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THE EVOLUTION OF A PASSIVE NARRATOR

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fulfilment of the requirements of
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ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises a novel and a critical study. The novel is a first-person text which explores the narration of unrequited love. The critical study is a discussion of how a character narrating unrequited love can tend toward passivity. Its purpose is to find how my narrator evolved from one whose passivity was a weakness in the novel, to one in which it became a quality that merited attention.

In the Introduction I offer some background about why unrequited love is a subject that interests me and how I have used the theme before. I describe how initially in this novel, my narrator's response to unrequited love was problematic for me, and why. In this context, I look at and give a definition of narrative passivity. I outline what type of narrator I realised I did want, and my intentions for the study. I also introduce the texts that sustained and supported me on the way.

Part One [Early Incarnations] looks back at the direction in which my originally unnamed and urban narrator was going. I explain why I felt the need to refigure him. I show how, during the process of developing him, I found he nevertheless retained some of his initial characteristics. I point to where the traces of these early iterations remain.

In Part Two [The Makings of Will] I discuss the concepts of passivity and agency in relation to my narrator. I look at what it means to be a protagonist and what I did to make my narrator both narrator and protagonist of this novel. I examine his relationships, including those that pre-date the novel. I show how the connections he forges serve to mitigate – rather than eradicate – his passivity, thereby making this aspect of him interesting as opposed to frustrating for a reader.

Part Three [The Division of Time] investigates how I organised the novel temporally. There are two timeframes. Initially, neither was organised in a linear way. I explain the changes I undertook – namely rearranging events chronologically – and why; that is, in order to better reinforce the arc of my narrator's growth. Finally, I reveal why the river is a crucial site within the novel and how it influenced my narrator's development.

The Conclusion summarises my main discoveries during the creation of my narrator. In particular was the realisation that whilst his character need not be wholly determined by a narration of unrequited love, and indeed is not, the two are bound – and balanced – throughout.

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INTRODUCTION

There are many ways to write about unrequited love. I am interested in exploring the subject through my own writing and I keep coming back to the theme. I wrote about it in my first published novel, *I See Through You* (2018)¹ from the point of view of a narrator who becomes obsessive and duplicitous. I decided to explore again how I might portray a narrator who loves someone without reciprocation, but through a different voice. The result is Will Crawford, the narrator of *Half River, Half Sea*.² This study traces the arc of his development.

In short, my remit here is two-fold. Firstly, it is an analysis of the problems that I encountered with my narrator as I originally conceived him, and an explanation of why I considered these to be problems. Secondly, it describes how I addressed these difficulties, namely by shifting the way I depicted my narrator. As a result, he has been through several incarnations. This is because in early iterations he was very passive. I am not claiming that the passivity of a narrator in a novel is necessarily a problem in itself. Only that in this instance, it was for me. I will explain what I mean by using *I See Through You* as a point of reference.

The narrator of *I See Through You* is a woman named Skye. Broken-hearted after the antagonist's treatment of her, Skye realises that he, Johnny, does not love her. She becomes embittered and conniving. However, prior to this, there is a moment during which Skye does nothing but wait for Johnny to get in touch. In this interlude, some of the debilitating qualities often associated with unrequited love – powerlessness, being entirely dependent on someone else, feeling half-existent – attach themselves to her. Being shut out of Johnny's world means that Skye has no access to it. She cannot affect any change in it. I am going to define this as

¹ McNally, Daisy, *I See Through You*. London: Orion 2018.

² McNally, Daisy, *Half River, Half Sea*. Unpublished manuscript.

passivity here; simply put, I use the term to mean that a narrator has no agency in a world that they are, or else long to be, a part of.

Skye does not remain a passive narrator for long. She emerges from her stasis, determined to inveigle her way back into Johnny's world, by any means. She becomes a force to be reckoned with. I hesitate to use the word 'active' because its meanings go beyond the precise remit I have in mind. I would say instead that Skye becomes someone with agency. She herself says: 'And something switched inside me...'³

The narrator of my new novel was passive as well. In early drafts, he was an unnamed and marginalised outsider who lived in Oxford. He was fixated on a glamorous neighbour called Eve. He was an observer. There are numerous examples of disenfranchised and lovelorn narrators in literature that inspired him, and I am thinking especially of Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* (1945)⁴ and Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty* (2004)⁵. They are both exiled from the worlds they seek to inhabit. They are the unlucky third, in love with someone or something unattainable. Both are separated from their objects of desire by an unbridgeable gap. They slide, amiably enough, between adoration and envy for the worlds they observe and describe.

However, my narrator's observation of the world from which he was barred was making him inert; all he could ever do was observe, and in a creepy way. Nothing seemed to be happening for him. He was waiting for something from Eve – just as Skye had been from Johnny, before her recalibration – but he could not influence that longed-for happening. Over time his inertia bothered me. I felt that I needed to give him some agency. He was my

³ *I See Through You*, p. 88.

⁴ Waugh, Evelyn, *Brideshead Revisited*. London: Penguin, 2000 (1945).

⁵ Hollinghurst, Alan, *The Line of Beauty*. London: Picador, 2004.

protagonist, after all; I needed him to *do* something, to act. His voyeurism alone had not sufficed, for him or the novel. So I had him act, and when he did, it was in a sociopathic way, just as Skye in *I See Through You* had acted. He was not remotely amiable in the way that Charles Ryder or Nick Guest are.

He was the type of narrator described by Kevin Maher as ‘speaking for an entire silent generation of the frustrated, the underappreciated and the overlooked.’⁶ This is from a review of *Unhinged*,⁷ a film with a homicidal protagonist known simply as The Man. Looking back, I can see that my narrator’s traits were the result of my rejection of a passive narrative role for him - but in the wrong direction. The novel would no longer be about my narrator’s experience of unrequited love, but about his sinister qualities and Eve’s understandable rejection of them.

It is not inherently problematic to write a malignant narrator, any more than it is a passive narrator. This is the deliberate choice of many authors and to a certain extent I did it with Skye in my first novel, although her behaviour is arguably justifiable. But I did not want to do it again; I wanted to write about unrequited love differently this time. I had to find a way to give my narrator some agency but without him becoming a sociopath and definitely not a psychopath. Furthermore, I still wanted to illustrate how experiencing unrequited love can sometimes make a person feel, that is, ineffectual and somehow incomplete. Let me explore this idea a little more.

Orkney (2013)⁸ is a novel by Amy Sackville which describes a two-week honeymoon leading to the disappearance of the narrator’s adored wife. When she has gone, in his desolation, the narrator/professor says, ‘I am a cancelled man.’⁹ These words intrigue me. Although the idea of difficulty, or pain in love, is not a new or an unusual concept in literature,

⁶ Maher, Kevin, ‘*Unhinged* review – the toxic villain we truly deserve’. *The Times*, 31st July 2020.

⁷ *Unhinged*. A film by Derrick Borte, 2020.

⁸ Sackville, Amy, *Orkney*. London: Granta Books, 2014 (2013).

⁹ *Orkney*, p. 251.

the notion that one's sense of self can be obliterated – or 'cancelled' – by love resonates with me. My challenge, which at times seemed conflicting, was to show how my narrator felt negated, or blanked out, but also whilst ensuring he wasn't completely inert or invisible.

In order to convey a sense of his powerlessness, in an early draft I gave my narrator a condition called spasmodic dysphonia. This condition made it hard for him to speak. I thought perhaps that having a broken, or hesitant voice could be an interesting metaphor for a lack of agency.¹⁰ But the result was that too many of his hopes and yearnings were being internalised, which meant that they never landed anywhere. Other characters simply talked at him. He had no real force or substance, at least none that other characters could comprehend. In this sense, mainly portraying his internal world – whilst possibly interesting for a limited time – was not giving him sufficient agency.

Who did I want my narrator to be? This, I realised, was not anyone exceptional, but rather someone ordinary. This is not to say that he could not be interesting in his ordinariness. I did not want him to be extreme, in either behaviour or physical affliction. I actually wanted him to be complex, and by complex, I mean not easily grasped, but graspable; that is, his thought processes and actions might not, and indeed should not, always make immediate sense to a reader but on a more profound and nebulous level, they would. I did not want everything about him to add up. Much of his (in)-action in the pursuit of his longings might seem counter-productive and this is because he is conflicted. Furthermore, I wanted him to have some awareness of this and the fact of his contrariness be recognised by, and possibly resonate with, readers. This is despite and even because of his reserved and unrevealing nature - a point worth emphasising because Will retains some of his innate reticence to the final draft. His self-containment is, to me, part of why he is interesting.

¹⁰ Of course, not having a voice does not automatically mean a narrator might not have agency. A murderer can commit numerous acts of murder without ever saying a word. This is a point that came up in discussion with Samantha Harvey about defining passivity.

However, being unforthcoming and buttoned-up are tricky characteristics to convey through a medium that relies on words, and my narrator, not least because he is the novel's anchor, proved a difficult protagonist to pitch. How was I to convey the richness about him without sacrificing the very things that make him who he is? This brings me to the second strand of this study's investigation - how I went about shifting early depictions of my narrator. To rephrase the question, how did the unnamed narrator of the first draft become the Will of the final draft? That is to say, how did he become a narrator whose passivity was part of his complexity, and not an obstruction to it?

To explore the answers, I look at my own process of writing the novel, and the rationale for some of the decisions that took me from the first draft to the last. For example, I gave him a name - surely not by coincidence did he become *Will*, a narrator with some impetus and force. I realised that I had taken a step backwards by giving him dysphonia and eventually I edited the condition out completely. I gave him back his voice. Equally, I tried to retain his reticence - his uniqueness - and surprisingly perhaps, this looked more likely to be achieved as he became increasingly ordinary and less extreme. Alongside this, I made changes to the confusing, non-linear time frames, with the aim of simplifying them as well.

I also look at two other novels: *Orkney* by Amy Sackville, which I have already mentioned, and *Dear Thief* by Samantha Harvey (2014).¹¹ It is especially illuminating to me how Harvey and Sackville balance both passivity and agency in their narrators and their approaches have helped guide my own decision-making around the construction of Will. Both of these first-person narrators navigate the terrain of unrequited love in nuanced ways that I find compelling. Their complex relationships with the objects of their affection showed me that how I managed the psychology of Will's own relationships would be key in achieving my aims

¹¹ Harvey, Samantha, *Dear Thief*. London: Vintage, 2015 (2014).

for him. Added to which, I wanted the connections Will forges to show that despite his love being unrequited, this love would nonetheless affirm rather than negate him.

The challenge was to demonstrate everything Will feels he *isn't*, whilst expressing everything he *is*. In an early draft of the novel, he says to another character: 'You don't know me... You don't know what happened. You don't know anything about me,'¹² and I realised that the reader, at this point in my writing, did not know or understand much about him either. These lines do, in fact, survive to the final draft but I hope that the context for their setting is now very different. How I altered that initial context is at the heart of this study.

¹² McNally, Daisy, *Half River, Half Sea*, p.187.

EARLY INCARNATIONS

Violent origins

I want to look at Will as he was in his very first inception in order to identify the problems with him. I can then trace how he evolved.

My narrator lived alone by the canal in Oxford. He worked as a photographer and this choice of job was in order to emphasise his role as observer. If the letter-writer of *Dear Thief* behind her escritoire is metaphorically behind the lens of a camera, my narrator would literally be so. He wanted to capture and be part of a life that seemed more magnificent than his own.

The professor in *Orkney* does something similar by narrating his wife as the heroine of Romance stories. Her elevation might, by association, mean his. It is worth stressing that in both *Dear Thief* and *Orkney*, the narrators long to participate in the stories they tell, but fear, deep down, that they are mere bystanders. A first-person narration can reinforce this: they have thoughts rather than actions; they are the consciousness rather than the body; they are the lens through which the story is seen. They cannot force or engender change. If they do try to be a participant it is often to be coercive and cross, because they know no other, true way of relating.

My narrator's bitterness about his exclusion from Eve's world kept surfacing. Always armed with a camera, always furtive; and at the same time, resisting the role of mere bystander. The options for him seemed to be becoming starker. This meant that the likelihood of him resorting to violent behaviour in order to make himself heard – and from a narrative point of view, in order to prevent him remaining static – were increasing.

I want to pause here to summarise the two novels about fixation and loss that are so pivotal to this study. *Orkney* is an unconventional love story. A professor is the first-person narrator; his wife, forty years his junior, the object of his adoration. The third character is the sea, given surging, poetic – and finally thieving – life of its own by Sackville. The professor spends his days nervously watching his wife on the beach. It is both a tender and increasingly

feverish account of his obsession with her. He describes her in terms of his creation but in an inversion of traditional religious homage, it is he who worships his 'tiny, perfect, whittled trinket...' ¹³ Such precise, devoted testaments to her fill the pages, including more frustrated ones: '...I want so much to own just some small part of her, for a moment, entirely. I sometimes think I know nothing at all about her. And sometimes I think there is some particular thing that I will never know, that I can never hope to know, for all my probing.' ¹⁴

He is terrified that she is going to leave. As early as the eighth line of the novel he says, anxiously, '...and then, I think, she'll come back to me.' ¹⁵ There is both an uncertainty as to whether she will return and insistence that she will. Sackville neatly sets up the conflict within the tortured professor here; the awful prescience that she is going to disappear bound up with his complete rejection of such horror.

His refusal to accept this horror means that he is a controlling, and at times violent husband. He helps nearly drown his wife by keeping her head under the water in the bath. Coercion is alluded to and certainly she has bruises. He admits, 'I may have been a little rough with her; when it was over and the blood cleared from my eyes, I saw her face was once more sea-stung with tears.' ¹⁶ He experiences such intense jealousy that another reader might wonder if a possible explanation for her disappearance is that he murdered her. He asks himself at one point: 'Will I be willing, when the time comes, to give her over to the world?' ¹⁷ It is rather a sinister question given that she does not return to the outside world. Violence – followed by remorse – is the clearest expression of the professor's conflicted feelings.

Dear Thief is a letter to an absent and erstwhile friend. The narrator is writing to Nina, not seen for nearly twenty years. The reason for the fractured friendship is the affair between

¹³ *Orkney*, p.22.

¹⁴ *Orkney*, p. 225.

¹⁵ *Orkney*, p.1.

¹⁶ *Orkney*, p.217.

¹⁷ *Orkney*, p.35.

Nina and the letter-writer's husband. The letter is begun because the letter-writer imagines that Nina wants an answer to an old question, but perhaps this inducement is false. The letter-writer has her own burning, bitter question for Nina: 'Not: Is she happy, is she free, is she alive? – no. Does she think it was worth it?'¹⁸

A letter, of course is a one-sided monologue. The narrator's rumination takes precedence over actual events, events which are shaped and understood by the letter-writer's uncontested version of them. Nina is not given the right to reply. The letter-writer has all the words and furthermore she has a fondness for fantasy. The controlling and punitive day-dreaming that she indulges in bears this out. She pictures Nina alone and uncomfortable in a desert hut. She declares: 'My imagination grants you electricity,'¹⁹ - or not. A little further on in the novel, she envisages Nina claiming the letter 'tantamount to assault.'²⁰ The letter-writer responds: 'I do not feel bad about inflicting this violence and cruelty on you. If you had not run away...'²¹

It is hard to enact revenge on an absence and the letter-writer is furious about this. As it is, she has to make it up. Further on in the novel she places Nina alone in a Lithuanian forest. She watches Nina in the melancholic heat, slapping at mosquitoes, and made livid by a dog barking nearby. 'Why has she put me here?'²² the letter-writer has Nina ask. 'Why has she locked me here in a forest inside a letter?'²³ A page or two later, she herself provides the answer to this question. She puts Nina in the forest because she wants to punish her, but the guilt induced by this desire for vengeance belies her vindictiveness and permeates the novel.

¹⁸ *Dear Thief*, p.14.

¹⁹ *Dear Thief*, p.67.

²⁰ *Dear Thief*, p.149.

²¹ *Dear Thief*, p.149.

²² *Dear Thief*, p.220.

²³ *Dear Thief*, p.220.

The letter-writer is many things. Prosecutor, criminal, defense, victim. My own narrator was just angry. I couldn't find in him any of the subtlety that I read in Harvey's portrayal of the multi-layered letter-writer, nor any of the empathy that Sackville emotes in her uneasy, slavish professor. My narrator's violent expressions were just that. I did write a short paragraph describing an episode in which he physically assaults Eve on the banks of the canal. I took my antipathy to that scene as confirmation that I was taking the wrong route.

With hindsight, I can identify that amongst the first, crucial changes to the original conception of my narrator was to name and relocate him.

Names and the coast

My narrator was unnamed to help signify his lack of agency. Eve was named for the original sinner of the bible and Rob was named for a robber, demonstrating the narrator's view of Rob's relationship with Eve as something stolen from him.

These early thoughts about names seem simplistic to me now, but seeds were planted and germinated in ways that I hope are more subtle and meaningful. For example, I thought of Shakespeare's 'inconstant moon'²⁴ and how Will views Celine as ever-changing. Eve became Celine, named after the Greek goddess of the moon (Selene). The name became doubly relevant once I had divided the novel's sections into months named for the moon. In this way, the moon itself provides the scaffolding for the novel's structure.²⁵ And Celine turns out to be Will's scaffolding in that she initiates his change and supports his growth.

The way an author uses names can be allied to who possesses and who lacks power. The letter-writer in *Dear Thief* is unnamed and therefore has a kind of invisibility. By giving Nina two names (Butterfly being the second), Harvey cedes some authority to Nina. The novel

²⁴ *Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, scene ii.

²⁵ See 'June and the moon', p.56 of the critical component.

is also named for Nina; she is the titular thief. The surplus of Nina's names can be seen as undermining the letter-writer's powerful narration. Harvey says in interview that although Nina is an absent presence, 'the narrator is, too. She's sort of absent because she doesn't have a name and we never see her. She can never look back at herself. There are very few allusions to what she looks like. So I wanted it to be a novel of absence.'²⁶

Harvey has the letter-writer say of someone in the novel: 'This wife, whose name I don't think I have ever imparted to you and which I now don't think I will...'²⁷ With characteristic ambivalence, the letter-writer changes her mind a few sentences later. 'And then I felt that his wife, Stefania – perhaps she does deserve a name after all...'²⁸ The letter-writer is asserting control over what she may or may not divulge to Nina and at the same time Harvey is inviting the reader to remember the letter-writer herself is unnamed.

The professor in *Orkney* is also known as Richard, but only to his wife. He remembers his name struck through – deleted – by the sticky blue dye on his childhood sticks of rock. We are not given his surname. He is only ever Professor_____. The elongated hyphen is one of the ways that Sackville uses grammar to give her narrator a blankness, and an irrelevance. It is blatantly anonymous.²⁹ His wife is not referred to by her birth name. When he does, on rare occasion, breathe her real name, 'she vanishes behind it,'³⁰ because he cannot narrate the reality of her. In one sense, she doesn't exist. In another sense, she has multiple identities. She is given an abundance of names from history and legend. 'My Lamia...Vivien, or Nimue or Niviane; the huntress, the some-time lady of the lake...'³¹ It is as if the professor gives her so much power he sucks it all from himself. And just as the title of *Dear Thief* invests the thief

²⁶ Filgate, Michele, 'An interview with Samantha Harvey'. *The Salon*, 23rd January 2015.

²⁷ *Dear Thief*, p. 202.

²⁸ *Dear Thief*, p. 202.

²⁹ The elongated hyphen recalls a nineteenth century convention regarding names and place. The professor is indeed somewhat old-fashioned, and a scholar of that period.

³⁰ *Orkney*, p. 227.

³¹ *Orkney*, p. 72.

with power, so too does naming *Orkney* for the islands, the landscape and the seas that the professor's wife will never leave.³²

I decided on a name for Will in the hope that he might emerge from anonymity and that I might try and give myself a sense of who he could be. David Lodge says something similar in *The Art of Fiction* (1992) when he writes that he could not 'imaginatively inhabit'³³ a character in his novel *Nice Work* (1988) until her name was fixed. The feeling that Will was a person very real to me quickly followed on from this simple decision. So much so that for a while, the title of the novel was for him - *The Boatman*. And Will's actual name has proved an interesting choice for me to reflect on. 'Will' might suggest someone with some purpose, even intent, but I have only realised this in retrospect.

I moved Will away from Oxford. Instead of a town, I placed him in a fictional coastal village near a river. This new proximity to the water gave the novel, and me, an accompanying sense of liberation. I found that Will was sensitive to his new surroundings and, immersed in this rich environment, the vacuum around him started to fill with his knowledge and appreciation of it. His repressed emotions had somewhere to land; even if not always processed through him, they could be reflected in the landscape. For example, I express his optimism on approaching the water like this: 'Grey, drippy rain splashed onto the bonnet and over the roads all the way to the Southampton exit, and then at last the view cleared, and I saw the sea.'³⁴

In his new home by the sea, I knew Will was in the right place. He is still positioned somewhat at an angle, never quite assimilated into village life. His existence is littoral. But he lost the creepiness that a confined city atmosphere gave him.

³² The dead first wife in Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) is a consummate example of a powerful – titular – character. The unnamed narrator is more like the ghost.

³³ Lodge, David, *The Art of Fiction*. London: Vintage, 2011 (1992), p.38.

³⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.16.

Ghostly remnants

My unnamed narrator had always seemed the unreal character and Eve – flirtatious and brassy – the more solid. Moving Will to a wintry seascape that he was absorbed into did not immediately help give him substance. In fact, he was evermore spectral.

Although he was no longer sociopathic – far from it – Will was still something of a loner. I initially made him a bosun, or boatswain. It is a solitary river job and a deliberate reference to Charon. However, I discovered that focussing on the ghostly aspects of him was emphasising his passivity and at odds with my aims for him.

I decided I did not want to lose Will to the shadows. But whilst thinking about the underworld, I saw a dimension to the relationship between the narrators of *Orkney* and *Dear Thief* and the objects of their affection that interested me. It was a slant that might also apply to my novel. This is what I mean.³⁵

The professor in *Orkney* can never bridge the divide between him and his wife. They are of separate realms. He thinks of himself as ‘a hopeless ghost’,³⁶ and not just because of his comparative old age. He means that he was sometimes unnoticed by his future wife. He would drift around her, but ineffectually. As narrator and husband, however, he is able to transfer the epithet to her. He describes his wife, Mrs _____³⁷, as pale and wispy to a point of vaporousness: ‘There’s a transparency to her; I can almost see through her, to nothing’.³⁸ She is like glimpsing a ghost: ‘all of these things seen only for a moment distinctly before vanishing.’³⁹ She is restless as a ghost: ‘- she wanders beyond reach, beyond meaning.’⁴⁰ For

³⁵ Here is a quote that is attributed to Christina Stead but that I originally came across as the title of a David Foster Wallace biography - ‘Every love story is a ghost story.’ Max, D.T, ‘D.F.W.: Tracing the ghostly origins of a phrase’. *The New Yorker*, 11th December 2012. The following is also an opportunity to explore in part what I think she may have meant within this context.

³⁶ *Orkney*, p.43.

³⁷ *Orkney*, p.4.

³⁸ *Orkney*, p.227.

³⁹ *Orkney*, p.124.

⁴⁰ *Orkney*, p.120.

the professor, the one-time ghoul himself, her eventual disappearance is like a death; hers, and metaphorically-speaking, his. Without her, when she has gone to where he finally cannot follow, he fades into the nothing he was before she noticed him.

There is little resolution for the professor in his wife's absence, because it is only a skirmish with death. He cannot prove, or believe, that she is actually dead. Hence his determination to stay behind, in purgatory, on the island. 'How long should I wait – for nine days to pass, for a full moon? In a year and a day will I still be here watching?'⁴¹ he asks. Similarly, there is no certainty at the end of *Dear Thief* - no answers about Nina's whereabouts or Nicholas's return; just an apocalyptically deserted street.

One of *Dear Thief*'s central metaphors is that of living in a draught, being in a room that others have vacated without shutting the door. Within this environment lie not only loss, regret and absence – the traditional tenets of death – but also jealousy, possession and fear; emotions well-suited to a ghost story. There is a ghostly aspect to the letter-writer in *Dear Thief*. If Nina is slowly killing herself through her heroin addiction, then, as Gaby Wood says in her review of the novel, the 'letter-writer is not quite living either.'⁴² Harvey imparts a sense of her isolation and sadness. However, the letter-writer ascribes to Nina all the attributes of a ghost, and Nina, subject to the controlling narration, is unable to shake them off. She is even unresisting. At the point in the novel where Nina's name change is recounted, Nina – now Butterfly – says: 'Let's consider Nina dead.'⁴³

Gaby Wood describes the relationship between Harvey's narrator and Nina as 'a negotiation with a ghost.'⁴⁴ The one glimpse the narrator feels she might have had of Nina in the snow, is just that; an unsubstantiated suspicion. Amy Salter calls Nina 'an enigmatic spectre

⁴¹ *Orkney*, p.250.

⁴² Wood, Gaby, 'Why great novels don't get noticed now'. *The Telegraph*, 14th March 2015.

⁴³ *Dear Thief*, p. 98.

⁴⁴ 'Why great novels don't get noticed now.'

who haunts the narrative, like she haunts the narrator's memories and marriage.'⁴⁵ In the novel, Nina's reappearance is described as 'a manifestation'.⁴⁶ A few pages later, we are told that Nina was always 'in transit'⁴⁷ and 'looked trapped',⁴⁸ which are among Nina's defining, purgatorial features. 'I'm getting out,'⁴⁹ are Nina's last words to the narrator, looking 'so old and sad.'⁵⁰ Yet, because she is mediated by the narrator, Nina's features and character are never stable and there is also 'something cruel'⁵¹ about her face. A ghost is simultaneously pitied and feared.

Of my own novel, I would say that Will sees Celine as other-worldly because he needs to believe that she is the unreachable, or transient one. This is because he himself is so frightened of commitment. He says, 'she will not stay still long enough for anyone...' and has enough self-awareness to add - 'I'm safe with her.'⁵² He will realise that his interpretation of Celine is quite wrong and the closest thing to a ghost the novel has is Peter, her dead husband. It is a blow to Will when she tells him she was married to Peter for fourteen years. Will thinks: 'For so long. So constant, so domestic.'⁵³ So there is a divide between worlds – between understanding – here.

To try and give Will some physicality, I made him a much busier harbour master. I realised that I had never portrayed him doing the work of a boatman anyway. The decision helped plant him more firmly on the page. I inserted detail about his job, for example: 'Sand hoppers dodge each other at my feet, flopping in and out of the gravelly sand. The smell of petrol and the sea merge in the heat...My fingers, black with grease...'⁵⁴ Most recently, I

⁴⁵ Salter, Amy, 'Dear Thief: A Review'. *Culturefly*, 26th September 2014.

⁴⁶ *Dear Thief*, p.91.

⁴⁷ *Dear Thief*, p.94.

⁴⁸ *Dear Thief*, p.94.

⁴⁹ *Dear Thief*, p.27.

⁵⁰ *Dear Thief*, p.26.

⁵¹ *Dear Thief*, p.26.

⁵² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.189.

⁵³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.226.

⁵⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.26.

changed the title of the novel because my agent pointed out that *The Boatman* was reinforcing Will's association with Charon. It also felt too unequivocal a title for the novel, which is now *Half River, Half Sea*. This liminal title seems to me to be more suggestive of how Will is tugged in different directions; how ripe for transition, how myriad his parts.

As an aside, I would like to point the reader to Hollinghurst's *The Line of Beauty*, because it provides an interesting example of a fading third-person narrator. This is Nick, with the apt surname of Guest. He is exiled from the world he seeks to inhabit, that of the entitled and glamorous Fedden family. His dissipation at the close of the novel mirrors the masculine opening but in reverse; that is to say, the ending is a feminine 'undoing' and loosening of all the ties, structural and thematic, to the Fedden's house, that Nick had himself created. Nick physically leaves, wandering through the rooms, seemingly dissipating as he goes, noticing the smoke and shadows. He drops the keys through the letter box, '...and then it was over, he made his dignified exit – a sense of floating and thinness...' ⁵⁵ Poignantly, his 'leaving' also incorporates the likelihood that he has AIDS. In anticipation of a positive HIV result, Nick is left in a between-state rather than anywhere conclusive. Assuming Hollinghurst is implying Nick's illness is a death sentence, this seems to me to be a unique combination of both a classic nineteenth-century death (albeit with a millennial relevance) and the symbolic death of a disintegrating narrator. 'He seemed to fade pretty quickly.' ⁵⁶

Returning to my own novel, there are still ghostly elements in the final draft. There is the spinster aunt in the Grange whose wheelchair haunts the young Will's dreams. There are his dead but not un-felt parents, buried within the ancient walls of the Abbey graveyard. There is the invisible presence of the Cistercian monks from centuries before. And there is the imagery of the seascape:

⁵⁵ *The Line of Beauty*, p.493.

⁵⁶ *The Line of Beauty*, p.501.

The mist was coming down again and it began to seem to me, as I stood there alone in the fog, as though I wasn't quite there. It felt that when she left, Celine always took some fractured pieces of myself with her. I pinched my thumb and could not feel it, my breath evaporated as soon as it hit the freezing air. My neck was damp and cold, like a ghost had wound itself around it. The heron took no notice of me; it had not acknowledged my presence at all.⁵⁷

These lines help convey Will's feeling that he is of little or no account.

Lastly – and I am not sure why this is – I never did ascribe any physical characteristics to Will. From the first draft to the last, there is no reference to what he looks like. I realise this could be risky, but we do not see Harvey's letter-writer as a physical character either and I never find that frustrating. I do know that keeping Will undescribed, even after the realisation, was a necessary part of retaining the vagueness that surrounds him. He needs to be slightly nebulous – because I never wanted him easily labelled, or too defined – but not to the extent that he is absent.

A literal voice

Even in his new setting by the river where he feels comfortable, Will still had some mystery about him and I liked this. I thought that not being able to speak would reinforce this sense of mystery. I also thought it could be another metaphor for the powerlessness associated with unrequited love. In early drafts, my narrator had hardly any voice.

Will, I reasoned, would have damaged his voice in a fire during which his daughter died. The condition is called dysphonia. It meant he carried the burden of guilt, and this guilt is something that remains an important part of his character to the final draft, though the cause and resolution would change. However, I was to discover that it was a near-impossible technical challenge to keep Will literally voiceless.

⁵⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.107.

While I held onto Will's guilt, and indeed wove it into the fabric of the novel, I had to let go of the death of the child. I wanted to write about unrequited love, and the significance of this would be meaningless when placed alongside such grief. Will's struggle needed to be one or the other of these. So I kept the child, Mattie, alive, and decided that Will would leave her when she was a baby because his relationship with her mother had floundered. Nonetheless, the traces of solemnity that Mattie retains to the final draft have their roots in the dead fire-child.

Further, as was the case with Mattie, I can see that the death, which was part of my early conception of the novel, also affected my portrayal of Celine. She can seem – for reasons that become clear – half in the world of the dead. She suffers from sleep-deprived and unsettled nights. She is lackadaisical in the day, often supine on her swing-seat or by the river. It made sense to me, given Celine's behaviour, to invent Peter. She ended up suffering from the grief, albeit to do with a husband rather than a child, that I initially imagined for Will.

Will's speech problem was contributing to his flatness. He wasn't engaged in his world. Rather, he seemed excessively separated from it. I couldn't see how he was going to forge relationships of any sort. Skye, the narrator in *I See Through You*⁵⁸ is silenced when Johnny ghosts her because he removes her ability to communicate with him. It leads to her unravelling. I did not want to cut off Will's embryonic potential to communicate and I finally abandoned the entire experimental idea of dysphonia. I had become distracted by the technical problems a gagged narrator carried and I saw that Will did not need to have an extreme disability to convey a sense of his powerlessness.

At one point in my novel, Celine asks what Will does. He feels compelled to abandon his usual self-deprecation. 'It stung, a little, the implied uselessness. To anyone else, I would

⁵⁸ I wrote my first novel *I See Through You* to try and understand the predominantly male action of 'ghosting', essentially a non-action by which to silently and passively end a relationship. It explores how silence is such a devastating and punishing response to love, and how it can be weaponised.

have said, not much, but I found myself showing her the computer...the apps we used.’⁵⁹ He explains, ‘sailors need a base. This is their port, a point of organization from which to strike off.’⁶⁰ Celine persuades him to vocalise something about himself; to insist on himself. His uncommunicative tendency, although a fundamental aspect to his character – rather than a by-product of his passivity – becomes less entrenched, and that is partly because of her.

However, Will’s world is nonetheless an interior one and he remains innately reticent. I wanted to build Will around this fact and at the same time show unrequited love as ultimately something that enriches rather than enslaves him.

⁵⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.56.

⁶⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.56.

PART TWO: THE MAKINGS OF WILL

My aims for Will

Will is not observing someone else's story. Will *is* the story. He is also the sole voice throughout. The novel is his consciousness and there is no escaping his point of view.

It is true that he is passive in his ongoing inability to change the way Celine feels about him, to tell Celine how he feels, or to bring that relationship to any obvious fruition. His indecision about Mattie, his baby daughter, could also be seen as passive in that he allows the arrangements around her to drift; initially, he just accepts the situation as it is. However, Will is the novel's protagonist as well as its narrator, and a reader might well expect a protagonist to incite change or action. Will has to fulfil these obligations, to a certain extent. After all, how passive can a protagonist be before he ceases to be one at all?

I would define a protagonist as a leading or major character who drives events. Against this, I would define a narrator as a character who recounts events. However, the line that separates protagonists and narrators can be blurred. In first-person narrations especially, the degree to which the narrator is a witness, but also a participant varies greatly. For me, Nick Carraway in *The Great Gatsby* (1926)⁶¹ is just the narrator. His passivity is fairly extreme and in my view this is not problematic for the novel because he is not also a protagonist. Nick is telling Gatsby's story. He is positioned rather like the narrator in a school play, at the edge of the stage. Of course, 'Nick' as a different character might well have influenced events to turn out very differently. But he is who he is, and Gatsby's story is what it is. Nick happens to be the one to tell it. Contrastingly, without Jake in Hemingway's *Fiesta* (1927)⁶² – a passive

⁶¹ Scott Fitzgerald, F., *The Great Gatsby*. London: Penguin, 1950 (1926).

⁶² Hemingway, Ernest, *Fiesta: The Sun Also Rises*. London: Arrow, 2004 (1927).

narrator who I would argue is also the protagonist – there simply would not be a story. The love story is Jake's as well as Brett's.

There is a much larger discussion to be had around this, and I recognise that I have barely touched on it here. Moreover, my claims about whether Nick in *The Great Gatsby* or Jake in *Fiesta* are protagonists are simply my views and are not shared by everyone. All the same, they are examples that help illustrate what I think are the key differences between narrator and protagonist and which helped shape my thinking around making Will both. For example, I saw that if I wanted Will to be a protagonist then I had to balance his passivity with some agency. Here is how Harvey and Sackville manage this balance.

The letter-writer in *Dear Thief* has no name and is without description. She is writing a letter that she likely won't even send. From the title we know something has been stolen from her and so she is depleted from the outset. She has no agency in the addressee's world. Being a novel about past events, it relies on what James Wood warningly calls the 'pressureless zones of retrospect.'⁶³ Yet at the same time, it is within these zones – her uncontested memories – that we can view the letter-writer differently. She has the opportunity to express vivid and vengeful desires in the letter. The narration is far from anonymous and distant; it is intimate, and probing. Her invisibility could well be taken as a sign of her strength. As far as the reader can know, the letter might have been sent. So a seemingly ineffectual letter is also a novel-length bid for agency. It is a stab at retribution - as well as a plea for understanding. Her final act, one of forgiveness, is supremely non-passive.

The letter-writer even toys with the idea of murder - but playfully. In one scene, tucked into brackets, Harvey both reinforces and casts off the letter-writer's passivity: '(Oh, to have murdered you, Butterfly, with my heart on fire...Happy days, happy, wild and playful thoughts.

⁶³ Wood, James, 'Fly Away: Triangles and treachery in Samantha Harvey's new novel'. *The New Yorker*, 1st December 2014.

Meanwhile, both (probably) alive, I suppose we proceed meekly on.)'⁶⁴ In a few short lines, Harvey has her indulge in a violent, colourful fantasy, exult in it, draw away, and plod on. The brackets used to mask this crime of passion are important because they emphasise the otherness of the desire. The urges are siphoned off; half-in and half-out, not appropriate but not un-felt either. The letter-writer expresses aggression whilst simultaneously shutting it down.

In *Orkney*, the professor's lack of agency in his wife's watery and mysterious world is fatal for him. He strives desperately to understand her through his mythological knowledge but his intellect proves a useless tool. He cannot unpick this myth – by which I mean, prevent her disappearing – and his failure will be his undoing.

He is made livid when she approaches a family on the beach. He is watching her whilst mashing prawns for fish stew. He notes the teenage boy's binoculars on her and smashes the prawns again with a 'brain-stained rolling pin.'⁶⁵ A few lines later, incensed by the perceived evidence of hormonal lust: 'I smash, smash.'⁶⁶ It is also, perhaps, the (subconscious) fear of his own offensive behaviour, and his self-disgust, that provokes such rage; not the teenager, who might just be watching birds. The prawns, though, are macerated, a 'bright orange mess of legs and burst beaded eyes.'⁶⁷ His rage – his brand of passivity – is never dull or wooden.

In Claire Messud's 2013 novel, *The Woman Upstairs*, the first line is: 'How angry am I?'⁶⁸ The narrator is explicitly, permanently angry, and absolutely refuses to suppress her rage and jealousy at the exclusion from the world she wishes to inhabit. We might place Nora at the opposite end of the scale from more amiable narrators such as Hollinghurst's Nick Guest in *The Line of Beauty*. Nora devotes considerable time and energy indulging in thoughts about Sirena Shahid's death in a way that reminds me of the letter-writer's sunset murder fantasy. 'I

⁶⁴ *Dear Thief*, p.104.

⁶⁵ *Orkney*, p.125.

⁶⁶ *Orkney*, p.126.

⁶⁷ *Orkney*, p. 129.

⁶⁸ Messud, Claire, *The Woman Upstairs*. London: Virago, 2014 (2013), p.3.

can tell you without blinking that I could kill them,’⁶⁹ Nora says of Sirena’s entire family, and then a few lines later – ‘Oh, don’t worry, I won’t.’ Nora’s anger climaxes in what is actually a life-affirming crescendo. ‘I’m angry enough...before I die to fucking well *live*.’⁷⁰ Her anger transcends her passivity.

Will never approaches the intensity of Messud’s creation, Sackville’s, or Harvey’s, and so I was always searching for other ways to give him agency. This was hard because he is not ‘colourful’ in the sense that he does not have extreme behaviours. He is not flamboyant in any sense. He lambasts himself for being underwhelming. Nonetheless, he *wants* to feel things but suspects there is nothing more to feel; until he meets Celine, that is. He has a sense of dislocation. He is a square peg in a round hole. That is why he struggles in his relationship with a neighbour called Naomi. He has a strangely reluctant affair with her, wanting to fit in, thinking that he should accept life as it is, but: ‘There is nothing in the mundane ordinariness in the room that does not remind me, each way I look, of the dazzling, worrying muddle in Celine’s house.’⁷¹ He cannot make the leap with Naomi. It won’t work.

Whilst I was thinking about my aims for Will, I found myself reflecting as to whether or not he would come across as unlikeable. A reader might feel exasperated by Will’s passivity, by his willingness to let things be as they are, and in turn become hostile to him.⁷² Equally, another might view some of his non-passive actions – he is even introduced as a man who has deserted his child – negatively.

I did not want to worry about exonerating Will’s actions and it became clear to me that trying to establish Will’s likeability either way was not a priority. I would prefer complexity,

⁶⁹ *The Woman Upstairs*, p.87.

⁷⁰ *The Woman Upstairs*, p.301.

⁷¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.111.

⁷² Perhaps, existentially speaking, we do not like to see ourselves as helpless or powerless and so we prefer narrative ‘doers,’ with whom we might more comfortably identify. Those who make things happen.

and believability in its place. I do not mean that being interesting and credible does not preclude being nice - but being nice is not always interesting. Elizabeth Strout's eponymous narrator in *Olive Kitteridge*, (2008), is not especially likeable but she is far from bland.

I also find the professor in *Orkney* fascinating. Despite his coercive and entrapping behaviour, he is at times self-aware and humble. He is also pitiful; childless and without other family. In the end, he is utterly alone. There is something tragic about him. He admits that he is 'a man well-liked by strangers. By lovers, colleagues, acquaintances, less so.'⁷³ He is erudite but also vain. He is, as John Burnside writes, both 'pompous and pathetic.'⁷⁴ Something almost – not quite – comic, then, as well. It is these conflicting aspects of his character that make him interesting. His collapse into infantile half-sentences also catches my imagination, and partly because of Sackville's cleverly crafted writing. Toward the end, his physical body is described as deformed, one of several nods to Caliban. 'Monster's feet and monster's hands, I have.'⁷⁵ Note how the comma and the inverted sentence is childish, illustrating the eloquent professor's regression. His self-loathing inspires pathos here.

The professor sits and passively watches his wife in the morning - and badgers her for sex at night. Will too, albeit very differently, is both prone to inactivity and does things of which he is not proud. A reader may well view the way Will treats Naomi critically. He sleeps with her despite knowing she feels more for him than he does for her. Indeed, his treatment parallels what Celine does to him but without the actual sex. But I knew that if I began to apologise for Will, the game would be up. I was more concerned with focussing on *why* he is stultified and lethargic; on *why* he feels torn between Naomi and Celine (and why indeed he felt he had to leave Mattie). Being with Naomi at all seems contrary given his feelings for Celine, but I wanted to bring out his conflicting aspirations and his tendency toward self-

⁷³ *Orkney*, p.51.

⁷⁴ Burnside, John, 'Doomed to Grief'. *The Times Literary Supplement*, 1st February 2013, p.20.

⁷⁵ *Orkney*, p.228.

sabotage. Will often acts in a way that doesn't make sense but that might invite psychological exploration from readers; and also resonate with them.

I wanted Will to be 'alive' in spite of his un-liveliness. But revealing depth of character is perhaps more difficult to accomplish if that character is deemed unexceptional. It therefore became important to me that Will was candid in order that the reader would know what he is thinking. He always tries to be frank and he does not shy away from self-examination. Here he is trying to make sense of a conversation with Lucy, his ex-partner, who accuses him of not being able to stick with anything. He admits he feels: 'unplugged, or out of battery; disengaged from everyone important to me. What had I not been hearing? *Sticking* with something; I didn't get it. It sounded glutinously self-harming.'⁷⁶ He is genuine in his bewilderment. If he is dishonest, it is only because he is compromised by what he himself is oblivious to.

Blind spots

In his essay on '*Divided Narratives*' and from the texts he discusses in it, Frederick Holmes deduces that 'everyone who narrates is fallible in some measure. People's blind spots and prejudices may differ, but no one has the authority that a God-eyed perspective confers.'⁷⁷ Will is a fallible narrator in this sense and in many ways, his blind spots are the cornerstone of *Half River, Half Sea*.

Celine is someone in whom Will invests his future and he is therefore inclined to ignore the signs that may contradict this belief in their future together. His existence with her depends on his false perceptions of her, and his perceptions of her often replace his own self-reflection. Here, they are returning from Lepe together and discussing Will's childhood. Celine makes a clear reference to her own unhappiness but Will ignores it:

⁷⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.16.

⁷⁷ Holmes, Frederick M., 'Divided Narratives, Unreliable Narrators, and *The Sense of an Ending*: Julian Barnes, Frank Kermode, and Ford Madox Ford'. *Papers on Language and Literature*, 51, Winter 2015, p.42.

‘And poor me’, she said and because she laughed a little, and because she turned the music up, because I always felt relieved when she was laughing, I didn’t think to ask anything of it, or why she included herself in the Crawford family circle of self-pity.⁷⁸

He shows himself as tone-deaf to her here.

Celine has not been good company on this trip, which goes some way to explaining Will’s relief at her laughter. Yet he doesn’t reflect on the sort of company he himself has been; despondent and watchful. ‘My hand grazed her arm and it felt icy and suddenly depression washed over me, as if rather than coming back to me, I had lost her to the sea.’⁷⁹ He describes the wasps, the heat, the spilt ice-cream. From the reader’s point of view, Celine might not have been entirely the problem, and indeed, when they recall the day together, Celine remembers it as a successful one. But he has not deliberately kept his bad temper from us. It has just been superseded by his concentration on Celine. He often over-responds to her - and thus misses crucial aspects of her.

When Will describes her appearance we can infer from her unkemptness someone who isn’t looking after herself because she is unhappy. He, however, just assumes she has no interest in vanity, that she is somehow above self-care. ‘She stood out rather like a tramp, or something from the river, still with that brown heavy coat on and her long, seaweedy tangles.’⁸⁰ His interpretations are misguided because of his refusal to explore emotion; he dare not unearth such messy possibilities.⁸¹ When Celine tells him that nothing makes sense for her, hinting that she is imploding somehow, he dismisses the gravity of her admission.

‘The world was completely and utterly off balance. Nothing made sense.’

⁷⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.211.

⁷⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.209.

⁸⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.87.

⁸¹ In Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Remains of the Day* (1989), the reader can infer a great deal about Mr Stevens and his lack of emotional intelligence through Ishiguro’s use of irony. We can see him get things wrong. We know he loves Miss Kenton before he does.

‘You must have been depressed,’ I told her, manfully, decisively, and she tilted her head to the blue beyond the oak trees and laughed.⁸²

She is laughing at the enormity of Will’s understatement.

And the reader may be too. This is because by this point in the novel we might recognise the signifiers of grief around Celine. I rely on the assumption that the reader’s judgement, unlike Will’s, is not clouded by infatuation. But Will is stubbornly resistant to joining the dots up. Seeds sown about her husband include that she is always dressed in a man-sized overcoat, and her fury about one of the villagers wasting time in an unfaithful marriage. I added two more pieces of evidence just to emphasise more concretely her sadness and secret, and though they make Will suspicious, he refrains from investigating them because he does not really want to know the truth. These two late insertions are that of a photograph of a man (later to be identified as Peter), and Celine’s list of anxieties which include her concerns about ‘P’s parents’ and Will himself.⁸³ These late additions were made in light of my feeling that the reader needed more pointers about Celine, and they make it clearer that there is something definitive about her that Will refuses to see.

Celine’s grief is also suggested in her references to ‘life’s sadnesses.’⁸⁴ This is a line that Will picks up and applies to himself. ‘And me, I wanted to ask. How do you remember me? Because I have changed since you came, the unhappiness of my life has begun to disintegrate. You make me feel the sadnesses of life less acutely.’⁸⁵ By appropriating her phrase, Will points to the connection between them. It is also a moment in the novel that Will articulates how Celine has changed him.

Celine is very knowing about Will. She understands him and can direct the reader with her responses to him. She says to him, laughingly:

⁸² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.234.

⁸³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.181.

⁸⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.219.

⁸⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.221.

‘You don’t answer questions, do you?’
‘Do I not?’
‘Ha-ha.’⁸⁶

And then, having light-heartedly confirmed his past tendencies, Will shows how, when he is with Celine, he overcomes them. He goes on to explain why he doesn’t like questions. His self-perception and self-awareness are limited at the outset of the novel but grow and develop in the course of the narrative, particularly in the way his understanding of Celine begins to equal hers of him.

Will as son

I wrote a backstory for Will. These pages were never meant to be in the novel, but my intention was that I, the author, should know the context and details of Will’s upbringing thoroughly. This was so that the legacy of Will’s dead parents might seep into the text and inform the reader, without either the author or the narrator seeming didactic.

Will punishes, even negates his dead parents, by refusing to name them. Even though it felt laborious for me to write it, he always refers to them as ‘My mother’ or ‘My father.’⁸⁷ I wanted to emphasise their cold parenting. At the same time, I was stressing the importance of their influence and the emotional legacy Will inherits from them.⁸⁸

In comparison, Celine refers to Peter’s parents as his ‘Mum’ and ‘Dad.’ Will is certainly transfixed by the warmth inherent in the family photograph he finds. This is to such an extent he thinks he can see ‘the indents on the parents’ raincoats where it seemed his (Peter’s) hands...

⁸⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.179.

⁸⁷ I wondered, if in Deborah Orr’s 2020 autobiography, *Motherwell*, she calls her parents by their Christian names not necessarily because she did so to their faces - but partly because to write ‘my mother’ or ‘my father’ repetitively might be jarring and wearing for the reader.

⁸⁸ Aspects of toxic masculinity are relevant to Will, for example, repression of emotion and hiding distress - and this is because of his upbringing.

were holding tight. Drawing them close.’⁸⁹ The scene encapsulates everything Will feels he lacked and was unable to pass on.

Will is an only child whose father used corporal punishment on him. The beatings are in the background partly because this isn’t a novel about abuse but also because the way Will remembers them – sparingly and unflinching – tells the reader something about his stoicism. ‘My father used a dog lead on me. Or at least it is a dog lead in my mind, which is odd, because my mother was never allowed a dog.’⁹⁰ Less can be more when writing about trauma – at least in the case of *Half River, Half Sea*.

He is used to being cross-examined by his legalistic father. Exchanges between them felt to Will like an investigation through which his father was trying to dismantle him or catch him out. This knowledge helps explain Will’s aversion to questions and his reluctance to engage when asked something directly. Lucy, his ex-partner and mother of his child, accuses Will of often being in his head. At the end of the novel, the reader will know he is trying to change his behaviour when Lucy asks Will a direct question and after a pause, at last he answers it.⁹¹

Another way to explicitly relay information about Will’s parents is when Celine draws it from him, which she does periodically. On the way back from their trip to Lepe, Will denounces his father as ‘a nasty piece of work.’⁹² Celine will remember this and indeed refers to it, in a seemingly casual way, earlier in the novel. Because of the structure of the novel, the reader must wait, in this instance, to understand why Celine makes this reference.

A less explicit way of referring to his unloving parents is when Will feels carsick on the road back from Lepe. ‘On the way back, as the truck weaved round one sickening bend

⁸⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.134.

⁹⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.71.

⁹¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.242.

⁹² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.211.

after another, I began to feel ill, and of course I wasn't actually sick, but the nausea churned in my stomach like nerves.'⁹³ The reader won't immediately know why an adult behind the driver's seat should feel sick and nervous. It is only a few chapters later that Will describes the childhood event that surrounded his actual vomiting. After Will's explanation, knowledge of the episode will colour any subsequent references to nausea and may make some readers reflect on earlier allusions to it.

It is mainly on these occasions – ones concerning his parents – that I deliberately delay the reader's access to some information. At such times I felt it worked as a technique, and it threads various strands of the novel together. This can be satisfying from a reader's vantage point, seen overall. However, mainly I did not want to play with the reader by alluding to numerous things that hadn't happened yet in the story. I look at this aspect of novel-writing in the section on the division of time.⁹⁴

Will never wanted to call Exbury his home, and indeed he had escaped this unhappy place of upbringing, but only temporarily. As another example of Will's conflicted thinking, I made it to the surrounding area of Exbury that he flees when he leaves Mattie, his daughter.

Will as father

The second strand of Will's past is his history with Lucy. Unlike his parents, she is represented directly in the novel. Will and Lucy had an agreement that predates the main time frame of the story. The agreement was that they would not have children. Unable to deal with what he sees as Lucy's betrayal of this agreement, Will leaves Lucy and their child, Mattie, when Mattie is six months old.

⁹³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.35.

⁹⁴ 'A chronological winter', p.58 of the critical component.

When the novel begins, Will is an absent father, and verges on dereliction of duty. It becomes clear however, that the issue is not black and white for Will. It includes his suspicion that Lucy became pregnant deliberately. But he also tells the reader: ‘Lucy used to think that we had split because of Mattie, but now I think it was because I felt tricked by more than just Lucy; I felt tricked by life.’⁹⁵ Alongside Will’s inherent twin fears of being trapped and deceived, I also wanted to raise the taboo subject of instinctive paternal love. It never materialised for Will. He doesn’t understand it, but in his matter-of-fact manner, he references his exclusion from the new family unit more than once; how hopeless and irrelevant he felt but also under pressure to be strong and capable when required.

I added a scene in which Will goes to visit Mattie so that the reader could gather early on what sort of a person Lucy is. It shows Will’s misgivings about her are not entirely unfounded. I hint at Lucy’s insincerity by establishing her dramatic fondness for quoting from films. Will despairingly recalls she once extravagantly remarked: ‘You don’t complete me, you deplete me.’⁹⁶ This is an inversion of a line from *Jerry Maguire* (1996).⁹⁷ Later in the novel, Lucy is confirmed as manipulative when she tacitly admits lying about the severity of Mattie’s croup to persuade Will the baby is better off with her.

However, progress of his relationship with Mattie was one way I could illustrate Will’s growth. I introduced an element of jeopardy that would force Will one way or another as far as fatherhood goes. It is this: Lucy wants to move to Scotland, and take Mattie with her, far from Will. In early drafts, Lucy and Mattie were merely present as prods to stoke Will’s guilt, but they were cardboard cut outs and never actually incited any action on Will’s part. I made Lucy’s and Mattie’s departure imminent. This, exacerbated by the presence of a new stepfather in

⁹⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.200.

⁹⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.13.

⁹⁷ *Jerry Maguire*. A film by Cameron Crowe, 1996. The line is ‘you complete me.’

Mattie's life, forces Will to stop being so tentative about his feelings towards his child, and the actions he would take in light of them. He is unable to remain introspective.

I deliberately make Will's feelings around Mattie cautious and depict them in the context of his memories of his childhood and parents. It is alien, but hopeful territory. I did not want the scenes to be mawkish, in line with Will's character, but equally wanted to show how his responses to Mattie are portrayed as increasingly loving. Mattie can't yet talk, so I focussed on her as a physical thing and developed their relationship that way; how Will notices the sweetness of a toddler. I show her chubby legs, how like a 'solid...plump-cheeked frog'⁹⁸ she seems when she hops. The emptiness he feels when Lucy plucks her from his lap.⁹⁹

Will's feelings about Mattie are both muddled and clear and among his many unresolved issues. She is, to him, an 'enigma, who has retained all elements of trickery about her. She was conjured out of both longing and resistance.'¹⁰⁰ However, by examining his feelings about fatherhood, the parameters of Will's once-limited world are enlarged. His lack of agency within Celine's world will correspondingly become less important to him.

Will as rival

Rob is the newcomer with whom Celine has an affair, thereby taking the space that Will hoped to occupy. In this sense, Will is established in another role, this time that of rival.

David Lodge calls this trio 'the eternal triangle,'¹⁰¹ a reference to three principal characters in an unhappy love situation. However, in this instance: Will is jealous of the wrong man entirely, Celine is closer to Will than the man she is sleeping with, and Rob himself is oblivious to the triangular situation. In *Dear Thief* and *Orkney*, Harvey and Sackville also write

⁹⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p. 239.

⁹⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p. 16.

¹⁰⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.121.

¹⁰¹ Lodge, David, 'Ambiguously Ever After: Problematical endings in English Fiction', *Working with Structuralism*. London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1982 (1981), p.143.

unusual slants to the trope. The letter-writer seems to feel more passionately about Nina than her husband, Nicholas, and although the professor is jealous of absolutely everybody near his wife, it is the sea that he should fear.

I found Tony Tanner's 1979 critical book, *Adultery in the Novel*, interesting when I was thinking about rivalry. Tanner's theory is that it is 'the unstable triangularity of adultery, rather than the static symmetry of marriage, that is the generative form of Western Literature.'¹⁰² This may be so, but I was also discovering that the links between my narrator, the object of his affection, and the interloper, could be a stabilising, rather than unsettling force.¹⁰³ After all, a triangle is a more stable shape than a two-footed thing if it is the right way up. The letter-writer in *Dear Thief* puts it thus: 'You were going to work your way into my marriage and you were going to call its new three-way shape *holy*...' ¹⁰⁴

Rob, Celine's apparent new love interest, is Tanner's interloper in *Half River, Half Sea*. He is a stranger of interest to the community and will be the catalyst for change. Will is derisive about Rob's youthful enthusiasm, envious of his nomadic independence and emasculated by his implied wealth. Above all, he is threatened by his relationship with Celine and feels very jealous. This is one way I show that Will has evolved emotionally because prior to Rob's arrival, Will thinks of himself as deadened somehow. He goes from this: 'It was if all the emotional short-circuiting I had ever done in my life had finally cauterised my senses'¹⁰⁵ to this:

I rub reddened, fork-jabbed fingers together, consider his open, genuine nature and hope that Celine will eat him alive. Surely...surely that eager face panting

¹⁰² Tanner, Tony, *Adultery in the Novel: Contract and Transgression*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins Press, 1979, p. 12.

¹⁰³ Tanner asserts that in the nineteenth-century novel 'it is the advent of strangers into the house... that precipitates the disruptive action of the novel.' (p.179). Amongst others, Tanner sees in novels such as *Anna Karenina* (1878), and *Madame Bovary* (1856) that this disruptive action takes the form of adultery and the result, he suggests, of such transgression, is that a 'real, if secret, interest has been aroused by the weak points in the family, the possible fissures, the breaches...' (p.371). This in turn leads to a change in narrative direction for the novel, the progress of which is too huge a subject to go into here.

¹⁰⁴ *Dear Thief*, p.114.

¹⁰⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.16.

around after her irritates. How can she stand to see it, muzzled in her garden, gazing wetly up at her, morning after morning? He reminds me of those dogs, those jowly mastiffs that everyone swears blind are friendly.¹⁰⁶

Rob's yacht is called *Iseult*, a reference to the Romance story, in which as Tanner notes, Tristan constantly attempts to penetrate Isolde's castle wall. But Tanner also draws attention to the positive link between Mark, Isolde and Tristan. Love is shared between the triangle; see also Arthur, Guinevere and Launcelot. This circumstance endorses my theory of connectivity between the narrator, the object of affection and the intruder. The intruder can be a binding and stable third, rather than an inevitably destructive force.

Rob trusts Will in an almost filial way. He even asks Will for advice on how to best to deal with Celine. Neither of them, of course, have the faintest idea. Will knows that Rob is essentially harmless and everyone likes him. He is slightly ashamed of his unreasonable sharpness around Rob, perhaps because Rob is merely a symbol of Celine's unavailability rather than the cause of it.

The letter-writer and Nina are deeply entangled, ever since childhood. When Nicholas is added as a link in the chain, they become even more inextricable. 'Even theft is a form of connection after all,'¹⁰⁷ notes the letter-writer. After Spain, when the letter-writer catches Nina and Nicholas having sex, she notices there is a new harmony in the household. She remembers that in fact she and Nina are 'always closer when one has taken too much from the other.'¹⁰⁸ There is a duality between them that means when they take, they also replenish. The letter-writer finds it impossible to stay away from Nina. Nina does not fare well separated from the letter-writer, either. When Nicholas cements their connection, the letter-writer realises

¹⁰⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.166.

¹⁰⁷ *Dear Thief*, p.256.

¹⁰⁸ *Dear Thief*, p.228.

thereafter: 'I never for a moment felt alone.'¹⁰⁹ This is why, even though she saw Nina's 'trinity'¹¹⁰ coming, she did nothing to stop it.

In *Orkney*, the sea is the third in the triangle. The professor finds himself becoming as obsessed with it as he is with his wife. He dreams and writes of the sea, of drownings and myths, immersing himself in its power. He promised his wife the sea if she would agree to marry him, telling her 'grandly, oh I will pour out oceans for you,'¹¹¹ as if the sea were on his side. His wife cannot escape from an island, after all, and he watches the 'soft and insistent suck of the tide'¹¹² force her away from the sea and back to him. Note the quiet, threatening alliteration. The professor, it turns out, gets things wrong. The sea was never his to gift: 'She has brought me the sea and the sky and arranged them around her.'¹¹³ Nor was the sea allowing her retreat. Rather, it was coming for her, as surely as if it were a third character in the novel.

The professor begins to see that he is the intrusive third, telling his wife that he is well aware the sea is '...the subject of your own devotion',¹¹⁴ rather than himself. It is ironic that by bringing her to the island, he is the one to deliver her to the sea. Toward the end of the novel he watches her wading into the water. The passage is sexual in tone: 'It laps at her toes and she allows it, allows the sea to kiss her bare feet without disdain; and it flows over the fine bird-bones of her toes...and up to the sharp jab of her ankles. She gasps silently...'¹¹⁵

Peter, Celine's dead husband, is the true obstacle to Will's relationship with Celine. But I needed Rob to incite action. It is because of him that Will finally confronts Celine with his feelings.

¹⁰⁹ *Dear Thief*, p. 228.

¹¹⁰ *Dear Thief*, p. 114.

¹¹¹ *Orkney*, p. 1.

¹¹² *Orkney*, p. 1.

¹¹³ *Orkney*, p. 29.

¹¹⁴ *Orkney*, p. 166.

¹¹⁵ *Orkney*, p. 225-226.

Celine

Will learns the truth about Peter almost incidentally, and only because he is questioning Celine about Rob. After this new knowledge, once Celine has articulated why she has been distracted and sad, Will can see her for who she more truly is. He can accept that her grief-stricken world is impenetrable and look towards his own.

The revelation about Peter comes at the end. For most of the novel, Celine is a mystery to Will. How do I show this unusual friendship working? After all, Will is in love with her but this love is unrequited. How can she enrich Will? And alongside this, I did not want Celine's perplexing, multi-faceted character to dominate. My priority was to ensure not that Celine as exotic creature takes centre stage, but that through Will's eyes we can see her supposed exoticism as expression of Will's longings - and one which misses the reality of her as a grieving wife with a tragic past.

Let me start by briefly referencing Eve in Oxford. She was a very unabsorbing love interest. My narrator had a stagnant fixation on a one-dimensional character, and I realised this was similar to the situation in *I See Through You*. Johnny, Skye's adored ex-lover, is very obviously ungentle and this meant it was hard for readers to understand Skye's weakness for him. Some critics were put off by how long it takes Skye to come to her senses.

I remembered that my aim in creating Johnny as I did was to emphasise an aspect of Skye's make up, which was just how vulnerable a person she is. That her predilection for a grossly charming man isn't accidental or foolish, it is inevitable.

In order to try and ensure that a reader's patience did not run out with Will, I tried to create Celine as someone intriguing, not the flat Eve character. In doing so, I discovered that she and Will are very similar. To a certain extent, when Will meets Celine, he is meeting himself – so, like Skye's with Johnny, perhaps his fascination with Celine is not a coincidence. He is trying to work himself out, after all, and perhaps he too is as intriguing as Celine.

Johnny in *I See Through You* is a handsome and suave operator. Will's infatuation with Celine is precisely because she is not a conventional flirt or beauty. When I wrote about her physically I deliberately included the reality of her – her nose-blowing, her greasy lips, for example – to show how Will embraces every part of her. He does not idealise her, as does the professor his wife in *Orkney*, and yet he sees her as extraordinary. He imbues her with majestic imagery. 'She presented the box to me and peeled back the purple tissue as if unveiling precious jewels.'¹¹⁶ The reader can intuit, I hope, that Celine is simply giving him chocolates, but Will regards all her actions as valuable. Without mythologising her, I wanted the reader to see how Will longs to believe something special about her, just as he does about life.

Will doesn't articulate to Celine what he feels for her, at least not until the end of the novel. Nevertheless, his adoration for Celine is implicit from the very first page of the novel. 'Upturned in the smoky half-light, her face was glued to the low-slung orb drifting across the blackening water.'¹¹⁷ Supposedly looking at the super blue blood moon, it is Celine's face he cannot take his eyes from. He lists what she does, where she lives, and tells us: 'I knew that she liked dragonflies but didn't like olives. I knew she liked daylilies and weeds.'¹¹⁸ All these facts are purposefully to tell the reader things about Will and his level of commitment to Celine. He also admits that really, he never knew anything at all about her - a fact that might partly explain why he is so drawn to her. People don't know much about Will either.

Originally, I had placed more importance on the landscape within which to ground Will but descriptive opening pages seemed too undramatic, even a melancholic, way to begin. They were also a memory and so it felt like I was going backwards before going forwards.¹¹⁹ The opening pages of this version submitted for the PhD, I hope, have more impact than my initial

¹¹⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.92.

¹¹⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.1.

¹¹⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.2.

¹¹⁹ The passage recalls a walk to the beach at Lepe and includes memories about his childhood. I moved it and it is now on p.33 of the creative component here under the heading 10th February.

attempts. Giving away his love for Celine to the reader from the first paragraphs marks Will, and with possible purpose. He is telling us something definitive about himself.

Will believes that he has found the reasons for his life choices, and the answers to all his questions in Celine. However, he has chosen someone spectacularly unable to give a direct answer to anything. She is a mass of contradictions – she may be flinty but she is also vulnerable – and Will’s feelings about her are not always straightforward. This is illustrated by the annoyance he feels the first time he meets her. He states that ‘she incurred nothing in me that dislocated and unhappy Christmas except antipathy.’¹²⁰ I hoped this would be both authentic and surprising.

I wanted to withhold the reason for Celine’s acerbic and enigmatic ways so that Will can play a game of catch-up with the reader; that is, until the revelation that her husband, Peter, has died and she has been mourning him. With hindsight, I can see that Peter was a necessary invention because without him, Celine’s behaviour, remaining inexplicable, might have been frustrating for the reader as well as Will.

Celine resists definition through her very job. Every week she takes on someone else’s identity for a local newspaper, only to shed it the following Friday. She is someone for whom every profession becomes the defining feature of her; she is ‘anyone from a midwife to an undertaker and everything in between.’¹²¹ Will, of course, misses the significance of these two professions amidst the arbitrariness of the others; he merely notices, with resignation, that it is not the sort of job that will tie her to Buckledon.

Celine’s neighbours are either piqued or flummoxed by her. ‘David finds her problematic and messy, the Burrows think her rude and not suitably acquiescent. Mary and Hugh are made uneasy by her, and Naomi thinks her unkind.’¹²² Will simply wishes he ‘could

¹²⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.87.

¹²¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.2.

¹²² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.132.

find something definitive about her, but she will not be labelled, or not by me at any rate. She is all these things, and none of these things. The harder I stare, the more confusing she seems.’¹²³ Celine comes to Buckledon to endure her past, not to explain it. Her obscurity is a mark of her grief, not of her mystique, though it will take time for Will to understand this. All he initially knows is that she cannot be pinned to a fixed identity.

This mercuriality seems to be a recurring theme for the objects of affection in *Dear Thief*, and *Orkney* as well. Nina, in *Dear Thief*, both tyrant and bound to authority, is above all ‘not the kind of woman you can expect to get something straight from.’¹²⁴ She is also mainly referred to in a transient context; the letter-writer observes of Nina, ‘...really, you never did look like somebody who was going to be there long.’¹²⁵ The professor’s wife is ‘bookish and studious and brilliant’,¹²⁶ but also a pliant lover and un-tamed mythological sea-creature. Again, she too is shape-shifting and on her way somewhere.

Will creates a version of Celine as a free spirit that isn’t wholly true but is necessary in order for him to be able to account for the way she is and his misperception of her also provides insights about him. Her defining quality, according to Will, is her impermanence. Yet too often he finds that his infatuation with her makes him feel impermanent and insubstantial. ‘Had I imagined her? Or was I the invisible trespasser, of whom she had not taken any notice. If not for my clumsy, ungainly stumble through the snow, I might have thought that I were the ghost who passed by so disregarded, and not she.’¹²⁷ Perhaps he must ascribe impermanence to her in order to deflect it from himself.

Actually, I think Celine’s defining qualities are her affection and patience with the introverted and conflicted boatman she befriends. She allows the reader to see Will in his

¹²³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.132.

¹²⁴ *Dear Thief*, p.30.

¹²⁵ *Dear Thief*, p.50.

¹²⁶ *Orkney*, p.118.

¹²⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.100.

entirety, partly of course because he opens up to her. And because they are similar, Celine is able to reflect aspects of his own character back to him. For example, I hope I imply his anxiety when Naomi tells him she thinks Celine is flinty and uses people. He sees that he also might be viewed like that.¹²⁸

Will's spoken declaration of his love to Celine comes before he finds out about Peter and is the antithesis of my original vision of Will as a ghostly and virtually speechless narrator. By the end, Will drops any pretence as to how he feels about Celine. And although he might seem to simply let her go because he cannot force her to stay, we know that he is heartsore. Her removal van 'waits like a hearse in the car park.'¹²⁹

Silence, truth and dialogue

Dialogue proved an especially rich vehicle for creating the dynamic between Will and Celine. There are also times when Will – despite being given a literal voice – still says very little, but even when he says nothing, perhaps not answering a question, or simply leaving long and uncomfortable spaces with no words, he is nonetheless revealing something. And between silence and dialogue – learning to talk, perhaps – I found an opportunity for Will and Celine to connect. Their connection is forged as they begin to wrangle and spar with each other, and truths about both of them are gradually revealed.

Will's silences are remnants of my early idea that he would have dysphonia, and I want firstly to reflect on my various use of these silences. The reader will still know his reaction to something in spite of, and often because of, the lack of a verbal response. When he is with Naomi, or Lucy, I often write Will's internal thoughts in italics. For example:

'Never mind,' says Naomi. 'I don't care enough anymore.'
*Fine, that voice in my head thinks.*¹³⁰

¹²⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.161.

¹²⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.244.

¹³⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.187.

Here, I illustrate Will's uncommunicative nature by having Lucy answer her own questions:

'Moroccan,' she said. 'New.'
She waited for me to ask then blinked in irritation.
'We haven't been to Morocco, in case you're wondering.'¹³¹

When Celine leaves with Rob for Yarmouth, I show how affected Will is by his uncorresponding reaction: 'And staying aboard for the night if they miss the tide,' says a villager suggestively, of the two of them. Will initially just stands up. Then he changes the subject. 'Need a lift to the boat, David?'¹³² I return to the agony of Will's afternoon at the end of the section when he makes his feelings explicit to the reader, as he often does, having been reluctant to do so with David. 'The afternoon is aimless, aimless and painful with no sign of the boat returning and images of Celine and Rob turn around my mind as if they are on a kaleidoscope that I can't put down.'¹³³

The above are all examples of why I gave Will a literal voice after his dysphonia proved too complicated. Without ever saying anything at all, there would be no difference between him being non-verbal (in varying exchanges with Naomi and Lucy), being curt and distracting (as he is with David here) or finally vocalising his internal thoughts (as he will do with Celine). His most important articulation to Celine will be how he feels about her, which of course, because he is Will, is not a direct and fluent declaration but rather a faltering admission.

Will is generally evasive in both thought and conversation. This is notable in a scene with Lucy when she wants to talk through what happened between them in the past. Will admits to the reader that he is desperate to leave, 'to get away from that emergency-red toy kitchen.'¹³⁴

¹³¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.10.

¹³² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.37.

¹³³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.38.

¹³⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.15.

Aloud, he makes something up about the traffic. Tension flares ‘fluent and malevolent’¹³⁵ when Will makes his excuse about rush hour.

It is meant to contrast with the (mostly) lack of tension between Celine and Will. Celine is just as evasive about herself as Will about himself. So they never force conversation or honesty from each other. Indeed, Will notices the same thing about Celine that he might be accused of, her lack of interference: ‘For a journalist, she was often strangely incurious.’¹³⁶ Neither seek to invade the other’s privacy. They both have a need for self-preservation, and their initially sparse dialogue reflects this.

Perhaps the defining moment of the novel is a wordless one. ‘Her hands fluttered uncertainly over my bowed head. Those skeletal fingers passed over me like a priest’s.’¹³⁷ Celine is crucial in expiating Will’s guilt and allowing him to feel forgiven. ‘...I sort of took that as my cue to leave, not because I felt dismissed, but because I felt exonerated and I didn’t know what else to do with that foreign feeling except walk away from it.’¹³⁸ It is from this moment that Will begins to open up to Celine. Positioning Celine’s cottage next to Will’s place of work was a simple, geographic way of ensuring they were always going to bump into each other, thus allowing their relationship to flourish.

Despite all the dialogue and speech being filtered through Will’s narrative and viewpoint, the reader is meant to trust that he is faithfully reporting it. There is no authorial indication to assume otherwise. Will attempts to work things out in good faith and when his frailties need pointing out, it is usually Celine who assists. Here, he isn’t exactly honest about the distance he lives from his daughter. He tells Celine that he moved to Lymington to be near

¹³⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.15.

¹³⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.2.

¹³⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.61.

¹³⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.62.

Mattie. Celine doesn't let him get away with the inaccuracy and points out, 'well, near enough. Not *that* near.'¹³⁹

The narrators of *Dear Thief* and *Orkney* openly engage in struggles – with Nina and with the wife – over their accuracy. The letter-writer of *Dear Thief* desires, like Will, to present her narration as the truth but because it takes the form of a letter, no one, Nina least of all, can refute the veracity of the contents. The letter-writer throws down the challenge in the first few pages of the novel: 'You are opening your mouth to object...but what of it, my friend? For once you have no right or means to reply, and so I continue.'¹⁴⁰ The tone is authoritative and even taunting.

The juxtaposition between the two protagonists is likened to battle toward the end as the letter-writer compares picking up her pen to sending an old man back to war.¹⁴¹ But she is a wry and knowing narrator, both admitting her lies of omission and offering up the letter itself for questioning. 'Aren't written words strange in this way,' she asks rhetorically of Nina, 'so inscrutable, all hurrying together on the paper to cover up reality...'¹⁴² I think finally there is a truce between the two of them. The letter-writer has become battle-weary. Indeed: 'The pen seems to fall dead at the idea of going on.'¹⁴³ Nina is not so much defeated as released and the struggle interpreting the past seems to fall away into the shadowy street of the conclusion.

There will be no truce at the end of *Orkney* but similarly, the professor often insists on his version of the truth. For example, the day his wife arrives in his classroom, he recalled leaves tangled in her hair. 'They were not,' she said, with a little shove.'¹⁴⁴ He replies, 'but so I saw you, darling, an autumn sprite.'¹⁴⁵ These are my quotation marks. Never using speech

¹³⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.105.

¹⁴⁰ *Dear Thief*, p.17-18.

¹⁴¹ *Dear Thief*, p. 254.

¹⁴² *Dear Thief*, p.35.

¹⁴³ *Dear Thief*, p.253.

¹⁴⁴ *Orkney*, p.41

¹⁴⁵ *Orkney*, p.41.

marks to denote the professor's speech in *Orkney* is one of the devices Sackville uses to suggest weakness. He is without definition, and his argument given no weight. His wife's firm words, in contrast, are even backed up - with that 'little shove'. Again, later in the novel when the professor says that she kissed him, she asserts, 'you kissed *me*,'¹⁴⁶ and Sackville's italics emphasise her retort.

The conversation about autumn leaves then morphs into a dispute about the colour of his wife's jumper, which the professor remembers as purple. He will dismiss as nonsense his wife's insistence that it was green¹⁴⁷ but the disparities between them have been made clear. Their opposing truths, however mundane, are an illustration of what the professor himself later refers to as the 'space between us.'¹⁴⁸ The entire novel, as John Burnside says – bringing to mind the section on ghosts – is about 'the impossibility of bridging the gap, between one world, or one soul, and another.'¹⁴⁹ Furthermore, I would add that the very foundations of their union, that of teacher and student, are called into question.

The wife, pinned under the male gaze, doesn't initially appear to be given much licence of her own, but this turns out to be a misconception. *She* is the teacher of words, like 'fluther.'¹⁵⁰ They enjoy their competitive synonymic word games, but *she* wins them: 'I conceded the game, I could think of no better word.'¹⁵¹ When he delves into her past, she nimbly dodges the questions and mocks: 'Are we done for today, Sigmund?'¹⁵² Even when she seemingly concedes that her jumper was not, after all, green but purple, she manages to be subversive. Her sarcasm is clear: 'With leaves in my hair and a cobweb for a shawl and so

¹⁴⁶ *Orkney*, p.188.

¹⁴⁷ *Orkney*, p.46.

¹⁴⁸ *Orkney*, p.225.

¹⁴⁹ 'Doomed to Grief', p.20.

¹⁵⁰ *Orkney*, p.5.

¹⁵¹ *Orkney*, p.8.

¹⁵² *Orkney*, p. 156.

forth. All ready to cast my spell on you.’¹⁵³ This mode of her speech is a tool for undermining the professor’s control and perspective. It often discredits his narration; which will grind to a halt.

The professor’s notion of the academic, whose wordy, intellectual prowess has made him vainglorious, disintegrates; his sense of the man, in whose potency as a lover he has prided himself, vanishes. He is reduced to silences characterised by increasingly large blocks of white space in the text.¹⁵⁴ In the aftermath of his wife’s disappearance he says: ‘All I have left is this act of empty rhetoric, this endless address to an absence.’¹⁵⁵ The last words of the novel, before an entirely empty page are, ‘Best leave the paper blank.’¹⁵⁶ These are not the narrator’s words. The advice comes from his wife.

I also gave Celine the last word of my novel. The part she plays in building bridges between hers and Will’s joint reticence is crucial. Because she holds back, Will reaches out. This shows Will is not stuck in an entirely passive rut. He is coaxed out of his shell and dialogue begins to illustrate an equality and harmony between them. Here is an example of Will and Celine understanding each other even whilst purporting to get each other wrong. She says:

‘Don’t forget I’m going to Italy on Wednesday.’
‘Of course I won’t.’
‘I’m going to start swimming when it gets warmer. What do you think?’
‘I’ll miss you.’
‘You know full well I mean about the swimming. Happy Easter, Will.’¹⁵⁷

Celine’s final words, a memory of Will’s because she has already gone, connect Will with Mattie. Despite the importance of his relationship with Celine, the definitive point of Will’s

¹⁵³ *Orkney*, p.43.

¹⁵⁴ *Orkney*, p.161-162.

¹⁵⁵ *Orkney*, p.249.

¹⁵⁶ *Orkney*, p.253.

¹⁵⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.152.

character development is to recognise the real centre of his world, which is not Celine, but Mattie. Happily, for Will, Mattie is still learning to talk.

Secondary characters

I'd like to look briefly at Naomi, Will's part-time lover, and Chris, Lucy's partner. They are important because they evince responses from Will that help show him as tricky, guilt-ridden, self-abasing and ultimately well-meaning; all the characteristics that make Will who he is. That is to say, complex as well as passive.

I would reflect after Naomi's creation, if I had also needed her to show Will as a warm-blooded sexual being. This would make him the very opposite of the flimsy early narrator who had such ghostly qualities.¹⁵⁸

However, as can sometimes be the way, Naomi also caused me some problems because as I wrote, I realised that she was too similar to Lucy. Will was the same around both of them – defensive and withdrawn – and whilst I wanted Naomi to remind Will of the safety in the life he left, she needed to elicit in him a different set of behaviours than Lucy does. I divided the village of Buckledon into two and put Naomi in the half that some of the villagers are snobby about. I was consequently able to show Will's indifference to classism. I also made Naomi half-French and an outsider in Buckledon that way as well. She often talks about feeling homesick for France and exiled in the village. Because English is not her first language, she sometimes struggles to find the right words, as can Will - although she will justifiably interpret

¹⁵⁸ The subject would be too large and contentious to elaborate on here, but I was interested to see that of the three narrators I have been focussing on, it is the two male narrators that are sexually active - the professor and Will. The letter-writer's lifestyle is markedly puritan. The distinction is interesting. I investigated a little further and within my small parameters this is what I found. Claire Messud does not give Nora in *The Woman Upstairs* a partner for sex. Her solo sexual act is videoed and she is humiliated for it. Zoe Heller's Barbara in *Notes on a Scandal* (2003) states that she is 'so chronically untouched that the accidental brush of a bus conductor's hand on your shoulder sends a jolt of longing straight to your groin.' (p.187). These instances might all suggest we can still, perhaps unwittingly, subscribe to the notion that male sexual appetites need satisfying over female ones.

his inability to express himself as aloofness. The conventional Lucy, contrastingly, never has trouble with words, borrowing them from films. I also gave Naomi a son to whom Will is kind and can demonstrate patience and gentleness.

Chris, Lucy's partner, wasn't initially an interesting character to me. This changed over the course of writing when I made him a successful army veteran. It provided an opportunity for Will to explore the feeling of jealousy of a man entirely different to Rob (who is wholly unencumbered by responsibility). To be in the army suggests collaboration with others, to be part of a team, involving sacrifice. This is awe-inspiring for Will whose envy is evident in how he compares his descriptions of domestic chores to Chris's heroism in Afghanistan. He recounts 'tasks such as learning how to fold and unfold the pram with the same level of anxiety and dread I might have trying to dismantle a roadside bomb.'¹⁵⁹

Any resentment of Chris is tempered by Will's sadness and gratitude. Chris now lives with Mattie and the scene at Mattie's first birthday party is a reminder of the loss of his family for Will. 'When I turned at the door and saw the three of them with their arms wrapped around each other at the end of the hallway and heard Mattie's sobs subsiding to juddery gulps, agony pulled slowly through me like a second turn on the rack.'¹⁶⁰ Will noted wryly during the party that 'it ought to have been me dressed as the clown.'¹⁶¹ Instead it was Chris, casting himself in Will's fatherly role.

Chris and Naomi helped show me that Will need not be defined by fixation and loss, which I felt might be the case with a narration about unrequited love. They allowed me to illustrate many other facets to Will's character, traits that did not have to undermine Will's fascination surrounding Celine. This narration of unrequited love could accommodate a narrator and a protagonist who was more than one-dimensional.

¹⁵⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.12.

¹⁶⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.122.

¹⁶¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.120.

PART THREE: THE DIVISION OF TIME

A heap of days

I used the structure of interspersing the past with the present in my first novel, *I See Through You*. For me, such a structure is a tool by which an author can explain where a character is – and is going – because of where they have come from. I wanted to do something similar in *Half River, Half Sea* but more experimental and so I initially thought about writing ‘a heap of days’¹⁶² which would consist of two messily entwined timelines. In other words, a narrative without a clear linear arc and one that mixed memories of past events randomly, and sometimes illogically, with the present. In attempting this, I hoped to represent more authentically our human experience of time, which is, after all, fluid, shifting and indeterminate.

For example, in an early iteration, the opening chapter – since re-positioned for dramatic reasons previously mentioned – was a descriptive reflection about Will’s visit to the beach on 10th February. This, in turn, inspired a childhood memory. So there were two flashbacks within a section headed July. The reader was given a sense of dislocation - which was intended. The next chapter was from May. The following chapter was June, and then came January. In this draft, even before page fifteen, I was asking the reader to follow Will through four different time frames. By now they might be frustrated that I was not leading them ahead more straightforwardly - which was not intended. How was a reader to catch hold of Will, pushed cold and without context into each section? Back to June and then to March. And so on.¹⁶³

¹⁶² *Dear Thief*, p. 217.

¹⁶³ I would like to have been able to reproduce this disordered sequence here, but such a layout never existed. I give the order of the final chronology on p.55 of the critical component.

The material was hopelessly difficult to follow. The plot was un-successive and disorganised. In *The Sense of an Ending* (1967) Frank Kermode calls such a plot ‘tock-tick’ as opposed to ‘tick-tock.’¹⁶⁴

This was problematical for me because the point was to track Will from beginning to end. I wanted to write a narrative and transmit some of the coherence and reassurance that such a structure provides. Frank Kermode’s contention is that our ‘need in the moment of existence to belong, to be related to a beginning and an end’¹⁶⁵ is satisfied by narrative. In its arbitrariness, my novel threatened the opposite.

It became clear to me that the novel’s structure should assist – and certainly not hinder – me in achieving my aims for Will. How could I otherwise reveal his increasing insight and hope surrounding Mattie? The problem for me was that I was trying to do two things simultaneously; I wanted to demonstrate his blindness and sense of sadness about Celine at the same time. Gain and loss run parallel to each other in *Half River, Half Sea*. Will’s premonition that Celine will leave is balanced with his sense that not only has he already lost her (indeed he never had her), but that he has also lost time with Mattie. Will is aware of the passing of time. He says: ‘I thought we had all the time in the world, as the song goes. And I forgot that the song, of course, means anything but that.’¹⁶⁶

Furthermore, he is beginning to realise that alongside these losses, Mattie might be a precious gain. Paternal possibilities and responsibilities for Will exist alongside recollections of his own lack of such a thing. Will can only realise these possibilities if he reaches some understanding of his past, accepts his present and gets to grips with the future.

The *tock-tick* narrative had seemed one way to manage Will’s multiple dilemmas and present the themes of loss and gain alongside each other - but they were not connecting at all.

¹⁶⁴ Kermode, Frank, *The Sense of an Ending*, p. 44.

¹⁶⁵ *The Sense of an Ending*, p.4.

¹⁶⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.184.

The novel was like a train with multiple, runaway carriages. The reader could not follow the development in Will's emotions and actions as they unfolded over the passage of time. I was going to have three (more, even when I included the two strands from Will's distant past) nonsequential timelines from which to be portraying him. I got in a terrible muddle. I am no Proust.

However, this was the reason behind the byzantine timeline: that the novel's structure should simulate the flowing and inexplicable shape and manifestation of memories. I wanted to show how time does not in fact appear as anything like linear in our recollection of the past; it tumbles like clothes in a washing machine through our minds. But it was just asking too much of a reader.

Here is the order of the final draft, provided so that the reader can refer to it during the discussion that follows.

THE FINAL ORDER OF *HALF RIVER, HALF SEA*

31ST JANUARY 2018 / FULL WOLF MOON

1ST JUNE

6TH FEBRUARY / SNOW MOON

1ST JUNE

2ND JUNE

3RD JUNE

10TH FEBRUARY / SNOW MOON

4TH JUNE

15TH FEBRUARY / NEW SNOW MOON

6TH JUNE

16TH FEBRUARY / SNOW MOON

24TH FEBRUARY / SNOW MOON

7TH JUNE

9TH JUNE

1ST MARCH / WORM MOON

25TH DECEMBER 2017 / COLD MOON – Christmas

5TH MARCH / WORM MOON

9TH JUNE

10TH MARCH / WORM MOON

15TH MARCH / WORM MOON

11TH JUNE

17TH MARCH / NEW WORM MOON

23RD MARCH / WORM MOON

12TH JUNE

13TH JUNE / NEW STRAWBERRY MOON

14TH JUNE

29TH MARCH / WORM MOON

14TH JUNE

15TH JUNE

1ST APRIL / PINK MOON – Easter

16TH JUNE

4TH APRIL / PINK MOON

6TH APRIL / PINK MOON

16TH JUNE

17TH JUNE

18TH JUNE

15TH APRIL / NEW PINK MOON

27TH APRIL / PINK MOON

19TH JUNE

12TH MAY / FLOWER MOON

20TH JUNE

21ST JUNE

20TH MAY / FLOWER MOON

23RD JUNE

25TH MAY / FLOWER MOON

23RD JUNE

24TH JUNE

30TH MAY / FULL FLOWER MOON

25TH JUNE

30TH JUNE

June and the moon

I needed to make it clearer what Will wants *now*, where ‘now’ is the month of June. I took July entirely out of the equation and presented the days of June in order and in the present tense, as they happen. I printed out blank calendars and filled in the events so their order should be simple to reproduce. At this point, I was still presenting the past events from January to May in whatever order Will happened to think of them, rather than in a chronological sequence.

June is two things: firstly, an examination of the hope-defined winter during which Will gets to know Celine. Secondly, June is the pivotal month, the days in which Will be forced by Mattie’s imminent departure and Rob’s arrival, to re-evaluate his life choices. His tendency towards stasis will no longer suffice, hence the fundamental and crucial exposition of June. By launching the narrative from this month and forcing Will to act, agency becomes embedded in the novel’s structure and not just in Will’s character.

As I had named Celine for the moon, it occurred to me that naming the months for the moon would be a natural and effective way of marking and connecting them - but one that still adhered to some sense of fluidity. The moon’s relationship with the tides also links Celine with Will, the boatman.

June is the strawberry moon. Neatly (these moon phases are not fictional), the last two evenings of May 2018 presented as a full flower moon and came to symbolise a full stop to Will. Before he has seen the end of June out, he might have hoped the full moon was an ellipsis.

When Celine becomes interested in the moon, it gives her a reason to initiate the meetings with Will on each new moon evening because a new moon traditionally represents hope, renewal and energy. Will refers to the moons often when thinking about Celine. ‘Like

two full moons a month, there was either a surplus of happiness (for me, at any rate) or, as in that day in February – a month when there wasn't a full moon at all – a deficit.'¹⁶⁷

By adding the threat, in June, of Mattie leaving, I not only give the present some tension but it is also a question to keep coming back to whenever Will is narrating that month. Before, he simply meandered aimlessly around after Celine. Now he has phone calls with the newly-created lawyer Angela Jameson to think about. One of the grounding aspects of the letter-writer's present in *Dear Thief* is a question, amongst others, that unfolds as immediate. Might she go back to Nicholas when he returns? This gives what is essentially a retrospective rumination on loss some current relevance.

And I ground June with a question that Will could keep returning to. Could he begin a legal battle to keep his access to Mattie? The arrival of Rob adds to the tension. June, and therefore Will, I hope, was beginning to look as though it was going somewhere.

The last thing I did was to emphasise the heat wave. The weather is a good flag for placing a reader at a certain time or in a certain place when time shifts can be disorientating. Toward the end of my novel, it seemed apt that the heatwave should break; the unwritten month of July is named for the thunder moon. But the heatwave, which lasts throughout June, is constant, just as Will realises that Celine too has been constant all along. He has just misread her. Celine moves away, but before this final act, she and Will have an honest conversation and by doing so, cement their relationship as something solid and real. Their connection is also suggested by the linking, circular shape of the novel: they meet by the water both on 31st May at the end of the novel, and on 1st June at the start.

¹⁶⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.92.

This circular shape is also emphasised by the final words of the novel: *Look*,¹⁶⁸ Celine tells Will, just as she did on the opening page. Only this time, Will feels that she is directing him toward Mattie as well as the moon.

A chronological winter

The main time frame is between December 2017 and June 2018 although there are also two strands of Will's far distant past that are referenced, both obliquely and as scenes within the text. These are the elements of his backstory; his childhood and the breakdown of his adult relationship with Lucy. These flashbacks were never meant to be in any chronological order, and not designed to be understood as linear events. They are weaved in and out of the actual plot so as to contextualise Will's wariness and mistrustful attitude surrounding love and commitment.

Despite the moon names giving some sort of coherence to the recollections splicing through June, the January to May timeline remained disorderly. Will's motivation still was not clear enough. I realised the complexity of a non-linear past timeline wasn't helping.

Another problem was that events were being alluded to that the reader had not yet seen dramatised - because their sequence was so mixed up and unchronological. Here is an example. In the novel's first iteration, Will made several references to a birdwatching hut. They were emotionally loaded but oblique and therefore potentially irritating. I decided to make the birdwatching hut a clear memory, rather than throwaway lines charged with meaning. On the novel's second page, Will now remembers 'an afternoon in April, when she kissed me in a bird-watching hut, with the pale-green paint peeling above us and rain running off the bank outside'.¹⁶⁹ This way, the reader is never in any doubt as to the meaning of the hut for Will.

¹⁶⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.244.

¹⁶⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.3.

Such a solution was viable once or twice. However, there were too many similar instances. It was not a sustainable way of solving the problem.

I needed to do something more radical, though writing it here seems an easy solution. I would have to ensure the January to May events were presented to the reader in chronological order, although still interspersed with Will's standpoint in June. In other words, there would be two interwoven time frames, each one in chronological order: June; and January to May. This process was both simple and complex, and something that I did not entirely embrace until late in the writing. This was because I was trying to remain true to my Proustian aim of presenting memory.

I separated the two timeframes into two documents and put the flashbacks in chronological order, working out cause and effect, making sure that each section ended and began sequentially, and trying to pick up where I had left off. I then re-interspersed the past sections amongst the present, taking care that each one reflected and illuminated what came before and what was to come. Before I had done this, there was no sense of progression, of what triggers what.

Christmas Day on the coast is the exception. It is the sole December recollection and it is a pivotal moment for Will. I wanted to place it near the middle of the novel, even though 25th December comes first in the timeline. I did not have to present everything 'as just one damn thing after another,'¹⁷⁰ after all. This scene is most suggestive of Will's liminality. He is on the threshold of two worlds. He has left Lucy but not yet started renting his cottage - and it is on this day that he glimpses Celine for the first time. On Christmas Day I could gather, albeit in his head, his parents, Lucy and Mattie, and after church, physically, Celine.

¹⁷⁰ Lodge, David, *The Art of Fiction*, p.75.

In *Dear Thief*, the letter-writer's entire story-telling ploy is perhaps to fill the spaces in her own life; more specifically perhaps, the gaps in her knowledge. She talks about 'splintering,'¹⁷¹ by which she means the bits of ourselves we leave in the past; of how there is comfort in taking refuge there and reuniting with the part from which we have split. You want to go there, she says, 'like you want to go to a lover.'¹⁷² It is because: 'The self you left behind lives in endless possibility.'¹⁷³

In *Half River, Half Sea*, Will cannot concentrate on and is paralysed by the present. He says: 'It's like I'm constantly making a to-do list in my head, and for no reason at all other than to reflect on the fact that I don't do them.'¹⁷⁴ He is always procrastinating, drawn to the winter months (and further back in time), thereby giving weight and reality to past narratives. And it seemed to me that the reader must be able to follow him naturally, to accept the arcs of his longing (and echoes of trauma) and feel that to accompany him in his backwards and forwards movements is safe and right. So the final draft of the novel saw me re-arrange the past in the most accessible way I could.

Things of beauty

I tried to find the beauty in things through Will's eyes, as they gradually opened. I found memory, and the water, useful inlets in my attempts to achieve this. For example, Will sees the Brent geese leaving for Russia, sensing that as they fly away, something else is happening too: 'As if in the chill of the pink air they felt the lure of home. The Arctic tundra a memory surfacing on the Lymington foreshore that evening.'¹⁷⁵ Will is trying to feel something about home and express a longing for it through the geese, as well as to make a connection with

¹⁷¹ *Dear Thief*, p.212.

¹⁷² *Dear Thief*, p.213.

¹⁷³ *Dear Thief*, p. 213.

¹⁷⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.173-4.

¹⁷⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.191.

something he has never seen or experienced. The cold sunset colours on the south coast of the United Kingdom are the same as in Siberia. Will always senses something more.

I wanted his regret and longing for Celine to be simultaneous. In other words, he knows at the moment of longing that what he longs for is impossible; that it has vanished before manifesting itself, but also that something unassailable has been left with him. Here is an example of what I am trying to get across.

I wish that when she had said – on that near-perfect April evening in her kitchen, when she sat on top of her Aga in her grey cardigan and the summer dress – that she wanted to be the sort of person who liked olives: I wish that I had told her I would take her to Greece. I remember I said, ‘rubbish,’ or something similarly dismissive. Why on earth didn’t I say, you needn’t have olives, but you could have the Aegean Sea and the rocky bay in the afternoon, Retsina and citronella candles spluttering at night. Come to... I don’t know, Ithaca, I could have said. We can go right now. You only need to take off that wintry cardigan, and those woolly socks that you have been skating on. You seem half-ready, packed even, with your battered suitcase in the hall. You always seem poised for flight, as if you are mid-way out of a door ajar. There is a warm, salty breeze in Ithaca that mixes with the smell of pine trees. Decide now. We’ll go together. Darling Celine, you can be an Ithacan who likes olives without liking olives. You are, after all, as you have insisted, a thalassophile. Instead, I told her drily, ‘what nonsense you talk.’ I didn’t tell her I loved her. I think I said, ‘I don’t like olives either.’¹⁷⁶

I hope the reader is transported to Ithaca for a moment, and that there is hope as well as regret. Nostalgia, as well, but without sentiment - as Will might feel it. Will also refers to ‘the possibilities of the day(s)’¹⁷⁷ but the possibilities he hopes for never materialise, at least not within the pages of the novel. Nevertheless, it says something about Will that he reaches for, and feels, this happiness.

In *Orkney*, the professor loses language and words when his wife disappears. He illustrates Julian Barnes’s belief that ‘there are lots of instances where there is no narrative, or

¹⁷⁶ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.194-5.

¹⁷⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.207.

the narrative is one we wouldn't want to accept because it's too painful to bear...'¹⁷⁸ But before this, even amidst the agony, whilst looking at the sea:

It is powder-blue, it is amethyst, it is black, bruised, blood-purple, garnet; calm and flat, harmless, or biding its time. It is a clear night, tonight. The soft dimming into evening; all the old, dead ghosts of stars, haunting the clear sky, brightening against the dark in the glimmerans. Lovely islanders' word for twilight. How she'd love that. Or was it her I had it from?¹⁷⁹

The professor too sees the beauty in things; the beauty – and the word – learned from his wife.

The landscape is very much a part of Will and I tried to write about it through his eyes, with sensitivity and clarity. How he interprets the natural world and its cycles is another part of my attempt to find the beauty in things. It is also a strategy through which I hoped to bring Will alive - my wish to articulate tenderly his experiences, to mitigate his uncommunicative character. He is attentive to the world around him, alive to nature, to landscape, to water. I re-read Paul Gallico's *The Snow Goose* (1940) and was influenced by the description of the wintry Essex marshes. I talked to the suspicious bosun at my own local yacht club, who did not want to talk to me, and to a friendly resident, who did not want to stop talking. It was all part of consolidating Will within a riverine world.

We know that the professor's Orcadian wife is disappearing into her landscape. The professor tells us, 'the edges of my wife blur against the sky.'¹⁸⁰ Indeed, he has been helping to assimilate his heroine into the elements that will take her. Hannah Tennant-Moore says in her review of *Orkney* that 'he is determined to turn the story of their love into the kind of fairy tale he has been addicted to...'¹⁸¹ Exactly so; his wife is lost to him otherwise, as a baffling and incomprehensible thing. But the stories he insists on are the stories that will lure her back

¹⁷⁸ Barnes, Julian, in conversation with Eleanor Wachtel, <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/writersandcompany/i-don-t-believe-in-god-but-i-miss-him-julian-barnes-on-why-he-puts-his-faith-in-stories-1.4772909>

¹⁷⁹ *Orkney*, p.249.

¹⁸⁰ *Orkney*, p.151.

¹⁸¹ Tennant-Moore, Hannah, 'Sightseeing'. *The New York Times*, 28th June 2013.

to her own kind, of finmen and selkies. He admits that ‘she could be lifted out of my library.’¹⁸² He regales her nightly with transformative tales of legend and in doing so, further encourages her absorption.

Will also imagines Celine as part of the watery landscape.

She became less hesitant. She knew where she was and the river knew her. The ghostly outline of her wintry form slowly filled with colour, imprinting itself onto the landscape; a streak of scarlet or green or white amongst the reed warblers and the whitethroats...¹⁸³

But Will is trying to claim Celine from the landscape, and unlike the professor, he is not an outsider looking in. Will’s childhood was by this river mouth, and Celine too was raised by the coast. The river is a frame for both Will and Celine. It gives them shape but also freedom, and colour. It is through the river, and their affinity with it, that the two are linked. The elements bind, rather than separate them.

A river is abundant with metaphorical possibility. Will reflects some of the symbolism surrounding such a body of water. He is always tugged to and fro, has one yearning and then another. He expresses one such longing when he says, ‘I never know if I want solitude or company; as soon as I have one, I feel it too heavily and long for the other.’¹⁸⁴ In *To The River*,¹⁸⁵ a non-fiction novel about a walk along the Ouse, Laing describes this as ‘the twin fears of being islanded and swamped.’¹⁸⁶

The river both reveals and conceals. Sublime mystery and rational explanation are an inherent part of it. There are aspects of both life and death within it, shown in my descriptions of the skeletal crabs, the ghostly jellyfish and the foetal movement of the water. Will’s central

¹⁸² *Orkney*, p.11-12.

¹⁸³ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.129.

¹⁸⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.188.

¹⁸⁵ Laing, Olivia, *To The River*. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2017 (2011).

¹⁸⁶ *To The River*, p.194.

conflict is that he wants to feel both safe and free. ‘How does that work?’¹⁸⁷ he wonders. A conduit between innermost country and open sea, rivers are both safe and free and this one will help enable Will to feel so.

¹⁸⁷ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.189.

CONCLUSION

The question at the heart of this thesis is how I engaged with my narrator and made his passivity a strength within the novel. My task, in order to answer this question, has been to trace the evolution of my narrator; to begin along the towpaths of the canal in Oxford and to end where a river meets the sea. In doing so, I realised that I had always followed Will where the writing of him led me, never sure what lay around the corner until I had turned it. Many of the changes I made to him were incremental, and many I suspect were instinctive. Equally, I have no doubt that my motivation in making some changes remains unclear to me. Undertaking a journey that is based on the pursuit of someone or something might also mean acknowledging there is something about the quarry that is intrinsically un-catchable.

To a certain extent, Will's character was always going to be hard for me to interpret. Perhaps, because he was pulled in different directions from the outset, he retains some of the ambiguity connected to my initial indecision about his creation. Perhaps the reasons for his equivocations lie in my restless early thoughts about the novel, when I moved him, voiceless and half-existent, from Oxford and he came face to face with a Celine who threatened to overshadow him. Even in his final incarnation Will is not an easy character to grasp. But I never wanted him to be an 'easy' character. Naomi sums him up. Will asks her if she can't guess why he is there. 'I have never, from the first moment I met you, been able to guess what you want. I have no idea,'¹⁸⁸ she responds dryly, thus articulating something fundamental about Will – that aura of mystery he has retained from early drafts – in just a few words.

I had to re-think some of my decisions surrounding Will but there are still remnants of the character I originally envisaged. This is the first of the discoveries I have made: how the

¹⁸⁸ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.212.

residue of deleted elements of a novel can indelibly mark that novel. Toward the end of *Half River, Half Sea* Will briefly succumbs to the Priapus-like behaviour that defined him in the novel's early incarnations. He has overheard Celine and Rob talking. 'I wait, barely breathing, as if horror-struck, near the newly-stripped shed. I don't know what for. Perhaps simply frozen by what I am now sure is the intimacy I can hear spreading warmly through their conversation.'¹⁸⁹ It is so interesting to me to see how the kernel of a character is perhaps never completely wiped out. 'I carry on trying to eavesdrop, staring up through the silver birch to where the moon, disapproving and lacklustre, sways to the rhythm of the syncopated jazz.'¹⁹⁰ The scene also illustrates how unique Will's jealousy is. His envy encapsulates his honesty, his vulnerability, his shameful bind to his disapproving father, and his longing. I hope that my final version of Will is much more than the creepy eavesdropper from Oxford.

Celine's pool house is a partial metaphor for Will. When we first see it, ivy covers it completely; shielding it but also no doubt strangling it. When Rob is set to work on her garden, the ivy is ripped from the pool house, leaving it naked, 'a shriveled imitation of its former, magnificent self. All that remains are some thin brown roots that thread through its slats like bloodless veins.'¹⁹¹ But this metaphor proved unsuitable for Will in the end, who is not just the stripped shed, wooden and apathetic. I hope he has substance and nuance and that despite – because of – his passivity, he is made interesting through the methods I have been outlining. Celine doesn't even have a swimming pool so her naming of the shed, in line with her obstinacy, is always a curious one.

The second discovery I have made is how tricky it is to write dialogue of the kind that is authentic and also revealing. In this case, it was a question of showing how Will's and Celine's graceful conversation compares to his stilted evasions with others; how it illustrates

¹⁸⁹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.176.

¹⁹⁰ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.177.

¹⁹¹ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.166.

the way they both challenge and endorse each another; and how Will tells the reader things that he doesn't know about himself. I hope their relationship unfolds spontaneously as expressed through their dialogue, from cursory beginnings to the point when Will has to admit: 'I can't keep things from her, I have never been able to.'¹⁹²

One of the defining statements of *Dear Thief*, I think, is: 'I forgive you simply because I hope to be forgiven.'¹⁹³ In early drafts, Will's search for forgiveness had not begun and he simply feels guilty all the time. Celine goes some way to providing him with that release.

We drank the vodka late into the moonless night, and I watched her long fingers pick at the stuffing coming through the chair, and her sharp, witchy silhouette darken and soften...I blame the vodka, and I blame the trickery of the moon that was both there, and not there with us, that night of absolution.¹⁹⁴

In order to feel both safe and free, Will needs to feel forgiven.

If one of my aims was to show that Will is a complex character, I wanted to make it easy for the reader to experience him as such; hence, my simplification of the two overly demanding timelines and the corresponding realisation of a fundamental difficulty of novel-writing. This is my third discovery: that for me, the comprehensible novel can never fully replicate the human experience of time. Indeed, most recently I decided to make the distinction between the timelines even less blurred. They are now further delineated by using different fonts for the section headings. June dates are in bold and December to May in italics.

Perhaps my foremost realisation was that this narration of unrequited love need not go hand in hand with a drained or inert narrator. Will's love for Celine is unrequited but he is not depleted by it. Rather, he is moved by it, and by 'moved' I do not only mean emotionally affected, although he is. I mean that he is inspired, and that he will do things differently than he might have done before, perhaps even things that go against his instinct. He may throw away

¹⁹² *Half River, Half Sea*, p.224.

¹⁹³ *Dear Thief*, p.256.

¹⁹⁴ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.117.

the flowers he buys for Celine – because he is Will – but he does actually buy them, something he admits he hasn't ever done before for anyone. 'It is only now, when the gesture fills me with nothing but anxiety, that I find myself with a bouquet of astonished flowers in hand.'¹⁹⁵ There is an element of courage to his purchase which is new, and admirable. Unrequited love is not the broken, defining statement of an extreme narrator I had once imagined. But it allows for Will's quietude, and perhaps even for grace.

It is worth mentioning Peter again, because if it were not for him, Will would probably still be trapped in a weighty and unrealistic infatuation. Peter sets him free. Peter represents both a defeat for Will, and a victory. It is a defeat that allows space for Will to be gracious and empathetic. He can make the life-affirming wish that Peter and Celine had a child and understands that he must let her go. This is an act both of liberation and self-preservation.

My final thought, and perhaps it is an obvious one, is that this sort of study can never be prescriptive. Another author might have followed Will down a different path. A novel is a personal thing. Everything in *Half River, Half Sea* seems to me to have been the result of a contract between Will and myself. I have been trying to understand something about unrequited love, and Will has made these thoughts substantial and generative. If I never fully grasp what it is I have been trying to understand, no matter. It is the nature of this exhilarating exchange that my reward is simply in the writing of it.

¹⁹⁵ *Half River, Half Sea*, p.162.

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HALF RIVER, HALF SEA

A novel

31st JANUARY 2018 / WOLF MOON

She didn't speak to me in those early days. But one evening at the end of January, when mist was gathering above the water and dusk filling the air, I saw her dragging a rubbish bin across the gravel.

Ducks were wheeling home down the river, calling to one another. I stacked my dinghy in its rack with the others, and she shoved her bin into another pothole, pushing hair that was almost white (the pink streak was gone) out of her eyes, and she didn't say anything until she saw the moon.

'Oh my god,' she said. 'Look,' she said, and then again more urgently. 'Quick, look.' I did as I was told, although I had already been looking for the last hour from my dinghy. We watched it, still sonorously rising; drawing itself out of the river. It was dripping with the colours of the deep, a crab-dark pink with spidery veins like coral visible on its surface. 'It must have a name, this sort of moon,' she breathed. 'I've never seen anything like it.' Upraised in the smoky half-light, her face was glued to the low-slung orb drifting across the blackening water.

It was a super blue blood moon the night that Celine spoke to me for the first time. It was only because it was quite impossible not to notice, and then to exclaim over the moon; that not even Celine could have ignored its celestial splendour - but then again, who knows for sure. She might just as easily not have spoken to me. As I say, she hadn't before.

She became an increasingly familiar sight from then on. I saw her walking in the early mornings when I arrived for work, a cautious but defiant figure, heading onto the frost-hardened riverbank with her breath visible about her face, and her hands hidden somewhere within a man-sized overcoat. She would sit on the wooden bench overlooking the pontoon without

moving and ramrod straight. Staring into the ashen sky. Gradually, as February became March, as if released from the grip of winter, she ventured further, almost to the river mouth and the sea, past the samphire marshes, trailing black scarves and losing gloves amongst the reeds.

She hadn't been there long. She rented her cottage, the one by the Yacht club, in early December. I told her that over Christmas I had been lodging with Henry - a newly-arrived and rootless tenant like her. She hesitated before deciding not to investigate further. For a journalist, she was often strangely incurious.

'You went to the Burrows' drinks on Christmas Day, though, didn't you,' I told her. It wasn't a question really because I was sure I had seen her there. But she wasn't convinced, from somewhere inside that enormous grey coat of hers, she shrugged. 'After church,' I prompted.

She shuddered. 'I don't go to church.'

'I definitely saw you at the drinks party.'

'You might have. I didn't see you.'

She had just started working for *The Bournemouth Times* and I knew her articles pretty well by the end. She invented lives for herself every Friday. Her column was called *A Day in the Life of...* and every week she took on the life of someone else, imagining what they did, just for a day. So she became whoever she wanted every Friday, permanently mutating; anyone from a midwife to an undertaker. There was never a discernible pattern to the lives she decided on and her choices seemed meaningless to me. I don't know how she lived off the income, which can't have been very much. I didn't know much at all until the end of June.

I knew that she liked dragonflies but didn't like olives. I knew she liked daylilies and weeds. There were sadnesses, she said, but they were part of the universal human timetable, weren't they? There was a family photograph I once saw, a list of anxieties and, it turned out,

two surnames. In many ways, I knew as little about her at the beginning of June as I would have if she had not – for whatever reason – turned to me the night of the super blue blood moon in January and said, ‘Look,’ and her hand fell in wonderment from her wheelie bin onto my arm. I imagined that I knew, but she was not a straight person.

When I was with her, she wasn’t there at all. When she was gone, she took shape, and a constant re-examination of the days together threw her into sharper relief. I learned to clutch for certain memories - the way her hand slipped cool and unexpected into mine, the concentration on her face as she counted cherry stones, her determined and ungainly struggle with a rubbish bin. An afternoon in April, when she kissed me in a bird-watching hut, with the pale-green paint peeling above us and rain running off the bank outside. Ducks hiding in dark-green reeds, floating around us like the background of a watercolour.

But she will remember it all differently. The winter has stacked up behind us, ice-edged and impassive; it hardly even bothers to exist without our perceptions of it. And they will be different, these perceptions, these remnants that mark time. I had always bound us together, with the river; but now I see that really she was alone, inhabiting a different sphere. She had the place to herself, and I was merely an observer, allowed from time to time to trespass on her solitude.

1st JUNE

A foreign visitor arrives this morning: the heatwave, forecast to stay the month. I carry my coffee into the garden, and push through the weather apps on my phone, swiping right over consistently yellow sun symbols and rising temperatures. Such warmth still seems unlikely. A chill, dragged over the sea, prickles in the dawn mist.

Mattie. Sunshine means extra work on the river and will make a visit to see her difficult. Recriminations will follow. But today that doesn't seem possible, this morning it could all work out. I glance at the latest photograph of Mattie, sporadically sent according to her mother's mood. They are scattered through my phone like reminders, amongst tide timetables and Yacht club rules, scraps of both happiness and of angst. In one picture, Lucy has caught Mattie unguarded and she is grinning at something or someone that I can't see. Her dark blue eyes are untroubled, and large as the sea, and her cheeks are round and full of health. Her spiky tomboy hair causes Lucy anguish, but I have grown fond of its unruliness. What is she looking at over the photographer's shoulder that has made her giggle? An absent father can only guess. I look away, back down at the diary on my phone, marked more by the space within it than any congestion. Saturday, Sunday...I don't know. Too often it depends on Celine. Last seen two evenings ago. I frown, thinking of how her eyes had filled with tears looking at the sunset. Perhaps she will meet Mattie this month. Perhaps if I leave it, Lucy will get in touch. Perhaps it won't be as hot as everyone predicts.

Everything about May has gathered itself and dropped into June. The months will merge with no difference between them but the increase in temperature. The Forest donkeys still snatch at the gorse on the side of the road, focussed and imperturbable as yesterday. I drive through the woods as usual, the woods where the bluebells have withered, and into the village with the

cowslip hiding the sign, WELCOME TO BUCKLEDON - still leaning on its side, as it has been ever since David Turnley drove into it late one night. I wait in the layby for the Burrows' ironing lady with the hunched back and tins of boiled sugary sweets to inch past me, sucking and waving. Twice a week she, Sheila, drives the short distance from the far end of the village by the development, over to the Grange and listens through the hissing of the iron to Lady Burrows's sufferings and trials. A little further along the lane are the Whitworths, with the silver Land Rover Defender on the gravel. Mary Whitworth will be leaving soon to do her charity rounds at the hospice, and Hugh will be off to his solicitor's office in Lymington, only unbeknownst to Mary he will be back at lunchtime to meet the Royal Southampton's newly arrived trainee for reasons that are not medical. Their friends and viciously competitive sailing rivals, the Notts, live on the corner of Celine's lane, when they are not in Europe or the Caribbean. They have the largest electric gates and CCTV cameras fixed to them which swivel on their axis when I turn past them.

Bumping down the track to the Yacht club, over potholes the size of lunar craters. I arrive with high water, just as the river reaches full capacity and is slopping at the bank like an over-filled bucket. Celine's cottage is surrounded by it, the water surging against the wooden barriers at the end of her garden. As if with these insistent nudgings, it could at any moment demolish them, and flood the unmown lawn littered with her possessions - discarded magazines, what looks like a jumper, her multi-coloured cushions, a rug. The river could flow under the wooden table, over the chair on its side, the one that has the latticing missing from the middle of the seat. There are the hurricane lamps and there is the swing-seat and the discarded paperback, stiff with already barely-remembered rain. Nettles seem to be growing from its pages, nettles that had appeared with a handful of surprised daffodils in the spring, and long since overrun them. The water could drench the thistles, growing in their prickly patches,

soak the thirsty dandelions and come to rest at the back steps. She would be surrounded, the river become a fairy-tale moat, cutting the cottage off from civilisation, only accessible by boat.

The silence is broken suddenly, and instantaneously, by several things happening at once. There is a mewling from the iridescent lapwing on the bank, and the bark of a dog in the distance. The blast of the first ferry's horn. A yacht, with sails tucked into its sides, is pushed into the estuary. The cormorant vanish in the blue.

And Celine shouts from the riverbank. 'Come on. You're late.' Thoughts and oystercatchers scatter.

I'm already in swimming trunks and, pulling our towels from the back of the truck, I walk down to her. By the time I get there, she has waded out and is waving, sort of, splashing water with her palm. 'Where have you been, Will?'

It is early enough that we are totally alone and early enough that drops of dew are still visible on the long grassy reeds. The river is very still. 'I'm not late.'

'Get in, slow coach.'

I take my trainers off and tread through the silt towards the stump that serves as a tufty green diving board. The water bites cleanly at my toes. Above me, fine, moss-etched branches are like oversized and pendulous wings, arching over the shadowy and secret spot. I clamber up onto the knoll and my knees get smeared with a reddish sap from something that make it look as though I have hurt myself. I stand there for a second and then I say: 'Jump or dive?' And she shakes her head, I dunno, is the answer and I have to take the plunge before the enchantment of the morning breaks. I glance downstream. The yacht has edged into the point where the sea meets the shifting, glistening river. Closer now, magnified with every second as it slips into this narrowing channel; half river, half sea.

I breathe in and jump, because we know it is deep enough just here. The shock of the sharpness of the water, the familiar taste of the river, and then I come up for air with Celine already turned away and striking out ahead of me.

‘To the far bank and back?’ I think that’s what she calls, and I put my head down again and try to catch up.

It’s even colder in the middle of the river, gaspingly cold, with the slimy dark-green reeds brushing past me, and Celine’s shadowy shape just ahead, dissolving and re-emerging in the sediment. Her legs are translucent now, and now neon-blue like the kingfisher, as they kick rhythmically ahead of me. The current must push us on, because we reach the other side further down the river than I expected, where the grey-mottled mussels cling to the rocks. She gets to the bank and wipes the water from her face. Her teeth are chattering.

‘You all right?’

‘Yes,’ but she loathes the hostility of cold water, and her arms are the colour of skin in a morgue. ‘See that yacht coming in? Are we going to get back over before it gets up here?’

‘Let’s not risk getting run down.’

We watch it pass, beautiful and bold and a little gawky with its sails lashed to leggy masts, willing it to go faster, our bones knocking white. She is a classic wooden boat called *Iseult*. Her varnished and spray-flecked timber glistens with the conker-coloured markings of a giraffe. As soon as it is clear, we plunge back into the water and have to swim strongly against the just-turning tide to get back to the tree stump. Celine hauls herself up first. She’s tired, and serious now the day has begun. She picks up the towel I brought for her, kisses my cheek, and orders me to have a good day.

As usual, there is no ceremony to her departure, and no commitment to meet again. We just will.

*

Back at the Yacht club, I see *Iseult* again, idling where the water laps at Celine's garden. She must be waiting for a mooring. When she is given a number from the office in Beaulieu, she picks up speed again and carries on upstream to pick up her buoy, leaving me to google her name for information.

My e-mail pings. Lucy. I always feel slight dread when she gets in touch, knowing I will have done something wrong. I should have organised my visit to Winchester earlier. I yawn and put the kettle on, leaving the email unopened, and read about *Iseult*'s owner instead. Rob Sinclair was born in Sydney and is now 'loosely based' on the Deben in Woodbridge. He's only thirty-five and there doesn't seem to be a peaceful or deserted corner of the globe that he hasn't invaded. He has a public Instagram account in which he describes himself as a 'nautical nomad.' The photographs that tell the story of Rob Sinclair's 'life-in-progress' are of bearded youngsters surfing at sunsets and sailing with long-limbed girls with bandanas in their braided hair. I close the App.

Celine is most likely sleeping now. I know that she has problems sleeping, she comes awake at night, rising when the sun drops away, and drifting off at dawn. There's no reason for it as far as I know, it is just the way things are. I've seen her curled on her swing-sofa, cat-napping; her face and head turned away and hidden under the large hat she shields herself in. She was born during the night - and with her face shrouded in a cowl. A rare thing and a useless thing in her family given that her father was a lifeboat sailor and a luckless, drowned one. She was troublesome as a child, being so stubbornly nocturnal, and jokes that it was as much to do with her sleeping patterns, established her very first night on earth, as it was the charming, evangelical antipodean who persuaded her weary mother to emigrate to the southern

hemisphere sixteen years later - *so I can get some sleep* the exasperated mother apparently moans, *and finally, at the same time as you.*

I'm helping some tourists with their rib when I notice that the door to what Celine calls her pool-house is wide open and swinging lazily. This old wooden shed is barely visible behind the dark ivy that shrouds it, spotted with the purple flowers that have pushed their way through the dense, green foliage. There is a step ladder here this afternoon on the grass, and an empty paint pot flattening the fungus that has spread in a fairy-ring around the shed. It's a glorious mess, all of it. I wish I couldn't, but I can hear my mother's distracting voice in my head, very clearly coming to unflattering conclusions about the standards of this gardener. My mother's is the only other garden I have known well, a garden with perfectly cultivated borders, trimmed hedges, colour co-ordinated shrubs and fastidiously pruned roses. Lucy had got on with her quite well.

Lucy opened the door of 54 St Cross Avenue and unexpectedly, she was smiling.

‘Mattie just said Da-da,’ she said, ‘Mattie is talking.’

I walked into the hall of the house that I had once lived in. It was always uncomfortable visiting here, the home that was only occupied by one of its original two dwellers but looked more homely and complete than ever. I was missing but not missed. Missing in action. Chris’s regimental beret was on the coat hook again.

‘Nice runner,’ I said, pointing at the rug.

‘Moroccan,’ she said. ‘New.’

She waited for me to ask then blinked in irritation.

‘We haven’t been to Morocco, in case you’re wondering. Not that I wouldn’t give anything. One day.’

Mattie was in their sitting-room, stuck in what looked like a small plastic bucket, with a vaguely appalled look on her face. She wasn’t saying anything at all, certainly no cries of Dada materialised on sight of me. She still hadn’t much hair then, but Lucy had fixed a pink hairband with a ribbon on it to her head.

‘Hello Mattie,’ I said, bending down to her.

Mattie looked at me quizzically.

‘Say Da-da,’ Lucy ordered behind me. Mattie looked down at her little legs, squidged either side of an orange bar. ‘Da-da,’ said Lucy again. I recognised that warning tone and laughed.

‘When she’s ready, Lucy.’

‘SO annoying.’ Lucy turned away. ‘She said it, I promise.’

‘I believe you. What’s with the hair accessory?’

‘She looks cute. And,’ she grimaced. ‘It stops people calling her- him.’

‘Fair enough. Any chance of a cup of tea?’

‘Sure. Don’t you want to pick her up? Carefully.’

I bent down to lug Mattie out of the bucket-thing, but she was wedged in so tight she was immovable. I gripped her sides and her face began to screw up.

‘You’ve frightened her. You’re a bit muddy, you could have put a clean shirt on.’

I stopped mid-tug. ‘I wasn’t aware we were dressing up.’

‘We’re not. It doesn’t matter.’ She pointed to a small cardboard box by the TV. ‘These are yours. Will you take them when you go?’

‘Okay. Thanks.’

She went into the kitchen, her heels clacking on the lino. A quick glance in the box revealed there was nothing in there that I wanted or could make use of. Ancient headphones, old phone chargers. Just a handful of outdated stuff. I turned back to Mattie and pulled again, and this time only succeeded in lifting the whole thing off the ground.

‘Kettle’s boiling,’ Lucy began from the doorway. ‘What on earth are you doing?’

‘I can’t get her out.’

‘Here. You have to put your foot on this hold. She does get a bit stuck in it. It’s a little tight, isn’t it darling.’ She leant forward to demonstrate and Mattie’s legs, hanging fatly off the front, began jiggling in anticipation.

‘Mum-ma,’ she cajoled and then her arms reached up.

‘There, see? Although she’s been saying Mumma for a while.’ Lucy pulled her out with an ‘Oomph,’ and then tried to pass her over to me. Mattie whipped her head away and buried it in Lucy’s shoulder. ‘Come on, Mattie, darling. Don’t be silly. Daddy’s here.’

Mattie did not care that Daddy was here, and that was okay, I got it. ‘Don’t worry. Later.’

Our cup of tea was punctuated with Lucy's failed attempts, several of them, to pass Mattie over. Mattie was having none of it. She shrank from me, further and further into her mother's lap as if I were an unidentified and suspicious stranger. Someone not meant to be there.

'Smile,' Lucy ordered every now and then, tickling her under the arms, stroking her cheek, trying all the tricks. Mattie refused such cheap bribes.

Somewhere between the dregs of the tea and a cousin's Moroccan textiles business, Lucy said, 'Are you even listening? I give up. I'm going to get a refill.' She put Mattie on my lap before either of us had a chance to object. Mattie, feeling ambushed, stared sullenly at the floor between my legs.

'Look at that,' I said to Mattie. 'It's just us.' I tried a little bounce.

Lucy hadn't liked to leave Mattie alone with me after she was born and watched us together like a miserable mother hawk. I don't remember feeling resentful at the time, because I hadn't been any good at it anyway. I was baffled, permanently. Whatever it was I was supposed to be doing, I wasn't sure. It never felt natural; it felt painfully wrong. My failure to cope with how to care for the baby, the burping, the back rub, the nappy; all were indicative of a wider, more general failure. 'Tighter,' Lucy would say watching me swaddle, and then, growing alarmed, 'Not that tight.'

Failure included not being able to do anything I should have been able to. Not just stuff to do with the baby, but practical, manly things. Everything that arrived needed putting together, so much turned up flat-packed, as if I had mistakenly enrolled on some nightmare, never-ending Ikea course. I'm not bad at woodwork but two was easier than one, and two couldn't be spared. We were both always tired, and nervous. I ended up approaching even relatively simple tasks such as learning how to fold and unfold the pram with the same level of anxiety and dread I might have trying to dismantle a roadside bomb.

Mattie had never slept well in the night and she wouldn't take milk, not from Lucy or a bottle. We made futile efforts to feed her, turns characterised by the unwillingness with which we undertook them; passing her weightlessness backwards and forwards between our exhaustion. Not one of the three of us could do something right for four months. But eventually Mattie had filled out and settled, and Lucy dared venture out to Mrs McNeil's book club in Alresford once a week. And then Mrs McNeil's son, Chris, returned from a tour in Afghanistan and it became My Book Club, ever more vital and frequent, the main point being, Lucy bitterly explained, with that week's paperback tucked under her arm: 'Chris can actually communicate. He can talk.' And then the moment arrived (which of course I missed) that it became "book club" and the paperback in her hand nothing more than an alibi.

I turned inward to investigate my own wordless terrain and stopped listening out for her. I certainly didn't fight for her. In the fallout of post-natal oblivion, there wasn't space for any such intensity. Just a steady disengagement from one another. But plenty of room as it turned out, left for Chris, who had patrolled provinces in Helmand whilst his men actually did dismantle IED's. He also took over assembling the toy kitchen that I had never got around to finishing. It had been shoved into the cupboard under the stairs, hob-less and sink-less, with a red plastic cutlery drawer that kept falling out and spilling blunted red knives onto the floor whenever we fetched the vacuum cleaner. It wasn't long before the kitchen became fully-functioning - like all aspects of their lives now that Chris was involved.

Lucy was compelled to try life with Chris in the end because, as she haltingly explained, she had a little remaining warmth and affection within her that was, despite Mattie, in danger of being wiped out entirely. I had once told her, in a rare moment of candour (frightened), that I didn't know I could love our unborn child, and she had said (equally frightened), hand over growing belly, that there must be something wrong with me, that I had a dark, cold heart. She said: 'You don't complete me, you deplete me.'

Lucy's lines rang a bell every now and then. She often parroted from films and would talk like a character she admired for as long as she could keep it up or until another role diverted her. I'd thought the trait appealing, at first.

Mattie sneezed, startling us both. Alarm mirrored in our eyes. Her eyes. My eyes.

'Look at you darling, on Daddy's lap,' said Lucy, pleased, when she came back.

'I'd better go.'

'Already?'

'Soon.'

'Come again next week.'

'Yes, of course. If I can,' I added. 'I'll need to check with work.'

'What's this funny harbour master job you've swapped the accountant's office for anyway? Badly paid and-'

'It's close to Winchester. It's not a funny job.'

'In your own words, not close enough to help from day to day.'

'There's no room for me to help,' I said, suddenly. 'You don't make any room for me.'

'What? Are you serious? That's not true, you've made that up.'

I'd forgotten that I was not allowed to defend myself, or my position - such as where I am passes for one. Those are the rules. A relationship that has broken up with a child involved is a strange sort of combat, only sometimes played amenably. It is like a blindfolded game of scrabble and only one person at a time feels enthusiastic about it. It isn't ever going to finish and no one wins. All the letters are there, but words won't form so really it's just a mess, a jumble of confusing signifiers but I can't disentangle myself. I certainly can't decipher Lucy's spelling. It's just the rules.

'I haven't made it up,' I said wearily.

'How can I not be making room for someone who left?'

Checkmate. Or whatever.

‘I was always surprised you wanted to go back and live in your parents’ area,’ Lucy was saying.

‘It suits me. Not the area particularly, the river.’

‘Well. Perhaps with nothing to keep you there, you won’t stay forever.’

There was a pause. I thought about the figure who stalked the water’s edges, a ripple of colour across the blankness. The pause lengthened. Eventually, Lucy just said, without emotion: ‘And you’re surprised I left you for Chris.’

‘I’m not remotely surprised.’

‘Will. What happened to us?’ She sounded sad.

And I thought, to my shame, that I didn’t want to investigate what, or why, just then. I wanted to leave, to flee the memories jostling like an uneasy crowd at a barrier. To get away from that emergency-red toy kitchen. I wanted to get back to Buckledon. Please don’t be sad, Lucy, I told her in my head, and aloud I said, ‘You know what happened. It didn’t work out. Things happened.’

‘Don’t blame Mattie,’ she warned.

‘I don’t blame Mattie.’ Thinking, I’d blamed you, actually. Blame had crept in after all in the end. It was Lucy’s fault because until she became pregnant, it had all been pretty simple. ‘And you’re happy now, you seem happy with Chris.’

I was telling her, I wasn’t asking her but she nodded vehemently all the same. ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I am. But don’t get me wrong, we have to work at it, like anything. But that’s life, of course, isn’t it? Sticking with something, working with what you’ve got. Not that you’d know an awful lot about that.’

The surge of tension was back again, fluent and malevolent as ever. ‘I’d better go.’

‘Go on then,’ and she reached over to pluck Mattie from my lap.

There was a sudden chill where Mattie's warmth had been. 'I don't want to run into Action Man.' I was trying some humour.

She didn't smile back. 'Chris doesn't get back till six o'clock tonight. He does a full day's work, every day.'

So I was forced to say something both mundane and misleading. 'If I go now, I'll miss the traffic.' It wasn't a lie, but I didn't have anything that I needed to be home for. Not missing the traffic didn't make any difference to me, it wouldn't matter because I didn't mind if I queued behind twenty lorries on their way to the docks, or two. 'I'll just grab that box.'

At the door, Lucy and Mattie kept their distance. I walked back to the truck carrying the box of electronics and earphones, and drove home drained, feeling more and more as if I were unplugged, or out of battery; disengaged from everyone important to me. What had I not been hearing? *Sticking* with something; I didn't get it. It sounded glutinously self-harming. I didn't get it.

The windscreen wipers scraped away the dirty sleet ahead of me over and over. The fog kept coming. It was if all the emotional short-circuiting I had ever done in my life had finally cauterised my senses. Grey, drippy rain splashed onto the bonnet and over the roads all the way to the Southampton exit, and then at last the view cleared, and I saw the sea.

1st JUNE

Slowing as I navigate the corner past the Burrows' house, I glimpse the waning moon caught between two chimney pots. That top floor – the attic – of the Grange, high above the paving slabs of the terrace, onto which useless surface a body had once fallen and not died. I shiver, the memory of a boy's fear rippling across my skin.

My swimming trunks are like cardboard on the back seat of the truck. I shake the salt from them and in the kitchen, pull a beer from the fridge. A long and busy day; Alice, the teenage work-experience for the summer, had not been in to help. I think about sending her a message. In the sitting-room, I turn on my computer. It's Friday, and I don't know who Celine has spent *A Day in the Life of* this week. I click on *The Bournemouth Times* and see that she has been a Ranger on the Solent coast. She has been bird-watching. As I read, shadows outside grow longer and the dark fills with silence.

The top of another bottle of beer disappears under my desk but try as I might, even though I scratch away at the sounds and syntax of the article, I can't hear Celine's voice. It is, as usual, too well disguised. I can't hear her through the calls and tweets of the birds. I never came away any more enlightened about the author of these articles and all the foraging was ultimately fruitless. She made up lives for gypsies and lap dancers. She never wrote an article on anything I thought might have led me to her.

Nothing of her here apart from the tattoo... this ranger has a dragonfly inked across one shoulder. But I know about the swampy, truculent insect already - so again, there is nothing to discover this week. I decide to message Alice, but the words feel accusatory – **where were you today?** – and I hadn't meant to sound like my father, so I delete it.

So I turn to Lucy's e-mail, as yet unopened.

Dear William, she'd written. I hope you're okay and that the job on the coast is still going well for you. I know this will come as a surprise but I'm just going to come straight out and say it. The army is relocating Chris to Scotland and he has asked me to go with him. Muirshearlich, north of Fort William. I don't want to take Mattie away from you, but I don't want to stay in Winchester for the rest of my life alone. I want a family, and you don't, so please don't blame me for trying to keep this one together.

Let's face it, you're not around that much anyway.

Lucy x

A brief wind, like a tremor, through the trees. Fat drops of rain, a slow summer shower. **Relocating.** It is not about the next visit. Fort William. My mother at the end of the garden, face soaked by the rain, surprising in a yellow dress. Two small herbaceous borders between her and my father. She was from Scotland. Mattie is my family, not Chris's. **Take Mattie away?**

Slight dread becomes panic. When I have told myself to stop being so fucking stupid and to calm down, I am left with an ache in my chest that I can't swallow. I put my hand through the open window and am glad to feel the rain splashing onto it. Would Mattie miss me? She is only just a year old. Mattie barely knows me. Is that my fault? Anyone's?

I go to bed with the ache leaden and familiar inside me and watch the silvery moon, freed from between the chimneys at the Grange, float higher and higher, away from darkening clouds. I must have fallen asleep just after the shipping forecast and I dream about Lucy and my daughter, although the dream is punctuated by a muddle of other things; of white sails unfurling on a far-away ocean, of barbecues on Bondi beach and of camouflaged Rangers on the coast. I feel angry when I wake at dawn, and cheated, because I haven't been allowed a

night alone with Mattie, not even in a dream. Lucy does not trust me even enough for that. During the night, the Isle of Wight has become invisible. Where there had been an island now there is nothing, and the fields heading out toward the sea are draped in a cloying, vaporous mist. I can't see beyond the lane so between me and the end of the world there seems to be nothing.

2nd JUNE

I've mended two punctured dinghies, mediated over a collision between scows and now, with the moorings secure and a lull in the early evening activity on the river, I walk across to Celine's. Her garden, which reaches the river at one end, runs alongside the Club car park on one side. I can see movement on her side, a flash of black silk here and there through the foliage. I want to talk to her about Lucy's e-mail.

'Celine?'

She comes through a gap in the hedge as far as she can, leaves rustling. 'Hello.'

'Are you off out?'

'You sound incredulous. But yes. It's the new members Club drinks and dinner. Are you coming? No? Why not?'

'It's a member's dinner. I'm not a member.'

'That's just slippery, and you know it.' There is a glass of something in her hand, some scent on the dark green leaves.

'Come out of the hedge. I can't see you properly.'

'I'm in a dress for the first time in so long. I hardly know myself. Anyway, I haven't any time, I'm late. Tomorrow?'

'Okay. But what are you doing at a Club dinner?'

'An invitation.' Coyness does not suit her, and she knows it, but she still isn't going to reveal from whom.

I want to ask her to swim again in the morning, but for whatever reason, I don't.

I'm going on foot to the pub and turn right at the end of the lane. There is no trace of last night's rain, and then mist; the day has been hot and clear again. I walk past the small park where

orange plastic slides and shiny red swings are roped off around a bark surface. There is a new housing development opposite that had been built before I came and wasn't popular. And a little further, the *Gipsy Moth*. I like this pub more in the winter. The barman is a quiet man with an impassive face who calls the women 'Madam' and doesn't look the men in the eye. In January, you couldn't hear anything in there apart from the burning fire. Tonight it is busy and the barman is off-duty.

There's a queue to be served. Much of the pub is adorned with photographs of the real boat, Chichester's *Gipsy Moth IV* and associated pictures and memorabilia but there is also a large collection of moths on one wall. Huge brown moths that have been stuck through their thorax with pins to some cardboard. Punishment for blundering into this terrible corner of the world. In their accidental, frozen misery they look wrong, and wronged. Such a dark corner. It must be about as far away from the light of the moon as it is possible to be.

David Turnley is propping up the bar under the large oil of a shipwreck. He reminds me – and is probably supposed to – of an old-fashioned film star; one hand casual in a tweed coat pocket and the opposite shoulder up against the wall, a leg loosely crossing an ankle. His dogged suaveness, sometimes interpreted as charm, is a sort of armour and underneath, he is raw as peeled shellfish. He had once let his guard down after too many whiskies and shown me a photograph of someone he had been engaged to. But mainly he talks at me to remind us both that he is definitely over the woman whose picture he keeps in his breast pocket.

He seems muddled tonight. 'Ah, Will. Looking sea-swept and rugged as usual. Do you know, I may have been burgled.'

'Either you have, or you haven't.'

'Well that's the thing. Perhaps I'm finally losing my mind. I always shut the windows at night, but this morning the drawing room window was wide open.'

'Is anything missing?'

‘Nothing large, not the laptop or the TV. But maybe some cash. I don’t know.’

‘I wouldn’t worry.’

“Agreed. Still, I think some money has gone.” He shrugs. ‘What are you having?’ He orders us pints and tells me about a friend who is having a stag party. ‘On the Isle of Wight for the whole weekend. I should have gone with them. It’s my sort of trip, isn’t it? Only I’m off to dinner at the Club tonight.’

‘I don’t think a members’ only evening when there haven’t been any new members for five years is going to be the event of the century,’ I tell him dryly.

‘But that’s where you’re wrong. A new chap has arrived from the east coast. He’s got a cracking bathtub and he’s here for the summer.’ He looks pleased, as though he were responsible.

‘Classic yacht?’ I ask.

‘Maybe the nicest on the river. Originally gaff cutter, now a fast Bermudan. She’ll win some races. I can’t think of her name off-hand.’

I know it already. We saw her arrive. ‘*Iseult*.’

‘That’s the one.’

‘Yes,’ David says to himself. He is flicking quickly through his mobile. ‘Yes, I see. 1904. Designed by Charles Sibbick. Come from Dartmouth some years ago, up to the Deben.’ He puts the phone down regretfully. ‘Very nice. Rob Sinclair is the owner. He knows Celine.’

‘Does he?’ I look up. ‘She didn’t mention it.’

David makes a face. “Does that mean anything? I gave up long time ago trying to work her out.”

I know; historically David has seemed to find Celine, and her untidiness, both confusing and unappealing.

‘I think this Rob is a relation of her Australian stepfather, or something like that.’

‘Okay. That makes sense. On his own?’

‘Not married if that’s what you mean. Ha-ha. Is our village bachelor put out?’

‘That’s you, David,’ I say, annoyed.

David doesn’t reply. He is still thinking about the yacht and he carries on poking about on his phone while various unpalatable thoughts crash around my head, and then downs the rest of his beer. ‘Good to have some new blood on the river anyway. You don’t mind getting the next one in do you? Just a half for me. Do you think I should ring the police about this missing money? Get the law involved?’

I become morose in the *Gipsy Moth* after David has left, trotting down to the Club for his dinner. I drink more than I planned, staring between my pints and the moths. David mentioning the law had given me an idea. Not an idea as such, but the uneasy rumblings of one, and I want to be alone with the shapeless thoughts; but not sober enough that I would be able to make sense of them.

3rd JUNE

Lucy had once suggested I like things unclear because of all the constraints in my strict upbringing. I had thought precision and clarity were requisites for tyranny and so, she said, I always embraced the murkiness of things, never elucidating, never confirming. If she was ever right, she isn't now. This opacity is not what I want. I want to know specifically what to say to Lucy today. I want to know what the rules are. When I want to do exactly the right thing, I can't find the rulebook.

From the clubhouse window, I can see the tide coming in and two canoeists surging upstream with it. The river is sweeping in from the Solent and fills every crevice from Lepe to Exbury, past Buckledon and all the way up to Beaulieu. And there are the swans, unseen for a few days. The pair of oystercatcher fuss around their nest on the grass by the mudflats. The female has been picking for aquatic worms and molluscs and her long beak, usually bright orange, is dark with mud. The kettle clicks off and I spoon in the coffee. Alice glances up and seeing me standing in the window, beckons me down.

'What's up?' I ask, thermos in hand, when I get there. Perhaps yesterday had been her day off after all. 'How was your day off?'

'Yeah. It's the mad woman on the radio. She wants to go into town and needs picking up.' She puts on her lifejacket and gets into the Dory. 'You coming?'

I steer out toward the mouth of the river. Half-way to Ginny's boat, I notice aloud to Alice that she was early to work that morning.

'I stayed with a friend.' Is she blushing?

'Hope that's okay with your Mum.' I get a sarcastic look. 'Alice. Maybe you ought to clear it with her.'

'It's nothing to do with you. Celine knows, and she says it's fine.'

‘But it’s not up to Celine.’

‘Don’t be stuffy. Don’t you worry about where I stay or don’t. I’m sixteen. And you stay where you like, don’t you?’

The oystercatchers take to the air with a furious pip-pipping, and one of the canoeists raises a quick, preoccupied hand in greeting. The water seems clearer today, and fresher in the morning light. Alice settles into her corner, back to her phone and quietly happy with her victory. She knows I won’t say anything. Jellyfish, carried by the current upstream in their blind, ghostly clusters with strands of seaweed like long green fingers holding them afloat. **See you anytime soon?** It is a message from Naomi - I don’t approve of my sleepovers at hers any more than I approve of Alice’s elsewhere. I must break it off with Naomi. I put my phone back in my pocket without replying and notice how the river has filled with boats of all shapes and sizes even in the last week. *Iseult* is further upstream, near where the samphire grows in fields so green they look black. The atmosphere is different now too; almost carnival with different flags and burgees crackling in the wind amid the wind-chime clink of the sailboat masts. The winter was stark in its unfussiness and there was beauty in its parity.

We pick up Ginny – Alice’s madwoman, mad on account of the fact that she doesn’t have a phone – and when we come back past Celine’s house, Celine is in her garden. Holding a mug, she makes an arc with her free hand - a vast, exaggerated wave as if she were shipwrecked, and Ginny averts her eyes from the dishevelled figure in her voluminous nightie and Alice snorts, her lips twitching. She doesn’t think much of Celine’s levels of sanity either, but she is always amused by Celine. Celine takes reprimands quite well from Alice. She enjoys them even. I wonder how she enjoyed her evening, presiding over the new member’s dinner in the unfamiliar black silk.

Ginny leaves to catch the bus for Lyminster and Alice and I are busy for a while near the river. Two large boats are being winched out of the water and need fitting into harnesses.

Sand hoppers dodge each other at my feet, flopping in and out of the gravelly sand. The smell of petrol and the sea merge in the heat. By lunchtime, we are finished; the boats are dripping water from their framed stilts on land, and anxiety about Mattie has overtaken everything else.

Dear Lucy. My fingers, black with grease slip across the letters. The screen of my phone is cloudy with sunlight and sweat.

Thanks for e-mail. Sorry I haven't replied earlier. I don't want you to take Mattie to Scotland and I've been thinking about the legality of that. Can we talk to face to face? W.

It doesn't look or feel clear, but I press send, because I can't leave it any longer. I am about to go home for a sandwich when Celine drives too fast into the carpark.

She climbs out of her car. 'I didn't see you.'

'You'll go into someone one day.'

'Not if they get out of my way.'

I laugh, she doesn't. 'How are you?'

'The excitements just keep coming.' And then she sighs. 'I'm fine, I guess.'

'Why were you waving at me earlier?'

'I wasn't, I was waving at Alice.'

'Oh.'

'But I was thinking of you just now,' she says, and comes to the window of the truck.

'There's some sweet art in Sandy Gallery you ought to look at. The sort of pictures I imagine children would like.'

‘Thanks. I’ve bought Mattie something from there before, but I’ll look again. Thinking of her, have you got a minute?’

‘Of course.’ She puts her head on one side, that sandpiper query again. ‘You look well, by the way. I suppose you’re in the sun most of the day, and on the water. You’ve gone brown.’

‘Need a hat,’ I say, realising this was just what I had thought about her. She is no longer so gaunt and her face, although still thin, has a less wintry hue. She has lost some of her sea-aspect.

‘You do,’ she agrees sternly. ‘And sun-cream,’ and she puts her large dark glasses on, to emphasise her point. They cover much of her face so I can’t read her expression anymore. ‘What did you want to say?’

‘Lucy’s been in touch saying that she and Mattie are going to move to Scotland. At first I didn’t think I could stop her but I’m wondering if I might have some parental rights.’

‘Lucy’s leaving with the hunky SAS man?’

‘Don’t you start.’

‘Only teasing. Parental rights? Don’t they come with responsibility?’ She looks as though she might have been going to say more but there is the sound of footsteps on the gravel behind us. ‘Oh look. It’s Rob.’

Rob? I glance into my wing mirror, so I see three versions of ‘Rob’ through cracked and dusty glass. Bits of him. Baseball cap. T-shirt. Arm raised at a right-angle in crooked greeting. A fly caught in an old cobweb. The sleeves of a faded shirt tied around a waist.

‘Morning,’ Rob says to Celine and she messes her white hair.

‘There you are. I was beginning to think you’d fallen off your boat.’ Oh yes. *Iseult*.

‘We said lunch, didn’t we?’ Wide, smiling mouth now more uncertain. Then he comes alongside the truck.

‘This is Will,’ she says, knocking at the truck, ‘and you have to be nice to him because if you want anything done around here, he’s your man.’

I stick my hand through the open window and Rob clasps it.

‘Rob is related to my step-father. He’s from Melbourne. And he’s got a beautiful boat that everyone here has gone crazy for.’ She doesn’t seem to be actually talking to me. ‘Gone crazy for,’ she says again. She takes the glasses off and squints at Rob, hard.

He flushes pink under his tan. ‘I don’t know about that. Great to meet you, Will.’ He’s very boyish under the shadow of his cap. ‘I’ve been meaning to come and see you. I pay to keep a tender on the pontoon here, right?’

‘You have to run everything past Will,’ Celine reiterates. ‘Will is... Will is.’ She can’t think. It’s not important.

Reaching over to the glove compartment I find a list of prices for Rob, the nautical nomad.

‘Thanks mate,’ he says. Australian accent. He reminds me of someone. Someone from a high school, someone from Netflix. He looks at the piece of paper. ‘Okay, I see... thanks,’ and he folds it away, jamming it into the pocket of his jeans and then turns back to Celine. Someone I’ve maybe seen on TV. ‘Did we say lunch? I wouldn’t put it past me to go overboard. I’m such a doofus.’

I haven’t heard these titters from Celine before. She doesn’t catch my eye. I thought she hated Americanisms. A *doofus*? She doesn’t reply, at least. I am familiar with her non-answers but Rob is made awkward. I don’t help him out. Celine is thinking and says suddenly,

‘Why don’t you come for supper? I’m no cook but then again neither is Judy and you’ve survived one of her meals. David Turnley nearly died after eating one of her mussels, didn’t he.’

‘Did he?’ Rob looks confused. ‘Who is Judy?’

‘Judy from the Clubhouse,’ Celine tells him. ‘You met her last night.’

‘The mussel was hardly Judy’s fault,’ I say.

‘You could come too, Will, Celine says. ‘For dinner. I’ll message with some dates. It was Judy’s fault. You shouldn’t eat mussels if they don’t open.’ She beams at Rob.

Rob says, ‘Well, great. Really great. Just let me know,’ and then they both look at me so I have to agree, thinking all the while, *Can’t the doofus just fuck off?* But Celine does not think the same and wants to keep chatting, asks Rob something else, still examining him with some intensity. I see that I am surplus to requirements and put the truck into gear.

Celine calls, ‘Don’t forget to go to the gallery. You’ll like it.’ She is leaning toward the peak of Rob’s cap, laughing slightly and scuffing the gravel with one foot. She isn’t looking as I drive off.

Sophie Notts is unpacking their car at the end of the lane with red life jackets in her arms, and Jack’s scarlet roses spilling over the garden hedge into the road. In my mind’s eye, Celine is still coyly scuffing gravel at the water’s edge. Maybe not a full-on Australian buckaroo. But still a good-looking, capable guy.

My phone whistles and glancing down at the still-greasy screen, I can see it is already a reply from Lucy. The email all fits in the preview.

A two-day silence broken by threats. Fine – lawyers it is.

I reel away from the road toward the ditch. I hadn’t meant that. What does she think I’d meant? I’d just wanted to suggest that I might be allowed to be involved, somehow, in the decision. Hadn’t I? I stop the truck on the side of the road near the dilapidated Buckledon sign. Lawyers? And then immediately, I can’t afford lawyers. Lawyers?

I can hear grasshoppers or cicadas, whatever, in the green wheat beyond the hedge. Nothing else, and then quite suddenly the overwrought chirruping is briefly cut off. The silence, while it lasts, is weirdly upsetting.

I thought things were getting better, that they were working out. I thought I was doing enough. I reply to Lucy asking if she is free to meet on the 6th, in two days' time. The answer – a curt **yes** – ricochets back even before re-starting the engine drowns out the grasshoppers, cicadas, whatever.

‘Sorry about the wood.’ The logs had been cleared from the car park. ‘I should have helped.’

‘Doesn’t matter, she said. ‘I’ve done it now. What’s wrong with your voice?’

‘Just a sore throat.’

‘Saltwater gargle. Saltwater is the cure for everything, supposedly. Sea, sweat, tears. And next time, don’t be a jerk.’

‘I am a jerk.’

‘Well.’ Bored now. ‘Choose not to be.’

I arrived with ragged edges like uneven fingernails. Celine, abrasive herself, did not do anything to smooth them, and I did not want them smoothed. I suppose had more people been around we might have passed by forever unknown to each other but we were made noticeable by the complete absence of others under a vast and empty sky.

‘Although I hate Americanisms. Like jerk. Don’t know why I said that. Does whoever deliver your logs bring them to your door?’

‘I don’t need any. I don’t have a fireplace.’

‘Poor you. *Poor* you. Where do you live?’

‘Not far from Lymington.’

Lucy always expressed disappointment with any reticence on my part, withdrawing into herself as she accused me of doing but Celine became more lively. ‘That could be anywhere. Which is fine. Anywhere. I’ve only recently arrived, so I don’t know where anywhere is anyway.’

Livelier but still not particularly interested in the answers, I don’t think, any more than she was interested in giving away information about herself. So when I asked her where she had been living prior to Buckledon, she continued the conversation from ten days ago about

the moon, as if it had never broken off. 'I'm so embarrassed,' she said, without any embarrassment at all. 'It was a super blue blood moon that night the other week, wasn't it? How I could have missed that?' Yes, it had been well publicised. 'The biggest lunar event for about thirty years. I'm sure you think I'm stupid. But now I know,' and she shook her fist at the sky (an unresponsive and bland canvas), 'and a whole lot more besides. To educate myself, I'm finding out about the moon. Ask me anything,' and when I didn't, she said, a little indignant. 'Anything,' fixing her eyes, grey like the sky on me. I laughed a little as I busied myself unfixing the trailer from the back of the truck, the sound escaping from me unexpectedly. 'It's a waning crescent tonight,' she said loudly. She was right; it was. She'd set her mind on the moon.

The laughter was wrung from me that February day. She didn't take too much notice, of course – not that she was indifferent to mood, just unaffected by it. It's the way with her, I know that now: but her indifference began to inspire the opposite in me. Bruised and bad-tempered, I started to mind, because of her. Anyway, I had been unchivalrous before - if not plain unhelpful. I had driven in with the trailer bouncing behind me over the potholes and the moon partially forgotten, and I saw the logs that had been piled too high tumbling from a wheelbarrow, and she was leaving them behind her like crumbs to be collected. I drove around the trail of scattered logs and I put the dinghy in the water. When I came back from the jetty, the logs were gone, and it was as if she was waiting for me. She said, 'I'm so embarrassed. It was a lunar eclipse, as well as everything else, wasn't it?'

I had unhooked the trailer and was on my way to Exbury. I turned back to her with the unfamiliar feel of laughter in my throat.

'Sorry about the wood. I'll help next time.'

'Yes. Next time, don't be a jerk.'

It took forty minutes or so. I parked near the old house. Never my house, my parents had not left it to me, as I had not expected them to, nor any of the proceeds of its sale after their death - which I had somehow, foolishly assumed. And I could no more put forward an argument as to why they might have, with them both dead, as when they were breathing. I can hear though, my father's voice reminding me that he had earned it, and I had not.

Smoke from the chimney was mixing almost imperceptibly with grey air, and the peaty smell of coal brought back the vision of our family within. My mother, silent and staring, occasionally adding coal to the fire with the tongs, rock by rock. Me, occasionally turning to my book, sentence by sentence. Tread by tread, the footfall from a study above. The constant, thunderous wind barrelling through the trees, unable to shake us from our isolated and anxious torpor.

I walked around the perimeter of the roadside boundary and found I could easily see into the garden. The wall had been taken down and all of the borders grassed over. It looked as though pigs were kept here now, that they had fought their way in from the Forest after all.

I kept going; I was here to walk. There is a rocky outcrop at the mouth of the river and finding it again was like catching hold of a thread that tugged me toward it, toward the sea. The insistent and not entirely gentle pull felt a little like some stitches in my leg I once had. I walked into the Forest and through the trees, the sky barely visible above the canopy of branches, knowing the way with my eyes shut but watching, catching everything as if I'd come to the place for the first time. The wind grew stronger as I neared the coastline, blasting the coal-thick fug from me.

We arrived here from Southampton when I was seven, partly because of the local grammar school. It was supposed to have got me to a good university, a lesser university; any university, surely. Nothing about the area fulfilled parental expectations. Not even the countryside; they didn't enjoy the freedom it turned out to offer their only child and they

worried at first. Exasperation followed soon after, and finally dislike - for my resistance to them, for me, and for themselves for raising something so absolutely ungrateful, and uncontainable. Tentacles of silent fury fattened, and slid, through the house. To escape them, I would squeeze through windows left ajar and march myself down the road and onto a narrow pathway, thwacking the trunks of the huge-girthed oaks with my sticks. Down through the last edges of the forest, to the sea.

Once there, I didn't do much. I smashed crimson-streaked shells into the cliffs and threw small crabs as far as I could into the waves. I ground bladderwrack into mulch and stamped sea-strange shards of glass to sand underfoot. Oh, I knew the feel of those drenched rocks, green and slippery under my palms, and sharp against bent knee (blood turning the sea cloudy-pink, recriminations and stitches to follow), and the sound of the seagulls crying overhead. The waves crashing against the shingle. This promontory, framed by the blue-musselled rocks above, with the shadowy glades of the Forest behind, and the dark, viridescent sea rushing up toward it, felt to the solitary child scrabbling angrily between the rockpools, like the end of one world and the beginning of another.

I always returned home reluctantly. My bedroom, the one possibility of refuge, was purely functional, and doubled as a study. The desk had newly-sharpened pencils in it, with which I was meant to do homework. I was once given a poster of Bob Dylan smoking a joint by a school friend, and I pinched some blue tac from somewhere, and stuck it to the clean white walls. My father tore it down, fearing imminent drug addiction, and the paint came off with the blue tac, leaving four gouged out marks that marred the wall forever. I used the pencils to vent my feelings all over the opposite wall, namely that I hated him. My father, not Bob Dylan. My mother could not help me that time and I probably deserved what followed. But no amount of discipline helped. They ended up not wanting me around, and I left at sixteen for the army, which seemed to be the only option. I didn't last there long either; I found then I couldn't do

what people told me to. Without the encouragement of a family friend called Henry, and the offer of a bed at his house, I would have never decided to give school another go.

The walk near Exbury that February afternoon was not helpful or healing. I found myself recalling many instances of petty crime and pointless punishment without understanding any of it. On the way back, as the truck weaved round one sickening bend after another, I began to feel ill, and of course I wasn't actually sick, but the nausea churned in my stomach like nerves. At Beaulieu, I got out by the Abbey for some air and there, seeing a half moon white against the graveyard dusk, I thought instead about the untidy, straight-talking woman who had told me what not to be.

Anyway, I didn't go back to Exbury until May, the day Celine and I went together to the beach at nearby Lepe.

4th JUNE

The saltmarshes are more alive with colour than before and the vivid green of samphire glints amongst the mauve fingers of sea lavender, but Celine is not there this morning. She has not missed an early walk on the marshes for months – apart from the ten days during April she spent in Tuscany – but today she is being taken on an adventure. She is going to Yarmouth with Rob. She steps into his dinghy like Cleopatra onto her barge, barefoot as usual. She is wearing some sort of unsuitable garment and she holds it above her knees with one hand, the other reaching for his. From a distance, he seems to have lost his boyish clumsiness. I can make nothing out but smooth movement and harmonious action. Now they are on, he sits, opposite her and they seem to just be regarding one another. If there is conversation, I cannot make it out at all. He is earnest, I think, leaning slightly forward. I conclude from her stillness, bitterly, that unusually, she is listening. Is he carving out a plan? Is it some sort of negotiation? An investigation, of mood or intent? Something is concluded and Rob walks around to the wheel. They have only a little way to go out to the buoy and *Iseult*, so it is not long before they are around the corner and out of sight. I can hear the engine reversing against the water and the sudden silence when it is cut.

An hour or so passes. The curlew picks her way dolefully along the sand, backwards and forwards. I keep busy, doing this and then that, but really, what are they doing on board, below deck, does preparation always take so long? Why hasn't the yacht passed by? Is there a picnic to have, the contents of a hamper to be eaten before they leave? Carefully stowed on board when no one was looking? It's too early to eat, surely, most likely, they are having coffee, just waiting for the tide but the tide is ready for them now. Is there cold lobster and chilled Chablis to be discovered later in the galley? Is this the sort of menu that Rob provides? I'm sure I must imagine, or is it those blasted whitethroats cackling, some laughter across the water.

And finally (I must have looked away for a few minutes) *Iseult* glides into view and Celine is at the bow, like a ship's figurehead. Her dress is more purple now than blue, illumined as she is between the indigo of the sky above and the glistening water below. And within two minutes, that is all it takes, they are both gone and there is nothing apart from the white, swirling water to show that they had passed at all. There has been something Homeric about the scene.

I am being ridiculous. I am an adult. There is nothing between Celine and me, nothing that is apart from everything that there is, unspoken, unwritten and undeclared. Nothing but the wintry months (and those have gone) between us, the foghorn and the ice and the low grey sky and the geese flying to and from Warren Shore. Nothing at all. Alice is looking at me sideways. I suppose it doesn't help that just as the yacht is leaving, following the trail of masts between green trees toward the sea, David Turnley arrives at the jetty. He spots the yacht disappearing and does what I hadn't dared, he leans into the Dory and picks up the binoculars.

'Good god, was that Celine on *Iseult*?' He presses them harder around his astounded eyes. 'It is. Our very own Celine.' Since when had she been that? 'In rather a ridiculous outfit. She looks like she's in a burka.' He sniggers, and hands the binoculars to Alice. Alice puts them back in the Dory. 'I did wonder if he was taking someone with him,' and he may have winked. 'Asked me where the best lunch in Yarmouth was to be had.'

'If they want to get to Yarmouth,' says Alice, looking at me with apology, 'it'll be dinner they'll be having by the time they get there. With this wind.'

Worse and worse.

'And staying aboard for the night if they miss the tide.'

I stand up. 'Need a lift to the boat, David?'

'No, don't worry, I've just come for a lunchtime sharpener. I'm on patrol duty later.'

Alice smirks because she thinks this small look out group watching the sea for invaders is so funny. 'Is this still a thing?'

'Yes, young lady. Julian thinks that more of the debris being washed up is from these migrant boats.'

'What,' she scoffs. 'The odd trainer?'

'A lifejacket,' he says darkly. "Don't you watch the news?'

He goes then, and shortly after, I leave as well for a sandwich, but the truth is it feels more as if I go with Celine and Rob. I am on *Iseult* as it heads out toward the windless sea. I am with them when the river widens at Lepe and spreads into the Solent and the sails are unfurled and the yacht relaxes, heaving on to the open water, rocking luxuriously on the waves.

The afternoon is aimless, aimless and painful with no sign of the boat returning and images of Celine and Rob turn around my mind as if they are on a kaleidoscope that I can't put down.

*

'William, William.' I can't hear her but Lady Burrows's mouth is making the shape of my name and she is waving down the truck as if she were bringing a 747 into land. Her spotty sundress is oddly pre-pubescent. I drive toward the pink pastel swirls flapping in the road.

'Evening, Liz.'

She puts her fleshy arms across the open window. I have a sudden vision of the scrawny Julian nestled scratchily into her heat-shiny cleavage, all claws and scrabble. 'I'm afraid we've got company in the village.' Her eyes close slowly so as to communicate to me just how unwelcome the company is. 'Travellers,' she says. 'In the lay-by up ahead.'

I need to get home to prepare for my meeting with Lucy. 'Yes?'

‘As you go out of the village, past Sheila’s and the playground. On the right-hand side.’

‘Okay.’

‘David Turnley’s already been down and given them what for. I’m just going over to tell the Notts.’

‘Tell them...?’ I can’t believe David’s ‘what for’ has been a useful one, any more than mine would be. If he really had given them what for; it’s far more likely he pretended to and darted off into the *Gipsy Moth* instead. David is not good at giving people pieces of his fractured, unhappy mind.

‘Well, at the very least to be on their guard. Lock up, bolt windows, that kind of thing. My children won’t visit whilst people like that are at the end of the drive. Watching us.’

‘I’m sure they aren’t watching you. And people like what?’

‘You know. Not the right sort. Travellers. They’re in motor-homes.’

Not Celine’s didakois then. ‘I doubt they’ll stop for long.’

‘Let’s hope not. I can’t get Julian to stop leaving his keys in the Range Rover. They could be thieves.’

‘They could be minding their own business, living under the radar.’

She doesn’t seem to dismiss the idea immediately. She purses her fleshy lip and clears her gravelly throat once or twice as if she is considering the possibility, and then says, ‘No.’ Emphatically. ‘Anyway, if you could help them on their way. You could stop off, make your feelings known.’

‘No.’

She raises thick, wiry eyebrows.

‘I’m not going that way. I’m sorry, I’m in a rush.’

‘But you do, don’t you.’ Her large grey head comes further through the window. ‘You are often down that way.’ She tilts it. ‘Hmm?’

Those glaucomatous eyes are not so unseeing. ‘Sometimes, Liz.’

‘Anytime you can add your voice to ours then, please do. It’s important we pull together.’ There is a plea, of sorts, in her eyes. ‘Because it’s peculiar they’ve come here. It seems odd. We don’t usually have a problem with this sort of thing. I’d have thought they all head for Stonehenge at this time of year, instead of coming to stake out our houses. Summer Solstice soon.’ She nods as though it all makes sense and then shakes her head as if she remembers it doesn’t.

‘Gone soon then. Don’t worry.’

She withdraws her head from the truck and gives the door an aggressive, veiny thump. ‘Community matters at a time like this. It needs protecting.’ She pauses. ‘Even if it is the less attractive end of the village.’

In the cool of my sitting-room, finally. I’m meeting Lucy in two days. I sit down at my desk, rub my head. **Legal rights unmarried fathers** gets pounded into Google. The vision of Mattie in my mind both softens and sharpens the edges and worries. And then the various options for me roll onto the screen. I open one website called Family Law and the word **responsibility** is everywhere. Literally all over the page. I start to read carefully through the awkward and unfamiliar legal jargon, word for word. Half-way down page three of a twenty-seven-page document, I realise two facts, and stop. Fact one: the birth mother will always have parental responsibility. Fact two: An unmarried father does not automatically have parental responsibility. A third fact, oddly, comes at me from nowhere: my law-obsessed father is not here. He would, as usual, have had all the answers to this. I have none.

And an unmarried father like me? I have actively shunned responsibility for Mattie. I have not even had the financial clout to ever contribute in a meaningful sense. Lucy’s parents

had taken care of them financially. To all intents and purposes, Mattie has the money, not me. I hadn't even kept the accountancy job I used to have.

I don't know what I was thinking. Before I shut down the computer, I scroll down through the questions mothers and fathers have asked the Family Law consultant. It is these desperate, anxiety-ridden messages – without exception, all pleas for help - that have taken up twenty-four pages of the twenty-seven.

Henry's house is the Mill House. It is situated on the edge of a road that must once have been a good deal quieter than it is today. The cars flow in steady procession over the bridge, and the water flows under the bridge and through the sluices into the Mill Pond. Just up the hill is the old Abbey, where monks once prayed, and worked unloading the salt gathered from the marshes near Buckledon. The abbey had been founded in 1204 by Cistercian monks on land given to them by the king as an act of atonement for his wrongdoings, and the crumbling ruins are still said to be haunted by penitent ghosts.

There was no light in the sky that night (the moon was new, and invisible to the eye) and even though I parked right alongside the Abbey, I couldn't see it. I crossed the road by the old gates. The street was quiet, for once. I paused to listen to the water rushing under the bridge. It wasn't late but it felt like midnight with the strange off-season emptiness swirling around me and the balustrades stretching black along the water's edge into the darkness.

Henry answered the door with a blue-and-white striped butcher's apron on. 'Evening, Will. Door was open, you don't have to knock.' He leaned into the night and the uneasy stillness evaporated. 'No rain yet? Good.'

'Not yet.' I followed him into the hall. 'I'm afraid it is on its way.'

The Mill House routinely floods. Henry was routinely pragmatic about it. 'Oh well. Let me take your coat. It's inevitable. Spring tides.'

'Spring tides? But it isn't yet spring.' The voice was coming from Henry's study. I turned - she was sitting by the fire, materialised seemingly from nowhere; unexpected...joyful.

'I'll get you a drink,' Henry told me. 'You explain to your new neighbour about the tides.'

'Hello,' I said.

‘I’m sorry for barging in on your boys’ evening. I hope you can stand me for the night. Neighbour.’ She stood up and extended an arm as if we had never met before. I took the hand, and fleetingly noticed the cold fingers in my palm. ‘It’s about time we met somewhere other than the riverbank, isn’t it?’

She was hardly recognisable without the habitual heavy overcoat. It had been replaced with a tasselled shawl. You must tell me what a spring tide is before Henry thinks I’m completely idiotic.’

I took a chance. ‘Well, I know you know about the moon.’

‘I’m an expert. It’s a new moon tonight. See?’ Her lips twitched.

‘The new moon means the tides are stronger than usual. A new moon and a full moon are when they are at their most extreme and called spring tides.’

Henry came back in with a bottle of red wine. ‘This seems to be drinkable, Will. A new moon or a full moon in direct alignment with the sun and the earth is a spring tide. As opposed to a neap tide when the moon and sun are perpendicular to the earth.’

This was the Henry that had drawn my cerebral father to him.

I sat down on the sofa opposite the fire, and Celine took up her position on the club fender, wrapping the black silk around her shoulders. She had taken her shoes off; dressed up, – especially dressed-up – she refused completeness. She liked, I think, to present herself as if she were an unfinished and probably unsatisfactory product.

‘Can I change the channel?’ I asked Henry. He often had Radio three on in the background. It was playing Wagner’s Ring Cycle.

‘You know where the wireless is. It isn’t that long ago since you were staying here.’ We had listened to the radio sporadically between Christmas and New Year, to some fiendishly complicated drama that I think neither of us cared about and couldn’t take in, Henry falling asleep and me staying awake, thinking about Mattie.

Henry explained. 'Will came for Christmas to keep me company.'

'I was here for Christmas too.'

'I wish we'd met you,' said Henry cheerfully. 'We were rather a solemn pair.'

'I would have made a solemn third.' Celine is unsmiling.

I turned the radio off.

'Don't you like opera?' she asked.

'I don't especially like Wagner. Sorry, do you mind?'

'Not a bit,' she said. 'I'm a cultural heathen. A barren musical wasteland. I think I'm probably tone deaf.'

I laughed and changed the subject. 'Have you got the sandbags down from the attic?' I asked Henry.

He grimaced. 'I'm afraid I couldn't get up there this time.'

'I'll do it before I leave.'

'We both will,' said Celine. 'Shall we?' She looked at me.

'Absolutely...' and I half-rose.

'Later,' Henry insisted. 'Relax.' I sat back and Celine took some chorizo from Henry's wooden board, still looking at me. 'And anyway, you never know. I might be lucky this time. I might escape the deluge.'

Celine's lips were shining with grease. 'I've taken to walking, Henry, I walk everywhere, madly. I can walk for miles along the foreshore.'

'Not miles,' Henry corrected her, but mildly. 'From your cottage I should think you could just about get to Warren Shore, and even then only at low tide.'

'I go as far as I can. I'm glad I came.'

There were so many moments that were cues to ask Celine about herself. I missed them all. I would replay these moments, imagining that I came away so much better informed, that

I had been given the missing piece of the jigsaw. It was my fault. Where have you come from, I should have asked. Instead, I said: 'I see you walking, don't I? Early in the morning.'

'Do you?' and she looked pleased, but not surprised, her lips pursing. She knew I saw her.

The image of her clambering over the shingle and down the path, past the bench and the samphire fields, out toward the Solent, is entrenched in my mind. That one, and this one - Celine on the first of our new moon drinks which Henry instigated but never took part in again. She was radiant that night, in a way that I never fully realised at the time because I expected her to be this person again. I think I thought that this warm and bright creature was her. It turned out to be simply one side of her; a moment. Like a fire at its most blazing, the point when it seems the fire must always be that way. Even when you know that isn't possible, even watching the sparks dim, and feeling the heat diminish; even then it doesn't make sense. And more than that, there is the cold, and the shock of the chill the next morning – or even a few days later – when you wander, forgetful, into the room and the fire is out, the smell is of stale smoke, and the grate nothing but ash.

But that night she was sparkling, and flirtatious. She and Henry had met in the village shop a few weeks ago.

'She was smashing up the place,' he told me, carving roast chicken in the kitchen.

Celine let the blinds fall, shutting out the dark. 'It was awful,' she agreed. 'I knocked the quince jelly off the shelf. By mistake of course.'

'I remember. It was medlar jelly. Can you stir the bread sauce?'

'I don't know what it was. But you cut yourself helping, and the shopkeeper has never forgiven me.'

Henry was not blind or stupid over her. At one point during dinner, Celine said she was thirsty, and I looked for a jug to fill with water.

‘She knows where it is, Will. It doesn’t do to make too much of a fuss.’

‘Let Will make a fuss, why don’t you,’ she said laughingly. ‘I never get made a fuss of.’

‘Nonsense,’ he said sternly, and she clasped her bony hand over his. I believed her, though.

‘You helped me in the shop with the jam.’

‘Ah, that was different. I wouldn’t have got served otherwise. No one would. Poor Naomi Fairweather, she was waiting too.’

‘Poor woman indeed. Goodness that son was badly behaved. I felt for her.’

‘Margie liked her son,’ Henry said, and Celine was admonished because this was a rebuke. Margie who was buried amongst the ghosts over the road.

‘Margie liked everyone’s children,’ I said. ‘Everyone, actually.’

Henry put his fork down and remembered this.

‘She must have been a saint. I don’t much like anyone.’

I looked at Celine, tried to fill the pause and immediately wished I hadn’t. ‘Haven’t you got children?’ It was clumsy.

‘No. I never had children.’ She seemed stoic, if anything. ‘I’d be a hopeless mother.’ And then I thought I detected the faintest trace of heartache.

‘You wouldn’t.’ Henry offered the gravy to her, and we listened to a lorry rumble over the bridge. Henry turned to me. ‘Do you know Naomi Fairweather, Will?’

‘No,’ I told him, shaking my head. ‘I still don’t know many people.’

‘I’m always telling him he needs to get out,’ Henry told Celine, and she put her head on one side and raised her eyebrows. She may have been laughing at me, it was always hard to tell. ‘You’d like her. Both of you.’

‘Who is she?’ I asked, not minding.

‘She lives the playground end of Buckledon and works at the university. She’s French, or at least her mother is.’

‘She didn’t sound French,’ said Celine, ‘neither does her name,’ and then that she’d had enough gravy, thank you.

Henry went on. ‘Everything all right with your little one, Will?’

Celine looked up.

Afterwards, when she knew Henry had meant Mattie, she sometimes asked about her, but only as if she were an intriguing idea, or a pleasing construct she might consider. She was not overly concerned with her well-being, I don’t think, or the intricacy of my relationship with her. She was occasionally, and scientifically inquisitive about an arrangement of people. Perhaps it was because of Lucy’s and Mattie’s relative geographical distance from us, from Buckledon, but equally she never bothered to question me about Naomi Fairweather either, after I started seeing her (Fairweather née Framboisier, undoubtedly French), and she was only just down the road. None of this bothered me. It’s odd – remarkable even, given her infuriating and unpredictable ways – but sometimes it really was pretty simple being with her. Her companionship was undemanding, and her outlook prosaic. She didn’t interfere with what was what. And I liked that about her.

Henry began to snooze after supper but not before he had told us to visit Ted in Lymington.

‘Ted Hamilton?’ I asked.

‘Yes, I rent the cottage from them,’ Celine said. ‘I’d love to see him. I’m always promising poor Joanna I’ll go. They were kind about the cottage. They left me all sorts, you know, stuff that wasn’t in the tenancy agreement, but they just left it. They were really kind to me.’

‘You’re a lucky girl.’ A blast of wind rattled at the window, and the draught blew the door shut. Smoke from the fire billowed confused into the room.

‘Not always,’ she corrected and again, I felt in her that small splice of sadness that I didn’t know what to do with. She never lingered long in these moments, she visibly pulled her shoulders back, and said, almost challengingly, ‘You know, another reason for visiting Ted is that I’ve been thinking about doing *A Day in the Life of a carer*. Or a nurse. For my column.’

I suppose I looked blank.

‘You don’t know them? Ah well, look me up on a Friday in *The Bournemouth Times*.’

She said it as grandly as if she were writing leaders for a national newspaper.

We were quiet, listening to Henry snoring softly and then I heard a clatter from outside as the wind blew something across the patio. ‘Let’s get the sandbags down,’ and we crossed to the stairs silently and up onto the landing.

‘Where’s the loft?’

‘It’s right above you.’

She craned her neck upwards. ‘Silly me. Which was your bedroom when you stayed here?’

‘It was um...um, it was this one on the left. That one.’

She barely glanced at the door and instead insisted on being the one to clamber up the loft ladder. She was passing the third bag down to me when she asked, ‘Did you do anything last night?’

‘Last night? No. Why?’ The bag fell into my outstretched arms and obscured her face from view.

‘I just wondered,’ she said. When I could see her face again, she was smiling at me, and the single light bulb behind her was illuminating her head so her hair was tumbling very brightly, almost white around her.

I wondered why she wondered, and it occurred to me that the previous night had been Valentine's Evening. I couldn't think of any other reason she would have asked if I'd been busy, other than to find out if I was romantically involved with anyone. But I often made the mistake of assuming I knew what Celine meant. And the one thing she wasn't ever, was surreptitious. Added to which, most of the time, there wasn't even a reason for anything she inquired about. She often preferred to leave some conversations, like her sartorial inclinations, incomplete. She passed the remaining bags down to me without saying anything else.

I piled them along the road in the blackness while she ordered a taxi and when the car's headlights swung over the bridge to illuminate our sandbags she said, lightly,

'Come with me?' and I hadn't drunk much and it would be difficult to get to work without the truck in the morning - but none of that mattered.

The rain was lashing down by the time we pulled up outside Celine's cottage, and she reached across and kissed the corner of my mouth, pressing her lips into the groove. It was casual and quick enough that I told myself it could have been mis-planted, a mistake. 'Nice to meet you formally. See you tomorrow,' and then she said, in a diffident sort of tone, 'I'll give you my number.' Something leapt inside, and I thought maybe her aim had not been faulty.

'I don't have my phone on me.' I tried to make her out in the dark but her face was in shadow.

'I've got a pen. I'm old-fashioned like that.' She leaned over and scribbled into my palm as if she were crossing it. The pen tickled, and the taxi driver cleared his throat.

The car door slammed and the rain swallowed her. I touched the corner of my mouth where her lips had smudged a kiss. Back in my house five minutes later, I looked at my palm. The black ink had run into my skin and spread along the fissures, so it looked like a cobweb and the number was unreadable, but drawn after the sunken numbers there was still, clearly, a small black dragonfly. I would remember that dragonfly in my palm, as though she had given

me something to hold on to. Something delicate but living, to outlast the ordinary, erasable phone number.

It didn't matter I couldn't make out the numbers because I saw her the next day; she hadn't lied when she told me she would see me tomorrow. She never did, actually, lie. She was walking along the riverbank toward Warren Shore and I was on the river, looking at a boat whose bowsprit had been run into during the night and broken clean off. She waved madly from across the water. I headed over to her, concentrating on the water ahead, chugging through the drizzle, motionless in the boat and watching her figure grow in size and definition as though it were her approaching me.

And she was there from then on, or at least it felt like she was, until Rob Sinclair arrived on the river with *Iseult*. It's hard not to blame Rob for lots of things. I know it was nothing to do with him, not really but you see, until he came along, there were evenings like the first one at Henry's that made all the other moments with Celine – the ash in the grate moments – worth every stale, miserable second.

6th JUNE

Mattie. Christened Matilda but immediately shortened. I'd often thought if my father had stayed alive to meet her, he would have rejected the nickname absolutely, and insisted on Matilda. I was unfailingly William. It was Margie who had first called me Will and my parents, unwilling to correct her, used to swallow their distaste and annoyance when we were together. So, Mattie is Mattie and she greets me by briefly looking up from her playdoh and then returning to it.

Lucy had opened her front door with a steely expression but it softens a little now. 'Look at that concentration. She gets that from you.'

'Not your Dad,' I tell Mattie, stroking her head, 'not me,' and she doesn't flinch, she sighs, concentrating on her task. 'It's so hot. Poor thing.'

'Yes, none of us can sleep at the moment. There's no air here. I expect you've a nice sea breeze. Tea? Water?'

'Just water please. How are you?'

'Not too bad.' She has her back to me, at the sink. 'I'm sorry about Scotland.'

'So you are going,' I say, to get it out of the way

She nods, not turning around. 'Chris has a really great opportunity, and god knows he deserves a break.'

I pick up Mattie's lime-green ball of dough and she emits a small grunt. 'When?'

'Mid-July.' So soon. 'It's training SAS candidates.' She can't help the hushed, reverent tones.

Mattie holds her hand up for the playdoh but I take her hand instead. Hot; smeared with red, white and purple bits of putty.

‘Look. I don’t care,’ I tell Lucy. ‘I don’t care if Chris has a job washing dishes or he’s the best sniper the British Army have had in decades.’ Mattie pulls her hand out of mine and makes a more determined sound. Give it back.

‘He’s not a sniper...’ Lucy begins. ‘I know you had a bad time in the...’ and then trails off.

‘I don’t care about that either. I was sixteen when I was in the army. I care that Chris is taking Mattie to Scotland and in a matter of weeks. My daughter,’ and my voice rises even though I don’t mean it to. ‘Why can’t they find some poor sods on Dartmouth Moor for him to shout at? Salisbury Plain?’

‘Don’t you shout at me. Chris does not have to go anywhere just to please you. He doesn’t owe you anything, Will. He wants to go to Fort William. He is Scottish. Calm down, please.’

‘I am calm. I’m just trying to make you see my point of view. I’m only just getting to know her.’ The panic that I thought repressed is spilling over again.

‘Come on,’ she sniffs. ‘Whose fault is that? You’ve had over a year to get to know her. When it comes to spending time with Mattie, we don’t think you’ve got a leg to stand on.’ *We*. Her and Chris. It is a stupid, as well as irrelevant, thing to say. As if I had a limb blown off in Afghanistan. Then I realise *we* might have meant her and a lawyer. I try and breathe and listen through the thrumming in my ears. Lucy is saying, ‘You hardly come here. You left after six awful months of leaving me to do everything, absolutely everything for her, and she wasn’t well, if you remember...’

I give Mattie back her playdoh which she shoves into her mouth in satisfaction. I retrieve her fist and take the opportunity to breathe in the soft skin folding around her neck. I kiss it and think I can see the corner of her mouth lift a little and her cheek crease, so I kiss the space again, making a smacking noise and she giggles properly. Lucy comes to an end.

‘You don’t have much ground either when it comes to the moral one,’ I say straightening.

She flushes white.

‘I don’t want another argument,’ I say. ‘I’m just pointing out that neither of us are perfect. I’m asking for a chance with her. Delay the move. I don’t know. Something. Help me think of something.’

‘It’s not that I don’t want to make this work for you. I’m sorry, I am. But I can’t help, we can’t delay.’ She does look upset, she does, but it’s not making a difference. ‘We’ll have to come back to visit Mum and Dad. All the time, I promised them.’ It’s fair to say I don’t give a shit about her sodding Mum and Dad who were so delighted when I moved out and Chris moved in. ‘It’s not as though you’ll never see her.’

I’m not so sure. I know how these things end. If I do see my daughter at all, she’ll end up resenting me for not being there the rest of the time. Visits won’t help, they’ll make the situation worse. She’ll probably call Chris Dad. Bloody perfect bloody Chris in his combat gear and boots, sniper or whatever.

I bend to kiss Mattie again, and this time she pushes my face away with her hot palm, hard. ‘Matilda!’ berates Lucy heatedly. ‘Don’t do that to Daddy.’

Mattie shoves again.

‘Matilda, don’t be so naughty.’ Lucy raises her voice. I know that fear is driving everything Lucy does and says at the moment. I know it because I have seen it in twenty-four pages of personal grief laid bare on the page.

‘Leave her alone,’ I say. I know it because I am the same. ‘It’s my fault. But don’t call her that,’ I add. ‘Please don’t call her Matilda.’

Lucy does not ask about my legal threat or investigations and I have not the appetite to share the results of my foray into Family Law. She wants to avoid it, and me? I had discovered

that just to scratch the surface of our situation would be to alter everything and forever. A fight would begin by which bitter end we would both have turned into different people. The game of scrabble would have become a battle for our souls. And yet - despite this knowledge, there is still the urge to hold on to Mattie. It's panic and longing and I don't know where it comes from but I can feel it, like someone who has vertigo can sense a foothold somewhere near, beneath them.

As calmly as I can, I tell Lucy at the door that she has to reconsider.

'Why?' she says. 'Just because you're biologically her father doesn't mean it's a job you can just decide to take on. You need more than instinct, William, you need experience. You learn on the job and you haven't got the qualifications.'

At that moment, Mattie crawls to the kitchen door and peers round it. 'Bye, Mattie,' I tell her, a stupid lump of something in my throat.

She raises a hand and twists it, looks at herself waving proudly and grins. Sits up and with one leg bent in and the other stretched out tries again, waving and smiling.

It occurs to me in the car, many years too late of course, that for Margie to coin a nickname for me, without invitation or permission from my parents, would have felt intolerably invasive to them. Perhaps my father had been jealous of my relationship with Henry. It's rather pathetic to hope so, that I am still looking for reasons for why things were the way they were.

It also strikes me that not so long ago, before the heat and before Rob, I might have been racing back down the motorway to talk to Celine about Mattie, about biology and instinct. To tell her that I do not want to let Mattie go, for her to evaporate like all the other unsubstantiated bits of my life that have petered out. But it's just me, morose and unqualified, knowing that that even weekly visits – the firmest fixtures I've ever had – aren't enough

anymore, and thinking that if there isn't a crash course, or a *Fatherhood for dummies* booklet, there ought to be.

She ran through the rain to her gates, and I went home with the dragonfly as a keepsake in the palm of my hand. I looked her up the following morning. Strange, but nothing was revealed apart from her column. I'd guessed there ought to be quite a lot to search through: if not a twitter account, then an Instagram or a Facebook page. I suppose it wasn't surprising that these conventional social apps had been shunned by her, but... LinkedIn, I tried that. Nothing. Land Registry, Zoopla, a voting record? Nothing.

In those days, until April introduced Alice and her chatter, I was alone at work, and now, I think, lonely.

'Hello.' I said. I cut the engine and looked up at her. Last night she had said she would see me today. 'Would you like a coffee?'

'I can't stay long.' No. Always transient. Being somewhere, or saying something, but at the same time cancelling it; warning of her impermanence, her unreliability. 'Not a coffee. Glass of water?' And then, 'Can I help?'

'No. Done.' I tied up. 'Come inside, you'll get soaked.'

In the clubhouse, she looked around. 'It's very quiet here. Are you busy?'

'Not in February,' I told her. 'I'm just here to pick up these charts.'

'What is it you actually do?'

It stung, a little, the implied uselessness. To anyone else, I would have said, not much, but I found myself showing her the computer, the myriad boats coordinated and moored to the marina, the apps we used. Explaining that each vessel needed logging, billing, often bringing out of the water. Always ferrying from one end of the river to the other. 'Sailors need a base. This is their port, a point of organization from which to strike off.'

There was a pause. I went to the tap for her water. ‘So a bit like a general,’ she said vaguely, picking up a paperweight. ‘Or, I know, more like a conductor in an orchestra.’

‘That sounds a bit grand.’

‘Not meant to. I’m tone-deaf, completely, don’t forget. I like this,’ and she brandished the yellow anemone weight at me. ‘Henry says he’s known you forever.’

‘Since I was seven.’

She didn’t answer. She was quieter than she had been the night before and I struggled for something to say. ‘The paperweight isn’t mine.’

She looked at it in her hand as if she had forgotten about it.

‘Your number smudged,’ I said.

‘What’s yours? I’ll ring it.’ She put the paperweight down and tapped the numbers laboriously into her phone, seemingly concentrating on the task. She didn’t look up when she asked: ‘Are you married?’

‘No,’ I said, too quickly, in that way one does if you are taken aback but trying not to show it.

‘Only I wasn’t sure. Henry implied you had a complicated personal life.’

‘Who doesn’t.’ I laughed awkwardly, and she didn’t. ‘I’ve got an ex-partner, and a daughter who lives with her.’

Usually people say, *How old? How sweet. Do you see her often?* Celine didn’t say anything at all.

‘I’ve been wondering why you drew a dragonfly on my hand,’ I asked, made bold by her interest.

‘Oh, it’s silly. I don’t know why I did that. I just draw them a lot. I’ve got a dragonfly tattoo.’

‘That’s a little more permanent than last night’s sketch. Why the tattoo?’

‘Why not?’

‘No, sorry, not why a tattoo, why a dragonfly?’

She looked as if she was only just considering why. ‘I’ve always liked the water. We used to have a pond.’

‘Growing up?’

‘Lincolnshire,’ she said, and then, as she so rarely did, followed up with a smidgeon of detail. Usually I was left flailing around the economy of her speech. ‘On the river Trent.’

‘Any other family?’

‘Nope, and in the end, just Mum. Why all the questions?’

So I told her something instead. ‘We had a pond in our garden too. Just across the river here, in Exbury. Murky, stagnant thing. I think my mother filled it in eventually.’

‘I thought ours was magical,’ she said. ‘I was convinced fairies lived down there. I remember the daylilies especially. And the pink lily pads on the water.’ I think she smiled then and I felt a dragonfly-quick flash of gladness. ‘Yes, those daylilies. I’d better go. Catch you downstream then.’

‘Catch you downstream.’

I looked up day lilies when I got home for lunch, because I’d never heard of these diurnal flowers that might have housed fairies and I learned that they were so called because they were short-lived, opening in the morning and dying by nightfall. I bought some bulbs for Celine when I was next in Beaulieu, from the Garden Centre on the high street, but as far as I know she never planted them and they probably got lost in the chaos of her untended borders, never flowering at all. But there were always plenty of dragonflies in the aquatic orchestra at the bottom of her lawn, darting above the water with the water beetles, and the sea skaters humming beneath them.

*

I saw her sooner than either of us imagined, the surprise immediately followed by the knowledge of the complete rightness of the meeting. Thus was the pattern set for the approaching spring.

After I'd locked up that night at the club, I went down to the jetty, lured toward the river by the gentle, irregular beat of waves against the pontoon. My footsteps fell loud on the planks and there was an indignant squeak from a sleepy duck on the marshes. Celine was sitting in the dark against the ladder.

'Will?' she said, startled. "Is that you?"

'Yes.'

'Oh. Good.' There was an awkward moment because I didn't have a reason to be there other than for the same reason she was, which was to be alone, but before I could leave, she said, 'Aren't you going to sit down?'

At night, the jetty wound its way into the river like a never-ending diving-board and sitting here, right at the tip of it, and looking up at the stars, was like coming to the frontier. A galactic outpost. At low tide, you could dangle your legs off the end and it would feel as if they were swinging in space.

'How old are you, Will?'

'I'm old. I feel old.'

'I'd guess forty-five. Forty-six?'

'Forty-eight.'

'I'm forty-two. What have I done, coming to this place.'

She might have had a bit to drink. She was tucked into that man-sized coat, her wild hair caught in the collar and glinting white in the dark. I don't think we felt the cold.

‘I don’t belong here. I really don’t. I never thought I would live amongst such narrow-minded, stupid people.’

I felt the attack was unwarranted, and inexplicably personal. I said, ‘You’ve only been here three months.’

She shrugged. ‘Long enough. Don’t you feel the same? You must do.’

And then grateful that she’d included me on her side, in her team. ‘Not so-’

‘- Ssh.’ Her fingers, which had been in her pockets, came onto her mouth. ‘Ssh. Did you hear that?’

I listened for a moment. ‘What?’

‘That splash.’

‘A fish.’

‘Something, anyway. It’s another world down there isn’t it.’

I examined the dark depths. Even in blackness, the volume and power of the river was unmistakable. ‘A grey mullet, probably.’ I couldn’t see them but I knew the fish were there, passing to and fro beneath us, jaws gaping, their huge prehistoric shadows twisting slowly between the seaweedy legs of the jetty.

‘This village is another world too.’ She hiccupped, and then leaned over to drag her hands through the silky river, the greeny phosphorescent water tumbling from her fingers.

I could make her out better now. She was the one who looked as though she was from a different world. She looked like something from the river itself, her hands dripping, her face skewed with concentration and crossness.

‘I went to see a fortune teller recently. It was when I was researching for *A Day in the Life of*...when I first started. She lived in a caravan, – a proper didakoi one painted green and gold on the side –and she read cards and my palm as well of course, and she told me a watery change was on the horizon. A good one, near the sea.’

She picked up on the scepticism filling my silence. She tossed her hair back. ‘Oh, don’t mock it. Don’t be predictable. Don’t be dull.’

‘I’m not,’ I said. ‘I won’t.’

‘It’s why I came here,’ she went on. ‘I probably only came here because of the gypsy. I saw the cottage by the water the following week and it made sense.’

‘The rent can’t be nothing...’

‘No,’ she agreed, and carried on. ‘I had no idea everyone here would be so provincial.’

‘Not everyone.’

‘Not Henry, agreed.’

There didn’t seem to be anyone else she wanted to include so I said, ‘You can probably read palms yourself.’

‘Don’t be silly,’ she answered, cuttingly, ‘Of course I can’t.’

She broke the silence after a while, and when she spoke again, she was gentle. ‘Why did you come here?’

I hesitated, and she reached out in the dark as if she was going to pat my arm or stroke it, by way of encouragement, but she didn’t touch me in the end. Her hands fluttered uncertainly over my bowed head. Those skeletal fingers passed over me like a priest’s.

‘Why?’

I told her, and the next morning I couldn’t think why I had. She had asked, it was true but people in Buckledon had asked before and they had got some nonsense about being brought up in Exbury. Celine got it all, how I hadn’t believed Lucy’s pregnancy was accidental, the misery of Mattie’s birth and then my cowardly flight from them both to a place I hardly considered with nostalgia. Celine didn’t reveal any distress on my behalf, and neither did she show disapproval.

She turned her face away from me and I couldn't see her expression, but I felt something switch and slow.

We listened to the water together for a while. The tide was dropping away with the wind, there were one or two stars and still no sign of the moon. I didn't want her to ever leave. I wanted her to stay like that against the ladder, bedraggled and unusually, kind.

'It was a shock, at first,' I said. 'I didn't behave well. At all, actually, and I'm ashamed of that. I tried, I suppose. What became impossible was the feeling that it was getting worse, not better. I expected things to get better, but they didn't.'

'I can understand that,' she said. 'I'm not surprised you left. I'm surprised it took so long.'

'Fathers aren't supposed to walk out on their new-borns.'

'I suppose they're not.'

'I thought things would get better,' I said again, uselessly. 'I couldn't believe I wasn't feeling it yet. What everyone says you're supposed to feel, I just couldn't find those feelings.'

'People who tell you things will get better often know less than you do. Some things just don't get better.'

'It must have been worse for Mattie's mother.'

'Perhaps. Not necessarily.' She shivered slightly.

After a moment, I asked: 'What else did your gypsy say?'

She shook her head. 'Another time,' and I sort of took that as my cue to leave, not because I felt dismissed, but because I felt exonerated and I didn't know what else to do with that foreign feeling except walk away from it.

I began to bump into her returning from sunrise walks as I drove in for work. She arrived back one morning bringing with her a flock of geese that darkened the sky above us and we shrank beneath the noise of their eclipsing flight, watching them bank right and finally skid onto the far side of the river by Exbury. She pulled the soft grey hat, the colour of their wings, from her head and asked if I knew where they'd come from. I guessed Siberia; she looked dubious and told me she'd find out and let me know. Two days later, there was a small book on migratory geese on the passenger seat of my truck.

Then, when the Whitworth's cherry blossom was jostling with swifts in the sky and turning the still-damp air pink, and just after Hugh had confided in me about the miserable ecstasy of his lunchtime meet-ups with the trainee nurse, Lady Burrows came into the *Gipsy Moth*. I had just started to read about Brent Geese when she interrupted.

'Aha. Tracked you down, Will. I've come to ask a favour.' Liz's voice was uniquely deep and gravelly. It was hard to ignore. 'Alice is my friend's grand-daughter,' she said. 'I've had the marvellous idea that working with you on the river would be wonderful experience for her.'

Brent Geese come from the Arctic tundra.

'Do you think you might take on an apprentice?'

'It's not really just up to me, Liz.'

'Nonsense. You put in the word; they won't refuse you. Thing is,' she confided, 'Alice has gone' – she pronounced it gorn – 'and got herself thrown out of her boarding school. She's only sixteen. Her poor mother.'

'What was she expelled for?' I didn't care, it just seemed as good a question as any to ask.

Liz looked repulsed. 'Body piercings I think.'

'Hardly criminal activity.'

'Oh, and general rebelliousness. Not towing the line at school at all by the sounds of it. Or at home. Everyone's fed up with her.'

'Thanks a lot,' I said sourly, 'I don't know why you think she'll do any better with me on the river.'

'Do consider Will, as a favour to me.'

'I'll run it past everyone at the next meeting,' I relented, thinking that the last thing I wanted was to have a mulish adolescent hanging around me all day. But also something about everyone being fed up with her.

'What you say goes,' and she smiled with satisfaction. 'And here's the other point, Will. If you have some help, you'll be freed up to take part in some beach patrols.'

'Are they happening regularly?' I'd only spent one evening with Hugh in his Land Rover, listening to waves break on the reef in the distance, and the story of his affair. 'It feels like a waste of time.'

'Of course it isn't. We must be vigilant. Every day there are more stories of illegal landings along our coastline. We're being bombarded by foreigners.' She peered at the book. 'Are you interested in ornithology?'

'Yes. I suppose so.'

'Henry Rickards is your man. He lives in the Mill House at Beaulieu and anything he doesn't know about birds isn't worth knowing.' She picked up the book about geese and flicking through the pages, a bookmark I hadn't known was there fell onto the table.

'Ha! There you are.' She was peering at the bookmark. 'This is his book. You've met him already.'

Celine must have borrowed it from Henry.

‘I know Henry,’ I reminded Liz. ‘My parents were friends with him, and with Margie before she died. I came to the Grange with him for your Christmas Day drinks.’

‘So you did,’ she said, but not convincingly. ‘Your parents...?’

‘No longer alive. The Crawfords, from Exbury.’

‘No...don’t think so.’

Actually, it wasn’t entirely accurate to call the Rickards my parents’ friends. But if you say things long enough and firmly enough words will create their own version of reality. The four of them had wanted it to be true, even if it was for different reasons. And it wasn’t completely untrue, just a little implausible. Henry and Margie were the originators of the statement – ‘These are our friends,’ they used to say, which baffled my parents. They were more used to the invalidating ‘Don’t think so’s’.

‘Don’t forget about Alice Leverett.’ Liz cleared her throat. ‘Will? I thought she could start on 1st April. Her mother is going to a health spa that week. Oh, and Julian will be in touch about the patrol rota.’

I read the message on the bookmark when she had gone and then tucked it back between the pages of the book. It had been given to Henry by Margie in 1998, with her fondest love. I wasn’t surprised Henry had lent Celine the book, that they had become friends, because that’s what the Rickards did with strangers and outsiders, they scooped them up and made friends with them. I mapped the migratory route of Brent Geese in my head, from their breeding grounds in northern Russia to their winter on the banks of the Beaulieu and gave the book back to Celine that evening.

She was on the bench, by the river. The sunset sky above us was shot through with colours like fireworks. If she heard me arrive, she didn’t show it. She carried on watching the mayflies dance above the green reeds.

‘Celine,’ I said. She was startled, turned around, and smiled. She was wrapped in a thick scarlet rug. I suddenly felt blinded and then I couldn’t find the words I’d wanted. Something about Siberia. With her pale, almost white hair and her angular face and sludge-grey eyes, she was surely, beautiful. She didn’t want her beauty though, just as she didn’t want straightforward conversation. (She swerved to avoid both). She botched it on purpose, running her fingers through her hair, never to smooth it, but to ensure the salt-filled wind had properly messed it. She picked at the skin on her dry lips and irritated the slight redness around her eyes. I said ‘Celine’ - she turned round, and words failed me. And because she was taken unawares, she smiled her instinctive, whimsical smile. And then immediately scowled.

7th JUNE

‘I’m really sorry about it all.’ Celine is picking at her thumbnail again. ‘I suppose it’s hard to know what to do.’ It’s hard to know if she has really been listening.

I have waded round from the clubhouse to clear a pile of rubbish caught against the wooden barrier and we are talking at low tide, me in the muddy marshes looking up at her with black plastic bags hanging off me, and her, at the end of the garden, entertaining Henry. Henry is resting in the deckchair with the faded and torn ticking. I have relayed the news of Lucy’s imminent departure. Easier to address two of them, although as I say, only one of them seems to have been concentrating.

‘Have they decided for sure, Will?’ Henry’s face is full of worry.

‘It sounds like it.’

‘Don’t give up. Telephone a family lawyer, why don’t you do that?’

‘Because I have some idea of what I’d be unleashing.’

Celine sighs. ‘But you can’t let that be an excuse.’

‘It’s not an excuse. I want to know if that is really what Henry advises.’

‘I know what it’s like to grow up without a father,’ but she says it in a disconnected, faraway voice. As if she has no idea at all.

‘So does Will,’ remarks Henry.

‘The nasty piece of work,’ she supplies, and Henry winces.

‘He was an old-fashioned parent, that’s all. Not given to much emotion. He was more interested in an academic life and not very hands-on with Will.’ Henry waves his own hands about in vague generalisation. ‘Anyway, Will. I do mean it. Look into it thoroughly. I would be very surprised if Lucy can take Mattie to Scotland without your permission.’ He stands up,

and limps stiffly to an overgrown flowerbed. I am left to recall the many ways in which my father had been acutely ‘hands-on.’

‘I was worried Henry’s chair was going to collapse. Where’s Alice today?’

‘You’ll know better than I,’ I told her. ‘You two are as thick as thieves.’

She is pleased; the accusation of clandestine misbehaviour is a compliment. The sound of an engine slices across the calm water behind me. I turn to see what Celine is looking at.

Rob is passing. She does not give him one of her enormous, exaggerated waves, she lies down, closes her eyes and stretches out in the grass. It’s not as if I expect Celine to look guilty for any reason (I’m sure that Celine doesn’t do guilt) but Rob’s tender is moving slowly and I’m pointing it out, stabbing at it, in his direction, and I expect her to seem...moved, but she is doing a good job of looking completely unconcerned. A great-looking dinghy of course, a flashy one with squashy white seats trimmed with a navy rope, and Rob in a polo shirt to match. He is driving whilst on the phone and his laughter carries across the river toward me, doleful in my waterproofs and waders.

‘You know what, he really likes it here,’ she says, from her supine position.

‘Glad to hear it.’

‘And it’s actually nice to have some rather different company. We went to Yarmouth on Monday.’ She is careless as a cat.

‘I know.’

‘I’m sure you could come next time.’

There are moments when she sounds entirely reasonable. She says this without guile. It is always tempting to be persuaded by such moments, but they are not her, not really.

‘I doubt Rob wants me tagging along.’

Henry is still attempting to weed, tugging at an enormous thistle.

‘Why not? From what I can tell, he’s actually pretty sweet. He’s trying to be an explorer. Why are you making that noise? He’s harmless. Shy, even.’

Celine likes nothing better than shyness. Shy, reticent people are a magnet for her.

‘I’d have thought he’ll end up with the rich yachties in Cowes.’

‘Why do you say that?’

‘You just said you were surprised he likes it here.’ Why can’t she see that he’s over-indulged and entitled?

‘No, I didn’t. He’s not sophisticated, you know. Maybe it’s me who hankers after the gin palaces and millionaires.’

‘I doubt that very much.’ As soon as I’d said it I knew I’d made a mistake to assume anything.

‘How do you know?’

I persevere, pointlessly. ‘I just don’t think you do.’

“Well,” and she scrubs at her cheek, leaving a mark on the pale skin. ‘Maybe I do. And maybe I don’t like Buckledon. Maybe I can’t stand our sleepy backwater.’

This is a nonsense conversation, and I wish Henry would abandon the thistle and return to steady us. ‘I think you just don’t like agreeing with people.’

‘Ha. Maybe not,’ and she relents but with a warning. ‘Any more than I like them agreeing with me,’ and then, before I can agree or disagree, she peers over the wire fencing. ‘Did you really find all this? Look, champagne. The champagne hasn’t even been opened.’

A picnic had been abandoned a little further down the river on the bank. There is an expectant air still clinging to the hamper. It belongs to a distracted, honeymoon pair, surely. There are two plastic champagne flutes, two red and white napkins. Two small boxes of Tupperware with the strawberries still bright in one. Someone has made brownies to go with them which have gone soggy. ‘What are you doing on Saturday?’

‘Hopefully going to see Mattie again. To make the most of it now.’

‘You’ll be a busy bee then. What are you going to do with this picnic?’

I won’t throw it away. It is preserved, it has the possibility of being claimed. It is an entire, lost afternoon but it still has some authority and ownership attached. I feel almost prurient rifling through it. ‘I’ll take it to the clubhouse. Why do you mention Saturday?’

‘That dinner party I’m thinking of having.’

‘A dinner party? I didn’t take you seriously.’

‘How lucky you can’t come.’

‘I didn’t say I couldn’t.’ I am feeble, risible. ‘I’ll only be away for the afternoon.’

‘I’ll let you know.’ Imperiously. ‘But meantime we could have this picnic. Shall we have a picnic later?’

‘Yes. Only not this one.’

She looks at me as if I were daft. ‘Why not?’

‘It’s not ours,’ I say patiently. ‘Someone might still want it.’

‘Oh, right. Never mind then. Thought you meant a free one, a stolen one. Never mind,’ and the thief loses interest in an un-plundered, legal outing. She wants someone else’s shipwreck, not packaged, ready-made provisions from Waitrose. ‘I’m going to do some arthritic gardening with Henry.’

She gets up then and leaves an indent, the shadowy shape of her pressed darkly into the green. The dew has soaked her up. She leans over; her lips, cool and brisk, brush over mine, inexplicably, I think, like dusting. The menial task of goodbye.

She meanders away toward the flowerbed and flops down again in the grass at Henry’s feet. I fish another plastic bag from the bladderwrack.

I return to the clubhouse when I'm done; waders thick with mud, two bags of rubbish and someone else's picnic. On the other side of the bank a woman is walking her dog, shrieking and whistling for it and waving a lead around. A spaniel, the sort my mother would have liked. My father used a dog lead on me. Or at least it is a dog lead in my mind, which is odd, because my mother was never allowed a dog. Never mind a spaniel, like the one careering through the reeds in the distance, with windswept ears and galloping paws. It must have been a belt. She longed for a dog. Something to walk with along the banks of the river in Beaulieu. Something to connect her with the solid, gilet-clad Labrador owners we passed, unseen. Dogs and belts.

I'm not sure that Henry, who has a kind of innocence, ever suspected that dog leads could have been put to the use my father found for them. How were they ever friends? They had met at a bridge evening in Beaulieu after the move to Exbury, after my father had to take early redundancy as Clerk of the Court. He simply wanted to disappear into his books, and my mother just wanted to get out of Southampton and live in the countryside. Once there, I don't expect she could hide her longing to be accepted within its verdant folds. Margie welcomed her but they had little in common and their friendship was a forced, stilted sort, one feeling patronised and the other awkward. Margie was on all the committees, and the parish council and the church council but I think it was her membership of the flower rota that my mother couldn't ever really forgive. They were often thrown together – my mother alternating between sycophancy and resentment – because of the hobbies my father and Henry shared: Bridge, history, opera. All three were pleasant diversions for Henry, but (fatally for their friendship in the end) serious and academic pursuits for my father.

Alice comes up to inform me that Celine has gone out on Rob's tender with him.

'Again.' She giggles and gawps for the rest of the day.

9th JUNE

This time, late in the evening and listening to the owls hoot, I choose another website, not Family Law.

I discover that because I am named on Mattie's birth certificate, I definitely have Parental Rights. And that part of PR is having the right to make legal choices. If Lucy and I are unable to agree on something, one of us can make an application to the court. I am thankful for the fact that I am Mattie's named father. Had I not been, my first application to the court would have had to have been for PR. It is turgid stuff, all of it, full of conditions and sub-clauses. Trying to decipher the density, and my chances, I stay up making notes till late into the night and so I am awake when Celine is. She sends a message just before two a.m., confirming supper at her cottage with Rob. If I'm back from Winchester.

I leave earlier than planned in the morning, to make sure I am. Driving past the Grange, I spot Liz and Julian on their lawn, trying to knock croquet hoops into the sun-hardened ground. The wisteria that trembles up the south-facing side looks papery, a pale hue of lilac, like hundreds of fragile butterfly wings. For just a second, I remember the squeak of the ghostly wheelchair.

A hosepipe ban has not officially been announced – it is too early for that – but the inhabitants of Buckledon have decided that it ought to have been and communicated their decree, as all others, via the weekly village email. David Turnley is outside his house washing his car and when he sees me he chucks his sponge guiltily toward the hedge.

‘Don't worry, I won't tell,’ I say.

David wipes his hands delicately on a spotted handkerchief and comes to my open window. ‘Where are you off to?’

‘To Winchester, to see my daughter.’

David never takes any notice of things that don't immediately concern him. 'Very good,' he says vaguely, and then, 'What's her name again?'

'Mattie.'

'Pint later?'

'I'm out for dinner.'

'I haven't been asked. Who with?'

'Celine.'

David brightens. 'You won't get fed.'

The thought had crossed my mind.

I do get fed at Lucy's. Only because they are about to have lunch.

'You are welcome to join us,' she says stiffly. 'Chris is helping my Dad, so the coast is clear.'

'Hello Mattie.'

Lucy watches me kiss her. 'You're earlier than we expected.'

'I want to be back in good time.'

'So it's not to spend more time with your daughter, then.'

'That, too. Of course, given your plans.'

For just a moment, something like shame – perhaps it is regret – flitters across her face. She busies herself with bowls and stirs some soup and I pass rubbery farm animals to Mattie that punctuate the silence with their squeaks. It is only when we are sitting down, an awkward duo either side of the highchair and Mattie's head rotating curiously between us, that I start speaking.

'Please don't fly off the handle, Lucy. We've got to keep calm discussing this.'

'There's nothing to discuss.'

‘Just please don’t panic when I say-’

‘-here, darling.’ She passes a bread roll to Mattie.

‘Lucy’

No answer.

So I just pretty much quote from the internet. ‘Neither of us is allowed, by law, to remove Mattie from the jurisdiction of England and Wales without the other’s permission.’

I know that Lucy will know this. The only uncertainty is how she has planned to deal with it and perhaps she too has not been sure, not until she is confronted with the statement. She considers me, seemingly calm. ‘How very legalistic. Perhaps you’re turning out like your father after all. A day in court for you at last.’

‘I don’t want any days in court,’ I say evenly. ‘Not one second.’

‘Well then. I’ve only got a few things to say to you. Number one.’

I try to hold Mattie’s eyes to mine.

‘You thought that I should have an abortion.’

I blink.

‘Number two. You left us because you didn’t want her.’ Mattie looks away. ‘Number three. If you think that your signature on Mattie’s birth certificate awards you any rights as a parent, you’re completely fucking crazy.’

‘Can we not do this in front of-’

‘-Number four. What in god’s name makes you think that Mattie would be better off staying here simply on the off-chance you turn up every other week?’

‘It would be more than that. Much more. I would have her at mine.’

This, I can instantly see, is just as frightening. Lucy does not let Mattie out of her sight.

‘No way,’ she shouts. ‘You can’t even commit to turning up at the arranged time, how could you handle such a huge thing? You’ve no idea what all this entails.’

‘Don’t use me arriving early as an excuse,’ and then Mattie begins to wail. I stop, and Lucy starts to soothe her. After a while, I try again. ‘Please hear me out and try and understand. I don’t want to take Mattie away from you, I just can’t lose her. I’m just getting to know her.’

‘But I don’t want to lose Chris,’ and she starts crying. ‘He’s going, he wants us to come. They adore each other.’

I put my head in my hands.

‘Why are you deciding now, of all moments, to attempt Dad of the Century? Why, just as I’m getting some sort of life back together?’

‘There isn’t a statute of limitations on when a father can start trying.’

‘Yes there is! You’ve given up all your rights.’

‘But have I? Why have I?’

‘Because you are nothing to do with her. But if you want to see her, I won’t stop you. Visit us whenever you want.’

‘It’s not the same. You’d be hundreds of miles away. I want to work out something more concrete, more permanent. I want her closer.’

She stops crying then and takes a breath. ‘Okay. If that’s how you want it. Like I said, give it your best. I’ve already got a lawyer so we can communicate through her from now on.’

‘Lucy, please. Why is it so hard for you to see she is half me? She doesn’t just belong to you.’

‘Could you leave?’

‘I don’t want to go down this route, Lucy.’

‘Don’t then. This last-minute attempt at being responsible is pathetic. Get out.’

Part of my problem, I think dully, as I leave, is that I’m never sure what bits of Lucy’s script are from a film - and what bits are real life, what’s really me. If it’s all really me, I’m in trouble. What I mean is that if she’s got me, if she’s right about me, I’m fucked. It’s a mess

and the only thing I know for sure is that my father is filled with renewed, virulent, from-the-grave disgust at my inability to do anything right.

‘Let me say goodbye.’

‘You’ve upset her.’

Mattie is throwing bits of the bread roll onto the floor. ‘See you Mattie.’ She looks up.

‘Da-da.’

‘Clever girl. Yes, that’s right.’

‘She says it to Chris too,’ Lucy hisses, kicking the door shut behind me.

I stopped by the playground in Buckledon that evening because a boy in vest and shorts was swinging on the tyre and crying loudly, a deep moaning cry. I thought he was stuck in the tyre. I braked and simultaneously knew something else was wrong because he was either too old or too big to be in the playground at all, but he was wailing like a toddler. It was too late to drive away.

‘You all right?’ I called through the car window.

The boy bellowed something unintelligible back. He was dressed in what I would come to know as his habitual day wear, but back then I thought he must be freezing cold. I looked around uselessly for his parents, an awareness of some sort of disability and the fact that I didn’t know what to do with it dawning on me. He seemed to be alone there. He shouted louder and tried to back away from me, shrinking into the tyre as I approached.

‘It’s okay,’ I told him, holding out my hands. ‘Are you okay? Where’s your Mum or Dad?’

‘Mind your business.’ A voice came back disembodied and slurred from the recesses of the tyre, and then the boy changed his mind and stuck his head out again. ‘Mind your own business,’ he said thickly, but now primly as well. ‘I don’t talk to strangers.’

It was hard to know how old he was, or how capable, but he wouldn’t be coaxed out of the tyre so I decided I would try and find out who he belonged to in the pub. I turned around and a woman was on the other side of the road watching us. I gestured toward the tyres as I walked toward her.

‘I know,’ she said. ‘I’m his Mum.’

‘Sorry. Not meaning to interfere. I didn’t see you.’

‘I’ve been watching him. Thanks,’ she added. She wasn’t flustered. I noticed these things about Naomi first: her composure, and her softness. A very slight accent, the faintest trace of otherness that was nothing to do with Buckledon. ‘I’m trying to get him to come home. It’s under control.’ It seemed a dubious assertion, as the wails from the tyre started up again but I would learn that this was a favourite expression of Naomi’s. Everything chaotic and uncontrollable in her life was described in such a way. I found something touching in this hope and inaccuracy, in her unflappable nature and the way she held her nerve against the disarray of her house.

‘Sure,’ I said and would have driven away then but for her son who pulled himself from the tyre and began to shout across the road.

‘Just a silly bitch, Mum, aren’t you. A silly old bitch.’ Naomi didn’t flinch. ‘No wonder Dad left.’ I looked away, embarrassed, and he broke into a mournful moan that must have carried all the way to the sea. I saw a neighbour angry at the window behind Naomi, pulling it shut with a bang. ‘Silly old bitch,’ roared the boy with a new sort of delight.

I hesitated. ‘Anything I can do?’

‘I’m fine. Just some new words he’s learned from the centre.’

I wanted to be sympathetic and she seemed to understand. ‘Don’t worry. He’ll get bored soon enough. I just have to ride it out.’ She smiled grimly. ‘I’d just rather it not be in quite such a public arena, of course.’ She was looking behind me as she spoke and a car approached, changing down a gear. The Notts slowed as they passed, the boy’s rant in full spate. Sophie’s face hung out of the open window half-anxious, half-horrified.

I shrugged, meaning, who cares, and she looked at me directly for the first time, in a way that clearly said, that’s easy for you to say. And then the boy began to quiet down, made curious I think by our talking between each other. Naomi realised this at the same time and

said, 'this is a bit odd but do you mind just staying put for another minute or so? Sorry,' she added. 'I don't know you, but he's looking this way. He might come over.'

'No problem. I'm Will,' I said, holding out my hand. 'From the RSYC. I work at the Yacht club.'

She may have been reassured but she wasn't impressed. 'I think Alex is going to come now. Don't turn around.'

I didn't, I stayed looking at her. She had dark brown hair, held away from her face with clips. Rumpled jacket and skirt, office clothes.

Sheila, the Burrows' ironing lady, materialised next to Naomi. Bent low over her tin of boiled sweets. 'This'll help,' she said, 'Alex likes the red ones, so I've saved them all,' and she offered the sticky pile to us. 'Here you are poppet,' she called, rattling the tin and then Alex was there too.

'Yummy sweets from Sheila.' He buried a paw-like hand in the tin.

'Only one,' began Naomi and then she thought better of it. 'Just say thank you.'

'Thank you poppet,' he told Sheila.

'Okay, love. Shall we go in now?' Alex nodded and he followed her up the garden path, his teeth cracking into the hard-boiled sweets, his tirade forgotten. At her door, Naomi turned and asked us in for a cup of tea.

I ended up staying for a while after Sheila had left. Naomi Framboisier was from Avignon. She agreed with things and she didn't ask any questions, not difficult ones anyway. She was entirely different to Celine who was mainly disagreeable and didn't stop asking any manner of questions (and then answering them herself.) Naomi had come from Southampton like me, because it had become unbearable living in the town with Alex. She still worked there, she taught French at the university and Alex still spent three days a week in the special needs centre. She lived, *literally*, she promised earnestly, in her car.

‘I spend too much time in Buckledon,’ I confessed. ‘I ought to get out more.’

‘So the coven of witches and their husbands at the yacht place don’t frighten you,’ she joked, and then back-tracked. ‘Not that I know any of them.’

She told me she was divorced.

‘I can’t have any more children and Jimmy wanted a baby girl. He’s got one now, just not with me.’ She ate the Jaffa cake she’d been holding to prevent any further disclosures slipping out.

She and Alex waved me off from their sitting-room window but not before we had exchanged mobile numbers. She gave me the thumbs up before disappearing which made Alex laugh and he spent some time giving me the same before changing his mind and flicking me a V sign.

She later told me she liked that I’d been gentle with Alex, and also that she liked my eyes. She thought I had kind eyes. That was what I had noticed about her – the big brown eyes alight with kindness – and why we would never have lasted together. Two pairs of nice eyes won’t work.

I didn’t tell her I was drawn to her because of her eyes and I rarely paid her compliments. I’m ashamed of that – Naomi didn’t make me feel good about myself – but it was for the same reason that I didn’t want anyone to know about us. Things get weighty with knowledge and if people talked about us, we would become ‘us’ and I didn’t want that. I wanted her company and, for a while, her kindness but I didn’t want us to be something that one day I knew I would be clambering out of. If I never articulated to Naomi or to myself what it was about her that I found attractive from day to day, she wouldn’t be able to throw it in my face when I left. I imagined that I could extricate myself from the relationship as easily and as cleanly as the tide left the saltmarshes.

I went to church in Beaulieu at the head of the river, with Henry. We were ushered past the candidly curious congregation into a pew near the front. It meant we were inadvertently seated by the crib. I felt the eyes of the nearby choir watching me as carefully as a firing squad.

I knew that this parish church was the old Abbey refectory, and that Beaulieu Abbey itself had been destroyed in 1538. Everyone who grew up round here knew that but perhaps it was only me that day recalling the history lessons from the local grammar school, and King John's guilt. The abbey was a monument to it.

Henry's company was familiar and uncomplicated. He had been more of a father than mine for many years. My own had spent his days immersed in various aspects of the law, incarcerated in his attic study from which crows' nest he glimpsed flashes of the coast. We lived perhaps seven miles from Henry, and I was really nothing to do with the Rickards, but Henry used to take me sailing most weekends. It was him who introduced me to the water and taught me how to navigate the river. He used to read to me from *The Complete Cosmicomics* in his old wooden dinghy and, at the end of the lesson, with these strange and wonderful tales about the universe in my head, we would sail upstream towards his house at the Mill and be given cinnamon biscuits by Margie. They were a childless couple, and the closest I knew, love as much a constant and gentle companion in their house as it was a stranger in my own. Margie was an architectural historian and after tea I remember quite often walking across the graveyard to the Abbey with her, feeling the lichen on the stones underhand and frightened by the rooks and crows above.

My mother was frightened of academics and of my father as well but what on earth was she supposed to do about that. I was no help to her because I was too busy subverting my father's authority in a way that was as frustrating as it was oblique, to her as well as him. I

think she felt utterly isolated in Exbury, on the fringes of proper society. She brought me to Beaulieu parish church every Sunday, Exbury not being a proper village with a working man's pub in place of a church. She used to linger outside after the services, unwilling to return home, and prolonging time on hallowed ground, hoping to be noticed. Her smile would grow more strained and the pinch of her fingers around my hand in hers more desperate as it became clear we were not going to be. She would admire the flowers in the porch, or pretend to, because she would have done a far better job, if only she were included in the weekly rota. We were always left alone. Not shunned, exactly and if not treated with disdain, then carefully and politely avoided. The smell in the church that Christmas Day was the same as it had been thirty years previously. It was the empty smell of ghosts and piles of stale years. It reminded me of the painful clutch of my mother's hand, and the grimness of a half-understood message; rejection disguised as civility.

I hadn't expected to feel, as my mother had in Exbury, as though I were in Beaulieu by mistake. I had expected it to feel quite sensible that I was here with Henry, given our closeness, given that I wasn't welcome with Lucy's parents. And yet the strangeness of being somewhere so familiar and finding it unfamiliar...something I wasn't managing to grasp. And the wrongness of not being with Mattie. I felt as if I ought not to be here and that it was a mistake it was too late to do anything about. Her first Christmas would come and go without me.

I don't remember going to church with my mother on Christmas Day although I assume we must have gone. At least I don't remember any jollity. But that morning the congregation was large and chatty, as if they had come to a drinks' party. The women were scented and made-up, with painted lips a similar crimson to the cavernous vault yawning above us, and with eyes dusted gold. They wore chocolate-coloured herring-bone coats and Russian army style hats. Fur-lined boots stamped as we rose and sat again in unison amongst air tinged with sloe-gin breath and the faint smell of oranges amongst the musk and holly. The men in country

tweed. It was as though everyone apart from me had pulled themselves together and cheered up over the last thirty years. I noticed one or two people more than once, an elderly woman I later found out was Joanna Hamilton and on her own because her husband had recently been moved to a care home. She kept dropping her hymn book in the sermon and she left before the end. I was aware of David Turnley before I met him because he coughed and sneezed so much behind his tartan cashmere scarf. I was close enough to him to see the book of common prayer shake in his hands and wondered if his hollow, reddened eyes were just because of a cold. There were children, of course, exhausted already, fiddling with stocking presents in their coat pockets, and shuffling reluctantly around the crib to sing 'Away in a manger.'

'You must come to drinks,' we were told by someone as we were leaving. I shook the vicar's hand who smiled beatifically at me and tried, behind thick-lensed glasses, to meet my eye.

'Happy Christmas,' he said firmly, the insistent smile stretching. 'Happy Christmas.' He covered our clasped palms with his left hand, and I nodded blankly at him before pulling my hand away. I heard Henry tell someone he thought a drink would be very good idea and my heart sank.

'That's marvelous then. You know where we are. See you shortly,' and Henry and I followed the same voice down the path to the cars as it called loudly to this neighbour or that and finally got into a waiting Range Rover. I did not look toward the gravestone in the far western corner although Henry hesitated a little on the path as though giving me the opportunity.

'Shall we go then?' I prompted him.

'We may as well,' Henry said. 'It's Julian and Liz Burrows from Buckledon. It's just down the road. I'm only sorry there's no one your age there but it's still good for you to get out.' As if he were finding me friends to play with. I didn't really mind.

I drove him to the Grange, a house on the other side of the river to Exbury but one I also remembered from my childhood although more from reputation than any insider knowledge. I had been convinced it was haunted. The spinster sister of the man who owned it had been so distraught by having to leave when he married that she had thrown herself from a top floor window on his wedding day. She had not died but been left paralysed and at night, in Exbury, I would float away across the still, wide river and along the dark corridors of the Grange, imagining the squeak of my hamster's wheel to be the whine of her wheelchair being dragged through the shadows. She had stayed in the end - but not, presumably in the manner she meant to. A sepia-coloured photo of her in a four-poster bed had been on display in Beaulieu village hall as part of some historical commemoration and I remember the wizened creature mainly because she was hard to make out, barely there at all, undefined amongst the lace and pillows, pressed into her bed and unable to get away. I had assumed she had loved her brother so much that she couldn't bear to leave him but my mother told me tartly, as we drove home from the historical exhibition, that she was an alcoholic who had despised her sibling and meant to punish him for ruining her life. My mother would have liked to live in Beaulieu; she would have liked to have gone to the Grange for drinks after church on Christmas Day. It was Queen Anne and immaculately presented. Dolls' house perfect. My father, doubtless deep in some legal or judicial tome, if he had come at all, would not have known what to say to anyone and my mother would have filled his silences with nervous, silly trilling.

We filed down the driveway and parked in line one after each other along the avenue.

I took Henry's elbow across the icy paving stones, slipping slightly myself and then said, 'Happy Christmas,' to the small, bony man who was welcoming guests at the door.

'Welcome, welcome,' he said, as profusely as the vicar, only with less sincerity. He was trussed up in a thick tweed jacket that was too broad for his thin shoulders, and looked

strangled by his regimental tie, which perhaps accounted for his rather high voice. Henry held his hand out.

‘Happy Christmas, Julian. This is William Crawford. He’s staying with me.’

He had watchful eyes, a tawny pale hazel colour. He seemed to be staring straight past me. ‘Marvelous. You are most welcome.’

‘Any of your family here?’ queried Henry, still looking out for friends my own age.

‘No. Apparently their turn to go to the in-laws. Again. The out-laws. Quieter the better, I say but Liz misses them.’

‘I’m sorry to hear that. Will was brought up near here. He starts work on the river in the New year.’

‘Ah. The new harbour master?’

I nodded and said something innocuous.

Henry intervened. ‘Will is a very talented and instinctive sailor. The Yacht club will be lucky to have him around.’

Julian Burrows looked slightly taken aback. ‘Sounds over-qualified. How have you ended up back here?’

‘I’m not sure,’ I said.

‘Julian, please go and deal with that blasted smoking fire.’ Lady Burrows had an extraordinarily deep baritone and Julian hurriedly backed towards its commanding pitch, gesturing at a tray of drinks by the grandfather clock. I made my way past one or two other guests to a marble chest. Glasses were lined up amongst fallen poinsettia leaves and cinnamon-and-clove scented candles and I picked a glass of champagne and passed it to Henry, looking around the hall of the Grange. I had never actually even been inside. The corridors I knew were all the nightmarish ones of imagination. Today, though, sprigs of holly and berries were entwined in the ornamental staircase banisters and wooden reindeer sprayed with gold were

positioned around baskets of potpourri, and tartan ribbons were hanging from silver birch lamps. Towering above everything was the tree, liberally doused with silver and white decorations.

I had absolutely no more right to be here on this festive Christmas Day than I had in my tortured dreams thirty years ago. No idea really what I was doing here at all, amongst the alcohol-fueled chatter, amongst people I didn't know or care for. What were Lucy and Mattie doing at that moment, in the house that I had lived in for six years? Did Mattie still have a nap at midday? I tried to conjure their presence, to picture them more clearly but it was impossible to hold on to the thought of them. It was as if I was too far, as if the threads that linked us had been severed so absolutely there was no longer anything left to bind us, however tenuous, and they were fading into the distance even as I tried to focus on them. The smoke drifted from the drawing-room like a fog.

I shook my head and turned back to the drinks tray, Henry whispered something, and I picked up another glass— a raspberry-tinted fizzy thing – and said, 'What was that, Henry? Sorry, I was miles away,' and lifted the drink to my lips, just as a woman I had not noticed before appeared in the hall, drifting toward the drawing-room fug. She had her back to me, and I only just managed to catch the whiteness of her hair, messy and unbrushed above an oversized and dirty looking overcoat - perhaps because the white was accentuated by streaks of pink running through it that were precisely the same colour as my drink. I remember that I saw her from behind and from the very first I had the sense that she was leaving; and the feeling was always thereafter accompanied by the compulsion to rush after her.

'I mean it - don't touch Liz's Bellini's,' said Henry and followed my gaze but the doorway was empty again. 'You will have a headache for days,' and he was tapped on the shoulder by a man dressed in the same military-type tweed suit as Julian and many others, as if they were all toy soldiers. I walked toward the drawing-room, and the cloying smell of the

scented candles that suffused the hall came too, and from somewhere more remote, the rattle and whine of a nineteenth-century wheelchair.

The room was packed, much more so than the hall, and I couldn't get further than the doorway. I sipped my drink, reluctant to join the throng anyway but half searching for the woman with the raspberry-coloured streak in her hair. She stood out rather like a tramp, or something from the river, still with that brown heavy coat on and her long, seaweedy tangles. I glimpsed her again when the guests parted for a caterer, and she was standing by the fire with her arms crossed. I thought she looked faintly repulsive. She looked as if she didn't take care of herself. A woman in a red dress with gold buttons was talking but she herself seemed to be saying very little in return, gazing mutely over the lady's silk shoulder. She swallowed another canapé, wiped her mouth with a hand and tossed back the streaky hair. The svelte woman made excuses and escaped. I didn't see if anyone took her place. It certainly didn't occur to me to talk to her; she incurred nothing in me that dislocated and unhappy Christmas except antipathy.

She didn't materialize in the crowd again. Every now and then someone pushing past with a Bellini in their hand, held aloft and airborne, made me look twice. I may never have known her as the same person again because by the time I saw her next in January, the pink streak had rinsed out as cleanly as if it had never been there at all.

We went to Ted's nursing home in Lymington together because Henry suggested it, at least that's why Celine went. I suspect I went because I knew where it was and so I was useful. I saw Joanna Hamilton around Lymington and had got to know her a bit. I liked her; she was not cowed by her reduced status as nearly-widow (worse than full-on tragic widow) and subsequent move to a flat in town. Her character was illustrated perfectly by her dedication to playing the Alphabet game in church, both loudly and obviously. She would follow the sermon carefully matching the vicar's words to the sequence of the alphabet and if he reached M, she was half-way and he had gone on too long and a hymn book or a prayer book had to be dropped in protest, and/or triumph. If she could get to the letter Z, it was time to walk out. Z was practically impossible, she told me once and when I reminded her she had walked out on Christmas Day, she wrinkled her brow. 'Zachariah? Zebedee?' Unlikely, I replied suspiciously.

I had some time off, so I reiterated the idea of the nursing home to Celine. She agreed because the day was dull, perhaps; rain had soaked through every part of it so far. I remember the windscreen wipers furiously clearing the way ahead, the over-sized puddles like lakes seeping from the Forest. Celine splashed through the downpour in the car park like the sodden, over-excited ponies we'd passed. I'd been planning to stay in the truck because I didn't know Ted and I didn't like hospitals of any sort, but Celine was energised by the rain or the hospital and dragged me in after her, shaking the wet from herself.

I stood near the door in Ted's room and watched her drip water onto his bedcovers and eat all his grapes. She opened the window, and either she or the wind knocked over a vase. I picked the tulips from the floor while she eyed the television balefully and after a few peevish minutes, changed the channel.

‘This programme looks much better,’ she explained to Ted, whose teeth had begun to chatter. ‘I’m good at crosswords. Here, have you got a pen?’

Ted shook his head nervously, and Celine looked at me and then around the room, but no pen materialised. She went into the corridor and didn’t come back. Ted and I listened, companionably enough, to the rain dripping from the gutter. When Celine finally returned, it was with a carer in pale blue scrubs. She must have been grilling the lady for her article.

‘This is Lena,’ she announced, jabbing at Lena’s name tag and Lena looked even more alarmed. ‘Lena is here from Eastern Europe because ironically enough no one in the retirement town of Lymington wants to work in the care home sector.’

Lena closed the window and then busied herself with Ted’s pillows.

‘And now she is worried she will be sent home where she will have to go back to dancing topless for rich Russians.’

Lena looked startled.

‘I think that’s what she said anyway. That because the people of Lymington voted to make it very difficult for Lena to work in the UK, she will have to work in strip clubs in Minsk.’

Ted was blushing.

‘And. She doesn’t have a pen.’ Celine’s voice was quivering with indignation.

When she deemed the visit over, Celine got up to open the window again. She left a damp patch on Ted’s chair.

‘Fresh air,’ she explained sternly to Ted. ‘Don’t forget these,’ and she rattled the pillbox. ‘Today’s pill is still in there.’ She tucked his newspaper under her arm – ‘you’ve read it, haven’t you?’ – and left the door wide open. Even as I was turning round to close it, a sudden gust of wind caused it to smack shut like a hand across a cheek and I heard Ted exclaim in fright.

Radiant, with the rain fresh in her hair, she turned to me by the truck. 'That cheered him up, didn't it?' She was ecstatic with the careless, blowy visit amongst the frail and elderly.

Against all the odds, I think it might have done. Celine's peculiar brand of nurture was not entirely without tenderness. I saw it in the impulsive kiss to Ted's cheek, a kiss that belied the off-hand manner in which it was bestowed. I saw it in the way she filled in his meal choice; with exam-worthy concentration. There was no awkwardness attached to the visit. I admired the way she brought a sort of volatility into the nursing home. It was life, not sympathy, that most people in there wanted.

'Let's stop at this pub,' she ordered and I nodded, then changed my mind. Hugh Whitworth was crossing the carpark with an unfamiliar woman in a nurse's uniform.

'No, let's go for a walk. The rain is stopping slightly.'

'It isn't.'

So I told her about Hugh Whitworth having an affair with the nurse and how miserable they all were.

Her eyes narrowed. 'Does Mary know?'

'Who knows. I expect she has some idea things aren't right.'

'I don't get it, I really don't. Why do they bother? Why doesn't he tell her and leave? Why doesn't he tell her and then she can strangle him. Such a waste, a half-marriage.'

We parked in a layby opposite a gateway to the Forest. The path was narrow and we were unable to walk alongside each other at first so I let her go ahead, a misty figure in her raincoat. The oaks and beech were a canopy of sorts and the further we ventured between them, the quieter she became as if the hissing damp between the trees was having a sobering effect and the mania that had overtaken her in the care home was wearing off in the rain-wet air. Eventually she stopped.

‘It’s a bit creepy in here, isn’t it? And cold.’

We turned back on ourselves instead of doing the circle she’d envisaged, and retraced our steps back through the grey forest, with me leading the way this time.

‘I don’t think I like woodland. Hansel and Gretel used to give me nightmares and I once got lost in some woods.’ She wanted to get back to the sea, to the edge of things. She didn’t like the claustrophobic thickness of the forest. ‘I’m a thalassophile,’ she explained. I looked the meaning up later. ‘Were you happy growing up?’

‘Not especially.’

‘I was. Why did you come back here?’

‘I’ve asked myself the same question. I think because it is somewhere that makes sense to me. It’s a recognisable if not a good pattern.’

I don’t know if that perplexed or bored her. She said: ‘I don’t ever want to go into a home like Ted’s.’

‘They’re meant to be good places. To help you get right to the end.’ I thought of Joanna determined to reach Z in the sermons. ‘They make sense.’

‘Not to me. It’s the idea of never leaving, at least not alive. Of literally waiting to die, in a sugar-coated holding room.’

‘You sound very grim. What happened to your childhood happiness?’

‘I grew up,’ she said witheringly and turned the radio up and shouted at me over it as if she had become angry. ‘Aren’t you hungry? Can we eat now?’

I was quite tired by then, worn out by something. We had walked a long way in the direction of Lyndhurst through the forest, and Celine had drained me of energy. Now she settled back against her seat with a set expression on her face that I took to mean she had become fed up with me.

‘Never mind then. If you don’t want to. Just drop me at the end of the lane, I’ll walk home. A Day in the Life of a carer. I’m glad that’s over.’

*

She always made up for her bouts of strangeness before they had time to lodge and take root in my mind. She altered, shifting shape and temperament before I could hold onto anything, or try to work out her sadness and complexity, and so it was when she appeared on my doorstep the next morning.

‘Joanna dropped some chocolates round earlier, and I thought you should have them.’ She presented the box to me and peeled back the purple tissue as if unveiling precious jewels. ‘Here you are. I didn’t thank you for taking me to see Ted, and I got you absolutely soaking, and I never even stood you lunch.’

I took the chocolates. ‘You’re very welcome.’

And she flashed her grin, razor-sharp and relieved. ‘We’ll go again,’ and she kissed me, on the lips. It was a brief enough kiss but it startled me.

Like two full moons a month, there was either a surplus of happiness (for me, at any rate) or, as in that day in February – a month when there wasn’t a full moon at all – a deficit. We didn’t go back to see Ted again, at least not with each other, but I got used to not knowing; not knowing if this gentle, better part of her nature was the truthful (usually hidden) part, or an aberration. Not knowing which Celine I was going to get. Anyway, Joanna thought she was a saint. Heaven knows what Ted thought.

9th JUNE

I choose the slightly less frayed shirt from three left over from the accountancy years and wonder about being early or late for Celine's dinner.

I was often late for Naomi. It didn't matter, she never seemed to mind but I always felt surprised at how little it bothered her. I was late picking her up for our first official date, but she had been ironing whilst waiting and told me she felt bad for me feeling bad and rushing (I hadn't been either feeling bad or rushing too much). I registered a nudge of dismay at her congeniality.

I arrive on time at Celine's, and so does Rob. We approach her gates warily, like gauche schoolboys, and it is up to Rob to smile and extend his hand. 'We're keen.' He is holding a large bag in the other hand.

I laugh, falsely. 'Just punctual.'

He turns by the porch. 'I should have been sailing today. Assumed I'd be a late arrival actually.'

'Cancelled?'

'Not enough wind to even pretend.'

'I had heard. Disappointing for you.' Usually I would have pushed the door open and called. Because I am with Rob I lift the knocker, demonstrating the appropriate way to approach. We stand there for a while, waiting for a response that doesn't come. Rob scratches his neck and hums a little.

'She might be round the back,' he suggests finally.

We walk round to the garden, jostling shoulders. She is on her swing seat, just staring at the river. She looks up when she hears us. 'There you are,' she calls, in a cheery way that I

don't recognise. 'Gosh, how lovely to see you. I've asked the Whitworths as well so we're a proper party.'

She kisses us both, formally and one after the other. Rob holds out his bag. 'I brought you something.'

'Ooh,' she says and looks at me excitedly. 'Do you know what it is?'

'No, I'm afraid not.'

She peers into the bag. 'Look. Oh, do look. Rob, you're amazing.' She clutches the bag to her chest. 'I couldn't have asked for anything nicer. That is the most thoughtful present.'

'But you've got something like it,' he says abashed, pointing at her swing-seat.

'What is it?' I have to clear my throat.

'Really. The most thoughtful present.'

I turn away. In the kitchen, mixing myself a drink, I'm able to hear the knocker when it bangs. I let Mary and Hugh in. Mary, petite and with flaxen curly hair, looks like a fieldmouse in a blackberry-coloured cardy. Hugh, bespectacled and habitually neat, is less neat than usual. He looks loose at the edges. They both accept a vodka tonic, and Mary watches Celine and Rob in the garden.

'What a pretty picture,' she says sadly. 'Look at those two.'

The present is a hammock. They are tying it between an old plum tree and the silver birch.

'We had a hammock on our old sailing boat, didn't we Mary,' Hugh remembers, and he puts a hand on her small shoulder. She winces.

'A long time ago.'

'They're having some trouble with it,' he says and Mary replies that they should go and help, and say hello, but for whatever reason, none of us move and we all stay in the kitchen, watching them.

‘Hugh, do you think you could give me the number of the solicitor you share an office with?’ I ask.

Hugh nods. ‘Of course. He’s called Graham, he’s very good.’

Celine catches sight of us, lined up against the window. She drops the end of the hammock she has been holding and strides toward the back door, up the steps and into the kitchen.

‘Why are you all hiding in here?’ she exclaims and dutifully, in unison, we turn. ‘Hello, darling Mary,’ she says and she turns to the bottle of vodka on the table. ‘I’ll have what you’re having Will, please. If you don’t mind.’

Celine’s rudeness toward Hugh is her only characteristic behaviour that evening, the only trait of hers that I recognise; at least until she can no longer keep it going. Being a considerate and jolly hostess does not suit her, but that does not prevent her from playing the part. She flits from one topic and one drink to the next, reaching across Mary to place a solicitous hand on Rob’s forearm one minute, encouraging Mary to have seconds the next. I am to her left, although I am used for very little apart from refills and affirmation about something.

‘Do you know,’ Celine whispers at one point, leaning forward theatrically, ‘that Rob hasn’t got a driving licence?’

‘I just never needed one!’ Rob exclaims, inexplicably blushing again. ‘It’s not that odd, is it?’

‘No,’ Mary agrees. ‘I don’t drive if I don’t have to.’

‘I’m not surprised,’ Celine says sweetly, ‘I wouldn’t drive that ancient thing your husband has. It should be target practice.’

Hugh is the founding member of the local Land Rover Association. He loves his Land Rover, adores it even. Even Rob looks uncomfortable. I should never have told Celine about the affair with the trainee nurse.

‘The bus service is good,’ says Mary, awkward. No one supports this contention so she adds, ‘this is truly scrumptious.’

‘Prawn korma?’ guesses Rob. His Australian accent is starting to grate.

‘Well, what else?’ Hugh spots a waspish chance to be in the conversation, but Celine merely closes her eyes to him.

‘You’re a cook, aren’t you Mary,’ she says, when she has opened them again. ‘I’m sure you are quite brilliant. I’m so sorry this is all I’m offering.’

Since when has Celine ever been sorry about anything? I bite down hard on an over-cooked shrimp and succeed in biting the inside of my lip as well. Bloody hurts. Hugh wipes the sweat from his brow and takes his tie off.

‘Land Rover Defenders are an iconic British institution. Mine is a first edition,’ he says. ‘I once drove to Morocco in it. What a great journey. Picked up a load of rugs to sell in Marrakesh.’

Perhaps one of them is laid across the beige hallway in 54 St Cross Avenue, with Chris and Lucy padding over it. Perhaps Mattie is playing in the hot night on its dazzling colour; the grey mizzle of Fort William its next destination.

‘You don’t use it now for anything other than your rather peculiar habit of watching the channel for persecuted refugees,’ says Celine. ‘Probably your carpet-makers.’

‘For illegal immigrants,’ he corrects. ‘Did you see the Navy picked up a boat load of Somalians about twenty miles down the coast?’

‘Were they all right?’ I asked.

‘They were Ethiopian,’ says Celine, quietly, dangerously.

‘Twenty nautical miles?’ asks Rob.

‘It’s the weather, you know,’ says Hugh. ‘That’s why they’re all attempting the channel at the moment. The conditions are so good.’

Mary shudders. ‘I feel so sorry for them.’

Celine says: ‘I feel sorry for you lot,’ and faced with her pity, fierce and withering as the Moroccan desert, we are all silenced. ‘Sorry that was so spicy.’

She pulls the bowl of cherries towards us. Droplets of water still gleam on them and she begins to play *tinker, tailor, soldier, sailor*, first with her discarded stones and then with Mary’s. She announces that Mary will marry a beggar-man and describes a romantic future to her. She is going to be pulled away down a flower-strewn path by a pie-bald horse and he has a caravan, and there is always music tinkling...

‘That’s a tinker,’ interrupts Hugh. ‘You’re describing life with a tinker, if anyone. A beggar-man is going to be in rags on the roadside.’

She taps her stained fingers on the tablecloth. ‘I’m trying to give Mary a better life. Don’t you want the better story, Mary? You don’t have to stay in any old boring story.’

I push my foot against her calf warningly, remembering her disgust with passionless half-marriages. She moves her leg away and then counts my cherry stones. I am also a beggar-man and because no-one attempts to quibble with the story she makes up for me (it isn’t of any interest or meaning), Celine gets bored and doesn’t bother to finish it. My sorry pile of pips is gathered up with a Gallic shrug. This is more like her. There is some relief in her return to short-temper.

‘I’m surprised you went to Morocco, Hugh,’ she says.

‘Why? I thought the souks, the Medina were wonderful.’

‘I just see you as so...English. So...starched sheets and stained radiators. Cold lavender bags that don’t smell of lavender on the pillow. Just not into Morocco.’

‘I get the feeling you’re not being flattering,’ he says, reddening, swelling and even Rob looks confusedly between the two of them.

It is Mary who comes to his rescue. ‘It’s not true, Celine’ she says, loyally, sadly. ‘Hugh loves travel and heat, and all those things. He used to have a share in some land in Andalusia. It was me who wanted to come here.’

We all choose a cherry and think about Hugh in his dusty land rover on the vast plains of Southern Spain and Mary drawing him away from the headiness and glory of it all. Hugh squeezes Mary’s hand. Celine’s vitriol leaks away.

I stay as of guardian of the peace but it isn’t necessary. Celine has shriveled into herself and is monosyllabic and wan. The Whitworths leave after ten minutes and then Rob and I wash up. Celine dries the occasional dish.

We say stilted goodbyes and she crawls listlessly into her armchair like an elderly cat, and we two her little mice. I get into the truck, exhausted myself, and Rob disappears into the darkness toward the river and *Iseult*. There is a moment, when we shake hands, of understanding - but perhaps it is more accurate to say of incomprehension.

10th MARCH / WORM MOON

Spring came late this year. I remember because the clubhouse opened on 9th March, and Julian Burrows had barely finished toasting the sailing season with the usual words about gentlemanly conduct and traditional values, before the snow flurries silenced him. It caught us all unawares, the only snow of the year, piling in from the sky day and night, covering daffodils and mud-splattered verges, and Sheila wasn't able to drive to the Burrows', Hugh couldn't get to the hospital (even in his Land Rover) and the Notts crossed off the calendar days till they could go to Antigua. The drifts swept high and heavy across the seascape. It was not the icy snowfall that settles delicately amidst snowdrops in December and January, it was soft and dumb, like an uninvited and thick-skinned guest.

The truck got me down the road to the beach in Lymington. I walked along the seafront, where the flakes fell faster and I watched them fall and disappear into the water. I thought how spikes of rain glance off the sea like arrows into battlements, but the sea surrenders to snow and accepts its gentle assault. Inland, four or five gannets huddled together around the trunk of a Forest Oak. I moved past them in robotic thuds over the drifts. The gannets flapped into the air on wings of white lead and melted into the flakes of falling snow over the sea.

It was hard to see in the blizzard, and I couldn't make out the figure coming toward me at first. Then I recognized her, or the shape of her. Head down, muffled against the cold, she was struggling against the white-out. She passed, and vanished into a maelstrom of falling snow which, in its thick, treacly tumult, was no longer possible to imagine as the place from where I had just come.

I turned back myself after a while, although not too soon, because it would have felt wrong – or maybe just impossible – to have caught her up, and actually come face to face with her. The tracks she must have made, already covered, as if she hadn't made any. Had she never

been there at all? Had I imagined her? Or was I the invisible trespasser, of whom she had not taken any notice. If not for my clumsy, ungainly stumble through the snow, I might have thought that I were the ghost who passed by so disregarded, and not she.

The snow should not have come, but it did.

An unexpected wind got up early that morning. A grey sun was like a saggy football, thrust about between scudding clouds. The river's choppy water was dark as the steel on a turbulent aeroplane wing and I looked at it dubiously.

'Never mind,' she said. 'Don't let a bit of weather put you off.' She'd been walking in the forest and the smell of pine clung to her wet anorak and hair. She wanted me to take her in the boat to Gull Island. The yellow daffodils on the bank shook in glistening clumps as another gust of wind blasted upriver. There was something about Gull Island, she added. 'I've got to go. It's where the river meets the ocean, and it's the way through and the way out.'

'It'll be blowing a gale out there,' I warned. 'I can't go all the way into the Solent today.'

'I don't want to go there,' she said, curt. 'I want to see the island.' She rubbed her temples and then complained of a headache. 'Can you hear them cutting down trees? It's driving me mad.'

In the distance, chainsaws were stopping and starting like hoarse, barking dogs.

'Shall we go? Can we get out of here? I need you to take me.'

I could see I wasn't going to be able to put her off. 'You don't need me, you need the boat,' I told her.

She disagreed. 'No, I need you to take me there. No one else will do.'

'Unless this 'no one else' happens to have a boat,' I pointed out, teasingly.

She said, 'Oh all right then, yes. Fine. Anyone with a boat will do,' and my foolish smile faded.

She would say at the end of the day, when we were back, in a rather dissatisfied tone: 'You were right. Henry ought to have been the one to take me, really.' The exchange reminded

me of one with Lucy during another unhappy day in St Cross Avenue. Lucy's uneaten lunch (a fishcake), was congealing on her plate, the steriliser hissed and a new-born screamed with reflux in her Moses basket by the kitchen table. Lucy's parents were over from Alresford to help for the day, even though they didn't help, they were just extra adults to cater for. Her mother always feigned surprised to see me there, and the father was always genuinely livid. The four of us sat around the table staring at the fishcake, until Lucy decided, although Mattie cried often, that today was the day to take her to the hospital and find out why. Her parents and I fought over who was to take them and I got my way, but it was an empty victory and the visit was a farcical disaster from start to finish. Mattie cheered up whilst we were waiting and after three hours – we clearly weren't an emergency – we came home again, unseen.

‘How ridiculous,’ the father had spat. ‘How pathetic not to have insisted on a check-up after all that. I would have.’

Later, I overheard Lucy agreeing. ‘Mum ought to have been the one to take me.’

Celine banged my knee from where she was sitting in the boat. ‘Penny for them.’

‘Not worth that.’

‘I insist,’ she said imperiously.

I cast around for something to say. ‘I’ve been asked to take on a little assistant. A friend of Liz Burrow’s granddaughter. Only sixteen - more hindrance than help, do you think?’

Celine answered, surprising me with rare candour. ‘I was only sixteen when my mother left for Australia. To join some happy-clappy church with my step-father.’

‘That can’t have been easy.’

‘No, I don’t suppose it was.’

‘Did you live with your father?’

‘No, he was dead by then. I bounced from school to school, relative to relative. You should take this girl on, it’s good to take a chance on someone. Concentrate, by the way. Your steering’s all over the place.’

‘Charming,’ I muttered.

‘Tell me about this failure of an island.’

‘It’s not a failure.’

‘Yes, it is, it’s not even an island anymore, so it’s a misnomer as well.’

She had made her mind up. Her chin was set, her eyes a reflection of the sky, her hands not trailing the water today but crunched up in her lap, droplets of moisture settling like bulbous insects on the wool of her mittens.

‘Do you want my hat?’ I asked.

‘No thanks.’

‘You can’t necessarily blame anyone for the gulls leaving. Maybe they just left.’

‘Huh. ALL the black-headed gulls. All the common terns and little terns as well.’ She took a mitten off and began to pull at some skin on her chapped lip.

‘Ah, you’ve been talking to Henry.’

She nodded. ‘Of course. Ow.’ Examined something in her fingers, a spot of blood on her lip. ‘He’s the only one with any sense round here.’

‘And what does Henry put their disappearance down to?’

‘Oh,’ she said airily, pressing the back of her hand to her mouth. ‘Something to do with banning egg collecting. What was that anyway?’

‘All the gulls’ eggs used to be collected for safe-keeping in March and April. Otherwise the spring tides just washed over the island and took the eggs with them.’

‘Bloody do-gooders. So all the gulls left, fed up with watching their eggs being washed away.’

‘There’s another theory,’ I said cautiously. ‘That when the island started to erode, they built the causeway between the island and the mainland. So predators were able to cross over.’

‘Henry doesn’t put much store by that one,’ she said dismissively. ‘A couple of foxes aren’t going to wipe out the largest population of black-headed gulls in the south.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘You’ve made yourself bleed.’

She ignored me, putting her mitten back on. As we approached the island, I thought that apart from the wind and the engine there was not anything else to be heard, none of the squawking cacophony that I remembered before the birds vanished. The island took on a sinister aura that I had not before associated with it.

Celine said something but I couldn’t make out what. I cupped my hand to my ear and it seemed to annoy her. She shook her head and didn’t try again, just licked her sore lip. She turned her back to me to face the island and the wind, blowing up a misty storm in the marshy fens.

I cut the engine and let us drift with the tide toward the causeway. ‘There’s no noise anymore. You used to be able to hear the birds before you saw them.’

‘That’s what I was just saying,’ she said accusingly. ‘It’s what Henry says.’

‘Oh right. I know. I couldn’t hear.’ After a while, I added, ‘I think that’s as far we can go.’

‘As far as we can go?’

‘Yes. We’re not allowed on the island you know. In case of disturbing any birds.’

‘Well, there aren’t any bloody birds left, are there. There’s nothing to disturb.’

‘That’s the point. No one’s sure,’ I said patiently. ‘But it’s not worth my job.’

She made a scornful noise. ‘There’s no one about for miles, not for miles. On this godforsaken day. Who’s going to see us?’

I didn't say anything. The boat lurched quietly and unhappily on the water and the island, shrouded in the drizzle, loomed closer.

'You don't care about your job anyway.'

'You don't know that actually. Anyway, landing on Gull Island isn't worth it, that's for sure.'

'Why do you do it? Ferry rich yachties from pontoon to boat and back again. Day in, day out.'

I looked at her and she stared innocently back.

'I don't just do that. It's much more than that. But it isn't forever. And it isn't as monotonous as you just made it out to be.'

'You look pretty bored sometimes.'

'And you know why as well. To be near Mattie.'

'Well, near enough. Not *that* near.'

And the boat ran aground. There was the sound of the bottom hitting and then scraping the shingle and we stopped. The wind, that had blown us here in a bad-tempered gale, died away and left us pinned to the pebbles on the edge of Gull Island, Celine gazing steadily at me and my heart thumping uncomfortably. 'As you say, near enough. Her birthday's coming up. March 23rd.'

'What is it they say? Walk at one, talk at two?'

'She's not walking.'

'Well,' she said, 'She will do. I don't know why parents get their knickers in such a twist about milestones.'

'I'm not,' I said, wondering if Lucy was.

'Come on. I'm getting out even if you're not. I promised Henry I'd have a look for any sign of these ducks. Whatever they are. Gulls.'

The bladderwrack popped as she jumped out and over its rubbery thickness. I stayed where I was, watching her disappear into the fog.

I waited for her in the channel, no doubt a foolish sight, a man in oilskins just waiting, bobbing in the cold— she was perhaps half an hour — and when she materialised again I motored in to get her. We didn't speak much on the return journey, only for as much as it took for her to report no sightings and to say that it was an unappealing place.

'Unappealing?'

'That's what I said.'

'What did you mean?'

'I was expecting it to be quiet, but not quite so deserted. Nothing there at all. So stark, and so gloomy. There's not a trace of anything, let alone any birds. It's so empty.'

I said, 'The weather doesn't help,' or something like that, and she gave the asinine comment the withering look it deserved.

After a while, I couldn't bear the silence so I tried once more. 'Don't forget the clocks go forward next weekend.'

'Forward or back? It's anyone's guess, isn't it.'

'No, it's a fact, they go forward. British summertime.'

'There ought to be a rhyme so I can remember.'

'There is,' I said, thinking of my mother standing by the lace curtain, kitchen clock in hand, but Celine didn't appear to hear me. She didn't really want the rhyme, I thought. She didn't want anything bent into natty soundbites. She wanted to be confused and surprised by things. Well. Either way, she ignored the idiocy of my recital. 'Spring forward, fall back.' The drizzle on her pale face was like a film of sweat. She looked ill, or choleric with bad temper. 'Why are you being so vile?'

She was about to snap again, I think, but she paused, drew in her breath and straightened her back. ‘We’d better just go home.’ And then the chainsaws from the forest started up again, sounding like the distant pack of coughing dogs had come closer. ‘Oh god,’ she said, and put her head in her hands. ‘I need some sleep. I’m sorry.’

When she’d gone, I stood for a while on the jetty, staring upstream toward Beaulieu. The mist was coming down again and it began to seem to me, as I stood there alone in the fog as though I wasn’t quite there. It felt that when she left, Celine always took some fractured pieces of myself with her. I pinched my thumb and could not feel it, my breath evaporated as soon as it hit the freezing air. My neck was damp and cold, like a ghost had wound itself around it. The heron took no notice of me; it had not acknowledged my presence at all.

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I think I’ve remembered the awfulness of the trip to Gull Island accurately but perhaps not. I don’t find it easy to recall our fights. Sometimes I wonder – hope – if she hadn’t been that awful after all. Perhaps I was trying to find the reason Naomi’s invitation appealed. That evening she sent me a WhatsApp suggesting an evening out in the bright lights of Southampton. It suddenly seemed tempting, even important, to accept the invite; that to do so would be the most enormous relief. Like drawing a splinter from a wound. Or was it not so much to do with Naomi and more to do with a wish to punish Celine? If so, what a pointless, pointless desire. Celine could not have cared less.

I think I’d had enough, again – yet another short-lived burst of exasperation – of Celine’s carping, and her upside down and sideways sentences. I was tired and dinner sounded reasonable and reassuringly normal. The sort of thing I should be doing. I wasn’t sure yet how to reply, but either way, it was always as if Naomi was attached, by dour comparison, to Celine

in one way or another. She rarely, if ever, existed for me in completeness, on her own. She was forever justified, or not, by however Celine had made me feel.

11th JUNE

The warm air from the Sahara was anticipated with disbelieving pleasure in May but now it is here, mainly wished away. The windless sky is frustrating for sailors; unnerving for everyone. The Yacht club has become, in a few short days, a place of confused irascibility. No one can stand the loss of our fresh, on-shore breeze.

Rob Sinclair has been doing something on *Iseult* all day. Perhaps the steering is faulty. He has been alternately at her wheel and underneath her hull, diving into the river, up and down the steps at the back, since lunch. Now, as the heat cools, he circles widely and deliberately in front of the Club, testing something. His manner seems almost gladiatorial, the engine revving and coughing. Flags fluttering, seagulls calling high above her rigging and behind him the sky is shredding into crimson ribbons. The exotic hues of the flowers on Warren Shore are the background; the green-winged orchids and purple hairstreak butterflies. Yellow-horned poppy. The white spray around *Iseult*'s bow.

Julian Burrows and Hugh Whitworth have been drinking outside the clubhouse.

'Rob is such a nice chap,' says Julian.

Hugh isn't so certain but perhaps it is the memory of Celine's hot kitchen and her burning prawn korma that causes his hesitation. 'Mary certainly thinks so.'

'No doubt he's an asset to Buckledon. To the club. To the river. We'll have him up to the Grange soon.' Julian almost purrs. 'But he seems to be spending a lot of his time with Celine. Liz tells me he's having supper there tonight.'

'Will,' remembers Hugh. 'Did you get in touch with Graham? I sent you his number.'

'What do you want with a solicitor?' asks Julian.

'I don't,' I tell him shortly, 'want anything with a solicitor.'

'You wanted a lawyer, didn't you?' supplies Hugh.

‘I haven’t rung him yet.’

The tide listlessly dribbles away, leaves the desiccated wing of a seagull or pigeon on the shore beneath us. Everything is so dry now, the seaweed cracks like tiny bones underfoot. The air smells of rotting fish. What is Rob doing at Celine’s, again? Hugh, ever slavish, wanders off to get Julian another Pimm’s. I watch him from the jetty talking to Judy, take his panama off to wipe his brow and carefully carry the drinks out again.

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Later I drive to Naomi’s, not caring who sees me, and find her alone. Her wide smile does not quite hide the relief that induced it.

‘If I’d known you were coming, I’d have tidied up.’

I say, “please don’t ever do anything on my account,” and notice, not without shame, how bland her house is, and kiss her to disguise the lack of..., well, just the lack. Nothing alters internally, even when her kiss deepens. How un-erotic her pleasantness is. How controlled and neat everything feels. The lack of colour and of abundance. Naomi’s tenderness is like trying to strike damp matches.

In the garden down the road, in my mind’s eye, Celine rises regally from a rug, and stiff from her vigil, her thoughts turn to supper. She flexes her long fingers and casts her pencil into the grass.

‘Can I do anything?’ I ask, standing in the doorway to Naomi’s kitchen. Two oversized canvas photographs of her son on the wall are making me feel more claustrophobic than usual. They are square and pastel-coloured. Combed hair and collared shirt; the images bear no resemblance to the boy I know. It’s a fake.

‘Um,’ Naomi is saying, contemplating saucepans, self-consciously.

It’s all these moments that Celine has when I’m not there, it’s not being in her moments. I’d minded, probably, even before Rob, but he gives them a spikiness, these moments of exclusion.

I turn away, with my drink, to the sofa. The stained pink and cream tartan rug covers it tonight; it is usually removed, when Naomi has warning I am coming. The oval pine table still has the single candle on it from another evening. Picking up the lighter next to it, I light the candle and turn the overhead lights off but the effect is to make the room look gloomy, so I put them on again and the room is garish once more. There is a neatly-stacked pile of magazines next to a box of tissues. A pile of bills stapled to a folder. An opened and half-eaten packet of digestives, re-sealed with a plastic clip. There is nothing in the mundane ordinariness in the room that does not remind me, each way I look, of the dazzling, worrying muddle in Celine’s house.

Did he go to her, as soon as he could, the steering finally fixed? I imagine her waiting, barefoot and increasingly stern as the evening light fades. Sullen now possibly, curled tight in the dusky hammock, fingers thrumming against temple, glass and notebook. I suppose her Medusa-like stares as he walks into the garden do not put him off. It is twilight now, almost the longest day of the year, and so warm. A witching hour, of sorts. The river will be stiller than ever, still and opaque with mayflies and gnats crowding drunkly on its surface. The sun will be crashing through molten clouds to the west and the ponies in the fields beneath it nuzzling disconsolately at the cracked earth.

‘Do you like boiled potatoes?’ asks Naomi. ‘You know, I’m a bit stumped tonight. If you will insist on just turning up...’ Without response, her teasing grin peters out.

‘Yes,’ I tell her, ‘I do,’ but I don’t.

‘I’ve got some white wine. Warm,’ she adds apologetically. Celine likes to make negronis on summer evenings and she drinks one strong, blood-orange one, very quickly. Does Rob make them, and carry them out to the hammock? ‘What I have got,’ Naomi is pleased with herself, ‘is fish. Fresh from the market.’

‘It wouldn’t be fresh today,’ and I can’t help it. ‘There wasn’t a market.’

She tries to make the hurt on her face into something else but it’s too late, I’ve seen it and mainly I just wish I hadn’t seen it.

‘I froze it last week,’ she says.

I want to concentrate on the hammock where there is nothing to hear but the lapwing on the river and the yellowhammer in the hedgerow on the lane. The moon, if Celine is bothered to notice, is a waning crescent and will be rising soon. She will probably need her shawl by now, but she will be relieved to need it, she does not enjoy the heat which brings a thin sheen of sweat to her upper lip and forehead and makes her cross.

‘Will? Are you okay?’

If you have to ask if someone is okay you should know they aren’t. ‘Fine,’ I reply.

Naomi is uncertain with a jug of something in her hand. The oven gloves in the other. She doesn’t know what she should do with me. Lucy had not known what to do with me.

‘I’m being a jerk tonight. I’m sorry.’ That thing with me, the knowledge that I am out of sync, and wrong; a memory that catches at my mind like a nerve. ‘I’m not sure why. I’m sorry.’

I hold out my hand to her because she can’t take it, not with the jug in one of her hands, and the oven gloves in the other; but she lets the gloves fall and squeezes my lifeless fingers gratefully. I wait, staring at the carpet, for her to tell me not to be a jerk. Choose not to be a jerk. But there is only her anxious grip on my knuckles and the anxious silence and me, as usual, unable to fill it.

It was bitterly cold again. The stars were frozen to the sky, glittering against their jet-black canvas. Two or three fell as I drove toward the wood, seemed to pull themselves from their glue, and plummet toward the clumps of New Forest Oaks. There was no moon that was visible from the earth that night.

On the other side of the wood, the headlights flickered over the dilapidated BUCKLEDON sign. The lights were off at the Whitworth's and at the Nott's houses. I drove slowly down the track toward the little white cottage, the gravel shimmering ahead and the whole world seemingly abandoned on this empty, icy night.

I climbed out of the truck and felt that it was too cold even for wind, as though the atmosphere was arrested by the chill, holding its breath. I stood for a minute in the utter silence by the river, listening to the silence and watching the stars in the water; rippling now, loose and easy on the tide. A fish jumped a little way out and just for a minute the stars vanished in the splash, sucked from the surface of the river like the falling ones from the sky.

I opened her gates and walked through to the front. I was anxious because although I had seen her since the trip to Gull Island, it had not been mentioned. I was nervous (and curious), about which Celine I was going to get tonight.

I pulled the brass knocker. From within the cottage – silence. I looked in vain for a doorbell. I banged on the door with my fist and the door flew open.

‘Next time,’ she said, ‘just walk right in.’

She slid away from me on thick socks across the stone slabs in her hallway. ‘Welcome,’ she said, and with a flourish, added, ‘Come in, by the little stove.’

I noticed her walking boots and her wellies shoved behind a log basket. A laundry basket half-way up the stairs. She had perhaps swept the floor but left the brush leaning against

a doorway. A fire was in the kitchen, burning in a wood-burner. A small red Aga at the other end and between the two, a kitchen table covered with notepads, biros and her computer. She flicked it shut as she skated over to the Aga. She was wearing a chunky grey cardigan over a dress and, shivering dramatically, she hauled herself onto it. She wrapped her arms about her knees.

‘As cold as bloody Russia here. I’ve got a blocked nose. Is the river frozen?’

‘No. It’s not Siberia.’ I sat in the armchair by the wood-burner. Lupine in her woolly cardigan and fluffy socks, she considered me. The cubby hole of the Aga was like a dimly-lit cave.

‘You can have a drink if you know why you’re here.’

She was regarding me quite solemnly, so I thought about it, and then said, ‘I’ve no idea why I’m here.’

‘Come on. You do.’

I didn’t want to disappoint her and said so, but also that it was the truth.

‘Fine. It’s a new moon. That’s a good reason to toast each other, isn’t it? There’s lots of symbolism around the potential of a new moon, you know. Setting new goals, that sort of thing.’

“Is there? I thought it was just when you can’t see the moon from earth.”

‘But it’s still there.’ She sneezed and wiped her nose with the woolly sleeve. ‘It looks as though it isn’t because it’s in darkness, but it is. And a few days later, the crescent sliver is visible. A young moon, which is a sweet name, don’t you think?’ When she spoke of such things, she straightened her spine so she could not be accused of sentimentality.

‘You know more about it than I do,’ I said.

‘What even is someone who knows about the moon called? Perhaps I’ll be her for my next Friday column. A moon expert.’ I didn’t know; and she didn’t wait, hopping off the Aga

to look up the answer, perhaps.

‘But drinks needn’t be for a reason,’ I said. ‘Does there have to be a reason for us to have a drink?’

‘I quite like reasons,’ she mused, looking under piles of paper. ‘What would you like?’ Just trying to remember if I’ve got any vodka.’

But she didn’t move and kept the concentrated expression on her face. She went somewhere, I think, at times like that. I don’t know where. Something flitting through her mind that she didn’t want to turn away from, that she wanted to stay with. And finally, a sigh, and with it, the search for whatever abandoned or forgotten.

‘I bet I definitely don’t have any tonic.’ She buried herself in the fridge at the other end of the kitchen and confirmed her suspicion. ‘It’ll be vodka on the rocks. You know,’ she said, still thoughtful, with her back to me. ‘There was another reason, and even if you don’t need one, here it is. I’m sorry about how I was when we went to Gull Island.’

I cleared my throat. ‘It doesn’t matter.’

‘It does, but thanks anyway. You’re very forgiving.’ She turned around, brandishing a bottle.

I took the vodka, and said, ‘I’m not. Lucy says I’m stubborn and immovable.’ I hadn’t meant to bring Lucy into the conversation, but I didn’t want to stay in the murky territory of compliments. ‘Where do you keep your glasses?’

‘Perhaps,’ she said, indignantly, ‘Lucy doesn’t deserve forgiveness. Here.’

I poured a measure into the tumblers she passed. ‘I just couldn’t move on. I was so convinced she planned the pregnancy.’

‘Tricked you, rather.’

‘I didn’t think about anything else for about six months and then I left. Very unforgiving.’

‘Ice,’ and she pushed a handful into my palm. ‘I don’t want to put the cat among the

proverbial birds. But it must be really complicated for you.'

I didn't say anything for a while, and when I looked up, Celine had downed her vodka and was rattling the ice in her frosty tumbler. Her grey eyes were silvery sad.

'Pigeons,' I said.

'Because Lucy got what she wanted, didn't she? The baby and the nice man tied to her forever because of it.'

'Genuinely - she isn't like that. And I'm not the nice man in this scenario. She's seeing someone from the army who does a much better job of it all than me.'

'They're lucky to have you still on the scene at all. You're still around.'

'Hardly. I don't visit much.'

'You'll start going more.' She nodded firmly. 'You'll be there for them, I'm sure of it.'

I stared at her and to my horror, some tears pinched behind my eyes. She was so matter of fact, she made it sound as though it was going to work out. She made it sound as though I would be worthy of them.

'I don't think you ought to beat yourself up. You're still here, rattling down the motorway when you can. And she played a rotten trick on you, if it was one.'

'She swears not.'

'And you believe her.' She tipped the glass against her mouth once more and her lips came away shining with the vodka. 'Another one?'

'Yes,' I said, and held out my glass. 'Yes, please.'

Like the heady Russian vodka, she was a redemptive shot of adrenalin, and as the drink flooded through me, so too did some relief, a sharp sense of vindication, and the possibility that it wasn't my fault that I felt the way I did; both unforgiven and unforgiving. And crucially, that it needn't be that way forever, that I could start again with Mattie.

Celine sat in her small armchair one side of the wood-burner and I, spellbound, sat the other, with the bottle at our feet between us. We drank the vodka late into the moonless night, and I watched her long fingers pick at the stuffing coming through the chair, and her sharp, witchy silhouette darken and soften. I forgot about how she had acted only two days earlier, and forgot about Naomi, who would somehow, wrongly, become more mixed up with the memory of the trip to Gull Island than Celine. Strange how we place things that don't belong together side by side in our memories, and let them live there in unhappy mismatch, but I blame the vodka, and I blame the trickery of the moon that was both there, and not there with the selenophile and me, that night of absolution.

Between finding Alex in the playground and finding Naomi on my doorstep, I went to Winchester for Mattie's first birthday party. Lucy and Naomi are very alike in some ways. They are driven by good sense and want to do the right thing. (Celine thrives on doing the wrong thing.) Both Lucy and Naomi want nothing more than an easy life. (Celine flourishes faced with impediment). One point of difference: Naomi still had some sympathy for me in March, but she didn't know me, and Lucy who did know me, had very little sympathy. I had enjoyed the cup of tea at Naomi's house, and I would get back to her pushing something through my letterbox, and in between I would spend an afternoon at Lucy's for Mattie's first birthday. It made sense to go between them. It ought to have always been that simple.

A woman with a baby on each of her hips opened the door to my old house. She stared at me suspiciously, her large frame blocking the doorway. I could hear the shrieks of toddlers behind her. 'Can I help you?'

'I'm Will,' and she looked blank. 'Mattie's father.'

'Really? Mattie's Dad?' She shut the door behind me and the cat flap shuddered.

'Yes,' I said, 'really.'

'We haven't met before, have we.' The disbelief had been replaced with a frank interest, laced with disapproval. 'I'm Sue. Mattie's quite the poppet isn't she? Not like my little monsters. Timid, though,' and she looked accusing as if she had suddenly worked out the reason for Mattie's timidity.

She was solemn at first; maybe suspicious of all the people and the unlimited cake, at least until she succumbed to the sugar and the attention and then she joined in, tentatively at first and then with abandonment. I imagined she stayed closer to me than she might otherwise

have done, and I thought I caught a flash of recognition in her unguarded eyes every now and then.

Lucy was equally manic, and her friends with their unattractive off-spring, cross and impatient about something or everything.

‘She can’t eat that,’ one of them told me, as I handed Mattie a grape. ‘You’re supposed to cut them in half.’ The offensive grape was snatched away. I tried again. ‘This way. Not that way.’ They all exchanged pained looks. Mattie went back to the chocolate, hiding behind me.

Chris was solicitous as ever. He arrived shortly after I did, not in his combats for once, but in a clown outfit. He was wearing those over-sized clown feet and had a large yellow flower pinned to an orange checked suit that squirted water when you pressed the centre, which I did not but Sue, who had opened the door to me, liked to do with fat finger and girlish giggle every time she sauntered past. Mattie screamed in fear with every sighting of him.

Lucy, her mania subsiding, put me on tea duty so the kettle and I embarked on a round of boiling and pouring. I made polite small talk and watched Mattie out of the corner of my eye, now parked a little way off in her highchair, somehow isolated and not really a part of her birthday scene. Everyone now and then, as if she remembered not to forget her, Lucy cried, in her false and harassed way: ‘Where’s the birthday girl? How’s the birthday girl doing?’ and everyone duly turned and cooed at the figure lolling to the side of her chair, grimly clutching the party sausage in her sweaty palm.

A dark-haired boy – one of the little monsters – started popping balloons which set his brother off and the kitchen became a melting pot of screams, sticky fingers and chubby cheeks puce with anger. Another balloon popped. Sue ate another sausage roll. Lucy brought the cake out and started looking for some matches, wet-wipes in one hand, candle in the other.

‘You might have to rub two sticks together,’ Sue said slyly to Chris, reaching forward to jab at his flower, and he didn’t have to do that, but he did produce a lighter from the back of

a drawer. We sung a laborious and tuneless happy birthday to an unimpressed Mattie, by now limp with tiredness. I picked her up and she did not resist.

‘If she sleeps now, she’ll give Lucy hell at bedtime,’ warned Sue. ‘Here, I’ll keep her up.’

I turned my back on Sue and caught Chris’s eye.

‘She’s had enough, hasn’t she,’ he said.

I nodded. Lucy, on bended knee with dustpan and brush in hand, looked up at us warily.

Chris pulled his orange wig off and ran his hand over his head. ‘I think parents do it because they feel they have to, not because anyone enjoys it much.’

Sue, making a dent in the sofa with a cup of tea and a pink cupcake, looked as if she felt differently.

‘It gives the other mothers a break,’ I said sourly. ‘Not sure how much it has to do with Mattie.’

‘Nice to have the photos,’ Chris supposed. I had filmed the singing for Lucy, trying so hard to give me jobs.

‘It’s a milestone. One year old,’ I said.

‘It is indeed. A milestone.’

And neither of us knew what to say after that, both horribly aware of the events of Mattie’s first year, the months split almost equally between us. I think he didn’t know if he ought to apologise or criticise, and I didn’t know if I should thank him or punch him (an unlikely and foolhardy option). We didn’t say anything.

‘Everything all right?’ asked Lucy.

‘It will be when I can get out of this costume,’ Chris said. ‘I’m not cut out for this at all.’

It was true; he wasn’t. It ought to have been me dressed as the clown.

‘I should be on my way,’ I said to no one.

‘Already?’ This was Sue from the sofa. ‘Men are always the first to scarper when there’s a mess to clear.’

‘Anything I can do, Lucy?’

Lucy shook her head. ‘Or, actually, when you go, can you take the rubbish out?’

‘I did that a second ago,’ said Chris. A small pause, and then he added, ‘But there’s probably another bag full again already. In this bomb site.’

Divested by now of his clown outfit, he was back to being Chris again. It was still impossible to hate this soldier, whose return from Afghanistan effectively precipitated my departure; although I’m pretty sure I had gone already. Chris fills the crevasses carved into his psyche by war with sensible and pragmatic civility. He’s better suited to Lucy than me – or better for her – and probably always was. Lucy’s father obviously thought so and always kept in touch with the McNeill’s, and I’ve no doubt he was the one who encouraged Book Club in Alresford. Chris returned from the abyss heroically, to fanfare both from the military and Lucy’s parents, more than able despite his trauma, to look after Lucy and Mattie (in between some sort of confidential and crucial anti-terrorism work). One memorable occasion, Lucy’s father pretty much asked me to do them all a favour and leave. And I remember thinking that I could prove him wrong. He hadn’t underestimated me after all, but much to his badly-concealed irritation, I didn’t leave immediately. It took a bit longer before I realised I couldn’t tick all of his boxes and then came the vitriol, followed by the unravelling and finally nothing. Nothing apart from the boxes un-ticking faster than we could keep up with. I ended up slinking off to Henry’s. And leaving Mattie, my enigma, who has retained all elements of trickery about her. She was conjured out of longing, and resistance. Ever since she was born, I have lived with a bundle of contradictions.

It might have been some consolation that Mattie started crying when I left but I don't think anyone pretended her tears were connected to my departure. I hated going, and I thought the fact that I had to, punishment enough; but actually, when I turned at the door and saw the three of them with their arms wrapped around each other at the end of the hallway and heard Mattie's sobs subsiding to juddery gulps, agony pulled slowly through me like a second turn on the rack. I had no business being there at all.

Unsure what to do with it, I left my present on the stairs. It was a picture of *The Owl and the Pussycat* from the Sandy Gallery in Lymington. They are far out to sea under the stars and the figures are illuminated by the light of the moon.

*

Naomi was on my doorstep when I got home. I had no conscious wish to embark on an affair but jealousy, ignited by Chris's easy intimacy with my family, was partially soothed by Naomi. I was not entirely alone in the cold. Naomi was there. Like Lucy, but different, someone who I had not yet hurt. She was pushing a scrap of paper through the letterbox, her embarrassment at being caught there was endearing, and I realised I wasn't unhappy to see her. I was never unhappy to see her, not at first. I hadn't got back to her WhatsApp about going out together under the bright lights, but I promised to be in touch with her this time, and over the next two weeks we started up what passed as our relationship.

But that evening, when she had gone, I replied to a message from Celine. She had a unique way of composing them, as if she was writing in stream of consciousness. Some people text with business-like efficiency, leaving out words and abbreviating sentences. It makes them seem indifferent. Me, apparently. Celine texted her entire head of thoughts as if words were building blocks; defensive sandbags. She didn't miss anything out. But her messages, piling

uselessly high against leaks and cracks, were misleading because they took no account of their pointlessness. They made her seem committed, but in reality, she was irresolute and the words were just covering up the chaos. Her texts weren't that different to Alex's meaningless, illegible story, the story that apparently he wanted me to see and Naomi had been delivering. Just words, with anything to read into them if one chose; or nothing.

12th JUNE

The tide is at its zenith: water has rushed in from the sea, and is resting now, or perhaps already looking toward departure. Just waiting. Beneath its smooth surface, it teems with the varying components of its life. A push here and now there, the innards of the river shift and bulge like a foetus. Grey mullet and very occasionally sea bass, as well as more constant companions; glistening black eels and the moon jellyfish that drift translucently above them in ghostly, tidal clumps. Crabs the size of ten pence pieces cover the banks like dirty grey snow. A pair of cormorants, all neck and sharpness, eye them from above.

‘Come into the shade,’ I tell a listless Alice. ‘You’ll get sunstroke.’

She doesn’t move. The air so heavy it is visible, shimmering in waves above the river. I get up myself, and going into the office, ring Graham the solicitor on the number Hugh had given me.

‘Graham? My name is Will Crawford, I’m a friend of Hugh Whitworth’s. I’m not sure you can help but...’

‘I’ll do my best. Lucky you caught me, but I’ve got a few minutes spare before a meeting.’

‘I think I’m after a recommendation. It’s an issue concerning family law.’

‘Right-o. Which area are we talking about it? I can help if it’s a will or a legal document you need drawing up. That sort of thing.’

‘It’s child custody.’

‘Okay. Definitely not my bag. But, you’re in luck. My daughter is an expert. She works for a practice in Southampton called Rathbones. Her name is Angela Jameson. I’ll give you the number.’

He gives me the number, and wishes me luck, and a good day before hanging up.

Back outside, I flop into the chair. Graham obviously relied on a lot of luck.

‘Did you know,’ says Alice, looking up from her phone, ‘I’ve been thinking about leaving at the end of the summer.’

Rob comes around the bend in the river from his mooring in that snazzy tender. It glides through the thick, milky water to the jetty. I watch him climb out, take his lifejacket off and toss it into the tender. ‘Where will you go?’

‘I’ll go travelling.’

‘You’re still young. Plenty of time for all that. I thought you might go back to school.’

Rob takes his cap off and runs his hand through his dark head of hair before replacing it. Then he leans back into the tender and extracts a small squashy hold-all from its depths and strides up the jetty towards us.

‘Celine thinks travelling is a good idea.’

I suppose she does. ‘I bet you haven’t talked to your mother.’

‘Course not.’ Things are clear for Alice. So simple. I cannot even decide whether it would be courageous or cruel to ring a lawyer.

‘Morning guys,’ Rob calls up to us from underneath the veranda.

Alice raises her hand in lacklustre response.

After a while, I wander down the jetty and check his boat. It’s pretty ship-shape. It’s tidy and not badly looked after, I suppose, all things being equal. Without really needing to, I untie, change some ropes over and tie up again, and make a mental note to ask him to use more fenders.

Alice has moved into the shade and fallen asleep in her chair. Even the sandpipers are quiet for once and the argumentative redshanks have called a truce. Seagulls are jostling for shade under the musty awning of Ted Hamilton’s disused boat. The river is like concrete. Nothing seems to be happening this afternoon at all. I smear some sun-cream over my face and

pull some weeds from the small flowerbed outside the club. When it hadn't been so hot, Celine might have come outside to talk, but June has discarded something more than the previous month, something that was there before... the heat has drawn something from the cooler months and let it go. I imagine her tossing and turning in her swing-seat – no, the new hammock – pencil chewed between her teeth. Or in the kitchen, her cotton curtains pulled across the windows like Indian chik blinds.

Alice is laughing. 'I fell asleep,' she is saying, chuckling to herself, the laugh whistling through the stud in her tongue. 'I fell asleep, can you believe it.' She gets her phone out to tell someone because no detail of her day goes unrecorded or unphotographed.

At the end of the flower bed, between cornflowers and river, the crimson anemones nod in a brief breeze. The bees, sighing, flop into their petals. No sign of Rob returning. No decision about ringing Angela Jameson.

13th JUNE

The heat clings to me at night, is briefly cooler at dawn and then tightens its hold again. Just a sheet over my legs; I kick at it. I haven't seen Naomi since Monday evening. Fish, surprisingly fresh, and boiled potatoes. White, warm wine, and cloudy like the river's sluggish tide.

At the window, the Isle of Wight is already dissolving into a misty African haze and the brown fields are like scrubland. The dead and greying trunks of trees, victims of last year's gale, look like fallen hippo dotted on a prairie.

Downstairs. The sea glitters like a mirage. Sailing east, a large yacht is hoisting her sails, the burnt ochre canvas flung against the sky; a washed-out night sky, sleep-muffled and puffy still.

Into the garden. Even after just two weeks of drought, it is collapsing around me, dull leaves shrivelling, everything turned in on itself to escape the unnatural heat. A clump of orange berries alone stand out in the aridity, a glossy vitamin C colour. Cuckoopint? Poisonous? If I had a child here, presumably I would have to dig the plant up.

A movement in the bush. A scraping, like a snake, and when I part the shrub I am confronted not with a reptile, but with the wide and frightened eyes of a young and enormous bird of prey. Shocked, I step back.

The bird is hunched over, keeling forward with neck bowed, supported by its wings. Coming closer again, I can see that its adolescent feathers are matted with a sticky greyness, the pallor of an old man. Its legs seem to have given way, its wings are its crutches. It is sinking into the ground, becoming skeletal before me. Flies which had scattered, resume their careless assault, unbothered by my presence. The bird opens and closes its beak silently.

In the house, I fill a bowl with water and take it into the garden. Unable to actually move its body, its dark eyes shift this way and that like a Dalek caught between panic and rage.

A pair of buzzards are wheeling above the garden, two black spots in the sky. Their cries are ones of intense distress.

Naomi messages as I'm leaving. She wants to know if I'm being 'aloof' or if it is her mistake. There is a French-English dictionary on her bedside table, perhaps she found her word (too polite) in that. Like a thesaurus, often a translation will get the gist but not the nub of the matter. I wish she would just put the knife in.

During the winter months, the river had been empty of boat and colour. It was a sliver of water snaking its way backwards and forwards, nothing more and nothing less than the phenomenon of tide. Sometimes frothing, made mad with wind, sometimes still and black as tarmac. Celine was a vague, unsubstantiated presence that seemed a part of it. I would glimpse her on the shore alongside it, but intermittently, because as she followed the curve of the river she would disappear in and out of sight, then materialise like a ghost on the next spit of land or another. She had a curious, stilted way of walking, that if I didn't know better I would conclude was self-conscious, her face tilted skywards to follow the arc of overhead geese, then at her feet, searching the sand for whatever it was she was looking. Sometimes she sat against a piece of driftwood, twisting salty bits of rope around her slender wrists, clutching fronds of pallid seaweed like bandages to her chest.

Occasionally I was instructed to come and collect her and I always did so with some sort of relief. She came back once to where I was waiting in the boat with some starfish that had washed up on the beach; a handful of pale-pink in her bruise-coloured glove. They were dead, or so she insisted, and she had stared at their bloodless forms, growing paler before my eyes, lifeless like the starfish. A green tinge to her face, and her eyes sunken, thinking of what terrible salty thing of the sea had done this. She left the starfish on the tideline and didn't mention them again although I sensed her thoughts returning to the invertebrates and the granular, brittle

bodies that had hardened before us.

She became less hesitant. She knew where she was and the river knew her. The ghostly outline of her wintry form slowly filled with colour, imprinting itself onto the landscape; a streak of scarlet or green or white amongst the reed warblers and the whitethroats, still searching the shoreline with undiminished concentration. The swifts, drawn to the far reaches of watery land with her, darted anxiously above her downcast head. She clambered over sandwort and bank as though she were a mountaineer, indelicate and determined, inhibiting skirts getting in the way. She would wade out to where the Dory hovered, bedraggled, strung about with shells and tiny crab carcasses that crumbled like yellowing parchment in her fingers. Laden with white handfuls of miniature star-shaped flowers, of creamy discarded eggshells. A dead, Prussian-blue butterfly. She collected these things seriously and meticulously, as if the scavenging was an assignment she had committed to but I noticed that her gatherings were invariably discarded at some point. She would always drop what she had been clutching and often in the boat. Trailing a cold hand through the water, she quietly unfurled her palm and let the flotsam and jetsam go. I assumed it was because shortly after the moment of collection she found her pickings didn't mean anything to her after all.

Much later I realised that she hadn't let go of her findings because they didn't mean anything to her. I think they meant everything to her, but in the ransacking of the tide's debris, she felt she was taking what ought to have been left. The disappearance of small things seemed to upset her and she preferred to leave the glistening shell – whatever it was – where it belonged. She knew such things, proven by the dead starfish, did not survive far from the depths of the sea.

When I get back from the crowded, rainbow river, with no sighting of Celine, I return to the shrubbery. The heat has intensified; so too have the flies. The bird's eyes are half-closed now.

Despairing, I reach forward. He rises against me but has no strength to fight when I pick him up. The talons that curl softly around my fingers are not, despite his intentions, threatening. I put him in an open box in the shed and leave the box in the dark and then I dig up the cuckoopint, the juice spurting from the berries staining unexpectedly dark. I message Naomi back with rust-coloured fingers telling her I was sorry. She would have liked to have got more from me but self-loathing, sticky and congealed, is best kept to oneself, tightly packed in.

14th JUNE

‘If you see Celine, could you possibly be a brick and do something for me?’

‘If I can.’ My mother had tried talking about people as if they were ‘bricks’, testing the word as timidly each time as if it were for the first. Coming from Liz it sounded aggressive and threatening; onomatopoeic.

‘She borrowed some paint and brushes from Julian. She was painting that little hut in her garden at the weekend, she had to do it herself because of course Scott won’t help her anymore. If she’s finished, you could remind her that I want them back.’

‘The pool-house?’

‘Yes, she calls it that. She does rather have ideas above her station, doesn’t she. It’s just a little shed. She doesn’t even have a swimming-pool. And her garden is just appalling. It’s disgraceful, actually. To let it run to rack and ruin like that.’

‘I’m sure you’ll get your paintbrushes back,’ wondering what Celine was doing painting in the pool-house.

‘Are you? I wish I had your conviction. I’m not at all sure Celine has much regard for other people’s property.’

‘You don’t know that.’

‘You don’t have to be Einstein. Look at the state of her own. I wonder if I ought to warn Rob Sinclair about her. He is a charming young man, you know. Charming.’

‘Warn Rob? What’s he got to do with it?’

‘Because he’s moving into what she calls her pool-house. He can’t stay on *Iseult* anymore. That’s why she’s trying to spruce it up but honestly, is that even possible? She’s actually a complete slob, you know.’

Rob is going to be staying in her shed?

‘You only have to look at the way she dresses. I’d wish him luck, if I wasn’t genuinely concerned about him. He’s made the newcomer’s mistake of getting too friendly with the wrong person. Everyone else knows what she’s like...’

She goes on and on. In a way, she’s right. Everyone in Buckledon is affected by Celine in one way or another. David finds her problematic and messy, the Burrows think her rude and not suitably acquiescent. Mary and Hugh are made uneasy by her, and Naomi thinks her unkind. I wish that I could find something definitive about her, but she will not be labelled, or not by me at any rate. She is all these things, and none of these things. The harder I stare, the more confusing she seems.

Liz is talking near the patch of scrubland at the bottom and to the far side of Celine’s garden. The tide never reaches it. It’s part sandy, part heathland and separated from the rest of the riverbank by a sagging barbed wire fence. This morning the scrubland is just brambles and tinder-dry sticks heaped across it in piles like pre-prepared bonfires. In March, it had looked completely different. In March, before Rob turned up with his swagger that wasn’t quite a swagger, packed a squashy white hold-all, tied up his tender and jogged like a revved-up tennis player along the jetty to her newly-painted pool-house. In March it had been greener, and softer, the coastal plants dotted around a soggy tangle of scrub. I had gone to her house first, looking for her.

I was impulsive, hoping she might come with me to the river and check the moorings. Unusually, I hadn't seen her for two weeks. Not since our new moon drinks, an evening I had held on to – clung to – every day since. Still it slipped away from me, or she did, fading further and further into vodka-smooth oblivion. I knocked on her door. She didn't answer and I tried the handle. She never locked doors and it creaked open.

'Celine? Are you there?'

A pile of post was on the mat and I bent, automatically, to pick it up. A bill, and a handwritten letter, and I placed both of them on the small table by the kitchen door. There was a pile of photographs on it.

'Hello?' I called again, and there was no answer and my eyes were drawn back to the table, and the photos on it. I only glanced, but long enough to see that the one on top looked jolly. I picked it up. There were three people in the photo, and none were Celine. A man with a dark beard was in the centre of the frame, and he had his arms around an older couple. The older man's beard was the same, only it was grey, and he wore glasses splattered with rain drops. I swallowed, holding these unexpected strangers between thumb and forefinger. There were skyscrapers in the background and the family – surely it was parents with their son – were standing in a back garden lined with wooden fencing. There were some terracotta pots and spring bulbs in them. Some crocuses in the grass at their feet. There was a sculpture to the right of them, a bronze airborne bird with broad wings spreading and elegant legs dangling thinly. A very small ornamental pond... a rockery. I couldn't put the picture down, every detail in it seemed to demand attention, but why, I don't know. Celine was not even in the picture. I'm not sure she was anywhere near it because nothing about it – the homeliness and ordinariness – seemed anything to do with her. There was too much comfort in it. Trainers, silver ring, the

indents on the parents' raincoats where it seemed his hands, arms spread around them like the bird's wings, were holding tight. Drawing them close. His mother was holding daffodils, her smile quiet and proud. All of them looking directly at the camera, the man in the middle laughing into it.

I suddenly knew I had no business in this family scene and that Celine was hovering close by after all – narrowing her eyes and disapproving my scrutiny of this most prosaic and dog-eared photograph.

I pushed the picture back onto the pile and stood for a moment alone in the hall. Then I left the accusing silence of the house; I had strayed too far into it.

If she ever alluded to past unhappiness, it was alongside the BBC's television schedule, or ferry timetables. She had a dispassion for vulnerability and masked it, making everything seem mundane. If I questioned her too intently, she reverted back to her childhood, presenting a linear tapestry of an uneventful life. 'Mum and I moved to Leeds. After Dad died. And at some point she went to Australia, but years later. I quite liked the city. I loved the cafés.' She only mentioned in passing that her father had been a lifeboat sailor and was otherwise adamant in her refusal to fill in their sleep-deprived gaps. 'Poor Mum. I'd been Daddy's river girl.' I had a vision of her lonely and disconsolate, poking sticks at daylilies and fairies. 'Just a bit of boredom mixed with disappointment. I wanted to leave Leeds after a while. Not much else.' The tapestry was spun of a fine thread and snapped under my clumsy inspection.

She was never completely transparent, and I had to search between the vagaries for the detail in order to make sense of it. There were things amongst her chatter that I should have taken notice of. Only of course at the time I didn't know what was important, and what was froth and bravado. I couldn't separate the two because it was all meaningful in one sense or another to me. I mainly gathered that she loved the water and if she wasn't near it for any length

of time she began to miss it. I never remarked on the strangeness of this given that her father had drowned. But she insisted on it. She saw long before I did that the sea has a capacity to hold difficult things.

‘You’re here now,’ I once told her, ‘by the water.’ Meaning that she ought to stay. She read my mind.

‘Don’t get any ideas. Just renting, like you.’

I think that every now and then, in spite of her waspishness, she revealed pain of some sort, but, in my defense, I think I would have been mistaken to assume that she wanted consoling. When she was traipsing her well-worn paths to the sea, she didn’t want my company or an assumption that I was a part of her morning, she just wanted the loneliness of the river because it matched her emptiness. She went out, and she came back, with the tide. Not with me. She kissed me once because she was empty, and because I hadn’t understood that, because I thought it was about me, I failed her, just as life had.

I left the seemingly abandoned cottage and found her standing in the middle of the scrubland. Where had she been over the last fortnight? It was high water and the land was boggier than usual. White spray whipped down the river, faster and faster, the wind chasing at its back. She was stock still and when I stepped over the barbed wire, she put up a trembling hand.

‘Stop,’ she said, and her voice was low, and raspy. Unused.

I stopped.

‘Don’t move an inch.’

‘What is it, for goodness sake?’

There was no reply. She must be stuck. Sinking?

‘What is it!’

‘It’s a snake. It’s a huge fucking snake.’

I crept next to her and she pointed toward a log. A brown adder was stretched out alongside it, dead or asleep I wasn't sure. I would hardly have noticed it. It was rather beautiful.

'I nearly stepped on it, Will.' She had torn her hands on the brambles. She was barely breathing through her chapped lips.

'Celine. Wear gloves, please.'

'I just can't move. Why can't I move?' Her fear was so intense it had, as the cliché goes, paralysed her.

'It won't hurt you. Come on, let's go. One step back.'

'No.'

'Celine. It isn't interested in you.'

'No.'

'Fine. We'll stay here.'

I looked at the somnolent reptile that evidently wasn't going anywhere very fast, and then at her. Celine's grey eyes hadn't moved from the adder but they were fixed vacantly on it.

'I feel sick,' and her teeth were beginning to chatter. I put my hand under her elbow but still she couldn't move and still I couldn't get through to her.

I pointed at the sky. 'Look.' She didn't look. 'You can see the moon.' It had appeared like a wispy cloud, an O breathed into the pale blue sky. 'Second full moon this month.'

A pause and then she said: 'So a blue moon.'

'Yes.'

'A blue Worm Moon,' shuddering.

'It's also the Lent Moon,' I told her, but she dismissed this puritan alternative with a slight twist of her mouth.

‘The last full moon of the winter,’ she said slowly. ‘Named after the earthworms that come out of the softer ground, marking the arrival of spring.’ She stepped back. ‘Spring,’ she said again, hollowly.

At the barbed wire, she buried her face into my jacket and curled her fingers around my neck and I looked over her pale bramble hair toward Gull Island and clenched my fingers so as not to smooth the tangle. Above us, the cotton wool moon darkened and rose.

I never could ask about the photo; the man, and his mum with the daffodils and his dad with the raindrops misting his glasses because I never saw it again.

14th JUNE

Liz Burrows has gone, and my phone is ringing. Celine, whose white head has been resting on my chest, vanishes. The weight is gone; it has been so real on me that the removal of it is equally vivid and there is an absence now. I resist the urge to put my hand in the space where her head had lain. I stare at the scrubland through the windscreen thinking that as far as I know, she has not ventured back on to it. The lazy adder probably slithers there still.

It is Alice's number coming up. 'Hi, Alice.'

'It's not Alice, it's me.'

'Why are you ringing me on Alice's phone?'

'I came to find you and left my mobile at home. On the kitchen table. At least I hope I did, otherwise I've lost it.'

I suddenly am awash with tiredness at her gaiety. She is not vulnerable and frightened. She is spikey and complicated. She has no regard for other people, or their property. 'What can I do for you, Celine?'

The call is cut dead and her face is at the car window, smiling at me through the glass. Not just smiling; there is a questioning push in her eyes, a sombre slant to the tilt of her head. She smiles and then furrows her brow and taps at the window, wound up to keep Liz Burrows out. I hesitate and then open it. The window slides away to reveal more clearly her serious face and my heart can't help lifting. It can't help it.

'Have you cheered up?' she asks.

'Yes.'

Her lips twitch. 'Liar. What's up?'

'Why?' I say, still childish. I practically add, 'what's it to you?'

She puts her elbows on the window frame and her chin in her hands. 'Because I care, of course. I thought maybe something happened with Mattie...or,' and she takes her chin out of her cupped hands, 'or maybe you're cross with me about something.'

'No.'

'Oh good, that's good. Phew. I hate it when you're grumpy. Being a crosspatch,' and her face clears. 'What news of Mattie?'

The fact that she is choosing to believe my lie is not a good sign. She doesn't press the point. 'Mattie is fine, thanks. I still don't know what to do about Scotland.' I get out of the car, forcing her away as I push the door open.

'You completely ignored me on Monday when you left,' she says.

'I didn't. I was in a rush.'

'To get to Naomi's?'

'That's none of your business.'

'Don't look like that. I'm not stupid. We've all seen your truck outside her house.'

'It's nothing,' I say angrily. 'You know it's nothing.'

'I'm not sure Naomi sees it that way. Just for the record. But, as you say, it isn't my business. Back to us. You ignored me yesterday as well.'

And now there is a silence, with a challenge thrown out between us. It lengthens while I try and decide what to do with it. Yesterday was Wednesday. New Moon drinks. Every month, in February, March, April. Building up to the full moon in May.

In the end I take the cowardly way out. 'I didn't see you.' As if the moon doesn't mean anything to us at all.

'Because you didn't get in touch.'

I start walking toward the clubhouse, across the carpark. 'Maybe I was busy. Maybe you were busy.'

She keeps up with me. 'I wasn't.'

'But you might have been.' I stop then. If she won't say it, I will. 'Your circumstances have changed, after all.'

Her eyes widen. 'What circumstances? You sound very Victorian.'

'I hear that Rob Sinclair has moved into your pool-house.'

'Even more Victorian.'

'Oi. Celine!' It's Alice, appearing from the clubhouse. 'Can I have my phone back please?'

'Yes, you may,' I say, and I take it from Celine and pass it to Alice.

'Will,' begins Celine. 'Can we meet later? To talk?'

I really don't like the sound of that. She never wants to talk. I leave them to it, the dark and the pale heads bent together, thick as thieves as usual. I shut the office door behind me.

*

'Alice. Did you know Rob was moving off *Iseult* and into Celine's pool-house?'

'Yep.'

'How come?'

'Everyone likes to know Celine's business,' says Alice, as if it were obvious.

'Right. I mean, how come - what's wrong with his boat?'

'I don't know everything, do I. Must be luxury for him sleeping in a proper bed again.'

'Spect he was glad of the excuse to move.'

'I'm sure.'

'If there even is a bed in that guest-house slash pool-house,' Alice adds. 'Do you know, I'm not sure there is.'

‘No bed and no pool.’

‘Yes, she’s so weird,’ agrees Alice cheerfully. ‘Don’t worry, I expect he thinks so too.’

At some point, pacing through a day at the marina, frustration becomes a recognisable and tangible thing. A shell, or the skeleton of a crab, cracks and splinters under my heel. The abandoned wooden dinghy that Sophie Nott has been meaning to restore literally falls apart. In this burning heat the beach itself is decaying.

15th JUNE

Whatever I do, I can't depend on any of Graham's luck so I finally call his daughter, Angela Jameson. A receptionist for Rathbones Family Law takes all my details and says that she will call me back. I'm nervous, nervous of legal jargon and absolutes and am unable to do much while I wait except for stare toward the sea and the direction of Lepe.

She rings in half an hour. 'Right. I think I've got everything I need. Just remind me of the details, so I can hear it from you.'

It feels like an interrogation already. 'My partner, that is, my ex, Lucy...My partner that was, is moving to Scotland. She wants to take our daughter with her.'

'And she didn't bother to apply for permission from the court?'

'No, but why would she? She may have assumed I wouldn't make a fuss.'

Angela doesn't respond so I keep going. 'I'd like to know if I've any right to be involved in the decision. I am named on the birth certificate but I'm not-'

She interrupts, crisply. 'Of course you do. You have every right. How old is – it's Matilda isn't it? – again?'

'One year. Mattie. The thing is, her mother doesn't think I've had much to do with her since we split up. It's true, I haven't but-'

'-How old was Mattie when the relationship ended?'

'Six months.' Even on the phone, to a strange lawyer, saying that makes me wince. My claim seems unjustifiable. That I should be allowed to join the ranks of those who love Mattie, when I have to say things like 'six months old,' seems a leap too far for the imagination. But the urge to explain has been getting stronger recently. 'Lucy and I hadn't been getting on for some time. I think living together was damaging for us all.'

Angela doesn't respond; I'm not sure she is interested. I'm not sure it makes sense even to me.

'The thing is, I haven't any history of taking care of her. I'm not very good at-'

'Don't panic,' Angela says, firmly. 'Things are very different now for fathers. You definitely have a case.'

'Do I?'

'If you want one, yes. You have to first stop finishing your sentences by telling me why you shouldn't have one though. What is your visiting schedule at the moment?'

'It varies. Nothing fixed. Once a week usually.'

'And you go to the marital home?'

'I go to their house. Where Lucy lives with her new partner. It's because of him that she wants to move.'

'Okay. The reason for relocation is important. Tell me about him.'

God. 'He's in the army. Decorated war hero, just about.'

'Never mind,' Angela says, robustly.

'He's being transferred.'

'Well - let's see what we can do. Can you afford me?' She lists her fees.

'No.' At least one thing is clear.

'I'll see if I can get you some support. For now, I suggest we write to your ex-partner telling her that we are going to apply for a court order prohibiting the child being taken from England. And that may do the trick. All right?'

'Yes. Yes, I think so.'

'We'll copy you into the e-mail. Don't get drawn into anything personal. Run anything you need to by me.' She hangs up.

I'm in a slight stupor when I wander down to the riverbank, bothered by something. I should have been buoyed up by Angela's energy, euphoric. But Lucy deserves better, a small voice is whispering, beneath the relief.

Alice is organizing the race groups for the regatta there. When I get closer, I see that Celine is lying in the grass near her. We still haven't spoken.

'We also did creative writing,' Alice is telling her. 'Hi, Will.'

Celine opens an eye.

'I was telling Celine what lessons I miss.'

'So you miss school?' I asked, pointedly.

'I miss creative writing.'

'I wish you'd go back. I didn't get creative writing as a choice.'

'Me neither,' says Celine. 'Not back in our day.' Her fingernails are painted purple today, pansy dark. They hadn't been yesterday. If I let it, things could be how they used to be, I think. If I forget about Rob, I could carry on as usual. 'Grammar and Shakespeare in our English lessons,' she muses. 'Not that I ever knew what was going on. Thick as two short planks, me.'

'You can't have been,' says Alice. 'To get your job as a journalist.'

'I could have been,' she replies, 'but actually I suppose I wasn't, not really.'

'Anyway, back to me. You're just fishing. Once we had to do a short story. Guess how short it had to be.'

'One word.' Celine stifles a yawn, turning her head into the sun, staring into the river's dappled light.

'No,' Alice frowns at the back of her head.

'It's too hot to think. What is that?'

It is just a log floating on the surface of the water.

‘Ugh,’ Celine shivers. ‘Looks like a crocodile. Do you like my nails?’

Alice clears her throat. ‘Getting back to my original point. Six words. This was the example. ‘Baby shoes. For sale. Never worn.’

Celine has shut her eyes again.

‘Isn’t that the saddest story you’ve ever heard?’ probes Alice.

‘Who wrote it?’ I ask her.

Alice shrugs and repeats the story. This time Celine counts each word, as if playing hide and seek, with her closed eyes and sing-song voice.

‘Clever,’ I say.

‘Hemingway,’ drawls Celine. She is twisting pink and white petals from a daisy.

‘Yes, that’s it,’ says Alice, grabbing at the gnats. ‘And here’s another. For sale. Wedding dress, worn once. By mistake.’

The daisy is shredded now.

‘Very good,’ I tell her.

Alice looks speculative. ‘Have you ever been married, Celine?’

A pause, enough time for Alice to mark another group session in her file for the racing, and I am about to change the subject when Celine says, ‘Yes.’ She puts her hand on her shoulder and then scratches it, hard. Her dark nails rake red over the dragonfly. She sits up and looks away down the river toward the yellow fields of wheat in distant Lepe.

‘What happened?’ Alice asks.

‘Alice,’ I say, and I don’t know why. ‘Alice,’ and Alice must agree, she sees that we mustn’t go here because she says, ‘Sorry,’ quickly, and asks me instead. ‘Will? Why did your marriage end?’

Celine replies for me, as she won’t for herself, with a lop-sided smile. ‘Will never got married, did you Will. You wouldn’t go *that* far.’

‘Really,’ asks Alice, ‘really?’

‘Yes, really.’

‘I imagined you married,’ she says, and then trails off. I did not imagine Celine married. She had never told me anything about a husband, surely. ‘You’ve got a baby,’ Alice adds then blushes at herself.

I think of an even shorter story. ‘One baby. By mistake.’

Celine adds two more. ‘Thank god,’ and Alice claps, asking Celine for another one but Celine shakes her head, and gives us something else to talk about.

‘I saw Henry this morning. I didn’t think he was doing so well. He was shaky and forgetful. He didn’t remember I was coming.’

There is none of the spark that is often apparent when Celine mentions the sick or the incapacitated. Henry’s infirmity is something she will not tolerate. I can’t believe she had never mentioned being married. Had she? Self-doubt, the kind my father induced, floods through me. Maybe I missed something. But then...the lack of her presence online, no voting record, no nothing. Another surname would explain that. No mystery, just missing the facts.

‘I feel so sorry for him,’ says Alice sorrowfully. ‘He’s all alone.’

‘He’s got his sailing. His little dinghy seems company enough for now,’ says Celine. ‘Anyway, nothing wrong with being alone.’

‘You’re not alone in the cottage, are you, not anymore.’

Alice is mischievous today.

‘Alice, you are a nosy parker,’ says Celine, tartly.

‘Come on. Tell us about Rob.’

‘Yes, tell us about Rob,’ I say.

Celine looks at me.

‘There’s not much to tell,’ she says, in the end. ‘He’s not here long. The boat is stifling in this heat. There’s plenty of room for him in the cottage.’

‘Isn’t he in the pool-house then?’ Alice does not miss a trick.

‘It didn’t make sense,’ she says. ‘I did a rubbish clear-up job, needless to say. I painted more of the ivy that had grown through it than the actual shed.’

When have things ever needed to make sense to Celine? This, of all excuses is not to be believed. ‘I must go.’ I get to my feet again.

‘Where?’ asks Celine, reaching out for me, but she misses my hand and instead she catches hold of my T-shirt and tugs a little. ‘Where do you have to be? Stay for a while.’

‘I’m going to see Henry.’ It’s a lie. ‘He won’t have his dinghy for long, by the way. The village are trying to get him to stop sailing.’ I haven’t, in fairness to me and my sore heart, made that bit up.

‘They can’t do that. No one can do that. Why should they? Why should they want to?’

‘Because he’s too old now. It’s irresponsible. Because someone might get hurt.’

‘If Henry gets hurt, that’s his responsibility.’

‘But someone may get hurt trying to help him. That’s probably it,’ says Alice wisely.

‘I can’t bear it,’ says Celine. ‘It would...it would. Well, there wouldn’t be anything left for him to live for.’

She studies me for a moment and then regal as a woodland bride, gets up and walks away. She always did walk away first. Down the path strewn with daisies, her white shirt billowing out behind her and the mayflies gathering tiara-shaped around her head. Just as she turns into the dusty carpark, she swipes at a cluster of cowslips and something – the fluff of a dead dandelion, a thin cloud of insects – scatter around her.

Alice looks up into the sky stretching blue from Beaulieu to the Solent with the wheat fields of Lepe framing the water, and hums a little, awkward. I’ve noticed this before. That

when Celine leaves a room or a conversation there is a moment when no one, not even Alice, knows quite what to do with themselves. She gets up herself after a while and goes after Celine.

Lady Burrows got her way but not because she would have it so, because Celine showed me that I wanted to give Alice a chance. She started work experience with me on a busy Easter Sunday.

I was thinking about Celine going away for a few days, on an Easter break. It was so quiet in the morning mist, it was as if she had already left, and not told me. That she had slipped away in noiseless retreat from the water's edge where snakes hid.

Alice's mother dropped her off for the first and last time. I looked at the river, lapping grey against the jetty and the low-hanging clouds. 'What a miserable wet day to start on.'

'I don't mind. I wanted to start as soon as I could.'

'Easter Day?'

Alice shrugged. It was true about the piercings; eyebrows, nose, lip. I think her mother had dressed her, incongruously, in a Breton striped sweatshirt with red epaulettes on her shoulders and white converse on her feet.

'Come on up. We'll keep dry as long as we can. Judy will find some chocolates.'

She smiled tolerantly enough but added somewhat sarcastically that she was a bit old for Easter eggs.

'Yes, of course, sorry,' I said but then Alice remembered her instructions and said what she was supposed to. 'Mum says I'm not to be a bore. I won't get in your way.'

I had always hated Easter. The violence of the Good Friday crucifixion never, for me, seemed understood by the miracle of resurrection. Death was not vanquished over a weekend. Lucy and Mattie were with Chris, but I doubt he was a church-goer either, any trust in God's benevolence blown out of his imagination by the roadside bombs of Helmand's Province.

Apparently, he was organizing a treasure hunt for the locals. It would no doubt be the most efficient and detailed hunt in history, for which the participants would need satellite navigation and camping provisions.

Anyway. It was Easter Sunday, when I was about twelve years old, that I discovered for sure what I must have already suspected deep down; that my parents weren't exactly friends with the Rickards. We went through the usual routine in Exbury, with my mother dutifully asking my father if he would change his mind and come to church in Beaulieu. He shook his head in bitter pity for us, and my mother hid her relief by bending down to put the lamb in the oven. In the car, she applied her lipstick, tugged a brush through my hair, and said cheerfully, 'Belt up, and off we go.'

After the service we trailed between the pews underneath the vast crimson knave, hymn and prayer book in hand, forming an orderly queue. In the porch, the vicar said,

'Happy Easter, young man.'

'Say it back, William,' snapped my mother.

'I expect you've got chocolate on your mind. I expect you're keen to get away to the Grange and join in the fun with all the other little boys and girls.'

My mother stiffened and the group in front of us went quiet before moving quickly off together. The vicar ploughed on, unaware of my mother's flush and the group vanishing so quickly down the steps.

'It's a wonderful treasure hunt, isn't it? A special occasion for all the children of the parish. Do enjoy yourselves.'

I don't suppose my mother took it as badly as she might have because we were bringing the Rickards back with us for lunch, (or at least they were following us but in their scow) and I seem to remember Margie hastily stepping in to ask the vicar about something else entirely. And then Henry asked if I wanted to travel with them by boat and my mother, cross and lonely,

told him no. That I would travel with her. I looked at her knuckles clenched white around the steering wheel as she drove up and down, round and up, on the way back and hated her for that small refusal.

Before roast lamb and bread-and-butter pudding, my father put Wagner on, doubtless too loud. Perhaps to block out the sound of Henry who was describing the journey down the river, telling me what a trip I'd missed because they'd seen the kingfisher which Margie feared had gone, because of this or that. I listened with envy, while my mother surreptitiously binned the kitchen towel beside each place (my father's mistake or mine? I can't remember) and instead folded white linen napkins, bought in the charity shop. Henry asked if I could go with him for a jolly on the water after lunch; my mother relented, and the day was bright again. But some fractiousness remained and congealed as we chewed the fatty lamb and Easter clouds grew larger and blacker outside.

My father and Henry were discussing the seventeen-hour Ring Cycle, and Henry, reckless and brave – so I thought – jokingly pronounced its length unendurable. My mother soundlessly tried the treasonous word out. I watched her mouth making the shape of the word, and a familiar expression of disappointment twist across my father's face. I had been made jubilant by Henry's flippancy; my father felt only betrayed. He had misjudged Henry. He was increasingly, ominously silent for the remainder of lunch and my mother predictably, foolishly vocal. *Unendurable*.

When the Rickards got up to leave and Margie told me to get my wellies and coat, my father shook his head. My mother, eyes darting nervously around the room, pleaded a migraine and disappeared upstairs. I don't know what I did.

The Abbey bells were tolling for the Easter service when Celine's car emerged from her driveway. She stopped and wound the window down.

‘Not going to church, are you?’ I asked, knowing the answer.

‘Why would I be? Just off to the bank.’

‘This is Alice,’ I told her.

Celine looked at her, interested. ‘Ciao.’

Alice picked at her lip piercing. ‘Won’t the bank be closed on Easter Sunday?’

Celine shut her eyes and dropped her head against the wheel. ‘Is it Sunday? Is it Easter? Oh, for god’s sake,’ and reversed back into her driveway.

Alice smiled for the first time and went to make a hot chocolate. Her sparkling trainers were black with mud already.

Alone again, I wished that my mother had the courage or desire, whatever it was she was missing, to kick my father out. Or, more characteristically, just ask him to leave (politely, because they never shouted, not once, not ever can I remember a raised voice between any of us), and that he had cordially agreed and gone.

And then Celine was behind me again, she was back, with her hands on my arms and her cheek pressed between my shoulder blades.

‘Don’t forget I’m going to Italy on Wednesday.’

‘Of course I won’t.’

‘I’m going to start swimming when it gets warmer. What do you think?’

‘I’ll miss you.’

‘You know full well I mean about the swimming. Happy Easter, Will.’

16th JUNE

The narrow pavements of Beaulieu are crammed with idle tourists in caps and shades, children queuing for ice-lollies, and bad-tempered donkeys flicking their tails at them. Swarms of flies have built up like clouds over the horse-shit in the road. At low tide, the river is fizzing like a sewer, grey and moist. The swans are immobile, squat on the parched grass.

Henry's scow is out of the water. As long as I can remember Henry has been sailing and racing on the river. When he is no longer alive, there will be something of him here still, a ghost boat, his sails darting above the waves. I stand on the quay, shading my eyes from the sun. The walls of the old Refectory are just to my left. Cistercian monks at Beaulieu Abbey had for centuries used the river for their fishing fleet. They would have loaded salt from the marshes onto barges here, and I suddenly imagined that the tourist chatter dimmed and was replaced with a mediaeval bustle, the ancient tolling of the bells, the whinnying of ponies and shouts of traders. The smell, too, of the medicinal herbs they grew in the gardens here and sent away down the river to France, the mint and sage.

I don't hear Henry at first.

'Will,' he is calling. 'Will.'

The brown-robed monks packing their trading boats and the trout flapping on the bank fade back into the past. The Abbey bells become the tuneless clang of the ice-cream van once more, and I follow Henry out of the sunlight and into the shade of the house. The kitchen still looks as though Margie has only popped out for a moment; the Lifeboat tea towels, the parish council notices, the biscuit tin. It is as full of their life and their hobbies as it always was, jammed with photographs of a trip down Icelandic fjords, a wooden boat in the southern hemisphere, Margie riding in the New Forest and framed pictures of birds and wildfowl on the wall. My father had judiciously, finally, concluded – on the evidence of this kitchen – that it

was inconceivable that Henry could be as erudite as he had first imagined. No one who spread their pleasures so widely and thinly, and on such entitled, un-enriching pastimes, was really worth much.

‘It’s parched out there,’ I say. ‘No risk of flooding these days.’

‘The heatwave is due to break any day. Can’t you feel the rain? And we’ll be bailing the water out as usual before you know it.’

Henry fills a glass with water for me and I drink the water and stare unseeingly out of the window.

‘That feels like a world away,’ I say and repeat the conversation I had with the lawyer. ‘I’ve got a case. She says we can stop them taking Mattie but it’s hard to know if that’s the right thing to do.’

‘I think that not to do anything would be wrong. This is a chance for you either way, and you must grab it.’

I don’t really know what that means.

‘And you must do the same with Celine.’

‘Celine?’ I repeat, stupidly.

‘Yes, Will. I’ve seen the way you wake up when she’s around. It’s like...Well, remember when you realised you enjoyed school? You used to show your Maths to Margie, I never understood it, but you told her you’d discovered the point of it. Of Maths, or school, I don’t know, but you came alive. It suited you.’

‘Are you saying I feel the same way about Celine as I did about school?’

‘Will Crawford. I’m saying this is another chance for you.’

But. ‘It is not as easy as that. She’s tied up with this Rob. She’s...somewhere else..., all the time. She’s a will o’ the wisp.’

‘Not really.’ There is a pause. ‘You are.’

‘And I don’t mean anything by that,’ he says gently. ‘Only that until you ask her, talk to her, you’ll never know what might be.’

‘I’m afraid it is too late,’ is my miserable reply.

‘I don’t think it’s a case of missed your chance. I’d have thought that with Celine it either is, or it isn’t. Either way, you’ll be able to move forward.’

I’m embarrassed by how encouraging and comforting the simple words are. Henry, easy as always, picks up a tea towel and says, ‘I’ll wash, and you dry,’ and we stand at the sink as we used to, occasionally watching cars over the bridge and the water under the bridge.

‘I remember my parents dropping me here when I’d been sick in the car from Exbury, do you?’

‘I don’t think so. When?’

‘I think I was about nine. I often felt sick on that road and maybe that’s why they didn’t stop. Or maybe it was because the lunch party was being given by the local judge and they didn’t want to be late. Anyway, I warned my mother, my father refused to stop, and I threw up on myself. They chucked me out here and carried on.’

‘I do remember that,’ he says, slowly. ‘Because your poor mother – gosh, he was fuming, wasn’t he? – had got the date muddled. After all that, they turned up at the judge’s house on the wrong day.’

‘I was so filthy, Margie put me in here.’ I pointed at the sink with the tea-towel.

Henry pulls the plug. ‘She did. Right. That’s that done. How are Regatta plans?’

‘All fine. No problems.’

‘I don’t think I’ll enter,’ Henry tells me. ‘The boat’s out now. It could be time for me to hang my sails up.’

‘Think about it. It’s not until the 26th, so you’ve got some time yet.’

Celine will have something to say about this decision. The thought galvanises me and soon after, when the Abbey bells are chiming twelve, I say goodbye and leave for her cottage.

I can smell the nine-year old's vomit on my hands. I remember, as much as the panic and the fear, the determination to get revenge on my parents for not stopping the car. I was glad when I was sick, willed the lumpy liquid from me even. But only momentarily. Horrified by the force and the quantity, I immediately and ineffectually clapped sweaty palms to my mouth, trying to stem the flow. And then the guilt. I convinced myself (or I was allowed to believe) that the whole day, not just the sick dripping down the upholstery, was my fault. That I was to blame for the mistaken date and the situation whereby the local judge and his family had just sat down to lunch when the bell rang, and the door opened to reveal the eager Crawfords behind it.

Celine duly flew to Italy and threw out a scattering of text messages behind her. She managed, peculiarly, to strike a tone in them that was both gloomy and gleeful. She told me (dolefully) that she was trying not to be dreary. She was determined, she said (uncharacteristic exclamation marks everywhere), in the pursuit of optimism, to sightsee (which she loathed). I thought these typically conflicted offerings were as goodbye, and that I wouldn't hear from her again till she was back.

It was not the case. She tried very hard to keep in touch and I was startled by this version of Celine. She lost the caustic and remote aspect of her nature that was so evident close-up and became, from a distance, both constant and precise. She told me she had bought a guidebook, and she wasn't veering from its recommendations, all of which delights and disappointments she catalogued for me. A slightly reluctant but awe-struck tourist took the place of my oblique, unnerving neighbour that week. She didn't give me an opportunity to miss her in the way I assumed I would; strangely, she was more present in her meticulous transcription of the hills and cobbled streets of Tuscany than she was in Buckledon, slippery and inconsistent.

I was more certain of her than I had ever been. It was a relief not to have to wonder what she was doing all the time, because I knew. When I worked a few hundred yards from her, all day, every day, my mind was concentrated on her, in and out of the cottage, up and down the riverbank; but never really sure what she was doing or thinking. This new and electronic Celine – defined by the detail in her text messages – was either cultural or lazy; greedy, reading, or stiff from a steep climb. She was something, and someone. I knew what she thought about Sienna, about the museums and the Torre del Mangia. About the restaurants, the filthy pigeons in the Piazza del Campo, the ice-cream – sickly, overrated gelato – and about the splendour of the friend's villa she was staying in: the Tuscan farmhouse with pale-pink

stucco walls. Finally, she admitted a sort of defeat. She confessed that she had never been anywhere like Sienna, that she felt flayed by the beauty of it all. The Celine I knew would have been bored or exhausted before too long and found some shaded, cushioned throne from which to amuse herself, fortified by Negronis and new employment as art expert. This Celine was humbled by Italy and brought to her knees in wonder.

She made up for this when she returned to Alice and me, rising from her week of worship as if waking from a trance, but otherwise unscathed. She threw off her reverence, and strode back to unreachable, heathen lands, but whilst she was away, she clung. And in the space that she left, Naomi emerged.

It always felt like infidelity. Only just when I thought I couldn't carry it on any longer, Celine would do something to make me think she deserved the betrayal, and back I went.

It felt good at the start, being with Naomi, until it felt wrong. It felt good in the way that doing something right (or more accurately) *correct*, felt good. I recognised something about the way Naomi made me feel as something I ought to feel, and it was a powerful, infantile compulsion. It was hard not to obediently succumb, and to keep trying to make it work. But not long after I had given in, I wished it all away. It was wrong, and inauthentic. I wished the feeling off, like I might a shirt that was the wrong texture – even though it ought to have been perfect and I wished it was – and had begun to chafe.

She opened the door. It was our third dinner date, and Celine was in Tuscany. Naomi was wearing a short, neat skirt, brown cord or something, something anyway that struck me as kind of sexy. Her hair was held back loosely with grips; she looked very French. Not overtly sexy but enough that I got an unexpected sense of something, maybe just something to do with my ego, because she'd made an effort to look appealing for me. It flattered a little. Celine never made an effort for anyone.

I noticed the candles and the soft music playing and Naomi saw me noticing.

'What is this rubbish,' she said, turning it down. 'Drink. What can I get you to drink?'

'I brought this,' brandishing the bottle of red.

'You shouldn't have,' she admonished. 'That was unnecessary. But, thank you,' and she placed it on the table where it looked a bit foolish unopened, like someone who hadn't taken off their coat. 'Gin? Or the wine?'

'Whatever's going.'

‘I’m afraid I didn’t wait,’ and she gestured to hers on the side, the ice melted to mouthfuls of cloudiness and then she knocked the ice tray off the side. ‘*Merde.*’

I wouldn’t have noticed that she already had a drink, her admission of nerves. But she did that, she always gave things away that she needn’t have. Tiny, insignificant admissions and confessions that I wasn’t interested in, all proffered on hooks that were meant to bind us, to roll us up together. ‘Oh, look at the hole in my tights,’ she’d say. Or, ‘You didn’t see me eat that second potato, did you.’ But that night anyway, it was still okay, and I found myself next to her on the sofa.

She brought Celine into the conversation, not me. ‘Are you friends with her?’

‘Yes. Why do you ask?’

Naomi shrugged. ‘It’s what we do here, isn’t it? Ask about each other? I know the neighbours are all too interested in my family. In my private life. What there is of it, anyway.’

‘I know what you mean. You can’t let it affect you, you just have to ignore it.’

‘Celine is *un peu*... difficult to ignore though, isn’t she?’

‘Is she?’

‘You must see her, working next to her house, no?’

‘On and off. I like these peanuts.’

‘Do you know Scott? He lives in Lymington.’

‘Yes.’

‘He says she uses people.’

I crunched the nuts.

‘She really didn’t treat him well, he says she refused to pay him after he cleaned her windows, so badly, that she told him she... I can’t say. She was rude. She uses people.’

‘I don’t really know what it means when people accuse others of using people. Don’t we all? Use people, I mean, most of the time.’

Naomi stood up then, as if she sensed there was a wall she couldn't penetrate for now and simply said, in her soft way, 'I don't,' and she smiled. 'Sorry. I find her...what's the word. Like a stone.'

I carried on looking into my glass.

'I don't mean to gossip. It's not like me. Let's not talk about anyone else.'

She was telling the truth, then. It wasn't like her, not when I first knew her because she had other things going on, things that ought to have carried on mattering much more than Celine. But Naomi started minding too much about things she couldn't do anything about. She developed her issues with Celine, just as everyone else did. But, 'flinty'? Why did that word attach itself to me, and feel sore? I couldn't work out if it was because it was so at odds with what I felt about Celine, or because it was so accurate.

16th JUNE

On the well-trodden route from Henry's house to Celine, I pass Liz's travellers. They have not moved on and look set to stay. One of them is selling flowers by the roadside. I have never bought anyone flowers, although there may have been occasions when I would have benefited from presenting Lucy with such a sweet posy – a wild, rainbow bunch tied with wheat-coloured raffia – (a time when Lucy castigated me over and over for my inability to display such emotional extravagance) but it is only now, when the gesture fills me with nothing but anxiety, that I find myself with a bouquet of astonished flowers in hand, scurrying unmanfully back to the truck.

Before I get to her cottage, mindful of Celine's sneers, I throw my offering out of the window.

'Celine? Are you in there?' I'm watching one of those butterflies that are the size of small saucers. It is humming in the heat, suspended on a current of hot air, too lazy to flit away. It is pale blue, almost white, the colour of Celine's cottage. There is no answer from within, so I walk round to the back and Rob is sitting on the steps of the pool-house. It has been stripped bare of its green ivy, and the periwinkle is wilting on top of an unlit bonfire. It's a weirdly shocking sight.

'Is Celine around?' I've never been so grateful for anything as I am for throwing away the gypsy's flowers.

Rob is surrounded by various tools and wearing gardening gloves. He stands up, pulling off a glove. It takes me a moment to realise that he is offering me his hand, not the glove. We shake, awkwardly. Rake, trowel, pitchfork. Implements laid out surgically on a work table.

‘I saw her first thing but not since. I’ve been doing a bit of tidying for her in the garden.’
He gestures at the evidence. Under our gazes, the pool-house shrinks from us. I feel almost embarrassed by its undressed state. The pool-house doesn’t know what it is anymore.

‘She liked that weed,’ I say, pointing at the ivy on the scrapheap.

‘She said it was the first thing on her list for the chop,’ Rob said.

I smile through gritted teeth. ‘How’s the boat?’

‘Hard work. Expensive. You know what they say.’

I don’t so he tells me.

‘Owning a classic wooden boat is like standing in a cold shower and tearing up fifty-pound notes.’ In the searing sun, it seems an incongruous as well as privileged thing to say and he adds, ‘Don’t get me wrong. I’m not made of money.’

He’d always looked pretty comfortable to me. ‘Everything seems to have worked out for you.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he says. ‘Things have turned out pretty good.’ He grins, showing the American style dentistry of his teeth.

I stare at him. There is probably not a bad bone in his well-toned body. But how can Celine stand his uncomplicated robustness, this sophomoric enthusiasm with which he is blundering around her garden?

‘I hear you’re a sailor,’ he tries.

‘I haven’t sailed properly for years.’

‘Shame. What happened?’

‘I don’t really know what went wrong.’

‘That interruption we sailors call life, hey. Wife, kids, that sort of thing?’ He takes his cap off, shakes his head and replaces it, pulling at the teak-stained peak. His smile is friendly and inquiring. He makes me feel old - old and mean. As if life had happened to me (except it

hadn't) but it was still happening for him. 'You ought to come out on *Iseult* with me for a day.' He doesn't ask if I'd like to, he must know everyone here would like to. 'Soon as I've got the top sail sorted and next good day, we could go.' He wipes sweaty hands on shorts.

It's a nice offer. Part of me would love to. 'I'm pretty busy at the marina. But maybe one day. How long are you here for?'

'Who knows? I like it here. But I usually just follow the sun, and the wind. I'm definitely heading to the Grenadines at some point. Have you been?'

'I had a holiday with my ex in Bequia a few years ago.'

'You know what I mean then. Paradise for the likes of us.'

'I didn't sail much there.' It had been for Lucy's 34th birthday, paid for by her father, and she had driven the agenda. We had drunk flat Buck's Fizz for breakfast and hiked with headaches in the midday sun. In the evening I had to wear a jacket and tie and we'd bumped into honeymooners at the manager's cocktail party, and we had gone on excursions to waterfalls with them, chatted around the barbie doll-blue pool and found out more about weddings than I ever wanted to. Lucy had exchanged numbers with them.

'Bad luck. Would sure hurt to be there and not sail.'

'I guess so.' It was more painful to remember the deal we had sealed there one night, the sound of the tree frog *hoop hoooooping* somewhere in the blackness by our balcony. Lucy understood, I thought Lucy had understood and agreed with me. We didn't want children. We weren't going to have any. Possibly a wedding, never children.

'D'you fancy a beer one evening?' Rob says, suddenly.

'If you like.'

Undeterred, he continues. 'I'd like to get the lowdown on Celine. I know you two are mates. A few pints would be great, man to man.'

'Okay,' I say, slowly.

‘Truth be told, I’ve never met anyone like Celine. Beats me how to play it. I’d like to make something of it. I like her.’

He is serious. I ought not be surprised - I’m not surprised, but there is still something improbable, shocking even, about his confession. ‘I didn’t think you were going to be here long.’

He looks taken aback by my paternal disapproval. ‘Who knows how things turn out?’ And then, ‘Celine isn’t one to stay put herself.’

No. ‘I can’t speak for her. Neither of us can.’ Still, I don’t think the Caribbean, sudatory and humid is Celine’s sort of climate. ‘Happy to meet up whenever. Just let me know.’

‘Sure. And in the meantime?’

‘In the meantime, I’d say don’t play games with her. Be straight and be honest. That’s my best advice.’

‘That’s a relief then. I can’t be acting cool. I’m pretty simple when it comes to relationships, pretty relaxed.’

I am not relaxed. I am desolate. A sudden desolation makes me suggest tomorrow for a drink.

‘I can’t tomorrow. Maybe the day after, but we may be going up to the Grange for dinner with Julian and his wife.’

“No worries.’ We?

‘I’ll tell Celine you dropped by.’

‘Thanks. You missed a bit.’ I point with the fork to some surviving periwinkle, hanging on for dear life to a corner of the shed, and chuck the trowel at it to mark the spot. He may as well rip the entire thing out and I may as well help. The more successful, the more thorough the job, the more likely he will be shouted at for undertaking it.

‘Back to the grindstone, then’ says Rob. ‘This garden is something else, hey. These weeds and brambles.’

I rub reddened, fork-jabbed fingers together, consider his open, genuine nature and think that Celine will eat him alive. Surely...surely that eager face panting around after her irritates. How can she stand to see it, muzzled in her garden, gazing wetly up at her, morning after morning? He reminds me of those dogs, those jowly mastiffs that everyone swears blind are friendly.

He’s looking at me questioningly. ‘Any message for her?’

‘No, no message. I’ll be off now. And good for you, by the way. The shed looks much better, keep at it.’

I lied. The pool-house has had its eminence ripped from it. It is a shriveled imitation of its former, magnificent self. All that remains are some thin brown roots that thread through its slats like bloodless veins. Now, it is just a shed in the corner, the sort my mother would have liked.

I told Rob another lie as well. Persuading that fresh-faced kid that it was best not to play games with Celine. It was nothing more than pettiness on my part. After all, how was he to know that Celine adores playing games? She is a tactician, she relishes strategy. Transparency bores her. She doesn’t want Rob fixing things. She wants broken, troublesome things.

17th JUNE

Armed with fresh water and some off cuts from the butcher in Lymington, I push the shed door open. The warm moonlight slants through the open door in the shape of a gravestone. I leave the meat near the water and the young buzzard gasps asthmatically at me. It is a cadaverous shadow in its black grass cuttings. When I go, I leave the shed door wide. It should be free to take its chances.

Why hasn't Angela Jameson written her e-mail? Lucy and Mattie are leaving in a month, taking their chances on a place I can hardly find on the map, let alone spell. The farthest end of the British Isles from Lymington are looming. Mattie couldn't go any further without hitting the Orkneys and, wedging a brick by the door, I suddenly stop as it occurs to me that I might be jealous. They are striking out, and I am not. I am obstructing them, rather than encouraging them. I'm too busy scrabbling around amongst all the moments I am going to miss. Because of all the moments I have already missed. I feel the loss of them, and my role in their loss, but they are gone. Perhaps this is what I must accept. Perhaps I need to learn how to miss out on the moments. And keep on missing them, regardless of pain and regret. Call and hear about the details second hand and be glad to hear about them, pin the photographs up that record the moment you weren't there, and still be glad. Call again. Visit that unpronounceable place in the north.

I would like to have known for sure whether or not Lucy planned Mattie. It doesn't matter so much now, but in the beginning, it was a really big deal. I made too big a deal out of not knowing. I suppose it was a form of denial, or something like that. I buried myself in the uncertainty, and wallowed in a perceived injustice, rather than accepting what was blatantly unavoidable. No matter how it had happened. But Mattie appeared as a confusing trick, and first it made me angry, and then it made me scared. I ran away, as if chased away.

The day I got the news that Lucy was pregnant, I had gone to work, a small accountant's office in Winchester where, day after day, I was held captive to the detail of other people's transactions. Examining them, dissecting all these lives, and then dividing them up by numbers. At lunchtimes, I would stare at a painting in reception of a yacht on sunlit water and believe that one day I'd be sailing it. It was another ordinary lunchtime, the yacht was still pretty, and still out of my reach. I came home at five-thirty and found Lucy with a glass in hand.

I threw my briefcase, piled with the details of other people's lives, on the table.

'Evening.' She tilted the glass at me, her eyes glittering. I remember noticing that she had brushed her hair and was wearing something black and shiny. The shirt seemed to match her mood and my heart had fallen a little. 'You want one of these?'

'I'll have a beer later.' I tried to edge toward the door. She darted between me and escape.

'Wait. Don't rush off immediately. We need to talk.' She was dressed for battle, I realised.

'Lucy,' I'd told her, 'I'm just back from work. I'm barely through the door.'

'Ask me how my day was.'

'How was your day?'

She went to the sink with the wine. I heard her pouring it down the drain and the chink of ice cubes against the steel. I had no idea what was going on. I went upstairs to the bedroom and started pulling off my tie. She followed me.

'Don't you want to know?'

'I've got a feeling you're going to tell me anyway.'

'You'll need a drink.' She waved a beer at me in a drunken manner although I knew that she was not drunk. She was imitating being pissed and it annoyed me.

‘What’s going on?’ I unbuttoned my shirt.

‘I’ve had my last sip of alcohol for a while. I didn’t even drink that glass.’

‘Now I’m really worried,’ I joked. Cufflinks off; my father’s old ones. He’d been dead for a year, my mother too. She died a month after him, which was ironic really as she’d spent her married life trying to get away from him (preferring to resent rather than leave him), but when it came down to it - well, she followed him to the grave pretty quick.

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘No, I can’t.’ I sat on the edge of the bed and took my socks off.

‘I’m glad you’re sitting down.’ She was on tiptoe, towering over me. ‘It’s like the films, isn’t this how they do it in the films?’

‘You’re being dramatic about something, and it’s annoying, I just can’t work out what.’ And then she’d said it, but I’d carried on talking so I wasn’t sure I’d heard properly. ‘I don’t have a clue what you’re on about.’

‘I said, I’m pregnant.’

‘Don’t be stupid,’ I said, and getting up, picked my dressing gown off the back of the door.

‘I’m pregnant.’

‘You can’t be,’ I said, turning round to look at her again and in that moment, I knew that she was. I said, louder, ‘It’s absolutely not possible.’

‘It clearly is. I am six weeks pregnant.’ She whirled away, back down the stairs with her dangerous mood and I expect she imagined that I would follow her. I didn’t. I put shoe trees in my shoes like my father had taught me and hung my suit up in the cupboard. I walked along the corridor and I took my shower. I got out of the shower and dried myself. And then I opened the cupboard above the basin and rifled through the painkillers and cotton buds and unopened TCP, the plasters and the savlon, looking for Lucy’s pills. I don’t really know why.

Maybe because if I found them, I could prove to her that we had taken the precautions we needed to. They weren't there. I shut the cupboard and stared into the mirror, unable to compute anything. I cut my nails and left the cuttings in the sink, washing them away when I heard Lucy come back up.

'How are we going to manage this?' she asked.

When I suggested – rather as if she take a stroll to St Catherine's Hill – that she have an abortion, she picked up the radio and hurled it down the stairs. It bounced off the bottom step and smashed through the glass of the lower right pane of the door frame. It had been cheaper, but also, mainly quicker, to put a cat flap in so that's what I had done the next day. The cat flap existed to remind me of the sort of person I was; the sort that had been unable to imagine Mattie and might have precipitated her non-existence.

Lucy cried in the kitchen for the rest of the evening and I went through more of her drawers and I looked under the bed and in her jewellery box and all the while I had no idea whether what I found or didn't find would give me any answers. And then I found some green microgynon pill packets in a box with her old contact lenses, all packets untouched.

MON→TUE→WED→THURS→FRI→SAT→SUN→MON→TUES→WED→THURS→
FRI→SAT→SUN

The arrows lead me round in a never-ending and dizzying circle, all pills present and correct. I began to wish I hadn't found them because I didn't understand what I'd found. Did the discovery mean something, or nothing? Why hadn't she just thrown them in the bin? Perhaps if she hadn't been taking the pill, I ought not to have found any contraception at all. But find some I did, and so I went down the stairs, where the draught was blowing in through the smashed pane of the door frame, to show Lucy.

She glanced at my supposed evidence with the disdain it deserved but I thought her hand shook a little.

‘Why were they hidden?’ I demanded.

‘They weren’t hidden.’

‘Yes, they were.’

‘Oh, grow up. I know what you think it looks like. But it doesn’t mean anything. That’s not what happened. I’ve been taking them religiously.’

The cliché gave her away, I thought. ‘Where are the ones you’ve been taking?’ There was nothing religious about this.

‘Where do you think?’

‘Why are these all full?’

‘I don’t use that sort. I haven’t for months.’

‘When did you swap? Why didn’t you mention it?’

‘Why should I have? My body, my pill. Just stop interrogating me, Will. I don’t have to answer to you for any of this. This is happening to me.’

‘But it’s happening to me as well,’ I said, in vain.

‘You don’t have to be involved.’ In contrast to my uncertainty, she had become stern and resolute.

‘But I am. Whether I want to be or not. Of course I am.’

‘I mean you can leave.’

‘I know that.’ But that was the irony of it all, of course. I didn’t know that I couldn’t leave, even after I left. It just wasn’t possible beyond the occasional physicality of it. I didn’t know that I couldn’t leave. ‘But Lucy, how did this happen?’ My voice was scratchy and hoarse, the panic escaping from my throat as a raspy growl. ‘If you’d swapped pills, maybe it was in the changeover period?’

‘Maybe,’ she conceded, her chin thrust forward. ‘I think that’s quite likely, even.’

‘We couldn’t have been more careful,’ I shouted suddenly, and not because I wanted to frighten her but because I needed to roar. ‘And we had a deal. Remember our bargain?’ I had been ambushed. I had trusted her. ‘Don’t you remember Bequia, Lucy?’ Bequia and the tree frogs that hoot like owls. She had looked into my eyes, candlelight glinting in hers, and sworn that she understood how my own parents had fundamentally ensured the terror of becoming one myself. She had sworn.

‘Will,’ she said, ‘that was a long time ago. You cannot expect a woman to live by a promise made years ago about babies. You simply cannot. It wouldn’t be fair, not to me, not to anyone in my position.’ She adopted another filmic, prim pose.

‘Why not?’ I was close to tears. ‘Why can’t I?’

‘Because it’s not realistic! But I am not saying that I did this on purpose. I’m saying it has happened.’

I wiped my nose and coughed. The cough turned into a retch.

‘Is it definitely mine?’

‘Yes.’ She would have liked to call me names. She kept her voice even, and flat.

‘Are you definitely keeping it?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘No doubt about it. I’ll do it on my own if I have to. This is what I want. Not it. He, or she.’

Lucy was way ahead of me.

By the time I went to bed in the spare room (soon-to-be nursery), I was sure of some things, at least. One was that I was scum, another was that Lucy’s and my relationship was over. Out of everything, I felt least bothered by these two certainties; in the chaos of my new, pregnant world, I suppose I even clung to these absolutes. Everything else had been blown sky

high. It felt like the tiger, or what I now understand was fear, had escaped, and there was nothing I could do to contain it.

The moon looks misshapen tonight as it waxes. It looks like a skull, with holes where its eyes might be, one side of its scarred face chewed off. The buzzard shuffles sadly on its unnatural nest.

Inside, I message the RSPB. Then I type an insect's name into Google and click on the BBC website.

Dragonflies are marvels of aerodynamic engineering. The adult beats its two sets of wings out of phase and can control both frequency and amplitude. The angle of the two sets can be controlled independently, allowing for some astonishing aerial manoeuvres, spectacular hovering and **flight** in any direction. Dragonflies love the world's wet places as their nymphs remain aquatic for months or even years. Both nymphs and adults are voracious **predators**: an adult will eat just about any insect it can capture in flight, especially **mosquitos**. Thousands of dragonfly species have been identified, differentiated by wing colour patterns and venations.

Did you know? Dragonflies can fly backwards, change direction in mid-air and hover for up to a minute.

A tattoo, of course, will always remind me of her, although none are so artful, so expressive as the dragonfly on her shoulder; her daemon, Celine called it, a reference that with a staggering lack of curiosity, I have never asked her to explain. I'll ask her tomorrow, I think, suddenly overwhelmed by my ongoing paralysis to do anything about anything. It's like I'm constantly

making a to-do list in my head, and for no reason at all other than to reflect on the fact that I don't do them. I'll go and see Celine and I'll chase up Angela Jameson.

18th JUNE

It turns out I didn't have to call Rathbones. Angela sends her email to Lucy at 08:00 this morning, and it must simultaneously chirrup into my own inbox. A spoonful of Weetabix is halfway between bowl and mouth. The cereal splatters back into the bowl. I read through it, with the dreadful image forming of Lucy slowly doing the same; the email cutting through her morning routine of Chris, of showers, of highchairs and bibs...of Weetabix.

It is exactly what Angela had said it would be, simply a notice that William Crawford had instructed Rathbones & Co. to make an application to the family court to prohibit the removal of Matilda Crawford from her home in England. It didn't mention Scotland and I realise that Lucy could have taken Mattie anywhere in the world.

Every time my phone beeps or chirps, my heart starts to race. The morning ticks by and I lose sight of what Lucy is doing. If I had pictured her at breakfast, it was only briefly, and the rest of the day, I am clueless about her thoughts and action. The silence, a lack of response, turns out to be as frightening as getting one. Nothing happens although I do get another email from Rathbones at about five o'clock. It is their bill.

I stay late at the club and share a bottle of wine with David. When he leaves, I decide to go and see Celine.

She is just there. She is just there, in her garden. With Rob.

I can hear them, so I carefully replace the latch I had been lifting and move away from the gates. From within the garden are the instantly and painfully recognisable murmurs of Celine chatting and moving around with someone. Music is playing from the kitchen. Their lazy, low-voiced exchange threads through the music and the laurels toward me.

It is vital I stay. Now I've heard them, it is out of the question to walk on. I wait, barely breathing, as if horror-struck, near the newly-stripped shed. I don't know what for. Perhaps simply frozen by what I am now sure is the intimacy I can hear spreading warmly through their conversation.

The swing chair creaks, some phrase I can't make out. Then: 'Have I got time for another?' It is Rob, presumably calling from the kitchen. His voice cuts through the music. She has put jazz on. Jazz – something I have never heard Celine play before. Has she ever put on any music before? The song is an instrumental and suggestive swing with a sultry New Orleans beat. Henry likes jazz, I think randomly, perhaps she heard this at his house. (But Henry likes all sorts of music. It meant my father never totally believed in Henry's admiration of opera; he distrusted anyone with wide-ranging and eclectic tastes and said that Henry could not have been a true aficionado of opera if he was happy to prostitute himself around other genres). Jazz has erotic overtones. I feel disapproving hearing it now, like my father.

After a while, I sit down by the hedge and, tilting my head back, look up at the leafy canopy of her silver birch. An upside-down, unsmiling crescent moon, with a spittle of stars dribbled around it, occasionally grimaces at me through the winking branches.

Is she in her long skirts, chewing on bitten nails, pushing off with bare feet against the grass, leaning sideways into his shoulders on the swing-seat? Is she warm, and languorous even? The stars begin to blur and run into each other. Are her eyes, watchful and unfathomable as ever, dimming and glinting with secrets I have sometimes imagined I almost catch? Perhaps she is merely amusing herself. Tickled by the invitation from the Burrows, if this is the precursor to such a thing? But she cannot laugh her way around this one. I swear she would rather have done anything than agree to a summons at the Grange. At least the Celine I think I know would have.

I can hear the odd, unimaginative word from Rob. She is softer spoken than him and it is harder to catch what she is saying but the meaning is all in the cadence of her speech anyway. I can hear when she is thoughtful. When she is evasive. I hear when she is shocked, and then the clink of her glass against his tells me he is forgiven for shocking her. It isn't strange at all that his words have more clarity than hers; she is, as ever, a will o' the wisp to me.

I carry on trying to eavesdrop, staring up through the silver birch to where the moon, disapproving and lacklustre, sways to the rhythm of the syncopated jazz.

After a while there are the sounds of some clearing up. I learn the crisps are finished, the bowl can stay there, leave the glass, and the music is switched off. Further, quizzical exchanges – does Celine need a coat? Should Rob lock the door? – and then a pause until I hear the wooden gates (never closed before) tugged open. There is a moment which I can't actually see but I know happens: one of them pulls the other back and somewhere between the gate swinging shut again and their footsteps on the gravel, there is a long and painful silence. It is broken by the footsteps padding away into the distance, down the track toward the Grange.

Still sitting by the laurel hedge, I scroll through previous messages from Celine and get to the ones from Tuscany when she hadn't ever shut up. As if when separated from me by countries and borders she felt released, and the words poured from her with that briefly-found catholic fervour. Now I am returned to the purgatory of her silence.

I miss her. There was a point, in March, that I didn't see her for a week or more, but it didn't feel so oddly like grief. It didn't feel as though her absence was something that was happening to me. It feels like that now. I miss her.

The mess was spilling out of every nook and cranny of her hallway, including an old-fashioned suitcase in the middle of it. It was open and I could see some sarongs, perhaps, t-shirts and a tube of sun-cream. There was spilled kindling and laundry on the floor, scarves hanging from a mop, odd shoes and boots and cardboard boxes in various states of packing. A toolbox, oddly. Paperback books, some ornaments, a small broken lamp. The shade was on a peg with her coat. It was such a strange mess that the thought she was packing up, rather than un-packing, occurred.

New Moon drinks again. 'Are you moving to a new house?' I asked her.

'One day.'

'Welcome back here for now,' I said, banality masking the alarm. 'How was Italy?' I put my wine on the kitchen island.

She leaned forward out of the shadow, her hand outstretched. 'Do I get a kiss and what you have bought me?'

'It's red wine,' I told her and catching her hand, we kissed, quite naturally.

'You always make me feel better. You cheer me up,' she said, and then, as though the observation had just occurred: 'I was lonely in Italy.'

I was still somewhere in the easy touch of her mouth on mine and the sweet shock of its familiarity. 'Were you?' I busied myself looking for a corkscrew. 'I thought you were busy. Sightseer extraordinaire.'

'Staving off loneliness. What have you been up to?' She reached behind me, back into the fridge and brought out a pot of olives. 'Here you are.'

I thought, miserably, I'd been with Naomi.

‘You don’t answer questions, do you?’ She opened a drawer and pushed the corkscrew down to me.

‘Do I not?’

‘Ha-ha.’

I concentrated on the wine. ‘Maybe not. Something to do with living with my father. He didn’t know any other way of having conversations. His idea of a conversation was an interrogation. He was always on the lookout for inconsistencies. It was a bit like living under cross-examination.’

‘He sounds a bit mad. No conversation stands up to forensic dissection. At least, mine don’t. Hurry up with that wine.’

‘Where’s your glass? He would ask, did you leave the light in the sitting-room on? A hole had been burned over night in the lamp shade you see. No, I’d say, and I would be sure I hadn’t, but much less so by the time he had finished with me. We went over and over my movements.’ I learned to be guarded. The less detail the better.

She bit into an olive and immediately grimaced. ‘I suppose you couldn’t ever get it right.’

‘No. It was a childhood littered with traps. Permanently shooting myself in the foot unless I kept quiet.’ It is what I’d done by going to bed with Naomi, I thought furiously. Shot myself in the foot. ‘Or taking bullets for my mother. Which was foolhardy.’

‘You’re so old-fashioned. Foolhardy. Who says that anymore?’ and then she had a coughing fit, spluttering into her wine. ‘I hate olives.’

‘Celine,’ and I wasn’t sure how I was going to, but I wanted to say it. I wanted to say it because I couldn’t be guarded around Celine. She was everything, by then. By April, I knew that being with her was like having the blank of my life filled in. And with this realisation

anew, I was suddenly frightened. If she told me to get a grip, as she likely might, what would happen to this hole, the hole of my life? It yawned ominously before me.

‘What?’ Celine asked, stretching back by the Aga.

So I stepped away from the edge. ‘Why do you buy them, then? Olives.’

‘Remind me not to. This wine is delicious.’ Back in her wolf-cub lair. ‘I couldn’t drink another Italian merlot ever again, but what’s this?’

‘Italian merlot,’ I said and she emitted a yelp of disbelief and pushed me aside so she could get a better look at the wine bottle. It gave me a moment to feel the relief. Better this way than nothing at all. But I still had to tell Naomi. Tell her that I loved someone else, someone utterly maddening and not in the least bit perfect, and there was nothing I could do about it.

We had almost finished the bottle when, still by the kitchen island and with Celine collecting the heat from the Aga, I became cold. She had not lit the woodburning stove that time and the room temperature had dropped so it was now as chilly as an ice-skating rink and I remembered the boxes in the hall and a departure, one day.

‘Why are there packing boxes in the hall?’

‘There aren’t,’ she said, picking bits of sediment from inside her wine glass.

‘There are boxes all over the hallway out there.’

‘Oh, those. I’m sorting things out, post-holiday clear-up. Will you take the olives with you?’

‘No thanks. I don’t like them either. But why do you buy them?’

‘I don’t know,’ she mused, pushing the slimy things around the oil. ‘They look tempting in the shop. Maybe I just want to be the sort of person who likes olives. Maybe it’s a new moon optimism, and I thought I’d like them this time.’

‘What a lot of nonsense you talk.’ I thought we would embrace as I said goodbye, but the olives had distracted her.

‘I’ll take them to Henry’s tomorrow,’ she decided, putting them down. ‘See you tomorrow, Will. Oh, and don’t burn the house down forgetting to turn the sitting-room light off.’

She left, grinning, and I let myself out. As I opened the door a piece of paper fluttered off the side table to the floor. I automatically bent to pick it up and read it without really meaning to – I was thinking about the lamp with the salmon-pink frills on the shade that I was convinced I had once turned off. I hadn’t meant to read what was written, but it was only a list, scrawled in sad, careless ink and my eyes flickered down it.

- What am I doing here?
- Bills
- P’s parents
- Column, phased out
- Will

The heading was LIST OF ANXIETIES.

‘If you would just spend a minute alone with yourself.’ The boy’s voice was quivering with righteousness, and strain. ‘Then you’d see what an asshole you’re being.’

His dad – if it was – stared straight ahead, his eyes fixed on something far away in the water. Misery sat with them in the wooden dingy. The dad didn’t answer, or if he did I couldn’t hear. Celine waved again from the tip of Warren Shore, and her voice floating across in the wind toward me, was lost.

I waved back and came in to get her.

‘Want me to get swept away?’ She grimaced, clambering ungainly over the side of the boat.

‘The tide won’t get any higher now,’ I told her. ‘You’ll be okay.’

‘That’s what you think.’

‘That’s what I know.’

‘Thanks for coming, anyway. I don’t think I would have made it back, at least not in time for lunch.’

‘No problem. The table is booked for 1:30.’

‘Look,’ she lifted her arm in her fisherman’s jumper with the hole jagged under the arm and pointed toward the bird-watching hut. ‘Can you get the boat in there? I’ve a different idea.’

‘Yes. Why?’ I was suspicious. ‘What have you got up your sleeve.’

She put her head on one side. As if it was obvious. ‘So we can be alone.’

The father and his son had finished with their dingy and I could see them struggling to get it out of the water and back onto its trailer. The father was reversing toward the tow bar, misjudging the distances and straightening up over and over. The son, hands in pockets, was

looking away, in despair or embarrassment I did not know. We were too far, and Celine was strolling toward the hut. She always maintained a level of aloofness long after I had abandoned mine. I remember I was on edge, expectant; thinking it felt as if there was something she wanted to tell me.

She turned to me at the door.

‘We were already alone,’ I pointed out. ‘In the boat.’

‘Hardly.’

Sometimes I had no idea what she meant. Sometimes I let it go, sometimes I didn’t.

‘No, literally. We were. Apart from a few seagulls.’

She looked at me as if I was spoiling something. She made me feel as though I’d not got something, that I’d missed something of meaning. ‘That strange boy and his father kept looking at us.’

‘They were sailing past to the jetty.’

‘Still. It’s more private in here.’

I had been going to say, well, now I’ve got to cancel the table, but then I saw her face. And suddenly, in the musty gloom, with the door creaking on its hinges behind us, I translated the nervous purpose in it. The wind pattered at the timber slats, it sounded like fingers rat-a-tat-tatting. Celine was a blue spot in the corner. It didn’t matter then who P’s parents were.

Still, I hesitated, and she came to me. Behind her, through the bird-watching window, two or three ducks emerged and rushed awkwardly into the water. ‘It’s starting to rain,’ she said, and then she kissed me.

I don’t recall why we separated finally, or even the boat ride back to Buckledon, particularly. As if, having been there in the hut with her – even for such a short amount of time – is so finely and completely etched in my memory that I don’t have the space in my mind to hold the leaving

of it, or any more detail. I do remember there was a regret, as well as a tenderness in the way she extricated herself, and in the way she told me that the rain wasn't worth getting in a fuss over and we ought to leave. That she didn't mind getting soaked after all. I don't think we spoke in the boat. I suppose we just said goodbye back at the jetty by the clubhouse, and she slipped out of my grasp as arbitrarily as she had come into my arms. I expect that she went one way towards her cottage, and I returned to the marina the other. Only later did I start to feel as though it had been some sort of test that presumably I had failed.

But whatever it was, and whichever way I looked at it, she was soaked into my skin as indelibly and as painfully as a tattoo by then and my suspicion of failure hardly mattered at that point, because I felt as though we still had time. Time for me to redeem myself, in whatever way that was, and time for me to tell Naomi, who I had, unforgivably, just been ignoring. And time to show her that I ought not to be on her list of things to be anxious about, and to try and make sure she didn't have a list of worries at all. I thought we had all the time in the world, as the song goes. And I forgot that the song, of course, means anything but that.

19th JUNE

No message or contact from Celine. She and Rob have traipsed, viperously, through my thoughts all night.

No reply from the RSPB. Before I leave, I check again on the buzzard and creep forward through the open door as I have become used to doing. But there is no sound from it today. Nothing at all. It has died without eating the meat or drinking any water, simply collapsed into the grass cuttings.

I don't even know what to do with its body and I'm still looking at it, hopelessly, when I hear a car pull up on the side of the road. It is Naomi, with sleeves rolled up, and my heart sinks when I see her face, tight with tension.

'I've just come to see if you're still alive.'

'Yes, of course, I -'

She cuts me off. 'You never replied to my concern. I ask why you are quiet and nothing. Nothing back.'

'I did...'

'You did not, hardly. Pathetic.'

'Yes. I'm sorry, I know. Look, come in.' I try to usher her away from the bird, a collapsed jigsaw heap of feathers.

'No. What is wrong with you? I thought something happened between us, and if I was wrong, you should have told me. You've kept me hanging since April.'

It's not very long, it's only a few weeks. 'Naomi. Please.'

She pushes my hand away. 'And from the day we met to this, you have treated me badly. You turn up when you're hungry or bored, or thirsty, or just passing.'

'It wasn't like that. And I haven't come to see you for ages.'

‘Is that your best thing? Is that a good thing?’

‘No, no, I’m sorry I haven’t been round. I’m sorry,’ I finish lamely. ‘I should have told you.’ I can’t stop the voice in my head, surely not mine, the voice that tells me she is making a fuss, that I never made a commitment to her. *Leave me alone.*

‘Told me what?’ she demands.

A pigeon is cooing loudly, a bit like a horn beeping. I wish it would hurry her up. Another silence, another coo. I say instead, ‘I thought that you didn’t want anything complicated. That it suited you.’

‘I may not have wanted anything complicated, but I didn’t want nothing.’

‘You could have ended it when you liked.’

‘Yes,’ she nods. ‘I am a fool. I should have, whatever ‘it’ was. You only half there, wanting to be alone, pushing me away. Or wanting to be with someone else? Maybe? I saw her half-dressed in your car, didn’t I?’

‘Who?’ I ask, bullish.

But I know what she is talking about and the memory of that morning seeps into and dilutes my bullishness. Celine had asked me to give her a lift to the Lymington shore to collect her car.

‘Look,’ she’d said, gaily, pointing from the passenger seat. ‘There’s, whatshername, look, your friend. Walking.’ It was early, and Celine was typically still in her dressing-gown. I’d been helpless to avoid the meeting. I braked alongside Naomi and her eyes took in Celine, the dressing gown and her bare feet insouciant against the dashboard.

‘Celine is picking up her car,’ I told Naomi. ‘I’m giving her a lift.’

‘Will,’ Celine said. ‘Don’t be cross about this.’

I turned back to Celine in frustration. ‘What is it?’

‘I haven’t got my car keys. I’ve forgotten my car keys.’

‘Are you being serious? We’ve come to get your car and you didn’t bring the keys?’

In cold tones, Naomi said, ‘I’ll leave you to it.’

‘Oh dear,’ Celine had said, not sounding in the least bit concerned, and loud enough for her voice to carry through the open window. ‘Your friend looked a bit stroppy. Is she always like that?’

The May morning fades, embarrassed. ‘I can see how that looked,’ I say.

‘Never mind,’ says Naomi. ‘I don’t care enough anymore.’

Fine, that voice in my head thinks.

‘Haven’t you got anything to say? I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone as unresponsive as you. As cold.’

‘I’m not cold.’

‘I know you have a daughter that you never told me about.’

‘Don’t bring Mattie into this,’ I say, sharply.

Mid-rant, she takes no notice. ‘Alice told me. That’s remarkable, don’t you think? To not once mention a daughter that you have?’

‘It never came up. Mattie doesn’t live with me.’

‘You must be really involved with her life.’

‘You don’t know me,’ I say, quietly. ‘You don’t know what happened. You don’t know anything about me.’

‘I won’t ever until you tell me, Will. That’s the point.’

I just don’t want to let her in. I don’t want to give her access to thoughts that even I can’t make sense of. I can’t unravel and present them just because she wants a few. ‘There is another side to the story. There’s always another side.’

‘Of course there is. I just don’t know your side. But you know what else? I don’t want to know. I’m done here. I’m almost frightened of you.’

It's an awful thing to say.

'I'm frightened of being like you. If I spend any longer with you, I'll end up like you, I'll stop caring. You're a machine, and if I don't get away from you, I'm in danger of thinking it's okay to be like that.'

There isn't a glass of wine to throw in my face, or gravel for the car to crunch on. If Lucy had been in this scene, as once I think she had, she would have turned on a stiletto. Naomi is just there one second and gone the next. The space is quiet and accusing. I never know if I want solitude or company; as soon as I have one, I feel it too heavily and long for the other. I shut the shed door with hands that shake a little.

I walk along the shoreline, the sky dissolving into the softness of summery evening light. In the winter, the evenings were clear and harsh; jagged sunsets the colour of one of *Iseult's* sails. Brent geese filling blue-freezing sky. Now, evenings have smudged, hazy trails like a violet mist, a giving up; a surrender. Across the water, the gentle slopes on the Isle of Wight remind me of the lowland hills in Scotland, purpled with heather. The Needles, strangely, like arctic blocks of ice, incongruously harsh in the nebulous landscape. Naomi's words come back to me like incessant pinches. I did not tell her, in part, about Mattie to avoid the judgment that befalls a neglectful father. Also that I just didn't want to tell her. My parents clawed at me, like eagles after innards, trying to find everything out about me. It used to hurt until I swapped my heart for a mechanical one. I know that comes from a film, and I know it to be true.

Toward the end of the shoreline, I begin to run and swerve up onto the pavement leading to Lymington - but the pinches come too. Mattie's; Mattie who I hadn't wanted but had been given anyway and nobody had been able to tell me what I was supposed to do with this flash of wizardry, and still could not, now that I knew I wanted her desperately. And needed her. The most precious thing; and the punishment for not seeing this was not having her. My father

had punished me, for mutiny or for ingratitude; for not offering anything in return for the opportunities they provided. I keep running, like I had when I was a little boy across the beach at the headland near Exbury. I run until exhaustion and until my grey, tin heart is beating in agony and I can taste the metal in my mouth.

Do I imagine I would be able to commit to Celine because I know in my dead heart that this, of all things, is utterly impossible? That she will not stay still long enough for anyone, not Rob, and not me either. I'm safe with her. We all of us only ever want to feel safe - and free. How does that work?

Celine, another year older this month, seemed undecided still, as to what to do with me.

After the rain, the evening was washed out, wrung pink; the dark colours sullen shadows beating a retreat to the east. The group on the foreshore were gathering like mourners. There was little talk. The ripples of water were clear over the pebbles and it was as if windscreen wipers had swiped left and right across the sky leaving our surroundings achingly clear and sharp.

It wasn't a wake. We were gathered by the sea to celebrate Celine's birthday, an expectant, almost anxious group, waiting in the dying of a rain-filled day for her. She hadn't arrived yet. Alice stood near me, scuffing at seaweed and shells, her hand, as ever, over her mobile, her new lip-piercing glinting. A flock of geese chattered in the estuary to the west.

'Think we can have a drink?' David Turnley looked at the cool box scraping the shallows.

'We ought to wait for the birthday girl,' said Mary.

'She's just getting Henry,' I told David. 'She won't be long.'

'It's quite cold,' said Lady Burrows in her gravelly, smoker's baritone. 'It's far too cold for poor Henry to be dragged out. I'm sure he'd rather be at home.' A small pause during which all who heard silently disagreed. 'It's far too chilly for me.'

We waited, Liz's annoyance crackling in the atmosphere, spreading a little. Julian stamped his feet as if crunching in the snow and blew on his knuckles. I wondered why Celine had invited them. I knew she had invited Mary because Mary had been wronged and now Celine would do anything for her.

'Holy crap.' Alice's voice made us all jump and we all looked this way and that, because in front of us Celine was making her way down the beach, holding on to Henry's arm,

and behind us, about five hundred Brent Geese had risen from nowhere and filled the sky, cutting through those pale, cut-glass clouds so they were suddenly black with these chattering, wheeling birds. The darkening light was like an eclipse.

‘Blimey,’ breathed Alice and even forgot to take a picture. ‘That is a lot of geese.’

‘Well well,’ called David, ‘what an entrance. Happy Birthday Celine. Drink?’ and on she came with the birds fanning out in a dark V above her.

‘Yes, please David,’ she said, not looking at him. ‘Some of that Dom Perignon, if you don’t mind.’

David dived into the cool-box.

‘Hi,’ and she smiled at me, her pale face still in an avian shadow.

I stared at her, dumb-struck.

‘Aren’t you going to wish me many happy returns?’

‘They’re going you know,’ said Jack Nott, his eyes still on the geese and the slanting stroke of their wing as they turned. ‘April. They’ll be back to the Arctic.’

‘Happy birthday,’ I said.

David emerged with a bottle of Prosecco. ‘There isn’t any Dom Perignon.’

‘I was joking, David. But that will do.’

‘The farmer will be glad,’ said Julian, and pointed an imaginary gun into the sky, and the geese, unflinching, flew another decisive circle above us. As if in the chill of the pink air they felt the lure of home. The Arctic tundra a memory surfacing on the Lymington foreshore that evening.

‘Don’t do that, Julian,’ said Liz, and then to anyone who was listening, ‘Ever since our eldest became a vegetarian she doesn’t like to come during the shooting season.’

‘None of them like to come at all, Liz,’ snapped Julian, suddenly. ‘Ever.’

Henry interrupted quickly. ‘It was a job we had to do.’

Celine, holding her glass out to David, swung round. 'What do you mean? Killing them?'

'Yes,' he said and Julian nodded emphatically.

'Why?'

'Because - do you really want to know?' and she nodded, 'Because Brent Geese don't move off when they're scared. Unlike Canada Geese, they'll stagger into the air and pretty much come down again. We had a huge migration here a few years ago, far bigger than this year and the farmer lost his crops to them. The whole lot.'

'Well, that's tough,' she retorted.

Henry said, mildly, 'Don't be silly. We got permission to shoot thirteen of them. Odd number, I agree. A few good, clean shots-'

'-you, me and Ted,' supplied Julian.

'- to get them off the farmer's fields.'

'It worked, didn't it.'

'Indeed it did.'

Celine was silent. And then: 'Are you going to open that bottle or not David? We're all dying of bloody thirst,' and David flipped the cork from the bottle and the sound was like a starting gun and the geese picked up speed with a surge as if the recently-departed rain clouds were pulling them away to the east.

Celine bent down to the small fire.

'Matches, anyone?'

Alex had helped me collect the kindling and out of guilt I'd asked Naomi to stay. She had shaken her head vehemently and told me that she hadn't been asked. I had, unconvincingly, I suppose, told her that I would be there to look after her and because she already knew better

than to trust me, she had given a hollow laugh before leaving. Now, watching the flames from the bonfire reflected in Celine's eyes, I knew I was glad that she wasn't there.

The tide was slow drawing up the beach. The sky was filling with purple ribbons and aeroplane trails, lights beginning to blink. Alice fetched the deck chairs I'd brought from the clubhouse and I unfolded one for Henry who sank into it, watching the water tiptoe toward his feet like grandmother's footsteps. Lady Burrows took another chair and, unusually, was quiet in it. David opened another bottle and he too stopped talking so much, his drink-flooded eyes beginning to reveal the wretchedness within them. The moon filled and brightened. It was as if the whole village was on beach patrol that evening. The sea was vast and empty.

And when the cool-box was also empty and there was nothing else to put on the fire that had blazed like a beacon all evening, everyone began to disperse. Celine slipped her hand into mine.

'I'm glad you came.'

'Of course I came.' Sometimes I thought I would have the strength to stay away, most of the time I knew I wouldn't.

'Why is it so difficult to get you to smile?'

'It's not.'

'That's better.' Her hand squeezed my fingers. 'I've had a lovely evening, thank you.'

'It's not to do with me,' I said.

'It is sort of to do with you. I haven't been well, really. I haven't been myself and I think you've stopped me falling apart completely.'

Her face was partially in shadow. 'Go on,' I said.

'If I talk about it, it becomes real and I can't let that happen. But I think, I think that when I'm with you that I might be getting there. You're holding on to me.'

‘I’m not going anywhere.’

‘Thank you. You know, I hope I’m like Henry as I get older.’

‘In what way?’

‘Well, he’s survived, for a start. And he isn’t wistful about anything. He’s done it all just how he should.’

‘He’s pretty unique then. Speaking of Henry, had you better take him home soon? Or I can?’

‘Shall we go together?’ she suggested.

‘Sure. Good idea,’ and those small white teeth flashed at me in the dark. ‘We’ll have to come back for a car in the morning,’ and she nodded.

I must have guessed, on some level. Probably, like her, I did not want to go there. Probably I knew that something was insurmountable and I didn’t want to hear what. In that sense, I failed her. My level of response and awareness to her was so over-heightened that I missed what was important. I was so busy with what I had to tell her, that I wasn’t listening for what she had to tell me.

I wish that when she had said – on that near-perfect April evening in her kitchen, when she sat on top of her Aga in her grey cardigan and the summer dress – that she wanted to be the sort of person who liked olives: I wish that I had told her I would take her to Greece. I remember I said, rubbish, or something similarly dismissive. Why on earth didn’t I say, you needn’t have olives, but you could have the Aegean Sea and the rocky bay in the afternoon, Retsina and citronella candles spluttering at night. Come to... I don’t know, Ithaca, I could have said. We can go right now. You only need to take off that wintry cardigan, and those woolly socks that you have been skating on. You seem half-ready, packed even, with your battered suitcase in the hall. You always seem poised for flight, as if you are mid-way out of a

door ajar. There is a warm, salty breeze in Ithaca that mixes with the smell of pine trees. Decide now. We'll go together. Darling Celine, you can be an Ithacan who likes olives without liking olives. You are, after all, as you have insisted, a thalassophile. Instead, I told her drily, 'what nonsense you talk.' I didn't tell her I loved her. I think I said, 'I don't like olives either.'

Someone said that regrets are idle but what a thing to say. Many of my moments are made up of regret. Regrets are not idle, they are keeping me busy. Languishing amongst such moments, I am transported to the arid warmth of a Grecian summer and my day is enriched beyond measure.

20th JUNE

It's pitch black and my mobile is flashing on the bed-side table. It stops and then starts again, moving with its vibration toward me.

Have been trying to ring you. Lucy. On way to A&E now. V high temp. Call me.

I call but she doesn't answer. I don't try again, pull jeans and jumper on in the dark, make some sort of coffee, drink it, and get into the truck. I drive too fast to Winchester hospital, darting between the dawn and the new forest, across the moor-like landscape and onto the motorway. Lucy rings again and I say, 'I'm coming.'

She bursts into tears. 'She's finding it really hard to breathe.'

I put my foot down.

I don't bother parking properly, and run through the doors, past security, and stop stupidly at the list of wings and floors. An awful list, a catalogue of chemotherapy and strokes and cardiacs. The pre-day quiet, the antiseptic corridor. Where is A&E?

'Is that your vehicle, sir?'

'Which way to A&E?'

'You can't park there,' repeats the security man. 'You need to move that truck sir. It's an emergency slot for paramedics.'

'This is an emergency,' I say.

He is not fazed. It is all an emergency. 'I'm going to ask you once more to move your truck.'

'I'm sorry, I will, but can I just find where my daughter is?'

And then Chris is there, taking my arm gently. 'I've been waiting for you,' he says.

'Calm down. It's okay. She's okay.'

‘What’s the matter?’ I notice my hands are trembling. I clench them.

‘Can one of you please move that vehicle,’ says the security man. ‘Ambulances need that space.’

‘Give me the keys to that truck,’ Chris says. ‘I’ll move it. They are on the second floor. D-42, East Wing. Not an emergency.’

I start fumbling in my coat pocket, find the keys, and push them into his hands. ‘Thank you.’ I’m dimly aware I need to pull myself together. ‘Sorry,’ I say to the security man.

‘Second floor, turn right,’ calls Chris from the revolving doors.

The low-grade humming of some unidentifiable machines. A nurse who asks me something. Two rows of beds and a sickly, sweet smell. Teddy bears everywhere, shiny balloons. Lucy. Two, three long strides. Mattie, tiny in a bed. Feeling through the starch sheet, the search for her hand, an arm. A Dickensian, dangerous flush to her cheeks. The sound of her breath, raspy and shallow. A cough, deep, and sore. Her eyes open, then they close again.

‘It’s croup,’ Lucy says. ‘I didn’t know what it was. They think it’s croup.’

‘Croup.’ My hand finds Mattie’s.

I squeeze the hand, too tight. Her eyes flicker open again and the fingers in mine twitch in response.

I think a nurse finds me a chair and I sit opposite Lucy, watching Mattie. The fright is fading, but strangely I did not want to let it go just yet. I want to hold onto the fear and to remember it so I wouldn’t ever again go anywhere without it.

After a while, after I have to let go of Mattie to sign some forms, Chris comes back. He hands me the truck keys.

‘I put five pounds of parking in the meter.’

I stare at him, gratitude surging through me. I last saw him at Mattie's birthday party handing out pink balloons with the number 1 on them. He could metamorphose into anyone that Lucy needed him to be, even a clown, with the utmost of dignity. Now he is back to being Chris again, an officer in a pink shirt, the faded pink of a Tuscan farmhouse I may have dreamed about once.

'Apparently croup is much worse at night,' he says. 'She's fine, isn't she.'

'We can take her home in the morning,' Lucy tells him, and he clenches his fist in a salute. We all grin, in guilty, unadulterated relief.

21st JUNE

I'm supposed to be meeting Angela Jameson in Southampton today.

I remember, from my sentry chair by Mattie's bedside, the day I had left St Cross Avenue. I had told Lucy I was going to get some beer. She found me about an hour later, sitting in the car. Her father had given us the Porsche. It used to make us laugh (briefly, before it made us cringe) because it was such an obvious statement of our independent and child-free lifestyle. No 4x4 diesel-guzzling family car for us. But I grew to hate the replacement, falsely redolent of success and frivolity.

'Will?'

Lucy had shouted my name into the street. Dusk was falling into the sky, spreading with the smoke from the chimneys across the branches of the distant rook-filled trees, over St Catherine's Hill.

Then she saw me. 'Will. What on earth are you doing out here?' She stumbled down the path to the road, glancing behind her at the open door. Mattie, crying as usual, in the pram, underweight and colicky.

I opened my mouth and the truth of what I was doing nearly fell out of it. But I curbed the impulse and looked away, staying quiet; in the absence of suitable words and phrases, that is what I do.

'Will? Jesus. You're worrying me. Come inside now. What are you doing out here?'

Actually, I don't have a fucking clue what I am doing out here. I thought it was to get away from the baby but maybe it was to get away from you. To get away.

'You can't not talk about whatever's going on forever. I can see how angry you are, and how upset. You've got to let me in at some point.'

Really? Really?

Lucy's face appeared at the window. I stopped myself winding it up.

'This is utterly ridiculous. And it's not your daughter's bloody fault. It's not her fault she was born!'

More tears. Is it normal that one's heart can be so unmoved by their reappearance? Or is my heart totally severed from my humanity? And agreed, it's not Mattie's fault. It's yours.

'You think that I made this happen, don't you? That I had Mattie on purpose. Well, no. It was an accident. I didn't.' Her voice rose. 'I didn't.'

But I think you did. Added to which you've fallen for Chris McNeil and you think I still haven't noticed that deceit either. Not that it matters anymore.

Lucy used to think that we had split because of Mattie, but now I think it was because I felt tricked by more than just Lucy; I felt tricked by life. By the sort of promises that a sodding Porsche couldn't deliver on. It wasn't her fault. She was right. She had said:

'We've been over this. Over and over. It's done, it is what it is. You need to just bloody grow up or get out.'

I got out. I started the engine and Lucy walked away. She stormed around the front of the Porsche and kicked the wheel arch as she left. About two days later I told her from where I was holed up at a friend's house that I didn't even want to be close enough to her to see Mattie every day, that once a week would do, and in December I left for the New Forest and Beaulieu, where I had grown up. I stayed with Henry until the cottage came up for rent. Shortly afterwards the job on the river began.

I get up, and walking into the corridor, try to find some signal. I have to circle around a bit, past ashen-faced parents, wheelchairs and surgical scrubs in shades of blue and green. Eventually I come to a stop near the coffee station. Two or three messages have come in overnight about the marina, including one from Celine. **You've been quiet.**

I ring Angela Jameson and cancel the meeting. Her PA says that I will have to pay for her time given the late notice.

‘Could you let her know that I think I’ll be able to sort it out myself.’

‘Of course,’ she says politely. ‘All the best.’

‘Sugar?’ One nurse asks another.

‘Two,’ is the reply. ‘What a night.’

I can’t sit in Lucy’s way like I had blocked the road in the Porsche. I need to reboot and move on. Then another message pings just as the coffee I’m doing for Lucy starts gurgling. It is a more plaintive prod. **You’ll want to know where I had dinner the other night.** I turn the phone off.

I go back to Mattie without replying to Celine. She is still in her drugged sleep, long lashes on flushed cheeks.

Lucy says, from the other side of the bed, ‘We’ll be back home by lunch.’ She is calm again, but guarded, not meeting my eye. ‘Those steroids really did the trick.’

‘Can we talk quickly, before you go?’

‘I think only through lawyers.’

‘I’m not going to get lawyers involved, Lucy. I won’t try and stop you going.’

‘God,’ she says, and then, ‘Really?’

‘Yes. It would be a pointless fight. And you should be happy.’

Lucy breathes out. ‘Oh god. I didn’t think you were going to say that. You’re so stubborn, usually, I thought, I thought...you know.’

‘I know Mattie needs you, but she needs me too. Surely. We really need to work something out. How I can see her more. I don’t want her to disappear.’

‘I don’t want that either. We can do this, I promise.’

‘You’ll have to let her come and stay with me.’

Lucy opens her mouth and then just nods, slowly. ‘We can talk.’

‘Yes. Okay, when you want. I’d better get off.’

‘I’m sorry to have panicked you last night. It was a terrible flashback to those early months, I think. We never stopped worrying, remember? We always thought something was wrong.’

On a whim, I say, ‘Why don’t you come to the cottage? With Mattie, to see it? It might help put your mind at rest.’

‘Yes,’ and she is so immediate, my heart soars. ‘Whenever you like. Next week any time?’

‘That would be good,’ I say quietly. ‘Really good. If she’s better. Monday, try for Monday.’

We don’t wake Mattie, now sleeping on her tummy, her fists curled above her head. In the lift, it occurs to me that I had spent no longer in the hospital than I had the night Mattie was born; Lucy’s labour was premature, no one could get hold of me and then it was very quick. But I was leaving this morning with more of a sense that I had a daughter than I had a year before. That this time, I was the one doing the waking up, seeing the world for the millionth time but as if for the first. I leave the ward as if for me, it had been the maternity ward, and I am as tired and relieved and joyous as I always imagined a father would be.

*

Celine is in the carpark by the clubhouse when I arrive back, showered and fresh. If I didn’t know better, I would think she had been waiting for me. As soon as I am out of the truck, she comes over.

‘Sometimes I think you’re angry with me.’

‘Sometimes I am.’

‘Why this time?’

‘I’m not sure I am anymore.’

‘I never know why,’ she says. ‘I never know why, with you. Was it because I wasn’t in the other day? I heard you dropped by.’

‘No. Don’t be silly. But Rob gave you the message, obviously.’

She does that thing with her hand, when it tries to find its way into mine; a reward, a crumb thrown out for not minding. For being sanguine and not minding.

But I am not dodging bullets today. ‘I’d like to know one thing, though. Why didn’t you tell me you were married?’

‘What?’ Her hand falls to her side. ‘Why have you brought that up?’

I just look at her.

‘Do you think I should have?’ she asks.

‘Yes, of course.’

‘It’s personal. You didn’t tell Naomi about Mattie, did you?’

We look at each other.

‘That was just a guess,’ she said, ‘but I was right. I see you, you know. We understand each other, don’t we?’

‘You can’t get out of this, Celine.’

She shrugs. ‘But it’s true. You didn’t want it to be any of Naomi’s business and maybe I didn’t want it to be any of yours.’ She must have seen some defeat on my face, because she adds, more urgently, ‘And I did tell you. The other day.’

‘Only last week, after all these months. Why? Did it end badly? Was it an unhappy divorce?’

She looks at me calmly. 'I'm not divorced.' She puts her head on one side slowly, like the sandpiper does. 'Let's not talk about this now. It's not the right time. I just wanted to see you, and to say hello.'

'Did you just say you're still married?'

'Yes.'

'I can't believe it. I had no idea. You don't wear a ring.'

'No.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Happy summer solstice?' Her smile is half-pleasant, half-threat, her patience running thin, thin as her webbed-like fingers gesturing into the sky. 'Did you remember? It's today.'

'Does Rob know?'

Her shoulders twitch as though to flick me away, like a new forest pony would to a fly. 'Why do you care about that?'

'He likes you.'

'I know. He's very young though. Not old enough to know better. Unlike you.'

'Sorry,' although I really don't know what for. For not knowing better, I suppose.

'You've no right to mind about Rob.' There is a growing, challenging light in her eyes now. The dragonfly is crouched blacker than ever, quivering with arachnid watchfulness.

'Maybe not. But I thought because of what happened. The bird-watching hut.'

'In the hut - what? I let you kiss me?'

'If that's how you remember it.'

'I'm not going to get into this. Let's leave it now.' Her face is set, her eyes hard. Hard - and bored. 'I only came to say hello.' She turns. She doesn't want to hear what I finally want to say.

Foe then, not friend. And there is no point after all. There is nothing I can do with her lack of emotion. Nothing can break through her wall, I realise, and the realisation is a cold, freshly-learned, ancient knowledge. I know I have known it all along. It is all useless. Stop it. This digging, this *scouring*. I am trying to scoop out responses that aren't there, that I probably don't even want. I think about the bouquet flung into a hedgerow not far from here. About how I had left Henry's and been on my way to tell her what I felt, and to ask her about a future. The thoughts, recalled anew, retreat under the force of her contempt, and wilt once more, like the flowers.

In bed that night, I dream about Exbury. The garden, that patch in the New Forest that my mother had simultaneously adored and despised; adored because it was a lifeline, something that rewarded diligence and loyalty and kept the forest at bay. And despised because it was undersized and simple. She had pretty much dedicated her life to this horticultural dichotomy and my last memories are of her amongst the flowerbeds, surrounded by her colourless shrubs, digging. Opening up and turning over the ground as if the answers she sought to her conundrum could be found in the earth. Celine and I are there arguing, or I am arguing, and she is motionless in the garden, sculptural in her chilliness.

I came to collect her on the day we had organised. We were to go to the beach at Lepe, on the other side of the river. It felt as though we were going to go thousands of miles from Buckledon, as if we were getting out together. But then, Exbury had always felt thousands of miles from anywhere.

I waited in the truck outside her cottage with the myriad possibilities of the day nervously suggesting themselves to me and fading again, darkroom photographs swirling in liquid before developing. A bluebottle was soporific on the dashboard. At that point Lepe was still linked to my parents and only them. From this day on, it would not be.

She finally emerged, with sunglasses on. I imagined they were concealing something, like a fool I wondered if she had remembered the bird-watching hut, and that she was considering what direction the day might take. When she wavered by the door, I thought I was finally done for, that I was on my own. She went back into the house. I forced myself to look at the fly, heavy with heat. When she returned it was with a wicker basket, because, as she announced, we ought to stop on the way to buy a picnic. The ridiculousness of my relief and then the renewed hope was a heady mixture.

I drove quickly through the twisting dark lanes towards Beaulieu. Overgrown branches thwacked the sides and the roof of the truck and each time Celine ducked her head as if she were afraid of being hit by them. Miraculously, the fly clung on.

At Exbury we stopped at a shop that had not been there thirty years ago. Baguettes and cheese, two tomatoes, and bottles of water filling Celine's basket. Apples and a bit of chocolate. A newspaper. Celine picked a jar of local honey and small carved serving spoons for a salad that we didn't have. She spent ages flicking through magazines and then feeding a thin cat outside with bits of the bread. I looked around and saw that Exbury, these days, was

characterized for me entirely by what had not been there before, by what the little boy waiting for the school bus every day had not passed. That country store opposite. The boat hire place. Blanks everywhere had been filled in, with surf hire shops and ice-cream vans. Just as she was getting back into the truck and squinting into the cloudless sky, Celine realized that she didn't have a hat. I went back into the shop for her and came out with a large straw boater that she put on and wondered if she looked like Liz Burrows. When I laughed, not disagreeing, she took it off, and threw it on the back seat. Something made me want to check her commitment to the day and I remember my hand hovering over her knee before I started the engine again.

‘Shall we go? Are you sure you feel like the beach today?’

‘Yes, Will. Of course, yes!’ and my hand, with a life of its own, fell onto her leg and clutched it. She covered it, without hesitating, with both of hers—for that one moment, she was uncompromising—and as I accelerated, past all those things that had not been there before, I allowed myself to believe again that the possibilities for the day were endless.

After five minutes we passed my old house. I slowed and pointed it out. I tried to see it through Celine's eyes and could not make the leap of imagination. It was too ingrained in my mind as something else to just be what it was - just an average, roadside house in the New Forest. Not so big that one could have been left alone, not so small that one could have found comfort. The average, roadside garden, once so determinedly tended. The kitchen, because of its proximity to the road and the public, was still hidden from view by a net curtain. On the floor above, my hamster had wheeled itself to wide-eyed insanity and then death behind similar lace. And next door, the study and its view of the river. A room where leather belts that looked like dog leads were kept alongside files and documents, reviews and judgments. A radio, and an old-fashioned tape-recorder from which Wagner's *Ring Cycle* seemed to be on constant broadcast.

In contrast to the rest of Exbury, which had clearly prospered over the intervening years, and where the blanks had been filled in with signs of expansion and modernity, this house seemed almost exactly the same. Even though the oak trees surrounding it were wider and taller, encroaching onto the clearing, branches overhanging the flowerbeds, the house itself seemed to be stuck in its forest space, like a timeless dwelling from a fairytale. I looked once more up at the top floor and saw myself again as I used to; a little boy, flying, falling through the air. Escaping from the room by the only means possible, through the top window and from where on winter evenings I could see the moon rising, impossibly bright and distant. Where I was flying to or whether I too would drop, smashing onto the road beneath, like the spinster from the Grange onto the patio, I was never brave, or stupid enough to find out.

On the steps heading down to the beach, Celine bought an ice-cream for us to share but I spent the next half an hour chasing bits of my newspaper down the wind-filled car-park whilst she ate most of it. She dropped the cornet before it was finished and swore when it splattered on the concrete. I managed to stick her parasol into the sand. The material was split on one side and let the sun through. But the sun wasn't that warm, and I shivered a little behind the property section of the paper and kept my sweater on. Celine obstinately smeared a thick layer of sun-cream into her forearms.

She read *A day in the Life of...* to me in her brown bathing suit and shielded her legs from the wind under a towel. Lucy wore pink bikinis that she never got wet and painted her toenails a glossy neon colour. Celine's toes were un-manicured and the feet sticking out from underneath the towel were a dry, bony grey. That week she was a barrister, a profession she had taken against. She tugged at her tangled hair as she read, as if the very thought of a wig, weighty and aristocratic, was horrendous. As if just the very idea of having to live between the musty depths of contracts and documents on the one hand, and incarceration in the gloomy

interiors of law courts on the other, was unspeakably awful. The black dragonfly on her shoulder, dismal today, shook in empathetic horror. She spoke in such a flat monotone that my attention wandered from the words. I suppose I thought it was a miracle that she had come, that we had got away from Buckledon. When she had finished reading, she chucked her notepad into the sand in disgust, and got up to swim.

I watched her go, hoping that any indecision would be sluiced away by the sea. The white-tipped waves licked at her toes and ankles and then her pale, veiny calves. She waded further in, ignoring nearby shrieks and splashes and I watched her disappear chunk by chunk. When she was chest-deep she stood for a moment with her white-pasted arms upstretched and immobile as if they were in plaster cast. She turned to me from her almost-submerged position; in acknowledgement of my watchfulness, or looking at something beyond me, I do not know. I blinked and when I looked again, she was gone, her shoulders and her head, the dragonfly too. When she reappeared, wherever that was, I wasn't sure, because I was searching for her elsewhere.

She was distracted when she returned to her towel and glistening with salty sea drops. She suggested, without sounding too interested, that it was lunchtime and obediently I took out the baguettes and the tomato. She asked for a knife and some salt. I gave her cutlery and she admitted to forgetting the salt and pepper. My hand grazed her arm and it felt icy and suddenly depression washed over me, as if rather than coming back to me, I had lost her to the sea. She ate half a tomato and then took her sea-salty arm into her mouth and sucked the drops from it. Then she found a biro in her bag and started the crossword I had brought. Don't say anything if I ask, she ordered, let me do it this time, you never give me a chance. It was true perhaps, that I had been raised to give an answer quickly if I knew it. She studied the words and then intoned clue after clue out loud, so I was stuck between answering and getting a dirty look or remaining silent and...getting the same. She took a large, untidy bite of an apple and chucked

the newspaper down. Wasps buzzed at the remains of the spilt ice-cream on the steps behind us and I retrieved the crossword, the letters blurring like a cluster of insects on the page. The apple re-emerged again from her mouth with another white dent in it and a snail's trail of saliva.

I wanted to talk to her properly, but I kept quiet. It occurred to me to bring Naomi up and bring some sort of sting into her afternoon but I was prevented from doing so by the knowledge of its pointlessness. I could never get what I wanted from her; the best I could have hoped for was a lie.

She reached for her shirt and I wondered why, even when she was with me, it felt like she wasn't.

I packed up, because the sun was drawing a cloudy glaze over the sky, and I had no further excuse to linger. She walked quickly to the truck and I made my way, sluggish and uncertain behind her, across the sand to the car-park.

'Did I tell you my father was a clerk of the court?' I told her, as we began the up/down, round/about drive down the twisty lane I knew so well. 'He would have given limbs...anything to have been a barrister or a judge. If he'd had the opportunities.'

'Henry mentioned it,' she said, staring out of the window.

'He hated me, I think, for squandering the opportunities I was given.'

'I'm sure he didn't hate you. Why are you still even thinking about him? I read the other day, can't remember who said it, that once we're over thirty we've got to stop using our parents as an excuse for the way our lives turned out.'

'That's not fair.' I said. 'I barely even mention them.'

'You don't need to mention them. You're a standard Philip Larkin cliché I'm afraid. They fucked you up.'

Sometimes, you are intentionally cruel, Celine, I thought. This was not how I imagined

the possibilities of the day. I tried to salvage it. I said, trying to stay calm: 'I'm sure I'm not unique in my un-idyllic childhood.'

'I'm sure.'

'If we were unhappy, which we probably weren't all of the time, it was because my father believed in discipline. He believed in rules, and actually, you know, I hated him. I don't want to talk about him. I only brought it up because you are a barrister this week.'

'Why?' And she turned to face me.

'Why what?'

'Why did he believe in discipline? Because if he was frightened of chaos, I can understand it. I was given too much freedom as a child. I was completely anchorless, and so was Mum. It's why my step-father and his god-squad appealed so much to her. A hand out of the storm.'

The idea of my father finding solace in the church was risible. 'My father was an atheist.'

'Poor him. To be so...severe, and unbending.'

'He was a nasty piece of work.' I couldn't help saying it, I wanted to say it, even if it did make me a cliché. I wanted to hear myself say it. And I knew I could because there was no chance of any sympathy, and becoming trapped in it, spending the car journey trying to escape it. I knew, that in this mood of hers, she would be deaf to any tragic undertones.

'I'm sorry, Will.' It was the softest of pauses. 'I am sorry. I know he was.'

I swallowed, and neither of us spoke as we turned toward Beaulieu.

'Poor you, darling. I'm sorry.' She said it again.

'Thank you. And my poor mother.'

'And poor me,' she said and because she laughed a little, and because she turned the music up, because I always felt relieved when she was laughing, I didn't think to ask anything of it, or why she included herself in the Crawford family circle of self-pity.

23rd JUNE

The blue is not so blue on the horizon and the breeze, at last, a breeze, seems to have gathered some moisture from the sea. The air is not as dry as it has been.

This apology isn't going to be helped by Alex. He opens the door and immediately slams it shut in my face. There are some raised voices inside and then Naomi comes out, with folded arms.

'What do you want?'

'To say sorry. Can't you guess?'

'Will,' she says, 'I have never, from the first moment I met you, been able to guess what you want. I have no idea.'

'I want to tell you I'm sorry. Have you got a few minutes?'

'I've just got back from teaching all day. I'm whacked. Frankly, I'm amazed you've bothered to come.'

'I want to try and explain.'

She studies my face for a moment and then says, 'Okay. Down there, by the swings.

Alex watches us go from behind the curtain, disgust trying to hide anxiety.

In the playground, she says, 'It doesn't matter anymore. We're going home for the summer holidays soon.' She begins to push the swing lightly backwards and forwards.

'Home?'

'How funny I said that. I haven't called France home for years. Well, whatever it is, we're going in a few days. I'm taking Alex out of school.'

'I didn't know.'

‘Does it make a difference?’ And just for a moment, hope flares on her face. ‘No. So it doesn’t matter why you’re here. I’m homesick. I’ve been homesick for a while, I just didn’t know it till now.’

‘Will you come back?’

‘Perhaps not. I don’t know. It’s no good for Alex here really. He liked you,’ she says suddenly, looking at the ground. ‘Me too. You could – admittedly rarely – make me feel special you know.’

‘None of that was false.’

‘And at the same time, or the next moment, you made me feel worthless. As though you were punishing me for something.’

‘I think when I met you, I let myself be carried away. I felt, feel, good with you, and that is a very nice thing.’ I swallow. ‘It’s very enticing to feel like that. But after a while, it isn’t a good feeling any more for someone like me. It’s like wearing something that doesn’t fit.’

‘It’s not as though I was all over you.’

‘I know. If I could change it, I would. I know none of it makes sense.’

‘It doesn’t really, not to me. I think you could probably change it if you wanted. But honestly? I’m glad I’m not involved anymore.’ She catches the swing and holds on to it. ‘And I don’t even want to ask this but-’

‘-Don’t then.’ A pause. ‘Sorry, go on.’

‘Why don’t you see your daughter more? Why aren’t you allowed time with her alone?’

I think two things, in the awkwardness of the silence. That Celine would never have had to ask, and that I hated I hadn’t seen Mattie more.

In the end, I say, ‘I do see Mattie more these days and there’s no reason I can’t be alone with her.’

‘And I’m right about you and Celine, aren’t I?’

‘We’re not together, if that’s what you mean. But yes... I...I...’

‘It’s plain as day. Too safe with me, blissfully dangerous with her,’ she adds ruefully.

‘I don’t know. She’s with someone else. And Mattie is my priority now.’

‘I hope you don’t end up alone. I think being with someone is what helps, even though it’s never perfect.’ *It helps life’s sadness being with you.* ‘But actually, I think you might be. You might be on your own. And you might be happier that way.’ She gives the swing a shove and lets it go. It flies into the air maniacally, lop-sided and I have to dodge its sharp and angled return.

Naomi goes back to Alex, is ushered in by him in paternal mode. She hugs him on the doorstep.

My hand is almost burnt by the temperature of the steering wheel. I pass donkeys and cowslip nodding on the banks of Buckledon, air blowing through the truck like a hairdryer and the sea in the distance glittering blue. Angela Jameson calls to check she is supposed to be rescinding the court order, to sign off Rathbones’ fleeting involvement with me.

‘Good. Very good. Everything ship-shape, then.’

‘Yes,’ I tell her. ‘I think it’s getting that way.’

Celine was buying her newspaper in the village shop.

‘It’s Friday,’ she said, looking over at me. It looked as though I had followed her in, but actually, we had arrived at the same time. She left her hand outstretched with the change in her palm for the tight-lipped owner to scoop out.

‘Who are you today?’

‘A librarian,’ she said, as if she’d said, a maharaja. ‘I’m getting bored, you know. I think this column’s days are numbered. Perhaps Alice is right.’

‘What does Alice say?’

‘She doesn’t understand why the paper don’t get a real librarian. Or vicar. Or whoever. She doesn’t understand the postmodern irony of what we’re about, of course.’

‘I’m not sure I do either.’

‘Well, you, Alice and my editor are in agreement. Apparently *A Day in the Life Of...* doesn’t chime with their goal of authenticity. I don’t care.’ She tucked the newspaper under her arm. ‘Authenticity’s over-rated. Do you want to come for a drink later?’, and I nodded, as she knew I would. She sauntered to the door, and I picked up a copy of *The Bournemouth Times* to read myself later.

I mouthed through the window at her, What time?

Seven? Her lips moved and she held up six fingers. I held up six and then seven fingers back at her, making a questioning face. Which one? She threw her arms above her head, laughing. Whenever.

*

Celine was nowhere to be seen and Alice was in her place on the swing-seat.

‘You all right? Celine said she told you six. I’m staying for supper.’

‘Nothing else on?’

‘Been blown out,’ she says, miserably.

‘I’ve been lecturing Alice on the inconstancy of men,’ said Celine from behind us. ‘I’m not sure any of it has hit home yet.’

‘This one’s not like that,’ insisted Alice.

‘Not all men are inconstant.’

‘On that unlikely note,’ Celine said, ‘what shall we drink? Not that you deserve one, you’re late, and now you’re a liar as well.’ She answered before I could attempt to defend myself. ‘Rosé. It’s that sort of evening isn’t it?’

‘Have you got some?’ asked Alice, looking eager.

‘Not for you I haven’t. Will, do you like my pool-house? I’ve been inspecting its possibilities. The last unexplored bastion of my dominion.’

‘Yes, but you haven’t got a pool,’ I said, not for the first time. I peered through the ivy at the filthy windows.

‘Pedant.’

It looked like a junk shop inside.

‘She’s got the river,’ Alice said loyally. ‘She doesn’t need an actual pool.’

‘But you’re right - I haven’t any rosé. And it is what I really feel like, don’t you agree?’

Celine looked at me.

It was impossible not to agree even though the May evening still breathed a spring coldness. Even though nature, and the temperature disagreed. ‘Yes, it’s that sort of evening. And guess what I’ve got.’ It was equally impossible not to feel stupidly pleased with myself. ‘As luck would have it,’ and I pulled the bottle out of the bag I was carrying.

There was a moment and then Celine clapped her hands. ‘Will,’ she said, taking it from me. ‘You are completely, simply brilliant, and I utterly adore you. You know me so well.’

When she had left – ‘for a corkscrew, unless you can magic one of those up too’ – I didn’t bother to hide an enormous grin. A splash of exultation dropped warm into the evening.

I think Alice and I both felt the same way. As though we had been summoned to her court for reasons that wouldn’t ever become apparent. A strange, watery court that was overgrown and ramshackle and where the mood was unpredictable. Alice ended up with a glass of wine after all and stared at the ivy with the purple flowers snaking along the bottom of the pool-house wall.

‘Is that a clematis?’

I knew it was not. My mother had this plant, several girlish pale-pink ones that she couldn’t make neat. They grew into each other with fine, twisting stems knotting. They looked flat and feeble when their brief bloom was over, all wisp and sadness.

‘God knows. Will?’ Celine asked,

‘It’s a weed. Periwinkle.’

Alice went to pull at a clump, but Celine said, quite amicably, ‘Oh, leave it alone. It’s pretty.’

Alice stopped mid-tug and pulled at the piercing above her eyebrow instead.

‘Are you ever going to do anything about this garden?’ I asked.

‘What’s wrong with it?’

‘Nothing. I wouldn’t have it any other way.’

‘We went swimming, Will,’ said Alice.

‘And I used up all the hot water. Sorry again Alice.’

‘You can dive at high tide off that tree stump.’

‘I’ll drink to that,’ I told them, and Celine and I drank the rosé in the swing-seat, and

Alice lay on her back gazing into the sky.

‘See Alice’s tattoo?’ Alice stuck her arm out to show the shell on her wrist.

‘Pretty,’ I told her. It was.

‘Mum collects shells,’ said Celine. ‘She has beautiful ones now, huge pink Australian conch like my step-father’s ears, but even they don’t stay the same once you’ve taken them from the beach.’

I thought of the ugly pile Lucy used to bring home from Poole where her parents weekended. She kept them in our bathroom, studded with grey grit, a washed-out, sickly gathering. One or two from the holiday in the Caribbean, the tinge of glamour faded, quickly as dull as the handful from Canford Cliffs in Poole.

The sun, pink-tinged like the wine, was dropping gracefully into the water at the end of her garden, and by the time we had nearly finished the bottle, the dusk had slipped into night and the moon was visible; like a shell, dusted with gold and tucked expectantly into the wings of the night. She was sitting on a rug, and shifted to pull it out from beneath us, and over our shoulders. A wing of her dragonfly tattoo was visible like the ends of a cobweb, etched finely over her shoulder bone.

‘Did you ever tell me why a dragonfly?’

She shrugged, and as she lifted her shoulder, the dragonfly shrugged too. ‘I can’t remember. Does there have to be a reason?’

‘I thought you liked reasons.’

She caught my eye and half-smiled, inclining her head. ‘You’re right, I do. Well, I guess it’s my daemon. Company. And they remind me of my childhood. The pond at home, before Dad died. He used to play with me for hours there, I think. We took leaky buckets down and filled them with tadpoles and frogspawn. He had a model boat. He loved pushing that old thing round. It was so decrepit, it was always leaking.’

‘How old were you when your Dad died?’

‘Four.’

‘On a lifeboat?’

‘Yes.’

With the inconstancy of men in mind, I carefully asked what he had been like.

‘He really was heroic. I adored him,’ she said simply, but nothing else, and she turned to lie on her back across the seat, so her feet were resting in my lap. My hand hovered uselessly near. I had learned to be so cautious around her. It was a matter of self-preservation, but that evening, I was thinking about throwing caution to the wind. Alice seemed to be asleep. My hand came to rest on her ankle.

‘Losing him was an early lesson, I suppose,’ she said.

‘A lesson?’

‘You know. In life’s sadnesses, I suppose.’

And I felt this, in her. It was torture to feel this in her.

‘I’m not being maudlin, I promise,’ she said. ‘I’m trying to say that I don’t feel life’s sadnesses so much when I’m with you. Not so much recently. That’s all.’

Torturous, and at times, exquisite.

Alice stretched. ‘Shall I do anything for supper?’

‘I haven’t got much,’ Celine told her, and she sat up, pushed off with her toes and the swing rocked backwards. ‘I wasn’t expecting company.’

Alice said she would have a look and when she had gone, Celine nodded after her.

‘She worships you, you know. She thinks you are, what was her word?’

‘Clearly something memorable and profound.’

She winked.

‘She likes you too,’ I said, ‘only I’m not sure you’re a good influence.’

‘I’m not,’ Celine assured me, ‘but I am quite fond of her,’ and when Alice came back, agreeing that the cupboard was indeed bare, Celine told her, with immense magnanimity that she could choose the takeaway, and in such a way she reiterated her affection for Alice.

‘Pizza,’ said Alice, ‘on laps in front of Love Island,’ and Celine groaned and then I suppose it was my turn for some show of affection because for just for a second, she stilled, and rested her head – and the dragonfly rested his – against my arm.

I left after the pizzas, Alice eating all the ham from Celine’s because Celine realized too late, as she always did, that she only liked the pineapple. Celine came out to the truck with me and discovered the straw hat in it that I had bought her on the way to Lepe.

‘It’s been here all along,’ I told her. ‘Since we had that funny day at Lepe.’

‘Funny ha-ha or funny peculiar?’

‘Um. Not funny. I don’t know. Maybe just connotations with that whole place.’

‘What was wrong with our day?’

I wished I hadn’t said anything. She sounded amazed.

‘It was windy,’ I reminded her. ‘And crowded. You were in a mood. You were cross about having to be a barrister or a judge or whatever it was that week.’

‘Rubbish. I went swimming, didn’t I?’ As though her courage was the mark of the day’s success. ‘I had a really good swim in the sea.’

I still wasn’t convinced, but as she remembered it aloud, the day lost some of its brittleness and began to take on a softer complexion. In Celine’s telling of it, some of the sharpness of the hours fell away, dulling into something that was at first ordinary and by the time she had finished, something else entirely. She could do that, with a conjuror’s sleight of hand, she could draw sunbeams through a shuttered window. The village shop at Exbury

became charming, the ice-cream (never dropped or wasp-infested) just a treat. The wind, not annoying, only bracing.

And me, I wanted to ask. How do you remember me? Because I have changed since you came, the unhappiness of my life has begun to disintegrate. You make me feel the sadnesses of life less acutely.

23rd JUNE

The fire on the beach is like the one we made for her birthday, only far larger. Someone tells me it is to ward off evil spirits. It is Midsummer's Eve.

Liz Burrows is worrying, obsessing, about whether or not the travellers will come and ruin the party. Jack Nott staggers past under an armful of logs and drops them at the top of the path and we hear them rolling all the way down to the shingle amidst his expletives.

It's a far bigger gathering than before. There is no formal invite from one person, anyone comes, and anything goes which accounts for Liz's nerves. Henry, tired this evening, is a notable absence. The Buckledon and Beaulieu lot are grouped together. Celine is on the periphery, looking like a pagan priestess in a flowery dress. Her hair is almost dreadlocked these days. Following my gaze, Liz shudders and takes a gulp of her chardonnay. Where is Rob, I wonder? The question, once asked, will not switch itself off. No Rob. Along with Naomi, Rob is not at this gathering for Midsummer and for me Rob is conspicuous by his absence in a way that it never occurs to me Naomi should be; she is just not here, but where is Rob?

And then I see that Naomi is here after all. She is further down the beach and putting up a makeshift May pole with some friends and Alex is tugging at the crimson and blue ribbons, careering around and around. There are good-humoured rebukes and then some sharper ones of annoyance. In the end, Naomi takes Alex down to the water while the Maypole is erected but no one is taking it seriously, it's not just Alex. There are rowdy jeers as someone trips trying to run full tilt around it and ends up on the ground with a ribbon torn from a pole.

One of the men hanging around near Celine has a drum around his neck and is beating it intermittently. The group near the fire poke it and bat at the smoke and when they rub their eyes they leave charcoal black marks smeared across their cheeks. The heat from the day begins

to dissipate and now the younger children are getting taken home. Someone drops a bottle of beer and it shatters into thick brown pieces on the shingle.

‘Shall we go?’ Liz entreats Julian uneasily.

‘No dear.’ He is terse. ‘The night is yet young.’

And then there is a music, something with a heavy hard beat that occasionally breaks into a repetitive, tuneful chorus. Someone says, ‘It wasn’t like this last year,’ and Liz says again, ‘Shall we go?’ but no one answers her.

‘Where’s Rob Sinclair?’ Eventually I ask David.

‘Coming later,’ he says, ‘After he’s back from Cowes. There’s a big do there as well. Probably somewhat grander than ours.’

Once Mattie goes, and in between the days with her, will I be truly alone?

‘This day has gone on forever.’ Liz, increasingly distressed, finally gets her way at about ten-thirty, when the sun, which has been suspended on the horizon, sinks blissfully behind it.

‘Going going gone,’ recites Julian and then, ‘Goodbye, one and all,’ still without moving, and then Celine walks past us.

David is drunk. ‘You’ve got something in your hair. May I?’ His hand, trembling with wine and chivalrous intent, stretches toward Celine’s pale head. She recoils, and his fingers meet thin air. Grandeur has attached itself to her, just as gaucheness to him.

‘Stop mauling me David.’ She puts her own hand to her hair and finds a leaf, a dark green leaf.

‘See?’ He smiles uncertainly.

‘It’s just a bloody leaf.’

‘Celine,’ I say, ‘Leave David alone,’ and she gives me a look of pure hatred.

Rob finds me on the shoreline. He has been drinking in Cowes and his sun-burned face looks florid and goofy. He stumbles a little and I step back, try to step around him.

‘You not staying to have a beer with me, mate?’

If I’d been his father, I would have told him to go home and sober up. If I’d been his friend, I would have said this isn’t the way to impress Celine. As I am neither of those things, I say, ‘another time.’ Then: ‘Celine’s married, by the way.’ I feel pathetic but uncaring. I want to shake him out of his torpid idiocy. ‘You probably ought to know that.’

‘Yeah,’ he says, scratching his head. ‘I knew that. I don’t know how this works, but apparently I remind her of him.’

He staggers away.

Figures around the fire are like matchstick men and women, dark arms upstretched, snaking from side to side. The sea stretches blue and orange away from them. Just east of us is Warren shore and Gull Island. I try to recall the afternoon in the bird-watching hut, almost wondering if I had made the whole thing up. I suppose Celine had thought that I would be more like her about it. I suppose I did used to be like her. Till I met her. And then I thought, for a moment, we had something. And suddenly, it is of vital importance that I tell her this, in the dying of the day. I can’t keep things from her, I have never been able to. And although I know she is with someone else, I must tell her she means everything to me and have it fixed: the winter that I began to love her not in ghostly and pencilled ash, but glowing and charcoaled.

I turn back to the group by the fire and she is a little apart from them, with folded arms. She sees me watching her and walks slowly, purposefully toward me.

‘Hello, you,’ she says, watchful in the dusk, just a shape. ‘I’m sorry we argued,’ and she slips her hand into mine, the way she used to, and it feels like clear, cold water.

‘So am I.’ But now I can’t remember which argument, which unhappy meeting.

She squeezes my palm.

‘I was jealous,’ I tell her, squeezing back. ‘I am jealous of Rob.’ It might be the beer, too much, or not enough, but I’m saying it.

She is silent for a long time and then tugs at my hand, so we walk a little way from everyone else, along the waterline and toward the east.

‘You don’t have to be jealous of Rob. He’s pretty uncomplicated. And things don’t last long with me.’

‘But he’s got you,’ I say. ‘And I don’t.’

‘He doesn’t have me. Rob doesn’t mean anything to me. Although, actually,’ and she pauses, ‘actually, that’s not quite true. Rob does mean something but that’s because when I first met him at the beginning of the month, I thought he reminded me of someone.’

‘Yes,’ I say bitterly. ‘He told me. Your husband.’

‘Will,’ she says gently. ‘I’m trying to tell you that Rob isn’t important, but that Peter is. This isn’t about poor Rob.’

‘Who is Peter?’

She doesn’t answer straight away and then I know. It comes to me in a slow dawning moment and then it is so obvious. Then it is an instant of knowing. I realise who Rob had reminded me of. Not somebody I had once seen on TV but a man and his life that I had once spied on in a photo. In the hallway of her cottage.

‘You’re important to me, too,’ Celine says. ‘Please don’t think you’re not important to me.’

‘Who is Peter?’

‘Peter is my husband.’

Peter is the laughing face with the dark beard and the light-heartedness in the picture. Peter with his parents.

‘It hasn’t taken me long to see that of course they just look vaguely alike. Peter and Rob. They aren’t at all similar. Not remotely. But you know, it was easy to pretend for a short time.’

‘I don’t really understand. Where is Peter now?’

‘Didn’t you realise? I thought you must have known.’

‘Known what?’

‘He’s dead.’ She turns away. ‘Wasn’t it obvious? Please don’t say you’re sorry. I’m sure you are.’

It feels as though I’m falling, reeling away from her. Known? What had I known? Dead. I had known... I have always known. She has never been with me. Peter. I must have said his name out loud.

‘Yes. I was married to him for fourteen years.’

For so long. So constant, so domestic.

‘Not long. My wedding ring is buried with him.’

‘You never talk about it.’

‘No. That way there’s a chance it didn’t happen.’

‘Celine. Oh Celine. When? How long ago?’

‘A year ago. In March, last year.’ Her voice is slightly sing-song, as though she is not quite here.

‘You went away this March. I didn’t see you for a while.’

‘I went to be with his family.’

P’s parents, I suddenly think. On her list of anxieties.

‘I nearly didn’t come back.’

I must have winced, because she bites her lip, but her gaze is still steadfast. ‘Will. I did come back, but it’s hard. I can’t seem to move forward. I got stuck and now it’s just the way it is.’

‘How did he die?’

‘It was unexpected. Quick. No hospitals or long farewell.’ Her eyes cloud for a moment before she shuts them. ‘Here one minute and gone the next. He didn’t suffer.’ She says it as if she has become used to saying it, because she ought to, but I can’t see anything apart from suffering in the ragged breath through her thin blue lips. ‘Oh well. There you have it. Finally. We didn’t have our new moon drinks this month, did we? Or last month.’

‘Celine...’

‘I remember now. We had a full moon walk instead, didn’t we? In May.’

‘Yes,’ I say, after a minute. ‘Yes, we did. Flower Moon walk.’

‘Flower Moon,’ she repeats. ‘I’ll remember that. It sounds as though it was rather lovely.’

‘It was,’ I tell her, uselessly. The shock is a kind of stupefaction. ‘Celine...I’ve been stupid. I’m so sorry.’

But she shakes her head. ‘No.’ I look at her, and see that, always wraith-like, her face is thin with grief. ‘You don’t need to be sorry. I don’t know what I would have done without you.’

But sorrow for her cuts through my dazed disbelief. I wish, suddenly, more than anything, that she had a child with Peter. That something was left for her.

‘I wish I had known. To help, however I could.’

‘I can see that, and I’m grateful. But I don’t have any practical worries. Peter left some life insurance and that sort of thing.’

‘I don’t mean that sort of help.’

‘But there isn’t another sort. So I’m just sorry about everything, and yes, I know you are too. Life is mainly ghastly you see, but every now and then, well – occasionally, there’s some hope and you were caught up in a bit of it. I’m sorry for that. But you got me through.’

She looks as if she doesn’t expect me to accept this – her apology – without making a fuss, without insisting on detail and explanation. She has straightened her back and is wearing that look that dares defiance, but she needn’t have, because I’m going to take it. I’m going to take her sorrow, her apology or whatever she gives me, if that is what is offered. Because we’re all hopeful, and we’re all sorry and it is all that is on offer. I’ll take it.

I hold out my arms. After a while she says, her voice muffled, ‘I didn’t always used to be a mess.’

I don’t want to let her go so she talks into my jumper, her head against my chest. ‘Peter kept me grounded, after all the moving with Mum, to Leeds and wherever. After she left for Australia, I drifted. Until him.’

‘Where did you live?’

‘London. It was just us. I probably relied on him too much. He was a sculptor, you know. His mum has all his pieces, at the moment. Their house is a mausoleum, I can’t bear it. But neither can they.’ I feel her shoulders lift and fall again.

I remember the skyscrapers in the background of the photograph, and the elderly couple who didn’t mind the rain. Who should have been grandparents but were not. ‘And you were writing then? For a paper?’

‘The paper is just me copying other people. Making things up, trying to imitate some sort of a life. I used to write my own stuff.’ She looks up at me then, almost pleading. ‘Is that hard to believe? Unpublished all of it, but still, you must have hoped there was more to me once than this.’ She spreads her arms wide for a second, as if ‘this’ was mere substitution. ‘We’ve all got pasts.’

But her past was more real than her present, her today. I too had lived in a city, worked for an accountant and been on double dates with Lucy's friends from Winchester Sports Centre. But it was an unreal past to me and I was not even the one with ghosts.

'Both our lives are different now,' she says softly. 'I'm a different person.'

And I'm different too; but my life before her had been no good, and hers before me seemed as close to perfection as one could get. We have been impossibly angled from the start.

'I wish I wasn't different. But when Peter went, it was like the strings that had kept me to the ground were cut loose. I've tried...I did think that you might be...' She breaks off.

'Could I still?' Hope nudges the words out. 'Might you, given time, be able to try again?' I'm looking out to the Needles, the jagged edge of the Isle of Wight.

'I don't know,' she says. 'Maybe. Perhaps I need to go away from you, to think.'

The hope dies a little, or rearranges itself.

I wish, as I hold her, that I had not seen the photograph of Peter. I remember its comfort and I feel the absence of it for her, the impossibility of it. It was a snapshot of everything that was lost to her and I knew that it was too much to bear even after just staring into it for five minutes. I think that if I hadn't seen it, I might wait for her.

24th JUNE

A skein of wild geese approach, swift and low. The rain in the distance is like pleats in the sky; a blackening curtain behind the birds. I stay on the shore watching the clouds move along the horizon until the geese are circling above me, just dark smudges in the dawn sky. The heron is on the bank behind me, picking its spiky legs along the bank. Its greyness is the pallor of my father's old age: a washed-out viciousness. It stops, and stares at me but without interest. I think that maybe I've been homesick, but not for home as it was. Homesick for something, a sort of nostalgia but for something I never knew, for an unknown. I have come to Buckledon so I could keep within my sights, across the river, a home that I didn't want. Celine had come to see if the river would carry her grief away.

My mother had rung to tell me when my father died and I was in the car with Lucy, on our way back from Alresford. I'd said, I can't talk at the moment. She had said it anyway. *William, I'm afraid...I'm afraid to tell you that your father has died.*

I remember, with head sinking back into the headrest, that I had pressed my foot harder onto the accelerator, pushing away at something. I had to resist any threat of regret. Lucy had turned to me in alarm as the car's speed increased. I resisted with all my strength. And then a ghastly relief as whatever it was, whatever threatened, crystalized into...nothing. A delicate sniff from my mother's end of the phone reminded me that I should say something to her. She was still afraid, and I still didn't know of what. He had never, to my knowledge, physically hurt her, and not in a way that she could ever articulate. She had freedoms, and a little cash; she thought it was just how her husband was. And she accepted it, was complicit.

It was very quick, my mother was saying, as I could not yet find any words. Yes, I thought, if my father had made up his mind to die, he would have dealt with the inconvenience swiftly and efficiently. And finally, into the silence, she said, quite harshly: *haven't you*

anything to say? For pity's sake, William Crawford. And the twisted ends of some sort of agony, like the roots of a gnarled tree trunk wrapped around my heart, tightened, hardened against them both. There was nothing to say, then. She hung up.

I met my mother in London when she came up to see her solicitor before she died. She didn't forgive me for not going to his funeral, but only because she would have been embarrassed by my absence. I think she told those she had to, Henry at least, that I was abroad, somewhere as inaccessible and remote as possible. And then a month later, beckoned from beyond, she followed my father into the grave, to a spot in the far corner of Beaulieu parish graveyard that she had ensured - peripheral as it was - by her years of dogged, hitherto unrewarded loyalty. I think after London, and our stilted, staccato talk, she understood that I too had been frightened of him, but nothing else, nothing about the roots that had grown around my heart. She insisted, as the taxis queued in their rank alongside our window booth, that she had done her best by me, and it was true. She had her ways of protecting me when I was little. We recalled, as I reached for her black-gloved hand across the table, how I had idiotically rushed in from the river one morning. I had left mud from the bank and intervening fields smeared across the hallway carpet, and she had not seen the mud as she usually might. She was in the garden so only knew when she came in with her flowers in her arm – at this point she said quietly, *tulips* - and my father was telling me what the consequences of my exuberance was to be. We remembered the tulips abandoned in the sink when she drew herself up and told him that I had a tutorial. The next thing I knew, I was in the car, and we were on our way to an extra maths lesson that she had made up on the spur of the moment. We had to pretend to go for the next three Saturdays.

She pulled her hand out of mine and it shook a little in her lap. We had another cup of Earl Grey, it was a tea-shop in Knightsbridge and we remembered the garden centre in Beaulieu on four Saturday mornings which had a cafe at the back. We used to circle the hydrangeas and

azaleas before eating cake, and never mention to each other why we were there. Then, or ever since. But her commitment to both my father and society exceeded everything else. As she got older, she became more like my father, and I became less and less like the sort of son she thought they deserved – rebellious, without purpose or gravity, and shockingly, sloppily unmarried (the disastrous fact of which they took as confirmation of my deliberate intent both to hurt them and fail in life generally). She came to my aid less and less as I lurched through teenage years. It was true that deception, I vaguely understood, was fraught with the danger of discovery and probably more complex for her than I knew. The further into any quagmire she sunk, the more I sensed she blamed me for the difficulty of it all. She didn't mind that I stayed at Henry's when I went back to school. It was a relief.

The heron's dismissal of me is like my father's had been after a beating. He didn't need to say anything, he would fold the dog lead in loops around his forearm like a lasso and put it back in the left-hand drawer of his desk. If I was snivelling a little, he would take his glasses off, blow on them and then wipe them clean with a small square cloth. We both knew he was waiting for me to stop before giving permission to leave the room. He would give a quick nod when I had pulled myself together and no doubt believe that he had done well by me, that together we had illustrated it was not impossible to hide weakness. (Getting thrown out of army recruitment after two months put paid to that belief and he relinquished his spineless, defective son to Henry). He would go and stand at the window with his back to me. I don't remember any visible sign of despair, and perhaps it is still the vain hope of a child, but maybe there was some wretchedness within that attic room. A loss of faith. With each beating he had to give me, with every punishment I forced him to administer, his sense of failure as a father must have grown, and I suppose his patience with himself, as well as with me, ran thinner until it was eradicated. I think he also ended up obliterating his own ability to believe in anything at all.

My shame is that I recognise his disappointment in the inability to love me. It is not the same thing, but it is akin to the disappointment I felt when I realised loving Mattie was not a pure, unsullied thing. I felt let down, like him. I love her, but I haven't ever known exactly what that means, and it isn't to the exclusion of all the other emotions and desires I can't help feeling.

I begin to feel a prickling sensation at the back of my neck. Is she coming, weaving down the jetty to join me? The feeling is so strong that I have to turn and check. There isn't anyone behind me. Just the incoming weather.

She isn't going to unexpectedly appear or take me by surprise. There isn't any mystery to her. She'd tried but she couldn't do it. I'd been looking at grief all this time, the messiest component of life, and the one wholly without remedy. I'd never realised; suspected perhaps, but not really. It isn't fresh grief, raw and bloody – easier to recognise – but the hardened sort that solidifies with the passing of time. It is muscular and knotty, and it is ingrained in her face like poverty, and pinned to her back like a rod. For Celine, things don't get better with time, things hurt more the next week, the next month. The next year. This is why she believes that the mark of a day's success – a swim in cold water – is, indeed, courage.

30th MAY / FULL FLOWER MOON

We decided to walk on the foreshore in Lymington that evening because Celine had wanted to get out of the cottage. She was quiet in the car.

‘Are you all right?’ I asked, thinking of her list of anxieties.

‘Of course,’ she said, but sadly. ‘Are you?’

We set off toward the sea, down the path with shadows playing on oak trees and the light soft in branches above us. I could hear a cuckoo in the distance.

‘I’m better these days,’ she said, unexpectedly. ‘I remember when I walked here in the snow. It must have been March I suppose.’ I had seen her. She had been so wrapped up in her thoughts, in something, that she hadn’t noticed me pass. ‘I’m better than I was then.’

‘What was wrong?’

‘Everything,’ she said. ‘The world was completely and utterly off balance. Nothing made sense.’

‘You must have been depressed,’ I told her, manfully, decisively, and she tilted her head to the blue beyond the oak trees and laughed.

‘It’s partly why I wanted to go to Ted’s care home. To see whether life made any more sense at its end. I thought it might be reassuring. You know, to aim for old age. It wasn’t comforting, of course, it was just clinical. Half of them were being kept alive by machines.’

The heatwave was hovering on the horizon like a sultry guest preparing with tanning oil. Celine was wearing a thin cotton skirt, and vest, so her shoulders were bare; she put her hand up to rub one of them, to touch the dragonfly. I wasn’t really following her train of thought and I wondered if she was trying to tell me something. I often thought that, but really, it was always me who wanted to tell her something.

In the end, I just said, ‘Ted was happy enough, wasn’t he?’

‘I didn’t think he was at all.’ She was indignant, and then of course a vision of Ted, and his pill-box with the MON →TUES →WED →THURS→FRI→SAT→ SUN→MON days of the week counting out the days till he died in the care-home bed. Heading towards Joanna Hamilton’s Z, the end of the sermon when it was time to walk out because the vicar had gone on far, far too long.

We were walking east, toward Buckledon, and before long we came across Hugh in his silver Land Rover on the beach. Jack Nott was asleep in the passenger seat. I could make Hugh out, staring across the Solent. I made as if to go over, but Celine stopped me.

‘Can’t we just walk on? I don’t want to get involved in this lunacy.’

It was lunacy. ‘It’s a waste of their time, I agree.’

‘But it’s more than that, isn’t it,’ she said. ‘It’s like, I don’t know...like *Waiting for Godot* or something. Shouldn’t someone put these idiots out of their misery? Tell them no one is coming to their godforsaken shores?’

‘It keeps them busy. They’re filling in time.’ But as we left the sentinels behind us, I glanced back at Hugh and thought how exactly due south he was facing; that if there was a compass drawn into the sand, Hugh had parked his car on it and was poised on its needle - not so much defending his shores as gazing with longing towards the Sahara. Toward Andalusia. ‘Maybe it isn’t a watch for war. Maybe it’s a lookout or a hopeful bid for rescue.’

‘You’re a good man,’ Celine said. ‘A forgiving man. Have you seen Mattie recently?’

‘I need to speak to Lucy. I’m thinking that she should come and stay with me soon. Maybe this month. I’d like to see her more.’

‘That’s fantastic,’ Celine said. ‘You’re really getting to know her.’ She nudged me with the dragonfly shoulder.

I was, I thought, and I thought of Mattie’s serious face and smiled inwardly.

‘Can I meet her one day? I’d like to.’

It seemed the most obvious and natural thing. ‘And swim in the river Friday morning, 1st June. Don’t forget.’

We walked on in an eerie light, towards the dark. The sky itself was split in two that evening because the sun was setting behind us and an orange shadow was casting a longer and longer light on the pebbles and clear shallow water. The light at our backs pushed us on into the distant dark, toward the moon that hung in the sky like a full stop. After ten minutes or so, as if she couldn’t bear the encroaching night, she stopped; we turned around in unison, and she gasped. Streaks of red and purple and ochre hung out to dry, a washing line of dyed sheets, birds carrying them to the west like clothes pegs. On the water, a ferry on the way to Yarmouth seemed suspended mid-way across the Solent, stopped in silent, motionless awe. Celine’s cheeks, more translucent than ever and her grey eyes suddenly filling with tears. Her head bowed like a snowdrop toward the disappearing sun.

‘What is it?’ I asked her, suddenly urgent. I couldn’t bear her to go backwards, to return to the depression of the snow-filled spring. She shook her head, wordless, and blinked the tears back. She walked ahead without me and I went after her but found myself unable to close the gap between us. Just when I felt despairing, she reached her hand blindly behind her, and I caught it.

25th JUNE

Lucy and Mattie arrive when I am in the garden. Shielded from the road by the hedge, I hear a car door slam, a pause, and then another. My heart is thumping. Lucy walks up the short path, talking to herself, and to Mattie.

‘Do we think this is it? I think this might be where Daddy is staying.’ And then, ‘Be good for Daddy. You’ll. Be. Good. Won’t. You,’ as if she was jiggling her up and down in her arms and hoping to jog some goodness into her.

I walk round the hedge to greet them. Mattie’s face is as serious and unsmiling as ever. Sometimes it is as if she is the only person who doesn’t pretend. Lucy’s face, in contrast, is lined with the effort of pleasure. She wants to make this up to me and make sure I don’t change my mind, I think fleetingly, uncharitably and then Mattie smiles shyly and I grin back, involuntarily, hugely.

‘It’s pretty here Will. You never said how pretty it is.’ Unexpectedly, she leans forward and kisses my cheek, Mattie momentarily squashed between us. ‘And Mattie has slept all the way, so she should be in a fabulous mood and we’ve brought her beach clothes, haven’t we, monkey?’

The monkey hasn’t taken her eyes off me. ‘Hello,’ I tell the face contemplating me, and hold a finger out to her. She looks at it and then yawns, staring away down the lane.

‘Say hello to Daddy,’ Lucy jogs her again.

‘Come in,’ I say. ‘We can have a cup of tea and decide what you want to do.’

‘We want to see where you work, and all the boats, and maybe go to the beach. We’ve bought lunch.’ In the kitchen she looks around, unashamedly curious.

‘All the nearby beaches are pebbly.’

‘She’ll just eat stones,’ Lucy says, downcast.

‘But she can still play, can’t she? It’ll be fine. Look, why don’t you put her down?’

We all looked at the floor. It had seemed fine earlier after I had mopped, but perhaps it wasn’t that clean. Still, Lucy tries to put her down, but Mattie wraps her chubby legs around her mother’s waist and clings to her hair for extra security.

‘Where’s the sandy beach,’ Lucy said, holding on to Mattie. ‘Didn’t you say there was one near your parents?’

‘Somewhere called Lepe. But a good forty minutes away. If you like, we could.’

‘Let’s see. I don’t want to get back into the car really. Can I put this in the fridge?’ She brandishes a Tupperware box at me, Mattie’s lunch, and the kettle flicks off. Lucy makes her tea, opening cupboards and commenting on this and that. ‘It’s quite tidy,’ she says. ‘I like this old cooker.’ When she goes to the bathroom, probably to inspect it, she heaves Mattie against my chest, her objections ignored. I walk to the window, feeling her comforting, solid weight in my arms. Her presence here is an alien but not unpleasant one, even though she keeps twisting round to the door that Lucy had exited from. And then when two seagulls land in the garden, she points at them, and looks at me.

‘Seagulls,’ I say. ‘Birds.’

Mattie stares at me and then at the birds again. One of them flies closer to the window, beak slightly open, eyes burning.

‘Birds.’ It is as if I am trying my voice out. It sounds odd to my ears. I say it again.

‘Look at you two,’ says Lucy from the doorway and I expect that she will want the small and chunky parcel returned to her, but she leaves us alone. Mattie heaves a huge, trembly sigh in resignation and turns back to the seagull. We watch it until Lucy has finished her tea and the bird has gone.

Outside we discuss whether or not to take the truck – which would involve swapping the car seat over – or Lucy’s car.

‘Just take mine,’ Lucy says. ‘Much easier.’

‘Fine. Let me get this boat engine out of the truck.’

‘Why, are we taking that? Is it filthy?’

‘No doubt.’

‘Okay, let’s move Mattie’s seat.’

I get it out of her car without a problem, but I am defeated in putting it in the back of the truck. I experiment with the strap in various ways, threading the seat belt through one part and then another. I have not done this before. The car seat I remember had been backward facing. Lucy lets me make my effort as long as she could bear before pushing me out of the way, and Mattie is pressed into my chest again. Her t-shirt is bright green and has a frog on the front. ‘Here,’ pants Lucy, ‘pass her over here. See how I did that?’

I look back at Mattie when I’m driving, red-faced but calm, staring out of the window, with one small hand loose in her lap and the other on a fender. When she was a new-born, I had been too frightened to touch her. She seemed all bone and wrinkled skin, a tiny sparrow, with eyes squeezed shut. Now she was solid, a plump-cheeked frog.

‘Are you hot, little frog?’ I say to the rear mirror.

Mattie turns away from the window toward me. Perhaps she recognises the word, she seems to try and hop, pushing forward in her seat.

‘Blast,’ Lucy says, clapping her hand to her forehead. ‘We forgot Mattie’s lunch.’

‘We can get something at the clubhouse. Judy and Alice will love seeing her.’

‘Presumably they’ll all be completely amazed.’

“They know about her. And they’ve got to get used to her,” and I sneak a look at Lucy.

‘And I’ve got to get used to her going.’

‘Do you mean that?’

‘Yes. Chris gave me a good talking to last night. If we’re moving away, Mattie is going to have to come and stay with you alone at some point. With me at first,’ she warns.

‘Fair enough.’ I catch Mattie’s eye again in the mirror.

‘You couldn’t blame us for thinking that you’re not really interested in being part of Mattie’s life. Sometimes you seem so in your head. How can anyone get in?’

‘I know I’m in my own head sometimes. Give me time. Mattie... was a shock. It’s taken me time to catch up.’

She nods as we pull into the carpark. There is no sign of Celine or Rob and I glance down at the jetty as we cross to the club steps, but his tender is not there either.

Alice greets us with shrieks of amazement. Mattie looks frightened and bursts into tears when Alice tries to snatch her, and Lucy tries to intervene, darting alarmed looks at me. I become so caught up in the fuss over Mattie that I forget to ask Alice where Celine has gone today.

Later we have a lunch that Judy has cobbled together on the bench by the river, throwing the swans our scraps and Mattie squealing with delight at them. Lucy says, idly pulling crusts off bread, that she feels happier about Mattie coming to stay with me.

‘I’m grateful we’re not fighting any more as well.’

‘It didn’t feel right. It’s better this way.’

‘Did you change your mind because she had croup?’ Lucy turns to pull the sun hat’s flap over Mattie’s neck, so I can’t see her face for a moment.

I’ve thought about this. ‘I think I would have come to the same conclusion, but not as quickly. It may have sped the process up, that’s all.’

‘Well - thank you. And I didn’t exaggerate it, by the way, the croup.’ She turns back to me, a touch defiant. ‘In case you think it was a ploy.’ She ties a bow smoothly under Mattie’s chin.

‘It doesn’t matter now if you did exaggerate,’ I say, matter of factly. ‘Perhaps you wanted to make a point and perhaps I needed to see it.’

Lucy opens her mouth, two spots of red on her cheeks, so I keep talking.

‘I’ve looked into flights between Inverness and Southampton. We’ll have to get used to airports, you see.’

Lucy drops her eyes first. ‘I’m going to have to get used to a lot of things.’

‘Other people do. Other parents manage.’

‘And it won’t be forever either. My parents don’t want us to go, maybe we’ll come back to be nearer them one day.’

Not a sentiment that I understand, but one I hope Lucy continues to feel.

‘Ma-ma,’ says Mattie, putting down her crisp, and pointing.

The three of us look. A white tender has glided up to the jetty. On board, two people are in deep conversation. He is gesticulating, and she is very still. When they are done, she stands up and steps out of the boat. She is in her white skirt. From where we are, they look a polished, and glamorous pair.

‘Ooh,’ says Lucy, idly. ‘La-di-da.’

I know that actually Celine will look like a river sprite, that she is not what she seems from so far away. She comes up the jetty alone, leaving Rob to finish with the boat. I feel sorry for Rob; I’d once hoped, like a child might, that she would shout at him for clearing the weeds from her garden shed. How irrelevant, how meaningless Rob’s passing through is, after all. He has nothing to offer her but faint resemblance.

She walks quite close but not close enough for me to call out and catch her attention. I look over at Mattie, who is watching some other boats motor down the river and know, although I don't see, that Celine is now in the carpark. The walk we'd had at the end of May, and when we agreed that she would meet Mattie soon, does not seem real. Celine doesn't seem real, close up or far away. The ferry blasts its horn once, as it did to signal the early morning swims in May. I have wanted, throughout June, to have those days again. Days somehow not yet fully begun, Celine dopier than usual and rubbing sleep-filled eyes; or crosser than usual, snapping at me. Possibilities still endless, and life's sadnesses dimmed.

With the sun behind a cloud, the brightness of the river fades to grey. The scows will be racing in bad weather tomorrow, I think. The river will be a flotilla of patchwork quilts washed through with rain, all the way down to Lepe and my parents' old house nearby.

'What's up?' Lucy asks. She and Mattie are looking at me. Lucy is used to not getting an answer and bites into her sandwich but Mattie, standing on wobbly legs with her hand on Lucy's shoulder, looks expectant. Her eyes don't waver. I look back.

'Just thinking about the old house in Exbury. And thinking that I might come over to you this week. For the day maybe, after the regatta, when everyone has left. There won't be so much to do here.'

'Yes, no problem.' Lucy is taken aback but that is all. 'When were you thinking?'

'Wednesday?'

'Chris will be there. You'll have to put up with that.'

'That's fine. I'll be nice.'

'Deal.' To her credit, she doesn't express further surprise. 'What have we got now for you, Mattie? A packet of crisps. What a treat. Where are you hopping off to?'

The back of my neck is cold. She must be drifting into her garden now. I imagine I can hear the hammock creak as she settles into it and begins to swing. Closes her eyes against the

sun's glare, pushes her feet into and off the meadowy grass. And then Mattie is in front of me, bouncing up and down on her chubby legs.

‘Hello froglet.’

She chirrups back, her version of a croak, I think. She considers, and then with great solemnity offers me a crisp. She watches me eat it and seems to nod a little, her jerky syncopated frog bounce imparting a little satisfaction.

30th JUNE

She is very careful in the manner of her leaving, displaying at the last an efficiency and methodology hitherto not evident to me. She has been packing, I think, since she said goodbye to Rob, and left him tying ropes, and hosing down the tender with attempted insouciance. She doesn't respond to my messages. She orders a large black van that arrives on the Thursday and waits like a hearse in the car park. A chest of drawers is brought out first, slowly and with some pomp. Everything else: bedding, kitchen boxes, lamps and cases, follow with sudden speed as though an invisible fast-forward button has been activated, and now her departure – already delayed too long – is accelerated. At dawn on Friday morning, she draws the curtains closed; a final, inverse distinction between night and day. If she locks the door behind her, it is for the first time.

The bushes, untrimmed all year, are too high to see over and too thick to see through. Brambles are already starting to settle into any gaps. Blackberries in a month or two. A cluster of wasps are trembling over some early plums. Rain has gathered in the foxgloves. The tide is whispering in the river, just at the end of her garden. And here: the wheelie bin under a super blue blood moon, mist above the water, the puddles frozen and the hedges trimmed with silver frost. 'Look,' she whispers. 'Look.'

THE END

‘As soon as the first sliver appears in the sky, and the more it waxes, the more clearly I imagine I can see her, her or something of her, but only her, in a hundred, a thousand different vistas, she who makes the moon the moon...’ Italo Calvino, *Complete Cosmicomics*.