clipped voice, then pushes the off button. 'Jesus. You'd think they could live without me for a few days.'

Laura and Alistair are everything Emma and Ed aren't: fit, solvent, sensible, upwardly-mobile. Laura is an accountant. Alistair does some kind

of inexplicably highly-paid work for a multinational—he’s explained it to Emma a few times, but she can’t even remember what his job is called. Laura once told Emma that they each have their own retirement savings fund, which Emma found incredible, given her own non-existent future planning.

Emma, on the other hand, is a somewhat impecunious freelance journalist and Ed, well, Ed works various jobs. Editing film is his preferred occupation, but when times are tough he’ll turn his hand to anything. Which means Emma gets free lattes when he’s shifting at the cafe up the road.

A sweet pain throbs every few seconds in Emma’s temple, and she can feel her complacent mood beginning to deteriorate. It’s being replaced by a vague, static electric agitation. She sips on her water bottle. The Audi roars up the avenue, past chestnut after chestnut. Emma feels nervous and she watches for children, squinting behind her sunglasses as light glitters around her and onto the backs of her retinas. Auckland. Full of image-obsessed caffeine addicts who don’t see the point of recreational thinking. One more week and she’ll be back on that plane. Back to her green and pleasant land.

Westmere is full of families, Emma notices, as they drive past the shops. Dads in baggy shorts push Darth Vader-style three-wheeler strollers, while tiny, tucked-in trendy mums trot beside them, eyes hidden behind sunglasses. Laura and Alistair will doubtless get on with the business of making a family as soon as they’re married, and they’ll do it as efficiently as they do everything else. Emma’s virtually given up on talking to Ed about having kids. He just laughs and calls her a broody mare and tells her they can’t afford it. Then he changes the subject.

The car pulls into the driveway of the renovated bungalow with the peek of the harbour that Laura and Alistair bought together a few months ago. It was their engagement present for each other. Laura poured in her life savings, and Alistair sold his apartment in Ponsonby at a profit as tidy as the trimmed pittosporum hedge that surrounds their section. Emma

helps her sister manhandle the armchair into the garage, where they leave it behind Laura's other projects: a Queen Anne sofa with dodgy squabs but pristine rattan, and a curvy Art Deco leather armchair with two large springs protruding from its seat.

Inside, Laura pours two glasses full of wine and plops down on her sofa.

Job well done, she says, and smirks. Sorry if I offended your delicate sensibilities. When Ponsonby starts throwing out its junk it pays to be the early bird.

No, its fine, Emma says, again. We go skipping loads. Once, we found a bedside table in St Pauls, and then a year later we found another exactly the same in Clifton!

Laura's never been to Bristol. She can't know that Clifton and St Pauls are about as alike as Herne Bay and Otara. She looks bored with the story, or perhaps disappointed not to be shocking her older sister. Emma wants to make her feel better.

We only do it because we can't afford proper furniture, Laur. Not like you. You make stuff look brilliant.

At this Laura rallies. She rubs her hand along her three-seater. This was a garage sale find, she says. Fifty bucks. In Avondale, of all places. I recovered it myself with vintage linen.

What a bargain, Emma says.

Totally. You have to get up so early to find anything at garage sales these days. You have to be there, like, right on opening.

Really.

Uh-huh. I plan my route the night before.

Laura starts pointing at the objects in the room and recounting how much she paid for each and where she found it. Crisis averted. Emma sips her wine. She doesn't want it, it'll make her headache worse. She goes to the fridge. The labels on the food and drink in there look almost surreal, like they're from a dream she had long ago. She holds up a Just Juice tetrapak, and gazes at the vague familiarity of the design, trying to

understand what she feels. It's something to do with being a child. It's something to do with heaviness. It's similar to the feeling she used to get when she'd look into a tide pool on the rocks, amazed at the worlds in there, but a little frightened of the tiny crabs and spiky kina. She wonders if this is peculiar to her. Her brother will arrive from London in a couple of days. She'll have to compare notes with him.

She pours a tumbler full of juice. She's due to visit her mother tomorrow; she needs to hydrate if she's going to keep up with Hannah. In her little rental car she can still—just—follow her nose from Laura's, to her mother's apartment in Mt Eden and over the bridge to her father's villa in Narrow Neck. Every time she comes to visit, her mother is a little more flamboyant. Her father has a few more lines and a little less hair. Her sister is a little more... gleaming. Emma makes her way back to the sofa.

She's a nightmare, Laura is saying, downing the not insignificant remains of her wine.

Who? Emma says.

Mum. Wants to help. At this last word, Laura makes quote marks in the air with her fingers. Emma has no idea what she's talking about.

She'll sabotage the whole thing, Laura says. She narrows her eyes. You don't live here. You don't know what she's like. Emma realises Laura is talking about the wedding. As chief bridesmaid, is it now time for Emma to provide her sister with some sensible and heartening advice? Probably. Emma's never been a bridesmaid before.

Why don't you give her a little job. Let her sort out the flowers, she offers, and hopes this is the right thing to say.

Because I don't want to end up with some of her godawful mid-life crisis bourgeoisie boho shit. Daisies. Or fucking lavender. I want peonies.

Peonies flower in spring. They'll be finished now.

You know what I mean. Something nice.

Emma sighs. Heaven forbid her sister should have to walk down the aisle holding something as déclassé as a bunch of daisies.

Is she really that bad? She means well, surely? Emma says. She sees her mother once every couple of years at the most. Menopausal, DIY-mad Hannah is a force to be reckoned with. She's come a long way from the unsure, apologetic woman who divorced Emma's father when Emma was a girl. Emma's proud of her mum. But then, Laura's right. She doesn't live here. She's not constantly exposed to Hurricane Hannah.

She bloody doesn't mean well, Laura says. She's being a complete bitch.

Why?

She doesn't like Al. I can tell. She thinks we're not in love. Not like you and Ed. Or Adam and Claire. She thinks that because we're not behaving like a couple of star-struck bloody teenagers that we're not in love. Stupid cow.

But you are. Aren't you? Emma needs to know. Everything her sister does is so controlled, so organised. Like tightly-tucked, starched hotel bed sheets with no wiggle room. Emma wonders if there's enough space for an emotion as big as love in her life. Oh, but this is a terrible thing to have asked, Emma knows. Especially right now. She wonders about her own motivations sometimes. Is she jealous of Laura? Could she be?

Of course I bloody am, Laura says, her voice thin and reedy. Of course we are. How can you even ask that?

You're right. Sorry. Look, maybe mum just... she knows how hard divorce is. Maybe she's just being protective.

By turning her nose up at Al? Nice.

How do you know she doesn't like him? What's she actually done? Emma says. She's on a roll, it seems. The big sister in her has come out to play. She's just trying to find out what's going on. She's not trying to be combative. Or is she? Think before you say anything else, she tells herself between the throbs in her temple. Think.

Laura faces her sister directly and regards her. There is a familiar self-righteous tilt to her chin. Emma holds her breath.

What the hell does she know about marriage anyway? Laura says finally. Nothing, that's what. How not to do it. She bottled it. Bugger the kids. It was selfish, what she did. Selfish.

Calm down, Laur. Please, Emma says, and goes to her sister and rubs her shoulders. Laura is breathing fast and her eyes are darting around the room. As Emma rubs, she feels Laura's shoulders ease down. It takes a while.

It's going to be a lovely wedding, Emma says. He's a lovely man.

He is, Em. He really is. Oh, god, maybe I'll let her do the flowers.

I'll make sure she gets what you want, Emma says, and leans over her sister's shoulder to kiss her on the cheek.

Is it possible to know someone so deeply, for years, and then not know them at all? Emma hopes not. The very thought terrifies her. Emma knows her sister. She knows the shape of her toes, the way she moves. She knows she slept with a picture of Simon Le Bon under her pillow for two years, that strawberries have always been her favourite food. She knows Laura's never forgiven their mother for the divorce, that she barricades against change because she thinks change means pain. She knows Laura is capable of deep love, and she knows they'll both make wonderful mothers. She is not lost to me, Emma thinks. I know her. The woman on the couch beside me is not a stranger.

'When are you going to come home?' Laura says, eyes closed, as Emma finishes her massage. 'You're can't stay over there forever, you know.'

'Not forever,' says Emma, thinking how nice it will be to get home, to Ed, to their little flat. 'Just for now.'

Still life

London, 2003.

Veronica and I met Bridget and Mike at an antenatal course filled with the kind of people who would happily part with cash in order to learn to swaddle a plastic doll. We never really bonded with them. They were far more earnest about the whole pregnancy thing. Bridget raved to Veronica about her Prenatal Yoga class at a new age centre in Highbury. Mike told me in his booming, shamelessly enthusiastic voice, about the pain-relieving power of sacral massage.

They lived in sensibly-shod Muswell Hill, having cut themselves off from London's sharper-edged hamlets. They'd claimed a Victorian terrace with tidy ticks in every middle-class box: south-facing, Farrow & Ball eggshell paint on the walls, original features, half a mile from Coldfall and Rhodes Avenue schools. When the time for school came however, they lamented, there still were no guarantees of a placement; just take a look at the high street at eight-fifteen every morning, the daily caravan of shiny SUVs trouping up into the wilds of Bounds Green—or beyond. But, having fled the flatland scrum of the inner city and surrounded themselves with fellow watchers of BBC2 documentaries and lovers of farmers' markets, they felt an easing in their throats and shoulders. Central London is for the very poor and the very rich, they said. And they can have it.

We, on the other hand, lived just off the Finsbury Road in a first floor flat behind Nandos. We sometimes called it Crouch End, usually to unfamiliar people at parties, in a kind of micro-pretension. Our entire flat was only marginally bigger than Mike and Bridget's freshly-painted nursery. We shopped at Tesco; they had free trade Waitrose goodies delivered in an eco-van. They went to wine appreciation evenings at the local Nicolas; we specialised in the eager drinking of discounted Chilean reds.

During our first antenatal class, held in a small hot, nicotine-stained room that had last been decorated in the 70s, I lost the respect of Mike, Bridget and many of the others. It was during the compulsory watching of the dreaded 'Birth Story' video. Ours involved a Dutch couple (and it's always a Dutch couple, I've since established through anecdotal research with other fathers), a Swiss ball, a birthing pool and a considerable amount of otherworldly howling. To be fair, I was sitting just a metre from the screen and the video was very graphic. My brain obviously couldn't cope with the sight of the poor woman's snatch expanding out of all reasonable proportion and decided instead that the most manly thing to do was to just ignore the visuals and focus on the sound. The sound, an animalistic call and response, went: pained moan, supportive groan, pained moan, supportive groan. Occasionally an indecipherable Dutch murmur from the midwife, but mainly just the moans and groans. Repeating at a steadily increasing pace and pitch, the noises became more and more comedic, and halfway through the crowning I had to leave the room, completely and helplessly overcome with giggles. I excused myself by making a fist and banging my chest with it, indicating, I hoped, that I was in the midst of an uncontrollable coughing fit.

Once outside the confines of the room, the sounds instantly ceased to be amusing, but I went to the men's and splashed some water on my face anyway. I waited until the video had finished before I went back in, just in case.

What the hell was that? Veronica hissed when I took my seat beside her again, and the laughter once again threatened to spasm out of me.

Sorry.

Jesus.

For the rest of the session I felt extraordinarily self-conscious, and had an unrelenting urge to clear my throat. I tried to get involved, joining in the discussions on birth plans with what I hoped was a serious and compassionate point of view, but the damage had been done; according to

the faces of the group, I was just not taking this whole fatherhood thing seriously.

I pulled it together in the next session though, managing to look on attentively while Veronica took her turn at clumsily pretending to breastfeed a doll. I even got my answer right when we blokes had to name the parts of a woman's reproductive anatomy (the uterus, and a lucky guess, in my case). But the giggling, a kind of terror-based hysteria really, was only just containable during our group's mandatory hospital visit.

There are few things more intimidating than a guided tour of a labour ward. For a start, the decrepid exterior of the Whittington didn't inspire any kind of belief that it was a modern hospital with state-of-the-art medical facilities. Inside, over-crowded wards just made things feel even more desperate. But the delivery suite was the real kicker. The high white bed stood, surrounded by strange-looking apparatus like chattering ladies-in-waiting around an imperiously silent queen. The gas-and-air machine, which we all had a turn on, seemed to me to be ridiculously ineffective. But most terrifying of all was the forlorn little brown visitor's chair, sitting humbly in the corner, trying to stay out of the way. I was as wide-eyed and frightened as a schoolboy on his first visit to the dental clinic.

We ended up in that very same suite.

Veronica had an endless labour. Contractions every six minutes for three days. Cervix doesn't want to open, they'd say. Quite common. Try to rest. Demoralised and exhausted, she was stuck in limbo, not giving birth but unable to sleep or eat.

I, on the other hand, felt like a superhero. At work, I explained proudly that my phone needed to stay on in meetings: my wife was due to have a baby!

When the call finally came, I hopped from foot to foot on the platform at Farringdon, staring down the tunnel to make the train come quicker. Wishing I had a car so I could scream through the streets of

Islington, preferably with a police escort wailing in front of me, like a high-speed diplomat.

After we'd been admitted the consultant came to check Veronica, and declared that she was two centimetres dilated. A victory against her stubborn cervix: Veronica was clearly buoyed by the good news, and told the consultant that she'd been in labour for three days.

Oh, you're not in labour yet love, the consultant said breezily. I could've punched her.

Veronica threw up later that day, Lucozade and banana, onto my shirt. Her face became purple and grotesque with strain and pain. I was utterly powerless. Asher eventually slithered out. He wasn't breathing. I was utterly powerless. Doctors rushed in, paediatricians, talking kindly and softly to Asher as they gently pumped his lungs with oxygen. Standing behind the doctors, watching, I was utterly powerless. Veronica's face, as the midwife stitched her up, was intent on Asher, staring away the three metres between them and holding him with her eyes. As the whites of the professionals' eyes slowly disappeared I felt faith. Then belief. Then relief. Asher suckled. We'd been lucky.

When the panic subsided, love came quickly and intensely, but those first moments were even more fundamental and profound: life. They say you can see god in every newborn's eyes.

I walked out into the corridor to make some calls, feeling calm and absolutely full of joy. I saw Mike walking toward me, a face from worlds ago. He had a cup of coffee in his hand. I saw him before he saw me. I said hello, eager to share my news, my joy, my pride, my awe and wonder with him, with anyone. I didn't notice his eyes at first.

Is Bridget having the baby? I asked; had his world changed, like mine? I couldn't wait for an answer. Vron's in postnatal now—we've got a boy! She's doing well; it was amazing, actually, I bumbled, my impotence of a few hours ago forgotten.

Then I looked at him properly. His face came into sharp focus. Red-rimmed eyes filled with a pure emotion that I couldn't decipher at first.

Then I realised: it was pain. Something terrible had happened. Everything else sucked away into another part of my brain, like a dream upon waking. I reeled away from him; my body knew before me what was coming. I'd been standing far too close.

We lost the baby, he said slowly. He moved a plastic stirrer mechanically around the black coffee as he spoke. Bridget's still in the delivery suite. She's okay. We lost the baby. The cord...

He stopped talking. We both stared downward, at the yellow bubbles collecting on the side of his cup, at the scuffed green lino. Mike was still.

I thought about Bridget and Mike a lot during Asher's first months. They came into my head unexpectedly and uninvited. Changing Asher's nappy, I'd think how I really should have painted his little room before he was born, and *bam!* I'd see Bridget and Mike's fully-prepared, lovingly-decorated nursery. A heavy sinker would attach itself to my heart, and we'd be off, plumbing the frightening and dark depths of sorrow. I'd put both hands on Asher's tiny chest. Bring my face close to his. Stare into his pale blue eyes. Feel his little heart racing. Eventually, the love and the joy and the thankfulness would overtake the sadness.

Bridget came to meet Veronica and the antenatal girls just the once, before all the babies were born, while the group was stuck in a kind of half-pregnant, half-new mum purgatory. While there was still room for her.

We sent flowers, as a group. We felt bad, as a group. We gossiped about inquiries and blame apportioning. We couldn't talk about their pain or our dumb luck, or even what had happened. Eventually, we stopped talking about them altogether, and after a decent period of unreturned phone calls and emails, closed ranks. Bridget and Mike fell off the email lists. We stopped inviting them to barbeques and coffees. No one talked about whether it was too painful for them, or too painful for us.

I hadn't seen them in nearly a year. Asher and I were in the village square at Crouch End, watching Christmas carollers in the afternoon dusk when I spotted Bridget, Mike and the empty space beside them. I felt a buzz reverberate through me. Asher sat in his stroller, layered up like a Michelin man in his coat and hat and scarf. I put my hands under his little arms, picked him up and held him tight. The rugged-up carollers sang defiantly, demanding we notice the twinkling shop fronts, the old clock tower gussied up with fairy lights and the still air, thick and soupy with twilight and harmony.

We'd left Veronica making mince pies and Asher's supper. Now I was glad she'd stayed home. I shuffled us a few steps back in the crowd, which meant I could sneak looks at Bridget and Mike without them being able to see me, a rubber-necker at a car crash. Mike had his arm around Bridget's shoulder and she was resting her head on his arm. Here they were, listening to carols in this world that carried on regardless of their death and birth. I kissed Asher's cheek, and the love felt unbearable.

Lapis lazuli

Bristol, 2004.

'Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes / Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.'

The morning started ordinarily. Slippers padded gently on wide oak floorboards. The bread bag rustled. Toast popped up too early. The kettle boiled. Next door the noise of the children on the stairs thumped through the wall, muffled but persistent. Emma shuffled around dazed and half awake, buttering toast, making strong coffee. She sat at her kauri farmhouse dining table. It was the one her Dad had grown up eating at, shipped over from New Zealand after her grandfather died. Emma's brother and sister had wanted it too, but Emma, the eldest, had pulled rank. It took up most of her kitchen, that table. She didn't mind. For more than a decade she'd moved it with her from flat to flat, from London to Coventry to Bristol. She'd had it the entire time she'd lived in England. Grounding, it was, with its chunky legs like her kiwi sheila's calves, and its battle-scarred top. She slurped, flicked through a pile of junk. Magazines, bills, letters, flyers, all held down by a lapis lazuli paperweight. At the bottom of the pile, her journal. She pulled it out, rubbed her fingers over its embossed cover print of Klimt's Kiss. The glittery picture always arrested her. Slowed her. Got her into her writing mode, her considering mode, her pondering mode. Opening the journal, she began.

Today I turn 35.

She put the pen down. Though the conservatory, out in her little garden, the ramblers on the back wall were beginning to curl brown at the edges. And it had been the right decision to prune the topiary roses hard eight weeks ago; they were rioting now. She looked back at her words. They

looked almost melancholy. Emma drew breath sharply, sucking it through her teeth. This was not the way to be thinking, not today. She picked up her pen and continued.

Today I turn 35. It is a beautiful late summer's day. Ashley has insisted that I hold a party, so a party it is, and the garden has thankfully agreed to put on a merry show of blooms. I am very much looking forward to seeing my wonderful friends. We're all getting on, all of us, together.

Better. Like a colonial woman's diary, though: easy to read between the chirrupy lines. She picked up her paperweight, rocked it in her hand, felt its satisfying, anchoring heaviness.

The phone rang. It would go to answer phone after two rings. Her friends got frustrated with her screening policy. Why be a slave to technology? Ashley, with his Blackberry addiction, was always peering down his nose at its screen, or punching its microscopic keypad. What's the point of being on holiday if you spend the whole time tapping away on that thing, she'd asked him last year in Morocco. He'd been sending an email from a Marrakesh souk as they sat eating a tagine and watching a snake charmer at sunset. He'd laughed and told her she was grumpy because she wasn't getting heckled by the local men like the travel agent said she would. That had stung a bit, actually.

She took her crumbed plate and coffee mug to the sink. The hot tap streamed cold water as she squirted green dishwashing liquid and listened to the answerphone's beep, and the disembodied voice invading her morning.

Hi Em, it's Laura. Emma imagined her little sister standing with her phone in her kitchen. She'd be fiddling with something, making something perfect. Pulling at her hair, or wiping an already clean bench top. You must be out already, Laura said. She always spoke rapidly into answer phones, as though she was too busy to be bothering with them. Happy birthday. Have a lovely day Em, love from us both.

Emma deleted the message, sponged a coffee spill on her bathrobe. Laura sounded stressed and old. She is old, really, Emma supposed. Laura, at thirty-three, had been with her husband for years, and married for two. If you disregarded chronology, in terms of life stages, Laura and Alistair had years on Emma. When Emma did speak to Laura, it was politely, as if Laura was someone older, someone who needed protection from strange ideas, highs, lows, enthusiasm of any kind. The phone rang again. Emma sat still: moving would give her away. This time it was her mother.

Emma, love, it's me. Happy birthday, darling. Love you heaps and miss you so much. Any plans for a visit home soon? Hope you've planned something nice with your friends. Did you get my package yet? Give us a call.

Emma found herself standing at her double doors looking out. Tears that had welled at the sound of her mother's voice subsided again. She would call them all back later. When she was ready. The morning light sprinkled down, dappling gently through her neighbour's apple tree and into her garden, which was on the decline: exuberant, decaying and wanton. Emma put on Franz Ferdinand, loud, and went upstairs to shower.

Emma walked into town and the gentle sunshine warmed her shoulders through her shirt. Adam, her brother, and his new wife Claire were coming for the party and staying overnight. They were travelling on the train from London, due in at three. After fortifying with caffeine, Emma stopped at the Farmers' Market to buy provisions for Sunday brunch: the Toulouse sausages Adam loved, free-range bacon, tomatoes, local eggs and butter and a loaf of the sourdough Claire liked. Her kete was straining at the seams. She caught the bus home to save her arms.

Opening the little wrought iron gate to her house she put the heavy bag down on the stoop of her two-up two-down. Her keys would be somewhere under all her groceries, too difficult to find. She reached behind the potted fern to retrieve her spare key. The poor wee punga

wasn't doing so well here, on the shadowed, north-facing side of her little house. She replaced the key and shuffled down the corridor to the kitchen with her kete. There were another three messages waiting.

Emma, it's Dad. How are you? Happy birthday old girl. She smiled. Mid-thirties, eh, it's official, his gentle voice continued. Have a great day. Give my love to Adam and Claire, they're looking forward to seeing you. He chuckled self-consciously into the machine. His laughter transformed into a long beep, followed by Ashley's voice.

Darling, are you up? Prosecco or the real stuff? I'm going to Threshers and I need to know budget. Call me asap. He'd called an hour and a half ago. She listened on to the next message: Ashley again.

Em, happy birthday and all that, but call me, please? We've a party to organise.

She sat down. Ashley was exhausting her already, and it wasn't even lunchtime. Reluctantly, she dialled his mobile.

Where have you been? he demanded and she could see him stopping dramatically in the street.

At the market. Adam and Claire are staying.

Oh god. Loved-up sibling descends for your official mid-thirties singleton desperado moment. How tragic.

Thanks.

Teasing. Now look. I'm on my way to get the booze now. Bellinis with prosecco, I've decided. And Peroni for the philistines. We can talk about food at lunch. Carluccios. Twelve-thirty. Yes?

When you say 'yes' like that you sound like Gordon Ramsey.

Touché. See you at twelve-thirty. Ashley rung off. Emma sighed. There was a man in overdrive.

They're always so worried, she said, twisting linguine around her fork. I've been here virtually all my adult life and they still worry about me like I'm a teenager on an OE. They don't worry about Adam like that and he's younger than me.

She hadn't planned on talking about her family. Half a bottle of Chablis had inspired her to start complaining.

Mum's always on about terrorist attacks and random knife crime and Laura's always warning me about teen gangs and asking if I've been happy slapped and god knows what else is making hysterical headlines down there these days. It makes me so cross.

Cross like a teenager, Ashley asked, smirking.

Yes, exactly like a teenager. She folded her arms and frowned. It's like they're in a competition to be the most worried about me. I haven't the energy to talk to them right now. I need a bit of space.

And being on the other side of the world doesn't put enough space between you?

No it doesn't, she said, breaking into a giggle.

Call them later in the week and tell them you were busy.

She listened to the busy restaurant's reassuring clinks and shuffles, knowing she was fibbing. There was a real reason she didn't want to call her family back. She just couldn't grasp what it was.

Are you bringing anyone to the party, she asked.

No one to bring, Ashley said, and sighed.

The two friends sat in silence for a few moments, Emma chasing bits of crab and chilli around her plate. After a while she spoke, but more quietly.

Did I tell you I got a birthday card from Ed?

Ashley looked up. His grey eyes moved around her face, looking for any sign of emotion.

Well, from Ed and Kate and Charlie and Olivia, to be precise.

What a twat, Ashley said. He took her hand across the table. She'd been separated from Ed for three years. Which made the fact that it still hurt worse.

He meant well, she said.

Meant well my arse. He's a prick.

Ashley was one of the few people who knew everything there was to know about Emma and Ed. She'd loved Ed for eight years. She could have carried on loving him forever. But, at thirty-two, with a man who insisted he didn't want kids and never would, she'd made a hard decision, a blunt, life-changing, miserable decision. She wanted children. With every passing year she grew surer of that. And how quickly the years seemed to be passing. She'd wept for months when she left him. She still couldn't bear to think about that time. In the end it had been for nothing. She hadn't fallen in love with anyone else. She hadn't gotten pregnant. She didn't have children.

If anyone asked her (oh, and people did. Casually, cruelly), she'd say having a baby wasn't something she thought a lot about. But she did think about it. She thought about little else. The cards just weren't falling the right way, and time was running out. There was nobody to blame, not even Ed, not really. She grieved, quietly, not for the lack of a child, but for the lack of opportunity. She couldn't get as far as thinking about children. That would be unbearable.

Today she was turning thirty-five. Frustration had given away to anger about a year ago, and that anger had crystallised into a resignation. This birthday marked something concrete, a reason for the resignation to turn into a sort of sadness that sat within her ribcage. There was now only a small chance that love, and a family, would happen.

Ed, of course, met and married Kate within a year of breaking up with Emma, and in the intervening two years Kate had popped out not only little Charlie, but Olivia as well. They were the perfect family. She'd seen them only once, a few months ago. They'd been coming out of a shop. Olivia had been crying, Kate carrying her. Charlie had been sat in his stroller, Ed pushing him. Ed hadn't seen Emma.

Let's talk about something else, she said. It's too upsetting today.

Ashley rocked her hand up and down over the table for a few moments. When he let go, his expression lightened. He ran his hands over the edge of the tablecloth to the corners, smoothing it down. The waiter

took away their plates. Ashley ordered tiramisu. Emma looked out the window and watched the families going past.

Adam and Claire arrived just after three. With much bustling, they dropped their bags in Emma's spare room and joined her in the kitchen where she was making coffee. Claire didn't have any cigarettes. When she said this, Emma realised that the cigarettes were what she liked best about Claire. When she said this, Emma sighed, said 'oh', in a small, disappointed way, and leaned back on her chair.

Given up, have you? she asked Claire.

Mmm, Claire said. Adam cleared his throat and leaned forward and took Claire's hand and they both smiled serenely at Emma.

Claire's pregnant, Adam said, his smile widening.

Oh, Emma said again, in the same strange way. This time she raised her eyebrows and nodded as she said it. Goodness, she said, then, what wonderful news. Her eyes were filled with tears for the second time that day as she hugged first Claire, then Adam.

Going postnatal

London, 2004.

It's funny what you notice. For instance, at this moment Claire's mind is mostly outside of her body. She doesn't know how long it's been like this. She's only just noticed. She's hovering, about three feet above herself. Look, down there: her frame, on the bed, bent double in a primal crouch. Her distended belly, tightening, tightening, tightening. No respite now. She feels like an angel of mercy might have felt, gazing helplessly down on Job, desperate to start an unsanctioned rescue mission. The pain, the noise, the lights are all muffled and distant. Even the persistent scratch of the starchy sheet that annoyed her when she first came in, one of the few constants in this whole episode, is barely palpable. It's all still there, she supposes. She can only sense it through a few very tiny slits and slants in her consciousness.

Down there, she can see her eyes rolling, wildly, from side to side like a crazed horse about to stampede. She knows what she's doing: she's searching the room for something to fixate on, something, anything that will consume and fascinate her, that will take her mind away from the body pain. Detachment. Good strategy. She should know: here she is, detached like a space shuttle, suspended in a serene orbital space.

She watches the struggle. Some of her must be still in her body. She feels the threat of torment and pain crowding in. The distant noise surges in volume. She watches herself close her eyes and throw her head back, concentrating with all her might on maintaining this strange status quo. She's half in and half out. She knows which half she wants to stay in. The noise recedes.

Her eyes open. They land on her husband's face, which is too close. He searches her eyes to find her. His face is too familiar. It offers no relief. She wishes it were upside-down, or a pencil sketch, or a silhouette.

Anything to make it less recognisable, a puzzle to occupy her wracked mind. She watches herself count the lines on his face. Usually they are only just perceptible, neat and tidy, where they should be. Right now he's a crumpled mess of creases. A puckered hem. Everyone's unravelled, then. He looks away from her, at the midwife and his mouth opens and closes and she can hear a low drone.

Now there is a rush of noise again in her ears. She lands back inside herself. It's like she's never been out. The agony is lesser than when she was here last. She feels her blood scrape around the corners of her body barely able to stay the course, infused as it is with every hormone she can produce. She vomits on her stomach.

'She's in transition. Claire? You're in transition.' The midwife. She wipes the vomit away. 'That means it's too late for the epidural. Okay? Wipe her brow, Adam; she's getting sweat in her eyes. And put those extra blankets around her.'

Adam's hand hurtles toward her. The midwife speaks again as he makes terrified, ineffective, pissy little dabs on her forehead. Time keeps lurching from fast-forward to slow motion and back again. She opens her eyes wide, tries to catch reality as it passes back and forward in front of her. She notices that her throat is burning. She notices that her legs are shaking uncontrollably. She notices that her teeth are chattering. She notices that she is freezing.

'Claire, we're nearly there. Okay Claire? You're going to want to push shortly. Claire?'

She stops her rabid eyes for long enough to squint at the midwife and move her chin up then down. It takes a determined effort.

'Good girl. Stay with us. Good girl Claire. Now when you feel that urge to push I want you to push. Okay?'

She nods again. Then: nothing. Nothing happening. There is a calm, a calm as comforting as the midwife's carefully even voice. She reclaims her relationship with time and space.

There is a knock. A man with a big head and a shock of thick red hair comes in. He has on the same green theatre kit as the midwife. He apologises to the midwife for taking so long. He must be the anaesthetist. The calm deserts her and she is filled with hate. Hey! Ginger! Where the fuck were you two hours ago? Inside her head she screams like a succubus at him. Adam smiles at him and says some words. They laugh. They are joking together. Joking. Well that's fucking great, Adam. Sympathy for the devil. What about sympathy for your wife, A—

Must push.

'Push...' she breathes. Only the midwife hears. Claire screws up her face and lets the compulsion overtake her. A new kind of pain begins. A rush of liquid floods the bedsheets.

'Good girl,' says the midwife. 'Good and strong now Claire. Let's push this baby out.'

She becomes only animal.

Adam's daughter was born at 3.22am on a Thursday.

His sponged-down, stitched-up wife and his tightly swaddled, as-yet-unnamed baby daughter—his baby daughter!—were transferred from the delivery suite to the crowded post-natal ward at five in the morning. Adam pushed Claire in an ancient wheelchair with a dodgy front wheel and Claire held their baby close. She had her nightie on and hospital blankets draped around her and she looked biblical. As he pushed Claire down the middle of the ward Adam felt eyes following them from both sides: new mothers both bewildered and bored, trying to sleep, babes beside them. Two infants mewled desperately down the far end. A mother rocked one, humming quietly. A nurse walked the other up and down the ward, making soft shushing noises while the defeated mother looked on. One woman, trying to squeeze a hard wet mass of flesh into her child's mouth, looked up at them momentarily as they rolled past and didn't return their smiles. When they came to an unoccupied bed, their midwife's voice, directing them, seemed to clang and echo throughout the ward. The

squelch of the rubber wheels turning on the linoleum was crude and deafening. So was the privacy curtain, drawn around them by the midwife with a never-ending, rattling *sslishhh*. Already, instinctively, Claire and Adam had sanctified sleep and the pursuit of sleep. They didn't want to be the ones to disturb the ward's brittle peace this dawn.

It took them a while to get settled. Claire and the midwife whispered instructions to Adam, who completed his tasks as quietly as he could. He pulled Claire's book and a handful of nappies out of the overnight bag and stacked them neatly on the shelf under the clear plastic bassinet. He placed the painkillers and a water bottle beside Claire. When the baby started snuffling with what could possibly be interpreted as agitation, he bravely and gently picked her up, supporting her (delicate, fragile, tiny) neck the way he'd been taught. He held her up and looked at the impossibility of her in wonderment, her scrunched up red vernix-covered face, the bloody slick of fine black hair plastered to her crown, then passed her to Claire. As his daughter suckled for the second time in her life and Adam looked on with the kind of awe usually reserved for close encounters with the Dalai Lama, the midwife politely requested that he leave and return during normal visiting hours, after nine, in accordance with hospital policy.

So now Adam sits on his sofa at home. The flat is unnaturally still. The planet has tilted on its axis, slightly and forever.

He waits for nine o'clock to roll around and resents the ridiculousness of his banishment. He's called his parents in New Zealand already. They're booking flights. Claire's parents will arrive tomorrow from Leicester. This baby is the first grandchild on both sides. Adam drinks sweet tea and eats buttery toast. They'd given Claire the same meal last night, after everything, and Adam had looked on enviously as she grinned a ghostly grey-faced grin and declared it the best, most perfectly delicious toast and tea that she had ever in her life enjoyed.

This will soon be his family's home, but it isn't, not yet. Home is where his family is, and he is not where his wife and daughter are. He should be. The familiar room feels unfamiliar, quiet and cold. Even the books on the shelves look like someone else's. Adam's shaken presence and his slow munching and slurping barely make a dent in the space. He checks his watch, but only four minutes have passed since he checked it last. It is still only just after eight.

He should rest, but rest is impossible. His mind is racing, turning over and over like a demented casino machine, trying to slot his new reality into place, a reality as elusive as a jackpot.

He turns on the television to catch the sports news. He didn't see the broadcast of the game last night, for obvious reasons. He had planned to watch the replay later today, but the bloody anaesthetist already told him the result, so highlights it is.

When Adam arrives back on the dot of nine Claire's ecstatic high has subsided enough for her and the baby to fall into an exhausted sleep. He watches his beautiful clever wife and daughter. Claire's getting some colour back in her cheeks. Still puffed up like a blowfish, but at least she doesn't look so sick. His daughter's arms have broken free from the swaddle and Adam feels quietly proud of her for this. As he watches, the baby jerks violently from the shoulders in a nightmare. He wants to pick her up and cradle her. It's not so bad out here sweetheart, he whispers. It just takes a bit of getting used to.

When Claire begins to wake, Adam realises the top of the bassinet is digging into his chest. He's been peering over, watching his daughter sleep, for a full half hour. Claire wakes slowly, eyes first, then her brain. He watches as she remembers that she is no longer pregnant. That she has become a mother. She looks around the room instinctively until she sees the bassinet beside her. Adam helps her sit up so she can see the baby and when she does he sees a joy radiating out of her through her eyes, a joy that is both primal and transcendent.

Claire wants to be home. She signs her discharge papers, ignoring the advice of the nurses who want her to stay in for the night. She and Adam pack her things slowly. Last of all, Claire bends over the bassinet and picks up the sleeping, half-day-old baby and places her carefully in the crescent-shaped car seat. It's Adam's job to do the thing up. He fumbles with the straps. The lady in the shop showed him what to, but he can't remember how it goes. This bit of the buckle is supposed to cross over the other, and they both push into the catch. Or something like that. He smiles up at Claire and shrugs. She laughs joyfully, at him, them, this situation, how completely unprepared and incompetent they both are. A nurse asks him if he needs a hand. He stutters and bumbles. He and Claire giggle when the nurse makes a joke about not being allowed to go home without a car seat. Except it's not a joke, they realise, it's just hospital policy recited with a smile, so they tilt their heads sideways, let the laughter fade appropriately. The nurse shows him how the catch works, and rearranges the baby's blankets to buffer her tiny head better.

Claire can walk, so she walks beside Adam. It's their first journey as a family. Up the corridor, down in the lift and along to the Main Entrance. It feels strange and magical, and Adam has to remind himself to keep putting one foot in front of the other. The three of them, Adam and his family, walk past the reception desk, just like any other family might. Claire waits inside with their baby, on a bench seat beside the door, while Adam sprints to the car. He pays the fee, turns the heater on full and drives as close as he can get to the big main doors. He leaves the engine running while he helps his girls to the car and buckles the car seat in. He sneaks another look at the baby and marvels that he and Claire, two people unrelated by anything except by legal documentation, are both biologically bound to this little soul. Claire sits in the back seat. Adam drives home in second gear.

She is Lucy. Lucy is what they decide, choosing from a pre-prepared shortlist that Claire compiled and printed out during her last week at

work. It's an immense challenge. A bit like getting a tattoo: they try to foresee future regrets.

Claire rejects Lola, Adam's favourite. She feels it will typecast her daughter and limit her choices of profession to graphic design or acting. Who ever met an accountant called Lola? Not, Claire adds quickly, that she has to be a professional of any sort, especially, heaven forbid, a bloody bean-counter.

Adam rejects Madison, Claire's favourite. He likes Monty as a boy's name and to have two children called Maddy and Monty would be beyond the pale.

Olivia, Ruby, Emily, Grace, Jessica, Chloe, Sophie, Lily, Amelia and Evie are rejected simply on the basis that they were included on a recently published list of the top ten names for girls. Claire still resents always having to answer school roll calls in unison and is insistent that they not inflict this same cruelty on their daughter.

Tilly, Poppy, Maisy? All lovely, for a three-year-old.

Imogen, Libby, Charlotte, Victoria: too staid middle-class. Zara, Iris, India, Pearl: too try-hard bohemian. Sienna, Sadie, Uma, Keira: too obviously poached from women's magazines.

Lucy. Lucy is old and new. Lucy is country, western, rock and roll. Lucy is not a badge of privilege or a stamp that will forever hint at the political leanings of her parents. It is Switzerland. It has a foot in many camps. It is not prescriptive. It will allow Lucy to be Lucy, not demand that she be a "Lucy".

She is Lucy. Lucy is what they decide. They decide it after dinner, while Lucy sleeps. Adam drinks two-thirds of a bottle of champagne his work has sent. Claire sips herbal tea and tries to tell him about the pain. It is an exhausting evening; their second as parents. They fall hard into bed at nine and crash straight into sleep. Lucy wakes at nine-thirty.

Two days later, in the morning, Adam returns from the patisserie with espresso and pastries and news that the outside world still exists

largely unchanged. Claire sits on their bed under the duvet, swamped by pillows. Lucy is at her breast and Claire is crying noisily and with abandon, her tears caught by the white cotton blanket that encases Lucy. As Adam gets closer, he can see that Claire is trying to help Lucy latch on.

'Hey. *Hey,*' Adam says. He dumps breakfast on the kitchen table and returns to the bedroom. 'It'll come. The nurse said it's tricky at first. Remember?' He goes to his wife. With one hand he rubs her shoulder, with the other he strokes Lucy's head.

'Leave me alone,' whispers Claire. Her eyes are puffed and bloodshot and a trail of watery snot runs from her nose to her lip. Her breath shudders.

'Come on darling, it's alright. Claire? It's alright. It'll come. We'll get it sorted.'

'We?'

'Yes, we. Of course. I'll do anything you need me to.'

'You can't help with this Adam,' Claire says. There is both despair and venom in her voice.

The baby finds Claire's nipple, finds the right angle and clamps on with instinctive ferocity. Claire gasps and her toes, poking out from under the duvet, curl under themselves. Adam watches as the baby snuffles through her nose, eyes closed, and at last finds her rhythm. Nearly half a minute passes before he hears Claire breathe out.

'Leave me alone,' Claire repeats. There is a look in her eyes that Adam has never seen before. He pulls his hand from his wife, leans back and studies her face. Claire, focusing on her nipple and Lucy's mouth, ignores him.

Adam goes into the kitchen. Claire has been in tears a dozen times in the past dozen hours and it's getting worse and he doesn't know what the hell to do about it. She's fragile. She's breaking. He's scared. He feels like it's his fault. He wishes he could ask someone what to do, but there is nobody he can think of to ask; he and Claire are in this together, alone, marooned. He tears the brown paper bag down the middle and peels each

side off of the sticky apricot glaze on the Danish within. He eats the pastry with shaking hands and without pleasure, and as he drinks his dribbling luke-warm coffee he rubs his fingers together to clean them, but the clingy, greasy, transparent flakes just break into ever-smaller pieces.

The journey

London, 2004.

On the morning of my mother's funeral, I stood in our bathroom and peered into the mirror. It was a small mirror, speckled black around the edges and hung with twine on a nail on the wall. A vertical crack ran from its bottom edge, up through the centre, and tailed off near the top.

It was the first time I'd seen myself since before her death, four days earlier. My eyes, encased in puffy flesh, had changed colour. Before she died, my irises had been muddy. Now they were flinted with wrought-iron. I was only thirteen, so I didn't attribute any particular science or mysticism to the change. I just noted it incuriously and assumed it was a by-product of crying; I'd spent the night sobbing into a damp pillow as the reality of Mum's death had sunk in. I know now that a sudden change like that is one of those things that the body sometimes does in response to stress, like alopecia, or transferred pain. I was lucky it was my eyes and not my hair. We had a boy at school with a grey patch above his ear and he had a hard enough time of it. A white-haired adolescence would have meant guaranteed torment.

I decided to practice my John Wayne, as usual. *Rio Bravo* was the last film I'd seen. I squinted from one reflection to the other—the crack meant there were two—and drawled 'sorry don't get it done, Dude' over and over. Even the death of my beloved mother couldn't stop the cinematic hero worship. I'd become numb, I suppose. I can't dredge up any memory of feeling the loss as I stood there.

'Crying won't bring her back,' I said to my reflection, in John's voice, and resolved not to weep again. Today's tears are the first I've shed since. Before long my sister Lizzie was banging on the bathroom door. I left with dirty teeth and unwashed hands and an unscrubbed face, a boy freed from the burden of personal hygiene.

Children didn't attend funerals in those days. So my brother and sisters and I took the schoolbus as usual. We dropped wee Joy off at our Aunt Vera's place in town. Vera, dad's sister, was annoyed. Mum dying was inconvenient. She opened her front door, looked from me to Lizzie to Joy, sighed, and picked Joy up.

'Stop swinging on that gate,' she shouted. Peter was lurking by the pavement, one foot on the gate, pushing it open and riding it closed. Vera made a 'tch' noise. She looked up into her oak tree as if apologising to it. We kids were drenched by her accusing silence. After a moment Vera rearranged her face into a bright smile and asked us if we had packed some lunch. Lizzie had made us all honey sandwiches, on thick jagged slabs of bread. Dad'll go crook with you using up all the bread like that, I'd thought as I watched her twelve-year-old hands struggling to manoeuvre the breadknife. It hadn't occurred to me to give her a hand.

At lunch, a persistent wasp buzzed around my sandwich. I was scared with each bite. I didn't want to bite the wasp and end up with a swollen tongue and a hospital trip like Phil Jenkins had the year before. I can't remember much else about that school day in particular. It was like all the others that week, and for the next few weeks. Whispers. Looks. Teachers not asking me as many questions as usual. The headmaster saying 'Good morning, Malcolm,' in his deep voice as he strode past me in the yard or the corridor.

That first day, Mrs Brownlee at the tuck shop gave Peter and Lizzie and me a free Sally Lun each. I remember that. That was the right kind of attention. But mostly I just wanted things to be normal again. It was over. Mum was gone and she wasn't coming back. Why couldn't everyone forget about it? I had.

There were a few people at home when we arrived back from school. Vera was there, with Joy and Dad. Dad's parents were there, starched and silent.

They hadn't liked Mum much and Mum hadn't liked them much. Mum didn't have any family of her own except for her brother, and he had a farm in Nelson that he couldn't leave. The headmaster came for a bit, and a few other people we knew. Vera made cups of tea. Lizzie went from person to person with a plateful of buttered scones. Joy was napping. Peter was outside, probably climbing something. Dad was talking to people. Every so often he disappeared into the kitchen for a nip of whiskey. I sat on the piano stool, still in my uniform. Lizzie passed me half a scone. I sat swinging my legs and ate, my mouth coated with the flour from the bottom of the scone. Nobody tried to speak to me. People left as soon as they could. Soon just Dad and Vera and us kids were left.

'Typical bloody June,' I heard Vera say. She was in the kitchen with Dad, washing the dishes.

'That's enough,' Dad said in his warning voice.

I stopped my legs swinging and was still, listening. Nobody had told us why or how Mum had died. The question I'd started to ask myself, the question that I've pushed out of my mind every day since, the question that would come to define me, regardless of my attempts to ignore it, was already there, fully-formed in a mind both desperate for, and terrified of, the answer: why didn't she stay with me? Didn't she love me enough?

They didn't say anything else. There was just the clinking of the dishes and the staccato cries of Joy waking up in her cot.

'Are you going to get her?' Vera asked as Joy's wail began to intensify.

'Lizzie, get your sister,' Dad called.

'Will you be alright? That stew will be ready at six,' Vera said.

'I'll be fine,' Dad said. And with that, Vera left and our new life started.

We didn't talk about Mum. We staggered along, each of us bewildered and miserable and lonely. The farm got away on Dad. He was living in an alcoholic haze, alternating between long periods of sullen silence and

short bursts of violent, misdirected rage. Lizzie did her best to keep us all fed and clean. Vera popped in now and again to force spoonfuls of cod liver oil down our throats and load the pantry with tins of tomato soup.

By the time two years had crumbled away, I had perfected the art of stealing Dad's beer. I'd drink, and feel numb and contented. On still nights I'd sit a hundred yards up the road, on a crackly grass verge that disintegrated into our familiar gravel lane. Chewing lengths of grass and swigging from the bottle, I watched the dim kitchen light in the house and waited for it to flick off.

Wherever I shifted my weight to on that verge, a rock pressed into my backside. In a patch of dirt I etched a gaol window grid with the sharp end of a stone. Behind me was the dilapidated fence, and behind that an empty paddock. Even in the dark, I could see that the paddock was studded with ragwort. The weed taunted me. Ignoring it, I waited. I watched the faint light glow in the distance for so long that when I closed my eyes I saw the glimmer's apparition imprinted on my eyelids.

When I gave up waiting, I added the bottle to my dusty collection behind some rocks and wandered up the lane towards bed, hoping Dad had passed out and left the light on again. The short frightened walk sobered me.

I unlaced my boots and stood them in the corner of the porch. I pulled the kitchen door open as quietly as possible. Creeping through the kitchen, I stepped over the noisy floorboards with a practiced skill. At the grimy, stained wooden table, Dad was slumped in his chair, temple on the table, spittle seeping from his open mouth. From the drawing room, soft static buzzed from the wireless, tempering his erratic snores and grunts. Despite the welter within me, my instinct was always to help Dad to bed. I knew from experience not to attempt this.

Nobody woke as I skulked down the corridor. On my way past the girls' room, I saw Joy's limbs flung from her blankets at all angles as she sucked her thumb in her sleep. She sucked her thumb for years, until she was bullied out of it at boarding school. To Joy, Mum was just a few

fleeting, partial images glimpsed. The veins on the backs of her hands. The ridged, crescent-shaped nibs of her fingernails. The shadowed curve of her chin, seen from underneath. It's odd, what congeals in a child's mind. Joy has carried these meagre memories through her life. I have these same memories. But I have a lot more besides.

It was a cool night, so I covered Joy up. Lizzie, curled on herself in the bed beside Joy's, stirred and drew the patchwork blanket—that Mum had made and she had mended—closer to her face. She breathed it in. Lizzie let herself think of Mum. It brought her comfort. She could feel Mum helping her, she said, as she laboured to capture a flapping sheet on the line, or stirred the stew, or dried her squalling, shivering sister's hair. At the piano she'd sense her, framed within a melancholy chord. Lizzie would sometimes tell me about her dreams, of Mum holding her, loving her, alive. Don't be stupid, I'd say.

Peter didn't rouse as I climbed into bed in our room, bedclothes rustling and springs creaking. He became reclusive after Mum died, hiding out in his trees, or roaming and scavenging. He was perpetually covered in scabs and acne and parasites, encrusted with blood and grime, blackened and frayed at his hems. He wouldn't wash himself or his clothes, and Lizzie's pleas were that of a subordinate able to be ignored. Even though his body must have been plagued with itches, Peter himself seemed untroubled. Sometimes he'd disappear out onto the land for days at a time, and nobody would worry. I still don't know where he used to go. When Dad walked off the farm a few years later, it was natural and obvious that Peter should take over.

I lay in the dark, with the vermin scurrying, the spiders weaving, the worms feasting, the decaying house weeping. Mum lurked at the edges, a whorled howl twisting out of her, up into the black sky, where malevolent clouds consumed the moon without mercy. I turned over and drove her away and tried to escape into the oblivion of sleep.

I left for the city as soon as I was old enough to get a job. I didn't see Dad for another twelve years, by which time he'd drunk himself to his deathbed. I met Hannah when I got a job with the civil service. We'd often arrive at the same time for the lift—she'd get out on the fourth floor and I'd travel up to six. It was 1969. The rest of our generation wanted freedom, liberation, truth. Hannah and I wanted security, certainty, permanence. We were young and eager. Of course we married.

When Emma was born it was like coming up through the layers of the earth. It was grief's perfect opposite. There was the same numbness and shock and disbelief: for the first few days I'd wake in the morning and go through the whole process of realising Emma was here all over again. My brain had trouble comprehending the reality of her birth, just as it had the reality of Mum's death. When I finally did come to understand she existed, a few seconds after waking each day, what I experienced was sheer joy. When Laura and Adam came along I fell in love with them faster, I think, because I wasn't struck stupid with awe and wonder.

Hannah left me. I wanted her to stay. Or perhaps I just didn't want her to leave. We're better people for it. We talk. Our three beautiful children are grown. They won't leave me. They might live on the other side of the planet, but they'll never really leave me.

And now Lucy. Beautiful, three-week-old Lucy. I'm a grandfather. I wish I could tell Mum. I've travelled from Auckland to London to see Lucy and today I held her, held my grand-daughter, my son beside me. And I cried. I half-expected my eyes to change back.

Lovers patient, lovers kind

Buckinghamshire, 2004.

Adam is directly beneath an enormous, potentially lethal chandelier. He is at a big round table with nine other people, surrounded by several other big round tables. Claire, his wife, sits directly opposite him in a midnight blue silk dress. Between them is a gulf of wine bottles, fancy water, different-shaped glasses, different-sized forks, white roses, glowing candles, unwrapped menus, discarded ribbons.

Adam sits on the edge of all this opulence like a grown up should. His napkin is draped over his lap. His charged glass is on the table. He faces the speaker addressing the room, currently the best man, with an elevated chin and a tilted head in order to convey three falsehoods: that he is paying attention to the speech, that he is enjoying the speech, that he is not the slightest bit intoxicated. His suit jacket is folded neatly on his chair back. His right arm hangs loosely down the side of the chair.

He realises he is rubbing the lining on his suit jacket back and forward between his thumb and his middle finger, the way he rubbed the fabric of his mother's dresses when he was a child. He lets the jacket go and gazes at the thick white linen table cloth, drawn into a close examination of its irregular weave. He feels the strange and quiet fatigue of a new parent.

The best man paces in front of the long top table, speaking theatrically, waving his arms. People laugh good-naturedly and a little tipsily at jokes they've heard before, willing him to do well, desperate for him to successfully negotiate the wobbly invisible tightrope of risqué—a highwire flanked by 'dull' on one side, 'offensive' on the other.

Earlier, before the ceremony, Claire slipped her arm around Adam. When they were standing, waiting, in the shade-less garden that was full of tense smiles, handshakes, double air kisses and haven't-seen-you-fors.

The groom had been greeting the guests, too jumpy to listen to a word anyone said. Dutifully-invited aunts had been fiddling about, moving beribboned plastic seats under sun umbrellas, helping ancient relatives to sit. The men had been wondering how long they were reasonably expected to keep their jackets on, the women worrying that the sun would wilt their hair. Adam had been beginning to suspect that the whole event was going to be tediously well-behaved. And then Claire slipped her arm around him. Adam thinks of this now and aches. He looks at his wife, so far away, across the table, across ritual and convention. He imagines he can smell her.

She looks exhausted. And worried. Because Adam is tired, he finds this tiresome. She feels guilty for leaving their baby at the hotel with her mother. She wants only to be with her daughter. She's tied to her by elastic band; the farther away she gets the more she strains to return. She watches the speaker but she doesn't hear the speech. Adam can tell by the way she laughs half a heartbeat after everyone else. He hasn't heard a word either. A fine pair they make. But Claire... it's more than boredom. It's more than pining. She's in her muffled little sleep-deprived bell jar of a world. No way in, no way out. Unreachable.

But this afternoon she reached out to him. He'd barely noticed at first, it felt so natural, that familiar arm around the small of his back, that beautiful head on his shoulder. Neither of them had spoken. Then the bride's song had started, everyone had turned, and Claire had left him again and Adam had wondered if the moment had even happened.

The bride calls out something to the best man and everybody laughs raucously. Claire uses the break to try to catch Adam's eye. She touches the face of her watch, discreetly, with her index finger. Adam pretends not to see her do this. He lifts his drink, pretends to laugh and sip and watch the speaker. Don't, he thinks. Please just stay. The baby's fine with her Nana. She has everything she needs, except us, but she can wait. Don't leave me.

People clap, scrape their chairs back, stand. They murmur the toast and smile at each other. To love. To the bride and groom. The sound of crystal tapping crystal sprinkles through the room. The wiry little MC makes a tired joke about his wife always being right and announces dinner. Claire stands. Adam is awed by her broad shoulders, the fluid fall of her dress, her dark, dark hair, the way her movements are so effortless. She comes to him. She bends to speak in his ear. He breathes her in.

'I have to go.'

'Stay for the meal.'

'No, I have to go. I'll see you back there.'

Claire leaves him without looking at him. She walks to the top table and makes her excuses. Because that's what they are, thinks Adam, just excuses. She leaves quickly and quietly. The waiters bring smoked salmon. Adam rests his eyes on the negative imprint on the empty white chair opposite him. His longing and his resentment are in perfect balance.

'Hello.'

It takes a while for Adam to realise that this greeting is directed at him. The speaker waits for him to respond. Adam looks at the table, in the direction of the voice, at the calligraphed name card of the person next to him that he hasn't yet introduced himself to.

'Hello... Bridget?' he says. He picks the name card up and flips it over itself in his hand as he looks at the woman beside him. Her eyes crease with undisguised warmth. Adam is warmed. He smiles back.

'Bridget, yes. You must be Adam. Aren't these handy little things.'

She reaches out long fingers, clips her name between her index and middle finger, and gently takes it from him. She holds it up to her cheek and grins a camp grin, like someone in a toothpaste commercial, then puts the card down on the table.

'Your wife had to go?'

'Yes.'

'That's a shame.'

The woman, Bridget, picks up her knife and fork and takes a bite of her salmon. In profile she is all opposing angles; cheek, nose, jaw. She rests her left hand on the table lightly, beside his. Adam becomes unusually aware of this proximity, as if it is matter between them.

Bridget has tiny wrists. Adam can make out carpal bones and arteries and humanness under her pale skin. He stares at her hand, sitting there like an invitation, until she moves it. When she does—just a second later, though it feels much longer—it's to put down the fork and gesture across the table with an open palm.

'That's my husband over there. Mike.'

Adam tears his eyes away from Bridget's hand to look at Mike, a man with close cut receding black hair and a large forehead. Mike looks older than Adam. He is engaged in an animated conversation with a red-headed woman beside him. His eye is caught by Bridget's gesture. He looks over, briefly, at her and Adam, smiles and waves in greeting without stopping his verbal march to a punch line that both he and the red head are clearly eagerly anticipating.

Bridget smiles, but her husband is gone again. Her hand is back on the table. Adam feels an immense heat radiating to and from his skin precisely where Bridget's forearm lies close and parallel with his, as though all his nerves have converged there.

'He loves weddings. Loves having a captive audience,' Bridget says, and she laughs quietly. Adam listens to how silvery it is, how it harmonises with the polite clinking of cutlery on china all around them. He imagines it is a laugh in a minor key. The heat in his arm is immense now. Bridget's hand is delicate but it holds dominion over this shared space between them; Adam cannot move his arm until she does.

'She not feeling well?' asks Bridget. Adam watches the way she makes minute private gestures with her fingertips when she speaks. He feels as though he is standing, slipping, on sliding sands.

'What?'

'Your wife. Not feeling well?'

'Oh. Sorry. No. She had to go back to the hotel. To our baby.'

'And you get to represent.'

'Yes.'

'Well I'm glad.'

'What?'

'I don't like sitting next to empty chairs.'

'Right. No, fair enough.'

Bridget's eyes crinkle again. Adam feels an electric desire crackling in him. The last woman he felt this kinetically drawn to was Claire. He's in uncharted waters. He can't deny this attraction, so he must simply ignore it. Blame the wine and ignore it. He becomes aware of a hesitating waiter hovering over his shoulder and gestures absently for him to take his untouched salmon. Soft music plays under the gentle hum of the room and laughter punctuates the pleasant monotony. Every single thing in the room is contrived to speak to the guests of romance, love. Desire.

Everything is pleasing. Easy.

'How old is your baby?'

'Lucy. Four months.'

'Ah. So—your wife is still breastfeeding?'

'Well, yes. But she's got bottles of the stuff already expressed. She didn't need to—'

Adam frowns and looks at the centerpiece and stops talking. He has said too much, betrayed Claire. Bridget smiles at the tablecloth, tactfully waits for him to collect himself.

He thinks of his wife, back at the hotel and he feels impotent. He has lost her. Lost her love. He has been usurped by a four-month old and a storm of hormones and a kind of manic despair that has shut Claire away from everyone and everything—except Lucy. It started long ago, before the depression. Lucy's first butterfly kicks in her belly thrilled Claire more than any intimacy they'd ever shared. Adam hated Lucy for that. Now all he feels for Lucy is love, the sheer violence of which constantly takes him aback. But back then she wasn't Lucy. She was just an abstract little

concept swimming around in his wife. Since she was born, Claire has withdrawn. From the world, but most importantly, from him. She stubbornly refuses treatment, saying she'll be fine once she gets a few good nights' sleep. Meanwhile, Adam's in exile. Required only to stick by his wife and child. Do the right thing. Well if he must stay out here, in the world, away from Claire, he might as well enjoy himself.

'Sorry. Do you have kids?' he asks. Bridget hesitates.

'No. Well... no.'

'It's not a trick question.'

'No. I had a still birth. About a year ago. So it is rather a tricky question, I'm afraid.'

She laughs. Adam hears the same forlorn tone. He hadn't imagined it.

'I'm so sorry.'

Adam looks directly into, rather than at, Bridget's eyes for the first time. He sees her pain, for just a second. And something else: Adam sees the same want that he's feeling. Just a flicker of it. She looks away. It's her turn to stare at the centrepiece.

Across the table Mike laughs loudly at a joke. Bridget winces. She smiles at Adam and puts her hand on his forearm. Adam feels a current that starts at his arm, bulldozes a path along every one of his arteries, and settles throughout his body as a jangling pulse.

'It's okay. Thank you.'

She removes her hand.

'I can't imagine how horrible that must have been.'

'No. I don't like to bring it up. But I haven't yet found a way of not. When people ask, I mean.'

The pain does a quick, violent encore in Bridget's eyes, then it's gone. Lights up. They both sit up straighter in their seats and begin to talk properly. About how they each know the bride and groom. About their jobs. The property market. How they really must go to Glastonbury next

year. Who's going to win X Factor. They both rigorously avoid any kind of simple flirtation.

After a few minutes the tension gets to Adam. He excuses himself. He puts his napkin on the table, grabs his cigarettes, stands, and is blasted from the little world he and Bridget have built back into the crowded, noisy room. He feels hot and cold at the same time. He collides with a waiter holding an armload of braised Angus and is nearly covered in posh gravy. He picks his way past tables and guests, wearing the everything's-fine-nothing-to-see-here smile of the truly rattled.

Near the exit he grabs an opened Sancerre from the tray of another passing waiter. He makes his way out of the function room and into the chill of the night. He walks down the cobbled stairs, out of the light and into the car park, until the crunch of the gravel he walks on is louder than the noise from the wedding. He leans against someone's BMW and necks a third of the bottle.

He puts the bottle down, twisting it into its own level gravel bed. He lights a cigarette, picks up the wine again and carries on drinking, though at less of a breakneck pace. There is no wind; the car park is surrounded by gardens. The tip of his cigarette glows red and crackles when he drags on it. The bottle sloshes as he lifts it to his mouth then drops it to his side. The gravel crunches when he shifts his weight. Adam is calmed by these quiet noises in the darkness. He flicks his cigarette away and watches the butt glow on the gravel.

Where did all these bloody beamers come from, he thinks. And the tailored suits. And the pricey watches built to withstand all the depth diving we'll never do. And while we're at it, when did we all start getting married, and having polite married-couple dinner parties with pretentiously rustic Nigel bloody Slater dishes getting served up in those abominable Le Creuset pots? And while we're at *that*, when did dinner parties stop involving drinking and table dancing and start involving baby monitors and ten o'clock finishes? When did it become okay to invite people over for dinner then lace the entire evening with a choking,

conversation-stopping static louder than the bloody background music? And when, for god's sake, did that music start being Café del Mar volume seven bloody hundred, anyway? When did we all become such wankers?

Adam realises he is drunk. And a little hysterical. He laughs at himself in the quiet darkness and flicks his third cigarette butt away.

He thinks of Claire, involuntarily. He feels revulsion. He has never felt this before. It is overpowering. His mind skips to mangled, swollen flesh and brutal black stitches and frightening webs of cobalt blue veins. He screws up his eyes in an exaggerated blink to get rid of the images. It's cold. He's hungry. He had better go back inside.

He crunches back, swinging the empty bottle. He puts it down on the cobbled steps and walks up into the noise and the light and the contrived happiness and he thinks of Claire again. This time, it's of her empty glances and the sullen silences between them. Little silences that have metastasized into bloody great brick walls. Even their bed isn't their bed anymore. It's just two people sharing two half-beds, with a Mexico-Texas border in between them: cross at your peril, because a little bit of you will be killed each time you try. Not even their feet touch.

Back in the room he picks his way back to the seat. He arranges his expression and puts the covers back over his black thoughts. He suspects that these thoughts have been there all along, he's just ignored them. To feel this way about his wife; it's not right, surely. She's the devoted mother of his child; she's having a tough time. She's at her most vulnerable. Shouldn't he be more understanding? Isn't that how it works? He finds his seat. His jacket has fallen off his chair and lies on the floor in a crumpled heap. He sits heavily at the table. Braised beef congeals in front of him.

He turns to Bridget: beautiful, beside him, smiling, saying, you're back! He smiles. He *sees* her. And he *feels* her. And it is real. Adam feels less bleak, less fatigued. He feels hope. Because of this woman he met five minutes ago. Bridget is positive to his negative. They fit, they attract. Bridget's cheeks are rosier than they were before and her smile is less controlled. This makes her look more gorgeous.

'Yes. Sorry, didn't mean to be gone for so long. How was dinner?'

'Good. You missed out on brulee. And the first dance. Very sweet. Al Green. Mike's doing the Macarena. I couldn't bear it so I came back for a coffee. Are you okay?'

'Fine. Just went for a fag.'

'Oh, you should have told me. I'd have come.'

'Sorry.'

'Actually, I was thinking... this might be totally inappropriate, not sure if you do this kind of thing, but you seem... do you... would you like to...'

Bridget has undone the clip on her evening bag and is holding it open in her lap. Between her lipstick and her tissues is a small, clear plastic bag with white powder inside it.

'Now you're talking.'

'I just thought... bit of fun... do you think? Everyone else seems quite... sober.'

'All the more reason. Let's go.'

'You go. There's a ladies' out by the kitchen that no one's using. I'll meet you there; I'll just check on Mike.'

Adam beams at Bridget, his dark mood abruptly forgotten. He crosses his knife and fork over his untouched beef and stands, jubilant. Bridget disappears onto the dance floor. Adam zigzags unsteadily through the dishevelled tables strewn with half-empty wine glasses and abandoned coffees.

On the dance floor, kids are up past their bedtime twirling to *Build Me Up Buttercup* as elderly relatives look on with rheumy, happy eyes, clapping and swaying. Older couples do their decades-old routines, glazed and close. The bride's eyes shine and catch the light as she dances with her father. The groom is laughing, arms around his mates, trying to do a cancan. The best man and the maid of honour do an over-the-top rock and roll, trigger-happy with the dips. Other guests do hammy disco moves, or sloppy, merry foxtrots. Everyone is joyous. Everyone celebrates love. It

looks like Adam's wedding did. His heart nearly snags on the scene as he slips past, hiding in the shadows, heading for the bathroom.

Slamming the door on the din and blare of the wedding he glances in the bathroom mirror. Freckles jump off his pale cheeks. Dark rings circle his sunken, bloodshot eyes. He goes into a cubicle and locks the door. The back of his mind is spinning like a top, the front of his mind trying to make it stop. Sitting on the toilet seat Adam has to focus hard on not letting the silent, brightly-lit little space make him sensible. Part of him is aware that he is already betraying Claire and is on a crash course to a far, far worse treason. He shuts this part down. He is just livening up a dull evening. Having a bit of fun. God knows he deserves it.

He waits for Bridget. For something to do, he fumbles in his wallet for a note, ideally a fifty. He settles for his least-battered tenner. He hears the door open and close with a blast of noise in between. He hears a tentative click-clack of high heels.

'Adam?'

He opens the door. He and Bridget grin at each other. They lock themselves in the tiny cubicle. Bridget opens the bag and tips its contents onto the top of the cistern. Adam passes her a credit card and rolls up his tenner. Bridget cuts the powder, divides it into six thick lines and passes Adam's card back. Adam hands her the note.

'One of the perks of not being a mummy,' Bridget says after her first line, and immediately looks as if she regrets saying it. She laughs her sad laugh. Adam wants to fix everything for her. She passes the note to Adam. They take turns until all the lines have disappeared.

Adam tastes a bitter trickle as it runs down the back of his throat. He coughs, trying to clear it away. They both sniff, hard, at the same time. They laugh about this, hard, at the same time. Adam feels fearlessness rising in his chest. His mind is racing, but there is none of the usual rush of words. He smiles at Bridget. Bridget smiles back. The silent conversation flows between them, loaded with all the flirtation they've avoided until

now. The fluorescent glare is strong. Adam is lucid and focused. He wants her.

They are standing very close together, facing each other. Bridget's hair falls onto her face as she does up her purse. She flicks it away and looks at him with her chin high, as if in challenge. She hands him his money.

'Shall we?' she says.

'Shall we what?' Adam says slowly, pocketing the note. He is happier. Smarter. Better. Taller. Invincible. Bridget looks sexier. More confident. They are having the best time. Adam wants more. They could never get caught.

'Shall we go back?'

Adam leans toward Bridget. He puts his cheek on hers. He pushes gently, to expose her neck. He presses his lips on her, just under her ear.

'Not yet' he tries to whisper. It comes out strangled, full of want. He puts an arm around Bridget, pulls her toward him. Bridget is suddenly pressed hard against him, both her arms around the small of his back. Adam is vaguely reminded of something that happened earlier in the day. His body buzzes with desire and heat and cocaine and possibility. He'd forgotten what coke felt like. He'd forgotten what lust felt like. He feels dizzy and hot. His breath ricochets around the cubicle. Bridget raises herself on her toes until their noses nearly touch. For a few seconds she studies him, wiping the sweat off his brow with her long fingers. Her breath is hot on his mouth. When she finally kisses him he closes his eyes and is in an orange, back-lit oblivion, his every nerve screaming and maddened. He tastes salt, feels his hair being pulled, his lips being bitten. He scrambles to take off her underwear, his elbows banging on the cubicle walls. He groans in his throat as he enters her. The sex is fiercely high, fast and jerking under the bright lights, silent except for their jagged gasps and the rattle of the cubicle door.

Afterwards Adam twitches and heaves lungfuls of air, his forehead on Bridget's shoulder, slick with sweat, his shirt stuck to his back. When

he finds his breath, he lifts his head to look at Bridget. She looks as astonished as he feels. He laughs through his nose, eyebrows raised. Bridget does the same back at him. He cups her chin in his palm, strokes her cheek with his thumb, kisses her gently.

‘Fucking hell, girl,’ he says, smiling, as she unwraps her shaking legs from his waist. He helps her to stand and pull her dress down over her hips, picks up her underwear and passes it to her with a trembling hand. He swipes his forehead with his palm and tucks his shirt in. As he begins to buckle his belt, the door to the bathroom opens. Close laughter and muffled drumming pour into the room. Adam freezes, both hands on his belt. Bridget puts her palm over her mouth. The door closes, the noise stops. Adam and Bridget stay frozen. Adam’s ears ring. He takes shallow breaths into his dry mouth, waiting to hear footsteps in the bathroom. There are none. After a minute Adam relaxes his rigid shoulders and neck. The fright has evaporated his high and left him with clashing nerves, clenched teeth and an empty soul. He looks at Bridget. Her smile is gone. Her eyes are wide like a child’s.

‘Hey. It’s okay. It’s okay,’ he whispers.

‘I know. Sorry. Oh, god. Sorry. I’ve never...’ Bridget draws in a breath and holds it as though she’s afraid of what will happen if she exhales. She looks up at Adam, distraught.

‘Me neither.’ Adam pulls Bridget to him, holds her head against his chest and feels her trying not to cry. ‘It’s okay,’ he says. What the fuck have I done, he thinks.

Jet plane landing

Auckland, 2004.

'Ten years and you still don't have an accent. I know people who lived there six months and came back talking like geezers,' says Alistair, peering at Adam as he rocks back on a green plastic chair. The two back legs threaten to buckle.

'Guess I just don't pick them up,' Adam says, carefully flattening his vowels. He pours tea, slowly, from an aged, crazed, sage-green teapot, into chipped, rose-covered cups. Pools of escaped tea gather in the indented square patterns of the grubby plastic table. He moves his chair. If it runs off, he'd rather it drip on the deck than his Diesels; he's fresh out of the shower, enjoying the feeling of being clean and wearing clean clothes for the first time in nearly two days.

'I usually just use bags,' says Laura, squinting up at Adam as she rubs insect repellent on her ankles. 'Nothing wrong with bags. Too much time in Blighty, that's your problem.'

'I didn't realise you had bags,' Adam says flatly. 'This was all I could find.'

'I'll go and get some beers,' says Alistair.

'We're going out for dinner, remember,' says Laura.

'I remember.'

'So don't get bladdered.'

Alistair doesn't reply.

Adam smiles benignly, as if it will break the tension. Jetlag is setting in. He feels drugged and floaty and a bit numb. Numb is good. It's helping him ignore the constant sniper fire between his sister and brother-in-law. It's helping him ignore the visceral pain of being so far away from his tiny daughter and the woman he's loved and betrayed.

'Back soon,' says Alistair. He stands and pokes around the many pockets on his cargo trousers for his car keys. On his way to the gate he stumbles over the back of Laura's chair and swears.

'Sorry about Al,' says Laura as the gate clangs shut. 'It's good to see you.'

'Innit,' Adam says in his best Brixton.

'Oh, give over,' says Laura in her best Mancunian. Adam feels his sister sizing him up. 'So. To what do we owe the pleasure of your company down here in the colonies?'

'I wanted to find out what's happening in *Shortland Street*.'

'Really why.'

'I missed SPQR?'

'Uh-huh.'

'I just love the outdoors?'

'Adam!' Laura is giggling now.

'Me and Claire have decided to—'

Suddenly Adam can't finish this sentence. Separating is what adults do. This is different. His wife has kicked him out. And fair enough too. Laura's giggle is gone. She's over to him, hands on his knees.

'Adam?'

'Separate.' The word feels spiky as he spits it out.

'What?' she says. 'When? What happened?' She looks him in the eyes, frowning and confused.

'About a month ago.'

'But... For good, do you think?'

'Think so.'

'Do mum and dad know?'

'Not yet.'

'Are you okay?'

'No, not really, Laura.'

'Sorry. I thought you two were—'

'It's complicated.'

'Okay. And Lucy?'

'With Claire.'

'Okay. Fuck. Okay.'

Laura sits back down on her chair. She knows when to drop it with Adam. The sun is falling fast and now the rays graze the top of the fence, forcing her to salute to shield her eyes when she looks at her baby brother. Her baby brother who's half a foot taller than her. He's a miserable wreck, now she looks at him properly. She assumed it was just the flight and the few years he's got on the clock since she saw him last. Adam rubs his index finger over a brown-stained oval chip on the rim of his cup. He's come as far away from his world as it's possible to come. He's come for a place to curl up and hurt.

'How long are you staying?' she asks.

'Ten days, if that's okay with you. I had leave owing, thank Christ.'

'Are you sleepy?'

'Not really,' Adam says, rubbing his forehead with his fingers. 'Just spaced. You guys going out?'

'We were going to. Don't have to.'

'No, no. Go.'

'It's our date night.'

'Date night. Wow.'

Brother and sister smile at each other. It's been a long time, thinks Laura. 'Why don't you come?'

'No. You go,' Adam stretches his arms above his head. 'Where are you going?'

'Just up to Delicious.'

'Is that place still going?'

'Most places are, Adam. Nothing much changes around here.'

Alistair takes more time than is strictly necessary in the cool store at the bottle shop. He's glad of the errand. It's given him time for a breather. He

wanders through the store absently, settles on some Coronas, recovers from the events of the past half hour. Adam had pitched up unannounced at the front door with a woollen jersey tied around his waist and a wheelie case at his side. No wife, no baby. Lucy must only be a few months old too. Laura had squealed and hugged and fussed over her brother and after all the hoo-hah, he'd left them to it to chat. Adam's a good guy. Bit of a ponce, and lacking in ambition like everyone in Laura's family, but a good guy. Maybe he and Claire are planning a move to the Antipodes. Alistair cringes at the thought of conversations with them about Auckland's terrible drivers and New Zealand's isolation from the rest of the world. They'd buy an old villa somewhere trendy then complain about how it has damp that they didn't bother checking for, and fret about how much they had to spend on heat pumps in winter. Returning expats were all the same and Alistair was bored of them. Alistair was bored of a lot of things. Well, at least he might be able to get out of date night now.

He puts the beers onto the passenger seat and sits in the quiet car with his hand on the keys in the ignition. After a few moments he sighs, turns the car on and drives the quiet tree-lined avenues back home with the radio loud.

Back at the house the latch rattles and the hinges squeak when he opens the gate. 'Just put these in the fridge,' he says on his way past Laura and Adam.

Adam's childhood feels point-blank close. Whenever he visits New Zealand all the years he's been away just concertina up and fold away into themselves, leaving him nineteen again. The strangeness of the feeling is accentuated by the jetlag haze he's in.

'Last chance, Adam,' says Laura. 'You sure you don't want to come?'

Adam doesn't want to come. Adam wants to lie down very still and go to sleep for a very long time. Or better still, Adam wants to lie down with Claire, the old Claire, and wake up on a... what would it be now? On a Saturday morning, and be told that this has all been a huge mistake, and to

pop down to the shops for the paper and coffee and pain au chocolat and the *Guardian* and jump back into bed, his chilled limbs warming against his wife's sleep-warmed ones, Lucy placid and cuddly between them.

'I'll pass,' he says. 'You kids have fun.'

Laura and Alistair go inside. The sun has dropped now and it's getting chilly. It gets chilly here, which always catches Adam by surprise. At this time of year, it's like Marbella during the day and frigging Aberdeen at night. And so quiet. Apart from the occasional car going past, and the hushed bickering and clinking coming from inside, it's deathly silent. It's like all the noise has been vacuumed up. And this is central Auckland, thinks Adam. The quietness has the strange and unpleasant effect of amplifying all the clatter in his head.

'Listen, if you want to stay in...' offers Alistair. Laura smiles at him cynically.

'Wouldn't you love that. He's fine. He'll probably fall asleep shortly anyway.'

Laura showers and puts on her favourite silk top. In the spare room, she flicks a clean sheet and it billows over the bed; she feels an inverse weight in her heart. Claire and Adam. Love's young dream. Laura can't imagine what could possibly have gone so wrong. Adam's dull eyes, taut mouth and defeated shoulders make her shudder. Poor, poor little Lucy.

When she comes back out, Alistair is in the same clothes. He's called a cab and is showing Adam how to work the TV remote.

'There's leftover lasagne in the fridge if you want it,' she tells Adam, kissing him on the top of his head. 'Got your wallet?' she asks Alistair as they leave.

Alistair barely listens as the taxi driver lectures them about how the Indian and Pakistani cabbies are all on the make, emphasising every point with puffed, gouty hands. He and Laura sit beside their respective

windows, looking out. Laura turns to her husband and studies his face and looks as though she's about to say something, but turns back to the window instead. The taxi arrives at the restaurant. The driver holds Alistair's credit card hostage for the next two minutes waving it about while he continues his diatribe, twisted in his seat to look at them. Alistair has to 'C'mon mate...' him to get his card back.

The restaurant is crowded, tables squashed together. Alistair and Laura study menus silently. Laura straightens her top when one side begins to slip off her shoulder. Alistair wishes it wasn't so busy. It'll be a long wait. He hides behind his menu. He has nothing to say.

'They've changed the menu,' says Laura.

'Eh?'

'The menu. It's different. The goats' cheese and beetroot salad is gone.'

'Hmm.'

'I liked that salad.'

'Choose something else.'

'Of course I'll choose something else. I'm just saying I liked that salad.'

'Ask if they can make one for you.'

'It'll be off for a reason. They probably can't get hold of the cheese.'

'It's just cheese.'

'It's not "just cheese". It's a particular kind of imported goats' cheese.'

Alistair puts his menu down on the table and smiles at his wife.

'And exactly what "particular" kind of goats' cheese is it, Laura?'

'I don't know.'

'So choose something else.'

'That's what I was going to do.'

Alistair lifts his menu again and surveys the restaurant from behind it. The narrow bistro is hot and bustling and full, as usual for a Friday night. He checks his phone, which sits prominently on the table.

'Leave it. You'll hear it if it rings,' Laura says.

'It's so noisy.'

'I thought you liked it here.'

'I do.'

The waiter arrives. He asks if they'd prefer still or sparkling. Tap, says Alistair. Sparkling, says Laura at the same time. They look at each other. Sparkling please, says Laura. Alistair shrugs.

Adam puts his feet at one end of the sofa and his head on a cushion at the other. Laura's lounge is godawful, crammed with crap. Shabby chic is what women call it, and only women like the style. Laura's ancient sofa is covered in quilts and throws and god knows what, and there's junk on every available surface. Old china vases, old speckled pie crust mirrors, old wood-framed botanical prints (there are half a dozen of these on Laura's wall, clustered together, a riot of faded Victorian roses). Even old books in the bookshelf. It's a bloody mess. He doesn't know how Alistair puts up with it. There only sign that he lives here is a pair of running shoes at the door.

He rubs his face with his palm. He is very tired now. He flicks the television on, turns it down low. Closing his eyes, he listens to the newsreader's nasal drone.

When he wakes from a fitful, dreamless nap, he checks the time. Nearly midnight. No wonder he's starving; according to his stomach, it's nearly lunchtime. He flicks on the kettle and puts the leftover lasagne in the microwave.

The microwave pings and the kettle flicks off. The appliances do their jobs themselves; Adam's not needed. He feels like someone's winding a screw inside him, screwing him up tight. He eyes the phone, but Claire's been screening her calls. He'll see Lucy when he gets back, but not Claire. Self-loathing courses through him like an electric current. He wipes his eyes, gets his pasta and makes a cup of tea with the bags that Laura's pointedly left out on the bench.

A car pulls up outside the house. There's a rattle and a squeak, then the clang of a gate. Adam takes a deep breath and collects himself, ready for Laura and Alistair's return. Only Laura comes in. She looks beaten.

'Hi,' she says.

'Where's Alistair?' asks Adam.

'Pub.'

Laura curls up beside Adam on the sofa. Adam puts his arm around his sister.

'Everything alright with you two?' asks Adam gently.

'Everything is terrible. Terrible. It's been like this for ages. But we're trying for a baby. So that'll sort us out,' Laura laughs a cynical laugh. She leans back and stares at her brother. 'How the fuck can you and Claire split up? How the fuck can you do that?'

'Laura—'

'No. It's not fair. What about Lucy? What about your daughter?'

'I'll see you in the morning Laura,' Adam stands up slowly and pushes his trouser legs down with his palms.

'We're in counselling,' Laura says. 'Did you know that? It's shit. He hardly bothers to turn up.'

'Sorry to hear that,' Adam says, half-caught in the conversation.

'Sorry to hear that,' Laura mimics. 'You couldn't be bothered giving it your best shot, then? Put marriage in the too-hard bin like mum, did you?'

'Night Laur,' Adam says and walks down the corridor and into the bedroom.

'Walk away, Adam,' taunts his sister, calling from the lounge. 'Well I won't. My children won't come from a broken home. Over my dead body. I'll make it work.'

You don't have any children, thinks Adam, as he goes into the bathroom. He needs a paracetamol. Opening the bathroom cabinet, he sees pregnancy tests, IVF injection kits, tampons. The paraphernalia of monthly despair.

He finds a Panadol, puts his mouth to the tap and gulps. His toothbrush is in his case and he's too shattered to dig it out. He squirts some paste onto his finger and sucks it, swirling the paste around his mouth with his tongue. Padding down the corridor in his socks he can hear Laura, still in her shoes, clacking on the kauri floorboards, angrily emptying the dishwasher. In the spare room, he sits on the edge of the bed. Alistair's bathrobe hangs on the back of the door and a crumpled business shirt is in a heap in the corner. He doesn't know what's going on with his sister's marriage, but he feels like he and Laura are on a jet plane landing, the full momentum of their lives trying to push their insides forward as the brakes slam on with everything they have. When he climbs into bed and closes his eyes, all he can see are the faces of his wife and daughter, like a slide show, now smiling, now blank, now shocked, now crying.

Signs of life

London, 2007.

When Adam's ex-wife made a joke about him being the darling of the school gate mafia, he knew she must be getting better. As usual, she was right. To the phalanx of formidably organised women collecting their over-loved middle class brats from Room Four, Adam was a hero just for turning up each day. Any dad would be, as long as he had a full head of hair, which Adam did, and was prepared to flirt a little with the alpha mums, which Adam was. If he didn't do these things, he'd be branded a no-hoper or a freak. He'd heard them dissect the teacher, the principal, the curriculum. These women were vicious.

Claire made the joke on the phone, during one of the routine calls he made to her every Friday afternoon when she was staying at her mother's house. Those calls put him in a sombre mood. When he heard her voice he felt an immense tenderness toward her, a racquet string tightening, aching across his solar plexus. It was the same as the feeling he got when their daughter cried about the mean girls at school. He didn't tell Claire about the mean girls, of course. She didn't need to hear how he never knew the right thing to say, how it would break her heart to see Lucy so withdrawn, how he was barely holding it together, how very much she was needed.

After Claire made the joke, Adam felt a lightness that made him almost giddy. That weekend he and Lucy made marshmallows together. Then, in a burst of uncharacteristically assertive parenting, he called one of Lucy's kinder friend's mothers and suggested a trip to the cinema. Sitting in the dark listening to the two four-year-olds munching through buckets of popcorn almost as big as they were, he wondered what the lightness meant. It took him a while to recognise the emotion. It was hope.

Claire agreed to meet him for coffee two weeks later. It was tense. Documents had been signed, after all. Closure had been achieved, if only

legally. He selected a cafe halfway between her house and his. He visited it first, to make sure it was pleasant and neutral. On the day of the meeting he arrived five minutes early and ordered a long black for him and a latte for her. By the time she arrived, five minutes late, he was on his second, jittery with caffeine. Hers must have been tepid. She didn't comment. She looked smaller, and fragile, as though she had been put together haphazardly, her limbs only casually attached to her body.

It was warm, for autumn. Claire left her thick scarf on, and kept sliding her hand under it, rubbing her neck as though the wool was irritating her. Adam wanted to talk about her illness, but he didn't know how to bring it up.

She sat with her elbows on the table, clasping her coffee with both hands in front of her mouth. The sleeves of her sweater were long and tight and they hugged her knuckles. 'How's Lucy?' she asked.

'She's great. She's amazing. You know Luce. She misses you.'

Understatement of the year.

'I miss her.'

Claire's eyes filled and reddened. Adam waited while she composed herself. He didn't understand much about where Claire was at, but he knew that it was important that she maintain control. He folded an empty sugar sachet over itself, into neat rectangles, then unfolded it again.

'How's Julie?' she said, after a minute. It was confrontational. He was proud of her for it.

'Jane,' he said.

She shrugged and looked sideways.

'We broke up,' he said.

'What happened?'

'Me having Lucy full-time didn't fit with her game plan.' That had been Jane's excuse, anyway. Adam had been relieved when she ended things.

'Sorry,' Claire said.

'Don't be.'

'You two racked up a few months together, didn't you?'

'It wasn't serious.'

'Still.'

She bent down and fished her cigarette packet out of her bag as if to close the discussion.

'You can't do that,' he said.

'Do what?'

'Smoke. They've banned it.'

Claire sighed and put the cigarettes on the table.

'A few months ago. They banned it a couple of years ago in New Zealand. Not smoking per se. Smoking in, you know. Public places,' he said. Will you shut up, he thought. Her mouth twitched in a tiny smile. How long had it been since he'd seen her smile. Not since she found out about his infidelity, certainly. That was four long years ago.

'The world is changing,' he said, and smiled in a way that he hoped looked apologetic.

'It is.'

'Remember when we met? You'd never get a night like that now.'

'No. I suppose you wouldn't.'

They'd met on the eve of the millennium, under Big Ben, in a carefree, celebratory city yet to experience the cataclysmic effect of the bombing of the twin towers, the trauma of 7/7. Any big-scale event in London these days featured police snipers poised on roof tops, jumpy tube travellers and an oppressive police presence. They could never go back to that innocent time.

Adam watched Claire roll the cigarette packet around in her hand. She was coiled, inscrutable. Nobody said anything for a good minute. Claire looked around the cafe. Adam realised that this was probably the first time she'd been out on her own since her breakdown.

'Sorry,' he said. 'I'm nervous.'

'It's okay. I am, too.'

'How are you doing?'

'I'm alright. Getting there.'

'What happened?'

'Oh, Adam. It's not so simple, you know?'

'How is it then? Please.'

Claire sighed. 'I think it started when we went in to sign the divorce papers,' she said.

'That was a terrible day.'

'I felt like such a failure.'

'You?' Adam said. The divorce was his fault. Entirely his fault. 'But—'

'Like I was letting Lucy down in the most unforgivable way,' Claire said and frowned at the table. 'After that, everything went flat. I didn't realise until I was in pieces. Then I convinced myself that a drink would help, stupidly, and Lucy was with you, and... you know the rest.'

'One drink, eh.'

'One drink,' Claire smiled ruefully, 'Is never enough.'

'Was it as bad as...' he stopped. As when she'd been obliterated by post-natal depression? As when he'd had sex with a stranger because he felt abandoned? Now he knew why he hadn't dared bring this subject up.

'As last time? It was different,' said Claire. 'But you know me. I function, until I don't.'

'So how did you end it?' he jerked his head back. 'I mean—'

'I got help,' she smiled at him as if amused at his arrogance, at his thinking he might have the power to drive her to a suicidal state with one careless comment. 'I was alright for a while. Half a bottle of wine, drunk quickly, seemed to numb everything. Then it got out of hand, of course. When it started affecting Lucy I knew I had to do something. For her. I'm sorry, Adam. You know I'm sorry, don't you?'

'Hey, I'm just glad you're here. Glad you're talking to me, I mean,' he said and took her hand across the table. She let him, looking at her hand as if it was someone else's.

'I miss you so much,' he said. He knew he shouldn't. She took her hand back, put her elbows on the table and rested her eyes in the palms of

her hands. Adam watched her. And loved her. And wanted to go back to a more innocent time.

‘Let’s go for a walk so you can smoke that fag,’ he said after a moment. ‘Then we could go and pick up Lucy. Together. If you like. Or not.’

Claire rested her hands on the table and looked at him.

‘Yes. That would be nice,’ she said.

Safe harbour

Sydney, 2009.

Alistair Harpen hasn't ever felt anything, really, toward Maria Olsen. Perhaps a very slight antipathy, based on the disparity between their pay checks, but that's all. She's actually very attractive, in a Parnell blonde kind of way. Maria became Alistair's boss after a savage round of redundancies eighteen months ago. The job would have been his if he'd lobbied as aggressively as she had.

The only contact Alistair has with Maria, aside from perfunctory emails, is his fortnightly one-to-one in which his progress in achieving his quarterly SMART goals is reviewed, and the combative management meeting they both sit in on each week. It's held on the fourth floor meeting room, the one with the nice view and Alistair, invariably still dazed from the weekend at nine-thirty on Monday mornings when the meeting is held, usually finds himself looking out over the Waitemata and fantasising about being on a mullet riding a stiff breeze out to Barrier.

Alistair isn't quite sure how he's ended up on a flight to Sydney with Maria, but if he's honest, the whole thing has seemed a little contrived from the outset. He usually deals with all the offshore negotiations, not her. She doesn't like travelling. He likes to get away. Until now they've had a tacit agreement, and everybody has been happy. Besides, this deal is in its infancy, far from being brokered. He's still doing the groundwork. She has no skin in this game.

Maria smiles as if to apologise as she reaches across him for her tray of chicken cacciatore. She's too close for a colleague. He can see the faint gradient of a tan line across her cheekbones. She arrived back from Queenstown last week. He chooses the beef. She has an apple juice. He wonders if she's trying to be professional. Bugger that, he thinks, and gets the very average merlot.

When they walk through customs and immigration, it's with a certain sense of authority. Alistair relishes the tandem clacking of their polished shoes, the insistent hum of their suitcase wheels on the travelators. They remove their laptops and empty their pockets efficiently, placing bags on conveyor belts. They acknowledge the customs officials with direct eye contact and curt smiles that say let's get this done as quickly as possible. Alistair wonders what kind of lingerie Maria's got on.

The meeting is tedious but productive. The room is too hot. As Alistair gives his presentation the other company's lead representative flicks ahead in his hard copy. Alistair finds this obnoxious and unprofessional. Maria contributes little. The biscuits are cheap and the filter coffee has been sitting on the element so long it has reduced to an undrinkable burnt tar.

Maria asks Alistair if he'd join her for dinner. Laura's face flashes up in his head. He files the image and says yes to Maria. They decide to visit the tapas bar that adjoins the hotel.

He orders them the smoked wood pigeon with blue cheese and the cured meat selection to start. He asks for a Barossa red and when it arrives he swills the liquid around the giant glass and sniffs. He doesn't think he's being ostentatious, but he notices Maria cringe and refuse the wine. She sticks to the San Pelligrino. He ponders the smoked wood pigeon before it arrives. He imagines a death-stiff, charred and blackened sky rat dropping from a great height to the plate in front of him, incinerated feathers poking out at odd angles. It's fair to say that this is probably not how it comes.

Alistair is his company's most successful broker. He enjoys the thrill of the hunt. They all do. He's a quintessential money-chaser. So is Maria. They are motivated by the same passions.

'So,' he says and smiles at Maria, widening his eyes at the same time. In the back of his head he is aware that he is flirting with his boss. He is sharing an intimate booth in a crowded bar with her, hundreds of miles

from home. He has thrown off the bowlines. Maria twists the diamond on her engagement ring around on her finger.

‘So,’ she says. Alistair laughs as though she’s said something clever and witty. His grey eyes will be twinkling as he does this, in a kind way that Maria won’t have noticed before. Grey eyes. Silver flecks in his hair. Working Style suit. Everything about him screams trustworthy. It’s why he sells so well. In meetings he makes open palmed sincerity gestures, similar to the ones Obama made during the primaries. That’s not fair. Less calculated. But still. Whatever works.

He’s disappointed they haven’t left the hotel. An element of the illicit thrill of being out drinking with a woman—a woman who’s not his wife—is mitigated because they’re still here. Bloody dull hotel life, he says, when he calls Laura from his room feeling like Alan Partridge. Alistair usually calls her mid-evening, which is early in the evening for Laura. She’s usually just finishing her dinner. He drawls ‘ah-ha’ to her, in Alan Partridge’s voice, when she answers, and she always laughs. It’s a comfortable start to the conversation, like putting on a pair of old slippers and settling in. Until the bickering starts, which it invariably does when they’re both feeling lonely and isolated. He usually gets the late flight home on Friday, but this week Maria’s booked them on Saturday’s early flight. He pretended to be disgruntled when he told Laura, but he wasn’t. He was intrigued.

Maria smiles back at Alistair. Her eyes sparkle.

‘So much for closing,’ she says.

‘We’re a few months away from closing,’ he says.

Maria takes a sip of her water. She leaves finger marks on the glass and a faint, cloudy half moon blush where her lips pressed. It’s been a long day. Alistair feels like he has a thin layer of grime covering him. He looks around. The bar is starting to empty out of the gaggles of chardonnay-guzzling corporates with bad hair that they’d had to jostle past on their way in. Soon it will fill up again, this time with twenty-somethings making this their first stop on their way to other, hipper bars and clubs that

Alistair hasn't heard of, being both a foreigner and on the wrong side of thirty. The boys will be in low-slung jeans. They'll lean in to talk to angular girls. Girls dressed up like Katie Perry or Agnes Dean, who'll pout ironically, with their straws and their pretentious cocktails.

'Thanks for letting me come along,' Maria says.

'You're the boss,' Alistair can feel his lazy eye starting to roll in to his nose, a result of the wine and the early start.

'You know, it wasn't the deal. I need to talk to you.'

The muscle in Alistair's lazy eye jumps back into action. Maria is in crisp focus. His brain scrambles like an auto-decoder and stops momentarily on strangely clichéd images of Maria: naked on his bed. Under him. On her desk. In underwear and heels, holding a tumbler of whisky on ice, perched on the board room table. He knew it. He bloody knew it. He just didn't know it would happen quite so quickly. Now what the hell is he going to do?

'What about?' he says, playing the game. Maria pours herself more water. Alistair watches Maria's hand as she pours. It's a very nice hand, small, with short, shiny nails. If you only saw those hands, you'd never suspect a tough bitch like Maria owned them. Laura has much longer nails. Maria's other hand is on her knee. Alistair wonders if she's trying to hide her engagement ring. There's no point. He, like everyone else in the office, knows about Maria's black-haired, black-eyed fiancé. Alistair imagines him now, with raccoon skier's eyes. The waiter arrives with the food.

Alistair realises the last meal he ate was the beef curry on the plane. There is a feeling he's sinking into: recklessness. Sail away or safe harbour? Slippers or seduction? He imagines himself jammed up against Maria, kissing her, in a door frame or an alcove or a corridor. He rolls his lips together for the sensation. Then, in a cartoon puff of smoke, the vision disappears. He tries to get it back, but it's Maria's head on Laura's body.

Last weekend he and Laura went to a dinner party. The hostess stood up just before the lamb tagine and announced to Alistair, Laura and the other four guests that she was sixteen weeks pregnant. Laura had

actually burst into tears. It was unbearable. The whole situation at home is unbearable. He understands money. If he could buy a pregnancy he would. Happily. He doesn't understand PCOS and IVF and all these other depressing acronyms that have ruled his life for the past half decade. He's almost ready to give up on it all. The scenes. The late night phone calls listening to tears fall down the line. The sheer desperation of it all.

He smiles back at Maria. What the hell. Maybe he is ready to give up. He picks up a morsel of pigeon. It's not what he expected. 'Tastes like chicken,' he says, and neither of them laugh. He wonders what's in store, how long she's been planning this.

'It's very personal,' she says, her hand clenched in her thigh.

She's nervous, he realises. Well if she wants this, she can close him.

'You know I'm engaged?' she asks. He nods, and leans forward in his seat, dizzy with the unique thrill of the situation. He runs his hand through his hair; it feels thick with product. His trustworthy hair.

Maria has a lovely face. It's graceful. Alistair likes graceful. He watches her picking at the pigeon; she hasn't touched the charcuterie meats. The bar is full again now; it's ten-thirty. Alistair imagines walking out into the street, the cold air slapping them in the face. They'd walk quickly, furtively, past velvet ropes and shivering clubbers, past ancient pubs and sushi joints. Maria would hold his arm and assume the intimacy of a lover. They'd find a quiet bar and sit on deep, plush sofas and order Martinis. When they returned to the hotel, Alistair would invite her in with a smile that wasn't too sleazy or too friendly. Without words or awkwardness they would fall onto his bed, the curtains open and the lights of the city shining on them.

Alistair gets up, on the spur of the moment, surprising himself.

'Give me a second,' he says, and heads to the bathroom. He's not used to this kind of thing. He looks around the bar and feels old. And cynical. He can't think of a way to absolve himself of responsibility. Laura might be a complete pain in the arse at the moment but she still loves him like all hell. And you know what? He loves her too.

'You're sure you won't have some wine?' he asks as he takes his seat at their booth, sitting a little further away from Maria.

'I can't,' she says. 'That's what I want to talk to you about. I'm pregnant. Four months.'

'Oh my god,' Alistair says, and bursts out laughing. He feels a sense of relief falling through him like an anchor, chains clanking reliably, rhythmically down to the sea bed. 'Congratulations.'

Maria tries to look serious but can't hide her delight and relief at sharing the news.

'I want you to step up to my job when I'm on maternity leave,' she says. 'I trust you, I know you won't stitch me up like Boycey would. Promise you won't say anything. They're a pack of vultures. I don't want anyone else to know until I can't hide it or I'm legally obliged to tell them, whichever comes first.'

'Of course,' says trustworthy, dependable Alistair. Five minutes ago he'd been prepared to fuck someone else. He can't even begin to understand the implications of this. His thoughts are stumbling over each other and the emerging feeling is not guilt, not yet, but a need to tell Laura he loves her, to bridge the endless distance between them. He'll tell her about the promotion. It's a better time to have a baby now, they'll have more money. He'll buy her a bigger house. He'll tell her the next round of IVF is going to work, that luck's on their side now. She'll be finished her dinner. If he wants to call her tonight he'd better get back to his room.

The shell

Fiji, 2010.

Adam brings you back a shell from the far end of the beach. You reluctantly put your book down to look at it. It's pretty. You peer inside. The interior glows orange in the sun. Thank you, you say. It's lovely. Adam sits down heavily on the low recliner beside you, all legs and knees and shoulders. He shrugs.

Really, you say. Thank you.

I'm going to collect one every day for you, he says. I'm going to buy one of those little silver boxes for them from the market. We can take them home and they can remind us of this holiday.

That's a lovely idea, you say, fingering your page.

It'll happen, Claire, he says. It'll happen soon. We had Lucy, didn't we?

I know, you say. I know. It already has happened, you think. It happened five weeks ago.

You hold the shell in your closed fist, hold it up near your chest, make a show of smiling at him gratefully. Then you put the shell down on the table beside the sunscreen. Adam picks it up and puts it in your sunglasses case.

Might get lost otherwise, he says.

Good idea, you say, and wait another moment before turning back to your book. Adam doesn't move. You feel him looking at you. After a few seconds you look back at him, keeping your book open and high. He gets the message, kisses you on the lips quickly, takes his shirt off.

Going for a swim, he says, folding his shirt and putting it on the recliner beside your crumpled sarong. You watch him walk to the ocean. He looks good, his body improbably youthful and strong. You go back to your book.

After a while you look up instinctively and when you do you see him, coming out of the water, rubbing his thick hair back and forward to get the water out of it, making it stand up in that way you love. You see his chest, his shoulders, his thighs. You don't notice his widow's peak, his flat feet, the ugly mole on his back. He is dripping, sparkling.

Beautiful in, he says, shaking out one of the perfectly rolled towels. He is more confident now, drying himself off. He carries so much water. Six foot two, he soaks a towel completely.

You feel something: you want to stand and press your body against his. This is what's left, you think. This feeling is what's left when you take away the stress and the worry. When you take away the school run and the packed lunches and the ear infections and the snotty noses. When you take away the mortgage and the mind-numbing nights of telly. This is what's left.

Dinner is booked for eight-thirty. At seven you make love. Slowly and exploratively. You are both gentle and tentative and true. You lie together afterwards without having to jump up for a child's cry for a toy that's fallen out of bed. You lie together naked, with the Do Not Disturb sign hanging proudly on the door. You pull the sheet over your sticky body as you begin to cool down. Your head rests on his chest. His body twitches in sleep already. This is what's left, you think, when you take away the washing and the folding and the notices to check for head lice.

At eight you get up. You take a shower. Nobody's crying because their favourite dress is in the wash. You shave your legs and under your arms. You wash your hair and you leave the conditioner in for the instructed two minutes instead of washing it straight out. You stand with your face under the water without worrying that you can't hear anything.

Adam comes in to the shower with you. You are slippery together. You stand close together; you are soapy, he is not. The water collects in a pool where your chests meet. It splashes on your face. You close your eyes

and rest your head on the wet collar bone you've rested on for the past decade. Give or take.

You walk out of the shower into the bathroom and wrap a towel around you and turban your hair with another. Nobody laughs at your funny hat. You brush your teeth and moisturise your face and nobody asks if they can have some too. You look at yourself. You have time. You try to see yourself as the rest of the world sees you. As he sees you. You see fatigue. In your body, which is starting to hunch the way mothers' bodies do. In your face too; six years of sleepless nights are pencilled on in lines and droops and shadows. You lift your chin and stare at yourself more kindly, as you know you must. You see honesty reflected back at you.

You go to the wardrobe and dress without hurry. Nobody needs dinner made, baths run, teeth brushed, pyjamas put on or bedtime stories read. Nobody wants a glass of water. Nobody wants you to lie with them and cuddle them and stroke their face for just one more minute, just one more minute. Nobody waits for you to tell them you love them more than the sun and the moon and all the stars. And you do; you do love her more than all the stars in the sky. You are so overcome with love it makes you gasp and knocks you down. You land on the bed, and sit, and catch your breath. You reach for your phone and look at the photograph on it, and stroke that instead.

You wear earrings. Nobody will try to pull them off your ears.

At dinner you order three courses and don't ask how long it will take. The ice in your water clinks as you sip, and melts quickly. Adam follows his Caipirinha with wine. You don't fret about the candle on the table getting knocked over. You remember you forgot to pack the wipes, and then remember that you didn't need to. Nobody wants to have plain boiled pasta with tomato sauce. Your starter of seared tuna with mango salsa is delicate and fresh. You share with Adam and he shares his salt and pepper squid with you.

The islands, the sky, the water have all been stripped of colour and left a deep grey. The breeze has ceased and the air cloaks you, seductively thick and warm. It feels like the rain is about to start. The downpours here are sudden and violent; impetuous, short-lived tantrums. You are pleased you remembered to put insect repellent on your bare ankles. Adam's face is already tanned and his forehead has already relaxed. You see the person you loved so fearlessly and you feel an intense echo of that feeling. It passes through your body like a shudder. Those were the innocent times. Privately you shield your heart.

I've been wondering if you're having another affair, you ask, keeping your tone light. It feels like the right time. You watch his face closely. You see something in his eyes but you can't tell what it is. Quickly, he blinks and the look is gone. He is not guarded, but the look is gone. Perhaps it was just confusion, or surprise.

What? What are you talking about, he says. It's not a no, you note. You don't say anything, you just watch him. The waiter comes and takes away your empty plates.

The late nights at the office, you say eventually. The surprise holiday. The functional sex. What am I supposed to think?

Claire, please, he says. Do you really think I'm that much of a cliché?

We are a cliché, you say. Aren't we?

He sighs and looks at the table, then back up at you. I love you, he says. I love you and I love our family. I'm not having an affair. This... it's a difficult time. Every month you get so dejected. I'm just trying to help. Can you honestly say you enjoy shagging on a schedule? He holds your gaze. After a moment, you believe him absolutely. You both smile, then laughter escapes from you.

The waiter brings your pancetta-wrapped reef fish and his rare eye fillet and you don't have to remind anyone to say thank you. Adam eats, as always, as though he hasn't done so for a week.

I'm sorry, you say. Forget I said anything. Can you?

Can we just enjoy ourselves, he pleads. Can we not complicate this?

Yes, you say. Of course we can. I love you, too, you say. With everything I have.

You eat dinner. Nobody keeps jumping off their seat pretending to be a ballerina. Nobody refuses to eat their vegetables. Adam is quiet, but not unkindly so. You talk about small things. What you might do tomorrow. Which is your favourite end of the beach. How that man sat at the pool bar drinking beer for a suspiciously long time this afternoon. Slowly, you both recover from your question.

After dinner you visit the bar. You are full and damp and sticky and drinking mojitos—virgin for you, full strength for him. The loud black rain has finally arrived. Plastic aprons have been hastily erected on the windward side, but myriads of rivulets flow persistently under them. Little paths of watery footprints have formed everywhere; the tiles are slippery. Geckos squelch up the thatching on the walls. The outsides of your high ball glasses sweat and turn the cardboard coasters into pulp. The truce hovers around you tipsily, like the moths at the candles. You sit quietly together on a rattan sofa, facing out, to the darkness, to waves unseen in the dark and unheard over the rain. You decide you'll tell him tomorrow morning. You were going to wait another week, just in case, but you'll tell him tomorrow.

When the rain stops you walk together, back along the beach to your room. You take off your sandals and the sand is soft and cool on your feet. Warm air clamps onto you; you expected a breeze but there is none. The tide is full and the waves lap quietly on the sand. When you get to your room, Adam fiddles with the card in the slot. It takes him three tries to find the right way in the dark.

Your eyes aren't what they used to be, are they, you ask tenderly.

No, he says, opening the door into the cold room. Shall we turn that air con down a bit? It's arctic in here.

Sure, you say, shivering with the chill. I'm easy.

I'll do it in a minute, he says. He puts the key in the slot on the wall and the lights flash on. He goes into the bathroom.

You put your sandals in the wardrobe and lie down on the bed. You open the sunglass case and take out your shell and roll its smoothness in your fingers. You put it back, and pick up your phones to see if Lucy has called. There's nothing on yours, but there's a missed call on Adam's. Your heart quickens; but it's too late to call her back, she'll be asleep by now. You ring the answerphone. Smiling, you press one to hear her beautiful little voice.

Adam it's me, an unfamiliar woman's voice says in your ear. I need to speak to you. Call me when you can.

Hollow

Auckland, 2010.

Why are you crying? Are you in pain?

Laura doesn't know how to reply. She shakes her head.

The ceiling has a pattern that looks like analogue static.

Grim hours pass. The man in the next bed refuses treatment.

Someone moans continuously. Someone vomits intermittently. Someone can't understand the doctor's loud slow words. House of horrors, thinks Laura, then: Get over yourself. It's not bloody Darfur.

The lure itches where it punctures her arm. Nurses observe, record incuriously. The muscles on Laura's face feel weighted, as if gravity is steadily intensifying. The lines between her eyes pucker and bunch in confusion. She realises again. As if for the first time. She screws her eyes tightly closed, holds her breath, shakes her head. When she opens her eyes she feels the loss. As if for the first time.

The loss is a congealing pain, and a black place she inhabits.

She rests her head back, heavily, on the damp linen. The tunnels and lobes of her ears are wet and she is quiet and nothing matters. The world is still turning. All life is still bursting forward in time. She is here, still.

The ceiling has a pattern that looks like analogue static.

Later, too many women will say to Laura that they know from experience. Sad, time, heal, they will say. Perhaps tiny angels dance beside them as they remember. This is a cardboard cut-out cliché. Laura used to be embarrassed by ideas like these.

Laura's husband didn't come to the appointment. He had a conference to be at. It was just a routine scan. Nothing to fear, the danger period well past.

Laura is transferred from emergency to another ward, to wait some more. It is late and quiet. When her phone beeps impatiently, it is deafening. Her husband will come as soon as he can get a flight. He will see her tomorrow. The other patients have their lights off. Laura tries to cry without noise. She moves her hand to her ear, to tuck a tress of hair back. There is no hair to tuck. Laura had it cut short three weeks ago. Her hairdresser laughed at her, at the way she was already preparing for motherhood.

The elderly woman in the bed beside Laura is distressed and confused and keeps trying to get up. Nurses untangle her from her catheter and lie her down again as she apologises. They don't ask where she was trying to go.

Laura's mother appears in the ward and comes to her. Laura looks at her, properly, for the first time in a long time. Without knowing why she expects it, she looks for judgement, disapproval. There is none of this, Laura sees. There never has been. Disapproval has only ever flowed toward her mother, not from. Laura wraps this precious, primitive understanding carefully and puts it away; she cannot inspect it now. For now she simply looks at her mother by the hesitant amber glow of her night light and sees her infinite love. I'm so sorry, says her mother. My darling, I wish I could fix this. Laura lets herself be held.

After a while, the woman in the bed opposite speaks softly through the dark. This happened to me, this thing that's happening to you. To my husband and me. Many years ago. I'm sorry for your loss. Laura and her mother bow their heads together until their foreheads touch their collection of clasped hands. Laura's mother's shoulders shake.

The doctor comes at midnight. This is not satisfactory, he says.

I'm sorry, Laura whispers, like the old woman in the bed next door.

She needs a single room to labour in, continues the doctor. Laura understands he is speaking to the nurse.

There are no single rooms left tonight, the nurse says.

What about maternity?

They would prefer not.

Please, asks Laura, in a sane and reasonable voice, if there is no space, can I go home until there is?

At home, Laura's mother tucks her into her bed gently and sleeps in the spare room. Laura curls up like a foetus.

There is a bed the next afternoon. Laura's husband arrives home and without unpacking drives her to the hospital. He is close and in focus, immediate. They are drawn together in an essential way, the way Laura hoped their baby would connect them. Was connecting them. Has connected them.

Laura is given pills, to induce a labour.

Please, she asks before she takes them, in a sane and reasonable voice, can we just check one more time? She has felt no movements but still. Please, says Laura's husband, who only sees a rounded belly and evidence of life. The medics make time for an ultrasound. The consultant shows them, quietly, the multiple structural abnormalities, the incompatibility with life, the anatomical indications that the pregnancy has failed. They see, quietly, that their boy is dead.

Back in the room she swallows the pills. They wait. They cry. Each short round of tears is a purging and for a few minutes afterwards Laura feels calm. Until she realises it isn't calm that she feels at all, but bereft: something inside her has died. For nearly a decade she has been trying to have a baby. Now there is only this baby. This baby boy. Her beloved son. The labour provides insufficient pain.

He is born in the morning, with little fuss, after a lilted night of abrupt tears and sleep drifts.

Where are you taking him? Laura asks the nurse. The nurse looks startled. Laura forgot to sound sane and reasonable.

To clean him up, she says. I'll bring him back soon.

Laura nods assent and her eyes follow her boy until the door shuts again.

He is gone.

He is brought to them. His hand is as big as Laura's thumbnail. She plays him a song, talks to him. Eventually she holds him.

He is cold. She wishes she could warm him.

He is a cold that she can't change. She wraps and rewraps him in blankets.

She wishes she could warm him.

She wishes she could have him back.

Laura asks for her mother to come. Why does it hurt so much, she asks her. I never even knew him.

Because you are a mother now, my darling. And you have lost your child. He is loved and he is missed.

This is truth and Laura's heart hears it. Later, at night, she'll see the grainy vision of him alive, floating in amniotic fluid, sucking his thumb, kicking his feet. Then she'll see him lying in his basket, translucent and tiny and loved and gone. It must be your fault, her brain will say then, in a million different ways, and late at night will become a kind of hell. Until she remembers the heart truth of her mother's simple words.

Silent, staring at the floor two metres in front of her, Laura leans on her mother and walks beside her husband as he carries their boy from the ward to the car. In the corridors, in the lift, people smile at them. Then they notice. The basket is too small. The blanket is drawn too high. They look away quickly. When they get to their car, Laura's mother holds the

seatbelt for her, tucks the bottom of Laura's coat inside the door as if she is wrapping eggs in a tea towel. She waves as they drive off, her eyes locked on Laura's.

They take their boy home and show him his room. They take him to the crematorium and they stand outside and watch the blur of vapour streaming skyward. There is a rainbow but no rain. Late afternoon sunlight beams down through clouds in shining strands. A child might have drawn this sky. Laura and her husband hold each other and look up. The world is still turning. All life is still bursting forward in time. They are here, still.

In the weeks to come, baby scan images, jauntily displayed on pregnant friends' fridges, will tug Laura's eyes and make them sting. She will wade through her world slowly. She will make many mistakes. Rage will explode unpredictably, at strangers, her husband, herself. Then the gaps between tears will get longer. The guilt and the anger will condense and evaporate, leaving no stain. One day she'll notice that the dull persistent ache in her chest has disappeared. She'll notice that her mother has become her friend. She'll realise how patient and kind her husband has been. Life will speed up again. Sad, time, heal, Laura will say to other women. Perhaps a tiny angel will dance beside her as she remembers.

Coda: hope and regret

Fiji, 2010.

Over dinner at the restaurant, and very politely, his wife accuses him of adultery. He listens to her intently, with his eyes, and wants to cry. A little distance between them, a little deviation from the norm, and this is what she suspects. He did betray her, once, a long time ago, and it wrecked them then and it still hurts them both. He feels like a different person now, although she, and his daughter, are his constants, his gravity. His breath. He chooses his words carefully.

On his own in the shower later, he feels violent. Anger isn't the right emotion. He washes his legs roughly and they tingle with sunburn. He shuts the shower off. Towel poised ready to dry his back, he stops and shakes his head. Frustration. That is exactly the right emotion. Nobody to blame, except himself.

He hears the heavy clunk of the hotel door shutting. Claire, he calls, that you? Sliding the bathroom door across he sees the cool room is empty, the crisp hotel bed linen indented with the shape of a body where his wife has been lying. On the bed is a shell he found for her earlier in the day, and his phone.

He calls her name again, redundantly, and flicks the air con off. Halfway through pulling on his tee shirt he stops, listens, imagines he hears footsteps scratching along the concrete. Her key card has gone. Where's she going at eleven o'clock at night? There are no footsteps. He gets dressed.

He picks up his phone and checks it. A message has just been played. He listens to it. It's from Ange, an aggressive recruitment agent who's been trying to get him to interview for a job with a contract publishing company. Ange's message is over-familiar and urgent, as usual. Call me, is all she says. Fucking presumptuous, he thinks. I'm on holiday.

He's been putting off talking to Ange, and putting off talking to Claire about the job. He knows he should be taking the opportunity seriously. He and Claire are trying for another baby, and the job has better pay and more responsibility than the one he has now. The problem is one of stupid vanity. He enjoys working for a national publication that everyone he knows holds in high regard. With its left-wing editorial slant he can pretend he isn't sliding comfortably into the same thinly-veiled neo-conservatism he sees in his friends. What's happened to us, he rants on the way home after every dinner party spent talking about property prices and good schools. How did we end up so dull and selfish? And she smiles at him patiently.

Claire smiles.

Claire.

He realises: Claire has just listened to this message. It sounds intimate.

He is filled with a fear of darkness.

He grabs his key card and jogs to the bar. Couples stumble past him on the beach, tipsy and leaning on each other and giggling at him, running, in the middle of the night.

Please don't drink, he thinks, then feels like a traitor. Her slumps start with circumstance and they run deep into shame and dread and guilt and oblivion, and his head hurts just thinking about it. He imagines her at the bar, perched on a stool, elegant and beautiful and crumbling, ordering vodkas. Her preferred medication. Always and instantly available. When she drinks, it's in precise, ever-increasing doses, and no good ever comes of it. She hasn't had a drink for years now. Since before she took him back. It took him a year to convince her to take him back. Playing at love, she used to say, is the quickest way to rob Lucy of her innocence. His daughter is at her grandmother's, tucked up asleep. Lucy doesn't know anything's wrong.

There is nothing wrong.

At the bar he holds his breath as he looks around. Two fifty-something American men, still with their cameras around their necks, are doing shots of tequila. The bartender is cleaning glasses and laughing at jokes. Everyone else has left, and already, the slick wetness on the floor from a downpour earlier has nearly evaporated. One of the Americans laughs loudly. The sound grates on his nerves. The bartender looks over and Adam realises he is standing, sweating and wild-eyed in the entranceway like a mad man.

Claire's not in the bar.

He runs his wet palms down his wet face, exhales, and walks out onto the beach again.

At the northern end he can see a dark outline of a woman, sitting, hugging her knees. The chainsaw buzz of cicadas is suspended in the air. The woman stares out at the black water, still and perfect. She moves an arm, and in the movement, with relief, he recognises his wife. He feels something sad and sweet; longing, or regret, or love, or perhaps even hope. He goes to her, trudging heavily on the soft damp sand, and sits beside her. So she can say something if she wants to, or needs to. She doesn't say anything.

You listened to the message on my phone, he says, and it comes out dripping with guilt and he feels the effects of the cocktails he had earlier.

Claire sighs and looks at him and his head feels as soggy and pulpy as the cardboard coaster his drinks were sweating on.

I heard it, she says, and she sounds weary. Who is she? Do I know her?

He wants to rewind the day, back to when they lay together in the room before dinner, naked and entwined, skin chilled artificially, laughing as they called to the maid to come back later and watched the geckos slink along their wall. Now the air presses on him relentlessly. He wants to sing a song to her, the way he would to Lucy, to comfort her. He wants to protect her.

It's not what you think, he says.

Heard that before Adam.

No, I mean—

You bring me down here, to the middle of fucking nowhere, so I can find this out? Why are we here, exactly?

Claire.

And why is it, Adam, that every time I fall pregnant you turn into the world's biggest shit?

What?

Are you hardwired to spread your seed and fuck off? Is it some kind of primal arsehole instinct that you just can't ignore?

You're pregnant?

Claire turns away from him. He puts his arm on her, tentatively, but she shrugs it off.

Claire, she's a recruitment agent. She's trying to head hunt me for a job that pays nearly twice what mine does but is boring as all hell. I haven't told you because I don't want to take it. She's just a recruitment agent. He's babbling now, tripping over his words, desperate to get the truth out of his mouth and into her head.

Claire turns back to him, blinking slowly as if she's resetting everything in her head. When she opens her eyes he sees sincerity and sadness. A recruitment agent, she says.

Yes.

Why is she calling you on holiday?

I don't know. She's aggressive.

A recruitment agent.

Yes.

The silence is as thick and black as the ocean. Adam's head throbs. He sits in turmoil beside his wife, beside the still water.

Claire frowns and presses her lips together, the same way she does when she's worried about a sick Lucy, or feeling shy and sober at a party.

I thought Lucy might have called.

I know. Please, Claire... I know it's hard to trust me.

Adam puts his hand on Claire's knee, palm up, fingers open.

I suppose I'm frightened, she says, staring at his hand.

I know. And fair enough.

Claire envelopes his hand with both of hers, straightens her back, draws herself up.

Adam?

Yeah?

I'll be six weeks tomorrow.

Adam laughs, a great roaring laugh that comes straight from his heart.

Let's do it right this time, Claire says, smiling.